Building urban livelihoods: two generations in an unauthorized settlement in Damascus
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5. Building Social and Cultural Capitals

In this chapter, I first provide a general overview of existing social and cultural capitals of diverse social groups in Syria. In doing so, I concentrate on the relations among the different religious groups who live in the country. This provides the context for the group that is the focus of this thesis, namely the minority group of Christians in Damascus among whom I performed my fieldwork. I then focus on the pattern of the Christian rural-urban migration toward Damascus over time and in the current situation and indicate how this group of people made use of social networks to gain access to the city. I analyze social and cultural behaviour inside the local community and the networks and interpersonal relations that provide bridges to adjacent neighbourhoods and links to the wider urban community (Putnam, 1994).

The main question concerns the forms that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital take in Duelha, and their strength in supporting the livelihood strategies of low-income households. Under bonding social capital, I examine which kinds of social relations households have within the community, based on kinships, spatial proximity and social religious organization (e.g. church).

Bonding capital entails the concept of trust, which plays an important role in building social capital. However, it is also the result of social capital, as local communities perceive adherence to social norms as contributing to the notion of “us and them”. Bonding capital, in the local community of Duelha, concerns the extent to which the local community is bound together and how this affects the physical space in the neighbourhood concerned. The issue is raised of the extent of violence or lack of safety which is found in unauthorized settlements, as examined by Moser (1998). The question is to what extent safety and the feeling of security, as well as the attitude of belonging to the community prevail in these types of neighbourhoods. A second issue is the way that physical proximity helps bonding capital to grow. However, the notion of sharing leads to a limited degree of privacy.

Bonding capital can also be seen in the extent of financial trust which exists within the neighbourhood; e.g. in the form of financial informal networks within the community members (rosacas) which have vital roles to play in supporting low-income households and individuals in many areas of the world.

Bridging capital helps provide links between the local community and other groups inside the geographical area and elsewhere. Inside Duelha, social networks through church groups and its services provide evidence of such bridging capital, in an area where formal
organizations are scarce. The local RC, as well as parishes of other dominations, are also forms of bridging capital. Networks linking the local community with rural areas can also be seen as a form of bridging capital in rural-urban relations.

Woolcock and Narayan (2000) make clear distinctions between bridging and linking social capital. They consider the relationship between local communities and government as linking social capital, a wider network than the bridging social capital with other communities. The extent to which bridging and linking social capital complement each other is well-articulated and theorized on the basis of government, and ruling group, with poor and less powerful groups. The core idea of bridging social capital according to Woolcock and Narayan is that "in society (communities) with good governance and high levels of bridging social capital, there is complementarities between state and society, and economic prosperity and social order are likely. But when a society's social capital inheres mainly in primary social groups disconnected from one another, the more powerful groups dominate the state, to the exclusion of other groups" (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000: 239).

Linking capital concerns the ways that the local community is linked with another level of social strata, in which the level of assets that the other partner has is higher than that of the local community people. Harriss has criticized this concept as representing a non-political way of defining 'patron-client' relationships (Harriss, 2001). The various churches and missionary orders play a major role in linking local communities to more powerful organizations and groups, as in the case of looking for job opportunities via personal contacts.

Religion plays a special role in social capital, with the role of the church or other religious organizations enhancing bonding capital among the local community involved by mobilizing individuals and groups and by providing services and activities. The relations between the different religious groups in Syria are very sensitive and are influenced by outside global political situations. For example, the Christians’ relations with Muslim Sunnis are much more distant than with the Muslim Alawits. I will elaborate on the religious relations between various groups in order to provide a background for the analysis of the local situation in Duelha and the relation of residents with other communities.

Social capital can be analyzed in a positive sense as a form for the general inclusion of social groups according to gender, ethnicity, religion and class. However it can also be used as a form of social exclusion on the basis of specific characteristics. The main question is how we should perceive the Christian community in Duelha. That is either as a concentration of people involved in strategies of building social capital, or as a space of exclusion and a place of refuge for outcasts? Social relationships -for example, based on gender, ethnicity, caste/class and age- are transformed in cities and provide increased inclusion for some and greater vulnerability and social exclusion for others. This transformation of social relationships affects the relative strength of social capital within and between social groups. For example, women and lower caste groups are often less constrained by traditional values in urban areas. On the other hand, ethnic or religious

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24 Organizations and social collective activities are very limited in Syria. The state provides these social services and activities throughout the Ba’ath party and government organization, such as The Youth Revolutionary Union, Women Union, these kinds of organisations through formal institutions such as schools, universities and at work place in public and formal sector.
minorities may be more vulnerable as cities bring opposing groups together within close proximity. Changes in the relationships of the elder and younger generations have led to the breakdown of traditional family and community support structures (Phillips, 2002:36).

I will address such changes and the local community reaction to changes in the wider context. At the level of the local low-income community, there are some fundamental factors that have impacted on household vulnerability. They include the shape and changes in the household, restructuring of households by internal factors, such as marriage, death, sickness, and birth. Other factors with implications for household vulnerability include marital conflicts, childcare and care of the elderly. External factors include access to adequate housing, employment (either loss of a job or working elsewhere), lack of income and access to adequate education and health (Moser 1996: 62).

Households change over time, as do their social and economic networks. Interestingly, in Duelha it was possible during this study to examine how social networks have changed between the first and the second generation of migrants. This provided unique insights into the ways that social capital evolves over time in an unauthorized settlement. Such changes between generations include their worldviews, social behaviour, consumption patterns in food and clothing and other priorities and lifestyle expenditures. By examining these aspects I will highlight how people of this community are using different kinds of social capital to enhance their well-being and livelihood opportunities.

The box below provides examples of social networks which are conducive to an understanding of vulnerability and the opportunities and limitations of utilizing social capital for improved well-being.

**Box 5-1: Social networks in a urban area**

| Neighbourhood-based grouping |
| Gender-and age-based networks and associations |
| Kinship-based associations (including rural-urban linkages) |
| Networks-based on a common area of origin |
| Political -based networks |
| Religion and ethnic linkages and associations |
| Saving and credit groups employment-based network and associations (such as trade union, informal association with NGOs and other external civil society organizations) |

Source: Phillips, 2002
5.1. Religious diversity among social groups in Syria and its implications in building social capital

In 2001, Syria’s population was estimated as being 17 million, of which 74% are Sunni Muslims. There are several groups of Muslims: Shiite Muslims account for approximately 18%, Alawits 11%, the Druze community 4%, and there are other smaller communities from Sammuli and Yazidi. The number of Christians in Syria is continuously in decline. There are many reasons for the decline and these will be addressed later. The government currently estimates the number of Christians to be 12% of the population. As Christians are continuously emigrating, other organizations refer to lower estimates and claim that the number of Christians is no more than five percent of the population (Holy Land statistics, 2001). Most people around the world assume the Middle East to be a Muslim region. However, this is a recent phenomenon, as the Christians dominated the Middle East for more than six centuries, outnumbering by far the Muslims and the Jews who also inhabited the region (Lorieux, 2001). Therefore, there is a great diversity between major world religions in Syria.

Different Christian denominations also exist. According to statistics dating from 2001, Syria has about 853,000 Christians who for example belong to the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglo-Protestant denominations. The majority of Syrian Christians are concentrated in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia. The remaining Christians live in four different mountainous regions of Syria: in the Hauran, to the South of Damascus, in Wadi Al-Nasara (the Valley of the Christians) to the West of Homs, in Jabel Qalamon where the spoken language of some communities is still Aramaic (the language that Jesus spoke) and finally in the North East of Syria, where they live in close proximity to the largest Kurdish community in the country.

Table 5-1: Denominations of Christian Syrians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Orthodox</td>
<td>425,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian Orthodox</td>
<td>135,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Orthodox</td>
<td>65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assyrian Orthodox</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Catholic</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maronites Catholic</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin Catholic</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaldean Catholic</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Protestant</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>853,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, 2001

25 In 635 AD, Damascus (was under the Byzantine empire) surrounded to the Muslim General Khalid ibn Alwalid.
The question of trust within and between the various religious groups in Syria is interesting. As we saw earlier, the concept of trust is a main component of social capital. In the livelihood approach, trust also plays a significant role in building economic and social ties among individuals and groups. When trust decreases the social network is minimized.

Elsewhere, in many parts of the world, ethnicity and religious diversity have led to major historical conflicts between various social and religious groups such as Croats and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia and Tutsi and Hutus in Rwanda. In the Middle East, coexistence between Christians and Muslims has not been easy. In Lebanon, Maronites and Druze engaged in bloody conflicts in 1860. Since 1974, Lebanon has nearly been destroyed by civil war between Muslims and Christians of different dominations. Similar conflicts divide north and south Sudan. Christians Copts in Egypt have suffered brutal attacks by Islamic radicals.

5.1.1. Christians, the Baa’th Party and Alawits

In the Syrian context, the question of social capital can be considered at several levels. To start with there is the concept of linking and bridging social capital at national level. The ruling Baa’th party has tried to remain inclusive as regards the various religious and ethnic groups within Syria by maintaining a strict secular approach to governing. However, the Alawites have been the dominant social and religious group in power for the last 40 years, maintaining military power and their dominance in various economic sectors.

Christians have benefited from this secularization policy maintained by the Baa’th ruling party over a long period of time (the founder of this party was a Christian lawyer educated in France). Formally, the government of Syria promotes throughout the country the idea that Syrians are one people. No religious differentiation or discrimination is allowed by law and religious signs have been banned from government identity and citizenship cards. This party's ideology is mainly based on the Communist philosophy of the former Soviet Union. For example, in schools pupils have to chant three times a day the Baa’th party slogan, one eternal Arab nation, and the party goals of: Unity, freedom, and socialism. This emphasizes the notion of Arabism in the minds of young Syrians throughout their education. The dissemination of the Baa’th party ideology has been internalized since the very early years and has had a considerable impact on the way young people build their world view. The intention is to unite people and project the image of one Arab nation that will stand together against one enemy (e.g. Israel). This helps the country to avoid internal social and politic unease.

In 1963, the Baa’th party became the sole ruling party. In 1970, Hafez Assad became the president of Syria. He was a Shiite Muslim of the Alawit minority. The Alawits traditionally lived in the Western coastal mountains, in the Lattakia region. Historically, the Alawits have had hostile relations with the Sunni Muslim majority dating back to the Turk Ottoman occupation. Soon after Assad became president, many Alawits migrated to Damascus looking for employment in the army and other governmental sectors. In that period (1960 onwards), many Alawits who had been marginalized earlier for many years
became generals, ministers and occupied high governmental positions. The Baath regime enforced the notion of integration in the society in the name of modernization and the unity of country. (Barre, 1999: 728). In addition, many Christians from all over Syria with both urban and rural backgrounds took advantage of the same opportunities and migrated to Damascus.

Thus, Christians have been supported by the ruling party of Alawits - formally by laws enforcing non-discrimination against them, and informally by many linkages throughout social networks, benefiting from the very positive Alawit attitude of respect towards Christians who have a similar minority status. An Alawit will easily trust a Christian. At the same time, many Christians will ask for help Alawits with administrative governmental issues. Christians have felt empowered by engaging with Alawits as partners in business or in facilitating the expansion and development of their careers, and bureaucratic processes, because they easily receive help with the necessary documents. Alawits support Christians who share not only their minority status, but also some elements of theology. The Alawit doctrine incorporates many other traditions and values with their Islamic religion, such as Christian rituals of praying to the Virgin Mary, icons and statues, lighting candles in front of the icons, burning incense and making sacrifices for some Christian figures, such as Saint George. In Alawit theology, Saint George is a prophet named Al Khader, who is very important in the lives of many Alawit Syrians. Moreover, Saint Mary’s picture is present in many Alawit shrines and houses. Such cultural integration between these two groups make the Sunni majority more suspicious of the Alawits.

Box 5-2: Diversity among Syrian villages

In Syria, there are two kinds of villages, in terms of religious distribution; those inhabited solely by Christians or by Muslims and those inhabited by a mixed population of Christians and Muslims. For example, Nami is a Christian village with a population of six thousand, located sixty kilometres to the south of Damascus. Many of my respondents came from Nami. I was present at their first rituals and marriages. Safi is a mixed village located also in the southern region of Syria, where the majority are Muslims.

Source: author

5.1.2. Christian- Muslim (majority Sunni) relations

Christian-Muslim community relations with the majority Sunni reveal many ambiguities. Urban Christians live in their own neighbourhoods, near their churches, and have relations with other Syrian religious groups at work and in educational institutions. Generally, both Christian and Sunni Muslims have relatively good relations. Both groups do this by keeping their distance from each other, not interfering in religious disputes, and showing open respect for the faith and rituals of the other group.

This relation has become more fragile in recent years, because of regional and international crises. Many local conflicts have not been reported by the local media or have been downplayed in order to avoid discussions and unwanted conflicts. For example, in the summer of 2003, near the city of Homs, more than two thousand Muslims
attacked a small Christian community. The result was that more than fifty people were injured from both communities. The Homs mayor personally visited the scene at night to stop the unrest (personal communication). Hundreds of people from both communities were arrested. This event was criticized heavily by the Muslim and Christian leaders who play a positive role in relations among the two communities. Educated people have also criticized the conflicts, referring to them as the result of activities of a minority of ignorant individuals from both sides.

Global conflicts also contribute to greater stress among Christians. The attack in New York on 11 September 2001 was seen as a war against terrorism, but also between Christians and Muslims. The regional conflicts, especially the one in Lebanon, are also seen as Christian-Muslim conflicts. Conflicts between Christians and Muslims have not spread openly in Syria because the government reacts in a very firm way to any openly religious incident, and the same applies to the Iraq-American war. The situation nowadays is very sensitive and fragile. People are scared and prevented from speaking openly in public on religious or political issues. The result has been increased emigration by many Christians to Canada, Europe and to other places.

5.1.3. Christian-Alawit-Kurd relations

Other events aptly depict the extreme fragility of social relations in Syria. There is a hidden tension between Muslim Sunnis and the Shiite Alawits, Christians, and conflicts with the Kurdish population. In addition to these sorts of conflicts, which often increase resentment between these groups, there is a clear initiative being taken in the north by the Muslim Kurds who have mainly resided in the northeast Aljazeera region of Syria from the Seventies until now. They have displaced Christian communities in that region. This is one of the reasons why many Christians emigrated (mainly with refugee status) to Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.

Syrian Kurds live primarily in the north east of the country, where the main oil sources are concentrated. Nevertheless, they are also found in Damascus and Aleppo. In both cities Kurds usually live in one poor neighbourhood known as “the Kurd area”. They are perceived by the general population as being poor, concentrated in their own neighbourhood and with common traits. This includes their own language, whose use is forbidden during military services and in official places. They are proud of their identity and loyal to their ethnic group. Kurds are also perceived as becoming more and more rigid and their relation with the government and other ethnic groups has become more fragile. The following example indicated this fragility with other non-Kurd groups. On 12 March 2004, in the city of Kameshly in the north-eastern region of Syria, there was a clash between communities when a fight broke out amongst the spectators of a football game. In a very short time, there was a riot that led to great conflict in the city. The conflict and animosity spread to other rural areas and villages. The authorities intervened, but the conflict became larger and eventually spread to the Kurdish settlement in Damascus. Soon afterwards, the Kurds in Belgium attacked the Syrian embassy and threw away the Syrian flag and replaced it with a Kurdish flag. Approximately 200,000 Kurds live in Syria with no citizenship rights. The point of interest here is that despite the Ba’ath slogans and propaganda that the Syrians are one people, one trivial conflict in a football arena can potentially develop into an international incident.
5.2. Christians in Damascus

Although Christians are numerically in the minority, they play a relatively important role in the economy and society. Many Christians in Damascus have a high social status, as a result of their high levels of education and their professional occupations. Some commonly found professions are doctors, lawyers, traders and gold traders. In addition, many Christians work in the traditional handicraft industries, such as the wooden mosaic industry of Damascus.

In the city of Damascus, there are two main Christian residential settlements; Bab Toma and Bab Sharqi. Both areas are in the south-east of Damascus. In Arabic, Bab means door. These two areas are built around the location of old churches and an historical residential area. Traditionally, people coming to the city would move to these neighbourhoods. However, when the settlements became crowded and congested, people spread out to other neighbourhoods. The other large Christian neighbourhood is Al Kassah, an extension of Baba Toma, which is home to many middle-class Christians (located to the west of Bab Toma). Among low-income households one finds very few Christian families who live in mixed communities. More affluent Christians live in rich Muslim areas such as Malki, Abu Rammaneh and Mezeh Villats (these are located in the north of Damascus)(see maps). Being the capital of Syria, Damascus has a large foreign community which includes diplomats and executives of large companies or businesses (such as the French Total, Dutch Shell). Many of these foreigners live in the affluent residential areas, along with Muslims and Christians in Malki, Abu Rummaneh and Mezeh Villats.

5.2.1. Christian population of Duelha

Duelha is located next to the Bab Sharqi area, just outside the old Damascus’ historical wall and is an extended area of the old Christian community of Damascus. The inhabitants of Duelha are mainly Christians from different rural areas who have migrated to Damascus in order to seek employment, particularly in the formal sector, during the period the State provided large-scale job opportunities in the 1960s. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the government nationalized all major infrastructure and most companies and factories. The religious aspect has played a major role in attracting Christians from different villages. They came to Duelha where land was inexpensive. They bought land and developed simple, cost-effective housing\(^\text{26}\). Christians have formed strong bonds and have developed a strong sense of community in this new location.

Existing patterns of migration among Christians in Syria also affected the Christian settlement patterns in Duelha. It is very hard to generalize on the pattern in Duelha which covers several generations. I learned that people migrated in clusters and as individuals from different Christian villages, with several brothers, friends or kin encouraging each other to venture into the city. Either they came with their wives or alone at first and then their family members followed. The main regions from which migration took place are in the southern part of Syria, including the Huran region, Swida and Dara rural areas.

\(^{26}\) Land, constructions and housing will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
Central Syria is also another region from which there is high Christian migration, especially from Homs rural areas (wadi alnassara), (which means the Christian’s valley) and from the desert area.

Since 1970, many Christians have migrated to Damascus to seek job opportunities in the formal sector. These included mainly governmental institutions, and military and government factories (see chapter on human capital). In the survey conducted in summer 2003, the origin of the 106 households heads was found to be as follows. There are 33 heads of households and spouses of the total 212 couples who were born in Damascus city\(^{27}\). Among migrating households, the majority of husbands and wives came from the southern regions (68 %), with a smaller percentage from the central region (16 %). Few Christians from the N-E came to Damascus (2 %).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Southern Region (SR)</th>
<th>Central Region (CR)</th>
<th>North-Eastern Region (NR)</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Nber</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Nber</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Nber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Marriages among first-generation immigrants are generally endogamous, in that most people of the southern region were found to have married people from their region. A large number were from the same village. As we can see in table 5-2, the number of husbands from the southern region is 74 and the number of wives is 70. Forty-six couples from the Southern region were found to have married people from the same village. From the Central region, 6 out of 34 couples came from the same village. Thus, people from the South tend to marry people within the same village more often than people from other regions.

5.2.2. Mapping first and last Dakhle

Migration to Duelha began in 1971. The spatial pattern of migration is structured in Dakhles e.g. — Small side-roads with housing around courtyards on each side. Several families may live around one courtyard. I will describe in detail two Dakhles, the first one built nearest to the church and the last one where building started in 1974. Mapping the first and the last Dakhle according to the migrated household’s origin helps us to capture the ways social networks have developed in this spatial context and shows us the geographical heterogeneity of the community.

\(^{27}\) the people found to be born in Damascus, their families from different region, they were distributed by their families of origin.
The first Dakhle is located close to the church and to Bab Toma (see map). The last Dakhles is located on the south side of Duelha close to the western Mosque. Since then, more Dakhles have been built on the ‘border’ of Duelha’s Christian neighbourhood by Muslims who have constructed their own neighbourhood there. In the first Dakhle, there are 37 households on the left side and 30 households on the right. Among these, there are only two Alawit households, from Homs rural area, and the rest are Christians from different parts of the country. The majority of the migrant households in the first Dakhle are from the Southern Region (48 households). There are 18 households from the Central region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of households who migrated to the first Dakhle, by region of origin</th>
<th>Southern Region</th>
<th>Central Region</th>
<th>Other places</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of households</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The common characteristics of this Dakhle are that the people all emigrated from rural areas and are all Christians, including the two Alawit families from Homs. The Dakhle has two grocery shops owned by a courtyard household, one law office, one women’s hairdresser and the Nuns’ household. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter five. The households came from various villages and regions, and belong to different families and clan. However, there are two exceptions. Six households belonging to the same family all came from a village called Tesia located in the southern region, and another three brothers live near each other who are from a village called Sadad, which is in the central region.

This clearly suggests that an important reason why people migrated to live together in this area was their religious ties and not just the place of origin and their family ties. Their social networks played an important part in choosing Duelha, based on their religion and cultural unity.

The last Dakhle is near the southern “border” of Duelha. The houses in this Dakhle were constructed after 1972. There are very few houses because the area is on the outskirts of the neighbourhood on the geographical/social boundary between Christian-Muslim communities. The mosque is located just beyond this Dakhle and the area is inhabited mainly by Muslims from Palestinian refugee camps to the east of the Duelha neighbourhood (see map). There are 11 households on the left-hand side and just four households on the right-hand side. There are no shops or offices or any kind of home-based businesses. A large wall separates the area from the east side, where the construction of the southern Muslim area starts.
Table 5-4: Number of households who migrated in the last Dakhle, by region of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Southern Region</th>
<th>Central Region</th>
<th>Other places</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of households</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Most of the inhabitants are also from the Southern region. Two Alawit families live in this Dakhle, but both households returned to their natal coastal village in Tartus, the first in 2000 and the second in 2003. Both heads of households were employed in the army. Their courtyards are used for renting rooms. Some students and soldiers (usually men) occupied these two courtyards. A Christian respondent who lives in this Dakhle explained the negative attitude people have towards this kind of renting out of courtyards, especially when the landlords are absent. “The other residents don’t know who has come and who has left, these strangers change our lives, we don’t know the tenants and have no relation with them.” This shows that geographic mobility and an absence of social links with tenant residents result in a lack of trust.

5.2.3. Discourse of ‘Us and Them’ as example of religious interaction

In the first Dakhle, there are two Alawit families among the 67 Christian households. These two families have lived there since 1972. The first family consists of a man and his wife and two married sons. The husband is retired from the army. The two married sons occupy the second floor of the courtyard. The second Alawit family is also from a village of Homs (the Central region). The husband works for the army and has one son and a daughter.

I asked my respondents who live in the first Dakhle about their relationships with these two Alawit families and how they relate to the Christian Dakhle as a whole. The answer was that they are like us and are not like the Sunni Muslims. They have lived here for years and there are no problems. One respondent added that one of the Alawits who is still in the army, had supported a neighbour during his military service. His wife and daughters-in-laws are not veiled and they have a good relation with my mother and sisters. This indicates that Christian-Alawit interaction is good and that a high degree of trust exists.

The relationships between Christians and Sunni Muslims are very limited and there is little communication. In the last Dakhle built close to the end of the Christian majority area in Duelha, a large mosque was built for Muslim Sunnis in 1980. This has become a clear border between the communities. I asked a Christian respondent about the relationships with his Muslim Sunni neighbours who lived in this Dakhle close to the mosque. The Christian man reacted in a very negative way, exaggerating his descriptions of the situation and complained by telling me the story of how his children used to play with Sunni Muslim children. Once his little girl came home and asked her mother, “is it true, after we die, we all go straight to Hell”. He added, we teach our kids of love, they (the Sunnis) teach their kids to hate us. When I asked the Christian man how often he
visited a Muslim Sunni family the response was, “I don’t know any of their houses, at the same time they never came to my house” adding, “a nearby Muslim household became more conservative and strict, their young girls were ordered to wear veils and they avoided greeting me.”

During my three year stay in Duelha, I rented a room in two different courtyards. I never witnessed a single visit by Muslims to any of my respondents’ houses, nor to the people I dealt with. I asked one of my respondents how many times he had invited a Muslim friend to his house. He gave me a strange look and said very slowly, “I have never thought about that. I have never invited any one of my good friends from school or work”. This is a clear example of the way Christians in Duelha maintain a closed community.

5.3. Community building in an unauthorized settlement

At the time I lived there, I found that Duelha was a relative safe area in which to live. I never encountered any cases of robbery or stealing. The people know each other by name, origin, background, work and family members. Most people have known each other for more than one generation. This knowledge of the community members can be interpreted as very strong ties that support social networking and indicate high levels of social capital.

By contrast, Moser found in Cisne Dos, Ecuador, a high level of personal violence experienced by local residents (table 5-5). In Duelha, there is a high level of safety and this has attracted many single women to move to Duelha to study and work in Damascus. Such a safe environment can became a social asset and reflects the extent of bonding capital in Duelha.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of violence</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present on bus when robbery occurred</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally robbed on a bus</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbed in the street</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbed at the house</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other member of family robbed</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem with street gang (pandilla)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Moser (1998)
Safety on the streets was linked to one of the most important assets in the community, the sense of community. Women can stroll through the streets day and night without any kind of fear. Doors were left open in many cases. The feeling was that if any stranger had come to the Dakhle many people would observe him or her to try and find out who he/she is, where he/she came from and for what purpose. This cultural behaviour was very important among the first generation, where they keep their rural traditional atmosphere. They have transplanted their everyday way of socialization into Duelha. They do not make appointments to meet with each other, they do not use calendars to register their appointments and instead they have retained their tradition of spontaneous visits and interactions. This has led to a relatively high level of safety among vulnerable groups, such as women and youngsters.

In front of most courtyards there is a cement construction which serves as a seating area called the *Mastabe*, which means ‘beside front door’. These Mastabas function as a place for getting together during the summer, when many people hang out in the alleys, chatting with neighbours and drinking Matte (local drinks consumed mainly by rural people) or smoking water pipes (*Argile*). The elderly enjoy staying out in the alley for hours. Nowadays, this common social area has become even more attractive to the second generation and their youngsters. In this atmosphere, there is no need for guards, alarm systems or watching agencies. There is no need for police protection because the sense of community is strong enough to feel safe and protected.

Outsiders coming into the closed area of the Dakhle, with no passages to other areas, will be questioned directly. People will ask you where you are going, who you are looking for and for which family/household are you searching? Residents interfere with strangers in spontaneous ways and try to help her/him find their way around. Local people thus build relations with all types of outsiders. This includes regular contacts with the vendors in the area such as the gas, fuel, vegetables and plastic vendors. For example, Um Tanuse was asking a gas vendor about his wife’s health. The man in his sixties came from Alkaboun, selling his gas on a mule carriage. The human interactions between the two parties was not only commercial, but contained a more personal concern about each other.

The community has developed a social network based on trust. They support each other by extended relationships. People feel free to visit and their visitors are not only their local relatives and neighbours but also people from their village of origin as a whole. Among first generation immigrants, invitations were considered a formal behaviour unnecessary in this type of close-knit community. Many family members and friends would come to stay, eat and even spend the night. In these close social relationships, people were expected to help and support each other when there was a need. Such relationships have also been extended into other areas of social life, such as finding work. It was very common to find work through friends’ networks and personal relations. Looking for employment in the newspaper and via the Internet has been rare until now in Duelha, and is not very common in Syria as a whole. People have depended on each other to look for jobs and to pass on the information to other family members and in the neighbourhood.
5.4. Household and Courtyard relations as an asset

The courtyard is an important architectural aspect of the housing system in Duelha. Traditionally this type of housing was built by families who started settling in Duelha in the Seventies. These families built their homes progressively, starting from one room for a nuclear family and several rooms for the extended families. They started by building one-story homes and later many of these homes were extended to two stories. Usually the courtyards would contain one common kitchen and a bathroom including a toilet facility. In many cases the toilet is located near the front door by the main road, close to the sewage system maintained by the government.

These courtyards were inhabited by one nuclear family or an extended family. However, some households would rent out part of their courtyards to newcomers or families, or individuals such as men doing their military service, students or workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5-6: Household pattern in Duelha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of family pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In this survey, the number of extended families is still substantial. Many young people prefer to live in separate dwellings as they are more aware of privacy and are influenced by the modern urban way of life and the younger generation feels more autonomous and has its own ideas of living in a separate dwelling. However, in financial terms it has become increasingly difficult to acquire separate housing in the urban setting. The concept of the extended family was traditionally more accepted back in the villages, although there are tendencies towards nuclear family structures among the rural families as well. According to Maluli (1996), education has influenced the family model in rural areas. He found patterns evolving towards nuclear families, although the rural extended family still has a strong presence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5-7: Household pattern in a rural area (village close to Damascus)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of family pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Maluli (1996:46)

The most common form of extended family found in Duelha according to the survey are parents and their married son with their wives and children. To a lesser degree there may also be a father or mother, brother or sister of the husband. In some cases, divorced women with their children are included.

28 Maluly research on several villages nearby Damascus rural areas
Legend: Courtyard roofs, showing the densely built-up area and the irregular building blocks used for the housing system.

Source: author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of extended families</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Son and his wife</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother of the husband</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father of the husband</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother of the husband</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister of the husband</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter and her husband</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nephew of the husband</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Duelha, as in the rest of Syria, there is a patri-lineal and patriarchal kinship model. As we can see in the table 5-8, it is more common to find sons living with their wives in their natal family household. This is a common practice that may have a cultural and a social background as well as being an economic strategy for low-income couples who are unable to rent or buy a house outside Duelha.
Moser's findings in Cisne Dos indicated the importance of the notion of nesting. This is also appropriate in the Duelha case where there is inter-generational asset sharing. Sons live with their parents after marriage without any complaint on the part of their parents. According to the patri-lineal kinship system, the sons have the right to the father's property but they also have the responsibility to take care of aging parents. Interestingly, the son-mother relationship is generally very strong and plays a major role in supporting newly wedded couples. Mothers take care of the household by caring for grandchildren. The son contributes financially to the household and shares in the expenses of everyday life, such as water, electricity and giving cash to the mother who takes care of cooking and household expenses. These are very strong bonds within the extended family. These norms and values give the new wives opportunities to work and produce income and share in the household expenditure. At the same time, wives help their mothers-in-law with housework when needed.

People use various strategies in Duelha in order to build up their livelihoods. For example, a respondent's family negotiated a room in the family house because of an inability to pay for a separate dwelling. All the family participated in the decision-making process, that is father, mother and sons. Daughters also had a say regardless of their marital status. When family conflicts occurred, uncles and cousins intervened to solve the problem of where/who should live. The final decision was eventually taken by the head of the family (father or mother). There were very clear distinctions between the brothers. The elder brother had more privileges and was respected by others because of his age.

However, conflicts also occurred in living together in the courtyard model. One of the negative impacts on the local community is the lack of space, when several families are found to live in one room and have to share facilities with several household in a courtyard. Conflicts occurred among families and households members. Such conflicts included arguments on cleaning facilities (such as leaving unwashed dishes and pots in the kitchen), competition in using facilities at the same time, and consuming more water and electricity than others. Solving these problems on a daily basis is not easy and brings tension within the courtyards. In order to solve conflicts, sometimes individual meters were installed for every room. Intervention from other neighbours is always expected. These unwanted patterns of behaviour are a result of a lack of privacy and an overpopulated area. The second generation shows less tolerance towards living in such communal conditions than their parents.

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29 The term is defined as “one of the most important housing-related strategies, this is invisible intergenerational densification strategy, facilitated by home ownership, in which young households without their own assets form separate households on their parents land. (Moser, 1990:59).
5.4.1. Bonding inside the household

In this section, I am providing a thick description of the relations among the extended family members as an example of the ways in which the restructuring of households and livelihood strategies work.

While I was doing my fieldwork in Duelha, I met a family originally from the Houran region that inhabited a courtyard. It was a family of six; a sixty year old widowed mother and her three daughters and two sons. Her husband had passed away three years previously (October 2001). Her husband had migrated to Damascus and worked for the national police department. He was moving with his family from one city to another because of his work. The couple was originally from the same village. In 1975, he and his family settled in Duelha and built a house with two rooms. Their three daughters got married and left the house. The eldest son also married and built one room on the second floor where he lived with his wife and two daughters. The family shared the kitchen and facilities on the first floor with his mother and a single brother. On the first floor, he built a third room which he turned into a photo shop and he started his own business as a local photo developer. His wife worked as a teacher in a school in the neighbourhood. The single brother and their mother lived on the first floor. Their mother’s responsibility included cooking and cleaning for everyone in the household. In addition, she looked after her two grandchildren and did the laundry and other housework. She also welcomed the guests by providing coffee and sunflower seeds. Because the house was full of all manner of items, they spent most of their time in the living room, which was converted into a bedroom at night.

The youngest son was very committed to the household socially and financially. In an interview, he told me about his contributions during and after his father’s sickness for two years. He told me that he had passed up an offer to get married because the girl questioned his close involvement in his family situation. He told me about the argument he had with this girl about the difference between what he pays and what his brother contributes. He continued by telling me about how difficult his brother’s life had been. His work was not well-paid and having two daughters generated a lot of daily expenses. He commented that the girl he wanted to marry seemed very materialistic. In addition, he was intervening in the family situation of his younger sister who was having problems with her husband, who was a drug addict. Her husband had been harassing her and her two daughters. The poor woman got divorced and moved in with her mother and the two brothers. She settled on the first floor, occupying the second room. She worked for the government in Damascus city hall.

On many occasions the brothers discussed how they were going to build a second room on the roof. After their sister divorced and moved in with them along with her two daughters, the decision was made to construct a room with a little kitchen and bath facility on the roof near the elder brother. The building of this room created a family conflict. The issue revolved around who was going to access the upper facilities. The argument was that the younger son’s fiancé was from the city of Homs and she wanted to be independent from the rest of the family. The elder brother’s wife argued that she and her family had the right to use and have access to the upper unobstructed facilities.
The mother and the two other married sisters became involved and the whole family came together to discuss the matter, especially after the divorced sister moved in with them. The mother solved the problem by giving and requesting financial contributions from the whole family. She asked her elder son to construct his own facilities by selling her saved jewellery. She was willing to contribute to the construction expenses.

Thus, from this example, we learn how social capital was utilized and household relations proved to be great assets to family members. By providing a nest for their divorced sister and her children and by acting on behalf of the collective goal, the family stood together in times of crisis. The mother played a major role in protecting the family members from their life crises, even after their marriage, by taking care of their children and by welcoming her divorced daughter and her children into the home. The involvement of the married sisters was also an essential factor in solving the situation. Again, these strong bonds played a crucial role in reducing vulnerabilities in the family and increasing bonding among its members.

5.4.2. Gender relations

A male dominated culture exists in Duelha, as in the rest of Syria, although Syrian women have become more liberated and have enjoyed a higher status than women in many other Middle Eastern countries. Women’s participation in the workforce and in education have influenced their position positively in many social arenas although in terms of equality with men, there is still a long way to go.

In general, public displays of an affectionate relationship between men and women are still not allowed. In Duelha, the situation is no different. Contact between unmarried man and unmarried women are a very sensitive issue. According to the norm, woman’s mobility is limited, although Christian women have more freedom than Muslim women. A woman’s reputation is very fragile and the good name of the family depends on it. A woman’s honour is still considered the primary aspect of family honour. For example, teenage girls are considered the most dangerous liability to the family name. The brothers, mother and the father control the girls’ mobility until their marriage. These days, women’s mobility in urban areas is greater than in the past. In the city, there are many reasons for greater mobility, such as going to schools and university, working in the city centre and participating in church activities. In rural areas, women are still strictly controlled.

Strict segregation between girls and boys is still the social norm. Boys enjoy a much higher freedom of mobility than girls. This gender norm affects social contacts within the community. In Duelha, women have (alternative) informal support from their family members. Strong brother-sister relations are embedded in local family practices (especially from Houran and the southern central area) in a ritualized way, through the Karaza. This ritual attitude of brothers towards their sisters has an important impact on gender relationships. Whenever brothers visit their married sister and married aunts, they offer them sweets as gifts during the time before the Easter. They travel to the villages to perform these expressions of love, respect and support. This ritual activity maintains the important link with their families and allows the sisters to feel that they are strongly supported by their brothers. In the example of a divorced woman, we saw how the entire
family intervened to protect first the marriage and, when it was too difficult to carry on with her errant husband, she was protected by her mother and two brothers and supported by the married sisters. The family bond in Duelha is very strong and this enhances the position of women in everyday life.

On the subject of marriage, men have the right to live with their parents and bring their wives into the family, whereas women are expected to follow their husbands, either to live with extended family or to form a new nuclear family.

Divorce is very rare in Duelha. According to the parish documents owned by the Roman Catholic community, there were only five cases of divorce during the last three years. Reasons for the low rate are the strong social ties and obligation of the family members to help each other out. According to our survey among 106 households, there were no divorce cases. On that note, let it be said that not all their marriages were happy or successful. Rather, the cultural ties have made the notion of divorce very negative among families, especially when children are involved.

5.4.3. The dilemma of generational changes

In Duelha, households have been experiencing many changes in cultural practices between the first generation to migrate and the second generation born in the city. The first generation, which migrated from the rural areas and has lived for part of their lives in their villages, tends to retain some of the traditional ways. Among members of the younger urban generation there has been a tendency towards modernization and increased distance from everything regarded as traditional. They (the second generation) have experienced growing up in the urban setting. Both generations react to urban life crises in different ways. I will describe several patterns of lifestyle to illustrate the diversity between the two generations and examine its impact on relationships between the two generations and the consequences for their livelihood strategies.

In general, in the villages, parents wear traditional clothing. After work, men put on their Jallabeh, which is a flowing robe worn by men. They do not need to own many of them. The use of this type of clothing symbolizes loyalty to a man’s birthplace and to his people. Despite their years in an urban environment, the parents act as if they live in a village by laying mattresses on the living room floor. They use the same rooms to sleep, eat and live in as well to receive visitors. They still eat on the floor as they did in the village. However they now have tables, chairs and armchairs but prefer the customs they were brought up with. Mothers, who fulfils roles as housewives, tend to behave in a similar traditional way. They wear traditional clothing and they serve food and eat it on the floor. Everybody eats from of a large common plate. There is little or no use of cosmetics and beauty items.

Usually, traditional food items are served, such as home-made provisions that vary seasonally. These include apricot and other sorts of marmalade, green and black olives, solid white cheese, eggplant with peppers (makdus). These kinds of traditional homemade food are very high in nutritional value. At the same time, they are much less expensive in comparison with the store-bought canned food. In many cases, they have access to these
items free of charge from their own land back in the villages. (I will address these in more detail in the chapter on physical and financial capital). This sort of food is served daily.

The second generation, which grows up in the city, has more modern ideas concerning clothing, food and lifestyle. Modern clothes are so popular that fashionable clothes for men are in considerable demand because they want to keep constantly up to date with changing fashions. The media have a substantial impact on this generation, bombarded as it is by westernized messages from TV, video and magazines. Hairstyles are also considered very important. There are a lot of men’s hairdresser shops in the Duelha. The men are extremely conscious of their looks and go out of their way to take care of themselves. They dress up daily as if they are going to a party or to an important meeting. They crowd the corners of the sandwich shops to order a shish tawok, hamburgers, or pizza. Their mothers urge them to eat at home but their traditional way of eating does not suit their urban way of life anymore. They smoke expensive imported or smuggled western cigarettes.

Young women in Duelha are expected to be very well dressed most of the time in public, and well groomed with hair fashionably coloured. Their clothes are very stylish. Most second-generation women do not leave the house without being full made up. The main street of Duelha has become heterogeneous in terms of women. Young westernized women walk alongside their mothers in traditional black clothing and with flip-flops on their feet.

Both men and women of the second-generation entertain friends in the guest room where they sit on armchairs and sofas. The guest room contains furniture that is rarely used by the first generation. The older generation only use the furniture occasionally during feasts and celebrations and at Christmas and Easter family members and friends are expected to visit.

Situations of conflicts may arise between parents and children. The usual way to solve such issues is to reach a consensus within the family according to its means and cultural background. The issues are kept within the private domain. Parents and children have usually a say in the solutions.

The cultural changes in everyday life make extensive demands on the local families in terms of social, emotional and financial relations. The new behaviour among the second generation changes relationships within the household and with the larger community and entails a much higher level of expenditure. Such changing cultural patterns raise two questions. First, how do changes contribute to the enhancement of cultural capital when integrating household members into a larger urban setting? Do changes in cultural capitals increase vulnerability by increasing the conflicts between the generations? Higher levels of consumption expenditures among the second generation widen the gap with their parents. These questions will be taken up in the concluding chapter.
5.5. The role of the Church in building social capital

5.5.1. The role of the Church

The Church plays a major role in supporting local community livelihoods and well-being among its members. It offers social, economic and humanitarian services. I limit my discussion here to the role of the Roman Catholic Church and the services it provides. The chapter on human capital focuses on the importance of the church as regards supporting the local community in the form of a health centre, education programmes and financial aid. The spiritual services are embedded within large social and economic activities.

One clear role of the Church is to encourage and promote the notion of “US” among the community. The Church is more concretely responsible for encouraging social networking. The Church promotes vertical and horizontal networking which in turn helps to promote and build trust within the neighbourhood. The Church bonds local families to each other by encouraging attendance at the weekly masses.

Other community social activities link the Duelha residents with a diversity of outsiders such as people searching for work opportunities and facilitate support from foreign agencies and the Christian elite of Damascus, thus providing both bridging and linking capital.

As a minority group, Christians experience latent oppression to some degree. Therefore, differences in being Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christians are no longer important. Being a Christian means being “one of us” or inclusion in a social group. The greater the outside pressure on the community, the more the community bonds together and the greater the role of the Church vis-à-vis its members.

The Roman Catholic Church is represented by two priests appointed by the Bishop of the Roman Catholics diocese in Damascus. These two priests are well educated in philosophy and theology and have some experience with pastoral activities. There is a committee elected from the local community, consisting of nine men and four women who assist the priests and share the concerns of the parish in Duelha. Nuns also live in Duelha. These nuns play an active role in church activities and in the community. They carry out a wide range of social tasks such as supporting and empowering women, intervening in family disputes and providing advice on child rearing and other social and spiritual activities.

This section focuses on a sample group of university students brought together by the Church. The Church encourages the discourse of being together, not only in order to pray and for spirituality, but also to spread trust and the sense of sister-brotherhood and increasing interrelations between community members. A group of, on average, thirty young men and women aged between 19-24 gathers every Saturday in a room in the local church basement. This gives them the opportunity to find out about each other’s lives and way of thinking. They discuss their common struggles in their households and at work, and sometimes they share very personal and private issues. They organize parties and fun trips. The group members are also willing to contribute to a lot of voluntary tasks related to local community needs. For example, the youth members have volunteered to teach school children with special needs, visit the elderly and carry out other charitable
activities. Coming to the church and participating in the social and spiritual activities is not always easy for girls. In many cases, the parents refuse to send their daughters to participate in these activities. The nuns have had to intervene and convince their parents by visiting them and discussing with them the will of God regarding the participation in Church activities.

In the summer of 2003, the group went on a four-day trip to a village in the rural area of Homs. Being together and sharing good times with each other was one of the Church's greatest achievements. The trip was organised by a priest and two nuns. One of the young men's mother participated in the trip by volunteering to cook for the group. This kind of group meetings and activities, increase bonding and trust over time among the group members. The expectations are that it also increases commitment to their community and increases the level of social capital over time. This outcome has already been partially achieved when people help each other within the community in finding job opportunities and enhancing the social network within the community.

**Box 5-3: The impact of social capital on employment**

Yousef, a young man from the local church group, explained proudly, "when I was working as a painter of houses in Lebanon in the summer of 2001, an opportunity arose and I thought about Maher (who was also from the church group in Duelha). I asked him to join me in Lebanon to engage in a well-paid job. At that time Maher did not know how to hold a paintbrush properly. He had no experience working in the construction business. I spent a lot of time training him. Today, Maher works for himself and has four employees." Then asked Yousef how he acquired his work experience as a contractor for painting in a constructions setting. He explained to me that his uncle, who had since emigrated to Europe, used to take him to work with him as a helper during the summer holidays. His task was to carry out odd jobs such as buying materials from the market. After two years, he started building shelves as a contractor.

Source: author

Linking capital is present through the church represented by the local priests. A priest has social power and charismatic personality and is widely respected by the local community. He also has a large social network outside the community, with many important relationships and contacts with key persons in the government and among wider Christian elites. Due to his spiritual and social status he plays a significant role in the community. He is actively in charge of voluntary duties, such as contacting a wide range of sources in order to find a job and personally following up support for individuals as regards needs and their families. He communicates actively with the church committees, the local nuns orders, youth groups and regularly visits all members of the community. His office at the church centre is open for many hours, starting from early morning until very late in the evening and with no fixed schedules. Many people come for private consulting and for help.

For example, when I was invited to have a cup of tea with the elder priest in his office during the Christmas period 2002, he was unable to speak with me for very long because there were constant telephone interruptions and people kept coming in and

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30 I used to visit the elder priest' office several times a week in a casual way, spontaneity, he welcomes me without any hesitation, he use to share with me many private issues regarding many social problems in the community.
asking advice on many different issues, such as financial issues, urgent medical treatment, problems with family members and searching for a job.

The priest’s office is more than a parish office. It looks more like a social and welfare office. It provides direct aid to many local households and their families. The priest contacts people in government offices, hospitals, private factories and businesses. Priests provide references and refer people to businessmen, doctors, etc. and write short letters stamped with the church logo to make the letter seem official.

The Church has also mobilized other more vulnerable groups in the community and organized social activities to enhance the feeling of “us”. They include groups such as the very poor and the physically and mentally handicapped. One physically handicapped group consists of seventeen young men and women suffering from a variety of diseases. Two of them use wheelchairs, the rest use canes and others supporting appliances. The group was founded in 2000 by a priest who was later replaced by another. The main purpose of the group is to feel included in the social and spiritual community. The priest and a nun and four volunteers help organise the group’s weekly meeting. The group shares their life struggles and health issues, they visit each other and provide special support when they need expensive operations and later supportive appliances. Money is raised and the members of the group pay more attention to each other. The wider community regards these kinds of activities in a very respectful way, and the role of the church has become more accepted. The group also carries out social-oriented activities such as day trips and one-week trips every year.

The beneficiaries of these church activities are not restricted to members of the Roman Catholic parish. Through the medical centre its services reach Christians from other sectors and those from other religions as well. The Muslim patients come from different parts of Kashkul, Jarmana, and other places where there is little access to health services. By providing other ethnic and religious members with services, the Church bridges the gap between Roman Catholic followers and other groups within the local community. However, the church restricts all other social services and activities provided for Christians. In the case of entertainment trips, when providing basic food for needy individuals and families and financial support, the priest will only guide non-Christians to organizations, which provide for their own social group.

5.5.2. The Nuns Orders as social activists

The nuns’ presence in Duelha is very important and they have a symbolic role as “Good women”. There are nuns from several religious orders in Duelha and I interacted with a few during my stay there as a social activist, not only nuns from the Roman Catholic Church. Not only do they deliver services and participate in church activities, their direct contact with women and dealings with family crises or personal concerns has gained them the community’s trust and respect. Their specific role lets them participate in the core of community everyday life. They have access to most households and can intervene successfully in family crises. In many cases, the nuns act as social workers, psychologists and their houses are a refuge for many women who encounter violence in their homes. Thus, nuns solve conflicts within the community and support women in the mobilization of the local community in many different ways.
In the first Dakhle of Duelha, three nuns (sisters) whose main role is involvement with the church activities participate in the daily mass and support the priests on a daily basis. One of them devotes her time to preparing children for their catechism and to leading the two groups. The second is very passionate about women’s issues and often tries to solve household crises. She actively looks for jobs for others, linking low-income women with rich families asking for baby sitters, housework and work in some factories owned by Christians. She told me once, “We cannot send our daughters to work for bad people”. The nuns support the poorest people.

There are four nuns from different orders living in Duelha. Their main contribution to the local community is visiting needy families and taking care especially of women and their children. Their house is open to many families and their kids. They are involved in intervention when the family crises occurred. They make their house available to a small group for prayer meeting on Fridays. They are also active in networking issues to link poor families with rich Christians for opportunities.

Duelha has also two other nuns’ congregations, the Mother Teresa and Jesus the Worker’s nuns, which are all active simultaneously in social and spiritual activities. They contribute to the social welfare of the community and networking among the families.

5.6. The role of Syrian and Foreign NGOs in Duelha

Social activities and humanitarian services are strictly controlled by the State. For example, in order to participate in a group Church excursion, one needs the permission from the Department of Security. All participants’ names, occupations and age must be reported. The government’s attitude could be explained as a sort of national security because the numerous political and military conflicts in the region cannot be ignored. On the other hand, it can be seen as a lack of freedom.

Until recently, the government has minimized the presence and the role of national and foreign non-governmental organizations in Syria. Now, the government’s tendency is to be more lenient concerning the civil society sector by legitimizing more local NGOs and allowing several foreign NGOs to participate and work with their Ministries and government organizations. The number of registered Syrian NGOs is growing, according to the Global Civil Society Report from 2001, growing from 438 in 1990 to 572 in 2000.31

The increased number of Syrian NGOs suggests that civil society organizations are becoming more important in the country. However, these NGOs include many government-sponsored organizations, such as The Revolutionary Youth Organization, the Women’s Union and other formal governmental organizations. The need for NGOs which are active in social, humanitarian and environment issues are forcing the government to legalize more NGOs. However, the State controls their activities through the Ministry of Social Affairs and the security police. NGOs have to report all activities, programmes and their financial expenditures.

31 Global civil society. 2001
However, local civil society organizations are active in several humanitarian fields, such as services for the handicapped, charity for the elderly and environmental activities. The Ministry of Social Affairs also has access to any activities within these NGOs. Foreign NGOs are still looked upon suspiciously by the State and are not allowed to act freely in the country. Therefore, the State has asked the foreign NGOs to be active under the umbrella of the UN. Christian NGOs, such as Caritas International, are active in the name of the Church, through a local organization called Al-Warda.

Al-Warda is a legal NGO registered in 1982. They run a nursery, a health clinic and school for the mentally handicapped located in Bab Toma. In Duelha, the organization delivers and distributes aid to 28 needy families. This aid is limited to a certain type of basic food such as sugar, oil for cooking, meat and canned food on a monthly basis. The beneficiaries are very needy families who live in Duelha. A woman employed in the organization opens a little rented house in Duelha once a month. The names of the families are validated by the nuns and the church. Some elderly who cannot come are visited by a group of volunteers to give them their monthly portions. This kind of support meets the needs of those needy families and the elderly. This kind of aid might also increase the level of social cohesion. There is a prevailing attitude of "us". Unfortunately, although there is a wide variety of needs among local families, NGOs are almost absent. Alwarda is the only one together with the church that represents civil society within the community. This clearly limits the potential support to people as regards building their livelihoods. The lack of other NGOs in Duelha means there is a lack of very crucial and vital assets.

5.7. Maintaining multi-local networks – the role of transportation

The migrants in Duelha are interested in maintaining links with their villages of origin. The high density of the local transportation system within the city and that linking it to other places means local residents and those coming from the city to Duelha are highly mobile. Duelha has a very dense transportation system. There are 150 diesel passenger vans that are privately operated. They run from early morning until very late at night. One goes from Duelha to the main station in the north part of Damascus, (Al-Kaboun bus station) where busses go to Homs, and in the direction of Aleppo. Ninety vans also depart from the bus station in the same direction. This transportation facility has played a very important role in maintaining the links the people of Duelha have with their regions of origin. Its popularity is also related to its relative affordability. The cost to the passenger is five SP (5 US cents). In Damascus, people who work in government offices commute to their workplaces on specially provided shuttle buses.

The van drivers openly express their religious affiliation. For example, Christian drivers decorate their vans with icons, the cross and pictures of Christian saints. Similarly, the Muslims drivers decorate their vans with the Koran and many Islamic verses. During the trips, the passengers listen to Christian songs in the Christian vans and Koranic verses in the Muslim vans. This is an indication of people’s commitment to religious rituals and religious engagements in their everyday life.
Since 1980, the highway from Damascus to Jordan has passed by the villages in the Huran valley. Many families intensified their links with their villages of origin as a result of the new transportation facilities. Families that have come and settled in Duelha have kept very strong ties with their village. Many people keep their village house and grow low maintenance crops such as olive trees and wheat. During the harvest period it is very easy to go and stay in the village for several days. Nowadays, some people work in Damascus and live in the village while others commute every day to the villages and sometimes spend a night with their relatives in Duelha. The vans from Duelha to the Khabab stop at two locations on a daily basis. The distance between Khabab and Damascus is 60 KM. One van stops near the church area, the second stops in the centre of Duelha. Many other people also use the bus station.

There is much less mobility between Duelha and other regions and cities. For example, people go to Homs only occasionally, mostly in the summer for weddings, baptisms and in the event of the death of a relative.

5.8. Conclusions

The major form of bonding capital within the Christian Duelha community is religion. This overrides the fact that people have migrated from different rural regions within the country. Nevertheless, regional ties have also created bridging capital by providing access to city life thorough family and village networks bridging rural-urban space, especially for the first generation of migrants.

At household level, family ties remain strong between generations, despite the change in material life style among the younger generation. This is reflected particularly in housing where “nesting” takes place in the property.

At neighbourhood level, the strong sense of responsibility for public space by older community members, makes Duelha a safe place for people to live. This also applies to women who experience little harassment. However, bonding is undermined by the exclusion of tenants who are not integrated into local social networks. A major source of linking and bridging social capital are the relationships with the politically dominant Alawits, who empathize with the Christian religion and who have formed the backbone of the dominant party that has been the government in power for many years.