



LOCAL GOVERNANCE INSIDE SYRIA

Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

**INSTITUTE FOR
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Front: Syrian man holds a wounded turtledove injured in a bomb blast in front of the Dera al-Shifa hospital in the northern city of Aleppo.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi

Back: A sunset over Al-Qsair.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi

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About the Institute for War & Peace Reporting

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting gives voice to people at the frontlines of conflict and transition to help them drive change. IWPR empowers citizens and their communities to make a difference – building their skills, networks and institutions, supporting development and accountability, forging peace and justice.

Working in three dozen countries, IWPR's innovative programs are crafted to respond to the needs of the people they serve. Projects prioritise locally informed objectives and lead to sustainable outcomes. Beneficiaries include citizen and professional journalists, human rights and peace activists, policymakers, educators, researchers, businesses, and women's, youth and other civil society organisations and partners.

Headquartered in London with coordinating offices in Washington, DC and The Hague, IWPR is overseen by an international board of trustees made up of internationally recognized journalists and media professionals, business and financial sector executives, philanthropists and civil society leaders. Its 125-person global staff is led by an executive management team of experts in media and governance, program development and management, policy and advocacy, financial development, finance and human resources.

ABOUT IWPR'S PROGRAMMES

The strength of IWPR's programming is rooted in its ability to help individuals and groups develop the knowledge, skills, relationships and platforms they need to communicate clearly, objectively, effectively, persuasively and safely and to use that knowledge and those tools to affect positive change. Projects and initiatives are developed in partnership with local organizations and are designed to meet the unique needs of the individuals and groups they will serve and the communities in which they operate.

IWPR'S GLOBAL PROGRAMMING FOCUS

PROMOTING FREE EXPRESSION

IWPR builds the skills of professional and citizen journalists working in traditional media (newspapers and magazines, radio, TV) and in social and new media (Facebook, Twitter, Internet news magazines and portals, blogs and other online vehicles). Programs train and mentor them to report fairly and objectively with the goal of achieving internationally recognized standards of reporting and analysis. Reporters, editors, producers, bloggers, and managers learn the value of producing substantive content that informs while helping to define the roles of citizens, civil society, government, the media, business and others in building fair, pluralistic, democratic systems that value and respect the opinions of all constituencies. Whether in repressive or closed societies, transitional environments, or democratically developing states, IWPR encourages the development and exercise of freedom of expression, assembly, and belief and uses journalism as a tool to advance peace and social justice.

STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY

Working with international and local partners, IWPR supports the capacity of civil society and human rights groups to more effectively advocate for government and institutional accountability and transparency, with programming designed to reduce corruption, strengthen rule of law, and promote basic rights. It promotes and publicizes the work of international courts and tribunals that support justice and hold individuals and groups responsible for crimes against humanity. IWPR

helps communities to more effectively fight against immediate and longer-term threats by building knowledge, empowering, and supporting citizen activism, and helps countries and regions to heal from conflict and war through support for transitional justice.

BUILDING INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

IWPR has supported peace and reconciliation in conflict zones around the world for 20 years. These efforts, along with campaigns and activities that encourage free and fair elections, counter extremism, and enhance the ability of civil society organizations to be effective, are all critical to building societies that value and build on the strengths of all of their peoples, including their women, youth, minorities, and traditionally marginalized communities. Societies are most inclusive and cohesive, and strive for the benefit of all citizens, when economies are strong, people are healthy, and the populace is educated; hence, IWPR's focus on these areas of concern.

IWPR employs a skilled staff and expert consultants in a variety of fields to support its capacity-building activities and to assist in providing journalists, civil society and civic activists with the basic and advanced skills and knowledge that support sustainable and positive change. It employs tools and technologies in programming that encourages citizen understanding, participation, and involvement and builds local expertise. All programs and projects are measured and evaluated to ensure that future initiatives and those who participate in them benefit from valuable "lessons learned."

ABOUT IWPR SYRIA

Institute for War and Peace Reporting has been running projects inside Syria since 2007, with support from the governments of United Kingdom, Norway and the U.S. Department of State. IWPR has undertaken multiple projects to strengthen the ability of independent journalists, human rights advocates, civil society groups and many local councils inside Syria to communicate more effectively and securely. Programming has built local capacity; supported the production and dissemination of independent multimedia reporting; delivered innovative distance learning and apprentice-style mentoring; and developed a unique network of civic activists on the ground. IWPR has provided hands-on workshops in news writing, human rights and economic reporting; established the Damascus Bureau, an independent, sustainable news website in Arabic and English; and embedded digital safety techniques through Cyber Arabs, a pioneering digital security platform operating across the Arab world.

Alumni of IWPR's Syria programming have assumed leading roles in the non-violent opposition; many are continuing to document human rights violations, coordinate civil society initiatives for humanitarian aid, and report the on-going conflict. Others, forced to flee their country, are advocating for international support for Syria's opposition, leading planning for transition activities, and organizing support for refugees. IWPR has played a particularly active role in providing activists and journalists with secure platforms for sharing their stories and shaping the narrative of the uprising, as well as convening workshops enabling inter-sectarian communication and encounters.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Institute for War & Peace Reporting	4
SUMMARY	10
BACKGROUND	12
FILLING THE GAP	15
THE COUNCILS	19
Yabrud Council	20
Dara'a Council	24
Ar Raqqa Council	27
ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES	31
Challenges Faced by Local Councils in Syria	32
Local Councils: An Opportunity Not to Be Lost	34
Assessing Syria's Local Council Needs	36
CONCLUSION	38
RECOMMENDATIONS	39

SUMMARY

Governing bodies known as local councils have emerged throughout Syria from the chaos of three years of war. The councils fill a critical need for social and governmental organization in areas where the al-Assad regime has relinquished control. This report analyses and evaluates several of these local councils and their related structures in terms of origin, effectiveness, existing needs, and potential.

A Syrian man waves the old Syrian flag in front of a former police station in Al-Qsair.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi



The findings and conclusions of the report are based on interviews with members of six councils, three of which are examined in detail:

- Yabrud (Damascus suburb)
- Ar Raqqah (North Central)
- Dara'a (South)
- Idlib (North)
- Deir ez-Zur (East)
- Latakia (West)

Local councils face many challenges since they operate in areas suffering the ravages of war, including ongoing bombardment by the al-Assad regime's forces. Yet, they offer many opportunities to enhance their effectiveness.

Key Findings:

- Three local councils discussed in this report, Yabrud, Dara'a, and Ar Raqqah have been effective in the midst of a devastating war, despite their lack of funding and expertise.
- The councils struggle to follow democratic procedures, create effective organizations, and delineate decision-making procedures.
- Councils lack a consistent source of funding that would allow them to systemise their work and plans.
- Local councils have a good level of transparency, considering the historical Syrian context.
- Councils maintain relations with military groups, and some have military units, but often the exact nature of the relationship is unclear.
- Local councils need trained staff and administrators, who can operate free of the legacy of corruption and inefficiency of the al-Assad regime.
- The councils lack the presence and participation of women.

BACKGROUND

The modern state of Syria was established in 1946 after gaining independence from France. Since then, Syria has survived periods of political instability. In 1967 Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel after its defeat along with Egypt and Jordan in the Six Day War. From 1958 to 1961, Syria was united briefly with Egypt during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser. An army coup restored Syrian independence, which was followed by the nationalist Ba'ath Party seizing power in 1963, transforming Syria into a one-party state governed by broadly defined emergency powers. During the 1960s, power shifted from the Ba'ath Party's civilian ideologues to Syrian army officers. This culminated with the rise to power of General Hafez al-Assad in a military coup in 1970.

A rebel prays near a tank whose crew defected from government forces in Homs province.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi



Syria has never been ruled by a democratically elected government. The president has been nominated by the Ba'ath Party and approved by a referendum for consecutive seven-year terms. The referendums have been orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-person People's Council, whose members serve four-year terms, yet possess little independent legislative power. All powers have resided in the hands of the president.

The government has dealt harshly with domestic opposition. Thousands of peaceful activists have been arrested, tortured, and detained for long periods without trial or formal charges. Tens of thousands were said to have been killed during the suppression of the 1982 uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian city of Hamah.

Hafez al-Assad's autocratic and one-party rule enabled widespread corruption that rarely drew reprisals. Bribery became necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. (Syria was ranked 144 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.)

After his 1970 coup, al-Assad moved to control professional groups under the Ba'ath Party umbrella. Unions were required to belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent organization that the government used to control their activity. Professional syndicates and unions conducted questionable elections in which all candidates were members of the Ba'ath Party and were approved by the regime's secret services to ensure their loyalty to the al-Assad regime.

In the Syrian constitution of 1973, al-Assad solidified the Ba'ath Party control over the state and civil society. Belonging to the party became a means to receive the privileges of the state. Al-Assad also controlled the judicial system and created exceptional courts that operated under the emergency law.

Following Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, control of government was assumed by his son, Bashar al-Assad. Under his leadership, Syria experienced a brief period of relaxation as hundreds of political prisoners were released. However, serious political freedom and reform of the state-controlled economy never occurred.

Inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, what became known in Syria as the Damascus Spring took place in early 2011 when Syrians began to openly discuss their country's need for political change. In February 2011, the regime arrested outspoken activists and sentenced them to lengthy prison terms. Others faced surveillance and intimidation by the secret police.

Activists in Syria continued to press for major reforms and campaigned for the release of political prisoners, the abolishment of the long-standing emergency powers, and the legalisation of opposition parties. Despite promises of change, the al-Assad regime did not implement reforms or make changes. Instead, the grip of the security agencies tightened and corruption increased as members of al-Assad's inner circle took control of the Syrian economy. Except the Ba'ath Party, all other political parties remained illegal.

Freedom of expression was heavily restricted. The penal code and the 2001 Publications Law criminalized the distribution of material considered to be harmful to national unity, defaming of the state, or threatening to the "goals of the revolution." A 2011 media law contained broad restrictions and journalists were detained despite a provision barring arrests or imprisonment for press offenses. Apart from a few stations with non-news formats, all broadcast media were state-owned.

Most Syrians accessed the Internet through servers controlled by the state, which blocked more than 200 sites associated with the opposition, Kurdish politics, Islamic organizations, human rights, and certain foreign news services, particularly those in Lebanon. Social-networking and video-sharing websites were unblocked in 2011, but reportedly have been used to track and punish opposition activists and their supporters.

Freedom of association has been severely restricted. Non-governmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have been jailed for publicizing state abuses. Despite grave risks, opposition networks continue to operate across Syria.

The outbreak of the armed Syrian revolution in March 2011 came as a surprise to many non-Syrians because the al-Assad family had controlled Syria for 40 years through a strong military and security apparatus. The protests of the Damascus Spring took on a more formal nature when the opposition organised political and military wings and prepared for a long battle with the al-Assad's government. By 2012, after a year of violent struggle, an apparent stand-off escalated into civil war, prompting defections from within the governing elite and signalling a weakened government.

The Syrian revolution was initially led by local coordinating committees formed in many towns and cities. The committees organised protests and documented human rights violations by the regime. Initially peaceful protests were met with increasingly harsh responses and protesters were killed. In 2011-12, security forces used tanks, gunfire, and mass arrests to crush the anti-government street protests that followed the Damascus Spring. In the early stages of the militarization of the revolution, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other armed groups led the armed confrontations with government forces.

By the beginning of 2014, most of Syria was embroiled in the conflict. New and disturbing aspects of the revolution emerged when battles broke out during 2013 between the FSA and armed Islamist groups sponsored by non-Syrian actors who had become involved in the civil war. An estimated 140,000 people have been killed since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. More than seven million Syrians are refugees or have been internally displaced.

FILLING THE GAP

Since 2012, hundreds of local councils have been formed in Syrian cities, towns, and villages now free of the al-Assad regime. The councils provide essential public services, including water, electricity, and street cleaning, as well as humanitarian relief, transportation, police and security. Local councils have different levels of independence and effectiveness due to varying circumstances on the ground.

A Syrian man drives a motorbike through Al-Qsair.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi



According to the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Force, (<http://www.etilaf.org/en/coalition-components/syrian-local-councils.html>) local councils fill the void of services left by the government and may become the foundation of a transitional government and future democratic elections. The local council goals are:

- Administer civil life, assist and monitor those working to provide services, and guarantee the quality and improvement of such efforts.
- Distribute aid whether from individuals, groups, or nations with “justice and transparency.”
- Provide relief, medical, legal, reconstruction, and media services, as well as civilian police forces.
- Become the nucleus of future municipalities in a transitional government and ultimately assist in the formation of an elected government.
- Build national solidarity through civilian work free of ideology, party, or politics.

FORMATION

The concept of local councils as an organizing force first appeared in a paper published on the Internet by Omar Aziz in October 2011 entitled, *A Seminar for Establishing Local Councils*. Aziz later died, reportedly after being tortured by Syrian secret police on 16 February 2013. Aziz’s paper, however, was circulated among activists in Syria and members of the newly established Syrian National Council. Although opposition groups did not immediately take action on the local councils at the time, the concept of local councils was well received.

The breakthrough came when Al Zabadani, a popular tourist suburb of Damascus with a middle-class and mixed-demographic of about 30,000 people, was the first community to establish a local council after it was secured by the opposition in January 2012. As the war evolved and more towns fell out of the regime’s hands, activists in other cities followed the example of Al Zabadani and created local councils. Towns such as Saraqib in the Idlib province, as well as Marea and Al Bab in Aleppo province were among the first to follow.

The initial aims of the councils were to organize the political protests and to fill the vacuum left by the departing regime’s forces. Local councils soon managed most aspects of daily civic life.

Discussions to implement Syrian local councils in all areas controlled by the opposition took place during meetings of the Syrian National Council in Turkey and Doha, Qatar. Representatives from the cities of Latakia, Homs, Dara’a, Damascus, Deir ez-Zur, Al Hasakah, and Idlib led the talks from September to December 2012. A follow-up committee drafted a standard constitution for local councils and proposed that seven people from each area be selected as the basis of the councils to give them “a wide range of experiences.”

The proposal was adopted by Syrian National Council in January 2012, after which local councils were created in each city or major town as the recognized form of local government. The councils, initially referred to as provincial councils, were responsible for and coordinated the work of smaller local councils in villages and towns in the surrounding

areas. Funding was channeled through the provincial councils, which expended funds within the city and distributed additional money to the smaller local councils.

Each provincial council is composed of numerous divisions including media, relief, medical, military, legal and civil services. Typically, each division leader reports to an elected president and vice-president. Smaller local councils under the control of the provincial council may have a similar or simpler structure, depending on their size and function.

Each local council has developed somewhat differently due to local circumstances. Some local councils operate more independently than others due to a lack of leadership provided by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), sources report. Regardless, the structures of local councils remain broadly the same. In some areas, the local council maintains strong links with the coalition, yet may operate independently. In other areas, the coalition has no involvement, resulting in outside groups exerting influence on the councils.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE SYRIAN NATIONAL COALITION

The political affiliations of the local councils vary. The Dara'a council identifies itself with the SNC despite the presence of armed groups in the area. The other two local councils examined in this report, Yabrud and Ar Raqqa, were established through the SNC, but lack a direct relationship with the SNC.

The three councils stated that the SNC does not provide ongoing funding or support. In some cases, the SNC is said to support only people in the local councils who are loyal to SNC. This has generated tensions within the councils and opened the door to influence by smaller armed groups that operate within the areas controlled by the local councils.

INDEPENDENCE

Military groups often have a strong influence over the local councils. One council member from Idlib said that the military groups can determine most of the candidates for the local councils. "They do not interfere in the work, but they are keen on having everything under the control," the man stated, adding that many members of the councils report to the military groups. Although it was impossible to verify this relationship, others from local councils in Deir ez-Zur and Dara'a confirmed this influence.

DECISION MAKING

Members of six councils (Idlib, Deir ez-Zur, Dara'a, Ar Raqqa, Latakia and Yabrud) affirmed that decisions within local councils are by majority vote. When a council member presents a project, the council considers the proposal, and if adopted, it is sent to the president and vice president for final approval.

Members from two different councils explained that occasionally members may obtain financial support for their projects outside of normal council routes and may carry out the projects without local council approval. Such initiatives were said to enhance the project sponsor's chances of being selected in the next council election.

DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Local council members were strongly committed to democratic ideals and representation. The councils have regular meetings and ensure transparency through the publication of their funding sources, their decisions, and project accountability. They were anxious to show that their finances were well organised and said that a council's legitimacy depended on how well it delivered services to people, even when no other organisation was capable or willing to do so.

While local council members confirmed that nominating and election processes were used, few details were available to support the claim. This cast doubt on the credibility of the procedures, leaving some to suggest that council membership and control may often be concentrated among prominent or professional members of the community.

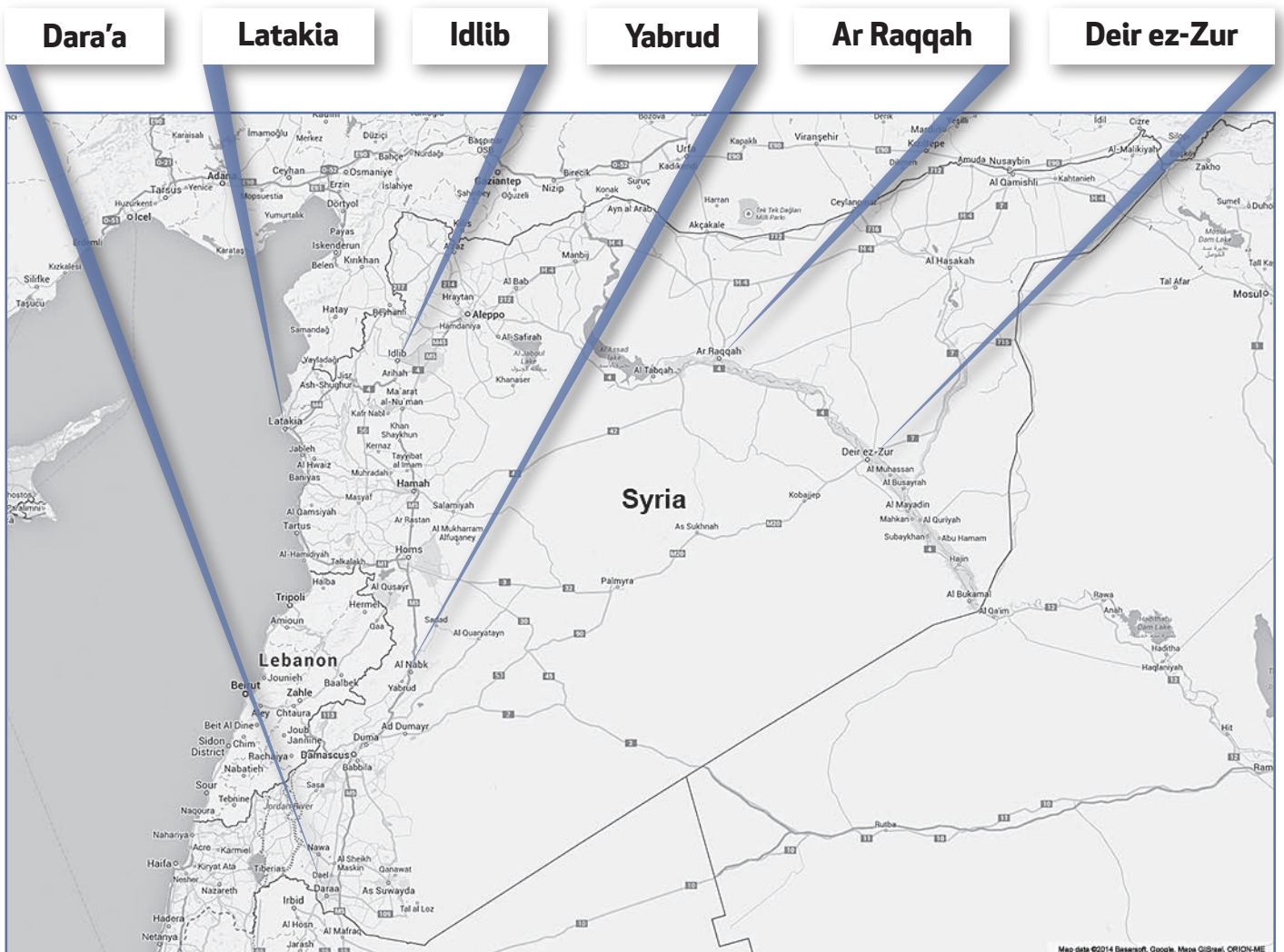
Despite some of the problems noted above, the emerging local councils indicate that the Syrian people are eager to manage their communities and determine their own future.

A Syrian woman and a child in their house in Baba Amro, a southern neighbourhood of Homs, after a bombing by President Assad's armed forces.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi



THE COUNCILS



Yabrud Council

BACKGROUND

Yabrud is a town within the Rif Dimashq Governorate, one of the 14 governorates of Syria. It is in the southwestern part of the country and borders the governorates of Quneitram Dara'a in the southwest, Homs in the north, and Lebanon to the west.

The governorate surrounds the city governorate of Damascus, which is home to the administrative headquarters of Rif Dimashq. It has an area of 18,032 square kilometers and a population of 2.2 million, according to the 2004 census. It has nine regions, 27 suburbs, 28 towns and 190 villages.

The Yabrud local council effectively operates as a provincial council, with several smaller towns and villages operating with their own local councils. There is no local council for Damascus since the city is mostly under the control of the al-Assad regime.

The Yabrud council is considered by some to be one of the most successful because it is close to Lebanon where it is supported by many refugees who have fled Syria. In addition, support of its activities has been beyond the influence of the SNC, which some view as corrupt.

The status of the Yabrud council was in question in mid-March 2014, when opposition forces and Islamist militias that controlled the town were defeated by the forces of the al-Assad regime. According to early reports, the regime initially respected the authority of the local council as the town's governing entity, but whether that respect would continue remained to be seen.

A member of the Yabrud council, who for personal security and purposes of this report will be called Mounir, said that prior to the formation of the council, the community was disorganized. "We did not know who was doing what. Many small groups or individuals were carrying out relief work. We did not know from where they brought the funds or how they were spent. The situation in the town was very miserable because of the continuous bombing of the city. No major work was done. No repairs of electricity affected by the bombing, no water pipes were working properly, and schools were not running. We all felt the need to be organised and have a strong solidarity. We also wanted to prove that we are able to run our lives without the presence of the regime."

Mounir believed that the council functioned well given the existing circumstances and was confident that "it will develop to be better in the near future." Mounir said the council faced difficulties due to the community's extensive bombing damage. The council was often unable provide adequate relief since it had very few resources or money. Yet, he was proud of what the community had been able to accomplish on its own. "Who could imagine that local people would the run the high school exams or climb an electric column to repair the wires?" Mounir said.



Yabrud

ESTABLISHMENT

The Yabrud local council was established in early March 2013. The initiative was taken by town activists and civil society members, Mounir said, “to bring all efforts together and coordinate them. There have been urgent tasks such as restoring security, maintaining public buildings, continuing the education process, and contributing to building a new Syria.”

The council was formed during a meeting of the Sharia committee, Mounir said. The legal committee was formed by independent lawyers in Yabrud. The military council, which existed earlier, is associated with the FSA, he said. “They, as many other local people, felt the urgency of the situation in the town where there is daily bombardment by the regime’s airplanes and there is a complete absence of services. Locals have been unable to survive in the same way they (did before). So the council was formed to improve some aspects of these people’s lives.”

ELECTIONS

The council held its first elections on 1 April 2013. The president and the vice-president were selected based on votes cast by the heads of each division. The president is not required to be from one of the divisions, but can be from outside the local council. Each council division can nominate a candidate for president, however.

STRUCTURE

The council was formed with four main divisions: legal, medical, education and engineering. Divisions added later were media, civil defense, relief, security, statistics, finance, public relations, and military coordination. The council officers include a president, vice-president, and secretary. While the president and vice-president are elected, selection of the secretary was unclear. The council is administered by a commission that consists of division heads and their deputies, who report to the president and vice-president. The commission coordinates the work of the divisions and the committees that are formed to oversee work of each division. Specialists within the committees present the projects to the division heads who discuss them at monthly meetings of the council along with the progress of plans adopted the previous month. The council has a constitution and manages the work of local councils in the villages under the Yabrud council’s mandate.

FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES

According to the Yabrud council’s Facebook page, the local council wants to continue the delivery of services that existed under the regime, but with new structures, new policies, and popular control. “There is no need for the council to establish new institutions, but to re-establish institutions that are not under the control of the regime. There is a need to get these services back to the society.” Members of the council deal with emergencies and the delivery of basic needs such as food, electricity, and water. The council also ensures the continuity of education, health, and security.

The Yabrud council prioritises humanitarian relief for those damaged by the frequent bombing of the al-Assad military forces, which has left many people without basic

necessities. The council distributes funds based established priorities and need. The relief division evaluates the needs of a family or person affected by the conflict, and then makes a decision.

When the Syrian regime bombed the town's industrial area on 17 May 2013, expatriates sent the council about 10 million Syrian Liras (approximately \$100, 000). The council compensated the poorest people in the area, beginning with the biggest families, followed by the residents of the other neighborhoods. "We had a policy of equal opportunity," Mounir said. "Among those who benefited were Christians and Muslims. We do not discriminate." In May 2013, the council established a "disaster fund," which collects money and provides it to families who have lost homes or their income as a result of bombing.

The council's legal division manages legal actions or complaints, and according to the council's Facebook page, "cooperates with the Sharia committee to deal with legal issues." The medical division looks after hospitals and health issues. The education division coordinates education with an education specialist and teachers. The engineering division rebuilds infrastructure and buildings.

The council's military division has conducted military operations and provided security for Yabrud. Detailed information on the military division was unavailable, but at the time the dominant militias around Yabrud were the Free Syrian Army and the al-Nusra Front. According to Mounir, the council worked with the armed groups on a limited basis. "Most of the time (it) is about keeping civilians from being targeted or about releasing people who have been kidnapped," he said. The council also has a security division that organizes transportation and protects schools during exams.

The work of the local council has helped ease the difficulties of living in a war zone. A woman who identified herself as Nabeela said, "In Yabrud, we are able to send our children to schools since the council restored some aspects of the education. Schools opened their doors after the establishment of the council. We have some services despite the regime destroying every aspect of life either from the air or from the neighboring areas. It is not perfect, but (the council) is making life continue."

FUNDING AND FINANCE

The council receives funding mainly from expatriate Syrian sources who maintain ties with Yabrud. "They send money because they want to help their fellow citizens to survive this terrible tragedy," Mounir said. Residents of Yabrud whose financial situation is better than most others also donate money. The council recently received an unspecified donation from the SNC.

Financial issues are handled with care, Mounir said. The finance division consists of seven well-known local members and four representatives of people who live abroad. They are assisted by a professional accountant and an auditor. The finance division facilitates the local council's unified fund, which was established in September 2013 to collect donations and aid that is distributed to various factions in the town. The division distributes funds based on need and attempts to prevent waste and misuse. The council records all income and expenses to prevent corruption and publishes all donations received.

POLITICAL AFFILIATION

The Yabrud council has no political affiliation and is not pressured by military groups, according to Mounir, but the council's Facebook page noted that the council consults with the Sharia commission on legal issues.

WOMEN

Women do not formally participate in the council's work, except to distribute humanitarian aid. The general work atmosphere and circumstances are not helped with the presence of women in the council, Mounir said.

Children shelter from gunfire in the city of Al-Qsair.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi



Dara'a Council

BACKGROUND

The Dara'a Governorate in southwest of Syria covers an area of 3,730 square kilometers. It is bordered by Jordan to the south, Quneitra Governorate to the west, Rif Dimashq Governorate to the north, and Al-Suwayda Governorate to the east. The population of Dara'a is 998,000, according to a 2010 census. Dara'a is divided into eight towns, each has its own local council which operates under the supervision of the Dara'a provincial council. Local councils receive money from the provincial council, but also raise their own funds.

Two members of the Dara'a provincial council, who preferred to remain anonymous for their personal security, expressed concerns that Islamist groups were gaining strength in Dara'a and other locations in Syria. They feared growing Islamist influence "would hinder our civil work."

Despite their enthusiasm and energy for a fully functioning council, they were not optimistic that this would happen soon because the situation in Dara'a was difficult. "The regime has targeted the council more than three times from the air and with rockets." The Syrian regime has bombed the council facilities, the last of which was in November 2013 and damaged the headquarters of the Public Commission for Civil Defense in Dara'a, which has worked with the council.

According to the members, the al-Nusra Front has tried to control the council by sponsoring candidates and pressuring members to implement plans that reflect the al-Nusra Front agenda. "Al-Nusra in Dara'a has too many foreign fighters and we are against that," one member said. "We (follow) the idea that foreigners can't have a role in any local (decisions) so al-Nusra's candidates could not run for the elections."

Both members were happy that the council was providing services and humanitarian aid to people who "lived in a vacuum before and (when) there were many groups, including al-Nusra, who had been trying to distribute aid. But the aid did not go equally to people. The public facilities were not repaired. We just need time to improve."

Another Dara'a community member, who identified himself as Hussain, was also pleased with the work of the council. "There are steps forward taking place in Dara'a. The council (is) offering the basic services we need to survive. We can walk on our streets since they are cleaned regularly and many of the bereaved families are receiving some financial help. I can't say everything is perfect, but we cannot ask for perfection at the moment. The regime keeps bombing the council building, yet the humanitarian groups are operating in Dara'a and they survive and continue to function. We hope this will be a (corner)stone for the future."



Dara'a

ESTABLISHMENT

The council was developed by groups already at work in the province providing basic support to residents. They included the Unified Committee for Relief in Dara'a, which was established on 4 March 2013 to coordinate relief efforts under one umbrella. It continues to operate as part of the council and focuses on supporting families of those who have been killed, detained, or who are in desperate need. Another organizer was the women's group Gosin al-Zaytoun (Olive Branch), which was formed in October 2012 to assist women and children with education and other needs. It receives funds from local people and expatriates.

ELECTIONS

Dara'a provincial council, which is distinct from the Dara'a city local council, initially was elected in June 2013 in Cairo for a six-month period. The election was held in Cairo because the U.S.-based funders advised the organizers to do that, despite the fact that, "There were few candidates who lived in Dara'a." As a result, "Most people won by acclamation." The council's facilities, president, and staff are based in Jordan.

At the Cairo meeting, a 13-member council composed of activists and community leaders was elected. The number was based on the provinces key towns and villages, and the desire to provide one candidate for every 10,000 people. The members were elected to participate in Cairo elections held in mid June 2013. A second election was held in Jordan in October 2013. Preparations are underway for another election, which will be province-wide.

According to the council members, the council identifies with the SNC and is affiliated with various armed groups, including the FSA. According to the two interviewees, about 65 percent of the province is under the control of the FSA. Remaining regions of the province are controlled by one of three Islamist groups.

The provincial council established local councils in town and villages in the province with populations of 5,000 or more, and the provincial council coordinates their work.

STRUCTURE

The council consists of an elected president, vice-president, and a secretary. The council created the following divisions: media, civil defense, relief, education, legal, monitoring and inspection, religious preaching, medical, finance, public relations, and human resources.

FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES

The Dara'a council provides essential public services such as water and electricity. Like many other councils, it prioritises humanitarian relief to help people most affected by the bombing of the al-Assad regime, such as families who have lost their income due to the death or detention of the family's bread winner. The council cleans streets, removes rubbish, and supports projects for children and women.

Prior to joining the council in January of this year, the Public Commission for Civil Defense in Dara'a, which was established in Dara'a in 2012, provided medical support for the sick

and wounded while distributing humanitarian aid. The commission has carried out social projects in Dara'a city and in November 2013 expanded its activities into the suburbs where it repairs electrical and water systems, bridges, and other public facilities neglected when the al-Assad government's forces and services withdrew from the area.

Another relief provider has been the Unified Committee for Relief in Dara'a, which was established in 2011 and restructured in March 2013 when it held elections for its executive office. According to one member, the committee, which is now under the council, is "transforming Dara'a completely" by "providing services under difficult circumstances and managing more than the providers of the al-Assad's regime."

FUNDING AND FINANCE

The council receives funds from people and groups inside and outside of Dara'a, such as the Syrian Women Organization in Saudi Arabia, An Initiative for a New Syria, and other humanitarian groups in Dara'a and Jordan. Expatriates provide necessities such as flour and bread, which are distributed by the council. The SNC gave Dara'a council \$45,500 in August 2013, according to the SNC website.

The Dara'a council publishes its financial spreadsheet on its Facebook page, detailing its income and expenditures.

POLITICAL AFFILIATION

The two members of Dara'a council stated that the council was not affiliated with any political party or any group. However, two members of the al-Nusra Front were part of the original organizing committee, they said. These al-Nusra Front members wanted to change decisions, such as the timing of elections, and preferred to have members appointed by a Shura council. However, these requests were voted down. According to the council members, "the al-Nusra Front attempted to nominate members for the council, but people organising the elections told them that it was not possible because the council wanted to maintain its impartiality."

Islamist influence on the council was apparent, however. The council has two divisions related to religious affairs. According to one member, allowing two religious divisions to work may have been a concession to the al-Nusra Front to avoid confrontations.

Council members stated that the council was affiliated with the SNC, but added that there was little guidance and communications from the SNC. This hampered the council's ability to function effectively. One member said that in many cases the SNC supported only people it believes are loyal to it. "This affect impartiality," he said.

WOMEN

The presence of women was not apparent within the structure of the council. However, a women' organization, Gosin al-Zaytoun as previously mentioned, helped establish the council. The organisation is headed by a female doctor, Jumana Aba Zaid, who left Syria for Dubai. She is also a member of the Public Commission for Civil Defence.

Ar Raqqa Council

BACKGROUND

The city of Ar Raqqa is in northern Syria on the banks of Euphrates River, 160 kilometers east of Aleppo. The population is about 250,000. Regime forces withdrew from Ar Raqqa in March 2013, which began a struggle for control of the city among three militant Islamist groups: Aurar Al-Sham, al-Nusra Front, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). In mid-January 2014 after months of severe fighting, the city finally came under the control of ISIL, which has been linked to al-Qaeda.

The ISIL executed people in the city's public square and imposed strict religious rules. The ISIL has closed all educational institutions in the city. The strength of the ISIL is derived in part from the proximity of Ar Raqqa city and province to Iraq's Anbaar Province, which is also controlled by the ISIL, despite on-going fighting between the ISIL and Iraqi government forces.

One member from Ar Raqqa local council, who wanted to remain anonymous for his personal security, feared for the future of his city. "I am really not hopeful about the current situation at the local council," he said, "despite the fact that the council is carrying out excellent tasks in offering aid and running the public facilities within the given circumstances." He worried about ISIL control of the city and its routine violations of human rights. The ISIL controls resources and continues to fight with other groups including the FSA. He was doubtful that the local council can develop under such circumstances, but at the same time he said, "We should not give up as local people need us."



Ar Raqqa

ESTABLISHMENT

The council was formed in December in 2012 by activists and well-known local residents who arranged a meeting of delegates from the city and its suburbs. The delegates selected an executive committee that called for a general meeting to establish the council.

ELECTIONS

According to one member, the provincial council of Ar Raqqa was elected on 2 July 2013 at a meeting of more than 180 people representing groups and unions in the city. The voters were among a total of 450 people who had been invited "by revolutionary activists in the town," he said. The lack of participation was attributed to divisions within the community and among the activists. "This led to discussions and challenges to the legitimacy of the council and pushed some people to call for its dissolution," the member said.

Competing groups attempted to steer the election. "During the elections, the allies of the ISIL tried to manipulate the process in order to control the council," the member said. The ISIL tried to push some candidates out and spread rumors about others by suggesting

they had connections to the al-Assad regime. "They wanted to disturb the process, but the election was held (despite the boycott)," the member said.

"I participated in the process from the beginning and I think that, despite its shaky start, the council continued working and was one of the first to be elected inside Syria," said the member.

STRUCTURE

The council has an elected president, vice-president, and a secretary. The council has various divisions that are responsible for emergency relief, electricity, and communications. Other divisions produce reports on the council's projects for donor agencies and supervise public services, medical needs, project planning, finance, civil defense, relief, family and children services, media, public relations, internal inspection (religion), and legal issues. The public services division cleans the city streets and repairs electrical damage.

Divisions work in partnership and members report to the division heads, who in turn report to the council president. Most staff members are volunteers and have been paid only once, which was in December 2013.

FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES

During its first three months, the council worked on projects to present to funders and held meetings to discuss the city's priorities. The council's first project was to clean the city's river banks. "It (was) the priority because the smell was very disturbing and diseases started spreading in the city," the member said. "Streets were not cleaned for months and people were suffering terribly." The project continued for six weeks. The second project renovated five schools. By the beginning of 2014, the council had renovated 12 schools, more than twice the original goal of five, the member said. The renovations began in November 2013.

The medical division received three ambulances and a kidney dialysis machine on 2 December 2013 from a German organisation. In June 2013 the council received a donation of \$4,000 from the SNC for the hospital of Ar Raqqah, and \$200,000 from the SNC to assist families of those killed, wounded, and disappeared. The council received a one-time donation in August 2013 of \$50,000 from the Syrian Business Forum, an independent not-for-profit organization established in 2012.

The council provides food and medical aid in collaboration with the SNC, the Syrian Business Forum, and other organisations. To date, 2,000 packets of first aid supplies and medications have been distributed to refugees who have arrived from different provinces, particularly those living in the makeshift refugee camps that arose after the al-Assad regime regained control of areas in the west and north of Ar Raqqah province, close to Ar Raqqah city.

Since militias took control of the city on 4 March 2013, however, they have assumed control of services such as electricity, water, phones, and sanitation. "There is a problem with that, since the militants have no experience in civil services facilities, yet are charging people for these services," the council member explained.

In December 2013, tension within the council reflected growing tension between the three armed groups that were fighting for control of the city. According to the member, the council was caught in the middle. "We tried to work during the fighting, but it was difficult, because of the fighting and the control of the ISIL over some facilities. The ISIL shelled the electricity generator, but the council repaired it."

The council has a good reputation in Syria because of its efforts to establish a civilian structure, the member said. The council conducted workshops on how the local council operates and a group of activists were trained on civil defense in December 2013. The training enabled civil defense teams to respond to disasters and mortar attacks and conduct rescues. However, the council has been unable to establish a police force because the city is under the control of the ISIL.

Despite their problems, the council tries to be transparent about its work. In February, the council published an email address on its Facebook page for people who had complaints about their work and encouraged people to be open and brave because, "We want to improve our performance."

So far, residents seem pleased with the work of the council. One Ar Raqqa community member named Munatser said, "Despite the terrible situation in Raqqa, internal fighting by the armed groups and bombardment by the regime, the council and other regional councils have kept the basic services going. The council restored the work of the hospital. There is tremendous pressure on the council and sharp political polarization since every side wants the council under its control, but the council is functioning in the given context."

Another Ar Raqqa resident named Mayyad explained that the council struggles under competing political pressures. "The council is working in difficult circumstances. We have some of the basic services running, but all the political groups want to run the services in order to gain the support of people. They are exploiting the people's needs. The council's big problem is that some of the officials lack experience or are not used to democracy yet. They need to be trained. Sometimes officials want to take projects to their areas for political gains and to please the armed groups. They are thinking of the next election. This deprives other areas of the services. Some officials raise funds for their own projects under the name of the council and want to look like heroes in their areas."

FUNDING AND FINANCE

According to the council's Facebook page, agencies supporting the council include the Syrian Business Forum, the SNC, and others. The council members said that all expenditures and income are documented and published.

Since most donations for local councils flow through the Ar Raqqa provincial council, the local councils are asked to be transparent and to send financial reports to the provincial council.

POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND INFLUENCES

According to one council member, Ar Raqqa council has difficulty remaining neutral since the ISIL controls the city. Many of the council's staff members are connected to the ISIL and the other groups that operated in the city before January 2014. A lack of communication and leadership by the SNC has opened the door for the influence of the ISIL and other groups, the council member said.

The election to establish the council was held on 2 July 2013 and was very political, the member said. Many discussions were conducted about the armed groups and their roles. Many candidates, not only ISIL supporters, withdrew and in the end, many candidates took office without opposition.

The provincial and local councils of Ar Raqqa experienced more turmoil early in 2014 when they were apparently dissolved on 5 February during a meeting between the vice president, members of the executive committee, and members of councils in the province. While no new election was conducted and no explanation was given for the changes, some members of the old councils were reappointed and some new faces were introduced.

In response to a query, the provincial council explained on its Facebook page that "the council had only been restructured and the majority of people were reappointed"

The abrupt changes followed a meeting on 28 January 2014 during which the council members were told to attend an early February meeting or risk being "dismissed." The turmoil seems far from over. Using his Facebook page, a council member named Ibrahim Al-Hassan wrote to the executive committee that he had rejected his appointment to the council. "Thanks for entrusting me and choosing me without consulting me," he wrote. "I apologize that I do not accept to be appointed."

WOMEN

Women do not formally participate in the council work except to distribute humanitarian aid. A council member explained that it was impossible for women to participate because the ISIL is "putting tight restrictions on women's code of dress and movement." In February 2014, however, the ISIL established a police force of women who patrolled Ar Raqqa streets fully armed, yet dressed according strict Islamic standards with niqabs, scarves that cover the head and face and only reveal the eyes.

ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES

A Syrian woman comforts a young boy after his father was shot by a Syrian army sniper in Al-Qsair.

Photo: Alessio Romenzi



Challenges Faced by Local Councils in Syria

By **Wael Sawah**

By the end of 2011, Syrian rebels realized that a return to pre-revolutionary Syria was impossible. The regime had withdrawn from many areas, yet public services were needed and civic problems had to be addressed. Syrian activists formed local councils to manage their communities while awaiting the birth of a new Syria. The coming of a new Syria has taken much longer than expected, however.

The emergence of local councils was not entirely spontaneous. Revolutionary leaders such as Omar Aziz believed that if rebels wanted to overthrow the al-Assad regime, they also had to reject the authoritarian structures that had been imposed by the state. For the popular uprising to succeed, Aziz said it needed to address all aspects of people's lives. With fellow rebels, he founded the first local council in Al Zabadani, followed by others in the towns of Barzeh, Darayya, and Douma. As local councils quickly spread, governments and other donors moved to support them. Today local councils provide services to much of the Syrian population living in rebel-controlled areas.

Since their formation, however, the local councils have struggled. They lack expertise and clearly organized structures of responsibility and authority.

The local councils grew out of the desire and enthusiasm of the most passionate activists who played essential roles in the revolution. When experienced technocrats fled Syria, the activists remained to help free their cities and towns from the al-Assad regime's authority. These activists now claim a right to lead the local councils. While their arguments are valid, Syrian communities still need trained experts such as engineers and doctors, the same people who were targeted by the regime and who fled as the conflict intensified, fearing arrest and execution. Those technocrats and experts who remained are reluctant to take positions with local councils for various reasons.

Local councils continue to play larger roles than were initially intended as they try to manage health, education, and judiciary needs for their communities. In some regions they also provide security, protection of public and private properties, water, electricity, telecommunication, fuel, aid delivery, media, civil protection, and reconstruction. These functions were formerly filled by agencies with specialized expertise that is now lacking in many local councils.

Local councils often fail to represent their communities since they are not elected. In some areas, the councils are self-appointed or are elected from within a select group of rebels in a town, city, or province.

The councils also suffer from a lack of continuity since their terms of office are only six months, which is too short a period for them to develop the expertise necessary to operate properly and provide consistent services.

The lack of income from local and outside sources poses a major challenge to the councils. Almost all opposition-held areas in Syria rely on aid from individuals, organizations, foreign governments, or combinations of these sources. One local council member in Idlib complained about the feebleness of such aid. "We receive slim funding from a number of aid organizations and the National Coalition of Syrian Opposition," he said. "The bulk of our funding comes from sons of the town who live and work abroad."

An additional concern is that the Muslim Brotherhood has politicized some councils that were formed to provide essential services. The Muslim Brotherhood has blocs within the councils and uses money to influence local council elections and decisions. They often succeed. In Aleppo, the Muslim Brotherhood controls the provincial council, according to some sources, while more liberal members control the city council. Donors tend to give money to the provincial council, which reportedly uses it to manipulate the liberal city council.

Elsewhere, local councils have been hijacked by reactionary and counter-revolutionary forces. In Ar Raqqah, non-local rebel Islamist groups with Salafi and Takfiri fundamentalist leanings have stripped power from the local council. As they attempt to impose an Islamic vision that is alien to most Syrians, the local people have protested. Sharia commissions have limited the council's power in Ar Raqqah Province, in northeast Aleppo, and in parts of Deir ez-Zur, rendering them more decorative than real. The real power has gone to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other Islamist groups.

If local councils are to evolve from de facto crisis managers into real local governments, they will need stability and security, the participation of experts, a stable source of income from foreign and local sources, and a transparent electoral system that gives them legitimacy as representatives of the local population's will.

Wael Sawah is Editor-in-Chief of the Syrian Observer.

Local Councils: An Opportunity Not to Be Lost

By **Marwan Maalouf**

Syria's peaceful and secular uprising in early 2011 was seen as an extension of the Arab Spring. As the protests spread across the country, an influx of arms and the brutal response of the al-Assad regime catalyzed the uprising into an armed struggle. The opposition was able to oust the al-Assad regime in many regions with armed support from Islamists rebels.

However, the Syrian situation has deteriorated, resulting in a shocking death toll and massive displacement of Syrians who now live in dire conditions in and outside of their country. Although free of the al-Assad regime, the liberated areas suffer from a lack of administrative authority, worsening their already difficult situation. Governing structures were formed by the rebels to meet the needs of citizens. These structures have become known as local councils and are the only viable governing bodies in most of Syria's liberated areas.

The quality and quantity of councils varies from region to region, as do their activities and composition. Some local councils have democratically elected members, while others were formed by mutual consent of residents. Their differing compositions reflect the roles they have assumed. Some councils provide vital services like water and electricity. Others have stabilized the prices and manage the distribution of humanitarian relief. Yet others conduct military operations and provide security. Some councils have documented human rights violations.

Since most councils were created to provide services, they are positioned to play a critical role as local representatives of the SNC of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The councils are an opportunity for the Syrian opposition to build on the uprising's grassroots and organic initiatives and to provide local administrative and security needs. Unfortunately, this reality of the local councils has yet to be realized.

If the local councils are to succeed, they need a centralized political force that functions as an executive branch. The SNC has failed to assume this role, however. Though united against the al-Assad regime, the coalition has fractured due to differing political agendas. The lack of uniform distribution of funding and arms to the Syrian opposition has further polarized the coalition. As a result, the coalition lacks a uniform structure, a clear political vision, and concrete authority. The coalition has also been hampered by international financing that attempts to control military factions, causing additional chaos.

The fracturing of the coalition has hampered the technical and financial support for the local councils. The coalition has been unable to clarify the role of the local councils or control them, leaving the local councils unable to properly provide security and judicial functions. This has led to improvised efforts, at times quite politicized, to secure the liberated regions. The irregular and unsupervised circulation of arms threatens the stability of the local councils, causing some to easily spin out of control.

Problems with the local judiciaries are also common. Liberated areas have not had uniform judicial power that is independent or effective. Some such bodies have challenged the authority of the coalition. For example, Sharia courts in some areas are headed by religious figures and routinely contradict the secularity of the local councils as they spread religious extremism funded by neighboring states. Weak and easily manipulated security forces and their judicial bodies have rendered some local councils ineffective.

The evolution of the local councils has relied on financing. Many were self-financed and generated revenue from taxes on local services. But this proved to be insufficient in communities that suffered extensive war damage. Many councils are now linked with the coalition in order to access finances. The coalition has responded by helping the councils develop by-laws, enhance their administrative capacities, and build the capacity of the police and the civil defense forces. The coalition has also provided funding for humanitarian relief.

To further help the local councils after the interim Syrian government was formed in 2013, a minister was assigned to help govern local councils and manage humanitarian aid. While this ministry was promising, that support has failed to materialize.

Because local councils provide critical services in hundreds of communities throughout Syria, the coalition and the international community must recognize them as a positive and important effort to fill the civic and political void left by the al-Assad regime.

However, the polarization of the international intervention in Syria, coupled with the lack of sovereignty of the Syrian opposition and poor coordination of funding and technical support, has damaged the coalition's role as a central organizing force. Efforts to reinforce the local councils will be irrelevant unless they are coupled with efforts to strengthen the coalition. Critical to that success, however, the military and financial support flowing into Syria from external groups and countries must be neutralized.

Marwan Maalouf is the principal and co-founder of Menapolis. He is a human rights lawyer focusing on the rule of law and political reforms in the Middle East and North Africa.

Assessing Syria's Local Council Needs

By Dr. Radwan Ziadeh

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the al-Assad regime has been reduced to a powerful militia engaged in a desperate conflict with the Syrian people. President Bashar al-Assad is draining Syria of its financial and human resources, and more critically, destroying its social fabric by prolonging a deadly sectarian and civil conflict.

The regime and the military it controls have ignored the internationally accepted rules of war and peace. What began as a peaceful revolution was met with bullets and bombs that have taken more than 140,000 Syrian lives, 7,000 of whom are children. Hospitals, residential areas, mosques, and churches have been targeted by the regime. Endless stories of people dying from torture and inhuman and immoral practices continue to emerge from the regime's security agencies. The Syrian people have struggled for the past three years, not just to maintain their resistance, but to remain united against a regime that wants to break it.

Syria is in transition. Large swathes of Syria have been liberated and are beyond the reach of the government. President al-Assad is little more than the mayor of Damascus and some of its suburbs. He is unable to leave his palace without the protection of his militia. Since al-Assad no longer controls the border crossings with Turkey and Iraq, he has lost control of strategically important regions. Though he continues to shell and burn these places, he cannot recapture them. Since these liberated areas are widely dispersed and are subject to targeting from the air, al-Assad has rendered them unsafe. The absence of a central authority in Syria means that the longer al-Assad remains in his palace, the more painful the transition becomes.

It is critical now for the Syrian people to agree on a mechanism to manage the transition in order to prevent further chaos and ensure public safety. The liberated areas need a central authority that can manage them politically, economically, socially, and legally. This was why the interim Syrian government was recently established.

In an effort to establish civil authority in liberated areas and towns, local councils were created by residents to fill the security and political void left by the al-Assad government. However, the councils have faced significant challenges:

- Because few were established via elections, the councils lack the necessary legitimacy. One exception has been in Aleppo, which has had the best management and civil control.

- Chronic financial shortages have hampered the councils and caused some to collapse. The inability of councils to provide basic services has undermined their authority. While the Syrian people have temporarily accepted these councils, they easily lose recognition as centers of civil control when councils fail to provide services.
- Loss of direct contact with supporters of the opposition who live abroad, despite the reasons, has left many areas insecure. The liberated areas are geographically dispersed, making it difficult to deliver and exchange services and information. As a result, the limited resources of the councils have caused many to collapse.
- Constant shelling and bombardment of Aleppo, eastern Al Ghutah, Dariyya, Idlib, and other areas by the al-Assad regime has made life and local administration impossible. The conditions have forced many residents to flee, including the Syrian intelligentsia, who prefer refugee camps or opportunities elsewhere to the daily risk of death.

If the interim Syrian government is to establish and maintain a civil authority that provides for civilian needs in the liberated areas, it will need extensive assistance from the international community.

The international community must grant legitimacy to the Syrian interim government by formally recognizing it as the official government of Syria. This must be followed by generous financial support that will restore water, electricity, and aid to liberated areas, thus bolstering the authority of the local councils. Finally, technical assistance is needed to ensure that services are distributed effectively, undermining domestic support for hostile, non-state actors.

All of these steps are necessary to slow the mass exodus of Syrian refugees. However, no step will be more effective than preventing the daily bombardment of Syria's cities. If the wholesale destruction of Syria isn't stopped, no amount of external assistance will save Syria.

Dr. Radwan Ziadeh is the executive director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies- Washington, D.C.; Director of Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies in Syria; a Fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding in Washington D.C.; and managing editor of the Transitional Justice in the Arab World Project.

CONCLUSION

Not long after the Damascus Spring became an armed conflict with the al-Assad regime, Syrian activists formed local councils to manage their communities. These grassroots organizations effectively replaced the government in areas where the regime had lost control. The councils continue to evolve as the key providers of services in liberated areas. Building and developing these emerging councils is essential for the current and future transitional period in Syria.

Some local councils have democratically elected members, while others were formed by mutual consent of residents. As such, councils are well positioned to play a critical political role as local representatives of the Syrian opposition and the interim Syrian government. The councils also present an opportunity to build on the objectives and initiatives taken by the Syrian revolution.

Unfortunately, the potential of the local councils has yet to be realized. As the councils struggle to fill increasing needs and multiple roles in their communities, they do so in the absence of a strong opposition leadership and stable sources of funding. While the Syrian people have generally accepted these councils, they lose recognition when they are unable to provide services, and this has caused some to collapse.

Support is needed to cement the councils as the corner stone for a future and democratic Syria. If the recently created interim Syrian government is to establish and maintain a civil authority in the liberated areas, it will need extensive assistance from the international community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local councils have great potential and are well positioned to take the place of local governmental bodies to provide public services to communities as Syria moves toward independence. The following are recommendations for existing and potential supporters and donors:

- Provide institutional support and training to help local councils become more effective in the areas of management and leadership, finance and accountability, public and strategic communications, public administration, justice, security, education, and health.
- Provide funding that enables local councils to deliver on-going services and assure their independence from armed groups and outside influences.
- Provide support that allows each council to work independently.
- Enhance relationships between the local councils and civil society groups.
- Encourage civil society groups to act as independent observers and monitor and assess local councils to assure accountability and transparency.
- Enable the involvement of women in local councils.

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