



Cities in Revolution

# Baniyas

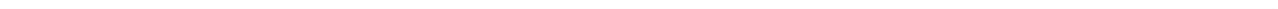
Al-Bayda: The White City

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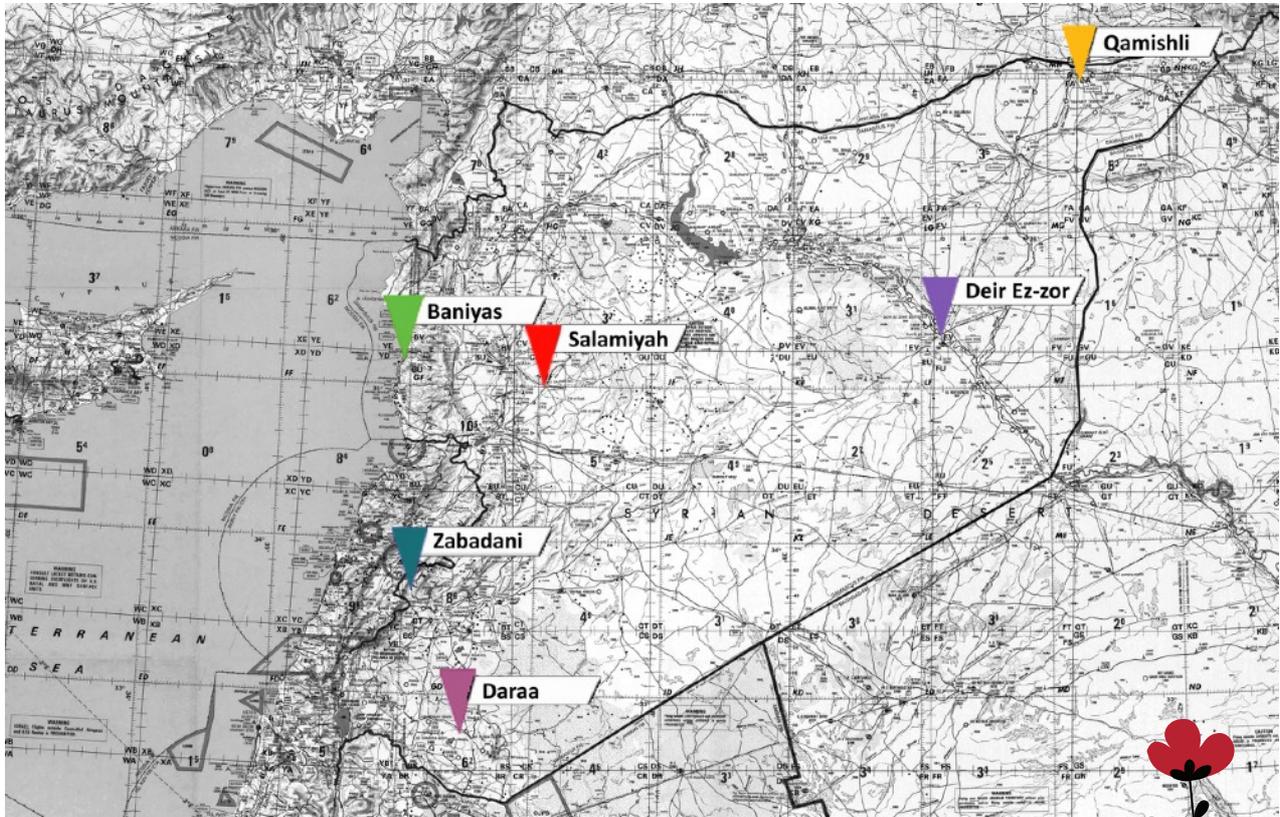
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## Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
A Look At The City’s Social Structure .....	4
A Gateway into Baniyas: Al-Bayda, From Which Nothing Remains.....	6
<b>Chapter One: The Impossible Challenge...Baniyas Revolts</b>	<b>9</b>
The Bustle of the Early Days.....	9
Following the 18th of March .....	11
The First Sit In And Occupation Of Public Space .....	13
Rumors, Falsehoods, And Liberation Of The City .....	14
The Control Over Rebel Neighborhoods .....	15
Escalation of Violence and the end of Liberation .....	17
Storming the City and the end of the Peaceful Stage .....	19
<b>Chapter Two: Beyond Spontaneity, Baniyas Organizes Politically</b>	<b>22</b>
Syrian Revolutionary Command Council in Baniyas .....	22
Ahrar Baniyas .....	23
Occupying the Walls: The Farouq Graffiti Brigade .....	24
Baniyas Media Office.....	25
<b>Chapter Three: The First Shots... Bearing Arms</b>	<b>27</b>
Martyrs of Baniyas Brigade .....	27
Ahfad Abi Bakr al-Sadeeq Brigade .....	28
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Team</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Cities in Revolution</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>SyriaUntold</b>	<b>34</b>

## Introduction



# Baniyas



Baniyas took part in the first protests against the Assad regime in 2011. Though other cities had risen up as well, notably Dara'a in the south, Baniyas garnered great media attention. The entry of Baniyas into the Syrian uprising was widely followed by different media outlets, which leads one to ask: what about Baniyas was so different? Why did Baniyas attract so much attention at the expense of other cities in the revolution?

Baniyas emerged in protest, early on. Baniyas's peaceful uprising was one of the first to pick up arms, and Baniyas's different movements were also both suppressed, and at the end of 2011, most of Baniyas's activists came to a standstill.

The city of Baniyas lies on a faultline: dozens of the villages and towns that surround it are Alawite, with many of them both supporters of the Asad regime and fodder for the regime's armies and militias. Situating Baniyas in this context helps draw a clearer picture of the nature of its revolutionary movement in the midst of heavy regime supporters.

Many of these pro-regime villages played a role in the suppression of Baniyas's revolutionary movement. Al Bayda village was subjected to repeated raids and Baniyas was attacked which inflamed all sectarian tensions in the region, eventually tinging the events that occurred in the city.

### **A Look At The City's Social Structure**

What strikes the person most about Baniyas is its clear sectarian divide. The city is split into two sections, the first of which, Ras Al Nabe', is Sunni and the second, Al Qusoor, which is Alawi and Christian. Of course, that is not to say that Alawites and Christians do not live in Ras Al Nabe' and Sunnis do not live in Al Qusoor, as they do but they largely remain the exception.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are many other neighborhoods in Baniyas, the oral tradition of the city is centered mainly around these two neighborhoods, reflecting the existing division within the minds of the city's residents which flourished under the authority of monopolized tyranny that has prevented them from properly reflecting on their city freely, reverting to instead a sort of fugitive language full of expressions that really belie what people think and view their city. History governs every day life in Baniyas, especially in the public consciousness. It isn't that Ras Al Nabe' or Bayda are majority "Sunni" villages, but rather it is that they were the ones to come out in support of the "Brothers" during the 1980s and who called for the fall of the regime; it is within the Alawite imagination that phrases like "God has not forgotten what happened in Hama; who knows what will happen to us if the regime is overthrown?" are common.

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this paragraph is based on the testimony of writer Mohamad Dibo. Summer 2016.

The souq that falls between the two neighborhoods within the city, Sunnis, Alawites and Christians meet regularly throughout the day, crossing sectarian barriers. At the end of the day, each returns to his region to finish the day in the divided city. Each region has its own nightlife, and this is in part due to the nature of society within each sect; Alawites and Christians tend to be more open minded in terms of dress and social relations, whilst the Sunnis are more conservative.

It is from this reality that the regime was able to demonize the revolutionary movement and push it towards militarization and sectarianism, and more important push the Alawites and the Christian communities into thinking of the revolution as a sectarian Sunni one.

The first thing the intelligence agencies did following the demonstrations in Baniyas was to spread rumors. At first, the rumors were based on the demands of the Sheikh Anas Ayrout, a revolutionary leader in the city, claiming that the salafists and religious leaders were leading the protests in order to establish an Islamic caliphate. This propelled the sectarian rumors, which were coupled with rumors surrounding the incidents where two regime soldiers were killed on the Baniyas Bridge, and rumors about German, Israeli, and U.S. weapon caches being found in the city.

These rumors frightened the Alawite sect into strengthening the support for the Asad regime. Since the start of the revolutionary movement in Baniyas, many Alawites were heard saying in Baniyas, "The Sunnis are going to kill us. They will slaughter us." This was a reflection of the way the authorities had gained power, and the road the regime had taken in terms of arming people, mobilizing entire villages and forcing them to live in an environment of fear by creating rumors of armed people.

The Asad regime largely succeeded in convincing many to believe their propaganda to the letter, following even their directives in disconnecting the "defamatory" channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya and Orient. The regime was able to play on these sectarian fears to turn neighbors into informants

against others. This was also partly due to the success of the regime in preventing activists and other political actors from gaining a foothold in those areas.

The first thing the regime did was prevent inter-community organizing between the different sects in the city and Alawites from participating in protests. While some of the elderly Alawite leaders did take part in the first demonstrations, the regime quickly worked to sic the Shabiha against them and start a campaign to slander them as traitors. The regime was successful in inciting social boycotts against those who were primarily involved in the uprising, discrediting them and subjecting them to community harassment. Many had their homes vandalized and were subject to beatings. There were even radio announcements against them, accusing them of carrying weapons, and dealing with Israel.

As such, those sympathetic were forced to work outside of their areas and neighborhoods enabling the regime to do what it saw fit, entrenching certain areas under its rule and keeping the Syrian uprising at bay.

### **A Gateway into Baniyas: Al-Bayda, From Which Nothing Remains**

On May 23, 2013 the world awoke to news of one of the most horrific massacres in humanity. Pictures of corpses -- men, women, babies -- lying on top of each other emerged. Dozens had fallen victim to bloody murder, slaughtered with knives, burned alive, and other forms of 'creative' murder at the hands of the National Defense Forces. The massacre took place in Al-Bayda. The one question in everyone's mind then was, "How can a human foster this kind of hatred, and why?"

Al-Bayda is located south-east of Baniyas, population 1,000. On May 2 and 3, 2013 the village was subject to a massacre that was, according to activist "Khalid"<sup>2</sup> indiscriminate collective punishment.

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<sup>2</sup> Eyewitness testimony gathered by the research team. Winter 2016.

## Al-Bayda, from which nothing remains



Al-Bayda is situated to the southwest of Baniyas



“Martyrs of Baniyas” Brigade was formed



A number of Asadist troops defected; A limited number of military operations were carried out

According to testimony gathered by the research team, the massacre started when the Syrian security forces arrested “Al Nasr”, an important activist from Al Bayda, when he was at home visiting his family. According to ‘Khalid’ Baniyas had risen up and seen many abuses against its residents and activists, which had ultimately led the youth to take up arms and defend themselves and their families.

In mid 2011, the first military group was formed: Martyrs of Baniyas Brigade. “Al Nasr” was prominent leader of the group. At the time, the brigade was successful only in securing defections from the Asadist ranks, and return them to their towns safely. Though they implemented some limited military operations against the checkpoints and groups of the regime. Everything changed, however, after the arrest of “Al Nasr” by the security forces.

According to “Bassam”<sup>3</sup> the members of the brigade were afraid that Al Nasr would give up the location of the brigade’s arms depots. Following debate, they decided to ambush various patrols belonging to the Asad regime.

Around May 2, 2013 various members of the Brigade were able to ambush forces belonging to the Asad regime. The Martyrs of Baniyas Brigade engaged in clashes for several hours, which resulted in the death of most of the Asad forces.

In light of this, Asadist forces gathered reinforcements in great anger at what had happened, and returned to the city supported by the shabiha militias, who played a large role in the massacre.

<sup>3</sup> Eyewitness testimony collected by the research team. End of 2015.



According to “Khalid”, the National Defense Forces stormed the northern neighborhoods of Al Bayda. Members of the militias entered civilian homes and massacred them. They slaughtered entire families, burned their bodies, and threw them in the streets. The militias prevented residents from leaving, and were reinforced by neighboring villages.<sup>4</sup>

There was no distinction made between the elderly or children; all were driven out to the street and killed with knives, machetes, and machine guns, led by Mihraç Ural (Ali Kayyali).<sup>5</sup>

By the end of that day, the world awoke to the news of a massacre. More than 300 people had been killed.

The victims’ bodies were buried in a hurry and people were prevented from conducting their usual funerary ceremonies. This sent a cruel message to the people of Baniyas and its countryside: the Syrian coast is no longer for Syrians but for the Asad regime and its loyalist. The Syrian coast had become the Asadist coast.

<sup>4</sup> Horrific scenes of victims’ bodies of the massacre in Al Bayda. Posted 05/05/2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFWLF1w6m3I>

<sup>5</sup> Survivor testimony from Al Bayda massacre <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUWds9xcpTc>

# Chapter One: The Impossible Challenge...

## Baniyas Revolts

### The Bustle of the Early Days

At a time when various Syrian cities were racing to join the Friday protests following the first one in Dara'a on March 18, 2011, Baniyas was unique in that it also came out in protest, independent of Dara'a on March 18, 2011.

According to Khalid's testimony, the city participated in demonstrations on March 18, 2011 at Al Rahman mosque in the middle of Baniyas.<sup>6</sup> Al Rahman mosque is important due to the impact it had on the revolutionary activity in the city and served as the revolutionary incubator for the first activists.

For many years, Sheikh Abdul Rahman was the imam of the mosque. In 1996, he was succeeded by his son, Anas Ayrout, who became an important revolutionary influence in the city.

#### The bustle of the first days



**First protest:** From Al-Rahman Mosque in the center of the city, **March 18, 2011** in front of Anas Ayrout

The most prominent leaders:



**Anas Al-Sheghri**  
**Hamed Arabi**  
**Mohamad Al-Zir**

All of whom are to this day detained by the Asad regime

Ayrout played an important role in the city's recent history, according to many accounts. His father played an important role in quelling the clashes that erupted in Baniyas following the events of 1982 in Hama. He promoted peace between different parts of the city. As a result, Ayrout was regarded highly by the Alawites and the Sunnis in the town.

Ayrout continued in his father's

<sup>6</sup>Video showing the first protest <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWdtUIbPiH4>

path<sup>7</sup>, receiving the respect of many community members. He preached moderate religious speech and coexistence.

Anas Ayrout was born in Baniyas in 1971. Following secondary school, he traveled to Aleppo to study at the Faculty of Engineering. Upon his father's illness, he was forced to withdraw and instead went to Damascus to study law. He graduated from college in 1994 and in 2011 received a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence from the Islamic Studies Faculty of Ouzai University in Beirut. Following this, he worked as an Islamic law teacher in various Baniyas schools as well as the Imam of Al Rahman mosque.

Ayrout was known for belonging to the Shazuliya Sufi branch in Syria. During his time as Imam of Al Rahman mosque, he gave twice daily religious lessons. Dozens of students devoted themselves to attending his lessons, and had a lot of respect and appreciation for him.

Ayrout, unlike his father's reconciliatory stances and rhetoric, played an important role in inciting the people of Baniyas to revolt against the Asad regime. According to activist Khalid, Ayrout took to the pulpit of Al Rahman mosque on March 11, 2011 and said: "This cannot be a platform for Islam unless it counteracts falsehoods and adheres to righteousness." He then spoke about the effect of the Baniyas oil refinery on the environment, the treatment of teachers who wore niqab, and other social issues and called for these issues to be rectified quickly.

That speech made a significant impact on the minds and hearts of the youth and the rest of the worshippers. Ayrout was merely speaking the demands of the city's residents, many of whom were too afraid to reveal them.

On the following Friday, March 18, 2011, thousands of worshippers gathered at Al Rahman mosque and Ayrout once again raised the same demands that had been raised in the previous speech. The speech stoked enthusiasm in the

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<sup>7</sup> سيرة الشيخ أنس بن عبد الرحمن محمد عيروط، رابطة علماء المسلمين، على الموقع الإلكتروني " <http://islamsyria.com/portal/cvs/show/286>

hearts of the audience who came out of the mosque, chanting their demands and making their way to the city center.

The youth of the city played a large role in the days leading up to the Friday, March 18 protest. They invited their friends to demonstrate after Friday prayers. The most prominent of these youth was Anas al-Sheghri and his friends, including Hamid Arabi and Mohamad al Zeer, who until today are languishing in the regime's prisons.

According to Khalid, they all gathered in the mosque. "I came out to the mosque after the prayers, and was talking to my friends. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I noticed that people began to gather as they were leaving. Anas al Sheghri started chanting, Freedom, at the top of his lungs and was soon followed by crowds of people chanting behind him. The crowd marched towards the city square, shouting for freedom and calling for reforms."

The demonstration was unorganized at first, and within a few moments, Maher al Masri, climbed on the shoulders of his freedom and began chanting as well, with people falling in behind him. The protesters moved unbothered until they reached the bus depot of the city. At that point, a number of protesters attacked an Alawite bus worker and damaged his truck. Ayrout, however, intervened immediately and ensured reparations were paid to the bus owner. Ayrout then emerged chanting, "Sunni, Alawi, we all want freedom" and the protesters repeated after him until they reached the intelligence security headquarters in the city. Ayrout entered the branch and presented the protesters demands, stating they had a week to comply. He then asked the protesters to return home, which they did.

### Following the 18th of March

As Baniyas's streets were filled with protestors, so too were Dara'as. However, Baniyas's protesters were left unharmed and were able to return home; Dara'as protesters were injured and killed at the hands of Asadist forces. Neither knew the other was protesting.

**The days following March 18**

**March 25, 2011**

Anas Ayrou, a sheikh, asked his congregation to remain at home as the regime appeared committed to responding to the demands. They refused.

**April 1, 2011**

Thousands of people in Baniyas took to the streets in overwhelming protests



Baniyas, however, was able to protest for a while freely, with no suppression that the other cities faced. Following the March 18 protest, the city did not experience a wave of arrests as had other cities. The regime also acquiesced to protesters demands, reinstating the teachers who had been fired for wearing niqab and investigating the price of electricity. This inspired the citizens to continue taking to the

streets and raising demands.

On Friday, March 25 2011 following Friday prayer, Sheikh Ayrou demanded from the worshippers to return home and not go out in protest. As long as the regime was reforming, there was no reason that the people should protest. The worshippers, however, refused to respond and insisted on going out in protest. They had heard about Dara'a and wanted to protest in solidarity.

Once they took to the streets, Anas al Sheghri once again chanted for freedom. Soon, the chants became about support Dara'a and denouncing the Asadist use of force against the demonstrators.<sup>8</sup>

The protesters headed towards the city center, before veering off towards the south in order to avoid potential clashes with residents from the northern neighborhoods, who were predominantly Alawite and in order to link with the protestors from a different mosque in the area, Qubayat mosque, and create a larger demonstration.

At the time, the imam of Qubayat mosque was Sheikh Mustafa Abdin. According to Khalid, Abdin had preached against protesting against the regime. The

<sup>8</sup> the March 25, 2011 protest in Baniyas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TldzgNukm9A>

youth however, prevented the Sheikh from making the sermon twice and by ascending to the pulpit and using it to chant for freedom. From within the mosque came the cry, and within moments the worshippers had flooded the streets, meeting with the protesters heading from Al Rahman mosque to the Center Square, chanting for freedom with their newfound energy.

On the third friday, following Asad’s speech at the parliament in Damascus, during which he had scoffed at the events in Dara’a, disregarding the bloodshed, many people in Baniyas were angered. This created determination amongst the people to go out to the street in massive demonstrations, which continued to attract more and more people to their ranks.

On April 1, 2011, the third Friday of the Syrian uprising, thousands of protesters emerged in Baniyas, chanting for freedom and dignity. Like other cities, protests in Baniyas had become more organized, more powerful, and featured pictures and banners. Protesters chanted against Iran and Hezbollah, criticizing their interventions within Syria.<sup>9</sup>

### The First Sit In And Occupation Of Public Space

In mid-April, four successful demonstrations had been staged by activists

without being exposed or attacked. They were growing in numbers, becoming more enthusiastic and confident. Activists decided to conduct a sit-in within one of the city squares, according to an activist named Khalid: “It was madness! The collective enthusiasm of activists there led us to decide that we will continue with our sit-in until the fall of the regime. It was like a dream”.



#### April 2011

Hundreds of people gathered in the Main Square and Center Square. Ayrouf asked the protesters to disperse to prevent killings.



<sup>9</sup> April 9, 2011 protest in Baniyas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2zbQx2WPaQ>

During April of 2011, the people of Baniyas headed towards the central square, gathering in the hundreds, chanting revolutionary slogans for freedom until they exhausted themselves. They would then play spirited songs on loudspeakers and continue to sing through the spring evenings. Some people donated mattresses, food and water for the protesters who decided to remain overnight.

At midnight, Ayrout left briefly to return and warn protesters that he had met with a security officer and was told there were orders from the capital Damascus to disperse the sit-in, even if it led to a massacre. He pleaded with them to return to their homes, fearing the worst, which is indeed what happened.

### Rumors, Falsehoods, And Liberation Of The City



After several days of peaceful demonstrations, a rumor spread throughout Baniyas like wildfire: the Alawites were preparing to invade the Sunni neighborhoods, similarly, that the Sunnis were preparing to invade the Alawite neighborhoods. This spread a wave of fear and panic amongst the people, and mobilized young men to arm themselves with sticks and iron rods. After a few

tense hours, these were found to have been rumors, and the security officials were known to have been behind their spreading. The way these rumors spread so quickly exposed how fragile the city's community was, and the erosion of trust between sectarian and social communities within it.

The Friday following these events, a demonstration was held with organizers focusing on rallying together the fractured dissident components. Activists of the Alawite sect were given the platform to speak to the amassed, stressing the necessity for solidarity between different sects within the revolutionary

community. Their aim was to extinguish any possible conflict within the population.

Despite all the attempts that have gone toward reassure the residents, and to prevent clashes, it was clear that there were seditious actors and that the revolutionary nature of the city's movement, demanding freedom, dignity and overthrow the regime, was going to be reduced to a sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Alawites.

In order to prevent protests from erupting the following Friday, the communications in the city were cut alongside the electricity. Panic spread through the citizens, who feared the city was about to be stormed by regime forces. They headed to Al Rahman mosque to allay their fears to Ayrout.

Although there was no clear sign that the regime was about to storm the city, with no increase in security presence in the streets or military reinforcements surrounding the city, the people were still worried. Rather than use his clout to ask about the power and communications, Ayrout called for the residents to practice self-defense, and made things worse.

The citizens mobilized, carrying their arms, and the youth erected checkpoints and roadblocks, cutting off access to public roads with garbage. The atmosphere of the city was charged with anticipation and concern.

According to Khalid, the night was long and difficult: "In the early morning, gunfire was heard in the city. It lasted for a few minutes, which led to the mobilization of everyone. When we went out to explore what had happened, we learned that a number of youth from outside the city had driven fast through the neighborhoods, playing loyalist songs and had opened fire on Abu Bakr mosque, seriously injuring the imam."

The youth returned fire, but the intruders managed to escape, with some escaping by foot. The car was then burned and towed to the city center, with a warning placed on it: "This is Baniyas, not Israel."

## The Control Over Rebel Neighborhoods

## Control of the City

After Sheikh Ayrouf called on the citizens to arm themselves, young men cut off the roads to the city and put up checkpoints at the city's entrances. The state institutions largely withdrew and the city fell to civilian rule.



Between April 10th and May 4th, 2011, Baniyas witnessed dramatic changes. Despite the relatively new uprising, Baniyas was the first city to truly test out 'liberation' which would not be heard by Syrians for months following the events of the city.

There is no real consensus about the exact day the decision was made to 'liberate' the revolutionary neighborhoods.

However, according to many testimonies, it is agreed that Sheikh Anas Ayrouf played a crucial role in every aspect of the events.

Following Ayrouf's recommendation to self-defense and the subsequent blockades created by the youth, entire neighborhoods fell to the control of the residents.

During this time, the neighborhoods bore witness to many revolutionary activities: mass demonstrations, varied forms of nonviolent resistance, women's demonstrations, school demonstrations, and the like. The protests expressed solidarity with other Syrians and everyone was chanting for freedom and liberation, which had not yet been widely discussed.<sup>10 11 12</sup>

The youth became extremely organized, which enabled them to divide themselves to different tasks. Anas al Sheghri played an integral role in organizing protests; others worked on media using satellite devices

<sup>10</sup>Video showing a mass demonstration in Baniyas: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TldzgNukm9A>

<sup>11</sup>- Night protest in Baniyas [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF0sQ\\_IM0jg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF0sQ_IM0jg)

<sup>12</sup>-Women's protest in Baniyas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Szgb2XH08rl>

smuggled in from Tal Kalakh. Meanwhile, Ayrout managed all of these groups.

Additionally, activists also organized food distribution to the residents according to Abdel Moneim, an activist.<sup>13</sup> They would bring in cars loaded with food from various neighborhoods in the city and take the food where it was needed. They distributed bulgur, rice, sugar, and oil alongside bread and milk. The food distributed was free, though it is unclear who was the primary funder of this activity. We could not determine the origins of financial support that were either within the city or elsewhere.

### Escalation of Violence and the end of Liberation

Following the activist takeover of various neighborhoods in Baniyas, the city bore witness to a series of violent events which ended the short period of liberation within the city. The regime army stormed those neighborhoods in an effort to impose order.

On April 10, 2011 Al Bayda was stormed by regime thugs and Asad forces<sup>14</sup> who launched a mass arrest campaign. The prisoners they arrested were then paraded out into the square, where they were abused and humiliated in an attempt to mass punish.<sup>15</sup>

On that day, amidst the atmosphere of fear and anticipation, sounds of heavy fire were heard from the bridge. Later, people learned that a group of youth from the Alawite villages surrounding Baniyas had clashed with some of the activists stationed at the entrance of the city.

According to Khalid, many rumors abounded following this incident. The intruders fled following the clashes, leaving behind a young Alawite man. The activists decided to detain this man, and videos emerged of them

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<sup>13</sup>Testimony gathered by the research team in 2016

<sup>14</sup>- Video showing the storming of Al Bayda by Asad forces <http://cutt.us/aUYS>

<sup>15</sup>Video showing the public humiliation of Al Bayda <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1iHlaNPaTk>

**Rising Violence and the Collapse of Liberation**

**April 10, 2011**

Al-Bayda was subject to harassment by the shabiha; an arrest campaign was launched by the regime, with dozens of citizens arrested and humiliated in the town's main square.



**April 12**

Rumors of a presidential pardon of Baniyas's activists spread, and the arms were withheld, and checkpoints withdrawn.

As a result the army was able to enter the town with no clashes, arrests, or searches.



**May 4**

Protests raged but were not subjected to any problems by the regime.



beating him. On the way to hand him to Sheikh Ayrout, the man was stabbed multiple times with sharp knives which lead to his death several hours later.

This incident provoked a lot of anger and outrage amongst the Alawite community and enabled the Asad regime, through a mass media campaign, to paint the uprising as a terrorist and takfiri effort to establish an Islamic state in the region. This struck fear in the hearts of many Alawites, who were outraged by the documented killing of the youth.

The day following the death, a group belonging to the army attempted to storm the city using the international highway between Ras al Nabe' and Jisr al Quz, situated about 200 meters apart. This led to casualties between the two parties. Six of the young men killed were from Baniyas, some of whom had died due to sniper fire.

The regime also used this incident in order to continue mobilizing the different sects in Baniyas to hate each other; the regime was successful in convincing many of the Alawites to stand behind it and to believe rumors established by the regime that the Sunnis were out to kill the Alawites, according to writer Mohamad Dibo.

In light of these events and the highly charged atmosphere, many were prompted to leave Baniyas due to a perceived lack of safety.

All events in Baniyas leading up to, and following, these events are a reflection of the Asad regime's desire to militarize the revolution in order to promote a climate of fear and tension amongst Alawite loyalists. Unfortunately, lead by Ayrout, the young men of the city fell to this trap; Asad was indeed successful in intimidating this population and fostering these distractions which have ultimately contributed to its longevity.

Looking back, we are able to understand that it was not merely a coincidence by the Asad regime to accuse Baniyas and its inhabitants of terrorism in order to justify storming and inciting violence against people, but it was a plot. Then, a bus had arrived with soldiers, fully armed with automatic weaponry, on the road between Baniyas and Tartous. Activists from Baniyas attempted to stop the bus and ultimately were successful, seizing their weapons, about 50 automatic rifles, with no resistance.

The next day, on April 12, a presidential decree was announced calling for 'amnesty for the militants of Baniyas'. The army then entered the city in an attempt to bring back order.

This was welcomed by the residents of Baniyas, who lifted the barricades, disappeared their arms and welcomed the army. The troops that were deployed were not at checkpoints and were not harassing people, with no mass arrest or search campaigns conducted by them.

In mid-April 2011, until May 4, 2011 the city did not stop protesting once nor did it stop its nonviolent activism. Most testimonies claim that there was no interference or harassment by the military forces, despite their chanting for the fall of the regime.

### **Storming the City and the end of the Peaceful Stage**

In early May 2011, the army withdrew from Baniyas. The residents were surprised. They were then again surprised by the storming of the neighborhoods

**Storming the City and the End of the Nonviolent Movement**

**May 7, 2011**

Asad's forces stormed the city and launched a campaign of arbitrary arrests. They arrested more than 2,000 citizens, who were rounded up in the municipal stadium and were beaten.



**May 5, 2011**

On Friday of "Margat's Women", Baniyas raged in angry protest resulting in many injuries and dozens of arrests.



that had been at the heart of the revolutionary movement. The regime had called in for reinforcements alongside the intelligence services, who stormed into the neighborhoods and carried out mass arrests and search campaigns, which affected the population almost indiscriminately. According to activist Mohamad, thousands of detainees were held at the municipal stadium in the city, where they were subject to insults and physical abuse.

Mohamad, who was arrested alongside his father, witnessed

these events first hand. He spoke to us of the beatings he and his father were subject to. After several days of detention, he, along others, were released. Hundreds of others of young men, however, were herded off into unknown places, many of whom remain disappeared to this day.

The intelligence forces and the army spread into the neighborhoods of the city, erecting roadblocks and checkpoints where they would conduct random searches on passerbys.

The following Friday, May 5, 2011, following all the events, the protest was called "Margat's Women." En masse, the women emerged, angry in the streets, risking their lives. They were confronted by the military and intelligence forces, with many wounded.<sup>16</sup> Dozens were arrested by Asad's forces, many of whom remain detained today. That protest was the last mass demonstration in Baniyas.

<sup>16</sup>- Video showing the protest on 12-5-2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lbmRQoP16k>

Following these events, Baniyas fell under tighter control of the security forces. In addition to the checkpoints scattered around different neighborhoods, there were dozens of soldiers stationed near the city's mosques, with military vehicles surrounding them in order to prevent any protests.<sup>17</sup> Security forces also flooded the city's public squares. Gradually, the activists were unable to demonstrate truly, only doing fly by protests that involved a small number of people and only lasted for a few minutes.<sup>18</sup>

The revolution had effectively ended in Baniyas, which had been subjected to violence, torture and terrorism which caused the people to view the toll for participating as too high.

With time, and due to tighter security controls, hundreds of young activists left their city, escaping from the grip of the intelligence forces.

Baniyas, which had been the first city besides from Dara'a to protest against the Asad regime, was the first city to halt its revolutionary activity due to the scale of suffering it had seen. The entrance of the army into the city was a turning point, and marked the end of an era. A new phase of the struggle was born, one that featured arms and militarization to address the violence of Asadist forces, a thought that had become the ruling option amongst the organizers of the revolution.

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<sup>17</sup>- The last protest in Baniyas, 5-5-2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PIIFoBlga0>

<sup>18</sup>- A flyby protest in Baniyas, dated: 5-10-2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXSITdzpczM>

## Chapter Two: Beyond Spontaneity, Baniyas Organizes Politically

Following the military raids and torture and arrests, the activists of Baniyas strove to organize their ranks and establish organizations in order to devise ways to protect themselves from the intelligence agencies.

The first group was the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council in Baniyas under the supervision of Ayrout, and when the members of the council left Syria, another group was established called the “Ahrar Baniyas” group which featured a broader framework and larger membership. In addition, the activists founded they Unified Media Bureau which played a substantial role in covering the events of the city, and the “Local Coordination Committee” which belonged to the larger network.

### Syrian Revolutionary Command Council in Baniyas

**The Revolutionary Command Council of Baniyas**

**May 2011**

**The “Council” was established after the regime army stormed the city**

**The Council’s work was limited to relief operations and humanitarian financial assistance, food relief, and medical relief for Baniyas’s citizens**

The research team was not able to connect with the most prominent of the Council’s members, Sheikh Anas Ayrout. However, the team was able to gather the testimony of members who had been present at its founding.

According to Khalid, the Council was formed after the army stormed the city of

Baniyas in May 2011. The Council was short lived due to the majority of its members living outside of Syria, in Turkey and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>The Syrian Revolutionary Command Council Facebook page : <http://cutt.us/hkbTt>

The Council's work was limited to relief, the securing of food and medical supplies to Baniyas, and played an important aid role in the city.

## Ahrar Baniyas

On September 3, 2011, the Ahrar Baniyas group was established in direct response to the suffering of the activists in the city and the decline of revolutionary work. Ahrar Baniyas sought to establish a political framework to express the demands of Baniyas's citizens.



**The group exists to this day and they work to gather evidence and documentation with which to prosecute the Asad regime and other criminals in courts of law**

According to activist Bilal, one of the founders of the group,<sup>20</sup> the Ahrar Baniyas framework was founded on civil and peaceful work which was in no way related to military organizing. The assembly is not a political party and does not follow a specific political platform. It is an independent civil organization.

Though a small number of people founded the organization, it quickly reached a membership of about 300 with the number doubling by the start of 2012. In 2013, the group featured 1,500 people. The assembly was founded to provide a voice for the people of Baniyas using nonviolent resistance. As such, the organized demonstrations, wrote revolutionary banners, disseminated political materials, and communicated with media outlets.

At the start of 2012, the members of the assembly were subjected to prosecution by Asad regime forces. Many of the members were detained, which no doubt had a negative impact on the group's ability to mobilize. As

<sup>20</sup>-Testimony gathered in 2015; the name is a pseudonym.

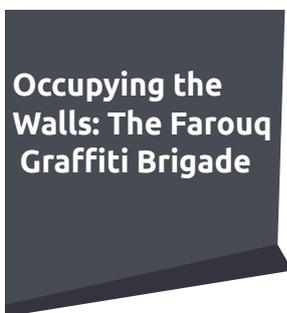
such, the group was forced to scale back dramatically. Regardless, the group was able to survive and regained its energy by March 2012.

According to one of the members of the assembly, the group exists today and seeks to preserve the morals and ideals from its inception. They reject sectarianism and still call for the fall of the regime and the need for social justice. According to the assembly, there is no justice until accountability from those who were involved in the Syrian bloodshed.

The group has managed to assemble large documents that can be used in courts following the fall of the Asad regime as evidence, which includes documents regarding those who committed crimes against the people of Baniyas.

### Occupying the Walls: The Farouq Graffiti Brigade

Due to the army’s presence in Baniyas, many young people were adamant about finding a way to express themselves despite the high security presence.



#### Mid-2012

**This group continued until the start of 2013**

**They would spray paint schools, residential buildings, and governmental though taking care not to place people in danger.**



The Farouq Graffiti Brigade was founded in mid-2012 and worked until 2013, according to Khalid, one of the founders of the group. “We were a group of young men, no more than six, who decided to form this group. We had seen and heard of other “Sprayers” in different Syrian cities and realized the importance of what they were doing and the inconvenience they were causing

the intelligence forces. So we decided to ‘occupy’ the walls of our city.’

The Brigade worked independently and in secret. They chose their targets carefully: school walls and walls of empty buildings so as to protect the

residents. They did also chose some government walls, when appropriate with the message. They would use phrases widely known by Syrians at this point, such as “The people demand the fall of the regime” considered to be one of the most provocative phrases to the security forces.

The goal of these youth was to defy the occupation of the city by the intelligence and security forces and to emphasize that they, despite all the risks, were carrying on.

According to Khalid, three of the young men were responsible for spraying on the walls, one was the photographer, and the other filmed. After they completed their project, the young men would compile a montage and share on social media.<sup>21</sup>

The young men participated in many revolutionary activities and campaigns that were launched by other groups, including the “Warrior” campaign which featured the stories of activists in the Syrian revolution.<sup>22</sup>

### **Baniyas Media Office**

In the second half of 2011, the Baniyas Media Office<sup>23</sup> was established in an attempt to overcome the chaos of the media scene in Baniyas since the start of the revolutionary movement. According to the activist Loujain,<sup>24</sup> one of the founders of the group: “We were a small group of activists, who trusted each other and decided to create a small media group to cover the events in Baniyas. Later, in 2012, we announced the establishment of the Baniyas Media Office.”

The team worked hard to amplify the voices of Baniyas to various media and to work as a liaison between the various relief and support agencies

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<sup>21</sup>-The Farouq Graffiti Brigade: 20-9-2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JizTfRDQaWY>

<sup>22</sup>-The Farouq Graffiti Brigade 30-1-2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0IE96WjKbA>

<sup>23</sup>The Baniyas Media Office Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Banias.M.O1>

<sup>24</sup>-Testimony gathered by the research team in 2015.

## Baniyas Media Office

### Mid 2012

**They worked to amplify the voices of Baniyas and to create a link between Baniyas and to coordinate relief efforts.**

**The Office documents the names of martyrs and detainees and archives important events**



and the residents of the city, documenting the aid.

The Baniyas Media Office cultivated an extensive network of contacts with the media, such as BBC Arabic, the Local Coordination Committees, and other media bureaus within Syria.

The office also worked at archiving and documentation,

documenting the martyrs, detainees, and those missing in an effort to be as thorough as possible.<sup>25</sup>

The Media Office sought to work honestly and professionally, staying away from rumors and exaggerations. It aimed to set itself apart from other bureaus, according to Loujain. They provided full transparency and a democratic process in determining the director, and would divide the work amongst themselves. Loujain likened their work to those of bees, working harmoniously.

Unfortunately, the Syrian intelligence services arrested several members of the team, including activist Hamid Arabi, who was arrested in 2014. A number were also killed, such as Abu Hussein and Shadi al-Baashtin, who were war correspondents covering the Free Syrian Army's activities and movements. Those who were not killed or arrested fled the city, negatively impacting the performance of the office. Media work has become increasingly dangerous and has been in a decline.

<sup>25</sup>- Baniyas Media Office: YouTube <http://cutt.us/F4eJi>

## Chapter Three: The First Shots... Bearing Arms

As other cities were in the infancy of their revolutionary movements, Baniyas was preparing to militarize.

Baniyas took up arms earlier than other cities for two reasons: one, primarily because of Sheikh Anas Ayrout's incitement and two, due to the violence perpetrated by Asad's forces and militias against civilians.

In April 2012, Baniyas saw the formation of the first armed group, Martyrs of Baniyas Brigade and a few months later the second armed group, the Ahfad Abi Bakr al-Sadeeq Brigade and then the Suqoor Baniyas brigade.

In spite of this, the groups have been unable to achieve their primary goal, that is the protection of civilians. The groups are ill equipped and ill trained, no match for the heavily armed Asadist forces and warplanes. As such, these groups have dissolved over time, either due to the death of their fighters or due to the heavy security presence that prevents their movement.

### Martyrs of Baniyas Brigade

**Formed: April/May 2012**

**Composed of youth from the city, they carried light arms**

**Commander: Hassan S.**

**He was arrested. There exist no news of his whereabouts and wellbeing.**

The "Baniyas Martyrs" brigade was formed between April and May of 2012, and was one of the first brigades formed in Baniyas, according to Khalid. The group was composed of young men and their light arms, though various young men did not have any weapons to speak of.

The battalion was lead by Hassan S., from Baniyas. The Asad regime arrested him, and he remains in detention to this day. The battalion was unable to continue

following this arrest.

## Ahfad Abi Bakr al-Sadeeq Brigade

In August 2012, the Ahfad Abi Bakr al-Sadeeq brigade was formed<sup>26</sup> lead by Huzayfa al Sheghri, from Baniyas. The Brigade was active in the nearby Jabal Akrad area, and in Ghassaniya and Al-Najiya. At time of writing, the brigade is still active.

According to testimonies, the brigade is a subsidiary of the “Civilian Defence Council” which is a part of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood military formations, and is funded by the organization.

**Formed: April/May 2012**

**Commander: Huthayfa Al-Sheghri**

**Active in Jabal Akrad,  
Ghassaniyeh, Najiye until today**

<sup>26</sup> - Video announcing the formation of the brigade: 14-8-2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U\\_l0o8T\\_Ppw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_l0o8T_Ppw)

## Conclusion

Life, though monotonous, goes on in the city of Baniyas, but it is insignificant to the media. It has been abandoned by most of the young activists, as they escaped repression, while the military and intelligence forces tighten their grip on the city and its inhabitants. To residents trying to topple the Asad regime, it revealed their efforts to be that of false hope.

Though Baniyas appears to be calm today, and devoid of any revolutionary activity, let us not forget that the people had succeeded earlier in creating a viable opposition to the Asad regime, proving that this calm is nothing more than a facade held up by the regime's use of force.

Baniyas paid a heavy price due to its revolutionary movements, losing hundreds of young men and women, many of whom were killed by the Shabiha, with others still languishing, forgotten in the regime's prisons. Those who have left, however, continue working in the revolution in any way that they can, seeking to use yesterday's experience to avoid mistakes and overcome.

## Methodology

Since mid-March 2011, Syrian cities -- their social formations and geography -- have been in flux. Though the revolutionary processes have resembled one another and intersected at many points, each city contains its own idiosyncrasies and distinctions. Thus, a macroscopic study of each city is needed to tell the story of what unfolded in each city.

The beginning of the revolutionary movement in Syria is characterised by the suppression of free speech and independent media by the Asad regime. Media teams and researchers are banned from entry and work in Syria, and thus it is a new independent media that sought to document and broadcast daily events.

For decades, Syria was a 'kingdom of silence' and Asad, both father and son' succeeded in maintaining it as such despite various activities in the country. After the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the regime failed to contain the story and civilians took on the task of producing knowledge about what was happening in the city.

This project, "Cities in Revolution", was born in this context. At first, different cities were selected for targeted research and later, each city had independent teams conduct fieldwork in order to gather information, verify information, and obtain photographs and video footage.

The primary source of information is eyewitness testimony, which was obtained and recorded by activists involved in the city's transformations. These testimonies were verified and thus became valid to use in research. The secondary source of information was electronic references, that is: videos and written testimonies. After information was gathered about each city, there were comparisons made across the different events and the events that were corroborated by a number of different sources and had consensus amongst eyewitnesses were ultimately used. Any gaps were

filled in by the research team, who relied on exclusive sources and electronic sources.

In any case, it must be noted that we are unable to claim neutrality and absolute objectivity in the production of this project: the team doing this work is biased to the revolution of the Syrian people. Those whose testimonies are present in the work are opposed to the Asad regime. That said, as much research and measures as possible were put in place to remain as true as possible to ethics of objectivity, hence this disclosure.

“Cities in Revolution” does not claim to portray the complete objective truth. And we hope that our efforts will be used by Syrian activists and movements as a means to fill at least some gaps in knowledge.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the eyewitnesses, who donated precious time and effort to relay their stories to us. We would like to also extend gratitude to the different downs who rose against tyranny and to all who contributed to the success of this project.

## Team

### SABR DARWISH

Syrian researcher and journalist. Darwish co-edited two books: *The Experience of Liberated Cities*, Dar al-Rayyes 2015, and *The Tragedies of Besieged Aleppo and the Messages of the Besieged*, with Lebanese journalist Mohammad Abu Samra, Dar al-Mutawasset 2016.

### MOHAMMAD DIBO

Current editor-in-chief of SyriaUntold (Arabic), and an editor at al-Arabi al-Jadid. Dibo is a Syrian poet, writer and researcher interested in Syrian culture and economy. Dibo's latest work is an autobiographical book, "Like He Who Witnesses His Own Death", about his experience in prison during the early days of the Syrian uprising. He is a regular contributor in many Arab and international newspapers.

## Cities in Revolution

The complexity of the situation in Syria, the regime's efforts in dividing the opposition as well as the growing militarisation of the conflict has led to very various forms of revolutions depending on the geographical areas or cities where the uprising took place. In this multifaceted context, the narrative on the Syrian events often tends to simplify what actually is a complex and varied reality on the ground. Moreover, the overabundance of information on Syria and the fast pace of news production make it difficult to ensure the validity of facts and figures and to establish a chronological, as objective as possible account of the events since March 2011.

Through the use of innovative forms of storytelling mixing research-based written content, infographics and documentary videos, the *Cities in Revolution* project's objective is to fill this gap by documenting a comprehensive, chronological account of the events as they happened in six different cities, in all their complexity and diversity, with a focus on civil movements and creative disobedience. Each multimedia documentary file will rely on content already available, but also on research and information collected by activists on the ground for this specific purpose.

**Cities in Revolution is funded through the Ebticar grant from Canal France International (CFI) and the European Union.**

## SyriaUntold

SyriaUntold is an independent digital media project exploring the storytelling of the Syrian struggle and the diverse forms of resistance. We are a team of Syrian writers, journalists, programmers and designers living in the country and abroad trying to highlight the narrative of the Syrian revolution, which Syrian men and women are writing day by day. Through grassroots campaigns, emerging forms of self-management and self-government and endless manifestations of citizen creativity, a new outspoken Syria has emerged, after decades of repression and paralysis. With mainstream media focusing increasingly on geostrategic and military aspects and less on internal dynamics developing on the ground, we believe there are many aspects of the Syrian struggle that remain uncovered, many stories that we would not like to see forgotten.