

In the Shadow of the State: The Rise of Kata'ib Al-Baath at Aleppo University after 2011

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Abstract: This paper examines the emergence and transformation of pro-state paramilitarism at Aleppo University in Syria in the context of the uprising and civil war. Paramilitarism refers to clandestine, irregular armed organizations that carry out illegal acts of violence against clearly defined civilian individuals or groups. From the outbreak of the uprising in March 2011, the Assad regime's violent response to the mass protests across the country became more extensive and intensive. The key aspect of the Assad regime's repression against the population was its use of paramilitary forces, especially through the arming and mobilizing of ordinary Syrians in civil militias. Consequently, state-sponsored militias appeared in cities and towns across Syria to fill the gap and create a hub for recruitment, such as the Baath Party Battalions, in Aleppo in early 2012. One of the first tasks of these paramilitary groups was to identify activists and pass information on them to intelligence services. While they seem to have appeared out of the blue, they had a clear prehistory: these groups were rooted in existing civil society networks. How were these networks embedded in the Syrian state prior to the conflict? How and why were they recruited in 2011?

Keywords: Paramilitarism, Kata'ib al-Baath, Shabbiha, Aleppo University, Syria

Introduction

After rising criticism of him, Rami Makhlouf, tycoon and maternal cousin of Bashar al-Assad, appeared in July 2011 in a public press conference to announce that he was willing to put away most of his wealth into charity work.¹ The man turned his charity association Al-Bustan (Orchard) which was founded in 1999 into a recruitment agency for *Shabbiha*.² Yassin al-Haj Salih defines the *Shabbiha* as a 'raw force which mirrors the structure and goals of the regime whose aim is to accumulate personal wealth

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- 1 See the press conference here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5Z_P7VIOsA> [accessed 14 April 2021].
- 2 For an overview of the charity project see: <<https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/30391>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

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and ensures its own survival at all costs.³ Rami Makhoul took advantage of his familial links and business networks in Latakia and the Alawite enclaves of Mezza-86, Ish al-Warwar and other Damascene neighbourhoods to mobilize young people and assemble them into the Popular Committees.⁴ However, resorting to recruiting Popular Committees' members was not for military reasons initially. One of the main goals was to enhance the intelligence-gathering and organize a counter-revolution and pro-Assad rallies.

However, the Popular Committees phenomenon was not Makhoul's idea in the first place. Saad Zammam, a visual artist from Tartous, was one of the names that rose after 2011 with his proposal to throng regime loyalists into groups to be auxiliaries to the intelligence services and the army.⁵ The security services took advantage of the general amnesty decree Bashar al-Assad issued on 31 May 2011, which renounced all crimes, with some exceptions, that were committed before the aforementioned date.⁶ Security personnel started to use their networks to recruit the newly released criminals into the Popular Committees with financial and power incentives.⁷

On 11 November 2012, a live radio interview took place with then the Baath Party Secretary of the Branch Command of Aleppo and the incumbent Assistant Regional Secretary of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Baath Party: Hilal Hilal. He reiterated that 'the Baath comrades were on the streets of Aleppo from day one of the events [March 2011], but the recent developments [opposition armed groups moving into Aleppo] necessitated that the party would adjust and take new routes.'⁸ He continued to define the new roles devolved to the party members under the new structure and name: al-Baath Legions. In Hilal's words, Kata'ib al-Baath are 'groups of al-Baath Party comrades who were not content to see their city, Aleppo, being molested by the [opposition]

3 Yāsīn Ḥājj Sālih, *Al-Thawrah al-Mustahilah: Al-Thawrah, al-Harb al-Ahliyah, Wa-al-Harb al-ūmmah Fi Sūriyah* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2017), p. 71.

4 See <<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=334287&r=0>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

5 For a detailed account and some more information of Zammam's background story see: <<https://www.alsouria.net/archive/content/>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

6 See <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/worldnews/2011/05/110531_syria_act49> [accessed 14 April 2021].

7 Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Stephen Starr, 'Shabiha Militias and the Destruction of Syria', *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, 5.1 (2012), 12–14 <<https://ctc.usma.edu/shabiha-militias-and-the-destruction-of-syria/>> [accessed 21 April 2021]. A full news report on how the Shabbiha was created can be found here <<https://bit.ly/3aSxrQL>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

8 Listen to the full interview with Hilal Hilal here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5psp9JElfxA>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

armed gangs. Therefore, Kata'ib al-Baath members played a crucial role in preserving security by protecting and supervising their neighborhoods. Moreover, they fought side-by-side with the prowess Syrian Arab Army.⁹

At their inception, Kata'ib al-Baath groups were funded and trained by the Syrian regime to become 'auxiliary forces' to the official army.¹⁰ Soon after, the new control mechanisms were replicated at Aleppo University, which was the most contentious spot in Aleppo in terms of protests and mobilization between 2011 and 2013. This process was facilitated by the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) organization. Hence, the article contributes theoretically to the literature on paramilitary mobilization. It shifts the focus from the state as the main orchestrator of such groups to brokers at the mid-level who act as middlemen to facilitate mobilization and relations between the micro (periphery) and macro (center) levels. Empirically, I highlight how individuals' intra-communal links play a significant role in mobilizing civilians and in particular students to oppress their fellow students and use violence against them if need be.

Methodology Remarks

To understand the process of paramilitary emergence, mobilization and violence in the context of Aleppo University, I propose to look at the role of brokerage. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly define brokerage as 'the linking of two or more previously unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relationship with one another and/or with yet other sites.'¹¹ The crucial characteristics of brokers are that '(a) they bridge a gap in social structure and (b) they help goods, information, opportunities, or knowledge flow across that gap.'¹² In his closer examination of the Greek civil war, Kalyvas argues that personal and family ambitions motivate belligerent action more than abstract political ideology.¹³ Hence, the article focuses on violence brokers profiles. It outlines their involvement in the facilitation of Kata'ib

9 Online interview with a commander in kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5psp9JElfxA>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

10 Ibid.

11 Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 26.

12 Katherine Stovel and Lynette Shaw, 'Brokerage', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38.1(2012), 139-58 (p.141).

13 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 365.

al-Baath groups inside Aleppo University and tracks their promotions inside the state structure. I do this by drawing on a mixed-methods approach. My ethnographic observation of the phenomenon at the time of my presence at Aleppo University as well as local and national media content analysis are key sources. I also use social media content (Facebook posts and YouTube videos) and Syrian regime's leaked and captured documents analysis. For the purpose of data triangulation, I conduct interviews with former officials, eyewitnesses, security services defectors and online interviews (via WhatsApp and Skype) with Kata'ib al-Baath members inside Aleppo University.

Why Resorting to Paramilitarism

Authoritarian regimes' dependence on irregular armed forces or 'volunteer' militias to oppress their internal opposition and insurgencies has attracted an increasing scholarly attention, notably after the end of the Cold War.¹⁴ I understand volunteer militias as those groups who are sponsored and trained by the state and are linked to its structures in one way or another. Beyond filling the military gap of the regular armed forces and the security apparatuses, paramilitary groups and pro-government militias¹⁵ have more capacities when it comes to 'local intelligence skills necessary to manage the civilian population.'¹⁶ Paramilitarism is a phenomenon in which a regime and its proxies of ruling elites establish irregular armed organizations that carry out violence against clearly defined individuals or groups.¹⁷ At their in-

14 Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi, 'Outsourcing State Violence: The National Defence Force, "Stateness" and Regime Resilience in the Syrian War', *Mediterranean Politics* 24.2 (2019), 157–80; Klaus Schlichte, 'Na Krilima Patriotisma—On the Wings of Patriotism: Delegated and Spin-Off Violence in Serbia', *Armed Forces & Society*, 36.2 (2010), 310–26; Kristine Eck, 'Repression by Proxy: How Military Purges and Insurgency Impact the Delegation of Coercion', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59.5 (2015), 924–46; Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'Shabbiha: Paramilitary Groups, Mass Violence and Social Polarization in Homs', *Violence: An International Journal*, 1.1 (2020), 59–79; Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, 'Militias in Civil Wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59.5 (2015), 755–69; Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Telling the Difference: Guerrillas and Paramilitaries in the Colombian War', *Politics & Society*, 36.1 (2008), 3–34; Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*; Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide', *War Crimes, Genocide, and Crimes against Humanity*, 2 (2006), 1–33.

15 In this context, I will use the term 'paramilitary' as a synonym for volunteer and pro-government militias. These terms are used interchangeably throughout the article to indicate organized, armed nonstate actors who are organizationally outside of the state, though they act with the explicit or tacit support of the government.

16 Eck, 940.

17 See Üngör.

ception, such groups are loyal to the regime and their sponsors rather than to the *state* or its institutions with ‘many advantages and few risks’ to the regime.¹⁸ However, they might deviate from the state’s and their sponsors’ lines to an extent that might pose a threat to the state itself, as was the case in Serbia during the 1990s.¹⁹

Paramilitarism appeared as early as states and power struggle appeared in history and emerged in all kinds of civil wars, including irregular civil wars in which states seek high-quality local information, ethnic or separatist insurgencies, as well as wars against foreign occupiers.²⁰ However, the phenomenon is more apparent in authoritarian regimes. Such regimes and governments resort to paramilitary organizations for many reasons. Clearly, they aim to delegate violence from an official institution, which supposedly holds the legitimate right to use violence and force, to enigmatic organizations. This way the authorities can ‘remonopolize competences’²¹ or even deny their responsibility to be held accountable for ‘plausible deniability.’²² In the context of Colombia, Sanín defines paramilitaries as a cadre army led by ‘members of the legal or illegal economic elites, which offers economic incentives to its members, and works like a loose network of security-providers, they have evolved towards a Mafia-type scheme.’²³ Moreover, paramilitary groups are, in most contexts, recruited locally.²⁴ Local recruits have invaluable services for the state when it comes to tribes, ethnicity and strong men who can be reservists and ‘stationary bandits.’²⁵

A key distinguishing factor of paramilitary groups, among others, is the absence of their command structure. Official military organizations tend to be rigidly organized along regimental hierarchy, while paramilitaries are less formally structured, usefully described by Leenders and Giustozzi as ‘heterarchical orders’ and structures.²⁶

18 See Alvarez. I tend to use the term regime in its negative connotation as it is defined in Webster dictionary to differentiate between it and the term ‘state’ which has the connotation of having clear structures and an institutionalized set of laws and regulations.

19 See Schlichte.

20 Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 757.

21 Schlichte, 311.

22 Alvarez, ‘Militias and Genocide’, 18 ; Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner, *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 12.

23 Gutiérrez Sanín, 28.

24 Kalyvas, pp. 369–276.

25 Mancur Olson, ‘Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development’, *American Political Science Review*, 87.3 (1993), 567–76 (p. 568).

26 Leenders and Giustozzi, 157.

These social dynamics play an important role in the line of command in the paramilitaries structure when compared to that of the traditional military or police forces. Paramilitary groups tend to rely on the authority of leadership, while the military and police tend to rely on the authority of position.²⁷ Likewise, Alvarez highlights the importance of personalities and individual relationships, rather than formalized roles and ranks, when it comes to promotion and membership.²⁸ Therefore, the article probes to answer the following research question: How do civil society organizations like NUSS get militarized in the context of the uprising and civil war at Aleppo University? I answer this question by looking at the relevant Syrian regime's organizations' structures, tracking key individuals' histories and tracing their promotions within such organizations during the conflict which started in 2011.

The Popular Organizations

In his historic visit to North Korea in 1974, Hafez al-Assad attended a parade of the Vanguard of the ruling Workers Party of North Korea (WPK). Hafez al-Assad was impressed by the performance and the way the popular organizations were enframed. Theorized by Ismail, enframing is a tool the Baath regime utilized to conglomerate Syrian society into syndicates, unions and organizations.²⁹ It was the key strategy of the Baath regime of Hafez al-Assad to control activism and coopt civil society. When Assad came back from his visit to North Korea, he asked to transfer the North Korean example into Syria and the Baath structure.³⁰ The Baath Party was consequently tasked with structuring the popular organizations mission. Their goal was to create a core of committed adherents who would be the pioneers and guardians of the Baath project.³¹ The organizations linked to the educational system and students were the first to be enframed. Key among these organizations was the Baath Vanguard Organization for students between six and twelve years old and was established in 1974 as a substitute for the Scouts of Syria which began in 1912 and the Revolutionary Youth

27 Chester I. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 162-3.

28 Alvarez, 6.

29 Ismail, p. 71.

30 See <<https://alkhaleejonline.net>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

31 Ismail, p. 71.

Federation which was decreed in 1970.³² Part of the Baath Vanguard's Organization's activities were, and still are, indoctrination classes, organizing annual training camps where students would receive military and the Baath discipline courses.³³

At the age of eighteen, Syrian students would either be enrolled at university or take a different path. If they are accepted at the university, they will be conscripted into the NUSS, which is also an auxiliary organization of the Baath Party. Otherwise, they will not be granted access to student services like housing. For those who do not make it into the university, other syndicates like the Peasants' Federation or the Trade Union would be their destinations. It is worth noting that the NUSS, much like other organizations, are nepotistically and patrimonially organized with the Baath Party constitutionally leading the society and the state. All leadership candidates would undergo a meticulous security screening and scrutiny by the different security services. Therefore, the patrimonial coercive apparatus is likely to be less receptive to the idea of regime change, compared to the institutionalized one.³⁴ These coercive apparatuses are built in a way that would protect the regime from being challenged and ousted internally. Authoritarian regimes coercive apparatuses building depends on three strategies which can coup-proof them. Theorized by Makara, these strategies are: first, creating parallel security institutions, secondly, distributing material incentives selectively, and finally, exploiting the communal ties.³⁵

Violence Devolution in Syria

Syrian pro-regime militias existed as early as the Baath Party took power in 1963. After successfully orchestrating a coup in 1970, known as the 'Corrective Movement of 16 November', Hafez al-Assad started

32 At the age of six, students are enlisted in *talaya' albaath* organisation to be raised in compliance with the leading party ideology. See <<http://www.syrianpioneers.org.sy/node/24>> [accessed 21 April 2021]. At the age of 12, students automatically get signed up into the *Shabiba Althawra* to be educated and trained in accordance with the Baath ideology. Members of these organisations were called *jil al-Baath* (the Baath generation), who only relate to the leader.

33 For an overview of the organization and its activities, see <<https://www.marefa.org>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

34 Eva Bellin, 'Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring', *Comparative Politics*, 44.2 (2012), 127-49 (p. 129).

35 Michael Makara, 'Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring', *Democracy and Security* 9.4 (2013), 334-59 (p. 336).

arming the Baath-affiliated popular organizations. Acting as extensions of security apparatuses, these armed organizations were later on institutionalized into the Popular Army to be on-call counter domestic disturbances forces.³⁶ The biggest advantage of such an organization was its absolute loyalty to the regime and the leading party, not to the state.³⁷ Moreover, Hafez al-Assad depended on them heavily to suppress the 1980s uprising and to crush the Muslim Brotherhood taking advantage of the loyalty factor.³⁸

A concise answer to the question of why the Syrian regime established paramilitary groups would be to fill the manpower gap and compensate for the probable disobedience of a conscripted army.³⁹ Historically, the Syrian regime was heavily dependent on the civil society organizations and syndicates to mobilize the mass to support its leadership as early as it took power. With Article 8 of the Syrian Constitution of 1973 which postulates that 'the Baath Party is the leading party in the society and the state', the regime could transform the party cadres and its institutions into a back-up force for the army and the intelligence services.⁴⁰

After 2011, with the diffusion of the protests from Daraa to other Syrian cities, the Syrian regime security apparatus could not oppress the dispersed rising voices. Moreover, the uprising of 2011 was different from that of the 1980s when the regime challengers took advantage of the wave of revolutions across the Arab World. Besides, the estimated number of members in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) forces in 2011 was 220,000, which meant that it could not be deployed to all uprising spots.⁴¹ Additionally, because it was a conscription-based army, the majority of its conscripts were Sunnis. This meant that it would likely be very difficult to deploy full regiments and forces to uprising cities.⁴² Furthermore, defection was a reoccurring phenomenon that affected the military and the security institutions on a daily basis. The regime, therefore, needed

36 Ismail, p. 105.

37 Michel Seurat, *Syrie L'Etat de Barbarie, souria al-daula al-mutawahisha*, trans. by Amal Sarah and Bialo Mark (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2019), pp. 182–3.

38 Seurat, p. 128,

39 Yasin Hajj Salih, pp. 78–9.

40 The Permanent Constitution of 1973 can be found here: <<http://emediatc.com/PublicFiles/>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

41 Joseph Holliday, 'The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War', *Middle East Security Report*, 8 (2013), 1–69 <<http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

42 Charles Lister and Dominic Nelson, 'All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria', *Middle East Institute*, 14 December 2017 <<http://www.mei.edu/publications/all-presidents-militias-assads-militiafication-syria>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

to reconfigure its security sector, including the armed forces, paramilitary criminal networks, and the intelligence and security apparatus to confront forms of resistance.⁴³ To fill this gap, the Syrian regime resorted to what Ahrām calls ‘functional necessity’⁴⁴ by the ‘militiafication’ of Assad’s loyalists.⁴⁵ Moreover, the regime leadership began to make use of past experiences and pre-existing networks and clientelism. By 2011, the Popular Army included an estimate of 100,000 paramilitaries.⁴⁶ However, the Popular Army was already a weakly structured organisation after thirty years of its active role in putting the uprising of the 1980s down. Likewise, it was far beyond being deployable after the uprising of 2011, as most of its members were old and loosely connected to the new bourgeoisie of Bashar Al-Assad’s clique.

On the use of force strategy, when comparing the SAA to other coercive forces at the regime disposal like the security services, it proved to be the weakest and the least coherent compared to other security services institutions.⁴⁷ This was apparent in the number of defectors and deserters from the army compared to those from the security apparatuses. To compensate for the personnel drain, the Syrian regime, using its recombinant nature, started to deploy new strategies and ‘a set of internal institutional adaptations and policy shifts’ to recruit new forces to fill the gap that exhausted the armed forces.⁴⁸ The unique distinction, however, that makes the Syrian paramilitary experience different from other examples like Serbia, China and others is the heavy involvement of foreign governments; namely Russia and Iran. In one of his interviews, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei confidante Mahdi Taeb said that Syria is ‘Iran’s 35th province [...] if we lose Syria, we won’t be able to hold Tehran.’⁴⁹ Russia, on the other side, intervened militarily in September 2015 to help Assad regain power after tumbling for four years. The Russians also competed with the Iranians to pull the

43 Steven Heydemann, ‘Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism’, *Journal of Democracy*, 24.4 (2013), 59–73.

44 Ariel I. Ahrām, ‘Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39.3 (2016), 207–26 (p. 209).

45 Aron Lund, ‘Chasing Ghosts: The Shabiha Phenomenon’, in *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, ed. by Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 207–24 (p. 215).

46 See Holliday, p. 16.

47 Ibid.

48 Heydemann, 62.

49 Karim Sadjadpour, ‘Iran’s Unwavering Support to Assad’s Syria’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 August 2013, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/27/iran-s-unwavering-support-to-assad-s-syria-pub-52779>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

militias into their sphere of influence. This resulted in the creation of the Fifth Assault Corps in 2016.⁵⁰ Therefore, the question now is: how did Kata'ib al-Baath groups emerge and rise to power in the specific context of Aleppo University?

The *Shabbiha* of Aleppo University

In the context of Aleppo, three types or networks of *Shabbiha* appeared at the onset of the uprising after 2011. They sometimes overlap with each other considering their communication and supply channels with the security apparatuses. First, some groups were recruited through the tribal and clan networks. Second, groups were mainly recruited through businessmen. The third type was mobilized through the Baath Party and its auxiliary organizations like NUSS. This paper examines only the third type of *Shabbiha*, namely those who are affiliated with the ruling political party of the Baath and its auxiliary organization of the Students Union in Aleppo.

The NUSS is the only official organization that represents higher education students and supposedly defends their rights. It is as old as the Baath Party and the Assad family have been in power. Its complex structure and young educated members make it the most effective organization when it comes to organizing events and mobilization because it has the necessary and sufficient resources to do so. In Aleppo, there are two branches; one that represents the institutes, while the other represents the faculties' students. Every faculty has a body of five to seven members who would elect the nine members of the union branch at Aleppo University. The dormitory has also what was called then 'the social committees', whose members were working under the direct supervision of the NUSS administration. There were around 350 active members whom the union had direct contacts with. There was, moreover, a *carte blanche* for the expenses of the pro-Assad rallies that it organized. All flags, banners, Assad's photos, speakers, DJs, and transport were free and abundantly provided. All branches in the country were also asked to organize rallies that were held in Damascus, as the faxes and emails that were sent to Aleppo indicate

⁵⁰ For details about the Fifth Corps, see: Abdulrahman al-Masri, 'Analysis: The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army', 11 January 2017, <<https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/01/11/analysis-the-fifth-corps-and-the-state-of-the-syrian-army>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

that.⁵¹ All the expenses were covered by the union: food, transport, and all required materials. The NUSS was always asked to cooperate and coordinate with other unions, corporations, and syndicates as they also received similar directions from the Capital to participate and organize pro-Assad rallies.⁵²

However, the tasks assigned to the NUSS were changing in line with the developments inside the campus. The main task at the beginning of the protest movement inside the university was to mobilize students to participate in rallies and prevent any anti-regime protests. After a couple of weeks, the reactions of the NUSS members and their recruits changed to more violent responses and strategies. In mid-2012, when the Free Syrian Army (FSA) started to gain a foothold in Aleppo, the NUSS was the first organisation that adopted the idea of the *Kata'ib al-Baath* inside the university, whose members were mainly students and Baathists. Basim Sudan, who is a NUSS senior executive office member from the city of Latakia, became the leader of the *Kata'ib al-Baath*.

Omar Arob was appointed Basim Sudan's Deputy as a gratitude for his efforts inside Aleppo University.⁵³ In 2016, Arob was rewarded a seat in the Parliament for his efforts. He was the mastermind of the *Shabbiha* recruitment at Aleppo University together with Hilal Hilal, who became the Assistant Secretary of the Baath Party in 2013 after he succeeded in mobilizing and assembling party members into the *Kata'ib al-Baath*. The *Kata'ib al-Baath* were first founded at Aleppo University to organize those who were 'ready to put down the movement and include what we call the thugs in one body.'⁵⁴ Although violence delegation to students' groups is not a new phenomenon, its endurance is worth exploring and paying attention to.

51 Author's own experience and observation when he was in Aleppo until 2015. He was also a member of the NUSS between 2006 and 2012.

52 For an overview of the NUSS activities see: <<https://www.shahbanews.com/n/34751.html>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

53 For details about Basim Sudan see <<https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/76957.html>> [accessed 21 April 2021].w

54 Ameer Abdulkader, 'Kata'ib al-Baath Tumaris Altashbeeh Dakhil Aljama'iat Alsuriya', 15 August 2015, <<https://arabi21.com/story/851853>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

Aleppo University's Kata'ib al-Baath Relationships and Structure

NUSS defines itself as a popular organization 'encompassing the public and private universities students and the higher and technical institutes students inside as well as outside Syria'.⁵⁵ The organization was officially founded in April 1963 with the former president Hafez al-Assad playing a leading role within it. In its charter, NUSS postulates that 'at the forefront of the union goals come the enhancement of the mass students' spirit to the country, the loyalty to the leader and the full contribution to fostering the building of the national unity, and prepare the students intellectually and combatively to counter challenges in all forms'.⁵⁶ NUSS falls structurally under one of the Baath Central Command Offices in Damascus. In the case of NUSS, it is attached to the Youth Office of which Ammar Saati, who directed the NUSS between 1995 and 2020, is the head.⁵⁷ The Baath Party Central Command is the highest authority in the Baath and the state structures. Figure 1, which I developed, outlines the hierarchical structure of the NUSS organization. Although article 8 was revoked in the 2012 Constitution, Assad and the Baath Party remain in control of every facet of Syria – not only of the state and society but also of the military.⁵⁸

The NUSS structure mirrors hierarchically almost all other organizations under the Baath rule when it comes to control and monopoly from the highest level to the smallest unit in the organization.⁵⁹ Like other popular organizations, the NUSS has an executive office who oversees the activities of the universities and the institutes students through its branch offices inside these education facilities. Hence, the executive office has eleven offices excluding the executive director who heads the union. These offices are: External Relations Office, External Branches Office, Studies and Students' Affairs Office, Culture, Media and Publication Office, Informatics Office, Private Education Office, Sports Activities Office, Forums and Patriotic Work Office, Organi-

55 See the NUSS official website: <<http://nuss.sy/aboutus>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

56 Ibid.

57 Here is an overview of the Baath Command: <<http://www.baathparty.sy/Posts.php?id=2784>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

58 Qais Fares, 'The Syrian Constitution: Assad's Magic Wand', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 8 May 2014, <<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55541?lang=en>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

59 Ismail, pp. 65–96.

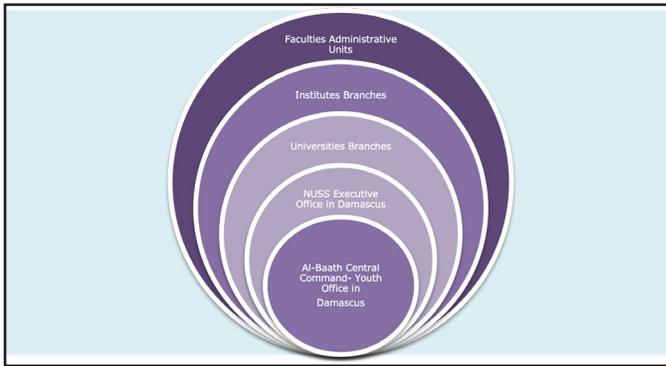


FIGURE 1. NUSS Hierarchichal Structure.

zation and Preparation Office, Institutes Office, Artistic and Social Activities Office, and the Executive Office.⁶⁰

Ammar Saati utilized his close friendship of Maher al-Assad, who is the commander of the notorious 4th Military Division of the Republican Guard, to stay in office for more than 25 years and get promoted to the Baath Party National Command.⁶¹ He has also established his parallel *kingdom of loyalties* inside the organization by scrutinizing the members of the executive office as well as the heads of universities and institutes branches. Thus, all of those under the NUSS umbrella must be loyal to him. If they fail to be so, they are pushed out of office.⁶²

The university branches' members are elected every two years by the university General Assembly's members who are the faculties units' members. Figure 2, which I developed, shows the elections process of the NUSS. The election process and lists of candidates are usually conglomerated along geographical lines and coterie basis. Clientelism and hiring are the main mechanisms deployed at popular organizations for people to get selected and promoted. The NUSS is no exception. To make it to the Administrative Office, the NUSS university branch, you have to belong to x's coterie.⁶³ Indeed, the question 'who is behind him?' would be the first question inquiring about a new face

60 Some offices and positions are jointly headed by one member although organizationally they have a separate office. For example, Dureen Suliman headed both Private Education Office and Informatics Office.

61 See <<https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/67577>> [accessed 13 April 2021].

62 Interview with Nedal Khateeb, Gaziantep, April 2019.

63 Ismail, pp. 97-120.

entering a high level in an organization. The answer then would be 'from the group of x'. Moreover, most of the NUSS members would be indoctrinated in early stages of their school lives.

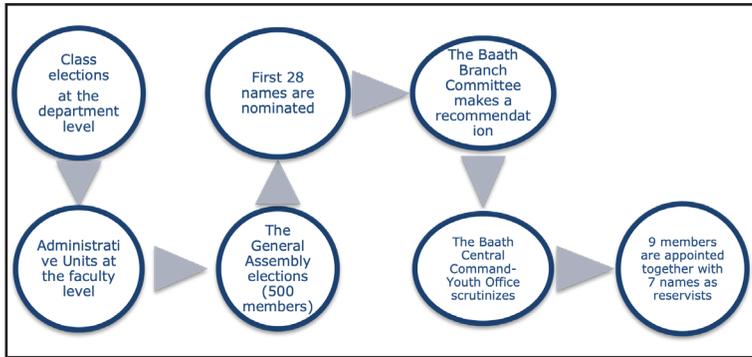


FIGURE 2. NUSS Elections Process at the University Level.

After appointing the universities Administrative Offices members, the new members would, in turn, form the faculties units with the same usual coterie approach. The NUSS Institutes Branch of the university would also undergo the same process as that of a university branch. It is worth mentioning here that every university has a unique experience and a set of factors at play which are different from others. By comparing Aleppo University, for example, to Al-Baath University (Homs) or Tishreen University (Latakia), we cannot find the sectarian factor playing a crucial role compared to the other universities. In Aleppo, class and the Baath loyalty are more pertinent criteria with a covert presence of a sectarian latent struggle.

NUSS' Aleppo Branch Links to other Structures

Considering that NUSS is an auxiliary organization of the Baath Party, every member must be scrutinized by the Baath Party leadership. Candidates have to be Baathists too, with very few exceptions from one of the National Progressive Front (NPF) parties.⁶⁴ This would mean clientelism is at the forefront of members' appointments. A copy of the

64 NPF was established by Hafez al-Assad in 1972. It is a coalition of ten political parties in Syria that support the socialist and Arab nationalist orientation of the government and accept the leading role in society of the Arab Socialist Baath Party, (the biggest party in the NPF). Although Article 8 was repealed in the Constitution of 2012, only one non-Baathist member was appointed in the NUSS Aleppo branch in 2016.



FIGURE 3. A Copy of the Baath Central Command's Decision.

Baath Central Command's decision (see fig. 3) shows the entrenching of the Baath Party and the chain of hierarchy in place when appointing a new batch of Aleppo NUSS branch members. The average age of the NUSS branch members is between 22-25 years. A senior Baathist member in Damascus or at Aleppo University Baath Party Branch level should be a protégé of a NUSS member in order to have clout. This phenomenon is ubiquitous in Aleppo for different reasons. First, with the absence of the explicit sectarian rivalry like that of Homs and Latakia universities, the competition is apparent between Aleppo countryside and other cities like Idlib, Raqqa and Deir Azzor where there were no full universities there. It is a class and leverage struggle rather than a sectarian one. On the other hand, students originating from Aleppo city who belong to the business coterie are rarely engaged in NUSS elections or activities.⁶⁵ Businessmen usually have close ties with the

65 Interview with Nedal Khateeb, Gaziantep, April 2019.

holders of powerful state offices, particularly in the military and security services. Such practices encouraged local bosses to emerge and entrench themselves throughout the Syrian territory.⁶⁶ Thus, the regime aims to 'corrupt people or ensnare them to commit an infraction against rules so that everyone becomes wanted.'⁶⁷

The NUSS structure is designed to be a watchdog vertically and horizontally inside the universities. Officially, in every directorate and institution there is a seat reserved for one of the NUSS members at all levels. However, their role is not to lobby for student rights. They are acting like informants for the NUSS leadership in Damascus considering that there are some professors who are not Baathists.⁶⁸ After the first protest at Aleppo Faculty of Humanities where students came together to protest the regime violence against peaceful protesters in Daraa and show solidarity with those undergoing such violence, new approaches were developed.⁶⁹ All NUSS members of faculties, institutes and the university accommodation city in key positions were summoned for a meeting with the member of the Executive Office, Omar Arob, who was the executive director envoy for Aleppo University. Arob indicated that he was asked 'by the leadership to organize NUSS to stand in the face of all the turbulences and prevent any tries to organize anti-government protests at all costs.'⁷⁰ This would not be possible without coordination between the NUSS units and the Administrative Office on the one hand and the security services on the other.

Links to the Mukhabarat (Security Services)

During the meeting Omar Arob headed in April 2011, he explicitly asked all faculties units and accommodation units members 'to expand the surveillance network inside the university by recruiting more volunteer students and report any suspected moves aiming at organizing students to protest.'⁷¹ NUSS members had a *carte blanche* to prevent and oppress any mobilization inside the campus. Moreover, those who

66 Ismail, pp. 65–96.

67 Tayeb Tiziny, 'Alhutam Al-Araby, Rihan Khaser: The Arab Wreckage, a Losing Bet', 3 March 2019, <<https://www.alfaisalmag.com/?p=15302>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

68 Interview with Jalal Awad, Istanbul, April 2019.

69 See tens of videos of the protests inside the university campus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3j_yL-iqtA> [accessed 14 April 2021].

70 The researcher' personal notes, observations, and communications when attended the meeting on 14 April 2011 at Unit 20 of the University Accommodation City, Aleppo University.

71 Ibid.

were in official positions inside the university accommodation city, the hottest demonstration spot in Aleppo between 2011-2013 where some twenty-thousand students were residing, were asked to check rooms regularly to report any suspected gatherings, with an extra focus on those who were from Daraa or Homs.⁷² The advantage NUSS members had over the security services was their access to the student's registry and their knowledge of the whereabouts of activist students. Inside the accommodation city, students from the same city or town tended to share rooms by agreements with other roommates without officially registering such changes in the official registry. Arob requested a new system to be implemented to surveil the student's activities. He proposed to activate the floor supervision system. This meant that in every floor there would be two-to-three students acting like eyes and ears for the whole unit supervisor who, in his/her turn, would report directly to the Administrative Office.

The Administrative Office had direct contacts with the different security services. By the time the protests increased inside the university campus, the Head of the infamous Air Force Intelligence in Aleppo then, Major General Adeeb Salameh,⁷³ called in a group of Aleppo NUSS Administrative Office members to 'systemize collaboration in the face of the conspiracy the country is undergoing.'⁷⁴ Soon after a security detachment was introduced into the Baath Branch of Aleppo University with some six members from the State Security Intelligence Branch to report directly from inside the university because at that time Baathists reporting capacity was not efficient enough.⁷⁵ This procedure was also to supervise the informants and empower them inside the campus.⁷⁶

When the frequency of protests increased rapidly in 2012, the security services flinched and started to adopt new strategies to counter the peaceful protests movement inside the university and prevent it from diffusing to other neighborhoods. Moreover, there was a good number of NUSS members who were sympathizers with the uprising. A majority of the NUSS members were from Idlib and Aleppo countryside, two areas which were quite active in opposition politics. The security services together with some pro-regime Baathists like Omar Arob started to

72 Interview with Hazem Ahmed, Gaziantep, April 2019.

73 See <<https://blacklist.pro-justice.org/criminal/adeeb-namer-salameh>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

74 Interview with Zaher Jaser, Gaziantep, April 2019.

75 Interview with Zaher Jaser, Gaziantep, April 2019.

76 Interview with Khalid Ahmad, Gaziantep, April 2019.

recruit students to organize pro-Assad marches and suppress anti-regime protests. This move coincided with the creation of the Security Liaison Office inside the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo University to coordinate between the security branches and the NUSS and Baathists informants inside the university.⁷⁷ At the beginning, however, the recruitment of such people was based on sectarian affiliations and security officers connections, especially those descending from minority groups like Alawites and Christians.⁷⁸ These groups of people were voluntarily offering their services to their relatives in security and military positions. However, these efforts were not sufficient to put an end to the boiling streets with daily protests between 2011 and 2013.⁷⁹

Kata'ib al-Baath Repertoires of Violence

When the NUSS leadership in Damascus delegated Aleppo University responsibility to Omar Arob by giving him the free hand there, he bypassed the Baath Party leadership inside the university and started coordinating with the security services branches instead. Hierarchically, the Baath Branch of Aleppo University is the highest authority overseeing other institutions and organizations activities with its executive being the Head of the Security Committee under the emergency law.⁸⁰ However, Omar Arob started to mobilize NUSS members and establish direct communication channels with the security services to pass intelligence information on activists and protests. At the beginning of the protests, the NUSS Administrative Office formed what it is called the 'students committees' with one of the Administrative Office members supervision.⁸¹ One of their first activities was forming an electronic army of trolls to promote Assad's image as a 'civilized leader' and repel the anti-regime narrative by associating those who are calling for protests with imperialist western governments and by being externally funded.⁸² Bashar al-Assad explicitly thanked these 'young enthusiastic and patriotic groups for standing in the face of the conspiracy against

77 Interview with a former security officer of Aleppo University al-Baath Party Branch, Gaziantep, April 2019.

78 Interview with Hazem Ahmed, Gaziantep, April 2019.

79 Interview with Nedal Khateeb, Gaziantep, April 2019.

80 For an overview of the Emergency Law see <<https://bit.ly/3uyQ3x9>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

81 The researcher's personal notes, observations, and communications.

82 Interview with Hazem Ahmed, Gaziantep, April 2019.

Syria.⁸³ At their inception, these committees members were intimidating other students and were acting like police because they were mandated to do whatever necessary to prevent protests from happening.⁸⁴ Moreover, they were doing this on a voluntary basis. However, the NUSS leadership endowed them with prestige and administrative privileges, including an administrative promotion in their university degrees, exceptional annual exam rounds, and the opportunity to carry arms inside the university and its campus.⁸⁵

Between 2011 and 2013, the university accommodation city was the most contentious spot in Aleppo for a couple of reasons. First, it was a diverse place with students from other uprising cities like Daraa, Homs, Idlib and Deir Azzor. Another reason was the relative safety for the students to protest during the night which made it comparatively difficult for the security services to identify activists. Third, Aleppo was the least intense city compared to other revolting cities which made the city secondary to deploy forces to. This in turn explains the Assad's regime dependence on murky networks to thwart the protests rather than on regimental forces like other cities. In a videotaped interview with the former Head of the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo University, Abdulkader Hariri envisaged that the 'students committees' to be the core group to fill the manpower gap and take over from the military personnel manning the faculties and the campus entrances.⁸⁶ Moreover, the group which he called the Baath Legions will potentially become the main 'university security force.' He was confident that this would be a success attributing that to the inside knowledge of the NUSS and the Baath members who would easily point the fingers to the 'spoilers'. *Kata'ib al-Baath* members would also secretly hold guns to make their responses more rapid when need be.⁸⁷

On May 2, 2012, security forces and popular committees in collaboration with the student committees' members hailed the university accommodation city to put an end to the daily protests inside the campus before the

83 See the clip of Bashar al-Assad thanking the students: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_db-pElAv60> [accessed 15 April 2021].

84 Interview with Hazem Ahmed, Gaziantep, April 2019. See also a video of a group of NUSS beating and arresting students inside the campus <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mljQjHV1eeY>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

85 Interview with a commander from Kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019. See also: <<https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/24315>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

86 See the interview with Abdulkadir Hariri: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHUiz58ihD8>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

87 Ibid.

UN monitors visit to the university which was due on May 17, 2012. As a result of using live rounds arbitrarily, six students, including one who happened to be Alawite, fell dead. This event drove the regime to deny its forces responsibility of the death of the students and blame it on the 'spoilers', i.e. the protestors. As a result, the Air Force Intelligence Branch of Aleppo under the leadership of Adeb Salameh started arming Alawite students to defend themselves against potential threats.⁸⁸ Their aim was to mobilize a core group of some twenty students to be involved in putting down protests inside and outside the university campus if need be.⁸⁹

During the tenure of the Aleppo University of the Baath Party Branch of 2011-2013, there was a tendency amongst some of the branch members to be against the security approach to demobilize the students inside the university campus.⁹⁰ On the other hand, there were some figures inside the Party Branch, like Abdulkader Hariri, who were in favor of the security approach and the mobilization of the university Baathists and the students union to thwart the protestors.⁹¹ Abdulkader Hariri was later on promoted to become the Secretary of the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo University. Simultaneously, the dynamics in other neighborhoods of Aleppo were important factors in the mobilization of the Baathists and the students to counter the protests movement.

The current Assistant Central Secretary of the Syrian Central Branch of al-Baath Party Hilal Hilal became the head of the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo in August 2011. In a live radio interview with him in November 2012, Hilal reiterated that 'the Baath Party has been active since day one of the crisis. However, the role of the comrade Baathists drifted into a more practical involvement and extended to act like a back-up and an auxiliary force to the Syrian Arab Army.'⁹² When the Free Syrian Army entered the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo in July 2012, the Assad regime intensified its military response

88 Interview with a former security officer of Aleppo University Baath Party Branch, Gaziantep, April 2019.

89 Interview with Nedal Khateeb, Gaziantep, April 2019.

90 In one of the first protests in 2011, the researcher was at the university accommodation city when the Secretary of the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo University and the Head of the Security Committee, Abdelaziz al-Hassan, called the Head of the National Security Bureau Hisham Ikhtiar. During the call, al-Hassan was passing his objection to the deployment of the Berry clan into the university and the way they were acting inside the university. He requested that the university deal with the crisis and negotiate with the students. If they fail, they will forward this to the crisis committee and recommend what to do.

91 Interview with a former security officer of Aleppo University al-Baath Party Branch, Gaziantep, April 2019.

92 Here is the full interview with Hilal Hilal, then Aleppo Branch Secretary of the Baath Party: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5psp9JEIfxA>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

by deploying artillery and fighter jets to the areas under opposition control. As a result, large numbers of civilian families moved westward to safer havens. Hence, most of the families ended up in the university accommodation city in very small rooms and without jobs. The Baath leadership together with the security services took advantage of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) influx to start recruiting from their families by giving them some incentives like allowing a family member to become a vendor on the streets of the accommodation city.⁹³ While the newly recruited members were deployed to the frontlines outside the university, most of the students were mandated to man the university entrances and monitor the security situation inside the campus.⁹⁴

One of the most significant events which changed the political and security landscape inside Aleppo University campus was the bombing of the Faculty of Architecture and the accommodation unit number nine on the first day of the examination on 14 January 2013.⁹⁵ In addition to tightening the screws on the activists inside the university, the attack was a clear message to activists that there was no red line and all options would be available to respond to any turbulences inside the campus, including air bombardment.⁹⁶ After this event, the students' political positions were very polarized. Most activists stopped organizing activities inside the university campus and decided to continue their activism in the areas outside of the regime control, especially after losing access to the university accommodation city, where IDPs were given the priority. On the other hand, the NUSS and the Baath Branch members of Katai'b al-Baath could get a room inside the university campus.⁹⁷ Moreover, calls for joining Kata'ib al-Baath rampaged the university billboards and the NUSS-affiliated Facebook pages.⁹⁸

Considering the intermediary nature of Assad's regime, brokers appeared to facilitate the recruitment and training processes. Hence

93 Interview with Nazeer Ahmad, former professor at Aleppo University, Istanbul, April 2019.

94 In an interview with Naif al-Silty, then the Secretary of Aleppo University Baath Party Branch, he outlines the tasks delegated to Kata'ib al-Baath inside the campus. See the full interview here: <<https://sy-medianews.net/news/6192>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

95 Alex Spillius and Damien McElroy, 'Syria: More than 80 Killed in Aleppo University', *The Telegraph*, 15 January 2013, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9804032/Syria-More-than-80-killed-in-Aleppo-University-blasts.html>> [accessed 15 April 2021]. The researcher was himself present inside the university when the attack happened on 14 January 2013.

96 Interview with Nazeer Ahmad, former professor at Aleppo University, Istanbul, April 2019.

97 Interview with Nedal Khateeb, Gaziantep, April 2019.

98 Details of the call for recruitment can be found here. However, after embarrassment of the universities and the comments on social media platforms, the calls had to be removed from billboards. See: <<https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/76885>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

some far-reaching figures and old-guard military people stepped in to implement the plans. In addition to the strong bond with Omar Arob, Hilal Hilal needed more eyes and ears inside the university. Hilal's nephew and protégé, Hassan Hilal, was appointed a NUSS member of Aleppo Administrative Office, although he was not a student, and a lecturer of the National Socialism subject at the university faculties. He started propagating for his uncle's experience with Kata'ib al-Baath in Aleppo to be injected at Aleppo University.⁹⁹ This needed a military dimension, not only administrative and regulating ones. Ahmad Mustafa Kusa, a retired military officer and an affiliate with the Air Force Intelligence, liaised between the Baath Party Branch and NUSS and the security services branches to organize trainings for the new recruits.¹⁰⁰ The anachronistic University Military Training Directorate, a military base installed inside the university campus, became the stage for training new university staff and students members.¹⁰¹ Every batch would follow a two-week basic military training on how to use AK-47 guns and how to be disciplined on the battlefield when deployed. The first official batch of Kata'ib al-Baath at Aleppo University was dispatched in February 2014.¹⁰²

Although it took longer to have an all-university staff and students Kata'ib al-Baath for Aleppo University, the group was kneaded well with that of the Baath Branch inside the city neighborhoods. In a televised video in August 2013, Hilal appeared in Aleppo to cheer the 'apparatchiks who showed their prowess in defending their city and supplanted official army units in critical places and were agile in their positions.¹⁰³ In Jamiat al-Zahraa and al-Khaleidia neighborhoods around the Air Force Intelligence Branch, Kata'ib al-Baath groups were amongst the main forces holding positions and repelling assaults by opposition groups, while the official army units were tasked to deploy artillery, mortars and air cover bombardment.¹⁰⁴ However, the head of the operations room is always a military officer from the Air Force Intelligence. This involvement in tasks and deployment show the expansion

99 Interview with a former security officer of Aleppo University Baath Party Branch, Gaziantep, April 2019.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 See: <http://www.dampress.net/?page=show_det&category_id=6&id=39768> [accessed 15 April 2021].

103 See the full report on the visit of Hilal Hilal to Kata'ib al-Baath in Aleppo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4PMpsxU7II&fbclid=IwAR0awSrNCQQRPDPvw6iEL-lytGZCOzRUF5M2V-X4rx3wiYI-sAhdS_WHJyKg> [accessed 15 April 2021].

104 Interview with a commander from Kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019.

of the student's participation in the conflict and violence perpetration. This is beyond what Baathists officials postulated earlier at the inception of Kata'ib al-Baath inside the university with psychological consequences of such actions on students' behaviors in their university lives, as one student member of Kata'ib al-Baath indicated.¹⁰⁵

However, students were lured with many incentives and advantages on different levels. Militarily, all students who would join a pro-Assad military formation would be (a) exempted from the official army conscription, (b) stationed in their hometowns, (c) free and unaccountable in looting whatever their hands fall on, and (d) in case of injury, militias members would be treated in the military health facilities.¹⁰⁶ While administratively, student members of Kata'ib al-Baath formations enjoy priorities over all other students when enrolling for a new academic year, a strenuous and a long process that could take more than a week to do. Moreover, they would get a room inside the university accommodation city where only two out of twenty accommodation units are allocated for students.¹⁰⁷ The rest are inhabited by IDPs. At times of goods shortage and economic distress, militias members always have the priority to get supply. Kata'ib al-Baath members, moreover, were allowed to carry weapons inside the campus, a sign of prestige and superiority felt by the guns holders inside an academic institution.¹⁰⁸ With their uniforms and violent appearance performativity, other fellow students always felt intimidated and vulnerable to be a target of these groups, in particular when they want to get revenge of one of the students.¹⁰⁹

Final Remarks: Violence Brokers

Resorting to informal networks by the Assad's regime is a classic example of authoritarian regimes' dependence on murky organizations to

105 Videotaped interview with Abdulkader Hariri in February 2014, who in 2013 became the Secretary of the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo University see: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHUiz58ihD8>> [accessed 14 April 2021]; interview with a commander from Kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019.

106 Interview with a commander from Kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019.

107 Interview with a commander from Kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019.

108 Interview with a university student from Aleppo, November 2019. Interview with a commander from Kata'ib al-Baath, October 2019.

109 This behaviour was ubiquitous after 2011 with people in military uniform wandering inside the university campus. There were also many cases where arrests happened on a revenge basis because of past enmity.



FIGURE 4. A group of university students posing in front of the Baath Party Branch of Aleppo University.

outsource violence and plausibly deny accountability for the violence perpetrated. The key question of how paramilitary groups and their networks are embedded and linked to the state structures leads to interesting answers in the case of Syria. As Üngör rightly puts it in his article on the *Shabbiha* in Homs: ‘The complex, symbiotic relationships go beyond classical principal-agent approaches, and include a coalition of forces in a society.’¹¹⁰ In Aleppo, the communitarian and personal networks within the state institutions could radically change the course of the conflict when such relationships were exploited by people in influential positions.

The Leninian question of *‘kto kovo — who will overtake whom?’* can better explain the nature of the relationship between the masters of violence in Damascus and violence brokers in the periphery. The leadership in the capital thinks that they are the biggest winners with the minimal expenses and damage, while the new rising elites, in this case in Aleppo, see themselves gaining great advantages by being promoted to positions they would have never thought of occupying otherwise. Political actors internal to the community played a significant role in the civilians’ mobilization in the context of Aleppo. The cases of Hilal Hilal, Omar Aroub and Ammar Saati are clear examples of the intermediaries’

110 Üngör, 73.

roles in the context of civil war and the rewards they could get for liaising between the center and the periphery.

From a head of a post office of one of Aleppo branches, Hilal climbed the ladder through the Baath Party to become the Assistant Secretary of the Baath Executive. This position is considered number two in the political hierarchy after Bashar al-Assad, the Baath Party Executive. When the demonstrations diffused in March 2011, Hilal was a member of the executive command of the Aleppo Baath Party Branch. Soon after he took over and became the head of the branch. This promotion came after he could successfully mobilize the networks he has built in the previous six years when he was a member of the Baath Party Branch in Aleppo. The engineer, his title by profession, cunningly managed to establish very strong bonds with the Baath auxiliary organizations in the fields of education and civil services. With his big and popular base, Hilal took the initiative from day one of the uprising to promote the idea of mobilizing and arming Baathists to act as a counter force to the civic uprising.

The complexities of civilians' involvement in the perpetration of violence adds another layer to the already intractable conflict that has been ongoing since 2011. The outcomes of the Assad's regime entanglements of civil society organizations and state structures have led to difficult to cure serious wounds in Syria: fractured social fabric, civil war, and finally a destroyed country which needs generations to be built.

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