

EASTERN EXPECTATIONS THE CHANGING DYNAMICS IN SYRIA'S TRIBAL REGIONS

KHEDER KHADDOUR AND KEVIN MAZUR

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.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kheder Khaddour is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. His research focuses on issues of identity and society in Syria.

Kevin Mazur is a Postdoctoral Prize Research Fellow at Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

CONTACT

Joumana Seikaly
Development and
Publications Manager
jseikaly@carnegie-mec.org
+961 199 1491

Carnegie-MEC.org



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