

“hd

Centre for  
Humanitarian  
Dialogue

*Mediation for peace*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of  
Denmark



## Local Administration Structures in opposition-held areas in Syria

Research Report  
April 2014

centre for humanitarian dialogue

centre pour le dialogue humanitaire

114 rue de Lausanne  
ch 1202 Genève  
t 41 22 908 1130  
[info@hdcentre.org](mailto:info@hdcentre.org)  
<http://www.hdcentre.org>

**About the HD Centre:**

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (the HD Centre) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

**Acknowledgement:**

We would like to thank the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark for its generous financial support and contribution to the production of this report.

**Disclaimer:**

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark.

© Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2014.

Reproduction of all or part of this publication may be authorised only with written consent and acknowledgement of the source.

## Contents

Summary of findings	4
Purpose of study	7
Methodology	8
False promise: the birth of local councils	9
Revolution of the hungry: LAS service provision	12
Fortune and class: factors influencing LAS character and role	16
In the shadows: the role of armed actors	19
A low card: legitimacy of local administration structures	21
A two way street: relations between the LAS and the SOC	24
Conclusion and recommendations	25

## Summary of findings

As the protest movement in Syria escalated into a military confrontation, it resulted in the opposition being able to force the evacuation of regime forces and gain territories specifically within the north of the country. However, this did not translate into claiming central power in Damascus and in fact left power vacuums both in terms of administrative and military control. Following the closure of government offices in ‘contested’ territories, local populations were in need of governance structures and basic services that had been shut down and it was local revolutionary structures, persons or networks that were expected to fill this gap. This transformed what had normally been a movement focused on local mobilization and documentation into a local administration structure shifting from organizing popular protests to institutional management, with absolutely no central model providing mechanisms to establish local power or to work within a broader national structure.

With the formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (SOC) in November 2012, Local Administrative Structures (LAS) were mainstreamed and expected to be the official link to the political opposition, both spiritually and financially, as well as provide services and local governance. The Councils were envisioned to network and consolidate administrative control of the various areas through mainstreamed structures and procedures to be designed and overseen by the Local Administration Council Support Unit (LACU) with political and financial support channeled through the SOC. Meant to ensure consistency with the political strategy of the SOC as well as channels for financial support through the Aid Coordination Unit (ACU) and the LACU to the local level, the LAS were the local component of the broader political strategy for consistency and administration of a post-Assad Syria.

The LAS in rebel-held Syria were composed of notables and active revolutionary groups from various political or religious leanings that had come together more or less along informal lines to address the need for the administration of public services. These were the first attempts by revolutionary forces to actually govern territory. The thinking went that, by empowering such bodies, the opposition was well on its way to establishing a state within liberated territory that could serve as a model for the entire country. The Assad regime’s monopoly on service provision was broken.

Two years after the first LAS were formed, the challenges are still high. In considering that LAS should meet five main minimum requirements - legitimacy, accountability, resources, human capacities and a connection to a strong political center - still much is to be done.

First, the LAS have a structural deficit of legitimacy as they were often established in a hazardous way, created *ad hoc* and without broader community engagement to capture opportunities of foreign (and national) humanitarian support, and have turned into aid driven organizations. As a result, some villages and cities were facing multiple local governance structures competing with each other as there were no formal, whether internal or external, mechanisms agreed upon concerning their formation. Nevertheless, through all kinds of classical parochial politics means (consensus between families, pressures from the notables, reconciliation and integration between competing councils and, last but not least, pressure of military groups), this fragmentation of power was solved and in most places one will not find more than recognized LAS. As such, it is fair to say that many of the legitimacy issues have been improved, and this is certainly a major achievement of the LAS over the last two years of their existence.

Second, resources are still scarce due to both the structural incapacity of the international community to mainstream support to LAS, and even more the absence of funds, the LAS being amputated from the central state. The LAS have also experienced difficulties in imposing themselves as real political bodies able to extract resources from their own constituencies or environment, rendering them dependent on foreign aid and limited resources from the SOC and/or the Interim Government.

Third, there is a crisis in the availability of basic technical capacities. Due to the fact that most civil servants have not participated in the new structures and compounded by the brain drain imposed by the conflict, many technocrats are not interested in risking their reputation in such a hazardous undertaking as the establishment of LAS. Furthermore they are not interested in provoking the regime that has continued to provide salaries for state employees not engaged in opposition activities, using it as a strong tool to neutralize potential candidates for public positions at the local level. In addition, new local opposition elites also continue to use the LAS as the direct ‘property’ of the revolution and not merely as a service provider that ensures that participants are not (s)elected based on technical merit but rather on participation in the revolution, thus continuing to limit the technical capacity within the LAS. As a result, the LAS have failed to attract the educated middle classes that have traditionally been tied to the state bureaucracy.

Fourth, accountability mechanisms need to be improved and developed, to collectively mobilize at the local level beyond the military frontlines and to foster popular interest and participation in administrative structures, in a way that allows them to be more inclusive and responsive. In fact, if at first public expectations of local councils were high, already at an early stage euphoria gave way to the grim realization that the conflict was long term and that the West was unlikely to intervene decisively. Optimism gave way to cynicism and apathy. Earlier this year, some local councils attempted a reboot of the LAS experiment by adopting measures to boost transparency

and accountability and by reigning-in exclusionist tendencies that have alienated key segments of their community. This was the direct result of a sharp rise in disillusionment with local councils by local populations and fears that they might defect to a rival LAS experiment and it should certainly be encouraged.

Fifth, the LAS still lack a strong political umbrella. The formation of the Interim Government provided the potential for a strong framework from which to derive legitimacy and funding as well as mainstream structures, procedures and mechanisms that can be supported through the line ministry or the government as a whole. But this comes after ongoing tensions between competing bodies such as the Local Administration Councils Unit (LACU), which has now merged with the Ministry of Local Administration, and the Higher Council for the Local Councils, which is facing extinction as a government organization and will function as an NGO. The local councils will still have to develop a *modus operandi* with the new Ministry of Local Administration that addresses internal needs for legitimacy and capacity, as well as external issues on how to handle relationships with donors and various umbrellas channeling support such as the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), or the Syrian Recovery Trust Fund.

Possibly, the main issue and challenge is to depoliticize the councils, in order to facilitate the return of technical capacities and then support horizontal and vertical accountability, also relying on local constituencies and external donor structures. This would allow local civil society groups to maintain a space for political activism in opposition held areas, but it would also restrict local administration to service provision and civil administration.

## Purpose of the study

The research aims to deliver an analysis of how local administration structures (LAS) have emerged from grassroots level in a society affected by conflict such as Syria, and how such structures work, as well as which political influence they have in the areas where they are active. Concretely, the study seeks to offer answers for the following questions:

- How were the LAS created?
- What areas of service and administration are the LAS particularly focused on?
- Which factors have shaped the specific character and role of the LAS?
- What political influence do the LAS have in the areas they are engaged in?
- To which degree are armed actors playing a role in the LAS?
- How do the LAS gain legitimacy in their respective local areas?
- What is the relationship between the LAS and the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC)?

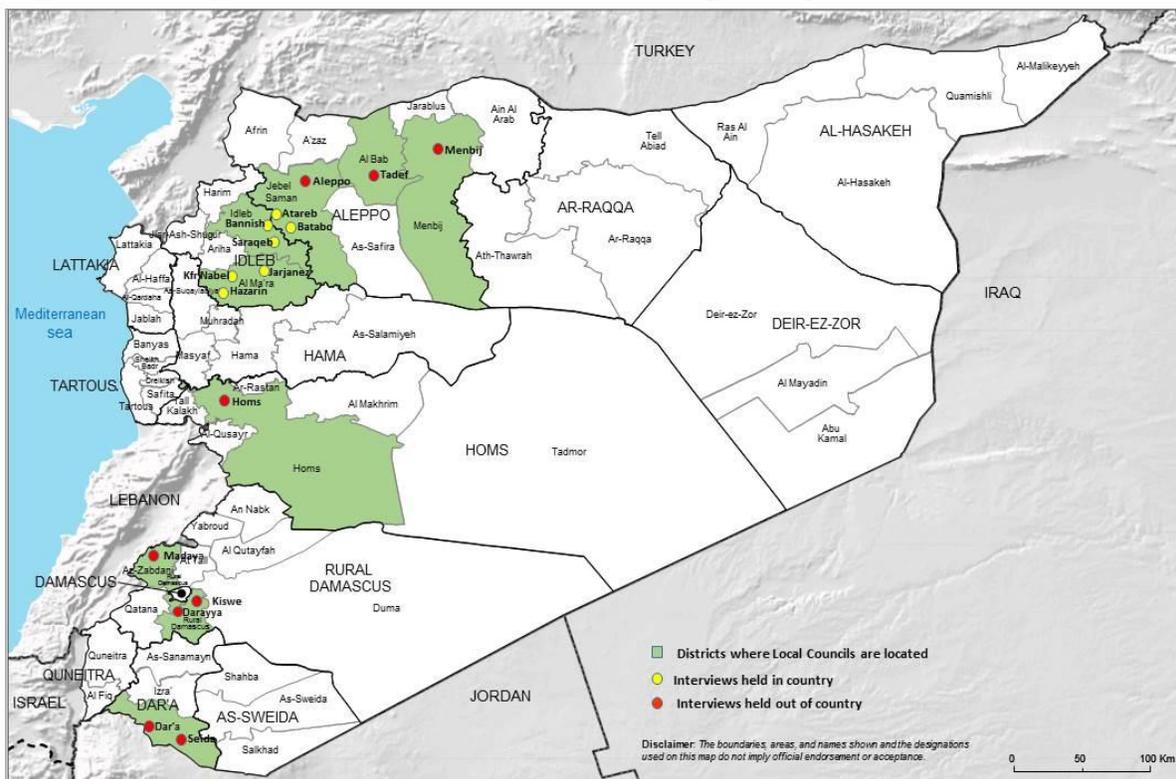
Beyond providing a deeper understanding of the Syrian case, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how local administrative structures emerge from the bottom-up in situations where the state apparatus has collapsed as a consequence of armed conflict and where there is no alternative to immediately replace it.

## Methodology

The research presented in this paper is based on data gathered in interviews inside and outside Syria, desk research and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) interaction with LAS members. At least one member of a LAS (usually the head of the body) and one prominent member of the local community were interviewed from the respective sample areas.

The sample area consisted of sixteen locations: Aleppo city, Atareb, Batabo, Binnish, Daraya, Deraa city, Hazarin, Homs, Jarjanaz, Kafranbel, Kiswa, Madaya, Manbij, Saraqeb, Seida and Tadeif. Of these, the interviews in Atareb, Batabo, Binnish, Hazarin, Jarjanaz, Kafranbel and Saraqeb were held in-country, while the rest were held in Jordan or Turkey for security reasons.

Syrian Arab Republic : Location of Local Councils targeted by the research



The information gathered in the aforementioned interviews was verified and supplemented by additional interviews with the Damascus suburbs provincial council, NGO workers and representatives of LACU, the ACU and the SOC. These interviews revolved around the needs and challenges of local administration structures, civil society organizations and the SOC government.

## High hopes in the starting-blocks: the birth of local councils

*Like many developments in the Syrian uprising, the creation of local councils was spontaneous and reactive. Some of them developed in the same way that Local Coordination Units appeared; which were basically local organization structures which had also developed medical, humanitarian and media offices as per local needs. However, with the need to go beyond local organization and meet much larger needs, councils were developed to handle larger needs, larger funds and larger services. While many were created to coordinate aid as well as exert control by influential (whether internal or external parties), councils were intended to meet various local needs from service provision, to aid coordination and representation within the SOC. Last but not least, other LAS appeared in response to external stimuli. Very often, Syrian exiles and Western NGOs played an instrumental role in setting-up local administration structures, but in so doing, they created unrealistic expectations of what local councils could deliver and of what the international community could realistically offer in terms of financial support.*

### *The external stimulus: dealing with erratic support*

In the Aleppo countryside, a long-time opposition activist headed one of the earliest attempts to create LAS. He convinced activists from the *tansiqiyat* (local protest coordination committees) that he could attract assistance from European governments if only they would step up and create local councils with a wide-ranging remit to administer services in the rural ‘liberated’ parts of the governorate. These promises were made following meetings held with EU, UK, Australian and Italian officials. In turn, forces were merged with some Saudi-based Muslim Brotherhood members, who were heading a similar effort in collaboration with Syrian expatriate opposition activists. Several meetings were held in Istanbul in January 2012 where the groups worked to coordinate their efforts. At exactly the same time, a separate attempt was underway by development firm ARK to do precisely the same thing.

By March 2012 all three attempts had come to nought. Cooperation between the groups broke down, while the ARK initiative got consumed in political wrangling as different factions within the Syrian National Council (SNC) attempted to dominate the project. In the same month, the Qatari-funded Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) was convinced to contribute with US\$50,000 for the creation of one of the earliest LAS in Madaya, a town northwest of Damascus. The money kept the council afloat for six months, after which it failed to solicit further funding and its influence waned. Lacking the institutional supports required to guarantee long-term funding, local councils created by individual initiative alone often did not succeed.

In some cases, individual initiatives proved to be ill-thought out and self-defeating. In Atareb, for instance, the local council was established by a coalition of notables and activists in early July

2012 in direct response to a financial pledge of €100,000. The money went largely towards a water project, but the two boreholes that were dug failed to produce anything like the amount of fresh water required to meet the demands of the town and the project was abandoned. The funding turned out to be a one-off but the damage was done: the connection between LAS and external funding was firmly established. Word had gotten round that hundreds of thousands of Euros in cash were up for grabs if only newly-liberated towns would follow Atareb's example and establish local councils of their own. Many of these councils would be sorely disappointed.

Given the way local councils were formed, many of their leaders came to espouse a sense of entitlement to massive foreign investment in their future. They understood local administration structures to be conduits to channel support from outside and not, as is often supposed, a means of establishing local democracy through self-reliance and community solidarity. In reality, both sides failed to live up to their side of the bargain; too many local councils expected too much from outsiders, and outsiders (both Western governments and Syrian exiles) either held unrealistic expectations of what local councils could achieve, or else were happy to cynically exploit local councils for political gain. One thing is for certain: the emergence of local administration structures was a tale of mutually-assured disappointment.

One of the few local councils whose creation was well-planned and executed was that of Aleppo city. Preparatory meetings were held prior to the eviction of security forces from the eastern half of the city. The Aleppo Governorate Revolutionary Transitory Council was launched in late August 2012 with solid pledges of continuous funding and a clear plan of action, and its evolution into a fully-fledged local administrative body remains one of the very few relative success stories. Few other LAS were created in such well-planned fashion, but few other cities came close to Aleppo's strategic and symbolic value or enjoyed its concentration of educated middle class elements who held a strong sense of civic pride. With the exception of Homs, the vast majority of local councils are in rural villages and towns with little strategic value and limited capacities for organization and outreach.

#### *The first attempt to centralize a fragmented reality: local councils in the geostrategic game*

It was not until the Syrian Businessmen's Forum (SBF), headed by Mustafa Sabbagh, that an institutionalised LAS-creation programme began to take shape. In June 2012 a meeting was held in Istanbul in which seven provincial representatives were invited to create an SNC bloc that would represent the nascent local councils in Syria.

The local councils soon came to be seen as the vehicle that would drive the political agenda in opposition held parts of Syria. Following the creation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) in November 2012, Sabbagh was elected as its first secretary-general and his 14-man bloc (made up of 14 provincial representatives) became the second-largest bloc in the SOC. By this stage,

the creation of local councils was in full swing as both the internal and external opposition, as well as key Western powers, expected the imminent downfall of Assad. Representatives of hastily-formed councils made the obligatory trip to Antakya, Gaziantep or Amman where they would make themselves known to aid organizations as well as to provincial representatives in the SOC.

Little effort was made at this stage to create a unified framework for local council structures, including by-laws, forms of representation and electoral processes. What mattered was that local councils existed and they recognized the suzerainty of the Sabbagh bloc. This project resulted in the recent creation of the High Council for the Local Councils: the High Council is the project of the pro-Sabbagh 14 members block in the SOC trying to establish an umbrella organization for those Local Councils that could ultimately possibly be used as a tool to create a real rooted Syrian opposition but also as a tool in the regional rivalry within the opposition's central structures.

## Revolution of the hungry: LAS service provision

*The average number of executive portfolios to be found in an average local council ranges between 11 and 15. These include the offices of president and vice-president and may include some or all of the following offices: finance, humanitarian aid, services, external relations, civil relations, media, education, medical, religious endowments, security, legal, military, project management and civil defence. To the outside observer, this may seem impressive. In most local councils, however, these offices have had to adjust to the reality of limited resources and qualified personnel, which is why they have had to focus on a number of core services.*

The first and most immediate of these core services is the **supply of bread**. Before the uprising, flour was provided to both state-run and private bakeries at a subsidized rate, and this, together with the provision of subsidized fuel, ensured that bread was readily available and cheap (average was 15 liras for 1kg or US\$0.25 at pre-uprising exchange rates). This changed when the armed opposition took over across Syria the infrastructure put in place to make bread cheap (granaries, mills, fuel depots, bakeries) fell into the hands of various armed brigades or tribes. These attempted to monopolise the bread supply process in order to assume the role of the state and make a great deal of money in the process. This brought the local councils into conflict with the armed opposition: the former tried to ensure low prices, the latter needed to make profits to carry on the fight elsewhere. Those councils that were able to hammer out a favourable deal with the right brigades ensured that bread was kept affordable, and like the regime before it, win the acquiescence of the people by supplying cheap bread.

Saraqeb represents one of the most successful examples of this strategy. Through its services office, the local council there was actually able to reduce the price of bread relative to pre-uprising levels (25 liras, or US\$0.16 at current exchange rates.) The profits generated from the mill went to supplying fuel and flour for the city's bakeries at cost price, supplemented by an international grant.

Contrast the situation in Saraqeb to Kafranbel, another town in Idlib, where 1 kg of bread in privately-owned bakeries retails for 60 liras (US\$0.40) or almost double pre-uprising prices. Residents of the town looking for cheaper bread can turn to a state-owned (but local council run) bakery where bread, made of flour supplied from state-run mills, retails for 25 liras. This bakery, however, cannot meet the demands of the 30,000 or so residents and it often suffers from weeks of stoppages when flour supplies are disrupted by the fighting and electricity shortages. Kafranbel local council is by no means the worst-run, but its inability to stabilise bread prices is regarded by locals as a blemish on its authority as a service-providing body.

In some cases, an inability to at the very least stabilize prices for basic commodities can have disastrous consequences for local councils. In Manbij in September 2013, youths attacked and

guttled the local council building following a rumour that the council was behind a five lira price hike in the price of bread. This attack proved to be the nail in the coffin for the council, which was only resurrected after it agreed to operate under the supervision of the sharia court and the armed factions. To underscore the importance of bread to winning popular support, the first major project that the council in Manbij undertook following its resurrection was to solve the problem of bread queues by taking a census of all residents in the city and ensuring that every family's fair share of bread was delivered to its local greengrocer at the fixed price of 40 liras per kg.

While bread is of immediate daily concern, **education** ranks very highly among core services delivered by local councils. The education office oversees the management of previously state-run primary and secondary schools, although most teacher's salaries continue to be paid by the state while a minority of teachers who have come out in support of the uprising have had their salaries cut but continue to teach on a voluntary basis. Because of the danger of aerial bombing as well as the fact that a majority of teachers are card-carrying members of the Ba'th Party, only 40 per cent of teachers have chosen to return to teaching. This, in addition to the shortage of available school buildings on account of many school buildings being damaged and/or occupied by armed factions or refugees, has made a majority of schools in opposition-held areas run double shifts with a reduced curriculum. The provincial council in Aleppo has managed to keep 600 schools open, allowing 350-400 thousand pupils to continue their education.

The supply of **electricity** is another core service that is of vital concern to citizens. The irony is that, by and large, in opposition-held areas electricity is still controlled by the government. The exception to this are Raqqa, Tabqa and to a lesser extent Manbij, all three of which lie close to hydroelectric dams and therefore have greater control over their electricity supply than other areas. In certain areas, such as in Aleppo in late April of this year, the armed opposition was able to capture a substation and electricity off to the government-held western half of the city. While looting and damage caused by fighting play some role, on the whole it is the government that uses electricity as a tool to punish civilian populations in rebel-held areas, limiting supplies to as little as 3-4 hours daily and often only at night. Most households have gotten used to this problem and have installed rechargeable battery packs in their homes as well as LED lights that consume considerably less electricity, while wealthier families have tended to install diesel generators.

Nevertheless, through their service offices local councils have attempted to alleviate the problem of electricity shortages by coordinating with the state-run electricity company to repair faulty lines. For this task, local councils have tended to rely on intermediaries. Some local councils turn to the regime-era head of the local council, a Ba'th Party official, who is tolerated for his ability to negotiate useful deals with "enemy" authorities. In large cities like Aleppo, Homs and Deraa,

negotiations over provision of water, electricity or other services are conducted with the offices of the governor.

The state maintains an awkward presence in opposition-held areas, not only by continuing to pay teachers' salaries and supporting some bakeries, but also by paying for **garbage collection**. This is seen as somewhat embarrassing by local council for whom the regime is an anathema, but they nevertheless tolerate it for pragmatic reasons. The opposition may want to overthrow Assad but it has to live with (and potentially exploit) his strategy of continuing to provide service to opposition-held areas in the hope that he will one day regain those territories. On its side, the regime uses the continued provision of salaries to neutralize civil servants or warn them from any role in local councils. This will subsequently weaken the opposition governance experience by hindering its ability to rely on state employee institutional memory and expertise in local governance (joining a local council might lead to dismissal from public service).

One service that the regime has stopped paying is salaries for is **civil defence**. Because of constant bombardment of opposition-held areas, there is a greater need than ever for fire engines and heavy lifting gear, and some NGOs like ARK (and others) have invested in the training and equipping of civil defence crews in Aleppo province. Not all local councils provide civil defence as many specialist vehicles were looted in the chaos immediately following the withdrawal of government forces and also dependent on needs.

Some local councils do have a Project Management office, whose duties are to ensure that **development** projects granted to these local councils are implemented correctly. Relative to the large number of local councils scattered all across Syria with real developments need, these projects are distributed thinly, with the average amount granted to councils ranging between US\$5,000-15,000.

One town that has managed to overcome this problem is Saraqeb. By levying a 7-lira tax on bread, as well as a similar figure on animal feed, the local council has been able to generate a monthly revenue of almost US\$20,000. In real terms this represented a monthly tax on every household of 150 liras, the equivalent of the price of a packet of cigarettes. This has helped to cover the council's salaries, transportation costs and emergency payments to poverty-stricken families. No other local council interviewed for this study has entertained the idea of generating tax revenue, let alone attempted to impose it. The rationale is that people cannot afford to pay any taxes, but some respondents admitted that the real problem lay elsewhere. The first was that no one in the local council would actually have the political will to propose a tax given the resentment it would generate within the community. The second problem was that even if a tax was imposed, the council didn't have the muscle to actually collect the tax should residents decide not to comply. It remains the case that moderate taxation remains the surest way of

proving a council's legitimacy and bolstering its independence and democratic credentials based on the principle of "no taxation without representation."

*The reification of local politics: from local governance to humanitarian work*

Of all the aforementioned services that local councils are engaged in, none can be delivered without the active cooperation of armed factions, sharia courts, prominent notables or even the regime. In the case of education and electricity, the role of the local council is more of an intermediary. Only when it comes to the distribution of **humanitarian aid** does the local council enjoy anything like an autonomous role. By handing out food parcels, a council can (to a much more limited degree of course) assume the distributive role of the state, and which allows it to claim, not without some justification, that it was providing an essential welfarist function that is equally as important as the defense and justice function provided by armed factions and the sharia courts respectively.

As a result of this line of reasoning, many local councils have come to see aid distribution as their primary function. They are certainly in a privileged position to handle this portfolio because foreign NGOs and SOC-affiliated support organizations prefer dealing with "official" bodies as opposed to armed factions or independent local charities that may not have proper mechanisms for accountability. In addition, distributing aid through local councils is considered by donors as a way of promoting "state building." However, they are also providing repair and maintenance services to local infrastructure, irrigation, agriculture, etc. They are maintaining local infrastructure and not so much focused on humanitarian aid.

The amount of assistance that any local council receives depends on a number of factors including size of population, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and level of contact with external bodies. Much of the humanitarian aid is, in fact, a form of social welfare that helps support poor families, or those who had lost breadwinners, to survive in the relatively harsher environment of civil war where prices of food and fuel have risen steeply. The problem is that too many local councils remain fixated by aid because it is the criterion on which they have chosen to establish their legitimacy within the community.

By definition, humanitarian aid is a temporary solution and cannot in any way be regarded as a basis on which to build a viable local administration structure, nor is aid distribution a function of government that cannot be performed equally as well, if not better, by civil society groups.

## Fortune and class: factors influencing LAS character and role

*The creation of local councils is considered by many to be one of the Syrian uprising's rare glimpses of hope. That individuals with no prior experience of self-administration should come together and create civilian structures to organize services is no mean feat. According to the minister of Local administration, the interim government is supervising now 760 Local Councils in 14 governorates. A number of factors have determined the specific character and role of these local councils, which vary from accidents of geography to middle class participation.*

The most important factor that determines the nature of a LAS is **location**. Aleppo and Homs are Syria's second and third largest cities respectively. On account of their population size and the symbolism that they hold for the revolutionary cause, it is almost guaranteed that any LAS that emerges in these cities will be better funded and staffed than, say, a sleepy agricultural town like Jarjanaz. Strategic value is of prime importance.

Proximity to the border of a friendly country is an important determining factor. Those towns and villages that are within an hour's drive of the Turkish border can rely only on easy delivery of humanitarian aid, essential if these areas are to remain opposition-held. They can also rely on access to commercial goods, essential for the well-being of local economies. Towns like Harem, Sarmada, Al-Dana, Azaz and Jarablus have profited from a boom in cross-border trade, especially as import tariffs were all but abolished. The resultant increase in wealth in private hands reduces the financial burden on the public purse of the local councils in these border areas. In contrast, the challenges faced by the local council in Daraya are immense on account of the complete collapse of economic life there. Where the newly-elected local council in Azaz could start focusing on reconstruction, Daraya has to endure a daily struggle for survival where the top priority is simply to keep residents alive.

Access to **natural resources** is also a determining factor. The provincial council of Deir az-Zour has put in production several oil wells, proceeds from which go to supporting local councils and investment in the lucrative cotton trade. The provincial council projects a financial surplus for the council, something virtually unheard of in the two-history of local administration structures in Syria. The local council in Rastan may not have oil, but it has fertile agricultural land owned by Alawite loyalists who have fled the area. The council has put the land to use, and the proceeds go to the coffers of the local council.

Location offers a natural advantage but it is no guarantee that an LAS will succeed. What does greatly improve the chances of success is the **participation of the middle class**. Not only does this boost the respectability of the local council, it also ensures a minimum level of professionalism and competency in the administration of services and in the interaction with the outside world. Daraya, home of one of the most sophisticated and well-run of all local councils

in the Damascus suburbs area, offers an interesting case study of how such a favourable scenario can come about. The professional middle class from Daraya who since the 1970s was engaged in nonviolent, civil society activism through charities and NGOs and who had earned a great deal of experience in local organization came to found the local council in Daraya.

A factor that may be hard to quantify but nevertheless is key to understanding why local councils develop in a particular direction is **level of religiosity** of a local population. Generally speaking, agricultural communities, particularly those in mountainous terrain such as that of Jabal Al-Zawiya, tend to be less strict in their adherence to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam than cities like Aleppo that have a higher preponderance of religious preachers operating in poor and overcrowded districts of the city. In Kafranbel, for example, you will not see graffiti calling for an Islamic state but “secular” graffiti promoting national ideals like “freedom” and “dignity”. Generally speaking, the less religiously-adherent a town’s residents are, the more likely they are to embrace a secular local council and be less enthusiastic about sharia courts or other Islamist-controlled bodies.

Other factors that can come into play that influence the character of a local council is the **number of wealthy expatriates** that hail from a particular locality. The local council in Seida in Deraa province is an example of a town that has come to be financially self-sufficient, largely on account of many of its many residents who emigrated to Kuwait in 1980s and 1990s and become wealthy there. When the local council was established in March 2013, these individuals established a fund into which they deposited tens of thousands of dollars that was then paid to the local council on a monthly basis. The amount that the council received was enough to cover the salaries of administrators and technical staff and has turned the local council in Seida into the most well-run council in Deraa province. As a result of its relative self-sufficiency, the Seida local council cut ties to the Deraa provincial council, which it accuses of corruption.

The **way a town or city is liberated** can also decide on the fate of a local council. Manbij for instance was not liberated by force; rather, the security forces there simply melted away overnight. The FSA brigades indigenous to Manbij were outnumbered and outgunned by those that flooded in from Idlib and the northern Aleppo countryside, who saw the city as something of a war booty. It did not help the cause of Manbij that many of the outsiders considered the local population to be closeted regime supporters. As a result, the local council was not given any respect by the armed factions, and its fate was sealed when, in November 2013, it eventually became subsumed by the sharia committee.

A similar fate befell the local council in Raqqa which hardly survived a few months as an independent body before it became a plaything in the hands of Ahrar Al-Sham, Jabhat Al-Nusra and eventually ISIS. Atareb on the other hand was one of those towns that had raised its own brigades and liberated itself without resort to help from outsiders. Even ISIS, which moved into

the town in late 2013, struggled to maintain a grip on the town and was eventually forced out in early January 2014 by those same indigenous brigades, much to the relief of the local population.

## In the shadows: the role of armed actors

*Recognizing the need to maintain popular support for the uprising, the armed opposition has cooperated with local councils, and in some cases, even encouraged their development. That said, the armed opposition maintains a vested interest in these structures, especially in their welfare function. This has created a complex relationship in which favours are exchanged between armed groups and local councils in often dubious fashion.*

The relationship between moderate armed actors is one characterized by an exchange of interest. Privately, many FSA brigade leaders express frustration at the way local councils are badly-run and riven with in-fighting. Publicly, however, they have not made any systematic attempt to supplant local councils or take them over by force. On the occasions that they have weighed in it has been by siding by one civilian faction against another. None of the heads of local councils interviewed for this study was a military figure, although close family or clan relationships do exist.

With the exception of the Islamic Council for the Administration of the liberated areas, armed actors have respected the role of local councils out of a recognition of their own inability to do a better job. Established in March 2014, the ICALT is a local governance Islamic project that aims at challenging the monopole of the SOC over LAS and service provisions in the opposition held areas. ICALT is a wholly Islamist body backed up by the financial and military clout of the Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra and local Islamist allies. Their reference is the former Sharia Court of Aleppo, an Islamist LAS founded by militant Islam armed groups and sought to go beyond the mere administration of justice to establish a full-fledged local governance structure dominated by Islamic armed groups supervising public service provision structures dominated by urban professionals. ICALT now has branches in Deir az-Zour, Idlib, Latakia, Hama and Aleppo provinces, and according to its founders, is expanding. In Idlib, the Binish sharia court established the same model, dominating the local “revolutionary committees” and controlling now all the courts in the opposition controlled parts of the Idlib governorate. These councils work under the supervision of a Shura council formed by representatives of the various dominant Islamic armed factions backed by some local militant notables. Nevertheless, the Islamic high hopes failed short to deliver. After severe pressures from GCC countries to stop support to Islamic armed groups, the Council suffered financial difficulties and accepted to ally with their former rivals in town to form a consensual local council and accept therefore to interact positively with the (western) international community.

In many instances, moderate brigades played a constructive role in the creation of local councils. Generally speaking, moderate commanders who operate in their local town or city, and who are driven by patriotism more so than religion, have demonstrated a commitment to local councils and have served to protect them from criminal elements and predatory bands of fighters.

In an environment where guns are sold at marketplaces next to fruit and vegetable stalls, local councils recognize the need for “muscle” if they are to have any chance of exerting any sort of authority. But, where local councils have attempted to create their own armed militia, the results have been disastrous. An attempt by the local council of rural Jisr ash-Shughur, to establish a police force ended with an armed group stealing their vehicles and weapons, and Jabhat Al-Nusra taking over their HQ in Darkush.

For this reason, local councils have come to realise that they need to establish a healthy working relationship with the armed opposition in which they do not seek to supplant its authority, but rather to enhance it by giving it a stake in community policing. A common response is to create a “security battalion” made up of fighters from one or more brigade whose job it is to maintain law and order, arrest suspects and to guard the prison. In most cases, this force remains under the nominal control of the local council, but on a day-to-day basis takes its orders directly from the sharia court. Where local councils-controlled police forces do exist, their remit is usually confined to traffic and routine patrol duties. Missions such as arresting criminals are almost always left to the security battalions.

Other types of cooperation deemed healthy is when brigades offer use of vehicles to the local council, assist in salvage operations, provide security for lorries carrying aid, and lend their moral weight to local fund raising campaigns. In return, brigades composed of fighters operating in their own towns are keen to see local councils well-run so as to limit any popular backlash against their presence. But they are also interested in the humanitarian aid that local councils receive, and so as a matter of routine, they provide local councils humanitarian aid offices with lists of the families of dead fighters they believe should receive preferential treatment.

On rare occasions, the opposite happens: local councils receive aid from the FSA’s Supreme Military Council (SMC). Despite the fact that these military councils have limited influence on the course of the battlefield, they do routinely received deliveries of aid from Arab or Turkish aid organizations, and in the case of the Aleppo military council, it used to assign a share of this aid to the Aleppo provincial council. Very rarely, a local council may have an operational military office that liaises between brigades and decides on strategy, as is the case in Daraya, but even this unprecedented level of mutual respect and coordination has now begun to break down as differences between secularists and Islamists become more marked. On the whole, armed actors have left local councils to elect their own leaders without attempts to impose certain candidates through crude force of arms. Local brigades do often get allocated a quota of seats in local council general assemblies, but this invariably is a minority share.

## A low card: legitimacy of local administration structures

*The issue of legitimacy represents the biggest single problem that LAS currently face. While problems of competency or resourcing can be solved through training or funding, legitimacy is a far more profound challenge that directly impacts on all aspects of LAS performance.*

Since local councils were first formed in early 2012, the organizational model adopted to create a quasi-democratic representation of the community has undergone a series of trial-and-error changes. These changes were made in direct response to claims and counter-claims of “illegitimacy” that sometimes resulted in two or more local councils being created in the same area. The issue here is about power, but it is power by consent (or the semblance of), and therefore the key challenge is to create a mechanism whereby various groups and strata of society are given a stake in the council without the council becoming too cumbersome and inefficient or beset by in-fighting.

One of the models adopted was the fully democratic model, whereby membership of the local councils was decided through direct elections by all citizens. This was attempted in Saraqeb in June 2013. Not only did very few people turn up to vote because of the understandable risk of air attack, but of those that were elected almost all proved to be unsuitable for the task of local administration. According to an activist from the town, those elected lacked the necessary education and experience to be effective administrators.

A second attempt was made in December 2013 to run elections, only this time using electoral lists. The thinking was that the list system would favour the more educated members of the community who would organize themselves in a “technocrats” list. The idea ran up against two problems: one was that a faction within the council preferred the single vote system and would not budge on the issue; the other was that those who campaigned for the electoral list system could not put together a rival list to stand against them. The experiment in electoral democracy was abandoned.

Saraqeb is somewhat unique in that it actually gave electoral democracy a chance. In almost all other councils, the model that has come to dominate is that of the familial consensus model. The partial exception to this is Aleppo city where, on account of the size of the city, several neighbourhood councils were created that were in effect an electoral college that voted in an executive committee for the entire city. Nevertheless, the dynamic was the same as pretty much everywhere else: in Aleppo’s neighbourhood councils, representatives of large and influential families tended to be the majority bloc while a minority were chosen for their experience or revolutionary credentials.

This model, while serving to appease the FSA and manage the ambitions of large families, does have its limits: chiefly, that the interests of a third major social group, the activists, was not always well-represented. Too many “first generation” revolutionaries who founded *tansiqias* felt that they were not properly represented, and consequently, they boycotted the local council all together. This may not have been a problem had it not been for the accumulated experience that these activists gained through three years of opposition activity that included considerable access to media as well as to aid and development organizations.

Searching for legitimacy through a normative process can be very time-consuming and sometimes fruitless, especially within predominantly agricultural communities with no prior experience of ever having to create leaderships on their own accord. So far, what they have produced has proven to be extremely fragile. Most local councils hold “elections” every 3-6 months, and the reason given for these short terms of office was that it offered an opportune chance to get rid of officials who were not performing as well as they should. In reality, it reflected a lack of confidence, both on the part of those who had created the system and in the system itself. At every round of elections comes a bout of “restructuring”, and these tweaks to the system are not aimed so much to correct oversights as to constantly change the rules to accommodate shifts in the balance of power within the community. With no arbiter to settle disputes and anchor the whole process down, every election can be a potential constitutional crisis that leads to months of deadlock.

The constant cycle of restructuring, coupled with a lack of experience, sometimes creates rather bizarre political arrangements that would flummox even the most experienced constitutional lawyer. Manbij represents one extreme case where the local council turned overnight from being an autonomous body to an appendage of the sharia court. Because the sharia court began increasingly to play an arbitration role in the disputes between local council members, and because it had the backing of powerful Islamist armed factions, it attained sufficient power and prestige that it left the enfeebled local council with only one option: become part of a “sharia committee”. This committee consisted of eight seats, seven of which belonged to armed factions with the local council being the only civilian entity in this new arrangement. The presidency of the sharia committee was by monthly rotation, with each entity nominating a cleric for the role. By a stroke, the local council was reduced to being an executive arm of the sharia court, and all of the council’s personnel were held up to the scrutiny by the various clerics nominated by the armed opposition groups to deliver justice in the city.

The sharia committee in Manbij may appear to be a regressive step in the evolution of local administration structures, but in many localities the primacy of the Islamic judiciary (the sharia court) over secular local councils has become more than just a passing fad. In Deir az-Zour province, sharia committees consisting exclusively of Islamist groups and their tribal allies administer not only justice but sizeable oil revenues from the Tanak oil field. Again, with the

partial exception of Aleppo city council, most towns and villages in opposition-held Syria have placed the sharia court at the top of their power hierarchy. It is the sharia court in places like Jarjanaz that bestow legitimacy onto local councils, not the other way around. Despite the councils being semi-democratic and invested with legislative and executive powers, and officially recognized and supported by the SOC, real legitimacy resides elsewhere, in a courthouse presided over by a small number of unelected clerics.

Having to share political space in this way with more powerful actors, it is little wonder that local councils are obsessed with funding. Given that legitimacy by popular sovereignty is not properly understood or highly-rated in opposition-held areas, local councils have little recourse but to legitimacy by performance. Measuring legitimacy by how much money a council attracts from external donors at a time of war when externally-funded development projects are facing something of a crisis of implementation must surely count as an act of desperation. Poorly resourced, inherently unstable and toothless, local councils continue to be perceived as the weakest link within the pantheon of opposition bodies. Without an improbably large injection of development money, a step that will bring with it its own dangers, secular local councils are unable to assert their primacy over religious authorities, because that will put them in a head-on collision with the Islamist factions in some areas,.

## A two-way street: relations between the LAS and the SOC

*Despite the fact that local councils recognise the authority of the SOC, the relationship between the two remains an inorganic one. Several SOC bodies were created to manage local administration affairs but they have not always concurred on the best way to develop the LAS project. Local councils have become skeptical about the ability of SOC bodies to extend real support, but they nevertheless maintain a wait-and-see position for lack of real alternatives.*

Local councils and the SOC are two different species of organization. One developed inside Syria and, for good or bad, reflected the state of society in that country; the other was created outside Syria and reflected the somewhat different reality of the expatriate opposition community. The latter claimed to reflect the aspirations of the Syrian people; the former aspired to actual representation of the people. One is resource-poor, the other is resource rich. The relationship between the two is fundamentally unequal. Given this, both sides have struggled to find a workable formula that would allow the cogwheels of the one to fit onto the cogwheels of the other.

The creation of the 14-man local councils bloc headed by Mustafa Sabbagh represented the first attempt to harness the perceived legitimacy of the local councils with the SOC. It was an important step forward, but local councils representatives still begrudge what they say is too small a representation and they are right: fourteen seats out of a total of 114 is well short of giving the local councils a genuine say with the exile body. In comparison, Michel Kilo's liberal bloc has equal number of seats in the SOC to the local councils bloc, while the Muslim Brotherhood presence in the body through members and affiliates actually exceeds that of the LAS, which claims to represent more than 700 local councils on the ground.

Local councils know all about the dysfunctionality of the SOC. However, since they are primarily concerned with receiving aid and development money, they maintain a pragmatically cordial relationship with the SOC in the hope that they might become the beneficiaries of the SOC's work with donor countries. In this regard, the establishment of the SOC government's Local Administration, Relief and Refugee Ministry is a cause for some optimism on account of the relatively competent staff, most of whom are veterans of LACU. It remains to be seen whether the SOC as an entire institution will ever carry out a strategic pivot and engage more pro-actively with constituencies inside Syria, as opposed to carrying on as the opposition's (so far unsuccessful) overseas diplomatic service. For the time being, the SOC seems unlikely to embark on such a course of action.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The need for local councils may appear now to be obvious, but it was not the case 12-18 months ago when they were still a relatively new phenomenon that was resisted by some and misunderstood by others. The realisation that the armed conflict is likely to be a long one has made the need for a civilian authority to organize local services all the more pressing, and what that has done is “stabilize” local councils by marking out domains in which they are expected to be active. The question that is now asked is not whether a local council should exist, but who is to run it and through what mechanism should they be held to account. That local administration structures created by the opposition have not lived up to their early promise is now a given. The problems that have risen to the fore have all been reflected in the challenges faced by local councils.

Chief among these problems was that of creating a local authority that enjoys legitimacy. Admittedly, the number of areas that have competing councils has declined in the last 12 months, suggesting an improvement in local mediation skills and, to an extent, an enhanced role of the SOC-linked provincial councils in recognizing certain local councils and not others. In the first quarter of 2014, a coordinated campaign was launched by local council bodies across Syria to do precisely that, and it seems to have had a modest but noticeable improvement on the level of acceptability of local councils. There has also been an improvement in the willingness of local councils to become more inclusive by opening up to the wider community in the search for skilled administrators, and to loosen the strict criteria for who is eligible to take up official posts.

Local Governorate and municipal councils were formerly part of a strong centralized political system, receiving financial support both for local development plans and salaries and there were very little chances that the current LAS will compensate these resources with foreign aid or by extracting resources from an exhausted population. Even if the various challenges mentioned in the introduction (legitimacy, capacity, political umbrella, accountability) were addressed efficiently, the access to enough resources will always be a major obstacle. Therefore, expectations both locally and internationally should then be drastically downplayed as these structures exist and are the only reliable structures available. Their importance should nevertheless be appreciated beyond means for aid and funding distribution; as envisioned by the SOC upon its formation, local administration structures also provide a platform for the Syrian opposition to produce a new, genuinely integrated political elite. Given that potential solutions to the conflict lie in the many of core issues of the uprising, i.e., over-centralized local administration, mismanagement and weak and failed decentralization lies, understanding local administration structures is necessary. Empowering structures through strengthening legitimacy and accountability, facilitating local community engagement in opposition held areas to produce inclusive political formulas to reintegrate technical expertise, as well as promoting the role of civil society to develop strong accountability procedures is necessary to address core gaps and

challenges in the success story of the LAS. The development of more credible LAS will further develop better interaction between revolutionary forces and the local notables, reintegrate the non-revolutionary elites and de-polarise local politics to address the needs and vision of local communities within the broader context of the Syrian socio-political landscape.

While there is no hard-and-fast solution to the problem of legitimacy, there are steps that can be taken to boost a council's standing within the community. Similarly, it remains imperative for councils to stress the need not to rely only on external donations but also to generate resources on their own. Countering the sense of entitlement to aid is paramount, since it is only by weaning councils off aid that they have a chance of building more democratic and more robust local administration structures. This can only be done by engaging in an open and frank discussion with local councils where concerns of donors are clearly laid out. From one side, councils need to start hearing firmer language from donors on the need to help them help themselves. From the other side donors need to develop a mid and long term strategy opposed to ad hoc donations.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been formulated:

**1 - Legitimacy.** The legitimacy of local councils can be enhanced if they can demonstrate to their communities that they care about what they think of them, and therefore, are keen for them to be properly informed. Without entering into political engineering, the most important measure to be taken should be to provoke a real debate on the nature of these local councils: are they “revolutionary” or “open to everybody”? A debate on shared experiences among the various local councils never took place. There is a need for dialogue and for promotion of success models such as Aleppo and Kafranbel, among others. This could be done under the supervision of the minister of Local Administration and with the collaboration of the newly elected governorate councils.

**2 - Efficiency.** There is a need for more cost effectiveness in budgetary/funding support to councils, in addition to mainstreaming funding components within projects that encourage or ensure sustainable income. For instance, communal generators can be purchased for local councils who can then run them for a profit. Reconditioning water pumps will allow the local council to charge households a reasonable monthly rate for supplying piped fresh water. If refurbished and properly staffed, schools that are under the management of the local council can charge a reasonable fee.

Different localities may develop different forms of taxation depending on the local conditions, but as long as any tax is approved by a majority of council members, and as long as the aims of the tax and the means by which the money raised will be spent is properly communicated to the community, this should be enough to overcome objections.

3 - **Accountability.** Supporting local councils that do not comply with minimum standards of institutional government is counter-productive and sends the wrong signal. Even if that means scaling back the scope of some projects, international donors should insist on minimum levels of community representation and consultation, financial transparency and civil/military separation of powers before offering any money. Donors should seek to work through the SOC's ministry for Local Administration, Relief and Refugee (LARR) to develop mechanisms to vet and monitor local council performance. In addition, the LARR ministry will need to accelerate its ongoing efforts to create guidelines on forms of representation and procedures for local councils.

4 - **Capacity building.** Local councils have an urgent need for expertise in local administration and governance. The local councils are far too numerous to be dealt with on a one-to-one basis, therefore a "trainer for trainees" at the level of governorate councils would be the most appropriate approach. Priorities should be established in consultancy with the LARR and the Governorate Councils.

5 - **Communication.** Local councils should be encouraged to improve their communication towards their communities and to be more transparent. There are several tools that councils could make use of, other than Facebook. It can also translate into a wider community engagement through a broader voice and accountability measures. This is building legitimacy by media.