

مَنْبَتِي الْأَقْصَى مِنْ بَيْتِ الْحَرَمِ

## **HOMS city in Syria**

### **Historical and social background for peacebuilding and recovery**



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## 1. The importance of Homs<sup>1</sup>

Homs is an important city in Syria. Its geographical position is unique, being at the crossroad between the North-South line of cities which constitutes the backbone of the fertile crescent and the West-East breach between the Alawite and Lebanese Mountains, linking the coast of the Mediterranean to the Syrian desert.

Homs has a great history, from the period of the ancient city-states towards the Macedonians, the Romans, Christianity, the Arab-Islamic civilization and modern Syria. This history relied on the wealth of the Orontes valley and on the trade between the coast and the West, on one side, and the desert and the East and South, on the other, since ever. Homs was not only a step on the Silk Road, but used to produce silk itself. Its glorious history is reflected in the collective sub-consciousness of its inhabitants with many particularities, symbolized by being the “city of anecdotes”, forging a strong identity. Also, Homs and its region host the most complex social, religious and sectarian mix in Syria, inherited from that history.

In modern Syria, Homs hosted the military academy and played, due also to the active social and political movements it had developed, an important role in the political history of the country.

The population of the city increased significantly, largely overpassing since the 19<sup>th</sup> century that of its Orontes river rival, Hama. But this urban development had not been accompanied by a strong urban integration and the city preserved a unique relation with its rural countryside; a large share of its neighborhoods being developed around old villages and formed of informal constructions. Thus, despite its central role and its connections with Lebanon, especially Tripoli and Baalbek-Hermel, its urban development lacked to give a strong urban role comparatively to Damascus and Aleppo.

Thus, when the uprising emerged in March 2011 in Der’a, Homs was the first major city to experience large overwhelming demonstrations, long before Aleppo and other areas. These demonstrations expressed initially the accumulated social anger against the governor, then quickly moved to express national political and social quest. “*Homs led the uprising from the outset: March clashes in Der’a sparked unrest, but it was the April escalation in Homs that fanned the flames*”<sup>2</sup>. However, and also very quickly, the uprising transformed to a social and sectarian divide, with kidnapping and assassinations, and became armed with regular fighting with the army as early as summer of 2011. Homs was also the first to see the emergence of a “Free Syrian Army”, as organized rebels.

Following, Homs was first Syrian city to experience a fierce armed conflict leading since the fall of 2011 to the occupation of several neighborhoods, including downtown areas, by the rebel fighters. The following months were made of army offensive and rebels counterattacks, with a substantial level of violence, of internationally negotiated ceasefire and of severe siege. Homs became the Syrian “*conflict’s center of gravity*”<sup>3</sup>. It was only in May 2014 that the army took over back most of the city neighborhoods and the remaining rebels transported to the Idlib region, except Al Wa’er neighborhood which followed 3 years later, in March 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> This background paper constituted a “Cercle des Economistes Arabes” contribution to a project with UN-ESCWA and UN-HABITAT.

<sup>2</sup> Holliday, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Holliday, 2011, p. 7.

During the fighting, Homs was the first to experience pro-government militias fighting the rebels, in the first fronts before the army. It was also the first major city to see significant destructions and a large share of its population transformed to IDPs and refugees. Very few returned since and little reconstruction or recovery occurred since.

## 2. Homs history and traditions

### 2.1 A City with a remarkable ancient history

City-States developed in the Region of Homs since the 5th millennium BC. During the Amorites in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, 3 such city-states had developed there to a moderate size: Qadesh (today Tal Al Nabi Mando), Qatna and Tadmor (Palmyra). The first mentions of Homs go back to the 13th century in the context of the famous Qadesh battle on the Orontes river between the Egyptian Empire of Ramses II and the Hittites of Muwatalli II. Homs was then a small village<sup>4</sup>.

The Arameans populated then the region and founded two competing kingdoms having their capitals in Hamath (the present Hama) and Hamath-Soba<sup>5</sup> (later Emesa or Homs, literally “the hot fortress”). They both fall under the Persian invasion by Cyrus in 539 BC until that Alexander the Great conquered the region in 330 BC and his Greek inheritor Seleucus I Nicator developed it and founded Arethusa (Ar-Rastan)<sup>6</sup>. Arethusa served as the first capital of the Emesan kingdom in central Syria which became a vassal of the Seleucids and later the Roman Empire.

The Emesan<sup>7</sup> dynasty of priest-kings of Arethusa worshiped a strong ancient pagan cult of the God Elagabal (figure 1)<sup>8</sup>; a name derived from Elio Baal or Elio Gabal (the God Baal of the sun or the God of the mountain), but romanized as Elagabalus or Heliogabalus (Helios, the sun, in Greek or sol Invictus in Latin). The God was worshipped in the form of conical long black stone, for which

Fig 1. Gold coin depicting the chariot carrying the holy sun God Elagabal from Emesa to Rome, 218-219 AD.



Fig 2. The celebration of the “Thursday of the Sheikhs” in Homs in the 1950’s.



<sup>4</sup> AL DBIYAT, Mohamed; 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Or Aram-Zobah mentioned in the bible.

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, quoting Cohen, Getzel M. (2006). The Hellenistic Settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin and North Africa. University of California Press.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Arethusan (Rastan) dynasty before conquering Homs.

<sup>8</sup> Courtesy the British Museum.

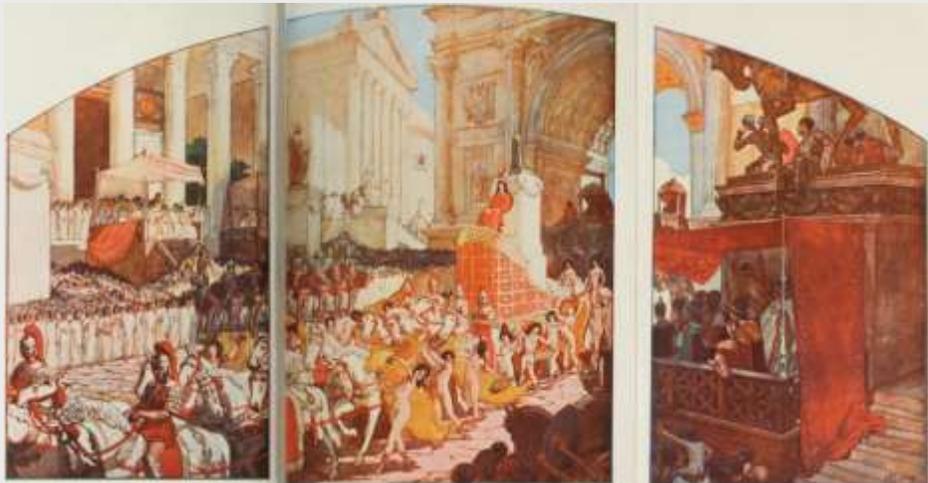
a temple was erected in Ar-Rastan and later in Homs<sup>9</sup>. The rituals of the God were celebrated on Wednesdays in the form of carnivals. Such spring rituals were kept in Homs tradition as the Wednesdays associated with the “madness” of Homs inhabitants<sup>10</sup> and the February to April Thursdays of carnivals (Thursdays of the cats, the fools, the sheikhs, the plants, the dead, the eggs, the secrets, the halva, etc., see figure 2<sup>11</sup>) celebrated until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>.

Fig 4. Gold coin depicting the chariot carrying the holy sun God Elagabal from Emesa to Rome, 218-219 AD.



The dynasty was of Bedouin origin (the sons of Aziz, Azizus of the Arabs<sup>13</sup>). In 64 BC, Sampsiceramus I, son of Aziz, captured and killed the second Seleucid King Antiochus XIII Asiaticus at the request of the Roman general Pompey who reorganized the region as a Roman province. its vassal kingdom added Emesa to its domain, as well as Baalbek (Heliopolis), the Beqaa valley, Yabrud and Salamiyah, building the castle of Shmemis<sup>14</sup> and becoming a strong rival of both Tadmor (Palmyra) and Hama. Lamblichus I, the son of Sampsiceramus I, transferred his capital to Emesa in 48 BC.

Fig 5. The emperor Elagabalus conducting his God to Rome



While having a major Bedouin component, the large urban development of Homs started mainly in this period, the “Golden Age of Emesa”. The city became a major trade hub, with a mix of Aramean, Greek and Latin cultures. Its neighborhoods saw major development of agriculture on the Orontes river, with the construction of norias and the building of a dam at Qattina<sup>15</sup>. Its dynasty erected a majestic mausoleum at the entrance of Homs, destroyed by the Ottomans in 1911 (figure 3)<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, quoting A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*, Routledge, 2002 and Temporini, 2, *Principat*: 9, 2, Volume 8, p.20.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks for part of this historical descriptions to Georges Kadar; see Kadar 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Museum of the Endowment, Homs, after Gillon, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> See Kadar, 2009 and Gillon 1993.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Aziz means the king in old Arabic language.

<sup>14</sup> Which ruins still remain today.

<sup>15</sup> AL DBIYAT, Mohamed; 1995.

<sup>16</sup> By Léon de Laborde, lithographed by Freeman and printed at Kaepelin. - <http://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/idurl/1/16416>, CC BY 4.0,



Emesa dynasty and notables were offered Roman citizenship, strongly involved in the power competition of its Empire. Emesan troops participated even to the Roman siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the second temple in 70 AC.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AC, Emesa became one of the most important cities in the Roman East, with its people considered Roman and characterized as warlike<sup>17</sup> as well as excellent traders. The cult of Elagabal spread in the Empire, and one of its priests originating from Emesa (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, later name as his God Elagabalus) became Roman emperor (218-222), brought the black stone to Rome and built for it a temple in the Palatine hill. He even tried to impose his God as the unique God of the empire; an exceptional event in ancient history after the Pharaoh Akhenaton and a hundred years before the conversion of Rome to Christianity. This was celebrated on coins, depicting the conical stone carried by a four-horse chariot and protected by an eagle (figure 4)<sup>18</sup>. This episode of the Roman history has excited the imaginations in the West since (figure 5)<sup>19</sup>.

Fig 3. 1837 view of Homs and the Mausoleum at Tell Abu Sabun



Fig 6. Julia Domna, Caracalla and Eliogabalus



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=74286093>

<sup>17</sup> According to Kadar (2009), the etymology of Homs means strength and wrath of the God, 'Amash in old Akkadians, *Hemesh* in current Syrian Arabic.

<sup>18</sup> Courtesy [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elagabalus\\_Aureus\\_Sol\\_Invictus.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elagabalus_Aureus_Sol_Invictus.png). English Wikipedia, original upload by Panairjdde.

<sup>19</sup> See per example the novel *L'Agonie* by Jean Lombard, 1902; Illustration by A. Leroux. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:L%27agonie\\_\(1902\)\\_Elagabalus\\_conduisant\\_un\\_char\\_a\\_seize\\_chevaux\\_blancs\\_ou\\_sur\\_un\\_autel\\_de\\_pierrieres\\_reposait\\_le\\_cone\\_de\\_pierre\\_noire.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:L%27agonie_(1902)_Elagabalus_conduisant_un_char_a_seize_chevaux_blancs_ou_sur_un_autel_de_pierrieres_reposait_le_cone_de_pierre_noire.jpg)



Elgabalus was one of the Septimius Severus (born in Libya) and Julia Domna (born in Emesa, daughter of the great priest of Elagabal) linea of Roman emperors founded in 193 AD (figure 6)<sup>20</sup>. It comprised Caracalla (211-217, born in Lyon), Geta (211), Elagabalus (218-222, born in Homs) and Severus Alexander (222-235, born in Arqa in Homs domain). Women of the dynasty played a major role, such as Julia Maesa (born in Homs and sister of Julia Domna) and her daughter Julia Mamea, regent. The other Roman emperor from a Syrian origin, Philip the Arab, born in Shahba in the Hauran valley, lasted only 5 years (244-249 AD).

In 272 AC, a famous battle was won at Homs by the Emperor Aurelian and the Emesan troops, against the queen Zenobia of Palmyra and her general Zabdas.

Because of its particular God, Emesa long resisted to the introduction of Christianity<sup>21</sup>. Its first known bishop participated to the Nicea council in 325 while it gave earlier a pope (named Anicetus, 157-168 AD) and a saint (named Julian). However, the Saint Elian Church in Homs dates to 432. In 452, the head of Saint John Baptist was "discovered"; what led to Homs independence from Damascus, becoming the center of the Lebanese Phoenicia. Most of the region's Christians adopted monophysitism, as Syriacs, and resisted the official Byzantine dogma and persecutions. And thus, the valley of the Orontes was the birthplace of the Maronites, who derived from the Syriacs, before they moved to the saint valley of Qadisha in Lebanon. The Persian Sasanians conquered the city between 613 and 629 just before the expansion of Islam.

Abu 'Ubayda b. Al-Jarrah, accompanied by Khalid bin Al-Walid,<sup>22</sup> conquered Homs in 635 (14H) following the battle of Yarmouk, in agreement with its population who paid a tribute. 3 years later, Abu 'Ubayda resisted in Homs a counterattack of the Byzantines. The Yemeni Banu Kalb tribe settled in the area, after those of Banu Tanukh in Byzantine times. Saint John Church, the largest in Syria, was turned into a mosque. And Homs quickly became a capital of a *Jund* (a military stronghold) governed by Shurahbil.

In the early Omayyad period, the siding of Homs in the Sunni-Shi'a divide has been a controversial issue. The historian Elisseef stated that "*At the battle of Siffin (657), the inhabitants of Homs took the side of 'Ali and for a long time Shi'ism held a preponderant position in the area*"<sup>23</sup> while other authors quoted 'Ali saying "*protect me from Homs people, they showed me what no others show*"<sup>24</sup>, inferring that they were on Muawiya side. Towards the end of the Omayyad dynasty, Homs saw fierce struggles between its Yemeni tribes and the Qaysis following the caliph Marwan II. Homs declined later, but it remained famous for its products, including its wine, praised by the famous poet Al-Akhtal.

Following, Homs fell under the Abbasids, the Tulunids (878-896) with Lu'lu' as its emir, the Ismaeli Qarmats (903-944), the Shi'a and Alawi Hamdanids (944-1016) after being conquered by Sayf al-Dawla. The famous poet Abu Firas Al-Hamadani governed Homs for a year before being executed. The Byzantine Nicephorus Phocas conquered Homs (969-973) and celebrated a mess in its great mosque-church before

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<sup>20</sup> Credit Photos : Julia Domna : Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyon, courtesy : Marie-Lan Nguyen ; Caracalla: National Archeological Museum, Naples, courtesy Wikipedia / Shakko; Elagabalus: Palazzo Nuovo, Musei Capitolini, Rome, courtesy José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro;

<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia, quoting Vitalien Laurent, *Le corpus des sceaux de l'empire byzantin*, t. 5 : L'Église, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1965.

<sup>22</sup> The participation of Khalid bin Al-Walid to this conquest, and his even presence in Homs, is controversial. The Mosque by his name is recent.

<sup>23</sup> ELISSEEF, Nikita; 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Daaje, 2019 quoting Ibn Muzahim Al Mankari and Ibn Al Adim (1192-1262).

burning it. Another Byzantine invasion by the emperor Basil II led also to the burning of the whole city (999).

Then Homs was later ruled by the Mirdasids of Banu Kilab (from 1029), the Fatimids of Egypt (1082, with Khalaf bin Mula'ib as a ruler) and by the Saljuqs (1094, with Taj al-Dawla Tutush, Janah al-Dawla Husayn and Duqaq as princes), before receiving multiple unsuccessful assaults of the Crusaders, which named the city as "La Chamelle" following the old Roman name. And Homs, under Qaraja, became for long a huge military camp against the Franks. This followed a period of struggle on Homs between the Mamluk emirs, Qarakhan or Khayrkhan, Zahir al-Din Tughtakin bin Buri, Shihab al-Din Mahmud, Mu'in Din Onar and Nur al-Din Zangi, while the city with its great walls was still resisting the Crusaders, until experiencing severe damages due to the successive earthquakes of 1157 and 1170.

Salah al-Din, the Ayyubid, took Homs in 1175 and confirmed the governing Asadi dynasty which ruled the city since his predecessor Asad al-Din Shirkuh and fought the Provençaux of Tripoli and the Hospitallers of the Hisn al-Akrad<sup>25</sup>. In 1260, the town was taken by the Mongols but sided with them and fought later alongside Hulegu's troops at Ain Jalut<sup>26</sup>.

Under the Mamluks, Homs lost its Asadi dynasty and fell to a secondary political role, but maintained a major economic activity with competitive and famous wool and especially silk tissues. Later, Homs resisted two unsuccessful tentatives of conquest of the Mongols; the first in 1260 following the destruction of Bagdad by Hulegu and the battle of Ain Djalout; the second in 1281 opposing Abaqa to Qala'un. But it was finally briefly conquered by the Mongols in 1299, before that Timur invaded Syria and sacked most of its cities later in 1400.

Homs population kept in the collective memory a specific myth of this episode, that Timur didn't enter Homs and sack it. After the successful Mongol battle, Homs people went out of the walls, dressed in colorful way, walking backward.

Fig 8. Ottoman administrative organization of Syria 1865-1916

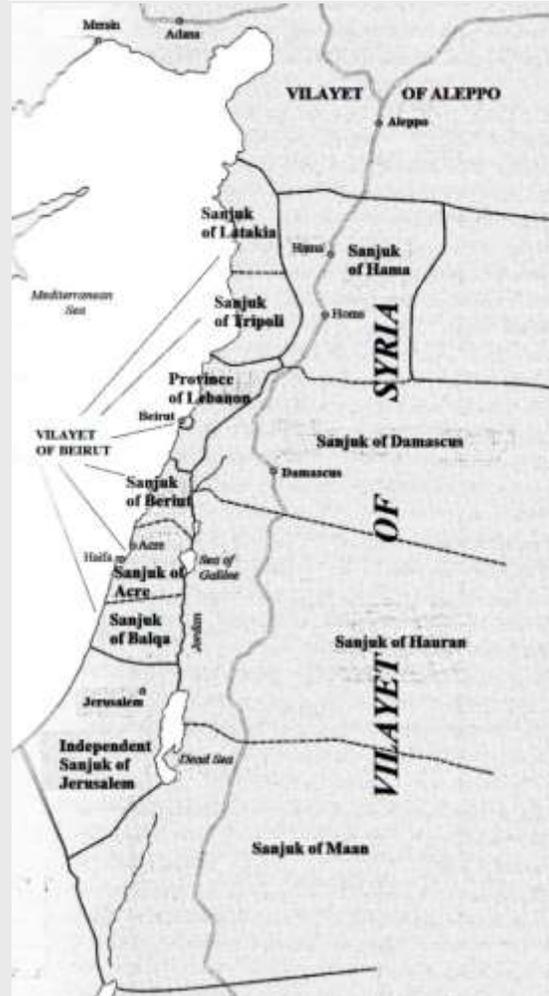


Fig 7. View of the city of Homs in 1799



<sup>25</sup> Named initially the "Fortress of the Kurds", a settlement of Kurds troops, and by the French Crusaders "Krak des Chevaliers" (1110-1271).

<sup>26</sup> ELISSEEF, Nikita; 2007.



Timur refused to enter the city in fear of these “mad” people (!).

This is until the conquest of the Ottomans on the Mamluks in 1516, when Homs became one of the five *Liwa'* attached to the *Vilayet* of Tripoli, continuing its political and demographic decline. The city was long ruled, as well as Hama and Damascus, by the Al-Azem family, granted to them by the Ottoman emperors as *malkana* (a concession for life)<sup>27</sup>. The primacy was taken periodically by either Hama or Homs. Both benefited from being on the road of pilgrimage to Mekka<sup>28</sup>, through Damascus.

The strong walls and the gates of the city (figure 7)<sup>29</sup> slowly deteriorated, before being mostly erased by Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt after its Homs battle with the Ottomans in 1832. After the retreat of the Egyptians in 1841, Homs joined the *Sanjak* of Hama within the *Vilayet* of Damascus<sup>30</sup> (figure 8)<sup>31</sup>.

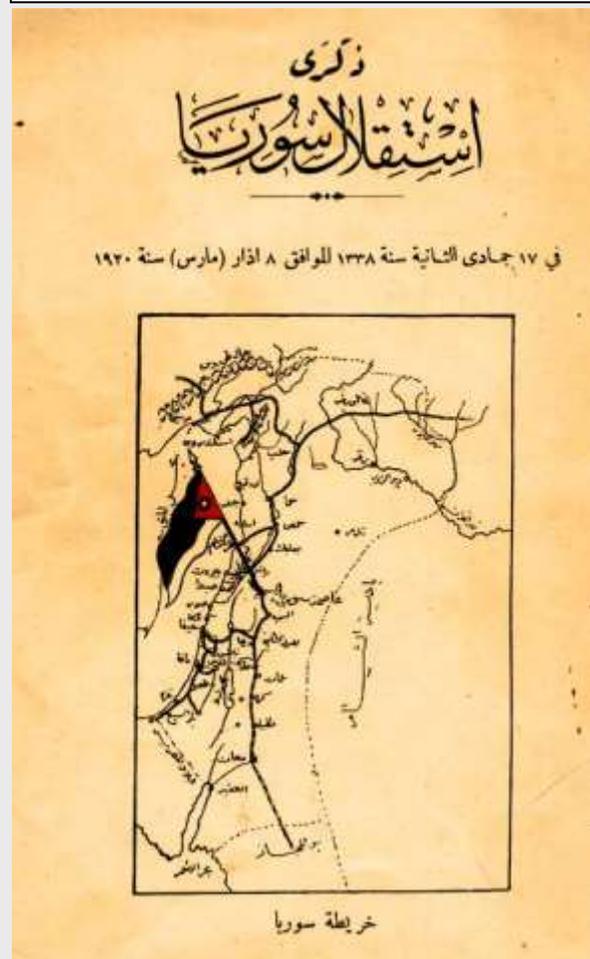
## 2.2 Modern Homs, a political pillar of modern Syria

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Homs started to regain an economic importance. In 1902, the Rayak-Homs-Hama railroad was inaugurated, and the Tripoli-Homs one in 1909. Russian, American and French missionaries disputed influence on Homs, still a major silk tissues manufacturer for the Ottoman empire.

During World War I and after the Arab Revolt of 1916, an Anglo-Indian cavalry regiment entered Homs in October 1918 without resistance. In 1919, Homs sent delegates to the Syrian National Congress (figure 9)<sup>32</sup> which declared the independence of Syria and drafted the 1<sup>st</sup> constitution of the Syrian State. Homs and its region had 5 delegates out of the 90, including Hashem Al-Atassi, later called the “*father of the Syrian Republic*”<sup>33</sup>. Atassi headed this founding Congress.

Following the invasion by French troops in 1920, Syria was put by the League of Nations under a French mandate. The French divided the country in several States and Homs was included, as well as the

Fig 9. Cover of a 1920 book celebrating the



<sup>27</sup> Makki, 1987.

<sup>28</sup> No Ottoman emperor ever made the pilgrimage to Mekka.

<sup>29</sup> View on the castle and city of Homs 1799; drawing of Louis-François Cassas, engraved by Simon-Charles Miger; <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/marbilder/1448749>

<sup>30</sup> AL DBIYAT, Mohamed; 1995.

<sup>31</sup> by Tallicfan20 — based off of Efraim Karsh's Palestine Betrayed, Domaine public, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11299907>

<sup>32</sup> Book by Youssef Al-Sioufi, printed in Cairo.

<sup>33</sup> With Wasfi Al-Atassi, Mazhar Raslan, Murshed Samaan for the city and Da'as Haj Hassan on Husn Al-Akrad.

neighboring Hama, in the State of Damascus. Homs was considered for some time to become the capital of a Syrian Federation.

In 1925, Homs participated actively in the Great Syrian revolt, with Damascus and the Djebel Druze. It suffered greatly during its repression and bombing. Its economic role declined as a silk

Fig 10. The father of the Republic, Hashem Al-Atassi, sitting in a parliament meeting in 1957.



production hub for exportation to Turkey but gained in industry and trade, with its new position as the central crossroad between the different governorates of Syria.

Following the formal independence in 1941<sup>34</sup> and its effective one in 1946<sup>35</sup>, Homs participated actively in the political life of the country and got on several occasions a major role. The presence of the military academy in the city reinforced such role, as the military played a significant role in Syria politics.

Hashem Al-Atassi became president between December 1936 and July 1939 (during the mandate) between December 1949 and December 1951 (until the coup of Adib Al-Shishakli) and from March 1954 to September 1955, following the restoration of the constitution of 1950 and the democracy in a conference held in Homs<sup>36</sup>. The military complied to his authority (figure 10)<sup>37</sup>.

Al-Atassi was a major founder of the National Bloc, a political gathering which played a significant role in the early political life of the country and which held its first constituting congress in Homs in 1932<sup>38</sup>. His son Adnan was a major leader of the competing conservative People Party<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Syria and Lebanon were declared formally independent by France ratifying the 1936 treaty, September 27, 1941 by General Catroux during the Anglo-“Free” French intervention to oust the French Vichy Government from Syria during World War II. See Khoury, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Syria celebrates its effective independence the day of departure of French troops, following a UN Security Council meeting in 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Atassi, 1954

<sup>37</sup> Photo, personal archives, Samir AITA.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, p. 111-112.

<sup>39</sup> Idem, p. 251-253.



Earlier, Homs gave birth to Sheikh Abdel Hamid Al-Zahrawi, an illuminated Soufi who published the liberal journal *Al-Munir*<sup>40</sup> during the late Ottoman period and was executed by Jamal Pasha in 1016.

The Baath party get strong roots in Homs, leading one of its prominent figures, Nour Eddine Al-Atassi, to become president<sup>41</sup> from February 1966 until 1970. With the military academy located in Homs, the city was the center of the collaboration and the conflict between the political parties, including the Baath, and the military officers who conducted several coups. Ar-Rastan, nearby Homs gave birth to Mustapha Tlass, a prominent figure of the Baath military and the former Minister of defense during Hafez Assad. The wife of president Bashar Assad, who succeeded his father in 2000, Asma Al -Akhras, originated from Homs.

Mustapha Al-Sibaï, the premoninent figure of the Muslim Brotherhood and its “general controller” from 1945 to 1964, was also born in Homs<sup>42</sup>. His influence played a major role to obtain a moderate text in the 1950 constitution concerning the place of Islam in the State and the position towards large land owners. He theorized on the “socialism of Islam”.

Also from Homs was Jamal Al-Atassi, a physician who brought marxist ideas to the Baath party before creating the “Socialist Union” with Gamal Abdel Nasser influence and who opposed Hafez Assad until his death in 2000. His Socialist Union was still active in the city and in Syria at the onset of the Syrian conflict.

Homs saw also significant marxist movements, initiated by Badr Eddien Al-Sibaï, a lawyer and a publisher<sup>43</sup>, Zahir Abdel Samad<sup>44</sup>.

The historical Communist party splitted in the 1970’s with Riad Al-Turk, from Homs, heading a party called for long “the political bureau” branch, before rebranding in the “People Democratic Party”<sup>45</sup>. Strongly opposed to Hafez Assad during the 1979-1982 events in Syria, Al-Turk was jailed between 1979 and 1998, as well as most of the active elements of the party. The young activists of the party played a significant role in the uprising of Homs in 2011.

Also, the “Communist Labour Party” emerged in the 1970’s and get a significant influence, especially among young activists originating from rural communities. It also strongly opposed the authorities in late 1970’s and experienced long detention period.

The split between these two marxist opposition movements had social implications. The first had almost no Alawi leaders and the second almost no Sunni leaders.

Thus, political life was active in Homs, comparatively to other places in Syria. On one side, the Baath party and the “National Progressist Front” of its political allies had their influence. On the orther side, the “People Democratic Party”, the “Socialist Union” and other political figures gathered opposition around the “Jamal Al-Atassi Forum” since the “Damascus Spring” (2000-2001) and opened towards the Muslim Brotherhoods, banned and death-sentenced since the 1980’s.

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<sup>40</sup> Idem, p. 57-61.

<sup>41</sup> As well as Prime Minister.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, p. 167-176.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, p. 263-269.

<sup>44</sup> Idem, p. 269-274.

<sup>45</sup> Idem, p. 337-341.

### 3. The city of Homs and its neighborhood

#### 3.1 The city and its administrative divisions

The city of Homs accounts 38 neighborhoods, as per its official administrative layout (figure 11). The old town comprises **Bab Houd** (1), **Bab Al Sba'** (2) – which host the citadel and its hill -, **Bani Sbaee** (3), **Jamal Al Deen** (4), **Bab Al Durayb** (5), **Bab Tadmor** (6) and **Al Hamidiya** (7). Most of these neighborhoods are named after the gates (*bab*) of the old fortified city (figure 12)<sup>46</sup>.

The city developed significantly during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adding the neighborhoods of **Boghtassiya** (8) – with Dablane avenue -, **Al Mahatta** (9) -literally the train station that it hosts-, **Karm Al Shami** (10), **Khidr** (11), **Nuzha** (12), **Mrajeh** (13), **Karm Al Zaitoun** (14), **Jub Al Jandali** (15), **Al Zahra'** (16), **Al Sabeel** (17), **Karm Shamsham** (18), **Al Khalidiya** (19), **Jouret Al Shayah** (20), **Al Qusour** (21) – made initially of villas – and **Al Ghouta** (22) – taking on part of the Gardens (Ghouta) of the Orontes (figure 13)<sup>47</sup>.

Following the independence of Syria, Homs developed significantly further adding several neighborhoods, integrating villages as for **Al Bayada** (23), **Deir Baalba Shamali – North –** (24) and **Janoubi – South –** (25), **Al Abbasiyeh-Muhajereen** (26), **Al Arman** (27) - where Armenian refugees had been originally hosted -, **Karm Al Loaz** (28), **Akrama** (29), **Wadi Al Zahab** (30), **Baba 'Amr** (31), or through public housing development as for **Al Fardous** (32) – also named Insha'at, literally constructions - **Dahyet Al Waleed** (33), **Al Hasawiya** (34) – the industrial zone -, as well as **Mimas** (35) and **Al Wa'er** (36) – on the other side of the Orontes gardens.

This rapid development resulted from a significant growth of population. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Homs accounted 2/3<sup>rd</sup> the population of Hama. Prior to the conflict, its population were 2 times higher

<sup>46</sup> MASRIE & SAJA, 2012. Bab Tadmor lead to Palmyra, Bab Houd to the coastal area, Bab Al Sba' to Damascus, Bab Durayb to the South-East countryside (mostly Syriac). Other gates existed: Bab Al Souk, leading to Hama and Istanbul, Bab Al Masdoud (the closed gate) and Bab Al Turkman.

<sup>47</sup> MASRIE & SAJA, 2012, op. cit. Figure xx is due to Aemilius 04, Creative Commons; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Old\\_Homs\\_City\\_Map.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Old_Homs_City_Map.jpg)

Fig 12. The old city of Homs in 1800

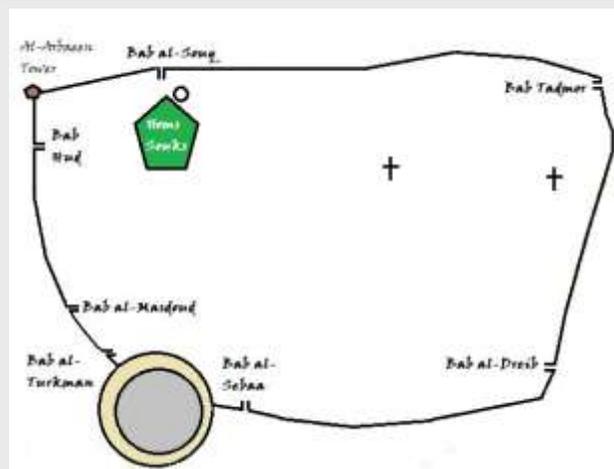


Fig 13. Homs in 1946

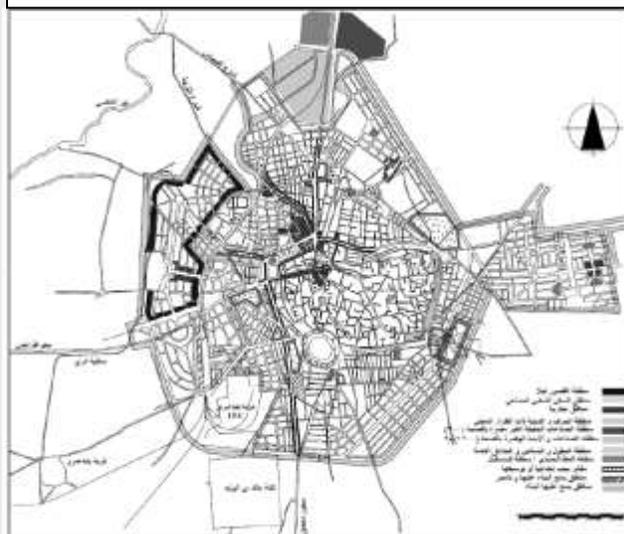


Table 1. Homs and Hama population since the 18th century (,000)

	1750	1840	1981	2004	2011
Homs	20	15	356.8	750.5	774.4
Hama	30	20	177.2	467.9	379.3

(table 1). It was constrained by the presence of the Orontes gardens on the West and by the 2 important, mostly Syriac, villages of Zaydal and Fayruza.

### 3.2 Homs and its governorate environment

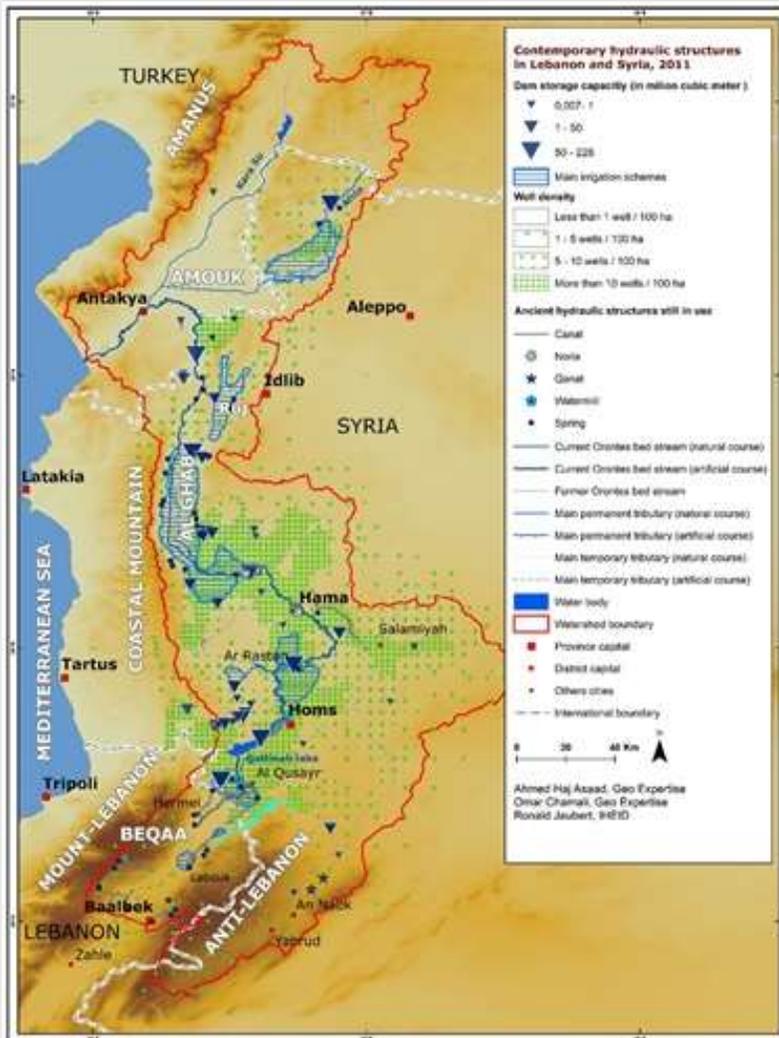
Homs is the administrative center of one of the 13 Syrian governorates, located strategically on the crossing between the North-South highway (Turkey- Aleppo-Hama-Homs-Damascus-Der'a-Jordan) and the West-East highway (Mediterranean Coast, Tartous – and Latakia – Homs – Palmyra – Iraq).

Its governorate comprises 6 districts (or mantika) and 21 sub-districts (or nahia) : the center (12 nahias: Homs city, Taldu, Kherbet Tin Noor, Ein Elniser, Faraqilas, Raqama, Qaryatein, Mahin, Hasyaa, Sadad, Qabu and Shin), Ar-Rastan (2 nahias: Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh), Tall Kalakh (4 nahias: Tall Kalakh, Hadideh, Nasra and Hawash), Al-Qusayr (1 nahia), Tadmor (2 nahias: Tadmor and Sokhneh) and Al Makhram (2 nahias: Al Makhram and Jeb Al-Jarrah). It expands along the Syrian desert towards the Iraqi border with little population.

Homs is situated on the Orontes river which takes source mainly at Ain-Ez-Zarqa in Lebanon just near the Syrian border, between Mount Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, sitting beneath the caves of Deir Mar Maroun. Then Homs shares the Orontes river basin (figure 14)<sup>48</sup> upstream with Baalbek, Laboueh and Hermel in Lebanon, as well as Al-Qusayr in Syria, and downstream with Ar-Rastan and Hama, up to Antioch and Samandag (Suwaydiah, now in Turkey).

Homs governorate accounts around 450 communities (cities and villages). The most important are distributed along the Orontes river and the main highways and roads.

Fig 14. The Orontes basin



<sup>48</sup> Ronald Jaubert, Myriam Saadö-Sbeih, Mohamed Al Dbiyat et Ahmed Haj Asaad, e-Atlas of the Orontes River Basin, IHEID & Geo Expertise, <https://www.water-security.org/>



The small cities on the East of the Orontes were almost empty and abandoned in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There were gradually repopulated by a deliberate Ottoman policy during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>49</sup>.

To the North, the highway to Hama and Aleppo crosses two major cities: Talbisseh (40,135 inhabitants in 2011) and Ar-Rastan (48,068)<sup>50</sup> (table 2), the third and fourth in size. Tir Maallah (9,110); Ghantu (11,096) and Dar Kabira (8,582) are nearby. On the same highway towards the South and Damascus lay Shinshar (3,676) and Hasyaa (7,633); Hisn (Krak des Chevaliers, 10,587) and Kafr 'Aya (8,156) are nearby. Towards the West, the highway to Tartous and Tripoli in the East crosses Kherbet Elhamam (Dhahabiya, 8,463) and Tall Kalakh (the 7<sup>th</sup> in size, 21,705 inhabitants). The highway to the East and Iraq, passes nearby Faraqas (6,588) before reaching Palmyra (Tadmor, the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city in the governorate, 64,031 inhabitants) and then Sokhneh (the 10<sup>th</sup> in size, 19,065) on the way to Deir Ez Zor.

Going South-West, a road gets to the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon through Al-Qusayr (the 5<sup>th</sup> in size, 39,428) and Rableh (6,281). Another road towards the North-West, the coastal mountains and Masyaf takes to Taldu (19,141), Kafr Laha (or Houleh, the 6<sup>th</sup> in size, 24,829) and Tal Dahab (14,813). Shin (17,139), Hawash (4,795) and Al Nasra (1,016) are well in the mountains in the West and more difficult to access.

To the East of Homs, a road going North of the two villages of Fayruza (7,611) and Zaydal (6,731) goes North-East towards Salamiyah<sup>51</sup> and passes through Mashrafa (16,516), while Upper Makhram (6,684) is more towards the East.

More isolated to the South-East in the Qalamoun mountains are the old Syriac cities of Sadad (4,130), Mahin (13,258) and Al Qaryatein (16,776).

Finally, a small city lays on the edge of the Qattina dam and lake (7,095).

**Table 2. Population of main cities in Homs, 2011**

Community	Population 2011
Tadmor	64,031
Ar-Rastan	48,068
Talbiseh	40,135
Al-Qusayr	39,428
Kafr Laha (Taldu)	24,829
Tall Kalakh	21,705
Taldu	19,141
Sokhneh	19,065
Shin	17,139
Qaryatein	16,776
Mashrafa (Ein Elniser)	16,516
Tal Dahab (Taldu)	14,813
Mahin	13,358
Ghantu	11,096
Hisn	10,587
Tir Maallah	9,110
Dar Kabira	8,582
Kherbet Elhamam	8,463
Kafr Aaya	8,156
Hasyaa	7,633
Fayruza	7,611
Qotniyeh (Homs)	7,095
Zaydal	6,731
Upper Makhrim	6,684
Farqalas	6,588
Kherbet Ghazi	6,387
Grandad	6,326
Rableh	6,281
Zafaraniya	6,015
Rabwa	6,004

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, 1987.

<sup>50</sup> All population figures in these paragraphs are in 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Now in the governorate of Hama.



## 4 THE SOCIETY OF HOMS

### 4.1 The complex Homs governorate's society

The Governorate of Homs has a unique communitarian mix (figure 15).

On its North-Western side, the cities and villages are mainly Greek Orthodox, with Nasra, Hawash and Marmarita as main communities. The area includes the Sunni city of Al Hisn (Karak des Chevaliers, or *Husn Al Akrad*, the fortress of the Kurds) and a small number of mostly Murshidis<sup>52</sup> and Alawi villages. Al Hisn city was historically a camp of Kurdish troops and the Murshidi faith developed among the Alawis and others during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>53</sup>.

Its South-Western side is dominated by the city of Tall Kalakh, with a mix of old urban, rural and tribal population and by small Sunni villages with a mixed tribal-rural culture. The countryside is mostly constituted of Alawi villages. Rare Maronite villages<sup>54</sup> exist also in the West of the governorate. The region of Tall Kalakh area hosts historically Arab tribes, mainly the Bani Khaled, that gave the name of the valley on the other side of the border with Lebanon, *Wadi Khaled*<sup>55</sup>. The city became a main administrative center during the French mandate. The whole area is at the junction between the Alawi and the Lebanese, mostly Maronites, Northern mountains.

Closer to Homs in the West, most of the small cities and villages are Alawis, except in the North where the Houla valley hosts Arab and Turkmen<sup>56</sup> large villages, and even small Shi'a ones<sup>57</sup>. Turkmen implementation dates from the Ottoman Empire<sup>58</sup>.

North of Homs, the area is dominated by the cities of Ar-Rastan and Talbisseh, mostly Arab Sunnis as the villages around; but Shi'a<sup>59</sup> and tribal Sunni villages are present in the direct neighborhood of Homs and several Circassian and Daghistani villages<sup>60</sup> to the North. The implementation of the Circassians and Daghistanis dates from 1874, following their expulsion from the Russian Empire.

Several Shi'a villages are also present on the direct Western neighborhood of Homs<sup>61</sup> and far in the South near the Hermel border with Lebanon<sup>62</sup> and Al-Qussayr; the inhabitants of these latter villages being mostly Lebanese citizens.

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<sup>52</sup> Jankarma, Baydar Rafie, ...

<sup>53</sup> Murshid, 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Otan, Marana, Aziz, ...

<sup>55</sup> Many of the Bani Khaled obtained the Lebanese citizenship in the 1990's; see [https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2011/05/110516\\_tel\\_kalakh](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2011/05/110516_tel_kalakh).

<sup>56</sup> Kafr Laha, Taldu, Burj Qaei, Samalil, ... down to Kherbet Elsayda, Qizhel and Um Elqasab in the direct Western neighborhoods of Homs city.

<sup>57</sup> Ghor Samaalil, Western Tiba, Qurb Ali, ...

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, 1987.

<sup>59</sup> Ashrafiya, Kafr Abed, Nejme, Esmailiyeh – Almoktaria, Thabetiyeh, Fadeliyeh, Diyabiyeh, Kherbet Hayek, ...

<sup>60</sup> Deir Fool, Talaamari, ...

<sup>61</sup> Rabwa, Mazraa, Um Eledam, Zarzuriyeh, Um Hartein, ...

<sup>62</sup> Bluzeh, Hawi, Hosh Elsayed Ali, Haydariyeh, ...



North of the Qattina lake, most of the villages are Murshidis<sup>63</sup>. They constitute to most southern expansion of the Murshidi faith. South of the lake, the way from Al-Qussayr to Homs is made of a mixture<sup>64</sup> of communities, with some Greek Catholic villages, rare in other areas of the governorate.

South-East of Homs extends a line of Syriac historical small cities and villages down to Mahin, Sadad and Al Qaryatein, surrounded by a mixture of mainly tribal identities, rural Sunnis and Murshidis.

Finally, the North-East of Homs governorate, towards almost the nearby Palmyra, is populated with Alawi villages, with small Shi'a<sup>65</sup> and tribal ones. They resulted from a voluntary Ottoman policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the villages west of the Orontes valley were empty and unpopulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The whole land was a personal property of Sultan Abdul-Majid. A systemic policy of pacification of the Arab tribes and implementation of peasants from the mountain areas was applied<sup>66</sup>.

The Arab Sunni Muslims constitute a major share of the population, and are mainly present in the cities of Homs, Ar-Rastan and Talbisseh, as well in smaller cities and villages along the Orontes river and along the main highway between Damascus and Aleppo, and in the sub-districts of Al-Qusayr and Tall Kalakh (figure 15). This is in addition to Al Husn, Tal Thahab and Houla (Taldu).

Their social identity and behavior range from old urban families mainly residing in Homs, strong sub-regional attachment to Ar-Rastan, Talbisseh, Al-Qusayr or Tall Kalakh, with rural and tribal background. The tribal identity is mostly prominent in the sub-district of Tall Kalakh, with mainly the Bani Khaled and the Dandash tribes, as well as in the East of Homs.

As most of Homs governorate is a desertic area, it hosts since the historical times Arab tribes that had long interacted with the city and its close regional environment<sup>67</sup>. The **Rwala** are around Farqalas and Hasyaa, the **Wild 'Ali** extends to the Zawiyah mountains; the **Asbi'a** concentrates at Um Hartein near Jun Al Jarrah; the **Ahsina** (Mulhem<sup>68</sup>, Al Fadel), one of the most famous which is mainly present in Saudi Arabia and is supposed to be father of the ruler family there, but settled and worked in agriculture in Eastern and Southern villages of Homs<sup>69</sup>; the **Banu Khaled** (Abd Al Jader, Dandan) that pretends to descent from Khaled Bin Al-Walid, extends to Palmyra and owns a significant flock of sheeps; the **Fawa'ra** which is also rich, have historical relations with the city and extend to all the Northern part of the governorate; there is also the Al Na'im, the Hrouk, the Akeidat, mostly around Rastan, the 'Amour, the Bdour and the famous Sulayb who does not mix or fight with other tribes.

#### 4.2 Homs urban society

The communitarian complexity of the city Homs today mirrors the complexity of its governorate and that of Syria (figure 16).

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<sup>63</sup> Zor Baqraya, Zeiti Elbahra, ...

<sup>64</sup> With some Greek Catholic villages such as Eastern Dmineh, Western Dmineh, Hosh Mershed Samaan, Hamra,...

<sup>65</sup> Um Elamad, ...

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, 1987.

<sup>67</sup> Zakariya, 1945.

<sup>68</sup> With the famous Trad Melhem who was executed by the Ottomans after joining the Arab revolt in 1916.

<sup>69</sup> Including around Qattina lake, Al-Qusayr, Hasyaa, Sadad, Mahin, Qaryatein, Palmyra and even the Bekaa Valley.



In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the old city of Homs accounted for 65,000 inhabitants only, one third of them were Christians, mostly Syriacs and Greek Orthodox. In 2010, Homs was assumed to host 7% of Christians, while 2 villages on the East of the city, Zaydal and Fayruza<sup>70</sup>, not integrated to the city contour, hosts an important Syriac community which considers itself inheriting the first Christianity in the area. Thus, Homs had always have one of the highest share of Christians in Syrian major cities.

The presence of the Christian communities is strong in the historical neighborhoods of the old city, in Bani Sbaee, Bab Al Sba', Bab Tadmor and Jamal Al Deen, but also in new neighborhoods such as Al Sabeel, Jub Al Jandali, Wadi Al Zahab, Al Wa'er and surely Al Arman, which originally hosted the Armenian refugees from their massacre in Turkey.

The Christian historical churches are mostly located in the old town: Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebastia cathedral of the Greek Orthodox in Bab Tadmor and that of Saint Georges in Al Hamidiya; Saint Mary of the Holy Belt (Um Al Zennar) cathedral of the Syriac Orthodox also in in Al Hamidiya; the Holy Ghost cathedral of the Syriac Catholics in Bani Sbaee; and the convent of the Jesuits in Al Hamidiya.

The city of Homs hosts also an important Alawi community, estimated in 2010 to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total population; also the highest share away from the coastal area.

The significant presence of the Alawis in the city goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Alawi community is strongly present in the villages in the western countryside of Homs, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were encouraged to settle - themselves and other communities, Cherkess, Turkmen, Ismaeli, etc. - and occupy the empty villages East of the city<sup>71</sup>. The trading of agricultural products led some to settle in the city. Also an Alawi leader, Isma'il Khayr Bey, governor of Safita, had even aspired to govern the whole province of Homs<sup>72</sup> and controlled effectively large areas of the present governorate. This is while many of the Alawis, especially in the East of Homs, worked, as well as members of other communities, as poor tenants on large agricultural estates<sup>73</sup>.

The Alawis' settlement in the city increased significantly following the creation of the military academy during the French Mandate, training the Special Troops organized by communities. It also developed with the Syrian refugees after the annexation of the Sandjak of Alexandretta by Turkey. Th Sandjak used to host an important Alawi community, including middle class and merchants.

The Alawis chose mainly in the neighborhoods of Nuzha, Akrama, Al Zahra', Dahyet Al Waleed, Al Al Abbassiyeh Muhajereen and Karm Al Loaz, but were also present in Wadi Al Zahab, Karm Shamsham, Al Mreijeh, Al Sabeel, Al Khidr, Al Arman, Al Wa'er and even Bab Al Sba' in the old city. Most of these locations are in the Eastern part of Homs.

The first mostly Alawi neighborhoods started to emerge during the 1940's, with rural-urban migrations for work in industry and civil services from both the Eastern and Western countryside of Homs, as well as

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<sup>70</sup> The population of these now rich villages had largely migrated during World War I to the USA. The migrants send regularly remittances to their families. For all communities, the relations with migration is a key factor in Homs society.

<sup>71</sup> Lewis, 1987, p. 72-73.

<sup>72</sup> Farouk-Alli, 2014 quoting Yvette Talhamy, "The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854–58)", Middle

Eastern Studies, Vol. 44, No. 6, November, 2008, pp. 895–908.

<sup>73</sup> Kerr & Larkin, 2015.



from the high Lattakia mountains, which were culturally different<sup>74</sup>. The rural-urban migration accelerated during the 1950's with the development of the military academy and the industries, and especially with the severe draught that struck Syria for several consecutive years in the second half of the decade. It continued following the 1963 and 1970 coups. However, the divide within the community continued, especially between the hinterland (*dakhel*), originating from the Homs-Hama region, and the coastal (*sahel*) Alawis. The former considered themselves more vulnerable, excluded from the power structure monopolized by the latter<sup>75</sup>.

A small share of Murshidis<sup>76</sup> live along Alawites in the above-mentioned locations.

Homs hosts also a small Shi'a community. In the city, they are mainly present in the neighborhood of Al Abbasiyeh-Muhajereen, but also in the close nearby, as in the village of Mazra'a, South of Al Wa'er, in Al Amin farm near Hasawiya, in the villages of Zarzourieh, Haydarieh and Hayek, near Homs refinery, in the villages of Rabwa, Ram Al Jabal and Um Hartein, West of Homs, in the villages of Kafr 'Abd, Nejmeh, Achrafieh and Saan in the North-Eastern nearby, in Hazmieh North of Deir Baalba, and in the villages of Umm Al 'Amad, Buwaida Salamieh and Tall Aghar, on the East towards Makhram. The Shi'a population in and around Homs was estimated at around 100,000 inhabitants in 2010<sup>77</sup>.

Most of the historical inhabitants of Homs were Sunni Arabs with an urban culture. They were mainly craftsmen, merchants and landlords. However, the rural-urban migration of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century brought significant Sunni rural and tribal population to settle within the city. Many of the present Homs neighborhoods were old villages which had been integrated within the city: Baba 'Amr, Al Khalidiya, Deir Baalba, etc. Culturally, this new urban population kept their initial rural or tribal traditions.

As Homs population had grown significantly with rural-urban migration, most of its population, except the old urban families, kept their strong links with their original villages. As a result, many of the Homs city residents still qualify **Homs as a "big village"**, questioning the urban social integration within the city. The very rapid growth of the population had left no time for deep urban integration. The old urban Sunni families becoming a minority.

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<sup>74</sup> See the document of the student of the Trade Union Institute, Nasser Mohammad Ali, on Nuzha neighborhood, in Hanna, 2019. The Alawis are divided in tribal congregations, with different interpretations of their beliefs.

<sup>75</sup> Khaddour, 2015, p 12.

<sup>76</sup> The Murshidis is a dissident Alawite sect, which emerged in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that not defines themselves as Alawis; See UNHCR <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57dfa3654.html> and Hanna, 2015.

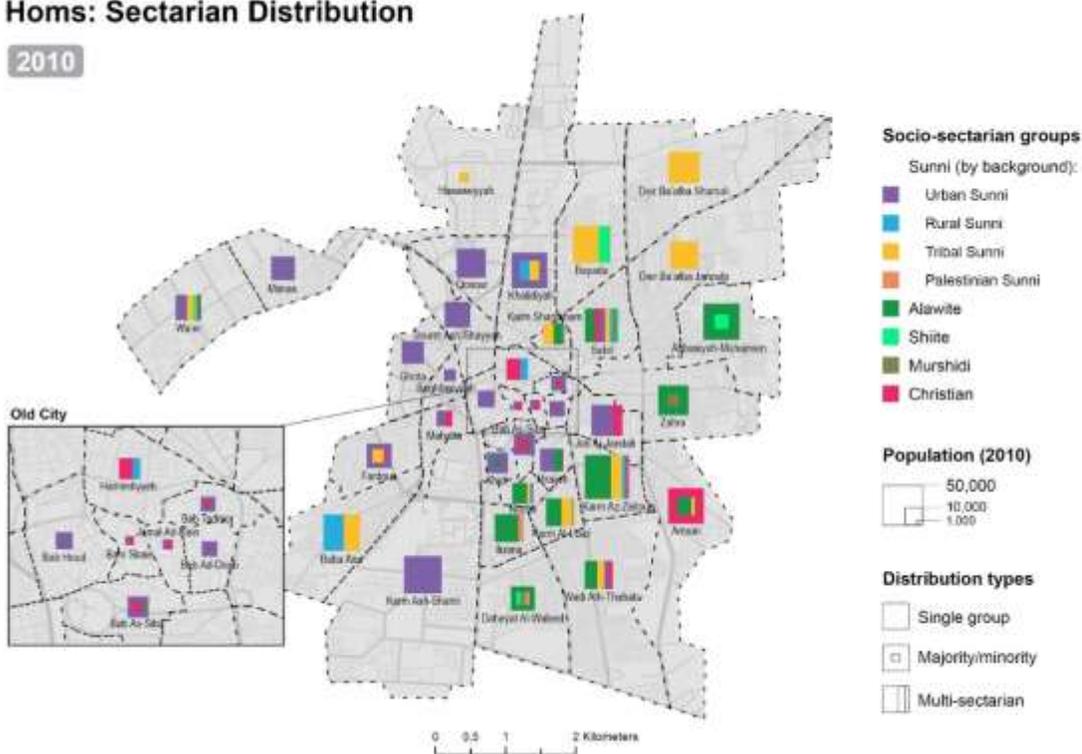
<sup>77</sup> Unknown Opposition Activist: A Study on Protest Movements among the Shi'a in Homs (the Popular Committees) and its impacts; 2015.



Fig 16. The social and sectarian composition of the city of Homs, 2010

Homs: Sectarian Distribution

2010



## Appendix The social role of the soccer ultras in the conflict

Homs hosts two soccer clubs: Al Karama (dignity) and Al Wathba (bouncement). These clubs competed in national, Arab and International competitions.

Al Karama club was created in 1928 and merged with several smaller clubs of the city in 1972. It won several times the Syria tournament and cup. It became a Homs and national symbol, and got an international recognition, especially after achieving the semi-finals in several Asian cup and winning Arab countries cups.

The supporters of Al Karama club were long known for being trouble makers, what resulted in some cancelation of games and occasionally of club successes. These supporters and ultras had been at the origin of several violent incidents prior to the conflict (figure 34)<sup>78</sup>. And it is well recognized that these ultras and their networks had significantly contributed to Homs uprising mobilization and the organization of the first demonstrations. This contribution scaled even up when the goal keeper of the young players team, Abdel Basset Al Sarout<sup>79</sup>, joined the demonstrations, created mobilization songs and voiced on Arab TV channels; thus becoming a prominent figure. Sarout was from Al Bayada neighborhood,



originating from a poor family. He became later a symbol of the Syrian “revolution”<sup>80</sup>, but with controversies on his adhesion to ISIS for a period when still in Homs and to “Al Nusra front” in a later period when evacuated to Idleb. His famous story from the times of common leading of peaceful demonstrations with the actress Fadwa Suleiman (an Alawi) to a fierce combatant symbolize the transformation of the Syrian uprising from a peaceful contest to a civil war.

As in the Egyptian uprising where the role of the ultras had been documented<sup>81</sup>, Al Karama ultras built on their experience of public mobilization prior to the conflict to quickly organize massive and popular demonstrations in the Homs uprising. The scale of such demonstrations and their early occurrence constituted a turning point in the Syrian uprising,



<sup>78</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/294123>

<sup>79</sup> See the study of Omrane Center Al Sarout phenomena; <http://bit.ly/2vyaoc8>.

<sup>80</sup> <http://bit.ly/32yren7>

<sup>81</sup> The role of the soccer ultras in the “Arab Spring” had been well documented for Egypt, but not in the Syrian context; see per example Dorsey, James: Pitched Battles: The Role of Ultra Soccer Fans in the Arab Spring. Mobilization: An International Quarterly: December 2012, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 411-418.



especially that of the clock square in Homs on April 18, 2011 with several tens thousands of protesters and which was repressed by live ammunitions.

The other competing soccer club in Homs, Al Wathba, was created in 1937, and resulted also from merging several small clubs. Its management was mainly constituted from members of prominent families in Homs. However, its supporters were more numerous in non-Sunni environment: Christians, Alawis, secular and politicized families, in particular with a communist background. The competition between the two clubs on national cups long reflected the social belonging of the supporters; and it was common to the ultras of the two clubs to clash on the occasion of prominent soccer matches.

The supporters and ultras of Al Wathba were less involved in the early uprising, especially as they were suspected to be pro-government by those of Al Karama. However, when the confrontation scaled up, starting by kidnapping, rumors or true stories of sexual abuses and individual assassinations, the ultras of Al Wathba played on their turn a role in mobilizing young people in the militias created to face the uprising.

Soccer is still a very popular sport in Syria and particularly in Homs. The support of the national team participation to the Asian cup in 2017 had been one of the rare moments of unification in the social divide created by the conflict<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/sports-39430462>



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