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# **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Research Project Report (2)

## ***Syrian People's Council Elections 2020: The Regime's Social Base Contracts***

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A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build common ground between the European, Russian, Turkish, and US views on the issues of reform, refugees' return, and reconstruction in Syria. This project is co-run by the GCSP, the EUI, the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and the Swiss Peace Foundation (Swisspeace).

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## Executive Summary

Against the backdrop of an unprecedented economic crisis, the Syrian People's Council elections were held in July 2020, following two postponements due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the electoral campaign slogans launched by the candidates – especially the independents – focused on economic concerns, and made reference to charitable contributions and propaganda from the candidates, the elections failed to capture the interest of the majority of constituencies in the territories controlled by the Bashar al-Assad regime.

As usual, the ruling Baath Party controls the majority of seats in the new Council. Certain marginal parties allied with the Baath are also represented within the so-called National Progressive Front (NPF), which is led by the Baath itself. Independents rank second in terms of seat numbers after the Baathists. However, partisan affiliations are of no significance in terms of stances vis-à-vis the regime, since loyalty is a non-negotiable prerequisite for all 250 MPs, and indeed all candidates.

Though the Baath Party retains an absolute majority of seats in parliament (66.8%), the elections demonstrated the inability of its leadership to revive the Party as an effective political tool capable of exercising influence by itself. First, the primaries for selecting Party candidates were marked by limited participation, accusations of corruption and widespread objections within the Party. Second, the parliamentary elections saw a historically low turnout (33%), illustrating the Party's inability to mobilise the electorate. Finally, attempts to renew the Baathist bloc in the People's Council resulted in the rise of military and paramilitary figures (with the entry into parliament of retired army and police officers); a growing influence of capital (with higher numbers of businessmen MPs); and the emergence of centres of power outside the traditional Party structure (with the entry of charity and development activists, backed by First Lady Asma al-Assad). This heterogeneity within the Baath's parliamentary bloc illustrates the reality of the Party today, which appears weaker than it was before the outbreak of the revolution.

The elections showed the regime's approach to its loyalists to be far from uniform. While seats continued to be allocated to traditional elites from minority backgrounds and activists engaged with the war-wounded and families of killed soldiers, loyalist elites from Sunni Arab communities – tribal sheikhs and the Sunni religious movement – appear to have been replaced by war profiteers, militia leaders and retired officers.

At a time when the intensity of armed conflict has receded and economic challenges have soared, the election results reflect the regime's quest to expand its partnership with war profiteers, whose increased number gives the 2020 parliament an air of war money. The number of businessmen MPs has increased to 43, of whom 30 have entered the Council for the first time. With prominent businessmen in Damascus and Aleppo side-lined, most of the winners were scarcely known in business circles before 2011, or even before their arrival to the Council. Their wealth was mostly – or, in some cases, entirely – accumulated during the war, owing to their close ties to the regime's senior decision-making circles. These businessmen have worked and invested in four major sectors that have flourished under the war: smuggling, construction

and real estate, food trade, and financial brokerage. Compared to the previous election in 2016, when the involvement of certain businessmen in military and security activities was their main qualification for membership of the parliament, the economic services provided by aspiring MPs have proven significant in the 2020 election. Most participated in the national campaigns launched by the government to confront the COVID-19 pandemic and to support the Syrian pound, or provided services in their electoral districts, at a time when state institutions suffered from an inability to meet the basic needs of the population. The large increase in the representation of businessmen in the 2020 Council may indicate the regime's determination to engage them in its attempts to weather the effects of the worsening economic crisis.

Finally, the 2020 elections revealed some of the changes that have occurred in the uppermost echelon of the regime's inner circle. Gone is the influence of Bashar al-Assad's first cousin, the business tycoon Rami Makhlouf, whereas the role of Bashar's wife, Asma, has risen markedly, especially through the election of charity and development activists affiliated with her, and the election of other MPs with direct links to the Presidential Palace. The influence of Asma al-Assad appears particularly prominent in the electoral districts of Damascus, Tartous, and Rural Damascus. Meanwhile, Maher al-Assad – Bashar's brother, and the commander of the army's Fourth Division – maintains his own influence with a renewed bloc of merchants and smugglers linked to the economic network of his Division, commensurate with the map of its geographical spread across Rural Damascus and parts of the governorates of Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Iran also preserves its influence – which remains limited – in the new Council through the 11 MPs it supports clearly and directly (up from around eight in 2016). Iranian influence is concentrated in the areas adjacent to the Euphrates River, particularly in the Aleppo Regions district, followed by Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor to the east.

## Introduction

On 19 July 2020, the Syrian government held People's Council elections in all electoral districts, even those outside its military control, after having postponed them twice since April as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic. The keenness of the political establishment to hold elections in wartime suggests a wish to prove its commitment to constitutional mechanisms and showcase its strength and legitimacy. Indeed, no fewer than six elections have been held since March 2011, including three parliamentary elections (2012, 2016 and 2020), the 2014 presidential election and two local elections (2011 and 2018).<sup>1</sup>

For decades, the People's Council did not play a significant role in political decision-making. However, the 2020 Council may have a special role in the 2021 presidential election (given that each presidential candidate must obtain the support of at least 35 MPs), notably if the international community presses the regime in serious negotiations resulting in a political transition. Despite the potential importance of the upcoming presidential election, present crises remained the focus in the 2020 elections. The regime currently faces major economic challenges resulting from years of war, the loss of national wealth and resources, and severe international sanctions. Moreover, its continued military advances are unlikely to yield any significant political impact in the near term. Amid such extraordinary economic and health crises affecting most of the population in regime-controlled areas, the 2020 elections mobilised a very small number of candidates and voters.

Despite the marginality of the Council in the political decision-making process, parliamentary elections reflect the priorities of the Syrian regime to reshape its social base, both in wartime and peacetime, in each of the country's 15 electoral districts.<sup>2</sup> Following an earlier study of the 2016 People's Council elections, the research detailed in this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the composition of the new parliament, considering it an expression of the configuration of power structures in Syria today. Through a detailed analysis of the profiles and trajectories of the 250 MPs elected in July 2020, this research paper aims to understand the changes in the regime's networks and its social base nine years after the beginning of the armed conflict.

This study draws on several sources, including official statements made by members of the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections,<sup>3</sup> official data published by the Baath Party during its internal process to select its candidates, data published by candidates of various political affiliations and constituencies about themselves, and news coverage of the elections by official and pro-regime media outlets. Moreover, the researchers conducted interviews and discussions,

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<sup>1</sup> Ziad Awad and Agnes Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)", Research Project Report, Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria (WPCS), European University Institute, Florence, Italy, April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IE6tik>.

<sup>2</sup> On the historical background of parliamentary elections in the Syrian authoritarian regime, see Awad and Favier, "Elections in Wartime", *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Until the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections website was last accessed by the researchers in mid-September 2020, the Committee had not published any data on the July 2020 elections on its website. The chairman of the Committee and its regional heads just made press statements before and after election day.

mostly online, with 90 individuals with direct or indirect contact with the winning candidates.<sup>4</sup> They also carried out extensive monitoring of the personal and public Facebook pages of victorious MPs and certain other candidates. They reviewed content previously published about MPs in print and online, including from the websites of certain ministries, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and trade unions, available copies of the Official Gazette, and specialised archival websites such as directories of businesses and establishments licensed in Syria. The resulting database includes the following data for each of the 250 MPs: place and date of birth; educational qualifications; profession; political affiliation; religious sect; number of times elected as MP; the key political, partisan, union-related, institutional and economic activities of each MP before entering parliament; social status and influence; family background; and the form of relations and support from various sources.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>These discussions took place between the official launch of the election campaign in March and the end of August 2020. Unless otherwise stated or cited, the detailed information and examples presented in this paper came from these online meetings after they had been cross-checked with the other sources.

<sup>5</sup>The authors use in this research paper the same indicators as for the analysis of the 2016 People's Council which relied on the introductory files of only 200 members, which makes a systematic comparison difficult. Meanwhile, the authors have completed data collection on the 2007 parliamentary elections as a basis of comparison with the 2020 results for some indicators. See Awad and Favier, "Elections in Wartime", *ibid.*

# 1. The Baath Party: Both Weak and Dominant

Over the course of the conflict in Syria, the regime has exhausted the surplus power it had enjoyed before the uprising, relying at the time on both the intelligence services and the compliance of a majority of the population. The regime has also tried to revive and promote the Baath Party, whose internal crises were deepened in the first two years of the revolution. It did so first through the appointment of an all-new Central Command in July 2013 (referred to at the time as the Regional Command),<sup>6</sup> which was renewed in April 2017, then through the (re)election of a majority of Baathists in parliamentary (2016) and local (2018) elections.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the leadership of all sections, divisions and branches of the Party were renewed through general elections – the first of this kind since 2011 – across all governorates between October 2019 and February 2020. To a large extent, the composition of the Baath Party’s lists for the 2020 elections could be seen as a continuation of these efforts to restore the Party’s leading role in state institutions and society.

As with previous People’s Council elections,<sup>8</sup> all the candidates on the National Unity lists formed by the Baath Central Command were elected in July 2020. These include 167 Baathist MPs and 16 others from smaller parties affiliated with the National Progressive Front.<sup>9</sup> Independents won the remaining 67 of the Council’s 250 seats, in a distribution almost identical to that of the 2016 Council (Figure 1). Out of at least 25 identified candidates from political parties licensed under the new Political Parties Law of 2011, only two from the People’s Party who ran as independents won seats, the same number that won in 2016.<sup>10</sup> The exclusion of candidates from these new licensed parties confirms the low regard in which the regime held these political actors. The regime merely instrumentalised them on several occasions as proof of the 2011 law being implemented and as examples of “political opposition within Syria” for conferences it organised, typically in response to pressure by external state actors.

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<sup>6</sup> The new leadership initiated its tenure with a “review of all organizational experiences and policies that brought the Party to its present state” according to Youssef Ahmad. Al-Baath Newspaper, “Comrade Youssef Ahmad, Member of the Regional Command and Head of the Organisational Office: We Are Members of a Party That Does Not Compromise Its Principles or Squander Its Beliefs” (Arabic), 7 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HVEOLb>.

<sup>7</sup> Agnes Favier and Marie Kostrz, “Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?,” Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, February 2019), <http://bit.ly/38771a4>

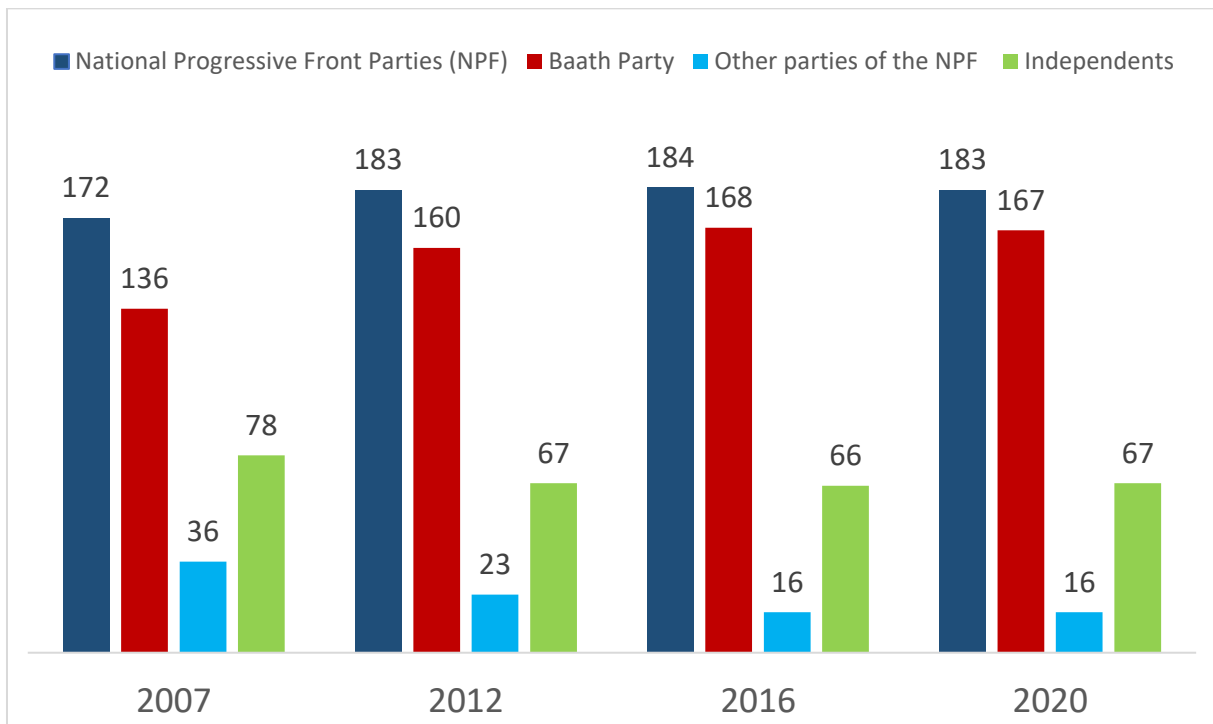
<sup>8</sup> The 2020 elections fell within the same legal framework as 2016 elections in terms of the division of electoral districts, the number of seats in each district, the 50% quota designated by legal provisions for “workers and peasants,” and the right to vote and the presence of polling stations in some governorates for IDPs from areas outside of regime’s control. See: Awad and Favier, “Elections in Wartime”, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> The National Progressive Front (NPF) is an alliance founded and led by the Baath Party since 1972. It includes 10 political parties whose representation in the 2020 People’s Council is as follows: three seats each for the Arab Socialist Union Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party; two seats each for the Syrian Communist Party (Khaled Bakdash faction), the Syrian Communist Party (Yusef Faysal faction), the National Covenant Party, and the Socialist Unionists; and one seat each for the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party and the Arab Democratic Unionist Party.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to Nashaat al-Atrash (re-elected in Sweida) and the businessman Khaled al-Sharaabi (elected for the first time in Quneitra), both members of the People’s Party, MP Fouad Aldani (Idlib) announced during his electoral campaign that he joined the ranks of the Development and Modernisation Party, which obtained its licence in March 2020 and held its constituent conference in July 2020.



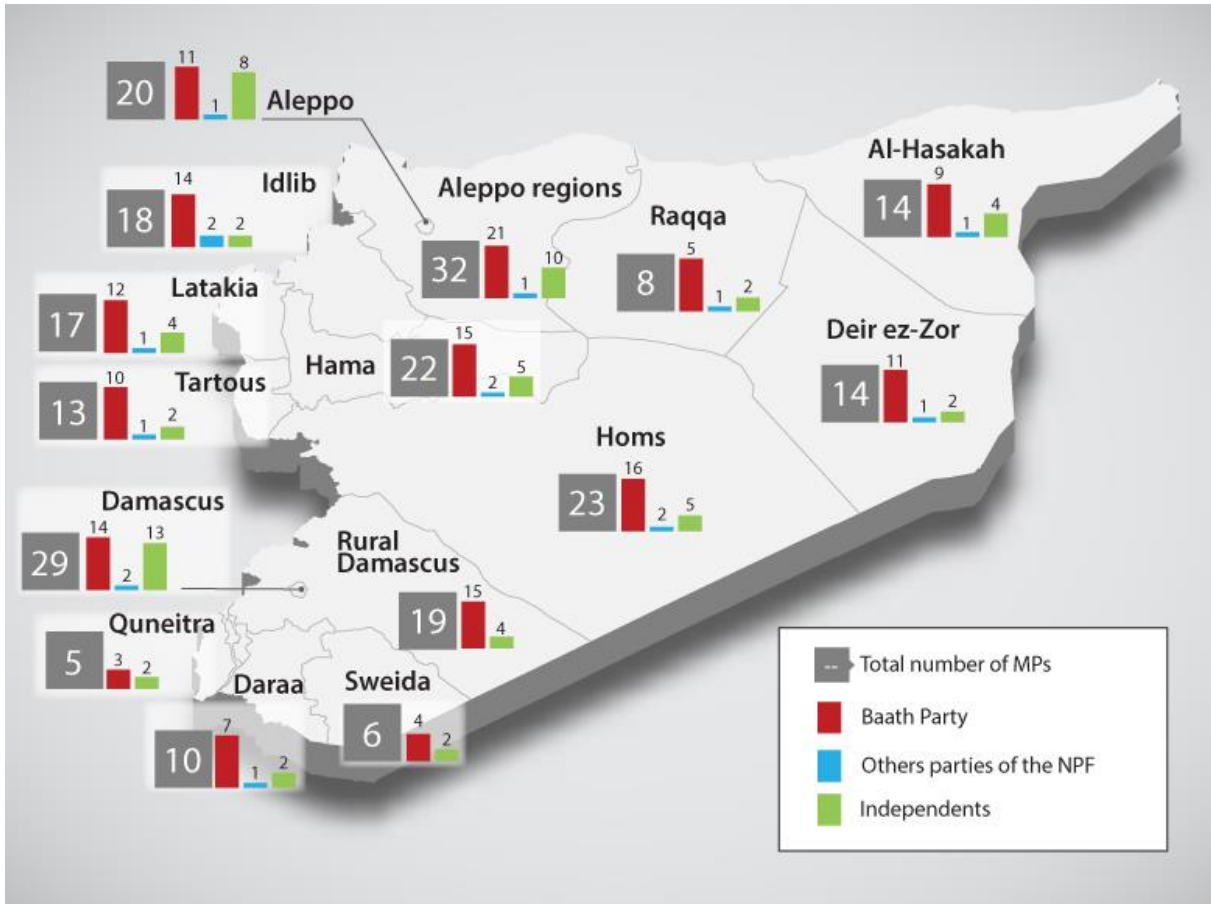
**Figure 1: Distribution of MPs by Political Affiliation (2007-2020)**



Source: The authors (based on official and party sources).<sup>11</sup>

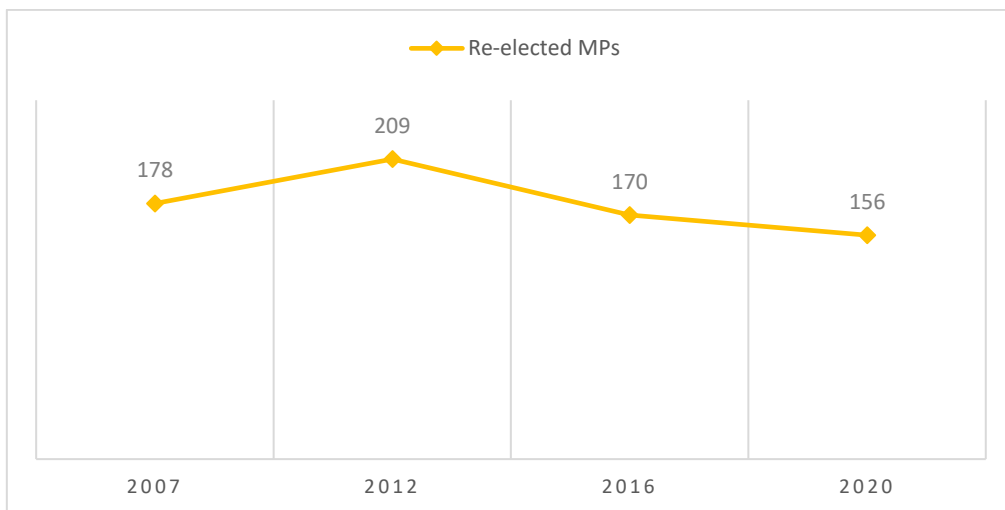
<sup>11</sup> The figure on the 2020 People’s Council election is based on information published by media outlets affiliated with the Baath Party and parties of the National Progressive Front. The figures on the 2012 and 2016 elections were based on the People’s Council database available in the following link: <https://bit.ly/3j7ORde>. The figure on the 2007 election was based on content published on the National Command of the Baath Party website, “Ninth Legislative Session Elections for the People’s Council in Syria” (in Arabic) on the following link: <https://bit.ly/2H0NMqu>.

**Map 1: Distribution of MPs by Electoral Districts and Political Affiliation (2020)**



Source: The authors (based on official and party sources)

**Figure 2: Numbers of Re-elected MPs from one session to another (2007 - 2020)**



Source: The authors (based on official sources)

## Primary Baath Party Elections: A Failed Attempt to Revive the Party?

In an experiment unprecedented in the history of the Baath Party, the Central Command organised non-binding primary elections between 15 and 28 June 2020 to select its People's Council candidates, a process the party dubbed a "consultation."<sup>12</sup> This experience was the last step in the Baath leadership's attempts to elevate the Party's position and expand its sphere of influence. In a speech given by President Bashar al-Assad to members of his Party, he described the consultation process as "the most important measure that preserves, develops, and strengthens the Party establishment and that widens the participation of Party bases in selecting their representatives to the People's Council" and as evidence of the "high vitality and spirit of rejuvenation that characterises and distinguishes the Party [...] and as a necessary step for its organisational and ideological renewal."<sup>13</sup>

20,271 members of the Party participated in the consultation process, of whom 2,513 competed over 334 seats - twice the number of final candidates required for the National Unity lists. Then, the Central Command chose half of those in an initial selection to represent the Baath Party in the parliamentary elections. However, it excluded 12 winners of the primaries, instead appointing seven retired army and police officers, the former and then current Council President Hammouda Sabbagh (al-Hasakah district), and four other candidates in its final electoral lists.<sup>14</sup> While the Central Command did not take into account the ranking of successful candidates in primaries to establish the final National Unity lists, it did nonetheless largely adhere to its results.

Still, the process was a subject of broad scepticism and criticism by the Baathists themselves, due to what they perceived to be internal corruption which was apparent in vote-buying, fraud, favouritism, and collusion between certain cadres (of the Central Command or its sub-leadership in the governorates) and some candidates. In the Aleppo Regions district, for example, 105 out of 483 candidates who competed in primaries submitted a collective protest against the results which they considered invalid and fraudulent.<sup>15</sup> In Tartous, due to similar objections, the Central Command had to recount the votes - a recount that the official *al-Baath* newspaper described as "a formality that changes nothing of substance."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the criticisms levelled against the primaries within the Party and more broadly in circles loyal to the regime, the Baath Central Command failed to expand participation within the Party's ranks or integrate more of its members into its selection process. Only 20,000 of the 900,000 Party members who had confirmed their membership as of 2017 participated in the

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<sup>12</sup> Consultations (Arabic: *ist'nas*) are internal primary elections for the selection of Baath Party candidates in the People's Council elections.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Baath Newspaper, "Comrade Assad to Baath Cadres: The Party Has Proven Its Dynamism and Ability to Launch into the Future" (Arabic), 16 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3i7NviM>.

<sup>14</sup> These four last appointments secured a second seat for women in Aleppo Regions and a seat for both the Murshidi sect in Hama and the Druze community in Quneitra, and filled a seat left empty by the death of a candidate in Aleppo.

<sup>15</sup> Hashtag Syria, "Democratic Experiment Voided by Party Leaderships: Aleppo Regions Consultations Sees Half of Votes Fraudulent, Third of Candidates Protest" (Arabic), 24 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2RBpLrx>.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Baath Newspaper, "Recounts: A Formality That Changes Nothing of Substance" (Arabic), 30 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jmm0SZ>.

primaries, or 2,5% of the total estimated number of the members.<sup>17</sup> The Baath Party also did not succeed in mobilising people on voting day, as evidenced by the record low turnout (about 33% according to official figures and 10% according to some observers), which would have been even lower without the coerced votes of soldiers, policemen, and government employees.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this weak mobilisation, the Baath Party leadership managed to renew its parliamentary bloc by 64% compared to that of 2016.<sup>19</sup> Out of 167 Baathist MPs in the new Council, 59 were MPs in the previous Assembly (2016-2020). Of the remaining 108, 92 entered the Council for the first time in 2020, four were appointed to fill vacant seats between 2017 and 2019, 11 were elected in 2012, and one in 2003. By comparing the renewal rates of Baathist MPs from one electoral district to another (Map 2), it appears that renewal rates are affected by military control in each district. In the districts where the regime has regained full control from the opposition during the past four years (Daraa, Rural Damascus, Aleppo and Homs), the number of new Baathist MPs is relatively high, as the selection criteria in these districts changed in favour of emerging figures. By contrast, the percentage of new Baathist MPs is lowest in Latakia and Damascus - two districts that have remained under regime control throughout the conflict. However, Tartous constitutes an exception to the theory, where Baath lists have included activists who have been involved in supporting families of war-wounded and fallen regime soldiers. As for districts in which large areas are still outside the control of the regime, the rate of renewal fluctuates between 57% in Idlib and 62% in Aleppo Regions, which may indicate a relative reluctance on the part of the Baath leadership to promote more new leaders from these districts to the People's Council.

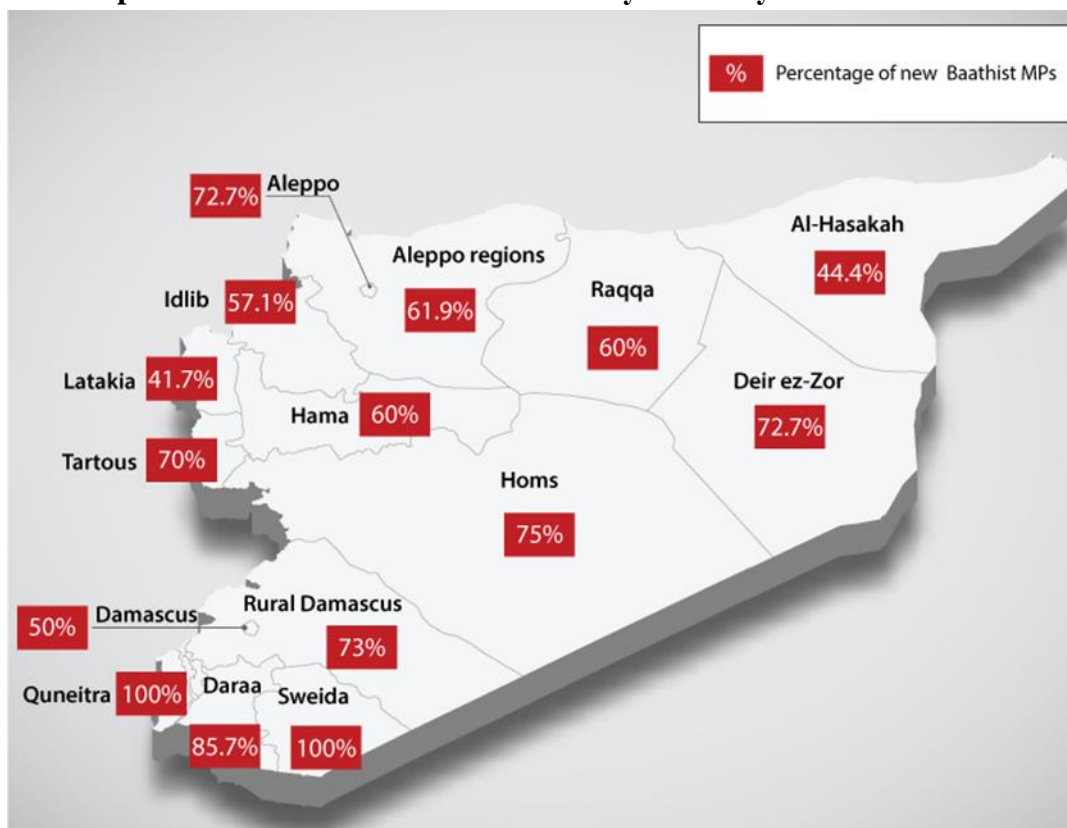
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<sup>17</sup> Al-Baath Media, "Comrade Youssef Ahmad Member of the Regional Command and the Organisational Office: We Are Approaching Breakthrough" (Arabic), 4 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/32Uf60k>.

<sup>18</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, "Syrian People's Council Elections: Modest Turnout and Lack of Trust" (Arabic), 20 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3hxTzjo>. The official turnout was at 57.56% in the 2016 elections, compared with 51.26% in 2012 and 56.12% in 2007. See Awad and Favier, "Elections in Wartime," *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> This percentage is based on the criteria used by the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections, which only cross-referenced the lists of successful candidates between the 2016 and 2020 elections to count the new MPs, ignoring the candidates who had filled vacated Council seats during this interim or those who had been MPs in earlier cycles. Map 2 is based on the same criteria.

**Map 2 :Renewal Rates in the Baath Party’s Bloc by Electoral District**



Source: The authors (based on official and party sources)

## Relative Shifts in the Baath Bloc

In the 2020 People’s Council, the Baath Party bloc comprises nearly identical components to that of 2016, with two main noticeable shifts: first, an increase in the number of MPs who had built their political capital outside of the Party’s structure (especially businessmen and those with backgrounds in charitable and development activities); second, a higher representation of retired officers and a conversion of certain militia commanders into leaders within the Party before the elections. The Baath Party also retains the monopoly on the representation of women in parliament, as it has for decades.

## Inside the Baath Party: New Entrants from Outside the Party Structure

The majority of Baathist MPs in the 2020 Council come from two intertwined backgrounds: the party structures and certain professional circles. Nearly 60 MPs hail from the Party’s leadership structures and affiliated organisations: 25 party members, 21 members of its popular organisations,<sup>20</sup> and 10 members of its affiliated trade unions.<sup>21</sup> These include public sector

<sup>20</sup> These include the National Union of Syrian Students, the Revolutionary Youth Union, and the Baath Vanguard Organisation (11 MPs); the General Workers’ Union (5 MPs); the General Farmers’ Union (3 MPs); and the General Sports Federation (2 MPs).

<sup>21</sup> Three MPs come from the Bar Association, two from the Order of Syrian Engineers and Architects, two from the Veterinary Association, and one each from the Teachers’ Union, the Dentist Association, and the Association of Financial and Accounting Professions.

employees and school teachers who are usually selected on the Baath electoral lists as leading officials in the Party or affiliated organisations (such as the Teacher's Union). Others Baathist MPs come from vital professional milieus and they are more representative of their professional environment than of the Party apparatus or its trade unions per se (to which they also belong in most cases). This second category includes university professors (12 MPs), attorneys and judges (23 MPs) and the medical professions, such as physicians and dentists (14 MPs).

The 2020 Council stands out with the slight increase in legal practitioners, especially judges, whose representation increased to six members. This may point to a trend in judicial milieus (already dominated by the Baath Party) engaging in the partisan arena in pursuit of material or other gains. This trend contrasts with the typically conservative behaviour of judges and eschews the theoretical separation between the legislative and judicial authorities.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the number of health professionals within the Baathist bloc is noticeable, with a two-pronged phenomenon that was not immediately discernible in the 2016 Council: the number of doctors on Baath seats is increasing in the districts of Homs (three MPs) and Tartous (two MPs), and four of them are all well-known activists in the realm of caring for the war-wounded and the families of fallen soldiers. Their election may be explained by two facts. First, doctors active in this caritative field have generally gained in social status, due to the increase in the number of war-wounded in these two districts, though the same cannot be said of Latakia, which has also seen the same phenomenon. Second, health professionals enjoy influence through their work in organisations and campaigns supported by the Presidential Palace. Most of them have no apparent history of activity within the Party, but belong instead to the charity networks associated with Asma al-Assad (see below). Therefore, it seems they represent more these networks than the Party itself.

This is also the case for businessmen elected on the Baath Party's seats, whose number doubled to 14 (six from the previous session, and eight entering parliament for the first time), which reflects a general trend towards greater representation for businessmen in parliament (see below). Most of these MPs lack a visible working affiliation with the Baath Party, and in some cases any public activity of any kind. Instead, they represent the interest groups to which they belong. Their increased number provides further evidence of the magnitude of external influences on the Party today.

### **More Military and Security Fighters in the Baath Bloc**

As with the 2016 Council, some members of the Baath Party bloc came to parliament in 2020 from backgrounds such as security (informants), military (retired army and police officers) and paramilitary (militia commanders). However, the 2020 Council has seen a remarkable increase in the number of retired officers (up to 16), which further consolidates the

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<sup>22</sup> Judges who are elected to the People's Council temporarily suspend their activity on the court bench for the duration of their tenure in the Council.

militarisation of the parliament.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, most militia leaders and informants had reinvented themselves as leading Party activists prior to their candidacy for the 2020 elections.

The 2020 Council includes eight Baathist militia leaders, three of whom were MPs in 2016 (Table 1, in the Appendix). Most had occupied central or local leadership positions in the Party during the past four years. For instance, Bassem Sudan (Latakia), the leader of the Baath Brigades in Syria, and Fadel Wardeh (Hama), the commander of the National Defence Forces (NDF) in Salamiyah, both became members of the Baath Party's Central Committee in 2017. Similarly, Issam Nabhan Sibahi (Hama), the commander of the Baath Brigades in Hama, and Abdul Aziz al-Hussein (Deir ez-Zor), the leader of a semi-dissolved tribal militia called the al-Hussein Groups, have both risen recently to the leaderships of their local Baath Party divisions.

Furthermore, some Baathist MPs distinguished themselves through security activities in the service of the intelligence agencies during the early years of the conflict, then subsequently became involved in official activities within the Baath or its affiliate organisations. An example is Wael Ali al-Dali, a new MP from Idlib, who was accused of pursuing dissidents and writing intelligence reports about them between 2011 and 2013. Al-Dali later emerged as an activist in the Baath Party's National Union of Syrian Students, moderating dialogue sessions organised by the Idlib branch of the Union in the city of Hama to which he had been displaced. In the autumn of 2019, al-Dali ran for the Baath Party elections at the governorate level, by which point he had concluded his transformation into an almost full-time Party activist.<sup>24</sup>

With greater numbers and more prominent representation than in previous Council cycles, the Central Command of the Baath Party appointed 16 retired officers from the army, police, and intelligence services within its 2020 electoral lists. Thirteen of them now enter the parliament for the first time (see Appendix, Table 2).<sup>25</sup> These officers represent their native electoral districts, although most of them spent two thirds of their lives away from their original communities and constituencies, being deployed wherever their military duties dictated. Some went through the branches of the Veterans' Association formed by the Baath Central Command in most of the Party's governorate branches, or else through the Veterans' League that had been active both prior to and during the parliamentary elections. Their selection appears both to pay tribute to the institutions of the military and the police and to be a personal reward for some who performed important functions during the war, such as the former chairman of the First Field Court, Major General Sheikh Jaber al-Kharfan (Deir ez-Zor), and the former commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Division, Naseeb Ajwad Abu Mahmoud (Sweida).

The appointment of retired officers to the People's Council may also reflect an endeavour on the regime's part to transform them into dignitaries and social leaders upon their retirement,

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<sup>23</sup> Ayman Abdel Nour, "Syria's 2020 Parliamentary Elections: The Worst Joke Yet," *Middle East Institute*, 24 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nwAjXS>.

<sup>24</sup> In a similar case, MP Ali Odah al-Jadaan, known in the city of al-Hasakah as an informant and accused of running brothels, committing armed robbery and kidnapping, has shown notable activity within the Baath Party since 2018, participating in the Party's base and division level elections the following year, before winning in the primaries in June 2020.

<sup>25</sup> The case of MP Ayman Ahmad (Latakia), who was discharged at a low rank (First-Lieutenant) more than two decades ago, is not included in this table.



especially in the Sunni-majority communities that had witnessed revolutionary and wartime activity. Among this group of retired officers, nine are Sunnis from the districts of Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo Regions, Hama, Daraa, Idlib, and Rural Damascus. Along with Homs, which is represented by an Alawite officer, these districts had been the epicentres of the uprising and subsequent armed rebellion against the regime. In light of the economic collapse and the deterioration of public services, the qualifications for social status and prestige have become purely material and driven by influence and wealth. As such, mediation with the intelligence services has become a source of influence, even if such mediation efforts were paid for. An example is the former Damascus police chief, Major General Mustafa Sukkari Mustafa, who provided mediation of this kind to the people of his village, Maar Shahour, as well as the people of the broader Hama countryside that was long the site of intense battles up until 2019. In rural Sunni communities in particular, retired officers and certain former militia commanders may become a new substitute for tribal sheikhs and traditional notables and dignitaries.

### **Women's Representation: A Baath Party Monopoly**

The 2020 parliamentary elections were held in the absence of the General Union of Syrian Women, which was dissolved in a decree by Bashar al-Assad in April 2017.<sup>26</sup> During its primaries, the Baath Central Command ordered its branches in the governorates to allocate quota for women. Later, the National Unity lists bore the names of 25 women, including 24 from different branches of the Baath Party, and one on a seat in Aleppo district designated for the Arab Socialist Union Party. The final tally saw three independent women added, bringing the number of women MPs to 28 in 2020 (Map 3), down from 34 in the previous Council.

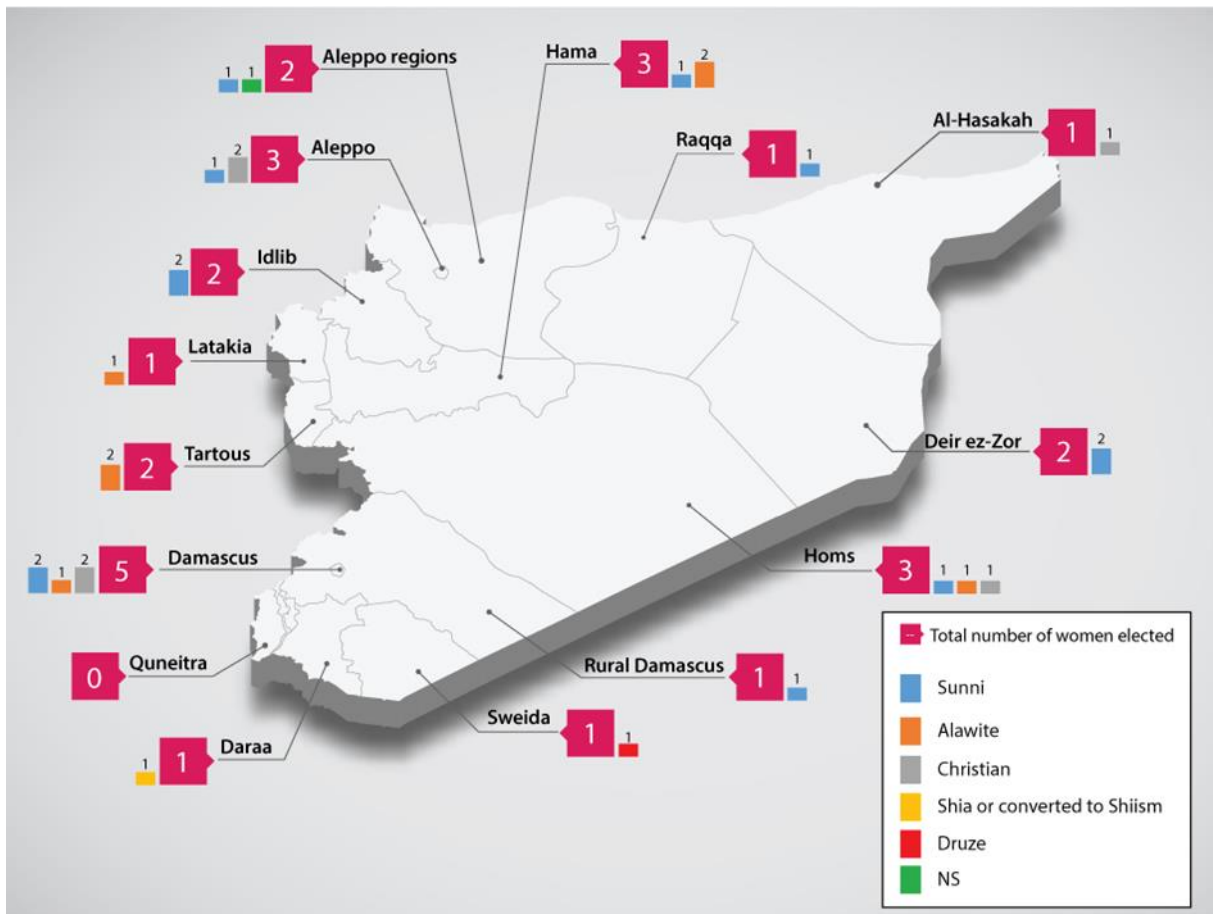
Not one of these women is a feminist activist. Moreover, the influence of militia leaders and officers extends to women's representation, which also reflects the relative imbalance in sectarian and regional quotas. In the district of Damascus, for example, three women won seats on the Baathist lists: Mary al-Bitar, a retired Christian officer originally from the Homs countryside; Bichri Zreika, an Alawite officer's widow from the countryside of Jableh; Basima al-Shater, a retired Sunni officer from Rural Damascus; and two as independents: Nora Arisyan, an Armenian-Syrian culture activist and Noha al-Mahairy, a Sunni Damascene judge, whose husband is a staffer at the Presidential Palace. Their profiles reveal the rural, military, and minority character of women's representation in Damascus. The proximity of women MPs to military and militia circles is also clear in other districts. For instance, Haifa Jumaa (Rural Damascus) is an instructor at an engineering faculty, but also the wife and daughter of military officers. Fadia Deeb, a dentist and MP since 2007, owed her first ascension to the People's Council to her then-husband who was an intelligence officer, before she became the chief dentist of Syria in 2011. Elsewhere, one militia leader secured a seat in parliament for his wife Ourouba Mahfoud in Hama, while another brought his daughter into the Council (Maryam al-Matras, from Deir ez-Zor).

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<sup>26</sup> SANA, "President Assad Issues a Decree Abolishing the Law Establishing the General Union of Syrian Women" (Arabic), 23 April 2017, <https://sananews.sy/?p=15405>.



**Map 3: Distribution of Women by Sect and District (2020)**



Source: The authors (based on official sources and field surveys)<sup>27</sup>

The 2020 People's Council elections, held seven years after the Baath Party launched its revival effort, demonstrate that the Party has failed to achieve any modicum of success in the revival. The candidate selection process via primaries was marked by the widespread accusations of corruption and mass objections to the process within the Party, and by the meagre participation of Party members, whom the Party failed to incentivise to vote. In addition, the attempts at rejuvenating the Baath Party's parliamentary bloc only produced further contradictions, including the expansion of military and paramilitary representation (including in women's representation) and the growing influence of both capital and power centres outside the Party structure. The resulting heterogeneous blocs within its parliamentary representation speak eloquently to the current reality of the Baath Party. The Party appears weaker than it was prior to the revolution, despite its hegemony and the regime's urgent need for it to rally support in light of mounting economic challenges and pressures.

<sup>27</sup> The authors relied on field surveys to determine the sectarian affiliations of MPs (see below).

## 2. Shifts in Sectarian and Family Representation

The forms and proportions of sectarian representation in the People's Council have been affected by the dynamics which prevailed after the outbreak of the conflict.<sup>28</sup> The number of seats occupied by members of sectarian minorities began to slightly increase in the 2012 and 2016 elections. Moreover, while post-revolution elections have preserved the representation of traditional social elites for minorities, the representation of the traditional Sunni elites has weakened, as evidenced by the lack of the Sunni religious movement and fewer influential tribal sheikhs in the 2020 Council.

### More Seats for Minorities

From the 1990 elections until 2007, the balance of sectarian representation in the Council remained largely constant. In 2020, however, the number of Sunni MPs decreased to 163 (65%), down from 190 (76%) in 2007. This slight decrease does not affect the overall sectarian composition of the parliament *per se*, but more seats have been granted in each election cycle to Alawites, Christians and Shia, while Druze, Ismailis, and Murshidis kept the same number of seats as before 2011 (Figure 3).<sup>29</sup> The Kurds, who are the large minority in the north-east of the country, remain outside these quota calculations due in part to the regime's marginalisation of them before the revolution. The Kurds also pursued more significant political aspirations than representation in the Council, reinforced by the erosion of the regime's control and the alliance of Kurdish forces with Western countries in the war against the Islamic State (IS).

The slight reshuffle in sectarian representation was clear in the 2016 elections, at a time when the regime's territorial control was at its lowest with about half of the population - most of them Sunnis - internally displaced outside regime areas or beyond Syria's borders. Yet the shift had already occurred by the time of the May 2012 elections, when the regime had only lost relatively little territory and population. The district of Homs appears to be one of the most affected by these changes (Map 4). In this governorate in 2012, Sunnis lost four of the 15 seats they had held in the 2007 Council, as a result of the inability of loyalist Sunni elites to confront the rising tide against the regime within the Sunni community. Conversely, traditional elites and other rising actors among minority communities succeeded in curtailing dissident voices and thus gained influence and prominence with the regime. In 2016, Sunnis lost two more of these seats in Homs, then one more in 2020, which may reflect the huge demographic changes in the region. By comparison, in Hama district, Sunni representation decreased from 13 seats in 2007 to eight in 2012,<sup>30</sup> and returned to its pre-2011 number in 2020, after the regime had

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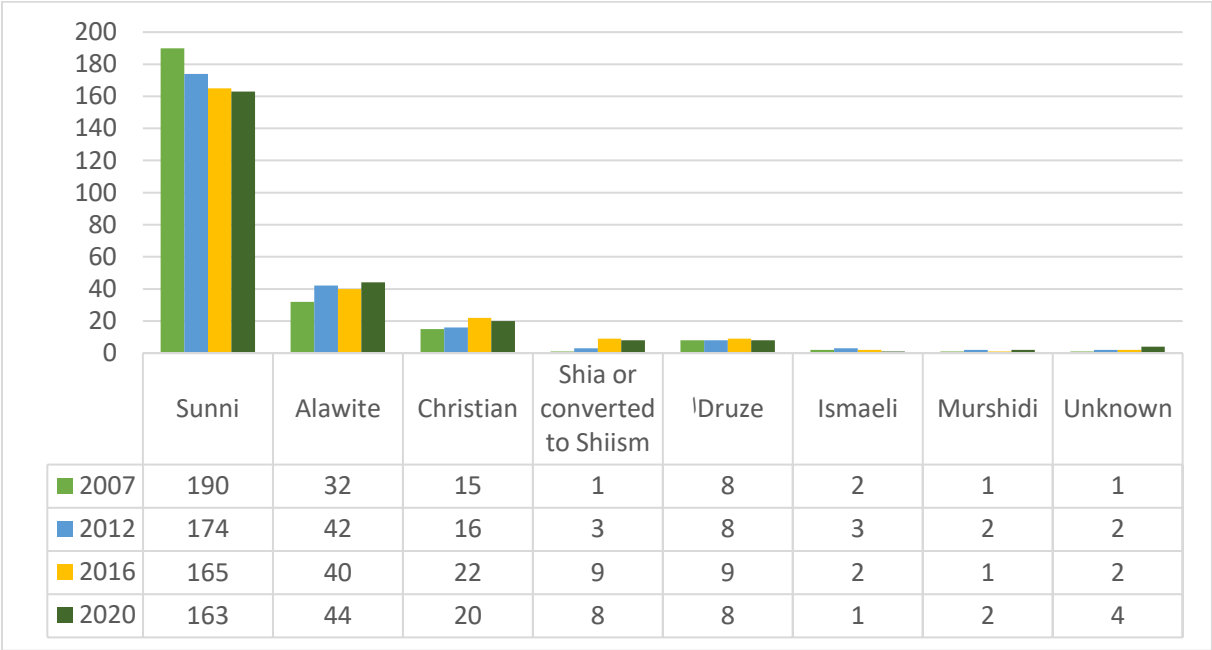
<sup>28</sup> As indicated in a previous study, there are no official sectarian quotas in the People's Council, nor is there official data on the religious affiliations of MPs. However, the regime has long taken sectarian considerations into account when determining Council seat distribution. Awad and Favier, "Elections in Wartime," *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Due to the lack of official data on the sectarian affiliation of MPs, the researchers relied on field surveys in formulating Figure 3 and Maps 4-5. The numbers are based on interviews with individuals from the communities to which the MPs belong, obituaries of deceased MPs that show religious affiliation, and analysis of MPs' personal Facebook pages which also indicate affiliation, especially those published on religious holidays. They may be subject to a margin of error.

<sup>30</sup> Of the five seats lost by the Sunnis, four were granted to Alawites and one for Ismailis. The latter sect at the time had an exceptional extra seat for Ali Haidar, who soon after became the Minister of National Reconciliation.

regained control over Sunni-majority cities and towns in the Hama countryside. While the Homs and Hama districts share similar religious diversity and early opposition activity against the regime, they diverge in terms of the effectiveness of the Sunni elites loyal to the regime. The comparison suggests that the shifts in sectarian representation do not necessarily reflect a concerted effort to favour religious minorities over Sunnis. Instead, they are the outcomes of circumstantial factors produced by the conflict which have culminated in the regime abandoning pre-determined quotas on religious grounds.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Council Members by Sectarian Affiliation (2007-2020)**

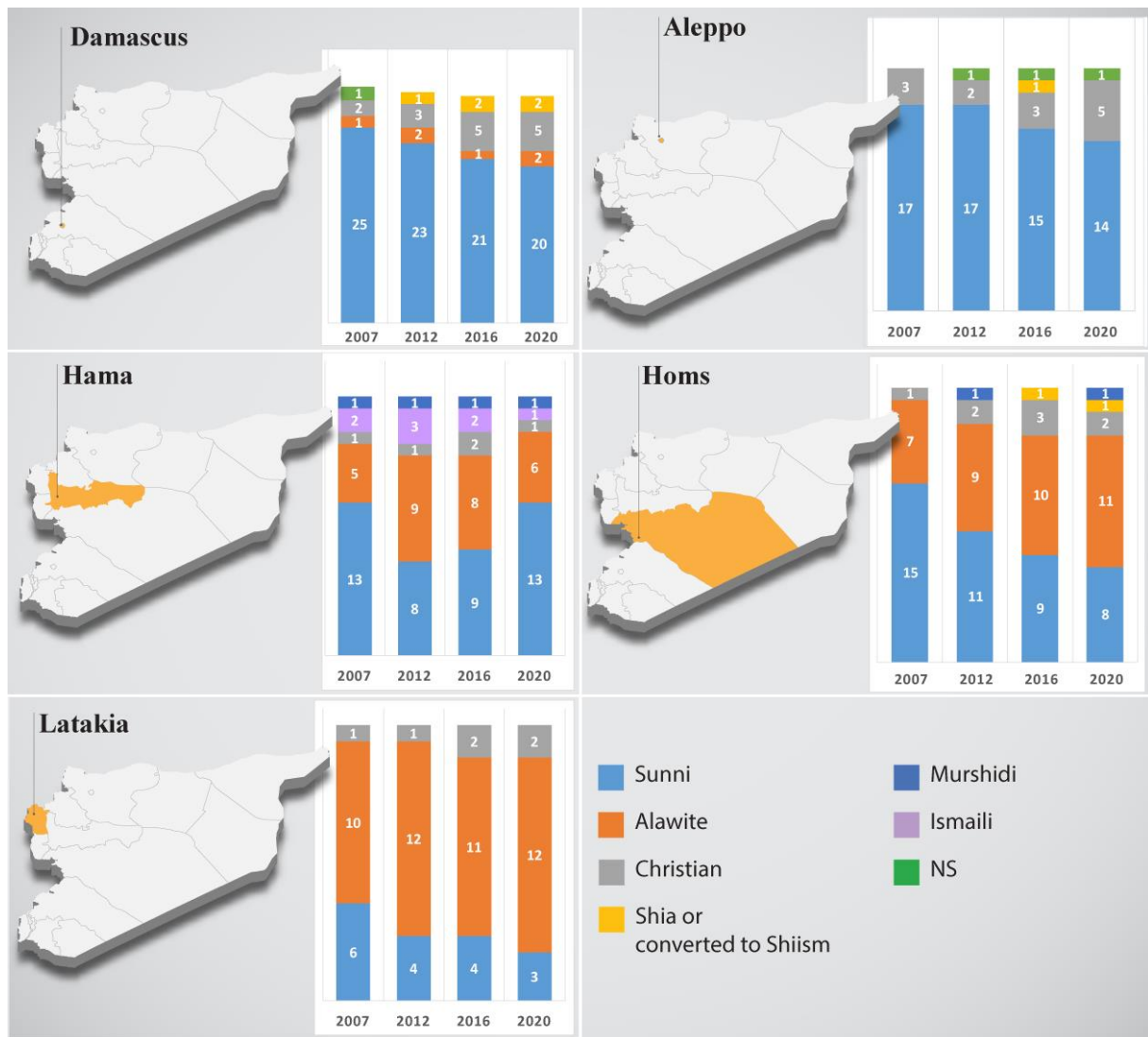


Source: The authors (based on field survey).

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According to close affiliates of Haidar’s, his appointment was a sign of veneration for his silence over his deceased dissident son, Ismael, killed by unknown gunmen near the Alawite village of al-Qabu in rural Hama.

**Map 4: Distribution of MPs by Sectarian Affiliation in Specific Districts (2007-2020)**

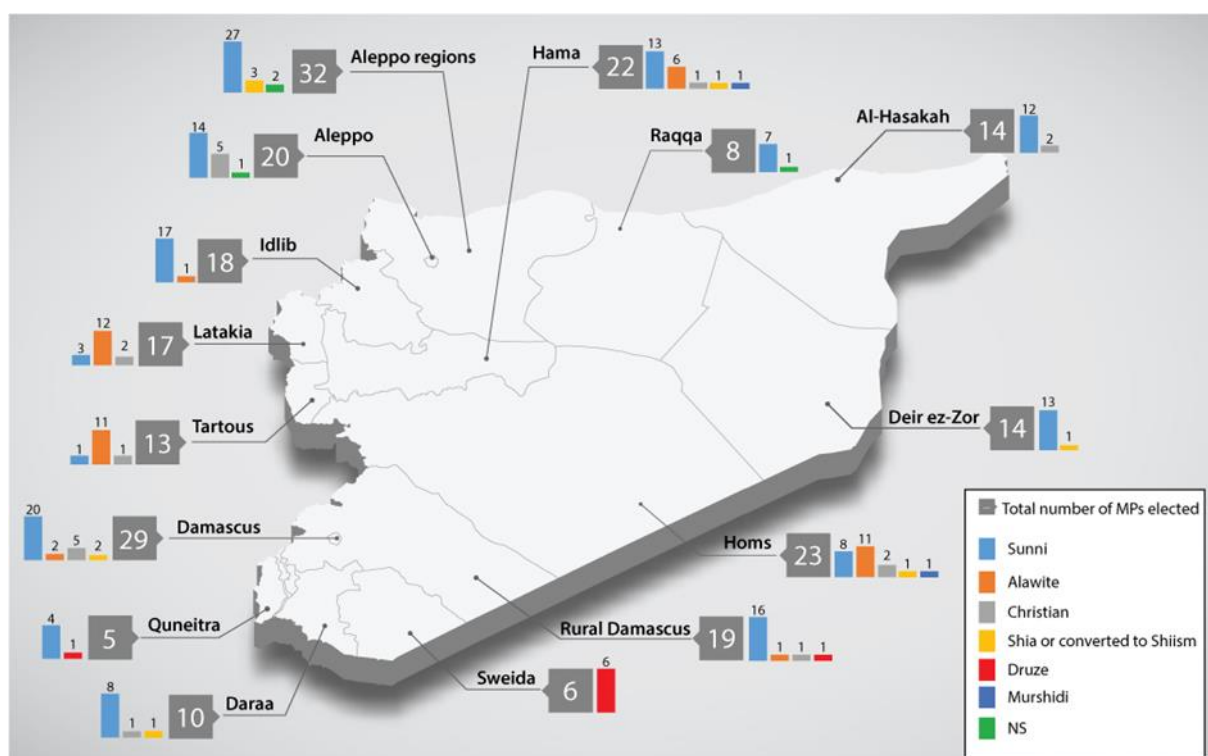


Source: The authors (based on field survey)

To a large extent, the sectarian distribution of the 2020 People’s Council approximates that of the 2016 Council (Map 5). The cumulative increases in minority representation are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo in the case of Christians; Homs, Latakia, Damascus, and Tartous for Alawites;<sup>31</sup> and Aleppo, Damascus, Daraa, and Deir ez-Zor for Shia. The increase in Christian representation in Syria’s two largest cities - Damascus and Aleppo - may serve the regime’s propaganda about protecting Christians that resonates within certain Western political and intellectual circles. Meanwhile, the number of Alawite MPs has increased in Homs, which served as the battleground for the most intense civil conflict whose final outcomes included the weakening of loyalist Sunni elites. As for the increase in representation for Shia, including recent Shia converts, it cannot be considered in isolation from the rising Iranian intervention, especially in the governorates of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to two seats in the districts of Rural Damascus and Aleppo.

**Map 5: Distribution of MPs by Sect and District (2020)**



Source: The authors (based on field survey)

Moreover, the regime has successfully maintained the representation of certain large and prominent families from minority communities, whether by keeping the same family in place or alternating among them from one election to another. In some cases, the social status is not the sole criterion of representation, but overlaps with other considerations pertaining to the Baath Party or individual professional backgrounds. In the Latakia district, Fawaz Bahjat Nassour (independent) was re-elected in 2020, retaining the seat he has held since 2003, undoubtedly in recognition of his position as a dynastic leader of the Alawite al-Haddadin clan in the Jableh area. In Homs, Zuhair Tarraf (independent), from the village of al-Qabu, returned to the Council after an absence in 2016, having previously served for three consecutive parliamentary terms as a representative of the Tarraf family, from which several Alawite clerics hail. In the same district, the Alawite al-Naqri family, a large family with a significant presence in the Homs countryside, has maintained a mostly stable representation from 1973 until 2020<sup>32</sup> with the election of the Baathist judge Abd al-Hamid Muhammad al-Naqri in the new council, despite a history of political opposition by some of the family's sons.

In comparison with the Alawite community, the regime's approach to the Druze community appears more cautious in this regard. The al-Atrash family, with its prominent history, has maintained a near-constant representation, occasionally interrupted by the rival Amer family, and is represented in 2020 – as it was in 2016 – by Nashaat al-Atrash. Finally, the representation

<sup>32</sup> Examples include MP Tawfik Hassan al-Naqri (1973, 1977 and 1981) and MP Saadallah Assaad al-Naqri (1986).

of some prominent Christian families is preserved, despite the fact that most Christian elites avoided involvement in political affairs, especially in the large cities. For example, Jean Mousalli, a gold merchant and member of an old and wealthy family in Aleppo city, entered the Council for the first time in 2020. Hammouda Sabbagh, who has been an MP for the al-Hasakah district since 2007, also belongs to an old family and is the maternal grandson of a former MP from the 1950s.

## **Sunni Representation: Disorder and Weakness**

Insofar as the 2020 elections (and the 2016 elections before them) revealed the growing political role of warlords, of whom Sunnis constitute the majority, these elections have also revealed the decline of the traditional Sunni elites. This is in stark contrast to the arrangement that the late Hafez al-Assad had established with these elites, which was maintained by his son until 2011, when the arrangement gradually came apart over nine years of conflict. The 2020 Council contains no representatives of the pro-regime Sunni religious movement in the cities, while the number of hereditary tribal sheikhs in the countryside has also diminished.

## **An End to Sunni Religious Representation**

For the first time since the first parliamentary elections under Hafez al-Assad in 1973, the Sunni religious movement – loyal to the regime, or at any rate perfectly willing to coexist with it – is completely absent from the 2020 People’s Council. Hafez al-Assad was always keen to maintain representation of this movement in parliament, even during his bloody crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s.<sup>33</sup> The movement’s representation began expanding in 1990, eventually reaching 4 seats by 2016. Most of these members were elected on independent lists in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, and sometimes Homs and Latakia, through alliances with traditional business elites. This was considered as a goodwill gesture and a sign of openness on the part of the regime vis-a-vis the movement and the broader communities to which it belongs.

The 2020 elections marked the end of the alliance between clerics and businessmen, as the main independent candidate lists for the cities of Damascus and Aleppo were devoid of any religious figures. Of the active candidates in these districts, only two could be considered representatives of the Sunni religious movement - both of whom failed to win seats: in Damascus, the lawyer Ahmed Bahaa al-Din, son of Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Farfour, and in Aleppo, Muhammad Abd al-Salam, son of Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Shami.<sup>34</sup> Baath Party lists were similarly devoid of any candidates representing the Sunni religious movement, after the Baathist Mufti of al-Hasakah, Abdul Hamid al-Kandah, was excluded from the final National Unity lists despite his initial success in the Party’s primaries. The election of the engineer Bashir

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<sup>33</sup> Marwan Sheiko, a presenter of religious TV shows and an imam, was a staple of the People’s Council since the 1973 elections until his death in 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Shami was killed by gunmen affiliated with the Free Syrian Army in the summer of 2012. Based on its historical loyalty to the regime, the al-Shami family has long been represented in the parliament, starting from Sheikh Muhammad al-Shami, who was killed by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, then Suheib al-Shami who served as director of the Awqaf in Aleppo, Abdul Aziz al-Shami who was a former MP, and Anas al-Shami, an engineer and MP for the 2012 cycle who later left the country.

Ghalawanji, grandson of the late Mufti of Latakia, on an Arab Socialist Union seat for Latakia, cannot be considered as representation for the religious movement as the young man is neither affiliated with it in practice, nor did he present himself as its representative.

This complete exclusion of the loyalist Sunni religious movement from the 2020 Council confirms its current state of weakness and reveals its inability to preserve the gains previously made by its figures. Meanwhile, loyalist clerics – including officials in the Ministry of Religious Endowments, the Fatwa Department, religious schools in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo and some of the sheikhs who brokered reconciliation agreements and encouraged thousands of dissident youths to surrender in Rural Damascus – are all required to continue performing their important functions of presenting a religious narrative of the conflict that supports the regime and grants it legitimacy. This contradiction – between the expansion of roles required from loyalist Sunni religious leaders and their diminishing gains in the political game – is bound to weaken these religious leaders over time and limit their ability to exert influence among the Sunni population in regime-controlled areas and within the religious movement itself.

### **Abandoning the Tribe**

In another indication of disorder in Sunni representation, the number of Sunni tribal sheikhs in the People's Council decreased from 19 in 2007 to eight in 2020, five of whom were previous MPs.<sup>35</sup> The presence of these tribal sheikhs in the 2020 council is not due to their hereditary social status, but rather to other factors: their financial, military, and security capabilities, the nature of their competitors, and foreign interference.

Among those who kept their seats in the new parliament, Abd al-Karim Maat Ismail, a sheikh of the small Bani Ezz tribe based near the city of Salamiyah on the outskirts of the Badia desert east of Hama, and MP for Hama since 2007, owes his re-election to the vast wealth he has accumulated over decades.<sup>36</sup> In the city of Aleppo, Hassan Shaaban Berri, represented by his family since 1994 and then in person since 2007, embodies the persistent power of organised crime families through their economic roles and their military involvement during the conflict. Muhanna al-Fayyad al-Nasser, who has been MP for Deir ez-Zor district since 2012 and is the son of the sheikh of the local Bu Saraya clan, adapted to the times by moving from being a commander of a small tribal militia to an oil smuggler. Another example is Hasan Muhammad al-Meslet, an MP for al-Hasakah district since 2016 who defeated his cousin Nawwaf who was to be the successor to his father, the sheikh and historical leader of the Jabour tribe, Abd al-Aziz al-Meslet, who died in 1999. Despite enjoying lower status and influence within the tribe than Nawwaf, Hassan Muhammad had shown unwavering loyalty to the regime, unlike his cousin.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The 2016 elections saw a reduction of prominent tribal sheikhs in favour of seats granted to members from smaller tribes. Awad and Favier, "Elections in Wartime," *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Maat Ismail made his fortune through the trade and manufacture of forage, a business he publicly co-runs with a partner in Salamiyah, while also reportedly being involved in the drug trade between Lebanon and the Gulf according to locals of his hometown, who cite the indictment of two of his former employees for this crime.

<sup>37</sup> Nawwaf al-Meslet maintained a neutral position at the outbreak of the revolution when he was a resident of Saudi Arabia. He later returned to Syria in 2019, declaring his support for the regime and his intent to push his

While the economic activities supported by tribal militias (e.g., Berri and al-Nasser), and the electoral circumstances of excluding unreliable candidates (e.g., Hassan al-Meslet) both played a role in some MPs retaining their seats, other tribal sheikhs who entered the Council for the first time in 2020 had been abetted by the recent deployment of foreign forces following Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. In al-Hasakah,<sup>38</sup> two winning candidates had recent contacts with Russian forces on the ground. Abd al-Hamid Asaad al-Dhafer, the sheikh of the small Bani Sabaa tribe, who works as a paid agent recruiting his tribesmen to fight in Libya on behalf of the Russian Wagner Group, displaced Muhammad al-Qasim Abd al-Rahman, the sheikh and most notable member of the Tayy tribe, who had been the honorary commander of the largest Arab militia in al-Hasakah governorate and who enjoys warm ties with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Similarly, Talal Ubaid al-Khalil (Baathist) was also elected for the first time after inheriting, from his elder brother, the sheikhdom of a branch of the small Harb tribe in the Ras al-Ayn area on the border with Turkey. An owner of agricultural land, al-Khalil managed to form relations with Russian field officers by offering his farmlands to serve as command headquarters for the Russian forces deployed in this area.<sup>39</sup> In the Aleppo Regions district, Muhammad Khair al-Mashi emerged as a propagandist both during and after Operation Peace Spring. Previously a member of the 2012 People's Council, al-Mashi is the presumed sheikh of the Bu Bina clans in the Manbij area east of Aleppo, the area in which the conflict escalated after Operation Peace Spring between the Turkey-backed opposition and the regime, supported by its allies.

The decrease in the number of MPs representing traditional elites in Sunni Arab communities further affirms the weakness, disintegration, and division that plague these communities today, as well as the regime's indifference to the social representation of Sunni Arabs. With Sunni clerics excluded from the 2020 Council, after independent dignitaries from old families in the large cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama) were similarly absent, the last natural link between the urban Sunni community and the regime has disappeared. A similar trajectory appears to be emerging for rural Sunni communities, after the regime began replacing influential tribal sheikhs with new minor actors. The ramifications of the war on the one hand, and shifts in the regime's approach towards religious groups on the other, have produced various alternatives to the traditional Sunni elites, including retired officers and militia leaders, and to a greater extent the businessmen who accumulated wealth in wartime. In the short term, these alternatives may provide the regime with a greater ability to tighten its control through renewed networks of intermediaries and agents. In the medium and long term, however, these new elites may see their effectiveness degrade as a result of their detachment from their constituent communities.

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tribe to stand "beside the state and the Syrian Arab Army," heralding a close Syrian-Saudi rapprochement. See Sputnik, "Sheikh Nawwaf al-Meslet: A Significant Return of Syrian-Saudi Relations" (Arabic), 28 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/3h8RxGh>.

<sup>38</sup> In al-Hasakah, a constant criterion for the selection of MPs has been diversity on the basis of ethnicity (Arab, Kurdish, Syriac, Assyrian), religion (Muslim, Christian), and tribe (Jabbour, Sharabiyeen, and other smaller tribes).

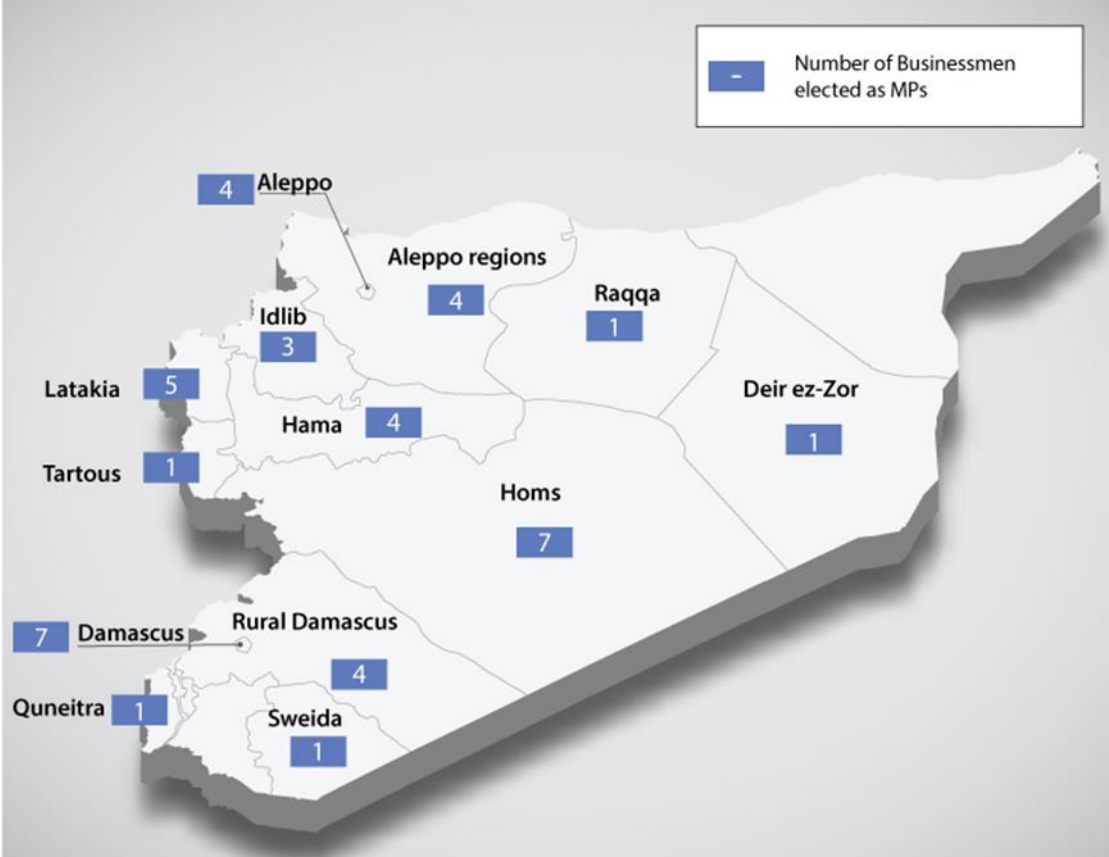
<sup>39</sup> To a large extent, Talal al-Khalil benefited from increasing financial capabilities, notably after an abundant harvest of thousands of donums of land resulting from a very good rainfall season in 2018-2019.



### 3. The Renewed and Growing Impact of the War Economy

The representation of businessmen has varied across the three parliamentary elections held since the outbreak of the conflict. From a sharp decrease in 2012, due to the tremendous turmoil within the traditional business community, the 2016 Council saw an increase and a change in the representation of businessmen, given the impact of four years of war.<sup>40</sup> However, the major increase occurred in 2020, with 43 businessmen entering the Council – 30 of them for the first time (see Appendix, Table 3). At the same time, this representation has spread geographically and expanded towards the peripheries and rural areas, to the detriment of the city of Aleppo whose business circles are less represented than they were pre-2011, while Damascus retains its central position (Map 6).

**Map 6: Distribution of Businessmen in the People’s Council by Electoral District (2020)**



Source: The authors (based on field survey)

<sup>40</sup> In the study about the 2016 Council, the researchers identified 13 businessmen, based on an incomplete database of 200 MPs. The category of “businessmen” is defined here according to two criteria: the (economic) nature of the main activity of each MP notwithstanding the scale of his business, and/or the self-presentation of each MP during the election campaign. This category thus covers a range of meanings – including smugglers, traders, manufacturers, and former militiamen-turned-businessmen.

## Retaining Beneficial Businessmen

Compared to the 2012 and 2016 elections, when the involvement of businessmen candidates in military and security activities was their most important electoral asset, in 2020, the economic services provided by these businessmen enabled them to win parliament seats. The need for military services has indeed decreased – albeit temporarily – while security services have also been rendered obsolete after the near-total eradication of dissidents and those suspected of opposition activity in regime-held areas. Under the weight of a metastasising economic crisis, most independent businessmen candidates launched their election campaigns in March 2020 with slogans affirming their defiance of international economic sanctions and their support for the campaigns launched by the government to confront the depreciation of the Syrian pound and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the regime’s current priorities, more seats were vacated for rising businessmen – most of them war profiteers or pure products of the war economy.

In light of these shifts from one stage of the conflict to another, only 13 former MPs were able to retain their seats in 2020. None of them had been widely known in Syrian business circles before 2011, or before their first entry into the Council in 2012 or 2016.<sup>41</sup> An exception is Samer al-Debs, a well-known industrialist who hails from an old family of the Damascus bourgeoisie. Al-Debs has long had a personal relationship with Bashar al-Assad,<sup>42</sup> and has maintained his parliamentary seat since 2007 through a firm and decisive position in support of the regime, which led to his appointment as chairman of the Chamber of Industry of Damascus and Rural Damascus in 2014. All these former MPs re-elected in 2020 have emerged by mobilising support and providing various services to the regime during the first years of the war. For example, Ayman Malandi, who is a former (and later honorary) president of the al-Talea Athletic Club in the city of Hama, has been an MP since 2012, after he had striven to de-escalate anti-regime sentiments in the city and exclude it from the conflict. Malandi was later appointed head of the Hama Chamber of Commerce in 2018, and then chair of the Union of Syrian Contractors in February 2020.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, other businessmen kept their seats after involvement in security activities during the first five years of the conflict, expanding their businesses due to close ties with the regime’s decision-making circles.<sup>44</sup>

Conversely, some prominent businessmen were side-lined in 2020. They include Muhammad Hamsho, an MP for Damascus since 2003 and the secretary of the Damascus

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<sup>41</sup> Awad and Favier, “Elections in Wartime,” *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Conversation with a former government executive and acquaintance of Samer al-Debs, in which he confirmed that al-Debs was among a handful of businessmen who became close affiliates of Bashar al-Assad as part of the latter’s preparation to inherit the presidency after his elder brother Bassel’s death in 1994.

<sup>43</sup> In 2019, Ayman Malandi pushed the merchants of Hama to make deposits in US dollars at the Commercial Bank and invited them to participate in the campaign “Our Lira is Our Pride” to support the Syrian pound. Business 2 Business B, “Hama Chamber of Commerce Joins Business Initiative to Stand by the Syrian Pound” (Arabic), 1 October 2019, <https://b2b-sy.com/news/56814>.

<sup>44</sup> In Homs, Wael Melhem, a contractor and MP since 2007, is backed by the Presidential Palace. Burhan al-Droubi, an insurance businessman and MP since 2012, enjoys old and close ties to the Iranians. Firas al-Salloum al-Hadba, a forage and poultry trader and MP since 2007, expanded his businesses with direct support from the Fourth Division since 2012.

Chamber of Commerce,<sup>45</sup> and Fares Shehabi, an MP for Aleppo in 2016 and chairman of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry since 2009.<sup>46</sup> Other rising businessmen candidates are absent from the new parliament, such as Khaled al-Zubaidi (Rural Damascus), who withdrew his candidacy after spending immense sums of money on his campaign,<sup>47</sup> and two renowned candidates from the Shia community in Damascus who lost: Musan Nahas, secretary of the Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, and Fahd Darwish, the vice chairman of the same Chamber. The absence of these high-profile businessmen from the 2020 Council may indicate a desire on the part of the regime's inner circle to exclude certain problematic parliamentarians. Muhammad Hamsho has been charged with corruption by the courts,<sup>48</sup> while Fares Shehabi – also accused of corruption –<sup>49</sup> has expanded his sphere of rivalry to include the warlords who swept Aleppo unchallenged. Both Hamsho and Shehabi, along with al-Zubaidi, are also on the international sanctions lists.

Yet being under sanction does not appear to have been the only decisive factor in the sidelining of some candidates. A number of MPs are sanctioned personally (such as Hussam Qaterji on the EU list), are board members of sanctioned companies (Bilal Naal and Abdul Rahman al-Masri from the Sham Holding), or are affiliated with other sanctioned entities (the Fourth Division, see below). Other factors were therefore decisive in the re-election of former MPs, such as the power of the candidate's network of mutual benefits within the regime's inner circles (examples include al-Debs, Melhem, al-Droubi, and al-Hadba). Additionally, the businessmen's field of operations appeared decisive – particularly in their scale and their ability to satisfy decision-makers (Qaterji being the paradigm, as will be discussed below). And finally, the candidate's personal desire or ambition to play a political role may have been significant, as certain major wartime businessmen (such as Sameh Tarazi, Wasim Kattan, Khodor Taher and Samer Foz) seemed to consider Council membership of little interest.

To a great extent, these factors also contributed to the election of 30 new MP businessmen. The newcomers share much in common with former MPs from the business elite, mostly in two ways. First, they have accumulated their wealth, or a substantial proportion of it, by exploiting

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<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Hamsho announced his withdrawal two days before the elections, after leading the “Sham” list which included 6 other candidates, of whom three won (the young judge Noha al-Mahairy, architect Muhammad Akram al-Ajlani, and businessman Muhammad Ghazwan al-Masri). The rival “Damascus” list included seven candidates led by businessman Samer al-Debs, six of whom won including al-Debs, businessmen Muhammad Hammam Msouti and Bilal Naal, dentist Abdul Rahman al-Jaafari, former Syrian Social Nationalist Party activist Jamil Murad, and mechanical engineer Samer al-Ayoubi. The third list, “Jasmine,” included six candidates of whom two won: businessman Abdul Rahman al-Masri and social activist Abdul Rahman Orabi. Meanwhile, on the “Rayat al-Sham” list, only one of the three candidates, cultural activist Nora Arisyan, won a seat.

<sup>46</sup> The independents in the city of Aleppo (8) were distributed across two main lists: the “Aleppo al-Shahba” list led by Fares Shehabi, none of whose candidates won; and the “Aleppo al-Asala” list led by Hassan Shaaban Berri, six of whose candidates won. Hussam Qaterji and Gerard Okhanes won the other two seats individually rather than as part of a list.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Zubaidi's electoral campaign coincided with his publicity efforts confronting the COVID-19 pandemic. Syrian Industry News Facebook page, “Initiative by Syrian Businessman Khaled al-Zubaidi Sees the Distribution of 3 Million Packets of Bread” (Arabic), 23 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/33HN1v6>.

<sup>48</sup> RT Arabic, “New Businessmen Designated on the Lists... What are the Implications of Freezing the Assets of Syria's Wealthy?” (Arabic), 25 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3bY8Ysj>.

<sup>49</sup> Snack Syria, “Syrian Industrialist Accuses al-Shehabi of Corruption... Another Confirms He Will Seek the Courts” (Arabic), 28 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3mBKWIz>.

opportunities offered by the emerging war economy after 2011. Second, they come from the middle classes, or the lower-income class to a lesser degree, and from families of craftsmen, small-time merchants, peasants, and government employees. However, while the majority of incumbent MPs are between the ages of 45 and 60, most of the newcomers are younger, generally ranging between 30 and 45 years old. Furthermore, the main businesses assets (or at least those publicly known) of the newcomers are located within Syria, which might mitigate the impact of international sanctions on their businesses in the event they were to be added to sanctions lists in the future.

## **More Nouveaux Riches in the People's Council**

Reflecting the shift within Syria's economy towards non-productive sectors, most businessmen in the 2020 People's Council share four main areas of business operations: food trade, construction, financial services, and oil smuggling (see Appendix, Table 3). All these sectors appear to have flourished under the war, as they are highly profitable and beneficial to the regime, which today faces a worsening economic crisis. Therefore, involvement in such sectors strengthens the financial position of businessmen aspiring for Council membership and expands their ability to exchange material benefits with powerful decision-makers or centres of political influence.

Against the backdrop of internal displacements, retail – and specifically the food trade and restaurant sector – has flourished in some areas. This has especially been the case in the cities of Damascus, Hama, and Latakia, which have become major destinations for the internally displaced, causing an increase in demand for food and other commodities associated with daily life. Of the new businessmen in the 2020 Council, at least seven work in the food and restaurant business. Four have their main business operations based in the capital, Damascus, while the other three have restaurant investments in the cities of Hama and Latakia. Food merchants and restaurant owners have made clear contributions in the national campaigns launched by the Syrian government to confront the economic and health crisis, even if most of the businessmen candidates have been involved, to varying degrees, with these propaganda efforts and initiatives. In Damascus, Muhammad Ghazwan al-Masri clearly embodies the model of the businessman actively supportive of the regime. He was actively involved in the campaign to support the Syrian pound in the autumn of 2019<sup>50</sup> and in the campaign to address the Coronavirus pandemic – specifically by providing a hotel in which he had invested near the Damascus International Airport to the Ministry of Health, which used it as a quarantine centre.<sup>51</sup> He was officially promoted to secretary of the Chamber of Industry of Damascus and Rural Damascus between 2019 and 2020, and treasurer of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry since 2019. With a history as an industrialist through his dairy company, Almarai,

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<sup>50</sup> Syrian Days, “Support for the Lira is a National Initiative... and Promoting Trust in it is a Duty” (Arabic), 21 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/3hMIHzC>.

<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Abdul-Kafi Oqda, head of the Association of Cafés and Restaurants in Hama and the owner of a famous restaurant chain there, donated daily meals from his restaurants to those in quarantine centres under suspicion of COVID-19 infection. Moreover, Oqda and another businessman financed the effort to sterilise important government buildings such as the governorate hall, the city council, and the national hospital in the city of Hama.

which he founded before the revolution, al-Masri is however an exception among the newcomers to parliament. Remarkably, the boom in retail and restaurants has recently encouraged other MPs to also invest in this sector. These include Samer al-Debs, who co-founded the company Molta Limited in 2019, and the rising businessman Bilal Naal, who co-founded a restaurant chain called Jeddo Abu Imad in 2019.<sup>52</sup>

With the war's devastating impact on urban areas, construction and real estate have been highly profitable business sectors for at least 12 of the 2020 MPs – five incumbents and seven new members. As a result of internal displacement patterns, it appears real estate has been a thriving source of wealth accumulation, particularly in the districts of Latakia and, to a lesser extent, Homs.<sup>53</sup> However, contracting has also been a source of great profit for certain businessmen in Damascus, as evidenced by the rise of Bilal Naal, who began his career as a salesman in a commercial store owned by his family. Naal later expanded his business, taking advantage of his former membership of the Damascus Governorate Council until 2011 and the support of the former governor of Damascus, Bisher al-Sabban (2006- 2016). Naal then accumulated the bulk of his wealth through his work as a main contractor for projects funded by UN agencies,<sup>54</sup> before becoming involved in the Marota City project to build luxury residential apartments in Damascus, and diversifying his investments and activities to include inaugurating a large mall, establishing a private security company, and founding a restaurant chain, in addition to his money exchange businesses.<sup>55</sup>

Several financial sectors also flourished due to the dynamics of the war economy and international sanctions imposed on Syria since August 2011,<sup>56</sup> including private banks, cash transfer companies, and currency exchange offices. In a clear example of this phenomenon, banking and cash transfers have been the main business activities of at least five members of the 2020 Council, including Nabil Elias (Latakia). Elias was a laboratory physician who abandoned his earlier profession to pursue a career in banking, becoming a board member of the Syria International Islamic Bank by 2016,<sup>57</sup> then a board member of the Damascus

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<sup>52</sup> Emmar Syria, "Pictures: Bilal Naal and Imad al-Sayyed Launch Restaurant Chain Jeddo Abu Imad in Damascus" (Arabic), 6 January 2019, <https://www.emmarsyria.com/post/96>.

<sup>53</sup> In the city of Homs, the sale of the homes of those displaced from Sunni-majority neighbourhoods caused the mass accumulation of property by a handful of real-estate businessmen. For instance, Munzer Ibrahim, a full-time real-estate dealer, managed to purchase hundreds of residential units in the destroyed and vacated neighbourhoods, especially Baba Amr, before reselling them to other real-estate dealers who awaited a supposed reconstruction process. Similarly, two contractors from Latakia, Rasem al-Masri and Ayham Jreikous, exploited displacement in their city and increased demand for housing to accelerate their construction of informal housing units. Rasem al-Masri began his career in the 1990s as a "broker of licenses" and "transaction tracker" working in front of government departments in Latakia. Later, he pivoted to a small-time construction contractor in the summer of 2012, as displacement increased to Latakia and its nearby villages.

<sup>54</sup> Rania Shahideh and Roula Ahmad, "Syrian Company Breaks the Monopoly of Foreign Companies over International Organisation Contracts... Bilal Naal: Our Slogan is To Be or Not to Be" (Arabic), *Syrian Days*, 23 March 2016, <https://bit.ly/3jZm6A7>.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Bilal Muhammad Naal" (Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/3iUK52q>.

<sup>56</sup> Due to the initial sanctions targeting the financial sector and the Syrian government banks, there has been increasing reliance on private banking and financial services, even after the renewed international sanctions that began targeting the private sector since 2012.

<sup>57</sup> This bank has been subjected to US Treasury Department sanctions since May 2012 and European sanctions imposed between 2012-2014. Yet, its profits were hardly affected according to its 2017 annual report. Islamic Markets, "Syria International Islamic Bank: Annual Report for 2017" (Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/32PLC56>.



Securities Exchange in 2018. Elias is also active within the al-Foz Charity Society, affiliated with the businessman Samer Foz. Another example is Adnan Abd al-Wahab al-Hamad, a former minor livestock trader who entered the 2020 Council for the Aleppo Regions district. Al-Hamad pivoted from his earlier business and accumulated large profits from his work as an agent for the cash transfer company al-Haram, based in Manbij – a city with a vital location along the trade routes between the three territories controlled by the regime, the opposition, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Financial brokerage activity is not limited to MPs who practice it as their main business. In most cases, it intersects to a large extent with other front ventures – commercial or industrial – for which finance is the true source of profitability, which propels their owners to become members of parliament. An example is the young textile merchant Mahmoud Nazif Abu Bakr (Aleppo),<sup>58</sup> who entered into a network of hard currency smuggling for the benefit of wealthy landowners who sold their properties in Aleppo, as well as transporting and laundering money accumulated by emerging warlords and militia leaders, sending the profits to the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Russia.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the substantial revenues from smuggling oil and oil derivatives are the prime source of wealth for at least six businessmen in the 2020 Council. Since 2012, a large proportion of Syria's natural resources, especially oil and grain, have fallen outside regime control. Therefore, with only two main oil refineries remaining under the regime's control, crude oil smuggling as well as oil derivatives have significantly grown. Hussam Qaterji, a prominent warlord who entered parliament for the first time in 2016, is the most famous example. For nearly six years, Qaterji served as a commercial broker supplying crude oil from the primary oil fields in areas controlled by the SDF (and before them, IS) to the Homs refinery. Most of his profitable businesses are located inside Syria. He is also known for his generosity with Baath Party leaders and influential intelligence officers in Aleppo and Damascus. Alongside Qaterji, two of his local agents also entered the Council for the first time – Bashar al-Makhsour (Raqqqa), Qaterji's proxy in the regime-controlled areas east of Raqqqa, and Madloul Omar al-Aziz (Deir ez-Zor), Qaterji's former agent in Deir ez-Zor between 2014 and 2018. (Al-Aziz was Qaterji's agent before he established his own independent oil smuggling business, later becoming a licensed businessman with a company under the name of Sham al-Aziz in July 2019).<sup>60</sup> Other new MPs have been active in trade in the other direction, smuggling fuel and oil derivatives to areas outside regime control. For instance, Baseem Yousef Naameh, a new MP from the Alawite village of Tall Jadid in the Salamiyah area of rural Hama, took advantage of his village's proximity to the Badia areas outside the regime's control where he owned a petrol station, to export petroleum products from the Homs refinery to these areas.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Mahmoud Nazif Abu Bakr owes his seat in the People's Council to his older brother Zaher, who took charge of the family following the father's passing and saved it from bankruptcy after the collapse of the textile trade and the massive destruction of Aleppo's main historical market where the family's shop was located. The Abu Bakr brothers then succeeded in diversifying their economic activities under the patronage and guarantee of the Mufti of the Republic, Ahmed Hassoun, with whom the family had a longstanding relationship.

<sup>59</sup> Conversation conducted remotely with a former customs broker in the city of Aleppo.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Madloul Omar al-Aziz" (Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/33piPDF>.

<sup>61</sup> Two other MPs, both from the Rural Damascus district, who worked in smuggling and trade of oil derivatives, and who are directly linked to the Fourth Division, are Ali Mahmoud Rishq and Ahmed Subhi Abbas. Rishq is from the village of Falita near the Lebanese border north of Damascus and member of the Damascus Governorate

Just as the establishment of companies was a milestone marking the transformation of smugglers into licensed businessmen, so it has been for certain militia leaders who devoted themselves to trade and smuggling after the fighting ceased on most fronts. Hassan Shahid, an independent MP for the Aleppo Regions district since 2016, turned from a commander of the Aasasna Regiment militia into a licensed businessman through his company Shahid Bros for Supplies and Transport. Similarly, a new member from the Idlib district, Fouad Aldani, pivoted from being the commander of the 25th Special Mission Forces Division, also known as the Tiger Forces, into an industrialist, merchant, and chairman of Fouad Industrial and Commercial Group, as he presented himself during the elections.<sup>62</sup>

Beyond these categories distinguishing four main areas of business operations, many MPs began their careers in specific businesses, then diversified their business interests and investments. Today their businesses include many activities which could serve the regime. Such is the case with Amer Tayseer Kheiti, from the city of Douma in Rural Damascus. In 2013, Kheiti was a vegetable and produce trader on the verge of bankruptcy. He then relocated to Lebanon and became involved in a Lebanese-Syrian drug smuggling network affiliated with Hezbollah.<sup>63</sup> Later, he returned to Syria and resumed his business, becoming embedded in the economic network of the Fourth Division. He then became the chairman of the Vegetable and Fruits Exporters Consortium, before establishing several companies in construction contracting, cash transfers, and plastics.<sup>64</sup> Much like other rising war profiteers, Kheiti began playing developmental, charitable, and social roles through his membership of the Development Work Committee in Douma city and even personally financed the renovation of certain government buildings in the city. In his ascent to parliament, Kheiti relied on his family name – a large and prominent Douma family – despite the fact that many of its members were in the opposition ranks. He also made use of his complex networks of relations with decision-making centres in the regime’s inner circles, especially the Fourth Division’s Security Bureau.

The significant increase in the representation of businessmen in the 2020 Council may indicate the regime’s determination to engage these actors in its attempts to survive the worsening economic crisis. However, the election results also reflect the clear political rise of war profiteers, which points to the paucity of options available to the political authorities in effectively confronting this crisis. Most of these businessmen accumulated their fortunes and diversified their business interests during the war, through close ties to powerful decision-making circles within the regime.

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Council since 2018. Abbas, the son of a small village of al-Roussiayin in the countryside of Jableh, whose fortune swelled within a few years after 2014 from being a partner in a petrol station owned by his father before 2011 to becoming the owner of more than 50 petrol stations, eventually became the founder of the Khubara al-Taqa Company in March 2020. Al-Rustom Law, “Companies Guide,” no date, <https://bit.ly/2HmPZMK>

<sup>62</sup> Facebook video introducing Aldani’s electoral campaign titled “Get to know independent candidate for category B, Fouad Aldani,” <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=889984874822446>

<sup>63</sup> Conversation conducted remotely with an acquaintance of Kheiti and a local of his hometown of Douma.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, “Amer Tayseer Kheiti” (Arabic), no date, <https://bit.ly/2GqaTdW>

## 4. Centres of Power and Foreign Influence

The results of the 2020 elections reflect some of the shifts in the centres of power and influence that have lately occurred in the uppermost echelon of the regime's inner circle. They also show that foreign interference in parliamentary elections remains limited to Iran, while there are no clear indications of a direct role played by Russia in these elections.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the difficulty of categorising Council members on the basis of their personal loyalties to these internal or external centres of power, due to the multiplicity, ambiguity, and frequent shifts within these loyalty structures, the patronage networks that link parliamentary candidates to the highest circles of power appear, however, to have had a clear impact on the election of some MPs. The growing influence of Assad's wife Asma is evident in the new People's Council, while Assad's brother, Maher, Commander of the Fourth Division, has maintained his ability to influence outcomes. By contrast, Rami Makhlouf's affiliates were sidelined, except for those who managed to prove their loyalty to Assad and dissociate from Makhlouf by diversifying their relationships with other influential figures.<sup>66</sup>

### MPs Affiliated to the Presidential Palace and First Lady

It appears that political interventions from the Presidential Palace, especially through Asma al-Assad, expanded in the 2020 elections. This is made evident by two phenomena. The first is the election of activists in the charity and development fields, most of whom may be considered affiliates of the First Lady. The second is the election or re-election of MPs with direct ties to Presidential Palace staffers, or to the president and First Lady themselves. Through the developmental, humanitarian, and cultural activities in which Asma al-Assad has been involved since the pre-war decade, new actors have emerged from the developmental and cultural fields before the revolution, and from economic and charity circles after the revolution. Some of these new actors found their way to the People's Council in 2016, which was evidence of the Palace's need for their services. A larger number joined the Council in 2020, revealing an increasing desire by the "Lady of the Palace" to play a political role through civil society organisations, especially in the governorates of Tartous and Rural Damascus.

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<sup>65</sup> As described above, two MPs benefited from the deployment of Russian forces in al-Hasakah district. Others were associated with Brigadier-General Suhail al-Hassan, the Air Force Intelligence officer and commander of the 25th Division backed by Russia, including Fouad Aldani from the Idlib district, Ourouba Mahfoud (from the Hama district) through her husband who is a commander in these forces, and to a lesser extent lawyer Issa Wassouf (also from Hama). However, these examples do not prove the existence of direct Russian political interference in the elections.

<sup>66</sup> For example, Bilal Naal, who initially joined Rami Makhlouf's network through the former governor of Damascus, was able to diversify his sources of support and partnerships with various centres of political power, including Fadi Saqr, commander of the National Defence Forces in Damascus and then member of the city's Baath branch leadership. Similarly, Jamil Murad, a former leader of the dissolved faction of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party – known as the General Secretariat and affiliated with Makhlouf – also succeeded in entering the People's Council as an independent for Damascus. Murad benefited from his other qualifications as a cultural activist at the Foundation for the History of Damascus sponsored by Buthaina Shaaban, al-Assad's advisor, and as a public figure of the Christian community who enjoys the support of both the community of his hometown of Saydnaya and the Greek Orthodox Church.



Of the nine MPs whose charitable and social work was the main component of their political capital before entering the parliament (see Appendix, Table 4), six can be considered affiliates of Asma al-Assad. All of these are new members of the Council and have actively participated in programs and projects closely associated with the Syria Trust for Development (STD), the non-governmental organisation founded by Asma al-Assad in 2007.<sup>67</sup> It is also worth noting that three of them are from the Alawite community in Tartous,<sup>68</sup> the district in which three seats were allocated to the families of fallen regime soldiers in the 2016 Council, and whose representatives reflect the regime's care to its social base in the governorate. The other three MPs also stand out for their activism in favor of war-wounded or internally displaced persons. Haider Nasr Abboud is a dentist from Homs who treats the war-wounded and families of killed regime soldiers free of charge or at reduced fees. Abdul Rahman al-Khatib, the head of al-Harjala municipality in Rural Damascus, has played a prominent role in receiving thousands of displaced persons in shelters in his town. Raafat al-Bakar heads the local branch of a large charitable foundation, Nour for Relief and Development, in the Quneitra governorate.

In addition to these six members, whose election can be attributed to their involvement in charitable activities supported by the STD, some Baathist MPs also strengthened their positions within the Party or its organisations through their affiliation with the Trust. One example is Hikmat al-Azeb (Rural Damascus), who managed some STD projects for the displaced<sup>69</sup> and was then promoted from the head of the Daraya Farmers' Association to the executive office of the General Farmers' Union in 2016, before entering the People's Council in 2020 as a representative of the Farmers' Union. Similarly, Muhammad Abdullah Ajil (Latakia) consolidated his position as a member of the executive office of the National Union of Syrian Students between 2007 and 2020 through his parallel activities as the secretary of the Latakia branch of the Syrian Youth Council,<sup>70</sup> which is in practice a subsidiary of the STD.<sup>71</sup> To a large extent, these examples highlight the prevailing patterns of relations between the Baath Party and the STD. Having once been somewhat competitive before the revolution, due to the

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<sup>67</sup> Ayman Aldassouky and Sinan Hatahet, "The role of philanthropy in the Syrian war: regime-sponsored NGOs and armed group charities", Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria research project), European University Institute, 11 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ealHsg>

<sup>68</sup> These are physician Suhail Salameh Khodor (independent), former head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent branch in Tartous governorate 2013-2019, then head of al-Areen Foundation branch founded by Bashar Al-Assad and his wife Asma; physician Muhammad Abdel Halim Jerri (Baathist), founder of the Sawa Charity in his hometown of Karto then member of the executive office of the Governorate Council and the head of its relief and social affairs office; and Rania Mohsen Hassan, a young instructor at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Tartous, member of the Governorate Council and a prominent activist in voluntary initiatives to care for the war-wounded and families of fallen regime soldiers, while also being active in the small business programs funded by the UNDP. It is worth noting that Khodor and Hassan belong to the very small mountain village of Jenainat Raslan in Tartous, inhabited by no more than 10,000 people.

<sup>69</sup> Especially the people of his hometown of Daraya, west of Damascus, at his shelter centres in the town of al-Harjala south of Daraya.

<sup>70</sup> This council adopted a different name upon its inception in 2009, the Youth Committee for Voluntary Work, when it was presided over by Ammar Saati, the former head of the National Union of Syrian Students. It assumed its current name in 2011 under the presidency of the current councillor at Syria Trust, Ihab Ahmad.

<sup>71</sup> In another example, Jerji Shahoud (Baathist, Damascus) maintained his position as the leader of the Syrian Scouts Federation since 2010, as well as his other position on the leadership of the Revolutionary Youths since the same date, due to his activism and keenness on engaging the two organizations in the Trust's activities and projects pertaining to adolescents. He soon entered the People's Council.

contradiction between Asma's modernisation tendency and the conservative bureaucracy of the Baath, the relationship has later become almost complementary. As the Party grew weaker, some of its leaders, especially from the younger generation, have begun seeking affiliation with the networks sponsored by the First Lady, hoping to cultivate political capital through them, and thereby rise within the Party ranks.

As well as Council members coming from charitable and development work, others who have been involved in cultural, legal or business affairs have joined the Council as independents. Many of these MPs, especially some representatives of Damascus, have benefited from a personal relationship with certain staff members at the Presidential Palace. Some are former members of the 2016 Council who were re-elected in 2020, such as the businessman Humam Msouti (Damascus), husband of prominent Presidential Palace staffer Lina Kinaya.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the young businessman Zain al-Abdin Abbas (Latakia) entered the parliament for the first time thanks to family support – as the son-in-law of the Minister of Presidential Affairs Mansour Azzam and the son of the Syrian ambassador to India.<sup>73</sup> In addition to prominent Palace figures such as Kinaya and Azzam, a less well-known employee, Zain Khaddour – an Alawite from the Jableh countryside – succeeded in assisting his wife, the young judge Noha al-Mahairy (Damascus), to win a parliamentary seat.

### **The Fourth Division's Affiliates**

In contrast to Asma al-Assad, whose emergence among the power centres around Bashar al-Assad came later, the electoral influence of Bashar's brother Maher, commander of the Fourth Division, has been evident since 2003. Back then, at least two of Maher's affiliates managed to enter the People's Council for the district of Damascus, namely the then-rising businessman Muhammad Hamsho (MP from 2003 to 2020), and Ammar Saati (MP from 2003 to 2016). Saati was the vice-chair of the National Union of Syrian Students and then its chair (until July 2020), as well as a member of the Baath Party Central Command since 2013.

Contrary to certain analyses suggesting a marginalisation of Maher al-Assad, citing the withdrawal of Muhammad Hamsho and other candidates affiliated with him, Maher's influence is renewed in the 2020 Council through at least eight businessmen, most of them involved in the economic networks of the Fourth Division.<sup>74</sup> To a large extent, his electoral influence is linked to the areas of the Fourth Division's deployment around Damascus and in parts of the governorates of Hama, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor. In the Rural Damascus district, for example, at least three newcomers to parliament – Ali Rishq, Subhi Abbas, and Amer Tayseer Kheiti – owe their seats to the Fourth Division or its Security Bureau.<sup>75</sup> In other districts, some MPs involved

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<sup>72</sup> Among the 2016 MPs reappointed in 2020 and known for their close ties to the Presidential Palace are filmmaker Najdat Anzour (Aleppo district) and Armenian cultural activist Nora Arisyan (Damascus district).

<sup>73</sup> Zain al-Abdin Abbas is a commercial agent of an Indian tractor company, as well as a development activist who serves as the public relations officer of the Syrian Youth Council affiliated with Syria Trust for Development.

<sup>74</sup> Ayman Aldassouky, "The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict," Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria research project), European University Institute, 24 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HnPkem>.

<sup>75</sup> In Rural Damascus, an MP since 2016, Osama Muhammad Mustafa, benefited immensely from the support of the Fourth Division. He curried favour with Division officers deployed in the city of Bloudan to access higher

in smuggling oil and oil derivatives (Bashar al-Makhsour from Raqqa, Madloul Omar al-Aziz from Deir ez-Zor, and Baseem Naameh from Hama) have established relationships with the Fourth Division's officers which are responsible for collecting money at the Division's checkpoints along the international roads. Firas al-Salloum al-Hadba (Homs) and Nabil Tohme (Damascus) are other examples of businessmen affiliated with Maher al-Assad.

The intertwining and ambiguity of relations between the Fourth Division and Iran make it difficult to estimate the Fourth Division's particular influence (aside from Iran's) in the 2020 Council. However, the examples above confirm that Maher al-Assad, or at least his Division, remains a principal actor and one of the influential centres of power over Council nominations. While the influence of the Palace and First Lady is concentrated around social interests in the capital and on the coast, the Fourth Division's influence is stratified according to its financial interests and spreads across Rural Damascus and the central and north-eastern parts of the country. The divergence of interests and spheres of activities between Asma and Maher al-Assad prevents potential clashes and disputes. Maher seems particularly ill-inclined to enter into conflicts with his brother on any matter, even if it appears at times that the Security Bureau of his Division disregards the laws with which Bashar is ostensibly keen for everyone to comply in order to preserve his prestige as president and the sovereignty of his regime.

## **Iran-Backed MPs**

Unlike that of the Presidential Palace and the Fourth Division, Iranian influence is concentrated in the territories adjacent to the Euphrates River, particularly in the Aleppo Regions district, as well as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor in the north-east. It also varies according to a broader spectrum of interests and goals. From nearly eight Council members supported by Iran in 2016, it is possible to identify 11 who unequivocally received Iranian support in 2020 (see Appendix, Table 5). It is difficult, however, to ascertain particular or direct Iranian support for Council members who represent the indigenous Shia community in Syria.

In the Aleppo Regions district, 10 independent candidates affiliated with Iran formed an electoral list called the "Loyalty to the Homeland" list, of whom eight won (seven from the previous Council). Most of these candidates had been leaders of tribal militias that were dissolved or disbanded, and thus presented themselves during the electoral campaign as clan chiefs and dignitaries. Among them, the lawyer Mujib al-Rahman al-Dandan, whose influence has risen in recent years, played the role of a local public relations manager for Iran (especially among intelligence officers and Baath Party officials) to the extent that he was credited with forming the electoral list of Baath Party candidates for the Aleppo Regions district.<sup>76</sup> In addition to these eight MPs elected on the "Loyalty to the Homeland" list, Iranian support also played a

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ranking officers, who in turn provided additional support for his cousin, the secretary of the Baath Party branch for Rural Damascus.

<sup>76</sup>According to a complaint filed by a friend of al-Dandan to the effect that he offered 30,000 US dollars in exchange for the appointment of his son, a Baathist judge, to the National Unity list.

major role in the appointment of Faten Ali Muhammad, an Arabic language teacher, to the Baath list in the same district (Aleppo Regions).<sup>77</sup>

As an extension of this geographical distribution, Iranian influence can also be seen in the districts of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, through two Baathist MPs. The first is Muhammad Amin Hussein al-Raja, an MP since 2016, who comes from a family that has embraced Shiism since the 1980s and is considered one of Iran's most important civilian affiliates in Deir ez-Zor.<sup>78</sup> The second is the young Council member Nidal al-Alo, who is active in the pro-Iranian cultural and political scenes. Al-Alo enjoys the support of two prominent figures close to Iran from Raqqa governorate, namely the Shia political activist Ali al-Shuaibi, and Khalaf al-Miftah, a former member of the Baath Party's Regional Command and then director of the Iran-backed al-Quds International Foundation.<sup>79</sup>

The landscape of the 2020 Council elections reveals some of the strategies adopted by Iran vis-à-vis rural Sunni communities. The first is openness towards the tribal structures by paying homage to their hereditary sheikhs, while at the same time tampering with these structures by endorsing rival claimants to the sheikhdom. Second, Iran has supported and encouraged the formation of large numbers of militias, paying special attention to some in order to transform them into factions with a 'Shia jihadist ideology' in the medium and long term. Third, Iran has managed to use the Baath Party structure and to contain its role, as well as circumscribe the role of the security services and other centres of political power in some areas.

As for the indigenous Syrian Shia community, Iran appears to have adopted a different approach, based on consideration and respect for the hierarchies (if any) that exist in each Shia community. In general, Iran does not attempt to make representatives of the indigenous Shia community (six MPs in the 2020 Council; see Appendix, Table 6) appear to be purely Iranian instruments. Rather, their representation appears to be a combination of their sectarian affiliation and other qualifications. Qualifications may include their position within the Baath Party apparatus, as in the case of Fayza al-Azba (Daraa), a school teacher and former local Baath leader. Or their social status as public figures may be a qualification, as in the cases of three MPs: the dentist Abdul Rahman al-Jaafari (Damascus), the activist for the cause of the disabled Hadi Mashhadiya (Damascus), and the businessmen and contractor Nasser Yusuf al-Nasser (Homs).

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<sup>77</sup> This MP, who hails from the opposition-controlled city of Jarablus north-east of Aleppo and resides in Latakia, is known along with her brother for having associations with the Iranians, which facilitated her access to one of two women's seats for the district of Aleppo.

<sup>78</sup> Ziad Awad, "Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities," Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria research project), European University Institute, October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dMt6yi>.

<sup>79</sup> Conversation of a former friend of al-Alo and local of the city of Raqqa.

## Conclusion

The People's Council elections of 2020 were held at a time when the threat of military escalation had receded. The outcomes reflect the regime's endeavour to consolidate power internally, in preparation for confronting an economic crisis which has grown to an unprecedented extent, becoming the regime's most pressing priority today. To this end, the regime mobilised the Baath Party and attempted to revive it as an influential political tool. It expanded its partnership with war profiteers. It also renewed its interest in its social support base among minorities and continued to re-shuffle and amend the networks of its loyalist intermediaries among the country's Sunni majority. Through the recent shifts in upper political echelons, the head of the regime, Bashar al-Assad, has attempted to concentrate as much power as possible in his own hands. Limited foreign interference posed no risk in these elections, which remain a predominantly Syrian affair.

Internally, the regime retains significant power, a fact which has seemingly enabled it to reproduce or renew its alliances according to its own priorities and terms. This is evident in the rise of the officers, philanthropists and businessmen. It is also demonstrated by the exclusion of Rami Makhlouf's affiliates and the elimination of the Sunni religious movement from the Council, with no apparent resistance in either case. However, the composition of the new parliament also reveals the nature of the major challenges facing the regime, which appears weaker during the lull in armed violence than in wartime. The regime's ability to reproduce its alliance networks has, indeed, failed to prevent a significant shrinking of its social base, which is now limited to narrower economic-security networks than has been the case in the past.

On the "political" level, the only tools at the regime's disposal have been old ones, embodied in the Baath Party, which has failed to revive itself as a political party capable of generating its own influence. The leadership of the Baath Party did not achieve significant mobilisation even within its own ranks, as demonstrated by the primaries. It has renewed its parliamentary bloc with a larger presence of retired officers, businessmen, and activists in the charitable and developmental fields, most of them having built their profiles outside the ranks of the Party and with the support of other power centres. This renewal only added further disorder to the Party's identity and deepened its lack of homogeneity and the contradictions of interests within it.

On the economic front, the presence of 43 businessmen in parliament may play no significant role in the regime's attempts to evade the impacts of international sanctions or to avert further depreciation of the national currency. The now-organic partnership between war profiteers and the regime may help the latter maintain a modicum of cohesion in the short term, especially when contrasted with the inability of government institutions to provide basic services to the population. Meanwhile, any and all benefits from this partnership come at the expense of national wealth, or what little remains thereof, and threaten to squander opportunities for recovering the productive sectors of the economy, which constitutes a conflict of interest for the majority of warlords.

Finally, the 2020 People's Council saw the diminishing of the traditional Sunni elites loyal to the regime. These elites have been replaced by militia leaders, retired army and police

officers, and war profiteer businessmen, while the social elites of minority communities continue to enjoy their prior status and privileges. In the short term, the regime will retain its ability to subjugate communities which, in turn, are increasingly resigned to their fate, whatever the damage inflicted upon them by the economic crisis may be. The regime will also preserve its ability to cling to what remains of “Assad’s Syria,” now devastated and disintegrated. However, the shrinking of the regime’s social base may threaten its long-term survival. The only means by which it can avert this is to adopt yet more repressive and militarised forms of governance.

## Appendix<sup>80</sup>

**Table 1: Baathist Militia Leaders in the People's Council (2020)**

Name	Electoral District	Sectarian Affiliation	Council Membership	Militia and Title	Position and Political Activity
<b>Bassem Sudan</b>	Latakia	Alawite	2016	Commander of Baath Brigades in Syria since 2013	Member of a Baath Party central committee since April 2017
<b>Fadel Wardeh</b>	Hama	Ismaili	2016	Commander of the National Defence Forces in the Salamiyah area since 2013	Member of a Baath Party central committee since April 2017
<b>Maher Qawarma</b>	Hama	Christian	2016 and 2012	Commander of the Local Defence Forces in the Mahrada area	Former member of the Mahrada division leadership in the Hama branch of the Baath Party
<b>Youssef Hassan Salama</b>	Homs	Alawite	First time in 2020	Supervisor of the Baath Legion in the Fifth Corps; commander of the Baath Brigades centre in Damascus	Former division leadership member
<b>Issam Nabhan Sibahi</b>	Hama	Sunni	First time in 2020	Deputy commander of the Baath Legion in Syria; commander of the Baath Brigades in Hama	Member of the countryside division leadership of the Hama branch of the Baath Party between August 2019 and March 2020
<b>Abdul Aziz Muhammad al-Hussein</b>	Deir ez-Zor	Sunni	First time in 2020	Leader of the small al-Hussein Tribal Groups (between 2017 and 2019)	Member of the al-Mayadin division leadership of the Deir ez-Zor branch of the Baath Party since March 2020
<b>Mahmoud Ahmed al-Rayes</b>	Deir ez-Zor	Sunni	First time in 2020	Symbolic commander of a small tribal militia	Member of a Baathist bureau in al-Shumaytiyah village in the Deir ez-Zor countryside
<b>Ahmed Aswad Zaidan</b>	Aleppo Regions	Sunni	2019, exceptionally, to fill a vacant seat	Tribal militia leader	

<sup>80</sup> The tables in the Appendix draw on a variety of sources: the official media, the personal, public and relevant Facebook pages of the winning MPs and their competing candidates, and finally conversations conducted mostly online with 90 people who have direct or indirect links with the elected MPs.

**Table 2: Retired Army and Police Officers in the People’s Council (2020)<sup>81</sup>**

Name	Electoral District	Sectarian Affiliation	Council Membership	Military Position or Position Before Retirement	Notes
<b>Mary Shehadeh al-Bitar</b>	Damascus	Christian	2016	Administrative officer in the Mobilization Directorate; former instructor at the Military College for Girls	Al-Bitar hails from al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside
<b>Basimah Saleh al-Shater</b>	Damascus	Sunni	First time in 2020	Head of the Medical Services Department at the Ministry of Interior	Al-Shater hails from the town of Harasta in Rural Damascus
<b>Ahmed Jamil Ibrahim</b>	Rural Damascus	Sunni	First time in 2020	Commander of the Third Corps until 2013, then head of the Security Military Committee in Homs in 2014	Accused of committing war crimes in the city of Homs; hails from the village of al-Marah in the Qalamoun region in Rural Damascus
<b>Mustafa Saleh al-Maarouf</b>	Homs	Alawite	First time in 2020	Retired police officer with the rank of colonel	Brother of Brigadier-General Muhammad Maarouf, head of the General Intelligence Branch (State Security) in Hama; descends from the Shuayrat area in the Homs countryside
<b>Mustafa Sukkari Mustafa</b>	Hama	Sunni	First time in 2020	Assistant Minister of Interior and, before that, Damascus Police Chief	Appointment after his retirement as secretary of the Hama branch of the Baath Party between 2015 and 2017; hails from the village of Maar Shahour in the Hama countryside
<b>Fayez Gathwan al-Ahmad</b>	Hama	Sunni	First time in 2020	Commanding officer of the 15 <sup>th</sup> Brigade	Mediates the return of the displaced from his village, al-Qastal, in the Uqayribat area in the Hama countryside
<b>Abdul Razzaq Saleh Barakat</b>	Aleppo Regions	Sunni	2015, exceptionally, to fill a vacant seat, then 2016	Director of the Autonomous Administration at the Ministry of Interior in 2013, and accepted by the Police Commander of Homs Governorate	Originally Turkmen; hails from the Turkmen Bareh village in the northern countryside of Aleppo
<b>Abdul Latif Abboud al-Bakar</b>	Aleppo Regions	Sunni	First time in 2020	Commanding officer in the Southern Region Branch of the Air Force Intelligence Service	Hails from al-Khafsa village in the Aleppo countryside
<b>Khaled Subhi Harba</b>	Idlib	Sunni	First time in 2020	Military engineer	Mediates the tracing and release of detainees in the regime’s prisons

<sup>81</sup> All army and police officers are members of the Baath Party.



<b>Thaer Jawdat Hassan</b>	Latakia	Alawite	First time in 2020	Former field officer; discharged due to injury during battles	Active in the affairs of the war-wounded and a member of the Sports Committee for the War-Wounded
<b>Ahmed Ali Hassan</b>	Tartus	Alawite	First time in 2020	Branch commander in the army's Signal Directorate	Hails from the village of Broumana al-Mashayekh in the Tartus countryside
<b>Sheikh Jaber al-Kharfan</b>	Deir ez-Zor	Sunni	First time in 2020	Head of the army's Mobilization Directorate; President of the First Field Court	Issued death sentences against detainees in Saydnaya prison; hails from the al-Busaraya clan in the village of al-Masarab. Many of his young relatives joined the National Defence militia in Deir ez-Zor; his sons founded a car dealership and rental company
<b>Aitan Hassan al-Aitan</b>	Deir ez-Zor	Sunni	2017, exceptionally, to fill a vacant seat	Quneitra Police Commander	Descends from the small Zubari clan in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor
<b>Mufleh Nasrallah al-Nasrallah</b>	Daraa	Christian	First time in 2020	Unknown	Delivers military cultural lectures glorifying the role of the army in cultural centres in Daraa governorate; hails from the village of Thunaiba, near the city of Izraa in the governorate's countryside
<b>Abdul-Nasser Ahmad al-Hariri</b>	Daraa	Sunni	First time in 2020	Head of the Izraa Facility for the maintenance of military vehicles	Hails from the village of Maliha al-Atash in the Daraa countryside
<b>Naseeb Ajwad Abu Mahmoud</b>	Sweida	Druze	First time in 2020	Head of the army's Inspection Authority until 2016, and before that commander of the Eleventh Tank Division between 2011 and 2012	Hails from the village of al-Dur in the Sweida countryside

**Table 3: Businessmen in the People’s Council (2020)<sup>82</sup>**

Name	Electoral District	Political Affiliation	Sectarian Affiliation	Council Membership	Areas of Work and General Activities	Origins and Occupation Before 2011
<b>Samer al-Debs</b>	Damascus	Independent	Sunni	2007, 2012 and 2016	Engaged in multiple businesses; first, manufacturing since the 1990s, mostly in the cardboard and packaging sectors, but also recently in the food industry; then, since 2019, in restaurants and shopping centres. Co-founded the Molta Limited Liability Company; president of the Damascus and Rural Damascus Chamber of Industry since 2014; member of the Syrian-Chinese Business Council; co-founder of Cham Holding Company	Industrialist; from a renowned industrial capitalist family
<b>Wael Melhem</b>	Homs	Independent	Alawite	2007, 2012 and 2016	Contractor in the construction business; director and co-founder of the Medina Company for Concrete Mixing in Homs governorate. He began his career volunteering as a non-commissioned officer in the police until his retirement after 2005, when he entered the People’s Council as an independent starting 2007	Policeman who retired after 2005 and started working as a contractor; descends from a peasant family
<b>Firas al-Salloum al-Hadba</b>	Homs	Independent	Alawite	2007, 2016 and 2012	Trader and owner of the al-Hadba Grain Mills Company in Tartus governorate; close to the Security Bureau of the Fourth Division, with whose assistance his business has expanded since 2012; member of the Homs Chamber of Commerce’s Board of Directors since 2015; re-elected in September 2020 as member of the Chamber’s Board	Feed and poultry trader; descends from a family of peasants and smallholders
<b>Badie Burhan Droubi</b>	Homs	Independent	Sunni	2012 and 2016	Insurance, construction, and food industries; chairman of the Board of Directors of al-Aqeelah Takaful Insurance Company and United Builders Company; vice-chairman of al-	Insurance businessman; former dentist; descends from a landowning family

<sup>82</sup> Names are sorted according to the date of entry into the People’s Council and main business area (by color: **blue** for foodstuff and restaurants, **green** for construction and real estate, **yellow** for financial intermediation, **red** for smugglers and former militia leaders, and **black** for traders in various sectors).

					Ahlia Vegetable Oil Company; an Iranian-backed businessman	
<b>Ayman Malandi</b>	Hama	Baathist	Sunni	2012 and 2016	Contractor and trader; president of Hama Chamber of Commerce since 2018; head of Construction Contractors Syndicate in Syria since February 2020; former and recurrent president of al-Taliya Sports Club	Contractor and trader from a family of traders
<b>Ayham Jrikos</b>	Latakia	Baathist	Alawite	2012 and 2016	Contractor and co-founder of al-Ghilar al-Wafira Concrete Company	Contractor; former physician; descends from a peasant family
<b>Humam Msouti</b>	Damascus	Independent	Sunni	2016	General trade, tourism and industry; general manager and co-founder of Roshana, Sorana and Liya companies	Engineer and government employee; first appearance as a businessman in 2015; from a bourgeois family
<b>Nabil Tohme</b>	Damascus	Baathist	Sunni	2016	TV production, media and publishing; owns al-Sharq TV Production Company, <i>al-Azmenah</i> magazine, and Dar al-Sharq Printing, Publishing and Distribution	TV producer; descends from a family of employees and craftsmen
<b>Osama Mustafa</b>	Rural Damascus	Baathist	Sunni	2016	Construction contractor; member of the Board of Directors of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce since October 2020; former head of the Chamber between 2015-2018; former treasurer in the board of directors and office of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce until 2018; member of the Board of Trustees at Dar al-Assad for Culture and Arts; secretary of the Syrian-Chinese Business Council; member of the Board of Directors of Adra Industrial City and the Arab-Belgian Chamber of Commerce	Contractor
<b>Hussam Qaterji</b>	Aleppo	Independent	Sunni	2016	Smuggling and trading of crude oil and grains, then construction and scrap dealership; chairman of the Qaterji International Group, which includes several companies such as the Arvada Petroleum Company, founded in 2018, and the Qaterji Real Estate Development Company, founded in 2017; works in scrap	Broker of licences and exemptions from government ministries and departments in Damascus; former tailor; descends from a family of craftsmen

					smelting through Foulaz Company founded in 2019	
<b>Hassan Shahid</b>	Aleppo regions	Independent	Sunni	2016	General trade and shipping; owns Shahid Brothers Company for Supplies and Transport	Grain merchant and then commander of the al-Aasasna Regiment militia between 2012 and 2016; descends from a family of peasants and rural merchants
<b>Alan Baker</b>	Aleppo regions	Baathist	Sunni	2016	Trader	Unknown
<b>Naeem Moazza Nasr</b>	Sweida	Independent	Druze	2016	Real estate dealer and investor; owns al-Reem Tower and a supermarket in the city of Sweida; member of the Board of Directors of the Sawa'idna Charitable Association	Trader
<b>Baseem Yousef Naameh</b>	Hama	Baathist	Alawite	2018, exceptionally, to fill a vacant seat	Smuggling of oil products to areas outside regime control until 2017, under the auspices of the Fourth Division Security Bureau, and by exploiting the location of his hometown, Tall Jadid, in the desert east of Hama	Owner of a petrol station in his village, Tall Jadid; descends from a peasant family
<b>Muhammad Ghazwan al-Masri</b>	Damascus	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Cheese industry, founding director of Almarai Company for Food Industries; hotel investor, including a hotel nearby Damascus International Airport which was placed at the disposal of the Ministry of Health in March 2020 for use as a quarantine centre for suspected COVID-19 cases; treasurer of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry; secretary of the Damascus and Rural Damascus Chamber of Industry between 2019 and 2020	Industrialist; descends from a family of manufacturers and craftsmen
<b>Abdul-Rahman Jamal al-Din al-Masri</b>	Damascus	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Fruit juice maker in his father's shop near Arnous Square in downtown Damascus; expanded his business by opening other juice stores; founded Elite Trading Company in January 2020; member of the Damascus Governorate Council; member of the General Authority of the Damascus Cham Holding Company; participated in the	Juice maker and seller; descends from a family of manufacturers and craftsmen

					public campaign to combat the COVID-19 pandemic	
<b>Amer Tayseer Kheiti</b>	Rural Damascus	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Engaged in multiple businesses; owner of commercial, construction and financial companies, including Kheiti Joint Stock Company, Ard al-Khairat Company, al-Amer for Concrete Mixing, al-Laith for Transportation and Shipping Services, and al-Saqr Money Transfer Company; member of the Board of Directors of the Rural Damascus Chamber of Commerce since October 2020; suffered a financial crisis in 2013, and subsequently travelled to Lebanon and became involved—according to acquaintances from the city of Douma in Ghouta, Damascus—in drug smuggling networks affiliated with Hezbollah, before returning and resuming his business under the auspices of the Fourth Division’s Security Bureau, branching out to various new fields	Vegetable trader; descends from a large family of merchants and farmers in the city of Douma in Rural Damascus
<b>Khaled al-Sharaabi</b>	Quneitra	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Foodstuff trade, distributor and egg trader living in Jdaïdat al-Fadl neighbourhood in Rural Damascus; suffered some financial damage due to the battles that took place in this neighbourhood in 2012, but managed to boost his trade again starting from 2013, taking advantage of the calm situation in Damascus, where his customer base of smaller traders and food distributors live and work	Egg distributor, then trader; descends from a family of workers and employees, displaced from the occupied Golan
<b>Hassan Koussa</b>	Latakia	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Owner and investor of a chain of restaurants and tourism facilities; president of the Latakia Chamber of Tourism since 2018	Restaurant owner; descends from a family of farmers and employees
<b>Abdul-Kafi Oqda</b>	Hama	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Owns a well-known chain of restaurants that provided free meals to those in quarantine centres suspected of COVID-19 infection; president of the Association of Cafés and Restaurants in Hama	Descends from a family of craftsmen and manufacturers

<b>Asaad Mamdouh Halloum Sallora</b>	Hama	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Investor in the luxurious Engineers Club and Restaurant in the city of Hama; owner of the al-Asaad Company for Money Transfers	Descends from a family of craftsmen and makers
<b>Munther Ibrahim</b>	Homs	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Real estate business and construction; his trade focused on the homes of those displaced from opposition neighbourhoods in the city of Homs	Real estate business; former physician; descends from a family of employees
<b>Rasem al-Masri</b>	Latakia	Independent	Alawite	First time in 2020	Contractor and real estate dealer; focused his work in the villages near the city of Latakia, especially between the villages of Basnada and Saqoubin, north of the city	Contractor; formerly broker and “transaction tracker” in government institutions in Latakia; descends from a peasant family
<b>Bilal Naal</b>	Damascus	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Engaged in multiple businesses: retail, contracting, real estate, banking, tourism and restaurants; owner and partner of several companies, including al-Naal Trading Company, Trading Company for Investment, Operation and Management of Shopping Centres, and Max 5 Chemicals Company; owner of Big Five and Jeddo bu Imad restaurant chains; headed the Falcon Security Company before its license was revoked in May 2020	Started his career as a salesman in a small shop owned by his family, before he expanded his business by taking advantage of his membership in the Damascus Governorate Council until 2011, with the support of Bisher al-Sabban, Governor of Damascus between 2006 and 2016; descends from a family of small craftsmen and merchants
<b>Nasser Yusuf al-Nasser</b>	Homs	Independent	Shia	First time in 2020	Contractor	Contractor; descends from a family of employees
<b>Nasr Mahmoud Hassan</b>	Tartus	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Contractor and trader of medical equipment	Engineer and government employee; descends from a peasant family
<b>Sarya Ahmed al-Qasim</b>	Hama	Arab Democratic Union Party	Sunni	First time in 2020	Trader and contractor, cladding and decoration	Descends from a merchant family
<b>Bashar al-Makhsour</b>	Raqqa	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	A local agent for the Qaterji business in smuggling and trading crude oil in the regime-controlled part of eastern Raqqa	Worked in Saudi Arabia until 2015; descends from a peasant family
<b>Madloul Omar Aziz</b>	Deir ez-Zor	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Oil smuggler and trader who founded Sham al-Aziz Trading Company in 2019; had worked	Worked in the Gulf; descends from a peasant family

					as an agent for Qaterji in the smuggling and trade of crude oil during the reign of IS between 2014 and 2017; member of the board of directors of the Futuwa Sports Club since 2019	
<b>Ali Mahmoud Rishq</b>	Rural Damascus	Baathist	Sunni	First time in 2020	Trader and smuggler of oil products to Lebanon under the auspices of the Fourth Division's Security Bureau, taking advantage of the location of his village Flitah, in the Qalamoun region in Rural Damascus, close to the Lebanese borders; works in managing a petrol station owned by his family	Descends from a family of smugglers and peasants
<b>Ahmed Subhi Abbas</b>	Rural Damascus	Independent	Alawite	First time in 2020	Owner of a chain of petrol station in the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus and Latakia; chairman and co-founder of Khubara al-Taqa Company in 2019 and of al-Mada Contracting and Trading Company, founded in the second half of 2012; his business ballooned after he joined the network of oil traders and smugglers of the Fourth Division's Security Bureau in 2014	Began his career at a petrol station owned by his family in the Jableh area in the Latakia countryside; descends from a peasant family
<b>Mohammed Subhi Sheikh al-Dayaa</b>	Aleppo regions	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Major investor in a plant for filling household gas cylinders in the village of Ain al-Asafir near the city of Aleppo; investor in the Hamdaniya Restaurant and Club in the city of Aleppo	Unknown
<b>Nabil Elias</b>	Latakia	Independent	Christian	First time in 2020	Finance; home furniture trade; mobile devices; member of the board of directors of Syria International Islamic Bank in 2016, then a member of the board of directors of the Damascus Stock Exchange in 2018; active in the al-Foz Charity affiliated with businessman Samer Foz	Laboratory physician in his clinic and the Latakia Health Directorate; descends from a family of employees
<b>Ahed Daher al-Sukari</b>	Homs	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Money transfers; agent for al-Fouad Money Transfer Company in Homs governorate (in an undisclosed partnership with Saqr Rustom, Commander of the National Defence in	Student; descends from a peasant family with rural origins

					Syria); co-founder of the Syrian International Academy; partner at BellaRoma Beauty Clinic, an institute for building and developing capacities and acquisition of skills; member of the board of trustees of the Shaheed Foundation since 2013 and its executive director in Homs between 2013-2015	
<b>Adnan Abd al-Wahab al-Hamad</b>	Aleppo regions	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Money transfer and auto trade; agent of al-Haram Money Transfers Company in the city of Manbij; car dealer; provides financial services to the Syrian-Lebanese drug smuggling networks close to Hezbollah through his office in Manbij	Livestock dealer; descends from a peasant family
<b>Mohamed Zuhair Saeed Tinawi</b>	Damascus	Baathist	Sunni	First time in 2020	Businessman in the fields of accounting and auditing through his office, and in the field of insurance through the United Insurance Company, for which he was a vice chairman; worked previously as an auditor with the Bank of Syria and the Gulf; additionally heads the Syndicate of Financial and Accounting Professions since its establishment in 2014	Accountant and government employee; descends from a family of craftsmen
<b>Mahmoud Nazif Abu Bakr</b>	Aleppo	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Textile trader and broker of money transfers	Began his career as an assistant to his father in a family-owned textile store; descends from a family of merchants
<b>Muhammad Amer Faris Hamwi</b>	Aleppo	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Trader, furniture manufacturer and money transfers broker; member of the board of directors of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce since September 2020	Furniture industry; descends from a family of merchants
<b>Jean Mousalli</b>	Aleppo	Baathist	Christian	First time in 2020	Gold trader and goldsmith, head of the Craft Association of Goldsmiths and Jewellers in Aleppo governorate	Goldsmith; descends from a family working in goldsmithing and trading gold and jewellery
<b>Zain al-Abdin Abbas</b>	Latakia	Independent	Alawite	First time in 2020	Commercial agent for an Indian tractors company in Syria; public relations officer in the Syrian Youth Council, which was established under the auspices of the Syrian Trust for	Student; descends from a family of rural employees, son of the Syrian ambassador to India Riad Abbas, and son-in-law of the



					Development, the institution headed by Asma al-Assad	Minister of Presidential Affairs Mansour Azzam
<b>Mamoun Ahmed al-Sayed</b>	Idlib	Baathist	Sunni	First time in 2020	General trade in partnership with his brothers; member of the executive office of the Idlib City Council since 2018; member of the board of directors of the Umayya Sports Club	Started his career running a private driving school owned by his brother who lives in Qatar; descends from a family of employees and craftsmen
<b>Ahmed Jamil Aqreen</b>	Idlib	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Grain trader, but depends on the wealth of his sons who own the large al-Jameel Group trading and producing foodstuffs in Saudi Arabia and the UAE	Grain trader; descends from a family of rural craftsmen and peasants
<b>Fouad Aldani</b>	Idlib	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Owns al-Fouad Industrial and Commercial Group; leader in the Tiger Forces and acts as a commercial operator for the crossings and checkpoints controlled by these forces at the borders with opposition-controlled areas in Idlib governorate	No clear career; descends from a family of farmers and employees

**Table 4: MPs Hailing from the Charity and Development Fields**

Name	Electoral District	Political Affiliation	Sectarian Affiliation	Council Membership	Profession, Charitable and Developmental Activity
<b>Raymond Sabra Hilal</b>	Rural Damascus	Baathist	Christian	2016	Dentist and trader of medical materials and supplies; chairman of the board of directors of the Khutwa Charity for Artificial Limbs treating wounded soldiers and members of other pro-regime forces
<b>Abdul Rahman al-Khatib</b>	Rural Damascus	Baathist	Sunni	First time in 2020	Mayor of the town of al-Harjala, south of Damascus; director and supervisor of the main centre for sheltering the displaced in Rural Damascus, which was established in his hometown of al-Harjala; director of the Mashrou'i programme for micro-loans since 2014, which was launched by the Syrian Trust for Development
<b>Suhail Salameh Khodor</b>	Tartus	Independent	Alawite	First time in 2020	Physician; former head of the Red Crescent branch in Tartus governorate between 2013 and 2019, then head of the Tartus branch of al-Areen Foundation, which was founded by Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma and began operations in July 2020, inheriting the Bustan Foundation founded by Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf
<b>Muhammad Abdel Halim Jerri</b>	Tartus	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Physician, founder of Sawa Charity in his hometown of Karto, then member of the governorate council's executive bureau responsible for the relief and social affairs sectors
<b>Rania Mohsen Hassan</b>	Tartus	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Lecturer at the Faculty of Economics, in Tartus University; member of the governorate council; prominent activist in voluntary initiatives caring for the wounded and families of fallen army soldiers, as well as UNDP-funded programmes for small businesses
<b>Haider Nasr Abboud</b>	Homs	Baathist	Murshidi	First time in 2020	Dentist; opened his clinic to treat the war-wounded and the families of killed soldiers, free of charge or at reduced fees; active in the <i>Samidun Raghm al-Jirah</i> ("Steadfast Despite the Wounds") association, the <i>Sarkhat Jarih</i> ("Cry of the Wounded") campaign and the <i>al-Aydi Tatakallam</i> ("Hands Speak") fraternity affiliated with the Orthodox Church
<b>Ahed Daher al-Sukari</b>	Homs	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Businessman, member of the board of trustees of the al-Shahid Foundation, the

					charitable arm of the National Defence militia
<b>Mughith Ibrahim</b>	Homs	Baathist	Alawite	First time in 2020	Member of the Homs governorate council; chairman of the Martyrs Support Committee in the “third city division” of the Homs branch of the Baath Party
<b>Raafat al-Bakar</b>	Quneitra	Independent	Sunni	First time in 2020	Head of the Nour Charity for Relief and Development branch in Quneitra since 2018

**Table 5: Iran-backed MPs (2020)**

Name	Electoral District	Political Affiliation	Sectarian Affiliation	Council Membership	Profession and General Activity	Notes
<b>Faten Ali Muhammad</b>	Aleppo Regions	Baathist	Sunni by birth, her conversion to Shiism not confirmed	First time in 2020	Schoolteacher	Descends from the opposition-held city of Jarablus in the countryside of Aleppo, displaced and living with her brothers in Latakia
<b>Omar al-Hassan</b>	Aleppo Regions	Independent – Loyalty to Homeland list	Shiite convert	2016	Honorary commander of the al-Baqir Militia of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard	Descends from the Baggara tribe on the outskirts of the city of Aleppo and its nearby villages (the main concentration of the tribe is in the Deir ez-Zor governorate)
<b>Ahmed Ali al-Hamra</b>	Aleppo Regions	Independent – Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	2016	Former leader of a tribal militia	Descends from the Asasneh clan spread in the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo and some villages near the city
<b>Obaid Sharif al-Issa</b>	Aleppo Regions	Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	2016	Former leader of a tribal militia; presents himself as a social dignitary	Descends from the Boumasra clan of the Boushaban tribe in the south-eastern countryside of the Aleppo (the tribe's main concentration is in Raqqa governorate)
<b>Hussein al-Hajj Qassem</b>	Aleppo Regions	Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	2016	Former leader of a tribal militia	Descends from the al-Qahifat branch of the Boushaaban tribe in the town of al-Sifeira, southeast of Aleppo
<b>Mujib al-Rahman al-Dandan</b>	Aleppo Regions	Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	2012 and 2016	Lawyer; engaged in multiple activities as a highly influential dignitary; co-founded with his family a tribal militia the latest name of which was the Raad al-Mahdi Regiment, an offshoot of the Iranian-backed Local Defence Forces	From the al-Bubani clans in the Manbij region; accused of being a hired broker for influential Baath Party officials during the formation of the Party's candidate list for his district
<b>Faris Junaidan</b>	Aleppo Regions	Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	2012 and 2016	Hereditary landowner; active participant as a dignitary in pro-regime tribal	Descends from the Ajeel clan in the Azaz region, north of Aleppo

					conferences and gatherings	
<b>Muhammad Khair al-Mashi</b>	Aleppo Regions	Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	2012	Hereditary landowner; active participant as a dignitary in pro-regime tribal conferences and gatherings	Sheikh of al-Boubani clans in the Manbij region
<b>Adnan Abdul-Wahab al-Hamad</b>	Aleppo Regions	Loyalty to Homeland list	Sunni	First time in 2020	Money transfer broker and car dealer; accused of providing financial services to a Syrian-Lebanese drug smuggling network sponsored by Hezbollah	Descends from a small clan of the Baggara tribe in the Manbij region
<b>Nidal Mahmoud al-Alo</b>	Raqqa	Baathist	Sunni	First time in 2020	Engaged in multiple roles and activities; vice president of the Private University Union, and before that head of the National Union of Syrian Students' office at the same university; former government employee; member of the Syrian Youth Council of the Syrian Trust for Development	Enjoys strong relations with the intelligence services (accused of being an informant) as well as with Iranian-backed figures, most importantly Khalaf al-Miftah, a former member of the Baath Party Regional Command, as well as the political and cultural activist and Shiite convert Ali al-Shuaibi
<b>Muhammad Amin Hussein al-Raja</b>	Deir ez-Zor	Baathist	Sunni by birth, converted to Shiism with his family since childhood	2016 cycle	Engaged in multiple activities; at the community level and in collaboration with security services, works on reconciliations and the return of those displaced outside regime-controlled areas from his hometown of Hatla; at the charity level, works in the distribution of aid and food baskets to people from his hometown residing in the Sayyida	Son of Hussein al-Raja, one of the most important Shiite preachers since the 1980s in his hometown of Hatla, in the Deir ez-Zor countryside

					Zainab area, south of Damascus	
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**Table 6: Native Shiite MPs (2020)**

Name	Electoral District	Political Affiliation	Council Membership	Profession and General Activity	Notes
<b>Abdul Rahman al-Jaafari</b>	Damascus	Independent	First time in 2020	Dentist; owner and director of al-Jaafari Centre; launched the Hams charitable initiative to help the poor during the lockdown period imposed in April to combat the COVID-19 pandemic	Gained wide fame in the field of dental plastic surgery, turning him into a public figure in Damascus
<b>Hadi Mashhadiya</b>	Damascus	Baathist	First time in 2020	Physical therapist and director of the Disabled Vocational Rehabilitation Institute	From the renowned Mashhadiya family in Damascus
<b>Nasser Yusuf al-Nasser</b>	Homs	Independent	First time in 2020	Contractor; member of the governorate council; active in Iranian-sponsored initiatives and projects to take care of Shia displaced to the Homs governorate from the towns of Kefraya and al-Fouaa	Son of former MP; hails from the village of Aisoun in Homs countryside
<b>Muhammad Abbas Fawaz</b>	Aleppo Regions	Baathist	2016	Electrical engineer; member of the governorate council; member of a Baath Party division leadership	From the Shia village of al-Zahraa in Aleppo countryside
<b>Fadel Kaadas</b>	Aleppo Regions	Baathist	2016	Teacher at the Technical Engineering College at the University of Aleppo; known for looking after students from the Shia towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa during the war	From the Shia village of Nubl in the countryside of Aleppo
<b>Fayza al-Azba</b>	Daraa	Baathist	2016	Former schoolteacher; former member of the Baath Party branch leadership in Daraa; engaged in caring for Shia displaced to Damascus from her hometown of Busra al-Sham in the Daraa countryside	Despite the settlement in the Daraa governorate, the displaced Shia of Busra al-Sham have not returned to their homes