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Tribal mobilisation during the Syrian civil war: the case of al-Baqqer brigade

Haian Dukhan

Teeside University, School of Social Sciences, Humanities & Law/ Department of Politics,

ABSTRACT
As a result of the debilitating situation that the Syrian state reached during the Syrian Civil War, the government relies heavily on paramilitary groups to confront security challenges. Existing studies imply that all the paramilitary groups in Syria were formed in a largely top-down process. Focusing on the rise of al-Baqqer Brigade in Syria and relying on a series of in-depth interviews with members of the al-Baggara tribe who make up most of this militia, this paper challenges that assumption. The paper shows that the emergence of tribal militias is principally a grassroots phenomenon stemming from competition over local resources. It argues that the Syrian state has seized this opportunity and outsourced some of its security and counterinsurgency tasks to the group.

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Introduction
To deal with the debilitating situation in Syria, which developed during the Syrian Civil War, the government has been transferring the task of preserving security in the marginal areas to tribal militias. This paper aims to answer the following questions: How and why does the Syrian state rely on tribes to confront challenges? What is the impact of this on internal tribal dynamics? What are some of the consequences of solidifying tribal ties, for the future stability of Syria? Existing studies suggest that all the paramilitary groups in Syria were formed in a largely top-down process. Focusing on the rise of al-Baqqer Brigade in Syria and relying on a series of in-depth interviews with members of the al-Baggara tribe who compose most of this militia, this paper challenges that assumption. The paper shows that the emergence of these tribal militias is principally a grassroots phenomenon stemming from competition over local resources. It argues that the Syrian state has seized this opportunity and outsourced some of its security and counterinsurgency
tasks to the group. Ahram suggests that often the aim is to recruit the services of tribes, to serve as what Olson calls ‘stationary bandits’. Relying on tribes allows the state to quickly and effectively react to local challenges, especially when fighting well-organised insurgencies that invest in building their own local institutions. Kinship ties played an important role in recruiting tribesmen into these militias and prominent local actors frequently invoked tribal concepts and affiliations to accomplish their purposes. Despite this, internal differences, social and geographic dispersal, and contested leadership, depicted through interviews, run counter to the image of the tribes as cohesive groups. The case study shows that the al-Baggara tribe is internally divided, and factional rivalries and conflicts among their lineages run deep. Traditional leaders were side-lined, and new leadership, organised around militiamen such as Khaled al-Hussein, the leader of al-Baqqer Brigade, has emerged. One may only wonder what the consequences of this are for Syria. Faleh Abdul Jabar warned that reliance on tribes for military purposes could become a ‘Frankenstein-like’ evolution in the future. This is exactly what is happening in Syria where tribal traditions such as community spirit (asabiyah), territoriality, and tribal practices such as revenge (Tha’ir) and dislocating civilians from their properties (jalwa) have been reconfigured and transferred to the context of modern military combat. Often, these behaviours encourage what Jabar calls ‘tribal gangsterism’ which is detrimental to national unity and state integrity.

**Methodology**

Research for this paper took place during September and August 2021. The methodology in general involved conducting a broad literature review on tribes and tribalism in the Middle East and North Africa, including debates on the structure and function of tribes. This was supplemented by further review of the available literature on the purpose of ‘paramilitary groups’ during conflict and their impact on state-society relationships in a ‘post-conflict’ setting. After the broad setting was established, I started conducting precise research on the case study chosen for this paper: al-Baqqer Brigade. This militia is built on a pre-existing social network, namely, al-Baggara tribe. Therefore, researching this case study required examination of the structure of al-Baggara tribe, its geographical distribution, its leadership, and the history of its interaction with the central states. This required analysis at both a national and a local level.

In terms of obtaining data about the establishment of al-Baqqer Brigade, I conducted research in government, donors’, and international organisations’ reports about the conflict in Syria and created a database derived from the information gathered about the group. Following this, I conducted thorough searches on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and
YouTube and compiled another dataset on this group. I then started comparing and contrasting these two datasets. Research was conducted using English and Arabic sources. As for obtaining data on the structure, history, and distribution of the tribe in Syria, I surveyed a wide array of literature. This includes genealogy encyclopaedias written by members of al-Baggara tribe, historical narratives produced by Syrian historians, such as Jamal al-Barout, and reports conducted for different US institutions as part of their military presence in Syria from 2014 onwards. After completing this literature review, I summarised my verified findings in a Word document and started drafting my interview questions.

Fieldwork to interview members of the al-Baggara tribe who have been displaced as a result of the conflict was supposed to take place in southern Turkey but due to the travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this had to be cancelled and replaced with online interviews. I managed to conduct 25 interviews with members of the al-Baggara tribe. The majority of these interviewees lived in Syria, but some also lived in southern Turkey. I prepared a list of questions in Arabic and the same questions were asked of each interviewee. Posing the same questions to different interviewees enabled me to verify the information through multiple sources. Of course, one could speak at length of the challenges that emerged in conducting these interviews, such as internet connection problems, issues of trust, and time zone differences. All this required patience and persistence, particularly in terms of establishing a rapport with the interviewees.

**History of devolution of violence to tribes in Syria**

Throughout history, tribes organised themselves military to protect their sources of livelihood such as grazing lands, wells, and herds from the threat of other tribes that wanted to take control of them to expand their power and influence in the absence of effective state control in the peripheral areas. This continuous cycle of competition for resources created a system of ‘political accumulation’, as Brenner describes the tribal raids intended to increase their resources or protect what they have. The tribes of northern Arabia dominated their desert and steppe rangelands (diras), and on occasion would use force in asserting their prerogatives and answering challenges from their own powers. Increased Ottoman activism in Arab frontier zones, beginning in the 1830s, signalled the decline of tribal autonomy that would gradually continue with the rise of the modern state, on the edge of the periphery, which prevailed in what Toth calls the ‘last battles of the Bedouin’. The case of Sheikh Ibn Mheid, chief of the Fad’an is particularly illustrative of the increasing power of the state and the declining power of the tribes. Suleiman Khalaf tells us how Ibn Mheid publicly gathered all the criminals in his region and said to them, ‘Now I cannot protect anyone’. The
government police forces entered his house in search of people who had committed public offences. In these battles, the state power has not only grown into the edges of the marginal areas but eventually spread to their cores. Despite this, central authorities in Syria and Iraq and other parts of the Middle East continued to rely on tribal leaders to recruit tribal mercenaries to quell internal disturbances, and to fight external threats as well.

The Syrian state has devolved violence to tribes on many occasions to face internal and external challenges. From 1979 onwards, the Syrian government faced demonstrations, strikes, and escalating violence orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood in a way that paralysed the country.\textsuperscript{11} Jonathan Rae describes how Jamil al-Assad, Hafez’s brother, visited Boueidar, the stronghold of the al-Haddiyn tribe, in 1981.\textsuperscript{12} Jamil asked the al-Haddiyn to be the government’s eyes and ears in the countryside of Hama and Aleppo and to monitor movements between the two governorates.\textsuperscript{13} The al-Haddiyn built military checkpoints around Hama, watched the desert, captured some members of the Muslim Brotherhood who wanted to escape to Iraq after the bombing of Hama, and handed them to the Syrian regime.\textsuperscript{14} In March 2004, the governorate of al-Hassakeh witnessed Kurdish riots encouraged by the American presence in Iraq. The Syrian army did not have a strong presence in the eastern part of the country, and it therefore sought assistance from the Arab tribes in the governorate.\textsuperscript{15} The al-Jabour tribe has a strong presence in Hassakeh and was entrusted with protecting the government buildings there. They were allowed to take up arms, surround the government buildings and protect them.\textsuperscript{16} The Tay tribe, headed by Sheikh Mohammed al-Fares was entrusted with defending the other major city in the governorate: Qamishli.\textsuperscript{17} The Kurdish movement was suppressed, with estimates suggesting that around 40 people were killed, with over 100 injured, and more than 2,000 Kurds were jailed.\textsuperscript{18}

This study contends that the devolution of state control over violence to tribes is hardly new, as the aforementioned examples show. The paper presents a more nuanced picture, with the hypothesis that the reliance on tribes for military and security purposes has previously occurred under a highly centralised conventional military structure where the state recruited the tribes as non-state actors to serve as the ruler’s proxies. Often, when a particular crisis was over, the state promptly returned to the path of monopolising violence. After the Syrian Civil War, governing structures became extremely fragmented, not at all resembling the highly centralised state mentioned above. This led to the multiplicity of local actors and intermediaries that have been empowered during the war and they will not easily relinquish their newfound autonomy.\textsuperscript{19} This is not to say that the state has crumbled, but its central power appears to have been permanently devolved
and dispersed, representing a fundamental abandonment of the state’s monopoly over violence and a turn toward what Robert Holden calls a reliance on ‘parainstitutional violence wielders’.20

Military tribalism in Syria during the conflict

When the protests began, tribalism played a major role in the restive areas of Syria, encouraging the young to mobilise as part of the protest movement against the regime. As peaceful protests transformed into violent confrontation, some tribesmen resorted to armed self-defence. Many tribal youths who took part in the protests resorted to carrying arms in order to take revenge for the murder or torture of one of their relatives by the Syrian regime’s security forces. The Syrian army had large numbers of soldiers from the tribes serving in its ranks. Many of them started defecting from the army to join the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in late 2011. Many army officers with a tribal background started to rise in the FSA, like Maher al-Nuimi from the Nuim tribe and Abdul Jabbar Akidid from the Aqaydat tribe.21 For example, some members of the Bani Khaled tribe formed a battalion known as the Shield Brigade, which fought under the umbrella of the FSA in Baba Amr district in Homs.22 Other members of the Mawali tribe set up a tribal militia known as Mawali Brigade, which fought under the banner of the FSA in Idlib.23 On the other hand, loyal Sheikhs set up militias and mobilised their youth to join them in fighting alongside the Syrian regime’s forces. For example, Sheikh Mohammad al-Fares of the Tay tribe, a member of the Syrian Parliament, established a tribal militia called al-Magawir (the brave) mainly composed of members of his tribe (Tay Tribe), in al-Hassakeh.24 Sheikh Ahmad Darwish of the Bani Ezz tribe, also a member of the Syrian Parliament, set up another pro-regime militia of his tribesmen in Idlib. In some cases, there were two conflicting tribal militias from the same tribe: one that supported the regime and one that fought against it. Some tribal youths formed their own militias, giving it their tribe’s name while their traditional leader would set up another militia that also used the tribe’s name but fought on the side of the regime. Towards the end of 2012, Syria reached a stage where both the regime on one side and the Free Syrian Army, on the other, used the tribes as proxies against the other side during the conflict. While tribal militias proliferated during the Syrian Civil War, there has not been a single study that discussed the subtleties of their formation and consequential power dynamics.

Rising from below: al-Baqqer Brigade in Aleppo

Studies of state devolution highlight the incentives for the state in setting up militias during armed conflict as part of the state’s delegation of violence to non-state actors, while often claiming that militias are mere ‘puppets’. The
incentives for the state to form and support militias differ, however, from the
dynamics that drive community-based militia formation and mobilisation.\textsuperscript{25}
The case study presented here shows that al-Baqqer Brigade was formed by
members of al-Baggara tribe and later received assistance from state agents
to mobilise recruits. In order to understand the process of the formation of al-
Baqqer Brigade, we have to delve into the sociological realities of al-Baggara
tribe on the ground, which constitutes the backbone of the military
formation.

The al-Baggara tribe in the governorate of Aleppo is a branch of the main
tribe that inhabits Deir Ezzor. This segment of the tribe left Deir Ezzor in the
19th century as a result of a rift among its members and since then has
inhabited villages to the east and the south of the city of Aleppo such as
Turkan, al-Alam, Blat, and Khalas.\textsuperscript{26} Sporadic visits between the two segments
in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor have maintained relations, particularly for important
occasions such as weddings and funerals, but each segment has developed
as its own separate entity.\textsuperscript{27} The Syrian historian Jammal al-Barout says that
the relationship between the two segments became merely symbolic, where
the al-Bashir Sheikly lineage family in Deir Ezzor has no power or influence in
Aleppo.\textsuperscript{28} From the 1960s onwards, Aleppo, like other Syrian cities, experi-
enced a massive demographic change with a large influx of rural incomers to
the city because of the growing employment opportunities generated by its
thriving industrial sector.\textsuperscript{29} Many members of the al-Baggara tribe, alongside
other tribes such as Assasneh, Beit al-Berri, and al-Hadidiyn, moved to the
eastern part of the city and inhabited the Bab al-Nayrab and al-Marjeh
neighbourhoods. Although market reforms in the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s
had benefited Syria’s commercial bourgeoisie in Aleppo, the regime had also
cultivated and often given priority to rival elites of rural and tribal origin by
incorporating them into its own monopolistic economic networks and,
importantly, its coercive structures.\textsuperscript{30} This process was both part of the
broader strategy to empower tribes in exchange for political compliance, as
argued by Dukhan, and a way to buy their support for counterbalancing the
traditional Sunni bourgeoisie, which, in 1982, had supported a Muslim
Brotherhood-led revolt.\textsuperscript{31} Prior to the uprising, people such as Akl al-
Hamadeen of al-Baggara tribe and Zeino al-Berri of the al-Berri clan became
members of the Syrian Parliament.\textsuperscript{32} Fierce competition existed between the
al-Baggara, Beit al-Berri, and Assasneh around smuggling routes for livestock,
tobacco, and drugs, and obtaining economic concessions from the state such as
the right to cultivate agricultural tracts of land.\textsuperscript{33}

As soon as the Syrian uprising erupted and violence intensified, al-Baggara
and Beit al-Berri saw this as an opportunity to prove their loyalty and rejuve-
nate Assad’s need for their support. In Aleppo, criminal gangs, called tribal
Shabiha, from al-Baggara, Beit al-Berri, and Assasneh, helped quash demon-
strations in the early phase of the uprising.\textsuperscript{34} In the same token, some
members of the same tribes joined the Free Syrian Army to confront the state. Lacher argues that violence creates divisions in the social structure causing fragmentation among groups relying on solidarity among their members to defend themselves against threats. Eastern Aleppo became an area of major confrontation between loyalist and opposition forces, many of which were tribal. Eventually, when the opposition managed to conquer eastern Aleppo, where many tribal Shabiha originated, the conflict’s brutality reached its peak. Some members of the Assasneh tribe attacked the house of Hussein al-Meri and executed him, alongside his eldest son Ali. This assassination has its roots in the fact that Hussein al-Meri was competing with other members of the Assasneh to control the livestock market in Jibrin and had previously been involved in many quarrels with other members of the Assasneh before the uprising. Khaled, one of the sons of Hussein al-Meri, managed to escape to Western Aleppo where, after a few months, he announced the establishment of al-Baqqer Brigade to fight alongside the Syrian army in eastern Aleppo. During civil wars, local communities may choose to protect themselves against wartime violence by forming militias under the umbrella of the state, which is the case for al-Baqqer Brigade.

**Al-Baqqer Brigade in combat**

In the al-Baqqer Brigade, the Syrian state had found a ready-made contingent for use in its war against their opponents in the divergent tribal interests. This also allowed the state to increase its numbers and firepower during the military operations in Aleppo governorate. In the context of the conflict with the Syrian opposition, al-Baqqer Brigade performed many tasks. Initially, members of al-Baqqer Brigade were intimately familiar with the physical terrain of Aleppo and its countryside and the social composition of their community – who is who and where to run. Akins argues that states incorporate local tribes into their counterinsurgency strategy, because they possess greater knowledge of the conflict environment, enabling them to be more effective at counterinsurgency. Many of my interviewees repeated an old Arabic proverb – (Ahl Makka adra bi-shi’abiha) ‘Mecca people know the trails’ – asserting that local tribes know their own area best and so they were able to guide the Syrian army to the active zones of the Syrian opposition in the rural areas of Aleppo. Secondly, the al-Baggara tribe presented a ‘readily available and organic social structure ideal for mobilisation’. Therefore, al-Baqqer Brigade was an important resource for mobilisation, used by the Syrian army to progress its local efforts against the Syrian opposition in Aleppo. Thirdly, this research shows that the Syrian state relies on tribes, not only out of practical necessity due to the government’s limited state capacity, but also strategically, in order to build state legitimacy among a target population where the state is perceived to be ruled by a sectarian
group (the Alawites) who want to oppress the Sunni majority, according to this perception. By supporting Sunni tribal militias in its war against the opposition, including al-Baqker Brigade, the Syrian government would dilute the sectarian tension and help legitimise its military activities in a Sunni dominated region.

The main justification expressed by members of al-Baggara tribe for the Syrian state’s reliance on the al-Baqker Brigade is that, because of war and economic crisis, the state has been diminished and is unable to execute its duties in sustaining peace and order. Defections, desertions, battle losses, the challenges of urban warfare, and the war of attrition waged by the opposition in eastern Aleppo significantly depleted the number of men available to fight.\(^4^2\) Raised on an ad hoc basis, the al-Baqker Brigade and other tribal militias proved to be cheaper to deploy than a standing army, in low-intensity warfare. Quickly becoming a template for pro-regime mobilisation, the al-Baqker Brigade, like other popular committees, spread throughout the country, manning checkpoints, searching houses for activists and opposition figures, and providing local information to the security apparatus in the initial stages of its establishment.\(^4^3\)

As the conflict in Aleppo intensified and government forces came within firing range of most of the opposition in March 2014, al-Baqker Brigade, in full battle gear, was organised into an ostensibly unified entity under the command of the Syrian military, to fight against the opposition in eastern Aleppo.\(^4^4\) Biberman argues that alliances between the government and non-state groups during civil wars are defined by the balance between interests and power.\(^4^5\) Governments rely on pro-government militias when the local balance of power between the government and rebel groups is in the rebels’ favour, or roughly equal, and non-state groups’ interests are served by an alliance with the government. Between March 2014 and March 2016, the al-Baqker Brigade claimed 246 ‘martyrs’.\(^4^6\) This claim to numerous ‘martyrs’ which was announced by the display of posters of these ‘martyrs’ on social media is a lot larger than those announced by other pro-Assad militias, which indicates the magnitude of its military participation in the battles to drive the rebels out of eastern Aleppo.

It is important to note that the Syrian state’s cultivation of support from the tribes also represents an attempt to counter the efforts of the opposition who could similarly recruit the tribes to their own cause. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the Syrian opposition have used tribal ties to mobilise and direct the peaceful and armed activities of tribesmen to further their interests in their battle with the regime. Thomson argues that insurgents often use identity-based cleavages, or politicise ethnicity for recruitment, tactical, and political purposes.\(^4^7\) Therefore, tribes are also instrumentalised as a means of undermining political foes and to counter similar initiatives from other actors.\(^4^8\) For example, al-Baqker Brigade called upon fellow
tribesmen who joined the armed opposition to lay down their arms, surrender and join the regime’s side. Thus, state outreach to tribes should not necessarily be viewed in military terms; it should instead be viewed as a form of community outreach, used to weaken the opposition, morally speaking. In a sense, this contributed to the state’s policies of eliminating local support for the rebels through a combination of coercion and co-optation. Asking loyal tribal militias to penetrate the opposition host communities was a way for the state to recruit defected local fighters from the opposing side.

**Reconfiguration of tribalism, solidifying of sub-tribal solidarities, and fragmentation of tribes**

The formation of al-Baqqer Brigade led to the reconfigured rise of tribal sentiments, practises, and values under which one can clearly see the features of the breakup of traditional forms of tribal authority and the erosion of old tribal loyalties. The result has been the emergence of a new group that retains certain tribal characteristics but who are also heavily conditioned and shaped by other factors such as economy, geography, and alliances with internal and external forces. Leaders of al-Baqqer Brigade have found tribal values and practises to be a possible model for recruitment and morale raising, and a way to achieve their military and security purposes. Many leaders of the al-Baqqer Brigade speak of a territory marked by the seal of al-Baggara tribe called ‘Khat al-Baggara’ as expressed in the following words of Fadi al-Afees one of the leaders of al-Baqqer in Deir Ezzzor: ‘We will not let the Kurds rule “Khat al-Baggara” and we will conquer this region and take it back from the Kurds who are killing our men and raping our women’. Another reconfigured tribal custom associated with the rise of tribal militias is the practise of Jalwa, which is a form of forced evacuation linked to tribal conflict, which started to remerge in different parts of the country to replace the absent state’s law. This happened in 2015 when the leader of al-Baqqer Brigade asked members of the Assasneh tribes, related to the killers of his father, to leave their village in 2015 after it was captured by the Syrian army and its loyalist groups.

In the formation of these militias, one can observe the rise of sub-tribal solidarities where one or two lineages, in the case of al-Baggara, form the core of these military militias. Broader tribal affiliations were used only in transactional, often ephemeral ways. In the case of al-Baqqer Brigade, Khaled al-Hussein, leader of this militia, recruited members heavily from his lineage: al-Bu Rhama, which came to be known as the military wing of al-Baggara tribe. Prior to the civil war in Syria, the most influential lineage of the al-Baggara tribe in Aleppo was al-Bu Fadel, based in the village of Turkan. The rise of the al-Bu Rhama via al-Baqqer Brigade jeopardised their position close to the
Syrian state. In order to hold that position, they used their maternal connections with Khaled al-Hussein to become active members of al-Baqqer Brigade, making this militia highly reliant on members of al-Bu Rhama and al-Bu Fadel. Tibi argues that often what are perceived as ‘actual’ kinship relations (based on principles of descent and on affiliations by marriage or adoption) are empirically evident within the smaller units of the tribe: these are referred to as local lineages. For the al-Baqqer Brigade, al-Baggara tribe is a source of identity and emotional attachment that is symbolically important. In many of the videos produced by the media section of al-Baqqer Brigade, called Sheila (tribal songs), the performers chant a verse which glorifies the military abilities of the al-Baggara tribe and calls upon their members to defend the tribe’s territory from what they describe as the ‘aggressors’. The tribe here is a collective that could be activated for a specific task.

Even within these small solidary groups, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that fragmentation often cuts across lineages too. Lacher argues that in civil wars, strategic conditions change constantly, forcing actors to reposition themselves and enter into new alliances and enmities leaving lasting traces in the form of rifts within the social fabric. Following the opposition’s victory in Aleppo, al-Baqqer Brigade started to fragment. The most pronounced case of such fragmentation was in 2019 when Sheikh Qadour al-Hussein of al-Bu Rhama lineage and Khaled al-Hussein, the leader of Liwa al-Baqqer, ran against one another on slates in which they were teamed up with members of al-Bu Rhama lineage. According to my informants, during this period, Sheikh Qadour al-Hussein restored the security intelligence apparatus and obtained their sponsorship to establish the ‘Shield of Tribes’ brigade. Mechanisms that promote differentiation within groups include competition among leaders to represent that group externally, and their competition in building up clientele within the group. Despite this defection, Khaled al-Hussein remains powerful within his lineage in terms of the total number of fighters he has, his wealth enhanced by controlling economic concessions from the state and the regular salaries his fighters receive from the state, and external factors such as Iran. Given these resources, his dominance would be safeguarded, allowing him to practise clan paternalism by distributing resources and extending his generosity in his surroundings. Further internal dissent is, however, inevitable as a result of continuous interlineage disputes and events.

The impact of military tribalism on intra-tribal politics

Alliances within the al-Baggara tribe may have brought advantages to the Syrian state, but the relationship between tribes in Aleppo became fraught with more tension and military confrontation. The establishment of al-Baqqer Brigade led to sharp increases in social distance, cleavage,
competition, and conflict between the tribes and the clans of the region. Leaders of the al-Baqker Brigade used their militia both as an instrument of control and as a way to assert their authority over other tribes in their locality and even outside their locality. The al-Baqker Brigade attempted to hold sway over the tribes of Aleppo in the city and its countryside. In 2018, al-Baqker Brigade organised a conference in the eastern part of Aleppo to which it invited representatives of other tribes such as al-Berri, al-Hadidiyn, and Assasneh. The conference represented a recognition of the hegemony of the al-Baggara tribe over other tribes in the region. This hegemony did not last long because other tribes such al-Berri sought support from external patrons, in this case the Russians, to compete with the al-Baggara tribe. Therefore, the desire of tribal groups to seek out privileges from their militias to settle private scores leads to a situation in which rival clans jostle to establish their own militias and legitimise them through the state in order to level the playing field. Not only did al-Baqker Brigade try to impose its hegemony over the tribes in Aleppo, but it also attempted to rekindle kinship ties with members of the al-Baggara tribe to establish a base there too. Dawood argues that the viability of tribes involved in the political game grows in proportion to their activity outside the initial sphere of their principal occupation. One of the leaders of al-Baqker Brigade told me, ‘Upon our victory in Aleppo and the return of Sheikh Nawaf al-Basheer to Syria in 2017, we went to visit our cousins there and we agreed to set up a branch for al-Baqker Brigade in Deir Ezzor. Things went well to start with but at a later stage, tensions started to escalate as Sheikh Nawaf al-Basheer did not want to receive orders from Hajj Khaled. Sheikh Nawaf and his followers said they are the main log of the tree, and we are just the branch and that we should follow his orders’. This resulted in political polarisation involving the whole of the al-Baggara tribe, which was then mirrored in the spatial location of the two main blocks in Syria. The term al-Sharqiiin, or Easterners, came to refer to Nawaf al-Basheer and the segment of the al-Baggara tribe located in Deir Ezzor. They arose as an opposing faction against the Garbiin, or the Westerners of al-Baggara tribe, headed by Khaled al-Hussein, occupying the western part of Syria, specifically Aleppo. We then see two versions of al-Baqker Brigade, each centred around a different power base, each having its own separate agenda and supporting symbols. In general, creating tribal militias not only reshuffled local dynamics but created new orders whereby these militias attempted to impose new systems with rules skewed towards subjugating other social groups and enabling one group to control the emerging order. Other actors tend to respond in different ways, resulting in successive waves of tension and instability in their local area.
Retribalisation and the shrinking of state institutions

The policies of the Syrian government that relied on tribalism to confront challenges have strengthened the power of tribalism and revived its sentiments. Mazrui defines ‘retribalisation’ as a process arising from the decline of nationalism, which he argues produces a revival of tribal bonds and sentiments. In the face of a weak state clinging to survival rather than being concerned with development, the members of tribes begin to isolate themselves from national politics and to look to local events. The result is the rise of tribalism and the decline of national belonging.

After defeating the opposition in eastern Aleppo, al-Baqqer Brigade treated the houses of the opposition fighters as war booty by occupying many of them and using them either as residences for their fighters or by stealing their furniture and selling it on the black market. Extortions and robbery became income-generating activities for the al-Baqqer Brigade, particularly in Western Aleppo. There were also many reports of civilians who were known to be children of wealthy merchants in Aleppo being kidnapped at military checkpoints, with their parents being asked for a ransom to release them. Many merchants were forced to pay monthly taxes to al-Baqqer Brigade to resume their mercantile activities in Aleppo. One of the residents of al-Akramiah district in Aleppo said, ‘Security forces must stop these thugs who belong to different tribes who came from the villages to the city. Their breaches of law are continuous. The state must be more serious in dealing with them and should force them to leave the city as soon as possible’.70

Military mobilisation of the tribes became so entrenched that some government institutions began to legitimatisate these formations and introduce formal power-sharing deals into their workings, thus reverting to a legacy that had almost disappeared due to the transformations achieved by the modern state. Just as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party had used its military presence in Syria to push for political influence in the form of candidates for the recent Syrian parliamentary elections, so too did Liwa al-Baqqer throw its weight behind an ostensibly independent candidate called Omar Hussein al-Hassan, Khaled al-Hussein’s brother.72 Moreover, al-Baqqer Brigade has taken over the transportation sector in Aleppo city where most minibus drivers are descended from al-Bu Rhama and Abu-Fadel lineages who fought in the brigade.73 The revenues of transportation services are shared between the al-Baqqer militia in cooperation with the Military Security Department.74 Despite the Syrian government’s knowledge of al-Baqqer Brigade’s leaders’ criminal records, it decided to cooperate with them for the sake of short-term success in the fight against the opposition, disregarding the long-term destabilising potential that such a strategy promised. It is obvious that Syrian state interests were simply designed to defeat the opposition by any means in the short term.
Unclear boundaries between state functionaries and tribal militias have led to direct clashes between the state agencies and tribal power. More than five years after the end of the Aleppo offensive by government forces, supported by its loyal militias, the eastern Aleppo region is a confusion of armed enclaves and seemingly intractable conflicts. The government’s writ mainly covers Western Aleppo, and even there its control has been challenged by the militias recruited mostly from Arab tribes that it armed as counterinsurgency proxies after 2013. The question remains whether the state can rein in the tribes, or whether they will continue to operate after combat has ended. What must be stressed is that, in the short term at least, tribes will challenge the state’s claim to central control and sovereignty, including decision-making and implementation.

**Conclusion**

State atrophy in Syria has brought about the weakening of government institutions, including its security and military capabilities that now lack the efficiency to deal with opponents during the course of civil war. During the war, the country has witnessed a dramatic rise of non-state actors that attempted to challenge the state and overrun it, as exemplified by a wide array of armed groups such as the Free Syrian Army and others. To support their counterinsurgency measures, the Syrian government established and trained pro-government militias, such as the national defence forces. Tribal auxiliaries became a widespread phenomenon and were often treated by academics and analysts as groups formed using a calculated, top-down approach. This study contended that tribal militias represent an attempt by certain tribal groups to benefit from the weakness of the state in order to strengthen their position vis-à-vis other tribal groups in their surroundings. Akkedian and Hasan argue that, in Syria, newly emerged formal and informal networks have become integral to the structures enabling the state’s exercise of power and control. The case study presented in this paper shows how al-Baqqer Brigade helped the state regain its power but, in turn, the group instrumentalised the state apparatus for their kin’s interests, agenda and power. Moreover, the findings of this research intersect with the research that Raphaël Lefèvre conducted on the militant Islamist movement in the city of Tripoli in Lebanon. This research reaffirms Lefèvre’s conjecture that people form tribal militias out of a thirst for revenge, a drive for money, or as a way to prevail in local conflicts.

This study challenges the organic model of tribes that defines them as coherent, internally closed systems. The tribes do not position themselves as a unified body, particularly in the military sphere. This finding does not mean that tribes are not a meaningful and functional social fact in Syria. Instead, it adopts the specifically northern Arabian connotation, very well elucidated by
Madawi Al Rasheed, that ‘tribe’ does not denote a static socio-economic grouping, but one that changes over time. Fluid realities of tribal belonging can hardly be represented in a fixed or schematic model. As clearly illustrated in this study, small, localised, often primary, tribal segments were decisive units in the establishment of al-Baqer Brigade more than the entire tribe is. Overall, what we are seeing in Syria is a situation where discipline and order are replaced by fierce competition among tribes to gain more concessions from the state or capture state resources themselves. The shrinking of the national arena and the relegation of politics to tribal groups is a matter of major concern, not only to Syria but to the entire region.

Notes

1. Haian Dukhan is a Syrian British Academic. He is a Research Fellow at the Central European University and the author of ‘State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns.’ Haid, ‘Reintegrating Syrian Militias.’
2. Ahram, Proxy Warriors.
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22. Mubashar, ‘Bani Khaled Shield Brigade.’
27. Interview via WhatsApp with Abdol Mohsen Ali: one of the members of the al-Baggar tribe in Aleppo on the 22nd of May 2020.
29. Pagani, ‘Urban Conflicts and Multiple War Narratives.’
32. Al-Mustafa, ‘What made the majority of the tribal leaders stand with Assad’s regime?’
33. Hussein, ‘Tribes in Aleppo during the revolution.’
34. Lund, ‘The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria.’
35. Lacher, *Libya’s Fragmentation*.
36. See above 29.
37. Hussein, ‘Tribes in Aleppo during the revolution,’; This story was narrated by many members of the al-Baggara tribe whom I interviewed for this research too.
38. Our-Syria, ‘Iranian Militias in Syria.’
42. The Carter Center, ‘Syria Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces.’
44. See above 42.
46. al-Tamimi, ‘Who are Liwa al-Baqir,’.
47. Thomson, ‘Ethnic Conflict and Militias.’
48. COAR, ‘Tribal Tribulations Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria.’
49. Euphrates Post, ‘Fadi al-Afees threatens to take over SDF controlled areas in Deir Ezzor.’
51. Mazur, ‘Dayr al-Zur from Revolution to ISIS.’
52. Interview via WhatsApp with Sheikh Zakkour Salman, one of the members of the al-Baggara tribe who resides in Turkey on the 13th of May 2020.
53. Interview via WhatsApp with Ramadan Habbash, one of the members of the al-Baggara tribe who resides in the countryside of Aleppo on the 2nd of May 2020.
54. See above 51.
58. See above 35.
59. *Shield of Tribes*, Facebook page representing the Militia of Shield of Tribes set up by Sheikh Qaddour.
60. See above 35.
61. Hassan, ‘Arab Tribes in al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor Choose Their Allies.’
62. al-Khatib, ‘How did al-Baqer Brigade become a stumbling block in the face of the Russians?’
63. Ayyam Syria, ‘How did Russia establish their own militias in Syria?’
65. Dawood, ‘The “State-ization” of the Tribe and the Tribalization of the State’
66. An interview via WhatsApp with Ali Hamadeen, one of the leaders of Liwa al-Baqer in May 2021
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Notes on contributor

Haian Dukhan is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Teeside University. He has taught politics and international relations at the universities of St Andrews, Leicester and Edinburgh. His most recent book is State And Tribes In Syria: Informal Alliances And Conflict Patterns (2019).

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