A University of Sussex PhD thesis

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details
The Spectre of Rural-Urban Relations: Syria’s 2011 Uprising

Supervisors: Professor Jan Selby and Dr. Kamran Matin

Student Name: Wassim Naboulsi

Registration Number: 21617790

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In the
University of Sussex
School of Global Studies

February 2022
I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: Wassim Naboulsi
A Note on Transliteration

To avoid confusion, in this thesis I have used the most popularized English transliterations for Arabic terms as they appear in the public record. I refrain from using most diacritics but retain apostrophizing for 'ayn and hamza'.
Dedication

To the Syrian People, especially to detainees and victims of torture.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my sincere thanks go to my supervisors Professor Jan Selby and Dr. Kamran Matin for all the support they given me throughout five intellectually and personally transformative, yet challenging, years. It has been a great privilege to be supervised and guided by them. They have always been there when I needed them. My gratitude goes beyond their academic mentorship, however; my personal gratitude is for the reassurance, support, and consideration they gave me as I was balancing my PhD studies with my treatment for cancer. I cannot thank them enough.

I would also like to thank Dr. Peter Cherry and Ms Felicity Tessaro for proofreading my thesis. Their expertise and their hard work are much appreciated.

My sincere thanks go to the many Syrians I met on Facebook. Our virtual friendship allowed me to gain a better understanding of the Syrian political and socio-economic scene. A special thank you goes to one friend - Muhanad Abul Husn - who answered several of my questions and who continued to send me important material that really helped my research.

I am grateful to Dr. Feras AlKabani for all the support he has given me while I have lived in Brighton and Hove. He not only helped me with my academic work but also helped me sort out everyday problems; in fact, I can say that he acted like a brother. No words can express the magnitude of my gratitude.

My friend Rouba al-Samad deserves a special note of gratitude. She was the one who helped me write my first academic essay when I was studying for my MA degree. Since then, she has continued to help me develop and polish both my English language skills and my critical arguments. Throughout the years of our friendship, we enjoyed hours and hours of discussions that allowed me to enhance my critical thinking and argumentation skills.

Fidaa el-Itani is not only a friend but also a mentor. I went to him whenever life, the PhD, or both, proved to be a challenge; he patiently listened and always gave careful and measured advice. I am also indebted to him for all the information he gave me about Syria. Thank you, comrade.
I am also grateful to my sisters Majida and the late Maha (may her soul rest in peace). Their emotional support was much needed throughout my journey. I would not have been able to finish this thesis without all the love they showered on me. I am sad that Maha is not here today to see this project finished.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank my wife and life partner Mayssaa Zaylaa. Her name should be beside mine on the thesis. She has contributed to every word of this thesis as much as I have with all her love, patience, and reassurance. When I finished my cancer treatment, I told her that even being a cancer patient had turned out to be a nice experience because of her presence. Today, I would like to say that her presence has also made my PhD a much more enjoyable experience.

None of these people are responsible for any problems or mistakes in the thesis; moreover, the thesis’s arguments and conclusions do not necessarily reflect their political positions.
List of Abbreviations

CBS: [Syrian] Central Bureau of Statistics
CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis
IMF: International Monetary Fund
NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations
WB: World Bank
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1: Introduction</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Historical Background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Literature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Major Arguments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2: Literature Review</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: Historical Background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: Critiquing the Existing Literature on the Role of Rural-urban</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations in the 2011 Uprising and its Later Course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: Existing Literature on Rural-urban Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: Social Identity Theory and Rural-Urban Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Methodology and Empirical Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4: Historical Background (Ottoman Period-1970): A History of</strong></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural-Urban Polarisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Assadism 2.0: Bashar al-Assad’s First Decade in Power (2000-2011)</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: The Impact of the New Elites’ Project on the Rural and Rurban Populations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: The Urbanites and the Developments of the 2000s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 7: The Syrian Uprising: The Spectre of Rural-Urban Relations (2011-2013)</th>
<th>154</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: The Regime and its Cronies: Their Political Behaviour and Discourses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: The Urbanites: Their Worldviews and Positions Regarding the Uprising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3: The Rurban/Rural: Their Limited Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 8: Rural-Urban Relations in the War Years (2011-2021)</th>
<th>187</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: The Militarisation and Ruralisation of the Uprising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: The Impact of the Uprising Ruralisation and Militarisation on Rural-Urban Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3: The Impact of the War on the Demographics of the Rural, Rurban, and Urban Populations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4: The Agency Behind ‘Rurbanisation’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 5: The Regime’s Discursive Manoeuvres</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 9: Conclusion</th>
<th>220</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empirical Findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Implications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos Appendix</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This thesis examines how rural-urban relations have affected, and been affected by, the 2011 uprising in Syria. The literature on rural-urban relations in Syria lacks a systematic conceptualisation of rural and urban identities. This has resulted in obscuring their complexities generating static and generally economistic accounts of how these identities have affected the political choices of the different actors. I critically deploy a Social Identity Theory perspective underpinned by Historical Materialism to underscore the processual and dynamic aspects of rurality and urbanity. I reinterpret the existing data and literature on rural-urban relations in Syria since the early 20th century and use Critical Discourse Analysis to examine some representative works of drama, journalism and literature in each period to illustrate how rural and urban identities have been developing and becoming more complex (both materially and ideationally) throughout the decades since the early twentieth century. I argue that the accounts depicting the 2011 crisis in terms of a rural revolt against the urban economic privileges and the 2000s liberalisation fail to incorporate the historical complexity of these identities. By contrast, I contend that the crisis comprised a conflict between different groups across the rural-urban continuum over the ruling elites’ endeavours to impose new definitions of rurality and urbanity that served their aspirations to become the country’s new bourgeoisie, and over the political, socio-economic, and ideational consequences of these (re)definitions. I then illustrate how the regime and its allies have been exploiting the war to manipulate rural-urban dynamics to further their interests. The thesis therefore offers a historically sensitive, theoretically systematic, methodologically rigorous and analytically nuanced understanding of the Syrian conflict that emphasises the processual and ideational aspects of rurality and urbanity. It also bridges the gap between the literatures on Social Identity Theory and Rural-Urban Relations in both peace and war settings. It, therefore, contributes to related research in other parts of the world.

(Word Count: 314)
Chapter 1

Introduction

The resignations of Bin Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, and the spread of the Arab Spring to countries such as Libya and Yemen, led most Syrians to start wondering whether their country would be the next to join the revolutionary wave. There were many Syrians who were worried about the consequences of such developments, while others were excited to see them happen (Bishara, 2013, pp. 76-78; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 36). During February and mid-March 2011, several small demonstrations took place in Damascus; however, the uprising gathered momentum only after the situation in the southern governorate of Dar’a escalated (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, pp. 37-38; Khafaji, 2016). As the news of the regime’s violence in Dar’a was spreading, the country witnessed a number of protests in different regions, demanding justice for Dar’a in addition to certain demands that reflected local grievances within each region (Ismail, 2013, p. 880). The persistence and escalation of the regime’s violence led to the escalation of these local demands to calls for the overthrow of the regime. What was remarkable, however, was that the two major cities of Damascus and Aleppo did not witness any major protests. When the inhabitants of other medium-sized cities such as Homs and Hamah mobilised, the regime managed to push their protests away from the urban centres to the more rural neighbourhoods on the peripheries of these cities (Bishara, 2013, pp. 119-120).

The perception that the uprising actually started from Dar’a, a governorate perceived by many as rural, and continued to spread in rural and semi-rural areas while the two major cities remained relatively quiescent, inspired many authors to talk about the ‘agrarian roots’ and the ‘rural origins’ of the uprising (Lesch, 2013, p. 85; Azmeh, 2014, p. 18; Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014, p. 40; Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 300; Matar, 2016, p. 108; Saleh, 2017). The interest in rural-urban dynamics in Syria grew among scholars of Syria as a result, and many started to discuss the role of these dynamics during the outbreak of the uprising.
A Historical Background

The role played by rural-urban relations in shaping the outbreak of the 2011 uprising is not a new phenomenon to Syria’s modern history. Rural-urban conflicts, in fact, have always been consequential to Syria’s political and socio-economic scene. These conflicts passed through different phases; between the late 19th century and 1958, the country was mostly ruled by the urban bourgeoisie. The majority of the Syrian bourgeoisie, however, was not interested in building a hegemonic bloc that could have maintained its rule. This lack of hegemony, associated with other domestic and international factors, paved the way for the 1958 union with Egypt (dissolved in 1961) and for the Ba’thist coup of 1963. These two developments led to a radical transformation in the country’s politics and socio-economic dynamics. The year 1963 witnessed the rise to power of the Ba’thist army officers who were mostly of rural origins. These officers started a process of redistributing political and economic resources which favoured the middle peasantry (and to a lesser degree the poorer peasantry) at the expense of the urban middle and upper classes. Hafiz al-Assad reached power, however, in 1970, and created his own configuration of rural-urban dynamics. Al-Assad maintained the loyalty of his rural constituency, while he reconciled with certain urban groups and coerced others. He endeavoured to colonise the cities with neighbourhoods of rural-urban migrants who were supportive of his regime. Hafiz al-Assad, moreover, did not attempt to create a hegemonic bloc of his own, but chose instead to rely on geopolitical rent, and the brutal force of his security apparatuses to rule the country. When his son Bashar al-Assad attained power in 2000, a new generation of regime elites were ready to enact their own configuration of rural-urban dynamics. The new elites sought to take over the cities instead of merely colonising them in their endeavour to become the country’s new ‘urban’ bourgeoisie (Dahi & Munif, 2011). A shift occurred in the 2000s towards favouring certain groups within the urban population - especially within the two metropolitan cities of Damascus and Aleppo - in a way that allowed the inclusion of the new regime elites into the urban circles. These changes came at the expense of the regime’s old rural and semi-rural allies. The 2000s economic liberalisation plan of Bashar al-Assad favoured
the country’s two metropolitan cities, on one hand, but increased the grievances of different urban and rural groups, on the other.

**The Literature**

There are many scholars who underscore the above-mentioned outcomes of the 2000s liberalisation in their endeavours to explain the reasons behind the 2011 uprising. The two metropolitan cities, they argue, remained quiescent because they were favoured by the liberalisation process, while the rural and semi-rural areas mobilised because of the deterioration in their living standards. This explanation of the 2011 uprising might be called the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’. A minority within the literature scholars tried to look for other explanations beyond this thesis. Azmi Bishara (2013), for example, argued that the most important factor in the outbreak of the uprising was the contagion of the Arab Spring. Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann illustrated how other factors have contributed to the witnessed geographical spread of the uprising. The uprising, according to Leenders and Heydemann, gained its momentum in Dar’a, regardless of the liberalisation grievances, because of the favourable opportunity structure resulting from the nature of the social relations that facilitated collective action and the geographical location of the governorate on the borders with Jordan: these made it impossible for the regime to besiege the governorate.

The work of most of the scholars who focused on the liberalisation grievances suffers from several problems, including the lack of a systematic understanding of what is rural and what is urban, an economistic tendency that mainly focused on linking the uprising to economic factors, and a negligence of the role of the symbolic and the subjective, and consequently the role of agency, in shaping the political behaviour and choices of various groups and individuals. The history of rural-urban relations in Syria, however, shows the significance of ideological and subjective factors. The above-mentioned historical developments were not limited to the economic aspects that are usually invoked by most scholars. These developments were accompanied by discursive shifts that aimed at either legitimising or delegitimising these developments (depending on the embedded interests underpinning these discourses); different groups produced and reproduced various discourses and narratives in their
endeavours to maintain and maximise their social prestige and their political and socio-economic interests.

The majority of the literature is underpinned by structuralist tendencies that depict the political choices of the different groups and individuals as predetermined by how the costs and benefits of the 2000s’ liberalisation would be distributed. This structuralist tendency has led many authors to neglect the role of perceptions and agency in determining the political choices and behaviour of actors.

These various problems inspired the research question for this thesis; a question that may have been asked but not yet sufficiently answered: How have rural-urban relations in Syria affected and been affected by the outbreak and trajectory of the 2011 uprising?

**The Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Major Arguments**

The aim of this research is to address this question by looking at rurality and urbanity in Syrian society from a Marxist-Gramscian perspective. This approach will employ Social Identity Theory to register and analyse both the contextual and processual aspects of identification, and the dialectical relations between the material and the ideological, the structural and the agential, and the subjective and the objective in constituting rurality and urbanity, and how they (as social identities) affect the political behaviour and choices of groups and individuals (Jenkins, 2014).

This thesis will not be limited to the material factors such as the economic grievances of the 2000s, or the data on population density which are usually underscored within the existing literature. An examination will be made of the issue on an ideological and subjective level, as well as the dialectical relation between material factors and the perceptions of the different actors. This thesis, however, does not aim at providing an exhaustive account of the uprising and the subsequent events that occurred during its early days or the subsequent years - other authors have already provided such accounts (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016).

This thesis, moreover, does not call for a wholesale rejection of the existing literature nor to dispute the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’ per se. The suggestion is that this was not all that was going on in this moment of Syria’s history; consequently,
investigation and reinterpretation of the existing literature will complement this aim by diving beyond the material factors and the economic grievances. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be used to analyse various materials reflecting the subjective, ideational, and symbolic dimensions of the conflict. This material includes: the speeches of the Syrian presidents, certain Syrian drama productions and memoirs, and selected news reports and journal articles.

CDA will be used to track how the different groups and their discourses and identity narratives have been developing throughout the decades since the early twentieth century. It would be impossible to analyse the current narratives of these actors or to understand their political choices and positions without such historical preface. The agency of different actors and how these agencies affected the course of the crisis will also be highlighted.

One of the basic assumptions guiding this thesis is that economic grievances and objective factors do not always or necessarily translate into oppositional politics or behaviour. Perceptions play a crucial mediating role in how actors decide to react to the world around them (Goldstone, 2001, p. 54). It is in this context that the importance of the role of the symbolic and the ideational becomes clear. The goal of analysing this wide range of materials is to uncover the links between rural-urban dynamics and the political positions and behaviour of the different actors.

This task will be performed in two stages. The first stage aims to understand the narratives through which the different actors try to disseminate certain understandings of rurality and urbanity, and how they locate themselves and others in this respect. The second stage will take a critical perspective towards these narratives by uncovering the interests embedded within them. This thesis will consequently attempt to link these narratives and interests to the political behaviour of the different actors, and how these contributed to shaping the trajectory of the uprising.

This project will not only provide a systematic understanding of the rural and urban in Syria, but also a deeper understanding of the liberalisation process of the 2000s, and the 2011 uprising which go beyond the economistic and structuralist tendencies that are common in the existing literature. It will highlight symbolic grievances and how
they affected the political positions of the different groups and actors throughout the early twentieth century to the civil war of the post-2011 period.

It will be argued that many urbanites, within and outside the two major cities, were dissatisfied with the regime and were willing to see it go; yet many factors contributed to their quiescence. The regime’s insistence on using the security apparatus to maintain its control over urban areas was one factor. The unfavourable opportunity structure and the lack of means of mobilisation or collective action due to the oppression of civil society were another. The most important factor, however, were the feelings of bitterness and distrust that many of them had towards the rural population and an uprising led by rural actors. Indeed, the grievances of different rural, ‘rurban’ (semi-rural), and urban groups towards each other (both material and ideological) have played a major role in weakening these groups vis-à-vis the regime. Similarly, many rural groups such as certain tribes and clans in Aleppo’s countryside and in the north-eastern governorates, did not support the uprising and maintained their loyalty to the regime. This makes it problematic to claim that the 2011 uprising was simply a rural revolt against urban privileges. The thesis’s argument here instead, is that the crisis was a contestation between different rural and urban groups against other rural and urban groups over the different configurations of rural-urban relations.

The aim here will be to show how each group sought to maintain or impose certain conceptualisations of rurality and urbanity that served their aspirations, and access to power and to material and symbolic resources. The dynamics of the 2011 uprising go much further and beyond the spatial perspective underpinned by the geographical distribution of the cost and benefits of the 2000s liberalisation policies as some authors argue (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 300; Azmeh, 2014, p. 18).

This thesis will also show how the regime has been manipulating rural-urban tensions to secure its survival since the days of Hafiz al-Assad. One of the major arguments in this thesis is that, between 1970 and 2011, the Syrian regime had managed to use geopolitical rent and its ability to manipulate social cleavages (class, sectarian, but most importantly rural-urban) to maintain its decisional independence vis-à-vis both local and international actors. This allowed the regime’s elite to produce and reproduce new configurations of rural-urban relations that suited their interests
without being checked by any actors. The result of this unquestioned manipulation was the accumulation of grievances, which resulted in periodic violent episodes such as the cold civil war of the 1980s and the hot civil war of the post-2011 period. This argument may help those interested in a better future for Syria on two levels. First, it shows the risks of allowing a small elite to manipulate social divisions without being held accountable; and second, it draws their attention to the importance of rural-urban relations and how they should be taken into consideration in any future settlement.

This thesis will also contribute to the field of rural-urban studies; most of the literature within this field is underpinned by a normative perspective that seeks to enhance rural-urban relations and to develop rural areas. This thesis, however, will provide a more pragmatic approach that focuses on the conflictual aspects of these relations and how they may affect, and be affected by, the political and socio-economic fields in both peace and war.

This thesis will add evidence to the existing body of scholarship on the importance of drama analysis in the context of understanding the narratives and discourses of the different actors. It will also illustrate how a Gramscian perspective could be helpful in such endeavours not only in terms of uncovering embedded interests and critiquing the worldviews conveyed through narratives, but also in terms of tracing the processes of identity formation, and how these processes influence, and are influenced by, the political and socio-economic scene.

Finally, although this thesis aims at drawing attention to the significance of rural-urban relations in Syria’s past, present, and future, it is not within its goals to contrast the role of these relations to the roles of other social divisions. This also does not imply that rural-urban relations are more significant than other conflicts. All these cleavages intersect, and, in many instances, it is impossible to isolate one from the other. Indeed, a pattern will emerge in the subsequent chapters where the socio-political conflict in Syria, from the early twentieth century to the 1970s, might be seen as a conflict between the rich Arab Sunni urban bourgeoisie and the poor rural inhabitants who often belong to religious or ethnic minorities.
It will also be illustrated how these intersections became even more sophisticated and nuanced after Hafiz al-Assad reached power in 1970. The focus will be on these intersections but will not ignore these cleavages: their role will be highlighted where necessary. Chapter 5 will also pay attention to the caveats resulting from generalising these intersections. It is necessary, for example, to remember that not all urbanites are Sunni, rich, or Arabs, not all rural inhabitants are poor, and that many of them do not belong to sectarian or ethnic minorities. The thesis will be an attempt to analytically distinguish between these intersecting cleavages for the sake of answering the research question, despite of the empirical challenge of separating them.

**Thesis Plan**

The remainder of this thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 2 will review the existing literature on rural-urban relations in Syria. It shows that a systematic definition of rurality and urbanity is generally absent in this body of literature. It will then move to a discussion on the literature dedicated to the role of rural-urban dynamics in the 2011 uprising. The economistic and objectivist tendencies within the literature will be highlighted as will the weakness and insufficiency of the spatial perspective that many scholars have used to understand what might be called the ‘rural aspect’ of the uprising. The chapter will conclude by stressing the need for a dialectical understanding of rurality and urbanity that comprises the objective and the subjective as well as the symbolic and the material.

Chapter 3 will present a theoretical framework capable of addressing the problems in the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. Drawing on Marxist and Gramscian perspectives, and depending on the literature of Social Identity Theory, the thesis’s theoretical framework will allow a non-reductionist, dynamic, and dialectical understanding of rural-urban relations in Syria and their role in the outbreak and the ensuing evolution of the 2011 uprising. It will highlight the significance of understanding the identity narratives of the different groups along with their “objective” political and socio-economic situations. The methodology section within the chapter will present Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the most suitable method for analysing identity narratives and for uncovering the embedded political and socio-economic interests as well as the discursive manoeuvres that aim at legitimising and
normalising these interests. It will also explore a wide variety of empirical resources that might be analysed in the context of answering the research questions of the thesis.

Chapter 4 will present the reader with a historical background. It will cover the period between the late 19th century to 1970 when Hafiz al-Assad reached power. The period covered by this chapter witnessed the rise of many rural, rurban, and urban groups who played a major role in the 2011 uprising and will be discussed throughout the thesis. It is therefore necessary to study this period, since identity narratives might not be understood without a proper consideration of the histories they invoke.

Chapter 5 will examine Syria under the rule of Hafiz al-Assad (1970-2000). This was a crucial period in Syria’s history: the developments it witnessed proved to be highly consequential during the 2011 uprising. Hafiz al-Assad left his heir a political manual on how to maintain the regime’s decisional independence vis-à-vis both local and external players. It also showed how to manipulate rural and urban groups to serve the regime’s interest, and how to use violence and discursive manoeuvre to secure the regime’s hold on power. Many of the regime choices since 2011 would be better understood if al-Assad senior’s years are studied. The argument in this chapter will be that al-Assad’s decisional independence and his ability to manipulate social cleavages without facing any significant opposition led to the cold civil war witnessed during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Chapter 6 will cover the first decade of Bashar al-Assad’s rule (2000-2011). It will be a discussion on the liberalisation project of the 2000s, and the role of the regime’s elites in tailoring liberalisation policies that would suit their interests. The most important task achieved in this chapter is its uncovering of the symbolic aspects of the liberalisation project, and how they allowed the regime’s elites to manipulate rural-urban dynamics for their interests and how this contributed to the accumulation of both material and symbolic grievances that exploded in 2011. Another important conclusion that this chapter reaches is that the above-mentioned grievances did not only emerge in the rural or the poor population, but also emerged in many of the urban middle and upper classes.
In Chapter 7, I will discuss the outbreak and early days of the Syrian uprising (2011-2013). It will take issue with the perception of the uprising as a rural uprising against urban privileges; a perception that is common among wide sections of the literature. It will highlight how al-Assad junior benefited from his father’s strategies to tame the cities and to pit rural and urban populations against each other in a manner that contributed to his regime’s persistence. It will be an examination of the political choices of the different rural, rurban, and urban groups, and how rural-urban dynamics affected their positions and choices towards the developments that were taking place, and how these choices affected the outcome of the crisis witnessed today.

Chapter 8 will cover the period between the militarisation of the Syrian uprising (somewhere in mid-2012 – the Red Cross declared the Syrian crisis a civil war in July 2012 (Kassab & Al-Shami, p. 77)). It will mainly focus on how the war affected (and was affected by) the rural-urban dynamics. The Syrian regime’s strategies towards the different rural and urban groups will be discussed, and how these strategies affected the composition of the Syrian society in general as well as the different urban, rurban, and rural spaces. The war (and specifically the regime’s behaviour) led to the rurbanisation of the Syrian society as more and more people were prevented from maintaining their rural incomes and lifestyles in rural areas, and many others had been pushed out of the city centres and urban spaces. It will illustrate how, in many instances, these developments were the outcomes of social engineering undertaken by the regime and its international allies. These developments and the plans underpinning them should, thus, be considered in any discussions of a future settlement in the country.

Chapter 9 (the conclusion) will summarise the findings of the thesis and will briefly discuss their broader implications. It will also explore areas for future research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction:

This chapter will be an examination of the literature on rural-urban relations in Syria from three perspectives: historical, theoretical, and empirical. Rural-urban relations have been playing a major role in the country’s political and socio-economic spheres since the late 19th century and the scholarly interest in these relations has been waxing and waning since the mid-twentieth century. These ebbs and flows were affected by the political and socio-economic developments that have been taking place since the 1940s until today. Scrutinising the development of the literature is therefore not only important for understanding the development of rural-urban relations in general, but also because of the historical insights it provides in terms of how the political and socio-economic environment has been affecting the scholarly interest in these dynamics; it shows, moreover, that the interest in rural-urban relations has decreased after the militarisation of the uprising in 2012-2013. The majority of authors became more interested in the role of external actors (Phillips, 2016; Darwich, 2020; Gani, 2020; Goodarzi, 2020; Hinnebusch, 2020; Oktav, 2020; Saouli, 2020; Schmidt, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020; Vorobyeva, 2020) and sectarian identities (Bartolomei, 2018; Díaz, 2018; Eido, 2018; Goldsmith, 2018; Imady, 2018; Kastrinou, 2018; Khatib, 2018; Rifai, 2018; Valter, 2018) in determining the course of the Syrian war. This leaves a space which allows for an original contribution.

It might be expected that this body of scholarship has developed one or more clear and robust theoretical frameworks that may allow for a systematic understanding of rurality and urbanity and of the way these dynamics have been affecting political and socio-economic life in the country. Yet, this is not the case. The different authors who engaged in these relations did not provide their readers with clear definitions of rurality and urbanity, and only a few of them seem to have benefited from the literature on rural-urban relations in other parts of the world. It is also clear that the majority among these authors tend to build their understanding of these relations on objectivist and economistic assumptions that ignore the role of perceptions and
subjective factors in deciding the political choices of the different groups and individuals.

The absence of such systematic understanding proves to be highly problematic when the literature is viewed at the empirical level. There are several debates and inconsistencies which occur within the existing literature on the role of rural-urban relations in the outbreak of the 2011 uprising. Following a brief exploration of these debates and inconsistencies, it will be argued that they could be sorted out if a clear, comprehensive, and systematic understanding of rurality and urbanity were established; an understanding that does not ignore the perceptive and subjective factors. It is necessary to mention here that the literature on the 2011 uprising is relatively wide and the primary criterion for choosing the works that will be discussed is the extent to which these works engaged with rural-urban relations. Other sources that focused more on different aspects of the crisis such as the class or sectarian divisions or the role of external players might be sporadically mentioned but were not extensively discussed.

The chapter will be divided into three parts. The first part will be a discussion of the history of the literature and the ebbs and flows in the scholarly interest in rural-urban relations since the mid-twentieth century. The second part will focus on how different authors have understood rurality and urbanity and what the assumptions underpinning these understandings are. It will illustrate how the absence of a systematic understanding of the rural and the urban has had an impact on the oeuvre of these authors. The third part will provide an overview of the existing literature on the role of rural-urban relations in the outbreak of the 2011 uprising. Several debates and inconsistencies within this body of scholarship will be discussed. The lack of a systematic and comprehensive understanding of rurality and urbanity will be highlighted as well as how it has led to these inconsistencies. The chapter’s conclusion will underscore the necessity for filling this theoretical gap, and how doing so could pave the way for a clearer and more consistent understanding of the 2011 uprising, and the role of rural-urban relations in not only influencing its outbreak but also its later course.
Part 1: Historical Background

The literature on rural-urban relations in Syria up to the mid-twentieth century was mostly limited to the oeuvre of certain authors who were affiliated with the French colonial powers. The works of authors such as Jacques Weulersse (on the peasants of Syria) and Jean Sauvaget (on the architectural development of Aleppo and Damascus) among others were meant to either guide or evaluate the rule of the colonial authorities (Sauvaget, 1941; Weulersse, 1946; Khoury, 1983). Other authors, such as Albert Hourani, addressed rural-urban relations, although only as a secondary interest (Hourani, 1947). Others such as Philip Hitti wrote about the country’s history in general (Hitti, 1959).

The academic interest in rural-urban relations in Syria increased, however, after the union with Egypt in 1958, and especially after the Ba’thists’ seizure of power in 1963. The rural background of the Ba’thist officers and their radical social and economic policies convinced many authors that rural-urban relations during that period were more consequential for the country’s politics than class or sectarian divisions (Hinnebusch, 1990; Batatu, 1999; Haddad, 2012). Among those who studied rural-urban relations in Syria during that period were Akram Shakra who submitted his doctoral thesis on land reform in Syria in 1966 and Sulayman Khalaf who submitted his master’s thesis on tribal politics in Raqqa in 1975 (Shakra, 1966; Khalaf, 1975). The 1990s witnessed the publishing of what might be considered the most important volumes on Syria’s contemporary history; all of these showed a special interest in rural-urban relations. These volumes include the works of Raymond Hinnebusch (1990), Volker Perthes (1995), and Hanna Batatu (1999).

Academic literature increasingly focused on what came to be known as the Syrian regime’s authoritarian persistence during the 2000s (Abboud & Arslanian, 2009; King, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Donati, 2013). The fact that the Syrian regime and other authoritarian regimes in the region persisted through the post-1990 wave of democratisation motivated authors to investigate the factors behind this persistence. Rural-urban relations were viewed from the perspective of the regime’s upgrading its authoritarian rule; they were, thus, perceived as only one factor among others that were invoked to explain the regime’s persistence. The regime’s shift during the 2000s
from its old rural constituency towards the urban middle and upper classes was perceived as an attempt by the regime to secure its persistence and to save the fiscal basis of the state after the decline of rent inflows (Abboud & Arslanian, 2009; King, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Donati, 2013).

Part 2: Critiquing the Existing Literature on the Role of Rural-urban Relations in the 2011 Uprising and its Later Course

The interest in rural-urban relations was revived after the 2011 uprising, however, as many authors highlighted the regime’s above-mentioned shift as an important factor in the outbreak of the uprising (Barout, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2012; Azmeh, 2014; Yaziji, 2014; Matar, 2016). Different authors invoked and prioritised different cleavages to explain the uprising and its course. These cleavages included: class (Dahi & Munif, 2011), sectarian (Zambelis, 2015), centre-periphery (Barout, 2012; Bishara, 2013) in addition to the rural-urban cleavage. Even among those scholars who prioritised other cleavages, all of them continued to perceive rural-urban dynamics as consequential to the conflict. The interest in rural-urban relations declined again, however, after the situation in Syria deteriorated into an open civil war, as the literature focused on the role of sectarianism and external players in the ongoing war.

2.1. The Absence of a Clear Definition of Rurality and Urbanity

The majority of scholars who focused on rural-urban relations in Syria do not present a clear definition of rurality and urbanity and rarely refer to the literature on rural-urban relations in other parts of the world. This part, therefore, will only be a discussion on the work of the few authors who provided their readers with hints or references to the assumptions or criteria that underpin their understanding of rurality and urbanity.

Hanna Batatu and Volker Perthes define urbanity in terms of dwelling in the city. Perthes starts his discussion of what he called Syria’s ‘urban society’ by writing ‘Syria's cities, or, more precisely, Syria's non-rural society ...’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 94). Other authors (Ababsa, 2015; Khafaji, 2016; Matar, 2016), meanwhile, invoked the nature of the economic activities of the groups or spaces where rurality is linked to agriculture and urbanity is linked to manufacturing and services. A different perspective is held by
authors such as Barout (2012) and Yaziji (2017, p. 3). These authors both followed the criterion of population thresholds where a settlement is considered urban when its inhabitants reach a certain number. Barout followed the Syrian government’s official threshold of 20,000 inhabitants; meanwhile, Yaziji was more critical about this number and compared it to other parts of the world where the threshold is usually 2,500-5,000 inhabitants (Yaziji, 2017, p. 3).

These approaches share two clear problems. First, they deal with the rural and the urban as two mutually exclusive categories in which a settlement is either urban or rural. Second, due to their static nature, these approaches do not capture the dynamism of urbanisation (or ruralisation). Authors have differed in their approaches to these problems in various contexts. They have tried to find their ways around them by resorting to diverse manoeuvres or by creating new auxiliary categories that often problematise their original assumptions.

Perthes, for example, tried to surmount these problems by discerning certain categories that he called ‘worker-peasants’ and ‘peasant-workers’ in an attempt to capture the dynamism of rural-urban migration, and how certain groups and individuals had both rural and urban sources of income (Perthes, 1995, p. 94). In the case of rural-urban migrants, not only the rural and the urban cease to be mutually exclusive categories, but also the criterion for determining the rural and the urban becomes more dependent on the sources of income than on places of residence (Perthes’s original assumption).

Batatu used the term ‘rural towns’ to describe these spaces that are characterised by both rural and urban features (Batatu, 1999, p. 26). He used the phrase ‘of recent rural provenance’, moreover, in the context of his discussion of rural-urban migration, to describe rural migrants to the cities (Batatu, 1999, p. 162).

Barout, in turn, used the phrase ‘newly urbanised towns’ (al-moutamadiena hadithan) when he had to discuss certain towns whose numbers of inhabitants reached the official threshold, due to population growth or to migration, and became officially recognised as urban (Barout, 2012, p. 303). He wanted to show that the inhabitants of these towns, despite being urban according to his understanding, had maintained
certain characteristics and political choices that his analysis linked to what he understood to be the rural population.

These phrases and auxiliary categories serve the arguments of their authors (even if they sometimes contradict their original assumptions), but they also confirm the existence of the two problems that were mentioned earlier and illustrate the need for new definitions that understand rurality and urbanity as dynamic and permeable concepts rather than static and mutually exclusive.

The term ‘rurban’ will be used in this thesis as it is used in the rural-urban studies to denote spaces or groups that simultaneously combine rural and urban characteristics. This concept is absent from the literature on Syria’s rural-urban relations, however, and is only invoked by one author (Caroline Donati) (2013). The absence of this term (which could have been very helpful in the analysis of the above-mentioned authors’ work) indicates that they did not engage sufficiently with the literature on rural-urban relations in other parts of the world.

A third problem should be added. All the above-mentioned authors seem to perceive the rural and the urban as categories that could be objectively defined from the outside. This approach overlooks the subjective aspects of rurality and urbanity and ignores how the different groups and individuals perceive themselves and others, and the consequences of these perceptions on the definition of rurality and urbanity. They also ignored the contextual nature of rurality and urbanity. Studies from other parts of the world found that groups and individuals may alternate their identity claims according to the context within which they find themselves; for example, they may claim to be urban or rural according to how these claims would serve their interests and aspirations (Erman, 1998).

These authors, more significantly, do not take into account that such categories are social constructs that are deeply influenced by power politics and discourses and by the interests and aspirations of the different actors. Power and interests play a major role not only in determining who should be included, or excluded from, certain groups, but also, what the consequences of such inclusion or exclusion are.
There are several works which have addressed the subjective and symbolic aspects of the Syrian uprising (Wedeen, 2013; Della Ratta, 2018; Salamandra, 2019). These authors, however, did not focus on the rural-urban dynamics or their role in the uprising. Only a few authors attempted to study the symbolic dimension of rural-urban dynamics. The oeuvre of Crista Salamandra (2004) is among the most important in this context. Salamandra studied how certain Damascene urban groups had been trying to maintain an exclusionary urban identity for themselves as a form of resistance vis-a-vis the rise of the rural Ba’thist rule (Salamandra, 2004). The book is temporally limited to the 1990s, however, and is mainly focused on the generational urbanites of Damascus; it is less concerned with the subjectivity of other urban or rural groups. The work of Salamandra has inspired other authors to discuss the perceptions of urban Damascenes from the perspective of the gentrification of the old city neighbourhoods in Damascus (Sudermann, 2011; Totah, 2014). These works, although very enlightening, yet, again, were mainly focused on the same urban groups; moreover, while Salamandra published her book several years before the 2011 uprising, Sudermann (2011, p. 54) and Totah (2014) did not pay much attention to the uprising, only addressing it briefly (if at all).

The only counter-example is found in two articles: one by Salwa Ismail and the other by Kilcullen and Rosenblatt. Ismail discussed how the residents of certain neighbourhood(s) in Darayya and Mu’adhamiyya who originally migrated from Damascus (in what is known as the reverse ‘urban to rural’ migration waves) continued to see themselves as urbanites and insisted on living together in certain neighbourhoods to differentiate themselves from the original ‘rural’ inhabitants (Ismail, 2013, pp. 887-88). Again, Ismail’s important work is limited to a certain group and does not cover others.

Kilcullen and Rosenblatt, on the other hand, recognised the role of perceptions in deciding the rurality and urbanity of groups and spaces. However, their contribution to this issue was limited to one assumption that they discussed in only two sentences. The authors wrote: ‘the words rif and medina have developed not just geographic connotations, but social ones as well. The rif not only describes village farmers but those urban poor living in the slums’ (Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014, p. 34).
This overview shows a gap in the literature between authors who are interested in the subjective and ideational aspects of rural-urban relations but are scarcely interested in the 2011 uprising; conversely, authors who focus on the 2011 uprising ignore or downplay the role of the symbolic and ideational aspects of the conflict. This gap needs to be bridged, and these two bodies of literature need to interact; a gap that this thesis intends to fill. This also shows the need for a new conceptualisation of rurality and urbanity in Syria that does not only perceive them as dynamic and permeable, but also recognises the material, ideational, as well as the subjective and objective dimensions of these two concepts.

2.2. The Role of Rural-Urban Dynamics in the 2011 Uprising

There is almost a consensus among Syria scholars that rural-urban dynamics have played a major role in igniting the 2011 uprising, and in influencing its later path. There are different authors who have talked about the ‘agrarian roots’ (Matar, 2016, p. 108) and the ‘rural origins’ of the uprising (Lesch, p. 85), the role of rural-urban tensions in the uprising (Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014, p. 40), a ‘rural-urban pattern’ (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 300), a ‘rural-urban axis’ (Saleh, 2017, pp. 44,214), and an ‘income and rural-urban divide in the geography of early protests’ (Azmeh, 2014, p. 18); even the scholars who prioritise other cleavages or conflicts continue to recognise a certain role for rural-urban relations.

The existing literature, in this context, seems to revolve around three points: (i) that the 2000s liberalisation had benefited the urban groups (especially in the two larger cities of Damascus and Aleppo) and harmed and alienated wide groups among the rural population and the dwellers of the semi-urban areas surrounding the cities; (ii) that this alienation contributed to the outbreak of the uprising; and (iii) that the geography of the protests confirms the previous point (Dahi & Munif, 2011; Barout, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2012; Azmeh, 2014; Ababsa, 2015; Matar, 2016). The majority of authors highlight the fact that the uprising started from the rural governorate of Dar’a, not from a major city, and that it mainly spread in rural and semi-urban areas while the
major cities remained isolated from what was happening (in contrast to what had happened in other Arab Spring countries).

The literature is replete with debates and inconsistencies despite the centrality of these points. The following sections will be an exploration of these problematic aspects of the literature and will pay special attention to how the absence of a clear and systematic definition of rurality and urbanity has contributed to these issues.

‘Liberalisation Grievances Thesis’ Debate

There exists a minor corpus of authors in the literature who rejected the above-mentioned ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’. Azmi Bishara (2013, p. 24), for example, argued that the socio-economic situation of many groups had been dwindling for decades, and that Dar’a, if one is to consider the spatial evidence, is not among the poorest or most harmed areas of the country. Bishara, consequently, offered a new explanation of the uprising that invoked the contagious effect of the Arab Spring which, according to him, not only offered a successful model for popular mobilisation, but also inspired the Syrian people to go to the streets.

Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann (2012) also had their reservations about the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’. They argued that the uprising started from Dar’a and spread to the rural and semi-urban areas, not only because these areas suffered elevated degrees of liberalisation-linked socio-economic grievances, but also due to a better mobilisation opportunity-structure. This resulted, among other factors, from the geographical location of these areas on the borders with other countries, and the nature of social relations that facilitated collective action (unlike the case in the country’s cities). The authors’ critique shows that certain social, cultural, and ideological factors (which go beyond the economistic tendencies of the liberalisation grievances thesis) should be considered.

There were several other authors, moreover, who highlighted the fact that many middle-class urbanites had participated in the uprising during its early months (Barout, 2012; Bishara, 2013; Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015). They stressed, in the same vein, that while it is true that the two major cities remained relatively quiescent, medium-sized
and smaller cities (such as Homs, Hamah, Deirezzor, and Idlib) witnessed significant, though varying, degrees of popular mobilisation. The fact that many authors continued to talk about a rural aspect of the uprising, despite the mobilisation of these urbanite groups, sheds doubt on the extent to which the urbanity of these groups is recognised and, therefore, consequential in formulating the perceptions of both academic and non-academic viewers.

In addition to these criticisms, the arguments and conclusions of certain authors deserve further investigation. These authors include Azmeh (2014, p. 18) who wrote:

> The income and rural-urban divide in the geography of early protests was very clear with most of the protests taking place either in rural parts of the country or in poorer urban neighbourhoods which often had high number of rural migrants ... Middle income neighbourhoods, particularly in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, remained largely quiet during this period.

Hinnebusch and Zintl (2015, p. 300) talked about a rural urban pattern that ‘corresponded precisely to the geographical distribution of benefits and costs of Bashar’s post-populist upgrading’.

These assertions are empirically problematic due to two reasons. First, the eastern cities of Raqqa, Deirezzor, and Hassakah were the most negatively affected by liberalisation but were among the last to witness serious demonstrations (Barout, 2012, pp. 310-11). Deirezzor, for example, witnessed protests since the early days of the uprising but, for months, the participants in these protests were no more than fifty people every Friday (Bishara, 2013, p. 146; Hisham & Crabapple, 2018, p. 42). There are many factors which might be invoked to explain these low numbers, but what is important in the current context is that economic grievances were not spontaneously or automatically translated into serious protests. This consequently means that the spatial perspective and the geography of the uprising are far from ‘precisely’ reflecting the distribution of benefits and costs of liberalisation.

Another author that should be discussed here is Barout (2012). Barout, unlike many other authors, prefers to look at the Syrian conflict from the perspective of the centre and peripheries. Barout writes: ‘The problematic relation between the centre and the peripheries during the 1950s and 1960s occurred in the form of a relation between the
plundered rural peripheries and the plundering urban centres’ (Barout, 2012, pp. 297-298). This relation, however, has developed since then according to Barout and has been transformed into:

A relation between small rapidly urbanising peripheries and urban centre - that were subjected to a ruralisation process with the growth of slums ... The medium-sized cities became metropolitan for their surroundings and peripheral with respect to the Million-inhabitant cities. We are in front of a continuum of the peripherality of peripheral cities and the centrality of central cities: inside each city we always find relative aspects of peripherality and centrality” (Barout, 2012, pp. 298-299).

The example of the eastern cities represents a problem for Barout’s argument. The rural areas surrounding these cities (their ‘peripheries’ in Barout’s language) remained calm and loyal, following the tribal chiefs who maintained good relations with the regime. It was the educated urban youth of these cities who went to the streets in these small numbers to demonstrate against the regime. The centres of the eastern cities joined the uprising while the peripheries did not.

It is also necessary to mention that the spatial perspective adopted by the proponents of the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’ (which looks at the geography of the protests to understand the uprising and its ‘rural aspects’) is also problematic on several levels. The problems of this perspective will be illustrated in the following pages. The most important among these problems pertains to how this perspective, in the absence of a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of rurality and urbanity, is insufficient to understand the uprising.

Is Dar’a a city or a rural space?

The second problematic aspect within the existing literature revolves around the city of Dar’a being classified as a rural or semi-rural space. The city of Dar’a, where the first demonstrations took place, is not only a city in terms of its population exceeding the official threshold (of 20,000 inhabitants), but also it is the capital of its governorate (also named Dar’a). Yet, even those who oppose the liberalisation grievances thesis (such as Leenders and Heydemann) agree that the city is perceived as rural (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012). This is not limited to Dar’a but includes other cities and towns.
that are described by many as ‘rural towns’ or ‘rural cities’ (Batatu, 1999; Hisham & Crabapple, 2018). Examples include Deirezzor, Hassakah, and Raqqa which are also the capitals of their respective governorates. The classification of these cities and towns as rural means that urbanity and rurality go beyond numbers and official thresholds, and even being the capital of a governorate. Rurality and urbanity are determined by assumptions that are most often unpacked. It is necessary to unpack and evaluate these assumptions before a researcher can understand the Syrian uprising and the role of rural-urban relations in determining it. If Dar’a, for example, is to be recognised as an urban space, as the official thresholds and criteria imply, it becomes problematic to claim that the uprising started from a rural area. This shows the importance of a clear and systematic understanding of rurality and urbanity.

**Who are the Authentic Urbanites?**

A third issue is the discordance between authors who argue that the major cities remained mostly silent and others who tried to undermine what is known as the ‘rural aspect’ of the uprising. In their endeavour to counter the arguments of the first group, these authors invoke the political choices and behaviour of the group of urban-rural migrants that was studied by Ismail (as discussed in 2.1). These authors argue that the major cities’ ‘authentic’ urbanites did not live in the cities anymore but have migrated to peripheral and semi-rural neighbourhoods such as the ones studied by Ismail. It becomes problematic to argue that the urbanites of the major cities remained silent since these groups were among the first to take to the streets (Mardam Bey, 2015).

The arguments of these authors are underpinned by an understanding of urbanity that does not link it to dwelling in the city but to other criteria such as family names and origins. If the ‘authentic’ urbanites ceased to dwell in the cities, how, according to this logic, should the current dwellers of the cities be classified? Are they urban or rural? Addressing this debate requires a clear definition of urbanity and rurality which considers and evaluates the different criteria invoked by different authors.

Another question that this debate brings forward pertains to the role of observers’ perceptions. To what extent do the perceptions of these authors contribute to
classifying these urban-rural migrants as urbanites? If such a contribution is to be considered, to what extent are these subjective observations affected by embedded interests? Are these classifications affected by power relations? If so, how have these power relations affected the political choices of the different groups since 2011?

It is important to note in this context that these urban-rural migrants benefited from the 2000s liberalisation. They exploited the spike in real estate prices and sold their properties in the city centres for high prices and moved to the cheaper semi-rural areas around the cities; despite this, they were among the first to take to the streets (Ismail, 2013). Their participation in the uprising would not be properly understood from an economic view that not only limits itself to the economic impact of liberalisation, but ignores its symbolic dimension. The spatial perspective that underpins the arguments of most of the scholars discussed in this chapter, however, does not discern between these migrants and the rural-urban migrants or the original inhabitants of these spaces.

The Role of Perceptions in Facilitating Mobilisation

The existing literature ignores the field of Revolution Studies. Scholars of revolution, such as Jack A. Goldstone (2001, p. 154), underscore the role of perceptions in mediating political behaviour. Goldstone, for example, insists that ‘material deprivations and threats need to be seen not merely as miserable conditions but as a direct result of the injustice and the moral and political failings of the state’ (Goldstone, 2001, p. 154). According to Goldstone: ‘Even defeat in war, famine, or fiscal collapse may be seen as natural or unavoidable catastrophes rather than as the handiwork of incompetent or morally bankrupt regimes’ (Goldstone, 2001, p. 154). It is, therefore, necessary to study the perceptions of different groups and their role in deciding their political choices and behaviour.

Revolution Studies scholars, in the same vein, call for ‘greater attention to conscious agency, to the role of ideology and culture in shaping revolutionary mobilization and objectives, and to contingency in the course and outcome of revolutions’ (Goldstone, 2001, p. 141). It is consequently necessary to not only study the perceptions of the
different groups and actors on the eve of the uprising, but also during the earlier and later stages. This would allow a better understanding of the uprising as it captures its processual nature instead of assuming that the political positions and choices of the different groups and actors were static and predetermined by the distribution of the liberalisation’s socio-economic costs and benefits. This processual understanding of the conflict requires a similarly processual understanding of rural-urban relations. This cannot be achieved with the static definitions of the rural and the urban which are currently dominant within the existing literature.

The Role of Subjective Factors

Building on the previous point that showed the significance of perceptions in mediating political behaviour, it is necessary to highlight the role of subjective factors in general. In this context, and as mentioned earlier, authors like Salamandra (2004), Sudermann (2011), and Totah (2014), who focused on the subjective and discursive aspects of rurality and urbanity showed that the ambitions and endeavours of the regime elites during the 1990s and 2000s went beyond the economic interests linked to the economic liberalisation of the 2000s. The regime elites, according to these authors, had a more sophisticated enterprise that aimed at redefining rurality and urbanity in a manner that not only recognises them among the urbanites, but also reflects their aspiration to become the new bourgeoisie of the country. These aspirations and the discursive manoeuvres that were intended to legitimate them are rarely discussed within the literature regarding the 2011 uprising. This calls for a discussion of these aspirations and discourses, and the way they were received by other rural and urban groups as well as their contribution to the political choices of different actors since 2011. This shows the significance of examining the subjective and discursive dimensions of rural-urban relations. It also leads to highlighting the need for an understanding of rurality and urbanity that goes beyond the simplistic, materialistic, and objectivist understandings that are currently common within the literature.

Beyond the Early Days
There were many authors who recognised the role of rural-urban dynamics as a factor behind the mobilisation of certain groups during the early days of the uprising. The interest in these dynamics have started to dwindle since 2012 when the sectarian factors, the militarisation of the uprising, and the role of external players became more attractive for both academics and journalists. There are many questions, in this case, which are left unanswered.

In addition to their role in the outbreak of the uprising, did these dynamics play a role in the outcomes witnessed today? Did they contribute to the regime’s persistence? How did the uprising and the subsequent war affect these dynamics? How did the understandings and perceptions of rurality and urbanity change during these years? What happened to the different rural and urban groups that were invoked in the analysis of scholars during the early days? How much attention should these dynamics be given when thinking about the future of the country? This thesis will try to address all these questions.

Conclusion

It has been illustrated throughout the chapter that the existing literature on rural-urban relations in Syria in general (and particularly their role in the 2011 uprising) suffers from several inconsistencies resulting from two major, yet intertwined, problems. The first is the lack of a comprehensive and systematic definition of rurality and urbanity and the second is a tendency to avoid the ideational and subjective aspects of rurality and urbanity. The absence of the subjective and ideational dimensions in the analysis of most scholars within the existing literature has led to reductionist and economistic understandings of the uprising. This is not to say that the economic developments witnessed in the last decades were inconsequential; nor does it mean that the existing literature is not beneficial and enlightening for researchers; however, it is not sufficient for the purposes of this thesis.

A new approach to rural-urban relations and their role in the country’s politics is therefore required. This approach should engage the ideational, subjective, and discursive aspects of rurality and urbanity in addition to their objective and material
aspects. This also applies to the definition of rurality and urbanity which should also recognise the dynamism and permeability of these concepts. Addressing these two gaps would allow a new understanding of the role of rural-urban relations in the outbreak and later course of the 2011 uprising that recognises the processual nature of the uprising and incorporates the historical complexities underpinning it instead of the economistic perspectives that depict it as the outcome of static and predetermined positions largely resulting from the distribution of the 2000s liberalisation grievances and benefits.
Chapter 3

A Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory: A Comprehensive Understanding of Rural and Urban Identities

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to introduce a theoretical framework capable of capturing the complexities of rural-urban relations, and the way these relations affect, and are affected by, political and socio-economic dynamics. The mission of such a framework is twofold: (i), it should allow a comprehensive understanding of what is rural and what is urban and what lies between them; and (ii), it should pave the way for studying how rurality, urbanity, and rural-urban relations are affected by the political and socio-economic conditions and how they, in turn, may influence the political attitudes, choices, and behaviour of different groups and individuals.

Existing literature on rural-urban relations will be brought together with literature on Identity Theory in order to produce such a framework. An exploration of the former will be conducted with a special focus on a smaller body of scholarship that has been concerned with rural and urban identities from a subjective perspective (in contrast to the objectivist tendencies of the mainstream literature). There are several problems with these studies and their objectivist and subjectivist approaches which will be addressed in Part I of this chapter. The discussion will subsequently shift to how Identity Theory may help in addressing these shortcomings.

Social Identity Theory calls for surpassing the external-internal and objective-subjective dichotomies by integrating all these factors into one dialectical continuous process of identification. The chapter will be able to propose a new framework that captures the complexities of rural-urban relations (in contrast to the common reductionist tendencies of the existing literature) by looking at rurality and urbanity from such a dialectical and dynamic perspective.

Social Identity Theory may also serve the goals of this thesis on another level.

According to the theory, identities are intertwined with the socio-economic and
political interests of groups and individuals. Identity processes are determined by negotiations and power relations and the imbalances interwoven between them. According to this notion, identities are inherently political (especially group identities). Applying Social Identity Theory to rural-urban relations would therefore pave the way to clarifying the link between identification processes and the political realm.

Narrative Identity Theory, in the same context, provides a way for studying these processes, for examining the ways identities and interests are intertwined, and how each of them (and the knot resulting from their intertwinement) influences the political discourses and behaviour of the different collective and individual social agents. According to the theory’s proponents, analysing the identity narrative of a certain group or individual allows the uncovering of not only the embedded interests within that narrative but also the manoeuvres used by the narrators to support their identity claims which, might legitimise their demands (and vice versa). This chapter argues that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ categories are not fixed, static categories and will show that they are continuously changing concepts that influence, and are influenced by, the political and the socio-economic dynamics within a society.

Discourse Analysis will be used to analyse these identity discourses and narratives. The oeuvre of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) scholars will be important in the context of uncovering the identity claims and the embedded interests within the narratives of the different rural, rurban (semi-urban), and urban groups in Syria; a wide range of empirical resources will be employed in order to achieve the thesis’s goals.

The chapter is divided into three parts. Part 1 will be a discussion of the existing literature on rural-urban relations and identities. Part 2 will focus on how Identity Theory can contribute towards the goals of this chapter; each section within this part will start by exploring the identity literature in general, and then an attempt will be made to examine how the assertions and the theoretical tools provided by this literature might be applied to rural-urban relations and identities. It will mainly depend on examples drawn from the existing ‘rural-urban relations’ literature in order to illustrate how the latter could be connected to the ‘identity theory’ literature to produce a theoretical framework capable of serving the goals of this thesis. Part 3 will
be a discussion of the methodology and the empirical resources that may be employed to achieve the above-mentioned goals.

Part 1: Existing Literature on Rural-urban Relations

1.1. Categorising Rural and Urban Spaces and Populations: Administrative and Economic Approaches

Different approaches are commonly used to categorise rural and urban populations and spaces. These approaches may be roughly divided into three categories: administrative, economic, and social (Iaquinta & Drescher, 2000, p. 2; Gough, et al., 2010, pp. 32-33; van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 31). Those concerned with rural-urban classifications are not limited to the academic field but also include governments, international and domestic organisations, and ordinary people.

Rural and urban populations on either the bureaucratic or administrative level, are usually defined by ‘residence in settlements above or below a certain size’ or a certain population density (Tacoli, 1998, p. 147), and each nation designates its own threshold (Lynch, 2005, p. 11). A 2,000-inhabitant settlement might be considered as urban in some countries while it takes twenty thousand inhabitants for another country to consider a settlement as such. Certain cases such as Belgium, for instance, may have two thresholds for different regions within the same country: 600 inhabitants per km² for Flanders and 300 inhabitants per km² for Wallonia (Pizzoli & Gong, 2007, p. 3).

Things become more complicated in other countries: India has multi-faceted criteria for classifying rural and urban settlements; the USA has several official definitions; and in Syria the official names for certain spaces cause ambivalence among the public and academics alike (the governorate of Rural Damascus, for example, despite the name, has several cities within its borders) (Berdegué, et al., 2014, p. 19).

The majority of academic authors start from an economic perspective that inspects rural-urban dynamics on the level of the dominant economic sectors. Urbanism has been traditionally linked to industrialisation and (or) services, while ruralism has been
linked to either agriculture and/or to pre-capitalist or primordial relations of production (Tacoli, 1998, p. 149).

There have been some authors, however, who have tried new syncretic approaches; some scholars, for example, called for a ‘multidimensional approach’ for classifying the rural and urban by ‘taking into account both economic activities and geographic dimension along with population density’ (Pizzoli & Gong, 2007, p. 1). Others called for considering the function of a settlement and its ‘position in the national hierarchy of urban locations’ instead of its population size (Berdegué, et al., 2014, p. 20). These approaches, however, did not dissent from the categorisation orientation (discussed later).

The above-mentioned approaches to categorising rural and urban spaces and populations (whether administrative, economic, or syncretic) are usually underpinned by an objectivist approach which is more concerned by the material situation of those being categorised rather than by their perceptions and subjective views. Restricting the study of rural-urban relations to such classificatory approaches is problematic on several levels.

First, the supposedly objectivist approach does not mean that categorisation would be objective. It is well-established that categorisation is ‘rarely neutral’ and that ‘categorising people is always potentially an intervention in their lives’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 6); more significantly, categorisation often reflects the goals of either the categorisers or the interests of certain elites.

Second, the views and agency of those being categorised and their ability to reject or accept such supposedly ‘objective’ categorisations is usually neglected by those making the categorisation (whether government employees, social scientists, or others). The way those being categorised perceive themselves and their material situation is no less important than their ‘objective reality’. Perceptions become more important when the researcher wants to understand how the rurality or urbanity of certain groups or individuals affect their political behaviour. ‘Objective reality’ does not directly determine behaviour as it is mediated by the perceptions and deliberation of actors.
Third, categorisation is usually focused on the nominal aspects of rurality and urbanity. Classifying a certain group as rural, for example, would highlight the rurality of this group and gloss over the differences between the members of the groups and how they experience being (or being categorised as) rural. The life experience of a rural-urban migrant, who might still be classified as rural by his or her urban peers, is much different than the life experience of those who have never left their villages. The term ‘rurban’ and the idea of the rural-urban continuum (discussed in the next section) might be beneficial here, as they highlight the existence of degrees of rurality and urbanity. These concepts, on the other hand, do not address all the facets of this problem. The life experience of a woman in a rural area, for instance, is very different from that of a man in the same area or even the same household (Erman, 1998, p. 543). The difference in life experience is no less significant than the previous example, despite the absence of varying degrees of rurality.

Fourth, the majority of the works cited in this chapter start from a normative perspective that is oriented towards policy-making; most of the scholars of rural-urban relations are concerned with development (especially rural but also urban) and alleviating poverty. The literature rarely focuses on how rurality and urbanity affect the political tensions between rural, urban and rurban groups and spaces. The influence of these categories on the political choices and behaviours of the studied groups is rarely considered.

Fifth, categorisation according to the above-mentioned criteria led to an understanding of the rural and the urban as two mutually exclusive categories. This is not the case in today’s world (discussed below), and it is unrealistic to perceive the rural-urban as a dichotomy.

The literature revealed two developments in response to these criticisms. The first was the spread of concepts such as ‘rurban’ and the ‘continuum’ to describe rural-urban relations in a non-dichotomic way; and the second was the flourishing of subjective approaches to rurality and urbanity which went beyond objective categorisation.

1.2. The ‘Rurban’ and the Rural-Urban Continuum
A minority of scholars were more aware of the complexity of rural-urban linkages and more sceptical towards depicting the rural and the urban as a dichotomy (Erman, 1998, p. 541; Berdegué, et al., 2014, p. 19). The co-existence and articulation of different economic sectors and farm and non-farm sources of income within the same spaces in current times have become a wide-spread phenomenon around the globe. This can be attributed to several factors such as rapid urbanisation (where cities, as they rapidly expand, swallow their rural peripheries and bring them within their urban borders), the re-classification of previously rural settlements, and rural-urban migration which has been playing a role in the spread of certain forms of subsistence economy and rural lifestyles within the poor urban neighbourhoods to which those migrants usually move (Erman, 1998, pp. 541-542; Lynch, 2005, p. 11; Dang, 2016, p. 36). Moreover, the continuous endeavours of governments across the globe to develop rural areas, the technological developments in transportation and communications, agricultural intensification, and the flourishing of agri-businesses have all reduced the cultural and ideological gap between rural and urban spaces. Electricity, public education, Radio, Television, and even internet services are now widespread in some of the remotest rural peripheries worldwide.

The borders between rural urban communities have become blurred, and the two categories are no longer seen as mutually exclusive as they are becoming more permeable day after day (Erman, 1998, pp. 541-542; Lynch, 2005, p. 11). Many scholars argue that urban-rural relations should be looked at as a continuum not as a dichotomy (Lynch, 2005, p. 32; Gough, et al., 2010, p. 12; Berdegué, et al., 2014, p. 19). Cecilia Tacoli (1998, p. 149) wrote:

‘Definitions based on a sharp distinction between urban and rural settlements often assume that the livelihoods of their inhabitants can be equally reduced to two main categories: agriculture based in rural areas, and a reliance on manufacture and services in urban centres ... recent research has shown that the number of urban households engaging in agriculture and that of rural households whose income is derived from non-farm activities is far higher than usually thought’.

This suggests that many households might be considered as multi-spatial: ‘combining farm and non-farm activities and rural and urban residence’ (Pizzoli & Gong, 2007, p.
The majority of scholars consequently agree that such ‘distinctions are often arbitrary’ (Tacoli, 1998, p. 150). It might be argued, in the same context, that only a few extreme cases could be counted today as ‘pure’ rural or urban considering that most spaces are somewhere between the two concepts.

It should be mentioned, however, that the ‘continuum’ concept has been criticised as it suggests an uninterrupted gradual shift from one extreme to the other. The patterns through which rurality and urbanity penetrate each other do not necessarily correspond to such gradualism; therefore, certain authors prefer to talk about ‘nexuses’ (van Leeuwen & Nijkamp, 2006; Gupta, 2015).

Another problematic aspect of using the concept of the continuum to describe rural-urban relations is that it might give the impression of stability on its rural and urban extremes and limits the dynamism to what is happening in the middle of the continuum. This is another caveat that should be considered when using the term ‘continuum’. For these reasons, it is important to make it clear that the continuum does not present an accurate representation of rural-urban relations; however, it will be used in this thesis for the purposes of simplification and clarification.

The term ‘rurban’ would be beneficial for understanding these relations, regardless of how rural-urban relations are depicted (continuum, nexuses, or other). The term is a combination of the words ‘rural’ and ‘urban’. It refers to groups and spaces with both rural and urban characteristics such as the wide-spread rural-urban migrants’ neighbourhoods that surround larger cities around the world. There are terms which are also common within the literature such as periurban, exurban, urban tract, urban fringe, semi-urban, and even suburban (Iaquinta & Drescher, 2000). The term ‘rurban’ remains the most expressive, however, especially as it could denote the ‘rurbanity’ of certain spaces that are not necessarily close to cities. These include certain rural towns or spaces where agri-businesses flourish.

However, it is crucial to be mindful of a significant caveat when using the term Rurban. Specifically, the term glosses over the different configurations that may comprise both rural and urban features simultaneously. For example, it does not allow the reader to differentiate between a village that became officially recognised as a city because its
population reached the official threshold and a poor urban neighbourhood that had been receiving waves of rural migrants.

However, the term will be used in this thesis for the purposes of simplification. It will prove to be beneficial for describing some of the phenomena that will be discussed in the thesis (such as the ‘rurbanisation’ of the Syrian society – see Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). Yet, the differentiation between the different forms of ‘rurban’ spaces will be maintained whenever necessary, and the caveats of using the term ‘rurban’ will always be considered throughout the coming discussions.

1.3. The Subjective Approaches

Another current within Rural-Urban studies is the trend that called for a subjective approach towards rurality and urbanity (Erman, 1998; Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2003; Huang & Guo, 2015; Dang, 2016). Proponents of this approach argue that it is necessary to hear the voice of those being categorised rather than resorting solely to external categorisation methods (Erman, 1998, p. 543). These scholars are interested in the subjective life experiences of the studied groups and individuals more than the objectivist concerns of their earlier-discussed colleagues. They consequently depended on qualitative and ethnographic methods, participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviewing more than the quantitative methods and data used by their colleagues (Erman, 1998, p. 543; Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2003, p. 248).

The proponents of the subjectivist approach were able to not only uncover how those being studied perceive their identities vis-à-vis external groups and individuals, but also, more significantly, by studying the perceptions and life experiences of the targeted groups and individuals, they were able to unveil the differences in life experiences within the studied groups.

These authors managed to study the identity transformations that rural-urban migrants face after moving into their new urban residences by focusing on the experiences of these migrants. They also studied how these migrants manoeuvre their ways through the complexities of power relations and imbalances. Encountering these power relations occur mainly upon being perceived as rural migrants and how this
affects their opportunities in the cities to which they migrated. This body of scholarship is still on the margins of the wider literature on rural-urban relations. This is due, partly at least, to the difficulty of measuring aspects of social life such as lifestyles, worldviews, tastes and other cultural and ideological preferences or dispositions of groups or individuals (Lynch, 2005, p. 19; van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 16).

Another weakness within this body of scholarship is that these authors are not sufficiently concerned with power and conflict dynamics on the collective level (Erman, 1998, p. 542). The literature does not address the question of how groups face each other on the political level, regardless of the undeniable significance of the studied individual-level manoeuvres, or how the dynamics of collective action take place within these groups, or how the perceptions and life experiences studied by these authors may influence the political behaviour of those being studied. Their works consequently do not provide much help for researchers who are attempting to understand how rurality and urbanity would affect the political choices and behaviour on the collective level.

A more comprehensive theoretical framework is therefore needed for studying rural-urban dynamics, and how they affect the political attitudes, choices, and behaviour of different groups and individuals. The next section will benefit from the literature on Identity Theory, and specifically Social Identity and Narrative Identity theories, in order to build a theoretical framework that addresses the above-mentioned shortcomings and serves the goals of this thesis.

Part 2: Social Identity Theory and Rural-Urban Relations

2.1. The Internal-External / Subjective-Objective Dialectics of Identification

According to Social Identity Theory, identity encompasses two processes. The first process, defined as self-identification, occurs when an individual or a group asserts a certain identity of themselves and demands or expects others to validate such identity claims and to deal with them accordingly (Jenkins, 2014, pp. 27;95-98). The second process pertains to how others might categorise that group or individual and how they
respond to their identity claims. According to Vignoles et al: ‘identity comprises not only “who you think you are” (individually or collectively), but also […] the social recognition or otherwise that these actions receive from other individuals or groups’ (Vignoles, et al., 2011, p. 2).

While others may, or may not, acknowledge the identity claims of a certain group or individual, the latter may also reject how those others label them. In the same vein, while presenting a certain self-identity might affect the perceptions of those on the receiving end, the categorisations made by others for an individual (or a group) may affect the latter’s perception of themselves (this would be more effective when those others are in a position of power). The two processes of (internal) self-identification and (external) categorisation therefore dialectically affect each other; identity should be perceived as the synthesis of these two processes. Richard Jenkins, a well-known identity scholar, developed this understanding of identity into what he calls the ‘internal-external dialectic of identification’ (Jenkins, 2014, pp. 42-43).

This understanding of identity led to two significant outcomes. First, most scholars were led to highlight the importance of the interactional aspect of identity (Bamberg, et al., 2011; Vignoles, et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2014). Identity only becomes visible in interaction, and it is affected by the nature of the interaction and by those who are the parties conducting it; hence, it should always be remembered that identities vary from situation to situation (Bamberg, et al., 2011, p. 188; Jenkins, 2014, p. 115). A good example of this may come from rural-urban migrants. The work of Tahire Erman showed that many rural-urban migrants present themselves as urbanites when interacting with urbanites and rural when they interact with their rural relatives. One of them told Erman: ‘I become an urbanite or a villager depending on where I am’ (Erman, 1998, p. 546).¹

Second, identity has been perceived by most scholars as a continuous process and not a fixed category (Jenkins, 2014, pp. 42-43). Jenkins, for example, uses the terms ‘identity’ and ‘identification’ interchangeably in his book (Jenkins, 2014). Indeed, the

---

¹ According to Bamberg et al: “This should not be taken to imply that identities only exist in interaction, but it is in interaction where they become visible—to the participants in situated contexts as well as to us as discourse analysts doing identity research” (Bamberg, et al., 2011, p. 196).
assertion and validation (or rejection) by others of any identity claim is the outcome of a continuous process of negotiation that is highly dependent on power relations and imbalances (Jenkins, 2014, p. 73). The same applies to categorisation; more powerful groups or individuals might be able to manipulate the categorisation processes (and impose their identity claims over others), while others might not have sufficient power resources to resist the external categorisation nor to impose their identity claims or counter-claims (Bamberg, et al., 2011, p. 181; Spears, 2011, p. 218; Jenkins, 2014, p. 47; 132).

This understanding of identification does not mean that the objective aspects of identity should be ignored, or that the subjective and interactional aspects should be treated as more important. The insistence on a dialectical perspective is meant to allow the integration of not only the internal and external factors, but also the subjective and objective moments of identification in one dynamic process (Jenkins, 2014, p. 48): ‘facts are still important’ (McAdams, 2011, p. 107). According to Bamberg et al.: ‘social and institutional conditions […] frame and, even more strongly, constrain who can say what is said, under what circumstances it can be said, and how it actually may have to be said so it will be communally validated’ (Bamberg, et al., 2011, p. 181). Dan McAdams, in the same vein, wrote: ‘There are many narrative possibilities, but not an infinite number. In narrative identity, the storyteller can work only with the material at hand’ (McAdams, 2011, p. 107). All this makes talking about (and working with) identities a tricky endeavour. To use the word ‘rural’, for example, to describe a certain individual or group might refer to an external moment of categorisation or to an internal moment of self-identification or to the synthesis of both moments.

This differentiation between the external and internal processes of identification is reminiscent of Marx’s distinction between the class in itself and the class for itself. Jenkins says: ‘a distinction can be made between a collectivity which identifies and defines itself (a group for itself) and a collectivity which is identified and defined by others (a category in itself)’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 45). The idea of a dialectical relation between the two processes also has its Marxist connotations. What is more important, however, is the dialectical relation between the perceptive and materialist dimensions of identity which invokes the oeuvre of Antonio Gramsci and his theorisation of the
role of perceptions in formulating the material, and his understanding of the dialectical relation between the structure and the superstructure which goes beyond mechanical approaches that continue to be common within certain Marxist circles today. Gramsci was much interested in the common sense and the way elites are capable of using the institutions under their hands to produce and reproduce it. This makes Gramsci’s œuvre relevant to the aims of this thesis. This Marxist-Gramscian line of thought will be present throughout this chapter and the thesis in general.

2.2. Collective versus Individual Identities

It is necessary to address the differences between individual identity and group identity before continuing. The most important difference in this regard is that groups are often perceived by social scientists as ‘imagined’ or as ‘sociological abstractions’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 107). However, being ‘imagined’ does not mean they are ‘imaginary’; ‘they are experientially real in everyday life’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 12). To use Jenkins’s words: ‘if people think that something is real, it is, if nothing else, real in terms of the action that it produces and in its consequences. Therefore, it is socially and intersubjectively real’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 108).

Another aspect of difference lies in the fact that ‘the boundedness of a collectivity is different in kind from the bodily integrity of an individual. Where a collectivity begins and ends cannot be mapped using the sociometric equivalent of a dressmaker’s tape’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 107). The borders of a group consequently represent an important issue to consider when discussing collective identities. This point has already been exemplified by the discussion in Part 1 of the blurred borders between the rural and the urban, and how scholars are reluctant to perceive ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as two solid and mutually exclusive categories.

These differences between collective and individual identities did not prevent many scholars from arguing that ‘the processes by which each is produced and reproduced are analogous’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 40). Indeed, the internal-external dialectic of identification occurs on the collective level, and collective identities should again be understood as the synthesis of the two processes of group identification and
categorisation (Jenkins, 2014, p. 113). It should be noted, however, that while ‘group identification always implies categorisation, the reverse is not always the case’ (Jenkins, 2014). People might be categorised in certain groups without them knowing of such categorisation, ‘for example, persons earning wages in a certain range may be counted as a category for income tax purposes’ without them knowing of the existence of such category (Jenkins, 2014, p. 106;166).

This is reminiscent of the difference between a group for itself and a category in itself. This does not mean that a category in itself is less analytically valuable or experientially consequential; rural-urban relations provide a good example in this regard. The significance of a government’s rural-urban labelling is not limited to its material consequences in terms of socio-economic policies and government spending and services, but also involves the process of identification as it affects the perceptions of the whole of society including those being categorised. The latter may resist such labelling or may internalise it; in both cases the labelling influences their self-perceptions.

Authoritative categorisation, moreover, may render the boundaries between the rural and the urban spaces and populations less flexible and less permeable. The household registration system (**Hukou**) in China discriminated between rural and urban populations and prevented rural migrants from registering as urbanites in the cities to which they moved. This ‘segregation’ not only prevented those migrants from obtaining public services in their new cities, but also made it too difficult for them to become assimilated within their new urban societies (Huang & Guo, 2015, pp. 172-173). While rural-urban segregation in other countries might not be as rigidly systemised as the Hukou, authoritative categorisation may often generate similar effects although to varying lesser degrees.

This might explain the interest within the existing ‘rural-urban relations’ literature in categorisation, but it does not justify the persisting ignorance within wide circles of the processes of self-identification. The argument here is that, without considering this internal moment of identification, a researcher cannot understand the political attitudes of those being categorised nor the embedded interests that may underpin these political choices.
2.3. The Multiple Aspects of Identity and Nominal versus Virtual Identities

There is another reason behind the challenges of studying identities which is that ‘multiple aspects of identity can and do coexist’ and that ‘these different aspects [...] will be more or less salient and relevant in different social contexts’ (Vignoles, et al., 2011, p. 4). One example could be a Lebanese female student studying in the UK. Her arrival within UK borders may suggest that her national identity (Lebanese) is much more significant than being a female, a student, or of a certain age. When this student attempts to obtain a student discount by presenting her student card, however, it is the fact that she is a student that matters and not her gender, age, or national identity (although the latter might be noted by others). Russell Spears points out: ‘The salience of identity is highly contingent on the social context, and can shift quite quickly as the context changes’ (Spears, 2011, p. 209).

Regarded from another perspective, the salience of certain aspects of identity is also dependent on:

One’s frame of reference: if one is focusing on an individual, musically talented, Australian mother, who simultaneously occupies these multiple categories, then it makes best sense to view them as components of her identity; on the other hand, if one is focusing on Australian national identity and its meaning in Australian cultural discourse, then it makes better sense to view this as an identity that can be considered independently of any particular individual who may endorse it (Vignoles, et al., 2011, p. 6).

In this sense, the rural/urban aspects of identity will be the most relevant for the purposes of this thesis. This does not mean that other aspects of identities are to be neglected. It is always the case that rurality and urbanity represent only one component of an individual’s multi-faceted identity. However, this chapter’s “frame of reference” requires that rural and urban identities be discussed as identities not as components of identities.

In this context, identity scholars maintain a differentiation between what they call Nominal Identity and Virtual Identity: ‘between the name and the experience of an identity’. According to Jenkins:
It is possible for individuals to share the same nominal identity, and for that to mean very
different things to them in practice, to have different consequences for their lives (Jenkins,
2014, p. 46) ... The consequences or meaning of any specific nominal identification can vary
from context to context and over time (Jenkins, 2014, p. 102).

This addresses the problem (discussed in Part I) of glossing over the differences within
those categorised as rural or urban in a manner that surpasses the possibilities offered
by a concept such as ‘rurban’. The variety of virtual identities is not only limited to the
degrees of rurality or urbanity as in the concept of rurban, but also pertinent to other
aspects of identity such as being a man or a woman, rich or poor, educated or non-
educated, young or old, and so on.

To summarise, Social Identity Theory may not provide a fixed definition of the terms
“rural” and ‘urban’ that may simplify the research in this domain, but it opens the door
for what is more important than this. It determines a number of factors and variables
that should be considered when discussing rural and urban identities. Considering
these variables will produce different outcomes at different points as this thesis
develops. It is true that the variation of results in tandem with the changing contexts
and situations complicates the researcher’s endeavours, but it is exactly what is
needed in order to address the shortcomings of the mainstream literature’s
reductionist understanding of the terms “rural” and “urban”. The complexity of
Identity should, thus, be embraced rather than avoided. Having such comprehensive
understanding of rurality and urbanity in mind, it is now time to address the second
goal of this chapter. The following two sections will be discussions on how rural and
urban identities affect, and are affected by, the political and socio-economic realms in
a society.

2.4. The Identity-Interests Intertwinement

The relation between identity and interests had been a debatable issue within identity
scholarship for a long time. Scholars such as Fredrik Barth asserted that identities are
not only influenced by interests but are the by-products of social actors’ endeavours in
pursuing their interests (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2014, p. 8). Others, such as Henry Tajfel,
argued, to the contrary, that group membership affects the behaviour of the group’s
members in a manner that favours other members and discriminate against outsiders even in the absence of interests (Tajfel, 1981; Spears, 2011, pp. 202-204; Jenkins, 2014, p. 8). These two perspectives are synthesised by contemporary scholars who agree that “interest and identity claims are closely intertwined” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 9).

This intertwining is verified by the few works that focused on the life experiences of rural-urban migrants. Erman, for example, found that many rural-urban migrants in the Turkish capital of Ankara insist on their rural identity because it allows them to be ‘a part of the migrant community ... and thereby to be able to use the services and support (economic, social, and psychological) provided by it’ (Erman, 1998, p. 545). This represents a typical example of Gramsci’s theorisation of ‘worldviews’ as underpinned by interests. A minority among those migrants managed to enhance their financial situation during their time in the city and, consequently, wanted to join the rich classes of the urban bourgeoisie. These migrants therefore decided to follow the path that Erman calls: ‘moving up by rejecting’ (Erman, 1998, p. 550). According to the author: ‘The negative image of rural migrants among the urbanized upper classes seems to be one factor operating in the migrants’ rejections of their rural connections in their desire to be “true urbanites”’ (Erman, 1998, p. 550). It is noteworthy that similar conclusions could be drawn from the work of authors who studied rural-urban migrants in both China and Vietnam (Huang & Guo, 2015; Dang, 2016).

It might be intuitive but still noteworthy that interests are no less (if not more) important on the collective level. The intertwining between interests and identification processes is also existent and effective on the collective level. It is well-established that ‘groups distinguish themselves from, and discriminate against, other groups in order to promote their own positive social evaluation’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 114). These endeavours do not only comprise social evaluation but also include the inextricably intertwined socio-economic interests and privileges.

It becomes easier to trace how identities influence political behaviour through perceptions of interests with such understanding of the relation between identity and interests. A certain individual or group who believes that it may be possible to maximise their material interests or social status by claiming a certain identity would be motivated to do so. This might mean different things in different contexts. It might
entail the rejection of their old identities for some, while for others it might mean attempting to maintain both identities (old and new). Those who are established as belonging to a certain dominant and powerful group (both in terms of external categorisation and internal identification) on the other hand will probably attempt to either maintain the status-quo in inter-group relations or to manipulate the in-group dynamics (or both) in order to enhance their position vis-à-vis other group members. These manoeuvres may even include attempts to redefine the nominal aspects of the identity in order to establish new group-borders that exclude other unwanted or competitive in-groups (Spears, 2011, p. 218); meanwhile, ‘individuals and groups with unsatisfactory social identity’ may attempt to modify their identity claims in order to manoeuvre their way towards a more favourable social status or better access to material resources (Spears, 2011, p. 218; Jenkins, 2014, p. 115).

The previous paragraph offered a number of examples on the relation between identities and interests, and consequently, on how identities affect, and are affected by, the political choices and behaviour of social actors. The work of Erman and others also provided a few examples on how such relations might occur in the context of rural and urban identities. These were only a few examples of a wide range of possibilities that may take place in different situations and contexts. This multiplicity of possibilities should highlight the fact that identities influence but do not determine human action; in the same vein, it should be kept in mind that ‘people may sometimes pursue interests that appear to conflict with how they are publicly identified, individually or collectively’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 8).

Taking these caveats into consideration, the next section will be a discussion on how the relations between identities and interests, and between identities, political choices, and behaviour could be studied through analysing narratives.

### 2.5. Studying the Political Aspects: Narrative Identity Theory

Identity is the outcome of an internal-external dialectic as previously discussed. The ‘internal moment of the dialect of identification’ occurs when individuals or groups ‘present an image of themselves ... for acceptance by others” while the external
moment is “the reception by others of that presentation: they can accept it or not’ (Jenkins, 2014, p. 95).

According to Narrative Identity theory, people convey their identities to others ‘in the form of a narrative’ (Wodak, et al., 2009, p. 8). Due to the complexities of social life, and the multi-dimensional aspects of the processes of identification, identity claims are rarely consistent, whether internally or externally, in terms of their congruency with either the material reality or life history of those making the claims. Groups and individuals therefore need to create narratives in order to ‘synthesise heterogeneous elements’ within their identity claims and also to integrate ‘different, partly contradictory circumstances and experiences’ into ‘a coherent temporal structure’ (Wodak, et al., 2009, p. 8).

Narratives, more significantly, allow those proposing them to rearrange and reinterpret past events when needed (such as according to the different contexts and situations in which the narrators find themselves) (Wodak, et al., 2009, p. 14). There are maybe some events which might become irrelevant or unsuitable for the narrators; in this case, they might either be downgraded or reinterpreted in a more suitable way, while other events might be moved closer to the narrative’s core. The result is that identities are not static categories but continuous processes, and, in order to understand such processes, it is necessary to study identity narratives. This is why narrative ‘has become a privileged form of discourse for identity analysis [...] it is by way of narrative that people are said to be able to construct a sense of a continuous self’ (Bamberg, et al., 2011, p. 180).

Studying a narrative and focusing on uncovering its internal inconsistencies and its incongruence with certain material realities, and on how the narrators try to bring these inconsistencies together or to justify the transformations in their life history may tell a lot about the interests embedded within this narrative and about the manner in which those proposing it intend to legitimise and achieve their identity claims and the concomitant political and socio-economic interests. This would open the door for studying the relation between identity and political behaviour. McAdams asserts: ‘narrative identity explains what the social actor does, what the motivated agent
wants, and what it all means in the context of one’s narrative understanding of the self’ (McAdams, 2011, p. 103). Martin argues in the same vein:

the identity narrative channels political emotions so that they can fuel efforts to modify a balance of power; it transforms the perceptions of the past and of the present” ... and it “brings forth a new interpretation of the world in order to modify it (cited in (Wodak, et al., 2009, p. 28)).

Moving to the external moment of identification, it is necessary to analyse how others respond to such narrative. This would necessitate the study of the counter-claims conveyed by the narrative(s) of those others. Analysing and contrasting these narratives would pave the way for the researcher to uncover the political dynamics ruling the relations between the different groups, their political and socio-economic interests and aspirations, their legitimising discourses, and, most significantly, the influence of identity processes on political choices and behaviour and vice versa. This leads to what may be described as a battle of narratives in which power relations and imbalances determine the outcomes. Narrative Identity, hence, does not only uncover the aspirations of the narrators but also ‘reflects gender and class divisions and the patterns of economic, political, and cultural hegemony that prevail at a given point in a society’s history’ (McAdams, 2011, p. 111).

Scholars of Narrative Identity Theory believe that the theory might be applied ‘to a community as well as to an individual’ (Wodak, et al., 2009, p. 13). Groups, similar to individuals, produce discourses and narratives in order to support their claims, legitimise their interests, and enhance their positions vis-à-vis other groups. Discourses that romanticise the rural population and highlight the significance of the agricultural sector for the national economy and development justify the demands for more government spending in the rural areas; on the other hand, an urban-biased discourse would justify the predatory policies of the urban elites towards the rural areas by invoking certain versions of the modernisation paradigm that prioritise

---

2 Narratives do not only modify the social world, they are also modified by it (Wodak, et al., 2009, p. 8).
industrialisation such as China or by resorting to a neo-liberal approach that disapproves of state intervention in the economy such as Syria in the 2000s.

3. Methodology and Empirical Resources

3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis and Narrative Analysis

The previous discussion shows that the purposes of this thesis will be best served by applying Discourse Analysis (DA) to the narratives of the different groups under study. Indeed, Discourse Analysis has been widely used to 'investigate “big” categories of identity' and the 'narrative-discursive' approach is one of the most significant in this regard (Taylor, 2013, pp. 55-56). The following chapters will be analyses of a wide range of discursive acts that are perceived to be constituent parts of the identity narratives of the different studied groups. These include not only the acts aimed at drawing the borders of a group (deciding who should be included or excluded under a certain identity label) but also the acts aiming either directly or indirectly at legitimising the privileges and demands that might be perceived as interlinked with such identity claims.

It is important in this context to highlight the fact that groups and individuals, when producing their identity narratives, often seek to hide the link between their identity claims and their interests in an attempt to normalise the latter. Van Dijk points out that when beliefs are communicated implicitly ‘without actually asserting them’, the possibility of them being challenged is reduced (van Dijk, 2001, p. 358). To use Gramsci’s terminology, narrators seek to present their identity claims and the concomitant interests and aspirations as ‘natural’ and ‘common sense’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 18). One of the major tasks of this thesis is to uncover such links and to ‘denaturalise’ the identity claims and the privileges, interests, and aspirations that are embedded within the identity narratives of the studied groups. This denaturalisation

---

3 Discursive Acts are used here in their wider meaning where they are thought to ‘involve the production of signs that make one’s intentions interpretable to another’ (heritage, 1992).
would allow the uncovering of the linkages between identity claims, concomitant interests, and political choices and behaviour.

This thesis will consequently depend mainly on the approach known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The term ‘Critical’ in CDA ‘means “denaturalising” the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 7). This will allow to “reveal the kinds of power interests buried in these texts” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 7).

CDA offers several ways to analyse discursive acts. One of these is to ‘analyse the basic choice of words used by a text producer’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 23). These lexical choices locate ‘events into particular frameworks of reference or discourses’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 23). The significance of these choices is often accentuated when a certain meaning is over-emphasised by the repetition of certain words and their synonyms. This overemphasis is known as ‘overlexicalisation’ in CDA terms. ‘Overlexicalisation gives a sense of over-persuasion and is normally evidence that something is problematic or of ideological contention’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 26).

CDA often scrutinises overlexicalisation to uncover the embedded ideologies and interests within a discursive act. Another tool is to study ‘suppression’ or ‘lexical absence’ within a discursive act. Suppression in contrast to overlexicalisation, occurs when ‘certain terms that we might expect are absent’ (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 26). This lexical absence might signify many things such as glossing over certain events in order to build a consistent narrative. Synthesising contradicting meanings or events by downgrading or suppressing the significance of some of them might be one way to achieve this aim. Suppression might also be a way of avoiding a clear assertion of certain ideas or aspirations in order to reduce the possibility of them being challenged, according to Van Dijk’s above-mentioned argument. Suppression, moreover, often occurs when narrators attempt to ignore or downgrade the claims, arguments, and rights of other groups.

It is paramount to remember that one of the most anticipated outcomes of narrative analysis is to uncover the inconsistencies within the narrative, and to highlight how they relate to the identity claims, the concomitant interests, and the attempts to normalise and legitimise these claims and interests. A researcher should be able to
compare the narrative and its details to the life history of the narrator(s) and to the material context within which the narrative is produced. It is therefore necessary that analysts resort to different kinds of data in order to contrast them with the studied narratives.

This thesis will not only depend on existing data and existing literature because this is necessitated by the chosen method (CDA) but also because this goes hand-in-hand with the theoretical framework established in the previous section of this chapter. The intertwinement between identity claims and interests, the dialectical relations between the subjective and objective, and the internal and external dimensions of the process of identification necessitate taking political, socio-economic, institutional, and cultural contexts into consideration. The goal of this thesis, as mentioned earlier, is not limited to studying the subjective perceptions of the studied groups, but also aims to understand how the whole process of identification affects, and is affected by, the political and socio-economic conditions in a certain space and time.

According to Van Dijk: ‘CDA is not a specific direction of research’ and ‘does not have a unitary theoretical framework’ (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353). Therefore, this thesis, will not be limited to a certain direction within CDA, but will benefit from different methods used by different scholars to analyse different discursive acts. To borrow the examples of Van Dijk: ‘Critical analysis of conversation is very different from an analysis of news reports in the press or of lessons and teaching at school’ (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353).

This plurality of methods and empirical resources is necessary due to the wide temporal and spatial scope of the thesis and to the nature of the political scene in Syria. The focus of this thesis will be on various ‘rural’, ‘urban’ and ‘rurban’ groups with varying degrees, and different forms of articulation of rurality and urbanity. These groups will also be studied and compared across an extended period. It is reasonable to expect that studying different groups and different periods requires a variation in methods and empirical resources. This expectation is especially relevant in Syria. Abiding by a single unitary method is impractical due to the radical changes that have been occurring within Syria’s political scene and the authoritarian nature of the regime since the 1960s. This impracticality will be further illustrated in the following paragraphs when studying the available empirical resources.
3.2 Empirical Resources

3.2.1. Drama

Drama production in Syria has always been of great significance in terms of disseminating the power discourses of the changing ruling elites. This significance increased in the 1960s when the Ba’thist regime created a new public institution for cinema production (Alexan, 2012). Syrian drama until then was produced by the private sector owned mainly by the traditional urban bourgeoisie (Alexan, 2012). It thus addressed the problems of this social class; it was also underpinned by its values and power discourses. During the two decades between mid-1960s and mid-1980s, however, most of the Syrian drama was sponsored by the state and mirrored the discourse of the middle-peasantry army officers who were in power. The private sector returned to the Syrian drama scene - starting in the 1990s and accelerating in the 2000s - and the Syrian drama became a channel for disseminating the worldview of the rising crony capitalists who were considered as Bashar al-Assad’s allies vis-à-vis the old guards of his father’s period.

There are many authors who have engaged with Syrian drama. These include some very well-known names such as Lisa Wedeen (1999; 2013), Miriam Cooke (2007) Marlin Dick (2007), Crista Salamandra (2015; 2019), Donatella Della Ratta (2015; 2018), and others. This academic and critical interest in Syrian drama has been motivated by several factors.

For sure, the success and popularity of many of the produced works has played a major role in this critical attention. A more important factor, however, pertains to the special attention paid by the regime and its head to the drama industry. This attracted many authors’ desire to understand how a medium that has provided biting political and social criticism since the 1980s has been able to function within Syria’s authoritarian regime.

Some authors tried to understand the regime’s interest in the drama industry and its tolerance of criticism as a kind of “tanfis” strategy:
Metaphorically referencing an Arabic word meaning “airing, venting, allowing to breathe,” the theory claims that by channelling their frustrations into artistic mediums such as television and theatre, dissenters are less likely to mobilize against the government (Joubin, 2014, p. 10).

A deeper examination of the issue, however, would lead into more plausible explanations; by following the historical development of the Syrian drama (as discussed in the previous paragraphs), it is easy to realise that drama production in Syria has been in tune with the developments in the regime’s political discourse and embedded interests. The regime used drama not only for “tanfis”, but more importantly, to build and rebuild its power discourse through the different episodes of its rule. The rural population, for example, might be the subject of praise (1970s) or satire (2000s), depending on the political agenda of the day.

It might be argued that drama is the favourite channel used by the regime to deliver its discourse. The three major regime-sponsored newspapers, for example, have no significant impact on the Syrian public opinion. Stephen Starr wrote: ‘The English and Arabic language state newspapers continued to run the same drivel for years on end, with a negligible readership, in spite of them costing just five Syrian pounds (US$10 cents)’ (Starr, 2012, p. 74).

This is not meant to depict those intellectuals and artists who contributed to such productions as necessarily loyalist to the regime; in fact, many of them joined the uprising in 2011 and some of them paid a high price for their political decisions. The critical credentials of Syrian drama should not be devalued, nor should it be perceived as merely dictated from above. This thesis will therefore adopt Donatella Della Ratta’s concept of ‘whisper strategy’ (Della Ratta, 2015). To borrow Della Ratta’s words:

I use the metaphor of the “whisper strategy” to hint at the communication mechanism through which the president and Syrian TV drama makers discuss and agree upon issues deemed worthy and suitable to disseminate through media outlets, particularly television serials (musalsalat, sing. musalsal) (Della Ratta, 2015, p. 53).

According to Della Ratta, the ‘whisper’ is a ‘multilateral strategy that implies an engagement from both sides. It does not take human agency away from the TV drama makers, regarding them as disempowered subjects who are passively submitted to the suitat’s [authorities] will’ (Della Ratta, 2015, p. 62).
The ‘whisper strategy’, however, does not mean that the regime aims at spreading a certain consistent hegemonic discourse. The thesis will benefit from the oeuvre of Wedeen who argues that the opposite is true. The regime did not even want the population to believe its discourse. The regime, according to Wedeen, wanted the people to act ‘as if’ they believed its discourse. Those who believe the regime’s discourse would be dangerous as they may expect the regime to be honest to its discourse and would demand to see this discourse translated into the political and socio-economic spheres. The following chapters will show that the regime has always maintained a diversified arsenal of discourses that gave something for everyone. The political agenda of the day has been determining the regime’s discursive inclinations since Hafiz al-Assad reached power in 1970.

The drama analysis that will be conducted in this thesis will be inspired by the work of the above-mentioned authors. Chapter 5, for example, will hugely benefit from the work of Salamandra (Salamandra, 2004). Some of these authors even analysed some of the mini-series that this thesis analyses. Wedeen (2019), for example, studied Day’a Day’a in her book; a mini-series that will be discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis. It is important to note, however, that none of these authors, except for Salamandra (2004), were interested in studying these drama productions from the perspective of rural-urban relations. It was necessary, therefore, to conduct primary research that went beyond the oeuvre of these authors.

Building on all of the above, a number of films and TV series will be selected for analysis. The reasons for selecting these works will be explained in due course; suffice to say here that their engagement with rural-urban relations and identities is their most significant common characteristic.

The development of the Syrian drama illustrates how the diversification of methods and empirical resources is necessary in the context of this thesis; for example, while drama analysis might be used to study the discourses of the middle-peasantry during the 1960s-1980s, by the 2000s, drama becomes the favourite channel for circulating the counter-discourses of the competitors of this group. Researchers therefore need to look for a different way to engage with the discourses of the mid-peasantry during the
1990s-2000s. The thesis cannot depend solely on Drama analysis, but will have to engage with other empirical resources and forms of analysis.

### 3.2.2 Autobiographies and Memoirs

Analysing autobiographies is one of the common methods for studying narratives (Taylor, 2013, p. 56; Crowley, 2003, p. 4). Crowley states:

> Narrative identity with its interplay of trope and trace, with its transactions between the freedoms of the productive imagination and the constraint of the archive, and with its facilitation of an understanding of self through narrative, seems particularly germane to both the genre and theory of autobiography. Indeed, in many respects this concept of identity would appear to have its generic home within autobiography’ (Crowley, 2003, p. 4).

Two caveats, nevertheless, should be considered. The first caveat is that it should be stressed that this thesis is concerned with collective identities and narratives. It is true that ‘language users engage in discourse as members of (several) social groups [...] and conversely, groups thus may act "by" their members’ (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354). It is also true that the ‘social acts of individual actors are thus constituent parts of group actions and social processes, such as legislation, news-making, or the reproduction of racism’ (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354). A researcher should be cautious, however, about ‘interpreting a participant as the “voice” of an identity’ (Taylor, 2013, p. 21). This problem, on the other hand, might be ameliorated by a certain characteristic that is common in Syrian autobiographies. Salamandra wrote about biographies written by Syrians:

> Unlike the traditional biographical and autobiographical form, the tarjama, these books do not merely recount the details and events of an individual’s—usually a religious scholar’s—life (Eickelman 1991). Rather, they construct fragmentary, imagistic, and highly emotive accounts of the past in a wider context. Part autobiography, part social history, these books are personal reminiscences which also evoke shared experience (Salamandra, 2004, p. 127).

The second caveat is, due to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime, identity narratives and political ideologies and worldviews in general do not easily reach the public sphere; when they do, they become distorted by the requisites of authoritarian censorship and self-restraint. This censorship reduces the number of memoirs available in which researchers can engage.
3.2.3. Presidential Speeches and News Reports

The speeches of the Syrian president at certain important crossroads, as mentioned earlier, and to be illustrated in the following chapters, were crucial in the formation of the public discourse and public opinion among Syrian citizens. The speeches of Bashar al-Assad when he reached power in 2000 and during the first months of the 2011 uprising are good examples showing how the Syrian people were looking forward to hearing what their president had to say about the recent developments; several presidential speeches will be analysed and compared in order to observe the developments in the president’s discourse.

News reports broadcast by state-sponsored and loyalist media outlets will be a good resource to complement our understanding of the regime’s discourses and embedded messages. It is expected that in a police state such as Syria, such reports will be subject to censorship, and often doctored to render them more reflexive of the regime’s views and discourses. The censorship over such reports is not unknown or hidden from the public in Syria; on the contrary, the interference of the security in the making of news reports is used as a subject for comedy and satire in Syrian drama after 2000 (see Chapter 7).

The presidential speeches and these news reports will be compared to other discursive acts such as drama productions in order to understand how the regime uses different resources to formulate its public discourse.

3.2.4 Additional Resources and Limitations

The thesis will still need an expansion of its pool of empirical resources despite the foregoing. Re-interpreting the existing literature on Syria and the 2011 uprising will help. There were many authors interested in studying rural-urban relations in Syria (see Chapter 2), and tried to understand the 2011 events in the light of these relations. It would still be beneficial and enlightening in the context of this thesis in spite of the shortcomings of this body of literature.
Another way to empirically enrich this thesis is to study the interviews conducted by different authors and journalists such as Stephen Starr (2012), Samar Yazbek (2018), and Rania Abouzeid (2018). Interviewees were allowed to talk and tell their stories from their own perspectives in these books which renders the interviews a good source for the purposes of this thesis; in addition, many journal and internet articles that engage with rural-urban relations might be beneficial in this context. These articles will be divided into two groups. First, many journalists working for different Syrian and non-Syrian newspapers and Satellite News Channels have touched on rural-urban relations in their coverage and in certain cases they interviewed certain individuals who talked openly on issues pertaining to these relations. Second, different (mainly young) Syrian writers wrote short essays in which they discussed their views towards rural-urban relations and how they view themselves and others in terms of rurality and urbanity. A selection of these short essays will be studied and used to complement, triangulate, and compared to the drama and memoirs that this thesis intends to analyse.

Finally, and most importantly, the thesis will benefit from the available data on the political and socio-economic situations of the different groups. Considering such data is necessitated both by CDA and by the understanding of rurality and urbanity as the outcome of both objective and subjective factors.

These data are provided by the Syrian government and its different ministries and institutions such as the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). The different international organisations such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the different United Nations bodies, and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). The news reports and analysis provided by certain websites such as ‘The Syria Report’ will also be beneficial.

**Limitations**

Drama, memoirs, presidential speeches, news reports and the other resources mentioned above do not cover the identity narratives of all the groups over the different periods of this research. This applies more to the groups that enjoy relatively less power and material resources. The ruling elites have been able to disseminate
their political discourses and identity narratives through drama, and while the urban bourgeoisie and middle classes were able to express their identity claims by producing publishable memoirs and books, the poorer classes, both on the rural and urban sides, lacked the necessary power and material resources that would allow them to articulate and assert their own identity narratives. These power differences explain why the categorisation made by powerful groups is usually considerably consequential and affects even the self-perceptions and the process of self-identification of those who are less powerful. This gives an added value to the previous two forms of resources (drama and memoirs) as they not only allow the understanding of the self-identification processes of those who produced them, but also of those less powerful groups who were categorised by them, and who tend to internalise these categorisations within their self-perceptions. This research still has to manoeuvre its way around Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous question: ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (Spivak, 1988, p. 24).

The intention was to study a certain group of the Syrian population for this project. This group was the internally-displaced people and refugees in camps inside and outside Syria. The aim was to study these groups and evaluate their material, and symbolic situations, and their processes of identification in terms of rurality and urbanity. Due to the lack of resources that address this gap, semi-structured interviews were planned to be conducted in a number of these camps in Lebanon and Jordan. The conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, and certain overwhelming personal issues that were faced made this attempt impossible at this time.

The majority of the above-mentioned resources are in Arabic. I am a native Arabic speaker. I am able to understand the content of these resources, but in some instances, it was difficult to translate certain concepts and ideas into English. I made every effort to translate the material as accurately as possible, but in many cases, this has been a challenging task which may need future improvement.

**Conclusion**
Social Identity Theory was used in this chapter to integrate the internal-external and subjective-objective aspects of rural and urban identities into one processual and dialectical understanding of rurality and urbanity. This understanding addresses the shortcomings of the common reductionist approach to rurality and urbanity within the existing literature on rural-urban relations. Social Identity Theory allows the consideration of the role of subjective perceptions in mediating and translating objective reality into choices and behaviour without relegating the impact of objective reality.

Discerning between nominal and virtual identities also helps in addressing the problem of perceiving the rural and urban as closed homogeneous categories, and glossing over the differences between those put under each of these labels; different people experience rurality and urbanity in different manners. These variations in life experiences are not only related to the variations in the degrees of rurality and urbanity (captured by the term ‘rurban’), but are also pertinent to the coexistence of multiple aspects of identity that go beyond rural-urban divisions and nuances.

Looking at identity and interests as inextricably intertwined, and dialectically affecting each other, opens the door for understanding how identities may influence political behaviour (and vice versa). There are a few works that demonstrate how such understanding might be applied fruitfully to rural and urban identities; yet, they mainly focused on the individual level in addition to the relative scarcity of such works. The goal of this thesis is to study the dialectical relation between identities and interests and political behaviour on the collective level.

Narrative Identity Theory provides the means through which the study of these dialectical relations and mutual influences can be attempted. The discourses (especially narratives) produced by groups and individuals in order to present their identities will help to uncover the concomitant interests and aspirations embedded within them. Analysing discourses and narratives will also allow understanding how narrators perceive themselves, how they perceive other groups, and what kind of political choices they are likely to take (or have already taken) in order to support and achieve their identity and interest claims.
The above-mentioned subjective-objective and identity-interests dialectics means that any discursive analysis of rurality and urbanity should encompass the material situation of the different groups and especially in terms of the political and socio-economic levels. Probing the incongruences between narratives and facts is an essential part of narrative analysis.

A wide pool of empirical resources will be employed throughout the research which will help to analyse the discourses and narratives of the different political agents within Syria’s society. Using CDA, these narratives and discourses will be analysed and compared to each other and to the available socio-economic data in order to understand how rural and urban identities affect the political choices of these agents and vice versa.
Chapter 4

Historical Background (Ottoman Period-1970): A History of Rural-Urban Polarisation

Introduction

Studying the period between the Ottoman reforms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and Hafiz Al-Assad’s coup of 1970 is essential in order to understand rural-urban relations in today’s Syria. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the classes that are today referred to as the ‘old’ urban bourgeoisie. It also witnessed the expansion of education and the rise of the educated middle classes not only of urban but also of middle-peasantry origins who led the fight against the bourgeois classes.

The focus of this chapter will be on the rise of these different groups, and the conflicts that ensued among them. An examination of the changing regional and international contexts will help to understand how rural-urban dynamics had been developing during that period. Understanding these developments is of paramount importance for the purposes of this study because the ideological dimensions of rurality and urbanity today are underpinned by references to these developments despite the decades that have elapsed since then.

Indeed, the pre-1958 period continues to play a major role in the perceptions and discourses of many groups within the Syrian opposition until today; many tend to romanticise this period and to describe it as the ‘golden age of pluralism’ or the liberal phase of Syria’s modern history (S’eifan, 2011, p. 68). It was not a coincidence that the protestors in 2011 chose to raise the ‘green’ flag of that period to differentiate their protests from the pro-regime demonstrations that raised the regime’s ‘red’ flag which symbolised the union with Egypt in 1958. This was a symbolic gesture that represented the desire to undo the Ba’thist period and to return to the pre-1958 golden years. It is one of this chapter’s goals to present a less romanticised and more objective understanding of this period of the country’s modern history.
This period reached its end in 1958. The middle-class parties which dominated the political scene in the 1950s led the country to the 1958 union with Egypt. The union only lasted for three years; it ended in a coup in 1961, followed by another coup in 1963, thus bringing the Ba’thist army officers to power. Hafiz al-Assad arranged his own coup in 1970, and started a new period of Syria’s history, which will be the subject matter of the next chapter.

The few years between 1963 and the 1970 coup of Hafiz Al-Assad witnessed the rise of three of the phenomena that are the aims of this study: rural-urban migration; identification problems; and the ‘rurbanisation’ of Syrian society. The unprecedented rise in rural-urban migration led to the emergence of the second phenomenon: the problematisation of the identification processes, and the complication of the politics of identity and recognition for the different rural and urban groups. The third phenomenon was the ‘rurbanistaion’ of Syrian society; a process that started in the 1960s and continued throughout the following decades before it dramatically intensified after 2011.

This chapter will be temporally divided into two parts: the period between the early 20th century and the 1958 union with Egypt; and the period between 1958 and the coup of Hafiz Al-Assad in 1970. A brief account of the political and economic developments that occurred during each period will be presented before it moves on to a discussion of how these developments had affected and been affected by the rural-urban dynamics of the time. These dynamics are relevant in both cases and the focus will first be from the material-objective perspective, followed by the perceptive/subjective angle.

In the first part, more space will be given for the material dimensions of rurality and urbanity as it will be argued that the perceptive aspects pertinent to problems of identification and recognition had not yet become problematic. The second part, in contrast, will be a discussion on how the urbanites’ hostile position towards the sharp increase in rural-urban migration during the 1960s had led to an endeavour to ‘protect’ their urban identity by refusing to recognise the newcomers’ claims of urbanity. It was during this period that problems of identification and recognition started to become prominent within the country’s socio-political sphere.
This temporal division will help to show the strong contrast between the two periods. This type of contrast occurs on the political and socio-economic levels, and, more significantly, encompasses a radical shift in rural-urban relations; a shift that continues to define rural-urban dynamics in today’s Syria. The contradistinctions between the two periods will become a major axis of conflict on which the Syrian society will be polarised by the eve of the 2011 uprising.

**Part 1: The Origins: The Ottoman Era – 1958:**

**1.1. The Political and Socio-Economic Developments**

The Ottoman authorities promulgated what came to be known as the Land Reform Law in 1858, which was meant to enhance tax collection by diminishing the role of local intermediaries. The law allowed the private ownership of lands that used to be *Musha*. *Musha* is a term used to describe ‘a type of collective farming’ where ‘communal land was redistributed periodically to give each family a turn on the better plots’ (King, 2009, pp. 35-36). The Ottoman legislators believed that allowing private property ownership would facilitate the establishment of registries and tax collection from individual owners. This would diminish the role of the above-mentioned local intermediaries; however, the latter managed to exploit the peasantry’s weaker position and lack of legal experience and ended up using the law to facilitate their own acquisition of land (Khoury, 1983, p. 27). A new class of urban absentee landlords emerged by the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, and the majority of peasants were reduced to the status of sharecroppers or wage labourers (Khoury, 1983, p. 5; Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 17; King, 2009, pp. 35-36).

Those landlords used their newly acquired wealth to buy influence and positions within the state bureaucracy and to gather increasing numbers of clients from the less fortunate urban classes around them and their families. They also made themselves available for the central power in Istanbul as the facilitators of its local policies (Khoury, 1983, p. 35; 44). They maintained their influence and access to power until the retreat of the Ottoman armies from Syria, and the fall of Damascus into the hands of Prince Faisal in 1918. Their power and influence were compromised during Faisal’s
short rule (Atassi, 2015, pp. 63-64). Yet, they soon regained their previous status when the country fell under French control in 1920 (Atassi, 2015, pp. 106-107).

The urban elites allied themselves with the religious – mercantile establishment and, by the mid-1920s, created the urban-biased national bloc (later the National Party) that demanded Syria’s independence and the end of the French mandate (Atassi, 2015, pp. 106-107). These demands were underpinned by the belief that the country’s elites were the ones who had the right to rule without the tutelage or partnership of foreign powers. The successful French suppression of the 1925 revolution, however, made the National Bloc refuse to engage itself in any radical or military resistance to the colonial powers. Members of the bloc were worried about their businesses and properties and preferred gradualism over radicalism. They ended up as mediators between the colonial authorities and the rest of the Syrian people (Atassi, 2015, pp. 108-110).

The colonial authorities, meanwhile, in line with their ‘divide and rule strategy’, sponsored sectarian minorities such as the Christians and the ‘Alawites (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 19). The latter, and specifically the rural groups within them, were encouraged by the French to join the ranks of the Syrian army that was established and controlled by the colonial authorities. The Sunni urban elites, in contrast, regarded military service ‘as a path for their social inferiors’ (King, 2009, p. 40). This attitude would cost these elites their status in the subsequent decades (King, 2009, p. 40).

Syria witnessed an expansion of trade and government services in the major cities under the French mandate. This growth and the deterioration of the living conditions of the Syrian peasantry under the new landlords led to an increase in the rates of rural-urban migration (Naim & Makhoul, 2005, p. 138; Zakaria, 2017, p. 153). Another factor was the spread of education during that period, which allowed many of those who belonged to the middle-peasantry to obtain the degrees needed to find jobs and live in the cities.

Rural-urban migration, however, had been precarious throughout the period between 1920 and 1958; it had passed through ebbs and flows that were affected by the changing political and economic conditions in the country. The low wages and the
deterioration of the work and life conditions of the urban workers in numerous cases pushed many migrants back to their rural areas (Zakaria, 2017, p. 159;163). The 1940s also witnessed a boom in the agricultural sector mainly due to the rise of demand by the Allied armies for wheat and other agricultural products, which led thousands of Syrians to leave the cities and move to the countryside either to work or invest in agriculture (Petran, 1972, p. 82). The Jazira region witnessed significant social transformations due to this boom, and as a result of the introduction of the money and machinery of urban entrepreneurs (mainly from Aleppo). Many tribal Sheikhs were transformed into agrarian capitalists (some of them came to be known as the ‘Cotton Sheikhs’). These sheikhs ceased to depend on the gifts from their tribesmen as a source of income and became more independent and even started to imitate the urban bourgeois lifestyles by buying properties and houses in towns and cities, for example, and by educating their offspring (Khalaf, 1991, pp. 69-70).

The withdrawal of foreign armies in 1946 meant that around thirty thousand Syrians who worked with these armies lost their jobs. This led to unprecedented levels of unemployment and to additional narrowing of employment opportunities in the cities (Petran, 1972, p. 82; Dib, 2012, p. 109). The instability resulting from these ebbs and flows meant that most rural-urban migrants of the period between 1920 and 1958 did not end up settling down in cities and kept moving between the cities and their villages (Zakaria, 2017, p. 163).

This rural-urban migration was accompanied by a movement of Damascus’ affluent inhabitants from the Old city to newly built modern neighbourhoods (with European-inspired architecture); a process that started since the late Ottoman era and accelerated in the post-independence period (Petran, 1972, p. 85; Sudermann, 2013, p. 35;38). One reason behind this move was the fact that those who belonged to the middle classes wanted to live their modern lifestyles and to fulfil their modern tastes and preferences; moreover, the rich families who remained in the Old City were not able to enjoy their wealth as they had to hide it from their neighbours (Petran, 1972, p. 85). Those who did move were able not only to enjoy their wealth and buy luxury cars but also to wear European clothes instead of the customary outfits that they were
expected to wear when they lived in the traditional neighbourhoods (Petran, 1972, p. 85; Dib, 2012, p. 112). The Old City’s traditional large houses were rented out to rural migrant families; the house that was used by a single Damascene family thus became a residence for five or six migrant families who would share it (Sudermann, 2013, p. 38). The Old City was gradually transformed into a cluster of neglected poor neighbourhoods. The social status and prestige became linked to residence in one of the new modern neighbourhoods.

Syria witnessed a vibrant pluralist political period during the first years after its independence. A conflict between the different factions within the national bloc resulted in its members creating two competing parties: The National Party and the People’s Party. Members of the National Party maintained the conservative political approach of the pre-independence National Bloc which aimed to preserve the status-quo. The People’s Party members believed, on the other hand, that the country was changing, and maintaining their elite status required a different approach which could accommodate the demands and aspirations of other classes and groups. Stephen King argued: ‘This new pro-business party pursued a cross-class social pact by considering policies to redistribute some large landholding and by proposing policies to improve workers’ standards of living’ (King, 2009, pp. 35-36).

The major goal of the People’s party was similar to the national party - to preserve the privileges of the bourgeoisie - but by following a more flexible political approach; despite the above-mentioned differences, both parties shared their pro-trade and pro-industry policies and agenda (Petran, 1972, p. 93; King, 2009, p. 40). The lines of division between the two parties were not limited to the differences in their approaches to post-independence Syrian politics, but also reflected a regional conflict between the north and the south of the country (Petran, 1972, p. 93; Hinnebsuch, 2001, pp. 22-23; Dib, 2012, p. 99).

The National Party was established by Damascene members of the National Bloc and remained stronger in Damascus. The party called for special relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt - the two countries with which Damascene trade had been historically strong. The People’s Party, on the other hand, was originally founded by members from the northern cities of Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah. This meant that the party called
for special trade relations with Iraq and Turkey - the two countries on which Aleppine trade had always depended (Petran, 1972, p. 93; Hinnebusch, 2001, pp. 22-23; Dib, 2012, p. 99; Atassi, 2015, p. 197).

What was more important in this period, however, was the emergence of populist political parties that called for ending the elites’ exploitation of the rest of the society which continued despite the flourishing of the People’s Party. The spread of education during the 1920s led to the emergence of a new educated professional middle class that differed radically from the pre-existing mercantile middle class of the Souk. The Ba’th Party was established by Westernised, urban, middle-class intellectuals - mainly schoolteachers - while the Arab Socialist Party was founded by the well-known and respected lawyer Akram al-Hourani and fought for the rights of Syria’s peasants. The Communist Party, meanwhile, was popular among Syrian industrial workers (Petran, 1972, p. 86; Perthes, 1995, p. 121). A considerable section of the latter worked in the small industrial sector that was created by a limited section of the urban elites. The Muslim Brothers emerged as a conservative religious party, at the other end of the spectrum, who allied themselves with urban elites and mercantile middle-class groups in the face of the secularist populist parties.

The Ba’th’s original base, representing the educated part of the middle class, remained numerically limited. The Ba’thists therefore first allied themselves with the People’s Party (the capitalist party that sought a cross-class social pact) and won the elections together. The Ba’thists abandoned this alliance soon afterwards and became unified with the peasants’ party (the Arab Socialist Party). The Ba’th party adopted the name that it still carries today: The Ba’th Arab Socialist Party. The new party soon became the major player in Syria’s political scene. The rise of popularity of parties that represented the peasants and certain sections of the middle class at the expense of the elites’ parties, betrays the fact that the elites and their parties failed to co-opt these social groups. Indeed, James Gelvin wrote about the Syrian nationalist urban elites of the 1920s:

[They] never synthesized a political discourse that was compelling to non-elites, and . . . never established bonds with the population comparable to those established between nationalist
elites and their future compatriots in other areas of the world (Gelvin, 1998, p. 35; Salamandra, 2004, pp. 7-8).

Their rule was consequently not as democratic as the current narratives try to depict. Tabitha Petran wrote:

The National Bloc used its monopoly of political power to feather its own nest and ensure its continuance at the helm ... President Shukri Quwatly became its symbol: 'His rule was comparable to the rule of the Turkish vali who made no accounting to any one for his actions'. The government, indifferent to the economic and social problems facing the people, embarked on a campaign of intimidation, purges, and arrests in an attempt to silence its critics and destroy all political opposition. Exacting emergency powers from parliament, it tried to muzzle the press and control political parties (Petran, 1972, pp. 92-93).

This shows that the urban elites were not willing to pay the price to maintain their hegemony (or to end their exploitation) over the rest of the society. This absence of a hegemonic project, partially at least, explains the series of military coups that had occurred since 1949, and the military dictatorships that lasted until 1954. Indeed, Colonel Za‘im’s coup was widely perceived as a ‘“blessed revolt” against the old order’ (Petran, 1972, p. 97). It also contributed to the rise of populist parties such as the Ba‘th and the Muslim Brothers. It is undeniable that this period witnessed certain democratic instances that seem to be remarkable toady after more than fifty years of Ba‘thist rule. The 1954 parliamentary elections - described as the first and only free elections in the history of the country - and the subsequent short lived democratic period which lasted until the 1958 union with Egypt, were one of these instances. The above-mentioned facts regarding the approach, followed by the bourgeois classes and their parties to ruling Syria, cast doubts on the romanticising narratives that present the pre-1958 period as a golden age of democracy and pluralism.

The Ba‘thist dominance led to the end of this period of Syria’s modern history. The Ba‘th party agreed to dissolve itself in 1958 as the price for the union of Syria and Nasser’s Egypt in what became the United Arab Republic. It is necessary to shed some light on the rural-urban dynamics of the pre-1958 period before discussing the union with Egypt and the events that followed.
1.2. The rural-Urban Dynamics Between 1920-1958

The City Dwellers: Their Different Classes and Groups

The material variances and divisions within the urban population have been presented above. The upper classes consisted of absentee landlords and the wealthiest businessmen and industrialists who were divided between the two above-mentioned bourgeois parties. The urban middle classes could also be divided into the traditional middle-class groups that consisted of the Souk merchants and the rising educated middle-class professionals. Members of the former mainly descended from urban origins, while the members of the latter group were a mixture of urbanites and middle-peasantry descendants who benefited from the expansion of education during the 1920s and managed to obtain degrees that allowed them to work and live in the cities. Those in the latter group may better be described as ‘rurbans’ and their rural/urban identity will be discussed further in the next section. The non-traditional middle-class members were more politically active and managed to organise themselves within modern political parties, while the traditional souk merchants maintained their older regulations and ways of political mobilisation. The merchants favoured the ‘laissez-faire state’ that was supported by the ruling elites, unlike the professional middle-class who favoured a statist developmental and modernising agenda (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 23&25). Hinnebusch wrote:

The new associations and institutions into which this class was recruited fostered loyalties to profession, class and nation which rivalled those to family, sect, or quarter and made it increasingly autonomous of the ayat [elites]” (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 25).

The urban working classes could also be roughly divided into three groups. The first group consisted of those who were employed by the traditional private sector establishments. The dominant aspect of these establishments is that they were mainly either medium or small enterprises which employed a limited number of workers - usually less than fifteen (Perthes, 1995, p. 97; Abboud, 2015, p. 51). These workers usually maintained the same ‘conservative’ political attitudes and allegiances of their employers (Perthes, 1995, p. 121). Volker Perthes say: ‘employers and employees work closely together and there is no great difference between the living standards of
qualified workers in such establishments and those of their employers’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 97)

The second group consisted of those who worked in the newly-created industrial sector. These mainly consisted of former craftsmen who became penniless due to the fierce competition of the then flourishing industrial sector and were transformed into waged labourers (Perthes, 1995, p. 95; Zakaria, 2017, p. 156).

The third group of the (r)urban poor were in fact rural-urban migrants who moved to the cities looking for employment not only to escape the exploitation of the landlords but also because the introduction of mechanisation to agriculture since the 1930s resulted in losing their jobs (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 26). These rural migrants were rarely hired in the factories or in the traditional souks and found employment mainly in the construction and transport sectors (Zakaria, 2017, pp. 158-159). These migrants ‘began organising into trade unions which battled employers for better wages and conditions’ unlike the souk workers (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 26). The communists and other leftist parties managed to establish their popularity within the ranks of these last two groups, as mentioned earlier.

It is necessary to mention the existence of a spatial aspect to urbanity, before moving to the divisions within the rural population, in which the major cities of Syria (called ‘Useful Syria’ by the French mandate) were perceived as more urbanite than the rest - especially the cities of the north eastern part of the country (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 90). Deirezzor represents a good example in this context. The major concern of Deirezzor’s young activists under both the Ottomans and French rule, was to ‘uplift’ their city from what they described as a ‘political situation charged with tribal tensions and divisions’ (Hanna, 2018, p. 128). The next chapters will illustrate how, up to this day, cities like Deirezzor and al-Raqqa are still described as ‘rural cities’ even by their inhabitants (let alone inhabitants of larger cities). A deeper discussion of this spatial aspect of rurality and urbanity will be left for later.

The Countryside inhabitants: Their Varying Lifestyles, Socio-Economic Conditions, and Forms of Political Organisation
There were more significant divisions among the Syrian rural areas and groups during that period. The rural groups and areas varied in terms of their socio-economic conditions, political consciousness, lifestyles and proximity to urban spaces.

On the economic levels, scholars have noticed that a significant gap exists between the rich and the poor in rural areas (Batatu, 1999). There was only 1.1 per cent of landholders (3,247 individuals) on the eve of the agrarian reform of 1958 who ‘controlled more than one-third of Syria’s cultivated land’ (Petran, 1972, p. 137; Batatu, 1999, p. 32); many of those were urban absentee landlords, but many others were ‘local sheikhs and aghas (local chiefs) whose ancestors had been registered as the owners of the villages they represented at the beginning of the century’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 88); meanwhile, more than two thirds of the country’s peasants were ‘landless sharecroppers’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 20). Variations also existed among landowners; while 30-40 per cent of the country’s private land was large holdings (100 hectares or more), small holdings (less than 10 hectares) amounted to around 15 per cent and medium holdings (between 10 and 100 hectares) amounted to somewhere between 38 and 45 per cent of the privately-owned lands (Perthes, 1995, pp. 82-83).

The differences among the rural groups and areas are not a new phenomenon. They can even be traced back to the Middle Ages, when Ibn Battuta, the well-known Arab traveller, visited al-Ghouta (in Rural Damascus). According to Ibn Battuta, the villages of al-Ghoutta had their own hammams, large mosques, and markets, and their inhabitants were ‘like the people of the capital city in their ways of living’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). These variances persisted until the 20th century when the well-known scholar Hanna Batatu discussed them elaborately in his volume (and continue today, as the following chapters will illustrate).

Historical scholarship on the period discerns two particular groups of rural inhabitants. The first group consisted of what Batatu calls the ‘Peasant Gardeners’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). According to the author, these peasants had always been tied to towns and cities, and usually ‘live[d] either in outlying urban districts or in the country immediately neighbouring them’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). They usually owned their lands and were well-known to be the country’s most passionate and skilful peasants. There were many who had started to become organised since the seventeenth century, and many
subscribed to the institutional religiosity of the urban poor (there had been large mosques in the villages since the days of Ibn Battuta). The prototype for this group of peasants, according to Batatu, was the peasant of al-Ghouta (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). Al-Ghouta was among the least affected areas by the agrarian reform of 1958. This could be attributed to the fact that most land in the area was either medium or small holdings owned by the peasants working on them, while the agrarian reform mainly targeted larger holdings. Peasants of the Orontes river living close to the cities of Homs and Hamah as well as the ‘enterprising peasants’ of Idlib and to a lesser degree ‘the ’Alawi peasants of the plains’ (who represent an exception to the general tendency among this group to follow institutional (Sunni) Islam) were the nearest to al-Ghouta peasants in ‘skill and attachment to the soil’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 11). Many within this group might be perceived as ‘rurbans’ and plotted relatively closer to the urban end of a rural-urban continuum.

Batatu perceives, in contrast to the previous group, the ‘Agricultural Peasants’ to be far from urbanity in terms of not only distance, but also lifestyles and socio-economic conditions. This group includes most of the peasants of the north-eastern governorates. According to Batatu, many of them are ‘akin to the bedouins in their values and mode of conduct’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). The peasants of Houran (Dar’a) in the south are closer to them than to the Peasant Gardeners (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). The peasants of the sectarian minorities of the mountains (’Alawi, Druze, Yazidi) could be added to this group. The most important characteristic of its members is the persistence of primordial clan relationships among them - most of them were not introduced to modern ways of organisation until the mid-1940s (Batatu, 1999, p. 10). The majority of them were sharecroppers who did not own the lands they worked on, and many (especially in the north-east) were averse to agriculture; they usually chose to revert to pastoralism when they managed to accumulate enough capital to buy livestock (Batatu, 1999, p. 11). Their religiosity was either less institutional (depends on shrines of Walis instead of mosques) or was perceived as heterodox by the Sunni urban majority (’Alawites, Druze, Yazidi) (Batatu, 1999, pp. 13-15).

The differences between these two types of rural inhabitants will continue throughout the subsequent decades and will prove to be consequential by the eve of the uprising.
The peasant gardeners of al-Ghouta, Hamah, and Idlib will be among the first to join, while the agricultural peasants of the north-east will maintain their loyalty to the regime. The exception will be the people of Dar’a whom Batatu considered to be closer to the agricultural peasants, but they were the first to mobilise in 2011.

**Rural-Urban Relations on the Perceptive and Discursive Levels**

This section will address two questions. How each of the different rural, rurban, and urban groups perceived themselves and other groups in terms of rurality and urbanity; and whether these perceptions were recognised by the other groups and actors. What are the assumptions or stereotypes that underpinned their positions and motivated the behaviour of each group towards the others? What did it entail to be rural or urban?

**Rural-Urban Identification Processes and the Politics of Recognition**

The question of rurality and urbanity during the pre-Ba’thist period of Syria’s history was less complicated than what it became during the subsequent decades and especially when compared with the situation today as the following chapters will show.

The peasant gardeners were passionate about their relationship with their lands and were happy to be perceived as gardeners; in contrast, the aspirations of the agricultural peasants were focused on returning to pastoralism rather than becoming urban. These groups self-identified as rural and/or pastoral; these identity claims were recognised by the inhabitants of the country’s cities and did not entail much power play or negotiations.

The situation might differ for the rural-urban migrants that were discussed earlier. A differentiation should be established between the poor migrants and the middle-peasantry educated migrants in order to understand their situation. It has already been mentioned that the former did not settle down in the cities but kept moving between the cities and their villages. One indicator on the precarious situation of these
migrants is that they used to live in temporary houses built of cane and sackcloth in the areas surrounding the cities in which they worked (Zakaria, 2017, p. 154). The next chapter will illustrate that this situation changed as more migrants tended to settle in the cities, and many of them chose to build permanent houses and flats with cement roofs.

It is more probable than not, therefore, that the precarious existence of the members of this group in the country’s cities did not create any conflicts over any claims of urbanity that they may have had. The shuttle-like movement of these migrants from rural to urban and vice versa did not entail any problems of identification or recognition. Unfortunately, it is difficult to confirm or deny this claim as the literature is almost silent on the behaviour and identity claims of those migrants during that period.

The other case concerns those of middle-peasantry origins who were able to benefit from the spread of education during the 1920s. They moved to the country’s cities after obtaining their degrees; many of those joined the rising middle-class political parties of the time (mainly the Ba’th party) and were, according to Hinnebusch, ‘partly urbanised’ (or ‘rurban’ if one is to use the terminology of the current rural-urban literature) (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 25). It is well-known that the rural origins of those individuals had played a significant role in forming their political and social attitudes and choices (King, 2009, p. 64). It is therefore presumed that their presence and political activities in the cities had entailed the rise of problems of identification and recognition; again, the literature is almost silent on the identity claims of those migrants and how these claims were received by other groups. The literature on the subsequent period, however, is abundant on these topics. This difference in research interests probably reflects the fact that, despite what is mentioned above, rural-urban migration until 1958 remained relatively gradual and less problematic on the social and political levels. The next section will show that the 1960s witnessed a sharp increase in rural-urban migration that was accompanied by a radical shift in the country’s political sphere. This resulted in the alienation of wide sections of the urban population and led to the rise of a new form of identity politics that revolved around the questions of rurality and urbanity. This, partially at least, explains the silence of the literature on
these issues in the pre-Ba’th period and makes it more prudent to postpone the discussion to the next section.

How the Different groups Perceived Each Other

An examination of the existing literature and the cinema production of this period will be helpful in understanding how the rural and urban groups perceived each other during this epoch of Syria’s history. The cinema of the time was produced by the private sector and was sponsored either by members of the rich bourgeoisie or by middle-class artists. It reflected the urban worldviews of the time in both cases, but the number of films that were produced at the time was limited and this leaves the researcher with only a few choices (Alexan, 2012).

The movie Al-Wadi Al-Akhdar (The Green Valley) of 1950 illustrates how the urban producers perceived the rural population. The film is inspired by a true story that took place in the village of Deir Attiyeh (Alexan, 2012, pp. 31-32). The film underscores the assumed backwardness of the rural lifestyles by highlighting the issue of al-Tha’r (vengeance). The film assumes a paternalistic position towards the rural population as it tries to show that the rural inhabitants were of good human nature. One of the protagonists decides to sacrifice his life by offering himself to the other family to take their revenge (Tha’r) to save his brother and allow him to marry the girl he loves. This romanticising of the rural protagonist was meant to pave the way for the main message of the film which was about the need to modernise the rural population and to replace the outdated customs with modern laws and judicial systems. This message, and the accompanying paternalistic feelings, were, in fact, quite common among the middle-class urbanites and their ‘progressive’ political parties (Hanna, 2018, p. 122). This aspiration to modernise the rural countryside could arguably be described as an ‘urbanite burden’.

The assumption of the backwardness of the rural population was also common among the upper classes. Members of the National Bloc, for example, believed that this backwardness would render any attempt to mobilise the rural population futile during the 1920s; an assumption which was behind the bloc’s decision to concentrate their
efforts on the cities and the more ‘politically conscious’ urban population (Atassi, 2015, p. 109). This conviction might also explain the absence of any role for the rural population in the national struggle as depicted by the 1947 film ‘Nour wa Zalam’ (Light and Darkness). The film, which was co-produced by two persons who belonged to elite families, tells the story of a foreign individual (most probably representing the Western colonial powers) who misappropriated the invention of a Syrian scientist (Alexan, 2012). The film ends with the Syrian protagonists retrieving the invention which might be seen as a national victory (Alexan, 2012, pp. 28-30). The film glorifies the struggle against the colonial powers which was led by the elites under the National Bloc and tries to disseminate a nationalist discourse that allows a role of leadership for the national bourgeoisie, but the rural population is absent in this discourse.

This view of the peasants by the urban higher classes was noted by Hinnebusch:

The landlord, regarding the peasant as a mere source of income and power, sought to extract a maximum, while peasants responded with poor working habits, theft, and an occasional jacquerie. The resulting stagnation of agricultural production forced landlord and peasant into a zero-sum relation. The landlord became a repressive power in the village, with the local police normally at his disposal (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 21).

Syria’s rural population was not totally passive despite this common perspective. The literature registers several instances in which the peasants rebelled against their landlords. The revolts of Jabal al-Zawiya, and what is known as the incident of “al-Habit” are good examples (Hanna, 2018, pp. 123-127). The next section will show how the Ba’thist rulers, in contrast to their pre-1958 bourgeois counterparts, celebrated these peasant revolts and struggles; a trend that continued during the first two decades of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule. However, as chapters 5 and 6 will illustrate, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a return to neglecting the rural population in a manner reminiscent of what has been discussed in this section.

The passiveness of the rural population was gradually transformed into political activism with the rise of the progressive middle-class parties. Akram al-Hawrani’s Arab Socialist Party was successful in mobilising the rural population, unlike the elite parties. One of the significant instances of such mobilisation occurred in September 1951 when the party organised a successful political rally in Aleppo which was perceived as a
stronghold for the elites’ parties. Abdalla Hanna wrote that the peasant crowds occupied the city throughout the day, and the success of the rally was a clear indicator of the rise of the peasant movement in the country (Hanna, 2018, p. 209). Peasant votes gave al-Hawrani and his list in the city of Hamah a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 31). The mobilisation of the rural population would escalate in the 1960s as the radical Ba’thists resorted to their peasant base to support and legitimise their rule.


The union with Egypt was facilitated by a cluster of factors that did not play to the hands of the incumbent urban bourgeoisie. The Arab defeat in the 1948 war against Israel eroded the legitimacy of these elites (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 24). The dominance of the modernisation paradigm throughout the developing world, and the concomitant discourses on state-led industrialisation and nationalisation became an excellent discursive tool in the hands of the rising Ba’th and other leftist parties. The unprecedented popularity of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the Arab world as well as the Arab nationalist sentiments and modernisation hopes that his regime spread between the Arab people, also undermined the old discourses. The discourses of the traditional elites were underpinned by a certain version of conservative Islam which, in resemblance with Weber’s perception of the role of Protestantism’s in the West, legitimated the accumulation of wealth, encouraged capitalist activities, and was hostile to any challenge to the status-quo (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 32). The conflict within the traditional elites themselves (which became obvious with the above-mentioned creation of the People Party), in addition to these ‘external’ factors, contributed to the weakening of these elites and to rendering them incapable of keeping up with the developments that paved the way to the 1958 episode.

In an attempt to explain the Ba’thists’ enthusiasm towards the union with Egypt, Stephen King wrote: “Their naive hopes and the excitement of the times were such that they believed that one great and charismatic Arab leader, Nasser, could realize all
of their aims quickly” (King, 2009, p. 41). The most important among these aims was to weaken the traditional elites and to put an end to their rule. When Nasser demanded the dissolution of all Syrian political parties, the Ba’th party was the first to dissolve itself despite some internal opposition (Atassi, 2015, p. 218). To the surprise of the Ba’thists, however, Nasser marginalised them from political positions and tried to besiege them in the army. Nasser preferred to sponsor Nasserite politicians, bureaucrats, and army officers instead of the Ba’thists (King, 2009, p. 41).

The union with Egypt did not last for long; while many Ba’thists were alienated by their marginalisation, the land reform and nationalisations that took place during that period also alienated the urban elites. A group of Damascene army officers executed a coup in Damascus in 1961 and declared the secession of Syria from the United Arab Republic (Perthes, 1995, p. 2). The coup returned the urban elites to power for a short period, but in 1963, a group of Ba’thist and Nasserite officers joined together and executed a coup under the banner of restoring the union with Egypt. The form of union imagined by the Nasserites was not what the Ba’thists had in mind. Ba’thist officers soon eradicated their Nasserite counterparts along with what remained of the Damascene (and most other urban) officers (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 45; Haddad, 2012, pp. 54-55). A small circle of Ba’thist army officers (known as the military committee) now controlled both the army and Syria. They did not directly exercise control since the major official positions (the president and the prime minister) continued to be occupied by civilians from Urban Sunni families (Atassi, 2015, p. 251). It was common knowledge in Syria, however, that real power lay in the hands of the Ba’thist officers. This was the time when the urban elites realised their mistake when they ignored military service and left it for those whom they perceived as their social inferiors.

The Ba’th of the 1960s was much different from that of the pre-1958 period. The power in the new Ba’th party was centred in the hands of the Military Committee: a group of Ba’thist army officers who shared their rural origins and their minoritarian sectarian affiliation (mainly ‘Alawites and Ismailis) (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 42). The difference between the old and new generations of Ba’thist leaders led to a power struggle between the two wings that lasted until 1966 when the new ‘radicals’ executed a military coup which ousted ‘the party’s historic founders’ (Hinnebsuch,
The line of division within the Ba’th also took an ideological aspect as the new rural leaders sought to radicalise the party by following a Marxist approach that prioritised class struggle over the union with Egypt (Abboud, 2016, pp. 40-41; Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 46). The difference between the two wings was succinctly summarised by Hinnebusch:

The party moderates, expressing the worldview of the urban middle class, had sought a reformist road to development in which the state could secure the co-operation of capital. The radicals spoke for the provincial lower middle class and the peasants, who, much more hostile to the urban establishment, sought to demolish its power in a revolution from above. Jedid’s coup marked the transformation of the Ba’th, against the wishes of its founding leaders, into a vehicle of plebeian rural revolt (Hinnebusch, 2001, pp. 48-49).

The period from 1966 to 1970 was a time of intense political polarisation that was often expressed through sectarian rhetoric: The Sunni urbanites versus the ‘Alawite – Ismaili – Druze rural army officers. The majority of Syria scholars, however, downgrade the sectarian motivation of the military committee, and accentuate class differences and the rural – urban divide. Hinnebusch, Perthes, Batatu, and others stressed the role of the ‘class background and rural social origin’ of the Ba’thist officers in determining their political attitudes and behaviour (King, 2009, p. 64; Haddad, 2012, p. 47). Sectarianism was a discursive tool invoked by the competing parties although it was never an end in itself (Haddad, 2012, p. 44).

The rise of the Muslim Brothers in the 1960s should be seen in the light of the above-mentioned developments. The movement received the support of the Sunni urbanites who were provoked by the rise of the rural officers to power, and by their pro-rural policies (Perthes, 1995, p. 103; Matar, 2016, p. 72). The most important among these were the traditional middle classes of the souk (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 47). The conflict between the Muslim Brothers and the social groups that supported them, and the Ba’thist regime took the shape of a cold war with occasional heated episodes. These episodes include the siege of the mosque in Hamah in 1964, and the strikes and demonstrations of 1967 which were forcefully repressed (Batatu, 1999, p. 171; Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 50). This conflict was later inherited by Hafiz al-Assad, and it became more intensified toward the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s. The Ba’thists managed to gain the support (or at least the passiveness) of certain urbanite
groups such as specific sections within the leftists or pan-Arabist groups who continued to favour the Ba’th rule over that of the regressive urban elites (Perthes, 1995, p. 120).

The Ba’thists’ situation was the exact opposite among the rural population. The majority of the rural population (especially among what Batatu calls the ‘Agrarian Peasants’) favoured Ba’th rule that provided them with plots of land, enhanced the sharecroppers’ relationships with the landlords, opened the public sector for them to work in, and started to extend government services (transport, communication, electrification and education) to their areas (Perthes, 1995, p. 93). The tribal leaders whom the Ba’thists sought to marginalise were hostile to the incumbent regime (Khalaf, 1991, pp. 71-72; Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 32). The Kurdish peasants in the north preferred to join the communist party due to the Arabist inclinations of the Ba’th (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 31). What was more significant in this context was the fact that the Ba’thists, despite all their efforts, failed to gain the support of wide sections of the ‘Peasant Gardeners’ (especially those of al-Ghouta) (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 32). There were many of the latter who refused to receive the plots of land that were allocated to them according to the Land Reform Law, because they believed that this would violate the property rights which they perceived as sacred according to the Islamic Shari’a (Batatu, 1999, p. 11). This could be explained by the fact that those peasants followed the (urbanite) institutional version of Islam, but this cannot be separated from other factors such as their spatial and ideological proximity to Damascus and their business relations with the Damascenes.

The result of these factors during the years between 1958 (and especially after 1963) and 1970 was a shift in the dynamics of rural-urban relations. This shift will be discussed in the next section.

2.1. A Political and Economic Shift in the Dynamics of Rural-Urban Relations

The rural-urban dynamics were influenced by several developments that took place during that period. The following paragraphs will discuss these developments and their impact.
**Land Reform:**

Laws were promulgated to regulate agrarian relations and land reform under the United Arab Republic and after the 1963 coup:

Land-reform imposed limits on the extent of private landholding, prevented the displacement of farmers from the land, introduced the first law for cooperatives, and organised agricultural relations between the landlord and tenant by specifying each party’s share of the crops (Matar, 2016, p. 75).

Land reforms enhanced the situation of the rural population in general. A considerable portion of ‘the landless agricultural proletariat was transformed into a small holding peasantry: between 1960 and 1970 the former dropped from 20.5% to 8.9% of the population while the latter increased from 27.4% to 41.5%’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 54).

The Ba’thist land reform, however, was criticised for several reasons. First, it became known that corruption played its role in the distribution of expropriated lands where in many cases lands were ‘allocated to people not legally entitled to benefit from the reform’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 81).

Second, inequality among peasants persisted throughout the following decades. Batatu, for example, mentions that ‘up to 1975 the state redistributed only 33.3 per cent of the total area of expropriated lands to peasants’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 32); in addition, many large properties were left in the hands of ‘urban absentee landlords and of local sheikhs and aghas’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 88; Zakaria, 2017). It is true that the number of landholders increased by more than 60 per cent between 1958 and 1970-1971, but ‘the emerging tenurial system continued to reveal glaring inequalities’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 35); for example, more than 75 per cent of all landowners in 1970-1971 ‘had title to only 23.5 per cent of the total area of private fully owned agricultural land’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 35).

It was apparent that the reforms benefited the middle peasantry (to which the Ba’thist officers belonged) more than the poorer peasants whose holdings were often too small ‘that in many cases, particularly in years of drought or bad harvests, they were unable to make a reasonable profit or even recover their necessary expenses’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 36). According to the available statistics, around 23.6 per cent ‘owned less
than one hectare and another 19.5 per cent less than two hectare’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 36). Meanwhile the middle-peasantry was able to ‘live with the system’ as ‘their income was higher in absolute terms, and agriculture of some scale reduced costs considerably’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 85).

This bias towards the middle peasantry was also accentuated by the creation of the Peasant Unions which were theoretically intended to serve and represent the interests of all the peasants, but was practically controlled by individuals from the middle peasantry and, in many cases, ended up as a tool in the hands of those individuals who often had more in common with the rich landlords than with the poorer peasants (Perthes, 1995, p. 87; Batatu, 1999, p. 170). The middle-peasantry dominance over the peasant unions became more entrenched later under Hafiz al-Assad who refused to intervene against the rise in corruption within the unions during his days (Khalaf, 1991, p. 78).

This discrimination against the poorer peasants meant that many of them were unable to make ends meet by depending solely on their agricultural work; as a result, many had to seek additional jobs in the cities and to depend on both rural and urban sources of income. There were some, for example, who left their families in the village to work on their small parcels of land (or leased their plots to an entrepreneur) while they moved to the city looking for work; others moved seasonally between the village and the city. Another example comes from Hinnebusch: ‘A peasant family might pool resources and one brother work the family land, while another sought government office or public sector work, and a third invested in a petty business’ (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 53). Hinnebusch highlighted the fact that many ‘individuals—and even more so families—tended to bridge social categories’ (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 53). Moreover, many of those rural migrants continued to be ‘very much connected to rural society through family ties [...] For many of this group, industrial work and the urban, industrial environment remain of secondary importance so far as their family income, lifestyle, and social values are concerned’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 96). This means that more and more families and individuals ceased to be just peasants and moved towards the urban direction of the rural-urban continuum and became more ‘rurban’ than rural but without being transformed into urbanites.
Nationalisation:

The country witnessed several waves of nationalisation after 1958. 1961 experienced the nationalisation of all banks and insurance companies in addition to full or partial nationalisation of twenty-seven industrial firms (King, 2009, p. 62). In 1964, the Ba’th renationalised some of these firms that were returned to their owners during the secessionist period between 1961 and 1963. It also ‘greatly expanded nationalisation to include sixty commercial enterprises, all cotton gins, and more than 130 industrial establishments and trading companies’ (King, 2009, p. 62).

This nationalisation has been criticised for being underpinned more by hostility towards the urban bourgeoisie and traditional middle classes than by economic rationale. It has been also criticised for being decided by the whims of the bureaucracy filled with employees of rural origin (see below) and not by economic planning (Atassi, 2015). Nationalisation were used, in some cases, as a tool to punish these groups for their opposition activities after the 1964 clashes (Perthes, 1995, pp. 38-39).

Nationalisation reached an extreme extent, in other cases, as to include certain shops of middle-class merchants who mostly employed less than 10 employees, and in many cases, the authorities realised the imprudence of their behaviour and had to return the nationalised establishments to their original owners (Perthes, 1995, p. 40). Perthes noticed, however, that ‘merchants were less affected than industrialists by the nationalisations. Their businesses survived, although they reduced operations for some time’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 110).

These procedures led to ‘a decline in the bourgeoisie, not only in its wealth and power, but even in its numbers through downward mobility or exit from Syria’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 53; Haddad, 2012, p. 53). The middle class expanded as a result, and many of the bourgeois businessmen moved from industry to trade (Perthes, 1995, p. 102).

The urbanite groups who were targeted by these policies did not recover from them even after decades. A committee for those who were targeted by the nationalisations presented a paper in 2005, demanding the state to return the nationalised properties to their original owners (S’eifan, 2013, p. 111). Two Syrian opposition research centres,
furthermore, collaborated to produce what they called ‘Syria Transition Roadmap’ in 2013. The roadmap called for returning all the assets that were nationalised or confiscated by the Syrian state throughout the past decades to their original owners. These were calls for undoing the socio-economic developments that occurred in the country since the union with Egypt (when nationalisation became a state policy) and for a return to the status of the pre-1958 period. This shows the importance of both the pre-1958 and post-1958 periods in formulating today’s political discourses.

The Ruralisation of the Armed Forces and the Bureaucracy and the Resulting Sharp Increase in Rural-Urban Migration:

The French mandate authorities pushed the sons of the country’s rural and religious minorities to join the armed forces, while the Sunni urbanites saw it as a way for their social inferiors. This disproportionate presence within the armed forces was taken to a new level with the purges that took place during the 1960s. The purging of the urbanites and adoption of more rural elements caused the country’s army to become increasingly ruralised (Batatu, 1999, p. 156; Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 45).

The statist policies of the 1960s Ba’th, including the above-mentioned nationalisation, had also led to an accelerated expansion in the public sector and employment opportunities within it. According to Batatu: ‘State and public sector employees, excluding the police and armed forces, increased from 33,979 in 1960 to 198,079 in 1971’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 160). These opportunities were mainly seized by individuals of rural origin who migrated to the country’s cities in order to engage in their jobs (Batatu, 1999, p. 160). The expansion of the public sector led to the sharp increase in rural-urban migration that was discussed in the previous section. The resulting unprecedented ‘shift in the demographic balance in the capital’ was attributed by Hinnesbusch to the Ba’thists’ plan to make it possible for the party ‘to entrench itself in Syria’s hostile urban environment’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 50). This strategy will be taken further by Hafiz al-Assad in the 1970s (in what is called the ‘colonisation of the cities’ in this thesis).

The official criterion that was used by the Syrian government to categorise rural and urban settlements is the number of inhabitants within a settlement. According to the
Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), a settlement should be considered urban if it was the capital of its governorate or if its population reach 20,000 inhabitants or more (Zakaria, 2017, p. 170). Following this criterion, the Syrian government estimated that the country’s urban population was 1,985,000 in 1960 (37 per cent of the population) and became 2,741,000 (44 per cent of the population) in 1970 (Zakaria, 2017, p. 171). This renders the 1960s the decade during which the country witnessed the sharpest increase in urban population growth (Zakaria, 2017). The population of the city of Al Raqqa, for example, witnessed an annual growth of 9.82 per cent during the 1960s due to the rise in employment resulting from starting the works on al-Furat Dam (Zakaria, 2017, p. 173); meanwhile, Damascus in the 1960s witnessed a rise in its population from around 530,000 to 836,000 inhabitants - an increase of almost 56 per cent (Batatu, 1999, p. 160). According to a former Ba’thist minister: ‘From the moment the party appeared on the stage, the caravans of villagers began moving from the plains and mountains toward Damascus’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 160).

The official criteria and categorisations are not sufficient, however, to understand the dynamics of rural-urban relations and their shifts. The process of identification is also dependent on the perceptive, ideational, and subjective dimensions. It is true that official categorisations affect the perceptions of the different groups and actors, but they do not solely determine the identification process and its outcomes. It is therefore necessary to shed light on these perceptive, ideational, and subjective aspects of rural-urban relations.

2.2. The Perceptive and Subjective Dimensions of the Shift

This section will address the two issues of how the different groups perceived each other, and how the conflictual politics of recognition contributed to the identification processes and the political choices of these groups. Problems of identification became much more accentuated during the 1960s than the previous period.

Rural and Urban Perceptions of the Other

The pro-rural and pro-poor discourse of the leftist middle-class parties ceased to be an opposition discourse in the 1960s, and became the discourse of the state and its
apparatus. The government established the ‘Public Institution for Cinema’ by the end of 1963 which, according to the decree that established it, aimed at ‘directing cinema production towards serving culture, science, and the national causes’ (Alexan, 2012, pp. 42-43). The institution experimented with producing several short documentaries before it decided to start producing a feature-length film that was intended to tell the story of a peasant who loves his land (Alexan, 2012, pp. 44-45). The project failed, however, and the film was not finalised. It was not until 1968 that the institution managed to produce its first long film directed by a Yugoslavian director (Alexan, 2012, pp. 45-46). This was one of the two films that were produced during that period. The other film *Rijal Taha al-Shams* (Men Under the Sun) addressed the Palestinian cause – beyond the scope of this thesis (Alexan, 2012, p. 47). *Sa’ik al-Shahina* (The Truck Driver) narrates the story of a rural young man who moves to the city to work as an assistant truck driver for an urban capitalist who owns several trucks and employs rural men to drive them (Alexan, 2012, p. 47). The film highlights the struggle of the drivers to obtain a pension plan that would help them after their retirement. The capitalist finds the struggle and misery of his employees a source for jokes and small tales that he uses to entertain his dinner guests. The messages of the film contradict what the cinema of the pre-1958 period used to convey; instead of presenting the urbanites as the pioneers who are expected to help end the backwardness of the rural population, they are depicted as exploitative and separated from the struggles and sufferings of the rural and the poor.

The protagonist, in contrast to the arrogant remarks of the urban capitalist, is asked about his ability to go on working without sleeping for long periods in one of the scenes. He proudly answers that he comes from the mountains and that people there do not sleep before the hyenas do. Being of rural, and especially of mountain origins, is a source of pride while urbanity is linked to arrogance and improvidence.

One of the major themes of the film was the heavy cost of individual struggles and the need of the downtrodden for organisation in order to be able to affect change. This was the film producers’ way of promoting and legitimating the role of the Ba’th party

---

4 The film is available here: [https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6rwg99](https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6rwg99) [Accessed 22/02/2022].
and the corporatist organisations (unions) it created. It was also noticeable that there was no difference in the accents of the urban capitalists and the rural drivers and inhabitants (the issue of accents is of certain importance as will be discussed in the next section). The only difference with which the viewer would be able to discern the rural (poor) from the (rich) urbanites is the *Keffiyeh* (head gear) that the rural drivers wear. The absence of such differences was probably meant to keep the viewers’ attention concentrated on the class aspect of the struggle: these people are similar; they only differ in who is exploiting whom.

There are other differences which exist and are consequential from the perspective of the country’s urban population. The majority of urbanites - except for the narrow group of leftist urban intellectuals who supported the Ba’th rule, became upset at what they perceived as an ‘invasion’ of their cities by rural elements (Salamandra, 2004, p. 84&160). The urbanites started to complain, and make fun, of the spread of the sound of the letter ‘*qaf*’ (which is used in rural accents) in their cities (Batatu, 1999, p. 160). The literature also describes how the urbanites resented the fact that they needed to deal with rural elements in the bureaucracy (Batatu, 1999, p. 160; Haddad, 2012, pp. 50-51).

**The Rise of the Problems of Identification and Recognition**

It was during these years that problems of identification and recognition surfaced, and brought the attention of the scholars. The urbanites felt that their urban identities were threatened by the rural ‘invasion’. In their endeavours to ‘protect’ their urbanity, many urbanites started to highlight their families’ urban origins as a hallmark of urbanity. The Damascenes, for example, started to use terms such as ‘*Dakhil el Sour*’ (Intra-muros) and ‘*Kharij el Sour*’ (Extra-muros) where the first referred to families that used to live in the Old City before moving to the modern neighbourhoods during the 1930s-1950s (Saleh, 2017, p. 229). These were the families to be perceived as ‘true’ Damascenes. Extra muros families and individuals who do not have origins in the old city and who, usually, had migrated to the city only with the Ba’thist expansion of the public sector and ruralisation of the armed forces were denied the urban/Damascene identity. This shows that social prestige, since the 1960s, became dependant not only
on residing in the modern neighbourhoods but, more significantly, on having origins in the Old City.

These stances by the urbanites hindered the social integration of the newcomers. There were many newcomers who were educated descendants of the middle peasantry who did not only depend on non-rural sources of income (mainly government salaries), but also adopted urban lifestyles, accents, and appearances (Perthes, 1995, p. 106). This did not stop the urbanites from looking down on those newcomers. The rejection was even stronger towards the rural poor who maintained their rural lifestyles and their relations with their villages and whose work in the city only complemented (or was complemented by) other sources of rural income. To return to the example of Old Damascus, Faeda Totah describes the discrimination by the Shuwams (the Damascene urbanites) against the poor rural migrants who moved to the old city neighbourhoods:

Though they lived in Shami homes, the rural migrants did not attain the urbanity of the Shuwam; rather, they “contaminated” the historic neighbourhoods with their country lifestyle. Socially conscious and upwardly mobile groups who lived outside the wall avoided the Old City for fear of “contamination” (Totah, 2014, p. 1206).

This trend in rural-urban relations (and the accompanying conflicts over urbanity and rurality) became more complex and sophisticated in the following decades under Hafiz al-Assad. These trends will be studied more deeply in the following chapter.
نوف رد بقى المناطقيين المواليين ع هالحكي

لَكْ نِحْنآ مَا
مَنْعَتْ
عُلَّ الْمِيْدَانِ شَوَامَ،
بِدَكْ نُعَتْبَرَ كَ
شَامِيَةَ اِنْتِيَ!

😊 Like 5.2K

1.3K comments • 54 shares
This meme was published on July 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2020, by a well-known Syrian sarcastic Facebook page called \textit{Syrian Salabina}. The upper square shows a candidate for the elections of the Syrian parliament of that year. The candidate’s family name betrays its Iranian origins. The square below shows a character from the famous drama series\textit{ Bab al-Hara} which depicts life in Old Damascus under French colonialism. The character, played by Abbas el-Nouri, a famous drama star, is shown addressing the candidate: ‘we do not recognize the descendants of al-Maidan as Shwam, and you want us to recognise you as a Shami?’ Al-Maidan is a Shami neighbourhood to which many authentic Damascene families proudly belong but is located outside the old city (extra-muros) (Malek, 2017, p. 54). This meme and the volume of reactions and discussions that it created shows how the divisions and classifications of the two periods studied in this chapter continue to be consequential in today’s Syria, despite all the decades and even after the 2011 uprising and the civil war.\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{Conclusion}

This chapter has presented a discussion of how rural-urban relations had developed between the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century and 1970. It has illustrated how the rise of the Ba’th to power in the 1960s, and how the accompanying inflows of rural migrants into Syrian cities complicated the problems of identification and recognition among the different rural and urban groups. The previous self-identification processes of most of these groups did not contradict how they were perceived by others; the rurality and urbanity of the different groups were rarely a source of conflict. It was not until the 1960s that the country witnessed the rise of identity politics and the conflicts over urbanity (and rurality). These different groups developed their identity narratives in the face of others in order to support their own identity claims and reject the claims of those others.

The 1960s had also witnessed a gradual process of rurbanisation of Syria’s society. The waves of rural migrants and the introduction of rural elements into urban culture (the arts and cinema e.g.) and the extension of government services, infrastructure and education to the rural areas led to what is usually referred to as ‘tamdin el Rif wa Taryeef al Madina’ (urbanising the countryside and ruralising the city) (Barout, 2012, p. 295). To return to the terminology of the current literature on rural-urban relations, more spaces and groups were pushed from the two ends of the rural-urban continuum towards its centre.

These two phenomena (the rurbanisation of society and the rise of conflicts over rurality and urbanity) will become more prominent, sophisticated, and nuanced during the subsequent decades. They will be consequential in determining the different positions of the different groups before and after the outbreak of the 2011 uprising, and, therefore, continue to be essential parts of the following chapters.
Chapter 5


Introduction

The rule of Hafiz al-Assad is another episode that should be studied in order to understand not only the rural-urban dynamics on the eve of the 2011 uprising but also the behaviour and choices of Bashar al-Assad’s regime before and after the outbreak of the uprising. Hafiz al-Assad was one of the most influential members of the Ba’thist military committee and served as the minister of defence from 1967. Particularly pertinent to this thesis, Hafiz al-Assad believed that the radical policies of his Ba’thist comrades in the 1960s and their hostility towards the urban elites and the regional isolation to which they brought Syria, were unsustainable (Batatu, 1999, p. 173). He executed a coup in 1970, which he called the ‘corrective movement’, and started a process of reconciliation with certain urban elites and enhancement of Syria’s relations with the Arab Gulf countries.

Al-Assad’s endeavours on the regional level yielded considerable inflows of geopolitical rent that helped his regime to end the economic stagnation that was caused by the radical policies of the 1960s. Al-Assad regained the capability of financing, and even expanding, the populist regime that he inherited from his former comrades. Sitting at the top of the state apparatus, he controlled rent inflows to cement his rule.

Al-Assad believed, on a domestic level, that following the old policy of allying with the rural population against the urbanites was also unsustainable. He had to follow a more sophisticated strategy that allowed him to control the capital city even if that meant he had to reconcile with its inhabitants. As a result, al-Assad’s regime ended up producing its own configuration of rural-urban dynamics in the country. This configuration is too sophisticated to be reduced to a pro-rural rule that might be opposed to Bashar al-Assad’s shift towards a new urban constituency. Indeed, in the process of producing and reproducing this configuration, Hafiz al-Assad reconciled certain urban groups (mainly the urbanites of Damascus) and violently coerced others.
(the urban inhabitants of other cities). He also discriminated between rural groups: he favoured the middle peasantry over the poorer peasantry. Al-Assad also followed a sophisticated discursive strategy that complemented the above-mentioned configuration and simultaneously disseminated contradictory discourses that had helped him to obtain the allegiance of opposing groups.

One of the most important characteristics of this rural-urban configuration is that it allowed al-Assad to maintain the decisional independence of his regime (Perthes, 1995, pp. 203-206; Haddad, 2012, p. 136). The regime managed to use geopolitical rent and its ability to manipulate the rural-urban, and other social cleavages, to further its policies without being checked by any domestic or international actors. The lack of such actors meant two things: first, the grievances of the groups who were harmed by the new rural-urban configuration were not mitigated and their choices for resistance were limited. This might explain why at least some groups may have been motivated to use violence as a final resort in its conflict with the regime; and second, it explains why the regime would be tempted to use violence as its preferable way to coerce opposition, knowing that no actors were willing or able to interfere to prevent it. These two outcomes might explain why the situation degenerated into the cold civil war witnessed in the late 1970s and early 1980s and contribute to explaining the political passivity that characterised Syrian politics during the following decades. It will be argued in the next chapters that this decisional independence which continued during the 2000s, also contributed to the outbreak of the 2011 uprising and the subsequent civil war. This decisional independence meant that the regime had an almost free hand over the country’s politics which rendered resorting to violence a preferable strategy in the face of any popular mobilisation (as had happened in 1982 and 2011).

The income from external rent started to decline towards the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, however, which, along with other factors that will be discussed in this chapter, led to a serious economic crisis that pushed the Syrian state to the brink of insolvency. Al-Assad and his inner circle became convinced that the old distributive welfare-state model was not sustainable because of the crisis. The regime started a slow process of economic liberalisation and reshuffling its social constituency through
the reconfiguration of rural-urban dynamics. He adopted a strategy that not only aimed at saving the economy, but would also pave the way for the Syrian president’s son, Bashar al-Assad, to inherit his father’s position at the top of the Syrian state, and for the rise of a new generation of regime elites (Al-Assad junior’s generation). Yet, it is important to note that, despite the economic crisis, the regime managed to maintain its decisional independence by relying on its alliances with countries such as Iran and the Soviet Union, and by refusing to cooperate with Western donors who might have been willing and able to intervene in its decisions (Perthes, 1995, pp. 203-206).

The different rural, rurban, and urban groups had to adapt themselves - whether during the period of abundance or of crisis - to the accelerating developments that were taking place around them, both domestically and regionally. Political positions and alliances were made and remade, and new identity claims and narratives were produced and reproduced. Studying these processes of identification is crucial to understanding how rural-urban dynamics developed during the 2000s, and how they affected the political choices and positions on the eve of the uprising.

This chapter will therefore examine how rural-urban relations and dynamics developed during the thirty years of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule. It will focus on how these developments were affected, not only by the relations between rural, rurban, and urban groups, but also by the relations between them and the state. While the existing literature is rich in discussions on the regime’s actions and alliances, only a few authors have discussed the processes of identification during that period. This chapter complements the work of these authors and pays special attention to the processes of identity formation and the accompanying discursive manoeuvres adopted by the different actors.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part is a discussion on the country’s urbanites and their alliance with, and resistance to, the al-Assad regime. It sheds light on the regime’s new configuration of rural-urban dynamics, and on its decisional independence. The second part focuses on the rural-urban migrants, and how their identities were transformed as a result of their movement to more urban spaces. It also focuses on how their identity claims were received by the residents of the urban areas to which they moved. The third section is a discussion on the rural population,
and how its material situation and the discourses surrounding their identities had been changing during that period.

Part 1: The Urbanites: Material Subjugation and Ideological Resistance

1.1. Hafiz Al-Assad’s First Years: Reconciling Damascus while Maintaining the Regime’s Decisional Independence.

Hafiz al-Assad’s attempts to appease the urban elites started even before his coup (Perthes, 1995, p. 50; Haddad, 2012, pp. 51-52). When al-Assad executed his coup, the urban merchants ‘sent demonstrators into the streets of big cities with banners that read: “We implored God for Aid (al-Madad), he sent us Hafiz al-Assad!”’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 175; S’eifan, 2013, p. 102). The reconciliation with the country’s traditional urban elites took several forms. The most important of which were the annulment of many of the nationalisations that took place during the 1960s and a period of ‘infitah’ that started in the early 1970s. There were many among the urban elites (or what remained of them) who were allowed a certain stake in the rentier economy through these infitah policies.

The infitah policies included the lifting of restrictions on certain imports; permitting imports without foreign exchange transfers in order to allow those ‘who had wealth abroad to repatriate some of it to Syria’; an amnesty on capital flight that occurred when the radical Ba’thists were in power; and the abandonment of foreign-exchange controls (Perthes, 1995, pp. 50-51). The 1973 constitution also ‘explicitly guaranteed private property’ and stipulated clear criteria for expropriations (Perthes, 1995, pp. 50-51). The government generally tried to assure the private sector, and to encourage those who left the country in the 1960s to return.

This infitah was made possible by the rent inflows that increased after al-Assad’s ascendance to power. Al-Assad’s openness towards the Gulf states, and the 1973 war with Israel, resulted in Syria receiving massive amounts of aid from the Gulf countries (Perthes, 1995, p. 42). The rise in oil prices was accompanied by a rise in remittances sent by Syrians who found employment in these oil-rich countries. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc as well contributed by providing the Syrian army with ‘cheap
arms and technology’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 85). Viewed from this perspective, Syria’s military efforts and its struggle with Israel were ‘employed quite successfully to generate financial resources from abroad’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 32). According to Perthes, ‘Syria’s military force (thus expenditure) [had] been employed to generate financial resources’ and Assad’s strategy might be described as selling war for geopolitical rent (Perthes, 1995, pp. 31-33). Perthes argues that ‘playing with the political conditions of the region’ (to be able to generate rent) had become since the 1970s very important for the regime (Perthes, 1995, p. 65). These rent inflows led Perthes to note that the infitah of the 1970s was ‘motivated by abundance’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 62); in this context, ‘the private sector was encouraged to take its share from public spending – mainly by importing on behalf of public-sector agencies and by playing an intermediary role between the state and foreign companies’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 51).

This infitah, however, was underpinned by a mutual lack of trust between the regime and the private sector (Haddad, 2012, p. 32). Al-Assad and his fellow Ba’thists learned from the experience of the union with Egypt and the coup of 1961 that the urbanites could use any weakness on the regime’s side to try to get back to power (Haddad, 2012, p. 48). Meanwhile, many among the urbanites, despite their celebration of Assad’s reaching power, were not ready to put all their eggs in his basket. Batatu mentions that some of the Damascene souk merchants played a double game in which some of them passed money to the Muslim Brothers without publicly identifying with them, while others publicly supported the regime through the platform of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce (Batatu, 1999, p. 208).

This lack of trust rendered decisional independence an important issue for the regime. The regime’s endeavours to maintain this independence took several forms, two of which will be discussed here. First, al-Assad made sure that the state continued to have the upper hand in the economy. The public sector remained ‘dominant in manufacturing’ and ‘banking and the wholesale trade in wheat and cotton remain[ed] state monopolies’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 211). The private sector, meanwhile, was relegated to light industry, trade within certain sectors and mediation between the state and foreign businesses.
Second, the private sector actors were obliged to enter into business networks that were dominated by regime figures. The private entrepreneurs came mainly, though not always, from the old bourgeoisie who managed to survive the 1960s; although many of them had lost substantial amounts of their wealth, they continued to have the much-needed managerial and entrepreneurial experience and relations with, and the trust of, foreign businesses that the rural regime figures did not have (Haddad, 2012, p. 94). The legal environment in the country since the 1970s was designed to be contradictory to the extent that made it impossible to establish any large business project without transgressing the law (Haddad, 2012, p. 76). It was the role of the regime figures within the said business networks to facilitate and cover such transgressions and to provide subsidised access to the lucrative deals and sectors of the economy.

These business networks represented the regime’s strategy to selectively accommodate the private sector instead of risking emancipating it as a whole (or what Haddad calls: ‘Collusion Versus Collective Collaboration’) (Haddad, 2012, pp. 40-41). The private sector actors were more replaceable than the powerful regime figures, they were often the weaker party within the networks.

The business elites of Damascus benefited disproportionately from these networks and the capital in general enjoyed a disproportionate share of government spending (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 93; Haddad, 2012). It should be noted that the allegiance of these businessmen also meant the allegiance of their employees (see chapter 4). The regime was also gaining the quiescence of wide sections of the city’s working classes by accommodating the Damascene traditional urban bourgeoisie and merchants.

1.2. The Grievances of Other Cities and the Years of the Cold Civil War

The situation was different outside the capital. Other cities such as Aleppo and Hamah (where the agrarian bourgeoisie was more dominant) were more harmed by the agrarian reforms and by the emancipation of the surrounding rural inhabitants they used to dominate. Aleppo, which has been historically seen by its inhabitants as equal
to Damascus, particularly resented the centralisation of power and economy in its rival city (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 93).

There were many urban groups, moreover, who remained hostile towards the regime and its policies. The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood - the major opposition party at the time - came from the professional middle class while ‘artisans and shopkeepers formed significant component of the society's membership’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 270). Yet, it should be maintained that the Brotherhood only represented (or gained the sympathy of) certain groups within the alienated population (Ghalioun, 2019, p. 32). Other groups included leftists, wide sections of the non-traditional souk middle-class, and urban merchants and artisans who did not necessarily sympathised with Islamist ideologies. This meant that many among these groups ‘entered tactical alliances’ with the Muslim Brotherhood but insisted on maintaining a distance from them (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 93).

The escalation of protests and strikes towards the end of the 1970s went beyond the mobilisation capabilities of the movement. Al-Assad claimed that ‘most of the participants in the strikes [...] acted under pressure and out of fear’ of the Muslim Brotherhood in order to explain (and demote) the popular participation in these protests (Batatu, 1999, p. 272). It was clear, however, that the protests were joined by non-Brotherhood groups who had specific demands such as the professional associations which demanded political freedoms and ‘an end to arbitrary security practices’ and the merchants who went to protest against price and supply controls (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 95).

Another important part of the opposition consisted of secular intellectuals who came from both urban and rural origins. Al-Assad held meetings with delegations from different social groups and encouraged them to express their criticisms towards the performance of his regime in an attempt to buy time and to pose as an understanding president who listens to his people (a manoeuvre that will be used by his son in 2011 who also met with delegations that supposedly represented the different components of Syrian society). The most vocal critics were among the members of the Union of Writers and Journalists (Batatu, 1999, p. 271). The concerns of this group were not by any means religious or sectarian - one of the boldest speakers was a well-known
‘Alawite poet. Their discussions with the president in contrast, were concentrated mostly on liberties, freedoms, and democracy (Batatu, 1999, p. 271).

The Brotherhood itself suffered from sharp internal divisions and could not be considered as a homogenous body or a unified actor. Regional divisions meant that the Damascus branch of the movement preferred a gradual and less violent course of action (at least until the mid-1970s). According to Batatu: ‘They were too closely connected with the merchants of the capital, who by and large opposed a policy of violent confrontation with the regime’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 263).

A faction of the movement’s youth that came to be known as the ‘Fighting Vanguard’, on the other hand, decided to escalate their opposition to armed activities (King, 2009, p. 85). They started by assassinating ‘Alawite officers and officials, but then escalated their activities to targeting government buildings, police stations, and army units (Batatu, 1999, pp. 266,269; King, 2009, p. 85). The regime managed to exploit this violence to discursively reduce the conflict into a battle against the extremist sectarian militants of the Brotherhood, although the movement was, again, divided on the position towards the Fighting Vanguard and its activities; by doing so, the regime legitimated its use of violence against its opponents and managed to side-line and suppress other groups and all forms of peaceful opposition (Batatu, 1999, p. 270). A conspiracy discourse was adopted by the regime which accused the US of standing behind the Brotherhood’s activities and providing them with arms and training through neighbouring Arab countries in an endeavour to serve Israel’s interests (Batatu, 1999, p. 272). Hinnebusch argued that the regime’s approach during this period of Syria’s history seemed to validate Machiavelli’s view that ‘repression, provided it was done thoroughly, could work’ (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 97). This Machiavellian view will continue to underpin the regime’s approach to ruling Syria, and the above-mentioned manoeuvres to transform a social uprising into a military conflict will also be emulated in 2011 by al-Assad junior.

A new study by Salwa Ismail takes this argument about the effectiveness of violence further. Ismail perceives the Syrian regime’s violence to be constitutive of a ‘modality of government’ (Ismail, 2018, p. 16). According to the author, the Assad regime’s use of violence has a ‘pedagogical’ dimension that goes beyond coercing rebellion: ‘using
markings on the body and the built environment to inscribe social memories into the political landscape. Through bodily and spatial inscriptions, subjects are instructed and reminded of interdictions against engaging in particular conduct’ (Ismail, 2018, p. 24).

Those who would not stop their opposition activities were detained, tortured, and accused of extremism, sectarianism, being CIA agents, and serving the interests of the ‘Israeli enemy’ even if they did not belong to, or support, the Brotherhood. Al-Assad passed a law in July 1980 after an attempt on his life ‘which regarded adherence to the Muslim Brethren as "a crime" punishable by death’ (Batatu, 1999, p. 273). It was during this period that al-Assad started to depend on ‘striking fear’ as a strategy to suppress the opposition (Batatu, 1999, p. 273). Torture in prisons was one of al-Assad regime’s favourite tools during that period (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 14). Torture was first introduced during the UAR period and became later systematised by the 1960s radical Ba’thists, it reached levels unheard of under Hafiz al-Assad only to be surpassed by the more vicious torture witnessed since 2011 (Petran, 1972, p. 132). Fear of torture and of the regime’s harsh behaviour in general convinced many to stop their oppositional activities and to resort to political passivity.

The years between 1976 and 1982 witnessed a cold civil war that culminated in the battle (and massacre) of Hamah (February 1982) when in retaliation to the activities of the security apparatuses, Muslim Brothers’ militants attacked government centres and ‘declared the city liberated’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 96). The Muslim Brothers were joined by traditional urban families such as the Barazis and by the followers of the late Akram al Hourani (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 97). The regime’s army was not able to regain the city, so it started a brutal military campaign that ended up recapturing the city after ‘virtually razing whole quarters and killing many thousands’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, p. 97).

There were many factors which played to the interest of the regime. The most important among which were its ability to use the rent and the state’s distributive power to exploit the rural-urban tensions (as the next parts of this chapter will illustrate) and to secure the quiescence of the capital. The regime did not only eradicate the Muslim Brothers by the end of the war, but also managed to discipline the different urban groups, tame the civil society, and further reduce the margin of
political freedoms. This meant that ‘the leaders of the lawyers, engineers, and doctors’ syndicates were purged and imprisoned’ and the ‘surviving modicum of press freedom and party pluralism was deadened’ (Hinnebsuch, 2001, pp. 96-98). The groups that used to be the regime’s base were also silenced. Labour representatives, for example, ‘have since 1985 become little more than mouthpieces’ (Haddad, 2012, p. 209).

1.3. The 1980s Economic Crisis and the Shift to Economic Liberalisation

Syria’s geopolitical rent had been declining since the early 1980s. The regional approach towards Syria’s role in the Arab Israeli conflict was changing, and oil prices were falling; as a result, rent inflows (including remittances) were also decreasing. The decline in geopolitical rent and remittances, the cost of the conflict with the Muslim Brothers, the failure and unsustainability of the understudied strategic projects that were established in the 1970s, and the endeavours of many businessmen (including members of the above-mentioned business networks) to smuggle their money out of the country, led to a new economic crisis that lasted throughout most of the 1980s (Matar, 2016, p. 93). Syria reached the brink of famine in 1989, when the country’s wheat reserves were depleted before the Saudi aid arrived to save the situation (Barout, 2012, p. 161). There were several developments which helped the regime to end the crisis. These included a rise in oil extraction since 1986, and a deal with the Soviet Union that allowed the regime to clear its debts by exporting certain products (Barout, 2012, p. 161; Matar, 2016, pp. 12-13). It was the US 2 – 3 billion dollars received by the regime as a geopolitical rent for its alignment with the Western and Gulf camp against Iraq in 1990, however, that created a situation of abundance (Matar, 2016, p. 102).

It was during this economic crisis that the regime became convinced that its old distributive welfare-state model was unsustainable. A consensus emerged among al-Assad’s inner circle on the necessity of liberalising the economy; however, a divergence occurred in respect of the speed and intensity of such liberalisation (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 5). This divergence was less motivated by ideological differences or economic rationale than by entrenched interests (Matar, 2016, p. 28).
While it is true that the 1980s crisis illustrated the failure of the regime’s old approach, liberalisation was not the only alternative. The push towards liberalisation was underpinned by the emergence of new players on the stage. The offspring of the regime’s 1970s figures (the al-Assad senior generation) had now emerged as new actors; many of them did not follow in the steps of their fathers in the public sector, army, or security, and preferred a private sector path (Perthes, 1995, p. 115). This was the period of the generation known as ‘Awlad al Mas’oulin’ (The sons of regime officials – the generation of Al Assad junior) (Haddad, 2012, p. 98; S’eifan, 2013, p. 107). There were many of them who were educated in Western universities and grew up in the cities (not in their fathers’ original villages). What is significant here is that during the two decades between the emergence of the business networks in the early 1970s and the rise of Bashar al-Assad as heir to his father in the mid-1990s, those regime officials and their offspring had gathered enough wealth and experience to the extent that they did not need the contribution of the urban bourgeois entrepreneurs anymore.

The new regime elites were ready to ‘become’ the new bourgeoisie instead of partnering with the old. Indeed, by the 1990s, they were already ‘entering the market at the expense of these former protégés of their fathers’ (Haddad, 2012, p. 65). It was this new generation of elites who was pushing towards liberalisation as it would allow them to move from running the economy (as state officials) into directly owning the economy (Donati, 2013, p. 39); by contrast, some of the old guard, especially within the party, were more interested in maintaining the status quo and they were the ones behind the attempts to slow down the liberalisation process. The most important factor in thwarting liberalisation, however, was the deterioration of Hafiz al-Assad’s health which made the succession issue and guaranteeing a swift transfer of power to his son Bashar, the most urgent item on the agenda.

Another factor that contributed to the sluggish implementation of the 1990s liberalisation programme was that, similar to the early 1970s, Hafiz al-Assad wanted to maintain the decisional independence of his regime. While law no.10 of 1990 succeeded in attracting some of the Syrian businessmen who had left the country in the previous decades, it did not change the contradictory nature of the Syrian legal
environment (Haddad, 2012, p. 151). This transformation was, more importantly, ‘homemade’ according to Perthes (1995, pp. 203-206). The Syrian regime, unlike most other Third World countries such as Egypt and other Arab states, did not allow any external intervention by creditors who might demand serious economic or political reforms even at the peak of the 1980s crisis. This refusal was built on al-Assad’s ability to exploit Syria’s oil reserves and geopolitical rents. He preferred creditors such as the Arab states and the Soviet Union and then Russia who had no interest in imposing any economic or political reforms (Perthes, 1995, pp. 203-206). The result was that the regime managed to avoid submitting its decisional independence to any Structural Adjustment Programme similar to the one that Egypt had to follow. This decisional independence allowed the regime to follow a path to liberalisation that prioritised its persistence and the interests of its elites over the economic reforms that may be demanded by international and Western creditors. This peculiar aspect of the Syrian liberalisation process will continue under Bashar al-Assad and will be a particularly important factor in understanding the 2011 uprising.

1.4. The Urbanites’ Ideological Resistance

Al-Assad’s endeavours also comprised a discursive dimension. The 1970s witnessed the dissemination of a contradictory discourse by al-Assad regime. The president’s speeches focused on economic pluralism on one hand, and tried to reassure the urban bourgeoisie and encourage them to return to the country (Haddad, 2012, p. 209); on the other hand, the state produced drama works that depicted the urban bourgeoisie as an exploitative class that abused the rural population. ‘Al-Fahed’, a film produced in the early 1970s, represents a good example of such discourse and will be discussed further in the last section of this chapter. This contradiction between the president’s speeches and the state-sponsored drama was, in fact, an endeavour by the regime to contain different groups by addressing them with different discourses. This endeavour was studied by Lisa Wedeen and will be discussed further later.

---

6 According to Perthes, the ‘Syrian government only paid small instalments on its World Bank debts, just enough to avoid being declared insolvent, and otherwise did not seem to be overly concerned about the World Bank’s cancelling of all its Syrian programmes’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 204).
The different urban groups, whether inside or outside the capital, realised that any form of active political resistance would be futile after the battle of Hamah. They consequently retreated to political passivity and focused on an implicit form of resistance that revolved around identity politics in the face of the rural-urban migrants. Waves of rural-urban migrants transformed the ‘original’ urbanites into minorities within their cities throughout the three decades between the 1960s to the 1990s (Salamandra, 2004, p. 83). The migration waves not only brought more rural migrants into the cities, but also caused a spike in the prices of homes which, by the 1990s, pushed many generational urbanites to either leave their homes inside the cities and move to cheaper areas in the nearby countryside, or to join the poor migrants in the illegally-built slums (Ismail, 2013, pp. 887-888); some authors estimated that by 2002, four million of Damascus’s 5.5 million inhabitants were of rural origin; they migrated to the city between 1980 and 2000 (Dib, 2012, p. 757; Atassi, 2015, p. 313).

The generational urbanites across Syria tried to create identity narratives that would establish clear boundaries between themselves and the other (the ‘rural’ newcomers) in an attempt to protect their lifestyles from what they perceived as the ruralisation of their cities, and to maintain the social status that they continued to enjoy despite their political marginalisation. This led to certain terms becoming widespread and used to describe the other(s): “‘the foreigners” (al ghurbatiyyeh), “villagers” (qarawiiyyin), “people from the country side” (ahl al-rif), “peasants” (fellahin), or “minorities” (al-‘aqalliyyat)” (Salamandra, 2004, p. 9).

The previous chapter illustrated how concepts such as intra-muros and extra-muros gained social significance after the 1960s wave of rural-urban migration. It also showed how social status became not only linked to the place of residence, but also to having roots in the old city. These two boundaries became more accentuated and entrenched with time. The place of residence was not solely meant to differentiate those who lived in the cities’ urban areas from the poor rural migrants who lived in illegally built settlements or poorer urban neighbourhoods, but also used as a tool to distinguish between the original elites and the new ‘nouveau rich’. The neighbourhood of Abu
Rummaneh in Damascus, for example, is associated with the urban ‘old money’ while the neighbouring Malki is associated with the ‘new money’ (Salamandra, 2004, pp. 38-39).

The place of residence, however, is less significant than the links to the ‘old city’ - being there before the Ba’thist rule and before the waves of migrants came to ‘invade’ the city. ‘Celebrating the Old City’ became ‘a form of resistance against the new social order’ (Salamandra, 2004, p. 83). Links with the old city thus came to represent a form of social capital that the generational urbanites sought to emphasise and invoke whenever possible.

The 1990s selective liberalisation and relative easing of the constraints on freedom of expression led the generational urbanites to become more assertive (Salamandra, 2004, p. 10). It is true that ‘until the early 1990s a middle-class or upper-middle-class Damascene might never have ventured into the Old City of Damascus, a place then associated with peasants and tourists, with the backwardness of the past’, but things started to change since then (Salamandra, 2004, p. 72).

A discourse that romanticised Old Damascus gradually became widespread. This discourse existed since the 1960s when, for example, the well-known Damascene writer Ilfat Idliby claimed in one of her short stories that democracy is a feature of the architecture of Old Damascus neighbourhoods (Idliby, 1992). This claim, though controversial if the nature of social relations within these neighbourhoods were to be invoked, came after the secessionist coup and was meant to celebrate the return of democratic rule during these few years.

The romanticising of old urban quarters in both Damascus and Aleppo, however, reached a new level with the production of drama series that revolved around the life of the old urbanites in these quarters in the past. The 1990s-2000s saw the production of different series that addressed different historical periods which ranged from the late Ottoman to the French colonisation to the independence years (Salamandra, 2015). A common feature of most of these series, though not all, is that they depict the old urban life in a positive manner which the inhabitants are kind and charitable, cooperate with each other for the greater good, and share patriotic feelings. The
production of these drama series indicated that the regime was shifting from its earlier discourse that was hostile to the ‘exploitative’ urban bourgeoisie in the 1970s to a new discourse that aimed at reconciling the urbanites.

It did not take long, however, for these identity assertions to be transformed into a form of ‘objectification’, commodification and even ‘Disneyfying’ of the ‘old city’ (Totah, 2014, p. 1206; 1212). The opening of restaurants and pubs (and later boutique hotels) in the cities’ old quarters, and invoking elements of architecture, internal design, outfits, and other cultural forms from that period, the ‘old city’ was transformed into an experience and these forms became available for consumption. The ‘selective consumption of these forms [became] a mode of identity construction’ (Salamandra, 2004, p. 2).

The irony is that by commodifying urbanity, those who endeavoured to maintain it as an exclusive marker of their social status, rendered it available to those who could afford it. Yannick Sudermann points out: ‘Access to a gentrified Old Damascus has become an opportunity to acquire both an urban Damascene identity and prestige, particularly for non-Damascene members of the new classes’ (Sudermann, 2011, p. 53).

This is exactly the group which the generational urbanites wanted to exclude. The commodification of the old city occurred at the same time as when the new generation of regime elites were rising to the scene. Those new elites grew up in the cities and endeavoured to ‘become’ the new bourgeoisie. It was intuitive within this context that they sought to be recognised as urbanites. They therefore became among the most excited groups to see old city cultural forms flourishing and available to them for consumption and use in support of their claims of urbanity. They also contributed to the process of commodifying the ‘old cities’ across Syria including Aleppo and Homs (Ahmad, 2011, p. 43; Droubi, 2017). These endeavours by the new generation of elites will be discussed in the next chapter.

Part 2: The Rural-Urban Migrants: Colonising the Cities

The 1970s continued to witness high rates of rural-urban migration, although it somehow decelerated when compared to the rates of the 1960s. Two factors might
have contributed to this deceleration. The first is that, due to the opportunities that rose from the oil boom, many of the rural inhabitants preferred to immigrate to the Arab oil-rich countries rather than migrating to the country’s cities. The second factor is that, towards the end of the 1970s, the public sector became saturated, and its employment capabilities declined over time. This decrease in employability was also underpinned by the decline in geopolitical rent during the same period.

2.1. The Rise of the Semi-Proletariat

There were many rural inhabitants who continued to flock to the cities, even with the decreasing job opportunities. Kheder Zakaria’s research confirmed that rural-urban migration was affected more by the bad living conditions and economic situation in the countryside than by the availability of opportunities in the cities (Zakaria, 2017, p. 162). This meant that many rural-urban migrants where not accommodated by the cities’ economies, whether in the public or the private sectors. This led to the flourishing of an informal economy, and a sharp rise in the numbers of what Perthes call the ‘semi-proletariat’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 100). According to Perthes, the semi-proletariat:

‘comprises the two large groups of casual workers, i.e. those whose permanent unemployment can often be interrupted by temporary engagements, and, secondly, self-employed sales- and servicemen offering their largely marginal products and services not in a permanent shop or shack but rather, as the Arabic expression goes, bi-l-rasif, on the pavement: these include vendors of small items, cigarettes, smuggled goods and other things in short supply, as well as lottery-ticket sellers, shoeblacks, beggars and others’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 99).

The semi-proletariats are not a homogeneous group, and neither are their political positions. Lacking any class-consciousness, they do not represent a great source of threat to the regime; yet, the regime was aware that a severe deterioration in their living conditions might initiate bread riots. The regime did not allow such deterioration to take place, even during the peak of the 1980s economic crisis (Perthes, 1995, p. 121). What is more significant about this group is their position in the context of the rural-urban divide. It is true that many of them left their villages and moved to more urban spaces, but they did not cut their relationships with their rural origins; most of
them maintained both rural and urban sources of income - Perthes classify them as worker-peasants or peasant-workers (Perthes, 1995, p. 94). A large number not only depended on renting or seasonally planting their small plots of land that were passed to them by the Ba’thist land reforms, but they also continued with their rural lifestyles and habitus.

The semi-proletariat included certain sections of the urban poor whose life conditions deteriorated due to the economic crisis of the 1980s; however, the bulk of this group came from the poor peasantry who migrated to the cities during these difficult times.

The migration waves of the 1960s-1980s were less precarious than those that occurred during the 1930s-1950s. The new migrants built themselves houses and flats with cement roofs unlike their ancestors who lived in houses built of cane and sackcloth. Illegally built slums started to mushroom around the country’s cities and the poorer urban neighbourhoods witnessed a rise in illegally built attachments to already-existing buildings. These new permanent settlements were closer to rural colonies within the cities.

The relative stability of these new migrants in their new urban/rurban spaces led to the emergence of contradictory identity claims. These migrants, similar to other parts of the world, maintained a rural identity when dealing with their peer migrants (or their original village people), and tried to present an urban identity when put in an urban setting, or when dealing with groups or individuals who were perceived to be more urban (Erman, 1998). These claims of urbanity were so widespread to the extent that they complicated the work of the researchers who were studying rural-urban migration. According to one of those researchers, many of the migrants claimed to be of urban descent, either because they thought that being categorised as urbanites would entail receiving certain forms of government aid, or because they were ‘ashamed’ of their rural origins (Salamandra, 2004, p. 84; Zakaria, 2017, p. 175).

The regime endeavoured to encourage this rural colonisation of the country’s cities in the context of its war against the Muslim Brotherhood (S‘eifan, 2013, p. 132). The government decided to provide these settlements with basic services and public utilities in the early 1980s, despite the fact that they were illegally built (Ahmad, 2011,
The declared rationale was that the government was not financially able to organise or regulate these settlements; regardless of these claims, by providing such services, the government was urbanising these settlements and their inhabitants. To borrow from the scholarship on Urbicide, it is well-established that to provide infrastructure to a certain space is to ‘grant’ urbanity to its inhabitants while withholding infrastructure means ‘denying the city’ for those inhabitants (Sharp, 2016, pp. 132-135). The 1980s regulations were a shortcut used by the regime to integrate those migrants within the city and to grant them an aspect of urbanity without having to follow the more expensive way of sound urban planning that takes environmental and socio-economic concerns into consideration.

2.2. The Regime’s Human Reservoirs

The above-mentioned ‘granted’ urbanity necessitates a discussion on certain significant sub-group of the poor peasantry migrants. This group consists of those migrants who were recruited to the lower echelons of the armed forces or security apparatus and moved to the cities to join their units. These migrants lived in certain settlements that represented regime-loyal ghettoes within, or on the peripheries, of urban spaces.

These settlements were inhabited by rural migrants who were often not on good terms with their urban surroundings. One significant example of the hostilities caused by the emergence of these settlements was Ish-al-Warwar which emerged in an area adjacent to Barzeh al-Balad, an area in Damascus. According to Salwa Ismail, ‘the area was considered part of the communal territory of the original Barzeh inhabitants, and the settlement caused tensions from the start’; this led to what is known among the inhabitants as ‘Ahdath Barzeh’ (the events of Barzeh) (Ismail, 2013, p. 883).

These settlements formed loyalist human reservoirs for the regime, available for mobilisation when needed. Hinnebusch noted that despite the radical policies of the 1960s, ‘the city remained a formidable power, wealthier, more culturally advanced, and barely under regime control’ (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 60). These settlements were one of the regime’s strategies to subjugate the city and discipline the urban
inhabitants. According to Ismail, these quarters provide the regime with ‘buffer zones within urban spaces’ and divide the population (Ismail, 2013, p. 884). These quarters proved to be of paramount importance for the regime, not only during its war with the Muslim Brothers, but more significantly, after the 2011 uprising as the next chapters will illustrate (Ish-al-Warwar and Barzeh will be one of many examples on how the regime used these ‘colonies’ that flourished in the 1970s-1980s to tame the cities in 2011).

2.3. The Middle-Peasantry Migrants

The expanding public sector favoured the recruitment of rural elements (see Chapter 4). While the lower echelons sometimes recruited elements from the poor peasantry, most of the recruits descended from the middle peasantry who had the means to complete their education and obtain the degrees required for public sector employment.

The public sector’s employment capacity declined towards the end of 1970s, as mentioned earlier; but before that decline, and especially after the 1973 rise in geopolitical rent, it continued to recruit more rural-urban migrants and others who were entering the job market. Thanks to the rent inflows, the Syrian government was able to establish many projects ‘especially in the so-called strategic sectors and commodities (electricity, cement), which required high start-up costs’ (Haddad, 2012, p. 93). These projects were more often understudied, and their feasibility studies were hastily prepared which led to what Haddad calls ‘investment chaos’ (Haddad, 2012, p. 93); despite this chaos, these projects allowed the regime to employ greater numbers within the public sector. The employment opportunities created by the public sector meant the expansion of the regime base within the cities as more rural migrants continued to flock to the cities to engage in their jobs (Zakaria, 2017, p. 173). This was another aspect of colonising the cities. Hinnebusch posits: ‘Ba’th’s drive to consolidate its rule began as a matter of turning the institutions of state power into rural strongholds dominating the cities’ (Haddad, 2012, p. 55).
However, the next chapters will show that these projects were not very consequential on the perceptive level as the perceptions of al-Raqqa and other north-eastern cities as ‘backward’ and ‘less urban’ did not change much during the subsequent decades. One major factor behind these unchanging perceptions is the above-mentioned failure of these projects which meant that they did not deliver their development promises in the regions within which they were established.

In the same vein, Hinnebusch noticed that the government’s investment strategy, including these projects, did not translate into ‘any substantial narrowing of the income gap between city and village’ (Hinnebusch, 1989, p. 278). One major factor behind this outcome, according to Hinnebusch, is that these projects ‘initially generate income chiefly in the construction sector’ (Hinnebusch, 1989, p. 278).

The failure of these projects maintained the already existing perceptions and served to increase the rural-urban tensions. In the case of the Euphrates’s scheme, for example, Annika Rabo documented the bitterness of the local rural population against the educated cadres who worked at the scheme. According to Rabo, many among the local population blamed these cadres for the failure of the project and accused them of being lazy and ‘lacking morale’ (Rabo, 1985, p. 217). Some of the cadres retaliated by blaming the failure on the ‘regional backwardness’ and the ‘laziness’ of the local labour (Rabo, 1985, pp. 221-222). To summarise, these state projects failed to achieve the promised rural development but represented a success if seen from the perspective of the regime endeavours to colonise the cities.

Rent controls also contributed to this aspect of city colonisation. The public sector employees of rural origin were able to rent flats within the city centres and the areas where the generational urbanites lived - unlike the poorer migrants who mainly lived in illegal peripheral settlements. Rent controls meant they could continue to live in these urban areas on the cheap; an outcome that came at the expense of the urban landlords who were not able to raise the rent or to evacuate the tenants.

The economic crisis of the 1980s hit the public sector employees harshly as their salaries lagged behind the inflation rates; in an attempt to guarantee their loyalty during its war with the Muslim Brotherhood, the government raised their salaries by
65 per cent in the early 1980s (Perthes, 1995, p. 53). Rent controls were another form of ameliorating the impact of the crisis on these groups; yet, by the mid-1980s, their situation deteriorated to the extent that most of them had to work in additional jobs to make ends meet. It is estimated that many of them fell below the poverty line (Perthes, 1995, p. 47). This deterioration created an atmosphere of dissatisfaction among this group according to some authors (Matar, 2016, p. 86). The events of the 1980s and 2011 and the decades in-between them clearly show that the regime managed to maintain their loyalty; in spite of the above-mentioned material deterioration, public-sector employability continued to be attractive to various groups. According to Perthes:

‘Public employment, however, has several advantages: almost total protection against dismissal; old-age pensions; free medical care and continued, though somewhat reduced, wage payment during sick-leave. Many public-sector establishments have kindergartens and consumer cooperatives, and free transport is often available to and from the under-serviced suburbs where most of the working class live’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 97).

The public discourse towards the public sector shifted in the 1990s, as the regime became more convinced about the necessity of liberalisation, from one that depicted it as an engine for modernisation to one that saw it as ineffective, corrupt and irreparable; the best example on this discourse was the then extraordinarily successful drama series ‘Yawmiyyat Moudir ‘am’ (The Everyday Life of a General Manager).

2.4. Identity Claims

Members of this group of migrants became more urbanised and were less concerned about maintaining their rural roots. According to Perthes, they followed ‘western modes of dwelling, consumption, and social behaviour’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 106); consequently, the urbaniy claims of this group were more accentuated; however, as discussed earlier, the ‘original’ urbanites continued to reject these identity claims, and insisted on certain criteria for recognising such claims. This group of city dwellers will be called the ‘acquired urbaniy’ residents for the purposes of this research. They acquired their urban identities by changing not only their place of residence but also their habitus and lifestyles. Most importantly, they adopted new self-identification
processes that reflected their will to urbanity (unlike the poorer rural-urban migrants whose self-identification processes continued to comprise both rural and urban instances).

A result of the conflict between the original urbanites and the new ‘acquired urbanity’ groups, was that a discursive war initiated between the two groups. The urbanites did not only categorise the newcomers as foreigners, villagers, and peasants, but also described the waves of migration as an ‘invasion’ (Salamandra, 2004). The urbanites adopted certain stereotypes which described the rural population as backward, lazy, and exploitative of their women (Salamandra, 2004).

Those who were excluded from urbanity, according to the narratives and borders set by the generational urbanites, responded by accusing the latter of being xenophobic and chauvinistic (Salamandra, 2004, p. 81&146). They ridiculed the above-mentioned claims about the old city life and the romanticising of the old urban quarters. There was a journalist among those whose urbanity claims were rejected by the generational Damascenes who, in response to the romanticised drama depictions, argued: ‘They portray themselves as wonderful, but half of them were traitors; historically, half of Damascus were traitors, during the days of the French, and those of the Turks and Mamluks’ (Salamandra, 2004, p. 118).

A doctor who is a long-time resident of Damascus but who descends from rural (‘Alawite) origins told Salamandra:

‘They want to show themselves as more authentic, and they look down on the minorities. They’ve failed in so many ways, in politics, in social structure—the family has disintegrated—so they produce Damascene Days to prove how wonderful they were in the past’ (Salamandra, 2004, p. 118).

Those with unrecognised urbanity claims developed their own stereotypes that depict Damascenes as Machiavellian opportunists who would back whoever is in power (Salamandra, 2004, p. 86). One poet expressed this stereotype by saying: ‘Damascus is a whore, but a high-class one—she doesn’t give herself except to those who’ll pay a lot’ (Salamandra, 2004, p. 25). The commodification of the old city, and the concomitant commodification of the urban identity, resulted in many among the
‘acquired urbanity’ group starting to frequent the pubs and restaurants of the old cities in order to support their urbanity claims (as the next chapter will illustrate).

Part 3: The Rural Population

The rise of the political role of the middle peasantry which started in the 1960s continued and accelerated under Hafiz Al-Assad. The peasant unions became increasingly controlled by the middle peasantry, while the poorer peasants were mostly side-lined; al-Assad ignored the corruption that was spreading within these institutions which allowed those who controlled them a wide margin for self-aggrandisement (Khalaf, 1991, p. 78). They often had more in common with the rich landlords than with the poorer peasants (Perthes, 1995, p. 87; Batatu, 1999, p. 170).

Another development under al-Assad’s rule was the re-emergence of the political influence of old tribal chiefs and their offspring through the peasant unions. Thanks to their pre-Ba’thist wealth, the tribal sheikhs were able to provide better education for their offspring than any other group in the countryside. The better education and familiarity with urban politics allowed the offspring to reach top positions within the unions (Khalaf, 1991, pp. 117-121). It should be noted, however, that their qualifications would not have allowed them to reach these positions had the veto on their participation in political life not been lifted. It was in the context of al-Assad’s de-radicalisation and his ‘quest to rebuild domestic unity’ that this veto was ended (Khalaf, 1991, pp. 117-121).

Many within the poorer peasantry maintained their loyalty to the Ba’th regime despite this bias towards the middle and higher rural classes. There is no doubt that, despite imbalances, the poor peasantry’s life improved since the 1960s (Batatu, 1999, p. 46). The different laws and decrees enhanced their position vis-à-vis wealthy landowners and transformed many of them into landowners themselves (although they often owned parcels that were too small to allow them to make ends meet). The state in the 1970s continued its attempts at providing basic services to the countryside - electricity, roads, schools, and drinking-water reservoirs gradually became more common even in the remote rural areas (Khalaf, 1991, p. 120).
Regardless of the impact of these projects, the state - at least until the 1990s - maintained a public discourse that favoured the rural population and presented them in a positive way, while the ‘old’ urban elites, as mentioned earlier, were often depicted negatively. One of the most important movies that was produced by the Syrian state (through the Public Institution of Cinema) during the 1970s was Al-Fahed (The Jaguar) (1972) (Alexan, 2012, p. 50). The film glorified the rural population’s struggle against the oppressive urban absentee landlords who were supported by the pre-Ba’th authorities. The film’s protagonist (Fahed – which means Jaguar) was imprisoned and tortured by the police after his land was taken from him by a certain feudal lord. Fahed managed to escape prison and sought refuge in the mountains where he used his gun to initiate a single-man war against the police and the ‘thugs’ employed by the landlords. Fahed was depicted as smart, brave, handsome, romantic, and respectful of women, in contrast to all of the above-mentioned stereotypes propagated by urbanites. Yet, Al-Fahed similar to the ‘Truck Driver’ discussed in the previous chapter, highlights the rural population’s need to be organised by an avant-garde party (indirectly signifying al-Ba’th). The village’s population sympathised with Fahed in the movie, but were not able to rise with him due to the lack of mobilisation capabilities; in the end, Fahed was captured and hanged.

The film’s messages became especially useful for al-Assad in the subsequent years when his confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood escalated. Al-Assad resorted to pitting the rural and urban populations against each other. One of the most significant ways to mobilise the peasants was by reminding them of their past agony under the rule of the urban elites (just as depicted in al-Fahed). It was in this context that al-Assad delivered his famous speech when he insisted that he is: ‘first and last a peasant and the son of a peasant’. ‘To lie amid the spikes of grain on the threshing floor’, according to Assad, ‘is, in my eyes, worth all the palaces in this world’ (Ajami, 2012). The regime’s endeavours succeeded, and the peasants’ mobilisation resulted in ‘an atmosphere of intimidation which kept landowners from their estates’ in Aleppo’s countryside (Hinnebusch 2001, 96). Hinnebusch wrote that this ‘was a warning to the old families that, without the protection of the government they disliked, their property rights were unenforceable’ (Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 96). Al-Assad, in the same
vein, promulgated decrees that established a new ‘minor’ land reform, raised the workers’ wages, and enhanced their position vis-à-vis their employers. These decrees served not only to elevate his regime’s support within these groups but also to send a message to the urbanites and higher classes about the consequences of pushing him to pursue the course of the hardliners within the party and the state; a manoeuvre that will be imitated by his son in 2011.

The regime’s pro-rural discourse was only one element of the ‘mixed ideological canon’ that was used by the regime to balance between the different social groups (Haddad, 2012, p. 58). Al-Assad was talking about economic pluralism in the context of his endeavours to reconcile the urban elites at the same time as pro-rural and pro-socialist cinema was being produced (Haddad, 2012, p. 209); despite depicting the old (urban and rural) elites as evil and exploitative, the old sheikhs were allowed to remerge in the countryside and to reassert their dominance over the poor peasantry; the regime will invest this good relationship with the Sheikhs in 2011 as will be discussed later.

Lisa Wedeen tried to explain these contradictions within the regime’s discourse and between the discourse and the policies that were actually applied by the regime. The regime was not trying to establish a Gramscian hegemonic bloc during the 1970s-1980s, and, according to Wedeen, did not want its people to believe any of its mottos; in contrast, the regime wanted its citizens to act ‘as if’ they believed its discourse (Wedeen, 1999). This was a period where force, violence, and the coercive apparatus of the state had the decisive role. Wedeen notes that those who would believe the regime’s rhetoric tend to be dangerous as they might expect and demand the actual application of the declared mottos (Wedeen, 1999). This explains why the regime’s coercion was not limited to the Muslim Brothers, but also included the leftist parties, even though these parties’ discourses were similar to the regime’s socialist and pro-poor slogans.

The rural population’s clear stand with al-Assad in his war against the Brotherhood (and the other groups) did not serve them for long; their socio-economic situation started to deteriorate after the end of the war in 1982. This was due to the 1980s economic crisis and the 1990s liberalisation policies that eroded much of the
peasantry’s gains of the 1960s (King, 2009, p. 138). The subsequent years would show that many of the poorer peasantry would cease to depend solely on agriculture as a source of income as the regime’s policies came to be biased towards the middle and rich peasantry. According to Perthes:

‘Holders of medium-sized and bigger estates could cope with the government’s agricultural procurement prices. They would get credit more easily, they could often afford to buy their own machinery, they were preferentially served by machine contractors’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 87).

The poorer peasants simultaneously could not cope with the procurement prices and many of them would join the waves of rural-urban migration searching for additional sources of income. According to Batatu, ‘the proportion of Syrians engaged in agriculture’ decreased from 53 per cent to 22.9 per cent of the economically active population between 1974 and 1989 (Batatu, 1999, p. 188). This trend would continue under the rule of al-Assad junior where this number would become 15 per cent in 2010 and the contribution of agriculture in the country’s GDP would become no more than 17.6 per cent (CBS, 2010; al-Kayyali, 2018). The number of ‘full-time peasants’ decreased ‘from 440,000 in 1970 to 290,000 in 1981. These data show that a ‘substantial number of smallholders have given up their agricultural work, sometimes leaving it to their wives and children’ (Perthes, 1995, p. 85).

To summarise, the living conditions in the rural areas were enhanced to a certain degree that allowed the regime to maintain the loyalty of the rural population but were not enough to keep this part of the population in their areas. Omar Amiralay, the film director, interviews a female peasant in the early 1970s in his film ‘The Daily Life of a Syrian Village’. Amiralay asks her why she voted for the Ba’thist candidates in the parliamentary elections rather than the candidates of the tribal sheikhs. The peasant answers: “Those [the Ba’thists] are more merciful with us’ (IMDB, 2017). The discursive favouritism towards the rural population also began to recede during the 1990s. It has already been discussed that the Syrian drama of that decade started to depict the urban life in Damascus and elsewhere in a positive manner, highlighting

---

7 Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQWJs4IWxqY&t=28s&ab_channel=YazanBadran [Accessed: 21/02/2022].
the authenticity of the old urban quarters and romanticising life within them; however, the 1990s also witnessed the production of some mini-series that criticised the rural migration to the cities, and the imposition of rural tastes and lifestyles over urban spaces. One of these mini-series was Seerat ‘Al Al Jalali ‘A Biography of Al-Jalali Family’ in which al-Jalali refers to a supposedly original urbanite family in Aleppo (elcinema.com, n.d.)

The series mainly revolves around the generational conflicts within the family between the older generation of Souk merchants and members of the newer generation who allied themselves to certain regime (rural) figures, thus becoming members of the aforementioned business networks. The series was somehow critical of this traditional urban family and its conflicts. What is important in the current context, however, is that one of the major themes of the series is about appointing a rural descendant as the manager of a cultural institution in Aleppo where he prioritised rural music and arts over the classical and Western forms of art that were usually preferred by urban intellectuals. The way in which the series contrasts the rural with the urban tastes takes a caricaturistic aspect. The rural forms are depicted as being of so low quality to the extent that makes them a source of mockery.

One of the Jalali brothers represents the urban intellectual helplessly and bitterly witnessing the cultural scene in his city dwindling under the authority of the appointed rural and obviously Ba’thist manager even though it was not clearly mentioned. The stark contrast between al-Fahed of 1972 and al-Jalali of 2000 summarises the transformation in the regime’s position towards rural-urban relations during the thirty years of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule. This discursive shift will accelerate under the rule of Bashar al-Assad, discussed in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

Rural-urban relations became much more complicated during the thirty years of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule, to allow a characterisation of this period as a pro-rural and pro-poor
rule. This was not merely the outcome of the regime’s agency but also the outcome of different groups’ actions and international and regional developments.

Syria was transformed from the radical pro-rural and pro-poor welfare-state model of the 1960s, into a regime that used rent, violence, discursive manoeuvres, and its ability to exploit social cleavages to coerce its opponents and balance between various social groups. Hafiz al-Assad’s strategies during this period will become a manual for his son in 2011 and the subsequent years.

It is true that al-Assad and his regime were forced to think about a future without rent in the 1980s, but they were able to do so without having to compromise their decisional independence. They were able to plan this future in a manner that would prioritise their interests and the persistence of their rule. Al-Assad exploited the rural-urban divisions within the Syrian society in a way that allowed him to use brutal force to coerce his opponents and to suffocate civil society; by doing so, and as he succeeded in overcoming the 1980s economic crisis without surrendering his decisional power to foreign creditors, he managed to keep the different social components (including and particularly the business sector) dependent on his regime. By the end of the 1980s, al-Assad was able to present himself as an irreplaceable leader without whom the country will deteriorate into chaos.

The different rural and urban groups had to contend with each other in their endeavours to secure and maximise their political and socio-economic interests within this political setting. The country’s urbanites had been divided since the 1970s between those who favoured the regime over its opponents (mainly in Damascus) and those who opposed the regime. While many urbanites actively resisted the regime’s authoritarian inclinations, al-Assad managed to maintain the quiescence of the capital. He managed to push the opposition into passive resistance after the Hamah massacre of 1982. This passive resistance entailed a rise in the importance of identity politics. Tensions increased over inclusion and exclusion within urbanite groups. The battle of narratives consequently escalated in the 1990s when the urbanites benefited from a gradual shift in the regime’s public discourse towards a more pro-urban discourse. This discursive shift, however, was not meant to favour the country’s original urbanites, but
to open the door to urbanity for the regime’s new elites. This discursive shift will prove to be consequential in the 2000s as will be illustrated in the next chapter.

The rural groups had to suffer a gradual deterioration, on the other hand, not only in terms of their political and socio-economic circumstances, but also in terms of the above-mentioned shift in the public discourse from a pro-rural to a pro-urban discourse. This did not entail a total alienation of the rural population, however; it continued to benefit from certain welfare measures; equally important, al-Assad’s regime mobilised a ‘mixed ideological canon’ that not only comprised contradicting elements but also continued to change throughout the decades of his rule (Haddad, 2012, p. 58). This chapter has illustrated how the regime’s discourse (just like the distributive apparatus of the state) offered something for everyone: the poor citizen and the businessman, the rural subject and the urbanite, the leftist and the liberal, and the religious and the secular person. What was common between all these elements of the regime’s discourse was that al-Assad never intended to bind himself with any of them. He was therefore wary of those who believed his slogans and preferred those who acted ‘as if’ they believed them (Wedeen, 1999).

The deterioration in al-Assad’s health, and the efforts to secure a smooth transition of power to his son Bashar meant that the regime upgrading programme which the father embarked on after the mid-1980s was delayed, and the most important parts of it had to wait until the son secured his power over the country. This will be the subject matter of the next chapter.
Chapter 6

Assadism 2.0: Bashar al-Assad’s First Decade in Power (2000-2011)

Introduction

The election of Bashar al-Assad as the country’s new president in 2000 was preceded by the 1990s rise of a new generation of regime elites who were seeking to upgrade the regime’s approach to ruling the country. These new elites grew up in the cities and tended to perceive themselves as more urban than rural (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 106). Their interests were entrenched within urban spaces, and they aspired not only to take over these spaces, but also to become the new bourgeoisie of the country (Dahi & Munif, 2011). They were less concerned than their fathers with narrowing the socio-economic gap between the rural and urban populations; on the contrary, as will be discussed in this chapter, the agricultural sector was harshly hit by the new economic policies under Bashar al-Assad.

Hafiz al-Assad’s strategy of ‘colonising the cities’ was upgraded to a project to conquer or take over the cities. This new elites’ enterprise contributed to a radical transformation in the dynamics of rural-urban relations during the years between 2000 and 2010. This transformation occurred on different, yet intertwined, levels: the political, the economic, and the symbolic. The new elites’ project was translated, on the political level, into a further concentration of power within the inner circle of the president and his family, and the exclusion of many of those who were perceived as the old guard of his father. The Ba’th party and the corporatist institutions were weakened which hindered the rural and provincial populations’ access to power. The rise of the new elites on the economic level meant that the business networks that flourished under al-Assad senior had lost their function and were gradually being dissolved. The new elites could now become the bourgeoisie themselves instead of partnering with the old urban bourgeoisie as their fathers did. The way to economic liberalisation was now open, as the new elites were ready and well established to capture its fruits. This economic liberalisation, however, maintained the decisional independence of the regime as in the days of al-Assad the senior. This meant that the regime and its elites could control the liberalisation policies, tailoring them to their
own interests. The new elites also sought to redefine the meaning of rurality and urbanity on the symbolic and ideational levels. They produced and disseminated their own identity claims and narratives. These not only allowed their inclusion within the urban groups, but also legitimised their interests in liberalising the economy and turning their backs to their old rural constituencies.

In this chapter I will discuss the new elites’ endeavours on these three levels and how they affected the different rural, rurban and urban groups. The most important issue that will be tackled pertains to the widespread perceptions that the 2000s liberalisation benefited the country’s urbanites at the expense of the rural, rurban and poorer groups. While these perceptions are not totally unsound, the following discussion will illustrate that not all urbanites benefited from the 2000’s liberalisation, and that such perceptions gloss over the different groups that might be considered urban.

The chapter will be divided into two parts. The first will focus on the impact of the developments witnessed during the 2000s on the rural and rurban groups. The second will be a discussion of the different urban groups, and the new elites’ enterprise had a different impact on them.

It should be made clear here that the term ‘new-elites’ enterprise or project’ is not meant to signify an already-set plan or anything close to an elite conspiracy; on the contrary, it will be illustrated how the ups and downs of this project were affected by a coalescence of domestic and international factors.

Part 1: The Impact of the New Elites’ Project on the Rural and Rurban Populations

The elites’ enterprise of the 2000s had deeply and negatively had an impact on the rural and rurban groups of Syrian society on different levels: politically, economically, and symbolically. These three levels are intertwined and may not be understood in isolation from each other; however, they will be discussed separately just for the sake of simplification.
1.1. Politically: Shifting the Regime’s Social Base

Bashar Al-Assad had to tackle two intertwined tasks upon succeeding his father in 2000. The first was to consolidate his power vis-à-vis the old guard of his father’s era and the different institutional frameworks linked to them; and the second was to pave the way for the intended liberalisation programme.9 Indeed, when he became president, Bashar al-Assad started a process of reshuffling the regime’s constituencies in a manner that served the two above-mentioned goals.

The intended liberalisation programme required reducing the old distributive role of the Syrian state and, consequently, the abandonment of many of those who used to constitute the regime’s social base. Those who were to be abandoned consisted mainly of rural, rurban and other poor groups who used to be the regime’s allies against the urban bourgeoisie (the regime’s old opponents); at the same time, many among these groups were linked to different figures within the old guard; hence, it was a ‘two in one’ opportunity for the regime which allowed it to weaken the old guard and to simultaneously pave the way for liberalisation.

Cutting with Old Allies

The Ba’th party, the epicentre of anti-market ideology and statist and redistributive policies, was the most significant field for al-Assad junior’s venture to neutralise the power of many old-guard key figures, and to pave the way for undoing the old statist policies of his father’s days. Bashar al-Assad, therefore, worked on replacing the old leadership of the party with a new generation of his trustees; by 2005, with the Ba’th 10th regional conference, Bashar al-Assad managed to bring new cadres of his trustees to the party’s leadership.

---

9 The term ‘Old Guard’ is used by many contributors to the literature to signify different things. This chapter will follow the current use of the term to denote the key figures who were not satisfied by the regime’s post-2000 approach to domestic and international politics. It mainly consists of Ba’thist and other high-rank officials who tried to oppose the regime’s new venture and were consequently sidelined. It also includes figures such as Abdelhalim Khaddam and Hikmat al-Shihabi who fled the country, and Ghazi Kan’an who died in mysterious circumstances after doubts that they were planning to topple the new president. It does not include figures such as Bahjat Sulayman or Mohammad Nassif and many others who served in important posts under Hafiz al-Assad, and continued (or even promoted) with his son. See also (Hinnebusch, 2015).
The 10th regional conference was also an occasion to push the liberalisation agenda. The conference officially adopted the president’s new economic agenda that came to be known as the ‘Social Market Economy’. Using the ‘Social’ in the ‘Social Market Economy’ was intended to avoid the embarrassment entailed by an explicit de-legitimisation of Hafiz al-Assad’s era and the statist policies of the previous three decades (Abboud, 2015; Dahi & Munif, 2011, p. 327; S’eifan, 2013, p. 108). The content of the new strategy was ambiguous: ‘everyone agreed that the government had adopted a social market economy approach to planning and policy, and nobody knew what the social market economy approach actually was’ (Abboud, 2015, p. 48). This ambiguity was intended to allow the regime’s head to maintain its ability to manipulate the divisions and tensions between the two factions within the regime (pro-statist versus pro-liberalisation), and between the different rural, rurban, and urban groups who might benefit, or might be harmed, by the new agenda.

It did not take much time, however, before al-Assad was able to achieve his goals. It is true that the tensions between al-Ba’th and the new liberalisation-oriented elites brought into the government and bureaucracy by Bashar Al-Assad continued after 2005, but they became more and more subtle and were more restricted to the lower echelons of the party. It was remarkable, meanwhile, that on the level of the party’s leadership, the cadres of the Ba’th party, after 2005, became more flexible towards economic liberalisation, and seemed to be ‘reading from the same book’ with al-Assad’s neo-liberal technocrats (Marshall, 2009, p. 108).

The reshuffling of the Ba’th leadership was accompanied by the weakening of the party through ‘shifting power to state institutions’ (Dahi & Munif, 2011, p. 326; Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 32;38). The consequences of both the weakening of the Ba’th Party and the taming of its leadership were not merely institutional. The Ba’th used to be a highway for recruiting individuals from rural spaces and lower classes into the political elite and its weakening meant that the regime was no more interested in co-opting rural and provincial groups by appointing some of their members in the higher echelons of bureaucracy and government (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 23).

This was accompanied by the side-lining of many Sunni security barons who used to be significant power brokers during the days of al-Assad senior; removing these barons
from power circles entailed the alienation of the clientelist networks linked to them. The positions that used to be held by these ousted Sunni barons were transferred to a new generation of the president’s trustees which mainly came from his kinship such as his brother Maher and brother-in-law Assef Shawkat. These changes led many to use terms such as ‘Jumlukiyya’ or ‘Presidential Monarchy’ to describe the Syrian regime during that period (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 40). This concentration of power was facilitated by the regime’s decisional independence that the son inherited from his father, and which continued to characterise al-Assad junior’s rule.

The old corporatist institutions inherited from the father’s days were also marginalised (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 101; Abboud, 2015, p. 46). These institutions served not only as top-to-bottom venues to disseminate rent resources in the past, but also as bottom-to-top channels that transmitted the voices of the vulnerable groups to those in power with varying efficiency. These institutions, in a phenomenon that started since the 1980s, were weakened and practically replaced by regime-sponsored NGOs as will be discussed in the next part.

1.2. Economically: Liberalisation at the Expense of the Old Allies

The regime’s 2000s policies brought with them a pro-rich and pro-urban distorted investment strategy, the streamlining of budget expenditure at the expense of the rural and the poor, the privatisation of several vital sectors that used to support the rural and the poor slices of society, and an increase in predatory practices by the regime and its cronies, especially in rural and rurban areas. It was remarkable for some authors that only few opposed the economic liberalisation (Kaileh, 2014, p. 343); even large sections of the traditional opposition hoped that the economic liberalisation might be a prelude to political liberalisation (Kaileh, 2014, p. 343). To summarise, the new elites’ enterprise did not face much opposition neither on the political nor on the economic level.

A Distorted Investment Strategy

The new investment strategy adopted by the Syrian government, specifically under the framework provided by the Legislative Decree No. 8 of 2007, did not discriminate
between the different economic sectors (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 8; Matar, 2016, p. 113); consequently, most foreign and local capital went to the tertiary sectors. The crony capitalists and foreign investors both preferred tertiary sectors such as services and real-estate speculations that allowed quick and high profits vis-à-vis more productive and employability-generating sectors like industry and agriculture which demanded long-term investments.

Industry and agriculture were also harmed by trade liberalisation. Signing free trade agreements with countries such as Turkey and Iran, and substantially reducing customs duty on many items meant the Syrian government left the industrial, manufacturing and agricultural sectors with no protection while they were not sufficiently prepared to face the competition of Turkish and Chinese goods (Matar, 2016, pp. 114-115). This led ‘to the closure of many local manufacturing plants, especially those located in the rurban suburbs of the main cities’ which entailed a spike in unemployment among the populations of these suburbs (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 101; Matar, 2016, pp. 114-115). The simultaneous deterioration in the agricultural sector also led to a spike in unemployment in rural areas and also to an increase in rural-urban migration.

The above-mentioned investment policy complemented the effects of the new rent laws of 2004; in 2004, the Syrian government ended the rent controls that had been effective since the 1960s and 1970s. These controls favoured the poor and the middle-classes at the expense of the rich landlords. This served several goals for the ruling elites of that time: weakening the rich landlords, gaining the support of the middle and lower classes, and encouraging rural migration to the major urban centres thus ‘colonising the cities’ by providing them with cheap rent at the expense of urban landlords. The interest in these goals was lost by 2004, after the rise of the new generation of the regime’s elites.

The 2004 law(s) accompanied an influx of Gulf capital which unleashed a wave of urban real-estate speculation that ‘drove the cost of housing beyond the means of the middle strata’ (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 102). ‘The resultant housing crisis was depicted as a “time bomb” waiting to go off’ (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 102). One aspect of the above-mentioned time bomb was the exacerbation of what is known as ‘reverse migration’ (from urban centres to rural/rurban towns). This was remarkably noticed in Damascus
were many Damascene families left their homes in Damascus and moved to nearby towns and suburbs such as Douma, Harasta, Qudsayya and others (Atassi, 2015, p. 314). All these developments were taking place without any interest from the government to ameliorate their impact on the new losers or the poorer groups.

**Streamlining Budget Expenditure at the Expense of the Poor**

One of the most controversial decisions made by the Syrian government after 2005 was the removal of subsidies on most basic commodities (Abboud, 2015, p. 55). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the removal of subsidies caused the consumer price index on bread and cereal, meat, and vegetables, to rise by 50.9 per cent, 58.6 per cent and 23.1 per cent, respectively, over the period 2006–2010 (Matar, 2016, p. 116). Some scholars believe ‘that these figures are underestimates’ (Matar, 2016, p. 116). The most shock-therapy-like procedure in this context was the 2008 phasing out of the subsidies on diesel and gasoline which caused a price hike of 240 and 33 per cent, respectively over night (Matar, 2016, p. 116). Removing these subsidies had a deep negative impact not only on the daily life of Syrian families, but also had an impact on several economic sectors of which agriculture was the worst affected (S'eifan, 2013, pp. 134-137). The Syrian government’s attempt to ameliorate the impact on the families was almost futile, and was abandoned by 2010 (S'eifan, 2013, pp. 134-137).

The government used to defend the phasing out of fuel subsidies by referring to a report by the IMF that advised the Syrian government to take this step in order to rationalise budget expenditure (S'eifan, 2013, p. 134). It is worth remembering here that in the context of maintaining its decisional independence, the regime was not bound by the recommendations of the IMF, and only used the report as a pretext for its decision. Rationalising budget expenditure could have been achieved by several less controversial and less poor-harming ways. Syria, for example, has been infamous for its inefficiency in tax-collection since the days of Hafiz al-Assad (Khaddam, 2013, p. 83). A recommendation to enhance tax collection, however, would harm the regime’s elites and therefore was overlooked. Taxes on investments, on the other hand, were decreased, and the government embraced a pro-rich regressive tax policy (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 102; Khaddam, 2013, p. 83; S'eifan, 2013, p. 109).
discordance in the government’s approach to subsidies and tax collection clearly reflects the role of elite interests in determining the policies of liberalisation (Azmeh, 2014, p. 12). Another example comes from trafficking activities. It has been estimated that ending these illegal activities could have provided the government with an amount of revenue that equals the amount obtained from ending fuel subsidies (Barout, 2012, p. 132). The government preferred harming the society’s poorer strata rather than upsetting the regime’s elites who were benefiting from such illegal activities.

Removing subsidies and lifting price controls not only harmed the poor but also represented an opportunity for the merchants who had access to the regime. These merchants took advantage of the new policies as they ‘had free rein to raise prices as they wished, thus increasing their profit margins’ through monopolistic practices (Matar, 2016, p. 116). These business practices contributed to the above-mentioned rise in the consumer price index.

**Privatisation of certain vital public institutions.**

The privatisation of certain vital public institutions undertaken by the Syrian government also tells a similar story. The government first privatised the collectively owned state farms (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 13). This privatisation harmed the peasants and benefited what Miriam Ababsa calls ‘a re-emergent class of latifundists tied to the state’ (Matar, 2016, pp. 116-117). The regime became more conservative and slower when privatising the public sector was brought on to the table.

**The Predatory Practices of the State and the New Elites**

A new predatory phenomenon started to flourish during the 2000s. The new elites used the state to put their hands on agricultural lands and use them to build shopping malls, hotels or other similar real estate projects. This happened in two ways. The state would decide, in many cases, that certain land plots within certain areas should not be sold without prior security clearance. The security apparatus would only give clearances when the buyer was close to them. This way, the original owner could only sell to those who were close to the security apparatus and the latter were thus able to
lower the price (Yaziji, 2017, p. 5). These predatory practices took place in areas such as Dar’a, Jableh, and Moadamiya (Yazbek, 2012, pp. 198-204; Eid, 2018, p. 60).

Another common way that was applied in these cases where the targeted lands were large. The state would confiscate these lands and compensate the original owners with absurd amounts that sometimes represented one tenth of the real prices (Barout, 2012, p. 317). The state would then sell the land to one of the regime cronies for a similar absurd price who would use them to build a real estate project (Bishara, 2013, p. 68). This phenomenon occurred in Homs and Rural Damascus among many other areas (Bishara, 2013, p. 68). These practices will flourish more with the militarisation of the uprising (discussed more thoroughly in chapter 8).

The Rurban areas:

The rurban areas that consist of rural towns and semi-rural suburbs surrounding the cities were also deeply affected by the liberalisation. The deterioration in the agricultural sector meant two things for these areas; first, this deterioration increased the rural-urban migration which not only rendered these areas even more crowded and intensified the competition over the available employment opportunities, but also made the population of many areas reach the government threshold of an urban area (20,000 inhabitants). Reaching this threshold, however, did not bring much change to the perception of these areas as rural or rurban (semi-rural). Second, most of the rural-urban migrants (those who migrated before or during the 2000s) did not cut off their rural origins but continued to partially depend on rural sources of incomes; for example, many of them had small parcels of land that they either rented out to others or seasonally worked in them. The slashing of subsidies and the rise in the prices of diesel made it harder to maintain such sources of income, and many had to depend more on the income they were producing in their rurban spaces. These areas also took a hit by the rise in diesel prices; for example, those who were taxi or micro-bus drivers.

Another factor that aggravated the situation was the increase of the reverse urban-rural migration to these areas. The new rent laws of 2004, and the fact that foreign capital preferred to invest in real estate speculation, as mentioned earlier, led to a
sharp rise in the prices of houses and flats within the urban centres of major cities. The result was that many urbanites chose to sell their properties within the cities and to buy themselves new cheaper homes in the rurban towns and suburbs surrounding the cities.

1.3. Symbolically: Discursive Shifts to Complement the New Enterprise

The regime’s endeavours were not limited to the economic or political levels. They were complemented by a symbolic and discursive dimension that aimed at justifying the deterioration of the living standards of its rural old allies, and at legitimising the new elites’ enterprise and its economic and political consequences. Businessmen among the new elites financed certain drama productions that aimed at delegitimising the old distributive and pro-rural policies of Hafiz al-Assad’s era. *Day’a Day’a (A Lost Village)* is the most important among these productions not only because of its unprecedented popular success but also because of all the themes that it addressed (which served the goals of the new elites as well as the purposes of this chapter).

“*Day’a Day’a*” (A Lost Village).

Produced in two parts and broadcast in 2008 and 2010, the events of this series take place in an imagined village called: *Om Al-Tanafiss* (elcinema.com, n.d.). The village represents an ideal setting through which to represent the countryside as backward in contrast to the more progressive urban environments of Syria. The narrator at the beginning of each episode says that the village is the only survivor of the globally omnipresent slavery to technology. None of the village’s inhabitants have a mobile phone or a TV set (let alone satellite receivers or the internet). There are only two landlines in the village: one in the police station and one at the grocery shop. There are

---


11 Available on YouTube (two seasons): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvw1EJEOT4&list=PLLCK2gut59nisWEPrg_szbTZCPy8evUft&ab_channel=SamaArtInternational https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqPc8iZVZa4&list=PLLCK2gut59nikMcUGxb8K_VeU_bam5sm&ab_channel=SamaArtInternational
no cars in the village. The only two policemen use a small motorcycle (only when it works) and one of the inhabitants owns a tractor used for different purposes: to plough the land, as a taxi, bus, and ambulance, and for moving goods. The lifestyles and worldviews of the rural inhabitants, as expected, are depicted as backward and outdated. The roots of most of the humour are found in the contradiction between the backwardness and ‘idiocy’ of the rural life, and the realities of the modern world and urban life. One of the most recurring themes is the mockery of corporatist institutions - mainly the peasants’ union and the women’s union. These institutions are depicted as corrupt, inefficient, and crippled by power relations and favouritism. Another recurring theme highlighted the strange rural accent of the inhabitants. The producers even used subtitles to ‘translate’ certain words for the viewers. This contrasts Day’a Day’a to the cinema of the 1960s, when the difference between rural and urban accents were not emphasised.

This series in its two parts was very successful and popular. There are many episodes which deserve to be carefully studied; however, if one episode is to be chosen for the purposes of this chapter, it would be the one on the foreign investors. A Lebanese businessman visits the village in this episode to explore any opportunities for investment. The village enjoys a superb natural scenery and might be attractive to tourists had it had the required facilities such as hotels, restaurants, and pubs. The producers insisted on highlighting the beauty of the village’s natural scenery in an endeavour to show the village, and hence its rural population, as exotic, virgin, and ‘out of this world’. The investor asks to visit the land plots owned by the inhabitants in order to buy one or more of them. The village inhabitants welcome the idea and start to think about how to seduce the investor into investing his money in their village. One of the characters, Adel al-Fassad, the dedicated informant (Al-Fassad’s meaning lies somewhere between the informer, the betrayer, and the rat) who is obsessed with ‘the security of the homeland’ and who cannot sleep without chanting the Ba’thist slogan: ‘Unity, Liberty, Socialism’, suddenly becomes fluent with neo-liberal trickle-economy arguments: ‘This is an investor’ al-Fassad says, ‘if he invests in our village, he will be followed by another investor and then another, and this way welfare will be spread to everyone’. The next scene shows each of the inhabitants trying to sell his
own plot by dissuading the investor from buying the plots of others (except for Salim/Slango the leftist intellectual who is depicted as a naïve believer of socialist values). During the night, one of the inhabitants installs signboards that warn of landmines in the plots of his neighbours; the other builds what appear to be old graves. Two of the inhabitants co-operate to paint signs on their neighbours’ plots to suggest that the government is planning to acquire these plots. When they finish painting the signs on every plot other than theirs, they decide they should put signs on their plots as well or the inhabitants will know that they are the ones behind the signs. No single plot was consequently left for the investor to buy, and he decides to move to a different village. Towards the end of the episode, the inhabitants receive the bad news that the investor decided to invest his money in Takhrimet al-Fawqa, a nearby village. The inhabitants of this village are depicted in the series as outlawed smugglers who abused their village’s geographical location on the borders with Turkey, and who have strong relationships with certain powerful figures within the security apparatus in order to cover their illegal activities. The final scene in the episode depicts the male inhabitants of the village sitting by the seaside, and gossiping about the investor’s bad choice of location, wondering what he finds in Takhreemet al-Fawqa that is more beautiful than their village?

The message of the episode is that the rural inhabitants are responsible for their own lack of welfare. Their primitive and naïve selfishness resulted in driving investments away from their village. They did not learn their lesson and remained ignorant even after what happened.

Investment and entrepreneurship are therefore the only way out of rural backwardness, and these require authoritarianism as these inhabitants are not ready yet to handle their own businesses. Another episode in the series (Tamalloq: flattery or bootlicking) is dedicated to the theme of the inhabitants being not ready for democracy. The more significant remark, however, in the current context, comes from contrasting the images of the rural inhabitant and the capitalist in the drama of the 2000s vis-à-vis that of the 1970s. Rural inhabitants were depicted as progressive revolutionaries struggling for their rights and freedoms while the capitalists were depicted as greedy and parasitic feudal lords who live on the blood and sweat of the
peasants. This is a totally inverted image compared to the 2000s capitalist depicted as the saviour looking to uplift the village from its misfortune and backwardness. What the regime hesitated to officially declare (by maintaining the ‘social’ in the ‘Social Market Economy’ approach), has been declared by the Syrian drama: the day is for the Market, the Social is no more relevant.

The Drought Discourse:

Complementing the discursive manoeuvres used in Syrian drama, the regime exploited the harsh drought that hit parts of Syria’s rural spaces - mainly in the north-eastern governorates - between 2006 and 2009 (Selby, et al., 2017; Selby, 2020). The regime blamed the deterioration of the rural living standards on the drought which was considered to be God’s will. The drought was therefore a message from God to the people and the regime had nothing to do with the outcome. Bashar al-Assad claimed that the drought was ‘beyond our powers’ while the Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah al-Dardari argued that ‘Syria could have achieved [its] goals pertaining to unemployment, poverty and growth if it was not for the drought’ (Selby, 2020).

Jan Selby and other scholars have clarified that ‘the evidence behind this narrative is weak’ and that it ‘largely originated from Syrian regime interests in deflecting responsibility for a crisis of its own making’ (Selby, 2020). Selby and Ababsa agree that the problem was structural, and was more affected by the regime’s neoliberal policies and its unpreparedness to face the consequences of such drought (Ababsa, 2015; Selby, 2020). Selby also illustrates how both the economic and social impact of the drought was exaggerated, and how regime policies exacerbated the consequences of the drought (Selby, 2020).

It is necessary to remember in this context that Revolution scholars insist that ‘material deprivations and threats need to be seen not merely as miserable conditions but as a direct result of the injustice and the moral and political failings of the state’ (Goldstone, 2001, p. 154). According to these scholars: ‘Even defeat in war, famine, or fiscal collapse may be seen as natural or unavoidable catastrophes rather than as the handiwork of incompetent or morally bankrupt regimes’ (Goldstone, 2001, p. 154).

---

Indeed, the regime figures were trying to ‘manipulate perceptions’ by linking the outcomes to God’s will instead of their own incompetent and predatory policies.

**Part 2: The Urbanites and the Developments of the 2000s**

The ‘liberalisation grievance thesis’ and its underpinning spatial perspective which highlights the spread of the uprising in non-urban areas may suggest that the 2000s liberalisation benefited the country’s urbanites at the expense of the rural, rurban and poorer groups. It will be illustrated in the following pages that this is a hasty generalisation that glosses over the different groups that might be considered urban. First, the contradictory situation of the urbanites with whom the new elites sought to ally themselves will be discussed. Second, there will be a discussion on the urbanites who were harmed or left out by the new elites’ project. These include wide sections of the traditional urbanites as well as many of the urbanites outside the two major cities such as the inhabitants of medium sized cities such as Homs and Hamah as well as a number of cities which are usually called ‘rural cities’; which include those like Dar’a and Idlib, but the focus will be on the Eastern cities of Raqqa, Deirezzor, and Hassakah.

### 2.1. New Allies with Minimal Stake in Power

The regime and its new generation of elites sought alliances within the cities after cutting off from their rural constituencies. The political marginalisation of Syria’s poorer groups and rural, rurban and provincial spaces was accompanied by a shift towards an increased interest in co-opting urban groups, especially those located in the two metropolitan cities of Damascus and Aleppo. This co-opting endeavour intensified after 2005, after the new president’s success in taming the Ba’th party and the corporatist institutions.

The economic policies of that period, as discussed in previous chapters, were mainly underpinned by the direct interests of the new businesses that mainly prospered in Damascus and Aleppo. The economic growth witnessed during the second half of the decade benefited the two metropolises more than other areas in Syria (and often at their expense) (Hinnebusch, 2012, pp. 107-108).
The regime continued to maintain its decisional independence, however, and these urban businesses continued to be dependent on the state and on access to power and lucrative sectors; consequently, the activities of these businessmen remained under the supervision of the regime and its security apparatus. No bourgeois or pro-business political parties were established to publicly represent the interests of these businesses or the urban groups that were linked to them (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 112).

There were several new businessmen who were elected as members of parliament (MP) during that period, but it might be worth remembering that parliament membership in Syria is usually linked to prestige and social status more than to real political power (S'eifan, 2013, pp. 110-111).

The regime’s endeavours also aimed at gaining the allegiance of the privately employed members of the middle classes as well as maintaining the loyalty of those who were employed in the public sector; in the case of the former, the expansion of the private sector resulted in new employment opportunities for the country’s middle and higher middle classes. The liberalisation of trade also encouraged the spread of malls, high-street brands, private education, and other aspects of the type of consumerism preferred by these classes. The contrast between the ‘show-off’ culture of these groups and the conservatism of the old traditional bourgeoisie has been striking for both academics and popular classes (Marshall, 2009, p. 111; Salamandra & Stenberg, 2015, p. 6).

The regime had to find itself other frameworks with which to co-opt the urban youth and activists due to the de-politicisation of Syrian society and in the absence of effective political parties. The highly indicative proliferation of NGOs during these years was the regime’s answer to the question of co-option; many of them were headed or sponsored by Asma al-Assad, Syria’s ‘First Lady’, or by the wives, sons, or daughters of the new cronies. The NGOs of that period managed to create a new source of rent (mainly in the form of foreign sponsorship for these NGOs) and, more significantly, to co-opt many among the educated urban youth (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 104).

As Caroline Donati puts it when discussing NGOs: ‘far from contributing to the spread of a civic democratic culture (thaqafa madani), they in fact block the emergence of an
autonomous civil society’ (Donati, 2013, p. 44). Indeed, these NGOs served to depoliticise potential activists and to legitimise the regime’s coercion of ‘activists, politically oriented (and often unregistered and thus illegal) NGOs, or other independent forms of engagement in public life’ (Donati, 2013, p. 44).

The regime, on a parallel axis, sought to maintain the loyalty of those employed by the state; unlike the case of the collectively-owned state farms, the privatisation efforts became conservative and gradual when privatising the public sector was brought on to the table. The reason behind this conservative approach is that the regime, although wanting to allow its cronies access to the different lucrative sectors, it did not want to lose the support of those who were employed by the public sector. The regime consequently started a gradual process that was later described as privatisation by stealth: ‘with parts turned over to private management by crony capitalists’ (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 101). Another method was to dissolve the monopoly that the public sector used to have over certain lucrative sectors. This was a way to grant the regime’s cronies access to some of the most lucrative sectors while at the same time maintaining the employability of these sectors. The regime prioritised maintaining the loyalty of the public employees. There are many reasons for this decision. First, it should be remembered that the public sector, since the days of Hafiz al-Assad, was among the means through which the regime allowed the descendants of middle peasantry to colonise the urban spaces. No one, moreover, would have been employed in the public sector without Wasta (access to a patron or someone powerful). The patron is expected to guarantee the loyalty of those who become employed through him or her. The low wages of these employees meant that most of them were involved in corrupt practices that would allow them to make ends meet. This embroilment makes these individuals face the continuous threat of being prosecuted by the government and renders them more psychologically inclined to justify the regime’s corruption and shortcomings. The majority of this group are urban dwellers as a result of their workplaces; by maintaining the loyalty of this group, the regime guaranteed the quiescence (and sometimes the active support) of a considerable urban-entrenched group who are interested in keeping city centres calm. It has been a regular practice by the regime since the days of Hafiz al-Assad to mobilise
these groups into upon-request, pro-regime demonstrations. It is noteworthy here that despite the decline in their real wages, public employability was still highly desired by Syrians because of the additional benefits:

‘Syrians in the private sector did not fare any better in regard to wages ... private sector salaries were high in areas such as banking, but this area only employed a small number of Syrians. Private sector workers in agriculture and industry continued to receive low wages commensurate with living costs’ (Abboud, 2015, p. 51).

2.2. Contention with other urbanites:

The new enterprise created new adversaries among the ‘original urbanites’ for the elites – despite all the above-mentioned endeavours. The first group of these adversaries consisted of wide sections of the traditional bourgeoisie. The new generation of regime elites, unlike their fathers, did not need the traditional businessmen to run their businesses for them; they were capable of running their own businesses. They consequently dissolved the old business networks that brought their fathers and the traditional urban bourgeoisie together; some of these businessmen were recruited into the emerging class of crony capitalists while most of them were left behind.

Another group consisted of the country’s industrialists and petite bourgeoisie who owned and ran small manufacturing enterprises in the suburbs of the larger cities and were hit by the liberalisation of trade and the subsequent competition of Turkish and Chinese products. These issues were the subject of prolonged conflicts between the Chamber of Industry and the Chamber of Commerce (Matar, 2016, pp. 108-121).

A third group consisted of the above-mentioned urban-rural migrants. Salwa Ismail argues that those migrants, despite changing their urban place of residence with a rurban one, maintained their urban sources of income and often gathered in their own neighbourhoods which were often called Haret el Shwam (The Damascenes’ neighbourhood) (Ismail, 2013, pp. 887-888). One of them, Munira (36-year-old), told Enab Baladi that she resided in Douma, a rurban town close to Damascus, but she was
so proud that she was born in Damascus and that this place of birth was registered on her ID card ‘like a medal of honour’ (al-Naqri, 2017).

It should be noted here that two different groups inhabited the same spaces; a fact that is often ignored by the literature. The urban-rural migrants maintained their urban habitus and sources of income and insisted on their urban identity, while the original inhabitants continued to perceive themselves as rural despite the expansion of their towns and the changes that were taking place around them.

The aforementioned urban-rural migrants were not much affected economically by liberalisation; on the contrary, they managed to sell their properties for high prices and to move to cheaper areas. They had their own grievances, however, which were more symbolic and ideational than economic. Those migrants used to be considered among the ‘original urbanites’ in the cities and neighbourhoods where they previously used to live. This did not continue to be the case when they migrated to the rural areas surrounding their cities. The new regime elites’ enterprise, as will be illustrated later, comprised a symbolic dimension that aimed at redefining urbanity and linking it to the place of living, consumption, and investment instead of origins and family names (Totah, 2014, p. 1203). Those migrants consequently were perceived to have rural or rural-urban identities against their will. Most of the country’s people as well as many academics do not differentiate between the two groups and perceive them both as rural. The resentment of this group was aggravated by the fact that the regime elites started disseminating a new public discourse that ridiculed rural life and made fun of the rural population. Liberalisation’s harm was not restricted to the rural or the poor but included many urban middle-class (and rich) groups whose interests, whether material or symbolic, conflicted with those of the regime’s crony capitalists.

The Medium Sized Cities

The businessmen and the petite bourgeoisie of the middle-size cities such as Homs and Hamah were also left behind. The tertiary sectors tend to flourish in metropolitan centres, and the fruits of the economic growth achieved during these years fell almost exclusively over Damascus and Aleppo; meanwhile, Homs and Hamah and other smaller cities were mostly excluded.
The city of Homs and its experience with the ‘Homs Dream’ project is the best example in this context where the rising cronies wanted to evacuate the city’s main Souk from the merchants that used to occupy it for generations in order to transform it into a real-estate project that suited the consumerist tendencies of these new elites (Bishara, 2013, pp. 68-69; Salamandra & Stenberg, 2015, p. 6). The urbanites of Homs and their Souks, instead of being invited to the party, were brought in as a cake to be shared by the new elites. This project was accompanied by an increase in migration from the nearby ‘Alawite countryside; both factors were understood by the city’s inhabitants to be an attempt by the regime to change the demography of the city (Bishara, 2013, pp. 68-69; Salamandra & Stenberg, 2015, p. 6).

Hama had a different story. Hamah is a marginalised city that some Syrians describe as a big village rather than a city (al-Kayyali, 2018; al-Saiid, 2013). The major reason behind this marginalisation was the regime’s long-term resentment towards the city after its rebellion in 1982. Many of its inhabitants discriminated against the Alawi villagers who came to the city ‘to sell produce and, later, came to work as government employees’ (Ismail, 2018, p. 157). However, urbanites from larger cities had different opinions. Alia Malek’s memoir recounts how her Damascene branch of the family used to look down on their city of origin: “What they think is a big deal here in Hamah,” they explained, “has already been done many times in Damascus” (Malek, 2017, p. 128).

There were other cities which were also the victims of the 2000s liberalisation and the rise of the new cronies. Jableh is the best example in this context. Atef Najib, the president’s cousin and the man whose arrogance contributed to the first sparks of rebellion in Dar’a, originated from a region close to Jableh. Najib managed to buy most of the lands considered to be part of the city whether directly or by using the names of other people (Yazbek, 2012, p. 198). Najib was one example on the rise of a new merchant class that the people of Jableh perceived as nouveau riche on the expense of the city’s traditional merchants and known families (Yazbek, 2012, pp. 195-

---

13 The role of Najib in igniting Dar’a uprising, see (Dukhan, pp. 7-8) and (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012, p. 148).
Jableh is only one example of what was happening in other cities and even rural towns across the country (Bishara, p. 68; Barout, p. 317).

**The Rural Cities**

The title of this section might appear to be an oxymoron, but it reflects the complexity of rural-urban dynamics in Syria. Indeed, it might be confusing for outside spectators that Dar’a is not only a city but also the capital of a governorate and is still seen by most authors and the public as rural. There were authors who deduced what might be called the rural roots of the Syrian uprising by referring to the fact that it started from Dar’a (see Chapter 2). Dar’a is not unique in this situation; other cities are perceived to have more rural than urban characteristics despite being the capitals of their governorates. The best examples here are the three governorates of Al Jazeera region (i.e. Raqqa, Deirezzor and Hassakah).

There are many people within the population of the city of Deirezzor, for example, who feel bitter for being discriminated against by the inhabitants of larger and more central cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Hamad Abboud describes his city, Deirezzor, as a ‘rural city’ in an article published in Aljumhuriya.net and mentions how it is usually perceived as an arid rural space linked to nomadic lifestyles. He complains about how many people used to ask him whether they (Deirezzor inhabitants) live in multi-floor buildings or in tents. Abboud is annoyed by the remarks of his ‘more urban’ friends, yet he considers that true friends are those with whom he can sit down on the floor (The habit of sitting on the floor instead of sofas is related to the tribal/rural traditions of the region) (Abboud, 2017).

Hanin el Naqri, wrote an article in EnabBaladi.net about a quarrel that took place between two young university students; one from Homs and the other from Deirezzor. The latter became very angry and started yelling: ‘until today some of you think we still live in tents and ride the backs of animals. Deirezzor is a city just like your cities and like you we study and learn’ (al-Naqri, 2017). These two articles illustrate how cities like Deirezzor are still widely perceived as rural, and how the inhabitants of larger cities feel superior towards these people; they also show the bitterness that results from such perceptions. It should be noted here that the regime’s new elites’ discourse of
the 2000s aggravated these perceptions and bitter feelings with its mockery of the rural population and lifestyles, especially as they had been depicted as heroes in the days of al-Assad senior.

While Abboud described Deirezzor as a ‘rural City’, Marwan Hisham, one of the early activists in al-Raqqa, described his city as a ‘rural town’ where ‘the culture of restaurant dining barely existed … and only elitists practiced its etiquette’ (Hisham & Crabapple, p. 45;65). Hisham describes in his memoir how he and his friends resented the lack of urbanity in their city, and how they wanted to see their city more urbanised. Hisham wrote: ‘Our Raqqa seems quiet—a poor, uneducated city lagging behind, just like it always has’ (Hisham & Crabapple, p. 4). He continued: ‘We looked at Raqqa and saw a society sunk deeply into its own ignorance and tastelessness’ (Hisham & Crabapple, pp. 28-29).

Hisham also mentions that he perceived himself as ‘coming from the countryside’ when he moved to Aleppo to study in its university:

‘Perhaps two-thirds of the students at the University of Aleppo were like me. People from the countryside who had come there to transcend their families’ circumstances but still had to till the fields or teach in the villages, then commute at least an hour each way to class’ (Hisham & Crabapple, p. 219).

Hisham contrasts his situation and that of his ‘rural’ counterparts’ to that of those who belonged to the urban middle and upper middle classes in the same university:

‘The other third were different … These were city people—Damascene, Halabi—sleekly cosmopolitan to their cores. The most elite of them had supportive families who didn’t just pay their way through university; they had the financial surplus to encourage their dreams’ (Hisham & Crabapple, p. 219).

One of the most depressing realisations for Hisham was that these differences would be ‘eternally’ maintained and, as such, dreaming of social mobility appeared futile. The author talks about ‘an eternal loop of kickbacks’ that would ‘entrench’ the elites’ ‘places far from the potholed streets of East Aleppo’ where he and others used to live (Hisham & Crabapple, p. 220).
2.3. The Symbolic impact of the New Elites’ Enterprise on the urban population:

Leaving the urban members of the old business networks and the traditional bourgeoisie behind economically was not enough; the new elites wanted to become the bourgeoisie; therefore, they had to complement their efforts on the symbolic level. The ‘original’ urbanites and the traditional bourgeoisie continued to see themselves as socially superior to the regime’s new elites despite the developments of the 2000s, and the previous efforts of the new elites during the 1990s to commodify urban and Damascene identities (discussed in the previous chapter) (Totah, 2014, p. 1206). The new elites had to continue and intensify their symbolic enterprise of the 1990s. This intensification occurred on two stages: the first was the drama of the 2000s, and the second was the continued efforts to gentrify the old centres of the cities (especially Old Damascus), and to transform them into tools for acquiring urban identities.

Drama: “Homey Hon”

‘Homey Hon’ is a light comedy mini-series produced in 2004 that depicts the life of three sisters who belong to a traditional Damascene bourgeois family (elcinema.com, n.d.). One of the sisters is widowed with one son, Fakhry, who lives with them while studying medicine at the university; the other two sisters are unmarried. The name of the mini-series is derived from English where ‘Homey’ is intended to mean ‘my home’ and the series name might be translated as: ‘My Home is Here’. The three sisters live in a house that has been part of the family’s property for generations. They still maintain the lifestyles and tastes of the old days when their family was among the most notable in Damascus. The widowed sister’s son, Fakhry, is intuitively expected to study medicine to follow the path of his grandfather the well-known physician and scientist with the same name. ‘What are you going to study at the university, dear Fakhry?’, one family friend asks, ‘He will study medicine just like his grandfather’ his aunt answers.

15 Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uen_unIq838&list=PLSBW2fs57td70naOJDBuJ0x4fv1fZ7r7TuT&ab_c hannel=SHAMMEDIA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7 [Accessed: 22/02/2022].
immediately, without giving the young student a moment to think or talk. During the first episodes, the oldest sister, Thurayya Khanom al-Aghabashi refuses to change the only black-and-white TV set in the house; made in the 1960s. Thurayya Khanom proudly keeps referring to the TV set with sentences like: ‘This was the first TV set in Damascus’; ‘when our family had this TV set, no other family in the city had something like it’. This hint to an outdated glory that is no more relevant occurs several times throughout the series. The TV set eventually stops working, and the family has to replace it with a new coloured set connected to a satellite receiver. There might be no real notable Damascene family with the name Aghabashi; however, the name rhymes with family names of Turkish origins, similar to several Damascene notable families. The sisters decide, in one episode, to make an *Istikbal*, a female only reception, in their house (a traditional custom among Damascene families). The sisters gather around the table to make sure that invitations are made according to the custom. The younger sister reads the list of families that should be invited. The names on the list are real names of well-known, Damascene old-bourgeois families. The series-makers intended to make clear a direct relationship between the incidents of the series and the real bourgeois families of Damascus.

The family’s financial situation has been deteriorating for decades. They still own a number of shops in the *Old Souk* of the city, but these are rented for small amounts of money. The incidents are obviously taking place before the 2004 lifting of rent controls. The tenants try to buy the shops from the sisters, but Thurayya Khanom refuses to sell them because it would harm the family’s name and reputation.

The most significant episode in the series is the one in which Fakhry, the medical student, befriends Sadeer, the son of one of the regime’s key figures (*ibn Mas’oul*). The rural tastes and behaviour of Sadeer have an impact on Fakhry. Fakhry changes his classical and conservative taste in clothes, and starts wearing his shirts unbuttoned, and imitates the rural accent and body language of his new friend. He also adopts Sadeer’s sense of unsophisticated humour. It is remarkable that his mother and aunts, usually very keen on maintaining a bourgeois habitus, had nothing to say about this transformation, as they were more than happy with their son’s new friendship. The narrative makes it clear that Thurayya Khanom is well connected to certain ministers
within the government in the first episodes of the series; yet, in this episode, it becomes clear that the real power lies in the hands of people such as Sadeer’s father. The family, in fact, is too intimidated to loudly mention the name of the man. The name is whispered mouth-to-ear from one actor to the other, and the audience will have no hint on the man’s name. The conclusion of the episode is that the urban bourgeois prestige and habitus almost evaporate in the presence of real power represented in Sadeer and his father.

It should be noted that, despite being young, Sadeer’s character is meant to represent the son of a key figure within the old guard, and should not be perceived to belong to the new generation of elites who grew up in cities and adopted urban accents and lifestyles. The series achieves two goals simultaneously: downgrading the status of Fakhry’s bourgeois family, and highlighting the corruption and misused power of the old guard and their sons. Taken together, this was a clear attack on the business networks of the al-Assad senior’s days.

The mini-series ends by an expatriate buying the family’s house, considered more harmful to the family’s name than selling the shops in the Souk. The house was sold in order to be transformed into a restaurant which invokes the context of the Old City’s gentrification process as will be discussed later. What was ‘My Home’ is no longer here. Selling the family house at the end of the series is a clear sign that the whole discourse on the family’s notability and bourgeois origins is not relevant anymore. The end of the mini-series represents the end of a whole period with all its symbolic and discursive references and paves the way for a new era in which prestige goes to the investors who are willing to buy such houses. The end of the old era is highlighted even more by the dialogue that occurs during the last scene in the series. Sitting around the family’s dinner table for the last time, a relative tells the sisters about his surprise at the food served at the table; fast food was served instead of the traditional Shami food which the sisters used to be so proud of their skills in preparing it. The sisters answer that Shami food takes much time and efforts to prepare, the new ‘fast’ food is much more practical. When asked about where she is planning to live after selling the house, Thurayya Khanom insists that she will choose a Shami neighbourhood: ‘Do you want me to leave Al-Sham for the gherbatliye (strangers)’.
The Gentrification of Old Damascus: Re-Defining the Damascene

The process of gentrifying Old Damascus and redefining the Damascene that started in the 1990s and accelerated after the 2004 abolition of rent controls, resulted in more and more old houses within the Old City of Damascus and other major cities such as Aleppo and Homs being vacated, renewed, and transformed into non-residential uses such as hotels, restaurants, cafes, and pubs. The majority of the evacuated residents were rural migrants who moved to the Old City during the previous decades when its old Damascene Shami inhabitants left their homes and moved to modern residential areas. The dominant discourse among the Damascenes was that these rural migrants ‘polluted the Old City’ (Totah, 2014, p. 1214). Building on such discourse, the gentrification of the Old City was perceived by many as a process that would save it from the rural contamination and allow the reclaiming of the Shami identity (Totah, 2014, p. 1206). This facilitated the perpetuation of a new meaning of being Damascene; instead of the old fixation on lineage and neighbourhood origins, the new meaning focused on the merits of ‘investors’ who were ready to invest their money in Old Damascus and, consequently, to bring the old city back into life. Faedah Totah argues: ‘social distinction could now be attained by those who lacked the lineage by appreciating Shami heritage and supporting gentrification. They became what I call the “neo-Shuwam,”’ (Totah, 2014, p. 1216). The majority of those neo-Shuwam were members of the ‘new’ class that ‘emerged as a result of economic liberalization’ (Totah, 2014, p. 1206).

There were many Damascenes who were opposed to this appropriation of the Shami identity by the new ‘investors’ and many of them perceived ‘gentrification as yet another attempt by the regime to undermine their identity and city’ (Totah, 2014, p. 1212); conversely, others were content with the fact that gentrification ‘continued to privilege the Shami identity’ and ‘maintained the traditional social hierarchy along urban and rural lines’ (Totah, 2014, pp. 1202;1211-1212).

The gentrification of the Old City of Damascus illustrates the shift of the regime from its old enterprise to narrow the gap of social status between rurality and urbanity during the first half of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule to its endeavour to maintain these social hierarchies when the new generation of its elites became capable of appropriating the
urban and bourgeois identity for themselves. It should be noted in this context that the assumptions on which the new meaning of *Shami* identity is built, do not only allow the inclusion of the *neo-Shwams* but also undermines the *Shaminess* of many Damascene families who left their homes in the city centre and went to the semi-urban suburbs and rural towns surrounding Damascus. The social status of these families and individuals became stigmatised by the fact that they preferred to put their money in properties in rural and semi-urban spaces outside urban Damascus. Al-Sham now belongs only to those who invest their money in it.

**Conclusion:**

The Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad proceeded with its liberalisation programme in a manner that was tailored to serve the interests of the regime’s new elites. During this decade, the regime managed to shuffle its constituencies, and to ally itself with certain elite urban groups, without giving them a share in real political power. The new elites’ project, however, antagonised wide sections of the country’s population. Those who were provoked by the new project were not limited to the rural population, as some might argue, but also included considerable sections of the urban population.

The most important aspect of the new project was that it moved forward while the regime maintained its decisional independence vis-à-vis both local and external actors. The result was that the economic liberalisation was not accompanied by any political liberalisation as had been witnessed in other liberalising Arab states such as Egypt and Tunisia; on the contrary, the 2000s witnessed further concentration of power in the hands of the president’s inner circle.

The regime’s decisional independence and the absence of political liberalisation resulted in the elites’ new enterprise moving on with little, if any, active opposition. The grievances of the harmed groups were not ameliorated or mediated by the recommendations of non-regime actors. The Syrian regime’s interests, unlike those in Egypt and Tunisia, sometimes dictated the implementation of some of the IMF’s harshest recommendations without considering the accompanying recommendations about ameliorating their effects on the weaker parts of society, as the phasing out of
diesel subsidies vividly demonstrates. The grievances created by the new enterprise were accumulated in a manner that was more harmful to the weaker and more marginalised groups compared the situation in other Arab countries.

It has been illustrated in this chapter that the grievances of the 2000s were not only economic, but also symbolic, as the new elites’ project had its symbolic dimension that aimed at redefining rurality and urbanity. The redefined urban identity allowed the inclusion of, and even a superior position for, the new elites within the urban categories; it also entailed pushing several urban groups towards the rural side of the continuum. The reverse migration that intensified during that period is a vivid example of this trend.

The example of the generational urbanites who sold their properties in the cities and moved to peripheral slums or rural towns is indicative in this context and would be helpful in illustrating the complex and radical nature of the developments witnessed during the 2000s. The reverse migration of these groups towards the rural side of the rural-urban continuum resulted in intensifying their bitterness. Had such migration occurred in the 1970s, it could have been ameliorated by the fact that the rural inhabitants were perceived in a much more positive manner and were allowed a share in the country’s political sphere. The fact that this move took place in 2000s Syria meant that those people who used to perceive themselves as urbanites started to be identified as rural against their will at a time when being identified as rural would entail banishment from access to power, and a relegation in symbolic and social status. This example illustrates how the outcomes of the different dimensions of the new elites’ project might be synthesised to produce an outcome that is more complex than a simple deterioration in the economic or political situation of a certain group. This may be linked to the fact that identity processes are intertwined with the political and economic grievances. These identities play a decisive role in determining who would be close to the regime, and who would have access to power, prestige, and to lucrative businesses, and who would not.

This was the Syrian society’s state of affairs on the eve of the Arab Spring. The next chapter will be an examination on how the grievances discussed here (political,
economic, and symbolic) affected the political choices and behaviour of the different rural, rurban, and urban groups during the first phase of the uprising.
Chapter 7

The Syrian Uprising: The Spectre of Rural-Urban Relations (2011-2013)

Introduction

There were several protests and silent demonstrations that took place in Damascus during February and March 2011; yet many scholars believe that the Syrian uprising did not gain its momentum until the incidents of Dar’a started (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012; Khafaji, 2016). The perception that the uprising started from what is perceived to be a rural governorate, and the fact that it spread in rural and rurban areas, while the two major cities remained silent, led many to emphasise the rural aspect of the uprising (Lesch, 2013; Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014; Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015; Matar, 2016; Saleh, 2017). The participation of the inhabitants of cities such as Homs and Hamah in the early weeks and months of the uprising drew the attention of some of these scholars. This attention quickly diminished, however, with the regime’s success in repressing these protests and regaining control over the urban areas in the two cities of Homs and Hamah while pushing the protests to the more rurban neighbourhoods. These perceptions by some of the above-cited authors led to the rise of the ‘economic grievances thesis’ which highlights the economic hardships created by the 2000s liberalisation policies and the rural-urban tensions which accompanied these strategies. These attempts to understand the 2011 uprising as an outcome of the 2000s economic liberalisation was underpinned by a spatial or geographical perspective that assumes a clear divide between rural and rurban areas, on one hand, and urban areas on the other (Azmeh, 2014; Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015).

This chapter takes issue with this ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’ and the accompanying spatial perspective that underpins this thesis, as well as with the perceived rurality of the uprising. It aims to present a more nuanced understanding of the 2011 uprising that embraces the complexities of rural-urban dynamics and how they affected the outbreak and the later course of the uprising.

The thesis, however, does not call for a wholesale rejection of the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’. The contribution of these grievances to the course of events that
have been unfolding since February 2011 is undeniable. Rather, this thesis’s argument is that these economic grievances do not tell the whole story. The chapter will question the economistic tendencies underlying the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’. It will show that the grievances created by the 2000s liberalisation were not only economic but also symbolic. The analysis will demonstrate that, despite being ignored by many authors, these symbolic grievances were not less consequential than the economic complaints in motivating the different actors.

More importantly, the 2000s grievances, whether economic or symbolic, did not automatically translate into the protests and events as they unfolded in 2011. The uprising was a process that was mediated by the agency of different actors (among which the regime was the most influential). It is impossible to understand the uprising without studying the role and agency of these actors. Therefore, the chapter will problematise this deterministic aspect of the ‘economic grievances thesis’. First, it will convey how the regime maintained its old strategy of pitting the rural and urban components of society against each other. The chapter will argue that the regime’s endeavours were decisive in ruralising the uprising and in limiting the protests to the rural and rurban areas. Second, the political choices of the different rural, rurban, and urban groups will be studied, and the chapter will illustrate how these choices were also consequential in determining the course of the uprising.

Moreover, the chapter will show that the 2000s economic grievances (despite their significance) were only the last episode of rural-urban conflicts in the country. This episode was precipitated by several episodes that cover decades of tensions since the Ottoman era. It is, therefore, imprudent to limit the attempts to understand the uprising to this last episode and ignore the previous episodes. This will show the importance of the discussions undertaken in the previous chapters and of the study of the identity narratives of the different groups as they have been developing throughout the decades since the late nineteenth century.

Finally, the chapter will argue that the above-mentioned spatial perspective is misleading as it glosses over the differences between the various groups that may live in the same spaces. By going beyond this spatial perspective, and by embracing the complexity of rural-urban relations in Syria, the chapter will be able to shed doubts
over the arguments that depict the 2011 uprising as a rural revolt against urban privileges. This will weaken the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’ further and will show its insufficiency for understanding the complexities of rural-urban dynamics in Syria.

In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary to uncover the links between rural-urban dynamics and the political positions and behaviour of the different actors during the first two years of the Syrian crisis. The discussion will benefit from the available data and the existing literature as well as an analysis of the identity narratives of the different rural, rurban, and urban groups. The existing literature and data will be critically engaged so as to draw a more nuanced picture of the uprising. The analysis of various materials will show how the different narratives have affected and been affected by the political and socio-economic developments. The interests embedded within these narratives will be highlighted and will be linked to the political behaviour of the different actors, and how they contributed to formulating the path of the uprising.

The chapter will be divided into three parts: the first will focus on the agency of the regime and its cronies and their endeavours to manipulate the rural-urban dynamics in their own interest. They had more agency than any other group in Syria due to their power. They had used this power to reconfigure rural-urban dynamics in the country throughout the previous decades.\(^\text{16}\) The second part will examine how the different groups of urbanites reacted to the regime’s manoeuvres and the discourses and behaviour of other rural and rurban groups, and how these interactions affected their positions towards the uprising. The third part will explore the different rural and rurban groups and their attitudes and behaviour in the uprising, and how they affected and were affected by the attitudes and behaviour of the urban groups and the regime.

It should be mentioned here that the chapter will be temporally limited to the period which starts with the uprising’s early days of February 2011 and ends when the major character of the uprising was transformed into an armed conflict between the regime and the opposition’s armed factions. This transformation occurred gradually between early 2012 and early 2013. To be more accurate, the Red Cross declared the Syrian

\(^\text{16}\) See Chapters 5 and 6.
crisis a civil war in July 2012 (Kassab & Al-Shami, p. 77); however, this date will only be used as an approximate marker.

**Part 1: The Regime and its Cronies: Their Political Behaviour and Discourses**

The regime and its cronies are organically tied to each other to the extent that it might seem difficult to discern between them; but during the early days of the uprising, two parallel lines of discourse emerged. One could be found in the speeches of the Syrian president and in the political behaviour and choices of the Syrian regime during that period, while the other could be found in the messages conveyed through the Syrian drama produced by the cronies; despite the differences between these two discourses, they complement each other as will be further illustrated.

**1.1. The Syrian Regime: Three Levels of Manipulating Rural-Urban Relations**

The regime had a clear strategy during the early days of the uprising which could be easily discerned from both its discourse and actions. The most important and relevant feature of this strategy was the regime’s endeavours to pit the components of Syrian society against each other in a manner reminiscent of the colonial ‘divide and rule’ strategy.

The studies of many authors focused on how the regime had played the sectarian card since the first days, when it claimed that extremist Islamists were among the main agitators of the protests, and that those extremists were funded and armed by foreign actors (Bishara, p. 91). The security apparatus did its best to scare the religious minorities and make them believe that the regime was their only saviour (Ismail, 2013, pp. 889-890; Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 288). Their tactics included the dissemination of rumours as well as a selective coverage of the uprising that highlighted what might incite sectarian sensibilities and ignored the mainly peaceful and inclusive nature of the protests (Yazbek, pp. 80-81).

What was even more important and effective, however, was the manipulation of rural-urban dynamics. The regime manipulated rural-urban relations on three levels, all of which aimed at pitting the two components against each other and maintaining the quiescence of the urban population, especially in the major cities. Manipulating rural-
urban divisions was not a new strategy for the Syrian regime as it had already been established by al-Assad senior since the 1970s (see Chapter 5). The rest of this section will be dedicated to examining the regime’s endeavours in this regard.

**Discrimination in Violence**

The first aspect of this manipulation occurred in the different ways in which the regime reacted to the protests that took place in urban spaces and those in rural and rurban spaces. The regime used minimum violence in the first case (clubs and tear gas instead of live ammunition) and did not resort to brutal retaliatory action (Kassab & Al-Shami, p. 49).

The demonstrations that occurred in front of the embassies of the Arab Spring countries, and in Old Damascus, and Aleppo represent good examples of the regime’s approach. The regime deployed huge numbers of security personnel and *Shabbiha* (regime ‘thugs’) in the streets of major cities in order to diffuse any protest before it gained momentum. This way meant minimum violence would be needed to disperse the few protestors who were the first to arrive; once others saw what was happening, they would retreat.

Live ammunition was used to disperse the protests in Dar’a and other provincial areas in contrast to such relatively moderate approach; as many spectators commented, the regime would follow a clearly different strategy in rurban and rural spaces:

‘The security would photograph the protestors and take notes on the leaders. Some would be arrested and beaten by the security, and the protests would turn violent. Snipers would shoot dead the protest leaders, thereby swelling the number of anti-regime elements among the population. When a critical mass was reached the army would be called in and a short bout of fighting – usually no longer than a couple of days – would ensue. Then life would return to a tense normality among the terrorised population’ (Starr, p. 176).

Raymond Hinnebusch offers an enlightening remark when he argues that ‘operations against small towns and suburbs were intended to deter the spread of the uprising to the main cities’ (Hinnebusch, p. 109). These towns and suburbs were subjected to this excessive violence to send a deterrent message to those living in urban spaces.
There are many authors who argue that the violence which was deployed in these areas incited more protests, encouraged more people to join the uprising, and to later endorse its militarisation (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012, p. 142; Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 298). The relatively moderate approach that was deployed in urban spaces made many members of the population in these areas hesitant to cross the line between demanding reforms to demanding the fall of the regime.

This was the time when Bashar al-Assad benefited from his father’s policy known as ‘colonising the cities’.17 His father managed to create small islands (neighbourhoods) of loyal rural migrants who moved to the country’s cities and towns in order to join their jobs - most of them were recruited in the army and security apparatuses (S'eifan, 2013, p. 132). These neighbourhoods were closed ghettos of rural migrants - often, but not always, from the ‘Alawite sect - that were not on good terms with their urban surroundings.18 Mazze 86 and Ish al-Warwar in Damascus (Ismail, 2013, pp. 882-885; S'eifan, 2013, p. 132), Al Hamdanyeh in Aleppo (Pagani, 2016), and others in Moadamiya (Eid, 2018, pp. 17-18), and Qatana (Starr, 2012, pp. 50-51) are examples of such settlements. It should be again noted that the neighbourhoods that were established within urban spaces reacted to the 2011 uprising in a way that was different from those established in rural spaces.

The line between the neighbourhood of Moadamiya (a rural town in Rural Damascus governorate), for instance, and the rest of the town was a frontline where fighting took place and where the regime’s attempts to invade the town started (Eid, 2018). The Damascene Mazze 86 and Ish al-Warwar, meanwhile, were a human reservoir for Shabbiha who spread throughout the capital’s markets, streets, and squares in order to pre-emptively suppress any attempts to demonstrate but were never in a frontline fighting position (Bishara, 2013, p. 175). The regime spread rumours among the loyal inhabitants about the will of the urban and rural neighbours to be rid of them or to take revenge for the 1980s incidents (Ismail, 2013, p. 884).

It might be difficult to prove that these differences in the regime’s behaviour towards the urban and the rural spaces were underpinned by a clear and pre-planned strategy.

17 See Chapter 5 for a detailed exploration of this policy.
18 See chapter 5 for more details and (Ismail, pp. 883-885).
to pit the two groups against each other, but it would not be a surprise if that were the case. Bashar al-Assad was following in the steps of his father who continued to manipulate rural-urban divisions throughout the three decades of his rule (see chapter 5). There are several indications that pitting the rural and urban populations against each other was an intended outcome that the regime was willing to intensify and exploit.

The regime’s behaviour, regardless of whether this was a strategy or a side effect, had gradually led to limiting the protests within the rural/rurban spaces and to neutralising the urban areas and the wide streets and squares of the larger cities. The regime managed to diffuse the protests in medium-sized cities which consequently gave credibility to its claims (since the early days) that what was happening was a rural rebellion vis-à-vis the country’s urbanites. In the next section, I will discuss the regime’s discursive manoeuvres in this regard.

**Highlighting the Rural Aspects of the Uprising**

The regime’s public discourse complemented the above-mentioned discrimination between the rural and the urban spaces and populations. The regime tried its best to depict what was happening as a rural rebellion that contradicted the interests and worldviews of the country’s urban population.

A good example of such endeavour was a news report broadcast by the Syrian official TV channel in early April 2011 which interviewed several citizens in different towns of Rural Damascus and showed that most of those interviewed had different local and economic daily life demands from the government - such as lowering the price of diesel, building a communal hospital, and maintaining the roads. When the reporter began interviewing citizens in Damascus, they surprisingly said they were doing well and had no demands. The report gave around thirty seconds of airtime to one of these Damascene interviewees to talk about some videos he had seen which clearly showed, according to him, the role of armed infiltrators participating in what was happening in the country. These reports were always subject to censorship before being broadcast and were doctored, if necessary, to reflect the regime’s view. The clear message in this

---

19 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0krE07GuPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0krE07GuPQ), [Accessed 21/09/2019].
case was that the urban Damascenes were doing fine and that the dominant feature of the uprising was rural.

The Syrian president met with different delegations from different Syrian regions during the early days in an attempt to give an image of himself as close to his people and keen to maintain the communication with the different components of the Syrian society (a tactic used by his father in the 1970s-1980s). The news reports that covered the president’s meetings with provincial, rural, and urban delegations mentioned that the latter presented to the president a number of demands of which unemployment (and other economic and local demands) were always uppermost.\(^20\) The ceiling of the political demands of these delegations was mainly limited to what the regime was already willing to offer, for instance, the abolition of the state of emergency.\(^21\) In contrast, when the president met with a delegation of Aleppine notables, it was reported that their major demand was that the government should decisively end what was happening in the country: ‘We want security and stability’.\(^22\) The report also mentions that some members of the delegation argued that the demands of the demonstrators were unrealistic and unacceptable for the majority of the Syrians; only then did the delegates talk about some additional demands that mainly focused on maintaining the role of Aleppo as the economic capital of the country.

The analysis of the mini-series *al-Kherbe* conducted below will indicate that these reports were probably subjected to previous censorship by the security, if not also doctored by them, and, more significantly, the members of the delegations were carefully selected and informed about the issues that they may or may not raise in front of the president. The mini-series that was broadcast during Ramadan 2011 shows how the Ba’thist officers selected who should meet the president, and not only what

\(^{20}\) See, for example, the reports on the demands of the delegates of: Al Raqqa tribes (https://www.shahbanews.com/n/33494.html) [Accessed 18/02/2022], Deir ez-Zor (https://www.shahbanews.com/n/33642.html) [Accessed 18/02/2022], Al Sleyba area in Latakia (https://www.shahbanews.com/n/32077.html) [Accessed 18/02/2022], and the town of Douma in Rural Damascus (https://www.shahbanews.com/n/32142.html) [Accessed 18/02/2022].

\(^{21}\) The regime did abolish the state of emergency but replaced it with an Anti-Terrorism law that gave wide authority to the security apparatus. The regime’s violence against the protestors also continued after removing the state of emergency.

\(^{22}\) The report on the meeting between the Aleppine delegation and the president: https://www.shahbanews.com/n/33077.html [Accessed 18/02/2022].
they should say but also how they should dress (See section 1.2 below). There is little
doubt that these reports were meant to convey a certain message intended by the
regime: what was happening was a rural uprising that opposed the interests and
aspirations of the country’s urbanites.

Another important aspect of the regime’s discursive manoeuvres during this period
was what might be called the drought narrative. The regime blamed the drought of
2006-2009 as the major reason behind the deterioration of the country’s agricultural
sector and rural living conditions. The regime was again trying to delegitimise rural and
rurban grievances by blaming the drought as an external factor that is mainly decided
and controlled by God, and not by the president or the government. According to this
narrative, the uprising was a rural rebellion motivated by factors that were beyond the
government’s power. The president and the government should therefore not be held
responsible for this deterioration.

These are a few examples of the regime’s public discourse during that period which
contrasted the ‘unacceptable’ demands of the protestors to the desire for stability by
‘most’ Syrians. The regime invested in this desire in different ways. One of them was
noticed by Stephen Starr, the Western journalist who lived in Damascus during that
time. According to Starr, the regime used hundreds of billboards in Damascus to put up
messages like ‘With freedom comes responsibility’ and ‘Yes to a shared life’ (Starr,
2012, p. 16). These messages were well received by the urbanites, in Starr’s view,
because they ‘expressed an opinion that was more balanced’ (Starr, 2012, p. 16). Starr
is probably right in his argument but what is more important in the current context is
that the messages addressed the desire for stability by those urbanites and contrasted
it to the ‘irresponsible’ and ‘exclusionary’ demands and discourses of the protestors.

Threats of Undoing the Economic Liberalisation of the 2000s: Pitting the Urban
Middle Classes Against the Uprising

The above-mentioned focus on the local and economic daily life demands of the rural
and rurban protestors (whether in TV reports or the coverage of the president’s
meetings with the provincial delegations) was also meant to gloss over the radical
political demands that the protestors raised in their demonstrations. This prioritisation
of the economic grievances was meant to downgrade the political demands of the
protestors and to remove the idea of regime change or even any serious political reforms from the political agenda and the public discourse. What was more important in this regard, was the manipulation of the rural-urban dynamics.

There were many groups among the urban middle classes who perceived the protests as an opportunity to push for more political reforms and freedoms. They believed that Bashar al-Assad was a ‘good president’ surrounded by corrupt elites. These beliefs had been common throughout different historical epochs, not only in Syria but also in the Arab world if not across the globe (Barout, 2012, pp. 176-177). Indeed, many Syrians, especially within the urban middle classes, who believed the regime’s long-time discourse about the president’s genuine will to introduce political reform and how it has been hindered by the old guard, were hoping that the uprising would be a good opportunity for the president to get rid of the latter by using the popular pressure to his advantage (Hanano, 2012, p. 231; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 41). The Syrian president ruined these hopes on 30 March 2011 when, in his speech, he insisted on refuting the assumption that he was a good president surrounded by a corrupt entourage (Bishara, 2013, p. 97). According to al-Assad, those who were corrupt were very few, and the Syrian people knew them by name - probably referring to certain former high-ranking regime officials who dissented earlier such as Abdel Halim Khaddam and others.23

The president insisted that the government should rapidly achieve the required reforms, in his April 16th 2011 speech, before clarifying that ‘rapidly’ did not mean ‘hastily’, and that the time needed to study these reforms should be taken.24 This insistence that the reforms would take their time meant that the president was actually destroying the illusion that the protests would be an occasion for him to remove the perceived corrupt entourage, and to move forward towards achieving his ‘genuine will to reform’. The protests, in fact, seemed to be pushing in the opposite direction; for those urbanites who wanted to see the economic liberalisation

23 A video of the whole speech is available at YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUkr5Sd23JE, [Accessed: 29/10/19].
complemented by political liberalisation, it appeared that the protests would result in undoing the former.

The threat of returning to the pre-2000s period appeared serious due to the regime’s discourse and behaviour at the time. First, in the context of prioritising the uprising’s economic demands, the president repeatedly talked about the agricultural sector and how it has been ignored during the last decade in both his 30th of March and 16th of April speeches. The president asserted that Syria had ‘to find a new economic model of development’ in his 20th of June speech: ‘Neither the socialist nor the liberal models fit us and we need to find a model of our own for economic development’ (The Syria Report, 2011, p. 44). This was a return to the 2005 ‘Social Market’ approach and acknowledgment by the president that what happened between 2005-2011 was not congruent with such an approach.

Another significant indicator was the formation of the new government in April, headed by Adel Safar, the minister of agriculture in the previous government. This was an important symbolic move that indicated the significance of agriculture on the new government’s agenda; equally important was the exclusion of Abdalla Dardari, the real engineer of the 2000s liberalisation (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 101; Richani, 2016, p. 48).

The president’s promise along the same line in early May was that the government ‘will protect the local industry and review trade agreements that have helped dumping practices’ (The Syria Report, 2011, p. 27). These promises might appear to be intended to appease the urban industrialists, but they were no less important for the smaller manufacturers in the rurban areas. The best example here is the furniture sector that flourished in Rural Damascus towns like Saqba and Harasta before it was destroyed by Turkish and Chinese competition (Barout, pp. 320-321). The closure of many of these establishments did not only harm their owners but also those who used to work for them and who suddenly found themselves unemployed. It is known, moreover, that the Damascene and Aleppine bourgeoisies were the most important beneficiaries of

---

25 The speech is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v81XBqyry1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v81XBqyry1s), [Accessed: 29/10/19].
the above-mentioned trade agreements and, consequently, they would be the ones harmed by reviewing these agreements (Bishara, 2013, p. 63).

To summarise, the regime made considerable efforts to depict and transform the uprising into a rural rebellion that should be perceived by wide sections of the country’s urbanites (especially in the larger cities) as a threat to their interests and lifestyles. These endeavours have played a significant role in escalating the tensions between the urban and rural/rurban populations of the country. There were many inhabitants of urban spaces who became alienated from the uprising as they feared losing their urban lifestyles if the rural protestors won (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 108; Khafaji, 2016, p. 12).

The regime’s manoeuvres, however, would not have succeeded to that extent had they not been buttressed by a history of intense rural-urban tensions, including the history of the Ba’thist regime itself and its endeavours since the 1960s to elevate these tensions and abuse them to its interest as has been discussed in the previous chapters.

The regime could not guarantee the loyalty or even the quiescence of all the urbanites all the time despite its endeavours and this bitter history. I will explore later how the urbanites perceived the uprising and the rural component within it, and how this affected their political positions during that early period; in the meantime, the next section will study the discourses and positions of the regime cronies, and how the uprising affected the pursuance of their 2000s project that aimed at reconfiguring rural-urban relations.

1.2. The Regime Cronies: Insisting on their 2000s Project

The regime was showing its readiness to halt the economic aspects of the 2000s liberalisation, while its cronies continued with their original project that aimed at reconfiguring rural-urban relations.26 The Syrian drama which was produced by these cronies and was usually their chosen medium to disseminate their discourses is the

---

26 See previous chapter.
better reflection of this continuity; almost the same themes of the previous years were repeated in the mini-series of Ramadan 2011.

The best mini-series to reflect this continuity is *al-Kherbe*, which was produced by Syrian Art Production International (SAPI) and belongs to Mohammad Hamsho, one of the most prominent regime cronies who is well-known to be the man of Maher Al-Assad (the president’s brother) (S’eifan, 2013, p. 111; elCinema.com, n.d.). The mini-series had the required formula for success - the stars acting in it were among the most popular in Syria. The comedy genre was also another component of success due to its popularity. The most important was the collaboration between the writer Mamdouh Hamada and the director Allayth Hajjo. This duo had been behind the success of many popular series in the past and their presence in any drama production meant that it was intended to succeed (which it did in this case). What makes *al-Kherbe* a good example on the continuation of the cronies’ discourse is that it was filmed after the Arab Spring started. The series included jokes on the speeches of Moammar al-Qaddafi after the uprising in Libya. There was also a joke about one of the slogans used by Syrian protestors ‘Death but not humiliation’ (*el-mot wala al-mazallah*) which was transformed into ‘bananas but not peas’ (*el-moz wala el-bazellah*).

The events of *al-Kherbe* take place in a village that is depicted as backward – similar to *Day’a Day’a*, the mini-series from the 2000s reviewed in Chapter 6. The inhabitants of the village are divided between two competing clans, and the members of each clan are generally respectful of their clan’s chief and his instructions; however, due to the poverty of the region in which the village exists, the competition between the two clans (and the two chiefs) is not underpinned by any real socio-economic interests over which to fight (except for prestige and historical grievances). This futile competition, therefore, often has a comic side that contrasts the banality of the disputes to the

---

27 Available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EFourit6nA&list=PL6RIU7u9cyEfdKEhwqfqMDly8X-VOXUav&ab_channel=ShamDrama%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EFourit6nA&list=PL6RIU7u9cyEfdKEhwqfqMDly8X-VOXUav&ab_channel=ShamDrama%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A) [Accessed: 18/02/2022].
seriousness and enthusiasm with which these disputes are undertaken by the inhabitants.

The common inhabitants from both clans start to notice the banality of their disputes over time, and how they mainly serve the prestige and egoism of their clan chiefs instead of the common good of the whole clan (or even the whole village). This consciousness was originally established by the rebellion of certain politicised intellectuals who used to live in the city for most of their lives and returned to the village only when the economic crisis pushed them out of the city; one episode starts with the TV turned on and in the background a report broadcasting about the global financial crisis of 2008. Those returning intellectuals are depicted as naïve enthusiasts who keep repeating the same old slogans that they only superficially understand. It is a recurring theme in Syrian drama to make fun of those politicised intellectuals who are meant to refer to the traditional opposition intellectuals and leftist political parties of the country. They are often depicted as dreamers who have lost their connection with reality.28 Their years in the city allowed them to make some changes in the village’s public discourse, however, despite their naivety; once again referring to the role of urban elites in enlightening the backward rural population; a recurring theme in the Syrian drama since the 2000s.

The two chiefs lose their control over their clans by the end of the series, despite putting their disputes aside, and meeting in secret to plan together to restore their deteriorating power. The village inhabitants meanwhile agree on two cross-clan marriages; something that seemed to be impossible and heretic at the beginning of the series. They decide to celebrate the two weddings in one celebration that gathers all the village’s inhabitants. The two chiefs sit together but on their own in the final scene, as the songs from the collective wedding play in the background. They think that maybe they too need to bless the weddings and decide to attend. When they arrive, however, they find that the celebrations are over, and everyone has left. One of them starts crying and says to the other: we are late, we are too late.

28 See the previous chapter.
The ending of the series shows that *al-Kherbe* should be understood from two perspectives at the same time. The first is related to the discourses that address the local level; the second is regional and is related to the Arab Spring. The two clan chiefs are meant to represent the Arab leaders and the two clans are meant to symbolise the populations of two different Arab countries. The series plays on a very common theme in the Arab street that talks about the Arab rulers showing hostility towards each other in public in order to agitate their people, while in fact, those same rulers are cooperating with each other under the table in order to maintain their rule as long as possible. What is more important, is how the final scene depicts what Bashar Al-Assad said in his 30th of March speech. He argued that Syria differed from other Arab countries in that it already had plans for reform, and has already started them: ‘We can discuss why these reforms were thwarted on another occasion, but what is important is that we already had the will’; but in the case of the other Arab countries, according to Assad: ‘if you want to start now, you are too late’.

The series adopts most of the important arguments brought by the president in his speeches: Syria is different from other Arab countries, the regime is not afraid of the popular mobilisation, is ready to fund dramas that show the victory of the population over their leaders; the other Arab leaders were (unlike al-Assad) too late with their reforms. The most important issue, however, was asserting a sort of urban superiority over the rural population through the clear message that the enlightenment of the rural population by urban intellectuals is always needed.

The mini-series diverts from the president’s speech in only one aspect which pertains to the old-new rhetoric on the ‘good president surrounded by corrupt elites’. The leadership (the president) decides to visit the area to which the village administratively belongs in one of the episodes. The local Ba’thist officer (a descendant of a different village) is the one in charge of choosing the names of representatives who will attend the meeting with the ‘leadership’. The officer ended up choosing only one representative from the whole village; something which may upset the delicate balance between the two clans, as only one of them will be represented in the meeting. When the chief of the unrepresented clan went to protest, the Ba’thist officer told him that he wanted to invite the local school principal (who belongs to the
unrepresented clan) but the problem is that the man wanted to say everything in front of the leadership. ‘Not everything is ok to be said’ said the Ba’thist officer to the clan chief, who understood the situation and promised to convince the school principal to talk within the lines drawn by the Ba’thist officer.

The representative of the other clan borrowed money from several relatives in order to buy a suit for the occasion. ‘It is inconvenient to go to such meeting in the Shantan’ (the traditional rural pants that he wears everyday) the man argued. The Ba’thist officer became angry when he saw him in the new suit. He clarifies the man was chosen as a representative of the peasants. ‘If everyone wears a suit the people would ask where the peasants are or will say: what kind of peasants are those who wear suits?’ The man concludes: the Shantan has a role then?”. The officer replies: ‘Comrade, everything is calculated’.

This episode is reminiscent of the above-mentioned reports on the president’s meetings with the regional delegations. It is clear that the series is apologetic for the coverage that took place (and the way in which the delegations’ members were chosen) by blaming the Ba’thists and the old guard.

The series repeated several themes of the 2000s drama. These include the investor that comes to the village willing to invest his money and to ‘transform it into a paradise’, but flees due to the backward mentality of the rural population. Another recurring theme is the intimidation and fascination with anything urban, especially if it came from the capital. One of the characters believed that ‘Google Maps’ was invented by the Damascenes (al-Shwam). There was also the aforementioned theme of blaming Ba’thist officers for preventing the ‘good’ president from meeting the people, and from freely discussing their concerns.

To summarise, the cronies’ drama continued its depiction of the rural population as backward, and of themselves as new investors – mustathmereen - as saviours of the backward rural population. The latter do not deserve such help, and are responsible for ousting those good-willed investors. Seen from this perspective, and by highlighting and exaggerating the perceived gap between the rural and the urban in Syria, the 2011 drama has complemented the regime’s endeavour to pit the two components against
each other. It was very insensitive although probably intentional to reassert the mockery of the rural population at a time when this population went to the streets to demand dignity and respect.

Part 2: The Urbanites: Their Worldviews and Positions Regarding the Uprising

2.1 The Urbanites of the Major Cities: Their Self-Imposed Isolation from Rural and Rurban Communities.

The regime’s above-mentioned endeavours seemed to be effective in pitting wide sections of the urban and rural populations against each other. There were some authors who noted that ‘the perception of the opposition as a rural-based movement led by religiously conservative, poor, and unsophisticated villagers has alienated wide segments of urban Sunnis, who have little in common socially with their co-religionists’ (Khafaji, 2016, p. 12). Hinnebusch in turn, argued that the urban middle classes of the two major cities feared ‘the loss of their secular modern lifestyle if traditional rural or Salafi insurgents were to take power’ (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 108).

Journalistic and academic coverage are replete with examples that show the hostility and isolation between these two components of the country’s society. Samir S’efan, a well-known Syrian academic, asked a Damascene businessman about his opinion in what was happening in the country. He answered: ‘it is the countryside rebelling against a rural regime, it is the countryside against itself, what do we have to do with this?’ (S’efan, 2017). What is important about this answer is that it betrays the businessman’s unfriendly attitude towards the regime; by insisting on the rural aspect of the regime, he rejects the new elites’ ‘acquired urbanity’ narrative and refuses to recognise them as urbanites. He is not convinced about the opposition, despite this discriminatory position, because he sees it as rural in its turn; he consequently isolates himself and his social milieu from it. The regime’s discourse on the rurality of the uprising was accepted even by those who did not support the regime.

Other examples show the stereotypes that the urbanites had of their rural compatriots. The *Daily Star* reporter wrote about a Damascene industrialist commenting on the demonstrations that took place at the time in Harasta (a rural
town close to Damascus): ‘There was not one person who demonstrated in Harasta who could read [...] they were illiterate and angry. They would rather see the country destroyed’ (Starr, 2013; Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014, p. 39).

These feelings existed even within the ranks of anti-regime activists. Fidaa el-Itani, a Lebanese journalist, wrote about his guide in Aleppo, an anti-regime activist who originates from the countryside, but had lived in the city for decades: ‘[He] does not enter to the slums and there is a kind of disdain when he talks about the inhabitants of these slums, although he himself descends from the countryside’ (el-Itani, 2014, p. 100). The disdain and feelings of superiority with which Aleppine urbanites looked at the rural and rurban migrants in their city were also noted by Giovanni Pagani (Pagani, 2016, p. 2). Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann in the same vein mentioned that ‘some Syrian activists still refused to acknowledge that the uprising had started in Dar’a, and not in Damascus’ (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012, p. 142). According to the authors, this refusal was motivated by ‘urban perceptions of Dar’a as backward, marginal, conservative and isolated’ (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012, p. 142).

This hostility reached its peak among the regime supporters. When asked about his position regarding the fact that the regime has been shooting live ammunition at demonstrators, an engineer whose work was flourishing due to his relationship with (at least) one of the regime’s ‘high-ranking soldiers’ told Stephen Starr: ‘Well, they should continue to hit and shoot these people. They speak of freedom, but they have no idea what it means’ (Starr, 2012, p. 131).

The memoir of Alia Malek seems to be the best source to understand how urbanites were separated from the rural population (Malek, 2017); only a few Syrians published memoires covering their experience during the uprising. Malek seems to be the only one among these few who has an upper-middle class urban background. Her memoir is relevant to the current context, since it tells the reader about the isolation of the group to which the author belongs from the country’s poorer rural groups. The fact that Malek perceives herself as anti-regime makes analysing her memoir more significant because it shows the miscommunication between the rural and urban

---

29 The slums in Aleppo are mainly inhabited by rural-urban migrants.
components, even within those who oppose the regime. Another factor that makes analysing this memoir important is the fact that it covers the positions of different individuals and groups within the author’s family and social entourage and is not limited to the author herself - a typical feature of Syrian memoirs as argued by Christa Salamandra (Salamandra, 2004, p. 127).

Malek is an upper middle-class Syrian American lawyer and journalist whose father is a Damascene from al-Maidan while her mother is the descendant of an absentee landlord in Hamah (Malek, 2017, p. 3 & 54). Malek was in Syria during the early days of the uprising and documented her daily life during that period in her memoir. The memoir clearly illustrates the urban biases of the author and her social milieu and their separation from the grievances and concerns of the poorer classes, and the country’s rural population.

Malek attended a Psychodrama session, for example, which was held in a Damascene church; despite being held in a church, the participants were ‘60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent Christian’; Sunni, ‘Alawite, and Druze were among the participants (Malek, 2017, p. 200). A few participants discussed their hopes and fears in front of the whole group, and the discussions were then open to everyone (Malek, 2017, pp. 200-207). No socio-economic concerns were discussed throughout the session. The participants only talked about freedom and the right to dream and to change (in the abstract) (Malek, 2017, pp. 200-207). One woman was clearer in her hopes when she mentioned, in the context of discussing the educational system in the country, that she aspires to change the upbringing of young girls: ‘after all, they will become mothers and raise our children’ (Malek, 2017, p. 201). The concerns of these middle-class urban individuals are unrelated to the concerns of their rural citizens. It is noteworthy here that while these discussions were taking place, the regime’s brutality was escalating, and while the lady was discussing her dreams about developing the educational system and paying attention to the upbringing of young girls, army tanks were attacking nearby towns and villages and killing their residents. This interest in changing the educational system was in fact a rather unconscious repetition of Bashar Al-Assad’s argument in his interview with the Wall Street Journal earlier that year (Bishara, 2013, p. 35). It does not diverge from the regime’s wider parental perspective towards the Syrian society as
backward that needs to be enlightened by a certain avant-garde elite; the same perspective that underpins most of the drama production in the country as illustrated by Donatella Della Ratta (2015, p. 55).

The author was taken by her uncle to visit a shop that sold Turkish furniture in Harasta, the small town in rural Damascus (Malek, 2017, pp. 215-216). The author and her father described the shop as a Turkish *Ikea*. The couple were interested in, and fascinated by, how opportunities to imitate Western lifestyles were becoming increasingly available in the country. The writer seized the opportunity of her visit to the shop in Harasta to discuss the developments in the al-Assad-Erdogan relationship, but never mentioned the impact of Turkish imports on Syria’s manufacturing sector (Malek, 2017, pp. 215-216). Turkish imports, especially furniture and textiles, were a major reason for the permanent closure of many Syrian workshops and small manufacturers, and the loss of a considerable number of job opportunities for many of the residents of Harasta and similar towns in Rural Damascus governorate (Barout, pp. 320-321).30 This position of Malek towards Harasta is not surprising if it is linked to the position of the aforementioned Damascene industrialist who believed that all the town’s inhabitants were illiterate or to the fact that the Damascene and Aleppine bourgeoisie were the most important beneficiaries of the trade agreements with Turkey (Bishara, 2013, p. 63; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 54). The al-Assad-Erdogan relations affecting such agreements are more important for the author’s urban milieu than their consequences on the ‘rural’ and ‘illiterate’ population of Harasta.

The author’s urban bias also appears in her unshakable assumption that a revolution should be urban. The author showed no interest in the demonstrations which were taking place in rural and rurban areas across the country; she focused solely on cities. This fixation pushed her to travel to Homs because it was a city where the urban inhabitants participated in the demonstrations and occupied certain squares and public urban spaces (Malek, 2017, pp. 193-197). She was not motivated to visit or discuss what was happening much closer to her residence in Damascus (the rural towns of al-Ghouta). Malek not only ignores the concerns of the poor and the rural,

30 For example, see (Barout, 2012) and (Ismail, 2013).
but also fails to recognise their agency. Agency is only for cities who have the burden to enlighten the uneducated rural masses in the worldview of the author and her social milieu; it is not a revolution if it is non-urban.

The memoir of Malek is reminiscent of what James Gelvin wrote about the Syrian nationalist urban elites of the 1920s who ‘never synthesized a political discourse that was compelling to non-elites’ (Gelvin, 1998, p. 35). The memoir of Malek shows that this is still the case today. Such self-imposed isolation was also a characteristic of the country’s opposition intellectuals; only very few among those felt that they had to address the rural component of the uprising. Michel Kilo, for instance, wrote an article calling for the rural population to follow the leadership of urban intellectuals (al-Kayyali, 2018); meanwhile, other intellectuals and academics were more concerned about refuting the claims regarding the rural aspect of the uprising. Isam Khafaji, for example, wrote that the common perception that the uprising started from Dar’a ‘does not do justice to the Syrian people’ - as if it were an offence to say that the uprising started from Dar’a (Khafaji, 2016, p. 8). Khafaji moves on in an attempt to demonstrate the role of many middle-class urbanites (especially in Damascus) in the uprising since the early days. Azmi Bishara (a non-Syrian anti-regime intellectual) also argues that the events have shown that the urbanites were always ready to rise whenever they felt they would not be faced with the regime’s bullets (Bishara, 2013, p. 153).

2.2 Evaluating the Success of Regime Manoeuvres: The Larger Cities’ Quiescence Does Not Mean Guaranteed Loyalty from Their Inhabitants

The regime’s abuse of the hostility and miscommunication between the rural and urban populations of the country was relatively successful. The regime’s behaviour and

31 Unfortunately, Khafaji’s account suffers several inaccuracies that spoil his argument. However, discussing these inaccuracies lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

32 This chapter agrees with Bishara’s argument on the role of the security’s fist (and other factors that will be discussed soon) in deterring many urbanites from rising but it has its reservations on using these arguments in the context of apologising about the rural aspect of the uprising (like in Khafaji’s case).
responses to the uprising and other factors had contributed to the relative quiescence of the two major cities.

One of these factors was that wide sections of the urban population - especially in the two major cities - had benefited from the regime’s new elites’ project of the 2000s; more employability opportunities were created in the flourishing private sector (Barout, 2012, pp. 368-371). The economic liberalisation also allowed better options for the consumerist tendencies of the urban middle classes of the two cities (Salamandra & Stenberg, 2015, p. 6). What was of special importance is that the new configuration of urbanity that the new project pushed into the public sphere meant that many of the two cities’ inhabitants who came from rural origins, and only moved to the city under the Ba’thist rule, were able to claim an urban identity for themselves. The previous examples show that many of those had a hostile position towards the rural and rural groups within and around their cities of residence, despite their own rural origins. Another factor to keep in mind is the above-mentioned strong fist of the security apparatus. Security personnel and Shabbiha were deployed in large numbers in the two cities’ streets and squares, and were able to diffuse any protest before it gained momentum (Bishara, 2013, p. 153; Ismail, 2013, p. 887). The reformist tendencies of urban middle classes and their hostility to abrupt revolutionary changes had played a significant role in their quiescence and ambivalence towards what was happening around them (Barout, 2012, p. 371).

The success of the regime’s manoeuvres was neither total nor permanent despite all these factors, and despite what is common in the literature on the quiescence of the major cities; many groups among the urban merchants and the middle classes, at certain times at least, were excited to see the regime go; among these is Leila, the daughter of a rich businessman, who told Stephen Starr: ‘We are rich, we have much to lose, but we can get better if the regime goes’ (Starr, 2012, p. 154). Rana, also a daughter of a textile merchant in al-Hariqa, wanted to see the regime go, after she and her family had passed through a humiliating experience with one of the regime officers.

---

33 There had been several surprises even with such capabilities: the thirty-thousand protestors who gathered in the Mazze area in Damascus (February 2012) in what was the largest opposition demonstration in the capital throughout the uprising (Al-Awssatt, 2012).
It is also well-known that due to the security’s iron fist, many Damascenes used to travel to nearby rural towns such as Moadamiya to protest (Ismail, 2013, p. 887). The apparent calmness within the city’s borders did not mean that the population was quiet. According to Starr, many merchants were enraged by the government’s decision to ban ‘all imports with over 5 per cent tax charges (Starr, 2012, p. 127). This ban harmed the businesses of many urbanite merchants, and the government had to withdraw it after a very short period; yet, while the ban was still in force, many of those businessmen wanted to see the government fall immediately.

Starr also noticed that resentment among Damascenes escalated during August (Ramadan) due to the rise in the number of casualties caused by the regime (Starr, 2012, p. 71). An even more indicative development occurred later in 2012, when both Damascene and Aleppine merchants and their souks went on strike to protest against the massacre of Houla. Houla’s massacre was clearly an atrocity committed by the regime ‘thugs’ against the inhabitants of a poor rural town in the Homs countryside - 108 deaths including 49 children and 34 women (Nebehay, n.d.). It has been claimed by some authors that the strike was halted only after Bashar al-Assad himself met the merchants and threatened them with the destruction of their souks over their heads (Saleh, 2017, p. 21).

Another noteworthy fact was that the largest demonstration to happen in Damascus throughout the uprising occurred in February 2012 in Mazze neighbourhood where more than thirty thousand protestors gathered (Al-Awssatt, 2012). This indicates that, even after a year of the regime’s endeavours, it was not capable of guaranteeing the quiescence of the Damascenes. Another indicative instance took place when a certain group within the urban bourgeoisie demanded in 2013 that all the assets that were nationalised or confiscated by the Syrian state during the union with Egypt and the Ba’thist rule should be returned to their ‘rightful’ owners. This shows a desire among this group to undo the whole post-1958 era, and to return to those ‘golden years’ when the urbanites ruled the country, and before the cities were ‘invaded’ by the waves of rural migrants.

These examples show that, despite the historical rural-urban hostility, the regime’s endeavours to abuse these tensions were not a total or permanent guarantee of the
allegiance of the urban population. The quiescence of the two cities should not be taken as evidence of the allegiance of all their inhabitants to the regime. The political positions of those who belonged to this group, in fact, varied from sub-group to sub-group and even from one individual to another - sometimes opposing positions occurred within the same family and the same household (Malek, 2017). These varied positions, moreover, were not static, and changed in accordance with the developments that were taking place. The situation, however, was much different in other cities that were left out by the new elites’ project or even were the victims of that project as the next part will illustrate.

**The Medium-Sized and Smaller Cities**

The divisions within the urban population regarding their position from the uprising were also noticed in medium-sized and smaller cities such as Homs, Hamah, Latakia, where the inhabitants could discern between the rich, who aligned themselves with the regime, and others who did not (Bishara, 2013, p. 142). The subsequent paragraphs, however, will illustrate that the new elites’ project of the 2000s had a different impact on these cities; the project has alienated many groups among the traditional bourgeoisie of these cities, unlike in the larger cities where the project was used to co-opt more middle class and bourgeois families and individuals.

The inhabitants’ problems with the ‘Homs Dream’ project and the ‘Alawite rural migration to their city (see Chapter 6) meant that Homs’s urbanites were eager to join the uprising and were happy to see the anti-regime rural groups joining them - whether from the city’s countryside or the city’s poor peripheral neighbourhoods which used to receive the rural and Bedouin migrants. The major demand of the city protestors was the dismissal of the governor Iyad Ghazal due to his role in Homs Dream. It is noteworthy that the chamber of commerce sent a delegation to participate in the demonstrations as a gesture of support from the city’s merchants (Bishara, 2013, p. 117). There were many of the city’s educated middle-class who were excited to see more political reforms taking place and were ready to take to the streets to demand such reforms.
All these factors glossed over the rural-urban differences in the city for a short while; but things soon began to change. According to certain witnesses who participated in the protests of the early days, the Christian population of the city was keen to join the demonstrations during the early days when the chants demanded reforms and the resignation of the governor; however, when the regime’s violence escalated and the protestors started to demand the fall of the regime, the Christians withdrew from the streets. The same story is repeated about the Christians of Hamah (Starr, 2012, pp. 134-135). The security forces stormed the city’s main square - the Clock Tower - where protesters, copying the Maidan Tahrir model, were planning to ‘sleep in’ what they renamed the al-Tahrir square (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, pp. 42-43). The regime was determined, however, not to allow a Maidan Tahrir model to emerge on its soil (Bishara, 2013, p. 116). The security assault on the protestors was brutal, and left dozens of casualties. The protests withdrew, at that point, to the poor peripheral neighbourhoods of rural migrants, and the urban residential areas remained calm. The Homs uprising, since then, was almost totally transformed into a rural/rurban uprising (Bishara, 2013, pp. 116-118).³⁴

The long-term marginalisation of Hamah, which was left out of the 2000s project, made the city’s urbanites ready to rebel at any favourable opportunity. The uprising of 2011 seemed to carry such opportunity mainly because, this time, unlike the 1980s, the city’s countryside had also joined the uprising (Bishara, 2013, pp. 138-139).³⁵ This harmony between the city and its rural surroundings resulted in the largest demonstration in the history of the Syrian uprising. Hundreds of thousands flocked to Assi Square to protest and demand the fall of the regime. The city went on a civil strike that lasted for several months, until the regime entered the city with tanks and regained its control (Bishara, 2013). The urbanites of the city later decided to separate their choices from those of the city’s countryside with the militarisation of the uprising. The rich merchants of the city contacted the leaders of the opposition armed factions and struck a deal that aimed at neutralising the city from any acts of war (or any

³⁴ In this regard Homs is a good example on the aforementioned strategy of the regime that aimed at limiting the protests to non-urban spaces.
³⁵ In contrast to the 1980s when the countryside aligned itself with regime due to the bitter history with the city’s absentee landlords.
attempt at regaining the city from the regime by force) in return for the merchants paying certain amounts of money to fund these leaders. They said to the leaders: take our money but fight the regime on your rural soil not in our city (al-Sheikh, 2016).

The urbanites of cities such as Jableh were also willing to undo the predatory practices of the 2000s and were ready to go to the streets to express their demands. Chapter 6 discussed how individuals such as Atef Najib abused the security clearances to accumulate real-estate properties.

**The Rural Cities: The ‘Disapproved’ Urbanites of the Provincial Cities**

The persistent tribal relations in the Eastern cities meant that only a few dozen educated youths (the likes of Hisham, Abboud, and others discussed in the Chapter 6) went against the will of the region’s regime-loyal tribal chiefs and managed to organise some small-scale protests. These protests, in contrast to Damascus, Dar’a, Homs and Hamah, were mainly limited to the urban spaces within these cities while the rural/rurban surroundings maintained their quiescence (Bishara, 2013, pp. 146-149; Dukhan, 2014, p. 10). The aforementioned educated youths were struggling in their attempts to mobilise their cities, while both the regime and the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) were competing over who could bring more tribal chiefs to their side (Dukhan, 2014, p. 12). Haian Dukhan mentions that the ‘Syrian state media presented these tribal sheikhs as symbols of Syrian identity and patriotism’ (Dukhan, 2014, p. 12).

The movement of these youths gradually gained momentum, and, within a year, the involvement of the eastern cities and their surroundings was rising. One of the factors that allowed this gradual success was that the regime did not coerce the youth movements. There were two reasons behind the regime’s relatively tolerant approach. The first was the fact that the regime did not perceive these cities as ‘true’ urban spaces which might be a source of danger; being perceived as rural, none of these cities would provide a valid Maidan Tahrir model. The second was the persistence of tribal relations in the region which made the regime cautious about enraging the tribes with violent retaliations (Bishara, 2013, pp. 148-149).
These rural cities of the Eastern Jazeera region of Syria had their own story in the uprising. It was underpinned not only by the economic marginalisation of the 2000s liberalisation, but also by the incomplete or unrecognised or disapproved urbanity of these cities and their inhabitants. The superiority with which other urbanites looked at the region’s population, and the transformation of the public discourse towards the rural population in general had affected the political behaviour and choices of the region’s educated youth, and consequently contributed to the path of the Syrian uprising in this region of the country.

**Part 3: The Rurban/Rural: Their Limited Agency**

The spread of the uprising in the rural and rurban spaces of the country has been widely discussed in the literature.\(^{36}\) Two issues, however, need special attention. First: the changes of rural-urban dynamics that took place in these spaces, and second: the distinction between the different sub-groups that are usually put together under the loose labels of ‘rural’ and ‘rurban’.

These rurban spaces mainly consisted of rural towns and rurban or semi-rural neighbourhoods within or on the peripheries of cities. There were many rural towns which had been gradually growing throughout the past years and had reached the official thresholds needed to be recognised by the government as urban. Rural Damascus governorate represents a great example in this context; according to the government’s statistics, this governorate has more cities within its administrative borders than any other governorate in the country (CBS, 2011).\(^{37}\) According to the 2011 statistics, the number of people who lived in spaces officially recognised as urban in the governorate (16.1 per cent of the country’s population) were much more than those who lived in the rural spaces of the governorate (9.9% per cent) (CBS, 2011). There were many residents, however, who continued to perceive themselves - and to be perceived by the ‘more urban’ citizens - as rural. This rurban population depended on rural economic activities in addition to other sources of income that are usually linked to the urban economy such as taxi and mini-bus drivers, and street vendors;

---

\(^{36}\) See Chapter 2.

\(^{37}\) According to the Central bureau of Statistics, there were 26 cities in Rural Damascus in 2011 (CBS, 2011).
many of them were able to educate their sons and (to a lesser degree) their daughters; yet, many of them ended up as unemployed graduates, or working in jobs that did not match their level of education (again as taxi drivers or street vendors and so on) (Perthes, 1995, pp. 100-101; Barout, 2012, p. 109).

The inhabitants of these rural towns shared the same attitudes towards the urbanites as their counterparts in the rurban neighbourhoods and suburbs surrounding the cities; most of them had bitter feelings towards the urbanites. These bitter feelings were shared by both Sunni and ‘Alawite, loyal and opposition groups. Roula Assad, who lived with her family in one of these neighbourhoods in Rukn Eddine area in Damascus, says that their neighbourhood was named the ‘‘Alawite neighbourhood’ in reference to the sectarian affiliation of most of its inhabitants. Their neighbourhood, however, was surrounded by other Sunni neighbourhoods that were named after the places from which their inhabitants migrated: Idlib, the Palestinians, and the Hourani neighbourhoods (Assad, 2018). According to Assad, the people of these neighbourhoods used to think of Damascenes as untrustworthy and people who followed the more powerful. They attributed the saying: ‘Whoever marries my mother will be my uncle’ to them (Assad, 2018). They also thought of Damascenes as unwelcoming, not only towards those from outside of the city but even among themselves. Assad mentions how she used to feel ashamed by her neighbourhood, especially when her university colleagues from higher class neighbourhoods wanted to visit her. The testimony of Assad shows that the rural/rurban population also had their own forms of hostility, stereotyping, and feelings of superiority towards the urban population.

The discussion of Syria’s rurban spaces may not be complete without exploring a third group – the urban-rural migrants. Chapters 5 and 6 illustrated how the rural towns and the rurban poor neighbourhoods had been witnessing what might be called a ‘reverse migration’ from the cities towards them since the 1980s. There were many members of the urban middle and poor classes who sold their properties in the cities’ centres

---

38 It is necessary to clarify that Rukn Eddine is a traditional urban area of Damascus that is mainly inhabited by Damascene Kurds. The area, however, witnessed waves of rural migrants who settled in their own neighbourhoods at the peripheries of the area; these are the neighbourhoods meant by Roula Assad.
and moved to these spaces where housing and living costs were more affordable (Ahmad, 2011, p. 10; Bishara, 2013, p. 211). Salwa Ismail clarifies that those migrants maintained their urban sources of income and gathered in their own neighbourhoods which were often called Haret el Shwam (The Damascenes’ neighbourhood) (Ismail, 2013, pp. 887-888).

This group’s claims of urbanity were denied, and they were categorised as ‘rural’ against their will at a time when being labelled as a rural would entail dire consequences (See Chapter 6). Munira, a female citizen who belonged to this group said to Enab Baladi that, while in Damascus, one felt like a ‘second class citizen’ if he or she were non-Damascene, and a ‘third class citizen’ if they were rural. According to her, the “revolution” returned some respect to them’ (al-Naqri, 2017). Their grievances were therefore more symbolic than material; yet, despite the fact that their urban background might have hindered their collective action, they were more motivated to protest, and took to the streets together with the original inhabitants. They participated in the uprising not despite their urbanity claims but because of these claims.

The Rural Minority

The final sub-group to be discussed here is the peasants or who might be called the ‘rural’, or those who were closer to the rural end of the continuum. The latter group had become a minority, as the number of those working in the agricultural sector in Syria kept dwindling during the last decades. It became around 15% of the Syrian labour force by 2009-2010 (CBS, 2010; al-Kayyali, 2018). It is assumed that the income of many of them did not solely depend on agriculture. The last decades also witnessed the expansion of infrastructure services such as electricity, mobile and internet networks, and public education even to many of the remotest villages in the country. The majority of the rural/rurban population therefore became more dependent on non-farm production or a variety of other income sources. The rural spaces in Syria witnessed a certain degree of urbanisation whereby those who could be described as rural had become a minority, and most of those described as ‘rural’ in the public
discourse were in fact ‘rurbanites’ (Barout, 2012, p. 295; S’eifan, 2013, pp. 99-100; Marzouq, 2013, pp. 58-59).

Myriam Ababsa mentions that a considerable number of the rural minority did not participate in the uprising during its early days because they were ‘too poor to get politicized’ (Ababsa, 2015); however, with time, most of them had to choose sides. This meant that many of them were recruited into the Shabiha, while many others were recruited into the opposition’s armed factions when the militarisation of the uprising started.

There were many factors which facilitated the mobilisation of the afore-mentioned groups - excluding those among the rural minority who were ‘too poor to get politicised’. First, the regime’s security iron fist was softer within their spaces than in the city centres. The regime was more concerned about securing larger streets and major squares than the poor neighbourhoods or rural towns with their narrow alleys that would not allow the emergence of anything reminiscent of Cairo’s Maidan Tahrir. The persistence of clan or tribal relations also facilitated collective action (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012); in addition, they had many more reasons to rebel than the urban middle and higher classes. The decline in welfare measures that came with the liberalisation policies (diesel prices for instance) affected their living standards much more than it did in the case of the higher classes (S’eifan, 2013, p. 124). The added humiliation they suffered as a result of being considered inferior by other citizens was another reason (Bishara, 2013, pp. 63-65). Being perceived as rural and poor had made their daily lives much harder. They would suffer the humiliation of the police, the security apparatus, the bureaucracy and the corruption of the public sector, and the abuse of those who had access to power. Had any of them had the required finances or urban social background, they would have been able to avoid much of these humiliations by resorting to bribes or to suitable connections. The difference between being perceived as poor and rural or rich and urban in Syria might have meant the difference between being raped, tortured and killed in the regime’s prisons, or being spared such experiences. The testimonies collected by Samar Yazbek reveal much on
how the social backgrounds of the interviewed women affected their experiences in the regime’s prisons and detention centres (Yazbek, 2018).³⁹

The inhabitants of these spaces joined the uprising in large numbers for all these reasons and were looking forward to their urban co-citizens in the nearby cities to meet them halfway. They became increasingly disillusioned and disappointed by the quiescence of the two major cities, and by the hostile or nonchalant positions taken by many urbanites - even by some of those who opposed the regime (as discussed in the previous part).

This resulted in many starting to talk with hostility towards the urbanites. One of the most used stereotypes to express hostility towards urbanites was the new-old accusation of Damascenes that ‘they would back whoever has power’ (Salamandra, 2004, p. 86). Hanin al Naqari, for instance, wrote an article about hypocrisy, and accused urbanites - especially Damascenes - of being too hypocritical to oppose al-Assad. She contrasted the Shami hypocrisy with the honesty and directness of the rural population, arguing that the latter were much more ethical than the Shwam (al-Naqri, 2017). There were many who used to mock Aleppines, at the same time, by saying that all they wanted during the uprising was to be allowed to enjoy their barbecues in peace (el-Itani, 2014). The spread of this common hostility towards urbanites motivated many opposition intellectuals and activists to defend the latter by highlighting the fact that ‘most’ of them have already left their cities in the aforementioned waves of urban-rural migration, and that they only represented a minority among the current inhabitants of the larger cities (Mardam bey, 2015). These intellectuals stressed the role of the urban-rural migrants in the uprising in order to refute the above-mentioned accusations.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how rural-urban dynamics have played a major role in deciding the course of the Syrian uprising. These dynamics were (ab)used by the Syrian regime

³⁹ Certain exceptions may apply such as being a rural person who belong to a large or loyal tribe.
in order to maintain its rule by pitting the different components of the country’s society against each other. The grievances were not only economic or material but also symbolic and ideational. The mutual prejudices, stereotypes, and feelings of superiority dominated the relations and interactions between wide sections of the rural, rurban, and urban populations in the country, and contributed to the isolation and miscommunication between the different groups which led to their weakening vis-à-vis the state.

The role of rural-urban dynamics in determining the path of the uprising does not mean that the uprising was a rural versus urban conflict. A clear, rigorous map of the uprising, based on rural-urban conflict cannot be produced due to the complexity and entanglement of rural-urban relations in the country. The chapter has illustrated how a spatial perspective is insufficient to understand these complex dynamics and their political consequences. Eight instances were invoked that might illustrate such complexity and entanglement.

First, the chapter presents argument that the quiescence of the larger cities does not necessarily imply the allegiance of their inhabitants. The many agential factors such as the strong fist of security and the self-imposed isolation of the urbanites from other components of their society, as well as other factors such as the historical grievances towards the country’s rural and rurban population and the lack of an effective civil society in these cities were very consequential in leading to the quiescence of these cities. This chapter has shown, moreover, how the political positions of the different social groups inhabiting the larger cities were neither homogeneous nor static but had been developing throughout time.

Second, even in the larger cities, many educated youths and traditional intellectuals tried to organise a series of demonstrations but failed due to the omnipresence of security and Shabbiha in the streets and squares of these cities. There were also many rurban neighbourhoods inhabited by the poorer rural-urban and urban-rural migrants who participated in the uprising; in some cases the regime had to bombard these neighbourhoods in order to regain control over them. These neighbourhoods have become part and parcel of the Syrian cities’ textures, even if their urban aspects are
not recognised within the public discourse or in most of the academic oeuvres on Syria.

Third, the bulk of the regime’s forces (whether official security personnel or Shabbiha) came from rural/rurban origins. The Shabbiha mainly came either from rural migrants who had settled in cities under Hafiz al-Assad’s ‘colonising the cities’ policy or from loyalist clans such as the Berri clan in Aleppo. A considerable number of tribal chiefs in Eastern Syria supported the regime; this meant that many members of the rural/rurban population did not join the uprising and maintained their allegiance to the regime.

Fourth, the chapter also illustrated how the urban-rural migrants who moved from the urban centres to rurban neighbourhoods in cities and rural towns around them had maintained their urban identity, habitus, and sources of income. These groups, who participated in the uprising since day one, were perceived by many as rural merely because of their place of residence. There were many Syrian intellectuals who, on the contrary, referred to them not only as urbanites but as ‘the original’ urbanites vis-à-vis the majority of the current inhabitants of Damascus and Aleppo who migrated to these cities only in the past few decades.

Fifth, large sections of the population inhabiting medium-sized and smaller cities had participated in the uprising especially during its early days. The examples of Homs and Hamah show how the urban population of both cities were coordinating with the rurban/rural population of the cities’ poorer neighbourhoods and the countryside surrounding them.

Sixth, what has been called the ‘rural cities’ of Eastern Syria (such as Deirezzor, Raqqa, and Hassakah) provided a counter example to what was happening in the larger cities. It was the urban educated youth who rebelled first in the case of the ‘rural cities’, while the countryside of these governorates remained calm during the studied period.

Seventh, the chapter has highlighted the fact that many poorer peasants did not participate in the uprising during its early days as they were ‘too poor to get politicised’.
Eighth, and probably most importantly, it has been illustrated how presenting the uprising as a rural-urban conflict was part of the regime’s ‘divide and rule’ strategy. The regime used different discursive tools to pit the rural and urban components of the Syrian society against each other.

These eight instances show the extent to which rural-urban dynamics and perceptions of rurality and urbanity were consequential in determining the political attitudes and behaviour of the different components of Syrian society throughout the first two years of the uprising; but at the same time, they show how difficult it is to describe the conflict in Syria as a rural versus urban one, as some of the readings of rural-urban dynamics in Syria have implied.

The uprising and the course it took since early 2011 deepened the grievances and feelings of disappointment among the different groups which led to further entrenchment of each group in its own social identity. It also produced narratives that underscored and gave larger margins to harsher judgements towards the other groups. The stereotype of the illiterate, backward villager, on the urbanite side, was intensified in the discourses of many urbanites; meanwhile, on the rurban/rural side, hypocrisy, submission to the stronger, egoism, and hostility were among the stereotypes used to describe the inhabitants of the larger cities. The elevation of these complications and grievances, and the further entrenchment of feelings of bitterness, not only paved the way for the militarisation of the uprising, but also allowed the emergence of more extreme actors (both within the regime and the opposition) as will be discussed in Chapter 8.
CHAPTER 8

Rural-Urban Relations in the War Years (2011-2021)

Introduction

The degeneration of the Syrian crisis from the peaceful protests of 2011 and early 2012 to the extended and brutal war that has been raging since then has had many dire consequences on the social, economic and (most importantly) human levels. This chapter will be a discussion of the impact of the militarisation of the Syrian crisis and the ensuing war on the rural-urban relations and their dynamics within the country. The militarisation of the uprising has accelerated and intensified some of the processes that were already taking place. First, the militarisation of the uprising was accompanied by its ruralisation. The opposition’s armed factions proliferated almost exclusively in the country’s rural and rurban areas. That period witnessed the rise of rural/rurban warlords who became more influential than any other (more) urban actors within the opposition. The spread of militarisation has led to a deepening in the rural-urban divisions across Syrian society including within the opposition itself.

The Syrian war witnessed the death and displacement, both externally and internally, of significant numbers of the population throughout the past years; among the most consequential social and demographic outcomes of the war is the demise of the middle classes and the decimation of the male population (Yaziji, 2017, p. 13; Synaps, 2018; Cornish, et al., 2019).

What is more important for the purposes of this thesis is the impact of the war on the rural, rurban, and urban populations and their relations. It will be illustrated that the war has resulted in a decrease in the numbers of those who might be perceived as rural (what will be called the De-Ruralisation of the Syrian society) and a decrease in the numbers of those who were described in the previous chapter as ‘urbanites’ - what will be called the De-Urbanisation of the Syrian society. It will be argued that these two processes coalesced to create a phenomenon that will be called the ‘Rurbansiation’ of the Syrian society. None of these processes or phenomena: De-Ruralisation, De-Urbanisation, and Rurbanisation is new to the Syrian society as has been illustrated in
the previous chapters. The war and the concomitant displacement of millions of Syrians have, however, intensified and accelerated these processes to unprecedented levels.

One of the goals of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of these phenomena by studying the agency behind them. It is needless to say that all of the different actors of the Syrian war have been contributing to these phenomena. None of these actors will be neglected, but the focus will mainly be on the agency of the Syrian regime and its allies. The reason behind this choice is that the regime and its allies have been achieving steady progress and victories on the ground since the intervention of the Russian air forces by the end of 2015 (Hassan, 2020). The result of this intervention is that the agency of the opposition and other forces has been limited within their shrinking areas of control. There are many consequential choices and actions that will be discussed in this chapter which have taken place during recent years and in areas that have been under regime control. The focus on the regime’s role is therefore determined by the facts on the ground.40

It will be argued that the three above-mentioned phenomena would be better understood if considered in the light of the regime elites’ interests and the revival of their 2000s project that aimed at an urban biased bottom-to-top redistribution of resources. The difference in the regime’s approach towards each of the de-ruralisation and de-urbanisation processes betrays an urban bias that suits the regime elites’ perceptions of themselves and of their future role and interests in post-war Syria. It is important in this context to study the regime’s discourse and how it has changed during the last few years. The analysis of the regime’s discursive manoeuvres during this period will confirm the arguments about its urban bias, and the influence of its elites on the three above-mentioned phenomena. This discussion will be an attempt to uncover some of the future aspirations of the regime elites, and a change in their perspective towards certain urban groups. Highlighting some new themes that have

40 Several reports have shown that both the Syrian opposition forces and the Kurdish YPG forces have been using some of the regime tactics that have contributed to the three above-mentioned phenomena (Yaziji, 2017). However, the spread of these tactics within the spaces controlled by these actors has been less systematic and less consequential (partly because the areas controlled by them are smaller than those controlled by the regime).
recently occurred within the drama produced by their companies will help to understand the reasons for the changes in their points of view. Indeed, analysing the drama of the last few years will show how the regime elites are still seeking to manipulate rural-urban dynamics and identities, and to decide who is to be categorised as urban or rural.

Part 1: The Militarisation and Ruralisation of the Uprising

The regime started to talk about infiltrators and armed gangs among the protestors since the first days of the uprising (discussed in Chapter 7) (Bishara, 2013, p. 100; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 39). These claims were intended to justify the violent response to the protests by the regime’s security forces; more significantly, it was meant to alienate certain groups from the uprising. These groups were not limited to the sectarian minorities but also included the urban middle and upper classes who, despite their will to see the regime go or at least to see some serious reforms, had much to lose if the situation were to deteriorate into chaos or violence.

The regime’s rumours started to materialise over time. The Syrian uprising started to gradually become militarised each day (Starr, 2012, p. 168). The militarisation process was a complex and gradual phenomenon. There were many factors which contributed to this militarisation, but many authors concur that the most important among them was the regime’s violence (Starr, 2012; Bishara, 2013; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). The regime became experienced in transforming popular unrest into an armed conflict with ‘terrorists’ since the late 1970s and the battle with the Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood. The previous chapters have illustrated how, throughout the preceding decades, the regime’s decisional independence had rendered it more prone to using violence as its favoured choice. Indeed, a few months after the outbreak of the uprising, many protestors felt that their peaceful activities would not lead to a regime change or to any serious reforms (Achcar, 2013, pp. 183-184); moreover, due to the regime’s authoritarian nature and history, those who took to the streets against it believed that the regime would brutally punish them if and when the situation returned to normal (Achcar, 2013, pp. 183-184). This meant that many decided they should continue their rebellion by any means. The escalation of the regime’s violence
made organising peaceful protests more and more difficult and many found that carrying arms and fighting the regime was their only option (Achcar, 2013, pp. 183-184).

Militarisation first occurred in the form of a limited number of men (usually dissidents from the regime’s army) who were armed with guns and whose mission was to protect the demonstrations from the assaults of the regime ‘thugs’. The regime’s excessive violence, however, led to the intensification of militarisation by the opposition. What started as individual attempts to protect protestors was soon transformed into fighting battalions that aimed at defending the neighbourhoods and villages and, in a later period, into militias with large numbers of fighters and links to external backers. The spread of militarisation resulted in undermining the influence of the officers who dissented from the regime’s army (and formed what is known as the Free Syrian Army); the balance tipped towards the rural/rurban civilians-turned-warlords (Levinson, 2012; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016; Ghalioun, 2019, p. 226;250;279).

1.1. The Ruralisation of the Uprising

The regime’s violence which led to the militarisation of the uprising went hand-in-hand with the endeavours to ‘ruralise’ it (see Chapter 7). The regime knew that and worked towards making the urban spaces unsuitable for such militarisation. The regime’s tight rein on the security over these areas was able to prevent any attempts to transfer or stock arms, or to initiate any organised activities. The repression of civil society, and the absence of independent institutions capable of facilitating collective action were additional factors in this context. The reformist tendencies of the urban middle and upper classes, and their feeling that they have much to lose with violence, rendered any armed activities unwelcome (Ghalioun, 2019, p. 279).41

Opposition’s armed groups proliferated almost exclusively in rural and rurban spaces where the regime’s control was weak or even non-existent, and where clan and tribal

---

41 It should be remembered here that, as discussed in the previous chapter, many poor rurban neighbourhoods might officially be within the borders of a certain city but geographic location is not the only determinant factor of the rurality or urbanity of a certain space. In the case of these neighbourhoods, they are inhabited by many rural-urban migrants, many of them are illegally built, their urbanity is not recognised by the more urban groups, and many of their inhabitants continue to perceive themselves as rural and to maintain their relations with their rural origins, lifestyles, and sources of income.
relations facilitated collective action; moreover, due to the 2000s developments, the population of these areas had much less to lose compared to their urban compatriots. Finally, the geographical proximity of some of these rural/rurban areas to the borders with other countries such as Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and the existence of smuggling networks (with decades of expertise) facilitated the mission of obtaining arms, food, communication technology, and other necessary items which made any attempt to besiege these areas futile (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012).

The regime’s choices and endeavours after the militarisation of the uprising were, however, no less important in deciding the geography of the conflict; its behaviour exposed a clear urban bias in its military operations. The regime’s violence within the rural and rurban areas was indiscriminate; aspects of this violence included torture, rape, insulting religious symbols, using live ammunition against peaceful protestors in addition to bombarding them with missiles, invading, and detaining people from the rurban neighbourhoods, towns, and villages which displayed any form of protest, regardless of whether they had participated in the protests or not. These forms of collective punishment ‘meant it was no longer possible to avoid repression by keeping out of politics’ (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 82). The regime’s approach towards the urban spaces in the meantime was pre-emptive in the sense that it aimed at preventing any escalation that would lead to the violence witnessed in the less urban areas.

This urban bias became more obvious and consequential as the militarisation of the uprising spread; many used the term ‘useful Syria’ to describe the regime’s strategy during this period (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 145). The term was initially used by the French colonial authorities and was forgotten during the decades separating the end of the French mandate and the beginning of the 2011 uprising. The term referred to an imaginary line that linked the country’s major cities from south to north: Damascus, Homs, Hamah, Aleppo, and the coastal area, specifically Latakia and Tartous (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 90;145). The usage of this term added to the feelings of bitterness

---

42 See Chapter 6 on how the 2000s economic liberalisation impacted rural and urban spaces.
among those who did not belong to ‘Useful Syria’ especially that it implied that they and their cities and regions were ‘useless’.

When, the regime felt that western Aleppo (the urban part of the city where the urbanites lived, in contrast to eastern Aleppo which mainly consisted of poor neighbourhoods and slums inhabited by rural-urban migrants) was threatened in 2012-2013, it did not hesitate to use fighter aircraft for the first time in the Syrian conflict to bomb civilian neighbourhoods in eastern Aleppo in order to prevent the opposition’s militias from reaching the western part of the city (Bishara, 2013, p. 208; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 99). The regime, more significantly, used chemical weapons in wide areas of the suburbs of Damascus and rural surroundings in August 2013, when it felt that keeping these areas in the hands of the opposition would threaten the urban parts of the capital. The targeted areas included Moadamiya, Ain Tarma, Zamalka, Irbin, Saqba, and Kafr Batna (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, pp. 103-104).

The regime did not show such ferocity when it lost cities and regions such as Deirezzor and Raqqa, despite the fact that these regions contained most of the country’s oil and used to provide most of the country’s agricultural output.43 The regime was facing the problem of lack of manpower, and had to choose which areas to keep and from which areas to withdraw (Hassan, 2020). Indeed, in a speech on 26 July 2015, the Syrian president said: ‘Sometimes, in some circumstances, we are forced to give up areas to move those forces to the areas that we want to hold on to’ (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 144). The regime’s lack of interest in what is called the ‘rural cities’ of north-eastern Syria emboldened the tribal chiefs and gave them a wider margin to manoeuvre. It also paved the way for Kurdish armed militias to take over wide areas of these governorates; at later period, this facilitated the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Plakoudas, 2017).

Part 2: The Impact of the Uprising Ruralisation and Militarisation on Rural-Urban Relations

43 A Syrian activist commented: ‘The regime withdrew from Raqqa like the Israelis withdrew from Gaza – they wanted a bad example’ (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 129).
The militarisation and ruralisation of the uprising affected the rural-urban divisions that had been discussed in the previous chapters. The focus here will be on how these two phenomena affected rural-urban relations in general, followed by a discussion on their impact on rural-urban relations - specifically within the ranks of the opposition.

2.1. The Rural-Urban Relations Under the Circumstances of War

The militarising and ruralising of the uprising have increasingly alienated the country’s urbanites (in all their different groups that were discussed in the Chapter 7). These groups were interested in maintaining stability and were concerned about the outcomes of militarisation, especially in terms of the deterioration of the quality of their daily lives.

It is true that some of the urbanites hoped for regime change and continued to financially support the opposition even after its militarisation, but those urbanites, who were not yet alienated by the militarisation of the uprising, would soon become alienated by its ruralisation. The shift of power within the opposition’s armed factions from the officers of the FSA (who had what might be described as an ‘acquired’ urban background) to the rural warlords was sufficient to alienate the urbanites who were not yet alienated (Levinson, 2012).

The behaviour of the opposition’s militias had aggravated these feelings of alienation among the urbanites at the same time; for example, they plundered the factories of Aleppo’s industrial area when it fell into their hands, thus losing the support of many within the Aleppine industrial bourgeoisie (Bishara, 2013, p. 205). The opposition’s factions also used to bombard regime-held urban areas with mortars in retaliation to the escalations in the regime’s pressure on their areas of control; moreover, some opposition atrocities, although were not as systematic as those committed by the regime, had negative consequences on the opposition’s image in the minds of the reformist and stability-craving urbanites. The best example is the video that spread during the early days of the uprising which showed one opposition commander eating the heart of one of the regime’s ‘thugs’ (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 85; Amos, 2012).

Furthermore, the majority of the opposition’s rural militias ended up embracing certain versions of *Salafi* Islam which challenged the more moderate version usually
followed by the urbanites (Saleh, 2017, p. 164). The urbanites feared that their urban lifestyles might be compromised by the victory of those whom they perceived as backward, rural, and conservative militias (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 108). The result was that many urbanites resorted to a passive position and maintained their quiescence under the regime despite all their reservations. The regime, for the urbanites, was ‘the least worst option’ (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 78). Khafaji argued:

“The hostile attitude of some Aleppo bourgeoisie towards those who liberated the east part of their city should not be taken as support for Assad’s regime: it was the rise of the provincial armed militias that tempered their views [...] ordinary urbanites no longer find themselves standing by Assad’s regime or siding with the armed opposition. They simply feel cornered between multitudes of warring parties” (Khafaji, 2016, pp. 12-15).

The urban and rurban educated middle-class activists who played a major role in the uprising during its early period also became alienated by the developments, as will be shown below. These developments did not only affect rural-urban relations between the regime loyalists and the opposition, but also affected the relations within the opposition itself.

2.2. The Continuation of Rural-Urban Conflicts within the Opposition

The relations between the rural and urban components of the opposition became more problematic and accentuated with the pressures accompanying the militarisation and the ruralisation of the uprising, and the increase in regime’s violence. One of the major contributors to these intra-opposition conflicts was the shift of influence from the dissident army officers to the rural/rurban warlords.44 Members of these two groups had different perspectives on what was to be done, and different worldviews towards rurality and urbanity. It did not therefore take much time for clashes to occur between the two groups. One example that shows the contrast in the worldviews of these two groups was documented by Charles Levinson from the Wall Street Journal who described a meeting between a colonel in the FSA and a rural commander in which the former asked the latter: ‘Do you even know how to write your name three

44 Many among the dissident army officers had either an urban origin or an urban background that was the outcome of the extended periods of time during which they resided in the cities attending their jobs.
times in Arabic without making a mistake?’ (Khafaji, 2016, p. 11). The schism between the dissenting professional army officers and the rural/rurban civilians-turned-warlords hindered the military efforts of the opposition, and contributed to the failure of the many attempts to unify the opposition’s armed factions, whether under the flag of the FSA of other suggested bodies (Ghalioun, 2019, pp. 251-259).

A similarly significant clash occurred between the new rural militia leaders and the urban/rurban middle class activists who played a major role during the uprising’s early days. There were many who rejected the militarisation and insisted on the peaceful aspect of the uprising. These activists had to escape from the regime areas to the rural/rurban areas that were under the control of the warlords, despite their opposition to the militarisation. Their activities were perceived by the militia leaders as a source of competition over funding and media coverage. The rural leaders’ choice to subscribe to an extremist Salafi version of Islam did not allow a margin for such activists; many of them were secular, and many women were unveiled, lived alone, and moved and mingled freely in a manner opposed to the regulations of the militia leaders. The most significant factor of all, however, was that the activists’ goal was to topple the regime, while many leaders were benefitting from the continuation of the conflict due to the funding they were receiving, and to other sources of income that originated from the war economy that emerged and proliferated during that period (including the proliferation of smuggling between regime-held and opposition-held areas) (Yaziji, 2014, p. 5; Abboud, 2015, p. 1; Richani, 2016). The urban/rurban activists were soon marginalised due to these reasons, and, in many cases, had to leave the areas controlled by the militia leaders – some even chose to leave Syria for other countries. The activists were harassed, detained, tortured, and, in some cases, killed by some of the opposition’s armed factions (Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, pp. 123-126).

These clashes resulted in many opposition intellectuals becoming outspoken about their reservations towards the rural component of the uprising - contrary to their avoidance of this issue during the early days as discussed in the previous chapter. Omar Kaddour, for example, criticised certain activists who, starting from the wider participation of the rural groups in the uprising, tend to praise rurality and to blame the country’s urbanite groups. According to Kaddour, such position serves the regime’s
agenda which initially sought to depict the uprising as rural. Kaddour also wrote: ‘Praising rurality is a Ba’thist motto that should not be allowed to sneak into the revolution’s literature; rurality might be joyful and a source of relaxation in the songs, but its dominance over politics had always been catastrophic’ (Kaddour, 2014).

Samir Nachar argued in an article entitled ‘In Defence of Urbanity and Cities’ that the rural factions’ leaders, who have tribal, sectarian, and regional mentalities, cannot lead ‘a national Syrian revolution that carried the motto of liberty, dignity, justice and equality for all Syrians’ (Nashar, 2018). Nashar highlighted the significance of Damascus and Aleppo and doubted the possibility of the revolution’s victory without them. According to Nashar, it was improbable for the centres to follow the peripheries, but the rule was for ‘the peripheries to follow the centre or for them to go together’ (Nashar, 2018). The writer argues that it was the behaviour of these rural warlords towards the inhabitants of the two cities which alienated those inhabitants who should not be blamed for their choices and whose position should not be contrasted to that of the rural population (Nashar, 2018). These opinions did not pass without harsh criticisms from many activists and opposition supporters who perceived such writings as unjustified attacks on the rural component of the uprising.45

The passing of time, and the continuous escalation of violence and brutality, meant that the Syrian war started to have far-reaching effects on the society, especially on its demographic composition in terms of the rural, rurban, and urban populations.

Part 3: The Impact of the War on the Demographics of the Rural, Rurban, and Urban Populations

It will be argued here that the war had had a ‘Rurbanising’ effect on the Syrian society which, despite being precarious, might prove to be so consequential in post-war Syria. This Rurbanisation was the outcome of two simultaneous processes of de-ruralisation and de-urbanisation that were intensified and sustained by the war. The country had

45 For more details, see the TV interview with Nashar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTy24lPbhPw&ab_channel=SyriaTV%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7, [Accessed: 18/10/2021].
been witnessing a decrease in the numbers of groups and individuals which might be plotted on either the rural or the urban ends of the rural-urban continuum, and a proportional increase of those who might be plotted towards the centre of the continuum. These two processes and how they coalesced to produce this ‘rurbanising’ effect will be the focus of the following section.

3.1. The De-Ruralisation of Syrian Society

The major cities remained relatively safe under the control of the regime, while the rural and rurban spaces that were controlled by the opposition were targets for the regime’s excessive violence: the destruction of crops and livestock in the countryside and shelling of bakeries, hospitals, and schools in the towns and rurban neighbourhoods (Jenkins, 2014; Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016, p. 105). This violence and the concomitant circumstances of war resulted in the displacement of large numbers of the population from these rural and rurban areas. It is estimated that, in Dar’a governorate, for example, by mid-2014, more than half of the population had left the governorate for countries outside Syria (mainly to Jordan) (CBS, 2014, p. 8). A large number of inhabitants from north-eastern Syria had to leave their homes and lands, not only due to the regime’s violence, but also because of fear of ISIS, after it took control over their areas. According to certain estimates, the Syrian countryside in general had lost more than thirty per cent of its population by 2017 (FAO, 2017, p. 4). There were many of those who were displaced who preferred to move to neighbouring (or other) countries, while many others became ‘internally displaced’ and most of them moved to the country’s different cities due to their relative safety and better economic opportunities (FAO, 2017, p. 4). These displacements have had a deep and long-lasting impact on the agricultural sector such as the intensification of desertification in many areas - especially in Dar’a and Hassakah (Saleh, 2017; Trew,

46 Using the concept of ‘continuum’ in the context of rural-urban dynamics is problematic on several levels as has already been discussed in the Theoretical Framework chapter. The concept is used here just to simplify the complexities of rural-urban relations in Syria and all the caveats that were discussed in the above-mentioned chapter should be considered.
The impact of the war on Syria’s agriculture has also been devastating on the economic and financial levels. According to the FAO:

‘The overall financial cost of damage and loss in the agriculture sector over the 2011–2016 period is estimated to be at least USD 16 billion, which is equivalent to just under one third of Syria’s GDP in 2016. The governorates with the largest loss were Al-Hassakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Rural Damascus, Deir-ez-Zor, Dara’a and Idleb, each registering over USD 1 billion of damage and loss’ (FAO, 2017, p. 5).

The contribution of the agricultural sector to the country’s GDP, in the same vein, has fallen from around eighteen per cent in 2010 to less than five per cent during the post-2011 period (Saleh, 2017). According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the agricultural sector used to be a source of income for 35.3 per cent of the population before the crisis, and for only 25.7 per cent by mid-2014 (CBS, 2014, p. 17). According to the CBS numbers, it seems that many of those have turned to trade as an alternative source of income (CBS, 2014, p. 17).

The De-Ruralisation of the Syrian society rests on the fact that the war pushed increasing numbers of the rural/rurban population out of their fields, villages, and small towns to the cities and to shift their sources of income from agriculture to trade and other non-rural sources for income. This shift seems to be precarious, as it might be reversed in the future if those people take the opportunity to return to their original areas and lifestyles, after the war ends; however, even if they chose to return, it is doubtful whether they would be able to resort to agriculture as a source of income. The FAO report states that the estimated cost of rebuilding the agriculture sector over a three-year period would range between USD 11 and 17 billion (FAO, 2017, p. 14).

It should be kept in mind, on the other hand, that these developments remain limited to the material aspects of urbanisation. It is probably too early to talk about the urbanisation of these people on the perceptive and ideational levels. They will continue to be perceived by most of the population, including themselves, as rural. It

\[\text{Idlib and its rural areas represent the only exception in this regard as it was the preferred destination for many of those who were internally displaced and as a result it was the only rural space that witnessed an increase in its population.}\]

\[\text{The numbers for the trade sector increased from 26.1% before the crisis to 34.3% by mid-2014.}\]
should also be remembered here that the term ‘rurban’ is unknown in popular
discourse which still maintains a binary understanding of the rural and the urban as
two mutually exclusive categories. The result of these developments would not be
seen as a move towards the urban end of an imagined rural-urban continuum, but as
another wave of rural invasion of the country’s cities. Indeed, one of the opinion
articles that discussed these developments was entitled: ‘The Syrian Countryside Raids
the City’ (Iskeef, 2012). According to the article, the ‘urban face’ of Syria is in real
danger due to this ‘rural invasion’. To summarise, these groups might have materially
moved towards the urban end of the continuum, but the ideational and perceptive
level keeps them close to the centre of the continuum.

3.2. The De-Urbanisation of Syrian Society

The urban population had also witnessed significant losses in its numbers. By 2017, the
Syrian cities had lost 20 per cent of their population, even after the compensation
resulting from the above-mentioned rural-urban migration (or ‘invasion’ as some
would like to call it). These losses were more significant in the two major cities. The
2017 population of the city of Damascus, for example, was 1.5 million inhabitants,
while in 2011, it was 1.74 million. This means that the Syrian capital had lost 240,000
inhabitants in absolute numbers. However, if the number of those who migrated to
Damascus during the war (970,000 migrants) is to be subtracted, the result would be
(1,500,00 – 970,000=) 530,000 inhabitants. This indicates that those who did not leave
Damascus since 2011 (530,000 inhabitants) represent only 30 per cent of the city’s
original population of 2011, while 70 per cent of this population left the city - either to
other parts of the country or to other countries. Applying the same calculations to
Aleppo, the city lost 37 per cent of its 2011 population despite the 560,000 migrants
that moved to the city. It therefore appears that 43 per cent of Aleppo’s 2011
population remained in the city while 57 per cent left it. Other cities had witnessed a
rise in their population (in absolute numbers) but had also lost varying proportions of
their original 2011 population as the table below shows.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>2011 Population</th>
<th>2017 Population</th>
<th>% of Loss/Gain</th>
<th>Migrants to the City</th>
<th>% Remained</th>
<th>% Left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>1,745,000</td>
<td>1,500,000</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>+970,000</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>1,870,000</td>
<td>-37%</td>
<td>+560,000</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>967,000</td>
<td>790,000</td>
<td>-18%</td>
<td>316,000</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamah</td>
<td>594,000</td>
<td>790,000</td>
<td>+32%</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idlib</td>
<td>423,000</td>
<td>530,000</td>
<td>+24%</td>
<td>343,000</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassakah</td>
<td>538,000</td>
<td>686,000</td>
<td>+27%</td>
<td>210,000</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deirezzor</td>
<td>545,000</td>
<td>527,000</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>114,000</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raqqa</td>
<td>361,000</td>
<td>370,000</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>136,000</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latakia</td>
<td>513,000</td>
<td>703,000</td>
<td>+37%</td>
<td>385,000</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tartouss</td>
<td>226,000</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>+33%</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dar’a</td>
<td>454,000</td>
<td>650,000</td>
<td>+43%</td>
<td>257,000</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suwaida</td>
<td>89,000</td>
<td>21,700</td>
<td>+22%</td>
<td>21,700</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qunaytera</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 8.1 (Sources: (Kassioun, 2017), (Saleh, 2017)).

There are no numbers on how those urban migrants were distributed among the different groups discerned by this thesis. Of course, many of those who left the cities belonged to what this thesis described as rurban groups (who used to live in the cities’ rurban neighbourhoods) and many were regime opponents who feared its retaliation, but many others were ‘more urbanite’ regime supporters, or undecided, or passive individuals, who left due to the deterioration of the economy and life quality. Jihad Yaziji wrote: ‘Many of the country’s upper middle class and bourgeoisie have left the country, and those remaining in the country have become much poorer’ (Yaziji, 2017, p. 13). Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl also talked about how the regime was disappointed by those middle and upper middle-class urbanites who left the country, despite the fact that the regime perceived them as its new constituency after it had turned its back to its original rural/rurban constituency (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 294). Moreover, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the regime-sponsored drama

---

49 In contrast to 70% who left their areas in Rural Hassakah
during that period shows a serious concern about the migration of those ‘more’ urban groups, whether they belonged to the established/original urbanites or to what the previous chapters called the ‘acquired urbanity’ group.

The country was suffering losses in the numbers of those who are traditionally plotted on the urban side of the rural-urban continuum, just as it was witnessing a move by many rural and rurban groups towards the urban side of the continuum. This leaves more of the country’s population closer to the centre of the continuum, which explains the term ‘rurbanisation’ of Syrian society.

It would, however, be too early to discuss the consequences of this rurbanisation for two reasons. First, the outcomes of this process are precarious and dependent on future developments. It is still unknown whether (or how) these outcomes would be entrenched or reversed after the war ends. Second, even if they proved to be persistent, it is well-known that perceptions of phenomena such as urbanisation and ruralisation take time to change. It is also still too early to know how the different groups would perceive these changes. It is true that, for the time being, many are talking about a rural invasion of the cities, but this may change with time and according to future developments and circumstances.

The currently available route for a better understanding of this phenomenon and its consequences is to study the agency behind it. The next part will focus on how the tactics of the regime, its allies, and other actors have affected the three processes, and how these processes and their future development and consequences might be better understood in the light of the plans and aspirations of these actors.

It is necessary to discuss the millions of refugees and internally displaced who ended up in camps both inside and outside Syria, before concluding this section. The available literature on the inhabitants of these camps indicates that the rural and urban origins of the refugees and displaced persons continue to affect their lives in their new destinations. The authors of a study conducted by the American University of Beirut and the UN HABITAT wrote:

‘It is important to note that the background of refugees affects their success in working in either urban contexts or rural/camp contexts. Refugees who have fled urban areas have no
experience in rural activities such as farming, and tend to perform poorly in this context. Similarly, refugees escaping rural areas encounter difficulties in working in urban contexts since they do not have the skills required, and tend to live in extreme poverty’ (Yassin, et al., 2015).

The majority of the studies which engaged in the situation of camp inhabitants, both inside and outside Syria, were either concerned about how to enhance their current situations or addressing the problems that may thwart their return (Yassin, et al., 2015; Pelek, 2020; Unruh, 2021). The process of identification of these inhabitants in terms of rurality and urbanity are rarely taken into consideration *per se*. It was among the goals of this project to engage in the processes of identification of the camp inhabitants, and how these processes affected their world views, aspirations, and how they see themselves and their futures. The aim was to allow these subalterns to speak and to express their identities and ambitions. Yet, due to the circumstances mentioned earlier, this became an impossible endeavour. This is one of the limitations of the thesis and one of its recommendations for future research.

**Part 4: The Agency Behind ‘Rurbanisation’**

It will be argued here that the regime’s military tactics have contributed to the rurbanisation of Syrian society by pushing different groups of the population outside their original areas. The regime complemented its efforts, at a later stage, with additional military and non-military tactics in order to maintain this outcome, and to exploit it for the benefit of its elites. The major argument here will be that the above-mentioned rurbanisation process would be better understood if looked at from the perspective of the regime elites’ interests and aspirations. The regime’s behaviour after the militarisation of the uprising has been characterised by a clear urban bias that springs from how its elites perceive themselves and their future interests as in the case during the 2000s. A discussion follows on the regime’s approach towards both the de-ruralisation and de-urbanisation that intensified during the war. Contrasting the regime’s behaviour towards each of these two phenomena will provide the basis for a better understanding of the rurbanisation process and will pave the way for the next part to complement this endeavour by discussing the regime’s discourse regarding
these phenomena, how it discursively attempted to justify certain aspects of them, and to oppose or reverse other aspects.

A brief review of the war’s impact on the regime elite circles is needed, however, before moving on to the next step. First, many of the pre-2011 business elites sought to distance themselves from the regime in an attempt to avoid the Western sanctions that were introduced in 2011 (and have continued to be expanded or modified since then) (Abboud, 2019; The Syria Report, 2019). The regime was simultaneously looking for new names that were not included in the Western sanctions’ lists (Yaziji, 2014, p. 5). The regime was also looking for brokers to mediate the deals between it and its opponents in the areas outside its control (Abboud, 2019). This led to the rise of many new names among which Samer Foz and the Qaterji Brothers were the most important (The Syria Report, 2020). There were a number of reports which talked about a competitive and conflictual relationship between the old and the new elites, especially between their symbols Rami Makhlouf and Samer Foz (Al Modon, 2019; The Syria Report, 2020). These changes in names, however, did not have much effect on the collective behaviour and choices of the regime elites as a group. What might be more consequential in this context is the entrance of the non-Syrian elites, who mainly consisted of Russians and Iranians. It is well known that Russian businesses and companies secured for themselves the lion’s share of the country’s natural resources (phosphates) and major strategic and infrastructure projects such as the country’s sole fertiliser production complex and the Tartous port among others (The Syria Report, 2019; Cornish, et al., 2019). The Iranians, meanwhile, had to maintain a lower profile, and coordinate their efforts with the Syrian elites in their endeavours to plunder the resources of the rebelling communities and areas (see below) (Chulov, 2017; Yaziji, 2017, p. 8). What is more important in this context is that the regime’s dependence on its international allies led to compromising its decisional independence. The regime’s decision-making process, for the first time in decades, became affected by increasing input from the Russians and Iranians. These new players did not hinder the regime’s

---

50 This period also witnessed the rise of war businessmen who worked in smuggling food and other goods between the regime-besieged areas and the outside (Abboud, 2019). However, only a few, if any, of these rising businessmen managed to reach the regime’s inner circles (IBID). While it is necessary to keep them under scrutiny in the future, they remain, for the time being, outside the scope of this thesis.
original tactics, however, but, on the contrary, pushed them forward and upgraded some of them.

4.1. The De-Ruralisation of the Syrian Society in the Light of its Elites Interests

The Syrian regime and its external allies have been resorting to violent tactics in their war against the opposition in a manner that is unprecedented in the country’s history; everything from traditional shelling to aerial bombing, barrel bombs, ballistic missiles, and even chemical weapons have been used in this war. What might be more important for the purposes of this thesis is the systematic and repeated targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructures (Jenkins, 2014; Sharp, 2016, pp. 128-130). These targets include crops, livestock, schools, hospitals, bakeries, and food markets.

It was this violence that displaced millions of Syrians from their rural/rurban areas and pushed them to look for new non-rural sources of income. The regime’s violence against these groups has been a major contributor to the phenomenon of de-ruralisation that had been discussed in the previous part. The regime’s violence against those civilians, and its willingness to displace them, may be linked to different goals: punishing the rebel communities, weakening the opposition forces by depriving them of their popular support base and demographic engineering. There are a number of authors, for example, who refer to the siege-and-starve tactics used by the regime and its allies in several places across the country. The regime offered the inhabitants the option of leaving their homes to rebel-held areas (mainly in Idlib province) after extended periods of the siege (ranging from months to years), hunger and bombardment. These mass displacement operations took place in many areas such as Homs, Eastern Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, Madaya, Zabadani, Moadamiya, and others (Shami, 2018). These siege-and-starve operations show that, in these instances at least, the regime and its allies were pursuing a process of demographic engineering that aimed at serving their future post-war strategic interests by ‘cleansing’ certain areas from hostile groups. These demographic engineering accusations might be supported by other facts like the repopulation of certain evacuated areas by loyalist constituencies (sometimes even by non-Syrian groups such as Iranians, Iraqis, Lebanese and others) (Shami, 2018).
The above-mentioned arguments are enlightening but insufficient. The de-ruralisation resulting from assaulting and displacing civilians in the opposition-held rural/rurban areas should also be understood in light of the interests of the regime elites and the revival of some of the most predatory aspects of their 2000s project which aimed at an urban-biased bottom-up redistribution of resources.

There were new tactics introduced by the regime in its endeavour to control the de-ruralisation process; these tactics also served the regime elites project of self-aggrandisement through redistributing resources - not forgetting the role of the regime’s international allies in such practices.

The first tactic to be discussed in this context is what is known as Ta’fish. Derived from the term “afsh” which means furniture and home appliances, ‘Ta’fish’ refers to the looting that takes place after the battles (Salama, 2018). Regime ‘thugs’ (and often soldiers themselves) would enter battle areas and start looting homes and shops, regardless of whether the owners were or were not involved in the fighting. Using pick-ups and small trucks, they moved the furniture and home appliances from the ‘liberated’ villages or neighbourhoods to their own areas where they would sell them for discounted prices (Yaziji, 2014, p. 5).

Ta’fish was the regime’s way to pay for its fighting support base – by using the money of the rural and rurban groups and individuals who happened to live in opposition-held areas – in addition to being a form of collective punishment, and a way to prevent those who had left the area from coming back (Salama, 2018).

The regime also used other tactics that thwarted the return of the displaced and, more significantly, paved the way for plundering their properties. These included requesting security clearances for those who wanted to visit their original homes and properties. These clearances would only allow the displaced to visit their homes and neighbourhoods but not to repair them. Additional (harder to obtain) clearances are requested for those who want to repair or rebuild their homes. Another tactic that was used in several places across the country was the torching of land registries in order to make it difficult for people to prove their ownership of lands and built properties.
The next paragraph will show how these tactics facilitated the plundering of these properties.

The most important tactic used by the regime in this context was the promulgation of several controversial laws that would practically allow the transfer of the properties of those who were displaced, either by confiscation or by expropriation for unfair compensation. The most controversial of these laws was law 10 of 2018 which gives the owners a limited period to claim their properties and prove ownership, or the government would be allowed to confiscate these properties with no compensation (Shami, 2018; Yaziji, 2017). These laws may be justified as an endeavour towards reconstruction in a country that has been hit by an extended war, but it is clear for most authors that this and other similar laws are meant to target the opposition rural and rurban communities (Shami, 2018; Abou Zeineddine, 2019). Law 10 would help the regime to exploit the fact that many of the displaced owners cannot return to claim their properties (mostly because of Ta’fish and because they needed the above-mentioned security clearances) and their relatives are too afraid to do this on their behalf (Shami, 2018). Another problematic aspect of this law is that it makes it much easier to target rurban and rural areas, since most of the property deeds in these areas are not documented. The torching of land registries led to the same outcome in the cases where the deeds were documented. The law was tailored to facilitate the plundering of the displaced rural and rurban groups and was complemented by the several tactics discussed earlier. These confiscated properties would soon be (and in some cases had already been) transferred to regime elites - a similar practice during the 2000s - or to regime loyalists who are fighting the war of those elites (Yaziji, 2017).

It might be unclear whether this plundering of the displaced populations’ properties was originally among the considerations that led to the regime’s violence and systemic targeting of civilians. This question may find an answer in the next section. What is clear for the time being, however, is that the regime had no problem in maintaining the phenomenon of de-ruralisation, by preventing the return of the displaced, in order to facilitate the above-mentioned plundering.

4.2. The Regime Elites’ Hybrid Approach Towards De-Urbanisation
The regime also used certain tactics to expel certain urban groups and to plunder their properties within the areas that remained under its control. The best example is Decree 66 which led to the destruction of two residential areas in south-west Damascu where the inhabitants were expelled, and their compensations were trivial (Yaziji, 2017, p. 6; Shami, 2018). The evacuation was claimed to be necessary because of the need to end the informal housing in these two districts (Yaziji, 2017, p. 6); however, many would argue that the real motivation was the collective punishment of the inhabitants for their participation in the peaceful protests during the early days of the uprising, and for hosting the armed opposition at a later date (Yaziji, 2017, p. 6). Proponents of this argument refer to other similar districts in Damascus and across the country that were not demolished because they hosted pro-regime groups like Mazze 86 and Ish al-Warwar (Yaziji, 2017, p. 6). It is worth mentioning that many of the inhabitants of these targeted districts belonged to the poorer sections of what the previous chapter referred to as the ‘original urbanites’. They came from Shami families who left their old houses in the old towns and moved to these two districts that were more affordable.

The collective punishment and demographic engineering were not the only goals served by these reconstruction projects. Another significant goal was to use reconstruction as a curtain to transfer the properties of those who were ousted from their homes to the regime elites; many of the latter were partners in the projects established according to Decree 66. One of the most important names in this regard is Samer Foz, one of the most prominent post-2011 rising elites, and whose company ‘Aman’ is a partner in the project (Shami, 2018). Another name is the well-known president’s cousin Rami Makhlouf (Shami, 2018). Yaziji summarises the regime’s endeavours as follows:

‘The scale of the destruction makes real estate by far the most lucrative sector for years and decades to come, hence the regime’s need to ensure that its cronies’ control as much land and property as possible pending reconstruction’ (Yaziji, 2017, p. 10).

---

This of course was before the relations between Makhlouf and the Syrian president took a hit.
These plundering tactics motivated many authors to criticise the regime’s behaviour. Steven Heydemann, for example, wrote:

‘For the Assad regime, however, reconstruction is not seen as a means for economic recovery and social repair, but as an opportunity for self-enrichment, a way to reward loyalists and punish opponents, and as central to its efforts to fix in place the social and demographic shifts caused by six years of violent conflict’ (Heydemann, 2017).

Another example comes from Homs; several reports argued that, during the battle of Homs, the regime’s shelling reached beyond the rural areas where the opposition fighters were stationed (The Syria Institute & PAX, 2017; Najm AlDeen, 2018; Shami, 2018). According to these reports, there was no military rationale behind the shelling: the real goal pertained to the ‘Homs Dream’ project. The goal was to demolish these neighbourhoods because their destruction was part of the infamous project. Indeed, after the end of the battle, the government approved urban planning schemes for certain neighbourhoods that are thought to revive the ‘Homs Dream’ which now seems to be a de facto reality, regardless of the wishes of the population (Yaziji, 2017, p. 12; Najm AlDeen, 2018). This example from Homs shows that the regime elites thought of the war as an occasion to not only continue their 2000s project, but even to accomplish what they failed to do during the peace time of that decade.

The regime’s behaviour in Homs also shows that the prospects of self-aggrandisement had affected the regime’s military operations since the early days (the battle of Homs was among the first battles in the Syrian war). This might answer the question that remained unanswered at the end of the previous section, as it shows that prospects of self-aggrandisement were considered by the regime personnel and affected their military tactics since the early days of militarisation.

These instances of regime behaviour within urban areas should be contrasted with a general tendency by the regime that shows its urban bias. The regime’s control over ‘Useful Syria’ mentioned earlier meant that the most important urban areas for the regime were, to a great extent, left outside the armed conflict. It is true that the three larger cities witnessed extended periods of fighting, but this fighting was limited to the rural areas while the urban centres remained isolated. The regime used
its iron fist to secure the urban areas within the cities under its control. Damascus, for example, had 287 check points all over the city in order to maintain security and the population’s quiescence (the number was 1,050 in Aleppo) (Abou Zeineddine, 2019; Imam, 2019). The inhabitants also became used to mobile checkpoints that would surprisingly appear anywhere and at any time in the city, before they were removed a few hours later. The central urbanite area of Damascus that consisted of some of the city’s high-class neighbourhoods such as al-Malki and Abou Rummanna was protected by several security layers and extra checkpoints. Their purpose was not limited to preventing security threats, but also to discriminate filter the visitors to the area by preventing those who appeared to be rural or poor from entering (Imam, 2019). The urbanite areas also enjoyed much better services provision such as electricity and water, while the poorer and less urban areas experienced harsher schedules of electricity blackouts. The result was that the prices of properties within the country’s urban areas increased despite the circumstances of war (Imam, 2019).

Aleppo was a similar case. It has been discussed earlier how the regime fought ferociously to thwart the opposition forces’ advance from the eastern rural part of the city towards the western urban part. The regime was also concerned about preventing disruptions to the daily life of the urbanite inhabitants; on one occasion, the opposition forces managed to take over certain roads that allowed them to control the provision of bread in western Aleppo; the prices of bread consequently increased in the urbanite areas. The regime fought fiercely to regain control over these roads and to secure the provision of bread for the Aleppine urbanites (Abou Zeineddine, 2019).

It should be kept in mind that, since the early days, even in Homs, and despite the above-mentioned targeting of certain urban areas within the city, the regime was decisive in limiting the protests to the rural neighbourhoods, and in keeping them away from the urbanite residential areas which remained almost unharmed, despite two years of fighting that razed several of the city’s rural areas to the ground (Bishara, 2013, pp. 118-120).

The regime was seriously concerned about the migration of the urban middle and upper classes, unlike its nonchalant position towards de-ruralisation and despite its endeavours to expel certain urban groups from their neighbourhoods. Hinnebusch and
Zintl noted that the regime was disappointed by these groups which it perceived as its new constituency while their first choice was to leave the country (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 294). What was more significant than these considerations about gratitude, was that the presence of these educated and westernised groups was perceived as an essential requisite for the regime elites’ project which depended on trade, tourism, services, and banking. An important statement from the 2000s to be remembered in this context is the one by Haytham Joud, one of the most prominent regime cronies who declared that trade and tourism should be prioritised over manufacturing which, according to him, should come last; he did not even mention agriculture (Barout, 2012, p. 76). The deemphasising of the role of agriculture sheds some light on why de-ruralisation in itself was not a concern for the regime.

Reports from 2018 show that the regime started to be concerned about certain side-effect of de-ruralisation. In 2018, after liberating Deirezzor from ISIS, the regime stopped providing those who fled the province to Damascus with clearances needed to rent flats inside the city (Synaps, 2018). The regime wanted to push those migrants out of its capital. While the regime was happy to see the groups which depended on agriculture leave the country and/or change their sources of income, it became concerned with the increasing numbers of those who moved to the cities and burdened the urban infrastructures and services.

This shows that the regime’s approach towards the de-urbanisation of the society has been different from its approach towards the de-ruralisation. This difference, which is underpinned by the requisites of its elites’ interests and aspirations, will be clearer on the discursive and ideational levels as the next part will illustrate.

Part 5: The Regime’s Discursive Manoeuvres

5.1. The President’s Speeches

Contrasting Bashar Al-Assad’s speeches, interviews, and talks during the early days of the uprising with those of the period covered by this chapter would reveal how the regime’s discourse developed during that time. It has already been mentioned that the regime had already started talking about infiltrators since the very first day of the
uprising. However, in his speeches during that period, Bashar al-Assad insisted that those infiltrators were a minority and insisted that he is willing to listen to the demands of his people. But in 2014, al-Assad started talking about terrorists and their hosting environments. According to al-Assad, the regime’s problem was not limited to the tens of thousands of terrorists who were carrying arms against the Syrian government, but also with their families and hosting environments which would make the numbers reach millions (CNN Arabic, 2014). Al-Assad was justifying his regime’s military tactics against the populations that inhabited the opposition-held areas. The problem was not only with the fighters but also with the civilians who ‘hosted’ them. According to this logic, it was therefore acceptable to target and displace those civilians.

As discussed in the previous chapter, during the early days, al-Assad wanted to pose as the young understanding president who was ready to listen to his people; but by 2014, al-Assad was keen on projecting himself as a strong president who could control the situation and who was willing to end the war in Syria, even if that meant getting rid of the above-mentioned hundreds of thousands (and the resulting de-ruralisation).

Al-Assad argued, in a speech in August 2017 that, despite the losses, the war had brought certain positive outcomes such as ‘a healthier and more homogenous society’ (Heydemann, 2017). According to al-Assad, the killing and mass displacement of the populations within the opposition-held areas (de-ruralisation) had rendered the Syrian society healthier and more homogenous. There are some authors who described this statement as ‘Hitlerian’ and a ‘confirmation of the “genocidal” intent of the regime’s policies of displacement’ (Heydemann, 2017).

Al-Assad, in a similar vein, declared in 2015 that Syria does not belong to those who live in it and carry its passport, but to those who defend and protect it (Ghalioun, 2019, p. 62). This declaration came in the context of legitimising the increasing role and privileges enjoyed by the regime’s foreign allies, and the newly established neo-Gramscian-style transnational partnership between the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian elites. The declaration simply meant that those who were displaced en masse did not

---

deserve to own any of the properties or lands, but those who displaced them were the ones who deserved to be rewarded with these same properties and lands.

The previous excerpts of the president speeches show that the displacement of wide groups of the population was not merely a side effect of the war or an unavoidable outcome of the military operations. They confirm that the displacements that took place were deliberate and served the regime’s goals that were discussed in the previous sections. This position should be contrasted with the regime’s resentment of the migration of the urban middle and upper classes, mentioned earlier, and will be further illustrated in the next section. This comparison shows a clear urban bias in the regime’s approach towards the demographic changes that were taking place. To summarise, there were many aspects of de-urbanisation that were not welcomed by the regime, while the de-ruralisation resulting from the displacement of the ‘terrorists-hosting’ populations was celebrated and its outcomes were perceived as social homogeneity - except, of course, when these outcomes threatened the quality of the lives of the urbanites.

5.2. The Syrian Drama

The Syrian drama stopped focusing on the old theme of mocking the rural population and their lifestyles after 2011. This may partly reflect some sort of sensibility towards what was happening in the country’s rural areas. The drama productions of these years, however, reflect the regime’s concern with maintaining the quiescence of the main cities. Two Ramadan series that were broadcast in 2014 and 2017 show this concern. These two series will be compared to those that had already been discussed in the previous chapters, as well as being compared to each other to show how the concerns and the discourse of the regime had been developing during the years separating the production of the two series.

*Al-Haqa’eb (The Luggage)*[^53]

[^53]: Available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwOuO7jZBck&list=PL4SKAxBjuOcu-BZOq3tPmWtfHcxctT2eV&ab_channel=BlueProductionsDrama](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwOuO7jZBck&list=PL4SKAxBjuOcu-BZOq3tPmWtfHcxctT2eV&ab_channel=BlueProductionsDrama)
Produced by ‘Sama Alfan Production International’ (SAPI), written by Mamdouh Hamada, directed by Al Layth Hajjo, and broadcast in Ramadan 2014, the series under the name *al-Haqa‘eb* (The Luggage), depicts the daily life of a Damascene family living in the Old City under the pressures of the Syrian war (elcinema.com, n.d.). The family decides to leave the country due to these pressures, and to seek refuge in a European country. The family’s attempts to leave their home are always hindered by surprising incidents that mainly result from the circumstances of the Syrian crisis. The series revolves around the debates that take place between the different members of the family and their different political positions. The oldest brother is a Ba‘thist enthusiast who has good relations with the security apparatus. The youngest is an outspoken opposition activist who participates in anti-regime demonstrations. The middle brother is a pragmatic realist who does not agree with either of the two brothers. One of the sisters and her husband support what is known as ‘the traditional opposition’ and insist on reforms but not necessarily on regime change. The problems faced by the family during these stressful times would result in debates between the different family members, and the series allows a space for the different opinions. The oldest (Ba‘thist) and the youngest (opposition) brothers were allowed to present their arguments, but the middle brother seemed to be the most reasonable among the different characters. The Ba‘thist brother’s arguments seemed to be outdated (returning to the 1980s) while the opposition brother’s dreams about the future of the country seemed to be unrealistic and romantic. The younger brother starts from certain rightful criticisms and demands but fails to capture the complexities of the situation, the role of the external powers, and the ‘conspiracy’. The oldest brother represents one of the Ba‘thists of the 2000s comedy (though within urban settings): the old guard who were hindering the president’s march towards reforms; only the middle brother’s opinions seemed to be reasonable and pragmatic.

The series may seem impressive and unexpected on the surface in terms of the time given to the opposition-representing brother and how his criticisms of the Ba‘thist brother were tolerated. The depiction of the middle brother as the most reasonable

---

[Accessed: 20/02/2022]

SAPI belongs to Mohammad Hamsho, one of the regime’s most important business elites (S’eifan, 2013).
would also give an impression of neutrality or a middle position adopted by the series producers. Observed from a critical perspective, however, the character of the middle brother as a tame citizen minding his own business and looking to navigate his way through the stressful times of the Syrian crisis, while allowing the government to mind its own business in fighting the conspiracy and terrorism seemed to be the one preferred both by the regime and by the producers of the series. It is repeated several times that the middle brother belongs to the ‘silent majority’. This brings more legitimacy to his opinions and worldviews since he is perceived as representing the majority of the Syrian people. The dialogue in the series, on the other hand, always sheds doubts on the popular support base of both the Ba’thist and the opposition brothers.

This focus on the silent majority is highly reminiscent of what Lisa Wedeen had written decades ago describing the al-Assad regime in the 1980s-1990s. Wedeen argued that the regime wanted its citizens to act ‘as if’ they believed its discourse (Wedeen, 1999). Those who would believe the regime’s rhetoric tend to be dangerous, as they might expect and demand the actual application of the declared mottos. Wedeen’s note might explain why ‘al-Haqa’eb’ is meant to send the message that the passive, silent, and pragmatic brother is preferred over the enthusiastic Ba’thist who keeps repeating the regime’s rhetoric.

The ultimate goal of the series was to be a contribution towards maintaining the quiescence of the Syrian cities and the urban population. This quiescence seemed to be the major concern of the regime during that period. This confirms what has been mentioned earlier about the political position of the urban population whose silence was not taken for granted and did not necessarily mean their support of the regime.

The fact that the series was produced by a company owned by the regime’s new elites is also an important factor in this context. The previous chapters showed how those elites, since the 2000s, had been working on side-lining the Ba’thist constituencies of the regime and the old guard linked to them. The endeavours to marginalise the Ba’th party were not halted but were moved to an urban setting that replaced the rural settings of the 2000s drama.
The family finally manages to leave its home and board a boat on their way to Europe by the end of the series. News reaches their Damascene neighbourhood that their boat sank, and all the family members died, except a newly born daughter of one of the sisters. The end of the series might signify the end of the old Syria as people have known it. What remained for the future is only the new generation represented by the newly born survivor. The viewer might contemplate other alternatives in front of this sad end. Had the family insisted on remaining in their home and city, they may still be alive, and had the opportunity to preserve Syria. One of the recurring themes in the series was the feelings of guilt resulting from leaving the country behind at a time when the country most needed its sons and daughters. One of the most important messages conveyed by the series was that leaving Damascus should not be perceived as a solution. This message reflects the regime’s concern about the de-urbanisation that resulted from the migration of the urban middle-classes.

_Azmeh ʿaʿliyya (A Family Crisis)_

Produced by ‘Syriana Art Production and Distribution’, written by Shadi Kiwan, directed by Hiasham Sharbatji, and broadcast in _Ramadan 2017_, _Azmeh ʿaʿliyya_ addresses the daily life of a Syrian family that lives in an urban area in Damascus (elcinema.com, n.d.).55 The father, Jihad, performed by Rashid Assaf, is a schoolteacher who belongs to that generation of Ba’thists who descended from the middle peasantry and migrated to the Syrian cities during the 1970s-1990s to join their jobs in the public sector.56 The members of this group of rural-urban migrants have intentionally become more urbanised (see Chapters 5 and 6). The family depends mainly on the father’s income and not on any rural sources. The family members always wear urban outfits and the son and two daughters are university students. One episode shows that the latter usually frequent Old Damascus cafes and restaurants for their recreational

---

55 Available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTo2_7l43JA&list=PL7RtNkO3mvp7TES7CvNFponCUJa_HLO7i&ab channel=%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B9-XYZRGBartProduction](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTo2_7l43JA&list=PL7RtNkO3mvp7TES7CvNFponCUJa_HLO7i&ab channel=%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B9-XYZRGBartProduction) [Accessed 20/02/2022].

56 Coined in this thesis: The ‘acquired urbanity’ urbanites.
activities. The father and the mother both maintain their relations with their extended families back in their original village. The following paragraphs will illustrate that the series might be described as a course in good citizenship tailored to this specific group of urbanites.

The series reflects the changing views of the Syrian regime towards the ongoing war. The series was produced after about a year of the regime’s victory in Aleppo that led to its recapturing of its eastern part. Supported by the Russian air forces that entered the battle towards the end of 2015, the regime was achieving victories on the battlefield which, together with what seemed to be a Saudi passivity, raised its morals.

When contrasted to al-Haqa’eb, the new series obviously depends less on the dialogue between the different political currents and more on the monologues performed by the series protagonist Jihad. Many episodes end by a scene of Jihad speaking loudly to himself or lecturing his family and/or neighbours about true patriotism, and how the good patriotic citizen should behave. The viewer is not left to conclude the right choices by themselves in these scenes but is directly indoctrinated by Jihad. When discussions take place between Jihad and some of his relatives who support different parties within the opposition, the discussion ends by the victory of Jihad’s logic, and is not left open-ended as in al-Haqa’eb. The conscience of Jihad’s pro-opposition uncle suddenly ‘wakes up’ in one episode, and he starts rebuking himself and describing himself as an idiot and even a traitor.

The Ba’thist ideological inclinations of Jihad, however, once again, are a subject of mockery. The series depicts the Ba’th party as a space for corrupt careerists who continue to parrot empty slogans while their endeavours are mainly focused on self-aggrandisement. Jihad is the exception in this corrupted milieu, but his attempts to follow his principles, inspired by the Ba’thist rhetoric, are often unsuccessful. Jihad has to acquiesce to reality and to become pragmatic even if that means violating his principles. One example is the episode when he wanted his cell in the Ba’th party to fight the ta’fish phenomenon, but he ends up buying a looted washing machine

---

57 The previous chapters showed how frequenting Old Damascus is a significant sign of a certain urban Damascene identity, sponsored and supported by the regime’s new elites in their endeavours to claim an urban identity for themselves.
himself. Another example is the episode when he wanted to fight the greed of the merchants and ends up dealing with those merchants themselves.

The ultimate example comes in the last episode when Jihad knew that a businessman was buying the buildings in the neighbourhood because he wanted to demolish them and build new modern towers in their place. When asked to sell his flat, Jihad firmly refuses and accuses the businessman of distorting the neighbourhood to serve his own interests; but towards the end of the episode, the businessman pays Jihad a visit and manages to convince him to sell his flat. The dialogue shows Jihad as a nostalgic dreamer who hopelessly wants to maintain the status-quo in the face of time. The businessman, meanwhile, seemed to be more rational and convincing than Jihad. The outcome of this scene contrasts the rationality of the regime’s elites (impersonated by the businessman) with the irrational nostalgia of the past of the Ba’thist schoolteacher Jihad.

One of the important, and most recurring, messages in the series, however, is the one directed at the urban population. The message is that the state is doing its best and the urbanites should be more patient due to the circumstances of war. One of the daughters gives her brother detailed numbers about the suffering of the different groups in the country and tells him he should be thankful for what he has. The brother, of course, agrees with his sister. The above-mentioned scene of Jihad and the businessman is also very telling in this regard. The insistence of Jihad on maintaining his old life is depicted as non-realistic. Following the businessman’s logic, Jihad should be happy to sell his flat for a high price and move to a more affordable (less classy and more importantly less urban) neighbourhood. This group of urbanites should accept the deterioration in their living standards, not only financially but also socially (as the suggested destination neighbourhoods are more rurban than urban) and allow the regime elites to go on with their real-estate projects.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the problem of the regime constituency leaving the country has not been central to this series, as it had been to al-Haqa’eb, but one of the episodes was dedicated to this theme. One of Jihad’s relatives spends the night at Jihad’s flat in preparation for his travel the next morning. The relative is young, handsome, educated, and depicted as very likeable. The man’s boat sinks in the waters
of the Mediterranean, as expected, and the likeable man dies. The message, again, was that migration is not a solution and real patriotic citizens should remain in their country when their country needs them the most (as Jihad’s lectures go). It is the regime elites who needed these groups to stay, not the country, but the series, as always, uses concepts like patriotism, national interest, and the public good to serve the interests and aspirations of the elites.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored and analysed the impact of the war on rural-urban dynamics in Syria. It has been a discussion on how the war has led to the deepening of the rural-urban divisions that were already existent on the eve of the uprising. It has explored the discourses of different rural and rurban groups towards the urbanites and highlighted an increase in the feeling of bitterness among the members of these groups which translated into an increasingly hostile discourse that underscored some of the existent stereotypes that have been historically linked to urbanites.

The chapter also focused on the militarisation and ruralisation of the uprising, and how this alienated wider sections of the urbanites. The behaviour of the opposition militias also contributed to the spread of these feelings of resentment among the urbanites. The regime continued to exploit this alienation to maintain its control over the country’s urban spaces. The resentments stemming from rural-urban tensions have been so consequential in determining the political attitudes of the different social groups; they should be considered in any national reconciliation or peace-building process that may take place in the future - no less than sectarian and class divisions.

The chapter also examined the demographic changes that resulted from the regime’s military tactics and social engineering endeavours. It was illustrated how the regime’s behaviour and choices have intensified the de-ruralisation and de-urbanisation of the Syrian society and how these two phenomena coalesced to intensify the rurbanisation of this society. It is too early to speculate on the consequences of these phenomena on the future of Syria, but it is necessary, as has been argued, to study the agency behind them.
The process of studying the regime’s approach towards each of these phenomena and its role in intensifying and maintaining them, allows the researcher to highlight certain predatory endeavours that any plan for future Syria should take into consideration. First, it has been shown that the regime elites may not be motivated to reform the agricultural sector and may even attempt to thwart such endeavours because they do not suit their outlook towards future Syria. According to them, it should depend more on services and tourism and less on agriculture. Second, the regime will probably continue to thwart the return of the refugees and to maintain the outcomes of the demographic engineering it has been working on during the past years. The return of the refugees or of the internally displaced groups to their original areas may threaten to undo all its predatory endeavours of the last decade.

The discussion about the material outcomes of the war was complemented by a study of the developments in the regime’s discourse during the last years. Analysing the drama produced by the regime elites during this period has shown that the elites’ concern has shifted from mocking the rural population towards maintaining the quiescence of the urban population and attempting to diminish the role of the regime’s old constituency within the urban spaces. This became clear when the drama started to criticise the urbanite Baathists and the ‘acquired urbanity’ urbanites instead of criticising the rural population and the rural Baathists as in the pre-2011 period. The drama of the post-2011 years is a continuation of that of the pre-2011 period despite this significant development; the regime elites maintained their endeavours to manipulate rural-urban relations and identities, and continued their efforts aimed at deciding who should be categorised as rural or urban.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

This thesis has shown the extent to which rural-urban dynamics have been influential in Syria’s modern history throughout the early 20th century until today. The shifts witnessed in these dynamics have led to shifts in the distribution of political, economic, and symbolic power and resources among the different rural, rurban, and urban groups (and vice versa). They have also affected and been affected by the changes in the political choices, the identification processes, and the public discourses and narratives of these groups.

The thesis has proposed a new understanding of rural-urban relations that not only embraces their complexity, but also recognises the dialectical relation between the objective and subjective, the internal and external, and the material and symbolic aspects of these relations. The different materials that were analysed throughout the different chapters of the thesis have illustrated how perceptions and discourses co-constituted the processes of identity formation. Critical Discourse Analysis informed the study of these materials which have allowed the thesis to trace the identity narratives of the different groups and to follow their development throughout historical periods covered by the thesis. The thesis has therefore highlighted the systematic operation and effects of agential, discursive and symbolic dynamics in the course of the development of rural-urban relations which the tendency towards economic determinism in the existing literature obscures. This is a lacuna that this thesis actively sought to address.

Empirical Findings

The period between the late 19th and the early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of most of the groups that influenced the outbreak of the 2011 uprising and its later course. It was necessary to de-romanticise this period, and to approach it from a dialectical perspective that highlights the discursive tactics used in building the identity narratives of these social groups and to expose the interests embedded within
them. Analysing the cinema of the period showed that urban elites believed themselves to be responsible for lifting the rural population from its ‘backwardness’; a belief that may be described as an ‘urban burden’.

The problems of identification that are so consequential today did not fully emerge, however, until the 1960s when rural-urban migration intensified and became less precarious than what it used to be during the previous decades. The expansion of the public sector and its attraction of waves of rural migrants to the urban centres (to join their jobs) resulted in the alienation of original urbanites and in rural-urban tensions and grievances, and the discourses and counter discourses that continue to define political and social life in today’s Syria. Analysing the film that was produced under the rule of the 1960s’ Ba’thists and comparing it to the films of the pre-1958 period have shown the contrast between the two periods and how the public discourse shifted from pro-urban to pro-rural. The urbanites who were depicted as responsible for ‘civilising’ and ‘enlightening’ the rural population in the pre-1958 cinema, became the exploiters of the latter in the post-1963 Ba’thist discourse. The rural population who was absent in the pre-1958 narrative on national struggle was also transformed in the 1960s cinema into heroes fighting for justice.

Studying the period of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule has paved the way for a much better understanding of the regime’s choices and strategies during the 2011 uprising. Hafiz al-Assad mastered the game of pitting the rural and urban populations against each other. He reconciled certain urban groups while he was simultaneously encouraging the colonising of the cities with loyalist rural migrants’ neighbourhoods. During the cold civil war of the late 1970s and early 1980s he used the state’s lucrative sectors as a carrot to seduce the urban population and, at the same time, he used the historical grievances of the rural population as a stick to threaten those urbanites by reminding them of what would happen if more radical leaders replaced him in power. Viewed from this angle, Hafiz al-Assad’s period may not be simply reduced to a pro-rural rule that might be contrasted to a perceived pro-urban shift during the 2000s. The rule of al-Assad senior produced and reproduced alliances that cut across social cleavages, accompanied by a discursive arsenal that provided something for everyone. Indeed, the analysis of the drama produced during his rule showed how he was able to
manipulate the public discourse. Producing *al-Fahed* in the early 1970s was intended to remind the rural population of the urban exploitation and to guarantee their allegiance to him in his war against the non-Damascene urbanites while producing *Seerat ‘Al al-Jalali* was meant to reconcile the urbanites of Aleppo and to criticise the dominance of rural Ba’thists over the city’s intellectual and artistic spheres.

The opposition during the 1970s continued to benefit from a certain margin that was left for civil society. The press continued to enjoy remnants of freedom (Ismail, 2018, p. 31). Labour unions and professional associations (*niqabat mihaniya*) of doctors, lawyers, and engineers continued to participate in opposition activities. Hafiz al-Assad exploited the cold civil war against the Muslim Brotherhood and its ‘Fighting Vanguard’ to end this opposition and annihilate the margin that was left for civil society (Perthes, 1995, pp. 170-80; Hinnebusch, 2001, p. 79). The urban opposition to al-Assad’s rule did not have any option but to shift to passive resistance. There were many urbanite groups who created discursive ghettos for themselves by reproducing certain narratives which asserted their urbanity and authenticity while excluding newcomers.

One of the most distinguishing features of Syrian politics since the 1970s which differentiates it from other countries in the region such as Egypt, was the decisional independence of the Syrian regime under the Assads which allowed the country’s leaders to manipulate rural-urban dynamics without being effectively checked by local or international actors. Countries such as Egypt had to rely on funding by Western and international actors who were capable of and willing to interfere in the country’s domestic politics and economic policies. The Assads, at least until 2011, preferred to rely on rent and on alliances with international actors (such as Iran and Russia) who were not willing to undermine the decisional independence of their regime.

It is noteworthy that the regime’s manipulation of rural-urban tensions was intentional and systematic. Authors such as Hinnebusch were aware of the intentional and systematic aspects of the regime’s tactics in the 1980s (discussed in Chapter 5). The literature on the 2000s Syria and the 2011 uprising, on the contrary, tends to deal with the shifts in rural-urban dynamics as by-products of the economic liberalisation, or the regime’s endeavours to upgrade itself during the 2000s, or the war in the post-2011
period. This involved various levels of analytical economic determinism which obfuscated the significance of the al-Assads’ regime’s pro-active exercise of agency.

The absence, or the defeat, of the actors capable of obstructing or ameliorating the regime’s manipulations have led to the accumulation of tensions and grievances that exploded in violent episodes on two occasions. The first was in the cold civil war of the late 1970s and early 1980s under Hafiz al-Assad, and the second was the crisis that started in 2011. These violent episodes distinguish Syrian politics from what has been taking place in countries such as Egypt, where the state’s policies have been scrutinised by international actors, and where power continued to be distributed among several actors and groups, as the army’s ability to sacrifice Mubarak and maintain its power proved in 2011.

In the same vein, the thesis has shown the limitations of the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’. It has been illustrated that the above-mentioned grievances and tensions were not only material (political or economic) but also symbolic. The variations in the public discourse throughout the decades meant that different groups had to deal with discursive shifts that contributed to boosting or reducing their prestige and social status as well as legitimising and delegitimising their interests, aspirations, and identity claims. These discursive shifts and variations also had an impact on the political choices and social alliances within and between these different groups. Different groups used different discursive forms to produce, reproduce, and disseminate their public discourses and identity narratives. The political power differential meant that certain groups were more capable of imposing their discourses (the regime elites and their drama production for example), while less powerful groups were able to resist by resorting to historical narratives: the traditional urbanites using memoirs, for example, to propose certain definitions of authenticity and urbanity. This, partially at least, showed the importance of revisiting the historical period invoked by these narratives.

The decade of the 2000s witnessed the concentration of power within increasingly narrower circles; the term Jumlukiyya – Presidential Monarchy - discussed in Chapter 6 - is revealing in this context. This concentration of power Ironically took place at the same time as many of the opposition parties were promising themselves that the
economic liberalisation of the 2000s would somehow trigger a political liberalisation process.

That decade also brought with it an upgrading of al-Assad senior’s project of ‘colonising the cities’ into a new project of ‘taking over the cities’. This new project was led by a new generation of regime elites who wanted to dissolve their fathers’ partnership with the old bourgeoisie and wanted to become the new bourgeoisie of the country. The result was that the first decade of Bashar al-Assad’s rule witnessed the rise of a new configuration or rural-urban relations that suited the interests of the new elites. The symbolic dimension of this new configuration was supported by the drama productions of that period. Two mini-series that were produced during the 2000s were analysed in Chapter 6. *Homey Hon* was intended to cast doubts on the generational urbanites narratives of urbanity; it depicted their identity claims as outdated and contrasted their dwindling prestige with the rising influence of the new businessmen (*Mustathmereen*). *Day’a Day’a*, on the other hand, focused on mocking the rural population and delegitimising the welfare measures from which they used to benefit during the previous decades. The series’ representation of the new elites (*Mustathmereen*) is reminiscent of how they were represented in the pre-1958 drama. They were, again, presented as burdened by the duty of enlightening and leading the rural population out of their backwardness. It seemed as if the Syrian drama had turned 360 degrees. The difference is that the ‘urban burden’ now is supposed to fall over the shoulders of the new regime elites instead of the traditional urban bourgeoisie.

This new configuration benefited certain groups within the Syrian society, such as the new elites and certain groups within the urban middle and higher classes, while it harmed many others, not only among the rural and rurban population, but also among the urban groups. The material and the symbolic grievances brought on by this new configuration played a major role in deciding the political choices of the different groups on the eve of the uprising. This should not lead, however, to hasty conclusions that may result in reductionist understandings of the uprising’s course; many ideational, agential, and historical factors also played a major role in deciding the behaviour and choices of different actors (discussed in Chapter 7).
This thesis presented a dialectical non-reductionist understanding of the 2011 uprising that goes beyond the economistic assumptions that are common in the literature and among the proponents of the ‘liberalisation grievances thesis’, and, more importantly, beyond the spatial perspective from which many authors started in their analysis of the uprising. Chapters 6 and 7 showed how such a spatial perspective glosses over very important differences among those who might live in the same space; a problem which led many authors to inaccurate generalisations.

Indeed, the thesis considered the choices and behaviour of several groups across the rural-urban continuum and showed how their choices, partly at least, were influenced by rural-urban dynamics. It also showed the political divisions towards the uprising did not always overlap the rural-urban divisions. There were rural, rurban, and urban groups on both sides of the conflict. It was argued, consequently, that the uprising might not be reduced into a rural rebellion against urban privileges.

Chapter 7, moreover, focused on the regime’s strategies in 2011, and showed how much it benefited from its experience with the cold civil war of Hafiz al-Assad’s period. The regime continued to play the rural and urban populations game, pitting one against the other. It also continued to highlight what was perceived as a rural aspect in the uprising to threaten the urban population and to maintain their silence and passivity. The son, moreover, followed in the steps of his father by using violence in an endeavour to militarise the uprising; strategies that were reminiscent of what the father did when he managed to transform what was happening during the 1970-1980s from a civil movement led by civil society organisations into a war with the Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is noteworthy that the regime’s tactics would not have succeeded without the existence of historical tensions and grievances between the rural and urban populations in the country. The chapter also illustrated that neither of the two groups made much effort to counter the regime’s strategies. The majority of urbanites continued to live in their decades’ old self-imposed isolation from the rural population while those who joined the uprising among the rural and rurban populations were disappointed by the passivity of their urban counterparts and ended up developing an even more hostile discourse towards them.
Chapter 8 highlighted the fact that the Syrian regime started to gradually lose its
decisional independence after 2011. It became more and more dependent on Iranian
financial and military support due to the persistence of the protests, and Iranian
consultants’ influence over its plans and tactics had been increasing (Richani, 2016, p.
60). Russia had become more influential in the regime’s decision-making process since
2015 and managed to obtain for itself the lion’s share of the Syrian economy spoils.
The circumstances of war, however, meant that both the new players (Iran and Russia)
and the regime were able to continue with their plans without being checked. The
regime’s manipulation of social cleavages and its predatory practices that started in
the previous decades therefore intensified during the war, due to the support of its
international backers. The analysis of the Syrian drama of the post-2011 war period
has shown that the predatory practices of the regime and its allies reached the
(r)urban middle classes - those who migrated to the cities during the previous decades
to join their jobs in the public sector. These groups used to be the historical allies of
the Ba’thist/Assadist regimes throughout the decades since the 1960s. The
circumstances of war, and the concomitant dependence on external players, led to a
further narrowing in the regime’s social base. The regime and its allies even upgraded
the old practices (of appropriating lands and properties for example) into a new
process of social engineering that aimed at creating a new demographic reality. The
original inhabitants were pushed out of their areas and replaced by new loyal
inhabitants that often were not even Syrians (Lebanese, Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians).

The chapter also added to the existing literature on the role of rural-urban relations
during wars. It illustrated how rural-urban dynamics affect the military choices and
decisions of the different actors. War facilitates the predatory practices of all actors.
The example of Homs shows how predation may target cities and urban areas; the
shelling and destruction of areas within Homs where no opposition fighters were
stationed, represent one of the best examples on how actors may use war to achieve
their aims. On the rural side, the destruction, mass displacement, and torching of
registries are only three examples among many other tactics that were used in the
endeavours to achieve the social engineering witnessed today.
Limitations and Future Research

The regime’s social engineering endeavours resulted in displacing millions of people into camps for refugees as well as creating millions of internally displaced persons. It was one of the main concerns of the thesis to study how the displacement and the life in these camps have been affecting the identification processes of those people, and how this would affect their perceptions of their present and future. It was impossible, however, to achieve this goal due to the pandemic as well as the personal circumstances mentioned earlier. It is therefore necessary to address this gap in the future, and to undertake research projects that complement the existing literature on this issue. Any endeavour to settle the Syrian crisis should consider the demands and aspirations of those millions of people who had to leave their homes and lands, and to live in camps throughout the past years. There were many among them who were displaced when they were young and grew up in these camps. It is assumed that their worldviews would be different from what their fathers and mothers used to have before 2011.

This research project, on the other hand, opened the door for different venues of future research. It has shown that Rural-Urban Studies should not be limited to the normative tendencies that currently dominate the field. Future research in this area should be underpinned by more pragmatic perspectives that engage with the conflictual aspects of rural-urban relations during peace as well as war. The Syrian case shows that rural-urban divisions are not less politically, socially, economically, and symbolically consequential than other social cleavages such as class, sect, ethnicity, and so on. Indeed, it has been shown how the influence of rural-urban relations is not limited to economic development, but also comprises shifts on the cultural and symbolic levels. Those relations even affect the artistic field such as music and drama production. The minority within this body of literature who acknowledge the role of subjective and symbolic factors are the ones more capable of presenting a deeper understanding of these relations, as well as their material and symbolic consequences; more research in this direction is much needed.

This thesis has also shown how Social Identity Theory may be applied to gain a better understanding of rural-urban relations. It offers a theoretical framework capable of
engaging with the complexity of these relations and dialectically integrating the
different dimensions of the pertinent identification processes. Further exploration of
rural-urban dynamics from the perspective of Social Identity Theory may prove to be
valuable both in Syria and other parts of the world.

The thesis has also shown the importance of analysing drama and memoirs to
understand rural-urban relations. The analysis of the memoirs chosen for this thesis
supports Salamandra’s argument on the exceptionalism of Syrian memoirs, and how
they ‘construct accounts of the past in a wider context’: part autobiography and part
social history (Salamandra, 2004, p. 127). It is therefore recommended that the
memoirs published after 2011 should be analysed in order to obtain a better
understanding of the crisis and its social dimension.

The research has also shown that most drama works were meant to disseminate the
discourses of the ruling elites, and to convey certain messages to the audience. This
demonstrated how drama in Syria is not about venting (tanfis) but more about
disseminating the discourse of the regime or of certain groups within its inner circles.
Using drama to reproduce rural and urban identities is not limited to Syria. One of the
most important articles used in this thesis comes from Turkey and shows how Turkish
drama reproduces such identities (Erman, 1998). This shows the importance of drama
analysis in understanding rural-urban relations not only in Syria but across the world. It
is hoped that this thesis will provide an example on how future researchers might use
drama analysis to present a better understanding of rural-urban relations.

**Research Implications**

It has been discussed how one of the consequences of the regime’s social engineering
was the intensification of the rurbanisation of the Syrian society: rural inhabitants
were pushed away from their rural areas and sources of income while many urbanites
were simultaneously displaced from their neighbourhoods to more rurban spaces (or
even outside the country). The two most important issues that occurred in this context
were the regime’s interest in: (i) thwarting the return of many of the refugees; and (ii)
hindering the rebuilding of the agricultural sector. These two concerns are implied by
the desire of the regime and its allies to maintain the demographic engineering they had achieved throughout the past years. Any attempt to reform the Syrian agricultural sector should therefore be underpinned not only by a consideration of how the dynamics of rural-urban relations have been changing since 2011, but also by an awareness of the interests of the regime and its domestic and international allies. It is in this context that highlighting the intentional and systematic aspects of the regime’s tactics becomes important.

The regime’s ambitions, moreover, are not limited to the agricultural sector or the rural population. Chapter 8 provided a discussion on how certain urban groups were also victims of social engineering. Any reconstruction endeavours should, therefore, also consider the social engineering performed by the regime and its allies within urban spaces. Heydemann noted that al-Assad and his allies see reconstruction as an opportunity ‘to fix in place the social and demographic shifts caused by six years of violent conflict’ (Heydemann, 2017). This shows why the shifts in rural-urban dynamics should not be taken as by-products of the 2000s liberalisation or the post-2011 war but as intentional and systematic undertakings.

The analysis of different journal articles, furthermore, showed that the tensions and grievances among the rural and urban populations had intensified during the war years. These grievances and feelings of hostility should be considered in any national reconciliation endeavour. A successful national reconciliation should not be limited to the sectarian, class, and ethnic aspects, but should also consider the rural-urban question. Rural-urban relations in post-war Syria should be underpinned by cooperation and partnership instead of hostility and competition over resources; a partnership that may facilitate a balanced development for both rural and urban areas.

Finally, the most important lesson that this study of Syria’s contemporary history may provide is that the regime’s ability to manipulate rural-urban divisions and other social cleavages without being checked was a major factor contributing to all the tragedies witnessed today. The regime’s decisional independence facilitated this manipulation and allowed the Assads not only to resort to violence, but to terrorise the society both in peace and war (knowing that none of the main actors is willing to, or capable of, deterring them). This meant that the Syrian society under these conditions may only
experience two states: either an explosion of violence resulting from the accumulation of the tensions between its different components (as what happened in the 1980s and in 2011), or a state of political passivity (as in the decades separating the two episodes). Any future settlement that might allow the continuity of the conditions that underpin such decisional independence will not be sustainable. A sustainable settlement, on the contrary, should allow civil society to flourish without oppression. The flourishing of civil society would create spaces for different hegemonic projects to emerge which represents an alternative to the Assads reign of terror and their lack of interest in building a hegemonic bloc.
Bibliography


Al Modon, 2019. *Why did Rami Makhlouf Declare War on Samer Foz? [Arabic]*. [Online] Available at: https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2019/4/5/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B2 [Accessed 04 03 2020].


Droubi, H., 2017. The Life and Death of a Restaurant Called Deek el Jin [Arabic]. [Online] Available at: http://raseef22.com/life/2016/06/18/%d8%ad%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%a9-%d9%88%d9%85%d9%88%d8%aa-%d9%85%d8%b7%d8%b9%d9%85-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d9%85%d9%87-%d8%af%d9%8a%d9%83-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ac%d9%86/ [Accessed 25 10 2021].


FAO, 2017. Counting the Cost: Agriculture in Syria After Six Years of Crisis, s.l.: FAO.
in-syria/
[Accessed 01 March 2020].


Iskeef, M., 2012. The Syrian Countryside Raids the City [Arabic]. [Online] Available at: http://orientnews.net/ar/news_show/698/0/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%25%E2%80%A6 [Accessed 21 06 2017].


Mardam bey, F., 2015. A Dialogue with Farouk Mardam Bey [Arabic] [Interview] (3 September 2015).


Pearlman, W., 2017. We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria. New York: Custom House.


Salama, R., 2018. The Ta’fish Years [Arabic]. [Online] Available at:


between-syria%E2%80%99s-pre-2011-business-figures
[Accessed 04 03 2020].


Videos Appendix

1. ‘Nour wa Zalam’ (Light and Darkness): Film; 1947; Writer: Mohammad Shamel and Ali al-Arna’out; Director: Nazih al-Shahbandar; Producer: Nazih al-Shahbandar.

URL: Unavailable

2. ‘Al-Wadi Al-Akhdar’ (The Green Valley): Film; 1950; Writer, Director, and Producer: Zouheir al-Shawwa.

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dsg4Zk7OQCI&ab_channel=MediaVisualAudio%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

3. ‘Sa’ik al-Shahina’ (The Truck Driver): Film; 1968; Writer and Director: Pushko Vushinish; Producer: Public Institution for Cinema


4. ‘Al-Fahed’ (The Jaguar): Film; 1972; Writer: Haidar Haidar; Director: Nabil al-Maleh; Producer: Public Institution for Cinema

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2Zd3xmUXkM&ab_channel=MediaVisualAudio%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

5. ‘Al-Hayat al-Yawmiya fi Qaria Souriah’ (The Daily Life of a Syrian Village): Film; 1974; Director: Omar Amiralay; Producer: Public Institution for Cinema


7. ‘Homey Hon’ (My Home is Here): Series; 2004; Writers: Loubna Mashlah and Loubna Haddad; Director: Bassem Yakhour; Producers: Al-Sham International for Cinema and TV Production, and Fares ‘ayyash.

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ8N5BtvFbE&list=PLMPI__cKm4maAR8n842WqrHLntvKLMmmQ&ab_channel=%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%84 %D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D9%8A [Accessed: 26-02-2020].

8. ‘Day’a Day’a’ (A Lost Village); Season 1: Series; 2005; Writer: Mamdouh Hamada; Director: Al-Layth Hajjo; Producer: Sama Art Production

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvw1EXEJOT4&list=PLLCK2gut59nisWEPrg_sb2TZCPyBevUf&ab_channel=SamaArtInternational%7C%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7 [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

9. ‘Day’a Day’a’ (A Lost Village); Season 2; Series; 2008; Writer: Mamdouh Hamada; Director: Al-Layth Hajjo; Producer: Sama Art Production

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqPc8iZVz44&list=PLLCK2gut59nikMcUGxb8K_VeU- _bam5m&ab_channel=SamaArtInternational%7C%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%D9%84%D9%84 %D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D9%8A [Accessed: 26-02-2022].


URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0krEO7GuPQ&ab_channel=rtvsyria [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

11. Speech by President Bashar al-Assad: 30-03-2011.


URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_VPu9CbH94
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjiDyFvCqy4&t=18s

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v81XBqyry1s [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

15. ‘Al-Haqa’eb’ (The Luggage): Series; 2014; Writer: Mamdouh Hamada; Director: Al-Layth Hajjo; Producer: Syrian Art Production International SAPI.
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwOuO7jZBck&list=PL4SKAxBjuOCu-BZOq3tPmWtfHcxctT2eV&ab_channel=BlueProductionsDrama [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTo2_7I43IA&list=PL7RtNkQ3mvp7TES7CvINFpnCUoa_HLQ7i&ab_channel=%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B9-XYZRGBartProduction [Accessed: 26-02-2022].

17. Interview with Samir Nachar: TV Interview; 23-07-2018; SyriaTV.
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTyZ4lPbhPw&ab_channel=SyriaTV%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7 [Accessed 26-02-2022].