

The Rise of Syria's Urban Poor: Why the War for Syria's Future Will Be Fought Over the Country's New Urban Villages

BY DAVID KILCULLEN AND NATE ROSENBLATT

The divisions between town and country or between the main cities and the country towns are very old social and cultural divisions and, historically, their interests have tended to be intrinsically at variance. For long the peasants lived at the mercy of the cities.

—Hanna Batatu

Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics

Syria's urban poor fight the Assad regime for the soul of Syria's cities. Syrian government troops have abandoned large swaths of countryside to a fractured opposition, focusing resources on key loyalist leverage points: keeping connected the big four cities Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, and Hama, and maintaining a path to the coast. This intensely urban conflict is a byproduct of over ten years of rural village migrations into the outskirts of Syria's ancient cities. Fueled by economic necessity and a persistent drought, these villagers created vast, insulated neighborhoods of urban poor. Three things characterize these communities: they are predominantly controlled by the opposition, they have been among the hardest hit during the conflict, and their guns and recent political activism mean they will be a key power broker in the post-conflict order.

Syria's ancient cities long reigned over the surrounding villages. Urban elites traditionally wielded significant leverage over villagers: they were the landowners, market-setters for farm produce, and funders of major religious institutions. This balance has shifted over the past decade. Nepotistic economic policies and an ongoing drought fueled unprecedented migrations of rural

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villagers into Syria's cities. An explosion in Syria's population amplifies the effects of this migration. Syria's population doubled over the past twenty-five years, with a disproportionate majority occurring in its main cities. This growth has not only stretched Syria's limited urban infrastructure, but has also forced these once-rural communities to come in near-direct contact with the wealth of the city itself. Long separated from cosmopolitan city life, these urban poor now see the rich beneficiaries of a new economic policy that has tripled Syria's GDP in the past ten years, magnifying their relative deprivation. This acute delta between Syria's "haves" and "have-nots" exacerbated historic urban-rural tensions, as a flood of rural migrants sought assimilation into city life. In Arabic, the word commonly used to describe the countryside is *rif*. The city itself is the *medina*. In Syria today, one can hardly discern where the *medina* stops and the *rif* begins.

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Today, the words *rif* and *medina* have developed not just geographic connotations, but social ones as well. The *rif* not only describes village farmers but those urban poor living in the slums sprouting up around Syria's cities. This "village-izing" of Syria's ancient cities has changed the complexion of urban space with the growth of large unplanned, parallel communities of urban poor. Syria's cities are still the gateway to economic and political power, but they no longer have the capacity to

assimilate such large numbers of rural migrants. Today, these vulnerable communities bear the brunt of the conflict: their young male residents are armed and fighting the regime. No matter how the conflict ends, these groups will have guns and grievances associated with a lack of services, high unemployment, and extreme income inequality in an indebted, post-conflict economy. For many armed groups, particularly Islamists, this is an opportunity to build political constituencies. Though the future of Syria is highly uncertain, one thing is clear: the urban poor have risen.

Coming Down the Mountain

Despite the present conflict, rural-urban migration is not new to Syria. Ibn Khaldun recognized this phenomenon seven hundred years ago. "The desert is the basis and reservoir of civilization and cities;" he wrote, "the toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life. Therefore, urbanization is found to be the goal to which the Bedouin aspires."¹ Six hundred years later, Philip Khoury describes a similar phenomenon after the creation of modern Syria: "With the ongoing settlement of the tribe," he writes, "the shaykh developed a taste for city life... He built homes in Damascus and Aleppo and began to participate in the life and politics of the cities."² Traditionally, the city dominated the country, and was able to assimilate those that decided to settle permanently inside its walls.

Hafez al-Assad lived this rural-urban migration and understood it as the key to social mobility. Assad once described to historian Patrick Seale that, "coming down the mountain," from the northeastern Alawite village of Qardaha was, "the crucial turning point of my life."³ Hafez went to Lattakia in 1945 as

the first member of his family to receive a basic education. "Rich boys didn't bother to work," Hafez later recalled, "but simply gave themselves what marks they wanted at the end of the year, and very few were the teachers who dared to stand up to them." Hafez's now-embattled son, Bashar, was not shaped by this history. He knew nothing of this "toughness of desert life." Unlike his father, who was careful to pay attention to rural provincial capitals like Suweida and Dera'a, Bashar built a state enjoyed by friends and relatives like Rami Makhouf.⁴ This city-centric nepotism marginalized a peasant class frustrated by mismanaged resources and scarce economic opportunity. It also accelerated a decade of mass rural-urban migration. Impressively, Syria's GDP nearly tripled from \$21 billion to \$59 billion under Bashar's economic

"liberalization" policies. But that money was not for everyone.

Nowhere was Syria's expanding wealth more clearly denied than to the residents of its burgeoning suburbs. Mojahed Ghadbian, a young activist now based in the United States, watched the posh developments of rich new Damascus neighborhoods from Al Tal, a northern suburb of the capital. He remembers his parents' childhood stories of raising livestock. Rare then was the trip to the city itself. Today, these burgeoning suburbs bleed into city life. The first protest of the Syrian revolution occurred on February 17, 2011 in the heart of Damascus.⁵ But residents of Douma, a blue-collar Sunni Muslim suburb, not Damascenes, were the participants. "The reality of this revolution," says Mojahed, "is that the people who started it did not have economic opportunities that those close to the regime did. They did



People chant and dance during an anti-regime demonstration in Bustan Al Qasr area in Aleppo, Syria on May 10, 2013

not have the *wasta* (influence) to get a good job, nor did they have the *baksheesh* (bribe money) to buy one, either.”

The lack of economic opportunity in Syria was exacerbated by unprecedented population growth. Despite unreliable statistics, considerable indirect evidence suggests Syria’s recent population boom occurred disproportionately in its cities. Syria’s population almost doubled in the past 25 years, from 10.9 million in 1986 to 20.8 million in 2010.⁶ This population rose predominantly in the slums surrounding Syria’s cities. From 2000 to 2010, Syria grew by 4.92 million people; 3.23 million of whom – or nearly 65 percent – were born into urban areas. Today, Aleppo and Damascus together hold approximately 4.5 million people. This means that these cities have likely doubled in population in the past decade. Al Tal residents used to raise livestock; today, it is a popular destination for Syria’s underground nightclub industry.

The sheer mass of new urban migrants makes them impossible to assimilate smoothly. Instead, they transform large swaths of Syria’s cities into stagnant, transplanted

neighborhoods of urban villagers. Twenty years ago, Charles Glass observed the early days of this phenomenon in his travelogue, *Tribes with Flags*. From Aleppo’s poor eastern suburbs, the section of the city most firmly under opposition control today, he wrote, “Now, I realized the village had come to the city, planting itself outside and growing in. The poor farmers were bringing their customs... to cosmopolitan Aleppo. ...They were turning their apartments into compact versions of their mud houses. It was not poverty, but tradition, that had put a whole family in one room.”⁷ For thousands of years, rural migrants were assimilated into urban life. Today, rapid population growth and unprecedented urban migration have upset the historical balance between village and city life.

The Country and City in the Present Conflict

The relatively ungoverned urban sprawl on the outskirts of Syria’s cities is the breeding ground for opposition activity. Baba Amr, a slum of Homs adjacent to the orchards that once fed the city, is synonymous with the



revolution.⁸ Ghouta, once farmland outside Damascus, is another example of a boomtown now besieged by Syrian government troops. The map of opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo is almost exactly that of the blue-collar working class Sunni neighborhoods: densely packed, poorly planned relatively recent urban growth. These areas share similar characteristics in that they are religious, conservative, predominantly Sunni Muslim working class communities with transplanted villagers long ignored by the government and deprived of services and economic opportunity.

These neighborhoods of urban poor are the most heavily contested in Syria. According to Syria Tracker, a collaborative, crowd-sourced effort to document and geo-tag deaths in Syria, there have been 14,125 deaths since the beginning of 2013. Of those 14,125 deaths, over half have occurred in Aleppo and Damascus and their surrounding suburbs. Syrian Martyrs, one of the contributors to this effort, was able to track deaths at the neighborhood level. By December 2012, they estimated that more than half of all deaths in Aleppo occurred in only 15 of 56 city neighborhoods.⁹ In Damascus, 65% of all deaths occurred in only seven neighborhoods.¹⁰ These neighborhoods generally share three things in common: they have grown rapidly over the past decade, they align closely with the opposition (in many cases they are controlled by the opposition), and are predominantly poor, working class city suburbs.

In Tadamon, a neighborhood of Damascus, people were considered criminals and homeless. "These were the projects," said one activist. "You don't start a revolution from these places." For these communities, the Syrian revolution is not about new governments; it is about the economy. Their

frustrations are the same ones that drove Mohamed Bouazizi to self-immolate in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, on December 17, 2010. Civil activists were prominent while the revolution remained peaceful, but they have been sidelined by this mass of urban poor who now drive the violent conflict. "Syria had been emptied of most of its peaceful activists," confirms an anonymous writer in Syria.¹¹ Unlike such activists, Syria's urban poor cannot leave. Armed groups take advantage of neighborhoods like Tadamon by providing residents with jobs, services, and basic necessities. That is how they get them to fight. Today, these groups spend as much time fighting each other as they do the Syrian government, recognizing the economic and political benefit of controlling these neighborhoods. Tadamon could not afford to keep armed groups out.

Nowhere is this divide clearer than in Aleppo. The rebels started the insurgency there in late July 2012, dragging the city's eastern suburbs into the fight. "We liberated the rural parts of this province," said a rebel fighter in the first days of the rebel offensive. "We waited and waited for Aleppo to rise, and it didn't. We couldn't rely on them to do it for themselves so we had to bring the revolution to them."¹² The attack was poorly organized because the rebels thought the city would fall to them easily. "Insurgents went in divided and overconfident," writes International Institute for Strategic Studies scholar Emile Hokayem. "The mostly rural fighters made no attempt at outreach and offered no guarantees to the city's terrified residents and anxious minorities."¹³ Most Aleppans had little interest in the conflict; many came to the city from rural communities and did not know their way around. This only reinforces the reality that the

revolution began with young activists but is now fought by the urban poor.

The neighborhoods that accommodate the rebel fighters do so out of economic necessity. Rebel groups provide cash and arms to neighborhood kids, who often constitute the informal police forces in opposition-held areas. They are then called *Ibna' al-Hayy* ("sons of the lanes"), a loaded term suggesting that foreign-funded militant groups have local concerns in mind. Now, the majority of the money and the training comes from Islamists who provide economic opportunity, social services, and law enforcement that both the regime and the secular opposition fail to offer. The secular fighters once offered an alternative, but infighting and lawlessness among the so-called "Free Syrian Army" has led to its demise. Basic services and honest dealing is how these Islamists gained a foothold in the poor neighborhoods. Today groups like *Jabhat al Nusra* and others are the most respected law of the land.

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The Future of Syria's Urban Poor

This problem of unmanaged urban sprawl will be even worse after the conflict. Syrian average life expectancy is reportedly 75 years, yet less than 8 percent of the country is over 55. This means that Syria is due for a population bulge despite the deaths of tens of thousands of young men in the past two years. This population growth compounds the damage inflicted on Syria's already dwindling or

destroyed infrastructure. The poorest neighborhoods are home to many refugees – they are among the most vulnerable populations affected by some of the heaviest conflict. Unlike rich Syrians, the urban poor cannot rent an apartment in Beirut to wait out the conflict; these are the areas from which many of the one million plus registered refugees flee. The UN recognizes this, declaring recently that 10 million persons, or more than half of the pre-war population of Syria, will need humanitarian assistance by the end of 2013.¹⁴ If the level of destruction and death in major city suburbs is any indication of need, humanitarian agencies must prioritize the urban poor's needs.

In the absence of effective international efforts to provide relief and security, intense localism blooms. Neighborhood gangs run rampant. Lawlessness is rife. Warlordism is on the rise. Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi observed this phenomenon in Baghdad fifty years ago: the insularity of rural migrant communities means that they continue to rely on group and kinship ties to provide protection. In the absence of state or municipal efforts to provide security and rule of law enforcement, these groups reinforce their position as quasi-governments.¹⁵ Before the conflict, these highly insular communities built their own solutions to basic service provision and, to some extent, even rule of law enforcement. Now these communities are armed. This has major implications for the future of the Syrian state: for when local militias take charge of their own services, they are loath to return them to institutions they do not control. If you are looking for a model for Aleppo's future, Libya's second city of Benghazi is not a bad place to start.

Amid this chaos, one ideological framework overcomes community insularity and

provides workable solutions for providing basic necessities and an effective cross-neighborhood governing structure: religion. Islamist groups thrive in these neighborhoods. They are generously funded, well equipped, highly experienced and the least corrupt organizations among opposition groups in Syria. They also provide a framework for governance that is familiar to each community: though civil society was heavily repressed in Syria, religion was afforded greater leeway to operate. In tapping into this network of frustrated urban poor, Jabhat al Nusra is quickly becoming the Hezbollah of Syria's Sunni Muslims. In Aleppo, four Salafist Jihadist groups, led by Jabhat al Nusra, have set up Sharia Commissions that are to date the only effective law enforcement bodies in opposition-held areas of the city. They have a police force, a judicial body, a religious scholarship network that issues fatwas (legal rulings), and a services branch that even runs public transportation services.¹⁶ Combining armed groups with civilian assistance delivery mechanisms like the Sharia Commission, these religious groups remain the only cohesive structure that protects residents and provides basic services in opposition-held areas. A new civilian council was formed for Aleppo City recently after elections in Gaziantep,¹⁷ but has yet to display the capability to curb pervasive lawlessness or the rigorous self-discipline to avoid local perceptions of corruption. The longer the conflict continues, the more powerful these Islamist groups will grow because they are winning over Syria's urban poor.

This dynamic not only improves the lot of extreme Islamists among the opposition, but also reinforces the appeal of the Syrian government in pro-regime areas. To these residents, the regime increasingly represents order amid

the lawlessness and religiosity of opposition-held Syria. Central Damascus and parts of regime-held Aleppo remain the safest parts of the country. But the fear felt by these loyalists is more visceral than Islamism and the chaos of opposition-led Syria. It is not the Islamists they fear, but rather the cause of Islamism itself that they fear: the uneducated, vulnerable, long-oppressed communities of the Rif who now rise up against them. "There was not one person who demonstrated in Harasta (a Damascus suburb) who could read," one Damascene industrialist explained to Daily Star reporter Lauren Williams in March; "They were illiterate and angry. They would rather see the country destroyed."¹⁸ In Aleppo, an activist in regime-held areas of the city describes the feeling among those still loyal to Assad: "A lot of people are closer to the opposition in these areas (than you think)," he writes, "but after the theft and lawlessness that occurs among elements of the Free Syrian Army, there is major concern among residents over newly freed areas." When the opposition recently took the key strategic neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud, he reports, armed elements stole more than 300 cars and looted local shops.

Conclusion

While country towns Dera'a and Baniyas sparked Syria's revolution, their fight quickly metastasized to Syria's cities. The first violent outbreak of the Syrian conflict took place in Homs, where the frustration of the urban poor boiled over into open hostility. Brought on by the grievances of village communities crammed into Baba Amr's unplanned slums, Syria's rebels took a stand. Today the communities of urban poor in the hands of the opposition are the hardest hit during the conflict

Their frustrations and their guns will motivate a key power base in Syria's post-Assad future.

Sixty years before Dera'a, a group of young activists sought to transform similar rural grievances into a revolutionary political movement. Much as now, these activists dreamed of a revolution that would lift the Arab world out of its collective myopia. "Ba'athism" was the term they coined – "renaissance" – to describe their lofty aspirations. But the dreams of Michel Aflaq and Salah ad-Din al-Bitar, the movement's co-founders, required the power of Syria's rural community to channel their ambitions into political power. Enter Akram al-Hourani, a "Syrian Castro," who rallied hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers to the cause of socialism. According to historian Patrick Seale, Hourani "roused the peasants, politicized the army, and gave the theorists of the Ba'ath a cutting edge. The anger of country boys, raging against the entrenched privilege of the cities, was given a sharper focus by his example."¹⁹ In 1953, his socialism combined with al-Bitar and Aflaq's Ba'athism to create the modern-day Arab Socialist Ba'ath party that now rules Syria. The Ba'athist revolution in Syria would not have been possible without the support from the very same communities they fight today.

Unlike sixty years ago, when the countryside rose up against the city during Hourani's time, contemporary urbanization in Syria means the city has risen up against itself. The fight for Syria's future is a fight for the future of its cities, pitting urban-rural tensions in smaller, denser pockets of ungovernable spaces. One remarkable work of recent fiction captures the essence of the deeply-felt suspicions of the city and the country. In *The Dark Side of Love* by Syrian author Rafik Schami, Elias, one of the book's central characters

moves to Damascus from the fictional Christian village of Mala. There, he falls in love with a Damascene girl: "She spoke fluent French," Elias recalls, "which sounded to his ears like civilization, liberation from cow dung and the smell of sweat." In another chapter, Schami writes of a Damascene police officer sent to Mala to resolve a dispute between the village's two main families: "The CID officer knew that by giving away the name he might cause a murder, but he hated peasants and the very smell of them. In the city, he would never have revealed the identity of a man who had laid a complaint, not for all the money in the world."²⁰ Sixty years ago, the peasants rose up and were granted Ba'athism. Today, this pan-Arab socialism is tarred with the brush of Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein.

Today a new order grips Syria and much of the Arab world. Islamism is on the rise. Post Arab-Spring demands for "one man – one vote" push the urban poor into government. Their superstitions and suspicions are channeled into a new, untrained mandate for religious-based government. When the conflict finally subsides, many activists and regime lackeys will have left the country. Picking up the scraps of what remains, Syria's urban poor will try to rebuild it without the knowledge and experience of generations of rich Syrians who have abandoned it for greener pastures. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Franz Rosenthal, trans., *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93.

² Philip Khoury, *Syria Under the French Mandate*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

³ Patrick Seale, *Asad, the Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 11.

⁴ See, for example: Oliver Holmes and Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Syria moneyman is target of anti-Assad hatred," Reuters, July 18, 2012, available at <http://reut.rs/173NqFC>

⁵ It was a spontaneous protest outside the famous Souq al-Hamidiyeh market in downtown Damascus. The Interior Minister himself arrived quickly to disperse the protest after police were unable to stop the demonstrators. The first words shouted in the video are "Haramiyeh! Haramiyeh" ("Thieves! Thieves!") in reference to the corruption of the regime, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDHLsU-ik_Y

⁶ These figures are all courtesy of the World Bank (databank.worldbank.org) and date from before the start of the uprising.

⁷ Glass, Charles, *Tribes with Flags: A Journey Curtailed* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990), 165.

⁸ See, for example: Erika Solomon, "Syrian army recaptures symbolic Baba Amr district in Homs," available at <http://reut.rs/104zXWO>

⁹ In order from most to fewest: Salah ad-Din, al-Sukkari, Bustan al-Qasr, al-Sha'ar, al-Firdos, Hanano, al-Haydariyah, Sakhour, Tariq al-Bab, al-Marjeh, Qadi Askar, Saif al-Dawla, Karm al-Jabal, Bustan al-Basha, and al-Amriyah.

¹⁰ In order from most to fewest: al-Qaboun, Jobar, al-Hajjar al-Aswad, al-Qadam, Tadamon, Yarmouk, and Sayyida Zeinab

¹¹ An anonymous author from Syria under the pseudonym "Rita" writes "Syrian Activist Communities: The Battle Inside," openDemocracy weblog, April 16, 2013, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/rita-from-syria/syrian-activist-communities-battle-inside>

¹² Erika Solomon, "Rural fighters pour into Syria's Aleppo for battle" Reuters, July 29, 2012, available at <http://reut.rs/1dwT1VT>

¹³ Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Battle Royale," Syrian Assistance (Blog post), February 12, 2013,

accessed at <http://www.syrianassistance.com/6/post/2013/02/syriaa-battle-royale.html>

¹⁴ Martin Chulov, "Half of Syrian population 'will need aid by end of year'," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/19/half-syrian-population-aid-year>

¹⁵ Ali al-Wardi, *A Study in the Society of Iraq*, (Baghdad, 1965).

¹⁶ From a twitter post by reporter Jenan Moussa while in Aleppo, dated April 7, 2013, Available at <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/320964677851041792>

¹⁷ See the council's active web presence on display here: <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity> and news about their election here: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrians-vote-for-aleppo-council-.aspx?pageID=238&nid=42271>

¹⁸ Lauren Williams, "Damascus Split on Support for Regime" *The Daily Star*, March 21, 2013, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Mar-21/210937-damascus-split-on-support-for-syrian-regime.ashx#ixzz2QySY8aqI>

¹⁹ Seale, Asad, *Op.Cit.*, 49.

²⁰ Rafik Schami, *The Dark Side of Love*, Anthea Bell (trans.), (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2009).

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Abu al-Taib, leader of Ahab Al-Mustafa Battalion, during a military training for female fighters in a mosque in the Seif El Dawla neighbourhood in Aleppo”