



AMBIVALENT LOYALTY AND DISSONANCE:

**Alawite Community
Dynamics Amidst
the Syrian War**

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6-8
Methodology and Modes of Analysis	9-10
Historical and Political Background	10-13
Findings and Analysis	13
1. Sectarian Tensions: Sunnis vs Alawites and its Retaliations	13-16
1.1 Reawakening of Existential Fear Leading to Militarization	16-18
1.2 Displacement, Sectarianized Geography and Fractured Belonging	18-20
2. Frozen Conflict and Economic Hardships: Cohesion vs Division	20-23
2.1 Shifts in Social Identity and Religious Affiliation	23-25
2.2 Reshuffling in Political Loyalty and Allegiance with the Regime: Past and Present	25-27
3. Prospects of Future Active Engagement and Reconciliation	27-32
Conclusions and Practical Recommendations	33-35
Appendix	36-38

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Syrian population percentage by sect	10
Figure 2: The Alawite State created by the French in the 1920s	11
Figure 3: Map of Syria showing Idlib Governorate and the Jisr al-Shughour massacre location	15
Figure 4: Who should be considered as a national traitor?	15
Figure 5: What is the preferred punishment for national betrayal?	16
Figure 6: What is national dignity?	18
Figure 7: What does homeland mean to you?	18
Figure 8: Alawite concentration areas	19
Figure 9: What gives you national pride?	19
Figure 10: What is considered a strong state?	21
Figure 11: What avenues should exist for granting Syrian citizenship?	24
Figure 12: Syrian currency devaluation	26
Figure 13: What is patriotism?	27
Figure 14: How can the national crisis be overcome?	27
Figure 15: Preferred forms of political participation and civic engagement	30
Figure 16: Perceptions on political inclusivity	31
Figure 17: Should full rights be granted to political opponents unless they threaten national security?	32

Executive Summary

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic and political transformations within the Alawite community in Syria amidst the ongoing conflict. Through a mixed-method approach, involving 150 surveys and 20 semi-structured interviews, the study explores the impacts of the Syrian civil war on this community. The Alawite community, which constitutes approximately 12% of Syria's population today, was historically marginalized and persecuted, developing a distinct cultural and religious identity by retreating to mountainous areas during periods of repression, particularly under the Ottoman Empire. The establishment of the French Mandate introduced some changes, including the creation of an Alawite State, but many socio-economic challenges persisted. The rise of the Ba'ath Party and Hafez al-Assad's presidency marked a significant shift, with Alawites being promoted to key positions in the military and government. This led to socio-economic improvements but also entrenched sectarian divisions.

The Syrian civil war has exacerbated these sectarian tensions, particularly between the Alawite and Sunni communities. The regime's strategy of portraying the conflict as a Sunni-led insurgency against minorities heightened existential fears among Alawites, resulting in increased militarization and mistrust. Survey findings indicate that many Alawites view national dignity as tied to military strength and the eradication of extremist groups. Despite growing disillusionment with the Assad regime, fear of retribution and economic hardships have led many individuals to develop complex and conflicting political attitudes. This ambivalence results in a mixture of support, opposition, and neutrality towards the regime, reflecting a cautious approach influenced by both dissatisfaction and security concerns about potential consequences. The conflict has led to significant displacement, with many Alawites fleeing Sunni-dominated areas, further entrenching sectarian divides. Survey data reveals that many Alawites now associate their homeland with areas perceived as safe, predominantly Alawite regions. There has also been a notable decline in Arab national identity among Alawites, with a rise in a more insular Alawite identity. This shift is driven by historical persecution, economic hardship, and the regime's manipulation of sectarian fears.

The report highlights the Alawite community's cautious approach towards political engagement, favouring lawful and community-supported activities. High levels of neutrality in survey responses regarding unauthorized demonstrations reflect deep security concerns and awareness of the regime's repressive measures. A significant majority supports participating in legally permitted assemblies and demonstrations, indicating a preference for lawful forms of protest and revealing deep security fears within the community. Despite these challenges, there are efforts by some Alawite activists to foster local harmony and reconciliation. These initiatives often remain marginalized due to the complex political landscape and the risks associated with opposing both the regime and extremist elements. The report underscores the need for inclusive governance and addressing the community's grievances as crucial steps towards national reconciliation. Overall, the Alawite community's experiences during the Syrian conflict highlight the intricate interplay between historical marginalization, political manipulation, and socio-economic challenges. Addressing these grievances and fostering inclusive governance is essential for Syria's path towards reconciliation and peace. This report provides valuable insights for developing effective post-conflict strategies.

Introduction

Many scholars have interpreted the Syrian crisis as a proxy war for geopolitical dominance: between Russia and the United States; between regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey; or some combination thereof.¹ Others have concerned themselves with the relations between the Syrian regime and its citizens by focusing on the roles of material domination, patronage systems, and nationalist narratives in helping the regime maintain power. For example, Salwa Ismail described political repression in Syria as a combination of material practice and ideological indoctrination that produces paradoxically loyalist subjectivities grounded in the shared experience and remembrance of violence.² These forms of analysis have a valuable explanatory power, but they do not delve significantly into the micro-level analysis of shifts in political and sectarian affiliations driven by the ongoing civil war in Syria.

The Syrian conflict has also intensified debates about sectarianism as a contributing factor in the outbreak of violence among different sects. Much of this analysis again tends to focus on the international picture of sectarian alliances, rather than looking at how the emergence of sectarian identities has become tied to national security discourses as a means of consolidating power *within* the country. These interpretations consider the national security narrative in Syria as constructing a patriotic banner to unify heterogeneous internal communities against a perceived ‘enemy.’ In this report, we focus on the Alawite community and the impact of war on their identities, political attitudes and perceptions on war and peace. In this report, we focus on the Alawite community and the impact of war on their identities, political attitudes, and perceptions of war and peace. In this context, we define ‘sect’ as a relational and fluid construct, rather than a fixed category. Sect-affiliation is shaped and reinforced through dynamic social interactions and can become more rigid in times of civil unrest and security concerns. Methodologically, the report relies on 20 extensive interviews and 150 surveys with members from Alawite community.³

Despite the central role of the Alawite community in Syria's ongoing conflict and their historical ties to the ruling Assad regime, there exists a significant gap in comprehensive understanding and nuanced analysis of their experiences, challenges, and transformations throughout the Syrian civil war. Much of the existing literature and public discourse predominantly frames the Alawites within the context of their political alignment with the Assad family, often overlooking the socio-economic diversities, internal dissent, and the complex web of loyalties and identities within the community.⁴ This oversimplification not only obscures the realities faced by the Alawites but also impedes the development of effective post-conflict reconciliation and rebuilding strategies that are sensitive to the intricate dynamics at play.

The Syrian conflict, marked by its brutality and prolonged nature, has had a profound impact on all sectors of Syrian society, yet the specific ways in which the Alawite community has navigated these tumultuous times remain underexplored. The binary portrayal fails to capture the nuanced spectrum of views within the Alawite population, ranging from staunch regime loyalists to discreet dissenters, nor does it adequately account for the socioeconomic hardships that have affected them similarly to other Syrian communities. Furthermore, the disproportionate losses suffered by the Alawite community in

1. Gani, J. (2015). Contentious politics and the Syrian crisis: Internationalization and militarization of the conflict. In F. A. Gerges (Ed.), *Contentious politics in the Middle East: Popular resistance and marginalized activism beyond the Arab uprisings* (pp. 127-153). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Ismail, S. (2019). *The rule of violence: Subjectivity, memory and government in Syria* (pp. 120-130). New York: Cambridge University Press.
3. All participants self-identify themselves as Alawite and expressed their national belonging to Syria that ranged from neutralization to opposition.
4. 'Notes', in Michael Kerr, and Craig Larkin (eds), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (2015; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 May 2016).

terms of human lives, coupled with the challenges of displacement and economic downturn, have not been sufficiently documented or analysed in the context of Syria's broader socio-political landscape.

This research addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the Alawite community's experiences during the Syrian conflict. It unravels the complexities of Alawite identities, loyalties, and socio-economic conditions, moving beyond simplistic narratives to uncover the deeper impacts of the war on this critical yet often misunderstood community. As such, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Syria's sectarian dynamics, the role of minority communities in conflict settings, and the pathways toward inclusive peace and reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

The Alawite community, constituting a significant yet relatively small fraction of Syria's heterogeneous components, holds a pivotal role within the nation's complex socio-political landscape. This sect, comprising around 12% of the population, has historically navigated the paradoxical simultaneities of perils and privileges of political power, especially since the rise of Hafez al-Assad to the presidency in 1970. The ascendancy of the Assad family, belonging to the Alawite faith, marked the beginning of a new era for the community, one characterized by enhanced political influence and access to military and intelligence sectors. This state-sponsored elevation, however, is a double-edged sword, fostering perceptions of Alawite privilege while also making them a focal point of sectarian tensions, particularly evident during the Syrian civil war that began in 2011.

The importance of studying the Alawite community transcends mere academic inquiry; it is crucial for understanding the dynamics of power, loyalty, and survival within Syria. The war has not only reshaped the country's demographic and territorial contours but has also deepened sectarian divides, with the Alawites often portrayed as staunch supporters of the Assad regime. This portrayal oversimplifies the community's complex realities, including the varying degrees of support for the government, the socioeconomic challenges faced by many Alawites, and their disproportionate losses in the conflict. Moreover, the Alawite experience is emblematic of broader themes in conflict studies such as the instrumentalization of minority groups in power struggles, the socio-economic underpinnings of sectarian loyalty, and the impact of prolonged conflict on community cohesion and identity. As Syria moves towards a post-conflict future, understanding the Alawite perspective is indispensable for addressing grievances, fostering reconciliation, and building inclusive governance structures.

As such, the primary goal of this research is to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the socio-economic and political transformations within the Alawite community in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. To navigate through the complexities of the Alawite community's experiences and their broader implications for Syrian society, this research is guided by the following key questions:

1. How has the Syrian war affected the Alawite community's socio-economic status, identities, and political affiliations?
2. What role do some Alawite actors play in localized solutions for reconciliation and enhancing social cohesion?

To answer these two questions, this report dissects the complexities surrounding the Alawite community's identity, their relationships with the Assad regime, and their interactions with other communities within the war-torn Syrian societal fabric. Specifically, the research aims to achieve the following objectives:

A) **Historical Contextualization:** Offer a brief historical overview of the Alawite community's status and roles within Syrian society prior to 2011, setting a foundation for understanding the subsequent

changes induced by the conflict.

B) Impact Analysis: Analyse the multifaceted impacts of the Syrian civil war on the Alawite community, focusing on socio-economic conditions, identity transformations, shifts in political loyalty, and the community's role and representation in the Syrian military and governance structures.

C) Intra-Community Dynamics: Examine changes within the Alawite community itself, including possible fragmentation, the emergence of new identities, and shifts in social cohesion and community leadership.

D) Inter-Community Relations: Investigate the evolving dynamics between the Alawite community and other ethnic, religious, and societal groups in Syria, with a particular focus on the levels of sectarianism and potential for reconciliation.

E) Role of Local Actors: Identify and assess the current actors, groups, and organizations within the Alawite community that possess the authority and legitimacy to contribute to localized solutions for community rebuilding, reconciliation, and fostering post-conflict social cohesion.

F) Policy Recommendations: Develop actionable recommendations for European and German policymakers to support localized solutions that promote social cohesion, reconciliation, and sustainable peace within Syria, with a focus on the Alawite community's role in these processes. By achieving these objectives, the research intends to fill existing knowledge gaps and offer insights that can inform more effective and inclusive strategies for addressing the challenges faced by Syria in the aftermath of its protracted conflict.

Methodology and Modes of Analysis

This study employs a mixed-method approach. The first part uses a quantitative approach to analyse surveys (150 in total) conducted to answer questions related to perceptions among Alawites (those who self-identify as such) on ‘common grounds’ that bind Syrians together after more than a decade of war, the process of political resolution in Syria, and to measure pro/anti-democratic attitudes. The second part employs a qualitative approach to delve into the socio-economic and political transformations within the Alawite community in Syria amidst the ongoing conflict. A qualitative approach (20 semi-structured interviews with civil community leaders) is chosen for its strength in uncovering the complexity of social phenomena, enabling the collection of rich, in-depth data, and facilitating an understanding of the nuanced experiences and perspectives of individuals. This approach is particularly effective for investigating changes in identity, loyalty, and community dynamics among the Alawites during and after the conflict.

1. Survey Data Collection Methods and Sample Specifications

This process entailed disseminating surveys among Alawites with the assistance of two research fixers (May -June 2024). The questions take into account the social background of participants (detailing their income, marital status, age, gender, and level of education). The questions focus on perceptions of national identity, forms of loyalty, and the meaning of ‘*national treason*.’ The main purpose of these questions is to test the extent to which the regime’s strategic indoctrination and manipulation of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion have been “internalized” by the Alawite community. Moreover, the survey conducted aimed to gather insights into the political culture and social perspectives of the Alawite community in Syria. To achieve this, a structured methodology was employed, ensuring that the data collected was comprehensive and representative of the community, which is estimated to constitute around 12% of Syria’s population. The survey targeted the Alawite community, focusing on capturing a diverse representation across various demographic segments. A total of 150 respondents participated in the survey. The sample was selected to ensure inclusivity, with considerations for gender, age, educational background, marital status, and geographical distribution. This approach was designed to provide a holistic understanding of the community’s composition and perspectives. Data collection was carried out using structured questionnaires. These questionnaires were distributed among the selected respondents to capture a wide range of information. The questionnaire design included both closed and open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses. The questions were categorized into sections covering demographic information, socio-economic status, and views on national identity, governance, and social cohesion.

The questionnaires were administered in person, ensuring that respondents fully understood each question and could provide accurate answers. This method also allowed for immediate clarification of any ambiguities in the questions, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data collected. The survey included a series of questions aimed at understanding various aspects of the Alawite community’s socio-political views. A general overview of the social background of the targeted sample is elaborated in the Appendices.

The selection of these survey questions was guided by the need to capture a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Alawite community’s perspectives on critical socio-political issues. Each question addresses a specific aspect of their experiences and views, providing valuable data to inform the analysis and recommendations in this report.

2. Online Semi-structured Interviews

The research includes 20 online semi-structured interviews with members of the Alawite community, comprising both ordinary citizens and those in positions of influence or authority. Conducting these interviews online ensures accessibility and safety for participants amidst the sensitive subject matter. The aim is to gather personal stories, insights into community identity and cohesion, and perspectives on the Alawite community's relationships with the Syrian regime and other societal groups.

3. Document Analysis

In addition to interviews, the study performs an analysis of relevant documents including media reports, official statements, and social media content. This method captures public narratives, government policies affecting the Alawite community, and how the community is portrayed in public discourse. Document analysis provides a broader context to the individual perspectives gathered through interviews, enriching the research findings with a comprehensive view of the external factors influencing the Alawite community's socio-political landscape.

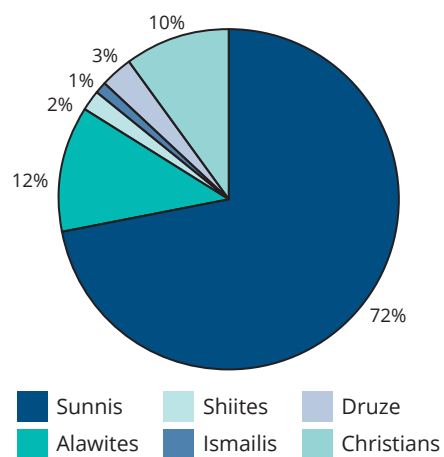
Data from the online semi-structured interviews and document analysis undergo thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns and themes. This process enables an in-depth examination of the impact of the Syrian conflict on the Alawite community's socio-economic conditions, identities, and political affiliations. Using coding techniques, the data is systematically organized, facilitating a detailed and nuanced understanding of the Alawite community's experiences and viewpoints.

Historical and Political Background

The history of the Alawites, an ethnoreligious group in Syria, is marked by periods of persecution, territorial isolation, and eventual political ascendance (see Figure 1). During the Ottoman Empire, the Alawites were marginalised and often subjected to severe repression. The Ottoman authorities, wary of their potential alliance with the Shi'a Safavid Empire, undertook numerous campaigns against the Alawite community. Sultan Selim I, for instance, ordered massacres of Shi'a sects, including the Alawites, to prevent any collaboration with the Safavids.⁶

The Alawites were forced to retreat to the mountains of Jabal Ansariya, where they maintained a largely agrarian lifestyle, isolated from the predominantly Sunni Muslim, Orthodox Christian, and Isma'ili communities surrounding them.⁷ This isolation was exacerbated by the rugged terrain and poor road networks, which limited their interaction with other groups. Despite occasional uprisings and resistance, the Alawites remained politically and economically marginalised throughout the Ottoman period.⁸ They were often exploited by local land-

Figure 1: Syrian population percentage by sect



Source: Adapted from Balanche (2018)⁵

5. Balanche, F. (2018): *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*. The Washington Institute.

6. Winter, S. (2016). *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1788*. Cambridge University Press.

7. Baltacioglu-Brammer, A. (2019). *Alawites and the Fate of Syria*. Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective.

8. Farouk-Alli, A. (2015). The Genesis of Syria's Alawi Community. In M. Kerr & C. Larkin (Eds.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (pp. 27-48). Oxford University Press.

lords and tax farmers, which further deepened their economic hardships. The Ottoman period also saw the Alawites developing a distinct cultural and religious identity, partly as a survival mechanism. The secrecy surrounding their religious practices helped protect them from persecution but also led to widespread suspicion and mistrust from their Sunni neighbours.⁹ This period of social exclusion and political alienation reinforced a strong sense of groupness and solidarity among the Alawites, which would later become crucial in their political mobilisation.¹⁰

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the establishment of the French Mandate in Syria brought significant changes to the Alawite community. In 1920, the French, aiming to protect minority groups and to counterbalance the Arab Sunni majority's nationalist sentiments, created an Alawite State along Syria's western coast.¹¹ This move was part of a broader strategy to fragment Syrian national identity and maintain control over the region. The creation of the Alawite State provided the community with a measure of autonomy and protection from Sunni dominance (see Figure 2). However, the French administration also faced challenges in integrating the Alawites into urban and political life. Despite constituting a significant portion of the population in their region, the Alawites remained underrepresented in urban centres and political institutions, with power still concentrated in the hands of Sunni and Christian elites.¹² Educational initiatives by the French aimed to foster an Alawite elite, but progress was slow and uneven.

Figure 2: The Alawite State created by the French in the 1920s



Source: Adapted from Balanche (2018)¹³

9. Tendler, B. (2012). *Concealment and Revelation: A Study of Secrecy and Initiation Among the Nusayri-Alawis of Syria*. PhD diss Princeton University.
 10. Farouk-Alli, A. (2015). The Genesis of Syria's Alawi Community. In M. Kerr & C. Larkin (Eds.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (pp. 27-48). Oxford University Press.
 11. Weiss, M. (2015). Community, Sect, Nation: Colonial and Social Scientific Discourses on the Alawis in Syria during the Mandate and Early Independence Periods. In M. Kerr & C. Larkin (Eds.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (pp. 63-78). Oxford University Press.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Balanche, F. (2018): *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*. The Washington Institute.

The French also promoted the Alawites within the military, seeing them as a reliable force against Sunni Arab nationalism.¹⁴ This period saw an increase in the number of Alawites joining the French colonial forces, which later provided them with military training and experience that would be pivotal in their rise to power in independent Syria.¹⁵ However, the socio-economic conditions of the majority of Alawites remained poor, with many continuing to live in rural poverty. The French Mandate period also marked the beginning of significant internal migration. Alawites started moving to urban areas such as Latakia, which gradually altered the demographic makeup of these cities.¹⁶ This migration was driven by economic opportunities and the relative security offered by French rule. Over time, this movement laid the groundwork for the Alawites' integration into broader Syrian society, although deep-seated sectarian tensions persisted.

The Alawite community's fortunes changed dramatically with the rise of the Ba'ath Party and Hafez al-Assad. The Ba'ath Party, which advocated for Arab nationalism and socialism, attracted many Alawis and other minorities due to its secular ideology and promise of social mobility.¹⁷ The Syrian Army also became a crucial avenue for Alawi advancement, as it offered economic opportunities and a pathway to political power, which the traditionally marginalised Alawite community eagerly embraced.¹⁸ Hafez al-Assad, an Alawi from the village of Qurdaha, emerged as a dominant figure within the Ba'ath Party and the military. His ascent to the presidency in 1970 marked the beginning of the Alawite dominance in Syrian politics. Assad's regime systematically promoted the Alawites to key positions in the military, security services, and government, creating a loyal base of support within the state apparatus.¹⁹ Under Hafez al-Assad, the Alawite community experienced significant socio-economic improvements. Land reforms and development projects aimed at integrating the Alawites into the national economy and reducing regional disparities. These efforts included the redistribution of land from Sunni and Christian elites to Alawite peasants and the development of infrastructure in the Alawite regions.²⁰ The Assad regime's policies fostered a sense of communal solidarity and identity among Alawis, who had previously been fragmented by tribal and regional loyalties.²¹

The regime also took advantage of the sectarian makeup of the military and security apparatus to consolidate power. Alawite officers were strategically placed in key positions, ensuring loyalty to the regime.²² This consolidation was not merely a strategy for survival but also a means of elevating the socio-economic status of the Alawite community. The state's policies led to an urban migration of the Alawites, who settled in major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, further integrating into Syrian society while maintaining their distinct communal identity.²³ Additionally, Hafez al-Assad cultivated a personality cult and a strong central government that promoted a pan-Arab identity while subtly ensuring that Alawites remained at the core of the power structure.²⁴ His leadership style, characterised by a mix of repression and co-optation, helped stabilise Syria but also entrenched sectarian divisions.²⁵ Some Sunni groups, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, considered that the Alawites had hijacked power in Syria. They began targeting Alawite army officers with assassinations in the 1970s and 1980s, leading to a full-scale confrontation between the Brotherhood and the regime. This conflict ended with the crushing of the revolt but left deep scars regarding the divisions between Sunnis and Alawites.

14. Saleh, H. (2023). Alawites and the Syrian State, Part One. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies.

15. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2024): [When Minorities Rule in the Middle East](#) (Part I): Syria

16. Hilal, I. (2023). [The Bond of Fear: How the Alawites Transformed from a Sect](#). Al Jazeera.

17. Hinnebusch, R. (1990). *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant*. Westview Press.

18. Ibid.

19. Heydemann, S. (2020). *Pity the nation: Assessing a half-century of Assadist rule*. Brookings Institution.

20. George, A. (2003). *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. Zed Books.

21. Hinnebusch, R. (1990). *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant*. Westview Press.

22. Baltacioglu-Brammer, A. (2019). [Alawites and the Fate of Syria](#). Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective.

23. Balanche, F. (2015). 'Go to Damascus, My Son': Alawi Demographic Shifts under Ba'ath Party Rule. In *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*.

24. Halaw, I. (2021). [In memory of a dictator: Hafez al-Assad's political legacy](#). The New Arab.

25. Hinnebusch, R. (1990). *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant*. Westview Press.

Bashar al-Assad's ascension to power in 2000 marked a continuation but also a gradual shift in the dynamics within the Syrian state. Under Bashar, the regime increasingly emphasised its Alawite base, focusing less on the broader inclusion of the Sunni majority, particularly those in rural areas. The regime developed primordial features and became more Alawite compared to the Hafez times.²⁶ This era saw the regime becoming more insular, with key military and security positions increasingly staffed by Alawites, which reinforced the community's critical role in maintaining the regime's power structure. Economic policies under Bashar favoured urban areas and sectors of the economy that were dominated by Alawites and other minorities, leading to a sense of alienation and neglect among the Sunni rural populace. As the regime focused more on consolidating power around its Alawite core, it inadvertently exacerbated underlying sectarian tensions.

The rural Sunni areas, particularly those suffering from economic neglect and lack of political representation, became hotbeds of dissent and unrest. This growing divide set the stage for the significant challenges that would erupt into the Syrian civil war. The concentration of power among the Alawites and the marginalisation of the Sunni majority during Bashar's rule sowed the seeds of conflict. As tensions rose, the regime's reliance on its Alawite base became both a strength and a vulnerability, tying the community's fate closely to the survival of the Assad regime. This alignment would later determine the Alawites' precarious position at the forefront of Syria's unfolding conflict.

Findings and Analysis

Our findings and analysis will be thematically divided into three main parts, each with subsequent sub-sections. Each part considers the shifts and transformations in Alawite political attitudes, religious affiliation, and perceptions of war and peace as influenced by the changing phases of the Syrian civil war, transitioning from an active conflict to a frozen one.

1. Sectarianized Tensions and its Retaliations: Sunnis vs Alawites

The Syrian civil war has profoundly affected the socio-political landscape of the country, exacerbating pre-existing sectarian divisions due to systematic political and cultural exclusion. The Alawite community, historically a religious minority in Syria, has experienced significant changes due to the conflict. The increased sectarianism between the Alawite and Sunni communities has been particularly notable, resulting in a complex web of mistrust, fear, and hostility. Since the onset of the Syrian war, the regime, led by Bashar al-Assad, has been accused of deliberately stoking sectarian fears to consolidate support among minorities, particularly the Alawites. This strategy, often referred to as "sectarianization" of the conflict and "securitization" of perceived opponents, involved portraying the uprising as a Sunni-led insurgency intent on eradicating religious minorities, thereby rallying the Alawites and other minorities around the regime.²⁷ One interview highlighted how the regime's actions in the early stage of the uprising fuelled sectarian fears: "The regime set up checkpoints at our village entrances and distributed weapons to the villagers to protect them from the opposition forces that might attack them."²⁸ This strategy was effective in fostering a sense of existential threat among the Alawites, leading to increased militarization within the community.

26. Wieland, C. (2012) *A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus spring to Arab spring*. Seattle, Cune Press; Aldoughli, R. (2020). Departing 'secularism': Boundary appropriation and extension of the Syrian state in the religious domain since 2011. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 49(2), 360-385.

27. Aldoughli, R. Securitization as a tool of regime survival: The deployment of religious rhetoric in Bashar Al-Asad's speeches. *The Middle East Journal*, 75(1), 9-32.

28. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H1) 25 May 2024.

The deployment of security checkpoints and the distribution of weapons to Alawite villagers exemplify the regime's efforts to create a narrative of defence against a Sunni insurgency.²⁹ This narrative not only justified the regime's brutal crackdown on opposition-held areas, but also deepened the sectarian divide. Additionally, the regime's deliberate actions to instil fear among the Alawites about the Sunni majority were a significant factor in increasing sectarianism. As one interviewee noted: "The regime used its tools — Ba'ath Party members, intelligence agents, many of whom were Alawites, and Alawite religious leaders in contact with the state — to stoke sectarian sentiments by all means." By framing the protests as a Sunni conspiracy aimed at overthrowing Alawite power and transferring it to the Sunnis, the regime successfully fostered a narrative of existential threat. This was further reinforced by external media outlets that spread sectarian rhetoric: "Channels like Wesal and Safa spread sectarian sentiments, making the Alawites believe that Bashar's regime was better than the revolutionaries who might slaughter us."³⁰ These media channels played a crucial role in amplifying fears and justifying the regime's actions in terms of using violence against the opposition.

Undoubtedly, the existence of extremist Islamist factions among the opposition has also played a significant role in increasing sectarianism. These groups have often targeted Alawite communities, which has fuelled fear and animosity. An interviewee expressed this sentiment: "Jisr al-Shughour massacre in 2011 happened at the beginning of the revolution before the emergence of Islamic groups.³¹ The regime left the branch [security office] for three days, and those who died were mostly Alawites (see [Figure 3](#)). Part of the revolution was sectarian from the beginning — channels like Wesal and Safa spread sectarian sentiments. There were early fears that traveling by bus could result in being killed based on identity. Such rumours spread, and people said that Bashar's regime was better than the revolutionaries who might slaughter us."³² The narrative within the Alawite community often emphasizes that extremists were the first to resort to violence, which has reopened old wounds and reinforced sectarian divides: "The Alawite narrative says that the Sunnis started the violence first. There were signs that the regime would fall, and the Sunnis began the beheadings. This severe violence and extremism made the sectarian rift even deeper."³³

As the cycle of sectarian violence increased by regime and opposition, retaliation has become a defining feature of the Syrian war. Incidents of brutal violence by Alawite-dominated security forces against Sunni communities have fuelled a cycle of revenge attacks. An interviewee recounted: "The regime's forces, mostly Alawites, committed acts of torture and violence against Sunni protesters. This has led to a deep-seated hatred and desire for revenge among the Sunnis."³⁴ The targeting of Sunni civilians by regime forces, often perceived as collective punishment, has exacerbated sectarian animosities. This has led to retaliatory attacks on Alawite communities, creating a vicious cycle of violence that has further entrenched sectarian divisions. However, this violence was perceived as a result of increasing involvement of regional and international actors. Our interviews reflect the resentment of interference of regional powers and the assistance provided to both the opposition and the regime armed forces as they perceive the involvement of foreign powers has resulted in instigating violence against Syrian people regardless of sectarian, ethnic or political affiliations.³⁵

29. Ibid.

30. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H3) 27 May 2024; Wesal TV and Safa TV, based in Saudi Arabia, were Sunni Islamic channels known for spreading anti-Shia content and sectarian sentiments.

31. The Jisr al-Shughour massacre in June 2011 was a significant and controversial event during the Syrian civil war. The Syrian government claimed that 120 soldiers and security personnel were killed by armed insurgents, describing the incident as an ambush by "armed gangs. For more information, read: Vela, J. (2011, June 14). [Truth about 'massacre' stays buried as fight for border town goes on](#). The Independent.

32. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H4) 28 May 2024.

33. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H5) 1 June 2024.

34. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H6) 3 June 2024.

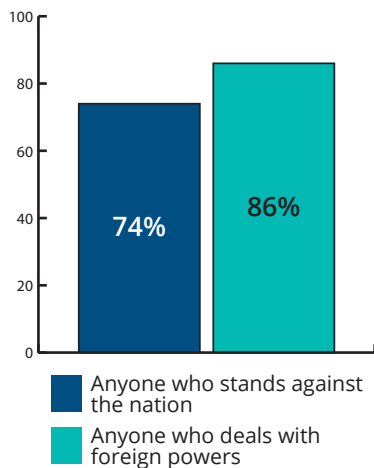
35. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H7) 3 June 2024.

Figure 3: Map of Syria showing Idlib Governorate and the Jisr al-Shughour massacre location



Source: Adapted from BBC News (2019)³⁶

Figure 4: Who should be considered as a national traitor?



Concurrently, survey findings reflect these sentiments, revealing how deeply ingrained the concepts of loyalty and betrayal are within the Alawite community. The results further underscore the extent of instrumentalization of sectarian tension that has gripped the Alawite community. A significant 74% of respondents agreed that anyone who stands against the nation (leadership and people) is a traitor, even if they are Syrians and regardless of their religious, ethnic and political affiliations. This response highlights the deep-rooted mistrust and fear between communities, illustrating how the regime's narrative has permeated Alawite perceptions. Additionally, 86% of respondents believe that anyone who deals with foreign powers for their own interests against the Syrian people is a traitor (see Figure 4). On one hand, this reinforces the regime's portrayal of external threats and bolsters its justifi-

cation for harsh measures against opposition forces, with respondents expressing high levels of agreement with statements that align with the regime's narrative of threat and betrayal. On the other hand, 86% of respondents agree that dealing with foreign powers is treason, which in the survey context is understood by respondents to include all external actors, even those allied with the current regime that are tied to the regime's survival. What is important to note here is that survey findings revealed height-

36. BBC News (2019): Syria war: Unexplained blast kills 15 in rebel-held Idlib.

ened sectarian tensions, reflecting the community's internalization of the regime's propaganda and its impact on their views of national loyalty and betrayal. The ambivalence, however, of this seeming loyalty towards the regime's leadership becomes clear when looking at the 86% that shows mistrust with external powers' intervention in Syria, pointing towards Alawites' disillusionment with external actors' motives even if they are allies of the regime. Hence, by integrating these survey findings with interview insights, it becomes evident that, while there is a certain ambivalence, the Syrian regime's strategic manipulation of sectarian fears has deeply influenced the Alawite community's perceptions and responses to the conflict. The deliberate portrayal of the conflict as a sectarian struggle has not only fortified the regime's support base but also entrenched divisions within Syrian society, complicating efforts towards reconciliation and peace.

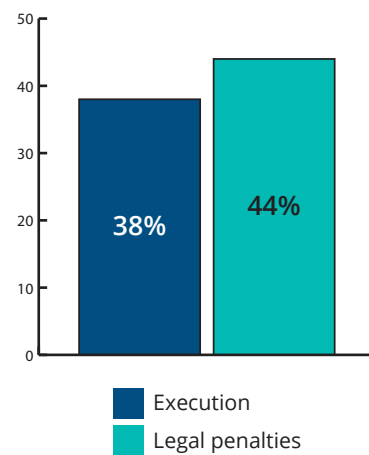
More importantly, survey results align with these interview insights, indicating that the majority of the Alawite community supports severe punishments for those perceived as betraying the nation. For instance, 38.0% of respondents support execution as a punishment for national betrayal, while 44.0% favoured specific legal penalties. This preference for harsh punitive measures reflects the community's desire for retribution and justice in response to perceived threats and acts of betrayal (see Figure 5). Moreover, in responding to questions on conceptions of homeland, an overwhelming majority of 60.7% of participants support the statement 'where there is safety and security,' which emphasises the regime's oft-quoted slogans and narrative.

The integration of survey findings with interview analysis provides a comprehensive view of the deep-seated sectarianism within the Alawite community. The survey results on definitions of national betrayal and preferred punishments highlight the community's stringent views on loyalty and justice, influenced by the intense sectarian violence experienced during the conflict. This data, combined with qualitative insights from interviews, underscores the complex interplay between fear, propaganda, and sectarian narratives that have shaped the Alawite community's perceptions and responses to the ongoing conflict. As such, the survey responses reveal a community deeply divided, with entrenched views on loyalty and betrayal that continue to fuel sectarian tensions and complicate efforts towards national reconciliation.

1.1 Reawakening of Existential Fear leading to Militarization

The Syrian civil war has significantly impacted the Alawite community, particularly by reawakening their existential fears and increasing their militarization. At the onset of the Syrian civil war, historical and contemporary fears resurfaced with renewed intensity among the Alawite community. The initial protests were perceived as potentially devolving into sectarian violence, with the portrayal of the conflict as a Sunni-Alawite struggle heightening these fears. One interviewee noted: "There is a feeling of fear among the Alawites because the conflict was depicted as a Sunni-Alawite struggle. In my house in Jableh, we participated in demonstrations, but the Alawites withdrew because they felt if the regime falls, extremist Islamists would take over."³⁷ This fear of Islamists taking over the government created a profound sense of insecurity within the community. Another interviewee described the climate of fear and the threats of economic collapse and forced conscription: "There was fear of the country being divi-

Figure 5: What is the preferred punishment for national betrayal?



37. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H8) 4 June 2024.

ded into an Alawite state and a Sunni state. There was fear of economic collapse. No one dared not to go to reserve military duty because they felt that this was their duty to protect their existence.”³⁸ These fears were compounded by the perception that participation in the conflict, even in a non-combatant role, was essential for the survival of the community.

Historical memories of persecution have also played a significant role in shaping the Alawites' responses to the current conflict. One interviewee recounted the impact of historical trauma: “Historically, the religious state persecuted the Alawites—during the French period, the secular state gave them their rights. The Alawites feared history would repeat itself. Our parents always told us about the massacres against the Alawites during the Ottoman period. We were told about the history of the Alawites and that we lived in the north in the past and how the Ottomans slaughtered us, forcing us to flee to the mountains. Therefore, we must protect ourselves from history repeating itself.”³⁹ This historical narrative of persecution has left deep scars and a persistent sense of vulnerability within the community. The fear was not only historical but also contemporary. The events surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in the 1980s further solidified the Alawites' sense of existential threat. During this period, the Alawites experienced targeted violence at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. An interviewee highlighted how this period intensified their communal anxiety: “The events of the Muslim Brotherhood made Assad garner Alawite support. Many prominent Alawite figures were killed by the Muslim Brotherhood at that time.”⁴⁰ The violent tactics of the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent fear it instilled reinforced the Alawites' perception of being a besieged minority, constantly under threat from larger Sunni populations.

In response to these fears, the Alawite community increasingly turned to militarization as a means of protection. The Syrian regime's mobilization efforts and the community's economic needs played significant roles in this process. As one interviewee explained: “The economic factor militarized the Alawites; there was no more food, and we returned to the old days of joining the army to earn a living. In the old days, many Alawites used to join the army and then from 2000 onwards, many stopped joining the army but the war has made us go to the old days of relying on the army to survive and make a living.”⁴¹ The state's portrayal of the conflict as an existential threat to the Alawites led many to join the military and other armed formations. An interviewee noted: “The war naturally led to the militarization of the Syrian society as a whole, including the Alawite community, especially during the early years. Militarization occurred for several reasons: state mobilization, the continuing strength of the state in their areas, and many Alawites' belief in the existential threat posed by extremist groups. Additionally, the economic factor led many to volunteer in parallel armed formations under names like the National Defense.”⁴² The interviews also highlighted the solidarity among minorities in the face of the Sunni extremist threat. This solidarity often translated into military support for the regime, perceived as a protector against extremist forces: “Minorities united against the Sunni threat. There was a bond between these sects. Christians sided with the regime because they saw it as a secular state. Although extremists were a minority among the Sunnis, their voice was the strongest.”⁴³ This militarization was not solely for regime defense but also for personal and communal protection. The fear of losing power and subsequent retribution was a significant driver: “When you feel in danger, you want to defend. You are not just defending the regime—you are defending your family, your honour, your village.”⁴⁴

38. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H9) 5 June 2024.

39. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H10) 6 June 2024.

40. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H11) 7 June 2024.

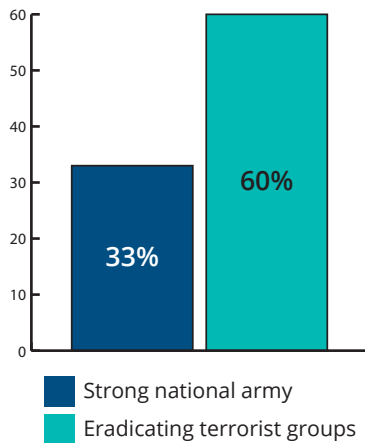
41. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H12) 9 June 2024.

42. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H13) 10 June 2024.

43. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H14) 11 June 2024.

44. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H15) 12 June 2024.

Figure 6: What is national dignity?



Survey findings reinforce this perspective, with 36.3% of respondents supporting that ‘national dignity’ is closely tied to being without occupation or dependence, whereas a majority of 60.0% agreed that national dignity is ‘eradicating terrorist groups’ indicating heightened levels of fear. This sentiment aligns with the respondents’ perception of ‘strong military presence’ as indispensable to maintaining national dignity amidst the chaos of war, with 33.0% of respondents confirming this statement (see Figure 6). This underscores the community’s view that military strength and robust leadership are critical to their sense of security and dignity. Survey findings underscore these sentiments, revealing the community’s deep-seated fears and responses to perceived threats. More importantly, 83.5% of respondents agree that anyone who deals with foreign powers

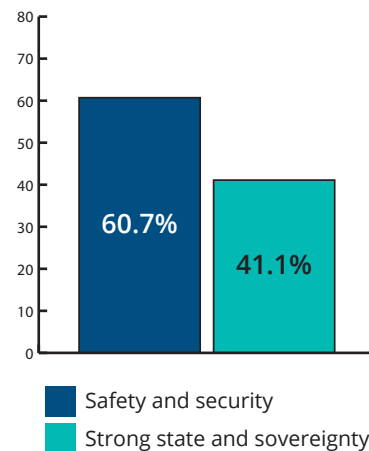
against the nation and its sovereignty is a traitor, reflecting the Alawites’ fear of external intervention and its impact on community security. This high percentage indicates a prevalent concern about sovereignty and the influence of foreign entities, which has historically been a source of anxiety for the Alawite community.

1.2 Displacement, Sectarianized Geography and Fractured Belonging

The conflict has also led to significant displacement, with Alawites leaving areas dominated by Sunnis due to fear of retaliation. One interviewee shared their experience: “The conflict drove Alawites to evacuate areas where they were a minority. I had to leave my home in the Damascus suburbs at the beginning of the war due to fear of reprisals. After three years, I had to sell the house because I felt I could never feel safe there again, even though the area was fully under state control.”⁴⁵ This displacement has led to a more pronounced geographical segregation between Alawites and Sunnis, further entrenching sectarian divides.

Survey findings echo these experiences of displacement and the resulting changes in perceptions of national belonging. When asked about their concept of homeland, 41.1% of respondents indicated that ‘homeland is where there is a strong state and sovereignty,’ reflecting the community’s prioritization of areas perceived as safe, predominantly Alawite regions such as the coast (see Figure 7). Concurrently, 43.0% of respondents agreed that ‘loyal Syrians are those who stayed in their lands and did not leave.’ This is further illustrated by another interviewee’s sentiment: “Most Alawites feel their identity is tied to the coast rather than to Syria as a whole (see Figure 8). This has increased after the war, and they see the coast as their place of safety. Why would I go to Idlib if I’m going to be killed in Idlib?”⁴⁶ The survey also revealed various expressions of ‘love for Syria’ among the Alawite community, with 40.9% describing their resilience. These expressions highlight a complex relationship with the concept of homeland, where safety and resilience in the face of conflict

Figure 7: What does homeland mean to you?



45. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H16) 14 June 2024.

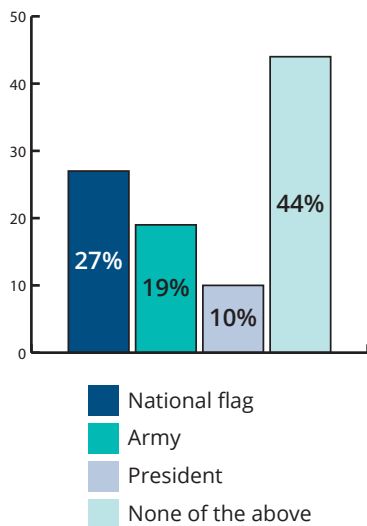
46. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H17) 15 June 2024.

play crucial roles. However, the notion of homeland being tied to physical safety in specific regions underscores the impact of the war on the community's sense of national belonging.

Figure 8: Alawite concentration areas



Figure 9: What gives you national pride?



As a result of these personal losses and increased grievances, shifts in conceptions of belonging to the nation have manifested. For example, survey results on the question: ‘What makes you most proud as a Syrian’: A) its army [19.0%], B) its president [10.0%], C) its national flag [27.0%], D) none of the above [44%] (see Figure 9). This neutral positioning towards these options signifies a shift from pre-existing emotional ties with the regime and its symbols. The integration of survey findings with interview analysis provides a comprehensive view of the deep-seated sectarianism within the Alawite community. The survey responses on concepts of national belonging and expressions of love for Syria highlight the community's focus on safety, resilience, and cultural ties to specific regions, influenced by the intense sectarian violence experienced during the conflict. This data, combined with qualitative insights from interviews, underscores the complex interplay

between fear, displacement, and sectarian narratives that have shaped the Alawite community's perceptions and responses to the ongoing conflict.

By examining both quantitative and qualitative data, it becomes clear that the regime's strategies and the actions of extremist groups have profoundly impacted the Alawite community's social fabric. The

survey responses reveal a community deeply divided, with entrenched views on loyalty and betrayal that continue to fuel sectarian tensions and complicate efforts towards national reconciliation.

2. Frozen Conflict and Economic Hardships: Cohesion vs Division

As illustrated in earlier sections, the entrenched sectarianized narratives from all parties have instigated violence. However, our data notably also elucidates the impact of the Syrian war on the social fabric of the Alawite community, creating both cohesion and division among its members. In the early stages of the conflict, the Alawite community demonstrated significant cohesion, largely driven by a sense of existential threat. The regime of Hafez al-Assad had already instilled a strong sense of sectarian solidarity among the Alawites, particularly in response to the rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 80s. One interviewee noted: “The rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood enabled Hafez al-Assad to create a sectarian solidarity. This solidarity started to wane off but the revolution of 2011 enabled the Assad regime to use the factor of fear to recreate this solidarity.”⁴⁷ The fear of extremist groups targeting Alawites reinforced their unity, with another interviewee explaining that “the Alawite community at the beginning of the war was largely united in support of the regime, seeing it as their protector against extremist groups that openly declared their hostility towards Alawites.”⁴⁸

The regime's ability to maintain Alawite support was also strengthened by the significant human losses suffered by the community. This perceived high loss is due to Alawite overrepresentation in the army. One respondent mentioned: “The enormous human losses that affected almost every household caused a collective shock, which prompted the Alawite community to rally and cling to the regime.”⁴⁹ This traumatic experience reinforced a sense of solidarity and a survival instinct among Alawites, making them more cohesive in their support for the Assad regime. Another interviewee highlighted this by saying: “The cohesion among Alawites increased, with neutral individuals being pushed out. Bashar al-Assad said, 'We have gained a more homogeneous society,' and he was right.”⁵⁰ Additionally, the Alawites initially saw the regime as their primary protector against extremist factions. As one interviewee explained: “At the beginning of the war, the Alawite community was largely unified in supporting the regime because they considered it their guarantee of protection against extremist groups, which did not hide their hostility towards Alawites in their slogans and practices. The failure of opposition groups to reassure the Alawites about their future in the event of the current regime's collapse was the main reason for their stance against the opposition, including secular factions.”⁵¹

However, this initial cohesion began to fragment as the war progressed and the immediate threats receded. Economic hardships and internal disputes emerged as significant sources of division within the Alawite community. One interviewee observed: “I believe the sectarian cohesion has started to decline because the war has ended, and the cohesion has started to fade away.”⁵² Economic disparities became pronounced, with another respondent explaining: “The current division is due to the economy. Impoverished people are saying, ‘We fought for ten years and sacrificed our children so that the president could stay in power while he grows richer.’”⁵³ Internal conflicts also arose from the regime's actions against prominent Alawite figures. For instance, the state's actions against Rami Makhoul, a wealthy Alawite businessman, sparked significant dissent. One interviewee stated: “What the state did with Rami Makhoul went against Alawite customs. Bashar al-Assad took the Bustan Association from Rami Makhoul. This caused a shock within the Alawite community initially but was eventually absor-

47. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H18) 16 June 2024.

48. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H19) 17 June 2024.

49. Authors interview with a member of Alawite community (anonymized as H20) 19 June 2024.

50. H2.

51. H4.

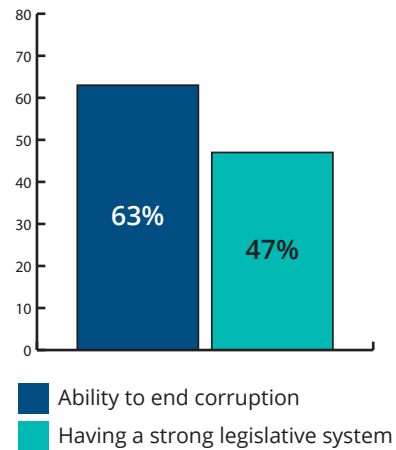
52. H6.

53. H7.

bed.”⁵⁴ This incident highlighted fractures within the community as some felt the regime's actions were betraying its own.

The impact of economic hardships on Alawites’ perceptions of ‘strong state’ have also manifested in our survey results. For example, a majority of 63.0% respondents agreed that a ‘strong state’ is defined by ‘its ability to end corruption,’ whereas 47.0% chose ‘a strong legislative system that legalizes punitive measures against war profiteers from all parties’ (see Figure 10). This unwavering support for having a strong governance and legal system is substantiated with another statement that defines ‘loyal Syrians as those who are still supportive of the government despite economic hardship,’ where a minority of 10.0% of respondents agreed with this statement.

Figure 10: What is considered a strong state?



As the conflict proceeds to more of a frozen one, economic changes also contributed to social upheaval within the Alawite community. One respondent noted: “On the economic level, significant changes occurred within the Alawite bloc, with most people who had accumulated some wealth before the war losing most of their savings. Meanwhile, a new affluent class emerged, consisting of those involved in looting, kidnapping, and some warlords tied to security agencies.”⁵⁵ This economic disparity created a real social revolution within the Alawite community, shifting loyalties and causing significant internal divisions. This devastating impact on the economic conditions of the Alawite community, leading to widespread poverty and significant economic disparities, was echoed in our survey sample. According to the survey, a staggering 60.7% of respondents reported a monthly household income of less than 200,000 SYP (approximately \$15.38 USD), highlighting the severe economic hardship faced by the majority. Additionally, only 2.5% of respondents reported an income of 1-2 million SYP (approximately \$77 to \$154 USD), indicating a sharp economic divide within the community.

It is important to note that most Alawites rely on government jobs, and the devaluation of the Syrian pound has disproportionately affected these individuals. As one interviewee noted: “Most of the Alawite community are state employees – the government hasn't increased salaries – an employee's salary is 20,000 or 30,000 [Syrian pounds] (approximately \$15 to \$30 USD) and they have been hit harder because they are government employees.”⁵⁶ This economic strain has not only exacerbated existing disparities, but has also led to increased resentment towards those perceived as benefiting from the conflict, such as regime warlords and connected elites.

These disparities within the community further disrupted traditional economic structures and led to widespread poverty and division within the Alawite community. An interviewee mentioned: “Most Alawites rely on government jobs, and the devaluation of the currency affected them the most. This issue does not impact a Damascene merchant like it does a government employee.”⁵⁷ This quote sheds light on the heavy reliance of the Alawite community on public sector employment. With the Syrian pound's value plummeting, the purchasing power of salaries has drastically diminished. This economic pressure is not felt equally across all sectors, with those in government roles, predominantly held by

54. H9.

55. H8.

56. H10; Before the crisis, 1 USD was equivalent to 50 SYP. Now, 1 USD is equivalent to 13,000 SYP, reflecting a severe devaluation of the Syrian Pound.

57. H12.

Alawites, bearing the brunt of the crisis. In contrast, merchants and those in private enterprise, particularly in cities like Damascus, are somewhat insulated from these economic shocks.

The economic deterioration is linked to the broader socio-political support structures that once bolstered the community. One individual complains about the lack of the regime's previous patrimonial networks by saying: "We were a community supported by security, intelligence, and the Fourth Division. All of that is gone. The rich have become poor, and the poor have become rich."⁵⁸ This statement reflects the collapse of the support networks that provided stability and security to the Alawite community, leading to a reversal of fortunes and increased economic instability. However, it's important to note that this reversal does not hold true for the majority of poor Alawites, who continue to face significant economic challenges.

Moreover, there is notable resentment towards the perceived accumulation of wealth by figures close to the regime, such as Asma al-Assad, the First Lady: "The tomatoes that go from Tartus to Iraq and sell for 40,000 [Syrian pounds] per kilo, who profits from them? Asma al-Assad? Why doesn't she share some of the stacked billions?"⁵⁹ This sentiment reflects widespread frustration with economic disparities and the monopolisation of profits by those in power. The question posed by the interviewee points to a deep-seated anger over the inequitable distribution of wealth, where the benefits of trade and commerce are seen to disproportionately favour the elite, leaving ordinary Alawites feeling exploited and marginalised.

Additionally, there is anger directed at regime warlords and groups like the Shabiha, who are accused of economic exploitation.⁶⁰ One interviewee elaborated: "Economically, there have been a series of changes within the Alawite bloc. Most categories that managed to accumulate some wealth have lost their savings, particularly those who benefited from government jobs or were educated. A new wealthy class has emerged, consisting of those engaged in looting, theft, kidnapping, and the warlords connected to security agencies or the Fourth Division. In other words, a real social upheaval has occurred within the Alawite community on an economic level."⁶¹ This quote captures the dramatic shift in the economic landscape within the Alawite community. Traditional pathways to wealth and stability, such as education and government employment, have eroded, while illicit activities and war profiteering have given rise to a new class of wealthy individuals. This has led to a profound social and economic transformation, fostering resentment and further dividing the community.

There have been regional shifts in the cohesion among Alawites. One interviewee observed: "At the regional level, an observer can notice a shift in 'Alawite loyalty' towards the Syrian regime from the areas of Latakia, Jableh, and Qardaha towards the areas of Tartus, Homs, and Al-Ghab. These shifts in loyalty are confirmed by the changes the regime has made in recent years in influential military and security positions."⁶² However, the majority of interviewees agree that the primary source of division within the Alawite community is economic rather than ideological or sectarian. As one interviewee noted: "There has been a crack, which is a class crack. The division is not on ideological or sectarian lines. This issue has caused a rift."⁶³ Another respondent emphasized: "Many analysts have bet on the impact of the recent economic crisis on the Alawite bloc's loyalties towards the Syrian regime, but the facts show that the chronic fear factor that the Syrian regime managed to instil remains the decisive element in controlling this human group."⁶⁴

58. H13.

59. H16.

60. The Shabiha are pro-regime militias, notorious for human rights abuses during the civil war.

61. H14.

62. H12.

63. H1.

64. H3.

The regime's failure to maintain control is further facilitated by the lack of a clear religious authority within the Alawite community. This lack of leadership is rooted in the historical structure of Alawite belief, which traditionally lacks a hierarchical religious framework. Additionally, during the war, many potential religious leaders were either co-opted by the regime or their influence was deliberately weakened to prevent any challenge to the regime's authority. One interviewee explained: "The absence of a clear religious reference among the Alawites made them a malleable group according to the regime's interests. This absence prevented any form of rational choice that might have opposed the regime's interests at any historical turning point."⁶⁵ Another added that "the chronic fear factor and the lack of a structured religious hierarchy allowed the regime to shape the Alawite community's choices in ways that aligned with its interests."⁶⁶ As such, while the early years of the Syrian civil war saw strong cohesion within the Alawite community driven by fear and collective trauma, over time, economic hardships, internal disputes, and the regime's manipulative tactics have caused significant divisions. These divisions are primarily economic and social rather than ideological, reflecting a complex interplay of factors that continue to shape the Alawite community's dynamics.

2.1 Shifts in Social Identity and Religious Affiliation

As illustrated in earlier sections, the onset of civil protests in 2011 followed by a severe cycle of violence have contributed to heightened emotions on belonging, political affiliations, and the cohesion within the Alawite community. However, as the intensification of violence ceased, the emergence of identity shifts became increasingly pronounced across various segments of the Alawite community. These shifts in identity were precipitated by the profound dysphoric experiences encountered by individuals during this period. According to our interviews, the cessation of prior threats, such as attacks by opposition armed groups, have resulted in disillusionment with the regime and its capitalization on fear to maintain control and dominance. This is coupled with economic hardships and an increased collective feeling that managing livelihood and daily needs is paramount. Such factors signify the initial phase of identity transformation within the Alawite community.

In the scholarly discourse on identity transformation amidst armed conflicts and civil strife, a consensus emerges among academics regarding the interplay between the weakness of national identity and the rise of sub-state identities.⁶⁷ This fragmentation often manifests across ethnic, sectarian, territorial, or tribal lines, engendering a rich academic debate on the correlation between the erosion of national identity and the emergence of internal conflicts and civil wars. Such discussions illuminate the nuanced perspectives surrounding identity transformation, underlining the profound impact of conflict intensity on individuals' social environments and their conceptualization of identity. Within the Syrian context, the rigid imposition of Ba'athist ideology has precipitated exclusion and discrimination, privileging "homogeneity" over a broader conception of citizenship or legal belonging to the state, ultimately attenuating national solidarity.⁶⁸

According to our interlocutors, their reflections on these identity transformations encompassed their perceptions on religious affiliations, social fabric and political attitudes. For instance, before the Syrian

65. H16.

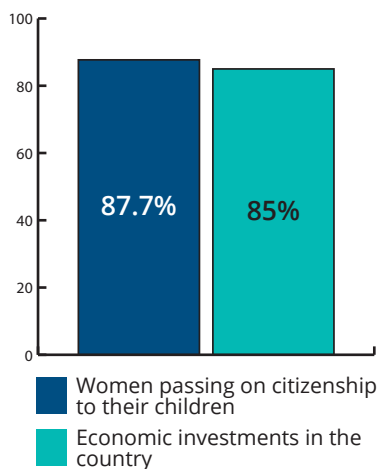
66. H19.

67. Hedetoft, U. (1993). National identity and mentalities of war in three EC countries. *Journal of Peace Research*, 30(3), 281–300; Malmvig, H., & Dreyer, J. (2020). Immanent conflict, without imminent war: Local actors and foreign powers scrambling for influence in Iraq and Syria. Danish Institute for International Studies; Phillips, C., & Valbjørn, M. (2018). What is in a name? The role of (different) identities in the multiple proxy wars in Syria. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(3), 414–433; Shesterinina, A. (2022). Civil war as a social process: Actors and dynamics from pre-to post-war. *European Journal of International Relations*, 28(3), 538–562; Hinnebusch, R. (2019). Sectarianism and governance in Syria. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 19(1), 41–66; Aldoughli, R. (2022). Romancing the nation. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 15(4), 427–439.

68. Aldoughli, R. (2021a). Securitization as a tool of regime survival. *Journal of Political Studies*, 45(2), 123-145; (2022). Romancing the nation. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 15(4), 427-439.

civil war, the Alawites did not perceive themselves as having a distinctive identity. They were generally open to all sects and intermarriage between Alawites and Sunnis was common and socially acceptable. As one interviewee mentioned that “Alawites marry into all sects. An Alawite man marrying a Sunni woman, or an Alawite woman marrying a Sunni man was not an issue.”⁶⁹ This inclusive attitude was further underscored by the statement: “In the Alawite tradition, what matters is one’s conduct, not their religion.”⁷⁰ However, all interviewees confirmed that discussions about sects and religious identities were generally avoided in the past, partly due to the political atmosphere which discouraged such discourse.

Figure 11: What avenues should exist for granting Syrian citizenship?



Concurrently, these open attitudes towards intermarriages were reflected in our survey findings on questions regarding women’s rights to pass their citizenship to their children, with 87.7% agreeing to the statement (see Figure 11). This is usually challenged by mainstream Sunni ulama who consider Sunni women marrying men from different sects/religions as not allowed in Islam, unlike the other way around. The respondents from Alawite community showed relaxed and gender-inclusive attitudes towards not only women’s rights but also a more of civic conception of national belonging. A question about ‘characteristics on granting Syrian citizenship’ came with four options: a) *foreigners who married a Syrian woman* with 85.0%; b) *foreigners who worked and lived in Syria for five years* with 60.0%; c) *foreigners who fought with the Syrian army* with 16.0%; d) *foreigners who contributed substantially to the economic sector* with

40.0%. These quantitative measures significantly reflect the extent to which economic hardships have impacted Alawites’ perceptions of nation-building and belonging.

Despite this evidence of inclusive social and political attitudes, the war has also led to a decline in the Arab national identity among Alawites and a rise in a more insular Alawite identity. As one interviewee stated: “This war has hit the concept of Arab nationalism among Alawites very hard. Faith in it has decreased a lot. Sympathy for issues like Palestine has also diminished.”⁷¹ This sentiment reflects a broader existential crisis within the community, pushing many to embrace a more defined Alawite identity in response to the existential threats posed by extremist Sunni groups. This is evidenced by instances where some notable members of the Alawite community openly discuss and assert their Alawite identity more vigorously. In this context, social media has played a pivotal role in this transformation, allowing Alawite activists to share their perspectives and correct misconceptions about their community. A religious figure, Muhammad Abdullah Mihoub, has been instrumental in this movement, working to clarify and preserve Alawite beliefs and history.⁷²

As such, this period has seen a marked rise in the expression of an Alawite identity, with a renewed focus on its unique cultural and religious characteristics. An interviewee highlighted this transformation, stating: “I was born and lived in Tartus and didn’t understand what being an Alawite meant until I moved to Damascus and saw the rest of Syria’s components.”⁷³ This shift is further emphasised by the

69. H20; However, since the onset of the war in 2011, sectarian divisions have deepened, and such intermarriages have become less common and more socially contentious.

70. H3.

71. H4.

72. H6; Muhammad Abdullah Mihoub, [Home \[Facebook Page\]](#).

73. H7.

growing identification with coastal areas among the Alawites, as one interviewee states: “Most Alawites feel their identity is tied to the coast, not to Syria, and this sentiment has increased after the war. When I hear the coastal dialect, I feel a strong sense of connection because of the coast.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, there has been a noticeable increase in religious symbols and practices, such as the display of images of Imam Ali and the Sword of Imam Ali.⁷⁵ This religious resurgence contrasts with the pre-war period when such expressions were less common. Additionally, some Alawites have begun identifying more closely with Shiite Islam, with some even participating in religious tourism to sites in Iraq.⁷⁶ However, it should be stressed that other interviewees have mentioned that Iran’s strategy in spreading Shiism among Alawites has failed significantly. The interviewees indicated that Iranian militias have pursued recruitment among Alawites with substantial material benefits.

The perception of their identity has been significantly altered by the war. Where once there was a secular, agrarian, and inclusive identity, there is now a stronger sense of sectarian belonging, as one interviewee states: “Before the war, the Alawite identity was more about being Syrian or from a particular city like Homs or Latakia. After the war, the identity became more about the existential threat and the need to protect the Alawite community.”⁷⁷ This shift towards a more pronounced and insular Alawite identity underscores the profound impact the Syrian civil war has had on the community, reshaping self-perception and social dynamics in fundamental ways.

2.2 Reshuffling in Political Loyalty and Allegiance with the Regime: Past and Present

The impact of the Syrian civil war on the Alawite community has led to a significant reshuffling of their relationship with the regime. This shift is characterized by changing perceptions and increased disillusionment among the Alawites. As one interviewee reflects:

To be honest, before the war, Alawites felt a strong implicit connection to the regime, believing it to be their own. They were treated differently from other groups, particularly the Sunnis. The security forces treated Alawites favourably – as an Alawite, I wouldn’t get beaten. If I went to the police for a smuggling issue, I wasn’t treated badly. Furthermore, employment and public services in Alawite-dominated villages were prioritized, with state intervention swiftly addressing issues like electricity and water shortages.⁷⁸

However, the war has fundamentally altered this dynamic. The Alawites’ perception of the state has shifted from viewing it as a paternal protector to seeing it as a neutral or even adversarial entity. As one interviewee states: “The social concept among Alawites changed from seeing the state as a father to seeing it as a party.”⁷⁹

This shift in political attitudes towards the regime became paramount in 2014 when many young Alawites sought to evade military service, a stark contrast to the past when defiance was unimaginable due to the threat of arrest. An interviewee emphasizes that “from 2014, any young Alawite capable of avoiding military service did so. No one dared to evade military conscription reserve because there were harsh consequences such as potential arrest.”⁸⁰ This highlights that the regime has calculative measures

74. H8.

75. H11.

76. H13.

77. H12.

78. H13.

79. H1; Aldoughli, R. (2024a). *Romanticizing masculinity in Baathist Syria: Ideology, identity, and gender*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; (2019a). Interrogating the construction of masculinist protection and militarism in the Syrian constitution of 1973. *The Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 15(1), 50-53.

80. H7.

towards Alawites as well. The privileges and material benefits were provided upon unconditional loyalty to the regime. One interviewee further elucidated this security approach, stating:

At the funerals of Alawite soldiers, mothers were instructed by the intelligence not to cry in public. The intelligence officers would tell the martyr's family to come out in front of everyone and say, 'We wish you the same,' and we are also going to send our other sons to the army. However, people started challenging this lie, crying at funerals, and some mothers cursed the army and even Bashar al-Assad.⁸¹

As the numbers of death among Alawites increased, feelings of anger and resentment were profound as a result of the regime's inconsideration and lack of sensitivity towards affected families. "For example, the regime compensated the families of deceased soldiers with meagre amounts of money like 20,000 liras a month [Syrian Pounds] (approximately \$1.54), and their families would say: 'My son died for 20,000 liras?'"⁸² (see Figure 12)

Figure 12: Syrian currency devaluation

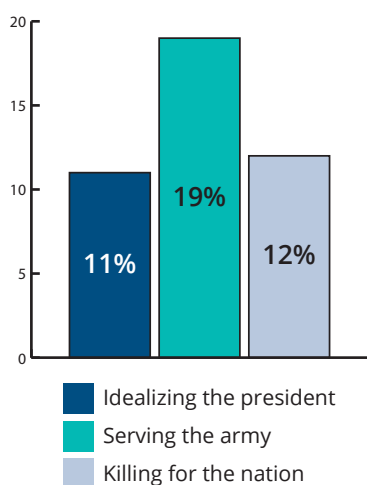


These growing feelings of betrayal among the Alawites were accompanied by profound political disillusionment with the regime's security tactics. Alawites believe that the regime has facilitated extremist incursions into their villages by withdrawing military units. One interviewee illustrated that "the regime made it easy for extremists to storm the villages of Slunfeh by withdrawing military units. These villages were hard to penetrate – the regime handed over these villages just like it handed over Jisr al-Shughur and Adra al-Omalia. Zahran Aloush, who established an Islamist extremist group, was released by Bashar al-Assad during the early phase of the revolution. Why?"⁸³ Moreover, there is a perceived injustice in how the regime treats different minorities, with Alawites feeling particularly neglected, as an interviewee laments: "There were orders not to arrest any Druze evading the army, but Alawites were punished."⁸⁴ This sense of betrayal and disillusionment has led to a significant rift within the community. "Assad has destroyed the sect, and the sect is in a historical predicament. Many Alawites believe Assad dragged them into a war. At the same time, there are no international forces that make us feel safe outside of Assad," stated an interviewee.⁸⁵

81. H3.
82. H4.
83. H8.
84. H9.
85. H10.

By 2022, shifts in the Alawite collective consciousness became more pronounced, influenced by various factors. The once solid alliance, forged since the 1980s by linking the sect’s fate to the regime, no longer seemed convincing or beneficial to many Alawites.⁸⁶ After 2022, there have been a series of shifts in the Alawite public consciousness. This revelation was echoed in the words of an interviewee, stating “while the regime manages to revive the existential fear every time there is an attack on the Alawites such as the latest attack that led to the War College massacre in Homs, yet there is a deep-seated resentment evident in private conversations among Alawites, although public declarations often still support the regime.”⁸⁷ Such ambivalence in publicly expressing dissatisfaction with the regime is understandable given the security approach the regime is known for. As another interviewee elucidates: “When you sit among Alawites – plainly, they all curse Bashar and are not happy with the work he is doing. But when someone from outside the sect comes, Bashar becomes ‘God.’”⁸⁸

Figure 13: What is patriotism?



Results show unwavering agreement with 83.3% and 78.7% for statements a) and b), respectively, while 11.3% support of option (c) (see Figure 14). This shift in priorities highlights a move away from the regime’s discourse that glorifies armed resistance and violence.

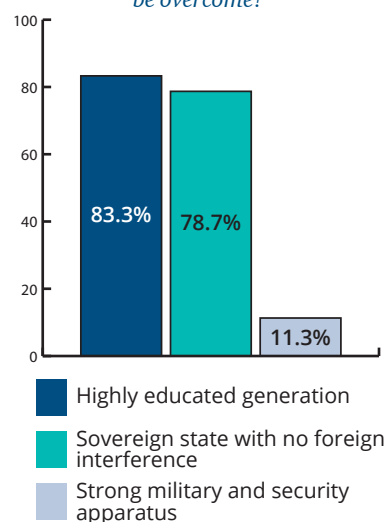
Hence, the Alawite community has experienced a profound reshuffling of its relationship with the regime, driven by growing disillusionment, perceived injustices, and a fundamental change in how they view their own role and sacrifices in the context of the Syrian civil war. The survey findings underscore this shift, revealing a community that increasingly values inclusiveness, civic rights, and a move away from militaristic and sectarian approaches.

3. Prospects of Future Active Engagement and Reconciliation

There is an overall sentiment that Alawite activists’ voices are not amplified and that Alawite dissidents

Survey findings also reflect this growing disillusionment. In our questions that measure ‘patriotic sentiments’ that have been propagated by the regime, such as synonymizing the regime with the state, idolizing the army and personification of the nation, three options were presented: a) ‘patriotism is about idealizing the nation’s president’ with only 11.0% choosing this option; b) ‘patriotism is about serving in the army’(19.0%); c) ‘patriotism is about killing for the nation’(12.0%) (see Figure 13). This disillusionment with the regime is further evidenced by the survey results on ‘prospects on overcoming the national crisis.’ We identified three listed selections with options (agree, disagree, none): a) ‘highly educated generation;’ b) ‘a sovereign state with no regional or international interference;’ c) ‘a state with strong military and security apparatus.’

Figure 14: How can the national crisis be overcome?



86. H12.
87. H15.
88. H16.

are stuck between the regime and the opposition, often leading to silence. This challenging position is summarized by one interviewee who stated that “if you are a Sunni oppositionist, you can flee to many areas. If you are an Alawite oppositionist – where can you go? If you go to opposition areas, they will slaughter you. If you stay, the regime will suppress you. At the same time, anyone who raises their voice to criticize the regime is told, 'Do you want your family to be slaughtered by extremists? Do you want your house to be taken over by extremist groups?’”⁸⁹ There is also a consensus that there is no proper civil society among the Alawite community. As one interviewee noted: “There are no civil society organizations in Syria, especially among the Alawites. This role has been limited to the remnants of leftist party forces historically opposed to the Assad regime. Notable figures who tried to play a role in conflict resolution have been marginalized and excluded since the early moments of the Syrian revolution.”⁹⁰

This sentiment is further illustrated by the experience of Abdul Aziz Al-Khair, an Alawite opposition figure: “For example, Abdul Aziz Al-Khair, an Alawite oppositionist, went to a conference in Cairo, and the opposition there started throwing eggs at him. How can you encourage opposition among Alawites when they see what happens to people like Abdul Aziz Al-Khair?”⁹¹ During a visit to Cairo in 2011, Syrian opposition figure Abdul-Aziz al-Khair and other members of the National Coordination Committee were attacked by Syrian protesters who pelted them with eggs, preventing them from entering the Arab League headquarters. This incident occurred as they were attempting to hold talks with the Arab League's chief regarding the ongoing violence in Syria.⁹² Suffice to say that these security fears are extended to religious figures. For example, all interviewees confirmed that Alawite religious figures are under surveillance and are not allowed to speak freely for their communities. In the wordings of one interviewee: “Any religious leader who speaks on behalf of the community or demands services is quickly side-lined and accused of various charges.”⁹³

Despite these challenges, there are notable examples of local initiatives aimed at fostering harmony and reconciliation. One interviewee highlighted the social strength of the Alawite community: “Alawites have a strong social point as their areas are open to displaced people from all sects, whereas an Alawite refugee cannot go to northern Syria.”⁹⁴ The welcoming nature of Alawite villages was emphasized by another participant who said, “all Alawite villages have refugees, and there is a significant number of mixed marriages. When the displaced people from Aleppo came to Dreikish, they emptied schools for them – who did this? The Alawite people of Dreikish. I was surprised by the situation regarding the displaced. The people of Dreikish collected aid for those who came to Dreikish.”⁹⁵ Another participant recounted early efforts during the early years of the uprisings: “At the beginning of the revolution, when refugees came to Tartus, there were initiatives to distribute aid to Sunni refugees. I was part of a team that visited displaced families. After the Baniyas and Bayda massacres, we went there to distribute aid to the victims secretly without the state’s knowledge. But most of the people who were with us were either arrested or fled the country.”⁹⁶

Another illustrating example of potential social and political reconciliation enhanced by Alawite activists is the one following the Tartus bombings and its consequences on the city’s local Sunni sect. The bombings on Tartus in 2016 resulted in 184 deaths, creating pressure and fuelling threats of revenge against the displaced.⁹⁷ In its aftermath, the al-Karnak camp for displaced people, mainly from

89. H17.

90. H19.

91. H1.

92. Maher Ismail. (2021). *Abdul Aziz al-Khair: A Politician of a Special Kind*. The Levant News.

93. H2.

94. H5.

95. H8.

96. H12.

97. Almodon. (2016). *A Week After the Tartus Bombings: How Are the City and the Displaced?*. Almodon.

Aleppo, experienced worsened living conditions and prevailing fear. There were reports of retaliatory actions against Sunni refugees, but Alawite youth activists stepped in to protect them: “After the Tartus bombings in 2016, which killed a large number of people, there was a retaliatory reaction that led to the burning of some Sunni refugee tents in Tartus. Alawite youth went to protect the refugees and stayed in the tents to safeguard them.”⁹⁸ More importantly, civil society activists worked to reassure them through visits and activities, despite criticism of the security forces' inadequate protection. Uncertain about their future due to ongoing conflict in Aleppo, the displaced faced challenges relocating, with activists emphasizing their protection to prevent further city instability.⁹⁹

While these initiatives do not take the form of an organised and autonomous civil society, in recent years, the role of individual Alawite figures in promoting reconciliation is rather noteworthy. For example, an interviewee highlighted the role of social media in amplifying reconciliatory narratives among Alawite public figures in particular: “Yes, there are no organizations or institutions that are explicitly Alawite in Syria, as this is prohibited. However, during the war, some Alawite figures played roles in bringing Syrians closer together and reducing sectarian tension by appearing in the media and on social networks.”¹⁰⁰ Notable examples in this context are Kamal Rostum and Lama Abbas. Kamal Rostum is known for exposing corruption and misconduct involving high-ranking officials and allied militias in Syria. Moreover, Lama Abbas, a Syrian journalist, has criticized the regime and its allies Russia and Iran, despite her support for the regime, leading to multiple arrests. In the most recent incident, she was arrested in September 2023 while returning from Jableh to Damascus, facing charges such as spreading false news.¹⁰¹ She was released in January 2024 after being detained for about four months. She has frequently appeared on social media platforms criticizing Syria's deteriorating economic situation and calling for a revolution against the regime, making her a controversial figure among regime supporters and opponents. During a live broadcast on Facebook, she accused international allies of destroying Syria and called for the government to be dismissed and the People's Assembly to be dissolved.

Collective movements like the 10 August Movement have also emerged in Alawite-dominated regions, reflecting growing dissatisfaction with the regime. The 10 August Movement, which emerged in Latakia and expanded throughout Syria, signifies an important shift within the Alawite community.¹⁰² The group employs non-violent resistance and focuses on building political consciousness, carefully avoiding immediate confrontation to evade severe regime crackdowns. This movement reflects growing dissatisfaction among Alawites with the deteriorating economic conditions and corruption under Assad.¹⁰³ Despite the regime's pervasive surveillance, the movement aims to unify Syrians across sectarian lines and has begun garnering support from frustrated members of the security services, signalling a nuanced approach to fostering change within Syria's complex socio-political landscape. The 10 August Movement has garnered a substantial following on Facebook, with around 31,000 followers, where it regularly updates on the situation in Syria's coastal and Alawite-dominated regions.¹⁰⁴ One notable post mocks Assad's visit to Tartus, questioning why he announces foreign visits in advance but sneaks into domestic regions, implying a lack of genuine leadership and connection with the local populace. This social media activity highlights the movement's efforts to engage with and mobilize the Alawite community by addressing local grievances and exposing the regime's perceived hypocrisies.

This leaning towards social media platforms as an avenue to express political dissatisfaction or opinion has also been stressed in our survey findings. For example, our analysis of *‘Support/Reject Various Forms*

98. H3.

99. H9.

100. H18.

101. Almodon. (2023). *Syria: Regime Intelligence Again Attempts to Arrest Activist Lama Abbas*. Almodon.

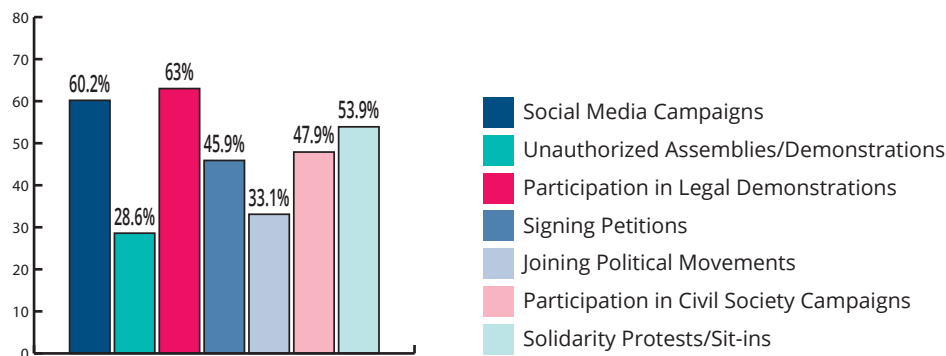
102. Christou, W. (2023). *Dissent spreads to Latakia as protests rage in south Syria*. The New Arab.

103. Saad, M. (2023). *Is an Alawite protest movement emerging in Syria's coastal areas?*. Al Majalla.

104. The 10th of August Movement, Home [Facebook Page].

of *Participation*’ illustrates the levels of support, neutrality, and rejection among respondents towards various forms of civic and political participation. On the topic of *‘participation in support campaigns (hashtags) on social media platforms,’* a clear majority (60.2%) support participating in social media campaigns, showing strong engagement with digital activism. Neutral responses are moderate (33.5%), and only a small fraction (6.3%) disagree, indicating widespread acceptance of online activism. However, opinions are evenly split on *‘participating in unauthorized assemblies and demonstrations,’* with equal percentages agreeing and disagreeing (28.6%). The largest group (42.8%) remains neutral, highlighting significant political apathy and ambivalence towards this form of protest. In authoritarian contexts, this neutrality can often reflect deep-seated fear and apprehension about the consequences of taking a clear stance (see Figure 15). The high neutral views on *‘participating in unauthorized demonstrations’* underscore security concerns regarding explicitly opposing the regime, indicating that Alawites are acutely aware of the regime’s repressive measures and the potential retaliations for expressing disloyalty.

Figure 15: Preferred forms of political participation and civic engagement



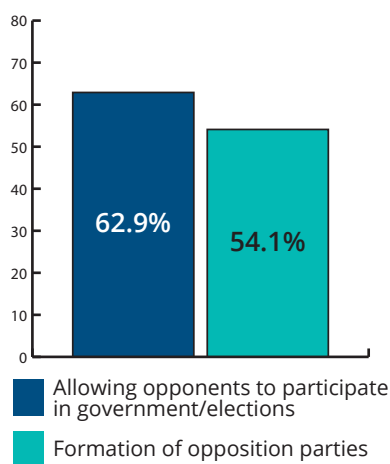
This is further substantiated in their responses about *‘participating in demonstrations with a legal permit,’* where a strong majority (63.0%) support participating in legally permitted assemblies and demonstrations, showing a clear preference for lawful forms of protest. Neutral responses are moderate (31.0%), and only a small fraction (6.0%) disagree. While these findings might be interpreted as a preference for lawful protest, they might also reveal deep security fears within the Alawite community, as showing any opposition might lead to persecution under the authoritarian regime. In such political climates, neutrality often masks the underlying fear of reprisal and the instinct for self-security. It represents a cautious approach where individuals avoid explicit opposition or support, navigating a delicate balance to ensure their safety. This context is crucial for understanding the political attitudes of the Alawite community, who, despite their disillusionment with the Assad regime, remain wary of openly expressing dissent due to the real threat of persecution.

This paradoxical positioning towards civic engagement indicates mild support (45.9%) for *‘signing petitions against decisions or laws,’* indicating substantial preference for efficient governance of enacted laws. A significant portion (42.3%) remains neutral, suggesting some hesitation or ambivalence, while a small percentage (11.8%) disagree. This significantly aligns with our data results on definitions of a *‘strong state,’* which is defined by 63.0% of respondents as being *‘able to end corruption,’* whereas 47.0% choose *‘a strong legislative system that legalizes punitive measures against war profiteers from all parties.’* Partially, this suggests dissatisfaction with the regime’s government apparatuses and addressing the national crisis. This further indicates that showing opposition towards government institutions such as mocking ministers in the regime’s government is relatively less dangerous than politically opposing the regime personified by Assad. Such analysis is substantiated in the responses to a statement on the right to *‘join a party, assembly, or political movement to support a person or election campaign,’*. A significant

portion of respondents (57.0%) remain neutral on joining a political movement, indicating considerable uncertainty or ambivalence. A smaller percentage (33.1%) agrees, showing some support for political engagement, while (9.9%) disagree, reflecting political apathy and security concerns in expressing political opposition.

On measuring civic engagement within the community, for example, views on ‘*participation in civil society campaigns independent of government but organized and supported by the community*,’ nearly half of the respondents (47.9%) support participation in community-organized civil society campaigns, indicating a positive attitude towards grassroots activism. A high neutrality rate (45.9%) suggests that many are still undecided or indifferent, while disagreement is minimal (6.2%). Moreover, a majority (53.9%) support ‘*participating in solidarity protests or sit-ins*,’ indicating strong support for collective action on specific causes. Neutral responses are relatively high (42.6%), reflecting some uncertainty, while disagreement is minimal (3.5%). The data indicates a general preference for legal and organized forms of civic and political participation, with the highest support for social media campaigns and solidarity protests. There is significant neutrality across many categories, suggesting areas of indecision or ambivalence among respondents on explicit expression of political opposition. This highlights the community’s cautious approach towards political engagement, favoring lawful and community-supported activities.

Figure 16: Perceptions on political inclusivity



This cautious approach towards public demonstration of political dissidence is manifested in our survey questions that measure the ‘*right to dissent*.’ The data reveals diverse opinions on several critical topics, showcasing the complexities and nuances within the community. There is a clear majority (62.9%) in favor of ‘*allowing opponents to participate in government and elections*,’ reflecting a preference for inclusive political processes (see Figure 16). This is complemented by a moderate neutral response (28.8%), indicating some reservations, and a minimal disagreement (8.3%), showcasing limited resistance to this idea. Similarly, more than half of the respondents (54.1%) support ‘*the formation of opposition parties and their participation in parliament*,’ indicating a significant leaning towards political pluralism, support for a multi-party system. The high neutral response (35.9%) here suggests a substantial portion of the population is uncertain or indifferent, while only 10.0% disagree. However, when it comes to ‘*granting opponents full civil rights unless they threaten security and peace*,’ the majority (51.9%) is neutral, highlighting significant concerns for security. Only a small percentage (14.8%) disagree and 33.3% agree, which further reflects deep-seated security fears (see Figure 17).

tion is uncertain or indifferent, while only 10.0% disagree. However, when it comes to ‘*granting opponents full civil rights unless they threaten security and peace*,’ the majority (51.9%) is neutral, highlighting significant concerns for security. Only a small percentage (14.8%) disagree and 33.3% agree, which further reflects deep-seated security fears (see Figure 17).

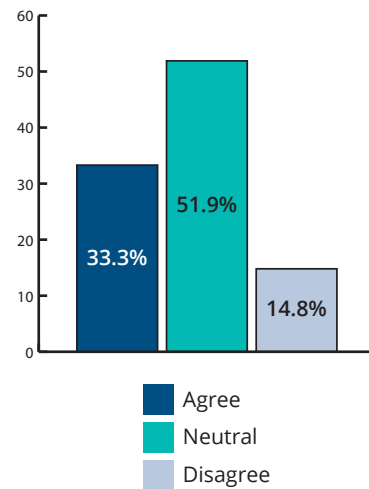
This part sought to answer the question: “What role do some Alawite actors play in localized solutions for reconciliation and enhancing social cohesion?” Through the analysis, it becomes clear that despite significant challenges, including fear of persecution, lack of a robust civil society, and the complexities of navigating opposition within an authoritarian regime, Alawite actors have made notable contributions to fostering reconciliation and social cohesion. Alawite activists often find themselves trapped between the regime and the opposition, leading to silence and marginalization. This precarious position is reflected in the reluctance of many to openly criticize the regime due to fear of retribution. Local initiatives have emerged, especially in the aftermath of violent events, such as the Tartus bombings. Alawite youth activists have stepped in to protect displaced Sunni refugees, demonstrating a com-

mitment to social harmony and protection across sectarian lines. The use of social media by Alawite figures to promote reconciliatory narratives has been instrumental in bridging sectarian divides. The 10 August Movement, which advocates non-violent resistance and political consciousness, is an example of growing dissatisfaction with the regime and an attempt to unify Syrians.

Alawite communities have shown openness and hospitality towards displaced persons from other sects, as evidenced by the aid provided to Sunni refugees in Dreikish and Tartus. This hospitality extends to organizing aid and ensuring the safety of displaced individuals. The analysis clearly demonstrates that Alawite actors play a crucial role in localized solutions for reconciliation and enhancing social cohesion. Their efforts, though often constrained by the political environment, illustrate a commitment to fostering unity and addressing grievances within the community. These actions, while not always part of an organized civil society, indicate a significant potential for grassroots activism to contribute to broader reconciliation efforts in Syria. Furthermore, the involvement of Alawite actors in reconciliation initiatives underscores their importance in the social fabric of Syria. Despite the risks, their actions provide valuable insights into the possibilities for social stability and political inclusivity. Future policy and research should focus on supporting these grassroots efforts, understanding their impact, and addressing the underlying fears and challenges that shape their participation in reconciliation and social cohesion activities.

The comparative analysis across these categories reveals key patterns and trends. There is a notable preference for political inclusion in certain areas, as seen in the support for opponents participating in government and elections. However, there is also strong neutrality to granting full civil rights to opponents that pause threats to national security, driven by deep security concerns. These high levels of neutrality in several categories indicate areas where public opinion is divided or uncertain, highlighting potential areas for further research or policy clarification. Hence, the Alawite community's responses indicate a complex interplay of acceptance, security concerns and political ambivalence and apathy that is possibly driven by a lack of faith in political change or reform. These insights are crucial for understanding the community's perspectives and could inform future actions or decisions aimed at fostering social stability and political inclusivity within the community.

Figure 17: Should full rights be granted to political opponents unless they threaten national security?



Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

The Alawite community in Syria has undergone significant transformations due to historical, socio-economic, and political factors. Historically marginalized and persecuted, particularly during the Ottoman Empire, the Alawites retreated to mountainous areas, developing a distinct cultural and religious identity that enabled their survival. The French Mandate introduced some changes, including the creation of an Alawite State, yet many socio-economic challenges persisted. The rise of the Ba'ath Party and Hafez al-Assad's presidency in 1970 marked a turning point, as the Assad regime promoted Alawites to key positions in the military and government, resulting in socio-economic improvements and deeper loyalty to the regime. However, this consolidation of power also entrenched sectarian divisions, leading to conflicts, such as those with the Sunni majority and uprisings like the one initiated by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Syrian civil war exacerbated these sectarian tensions. The regime's portrayal of the conflict as a Sunni-led insurgency against minorities heightened the sense of existential threat among Alawites, resulting in increased militarization and mistrust towards other communities. Displacement and geographical segregation further entrenched these divides. Economically, the war has devastated the Alawite community, leading to widespread poverty and resentment towards perceived exploitation by regime-affiliated figures. The regime's failure to protect Alawite interests consistently, coupled with economic hardships, has fostered growing disillusionment and resentment. Public support for the regime often remains, driven by fear of extremist threats rather than genuine loyalty.

Efforts by Alawite actors to promote local harmony and reconciliation have been significant but limited by the complex political landscape and risks associated with opposing both the regime and extremist elements. Despite challenges, some Alawite activists have worked towards reconciliation and aid, although their voices often remain marginalized. In conclusion, the Alawite community's experiences during the Syrian conflict highlight the intricate interplay between historical marginalization, political manipulation, and socio-economic challenges. These factors have reshaped their social identity, political affiliations, and perceptions of the conflict. Addressing the community's grievances and fostering inclusive governance is crucial for Syria's path towards reconciliation and peace. The insights gained from this research provide a nuanced understanding of the Alawite community's dynamics, which is essential for developing effective post-conflict strategies.

Framing Policy Recommendations: The Importance of Localized Solutions for the Alawite Community

To effectively address the unique challenges faced by the Alawite community and ensure the relevance and impact of policy recommendations, it is essential to consider the broader concept of localized solutions. This approach acknowledges the importance of community-specific dynamics and the pivotal role local actors play in fostering reconciliation and enhancing social cohesion.

Localized solutions are particularly significant for the Alawite community, which has experienced profound socio-economic and political transformations due to the Syrian civil war. The war has not only exacerbated sectarian tensions but also highlighted the need for grassroots initiatives that promote inter-communal dialogue and reconciliation. Some Alawite actors, despite facing significant challenges such as fear of persecution and a lack of robust civil society structures, have made notable contributions to fostering social harmony. For instance, Alawite youth activists have been instrumental in protecting displaced Sunni refugees and promoting reconciliatory narratives through social media.

These localized efforts demonstrate the potential for grassroots activism to contribute to broader reconciliation processes in Syria. By supporting these initiatives and understanding their impact, policymakers can develop more effective strategies that address the underlying fears and challenges within the Alawite community. The following policy recommendations are designed to empower local actors, promote inclusive governance, and foster local peace initiatives within Syria, with a particular focus on the Alawite community's role in these processes.

Practical Recommendations

1. **Support Inclusive Community-Based Initiatives:** Fund and support grassroots organizations and initiatives that promote inter-communal dialogue and reconciliation within Syria. Focus on projects that bring together Alawite and Sunni communities to foster mutual understanding and cooperation.
2. **Empower Civil Society and Human Rights Groups:** Strengthen civil society organizations by providing training, resources, and funding to those working on reconciliation, human rights, and social cohesion. Focus on building the capacity of local leaders and activists to advocate for their communities independently of the regime.
3. **Promote Educational and Cultural Programs:** Fund educational programs that emphasize shared history, cultural heritage, and the importance of coexistence. Support cultural initiatives that celebrate the diversity of Syrian society and promote narratives that counter sectarianism.
4. **Engage in International Advocacy:** Use diplomatic channels to advocate for the protection of all affected communities and the promotion of reconciliation in Syria. Engage with international bodies to keep pressure on the Syrian regime while supporting efforts that align with humanitarian principles.
5. **Facilitate Safe Spaces for Dialogue:** Create platforms for dialogue between different Syrian communities, including virtual spaces where activists and community leaders can share experiences and strategies for peacebuilding without fear of repression.
6. **Establish Contact with Alawite Opposition Figures in diaspora and regime-controlled areas:** Engage with Alawite opposition figures and activists who promote non-violent resistance and political change. Support these figures through diplomatic channels and provide platforms for their voices to be heard in international forums.
7. **Create safe, independent platforms for Alawite key leaders to engage in dialogue and share their perspectives without fear of retribution:** These platforms can include virtual forums, workshops, and conferences facilitated by neutral third parties.
8. **Encourage the formation of Alawite-led civil society organizations:** These organizations should be able to operate independently of regime influence and provide a voice for the community.

Limitations and Sensitivities in Offering Foreign Support

- **Political Sensitivity:** The Alawite community's close association with the Syrian regime makes foreign support highly sensitive and potentially politically charged. Any external involvement could be perceived as interference, leading to mistrust or backlash from both the community and the regime.

- **Security Risks:** Providing support to the Alawite community could inadvertently put members at risk of targeted violence or retribution from the regime. It is crucial to ensure that any assistance does not expose individuals to greater danger.

- **Risk of Sectarian Tensions:** Foreign support must be designed to avoid exacerbating existing sectarian tensions. It is essential to ensure that aid is inclusive and does not favor one community over another, which could lead to increased divisions.

- **Sustainable Impact:** Programs must be sustainable and locally led to ensure lasting impact. Short-term, externally driven projects may fail to address the root causes of issues or may not be maintained once foreign support is withdrawn.

- **Coordination with Local Actors:** Effective support requires coordination with local actors who have a deep understanding of the community's needs and dynamics. Overlooking local expertise can result in ineffective or inappropriate interventions.

By acknowledging these limitations and sensitivities, policymakers can better navigate the complexities of offering support to the Alawite community, ensuring that their efforts are both effective and respectful of the community's unique context and challenges.

Appendix

1. Demographic and Socio-Political Insights from the Alawite Community: Survey Results and Rationale

Gender Distribution: The survey revealed that 47.6% of respondents were female, while 53.4% were male. This distribution highlights a slight male predominance in the sample population.

Educational Level: The educational background of respondents varied, with 27.0 % having education up to the higher level, 20.0% middle institute, and 53.0% university education. This indicates a relatively high level of education within the community.

Marital Status: In terms of marital status, 20.0% of respondents were widowed, 26.0% single, 27.0% married, and 27.0% divorced. This distribution provides insight into the family structures within the community.

Age Distribution: The age distribution showed that 37.0% of respondents were between 20-29 years, 34.0% between 30-39 years, 24.0% between 40-49 years, 4.0% between 50-59 years, and 1.0% were 60 years and above. This indicates a predominantly young adult population.

Geographical Distribution: Respondents were from various regions, including Quneitra (1.0%), Latakia (25.0%), Aleppo (1.0%), Hama (23.0%), Homs (25.0%), Damascus (15.0%), and Tartous (10.0%). This geographical spread highlights the diverse living environments within the community.

Monthly Household Income: The survey found that 10.7% of respondents had a monthly household income of less than 50,000 SYP, 10.6% less than 100,000 SYP, 60.7% less than 200,000 SYP, 16.5% between 500,000-999,000 SYP, and 2.5% between 1-2 million SYP. This indicates significant economic challenges faced by the community.

The selection of survey questions for this study was meticulously designed to address key aspects of the Alawite community's socio-political and economic conditions. Each question aimed to uncover specific insights that are crucial for understanding the complexities within the community. Here is a detailed rationale for each question included in the survey:¹⁰⁵

- **Circumstances for Granting Syrian Citizenship:** This question was included to gauge the community's views on citizenship criteria. Given the Alawite community's historical and political context, understanding their perspective on who should be granted citizenship provides insights into their views on national identity and integration. The responses help identify the community's openness to inclusivity and diversity.

- **Concept of Homeland:** The concept of homeland is central to understanding national identity and belonging. This question aimed to uncover the various dimensions through which the Alawite community perceives their homeland. It explores whether they view Syria primarily as a place of dignity, security, ancestral land, or simply a place of residence, shedding light on their emotional and cultural connection to the country.

105. For those unfamiliar with the Baath ideology, our surveys' options have captured terms propagated by the regime for five decades. For more details, see Aldoughli, R. (2021). What is Syrian nationalism? Primordialism and romanticism in official Baath discourse. *Nations and Nationalism*, 28(1), 125-140.

- **Definitions of National Treason:** National loyalty and betrayal are sensitive and critical issues within any conflict-affected region. This question sought to understand what actions the Alawite community considers as betrayal of the nation. The responses provide a window into the community's values and their stance on sovereignty, patriotism, the army and its leadership, and external influences.

- **Punishment for National Treason:** Understanding the community's stance on punishment for national treason provides insights into their views on justice and retribution. This question examines the severity of punitive measures the Alawite community supports, which reflects their attitudes towards national security and law enforcement.

- **Expressions of Love for Syria:** Understanding how individuals express their love and loyalty to their country can reveal much about their nationalistic feelings and pride. This question was designed to capture the various ways in which the Alawite community articulates their affection for Syria, whether through resilience (involvement in military action), familial connections, or other symbolic representations.

- **National Dignity:** National dignity refers to the shared sense of self-esteem and pride within a community. This question aimed to explore what constitutes national dignity for the Alawite community. The answers help to understand their priorities, such as freedom from terrorism, strong leadership (strong president), or independence from foreign occupations and interference, reflecting their aspirations and concerns for the nation's future.

- **Overcoming National Crises:** This question was crucial in identifying the community's views on how Syria can navigate and overcome its ongoing crises. By examining solutions such as loyalty to leadership and the army, purging 'perceived' traitors (addressing alleged traitors), holding war profiteers accountable and combating government corruption, the survey captures the community's preferred strategies for national recovery and stability.

- **Support for Opponents' Rights:** This question was included to assess the Alawite community's tolerance and support for political pluralism. By evaluating their views on the rights of political opponents, such as such as the right to citizenship, voting, and participating in elections, the survey reveals the community's commitment to democratic principles and inclusivity.

- **Supporting Various Forms of Political Participation:** To understand the levels of civic engagement and political activism within the Alawite community, this question investigates their support for different forms of participation, including social media campaigns, standing in solidarity, signing petitions, and demonstrations. The responses highlight the community's willingness to engage in public discourse and activism.

- **What Syria Needs from Its Citizens:** This question was designed to identify what qualities and contributions the Alawite community believes are necessary from Syrian citizens for the country's progress. By focusing on attributes such as education, fighting strength, and professional success, the survey captures the community's vision for the role of citizens in nation-building.

- **Agreement with Women's Rights to Grant Citizenship:** This question was included to understand the community's stance on gender equality, specifically regarding the rights of women to pass on citizenship to their children. The responses provide insight into progressive views within the community and highlight the importance of gender rights in shaping national policies.

2. Demographic, Educational, and Economic Profile of Survey Respondents

Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Gender Distribution	Female	47.6
	Male	53.4
Educational Level	Higher level	27.0
	Middle Institute	20.0
	University education	53.0
Marital Status	Widowed	20.0
	Single	26.0
	Married	27.0
	Divorced	27.0
Age Distribution	20-29 years	37.0
	30-39 years	34.0
	40-49 years	24.0
	50-59 years	4.0
	60 years and above	1.0
Geographical Distribution	Quneitra	1.0
	Latakia	25.0
	Aleppo	1.0
	Hama	23.0
	Homs	25.0
	Damascus	15.0
	Tartous	10.0
Monthly Household Income	Less than 50,000 SYP	10.7
	Less than 100,000 SYP	10.6
	Less than 200,000 SYP	60.7
	500,000-999,000 SYP	16.5
	1-2 million SYP	2.5

About the Authors

Dr. Rahaf Aldoughli is a Lecturer in Middle East and North African Studies at Lancaster University. Her research focuses on nationalism, sectarianism, and political attitudes within authoritarian contexts, employing an interdisciplinary approach to explore complex identity formations. Dr. Aldoughli's notable works include her book, *"Romanticizing Masculinity in Baathist Syria: Gender, Ideology, and Identity"*, published by Manchester University Press. Additionally, she is finalizing a manuscript on sect(ism) in Syria, slated for release by IB Tauris in 2024. Dr. Aldoughli's contributions have been recognized through awards and grants from prestigious organizations, including Women in International Security (WIIS), the Kroc Institute Fellowship, XCEPT, and the Arab Center for Graduate Studies. Her current research delves into the motivations of Syrian fighters during the civil war, seeking to understand the underlying drivers of violent behavior. Through her work, she aims to provide nuanced insights into conflict dynamics and contribute to the broader discourse on peace and resolution in the Middle East.

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