

ASSAD'S OFFICER GHETTO: WHY THE SYRIAN ARMY REMAINS LOYAL

KHEDER KHADDOUR | NOVEMBER 4, 2015

The Syrian army's officer corps has remained intact despite the immense pressure of nearly four years of civil and military conflict, a fact that has prevented the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The military housing system is a crucial aspect of this cohesion: it reveals the world Syrian officers inhabit, their relations with the regime and wider Syrian society, and the reasons why so few have defected so far.

While there have been defections in the infantry, no major fighting unit has broken away en masse, as defection on this scale would have required the participation of middle- to high-ranking officers. Indeed, the core of the officer corps continues to stand by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The fact that a majority of officers are drawn from Syria's Alawite community has often been noted as the primary, even singular, factor in the army's cohesion since 2011. But this explanation overstates the role of sectarian affiliation.

Army officers have access to a benefits system that links nearly every aspect of their professional and personal lives to the regime, and this places them in an antagonistic relationship with the rest of society. Dahiet al-Assad, or "the suburb of Assad" northeast of Damascus and the site of the country's largest military housing complex, reveals how this system works. Known colloquially as Dahia, the housing complex provides officers with the opportunity of owning property in Damascus. As many army officers come from impoverished

rural backgrounds, home ownership in the capital would have been beyond their financial reach. Military housing has offered them an opportunity for social advancement, but the community that officers and their families inhabit within Dahia also fosters a distinct identity that segregates them from the rest of Syrian society, leaving them dependent on the regime.

The benefits Dahia provides come at a steep cost. With the move into military housing, officers effectively complete their buy-in, linking their personal and familial fortunes to the survival of the regime. All the trappings of an officer's life, and the social respectability it provides, are thus granted by and dependent on the regime. In 2000, when then president Hafez al-Assad died, many officers in Dahiet al-Assad sent their families back to their home villages to wait out the succession outcome. The families only returned once Hafez's son Bashar was confirmed as the new president. Officers had understood that their life in Damascus was contingent on

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kheder Khaddour is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. His research focuses on issues of identity and society in Syria.

the Assad regime's survival, rather than on their status as state employees or military personnel.

Syria's military housing programs were greatly expanded during the 1980s, but in the decades since, they have not fostered a sense of solidarity among officers from different sects, especially Alawites and Sunnis. Nonetheless, military housing benefits had the de facto effect of drawing officers together to protect their common financial interests after the start of the 2011 uprising.

Dahia's haphazard development suggests that its role in cementing regime loyalty was not a deliberate choice but rather an inadvertent outcome of years of mismanagement and nepotism. The regime has thus been able to capitalize on the suburb's internal corruption and isolation from wider Syrian society to strengthen its ties with the officers living there and secure their unyielding loyalty. As the uprising descended into full-scale civil war, the ghettoization of the officer corps has played out in the regime's favor and prompted many officers to regard the revolution as a personal threat to their assets and livelihood.

Protecting a beneficial system, rather than adhering to strict ideological loyalty, is what has kept the Syrian officer corps largely intact. While there have been individual defections among officers living outside of the military housing system, as of mid-2015 there has been only one recorded instance of an officer leaving Dahiet al-Assad to join the opposition—and he was already retired.¹ The neighborhood has morphed from a residential area into something more akin to a fortified military base—one that officers perceive as defending them collectively, and by extension the entire army and Syrian regime.

DAHJET AL-ASSAD: THE PRESIDENT'S GIFT

Two systems of military housing exist in Syria. The first provides officers and their families with accommodations in army compounds during active service—such as the Qatana housing area in Damascus, Rayan in Homs, and Saida in Daraa—without conferring ownership. The second system is a

state-subsidized home purchase program that enables officers to purchase homes at discount prices in designated housing areas run by the Syrian army. In theory, any officer could apply for military housing, but the success of an application depends largely on securing favors from those with the de facto power to bestow or withhold property.

Dahiet al-Assad is by far Syria's largest example of the state-subsidized home purchase program. Others are located in Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, and Tartus.² In 2003, the army ended the program through which new officers could apply for home ownership in military housing complexes, replacing it in 2005 with a loan program that allocates officers 1 million Syrian pounds (nearly \$20,000 at the time) that is paid off monthly via salary deductions. This restricted the supply of housing in Dahia and in areas under the same military housing system, making existing homes all the more coveted and valuable.

It is unlikely that Dahiet al-Assad was originally part of the regime's long-term plan to preserve officer cohesion. Initially, it simply provided homes to army officers, and later it became the target of commercial property investment and speculation. That the officer corps would be steadfast in its support of the regime was not a foregone conclusion when the uprising began in 2011, but the regime built on decades of mismanagement, corruption, and patronage to ensure its loyalty and to turn Dahia into a bastion of military and ideological support.

Haphazard Development

Dahiet al-Assad was first established in 1982 after Hafez al-Assad issued an executive order to establish housing for officers and their families.³ The archway at the suburb's main entrance still declares it “the gift of President Hafez al-Assad to the officers in the Syrian Arab Army and their families.”

Dahia's construction began under the auspices of the Military Housing Establishment (Sharikat iskan al-askari), but the Institution for the Implementation of Military Construction (Moassat tenfez al-inshaat al-askaria) assumed responsibility for the project in the late 1980s. The Military Housing Establishment, under the purview of the Defense Ministry, is

the overarching institution responsible for military housing in Syria. While it does not carry out actual construction, it is the lead contractor for military housing, and it is ultimately responsible for all work undertaken in Dahia. The Institution for the Implementation of Military Construction is effectively a real estate firm and general contractor that manages many public and private sector projects.

Construction was meant to take place through a series of multiyear development plans that involved coordinating with various government institutions in order to bring in necessary services. Then defense minister Mustafa Tlass laid the first stone of the housing complex in 1985, and officers began moving in by the early 1990s. As of March 2011, it covered some 250 hectares and housed more than 100,000 residents.⁴

Contrary to popular belief, Dahia is not a luxury residential area nor is it home to high-ranking officers. Despite its growing population, most areas of Dahia lack key public service provisions. The supply and quality of services have often lagged far behind other neighborhoods in the Syrian capital, due to the lack of coordination between military housing institutions and the civilian government that dispenses services.⁵ The streets need repair, and water and electricity cut out frequently. While there is much unused land, the neighborhood lacks public spaces or a large park. Public transportation to and from Dahia is also insufficient given its population size and location. The first government bakery in Dahia only opened in 2014, and until 2009, a large garbage dump servicing the neighboring town of al-Tal had only operated near the suburb's entrance. Burning trash was common in Dahia, and the suburb's dump site often attracted packs of wild dogs.⁶

The Civilianization of Military Housing

Economic reforms during the 2000s spurred rapid real estate price inflation and an investment rush into Dahia, which exacerbated the suburb's chaotic infrastructural development. This process was also facilitated by Dahiet al-Assad's unique status. Contrary to the rest of Syria, real estate in Dahia is not registered with the Ministry of Local Administration. Rather, the Institution for the Implementation of Military

Construction owns the land where the suburb sprang up and thus holds full decisionmaking authority for new construction projects and property sales. Thanks to this special status, the institution has broad leeway in contracting new construction projects for civilian housing and for private firms, with most of the latter being owned by regime members and their affiliates. During the 2000s, the institution became flush with cash following the Dahia construction boom, in turn drawing in a new wave of regime-affiliated personnel and the corruption that came with them.

Thanks to the institution, Dahiet al-Assad also received a large influx of civilian residents during the 2000s. Although there are no official statistics available, interviews with residents suggested that in 2011, roughly 60 percent of the suburb's residents were officers—including active and retired officers, secret service members, and other security personnel—and 40 percent were civilians. Subsequent interviews with both civilian and military residents confirmed a notable change in the neighborhood's composition during the run-up to the 2011 uprising. Dahia had become more civilian and had ceased to be, in the view of its residents, a place for officers and their families alone.

This civilian influx made the officer corps more business savvy as the Dahia property boom in the 2000s had increased the value of homes there. Officers began viewing their homes as financial assets. In Dahia's more wealthy areas of Jowiyyeh or Amjad, for example, home prices reached as high as 30 million Syrian pounds (roughly \$600,000 before the uprising began) or more, even though most salaried officers could not afford an apartment worth more than 2 million Syrian pounds (\$40,000) after even thirty years of service.

Nonmilitary families moving into Dahia, especially during the five years before the uprising, made many Damascenes believe the area had become a residential suburb of Damascus like any other. One former civilian resident noted: "By 2007, we could no longer say that it was military housing."⁷ But the uprising-turned-civil-war showed how Dahia's new civilian feel was merely a veneer for what was in effect a military neighborhood.

THE OFFICERS' GHETTO

The Benefits System

The army has traditionally framed the purchase of a home in Dahia as a lifelong commitment to the regime. Upon graduating as a second lieutenant—the starting officer rank in the military—cadets would begin a ten-to-fifteen-year waiting period, during which 5–7 percent of their salary was withheld as an eventual down payment on a home. During this time, military personnel and their families often stayed in practically cost-free temporary military housing. Officers invariably need influential connections to eventually purchase a unit in Dahiet al-Assad, and that acquisition normally takes another twenty years to pay off via monthly salary deductions.

Dahia almost entirely hosts only middle-ranking officers. The vast majority of the officer corps there is ranked between major and major general, with less than a dozen of the latter living in the suburb. Higher-ranking officers live in elite areas inside Damascus.

For many officers, military housing has given them a unique opportunity for rapid social ascent. The typical army officer living in Dahiet al-Assad is lower-middle class—regardless of his sect—and hails from the countryside or from coastal areas where economic prospects are dim. Alawite officers mostly come from the coastal areas of Jableh, Latakia, and Tartus, whereas Sunni officers tend to come from the rural outskirts of large urban centers such as Aleppo, Daraa, and Raqqa. Yet both Alawite and Sunni officers share a similar socioeconomic upbringing and thus similar aspirations of upward mobility. The military is one of the few avenues open for these young men that offers them a degree of status, a decent wage, and the prospect of home ownership (in the capital, no less, which many view as the pinnacle of personal success). A home in Dahia was also seen as a place where officers can live while serving out their career, and later as a home to retire in.

Moving into Damascus also improves the social lot of an officer's entire family. Housing in Dahia provides an officer's children with the opportunity to grow up and study in the

capital. One retired brigadier general, who had lived in Dahia for thirty-five years, at first in temporary army housing but later in his own home, talked about the benefit of living in the suburb had for his four children. "After I took possession of the apartment, our life became more stable and we had [better] hope for the future of our children. As we lived in the capital, our children would study at Damascus University," he said. The officer mentioned other benefits such as free access to army hospitals anywhere in the country for his entire family—including Tishreen Hospital, Syria's most advanced, which is also located in the suburb.⁸

There are other perks that living in Dahia provides, and these can be seen upon entering the homes of officers. Army-issued soap and blankets, bread procured from special military offices, and gasoline coupons are all given to officers at discount prices or free of charge. Officers also receive free subscriptions to all three official government newspapers (*Thawra*, *Tishreen*, and *al-Baath*). And each officer receives a certificate of completion of military training signed personally by the Syrian president, along with a photograph taken with the president that is typically hung on the living-room wall.

These may not sound like the sorts of luxuries a resident of a rich central Damascus district would covet, but the officers value these perks because they come largely from lower-middle class and rural backgrounds.

A Sort of Solidarity

Besides the material benefits, the military housing system is central to cultivating a shared identity among middle-ranking officers, as living in Dahia is a comprehensive, all-encompassing lifestyle. Living together with people who are all adapting to city life helps build a sense of solidarity. Dahia is also the space where officers can showcase their social achievements—which many then jealously guard.

But living in Dahia causes officers and their families to be caught between two worlds: the city on the outskirts of which they live and the villages from where they come. In the capital, they are considered to be from the countryside,

and in their ancestral towns and villages, they are considered urbanites. This liminal identity strengthens their attachment to Dahia and all that it represents. This hybrid identity is felt most strongly among the officers' children, who grow up in the suburb and have their identity anchored in it.

Segregation From and by the Wider Society

The benefits officers have access to, along with the shared identity nurtured in Dahia, effectively “ghettoizes” officers within the suburb’s perimeter. Dahiet al-Assad has few official or unofficial relationships with its neighboring areas. In the 1980s, there was little interaction between Dahia and the adjacent suburbs of Barzeh, Douma, and Harasta. Following economic reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, some Douma and Harasta residents opened small businesses in Dahia, including supermarkets, vegetable markets, and butcher shops. But these forms of commercial or social interaction were the exception, not the norm. Dahia students would be sent to the Baath Party’s vanguard camps (*muaskar lel-talai*) in Douma, and, because the suburb remained administratively part of Harasta, its residents would go there to get a number of official services and paperwork completed.

The army benefits and the officers’ socialization in Dahia give them an incentive to stay where they feel welcome. The colloquial and derogatory term for Dahia residents is the “army of sandal-wearers” (*jaysh abu shehata*), because they are regarded as being from uneducated, rural, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Aware of this perception, officers tend to see few viable options for themselves outside the military in Damascus cultural life, where they expect to be treated poorly.

The divide between Dahia and non-Dahia residents has only grown since the 2011 uprising. To wider Syrian society, a person who lives in Dahia is inescapably associated with the regime. This reinforces a defensive attitude among these officers in Dahia vis-à-vis the rest of society. Whether or not officers personally support the Assad regime, their residences in Dahiet al-Assad, their places in the military, and often their sects and backgrounds all play a role in cementing a

perception among the officer corps that they would be targeted by opposition supporters.

Bonds Beyond Sect

Sect plays no formal role in the Syrian army or in Dahia, as this would run counter to the regime’s secular claims. Yet military housing has not bridged the divides among officers of different sects. Division and mistrust has persisted and has even grown stronger between Alawites and non-Alawites since the uprising began. Even in each sect, there are divisions along regional and familial lines.

The military housing system has, however, de facto aligned all officers in defending the benefits and status conferred on them by living in Dahia. Though most officers are Alawite, there seems to be little perceptible difference between them and non-Alawite officers in the way they worry about outside threats. Indeed, many officers have shed their overt sectarian affiliation in order to encourage unity among the officer corps.

For instance, one Sunni major, originally from Daraa but who now lives in Dahia, views himself as an officer first and foremost. When asked to choose between his belonging to Daraa or Dahia, the officer unequivocally said, “I’m from the Dahia community” (*ana min abel al-Dahia*).⁹ Though he noted that the security services committed violent acts, the officer blamed the opposition for fomenting chaos. He maintained that Dahia remained safe even after 2011, but that the uprising has affected him personally because it was against the army institution broadly, to which he belongs and identifies with.

Sect and place of origin are still relevant to life in Dahia. When demonstrations began in Daraa in 2011, Sunni officers avoided grouping and socializing with each other to prevent arousing suspicion. One Sunni officer, for instance, was suspected of sedition, and he made significant efforts to prove that his loyalty to the army superseded his loyalty to his home region. The officer received a Facebook message saying that a fellow officer had accused him of insulting the president and

supporting the uprising in his home province. The message frightened the officer, and he followed the chain of rumors about his disloyalty back to its original source, taking great pains to prove the accuser otherwise. He even hung a large photo of President Assad on his balcony to underscore his allegiance to the regime.¹⁰

Sect has played a different role for Alawite officers. The uprising deepened their sense of isolation from non-Alawites, causing them to rely even more on the army for their defense. The memory of the Muslim Brotherhood's rebellion from 1976 to 1982—during which a 1979 attack on the Aleppo artillery school left many Alawites dead—colored their views of the 2011 protests. For them, the uprising was a replay of that earlier Brotherhood rebellion, when their sect, the army, and the regime had all come under fire.¹¹

The 2011 uprising had the effect of driving Alawite officers even closer to the army without necessarily strengthening ties between them and Alawite civilians. One Alawite officer described the predominately Alawite Esh al-Warwar neighborhood near Dahia as follows: “Esh al-Warwar is close to Dahia, but I [have] never been there. They are street people [*shabeen*].” Before the uprising, the officer and his family used to say that the Alawites of Esh al-Warwar were “cattle and gypsies” (*baqar wa shrashih*).¹² The daughter of another officer in Dahia expressed similar sentiments about Alawites from Esh al-Warwar: “The Alawite officer is closer to the Sunni officer than he is to an Alawite from Esh al-Warwar, because they say the Alawites of Esh al-Warwar are lower than them. My mother speaks badly about those people in Esh al-Warwar. The community [negatively] affects the Alawite image in the capital.”¹³

The relationship between these two Alawite communities has somewhat evolved since the uprising began. Alawite officers' sentiment in Dahia toward their neighboring Alawite community morphed to some degree from hostility to pity, in part reflecting the uptick in sectarian solidarity after the conflict erupted. After Esh al-Warwar came under attack from rebels in the neighboring area of Barzeh, Alawite officers in Dahiet al-Assad began describing people from Esh al-Warwar as “poor,” “simple,” and “deserving of pity and protection.”¹⁴ However,

officers in Dahia did not rush to support the residents in their fight against the rebels, nor, as the conflict evolved, were new linkages developed between the two Alawite communities despite their shared position on a sectarian border.

THE REGIME'S COUNTERMOBILIZATION STRONGHOLD

Even though the initial opposition protests in 2011 were political in nature and were aimed specifically at altering regime policy, the isolation of Dahia residents led army officers and their families to believe that protesters posed a threat not only to the regime but also to them personally. As the uprising unfolded, officers shared the same belief—regardless of sect or political ideology—that defending themselves and their interests from wider society was a priority.

The uprising made Dahia residents more suspicious of neighboring areas. Officers would routinely tell their children not to let taxi drivers know they were from Dahiet al-Assad or that it was their final destination. Rumors were common, including one unconfirmed story about the daughter of an officer from Dahia being kidnapped and later killed by criminals from Douma. Another unconfirmed account in Dahia describes a taxi driver kidnapping, killing, and decapitating a young man from the suburb.¹⁵

The officers' separation from the rest of society allowed these rumors to spread. In Saida, near Daraa, for instance, where officers also live in a military compound, Air Force Intelligence Directorate agents began reporting to residents that protesters from nearby villages were planning to attack the military housing complex in retribution for the siege of Daraa.¹⁶ In response to these rumors, the military officers and their families in Saida created defense plans and prepared for a potential ambush from would-be attackers even though the battle never materialized. Fears that “maybe the Doumanis or Barzawis [families from towns adjacent to Dahia] will do the same” were expressed frequently and openly in the suburb.¹⁷

The 2011 uprising strengthened the perception among Dahia officers that the area's defenses needed bolstering. Under these auspices, Dahiet al-Assad's military identity has been fully reasserted. The suburb was turned into a military platform from which to launch attacks on neighboring pro-opposition areas. Military infrastructure that had been blended into the residential area before the uprising were suddenly put into full use.¹⁸ For instance, both a property belonging to the water resources ministry and a school for traffic police were used as artillery positions to launch shells at rebels in neighboring Harasta and Barzeh. These sorts of actions reveal the army's dominance over Dahia and the perception among residents that the regime holds ultimate control over the area. While the militarization of neighborhoods has happened throughout Syria, the transition has been quicker and more thorough in Dahia, which as of 2015 resembles a military base.

In June 2012, as the Free Syrian Army advanced toward Dahia, regime personnel began organizing officers' sons (mostly Alawite) into the National Defense Forces (NDF), a vigilante group tasked with the suburb's internal security. As shelling by the rebels became routine, the NDF erected checkpoints throughout the area, and its military vehicles became omnipresent. DShK heavy machine guns were occasionally mounted on the backs of pickup trucks and tanks used to patrol the suburb.

Insecurity and sect-based militarization compelled civilian residents (and Sunnis in particular)—who had migrated into Dahia during the economic boom of the 2000s—to leave the suburb. The reverse was true of military families: one resident remarked that, for him, the sounds of war were “pleasing” because it meant they were in the thick of the fight against the “conspiracy” aimed at the army and the country.¹⁹

Once the conflict began, the defining criteria for belonging to Dahia became explicit association with the Assad regime and its symbols. Before the 2011 uprising, pro-regime paraphernalia was no more common in Dahia than most other parts of the capital. But walking through the streets of the suburb since then, the transformation is palpable. Syrian flags and posters of Assad are ubiquitous, with pro-regime groups

delivering speeches and holding routine public rallies. Posters of martyrs killed in the fighting are also common. Discussions about the war in Dahia tend to fit with the regime's narrative, often miming Syrian state media. It is common to hear that “everything is well in the country, there are no problems,” along with stories about how “infiltrators,” “terrorists,” and a “foreign conspiracy” are trying to destroy Syria.²⁰

Sons of officers have begun to prominently display pictures of the president with slogans such as “we love you” (*minhabek*) while patrolling Dahia and blasting pro-regime songs from their car stereo systems. These sons—many of whom did not enlist—are generally more vocal than their fathers in expressing the need to defend Dahia. That is in part a reflection of their torn identity as neither belonging to Damascus nor to their ancestral villages. This cohesion among Dahia youth has played out in various other ways, including the formation of new political organizations such as the Lions of the Assad Suburb (Asood Dahiet al-Assad) and paramilitary groups such as the NDF.

Fighting on the side of the regime effectively became the defining criteria for belonging to Dahiet al-Assad. A civilian resident reported that military personnel who moved to the area as late as 2007 are considered to be “original residents” as of 2015, while the few civilians who have been living there since the 1990s—longer than the majority of military families—have become “outsiders.”²¹ This fact was driven home when the NDF began making lists of all Dahia residents in early 2014, but it would only enter the homes of nonmilitary families for head counts. Yet joining the NDF was one way for civilians to “belong” to Dahia. One Dahia resident recalled how a Syrian-Palestinian civilian, who was unable to join the army because of his dual nationality, instead joined the NDF and began to speak with a rural Alawite accent in order to prove his loyalty.²²

SURVEILLANCE

Regime personnel had long ago infiltrated the private firms tasked with constructing and allocating homes in Dahiet

al-Assad. As a result, the determining factor in allocation is rarely the official process, with personal ties to the regime being the most important factor. This allowed corruption and surveillance to thrive in Dahia, with the two reinforcing each other.

The Institution for the Implementation of Military Construction, which is responsible for real estate and construction in Dahia, informally conducts surveillance to protect the regime's interests. Officially, the institution operates under the Syrian state's military and is not accountable to the country's judiciary. Major General Riyadh Salman Issa, who is also known as Riyadh Shalish and is the cousin of President Bashar al-Assad, has been its director since the late 1980s. Ali Saqr, a regime figure, ran the Office of the First Assistant to the Director for years. Though Saqr is not a commissioned officer—his official military rank is warrant officer first class—he oversaw important administrative tasks in Dahia, making him both powerful and feared among the suburb's officers.²³

Corruption has been the regime's main tool for both co-optation and surveillance in Dahiet al-Assad. In the case of Saqr, his office was effectively the key to everything from home allocations to business and construction permits—none of which were granted without connections (*wasta*). Officers as high-ranking as brigadier generals would have to go through Saqr and his office to secure their home allocations. As a result, officers who officially outranked Saqr were forced to curry favor with him in order to receive what was, by all rights, their due. (Saqr was replaced in October 2007 with a civil engineer as part of the regime's economic reform program to give the institution a more bureaucratic, rather than military, appearance.²⁴)

In Dahia, officers often spy on one another, informing regime personnel about pertinent information or people who criticize the regime. In part for this reason, criticizing the regime or the president in public is rare in Dahia, unlike in most other parts of the country where there is at least some tolerance for it. In one incident during the 2000s, a fifteen-year-old girl living in the suburb published a magazine detailing the government's failure to provide services in

the neighborhood. Shortly afterward, her mother received a call from the Office of the First Assistant to the Director, warning her to desist or face retribution. This is the sort of response most Syrians in Damascus would normally associate with the regime's intelligence services. Shocked by the call, the mother asked the daughter: "What did you do in the school to have Ali Saqr call me?"²⁵

Corruption has become entrenched in Dahia through the military housing system. An officer knows that improving his lot in life—including his job, salary, and housing for him and his family—is based largely on his ability to befriend key regime personnel. This cronyism has helped foster an environment where officers vie for influence by snitching on each other and backstabbing their colleagues. This has created a general atmosphere of myopic self-interest in the army and regime at large.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian military was not the only beneficiary of state-subsidized housing. Over several decades, public sector teachers, workers, and numerous other state employees acquired homes through similar projects. Dahiet al-Assad simply offers a window into the wider ways in which the regime provided benefits to state employees before 2011 and insight into how these benefits, whether by design or default, have kept those employees from openly resisting the regime.

In the army, sectarian ties alone do not account fully for the loyalty of officers. Clearly, Alawites hold the most important commands, but many non-Alawite officers have not defected, which suggests that other factors have held them back.²⁶ A close look at the workings of Dahiet al-Assad indicates that the benefits awarded to officers and their families—many of whom come from humble origins—tie them to the army and the regime, irrespective of any religious or ideological concerns. However, the diversity found within Dahia has not resulted in the erasure of sectarian identity and its replacement with a new, corporate officer identity. Conversely, it is Dahia's networks and patronage system that have created a

shared interest in compelling people of various backgrounds to remain loyal to the regime. The uneven public services and byzantine regulations governing the neighborhood suggest that it has prevented defection because it has de-professionalized officers, making them dependent on informal back channels for basic services and compensation, rather than a formal military hierarchy that could weather civil strife.

For decades, one of the Assad regime's strongest instruments for retaining control of the army and other state institutions has been to corrupt officers by providing them benefits on a personal, rather than institutional, basis. By awarding housing as a matter of discretion and not as an entitlement, the regime has ensured officers and their families have had little choice but to stay in the ranks and remain loyal. And because officers have acquired status and benefits as individuals, not as a corporate group, this has encouraged rivalry among them, discouraging the kind of networking and trust that would be necessary were any officers to try to lead whole units to defect.

Most Syrian army officers have spent years trying to rise above their lower-middle-class origins and acquire the privileges Dahiet al-Assad offers them and their families. Yet in attaining these privileges, they have signed away almost all plausible options ever to leave Dahia. And it is not just the officers' own futures that are at stake but the fortunes of their entire families. For this reason, almost all defections from the officer corps since 2011 have involved officers who were not invested in the military housing system.

The extent and manner of the dependence of army officers—and other state employees—on the regime for their livelihood, upward mobility, and their families' well-being reveals a crucial social component that has shaped their behavior since the uprising broke out. This same calculus will also shape their response to any political transition, should this come to Syria.

NOTES

- 1 Author survey with Dahia residents, 2015.
- 2 None provides housing for noncommissioned officers.
- 3 Directorate of Culture in Damascus Countryside, "Arab Cultural Center in Dahiet al-Assad" [in Arabic], last accessed September 14, 2015, www.doc-dc.gov.sy/center.aspx?id=39.
- 4 Author interview with an employee of Damascus Province, Damascus, May 2012.
- 5 "Suburb of Harasta Out of Time and Space" [in Arabic], *Tishreen*, March 12, 2006, www.tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/93299.
- 6 "Suburb of Dahiet al-Assad Suffers From Poor Services" [in Arabic], *Tishreen*, October 19, 2006, <http://tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/88809>.
- 7 Author interview with a former Dahiet al-Assad resident, Beirut, March 2014.
- 8 Author interview with a retired brigadier general, Damascus, Syria, June 2012.
- 9 Author interview with a Syrian Arab Army officer (via Skype), July 2014.
- 10 Author interview with Dahia al-Assad officer (via Skype), September 2014.
- 11 The Aleppo artillery school was attacked early in this rebellion, with prominent Alawite civilians, such as scientists and doctors, later being targeted, which led to the sense that Alawites as a sect, rather than the army or the regime, were the true targets. The rebellion, which was centered in and around the city of Hama, ended in 1982 after the Syrian army laid siege to and destroyed large sections of the city with tanks and artillery, killing thousands of people in the process.
- 12 Author interview with the wife of a Dahia officer, Damascus, August 2012.
- 13 Author interview with a daughter of a Dahia officer (via Skype), September 2014.
- 14 Author interview with Alawite officers from Dahia (via phone), November 2014.
- 15 Author interview with a Dahia resident (via phone), Beirut, Lebanon, June 2014.
- 16 See interview with former member of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, "Interview With Intelligence Official Afaq Mohammed Ahmad," YouTube video, 17:15, from a segment televised by France 24 on November 18, 2012, posted by "France 24 / FRANCE 24 Arabic," www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4RWZP-QEIk.

- 17 Author conversation with officers' families, Damascus, Syria, February 2012.
- 18 This included military storehouses that had been discreetly spread throughout Dahiet al-Assad and held ammunition, weapons, medical supplies, blankets, and other military gear.
- 19 Author interview with a Dahia resident (via Skype), September 2014.
- 20 Author observation in Dahia, May 2011.
- 21 Author interview with a civilian Dahia resident (via phone), October 2014.
- 22 Author interview with a Dahia resident (via Skype), October 2014.
- 23 Saqr's office was also responsible for recruiting the sons of officers into the NDF, with Saqr's own son heading the Lions of the Assad Suburb.
- 24 Hilal Aoun and Ahlam Ismail, "Dahiet al-Assad: Associations Bypass the Plan" [in Arabic], *Thawra*, June 7, 2009, http://thawra.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=6715202220090705212911.
- 25 Author interview with a Dahiet al-Assad resident (via phone), July 2014.
- 26 For estimates of the ratios of Alawite and Sunni officers, see Hicham Bou Nassif, "'Second-Class': The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 626–49.

This regional insight was prepared as part of the 2014–2015 Renegotiating Civil-Military Relations in Arab States: Political and Economic Governance in Transition Project run by the Carnegie Middle East Center. The project sought to promote research on armed forces in Arab states and on the challenges of democratic transition.

The Carnegie Middle East Center is grateful to International Development Research Center (IDRC) for their support of the Civil-Military Relations in Arab States project. The opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author.

CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

The Carnegie Middle East Center is an independent policy research institute based in Beirut, Lebanon, and part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The center provides in-depth analysis of the political, socioeconomic, and security issues facing the Middle East and North Africa. It draws its scholarship from a pool of top regional experts, working in collaboration with Carnegie's other research centers in Beijing, Brussels, Moscow, and Washington. The center aims to impact policymakers and major stakeholders by offering fresh insight and ideas that cultivate a deeper understanding of the region and by developing new approaches to the challenges of countries in transition.

© 2015 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

