

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the map of Syria.

The Alawite Dilemma in Homs

Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community

AZIZ NAKKASH
March 2013

- There are many ways of understanding Alawite identity in Syria. Geography and regionalism are critical to an individual's experience of being Alawite.
- The notion of an »Alawite community« identified as such by its own members has increased with the crisis which started in March 2011, and the growth of this self-identification has been the result of or in reaction to the conflict.
- Using its security apparatus, the regime has implicated the Alawites of Homs in the conflict through aggressive militarization of the community.
- The Alawite community from the Homs area does not perceive itself as being well-connected to the regime, but rather fears for its survival.



Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Army, Paramilitary Forces, and the Alawite Community in Homs	3
2.1 Ambitions and Economic Motivations	3
2.2 Vulnerability and Defending the Regime for the Sake of Survival	3
2.3 The Alawite Dilemma	6
2.4 Regime Militias	8
2.5 From Popular Committees to Paramilitaries	9
2.6 <i>Shabiha</i> Organization	9
2.7 <i>Shabiha</i> Talk	10
2.8 The Militarization of the Community	11
3. Civilians and the Militarization of the Alawite Community	11
3.1 Alawite Families and Constraints	11
3.2 The Alawite Trap	13
3.3 A Divided City?	14
3.4 Salvation from the Coast?	15
3.5 Kidnapping and its Effect on Inter- and Intra-communal Relations	15
4. Conclusion	16

1. Introduction

Syria's Alawites are often portrayed as a monolithic religious community which has unconditionally and unwaveringly supported the Syrian regime through the crisis which has shaken the country since March 2011. However, very little attention has been paid to the community's diversity and to reasons for its support of the regime that might extend beyond the simplistic equation: »The ruling family is Alawite, and therefore Syria's Alawites support the regime.« While emphasizing the Alawite community's diversity in the context of the current situation, this research analyzes the fears for survival and the socio-economic conditions which underpin the current expressions of Alawite solidarity with the regime.

This study focuses on the Alawite community of Homs, a city located in the economic and strategic centre of the country with its numerous factories, oil refineries, fertilizer plants, power plants, gas storage facilities, etc. This region is militarily important, as it is the seat of the country's most important military institutions. Alawites from Homs and its environs are employed in great numbers by these state-run industries and military institutions, and the region has suffered economically due to the current crisis, especially since late 2011 and early 2012. The Alawites of Homs and the surrounding region are a minority,¹ and their presence in the city is relatively recent, stretching back only 20–30 years. Most Alawites came to the city from the surrounding towns or villages and it is in fact not possible to discuss the Alawites of Homs without referring to the villages of origin with which individual Alawites maintain strong links, whether through the presence of relatives, houses or land that they continue to cultivate. From within their neighbourhoods, Alawite residents of the city tend to cluster amongst those who originate from the same villages. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the Alawites have moved their villages to the city. In fact, some consider the city's expansion a result of the extension of surrounding villages into the city, rather than the more traditional movement of outward growth from within the city to the country. Before March 2011, while the different neighbourhoods of Homs tended to be dominated by one community – whether Sunni, Ala-

wite, Christian, or Shiite – a peaceful pluralistic society generally prevailed. It was not uncommon to find minority-owned businesses, such as Sunni shops in Alawite neighbourhoods. In some of the newer areas developed in the mid-1990s, the population was mixed, a trend which has progressively reversed since March 2011.

This study differentiates between the Alawites from the »hinterland« (*dakhel*), i.e. the Homs-Hama region, and those from the Mediterranean coastal region (*sahel*)² and it argues that Alawite solidarity does not represent a monolithic community. Another key objective of this study is to demonstrate the difference between the lived experiences of Alawites of the hinterland/*dakhel* and those of the coastal region/*sahel*. This distinction has historical antecedents, but appears to have become further exacerbated by the current situation of turmoil. Alawites from the Homs region consider themselves particularly vulnerable compared with their counterparts in the coastal region, where Alawites remain a majority. The Alawites from Homs also feel excluded from the power structure which, in their eyes, is monopolized by Alawites from the coastal areas. However, due to the nature of the current turmoil in Syria, these differences operate to reinforce or create sentiments of a common group affiliation, re-establishing social cohesion from within the Alawite community as a whole.

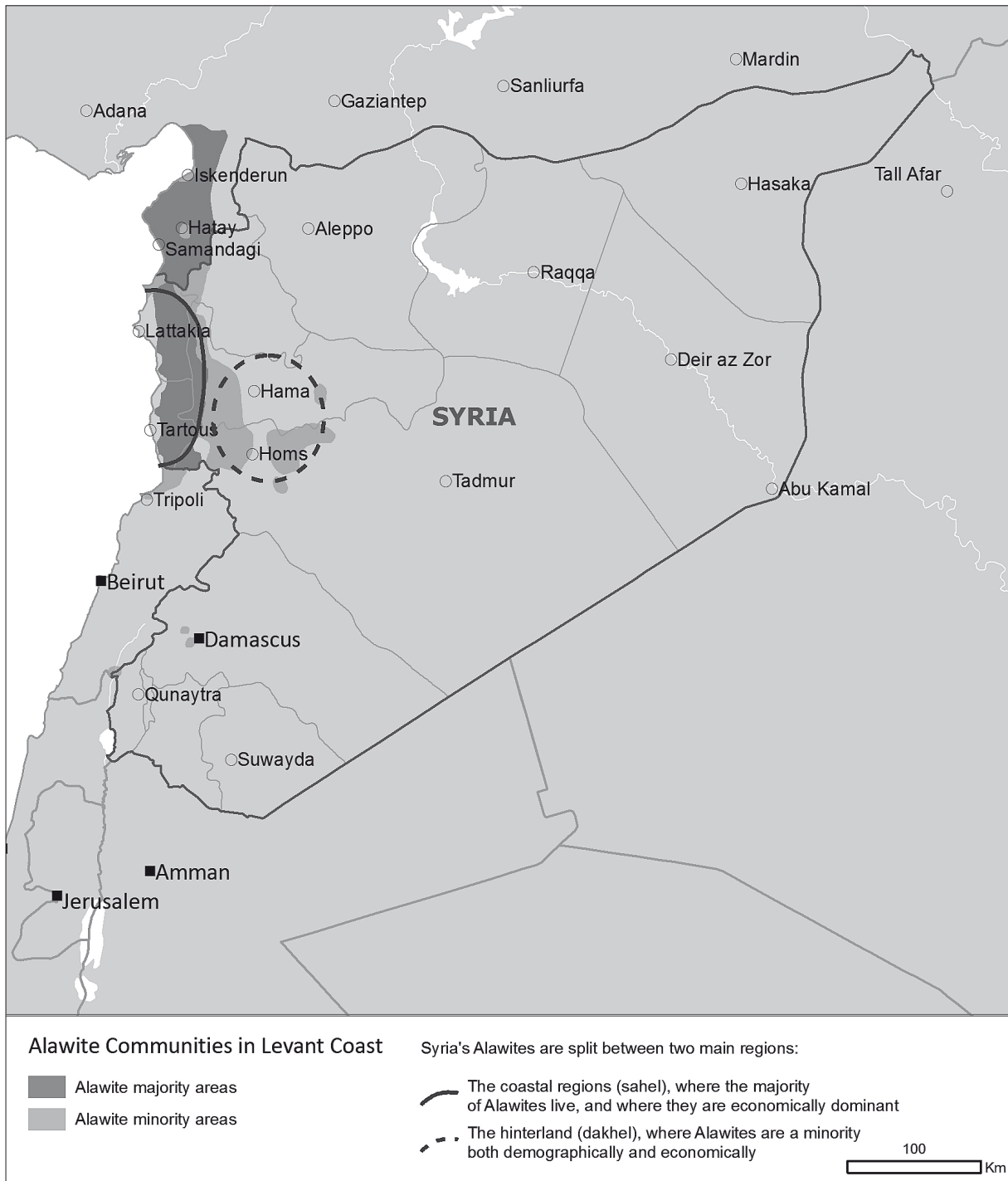
This study will also demonstrate that support for the regime by the Alawites from Homs is multi-faceted. The Alawites not only work for state-run economic and military institutions where they earn incomes which they depend on for their livelihoods, but they fundamentally fear for their lives as the present uprising is increasingly seen as an anti-Alawite movement rather than a »popular revolution«. Consequently, the Alawites are not able to conceive of a viable alternative for their survival other than acceptance and support for the present regime. For many Alawites, support for President Bashar al-Assad and his regime is not simply a matter of endorsement, but has evolved into a basic fear for the lives of family members or neighbours whose employment in the army, the secret service or paramilitary groups – the notorious *Shabiha*. This support can be regarded as a manner in which Alawites seek protection and a key to their basic survival.

1. Minority is here referenced as a population whose economic and cultural impact on a particular geographical area is limited. In contrast, the majority is not only demographically dominant but also controls the day-to-day economy and other aspects of the broader culture.

2. The boundary between the coast (*sahel*) and the hinterland (*dakhel*) broadly follows the coastal mountain range of Syria (*Silsilat al-Jibal al-Saheliyya*), also known as the Alawite Mountains (*Jibal al-'Alawiyyin*).



Figure 1: Alawite Communities in Levant Coast



This research will also demonstrate how the regime has used the secret service to garner the allegiance of Homs' Alawites who broadly perceive the *Mukhabarat* as an institution which is controlled and dominated by coastal Alawites. Finally, it will show that despite

the fact that the Alawites of Homs remain civilians, most have family members or neighbours who work for the army, the secret service or the paramilitary and this has contributed to the greater »militarization« of the community. In this context, the rise of the *Shabiha* in

Homs can be associated rather with the community's militarization rather than with a concerted strategy to suppress the uprising. There are other factors which have also strengthened the community's sense of cohesion, most notably shared religious values at a time of heightened sectarian tensions, as well as the influence of the media, both state-run television and social media networks.

This study is based on observations and interviews conducted with members of the Alawite community in the Homs area during the summer of 2012. The interviewees range from army officers to paramilitaries and civilians, including students, academics, businessmen and individuals from diverse backgrounds. While some identified themselves explicitly as religiously observant Alawites, others consider themselves trapped in the »Alawite box« as a result of the current crisis. Some interviewees were aware of the research, whereas others were not aware of the aims of our discussions. This was particularly true of the *Shabiha* with whom I spent time as a »participant observer«. Some of the interviews and observations gathered in outlying villages were provided by intermediaries. The interviewed sample is not representative in that it does not reflect a broad cross sectional range of views by Alawites, although it nevertheless provides some insight into the Alawite community in Homs. The objective is neither to censure nor to defend but to shed light on the multifaceted and often complex political and social realities of the Alawite community in Homs today.

2. Army, Paramilitary Forces, and the Alawite Community in Homs

2.1 Ambitions and Economic Motivations

Homs is the main location where army officers are trained in Syria. Military institutions in Homs have been and remain important pull-factors for Alawites to the city, particularly following Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.³ For those living in the surrounding villages as well as those raised in Homs, joining the army represents a desirable means of securing an income.

3. There are many military institutions in Homs, including colleges, weapon factories, airports and important bases and compounds.

A case in point is Salem⁴. In 1985, Salem, while in his twenties, enlisted in Homs' famous military academy (*kulliya harbiya*) located in al-Wa'er, where all high-ranking officers start their careers. While his family originates from a village to the east of Homs, Salem was born in Nuzha and now lives in Wadi al-Dahab, two mainly Alawite neighbourhoods in the southern part of the city. Salem maintains strong links with relatives in the village where he also continues to own land. Salem, who is now in his fifties, is a Colonel (*'aqid*) in the army. He enrolled at the military academy hoping to eventually become a high ranking officer. Salem explains that to achieve this goal, he »*should work hard and follow the rules*«. Salem also explains that joining the army would guarantee a stable income even if he did not attain the desired position. Salem was based in Damascus for about a dozen years before returning to Homs six years ago.

At the time when Salem enrolled as a young man, circumstances were such that a career outside the army would have been difficult given his lack of connections in business and other sectors of the economy. Today, Salem considers joining the army represents a »*hard life*« and he hopes that his sons will not follow in his footsteps. Salem, however, also realizes the challenges of changing professions.

2.2 Vulnerability and Defending the Regime for the Sake of Survival

Salem cites economic and ideological reasons as motivating factors for remaining in the armed forces: »*We depend on the regime economically speaking, but we also depend on it for safety*.« Since March 2011, he sees his role in the army as a guardian of the homeland (*watan*) and of civil peace (*silm ahli*), clarifying that »*any attempt to overthrow the regime will render Syria very dangerous*«. He explains that in late 2010 and early 2011, in the weeks following the initial events in Tunisia, he received a message »*from Damascus*«, sent to army officers throughout Syria, warning that units may come under attack by Islamist radical groups. At the time, the Colonel took this warning very seriously. Eighteen months later, in the summer of 2012, he declares, »*look what is happening now, they were right*«.

4. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.



Figure 2: Migration of Hinterland Alawites to Homs

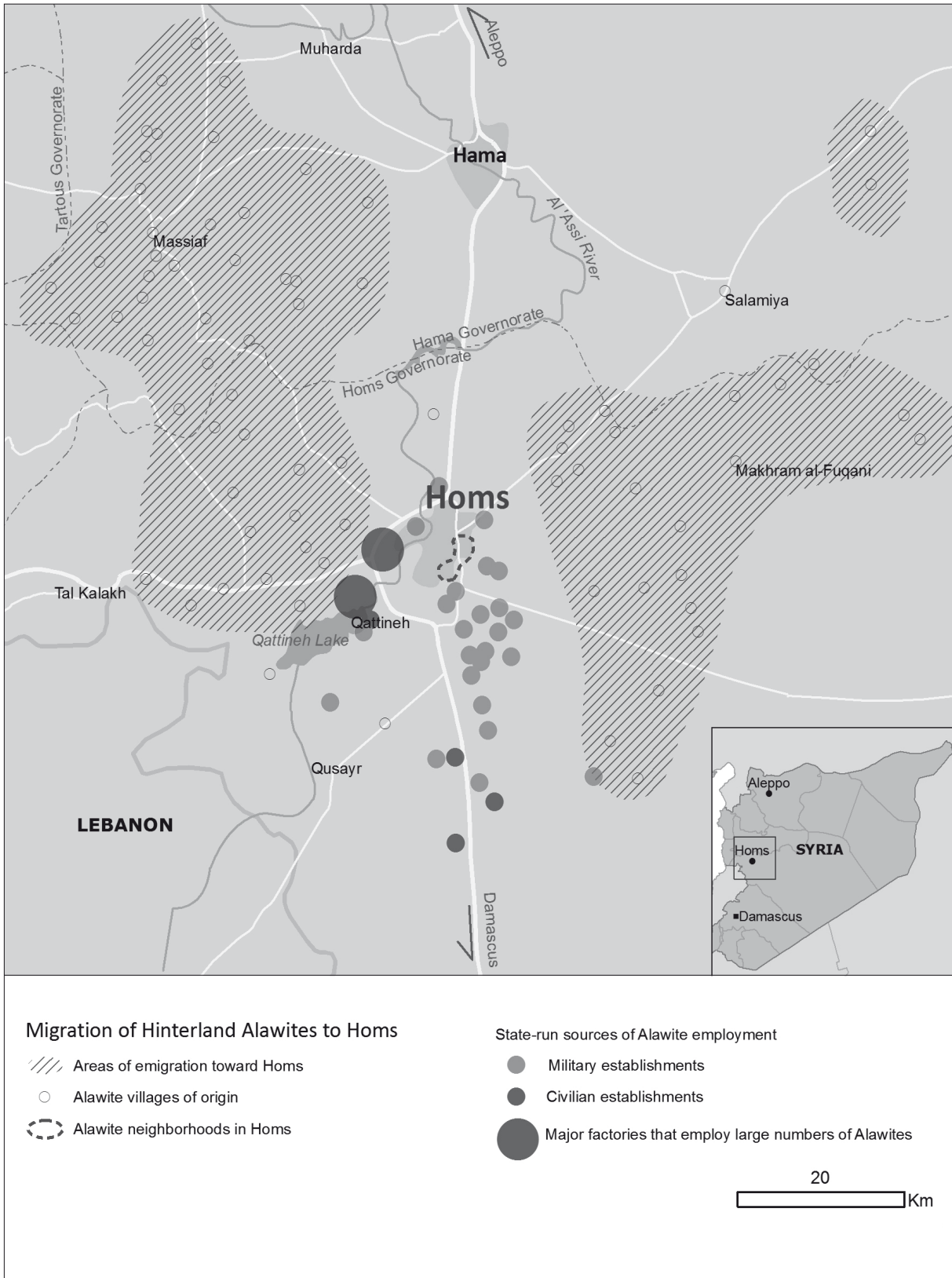
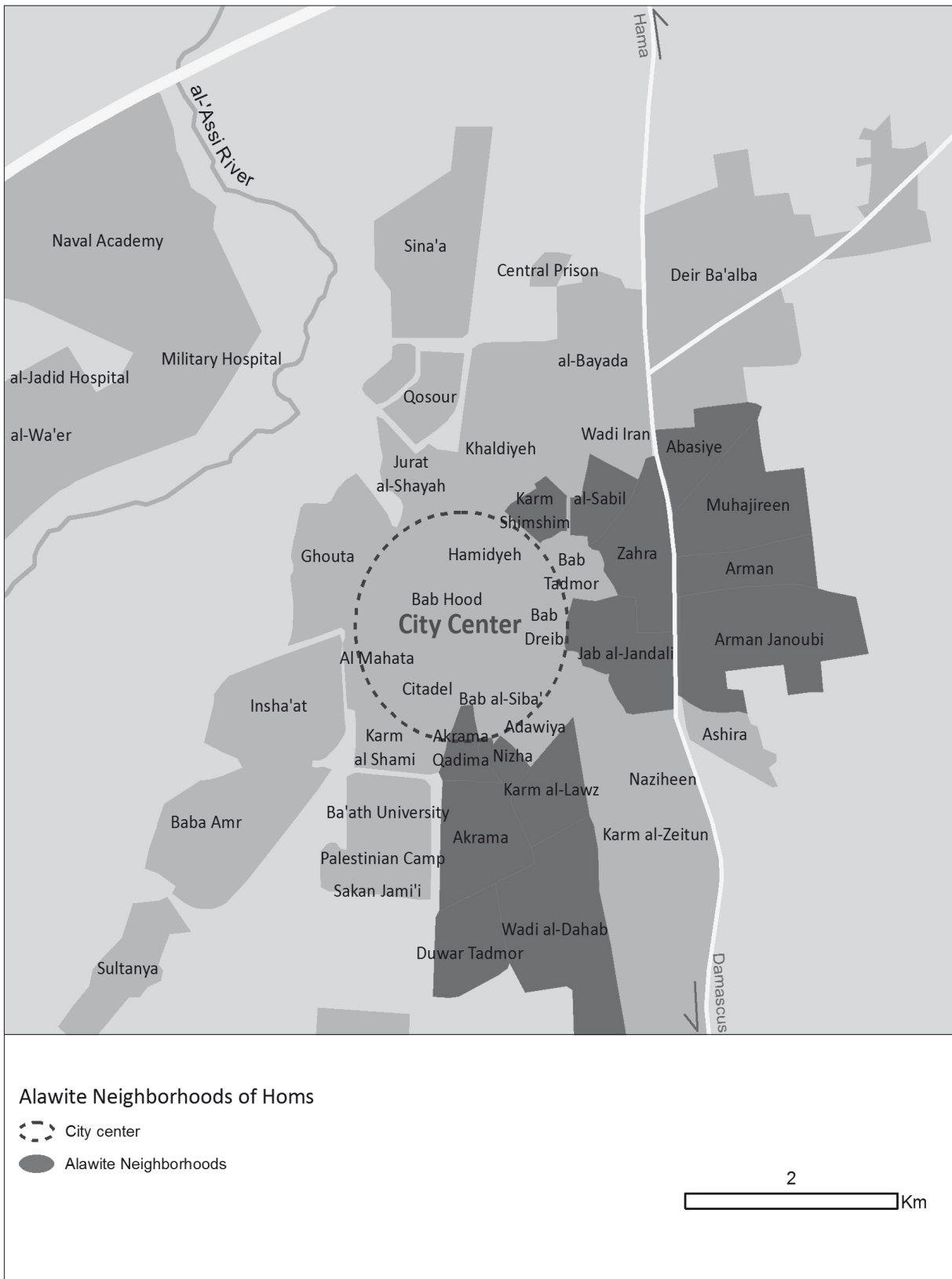




Figure 3: Alawite Neighborhoods of Homs



Since March 2011, Salem has stopped wearing his army uniform when traveling between the office and home fearing targeting. He only wears his military uniform when engaging in combat. Salem's task at the outset of the crisis was to »escort« pro-regime demonstrations. Later, he participated in military incursions to areas held by the »opposition«. Echoing the regime's official rhetoric, the opposition is referred to as »terrorists« and »armed gangs«. For a time, Salem was also charged with managing strategic checkpoints in conflict areas, notably Baba Amr when it came under heavy fire. He recalls asking his superiors if he could mobilize the young men of his neighbourhood to assist the army, but his request was declined. »At the time«, he explains, »my superiors were not enthusiastic about the idea of having militias directly linked to the army.« Here, it should be noted that the regime's initial strategy was to maintain distinct divisions between the army, the militias and the secret service. However, with the deteriorating situation, the secret service was charged with organizing paramilitary groups which then established a direct link to the army.

The Colonel considers that today it is not just the army which is a target, but »Syria as a whole. The target is Syria's unity (*al-hadaf huwa wahdat Suriya*)«, he says. In his view, defending what he refers to as the country's existing unity signifies above all maintaining the status quo as a necessary condition for the safety of Alawites. He describes the situation of Alawites from the hinterland/*dakhel*: »We are a minority here and the Sunnis want to drive us out.« According to him, »the question isn't about Bashar [al-Assad] as a person, but if he goes, Alawites will be in danger, especially those in and around Homs and more so than those on the coast«. For Colonel Salem, the survival of the regime thus represents the survival of Syria's Alawites, especially for those from the hinterland.

This last point is of particular significance as it helps to open the »black box« which the Alawite community of the Homs region represents, and it addresses the greater vulnerability they feel when compared with the Alawites from the coast. This sentiment is echoed by Abu Ayman, an Alawite originally from a village of the coastal region who now lives in Homs. Abu Ayman explains that in general he still feels safer on the coast. He also highlights further inequalities amongst the Alawites, in particular from within the army. This divide exists not only between *sahel* and *dakhel*, where the former rise

to higher, more powerful positions, but it also exists between the coastal Alawites themselves. Abu Ayman was previously a Lieutenant Colonel (*muqaddam*) in the army for 20 years. He explains: »I realised that I couldn't get a good position because of the existing regionalism among the Alawite sect on the coast.« Abu Ayman further notes that »in order to reach a high rank and especially a powerful and influential position in the army, one needs to be from a certain clan«. Therefore, even though Abu Ayman originates from the coastal region, where most of the powerful men in the army and the regime originate, his clan affiliation prevents him from rising to a position of influence.⁵ After realizing that he could not reach the position he had hoped for, he resigned from the army four years ago. »I quit my position as a Lieutenant Colonel in the army and it was not easy. I needed good connections (*wasta*) to do so.« His resignation was facilitated due to his contacts to persons in positions of power, connections in the business sector, in addition to the fact that Abu Ayman has family living abroad. Like Salem, Abu Ayman attended the Homs military academy and was then based in Damascus. Following his resignation from the army, he settled in the eastern neighbourhood of Akrama in Homs where his wife originates and continued working as a building contractor.

2.3 The Alawite Dilemma

In addition to feeling particularly vulnerable compared with their coastal counterparts, after March 2011, the Alawites of Homs began to face the increasingly volatile dilemma of their political stance, namely whether to stand behind the regime, whether to oppose it, or whether to distance themselves from the uprising. The regime took all means necessary to ensure allegiance from the outset, and Abu Ayman regards the Secret Service (*Mukhabarat*) as essential in that process. According to him, it is they who hold the real power in Homs. »From the very beginning«, he says, »the security forces worked to mobilize Alawites, especially the young who were out of work. They mobilized and organised them and sent them to Sunni areas of Homs to lead demonstrations in favour of the regime.« According to Abu Ayman, this move complicated relations between the different communities and areas of Homs.

5. An individual from a powerful clan in the hinterland would encounter the same difficulties.

Abu Ayman recounts several incidents that contributed to shaping the stance of the Alawite community in Homs. He notes, in particular, the killing of Brigadier General Abdu Telawi, his two sons, and a nephew near Zahra in April 2011 at a time of heightened anti-regime demonstrations. The event was highly publicized with the mutilated bodies of the men and the funeral in Wadi al-Dahab widely broadcast on television. Interviews with the general's daughter and his wife speaking in recognizable Alawite accents also highlighted the family's sectarian affiliation.⁶ This incident is considered a major turning-point for the Alawite community of Homs, as fear and anger dominated the discourse from within the community, ultimately motivating many Alawites to support the side of the regime. Relations with other communities quickly deteriorated with tit-for-tat killings and abductions based on sectarian affiliations multiplying.

Abu Ayman knows many people who have been killed or kidnapped in Homs. He explains that his relations with Sunni business partners gradually ceased, as they were no longer able to travel between neighbourhoods with the rise of sectarian divisions. Or Abu Ayman simply explains, *»they just stopped answering my calls«*.

Both the narratives of Salem and Abu Ayman draw a similar experience which emphasizes distinctions between the Alawites from the hinterland and those from the coast. In the words of Ghandi, a young agricultural engineering student at the Baath University of Homs, *»we are so very far from Qardaha«*, the Assad family's village of origin.⁷

Ghandi is from a village close to Masyaf, a town northwest of Homs, near Hama. He relocated to Homs to study and currently lives in the neighbourhood of Zahra. His father is an Alawite religious sheikh (cleric) as well as an officer in the army, while one of his brothers works for the *Mukhabarat*.⁸ Ghandi has never felt safe in Homs, particularly in *»non-Alawite neighbourhoods.«*

6. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7eSoRoj8uE> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUGw6-uT4ZE>, accessed 21.12.2012.

7. Qardaha is located in Jabal al-Alawiyyin, the coastal mountain range.

8. In the Alawite tradition, a sheikh imparts religious teachings to a male student in the framework of a quasi-filial relationship. The sheikh is regarded as a father figure and students relate to each other as brothers. Once the sheikh judges an adept to have gained sufficient knowledge of Alawite teachings, the student can in turn become a sheikh after a process of request and approval has been completed.

He states, for example, that *»the souk is not ours«*,⁹ and he will not allow his family to leave the natal village because *»they are safer there than anywhere else«*. In his view, the uprising in Syria targets Alawites. *»Sunnis want to drive us out to the coast, which is historically where Alawites have always been chased«*, he states. He explains that this situation long pre-dates the start of the March 2011 the uprising. *»[Sunnis] already hated us before (...) not all Sunnis, just the Muslim Brotherhood because they want to create an Islamic religious state.«*¹⁰

The idea that some of the Alawite villages of origin represent a potential refuge or resource for the community is further explained by Ali, a military judge in his thirties. He notes that it is important for cities like Homs to maintain connections with surrounding villages, and for the roads to remain secure and open between the city and country. This way, Ali explains, *»if anything happens, [villagers] are ready to come and help us, or we can flee from the city to the villages«*. He considers it vital to maintain these links to guarantee the security of the Alawite community but does not regard economic and trade links with neighbouring non-Alawite villages as a priority explaining that *»[t]he main concern is not the economy but to live in security«*.

Ali is the son of an officer and lives in a village located northwest of Homs, where many inhabitants are enlisted in the army. His place of work is Homs and he considers his village *»outside the current situation«*. After studying law, rather than completing mandatory military service, he applied directly for a position as a judge in the army. To obtain the job, he paid a bribe to an Alawite of the coastal region to secure his support for the appointment. Ali sees the uprising since March 2011 in very negative terms: *»You can't give to these people freedom (...) as soon as they get some freedom, kidnappings start.«* He is broadly supportive of the government's approach stating that in general, *»Syrians can only be controlled if you scare them«*.

9. The large souks or markets of Homs are located in the city centre in areas which are predominantly Sunni.

10. Historically, one of Syria's oldest opposition movements, the banned Muslim Brotherhood took up arms against the regime in the early 1970s. This turned into a full-scale uprising in the early 1980s, and culminated in a bloodbath after the Brotherhood took control of the city of Hama. Today, the movement is based in Hama, Homs and Damascus and is represented in the opposition-led Syrian National Council.

Religion is an important aspect of Ali's beliefs which he feels explains the community's support for the regime. »Our villages are very religious, and we are ready to support Alawites anywhere«, he says. Ali attributes the final outcome of the country's turmoil to fate. »Bashar [al-Assad]«, he says, »will stay in power because it is written«, although he does not exculpate the president from responsibility for the situation. »If Hafez [al-Assad] were still alive, this would never have happened«, he concludes. Ali's religiously-inflected arguments are all the more interesting coming from a person with a background in law in Syria, where the legal system is a combination of French and Sunni *Shari'a* (Islamic) law. To conclude, he declares with pride that he is ready to die for the Homeland. To him, this signifies above all else, that he would be willing to die for the Alawite community and its continuing domination of the country.

Ghandi, the afore-mentioned student, also highlights the point that opposing the regime is ultimately his way of supporting close relatives. The young agricultural engineering student rejected his support for the regime only after »many Alawites were killed and kidnapped (...) that is [the reason] why I decided to defend the community«, he explains. Rumours and reports of kidnappings and killings became rampant from within the community, with many witnessing countless burials of victims and the news of such unconstrained incidents of violence quickly spreading. After Ghandi volunteered to take up arms under the supervision of the *Mukhabarat*, he was sent to accompany military units entering the Khaldiya neighbourhood to fight. This is how he describes his involvement: »I didn't go for Bashar [al-Assad]; I went for my brothers who are working in the army and are currently fighting in Idlib and the suburbs of Damascus.« Family solidarity rather than regime identification was the ultimate reason for Ghandi's decision to become actively engaged in the conflict.

2.4 Regime Militias

Ghandi eventually became a member of what is today known as the *Shabiha*, often described as the regime's militias. There are two explanations offered as to the origin of the word *shabiha*. The first and more widespread claims suggest that the word *shabiha* comes from *shabah*

which means »ghost«.¹¹ However, a more likely explanation is that the term *shabiha* is derived from *shabaha*, a verb meaning to rip apart an object or a person, almost to the point of dismemberment. This word is commonly used by people in the coastal mountains to describe the rending of an object, and it connotes brute force. The word *shabiha* appeared in the 1980s in the home village of the Assad family, Qardaha where individuals belonging to the extended Assad family and their entourage were known to act extra-judicially, operating large-scale smuggling operations and using tactics of intimidation against the inhabitants of the coastal region. A stereotypical *Shabih* (singular of *Shabiha*) sports a muscular body, a shaved head, a moustache, and a full beard. He drinks whisky, smokes Marlboro cigarettes or cigars and drives a car with tinted windows and without licence plates. In time, whether as individuals or in groups, the *Shabiha* grew very influential until the beginning of the 1990s, when a campaign led by Basil al-Assad, the eldest son of Hafez, sought to limit their growing power and led to the imprisonment of many members. Links between some of these groups and Rif'at al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad's brother, whose relationship with the president had become problematic, is one explanation for this development as members of the *Shabiha* may indeed have been targeted in reprisal. A similar campaign against the *Shabiha* was conducted at the turn of the new century by Maher al-Assad, a younger brother of Bashar al-Assad.

However, since March 2011 the word *Shabiha* has been used by both the media and the opposition to designate any armed paramilitary group or militia with links to the army, the secret service or the Baath Party. The opposition refers to *Shabiha* in negative terms to designate any person who is above the law, while supporters of the regime and the *Shabiha* themselves reference the word with positive connotations. For them, *Shabiha* does not designate a person above the law, but rather a person who represents the government and embodies the law. The *Shabiha* today, do not currently believe that they are operating outside the framework of the law, but rather adhere to military laws that govern the conduct of warfare in the army. This provides the present *Shabiha* with the moral justification for their actions and gives the group a sense of perceived impunity. Those in charge of

11. The term is also often traced back to the Mercedes-Benz S600, the *shabiha's* vehicle of choice which in Syria was nicknamed »shabah«, or »ghost«. This explanation, however, is not convincing as the term *shabiha* was in use long before the »shabah« Mercedes S600 was available in Syria.

organizing and managing *Shabiha* groups might belong in the army, the secret service or the Baath Party, with many such individuals remaining »civilians« who are de facto neighbourhood or village strongmen with connections to influential individuals inside the regime. Lastly, *Shabiha* groups all have links to each other and these links have only become further reinforced following the wake of the uprising.

The rise of *Shabiha* groups in Homs is worth recounting to gain further insight into Alawite support for the regime. Most importantly, similar to the army and the *Mukhabarat*, the *Shabiha* are not disconnected from broader society but rather fully integrated into multifaceted layers and their involvement in the conflict has taken on different forms since March 2011.

2.5 From Popular Committees to Paramilitaries

Soon after March 2011, Popular Committees (*Iijan sha'abiya*) were created in the Alawite-dominated neighbourhoods of Homs and the villages in the city's hinterland. The need for Popular Committees became immediately apparent with the presence of armed gunmen who patrolled the neighbourhoods shooting randomly into the air. Such episodes instilled fear amongst residents as the »peaceful revolution« quickly became degenerated into violence. Creating vigilant neighbourhood watch groups thus generally found favour with neighbourhood residents. Initially formed as »popular committees« in coordination with the Secret Service, these groups were primarily composed of volunteers who were often unemployed young men. Initially armed with sticks, they were posted at checkpoints strategically located throughout residential neighbourhoods. Their main duty was to control vehicles entering the area and to report to the *Mukhabarat* any individual that they found suspicious, including neighbourhood residents. In this way, they were also able to prevent any potential mobilization against the regime from within their area. The secret service would also organize young volunteers from the committees to take part in pro-government demonstrations (*masira*), and provide them with the necessary posters and banners. In a speech given in June 2011, the president personally thanked these volunteers for their work.¹² As the army

gradually began entering the city during the summer of 2011, these committees slowly disappeared – or, to be more precise, they eventually became associated with the regime apparatus. By the fall of 2011, collaboration between the committees and the secret service had grown so strong that vigilant groups began to accompany the army and the secret service to fight in neighbourhoods held by the opposition. Having begun as popular committees, the groups gradually became the *Shabiha*, although neighbourhood residents often referred to them as »*majmu'at*« (groups) or »*shabab*« (young men).

2.6 *Shabiha* Organization

The *Mukhabarat* used real estate and local car rental offices as »intermediaries« to organize the popular committees or the precursors to the *Shabiha*. Even before March 2011, owners of real estate businesses had strong relations with the secret service as they held valuable sources of information about the inhabitants of each neighbourhood. Over time, such businesses provided a central meeting point from which the *Shabiha* were organized in Homs where their political stance was easily identified due to the prominently-featured posters of the president and other pro-regime paraphernalia. This was the case in both Wadi al-Dahab and Zahra, two predominantly Alawite neighbourhoods of the city.

In Wadi al-Dahab, Abu Rami, the owner of a real estate business, claims to be in charge of about 200 *Shabiha*. Although previously convicted and imprisoned for murder, since March 2011, he has succeeded in gaining the confidence of the secret service and the army, and has now established direct contacts with high-ranking officers in both institutions. He states, »[t]he whole neighbourhood should be thankful for what I'm doing«.

The *Shabiha* in Zahra eventually grew more powerful than the *Shabiha* of Wadi al-Dahab. The administration of the *Shabiha* in Zahra is located in the centre of the neighbourhood, in the midst of residential areas, whereas the centre in Wadi al-Dahab was in the surrounding environs. Scores of *Shabiha* streamed into Zahra from outlying villages, for a specific »mission« prior to returning to their villages. They were also known to have taken over the homes and businesses of Sunnis in the neighbourhood who had been driven out. In Zahra, almost all

12. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqNVdYyUelk>.

the Sunnis were eventually forcibly evicted and the belongings looted by the *Shabiha* and sold in what became locally known as the »S Sunni market«.

The *Shabiha* of Zahra fall under Abu Akram's supervision who successfully commandeered stolen cars for his recruits and levied protection money from the residents of the neighbourhood. As the son of a Sheikh, he is well-known amongst the locals and therefore decided to run for a parliamentary seat in the May 2012 elections. He was unsuccessful – surprisingly, given his close links to the regime. Zahra's location is unique in that it is an Alawite-dominated neighbourhood that is almost completely surrounded by Sunni or Bedouin-majority areas. In addition, the area maintains an almost rural feel, particularly since its residents maintain strong links to their villages of origin.

A *Shabih* typically receives around 15,000 Syrian pounds a month (about 200 US dollars). At the outset, the *Shabiha* were paid by the charity foundation *Bustan*¹³, which would also support the family if the *Shabih* were wounded or incapacitated. If, however, a *Shabih* dies in combat, he would be declared a *Shahid* (literally, martyr, or fallen hero) by the government, thus granting his family the right to state benefits. *Bustan* eventually stepped in to help secure other facilities to host »on call« *Shabiha* alongside the well-established real estate offices.

Most of the *Shabiha* in Homs come either from the neighbourhood where they are based, or from villages connected to a locality where they have relatives. Sometimes, a *Shabih* will have been a member of the early popular committees, while in other instances a *Shabih* will relocate from an outlying village to join an army unit. Motivations vary widely, ranging from the financial and economic, such as earning a salary and looting, to more »ideological« ones including feelings of hostility toward the Sunni community and more especially towards the Salafists (Islamists). Some *Shabiha* are personally motivated, and participate in order to defend of their community and relatives. For others, reprisal is the key motivating factor, while others join because they believe it is their duty to help the army whom they

believe is fighting a battle against radicalism. A *Shabih* may share one, more, or all of these motivations. Many of the men have little more than a very basic education and most have few job prospects. Some, especially those from outlying villages were previously peasants. Some are married and some have children. Many are religiously observant and only a handful of those interviewed had a high school certificate. The more educated members tended to be the sons of army or secret service officers and it was to them that fell the task of organizing the *Shabiha* groups.

2.7 *Shabiha* Talk

I spent some time with a group of *Shabiha* at the Wadi al-Dahab centre. That night, about 30 men were »on call« and they wandered in and out of the centre, with an occasional army soldier also passing through. The men were armed with Kalashnikovs and hand grenades, and three mortars were also stationed outside. Sporting full beards and closely-cropped hair, the men drank *mate* and '*araq*¹⁴, and discussed a good deal about the difference between several kinds of weapons, particularly the advantage of (Russian) Kalashnikovs over (American) M-16 rifles. To a backdrop of explosions and gun-shots that went unnoticed, the men recounted stories of their exploits, highlighting individual incidents of bravery and emphasizing the implacable hatred of Sunnis toward Alawites. Below are some of their accounts.

An »assistant« of Abu Rami claims that the »terrorists snipers« and »gunmen« who are currently positioned the city's *souk* (commercial downtown area) have remotely-controlled weapons on the rooftops which they operate from a distance with the help of a camera and a screen. He uses the word gang (*'isaba*) to refer to those fighting on the other side. What is interesting about his account is not the credibility of the information, but his lament that »we« – the *Shabiha* – do not have the means to obtain high-tech weaponry from abroad and there is greater valour involved when forced to use conventional weapons. Confirming fear of the opponents', another *Shabih* speaks in the same vein concerning what he experienced when fighting in the Nazihin area that night. He describes children armed with grenades and

13. *Bustan* is a charity which was founded in 1999 by Rami Makhlof, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad. The goals of the charity are to provide medical, educational and cultural aid to people in need in Syria (see <http://al-bostan.net>, accessed 21.12.2012). There are also *shabiha* groups that are supported by influential businessmen who are not necessarily Alawites.

14. *Mate* is a popular tea which has its origins in South America and is widely consumed in Syria and Lebanon. '*Araq* is an alcoholic spirit flavoured with anis that is prevalent throughout the countries of the Middle East.

recounts how after he had successfully disarmed them, he followed them into a house to find an entire cache of grenades.

Another man in the group recounts the story of how he was kidnapped. He describes that when his kidnappers took him to the Bayada area, they laid him on a blood-spattered steel table with a guillotine hanging over it. When they asked him if he was an Alawite, he lied and told them he was an Ismaili. Although he believes that his accent may have betrayed him, he was eventually freed or, to be more precise, »exchanged« for a kidnapped victim on the »other side«.

To justify their use of violence the *Shabiha* recount stories that they have heard from others, all of which involve the »massacre« of Alawites in other areas. The men from the rural areas, in particular, attribute the current situation in Syria to God's will and they assert that it is pre-ordained for an Alawite massacre to take place every 100 years. In a somewhat contradictory vein, others in the group point out that Sunnis are determined to exterminate Alawites and that it is therefore their duty to retaliate. In the words of one *Shabih*, the Alawites' ultimate purpose is »to fight and to win«. Should they fail, this would indeed be God's will, he points out. The men agree that they are currently engaged in a direct fight against figures such as Sheikh Adnan al-Ar'our.¹⁵ They consider him the commander of the »opposition«. As the men sip *mate*, they recount what they have heard Sheikh Adnan al-Ar'our saying against Alawites on his television channel. Again, these points provide further justification for their actions. As they see it, they are presently at war but soon »everything will be over«. The future or any plans for the future are not mentioned.

In Zahra, the *Shabiha* described even more gruesome stories, recounting some of the violent killings they had carried out. By doing so, they said, they were »creating the Alawite future« and actively participating in their own survival. Even the army is scared of the *Shabiha*, one of them crowed. He recalls one instance when the army came to their neighbourhood, the *Shabiha* welcomed them with gunfire so loud that they could have »taken the Golan back«, referring metaphorically to the long disputed claims to the Golan Heights.

15. Adnan al-Ar'our is a Syrian Sunni sheikh renowned for his virulent anti-Alawite rhetoric who broadcasts a TV program from Saudi Arabia where he lives.

2.8 The Militarization of the Community

In the current turmoil, the *Shabiha* can be seen as having replaced the militias of the Baath Party which helped the army and secret service put down the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in the early 1980s. At that time, the paramilitary groups were also involved, and comprised of young Baath Party members who were armed, charged with monitoring checkpoints, and who on occasion also fought alongside army units. The former Lieutenant-Colonel, Abu Ayman, explains: »In March 2011, the regime tried to revive the [Baath Party] militias, but there were just not enough young members anymore and the party base was too pluralistic.« One could add that the party had also grown too bureaucratic and inert and that it was a better option for the regime to rely on the *Shabiha*, who were already established in and around Jabal al-Alawiyyin, the coastal mountain range area where the ruling family has its base. Today, young party members who become active in the fighting are also called »*Shabiha*«.

To conclude here, one might ask why a regime with a significant army and therefore an offensive force at its disposal rely on groups of mainly Alawite militias to harness support in the present situation. And furthermore why are these groups not integrated directly into the army or secret service? There may be more than one reason although the proliferation of *Shabiha* in Homs is believed to be a strategy established to militarize the community and obtain its allegiance as a whole rather than solely a means of defeating the uprising.

3. Civilians and the Militarization of the Alawite Community

3.1 Alawite Families and Constraints

The regime and its security apparatus, namely the army, secret service, or paramilitary units, have been inextricably woven into the fabric of Alawite society. Virtually every family has at least one family member or a neighbour working for one or several of these establishments. This signifies that the Alawite community as a whole operates under a burden of constraints which implicates them directly or indirectly, in the current conflict.

Living in a village located east of Homs, Sheikh Mahmoud has four sons in the armed forces. *»I don't support Bashar [al-Assad]«,* he says, *»it is my sons that I support«.* Although he is now retired, he was a First Lieutenant (*musa'id awwal*) in the army for more than 30 years, and was stationed in Dara'a for a time. He considers Alawites from the hinterland like himself to be far removed from the centres of power. *»We are modest people here, and we struggle to survive economically. This is why the young enlist in the army and secret service, so as to be able to eat, not in order to gain power.«* The army is a welcoming work environment for impoverished Alawite families because it is in the hands of members of the same community. This is also one of the reasons why poor people from other communities in Syria choose not to join the army.

Perceived poverty is what motivates Alawites currently looting Sunni homes, says Mahmoud, despite the fact that he deplores this type of behaviour. *»Yes, it's a sin (haram), but what can we do when our people have so little?«* The sheikh reiterates an idea that is widespread among Alawites from the hinterland, namely that it is difficult for them to garner positions of influence when compared to their counterparts from the coastal region. He also believes that the former are more vulnerable and in greater danger. *»Here, we are a minority«,* he points out. At the same time, Sheikh Mahmoud also regrets that relations with neighbouring Sunni villages have deteriorated. He explains that in the hinterland, *»Alawites need Sunnis for economic reasons, and now there's no more trust between the communities«.* He also deplores the conflict from an-other perspective. *»It's a sin for Sunnis and Alawites to be fighting each other.«*

In the eyes of the sheikh, the situation in Syria is a full-scale war with sectarian antecedents. *»It started when Hafez [al-Assad] came to power; it intensified in the eighties at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood [uprising] and has continued to this day«,* he explains. *»If Bashar [al-Assad] weren't Alawite, there wouldn't be a war«,* he says, but then hastens to add that it is the will of God. This war has also caused a new understanding of *jihad*, he argues, and while he does not fully support it, he also regards it as *»necessary«.* He explains that traditionally, in Alawite beliefs, *jihad* represented the spiritual struggle within oneself against the temptation of sinning. But the concept of *jihad* is now also

used to promote the armed defence of one's community and of the Alawite religion from aggressors. The sheikh concludes by invoking the name of God to save the Alawites.

Fadi is a young man in his thirties who works in sales and is the father of a young girl. He used to live near Akrama, but moved to the coastal city of Tartous in January 2012, as the situation grew progressively worse in Homs and his work prospects evaporated. Many Alawites from the hinterland have moved to the Tartous area which has witnessed relatively little turmoil compared with other parts of the country. Prior to March 2011, Fadi had numerous dealings with Sunnis, mainly in the context of his work. He expresses no concerns with travelling in Sunni areas of Homs and goes so far as to say, *»I use[d] to like Sunnis more than Alawites«.* At one time, he wanted to marry a young Sunni woman he was in love with but marriage was rejected by her parents and Fadi eventually married an Alawite. Fadi hails from a village near Masyaf, an area which he says *»produces many sheikhs«* as its *»inhabitants are very religious«.* He still has many relatives in Masyaf whom he had grown somewhat distant from over the years, as many were either members of the army or the *Shabiha*. Since the uprising, however, he has felt closer to them.

When Fadi first arrived in Tartous, he felt quite alienated. *»It felt weird there«,* he says. *»The Alawites of the coast were very different from the Alawites of Homs. So I mostly hung out with people who had also moved to Tartous from Homs.«* He goes so far as to say that he felt a greater sense of kinship with people of his own region than to those of his own religion. *»When I used to work in Sunni areas of Homs, I felt closer to them than I did to the [Alawite] people of Tartous.«* Now, however, his feelings are mixed and his shared sense of commonality with Sunnis has receded.

Fadi's case is interesting on two counts. Firstly, it highlights that even if Alawites have family members in the army or the secret service, they do not necessarily endorse the regime. And by the same token, i.e. as an Alawite with family members in the army and secret service, he is fully aware of the brutality of the regime but fears joining the opposition. What Fadi expresses implicitly is a desire for change and for many Alawites who want change; they also do not support the present uprising and do not wish to participate. Ultimately he considers

the opposition in Syria as lacking a *»legitimate vision«*. He also believes that as an Alawite, the opposition will not accept him within their ranks.

»When the revolution started, I was really excited«, Fadi states. In April 2011, he joined a large demonstration against the regime in the main square of Homs. He remembers that on this occasion, the *»secret service people were brutal with the demonstrators. And that same night, they started shooting at people«*. Soon afterwards, he remembers hearing loud appeals to *jihad* coming from the minarets of mosques – which to Alawites meant a holy war against them. He says, *»Suddenly I became scared and I changed my mind, as I realized that what was happening was no longer a revolution«*. The uprising had evolved the contours of a sectarian conflict and civil strife in Homs. A turning-point for him was when three young Alawite boys were killed in July 2011.¹⁶ In reprisal, Alawite men went on a rampage and attacked Sunni-owned stores in their own neighbourhood, causing the Sunni owners and their families to flee. Now, in the summer of 2012, Fadi states: *»I don't support Bashar [al-Assad], but I cannot actively oppose him, because I'm scared for my brother who works in the army, and also for myself. And in the end, I want to be able to live, and to provide a good life to my daughter.«*

Before becoming a salesperson, Fadi attempted to apply for a position as a civil servant, but lacking the *»required«* connections and money, he was unable to obtain the job. He could have worked in the army but declined to do so. In the late summer of 2012, the army conscripted him along with many others as a reservist. Unwilling to serve, Fadi evaded service by fleeing to Lebanon. He is certain that many people in Syria now consider him a traitor.

3.2 The Alawite Trap

Many civilians feel trapped by their situation. This is the case of Samer who is a post-graduate student at the University of Damascus. Samer was raised in the neighbourhood of Nuzha in Homs, after his family moved to the city from their village of origin about 30 years ago. They relocated to Homs because his father served in the

army. Unlike other Alawite migrants in the Homs area, Samer's family no longer has connections to their village of origin.

Samer feels that his peers at the university think that because he is Alawite he has favored status and *wasta*, but *»this is merely [a] rumor«,* he says. Some of his fellow students fear and distrust him solely because he is Alawite, and some suspect that he is working for the secret service. He confirms what others have said concerning the *dakhel/sahel* dichotomy. Non-Alawites in Homs *»think we hold the power, but this is not true, the power is held on the coast«,* he says. In any case, he goes on to explain that *»[t]his country isn't for us [Alawites] (...) we are a minority, and we shouldn't hold all the power«*. In his view, his father spent more than forty years in the army *»for nothing«* and he hopes to join his two siblings who live in Australia once he has finished his studies in Syria.

Professor Nader, who studied in Russia, teaches mechanical engineering at the Baath University of Homs. He too expresses ambivalence about the situation of Alawites in Homs. In his fifties, Nader is originally from a village located to the west of Homs where he still owns a villa. He grew up in the Nuzha neighbourhood and was, until recently, living in al-Wa'er prior to returning to Nuzha for security considerations. He regrets that fearing for his safety; he was forced to return to an all-Alawite neighbourhood. His father joined the army when he was young as it represented a work opportunity and one of his brothers was a military doctor and facilitated his recruitment. He refuses to label what is currently happening in Syria as a *»real revolution by the people«*. He still sees the hand of the Muslim Brotherhood at work in Syria's crisis, even though he says that he is not in favour of *»Bashar al-Assad or the secret service«*. He holds the regime largely responsible for the current crisis, stating that *»they are playing fast and loose with this country«*.

Turning to the past, Nader recollects the following about his city. *»Before the advent of Hafez al-Assad and the establishment of high-ranking mukhabarat officers from the coastal area which is the stronghold of the Assad clan, Alawites, Sunnis and Christians lived in Homs peacefully. Once the mukhabarat came in, the city began to be viewed in terms of its sectarian components, and this was also reinforced by the attitudes of some Alawites from the city.«* As a result, Sunnis from Homs (or Sunni *»Homsis«,* a colloquial name referring to peo-

16. See *Asharq al-Awsat newspaper*, نبي يولوع نابش 3 لتق ذيفلخ لعل صم ح يف رتوت, <http://www.aawsat.com>, 18 July 2012, accessed 21.12.2012.

ple from Homs) who have traditionally inhabited the city, in contrast to Alawites who are relative newcomers from the surrounding countryside, »regard us [Alawites] as being all-powerful. My colleagues at the university think because I'm Alawite I have a lot of connections that can benefit me, but this is not the reality. It may have been true at the time of Hafez al-Assad, but now you only have preferential treatment if you are rich«. He concludes by expressing mixed feelings: »Ultimately, if Alawites didn't have power, it would be better, because we would live without problems. But we also wouldn't have had the job opportunities we got. And now if Bashar [al-Assad] is overthrown, our situation will become very dangerous because of the revenge which will be visited upon us.« Nader fears for his life and he sees a political solution as the only safe outcome to the present crisis. He cautions that »not all Sunnis support the uprising, but like us [Alawites], they too feel obligated to support their relatives who are fighting«.

3.3 A Divided City?

»In the Secret Service »centres, most of the officers are from the coast. We all grew up in Homs and did not think in sectarian terms, we all used to get along. But after they came, they began saying »you are Alawite« and »he is Sunni«. In the current crisis, the Mukhabarat are playing the sectarian card, and I have known that since the very beginning. I hate people from the coast, because they see everything in sectarian terms.« Abu Ahmad explains the rise of sectarianism in Homs since the 1980s in this manner. A father of six girls and two boys, he is now a grandfather in his sixties. He lives in Karm al-Loz near Nuzha, although he is originally from a village to the west of the city. In stark contrast to the current view of Homs as a city defined by sectarianism, Abu Ahmad states that he has spent his entire life with Sunnis who were the dominant population when he was a young man. Whether at school or in the context of his work as a painter, most of his dealings were with Sunnis – that is, until March 2011. It is also precisely since then that he can no longer find work because »the situation« has severed all relations with his Sunni clientele. He still calls his friends and former work colleagues who were forced out of their neighbourhood or left the city altogether, but he feels that the relationship between sects has changed in the way the Sunnis talk to him. Abu Ahmad regrets this friction between Sunnis and Alawites, but understands the

reasons why relations have become increasingly strained. Abu Ahmad stresses that he cannot tell his [Alawite] neighbours that he is still in touch with his Sunni friends »because I'm afraid they'll think I'm a traitor«.

Abu Ahmad continues: »For me, »Alawite« doesn't mean anything. I'm married to a Christian woman and one of my daughters is married to a Sunni.« He specifies that he has not been initiated into faith by a sheikh (the traditional process for an observant Alawite) and for this reason, he does not feel a strong connection to the Alawite community in general. »They treat me differently because I don't have religious knowledge«, he explains. Regardless of the distinctions made from within the Alawite community concerning religious initiation, Abu Ahmad recognises that generally speaking »people in Homs regard my family and me as Alawites«. He clarifies that because he does not have close relatives in the army or the secret service, his family is not considered »part of the regime«. However, he acknowledges that in the current situation »all Alawites are targets whether or not they support the regime«. For this reason, Abu Ahmad considers moving to Tartous in the near future. »Even though I know nobody there«, he explains, »I need to find a safe place for my family to live. I've spent all my life in Homs and if it were up to me, I would never leave, but nothing is more important than the security of my family.«

A dentist in her forties, Huda is originally from a village outside Homs where her family still owns land. Huda was raised and currently resides in Zahra. As far as she is concerned, Homs »was already geographically divided before March 2011. Not that we had any problems with Sunnis«, she says, »but we couldn't live together. Our customs are different.« Huda studied medicine in Aleppo in the 1990s where she felt notably uncomfortable as an Alawite in the predominantly Sunni city. She says that the people there viewed her with suspicion, although she hastens to add that »still, there was no problem between me and them«. Huda says that it was thanks to »Hafez al-Assad that I was given the chance to go and study outside Homs«, and while she acknowledges her personal sense of gratitude to the regime, she feels a greater sense of loyalty to her community. Nowadays, she volunteers at a small field hospital in her neighbourhood to assist with the care of the injured on the side of the regime because she feels that it is her duty to do so. »The casualties are my family, they are the ones defending us, and not the government which isn't doing anything for us«, she says.

3.4 Salvation from the Coast?

Echoing the experience of others, Huda recalls that early in the crisis, she heard and witnessed armed gunmen entering her neighbourhood shooting gunshots into the air. *»We became really afraid«, she says, »and from that point on, I no longer believed that what was happening was really a revolution. In any case«, she adds, »I cannot trust a revolution whose leader is Sheikh Ar'our.«* She expresses fear for her life and her daughter's. She is especially fearful of kidnapping *»because we are an Alawite family«*. She too regards outlying villages as a refuge for Alawites fleeing from the city and says that she sent her daughter there during the summer of 2011, as it is considered safer than Homs. *»At the end of the day«, she continues, »we are a minority, and we are surrounded by Sunnis and Bedouins.«* She speculates that if the situation worsens, the Alawites from Homs will flee to the coastal area. *»The coast is safer, it's quieter there. People [i. e. Alawites] there are stronger than us and they can save us.«*

Kamel is a taxi driver in his thirties who grew up in Akrama and currently lives in a relatively new suburb with a *»mixed«* sectarian population near Wadi al-Dahab. He too expresses the hope that *»salvation will come from Qardaha«*. At this juncture, he regards all Sunnis as *»terrorists«* although he used to think quite differently. The son of an Alawite father and a Sunni mother, Kamel maintained friendships with Sunnis, many of whom he met through his brother-in-law, who is also a Sunni. He was once engaged to a young Sunni woman from Hama. Two events led to Kamel changing his mind. Firstly, he was kidnapped and his family forced to pay a large ransom to secure his release. Given that he is half Sunni, he did not receive any assistance from the Alawites. In addition, in the middle of 2011, his brother with whom he shared a taxi business was killed by a sniper in a mainly Sunni area of Homs. Since then, he says, *»I hate Sunnis, and I told my brother-in-law to stop coming into our neighbourhood«*.

As a result of these violent events, Kamel embraced his Alawite identity and became active within his community. He has in effect forced his brother-in-law out of the neighbourhood, insisting that his sister and her children live in the family home with him and their mother. He has also become observant and adopted an Alawite accent. Kamel harbours strong feelings of revenge and pledges to *»remain in Homs, until there are no more ter-*

rorists«. While driving his taxi, he is always armed with a Kalashnikov, a weapon he requested and obtained from the *Mukhabarat*. In the past, his feelings towards the military were not particularly positive, but he would now be the first to join, *»if there were an opportunity to work in the army«*. If forced to leave Homs, Kamel states that he would go back to his village of origin although he no longer has any connections there.

3.5 Kidnapping and its Effect on Inter- and Intra-communal Relations

Kidnappings and abductions from different communities on the basis of sectarian affiliation have greatly contributed to further dividing the city of Homs and to reinforcing intra-communal ties. The number of kidnappings began to rise in Homs after mid-2011, with incidents often motivated by revenge although carried out ostensibly for different purposes.

There are three basic types of kidnappings: those based on sectarian animosity towards another community, those committed as a form of retaliatory reprisal for earlier abductions or as an *»exchange«* between communities, and finally, those that are criminally motivated, where kidnappers are paid a ransom. The outcome of abductions differs according to their motivations. In the case of a sectarian kidnapping, the victim is often killed. In the two other cases, the victim is freed either in exchange for another victim from the opposing side or following the payment of a ransom. The *Shabiha* are often implicated in kidnappings with rivalries between the *Shabiha* groups escalating incidents of violence. For example, compared to their counterparts from Wadi al-Dahab, the *Shabiha* from Zahra have a reputation for carrying out riskier kidnappings which target wealthy individuals or individuals from influential families.

Alawites claim that scores, if not hundreds, of people from their community have been kidnapped since the beginning of the current crisis in Syria. At least one exchange of victims was organized by the Governor of Homs Province with the cooperation of notables from both the Sunni and Alawite communities.

Real estate offices, in addition to becoming strategic locations for the *Shabiha* and *Mukhabarat*, have also become centres where *»missing persons«* are reported and

victims exchanged. There is invariably a financial reward provided to members of the secret service or *Shabiha* who »help« or facilitate such exchanges.

Abductions have deepened divisions in the city and strengthened bonds within communities. Over time it has grown impossible for Alawites to travel to Sunni areas, and vice versa, for fear of being kidnapped. Not only does this heightened sense of fear promote and strengthen ties with other members of their own community, but the practical effect of kidnappings and the exchange of victims has woven a web of mutual dependence that was previously absent. For example, if an Alawite from Wadi al-Dahab were abducted, the Sunni kidnappers would contact the victim's family and demand that in exchange for the release of their loved one they intervene with an Alawite person or group holding a Sunni victim so that an exchange could be affected. Thus, Alawites who were not associated with the regime, or significantly dependent on it, now find themselves forced to rely on the goodwill of those who are operating in the shadow of the regime and routinely carry out kidnappings. That is how inter-communal abductions have resulted in the strengthening of intra-communal ties among Alawites.

4. Conclusion

The son of a Brigadier General (*'amid*) from a village in the coastal area recounts the following story: After a battle between the army and the opposition in the adjacent Sunni town of Haffa in the summer of 2012, his father asks one of the town's prominent – and therefore Sunni – notables the following question: »*Why did you harbour terrorists? What more do you people want? You already control the area's major transportation networks, as well as the largest vegetable wholesale market, and the schools. Isn't that enough for you?*«


The Brigadier General's words highlight the point that while *sahel* Alawites may dominate the area politically, demographically and economically, they also consider themselves as having »generously« provided all residents with opportunities, regardless of their sectarian affiliation. One is unlikely to hear such words in the hinterland, where Alawites still feel strongly that their status is that of a minority.

This vignette is a small illustration of the way in which Alawite identity is experienced differently and how geography and regionalism are critical to an individual's apprehension and experience of »Alawiteness«. Notwithstanding these very real differences, the first eighteen months of the Syrian crisis have also led to a sense of solidarity within the community and revived its sense of selfhood »as a minority«.

The Alawite community from the hinterland does not perceive itself as having »connections in high places« but rather as fearing for its very survival. This study has described the deep rooted feelings of insecurity and the precarious socio-economic conditions that are widespread in the community. These factors contribute to intra-Alawite solidarity and the community's generally supportive stance towards the regime, in the current context of strife in Syria. Economic stability secured through state employment opportunities and the strong and violent anti-Alawite climate that currently exists in the country reinforce the sense of separateness and isolation that the community harbours, especially in the hinterland where Alawites feel that they are far more vulnerable than their counterparts from the coastal region as they are located strategically »at the centre of power« in Syria. It must be emphasized that this is the perception but not necessarily reality. Indeed, Alawites from the coastal region may also feel an existential threat, especially those who are not politically aligned with the regime and will therefore not be afforded any protection.

As a result of this sense of inferiority and a lack of connection »to the coast«, Alawites from the Homs region feel that they are, first and foremost, supporting their family members and neighbours whose service in the army, the *Mukhabarat* or the paramilitary is their livelihood. This is what harnesses their support rather than sentiments of loyalty to the regime or the president. Furthermore, the very notion of an »Alawite community in Homs« identified as such by its own members did not truly exist prior to the crisis which started in March 2011. The growth of this self-identification has been the result of or in reaction to the conflict.

Currently, the Alawite community of Homs is caught in an impossible quandary regarding its stance. Or, to be more precise, the outcome of that quandary has been largely determined by the regime's strategy. Using its



security apparatus, and especially the *Mukhabarat*, the regime has implicated the Alawites of Homs in the conflict through the aggressive militarization of the community. Alawites with family members in the army, the secret service and especially the *Shabiha* have limited options, and the regime has exploited their precarious position to gain the support of the community as a whole.



About the author

Aziz Nakkash is a Syrian researcher based in Germany.

Maps by **Nada Razzawi**

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Dep. for Middle East and North Africa
Hiroshimastr. 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:
Hajo Lanz, Head, Middle East and North Africa

Tel.: ++49-30-269-35-7420 | Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9233
<http://www.fes.de/international/nahost>

To order publications:
info.nahost@fes.de

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

This publication is printed on paper from sustainable forestry.



ISBN 978-3-86498-499-0