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COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AL-WAER

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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, the Greeks, Romans and Ottomans have each been drawn to Homs, leaving their own indelible marks on the city's cultural, political, and architectural landscape. Homs was not only a physical museum for this rich history, but an incubator for the combination of these societies into one of Syria's most diverse and cohesive major cities. Resting at its northern fringes, on the western bank of the Orontes, Al-Waer is a relatively recent addition to ancient Homs. A consequence of 20th century urban sprawl and domestic migration, it was in many ways the prototypical suburban neighbourhood and an unremarkable reflection of Syria's modernisation.

Though there may have been many 'Al-Waers' before the war, much has of course changed since 2011. A pronounced sectarian dimension to conflict in the Homs area has compounded divisions between government sympathisers and their political opponents, with extensive damage, displacement and discrimination destroying the socio-economic melting pot that had been found in the 'old city' centre. This has consolidated the ethnic homogeneity of neighbourhoods at the city's periphery, each of which have developed their own physically distinct commercial 'quarters'. Given its size, broadly functional local services, and comparatively undamaged infrastructure, Al-Waer has increasingly transformed into such a hub for the predominantly lower middle-class Sunni western Homs.

This is in some ways positive for Al-Waer. It has created forms of economy that were not present before the war and has lent the neighbourhood enhanced importance. Longer-term, however, the future success of Homs will depend on the restoration of links between the dilapidated centre, north, south, east and west. This assessment presents three channels through which donors might work to develop community cohesion between Al-Waer and Homs in accordance with nexus principles:

- **Social cohesion through mental health service development** — in order to support the types of social capital necessary for longer-term inter- and intra-communal reconciliation.
- **Agricultural rehabilitation, water management and governance** — a water and agricultural land management plan concerned with enhancing land and water quality, agricultural livelihoods
- **Community committees for community engagement** - to substitute for direct community engagement in relief and development programming and to provide a platform for expansion of local engagement as operating conditions allow.

PART 1: HDP NEXUS CHANNELS

Social Cohesion through Mental Health Services

Why?

Before the war, Homs was arguably Syria's most religiously diverse governorate. Parties to the conflict weaponised sectarian differences to their advantage however, creating pronounced ethno-religious fault lines that are likely to reverberate for generations. Bloody attacks by Alawite, Christian and Shia paramilitaries against Sunni populations in and around Homs will live long in the memory, as will the prolonged assault and subsequent injustices inflicted on resident Sunnis both prior to and after the reconciliation of formerly opposition-held areas. It must also be recalled that minorities similarly suffered at the hands of local Sunnis in ways which hardened minority identities, fostered anti-Sunni sentiment, and produced stronger intra-minority bonds.

Addressing such sectarian social fissures will be an arduous process. Inter-communal differences in Homs are not only entangled in visceral forms of politically-sponsored violence, they are compounded by ongoing issues of demographic segregation, and the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of residents and displaced people. It is therefore unrealistic to assume that donor-funded interventions will in themselves help Al-Waer to recover from these wounds, to say nothing of the cruelties experienced by the population that did (and do) not have a basis in identity-based tension, competition or difference. Profound damage to societal bonds within and between Al-Waer and neighbouring areas nevertheless demands attention if organic processes of social cohesion are to evolve anew.

Despite strong coincidence in psychological and psychiatric literature regarding the immediate and intergenerational consequences of collective and individual trauma, concrete efforts to address its effects are often missing from assistance deployed by aid and development agencies in conflict-affected settings. Discussions around trauma are also often absent from the peacebuilding community, and interventions concerning mental health are typically marginal to peacebuilding practice. Arguably, this is a symptom of several ongoing debates within trauma studies, yet it ignores the range of social and mental health intervention strategies which have expert support, as well as the widely accepted belief that real reconciliation seldom results only from an end to physical violence.

How?

Social cohesion is a complex multi-dimensional concept and its underlying conceptual basis remains a matter of debate. There is a need to better understand these complexities as they apply to 'post-war' Syria, specifically the extent to which inter-communal trust is generated through historical-cultural terms and/or through a more rationally evolved processes. Presently, however, options for exploring these ideas in practice are limited in Al-Waer. Firstly, because the Syrian government's attitude towards post-reconciled areas prohibits aid actors from working with local leadership institutions to set the tone on key issues of social cohesion. Secondly, because space

for bridging divisions across heterogeneous social groups via mid-level institutions like the media, civil society, and academia is limited. And thirdly, because of the sheer depth of divisions found between Al-Waer and areas with a distinct experience of conflict and its effects.

In this context, focusing on social cohesion as a phenomenon arising from mutually beneficial everyday interactions like economic exchange may be a feasible approach. So too methods which privilege the accumulation of social capital at the grassroots and/or individual level, including health and education services. As noted above, mental health services have the potential to contribute to HDP outcomes, are commonly under-resourced by aid agencies, and are in acute need in Al-Waer (and nationwide, for that matter).¹ SARC reportedly plans to open a dedicated mental health centre in Homs, but the extent to which this facility intends to service needs in Al-Waer is unclear. Engagement with this process to help ensure that it has the broadest possible impact on community mental health is recommended, as are complementary moves via state health authorities, educational service providers, and international health partners (e.g. WHO).

¹ Mental health service provision by the Syrian Ministry of Health is woefully inadequate: There is a nationwide chronic shortage of clinically-trained psychologists and psychiatrists, the Syrian Ministry of Health does not recognise the role of psychologists in mental health services outside of NGO service providers, and the absence of relevant licensing law means professional psychologists are unable to practice independently.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Mental Health and Psycho-social Support (MHPSS) Training

OBJECTIVE

To strengthen local mental healthcare provision with a view to the development of social capital which enhances social cohesion. Institutional capacity development will contribute to a local culture of reconciliation through the healing of conflict-related trauma.

SCOPE

Enhance ongoing efforts to strengthen local mental health service provision through a joint focus on: 1) Training new and existing professionals to support NGO health centres in Homs, and; 2) Increasing the capacity of free mental health services. The WHO has previously carried out MHPSS training in government-held areas, but more support to partnerships between such agencies, the Syrian Ministry of Health, training/education providers (e.g. universities), and accrediting bodies is necessary. Dedicated job opportunities for MHPSS graduates should be created in Al-Waer in order to ensure service coverage, to provide career pathways, and to retain educated professionals in the area. Consider salary support to NGOs hiring training programme graduates in Al-Waer.

RISKS

- Reputational risks associated with engagement of government agencies, as well as government-linked NGOs (SARC)
- The Syrian government and donor organisations tend to prefer direct health provision over human resources for health
- Potential for Syrian government Ministry of Health to insist training graduates are deployed in locations unpreferred by donor
- Project may exacerbate societal divisions across Homs city in the event of beneficiary selection bias.

MITIGATIONS

- Training will in many cases be long-term, necessitating donors to align their support throughout the programme and post-qualification
- Work to flexible funding deadlines to enable likely long-term negotiations with government and other stakeholders
- Build upon prior successes of this kind, specifically the WHO's work to engage Syrian government actors in the development of human resources for health
- Condition salary and/or NGO support on deployment of trained professionals to donor-selected locations.

Environmental Rehabilitation

Why?

Al-Waer's population was not wholly reliant on the strip of agricultural land which separates it from central Homs before the conflict, but the environmental damage endured by this part of the Orontes River valley in recent years has been so extensive as to severely weaken agricultural livelihoods in both Al-Waer and other areas peripheral to central Homs.² This has reduced incomes for many, and has lowered household resilience to economic shocks and the weakness of the Syrian economy in general. Moreover, if the degradation of this land is left unaddressed, it is increasingly likely that it will be lost to unplanned informal urban development over the longer term. The opportunity to protect agricultural livelihoods will then be irretrievable.

² Agricultural employment in Homs decreased by over 80% between 2010 and 2014.

Additional problems lie in the fact that most of the more southerly fields west of Homs city have been appropriated by Shia populations with implicit government sponsorship. Many of the original — mainly Sunni — landowners have been dispossessed, and cultivation of these fields is now undertaken by the predominantly Shiite communities of southern Al-Waer and the satellite villages of Rakab and Mazra. Moreover, downstream pollution means that southerly Shia-run fields are now the most fertile lands in nearby portions of the Orontes. This contributes to tensions between local Sunni and Shia communities, and reinforces apparent discrimination against Sunni residents. If the rights of landowners in more northerly areas are to be restored and investment in agricultural livelihoods encouraged, environmental rehabilitation along the local stretch of the Orontes will be necessary.

How?

The causes of damage to agricultural land near Al-Waer result from the combination of several conflict-related events. Bombardment and damage caused to Homs produced a large amount of debris, much of which fell into the Orontes and flowed downstream into the Al-Waer area. This issue has been compounded by the construction of a dam by Syrian government forces at the Zeina checkpoint in the low density green belt. Waste and sewage from Homs now gathers at the dam, and the government has reportedly taken few steps to improve debris management systems. Reclamation of what remains of land owned and worked by Al-Waer's farmers will therefore require a multi-pronged approach which not only rehabilitates water systems in partnership with local authorities, but which also supports sustainable cultivation.³

³ This research was unable to determine the construction of the dam. Given it was completed in ad-hoc fashion in the earlier part of the conflict and was not part of the formal city planning process, it is highly likely the dam is as described above, an earth-filled embankment. Notably, these dams are notorious for failure.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Orontes River Health and Management

OBJECTIVE

To drive improved water governance⁴ in the Homs-based Orontes River area through enhanced water quality, distribution, and management systems for local agriculture. Such a programme will enhance agricultural livelihood resilience through infrastructural development which: 1) Encourages good water governance, and; 2) Partially compensates for the disenfranchisement of Sunni agricultural livelihoods in the Al-Waer area.

⁴ Water governance as conceived by the FAO refers to the promotion of "responsible actions and measures to protect and ensure the sustainability of water resources and to optimise the services and benefits obtained from those resources".

SCOPE

Engage the Homs City Council, the Homs branch of the General Commission for Water Resources, and international and local partners in a water management project which considers the links between water, land, and agriculture in the low density farming areas between Al-Waer and Homs. Although current practice within water governance is focused on assisting governmental authorities to make the institutional, legal and political adjustments necessary for successful water management, donor organisations are likely to find that a systems-thinking sectoral approach undertaken via local technocracies is more feasible in government-controlled Al-Waer/Homs. Such an approach should at best encourage institutional adaptations which improve local resource governance, and should at least aim to improve land access, tenure and agricultural livelihoods from the perspective of sustainability, inclusiveness and efficiency. Potential synergies between activities undertaken by different sectors must be both considered and exploited as appropriate: For instance, development of irrigation systems should consider the sustainability of livelihoods any such infrastructural development is likely to create and provide supplementary support to farmers support as necessary.

RISKS

- Syrian government security forces control the dam at the Zeina checkpoint and may at times obstruct agreed works for military (and sometimes arbitrary) purposes
- Development of a plan which incorporates synergies across sectors may be complex and require government engagement
- Major property development plans for the northern portion of Homs's farmland could compromise project outcomes
- Lack of locally-available water management expertise⁵
- Communities struggling to meet immediate financial need may be hesitant as to the benefits of sustainable land and water management practices.

⁵ In November 2020 the FAO initiated an [advanced water management training programme](#) for specialists at the Syrian government's General Commission for Water Resources. This programme will develop water management knowledge and practice across eight Syrian governorates, including Homs.

MITIGATIONS

- Work to flexible funding deadlines to support (likely) long-term negotiations with state ministries and other stakeholders
- Operate on a strict policy of non-interference from government-linked security services
- Establish a partner selection policy which emphasises project independence and which privileges competence over political considerations
- Determine partner eligibility through clear criteria and vetting procedures to support adherence to quality, political, and principled assistance standards.
- Establish procedures to ensure local staff protection
- Focus on multiple, lower value, small-scale local tenders to avoid unwanted diversion and monopolisation
- Publicly disclose all information relating to contractors hired by projects and/or project partners.

Community Engagement

Why?

Community participation is regarded as crucial to the identification of needs and efficient project design, yet there is limited scope for direct community engagement in practically all government-held areas. Al-Waer is no exception, and it is highly likely that access for hard infrastructure projects will be easier to secure than for programmes that involve and/or require direct community engagement. Many groups of people in Al-Waer are under-represented in civil and political life, denied a range of rights, and would likely be excluded from discussions around the delivery of assistance. Such groups typically include women, people with disabilities, and IDPs. In a community which the Syrian government identifies with the opposition however, it also includes the Al-Waer population at large.

Community-level assessments are rare in Syria, and is often impossible to design programmes that meet the needs of specific groups of people. This entails that the specific challenges in a given area, their scale, distribution, and impact are seldom uncovered, and Syrian government ministries are renowned for insisting that assessments are only undertaken in relation to specific projects. In practice, this means that programmes must proceed from secondary analysis and/or prior project monitoring, evaluation, and learning data, meaning the prevalence of phenomena that programmes intend to address are only vaguely understood.

How?

Obstacles to community engagement are likely to remain high in Al-Waer. The community remains very much in a post-reconciled state, and the Syrian government continues to exert its authority through the imposition of broadly oppressive policies in which recovery has received limited state support. At the same time, there is often space for aid agencies to coordinate with local partners and government offices in sectors where state security concerns over matters of public compliance are fewer, such as education and health. If forms of community engagement are to be supported in Al-Waer, they must focus on these sectors and expand in step with changes in the local operating environment. This entails a long-term approach to community engagement which goes beyond attachment to individual projects and instead prioritises community engagement as an outcome in its own right.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Long-term Community Committee Support

OBJECTIVE

To establish community committees within the education and/or health sector, with a view to expansion into other sectors as political conditions allow. Committees not only represent a platform for the identification and resolution of community needs, they promote cooperation, communal dialogue, and civil society development. Potential to enhance peace outcomes may arise from the accountability accrued from authorities involved in service provision.

SCOPE

Establish a community committee in Al-Waer to provide community engagement support to education and/or health programmes. Activated when education or health programmes are initiated by local partners, the committee is to bring together influential members of the local community and local professionals including bureaucrats, teachers, and parent association members, as well as representation from commonly marginalised identity groups. Partners are to maintain regular dialogue with the committee, focusing on issues of targeting, beneficiary selection, assessment, and monitoring to support relief and development programmes. Ultimately however, the committee is intended as a platform for longer-term and more extensive community engagement. As operating parameters shift, as trust with government political and security actors is developed, and as restrictions are relaxed, the committee programme could be extended into new sectors.

RISKS

- Syrian government resists formation of the community committee or responds to perceived committee overreach by shutting down the programme
- Exposure of community members to increased government scrutiny and potential protection risks
- Primacy likely given to committee involvement in hard infrastructure projects within education sector
- Requires long-term funding support given expansion of the committee model depends on consistent outcomes within humanitarian and development work.

MITIGATIONS

- Work to flexible funding deadlines to create the opportunity for achievement of longer-term programme objectives
- Operate on a strict policy of non-interference from government security services, conditioning aid project support on continuation of the committee model
- Emphasise selection of broadly representative committee members, including state technocrats, to strengthen government buy-in
- Establish procedures to ensure committee member protection
- Ensure relevant donor-funded programmes are required to routinely engage the committee
- Maintain open channels with the committee to allow for complaints, advice and information sharing.

PART 2: PROFILE

Violence and Security

Reconciliation

Al-Waer is one among many examples of Russian involvement in reconciliation negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition. Initially, the process was overseen by Syrian intelligence agencies, but Russian generals presided over later rounds of discussion with little official Syrian government involvement. Once a reconciliation deal was agreed, Russian military police were stationed in Al-Waer and a limited number of returns were permitted. This helped create the impression that the terms reached following reconciliation would be honoured, and portrayed Russia as a dependable local peacekeeper. The Russian approach contrasted sharply with the more abrasive methods pursued by Iran and the Syrian government elsewhere in Homs governorate, both of which took several opposition-held areas by force and immediately set about weakening dissenting voices.

Of course, Al-Waer ultimately met a similar fate shortly after Russian military police retreated and government-linked National Defence Force units were established in 2018. These units carried out hundreds of arrests in order to reassert government control, and reconciliation commitments that had been upheld by the Russian presence were broadly ignored by government authorities. Inevitably, this has undermined the prospects for transitional justice in Al-Waer, and has only helped solidify the differences between the local authorities and residents that remain opposed to the Syrian government.

Sectarian Divisions

Prior to the war, Homs was perhaps Syria's most ethnically diverse city, with Sunnis living alongside Shia, Christians and Alawites with few serious problems of social cohesion. As conflict in the city has subsided however, sectarian fault lines wrought by fighting around Al-Waer manifest in everyday forms of community exchange, and it is now difficult to envisage these communities coexisting peacefully without concerted and long-term effort from all sides. The experience of Homs Alawites highlights many of the features and consequences of these contemporary social divides, and shows how sect became an organising principle around which communities mobilised out of self-preservation and self-interest.

Alawites have a relatively short history in Homs, arriving mainly in the last forty years to pursue careers via Syria's leading military institutions and strategic state-run infrastructure including power plants, oil refineries, factories, and other key facilities. In doing so however, they created an Alawite hinterland which was only loosely adjacent to their coastal strongholds. They subsequently became exposed to local minority status, were separated from power structures controlled by Alawites in Tartous and Latakia, and created modest communities that are sometimes mischaracterised as vastly advantaged compared to the Sunni Arab majority. The reality is that many Alawites in Homs were in fact excluded from the echelons of power to which their coastal peers commonly ascended, and many likely found greater affinity with local Sunnis of their own socio-economic class than with coastal Alawites.⁶

⁶ Nakkash, A. (2013), [The Alawite Dilemma in Homs](#). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

When the uprisings began in 2011, many local Alawites were therefore supportive of revolution until it became clear that they were amongst the targets of the early violence. Homs-based Alawites were therefore confronted with a difficult choice. Vulnerable within an uprising that contained decidedly anti-Alawite themes yet reliant on the state for their livelihoods, most were unable to conceive of their survival outside allegiance to the Syrian government. Even if they were supportive of revolution, their choice to endorse the Syrian government was therefore qualitatively different from that which is commonly ascribed to Alawites in Syria and derived from a subtly different kind of fear for self, friends, and family.

In this context, the evolution of Alawite communities into paramilitaries was a natural one. Multi-faceted connections to the state and its security services, government propaganda, attacks on Alawite villages, numerous kidnappings and killings, and the ceaseless recruitment efforts of the mukhabarat each contributed to Alawite solidarity in Homs and prompted many to take up arms alongside government forces. It soon became impossible for Alawites to travel Sunni neighbourhoods and vice versa, including in Al-Waer. Patterns of violence established by sectarian alignments were exploited by conflict parties, and have now been baked into the city's social, political and urban geography by nearly a decade of rivalry and urban destruction.

Governance

Municipal council

Al-Waer's Municipal Council was established by the nationwide local elections process in September 2018. It is, however, relatively small when compared to most councils that serve a similarly large population, and comprises just 11 members. As is common to municipal councils throughout government-held Syria, most serving councillors are drawn from local branches of the Ba'ath Party, or have been long-term supporters of the Assad government. This is often something of an obstacle to council legitimacy in former opposition-controlled areas, but Al-Waer's Municipal Council is fairly well regarded and local sources report it is broadly representative of the area's major stakeholders.

Despite its reported popularity, Al-Waer's Municipal Council is considered to have neither the financial means, the administrative capacity, nor the autonomy to have a determining influence over decision-making in the community. Indeed, it is presently resourced and structured in such a way that local administrative power determined by Decree 107 of the Syrian Constitution⁷ has remained largely in the hands of the Homs City Council. Al-Waer's local governance structure is therefore often peripheral to the local decision-making process, and is very much a reflection of the Syrian government's general unwillingness to devolve power where former opposition groups were once dominant. It was not found that figures from within Al-Waer's local administration were particularly influential at higher levels of the Syrian administration, though some connections with the security services will almost certainly exist in some form given the nature of local reconciliation negotiations.

⁷ Specifically, that which determines a decentralisation of governance in Syria, and that local administrations would therefore be afforded more power over local affairs.

Al-Waer and the ‘Homs Dream’

Presiding over Homs-wide urban plans, Homs City Council holds much of the funding used to orchestrate Al-Waer’s urban development. Before the conflict, it ensured that Al-Waer was a well-serviced, primarily modern residential middle-class neighbourhood with a population that supported city-wide commerce and industry. This was in line with the pre-war Homs city master plan, which identified Al-Waer as primarily ‘residential’, and highlighted the importance of linkages with both central Homs and the city’s light industrial area, Al-Hasaweyya, to Al-Waer’s immediate northwest.⁸ Buoyed by lower property prices, good local services and reasonable access to central Homs, Al-Waer was thriving in its role as a suburban commuter town in the pre-war period and had been amongst the city’s fastest growing neighbourhoods. Of course, more recent times have redrawn the contours of the urban map in Homs, prompting the City Council to reevaluate Al-Waer’s role in a manner consistent with its broader plans for urban regeneration.

⁸ Hosting several thousand factories and workshops, Al-Hasaweyya was a major source of local employment until a combination of damages and large-scale looting forced most of these businesses to close early into the conflict.

These plans are a matter of ongoing controversy in a city which is now afflicted by multiple layers of social division, and none more so than the now revived Homs Dream project. Conceived in 2007 by former Homs Governor Iyad Gazal,⁹ Homs Dream was presented as an opportunity to embrace modernisation and urban improvement. Residents widely condemned the plan however, objecting to what they claimed was another example of top-down Assadist urban planning concerned mainly with the enrichment of regime-linked figures and government interests. Focused on several of the city’s poorest and most unregulated¹⁰ Sunni-majority neighbourhoods, the project required the resettlement of thousands of people and reportedly offered pitiful compensation to those affected by planned redevelopment. Public opinion was ignored however, and were it not for the outbreak of conflict in 2011, it is likely that high-rise tower blocks and commercial districts in the image of downtown Beirut would now be under construction.

⁹ It is assumed that Gazal remains a key figure in the Homs Dream project.

¹⁰ Unregulated here refers to unplanned, tightly packed, and somewhat informal urban areas.

Regrettably, conflict appears to have presented only a temporary obstacle to those involved in remodelling Homs’s urban centre in their own interests. Last year, the Syrian government announced it would permit the Homs Dream project to restart given the need to address heavy damage caused to former opposition-held areas in central Homs. Many in the city reacted to this news with a familiar sense of resignation, noting the obvious correlation between excessive levels of conflict-related damage and Homs Dream development areas, particularly in the now infamous Baba Amr and Jobar neighbourhoods. Indeed, as the government moves to reshape the urban core, the prospect that it will do so inequitably looms over the city at large.

In 2018, the Syrian government rezoned three predominantly Sunni (and formerly opposition-held) areas in the old city, Jouret Al-Shiyah, Al-Qoussour, and Al-Qarabis. In most cases however, compensation given to those affected by this process amounted to less than 20% of the land value, and reflected a broader trend towards the denial of housing, land and property rights by the Syrian government in law and practice.¹¹ As a result,

¹¹ In its study on the legal obstacles to HLP rights in Syria, PAX notes that, on average, and where eligibility can be proven, property owners affected by urban zone planning processes receive 17% of the total value of the land. It elaborates on a range of laws introduced alongside the notorious Law 10 which have similarly restrictive effects on HLP rights in Syria.

there is a strong prospect that regeneration plans like the Homs Dream will solidify — rather than alleviate — socio-economic differences and sectarian geographies in Homs. These processes have already begun to make their mark on Al-Waer, and the neighbourhood has increasingly shifted away from its largely residential pre-war status towards one of growing economic importance to the dispossessed Sunnis of formerly opposition-held central Homs. This, in turn, is contributing to the segregation of Homs into ethnically- and politically-differentiated urban quarters, feeding the kind of opposition vs government and Sunni vs Shia dynamics that were (and remain) a feature of the city’s broader socio-political landscape.

Social

Al-Waer and a Divided Homs

During the conflict in Homs, many central and northern parts of the city were completely destroyed. Destruction to the centre reduced everyday forms of exchange between different community groups, and now feeds inter-communal feuds produced by nearly a decade of conflict and competition. Difference and opposition now define the distribution of community groups across the urban environment, and Homs can now be roughly divided into three quarters distinguished by certain socio-political and/or religious characteristics. In keeping with their historical concentration close to government institutions located in southeastern Homs city, the south and east remain largely Alawite. Having traditionally hosted the city’s main Sunni populations, the west became home to anti-government Homsis displaced from the damaged centre. And Al-Waer, effectively an extension of western Homs, is home to a similar population but also perhaps the city’s greatest concentration of ‘outsider’ Sunnis, namely, IDPs, pre-war economic migrants, tribes,¹² and the most ardent anti-government sympathisers.

¹² Including Sunni Bedouin from the Banu Khaled and Fawara tribes, as well as Bedouin Turkmen.

As a result of these shifts, Al-Wa’er has lost something of the demographic colour it had before the conflict. Whereas sizable Shia, Alawite and Christian communities lived alongside a majority Arab Sunni population before the war, few of Al-Waer’s minorities remain in anything like their pre-war numbers. Most of the district’s more affluent Alawite and Christians left under threat of violence, and less than 20% of Al-Waer’s population is now reportedly Shia, most of whom are concentrated in Al-Waer’s more southerly reaches close to major factories that employ large numbers of Shia and Alawites. As a result, Sunnis are now a greater overall proportion of the local population and broadly comprise three types: Bedouin and Turkmen tribal migrants who came to Al-Waer in the 1970s and 1990s, intracity IDPs from destroyed parts of ‘old’ and northern Homs, and the suburb’s long standing Sunni resident population.

As Al-Waer evolves into an increasingly important commercial center, the division of Homs city becomes a matter of particular concern to those seeking to promote socio-economic development without compromising prospects for cultures of truth, justice, and reconciliation. Too much of an emphasis on the redevelopment of Al-Waer at the expense of central Homs may inadvertently reinforce the social divisions that the old city had historically diminished. Indeed, until central Homs is rehabilitated, there is every possibility that the city may well remain split into distinct enclaves

where mutual hostilities are able to fester, undermining longer-term social cohesion and community stability. Development work undertaken in Al-Waer should therefore attempt to strengthen linkages with central Homs wherever possible, and contribute to the mutual recovery of demographically distinct neighbourhoods.

Sectarianism in the Suburbs

In the immediate southern vicinity of Al-Waer are two Shiite villages, Rakab and Mazra, whilst western rural Homs is scattered with Shia and Alawite villages as far as Tel Kalakh.¹³ Owing to wartime clashes, and having been exacerbated by the sectarian tensions now common throughout Syria, many Sunnis in Al-Waer are strongly opposed to these communities. Indeed, Shia and Alawite militias from this area were instrumental in imposing significant access restrictions on Al-Waer, and were known to have carried out attacks on residents in the suburbs. Shia and Alawite communities near to Al-Waer also have linkages with eastern Homs city given family ties and the migration of many away from opposition-held areas to eastern neighbourhoods.

13 Indeed, the concentration of Alawite village also extends northwards as far as western rural Hama.

Displacement

Al-Waer's population has ebbed and flowed in patterns common to other reconciled locations. A first wave of displacement from the neighbourhood took place at the start of conflict in Syria, with religious minorities and the middle class fleeing early on. Given the relative size of Al-Waer's middle-class in particular, this left a notably large hole in the neighbourhood's original resident population, most of whom moved to the more affluent parts of Homs city, Syria's coastal regions, and central Damascus. The departure of the wealthy and local minorities did not, however, result in a massively decreased local population overall. In fact, until it fell under concerted besiegement by government forces in 2013, Al-Waer was amongst the most important displacement destinations in Homs governorate. The neighbourhood's relatively consistent public services were a major draw for the tens of thousands of people fleeing government-held areas and, for a time, this proved a major factor in the neighbourhood's description as the region's foremost 'humanitarian shelter'.

All that changed with besiegement and eventual reconciliation. Under pressure from government forces controlling entry points and main supply routes, people steadily streamed out of Al-Waer, and a final organised displacement resulted upon conclusion of the reconciliation agreement. Thousands are thought to have left at this time, most for northern Syria, primarily Jarablus district in Aleppo governorate. Though they had largely endured the changes in Al-Waer since 2011, many local Bedouin Turkmen tribesmen were also evacuated upon reconciliation. Notably, however, around 3,000 remain, and leaders from this community have negotiated a special relationship with the Russian Hmeimim Reconciliation Centre whereby they are permitted to appeal to the Russians in the event of local disputes.

An end to local hostilities, relatively low levels of damage, and fairly well-functioning service networks are amongst the main reasons why Al-Waer's population has climbed since reconciliation. Leaving the large-scale destruction of central Homs behind, the Sunni middle-class have been the primary arrivals, yet this group has also been attracted by the neighbourhood's cheaper rents and Al-Waer's steady transformation into an alternative commercial centre for Homs. It is also worth noting that the Syrian

government was also proactive in arranging for the return of Al-Waer’s pre-war and displaced populations shortly after reconciliation, including individuals that would have arguably been arrested by state security forces in other post-reconciled locations. Most observers regarded the permission to return with cynicism however, noting this was largely a media stunt which took advantage of the government’s failure to meet its commitments to the reconciliation agreement.¹⁴

¹⁴ In August 2017, for instance, the Syrian government arranged for residents evacuated to Zohra Camp, in Aleppo Governorate, to return to Al-Waer without fear of reprisals. Notably however, conditions at the Turkish-managed Zohra were extremely poor and the evacuation caused a strong local reaction.

Economy

Prior to the conflict, economic activity in Al-Waer was largely related to the supply of labor and services to Homs city and the Air Defence base. Middle classes from Homs city had also been moving steadily into the area, variously taking up work in the public and private sectors of central Homs as skilled laborers and professionals. Agricultural land in the Orontes river valley was also an important source of local income, though the majority of the farmers did not live in Al-Waer itself, and instead lived along the Orontes or in the Homs city periphery.

Since the end of direct conflict in Al-Waer and reconciliation, the suburb’s economy has in some ways expanded, albeit in a distinct manner to its pre-war pattern of growth. The majority of Orontes Valley farmland in the immediate vicinity of Al-Waer is less productive because of environmental damage caused by damming of the river. Public and private sector work has also inevitably declined. At the same time, conflict-related dynamics have generated new opportunities, with Al-Waer becoming an increasingly notable commercial hub. There is a large market in nearby Khirbet Tin, an Alawite village southwest of Al-Waer, which was created subsequent to access restrictions imposed on Homs city during the height of local hostilities. Khirbet Tin is now one of the largest markets in western Syria, and is now a major destination for goods produced in Lattakia and Tartous given the prominence of local Alawite merchants. Souk Tijaree, located in central Al-Waer, has become a functional marketplace for individuals living in the suburb itself. Most Souk Tijaree merchants are members of the Homs old city Sunni business class who relocated to Al-Waer.

There is also a major exhibition hall in Al-Waer which has become an important center of economic activity. During the conflict, the Al-Waer exhibition hall provided a covered and protected space for approximately 300 shops. The exhibition hall, managed by the Homs city trade room, continued to rent space in the hall to local merchants throughout the conflict. Though majority of local merchants left Al-Waer following the reconciliation agreement, the Al-Waer Chamber of Commerce has continued to offer out commercial rental space in the exhibition hall on short-term letting arrangements. It is understood rents were kept artificially low in order to encourage business between 2017-19., but these preferential terms have reportedly come to an end more recently. Even so, the exhibition hall represents an important centre of local commercial activity in Al-Waer.

One of the major growth sectors in the Al-Waer economy is in the real estate market. A relatively large contingent from old and northern Homs’s Sunni middle class have

relocated to Al-Waer due to inexpensive rents and the suburb's steadily improving economic potential. Local sources report rents can be 50% less than in central Homs city, helping position Al-Waer as an area likely to rebound as Homs' new commercial focal point. It is important to note, however, that this may have a deep impact on the socio-political stability of Homs city as a whole given eastern Homs may become isolated, and the previously lively commercial activity of Old Homs may be marginalized.

Agricultural degradation

Al-Waer lies on the western side of the Orontes River, just across from what was once relatively fertile land fed by irrigation systems linked to the Qattinah Dam (Homs Lake). These lands are described as having been rich in fruit and vegetable crops prior to the conflict, and reflected the excellent natural conditions for agricultural production along the middle portion of the Orontes River Valley. Relatively few people living in Al-Waer own farmland in this area, largely because many current residents are drawn from the displaced populations of northern and central Homs.

That Al-Waer's local economy is geared more towards service- and industrially-oriented activity than agriculture is fortunate for most of its residents. During the early part of the conflict in Homs city, Syrian government forces established the Zeina checkpoint in the Orontes River valley on the main route between central Homs and the Al-Waer suburb. These forces subsequently dammed the river, causing sewage and debris produced by ongoing fighting in Homs city to gather and pollute agricultural land beside the Orontes. This land was amongst the most productive in Homs governorate and areas that were once accessible to residents of Al-Waer and Homs city have since been heavily degraded. What fertile land that does remain in the Orontes valley near Al-Waer now lies further south, much of which has been taken from its original, largely Sunni owners and appropriated by farmers in the predominantly Shia villages Rakab and Mazra. If original landowners are to return to the area and help revitalise local agricultural economies, work to redress poor environmental management will be necessary.

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