Daily Life in Syria before 2011

Written by Asma Alghoul

Part of a series of research papers entitled
"Syria and its people"

Produced by Sharq
in partnership with
the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

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Translated and edited by Jenine Abboushi

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A series of research papers about life in Syria prior to 2011
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We at Sharq have in recent years interviewed Syrians from diverse socio-economic, religious, ethnic and geographic backgrounds about their lives in Syria prior to 2011. Each interview focuses on a specific topic in which the narrator has experience, and all provide detailed personal accounts of life as a Syrian in a particular community and town living under particular pressures and privileges.

Listening to the individual stories, it becomes apparent that certain problems impacted Syrians across the country, regardless of ethnicity, religion, class or location and that these stories, collectively, add insight into the difficulties Syrians faced in the decades leading up to the 2011 revolution.

It would serve the future leaders of Syria, and agencies and organisations concerned with the development of the country post-conflict, to consider the lessons presented through these collective stories and experiences to ensure the development of a peaceful and prosperous society.

This is the motivation behind this book, this collection of studies on six interrelated spheres, each of which was written following a review of over 120 personal stories and a study of existing research. Despite the massive destruction, the country is not going to be built on a blank canvas. Its people and diverse communities carry with them fond memories, valuable experiences and crucial knowledge that if heard, nurtured and shared can provide the foundation needed for rebuilding a strong and inclusive Syria.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in the destruction of much of the country and many aspects of its society, but warm memories and relationships abound. When looking to rebuild, be it physical structures, institutions, programmes or communities, looking to Syria’s past should inform design for the future. It is not enough to only understand the experience of Syrians during the conflict, but also to know about their lives, loves and concerns prior to it.

Peaceful coexistence and post-conflict development require above all else empathy and understanding of the other. Effective and constructive development in our understanding of the causes and impact of different actions, events and environments on individuals and communities pre-conflict is key to our ability to develop approaches that can both help end conflict and build sustainably peaceful communities.

For decades, Syrians were denied the opportunity to honestly and constructively share their experiences, their dreams and their concerns. As such, we must focus on building trust based on a unifying desire to build a harmonious and inclusive society. Such trust can be built through storytelling. The telling of and listening to individual people’s stories of struggle and success, woes and wonders, nurtures connections and helps build stronger communities based on empathy, acceptance and respect.

Reem Maghribi
Managing Director, Sharq.Org

You can read and listen to the interviews referenced in this paper at www.SyrianHistories.org

Daily Life in Syria Before the Revolution and the War

Written by Asma al-Ghoul
Produced by Sharq.Org, 2018

Introduction

Before the Syrian revolution, Syrian society was not exposed to the world but was more like a box of mysteries. You may get some of its news if you meet someone coming from there or if a Syrian television drama represents actual social reality, but that seldom happened. Most of the literary, research, technical, and even statistical work coming from Syria had usually already been approved by the regime. Aside from this, what used to reach us was little more than a whisper, unfinished stories, coming from afar, from the underground, and smelling of damp isolation cells--more terrifying than what can be read in Alexandre Dumas's *The Count de Monte Christo*, or Kafka's *The Penal Colony*.

Hence any project that traces life in Syria to the pre-revolutionary period serves as a treasure filling a void from the unknown, a place we never knew: how was Syria before the revolution? What were the problems of the community then? What was the nature of social relations at the time? What is the extent of liberties achieved then? All of these were questions that remained unanswered until millions of Syrians, without censorship or fear, went out to tell the world the facts of their lives there.

We have a hundred and twenty-five stories of men and women who tell their experiences frankly and truthfully, but it will be difficult to publish them all as they came, as stories directly from the heart that can be printed on paper. We will instead publish cite important passages from these conversations without losing their vitality. We travel, with the Syrians interviewed, back in time to their childhood when they return there. We also visit with them through the span of Syrian geography, its diverse landscapes, customs, and dialects, and we carry with them their dreams and longings in the expanses of their exile between Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Europe--their journeys of a thousand miles without finding the first home for which they always yearn.

We will explore in the first section the social phenomena that are frequently mentioned in the narratives and that marked peoples' memories. Quotations are supported by historical and intellectual references that help in their interpretation, including women's issues, social freedoms, and social culture, including family, nature, and cooking.

The second section discusses the social groups according to their respective functions. Each group has its unique world, through which the narrator narrates the facts of her/his life, memories, the challenges s/he underwent and even her/his offenses. These are fascinating worlds that reveal many secrets of Syrian society.
The memories of these groups will be presented from different regions and periods in Syria before 2011 through the integration of quotations and ideas. This means presenting small living models of Syrian society in different groupings: traders, farmers, and university students.

Social phenomena

Introduction

Syrian society before the revolution might seem to have had a flourishing social fabric that developed consistently despite difficult economic and political realities. But this is not the full reality, evident by examining more closely this social fabric. In so doing, we find social relations frayed by the experience of facing deterioration in all spheres of Syrian society.

What happened with the revolution was the rise of this internal turmoil to the surface. According to a study entitled "The Impact of Strife on Social Capital: Social Confrontation in Syria" (published by the Syrian Center for Policy Research and funded by Friedrich Ebert), the present challenge for Syrian society is managing certain social advantages with the cessation of violence, because the continuation of the war "ensures a continual unraveling of social fabric."

The fragmentation of social ties and networks resulted from dramatic polarisation and the surge of diverse religious, sectarian, national, ethnic and ideological groups. Social confidence has fallen to very low levels, whether in terms of trust among individuals or a sense of security. These social realities, after the revolution and the escalation of armed conflict, are now easier to detect and measure, but before this time the nature of social relations was less clear, and it was not easy to make accurate judgments about them.

But what we can deduce from the citizen testimonies, during the interviews with the *Syrian Histories* team, is that the state of social structures, individual and collective, under tyranny and with economic deterioration, led to certain phenomena, at once negative and positive. But all lean in favor of the regime, to help it gain control and export the image it wants to the world.

This view develops from the nationalist and patriotic slogans and the struggle against the Israeli enemy, and at the same time combines tolerance for all religions with a leftist' perspective on social freedoms. These ideas seem principled and credible, but they were the same ideas through by which the state blackmailed Syrian society, enforcing silence regarding the narrow power interests of state. These methods were also used to exercise tyranny, create economic decline, and justify detentions.

The Baathist Baath Party in Syria used two words opportunistically: "freedom," a forceful, influential concept, and "unity," a profound aspiration of Syrian and Arab peoples.

Successive political conflicts have thrown Syrian society into a state of permanent transition. This chronic crisis grew out of the conflict between fundamentalist Salafist ideologies and modernity, the forces of division and fragmentation and the forces of unity and integration, as well as external interventions. It is a society in a state of constant confrontation and conflict.

When we speak about a social phenomenon, we refer to the behavior of a group of individuals that may be either fixed or variable. We will begin with the first of these phenomena: injustice against women, and the difficulties they face as a result of behavior rooted in perceptions of women as weak and inferior.

First Experience: Women's Struggles

Women in Syrian society have many social difficulties, which are partly shared with all who live in societies in which they are exposed to oppression, detention, and government corruption. The other part concerns their identity as women, their social category, social violence, early marriage, and access to education.

In a previous study by the Syrian Center for Policy Research, data shows that women's social participation in public social activities, volunteer work, and educational, health, and cultural initiatives fell sharply from 69 % before the Syrian revolution to 51% during the revolution at the national level. Before the revolution, women already suffered from social, economic, political, and legislative marginalization as permitted by the personal status law.

We note the weak participation in major governorates such as Aleppo and Damascus, while participation was relatively high in some rural areas. This paradox raises questions about the weakness of civil structures and citizen participation in general and in the case of women in particular, and perhaps points to the considerable suffering of Syrian women during this period. Respondents' views may also be influenced by the war, as many tend to see the period before wars in an exaggeratedly positive way compared to current warfare.

Beating

Fatima al-Hassan, born in 1971, was interviewed by the *Syrian Histories* team in Lebanon in 2016. She starts her story by saying: "I am from Damascus. I have lived a tragic life. Since my marriage, my life is miserable, and it is miserable until today."

She married three times. Her first marriage took place at a young age, and she stayed in Jordan. She is deprived of her sons and her daughter, and she knows nothing about them. She was also deprived of another son from her second marriage. She was subjected to various kinds of violence, deception, exploitation, and dispossession of personal documentation.

About one of the times when her second husband abused her she said, "he grabbed me by my hair and punched my nose. The blood dripped from me, and he made away with our son. I wanted to cross the street to get my son home, and I went to get him from my husband's house, and I was covered in blood. I went to the hospital, and they set the break in my nose. I was in very bad condition and did not go to my family until three days later when the swelling of my face eased. "

During the interview, Fatima said she protested to the police after having paid the patrol group a sum of money to arrest her husband, but nothing happened to him, as he had paid more and got away.

Today Fatima dreams of living with her children and seeing them married and seeing her grandchildren. She settled in Lebanon with her third husband and another young son.

When women are reported to have suffered from beatings, forced marriage, or being barred from education, their experiences are included in the category of gender-based violence. The focus here is on violence against women, where domestic violence by a family member is the most widespread form of injustice against women.

Sexual Exploitation

It is difficult to determine the specific dates of occurrence for the incidents recounted in many of the testimonies presented by women, and the *Syrian Histories* project determines the length of narration, but all of these incidents occurred before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011.

While it cannot be said that the status of women in Syria progresses after the revolution, Syrian women suffer from multiple types of social violence that conforms to the definitions outlined in the gender-based violence manual of the UN Women's Program. Indeed, some problems persist in pre and post-crisis conditions of Syrian women: a lack of access to support due to fear or shame, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, child marriage, restriction of movement, and harassment.

The dancer Mira, who preferred not to be identified, was 36 when she was interviewed in 2016 in Beirut where she settled. She says that it started during an evening with her husband and his friends when her husband suggested going to visit one of his friends.

She says, “When we arrived, my husband went out to buy coffee to help his friend wake up from his drunkenness. In his absence, his friend tried to harass me, and I opened the door and ran outside to find my husband standing on the stairs waiting. I told him what happened and he didn’t react. I then understood his intention and argued with him. The next day I took my things and returned to my family’s home. But my husband came and talked with my brother, who in turn forced me to return to my husband."

Mira explains that at that moment she understood that her family wanted to get rid of her and that she could not take refuge with them. She added, “My husband insisted on taking me back to the cabaret, saying that the matter was not in my hands, and then he took me back to the house of one of his friends. This time I waited for him to come out and pretended I was unconscious. They took me to the doctor and brought me home. The next day I took advantage of my husband’s absence from home, collected my bag, and took refuge with my only aunt who stayed in touch with me. I stayed with her that night. She promised me that she would intervene to solve my problem, but the next day I heard her husband threatening her with divorce if I stayed with her, so I decided to go back to my husband's house. There is at least one house where I can stay. I decided to make a deal with him that I will dance in the cabaret, but without night duty.”

Mira's suffering began when the community stigmatized her from childhood.
"When I was 15, I loved a young man, a wicker artisan in our area, and I met with him and talked. He told me he loved me. On one occasion he took me to his house to sit alone, and we spoke about things that happened with us. My family found out about this, and that same day they would not let me leave the house. I was treated as a disgrace, and they decided to marry me off quickly."

Living with Corruption

Women suffer from the same abuse of rights as all citizens, particularly the rampant corruption in the organs of the state. Midwife Amina Na'ana, born in 1958 in an interview

with the *Syrian Histories* team in Turkey in 2017, says that influential people forced her husband to relinquish all his property and then they pursued her after his death and were able to obtain everything that she inherited. She adds: "I had everything concerning his property on my ‘eco' machine I used for work. I had bonds and legalized, notarized documents. I had the name of the engineer who sold the machine to me in addition to the date of purchase. I took the contract and went to court, and found there a witness. He swore on the Quran that he saw my husband paying for the device. I asked him how old he was and he said 18, and I said I had bought the device 16 years ago. Yet his testimony was confirmed, and I was tried in bad faith and imprisoned. All my husband's efforts and his work went into the hands of gangsters."

Racism

Women sometimes faced problems because of their identity and ethnicity. Noor Aweys, a 30-year-old Palestinian who lived most of her life in the Palestinian camps in Syria said she did not feel any discrimination against her during the course of her studies up to the university. She lived the best years of her life during this period until she reached the stage of searching for employment. "I began to try to integrate into Syrian society in practical terms, as I was no longer studying, so I realized I was a second-rate person and I heard strange things said about the Palestinians," she says. “Some said that Palestinian girls, and girls from Yarmouk refugee camp, were cheap institutions. This was such a shock to me."

She also began to hear about her Palestinian origin and her dark skin. She said, "I heard this talk from both young men and women in Syrian society. Even though I associated with educated people, they would know that I was a Syrian Palestinian. When I heard this talk, I suddenly felt a barrier inside of me, as if I suddenly discovered that I was a Palestinian, not a Syrian." During the interview with the *Syrian Histories* team in 2016, Noor noted that if she wanted to have a relationship with a young man, she must immediately mention that she was a Palestinian at the very moment when she had forgotten it. She had always lived in Syria as a Syrian, grew up there speaking the Syrian dialect, studied Syrian laws, and she does not know a lot about Palestine.

Everyone Oppressed Women

The oppression of women is not limited to a specific ethnicity or sect in Syrian society, but it is on some level practiced by everyone. Some habits govern society in all its dimensions, preventing women from living their humanity equally to men. Turkoman Hasna Assaf said during a meeting with the *Syrian Histories* team in 2016 that the Turkmen girls were married at an early age, and some of them were married as children, and this was forced, and no one cared about girls. And if a girl is born, the family is sad as it had suffered a misfortune. When a girl reaches the age of ten years old, someone asks to betroth her, and the family accepts, even if she has not yet reached puberty.

Hasna Assaf explains that some girls die because of marriage before puberty. "If the Aga fancies a girl, even if she is very young, he would marry her with no impediment or someone standing in his way." It also shows how everyone was afraid of the Aga, and they said: "Whoever rejects the Aga's request, he will remove this person from the face of the earth--simply kill him and kill his family." She also explains that the 10-year-old girl has many

tasks: she bakes and shepherds the sheep, cooks, and works in agriculture. "Moreover, she lives in terror that the Aga might see her and ask to marry her, and this would be the last day of her life if she refuses or even if she agrees! Such is the oppressive Turkmen customs."

Things are not so different in other communities. Najah, a Druze woman born in 1981, says that girls are the focus of everyone's attention through their actions and everyone is scrutinizing their movements." This is "unlike young man in our society, who are not subjected to the same harassment." "…Among the reasons for our leaving the village so that we would be relieved of such social pressure, where my (paternal) cousin can intervene in our lives, and even our neighbors can intervene. The marriage of my sister resulted from the intervention of our neighbors and their pressure on my mother!" Najah expressed surprise that even when she moved to Damascus, she remained a "daughter of the village," restricted in her behavior, her way of talking, and deal with those around her because she was scrutinized in Damascene society. "But this is all now in the past, and things changed when I worked and mingled with people from other sects. I felt like I came out of a closed environment now I can form my personality," she said in an interview with the *Syrian Histories* team in Lebanon in 2016.

The Breadth of Hatred

Despite the relative improvement in education, health, and the living conditions of women in Syria before the crisis, most institutions, networks, and values have assumed a dominant male character, according to the study, "The Impact of Social Capital Conflict in Syria," by the Syrian Center for Policy Research. Syrian society sustains a contradiction between the promotion of the status of women and diverse motivations to exclude and marginalize women's roles. The lack of space and civic freedoms played a major role in the slow development--and at times the decline--in the role of women, evidenced by their weak participation in economic activity between 2001 and 2010.

This desire to exclude women did not differ from village to city to desert, and it did not change from the distant past to today. Maryam Bouchi, from the Benesh district of Idlib, was eighty-one years old when interviewed by the *Syrian Histories* team in Beirut in 2016. "In a word, they hated girls and made sure to keep them at home. Girls only went out to work, and some of our families were running around after them for their lives." She added, "When I was seven, I started working in agriculture with my family and married at the age of 15. I gave birth to my first child at the age of seventeen, and then I made bread and cooked alone."

These tasks and burdens did not differ geographically. In the desert, for example, the largest burden is placed on women. "When a girl is born, at first they do not carry or approach her," says Nada Abdelkader, born in 1989, "as if there was no child in the house, like a rag on the ground. If she dies from crying, no one asks about her," she said in an interview with Turkey's *Syrian Histories* Team in 2017. "A relative of mine had a three-month-old baby girl. I nursed the infant, gave her affection, and carried her while the mother finished her work. I thought that what was happening was neglect by the mother. Later on, I discovered that those around her would tell her to not tend to her daughter before the house was finished, and they said to her, 'even if she dies.'"

Political Detention

Women have not been spared political persecution, part of general repression in Syria, and a large proportion of them have raised their sons and daughters in the absence of a father who was imprisoned for many years. Hala Ashraf al-Nasser, born in 1957, says, "When Abu al-Mu'amil was summoned 1987, Mu'amil was only three and a half months old. They called in my husband, and we thought it would be something simple. We hoped for his return and several days passed, and his detention continued. The first period was so hard that I hated everyone around me completely. Even my son Mu'amil I did not feel like nursing. I was wondering, "Is it conceivable that this thunderbolt has struck on our lives?"

It was only a year after Hala's marriage and the birth of her son when her husband was arrested. The shock of loneliness awaited her not for one year or two, but for ten years." During her interview in Turkey in 2017 about the harshness of society around her, Hala said: "We became a scourge for others so that the people who wanted our friendship before ignored me and did not greet me if I saw them by chance. I made a promise to myself that hope is my destiny in life; my efforts to raise my son and look for my husband's place of detention were my main concerns."

The mother of Mu'amil remained dependent on herself and refused anyone's help. She also worked in education, three and a half years went by before she learned of her husband's whereabouts. She then began to visit him until he was released. Here began another ordeal of trying to bring together her husband and her son who grew up without his father.

About the experience of imprisonment, said nurse Mariam Zakaria, born in 1960, said, "I got married and traveled to Lebanon, but after the Israeli invasion in 1982, I returned, and my husband stayed there. I never heard of him again and until this day. "I went back to Syria and was pregnant with my daughter. I applied for a job at the hospital and worked there until 1988. I started a campaign against the Communist Labor Party. I was imprisoned for six months, during which my daughter stayed with my family, and she was five years old at the time. During that time, my family visited me twice, and I considered my whole life to be in the grip of those months. Those were very harsh days, but compared to what is happening now, it was a 7-star hotel!"

As for her life in the prison, Maryam, during her interview with the *Syrian Histories* team in Turkey in 2017, said: "Many women detainees were transferred to the women's prison in Douma, and they still did not decide where to put the rest of the group from Palestine of which I was part. We had neglected cases of illness. There was a woman named Samira Khalil suffering from suffocation, and no one cared for her. Her medical condition required her to be taken out of the room, as the air was unhealthy where she had her sister Fatima were imprisoned. Samira disappeared now for several years, and her family knows nothing of her whereabouts.

Second Experience: Freedoms

Freedoms in this context refer to social and individual liberties such as the freedom of dress for women, the freedom to establish love relationships and social relations between men and women, and mixed ethnic and religious marriage. A large number of women spoke about these experiences from different stages of their lives in Syria.

It is difficult to speak of a single Syrian society. There are several Syrian societies according to regions, customs, and traditions. From this vantage point, we note that personal freedoms become a relative issue according to family and their issues. This in itself creates cultural wealth and makes it difficult to make a single judgment, whether ‘reactionary’ or ‘progressive,’ on the issue of freedoms.

But those who reflect on these testimonies note that real change has occurred twice. The first time was the impact of the ruralization of cities, which has been encouraged by successive Syrian governments since the Baath took power in Syria. The migration of hundreds of thousands of rural people to the centers of the big cities has generated a mix of customs, as well as change, resistance to stability, leaving a considerable margin for these freedoms.

In his book *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, Nicolaus van Dam argues that "improved communication and transformation have alienated certain communities, and modernization and industrialization have made it possible to mix members of different communities more and more intensely. Widespread education since the era of independence and unification at the national level during the sixties has led to the suppression of sectarian, ethnic, regional, and other mentalities."

The second time there was a major change in freedoms in Syria was during the escalation of tension between Iraq and Iran, which started a major war in 1980. Parallel to this was popular manifestations of Shiite religiosity in many areas of Syria. And as a kind of reaction to the spread of Shiism, in addition to other political factors, began manifestations of Sunni religiosity, which was rare before the mid-seventies. And the simple popular Sufi fomr of religiosity in which the majority participated was in retreat. The failure of economic development and the emergence of a large stratum of exploited or dispossessed peoples in the 1960s led to demonstrations in various large cities beginning in 1970. From this period on, the Islamic movement took on a clandestine existence to become one way of expressing such resentment and social deprivation.

Religious Extremism

This popular religiosity began with the Sufi-Ash'ari orientation that dominated educational-religious institutions in Syria, and which is limited to learning jurisprudence, worship, and moral education. This was accompanied by the rise of a Salafi movement based on Wahhabi or Salafist reformism that Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi, Bahjat Bitar, and Tahir Aljazairy developed in the early 20th century. The Islamic Institute Zahra and its mosque and the Institute of the prominent imam Badr al-Din al-Hassani played a major role in the dissemination of Salafi thought in Syria.

In an interview with Turkey's *Syrian Histories* team in 2017, Kabriya’ Saaour said that the Islamists' activities after the 1970s led to societal sensitivities. She adds, "It does not mean that society lived in peace. There were problems, like of if a Christian and a Muslim marry, for example". Ilham Haqi (born in 1960) agrees with her, explaining that during the decades between 1940 and 1960 women were quite liberated. She illustrates by saying, "Women were able to receive men in their homes, go to the fields to work, side by side with men; there was no separation between the sexes, and they were holding hands with each other in weddings."

She pointed out that the practice of social separation between the sexes happened recently, and the idea that there should be a wedding for women only never previously existed.

During the interview, Haqi explains that women from Raqqa are and are not conservative. They do not cover their hair or the like, but at the same time, they respect the concept of honor. "We were not separated from boys at school until the government did so forcibly in the early 1980s." Haqi continued, "one day they brought trucks to separate boys from girls after Damascus issued a decision. If there were more girls than boys, they loaded the boys onto the trucks and took them to another school. In schools that had more boys than girls, they did the opposite. The transition was immediate, arbitrary, and had many serious consequences."

It seems that what happened is a kind of extremism towards religion by a large segment of society. The government wanted to absorb change and even claim that it is also religious, fearing the possibility of popular sympathy with religious movements. The first decision was to separate boys and girls in schools.
For decades, the ruling regime systematically manipulated popular Sunni religiosity and deployed religious discourse to reinforce political legitimacy. The regime resorted to the sheikhs of the poor and middle classes, who were representatives of popular religious sentiment. Later they gained religious authority to maintain social equilibrium in light of political developments at the local, regional, and international levels.

Haki expresses her opinion: "a society where men and women dance debkeh together, that knows no headscarves or alcohol, and where men and women stroll together on the banks of the Euphrates river, is a society shaken by the Iran-Iraq war. "The majority of women turned to the headscarf after having sported other headwear like ‘malfa3’ and ‘3saba.’ Before wearing the headscarves, the Iranians entered the Aweys Al-Qarni quarter of Raqqa and began inviting some women to put on the hijab and convert to Shiism. At that time, we were not aware of what was happening. This was the beginning of religious extremism. Even though people here pray and fast, they are not severe. In Aleppo, for example, there was a religiously extremist quarter, and the same in Hama and Homs. We were conservative, without being extreme, and women worked outside some, alongside men in agriculture, men and women walked in the streets together, and shared everything."

The Gulf War was not the only force that affected Syrian society's religious and social trends. The Syrian regime’s efforts to strengthen its relations with Iran and Hezbollah after the US invasion of Iraq, Rafiq Hariri's assassination, and the regime's sense of threat also had impact. Shiite proselytizing, religious activities and rites by Shiite delegations from Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon in the Hamidiya and Umayyad mosques in Damascus intensified under a security cover and official sponsorship of the Iranian cultural attaché in Damascus. This provoked the Sunni majority and facilitated the growing phenomenon of Salafism.

Haqi believes society's sympathy with the rise in religious trends derives from its demoralized state at the time caused by ruralization, the flight of the population of Raqqa to the cities. "The state has handed over all authority to the rural people, alienating the people of Raqqa from their city, and we had a large percentage educated people and writers. But the state gave official positions to strangers from the countryside, and Raqqa degenerated, and the city is now alien to us, no longer our city," she said. She forewarns that this transformation contributed to the decline of freedoms, especially regarding the conditions of women.

"I remember that in the late 1970s, I went to study in the Harasta area," says Syrian Mariam Halaq, who was 63 when she interviewed with the *Syrian Histories* team in Lebanon in 2016. "I remember at the end of the 70s when I went to teach in Harasta. The atmosphere was very austere, and I did not wear a hijab or any head covering, which provoked the community. I did not want to change myself for the sake of society; let it change for me. There was an older man who objected to living in the same neighborhood with a woman who did not wear the hijab and who wore trousers. But I stayed there until 1985 teaching until I became school director." It is clear that women in Syria have always been the cornerstone of change in society when the regime wishes to support this. Syrian women continued to show signs of this religious turn, and structurally and ideologically, they continued to form an integral part of the religious system in Syria until the revolution of 2011.

Women's religious groups have also begun to bourgeon in the official religious establishment, which allows them to carry out their activities along with the precepts delineated by the regime and its security services. One of the most prominent manifestations of women's religiosity was the group "Qubaisiyat" founded by Sheikha Munira Qubaisi, which depends on the dissemination of the Islamic call and remembrance practices, teaching the jurisprudence of worship, the memorization of the Koran, and the propagating of the hijab. Indeed, this group has taken control of a wide range of private schools. The group's representatives have spread throughout civil society in Syria. The system allowed them to practice in mosques after being confined to their homes, and they took hold of girls to the extent of sanctifying them as Qabisies.

A former flight attendant, Abeer Idris, born in 1981, recounted her story of religious extremism in an interview with a *Syrian Histories* team in 2016: "No one interfered in my clothes except my uncle, who joined an Ismaili sect and became extremist. When I visited him, he repeatedly said ‘Why do you always feel entitled?' commenting on my clothes. He liked to intervene in my business, but I replied that I had a father. He thought my mother didn't raise me properly, and he blamed her constantly saying: ‘you are very liberal and easy with your daughters, leaving them alone.'
Idris explains that when her uncle converted, no one was disturbed in the family. This was common at the time, a new sect, the Shia Twelvers, entered the city of Musayaf.

She continued by saying, "Suddenly Sunnis families were converting to Shiism, and started self-flagellating during Ashura. This was not witnessed in Musayaf. They had established educational centers and a mosque they called the ‘Great Prophet' and encouraged people to come to celebrate the Prophet's birthday, the distribution of food, sweets, and alms for the needy. They encouraged the hijab. Girls in the ninth grade take lessons, for example, and another teacher enters the classroom, not the habitual one, and says: ‘you are good and glorious, but would that you enhance your morals by wearing the hijab.'" Idris says that the hijab suddenly spread quickly in Masayaf and was worn by girls during their childhood when usually it was worn in religious families with the onset of puberty. This was common in all religious families, whether Sunni or Ismaili. Janan Awad explained in an interview with the *Syrian Histories* team in 2017, born in 1950, explained that believes that extremism began when the ideology of the Wahhabi brotherhood spread after years of being fought by the regime. In the beginning, people did not like them. If you are a Wahhabi and told someone, ‘Do not bless graves, this is haram (forbidden), you immediately become their enemy because it is forbidden to offend elders. Then when the new generation grew up, traveled and learned, they transferred to their parents this thought and brought with them books, and converted their

families from Sufism, which began to go extinct as Salafism spread, and people began to distinguish between what is halal and haram, approved or forbidden.

In her discussion of state repression of the brotherhood, Awad said that in the years after November 1980, when a 65-page statement was issued in Damascus, “A Proclamation For Reconciliation,’ outlining a new program and new goals for the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic front was established by various Islamic movements opposed to the regime. The regime's response at that time was harsh with the massacres in Tadmur prison in June 1980 and Hama in March 1982 and the execution of anyone who proved to belong to the Brotherhood.

Mixed Marriages

Nada Nasr al-Din related an important experience about her sister's marriage to a man from another sect. "My sister married someone from another sect, and she did not have problems with her husband's family, and everyone was accepting of the matter as they were to their second son's request to betroth me. Later, a young man from Afrin asked for their daughter's hand in marriage and was rejected. They were lenient with their sons, but it was not with their daughter."

Nada told how she quickly followed in her sister’s footsteps and also fell in love with someone from another sect. She hopes that when her children reach a suitable age for marriage, this mixed marriage will no longer be a problem. "After I got married and had this experience, I sometimes wonder if it would be better had I not entered into a mixed marriage. If I had married someone from the same background, I would have avoided some of the experiences I had."

Ahlam Nazzal, born in 1968, during an interview with Turkey in 2017, said: "I lived in an environment with different sects. However, there were a few marriages between them despite the relatively open atmosphere," indicating that sometimes it was enough for the person to come from a different environment or from outside the "peaceful" area in which she lived, to reject mixed marriage, which left many women single. “But I remember a girl from our family who was an Ismaili nurse in Latakia who married an Alawi. At first, the family did not bless the marriage, but later they accepted it," she said.

Insaf Nasr, born in 1966, hasd an important experience relating to mixed marriages that she spoke about to the *Syrian Histories* team in Turkey in 2016. "I am a Druze woman from Sweida and married outside my community, but the social environment surrounding my husband was very similar. I even made personal friends in Deir al-Zour during the four months I lived there. There were no social restrictions. "

Nasr cannot forget the fate of her girlfriend who married her colleague from another sect. "On the eve of 1996, we had a friend named Sanaa Saif, who loved a young Palestinian from Safed," she says. "We used to live in Yarmouk camp when my husband went with them to the court for their marriage, then to in Deir al-Zour where he rented an apartment for them and where they lived for a while, intending to settle there."

She says that her friend's husband was not a sufficiently responsible person, and he wavered and could not remain living in Deir al-Zour. During this period my friend's people were

monitoring the movements of the young man at his place of work and residence. The couple left their home and lived in her home in Yarmouk refugee camp. There were a group of friends who provided protection and support to my friend until her problems were solved. Her parents had first taken her and imprisoned her for a month when they learned of her love for this young man, and then she fled and married him.

And Nasr adds, "They lived with us for a month. Once we went out to visit friends and the couple stayed home. When we got home, we discovered that her husband took her to his main residence in Rakn Eddin. I tried to reason with him to bring her back so that her family does not get wind of her whereabouts, but with no success. On the third day, her family found her there, and her brother suddenly showed up. He knocked, and her husband opened the door. "I'm not here to kill," said the brother, "I just want to see her and be assured she is fine. The brother saw her, and then took her with him with the excuse that she was absent from home, and they hadn't told people anything except that she was in Damascus studying. He said she must come home and her husband can follow and ask for her hand in marriage and say he is a Druze from Palestine. This arrangement convinced her husband, and we tried to change his mind, but he wasn't responsive.

In the end, her family married her to someone from Suweida, and the next day told her (first husband) that he must return to Damascus and they never wanted to see his face again. Their story ignited in the village after he went to the police. The mother and brother killed the girl, and they handed over to the police another brother who was 17, underage, saying it was he who murdered her. Nasr concludes the story saying that the cowardly husband, according to her description, suffered a nervous breakdown and left to Lattakia, and then with time everyone forgot the story of the departed Sana.

The countries of Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq have articles in their legislation that provide lenient provisions for a man who kills his wife if caught while committing adultery, or who kills a female relative as a result of "unlawful" sexual conduct in so-called "honor crimes."

Love

Ahlam Nazzal talked about the nature of the relationship between young men and women by saying: "there was a social ritual that regularly took place in the evening, where young men and women went out to Hama Street, especially after exams were over. The street became a carnival the night of the holidays, and everyone would wear the best clothes they had, and go out. There was no room to place your foot there were so many people on holiday nights. And on the night of the exams, Hama Street was a meeting place, so anyone who wanted to meet someone else would go there. In those days there was no Whatsapp, but there was a street called ‘Zaynab School,’ and it was where two people who loved each would meet with the pretext of buying something."

However, Nazal points out, not all segments of society were lenient with the mixing of the sexes. "For example, the first condition that the owner of the house made when we were university students was to wear the hijab, and his other condition was that men would not come to the house. The second condition was also a requirement for us, but I could not comply with the first condition, as I am not accustomed to wearing a head covering. This was accepted due to my behavior and the good impression that my friends and I left." She added

that in those days went a lot of camping for several days in a row and the camps were mixed in contrast to these days, as parents reject camps.

Nur Shamma3, born in 1963, had a different experience with freedoms related to individual autonomy. "I was 17 years old when I left my family. It was a strange experience in a conservative environment, but I enjoyed being in a city I loved. Yet every time I had to justify myself to every new landlord and to every neighbor about why I lived on my own. If I had a girlfriend come over, I had to tell people that she was my sister, relative, or cousin. Things got better when he moved to the Maidan neighborhood because of the presence of the Christian community, which was different from the conservative Muslim neighborhoods where he had lived, and in which he and his friends looked different and strange, as he put it.

Shamma3 remembers an incident that happened concerning the neighbors. "A little boy saw a girlfriend of mine coming into my family's house. He told his mother, who told his aunt, and his aunt told the whole neighborhood. You can imagine the news moving from one building to another: 'Look at Nour and his girlfriend sleeping in his family's house.' I noticed funny looks from people in the neighborhood, but no one said to my face what was going on." Noor, who was interviewed by the *Syrian Histories* team in 2016, explains that he opened up his home to all his friends visiting from Damascus or Lattakia. He was questioned frequently by the neighbors or the landlord, but what saved him every time, he says, is transparency. I responded to the questioner, saying 'welcome to my place and see for yourself what goes on, before you judge.' Sometimes the problem would be resolved, and at other times I was politely asked to find another place. I move between a lot of places in Aleppo and lived in two-thirds of its quarters, sometimes not staying for more than a month, and this helped me to adapt to Beirut."

As for the experience of living together unmarried in Syrian society, Shamaa3 says that he knows some young people who lived alone at the beginning but were soon joined by a partner. Some decided to leave their parents' house to live with a girlfriend. He added that "the reason for this is each comes from a different sect. For example, one of them was a Kurd, and his companion was Christian, or there was a Muslim coupled with a Christian. They knew their families would reject this, so the solution was to live together. There are also university students coming from different provinces such as Latakia and Idlib; they either live in university housing or rent in town. A young man may live with a girl, and his family would not know unless they follow him.

Social Culture: Family, Nature, Cooking

It is very difficult to go into all cultural production that is transmitted through social learning, such as art, music, dance, clothing, cooking, and designing houses.

We choose to trace some forms of cultural production that are social. Some are material such as cooking and nature, unlike other demonstrative engagements such as family and relations to nature, whereas culture is a product of society itself and inherited through generations.

The difficulty of exploring social culture in Syria is the absence of stability and patterns with the succession of crises and events in Syrian social life. However, certain social-cultural domains such as family, nature, and cooking traveled through these crises and times with their essences intact.

These forms of social culture are mentioned in the majority of testimonies, regardless of the identity and experiences of the people interviewed by the *Syrian Histories* team. These social forms were mostly positive practices in their lives despite suffering and loss due to poverty, illiteracy, and war. Although there may be no academic resources to follow, systematically and historically, the changes in these social practices, here Syrian citizen testimonies will be both the source and the reference.

Family

The family is usually a microcosm of the community, but also a model of the world itself, with challenges that may affect the behavior and beliefs of family members, relationships, and shared values.

The family is an essential point of return in Syria for every individual wherever s/he travels abroad or across the country. Many local factors, such as ignorance, poverty, the deterioration of women's rights and surrounding violence have marked families. The results are serious, given the shrinking government role and the absence of civil society institutions in protecting and supporting these families during crises, not only financially but in terms of human development.

Close social and family relationships in Syria since the 1970s have shown new patterns based on connections with influential figures in the ruling elite. These ties, in turn, relied on official authority and a network of client relations, or on relations based on the security apparatus, which subvert traditional ties, exploiting them to augment their influence. One way or another, the family and kinship function at the mercy of the security authorities and the expense of mutual trust.

Warm Memories

Among her memories in her family, 63-year-old Maryam Halak recalls that she had more than eight brothers and sisters at home and lived in the Bab Touma area in great happiness. Her father owned large cars and transported citrus and other goods between Beirut and Lattakia, and to Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Their physical condition was good. "As for my father, I have no childhood memories of him except when he would return from travel. We would see him at night, and then we would wake up in the morning to find that he has traveled again, but left us a watch or a Parker pen from Kuwait or Iraq," she said.

She tells of her childhood that the most important thing for her was her older brother Tawfiq, who traveled to Kuwait and returned to help the family, adding that he was “very cultured, often studying, and reading. His room was at the top of our house, one of the old Damascene houses you see in the soap operas. He used to forbid us to enter his room. I enjoyed reading a lot, so I would climb up to his room and take a story and go back downstairs. When I was in the fifth or sixth grade, I had already read in my young age such great stories as *The Mother*, *Les Miserables*, and the like. I read them quickly, in a few days, and took them back to his library," she said.

The love of reading and learning remained in her nature. After years of marriage to a relative at an early age and the birth of the boys, she was able to go to high school with the support of her family, especially her husband and her mother. They stayed with her son until she graduated from the Teachers Institute in the mid-seventies and was appointed as a school teacher.

Nada Nasr al-Din's family also supported her after she gave birth. She said during the interview that "my mother's presence alleviated me of many burdens: leaving and returning home was easy, my financial situation was fine, and I had my car. When needed I could go back home to see my son and nurse him, and then go back to the office if I wanted to do my job there. "

Nada's husband was working abroad: "During this period, my husband was in Kuwait, he came almost every three months to stay for about 20 days and then returned to Kuwait. This was not strange in the province of Suweida, where entire families are living this way. Since I was little, I saw many women living alone with their children while the father is an expatriate who lives most of his time in Kuwait working and sending money back home while the mother raises children."

Separated Families

Some families were separated, says Circassian Jamila Amin, who lived between parents who disagreed on everything. "I raised my daughter to have freedom of agency. I used to tell her that was what I was deprived of, so I do not want her to be deprived of the same. I would advise her only when she comes and asks me for advice--all that I did not have as a child. Everything I was not allowed to do as a child I would let her do, not letting her know that I was compensating for my loss, but it was so." Mona explained that her childhood was "lost between two methods of education. The first was a inflexible approach used by her father and his family, and the second open approach of her mother and her mother's family. This was her situation until her parents separated."

She explains that when she married, all she thought was that her marriage was not like her parents' marriage. She was looking for a mindful person with whom she could find complicity about everything. But the fate of her marriage was separation for want of complicity, just as her parents. "We reached a stage where each wanted to destroy the other," she said, adding that there was an agreement between her and her former husband to co-parent their daughter.

Jamila remembers an incident which made her feel confident about her parents, despite her childhood suffering. She says that "our neighbor would chain his daughter Nada and not let her out. When I considered how my father allowed me to go to school, whereas that girl was chained, I felt a difference, and felt that my mother was an angel in comparison with the girl's father. This young Nada died of abuse at age twelve in the Maydan quarter where we lived."

"There was a wooden wall separating our two houses. And Nada had a brother who was beating her by order of his father. I do not know if the father was ruthless or if he had a mental illness. I could hear Nada walking in her house with chains because the wall was wooden. I used to knock, if no one was home, and she would respond. If there was someone there she would not respond, and I would not come near."

Jamila explains that she had heard her cry most of the time. Her mother was dead, suffering from lack of nourishment and comfort because she did all the housework with chains on her feet. “One day I was at school, and I came back at noon, and I did not find my mother at home. I asked the neighbor, and she said she'd be back, and did not let me go look for her. I asked her why. She said Nada died. I asked how, and she replied that she did not know. Later when I asked my mother after she came back, she did not say."

There are those who did not experience family and lived a life moving between houses of relatives. This was the case with Ahmed al-Mez, born in 1986, who compensated for this absence with many hobbies, such as piano and handicrafts. His mother died and he then lived with his aunt, then his grandmother, and finally with his father's wife.

"My father worked for long periods of time, and I did not see him," he said in an interview in Beirut in 2016. "His wife was jealous of her husband's children, so I was under great psychological pressure and could not tell my parents or anyone else. When I was living with my grandmother, the situation was better, and I remember that every day my grandmother organized the so-called reception: she would bathe, prepare herself, and dress, and we children would clean up outside and set up the chairs. My father would call her gathering ‘the widows’ café.’ No man would come. Our house was one of the few Arab houses that remained standing in the area, and the women gathered for four or five hours and sang or told old tales. I used to sit with them in my youth, but when I grew up, they pushed me away, but aware that sometimes I would sit in the living room, close the door, and listen to their wonders. It was not all without conflict, and a quarrel may ignite between them.

Ahmed moved between many schools. Each time he had to tell the story of his deceased mother, putting him under the whip of questions and the pity of the teachers, and this influenced his psychology. He would tell people, ‘I remember only a few flashes, not more. She died when I was three years old, and I remember her mostly on her sickbed. We were three brothers who were suffering from her illness,’ he said of his memories of his mother.

In spite of these faint memories, Ahmed holds a great appreciation for his mother, saying: "My mother was very patient, she died after her bones started to go, as she had cancer in her bones. My father was drained by treating her to no avail. My mother made quilts. There was a thick satin cloth, the mark of ‘Atlas,’ that she stuffed with wool or cotton, and would sew them so so that the thread would stick in the stuffing so that the cotton would hold inside. I saw pictures of my mother working, and I still have a quilt she had made by hand. Her handiwork was unique among women as she painted the quilt with a fine design that was not easy."

Nature

Syria is one of the Arab countries where delightful nature holds the history of cities and monuments. Much of this beauty has remained in spite of conflicts. The fact is that war was not always the cause of the destruction of the country. Sometimes destruction was the result of poor development plans, the emergence of slums, the absence of urban planning, and the alteration of nature as well as the old Damascene houses.

Syria is one of the richest countries in terms of tourism and archeology, especially regarding the old Arab houses. The city of Tartous is one of the most important tourist places in Syria. It

is a beautiful city on the Mediterranean Sea and is an important port. There is also Lattakia, also an important port, the gateway to the Middle East on the Mediterranean Sea, and the number capital of summer tourism in Syria. Aleppo is an ancient Syrian city founded by Saif al-Dawdah al-Hamadani, where al-Mutanabbi, Abu Firas al-Hamdani, and al-Farabi lived. Homs also occupies a unique place in the center of Syria, and extends on an plain surrounded by hills and highlands on one side, and on the other is the desert sand leading to Palmyra archaeological site. The spread of dense nature in most parts outside of the cities of Syria invited frequent social and familial outings. People are familiar with with the term "Siran" for picnic--a word goes back to the days of the Umayyad state in Damascus.

Markets

One of the most famous and most beautiful markets in the Arab world is the Hamidiya market, which historians describe as a great market for architecture. They also describe it as an industrial, commercial city in the heart of old Damascus. Many markets branched out from the Hamidiya making more than 20 markets. Hamidiya is covered entirely with a roof of iron, filled with small holes letting in sunlight, and is paved with black basalt stone. It is a gathering place of visitors and tourists from all parts of the world.

In every city in Syria, you find several old and famous markets. The name often follows the profession of shop owners, such as the blacksmith market and the tailors market, or historic governors such as Medhat Pasha Market and Mardam Bek Market, or a market bears the name of the product sold, such as the gazmat or shoe market (Bustal). There is also a bridal market, and the clog, silk, wool, and cotton, markets.

Most of Ghada Hamoud’s memories of Hamidiya, she recounts, were "during the Eid, when the market is very crowded, and so long you cannot see the end of it. It is a market that branches out to lead to other markets, and you have to be professional to navigate it and be aware of all entrances and exits," she said.

In an interview in Lebanon in 2016, she added that everyone is busy before the Eid feast, with purchasing provisions and clothes--all the necessities so that the house will not be missing anything during the Eid. Families also buy for their children everything they need from "baboush to tarbush." They also buy pajamas for the Eid. A baby is bathed, and then he is dressed in his new pajamas, so he feels that everything is new once once the night of the feast commences.

Akil Ahmed also has many memories with the market Hamidiya in Damascus, explaining that it was built during the Ottoman rule and attributes its name to Abdul Hamid Pasha. There are cloths of Al-Aghbani and Damascene, as well as copper, which are famous in Damascus. Shops make shell-inlaid wood, famous throughout the world. This market is a gathering point for tourists from around the world as well as for those coming from other provinces to Damascus, where they stop to enjoy the markets and eat ice cream from the famous Bakdash shop," he said in an interview in Lebanon with the *Syrian Histories* team in 2016. “I went with my friends and enjoyed our day there, and it all smelled good to me, whether it was a nice breeze in the summer or from the smell of winter rain. I also saw Russian tourists, Italians, Germans, and others."

He continued that there was a religious shrine in the area, which is the residence of Mrs. Rukaya, so there is heavy religious tourism. "I was fascinated by the sight of the Chechens on their way to pilgrimage in Mecca. Their cars traversed the roads from their countries to Turkey and from there to Syria, where they stayed in Aleppo for a day and then would also go to Hamidiya to spend two days before traveling on to Mecca."

Hayat, born in 1963, has another story with the markets in her city. "There was a beautiful market in the Bazaar district of Lattakia where there were shops, carpets, clock repair places, fish shops, a sesame bread oven, and an ice making workshop where the refrigerators were at the time," she said. She notes that she lived there from the beginning of her childhood until her adolescence when the shops were simple. The goods, such as grain and dry herbs, were presented in burlap bags.

Hayat also points out that there is a copper market where heaters and water pipes were made, and the market is designated for transportation, and she describes the market as saying: "I used to be content to watch the blacksmith make the waterpipes and kanouns, which were also used as heaters in those times.

Not far from these markets are the baths, most of them ancient. Hayat says, “the neighbors decided to set a day during the week where girls and mothers meet and prepare various dishes, one would bring lentils and rice, and the other tabouleh, another beans, and yet another with sweets or nuts, as if they are going on a pleasure trip. There is a bath in the main market and another in the Saliba quarter, where there was also an old soap factory handmade from used frying oil.

Homes

Central to Arab architectural heritage is the idea of a house--open to heaven from which Adam descended--as a model of paradise. The first ancestors wanted to build something similar to this paradise, and create it on earth in the form of a house whose shelter is fruit trees and wind. In this way, the Syrian Arab house was like a small paradise, and for a long time continued have in the basin six mayazib; three coming out of each side, with water flowing from the upper to the lower basin, and representing the six rivers irrigating the Garden of Eden.

The traditional Syrian Arab house through the ages was in integral part of Syrian cultural identity. The Arab house is composed of a large unroofed courtyard with an aqueduct surrounding a central fountain, as well as some fruit trees and various types of roses. The rooms, topped with a second floor, are the bedrooms, and are decorated with all kinds to all kinds of ornaments and mosaics, not to mention the magnificent columns, upon which the upper floor rests, surrounding the courtyard from its three sides.

"Every family planted trees in front of their house. Our houses were large in Sarqeb, and there was a garden in front of every house," says Wafa Mohammed about her house. "We had 20 olive trees, jasmine, walnuts, *ful*, or perfume of night, pomegranates, and figs. Vines of jasmine flowers must drape over the door to diffuse their perfume throughout the house. "

She explained that the size of the smallest house was 200-300 meters, and the majority were between 500 and 1,000 square meters large, explaining that recently the people were building houses in the form of a long building.

Wafa said that the festivals were held between the trees, where those who loved singing would sing. There was a flute, and people played, passed the evening, talked and drank tea, and some stayed sleeping outside. But if there was a death in the neighborhood, the sound will be lowered, or the wedding will be delayed until condolences end," she said.

Houses like this are likely found only in the "Mora" countries of southern Italy, Sicily and southern Spain, where Pierre Rossi says: "a traveler from the Euphrates or the Nile does not feel strange when he arrives in Rome. The private houses were made in the traditional Aramean style: a large inner courtyard decorated with columns and a façade with a wide-open space. Living in a courtyard can only be matched by the thoughts of people living under a sky without rain. "

"My father died in his ninth decade," said Nazim (a pseudonym) in an interview in Turkey in 2017. The roof of our house was brick with a large arch made of olive wood a few meters high. I remember when a guest came to visit us how surprised he was that other houses were made of cement, and our house was mostly made of wood, so I told him that it was my father's and that we were only visiting him."

He adds that they "obeyed their father fully, went into nature, and harvested and feed the animals, and there was a well from which to drink. People in the region spent long hours on farms working while children collected stones from the ground and played. Everyone was happy."

"We used to light a kerosene bulb at night and warm ourselves on firewood in the winter. I had a friend who brought tahini and bread, and my brothers and we brought figs and molasses, and then we went to the mountain and caught starlings and would grill them. This is how we passed our childhood."

Palmyra had a different style of houses. "The houses were large and built of mud because of the harsh weather, and there was a space in front of the rooms," said Jamil al-Qayyim. "This space was planted with trees and turned into an interior garden." The ceilings were high and palm-lined, and the walls were thick and resistant to heat and cold. There were windows at the top and bottom, and when they opened, they all offered a nice breeze, no matter how hot the weather was, so there was no need for fans. "

He added that during an interview in Turkey in 2017 that at the time of the '58 years,' modern construction spread later destroyed this effect, creating a need for fans. He noted that the old houses that remained in Palmyra had become touristic. Some of them were turned into restaurants like houses of old Damascus that became hotels. He also believes that the reason for the difference in the design of houses in Palmyra from the rest of the region is that it is located in the middle of the desert next to shops selling milk, cheese, and wool. The Bedouins made these products to sell them in Palmyra, which they traded for sugar, tea and the like. It did not become a tourist attraction until many years later, and that economy revived there.

"People wonder how old people were living with the harsh desert climate of Palmyra without modern refrigeration. As I said, they had homes with their own micro-environments. The

streets of Palmyra are also distinctive, straight and wide despite their length. And whoever sees the ruins says they are miraculous, including the monuments and mud houses."

Outings

‘Siran" is a short-distance journey taken just outside of the city to surrounding orchards for recreation and relaxation. There is interest in the varieties of food that are prepared, especially the grilled meat. The whole family is outside, and the children play in beautiful nature, in the Damascus hillside near the river Barada or the famous gouta of Damascus with its orchards and trees, where the family sits down to relax and prepare food. Sitting in circles is also common when smoking waterpipes, playing cards, or singing.

"We used to cook at home sometimes and take food with us," says Jamila Amin, a Circassian says of her memories of Sirans. “It would be lentils with rice or sometimes bulgur with tomato sauce and salad, and we would sit somewhere near the river. "I remember that we were children playing with my cousins, while adults cut up fresh vegetables for the salad and make the food. These are beautiful memories."

A teacher, Ashouri Samuel Warda Abder, 65 years old, also says that in the past the Khabur was a river that flowed in beauty before it dried out. Its banks were green, and any guest who came to the city of Hasaka was taken by officials to the Khabur River because its banks were very beautiful.

"I remember once an old colleague visited me in the 1980s," he says in an interview in Beirut in 2016 with a *Syrian Histories* team. Al-Naoura or spring steamed into the edge of the river, making a curious sound, and its spray was also amazing. Also, we were passing under the shade of fruit tree trees, and we sat on the river near a waterwheel, surrounded by trees, with our feet in the water and tables in front of us. My colleague told me it was unbelievable that this place was in Syria, and it seemed like we were somewhere in France. I said, ‘my friend, you are in a poor village, but we have created the paradise we want.’”

"When we remember these trips, we are surprised to see this place, and we wonder if the water will run again in its channels, and whether Kurdish girls will return to walk with non-Kurdish teachers and colleagues on such trips, or an Assyrian girl walk with a mixed group of all sects? I hope that they will return like in the previous era and that Syria will be a warm embrace for all good people in this world. "

Cooking

The diversity of Syrian cuisine is principally a reflection of the diversity of its ethnicities; indeed, it is a living reflection that has taste, color, and texture. Syrian cuisine is an ancient one developed from Arab, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Turkomanian, and Chechen traditions. Geographic reach and diversity also have a role in creating differences in preparation methods, taste, and ingredients.

Among these Syrian foods are fetteh, mhammara, Syrian dish, Aleppan dish, pastries, Damascene ice cream, the kishk of princes, fattoush, tabouleh, kibbeh, kabbab with cherries, mussabaha, baba ghannouj, kenafeh, madlouqa, and shaqa’iq nouman.

Each region has its specialties, as Hayat explains: "Lattakia jazariyyeh is made of grated carrots boiled with sugar. It is served dry with nuts after it has been wrapped. I do not recall eating it in any another place, in addition to the sweet al-muaallal sold here, made of colored sugar. There is harisseh, made with semolina, as well as sweets sold by street vendors like ghariba. We were very happy when the merchant hawked his sweets, calling out 'nahi, nahi.' There is also al-jawzieh, a cookie made of sugar, sryrup, slices of halaweh, and sesame seeds. And I cannot forget squash jam." Hayat describes a kind of kanafeh that exists only in Lattakia, saying: "There is a famous kanafeh called 'Majnoon Leila.' No one comes to Lattakia without tasting this kanafeh, made with vermicelli. It it is not the like soft knafeh from Nablus, that has a layer of pastry topping a layer of cheese.

About the difference between Lattakia and other cuisines in Syria, Hayat says that our okra strew consists of tomatoes, meat, dry coriander, and garlic, whereas in Damascus, to these ingredients are added pomegranate molasses, fresh coriander, and sometimes hindi date juice. Malukhiya is also made differently from the way it is made in Damascus, where the meat and the malukhiya boiled for two hours until cooked. Fresh oriander and garlic are sautéed, before being added to the pot, until the smell is very strong, so the whole street knows that we are making malukhiya today! "

"I learned from the dishes in Damascus," Hayat continues, fuliyeh, "which we do not make in Lattakia. You boil "mowzat," or tender pieces of meat, and add fresh fava beans, swiss chard, lard, garlic, and green coriander. This stew is served with vermicelli rice or bulgur. Also, I also learned another dish called Abu Shalhoub, made of cabbage, cut into cubes and cooked with meat and onions and served with rice."

For his part, Osama (a pseudonym) believes that the origin of Syrian food lies in Homsi cuisine. He says: "Homs is where the first cuisine in Syria developed, before the Aleppan. The latter is the most famous, but the essential cuisine is Homsi. I do not suggest a lack in Damascene and Allepan cuisines, both old and celebrated, but women from Homs are masters of cuisine and cook maqloubeh and all types of kebbeh and stuffed vegetables.

And he said in an interview in Turkey in 2017, when he was 51 years old, that he has never tasted humous kababs in his life other than in Homs. "We have ten types of kebabs, including grilled, with yogurt, and spread into trays. As for stuffed vegetables, there are many of them, such as squash, eggplant, and pumpkin. Malukhiya, is cooked in a special way in Homs. In Aleppo it is a liquidy soup, like Egyptian malukhiya, but if you taste the malukhiya of Homs, you will know the difference.

As for the Assyrian food, the teacher Shmuel Warda Abder says that "Assyrian women are experts in cooking. Whoever tastes the cooking of the Assyrians wishes to eat it regularly. One of the foods known to us is the Assyrian kofta and it is shaped like a dome."

He also describes the way another Assyrian dish is prepared: "There is a dish called dakhwat, made with peeled, unripe strawberries in addition to the meat. This was prepared for officials who were guests of the city. We do not cook this dish frequently because the ingredients are expensive, so it is prepared only on occasions." He describes another Assyrian dish called hariseh, which is not sweet. Rather, it is made of meat and flour, and it is soft and smooth and without fat, cooked to a rubbery paste. When serving you add a spoon of honey or a spoon of lard.

"These three dishes are particular to us, and also mardoukha, offered to children and women on the occasion of childbirth. It consists of brown flour that is coated with Arab ghee, and honey or sugar. I think that in our heritage this dessert was offered to the god Murdoch during the Assyrian Empire, so it was called mardoukha."

He said with a smile that the Kurds, the Arabs, the Yazidis, the Armenians and the people of the coast ate Assyrian dishes in his house; in his turn, he ate with the Arabs, desert, and rural people who loved mansaf, as well as in the houses of the Kurds.

"The Aleppans are people who know their duty towards guests. They make a lot of dishes and desserts, such as walnuts and eggplant," said Arda Kashkashian. She adds that "the Aleppans store food and each season has its food. Pistachios come in season, and there is a way to prepare them by spreading them out under the sun to dry. Pistachios dried and salted taste distinctive."

She also refers to other dairy dishes made with white cheese, and there are special cakes made from the water from this chee by several women at once. Families gather in important rituals where they make cakes and jams, rose petal jam, and rose syrup." She notes that recipes are kept alive and passed from one generation to another. Alushna cherries are also made into jam and syrup, very acidic and use to make kebab with cherries.

Arda concludes, "there is a great mix of between Aleppan and Armenian dishes, and when someone asks me if they are Armenian or halal, I do not know the answer--which is good evidence of fusion and coexistence."

Social Groups in Syria

The Assad regime has for decades reduced the influence or authority of the middle classes, both economic and political. Thousands of members of the parties that emerged from the middle classes since the 1970s were arrested and killed, like members of the Communist Action Party. The regime also granted positions in the provinces and major cities to rural people, neglecting cities and urbanites. The rural population has migrated to big cities in a major demographic change historically known as "ruralization," further marginalizing the middle class and replacing it with what could be called a more popular, less ambitious political constituency that remains allied to the system. It is certainly not a class that owns or can gain small fortunes.

Hence the middle class has lost its most important characteristics, including independence, the bourgeoisie, the ability to create small wealth that supports the free economy, and political ambition. It is the lower classes close to the system that absorb the remains of what was once a middle class of craftsmen, workers, traders and independent farmers, and who do not work for or have interests with the state.

Over decades, the Assad regime worked to break down any social incubator from which change might begin, in deliberate policies that recognize the importance of the middle class in its ability to influence people. The regime adopted a policy to fragment and reduce it, especially the owners of capital, who are successful in their work, or who are are faltering under the weight of the regime's targeted imposition of taxes and new laws and unattainable

conditions. Economic and commercial work is then confined to classes that remain close to the political system, thus creating an overlap between the middle class and the poor.

This was the system's approach before the outbreak of the revolution in dealing with the social classes that had influence and grew in strength. The regime's work was to get rid of them or to weaken and control them. The threat of using violence guaranteed President Assad's immediate entourage, large parts of the country's economy, as well as illegal activities and shady government purchases.

Despite the great hope that Syrian society held with the coming to power of Bashar al-Assad at the beginning of the last decade, people discovered that the regime maintained the same policies, ones even more severe against the diminishing middle classes, and that continued to spread poverty and illiteracy.

The regime knew that the lower classes that had risen to the surface would not be able to organize awareness campaigns or gain influence, which are, for many reasons, capacities more readily attributed to the middle class. Government employment played a large role in holding down the middle classes through strict and long-term work, without real production and development for the county. Syria has always been able to build abroad more than it builds in its own country. This was not an ambition but rather driven by the obstacles of an authoritarian, bureaucratic system, low wages, and the miserable conditions of its employees. All this prevented real production, which was defeated by security control and corrupt system of rampant bribery and theft.

This is how a new lower class, seeking justice and participation, suffering from repression and poverty, set out against a wealthy class that wants more power. It was principally this impoverished middle class that first hit the streets in 2011 and demanded the overthrow of the regime.

Although the 2011 revolution recast the poor classes, workers, young people, and intellectuals, increasing in value what they could do, the revolution itself soon unraveled and fragmented.

A report entitled "The Middle Class in the Arab Countries: Measuring and Role in Driving Change" by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) states: "The size of the middle class is close to 45 percent of the total population in the region; however, after taking into account the repercussions of the crises in the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen in measuring the size of this stratum, it decreased to 37 percent of the total Arab population in 2011. Poor and groups vulnerable to poverty constitute 53 percent of the total population."

Traders

During the 1970s and 1980s, the regime was involved in many conflicts both internally and abroad, such as the Lebanese civil war, the armed conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood, and other interventionist policies in the region.

At the same time, the community of traders suffered another kind of loss. Because of the imposition of economic sanctions on Syria, farmers and other industry owners and workers sustained losses amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars over several decades.

Economic sanctions have been imposed on Syria since 1979 when the US State Department placed Syria on the terrorism list and imposed indirect economic sanctions. In 1981, the United States imposed a ban on Syrian benefits from US aid. The US Congress passed a series of diplomatic and economic sanctions in 2003, including a reduction in diplomatic relations, travel of US citizens and officials on board Syrian aircraft, and banned exports to Syria. Syria's commercial bank and the assets of some officials were frozen.

President Barack Obama renewed all these sanctions for Syria, alongside Cuba and Iran, in 2010. The severity of these sanctions increased after the regime's repression of civilians in the events of the 2011 revolution. EU countries, Turkey, and other acountries joined the economic sanctions imposed on Syria.

Losses druing the first year of economic sanctions after the start of the revolution reached $6.8 billion, or 28.3 percent of the total GDP losses. The Syrian people bore the bulk of the cost of this loss. In the foreign trade sector, exports to the Arab countries decreased by 52%, to the European Union by 93% and to Turkey by 82%. The sanctions contributed to increasing the trade balance deficit and the devaluation of Syrian currency.

These sanctions in Syria created internal economic turmoil. Taxes and monopolies increased without government or international regulation, especially after the continued isolation of Syrian commercial and economic systems from international organizations, companies, and commercial and international banks. Corruption and the imposition of royalties on capital and successful projects was the law of the jungle, which prevailed in the name of the state, the government, and their associates.

"I had a diamond-cutting factory in Aleppo; that is to say, I used to make the diamonds that cut stone and marble in oil excavators and circular wells," says Tammam Baroudi, 62, in an interview in Turkey in 2017. I also made sounding machine heads, which were industrial diamonds. "I was the only manufacturer in Aleppo, and no one else did this work."

He explained that he started the project in 2003 and obtained a license for the plant. Then the workers were registered in the social insurance system and had to pay under the table to finish the process, adding: "People used to pay bribes so they would not register their workers, but when I registered they asked me for bribes! Also, many government companies have contacted me for the purchase of diamonds and their installation, but I refused, because I do not want to enter the vortex of corruption."

There is Rami Makhlouf, who controls the "Syriatel" company, and fought to run the Mercedes company, and gained control of several large companies. The state wants its men to benefit. It is corruption! Even if you have the capital, if you do not operating it, the state will impose a partner to work with you against your will. "

It seems that this was also the method of the regime to circumvent the international sanctions imposed when the Syrian state adopted economic policies that worsened the conditions of the poor, split the middle class, and created corporate capitalism.

"The same thing happened in the case of bids for raw materials," Baroudi said. "When he came with a friend from Homs to supply raw materials to the phosphate plant, someone else did the same and received his money in a few days. Baroudi waited with his colleague for six months to get the money. During this time, the other man invested his material several times over and completed three times their work.

"What happened was a warning to me not to return the ball and compete in the state's field," he said, pointing out that no one dared to approach road construction projects in Syria.

In a later period, Ghassan Al-Halaq, born in 1956, says in an interview in Turkey in 2017: "In the 1970s, I was helping my father in commerce, which I was doing since young. When the Ministry of Supply and Trade introduced changes, we were forced to have a business record, whereas we had been working without one beforehand; we sold cement, and depended on trust and our reputation in the Shaghour area." He explained, "When we had institutions such as CEMEX, and exports were made through the government, things changed," he said, adding that the state imposed more control and restrictions.

Al-Halaq said he was discharged from military service in 1980. Because of his young age, he allowed his father and older brothers take responsibility for providing transport vehicles used transport goods to Gulf cities. He went out with trucks from Damascus to Dubai and Jeddah on the desert roads. He continued until 1984, until his family sold the transport vehicles, especially after the border with Iraq closed at the time. "The Gulf countries imported everything from us in Syria, but now everything they import is from Lebanon and Turkey," he says.

Al-Halaq explains that he started to work in illegal construction, or slums built on agricultural land without a license. He justified this work by saying: "it started because population growth in the country was not accompanied by administrative growth. Authorized houses were very expensive, and I was selling an unauthorized house at the time for a thousand pounds. There was a contractor who was responsible for dealing with the municipality, and it was about exploiting administrative corruption in the state. I sold a lot of unauthorized housing and made a lot of money.

Al-Halaq could say that he imposed some order in the slums, adding, "I became a specialist in real estate, built in Jadida, Al-Shibani, Ein Tarba, Aqraba, and Nashabia, and so on, and all this was unauthorized." In the past, an unauthorized building was destroyed if it was under construction, but if it was finished, especially if it was inhabited, it would not be demolished. So we built the entire building 'on the bone,' meaning we built the pillars, and made it look from the outside like it was inhabited. Then Bashar al-Assad issued a law to punish all those who built an illegal building so I left this work. "

Al-Halaq added that he entered the world of legal construction and built a tourist complex in the city of Rankos, considering it as his life's project. "I had 35 villas and about 500 apartments. I chose the most beautiful spot, and I built a villa in which I wanted to retire. I had a dream house, and I remember that we paid half a million dollars before the crisis for the security approvals, leaving me about 150 thousand dollars. When the crisis began in 2011, we abandoned everything and left the country after 50 years of work. "

According to various figures and statistics, wholesale and retail trade and government services were the main sources of economic growth during the decade from 2001-10,

followed by transportation, communications, manufacturing, finance, real estate, and construction. The contribution of the extractive industries sector was in the negative, while the agricultural sector was near zero.

Corruption in commerce and real estate is not more than in banks. Basma Jiri, born in 1975, interviewed by the *Syrian Histories* team in Turkey in 2017, tells us about her career with the Central Bank of Syria. "When you hear Syrian Central Bank and read a lot about the role of central banks in economies, you think it has a real role, and yet it has no active role. But when the Central Bank opened Latakia, I simply discovered that all the branches of the Central Bank in Syria are warehouses of funds, and had no relation to the science of economics.

Jiri continues: “imagine that the Deputy Director of the Central Bank and the Head of the Treasury Department in 2009 never heard of financial derivatives, and the supervisor of the Bank's treasury holds a diploma in Arabic literature! They put him there because his brother was the head of Labor in Syria and that way the two can swindle the workers as much as they want. "

Basma adds that she was surprised that the central bank could function, as it is customary for any bank to set the policy of liabilities and assets, interest rates for deposits and loans, and other types of banking services. But in Syria it is forbidden to make such decisions, and the state uses coercion in all public and private banks.

When the Syrian revolution began in 2011, Adib Miyaleh, head of the Central Bank of Syria, decided to sell the dollar in the Central Bank to *Shawwal*, which led to a drop in the exchange rate of the Syrian pound from 47 to 150 Syrian pounds to the dollar within a week. "I cannot say that he acted like an idiot. He was very thoughtful because he personal advantage by this move. He agreed with the money exchangers on the exchange rate and his cut," she explained, noting that the *New York Times* considered his decision one of the worst economic decisions in the world.

Small-capital owners such as Osama, a pseudonym, also have a similar story from the world of trade disasters. In an interview in Turkey in 2017, he said, "my salary was a joke, minimal, so in 1997 I took an annual leave without pay. I traveled to Saudi Arabia and worked there for a year. I went back to Syria and got married. Then I returned to the same government job for two years. I felt that continuing on in such conditions is too difficult, so I decided to travel again to Saudi Arabia."

He returned to Syria again 2003 with a small amount of capital. His decision to return this time was motivated by hopes that Bashar al-Assad, who had recently taken office, had increased staff salaries twice and was talking about economic openness, and agreements were underway to enter the European market. "I was optimistic and told myself that I had to go back because my country was the first to be there, and Syria's economic situation would improve and life would revive. I bought a small shop where I was trading and selling clothes, in addition to my official job."

Indeed, in 2000 there were serious attempts at reform at the developmental and political levels. However, political change stalled while progressive and incomplete reforms had been applied in certain economic and public administration domains. In 2005, there was a second attempt at reform. This time too, political reform was postponed, and the course of economic reform turned into another form of authoritarian policies.

This is confirmed by Osama, saying that "gradually we began to discover that the course of economic recovery in Syria was controlled by a monopoly of those close to power. There was an increase in bribery and clientelism and an increased injustice," Osama stressed, saying that it became worse under Bashar than it was during his father's rule. Jobs were filled according to sectarian interests. He pointed out that in 2004 or 2005, administrative institutions were divided according to sects, regardless of competencies. For example, in the institution where I worked there were seven heads of departments, and five of them were Alawite and one Sunni from the city of Homs and its countryside."

Farmers

Farmers, as other economic groups in Syria, had always been better off in the past than in the present, whether in terms of their standard of living or professional development. The conditions of farmers has grown increasingly bleak, with decreases in income, inadequate technological development, and a lack of facilities.

Farmers suffered continuous setbacks due to governmental policies that stood in the way of their livelihoods and made their lives increasingly difficult. Although few of the interviewees work in the field of agriculture, but what endures is their memories of agricultural life around them, the land, the fields, with a father or grandfather, either in harvesting, growing trees, or picking fruit. Farming is profession of the past for the Syrian people.

The rapid population increase of the 1950s derived from the revitalization of agriculture and its integration into global export and trade, but an increase in population quickly surpassed this agricultural progress, bringing it to an end. People abandoned this profession in large numbers and migrated to the cities. There had been pressure to produce the same crops to achieve self-sufficiency, exhausting and drying out the earth. The prices of crops also increased.

During the first period of Baath party control, the state was interested in the countryside, the health and education of its people, as it was a party with rural roots. But when the Baath Party and ruling power decided to move rural populations to the city centers, the majority left behind agriculture.

Akram al-Khatib, 48 years old, in an interview in Turkey in 2017, said he depended on rain-irrigated agriculture until 1998. From childhood, he went to the fields to work with his father. "I still have a passion and nostalgia, and the smell of dust after the rain still nestles in my memory and my senses, as does the smell of corn after harvest. Many of my beautiful memories have arisen from these experiences, and sometimes I drive to the countryside to reconnect with it.

Regarding work prospects after agriculture, Al-Khatib said, "I looked for work in the city, then I bought warehouses and started to work in trade, commitments and contracting in Aleppo until I left Syria," he said.

Al-Khatib lived in the city of Raqqa, where agricultural investment was available to all people of the province, whether they landowners or otherwise. "Whoever owned material surplus

was investing in agriculture, and of course we were working in the domain of rain-irrigated agriculture exclusively."

He explains that the majority of the population in Raqqa, especially the rural people, works in agriculture as a profession inherited by the children from the parents. "The main types of crops were strategically chosen by the state: wheat, yellow corn, cotton, or sugar beets." He explains that the state established several silos in the countryside to receive these crops, and there are two huge centers for marketing cotton in Raqqa, producing huge quantities. The state did not allow the production of vegetables, only a limited amount, and focused on their strategic choice for crops.

The drive in agricultural growth in Syria during the periods between 1974 and 1982, and between 1991 and 1995, using chemical fertilizers, as well as large-scale industrial materials used during the cultivation of cotton, beet or sugar beet crops, but rarely for wheat or barley crops. The government paid particular attention to cotton because it attained foreign currency. The sugar beet industry received interest equal to cotton, while barley did not received same attention it did in the mid-1980s. During the same period, agriculture in Syria declined sharply due to the devastating drought of 1984, then rains, frosts and hot winds in 1987 and, more importantly, a sharp decline in world oil prices.

Al-Khatib pointed to the existence of other crops that farmers tried to plant to avoid costs such as olive trees. These were popular in the province because of plentiful land excluded from state irrigation, as olive trees do not need large amounts of water, and simple engines installed over water channels can irrigate vast areas olive groves, producing a successful cultivation.

"Rain-irrigated agriculture requires two farming periods a year," Al-Khatib said, “as it commences in October and then again in May, depending mainly on rainy seasons, which is a gamble. Once in this profession, one cannot get away from this even at a loss. If the rain comes, we will harvested and revitalize, and if not, we lose the season. "

In terms of rain-irrigated agriculture, it is not as expensive: there is no need for fertilizers or diesel engines provided by the state, for which it must be compensated from harvest profits.

"The policy of the state was wrong-headed. For example in 2000, a certain price was paid for grain, and it stayed the same for ten years without a rise in prices." In contrast, the prices of production multiplied several times, and the price of fuel increased, such as fuel oil for engines. These financial discrepancies put considerable pressure on the farmers, who became debtors to the state through agricultural associations.

Khatib also explains how thousands of hectares were used to cultivate strategic crops and were purchased by the state, and farmers were not allowed to sell or export directly to buyers. "The state was conducting patrols to monitor farmers; it is forbidden to transfer strategic crops between governorates because it all must be given to the state, and there is no other option," he said. Al-Khatib addresses bribery and corruption offences committed by the directors and accountants of agricultural associations, as well as the procedures of banks in each governorate. The latter facilitated access to loans to farmers, but the collection mechanism was difficult to evade.

Hanna Batato, in his book *The Farmers of Syria*, wrote that agricultural reform organized by the Syrian government at first protected the farms from global price fluctuations. The government was keen not to fall victim to price changes with the regulation of purchase prices. Small farmers were no longer vulnerable to internal seasonal fluctuations in cereal prices. However, they fell victim to traders who buy their crops at the lowest prices.

However, after the successive crises in Syria--loss in the global market due to economic sanctions, and the decline of the Syrian pound--this price regulation finally brought great loss for the farmers, who needed protection from the monopoly of the state. The state was buying its crops at the lowest prices, imposing high prices on agricultural equipment and fuel, and loans quickly turned into a nightmare for farmers.

"Agriculture was a field of profit until the state intervened and fertilizer and chemicals increased," says farmer Tawfiq Saleh Mohammed, born in 1969, interviewed in Beirut in 2016. “The land was stripped by repeated harvest year after year, whereas farmers used to plant using natural irrigation and fertilizer methods. They had relied on rain-irrigation so they could relax, but everything is changing now."

"People started to travel and leave farming once the materials started to become expensive, the water dried up, the weather changed, and livestock supplies also became expensive and living was difficult," he explained.

"We used to harvest and put crops in large bags in the trucks that lead to the state stores, and after a month or two we received the money; the state deducted irrigation and fertilizer expenses gave us the rest."

As for a season's work, he says, for example, wheat is grown, fertilized, and irrigated four or five times a season. Cotton is more difficult to cultivate. It has to be grown, fertilized and watered every fifteen days until it is like a bell. The season lasts nine months, but the wheat season only four or five months. The profits of cotton are higher than those of wheat.

Although Tawfik Salih's primary work was in agriculture, he also raised livestock, as did a large number of farmers, benefiting from them by producing wool or milk, from which they also made and sold cheese and margarine.

According to researcher Batato, there is no homogeneous class that can be called farmers in Syria. "There is no general category called ‘peasants.’ Those working in agriculture belong to a variety of social categories.” Batato also sees important local distinctions among the peasants. There are farmers who own the land and there are those who rent it while others who cultivate it; there are farmers from clans and others who are not. You also have peaceful farmers like in the Alawi plains, and Idlib al-Ghouta, and the peasant-warriors like those of Bedouin origins or the mountains. There are also farmer-gardeners and agricultural farmers, and often the gardeners were linked to the towns and cities nearby, and live either in remote urban areas or in the countryside directly adjacent to them. Because of this proximity, they were affected by the European economic penetration at an early time, benefiting from the rich oasis of Damascus fed by the waters of the Barada River.

Another characteristic of the peasantry is religious backgrounds, which are often less numerous, such as the Yazidis who speak Kurdish, Ismailis, Druze, and Christians. Religion, however, has always been a dividing factor among peasants. Although it may establish links

between peasants beyond the boundaries of villages, but religion separated them when it comes to other sects.

"My ancestors have existed for a long time in Afrin, before the land was distributed to them during the Arab unity in the 1950s, when the mountains and lands were spread over large empty areas," says Kurdish farmer Aybash Mohammed Khalil, born in 1962, in an interview in Lebanon in 2016. “They came for grazing land in these areas and then to buy land and inhabit it."

He adds that they used to cultivate the land using mules, and may extend cultivation for a full year since the tractor was not available. They hence relied exclusively on the piece of wood extension attached to the mule's neck used to plow the land.

Regarding the development of agriculture, he says, "people cultivated the land throughout their lives, but the prices of crops rose very little. When the roads opened between the provinces, with them opened up the eyes of the people. Many died before they even knew of the road to Aleppo. Money was not available, and anyone wanting to educated their son, they would send him to the Sheikh of the mosque to learn Koranic verses. Schools, roads, and pharmacies opened in the seventies.

“Olive cultivation was successful in Afrin,” explains Khalil. "At first, there were only 50,000 trees, but since olives are useful in industries, and since there was lots of empty land, people started planting them and oil sold for twenty pounds." At that time, the barrel of diesel oil was twenty pounds, which was the price of olive oil. People used only firewood, and they did not know the value of the fuel, which at first was like magic to them, as if water was poured on fire to light it. Then they understood it, and distinguished between gasoline, gas, and oil."

"Our entire olive oil production was sent to Aleppo, which then redistributed it from Khan al-Hesba, where it is sold for amounts we do not know. Many Allepans made profits from our work. Later schools opened in Afrin, and people became educated and asked traders about prices.

University Students

Syrian universities were only another trap for the manufacture of fear, the hunt for dissidents, and their removal to prisons. The state established security control of the science institutes in the 1980s and 1990s. Many university students were arrested on the basis of their views and affiliations to opposition parties, and they remained in prison for many years without trial. After their release, they were prevented from completing postgraduate studies, and were denied of civil rights.

What seemed to some to be academic and economic openness after the year 2000 when Bashar al-Assad took office was only a deception. University admission, which was based on ideological and security criteria under President Assad (the father), was based on class and sectarian criteria in the era of his son. The security presence at the university was evident, as was forced compliance with this authority.

About her experience in Syrian universities, Kebriya’ Saaour, who studied sociology at Damascus University during the 1980s, described her university days as eventful, especially

political activity. The students were interested in politics, and historically Damascus University was a place of political debate, ideas, and movements. She added that distinctive minds taught at the University of Damascus before the Baath party imposed its power. It then worked to empty the university of all intellectual content by excluding important thinkers and university doctors, of whom only a few remained.

"I was living in the university city and many of my friends who were involved in communist political work had been arrested." Most of the arrests targeted the leftist movement. Under the banner of confronting the Brotherhood, Saaour said, a campaign of arrests targeted other movements until Syria became the city of graves as described by Riad Turk."

Like the other students, she read Ahmed Fuad Najem's poems and listened to Sheikh Imam, which made them feel like they were resisting. Nada Nasr El Din said she studied at the university of Aleppo, a beautiful time she passed with university friends from diverse sects and places. She added, "we were a nice and happy group; we studied together, we studied Syria, went on picnics and spent time with each other. Most of my friends were like me, from Sweida, and we went out together for walks, on holiday trips, or to eat or sleep in the university city," she said, adding that this did not mean she was isolated from students from other regions of Syria who were studying at the university.

She also explains that when she studied at university, she wanted to specialize in pharmacy. But she did not because of her average; instead, she studied engineering, which she found interesting. But she was shocked after graduation, as studying was had little to do with the reality of work in any respect.

Nada's words seem to confirm what academic research already concluded: the most significant weaknesses in higher education in Syria is that educational training does not fit the needs of development and the labor market. The Council of Higher Education in Syria recognized the need for major reform and diversification at the level of educational programs and the need to reduce the rigidity of the systems governing curricula development, but this delay came decades later. It began with attempts to ensure the quality of Syrian universities through a participatory reform system between students and university professors The realization of a strategic plan started at the University of Damascus, where a reform program began in 2006 to evaluate the programs, teaching, and subjects offered by colleges.

"I started law school and was working at the same time, and it was a very tiring journey," Basma Jiri said. "There was no law school in Latakia, and I had to study at the University of Aleppo. I lived in the university city, but we had to travel from one city to another to attend certain lectures."

Had Basma studied the university when Bashar al-Assad founded the Syrian Virtual University in 2002, perhaps she would not have needed to travel to attend lectures. The university was then promoted as the first of its kind, taught online, in the Arab region, and its slogan was "Learning Anytime, Anywhere." Two hundred students started studying in this university in 2003, with an increase to 7000 students by 2009.

Basma discovered the level of corruption at the university. "By the time we were in our third year of studies, we understood the meaning of selling study materials at the university and the identities of corrupt professors. There were students who bought difficult study materials to succeed in exams and get diplomas." She did not participate in this as she feared that this kind

of professor would want other things from her. She finally obtained a law degree without needing this.

In a different experience, Basma Jiri learned how to mix with the students in the university from different sects and regions, making them realize that the regime was intent on severing relations between the provinces by transmitting certain patterns of rumors about the people of a particular region.

She explained: "You heard that those from Raqqa are backward and shepherds, according to what we see on TV about these provinces, and that the people of the region know only agriculture and sheep, and wear jellabas." In short, this was the idea of the people of Latakia. "When I mixed with everyone at the University of Aleppo, I met people from of Idlib, Raqqa, Hasaka, Qamishli and its Kurds. I knew the truth. I met with their kindness, morality, sophistication, and understanding."

Maria (a pseudonym), age 32, interviewed in Lebanon, says that the university consisted of different groups. For example, there was a group of Palestinians, the Jazira community, and so on, and it was not easy to become friends with people of other groups. "I was initially in one group, and we were all friends for about two months. I remember that during Ramadan they decided to go out, and I told them that I was fasting. They were surprised, and asked me if was Muslim, and then they did not talk to me again for the rest of my time at university."

"I entered the economics department and it was crowded," she says in an interview in Lebanon, "I remember that for the first year I was sitting on the floor, my father felt sorry for me and wanted to bring me a chair but I told him that the students would laugh at me. And I remember development and underdevelopment courses taught by Adnan Suleiman and Badi3 Al-Ali that influenced and changed me.

Simhan Sarhan, born in 1969, became depressed at university. "I followed a very dull routine at university. The first shock was that I studied media but could not express myself because of censorship, so I just studied just to pass my classes. Frankly I paid a bribe to pass English." She justified doing this by saying that as long as there are professors who take money from the students there will be those who will pay.

About security control at university she said, "even at the university, it is difficult to speak freely; there must be controls, and the majority were afraid. If some people hear about someone who speaks freely, they figure that they do this just to get them to to talk freely about certain subjects," she said. This was something that was organized and supervised, so that you graduate from university and you end up hating yourself!"

Regarding an incident she remembers very well: "A professor lecturing protested the late arrival of several students to class, but it turned out that they had relations with the authority, and forced the professor to apologize to them despite the fact that they were thirty minutes late."