

A Decade After The Syrian Conflict; What Has Changed In The Syrian Family Shape?

Conflicts and wars have devastating effects on countries, not just on the physical devastation in the infrastructure, agriculture, and installations; beyond that there is also a kind of destruction that afflicts the individual, the family, and the community, which will reshape the society in its various spheres in ways that differ, somewhat, from its initial form.

In the last decade, Syria has been exposed to two major seismic events that had a great impact on its society structure in its various circles. The first is a wild wave of popular protest between 2011-2012 which carried many ideas of change, and the second is the military conflict that began in 2013 between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

The Syrian families have been affected by military conflicts, which has manifested in a disruption in the community structure, the weakening of family cohesion, and the increasing of some social problems.

Although the Syrian conflict is not yet resolved, the changes in the Syrian society seem to be clear, and it may become a lasting change that could shift the Syrian family shape in the future.

New family shapes

The conflict years changed the traditional pattern of the Syrian family, which consisted of a father, mother, and children living in the same apartment or parents living in their house and their married sons and daughters in others near them.

The war effects have given birth to new shapes of the Syrian family that had not been previously familiar. These new forms include the elderly family, where parents live alone in the country. All their sons and most of their married daughters have gone to another country due to military conscription or for the sake of a new life or job, or have been disappeared, killed, or forcibly deserted.

Among the new noticeable forms that are becoming familiar are several big families living in the same house with many females (sisters, aunts, and wives), and kids (sons, daughters, cousins, and cousins); all of them supported by one male, if any.

There are also families that consist of aged grandparents who are taking care of large numbers of grandchildren after the absence of their parents for different reasons; or families controlled by the eldest kid who takes care of the rest after the death, war injury, or disease of one or both parents.

Changes in family members' roles

One of the most dramatic changes in the Syrian family is the changing roles between its members. Many women have been forced to leave their homes and enter the labor market often without any qualification. They do this given the absence of a social or family environment that can help or compensate for their absence from home.

In addition, a number of men found themselves in a different role; from being breadwinners, they have now become unemployed, disabled, injured; in short, they are forced to be dependent.

On the other hand, we can notice some cases when one or both parents evaded their responsibilities; such as when a mother leaves her kids alone in the camp without any adult because she cannot provide for them, or when the husband arrives at an asylum country, starting his new life and ignoring his wife and kid's needs, or when the husband depends on his wife's work, taking her money and refuse to work or help her.

Some kids — boys or girls — have had to leave school and enter the labor market early with very low salaries and spend long hours doing risky jobs; these kids took the responsibility for supporting their family when their breadwinner is absent or the parents are unable to meet the entire needs of the family. Meanwhile, many teenage girls must take care of their little brothers and sisters for a long time when their mother is ill or working or died.

The high rate of child recruitment and participation in military operations in various regions cannot be ignored; the Assad regime has recruited many teenagers into national defense militias and the Iranian militias. While ISIS recruited, trained, and enlisted many children in what is known as “the Caliphate's cubs camps”, some opposition groups and HTS also have intended them and included them in the fighting, while the Syrian Democratic Forces have abducted a number of teenagers (boys and girls) and recruited them in their forces.

Relationships within the family

The rate of spinsterhood in the Assad regime regions has risen to 70%, while the marriage demand rate has decreased by 45% according to 2019 statistics given the decrease in the number of young males compared to females due to immigration, detention, and joining the army, in addition to the economic difficulties that have made marriages a heavy burden.

In opposition areas, marriage rate has risen as a result of the rising number of young males, and it became easier and less costly compared to pre-war era. Men now are marrying two or three wives for various reasons, given the high number of widows and single females. The rate of minor marriages (males or females) has also increased significantly. Early divorces in the first year of marriage have increased, especially when the marriage involves young males.

On the other hand, marriage and divorce notarization seem problematic, many marriages are performed religiously without official papers, especially in opposition areas, where local notarization of marriages, divorces, and births are almost impossible to find.

The Syrian war also affected the pattern of family relations; political affiliations have caused major cracks in relationships, sometimes caused divorce, abuse, or even estrangement. People of the opposition side were persecuted by the security forces following reports from their own relatives. Some Assad regime supporters have also disowned their relatives who have been prosecuted or arrested, or who have defected from the Assad army, or their alignment with the opposition confirmed.

Although there are parts in Syria that are relatively stable, the ongoing social changes in many parts of the country still greatly affect the Syrian family formation patterns. However, these new changes suggest that the shape of the upcoming Syrian society will be fundamentally different in its social, psychological, and economic terms. All of these reasons will base a new form of social relations and values that bind Syrians in the future. Thus, no sustainable peace can be built unless these changes and their causes are studied, and their effects anticipated.