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Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Syria

Civil Society in As-Suwayda: Critical Confrontations Against The Authority

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The civil society movement in As-Suwayda governorate presents a problematic experience concerning the community's capabilities and civilians' choices in an environment of increasingly widespread violence. The governorate remained on the margins of the military conflict relatively, but it developed civilian mechanisms and formed local committees and organizations that played different roles in enhancing security and organizing society by implementing "defensive" tactics to protect civil peace. At the same time, these organizations adopted a local approach due to the lack of resources and their dependence on community participation that focuses on "pre-state relations", which made the initiatives "protective" and "isolated" to a large extent and reflected an organizational weakness in civil society organizations. Nevertheless, it presented, on the other hand, the context of its peculiarity, as it grew in response to the complicated reality of the conflict by practicing tested and agreed upon societal mechanisms.

This case study monitors the civil society activity in As-Suwayda, which adopted a neutral and peaceful discourse during the conflict. It also covers the campaign organized in the governorate against the so-called "looting" (Taafish)¹.

CASE BACKGROUND

The case dates back to June 2018, when the Authority forces took control of Daraa villages, making progress on the opposition groups. The military victory was accompanied by campaigns of robbery of houses and shops. This phenomenon was known as "looting", which began in 2012 in Homs. Also, it appeared in Qusayr, the northern countryside of Latakia, Daraya in the western countryside of Damascus and the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and Eastern Ghouta. However, when stolen goods were brought from Daraa to As-Suwayda to open markets that publicly sell the stolen goods from their owners, a large campaign was launched in which the civil society and many civil society organizations participated in As-Suwayda to boycott these stolen items and seek to put pressure on the authorities to prosecute the perpetrators.

The term "looting" appeared in 2012 when the authorities disregarded the fighting members in their ranks. They had stolen property from the controlled areas and facilitated the stolen items' passage through the military checkpoints. The issue evolved into opening markets in the pro-authority regions to sell the stolen items before turning them into a systematic policy. Thus, "looting" transformed from a random process into an organized phenomenon linked to paramilitary groups protected by influential figures with whom they share profits and spoils. It has become a norm in the post-military battlefield². Even though plundering

¹ There is no synonym for the term «looting» in the Arabic or English language, as the Arabic term is known in the Syrian dialect; its origin is the luggage of the home (home furniture), and it means the robbery of the empty houses, warehouses, shops and factories of all their furniture, equipment, property and goods.

² This phenomenon was primarily linked to the pro-governmental forces' militias, particularly the National Defense Forces. It was then emerged among the parties to the conflict and accused the Kurdish People's Protection Units following Syrian Democratic Forces of stealing residents' houses in Ar Raqqa after controlling it last year. Afrin region was the most noticeable example of the «looting» carried out by the rebel opposition military groups after taking control of it last February.

the property of the “other” contradicts the hierarchy of societal values with all its cultural, social and religious concepts, it was legislated as a reward for “those who stood with the authority” and a punishment “for those who stood against it.”

Moreover, the roots of “looting” in the politics of the Syrian authority go back to before the outbreak of the conflict, through the so-called “corruption policy” (Zinni, 2001), which generalized systematic corruption that exposes everyone to condemnation and results in social normalization with corruption, which is what developed in the emergence of a “spoiled state” that distributes shares of wealth and power to the citizens according to the degree of kinship and loyalty to the authority; thus it reproduces the relations of subordination that prevent establishing citizenship relations based on right, control and accountability (Nehme, 2014), while the authority derives its legitimacy from the beneficiaries who are trying to increase their number, especially that daily meeting needs requires involvement in the system of corruption.

TIMELINE AND ADOPTED TACTICS

Activists began to highlight the phenomenon of “looting” in As-Suwayda on social media, and the first reactions were summarized in unorganized individual denunciations. Later, discussions quickly developed towards organizing a serious campaign³ that does not seek to enter into any direct confrontation against the authorities, which led to the exclusion of organizing demonstrations and protests, while it was agreed to launch a popular movement directed at people and public opinion to urge them not to buy stolen goods and not to link them to any of the other issues in the governorate.

The campaign began by creating a Facebook page, “What I Won’t Buy It ... Its Owner Is Crying For It”⁴. Many volunteers from the associations printed flyers and posters and distributed them in the streets of As-Suwayda⁵. The activists started the second phase of the campaign by documenting dozens of thefts and exposing its participants’ names daily.

The campaign became more organized after several civil organizations in As-Suwayda⁶ agreed on an action plan that includes advocacy mechanisms and practical measures, most notably establishing a coalition of clerics, leaders of large clans and some intellectuals, and initially turned to the “Men of Dignity Movement”, despite it being an armed party, under the pretext of previous bold positions supporting social demands, in addition to its neutral stance in the conflict, which gives it credibility. Then, the movement issued a statement warning against “being dragged behind this filthy blood-stained trade” and demanding the “political and security leaderships to take their role”, and blamed them of “full responsibility”⁷.

3 The killing of three brothers from the «Abu Hamra» family during a dispute over the purchase of a shipment of stolen items prompted a number of activists to take a more serious stance.

4 They launched the hashtags ‘Do Not Loot, We Can See You’ (لا تعفش شايغيناك), “Do Not Buy Stolen Items” (مايبتشترى ميسروق) and “No For Looting” (لا للتعفش) and “Do Not Be Involved in Looting” (لا تكون شريك وتشتري تعفش).

5 On the second day of the campaign, Arman town’s residents closed a shop selling stolen items from the Daraa governorate, and the state of refusal moved to many areas. Hence, some residents of the town of Thaala burned a car carrying stolen furniture, while the residents of some towns prevented cars from «loot» in their villages.

6 Many organizations led by the Syrian organization, “Jouzour”, which was suspended three times by the Syrian government in the past, are the Social Commission for National Action, the Earth Organization, My Home, My House, the Citizenship and Civil Peace Committees, Thuraya Organization, the National Initiative in Jabal Al Arab, the Center for Democracy and Rights Civil Society in Syria, Syria Roots Organization, Arab Organization for Human Rights, Social Work Forum in As Suwayda, Al-Hikma Center for Studies and Dialogue.

7 «Men of Dignity» condemns looting: what goes around comes around. 2018/07/02 Cities Website. <https://bit.ly/2HvJoPV>



The responses to the statement were positive, which facilitated the process of joining new social mediators, as a delegation from the campaign visited the major clans in As-Suwayda, each of which issued a statement declaring “the disavowal of their sons if they participate in looting in any way”⁸.

These steps facilitated negotiations with the “Akl Shaykhhood of the Druze Denomination” that supported the authorities and responded to the campaign and “absolutely prohibited any circulation, sale, purchase, or trade-in these stolen goods”, and demanded that the official authorities should not allow the passage of looting goods or the establishment of markets for them in the region⁹.

The moves that turned into a factor that pressured government agencies to adopt legal measures came successively, as a group of civil society organizations provided a report to the Public Prosecution in As-Suwayda¹⁰ “about the crimes committed by gangs of robbery, plunder, theft and looting”, and the number of signatories exceeded 400 citizens (Balan, 2018).

CIVIL SOCIETY’S ROLE

Civil society’s role in this campaign can only be understood by placing it in a wider context, which is the violent conflict and the attempt of civil society in As-Suwayda to protect the group whose interests it represents from entering into armed conflict, and at the same time, to preserve its function “as a field of collective activities that focus on joint principles, values and social justice” (Fisher, 2009, p. 5).

During the past seven years, many civil groups and initiatives have been formed in As-Suwayda that have worked mainly in activities to combat poverty, empower women, protect the environment and respond to the humanitarian crises left by the conflict, including health and food relief, providing psychological support

8 Families in As Suwayda threaten their children who participate in «looting». Enab Baladi. 2018-02-10. <https://bit.ly/2QWunFT>

9 Sheikh Al-Aql forbids looting: “Forbidden money is destroyed for its owner” 2018/03/07. Al Modon website <https://bit.ly/2sxTOUP>

10 Informing is a procedure that citizens carry out to inform the competent judicial authority of the occurrence of a crime, as these authorities may take the legal measures specified by laws and regulations.

to children, and combating hate speech. Meanwhile, these teams disregarded critical issues such as promoting public freedoms, the rule of law, accountability and economic inequality and tried to remain within the narrow field available to civil society in areas controlled by the authority that did not allow direct attempts to influence public policies.

Despite this, some of these initiatives formed mechanisms to resist the effects of violence and protect society from joining it, including the “They Destroyed Us” and “No” initiatives, which adopted the cessation of the enforced recruitment of As-Suwayda’s residents as their main demand, in addition to the “We Want to Live” campaign “The Campaign Against Looting”. These initiatives had many roles, including:

- Working for credibility and providing correct information and focusing on collective common values to encourage citizens not to participate in armed conflict, directly or indirectly, by buying stolen items.
- Playing the role of a mediator who mediates the social actors, as they are able to build forms of organization that include actors from traditional categories such as clerics and tribal leaders as civil society’s members.
- Providing reliable unofficial communication channels to raise public awareness about the crisis and the economic dynamics increasing the war economy.
- Spreading the values of collective initiative and contributing to forming a valuable community reference, playing a compensatory role, especially regarding the “deterrent function” that the state is supposed to assume.
- It did not establish patterns of participation based on citizenship and rights, but it used patterns based on primary relationships dominating the influence of family, clan and religious institutions.

INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

Civil society activity in As-Suwayda has been affected by attracting and repelling factors. Many circumstances have prompted civil society organizations to resist the effects of violence and remain neutral from the conflict:

Displaced people: The number of residents in As-Suwayda reached almost 350 thousand people before the revolution started. Today, it is more than half a million people (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The majority of the governorate’s population belongs to the Druze community, with some Muslims and Christians. Tens of thousands of people have been displaced to As-Suwayda from hot spots due to the relative calm it has witnessed and its social inclusion on the list of safe areas (Al-Khatib, 2014). The internal displacement pressured the governorate’s needs, but on the other hand, it activated civil society, strengthened host community-displaced relations, most of whom came from opposition areas and made it more critical to their conditions and more accepting and understanding of their views. Furthermore, the results of the analysis of societal disunity in Syria revealed significant deterioration of societal trust due to the spread of sectarian rhetoric and sharp polarization, while the governorate of As-Suwayda had the best results and witnessed higher levels of effective networks and community participation (Nasr et al., 2017, p. 27).

Organizations: The governorate of As-Suwayda witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of civil and relief organizations during the years of the conflict (Hatoum, 2018), as their number increased to more than 90 licensed organizations and

tens of unlicensed, compared to 14 organizations in 2009. These organizations attract a large number of volunteers, according to the results of the non-governmental organizations’ survey in As-Suwayda (2017), the number of its affiliates reached 22,000, of whom employees constitute only 1%. Moreover, most of these organizations are small. Most of them were established to meet the increasing needs of relief resulting from the escalating violence, especially that the charitable nature prevails over 70% of them. In this context, these organizations are distinguished by their local interests, as only 9 of them were able to be partners with donor organizations, but 91% of some of their work targeted the governorate, which contributed to preserving their independence and making them reflect local social needs instead of implementing the agendas of the funding agencies, even if this greatly affected its resources, as only 4% of them have headquarters. Most of them are small organizations and organize activities instead of planning in the medium or long term to associate their demands with public policies at the national level.

Political marginalization: After the arrival of the Arab Socialist Baath Party to power, the governorate of As-Suwayda experienced widespread political marginalization, as its officers were excluded from the army and its members were excluded from important positions in the state after they lived a golden time under the Great Syrian Revolution (Donati, 2012). Furthermore, the governorate witnessed previous tensions with authority. In 1986, the memory of Sultan al-Atrash’s revival turned into a student protest movement and demonstrations in As-Suwayda, and they were confronted with force and repression. In 2000, demonstrations erupted in the governorate, in which the army intervened, resulting in deaths and injuries (Al-Abdullah and Al-Hallaq, 2017).

Economic marginalization: Before 2011, As-Suwayda ranked second in Syria in terms of the prevalence of poverty, which reached 18% of all residents there, according to the Poverty Study in Syria (2005). In fact, the governorate was neglected, as no industrial or commercial centers were established in it, and agriculture remained the predominant economic activity, but within narrow areas and with the most of agricultural properties in the hand of only 3% of families, most of which relied on remittances from expatriates as the main source of income (Rafii, 2011).

Independence tendency: Many Druze figures played a remarkable role in contemporary Syrian political history, yet the ruling elite in Damascus tried to control the political ambition in As-Suwayda (Al-Abdullah and Al-Hallaq, 2017). In fact, the relationship of Jabal al-Druze with the central government was not stable at all, as they had many tensions, since the people of As-Suwayda stood with Prince Faisal on the condition of obtaining the “independence of Mount Druze”, the dispute with the rule of President Adeb al-Shishakli, who bombed the city of As-Suwayda with aircraft after the mountain revolt against his rule, and the failed coup attempt by officer Salim Hatoum.

Participation in the first protests: The opposition groups in As-Suwayda participated in peaceful activities in the wake of the first protests in 2001. Lawyers held a protest in front of the Bar Association at the end of March 2011. Several demonstrations also took place calling for public freedoms and the lifting of the siege on the besieged cities, as well as the demonstration in Shahba for “the victory of Hama”, the open protest that lasted 8 hours, and the large demonstrations in the city of Salkhad (Rafii, 2011), while some of the governorate’s youth defected from the army and formed an armed organization called “Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash Brigade” amid the local residents’ reservations and failure to gain their support.

Neutrality in the conflict: The people of As-Suwayda formed several armed groups to defend their area and refused to participate in any operations outside the governorate. Since earlier of 2013, the main concern of the people of As-Suwayda seemed to be stopping enforced recruitment and boycotting more than 27,000 young Druze men from military service (Rida, 2018). Earlier in 2015, the residents attacked the two recruitment divisions in Shahba and Salkhad and released detainees who wanted military service. A military force, the “Sheikhs of Dignity” movement, which severely criticized the government and President Bashar al-Assad, was established before its leader was assassinated in 2015.

LESSONS LEARNED

The civil society movement in As-Suwayda was based on traditional relations, avoiding governance issues, citizenship and good governance based on pre-state relations, focusing on the local privacy of the region’s problems. It was also unable to link its demands with public policies at the national level, which confirms once again that civil non-governmental organizations cannot be achieved in its legal and institutional form, except after society has completed its national state and completed establishing its institutions that guarantee freedoms and law.

POLITICAL FRAMING AND CAMPAIGN’S POLITICAL OUTCOMES

Although the campaign’s demands are limited and do not relate to a specific law, and may seem at first glance separated from the general policies of the state, knowing the Syrian situation confirms that it is a mechanism for resistance to conflict and a critical confrontation against the authorities and a policy that was promoted. It also permits the seizure of money of the people who challenged the state or carried weapons to give it a gift or reward to the loyalists (whether those who stole or who buy them cheaply). Moreover, it is a direct translation of the military power that gave people a choice between ignoring its mistakes or the security chaos that may result from its absence, and at the same time a pressure mechanism to activate the laws and its executive and judicial means to hold accountable those who violate the law.



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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

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