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# Syrians Under Siege: The Role of Local Councils

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The crisis in Syria raises questions about how Syrians live their lives amidst the ongoing war, particularly in the “liberated zones” which are no longer under the control of the Assad regime. Bashar Assad’s forces have imposed a strict siege on these zones and, together with Russian and Iranian forces, have subjected them to heavy bombing. The war has damaged the economy, causing thousands of families and individuals to lose their sources of income and live in deteriorating conditions. It has thus forced many people to change their economic activities in order to provide for their families.

In an attempt to take control of their lives and build some stability in incredibly difficult conditions, residents in these liberated zones have formed local councils. In some zones, they have indeed succeeded in forming actively independent local councils, while in other areas the local councils have limited freedom to perform their duties. In all cases, local councils operate like “small governments” in managing the affairs of their region. They work with development and service institutions to lessen the chaos of war and provide support in the absence of state institutions. This raises questions about the challenges that local councils face and offers an opportunity to assess their performance in a war context. For this purpose, this paper presents case studies of local administration in Douma, Qalaat al-Madiq and Tasil, which represent three different regions of the country.

## **The formation of local councils**

According to multiple testimonies,<sup>1</sup> the way that local councils are formed varies from region to region depending on the political forces active there. According to testimony from

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this paper was obtained from several sources. These include recent testimonies from Syrian activists and local council members, and notes taken by the researcher while visiting the area around Damascus in 2012 and 2013.

one council member, the council in Douma (near Damascus in Rif Dimashq governorate) was formed through a “democratic” electoral process with the participation of civil society and political actors.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Douma council members numbered 298. They include individuals with diverse expertise and varying levels of education. Twenty percent of them have university degrees and some 30 percent hold mid-level diplomas. The council is composed of 20 offices, including eight administrative departments and 12 service offices, divided into multiple fields.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the local council in Qalaat al-Madiq, a city in the countryside of Hama Governorate in central Syria, was formed in 2013 through an agreement between the city’s military and civil society leaders. According to the head of the council,<sup>4</sup> the Shoura Council selected members for the local council in coordination with leaders of military factions. He said that the council is independent and free from interference from local military groups. Nonetheless, the council remains dependent on funding from military groups and is therefore subject to influence by them.

The Qalaat al-Madiq council includes several members with particular expertise. The head of the council has a degree in law, and most office directors hold mid-level diplomas or high school degrees. These members are spread across 10 key administrative departments and service offices.

The local council in the town of Tasil, in Daraa Governorate in southern Syria, was formed through a different process. According to a teacher in Tasil,<sup>5</sup> two members from each family in the town were selected, and the council members were elected from amongst them. As a result, the council is more or less representative of most families in Tasil. Although this formation mechanism ensures the council’s independence from the influence of military factions, it is more akin to a family and tribal system than to a democratic one. The council comprises 10 specialized offices, including a census office.

Most councils, including those described above, have to deal with interference from the opposition military groups that control their area. Judicial courts, for example, which fall within the councils’ purview, are often subject to change. Some courts which started out as independent and secular have become sharia courts as a result of pressure from military groups. Military groups also undermine the work of the judiciary, as each of them has their own sharia courts that do not recognize any outside authority. Furthermore, local councils have authority only over civilians; they have no power over combatants operating within

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<sup>2</sup> Statement from Mahran Ayoun, a member of a local council in the city of Douma, in June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the local council in Douma, see <http://doumalc.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Information obtained from Fawwaz Haj Hussein, head of the local council in Qalaat al-Madiq, June 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Information obtained from Belal al-Ghumra, who works in education in Tasil, June 2016.

military groups. This has significantly weakened the councils and encouraged the spread of chaos. It could be circumvented with a separation of power between the military, the judicial and the administrative work of the councils.

### **The administrative and service roles of local councils**

The performance and efficiency of the administrative and service functions of the local councils depend largely on their access to revenues, their independence from military groups, and the amount of external support they receive.

In terms of services, the Douma council created teams to collect the city's waste, to remove rubble from the residential areas bombed by Assad's forces, or to repair the electricity grid and sewage systems. In terms of administration, the land registry office is perhaps one of the most important administrative offices in Douma. With about 32 employees distributed across eight offices, its main function is to manage sale and rental contracts, to confirm ownership of real estate, and to keep records of public and private property in the city. The council has also a civil registry office which employs 11 people to document marriages, divorces, births and deaths and to release related information. The office also documents the names of those killed, detained or reported missing in the conflict. Similarly, Tasil's local council has a census office tasked with keeping records of the city's residents, including its student population.

Most councils covered in this study perform most of the service functions in their regions. Often, they are the official entity responsible for recording and keeping all documents related to residents; they have gained more experience and appear to perform these tasks better than at the time of their establishment. The councils have increased the number of their specialized offices and of employees, but all suffer from a severe shortage in specialized personnel, which is reflected in their performance and efficiency.

### **The development role of local councils**

Local councils that have emerged in the liberated areas have very limited financial resources, severely limiting their performance on economic and development issues.

According to its own statistics for 2016, the Douma local council has implemented 12 projects worth \$1.8 million since it was established and is currently undertaking eight projects worth \$974,000. The council has sought to generate additional revenues to reduce its dependence on external support. For instance, it created a small recycling factory where waste is shredded, recycled, and turned into organic fertilizers for sale in markets in Eastern Ghouta.

The Douma council also supports several agricultural projects and provides assistance, in particular, for wheat production – an essential commodity considering the siege that Douma endured for nearly three years. It has successfully developed 741 acres of agricultural land to produce mostly wheat and vegetables for Douma residents.

Among the three councils studied, Douma is the only one to have invested in sustainable development. The council has successfully implemented several projects which benefit the entire Douma population. According to the council, it is expected to sign off on two more projects worth \$225,000 and, pending further funding, the council's Project Study Office has proposed 12 more non-profit, social projects.

In Qalaat al-Madiq, the local council's performance has been more modest. According to the head of the council, the work has been limited to service and administrative projects related to waste removal, sewage system maintenance, and repairs of the electricity and water supply networks. The council also provides some support for agricultural and fish-farming projects and ensures their produce reaches local markets. The council also opened a public transport station to link Qalaat al-Madiq with nearby towns and cities.

The Tasil council plays a similar role in supporting agricultural and livestock production, preventing monopolies, and confronting the siege imposed by the Assad regime. It also ensures that agricultural and animal products can be sold in markets in Jordan and Damascus.

The difference in performance, particularly between the Douma council and councils in the other cities, may largely be due to their locations and the circumstances of each city. Douma is in central Syria and has been isolated by the Assad's regime siege of the city. This had a major impact on the role played by the council in protecting its residents. In contrast, Tasil and Qalaat al-Madiq are closer to Syria's northern and southern borders, giving residents more choices and opportunities for securing their livelihoods and receiving international humanitarian aid, reducing the need for a more central development role for the local councils.

### **Education sector**

In coordination with local and international civil society organizations, local councils have also taken charge of the education sector, which has been one of the sectors most threatened by the war. There are 5,104 students in Tasil, 18,000 students in Douma, and 4,800 students in Qalaat al-Madiq. Taking care of the education sector provides education for students and helps employ a significant number of teachers and other employees, of

which there is a severe shortage. With only 323 teachers and administrators in Tasil, and some 475 in Douma, classrooms suffer from overcrowding.<sup>6</sup>

Local councils also provide students with textbooks. They collect books previously used in public schools and redistribute them to currently functioning schools. Curriculums are slightly amended by, for instance, removing references to the Assad regime or to nationalist educational courses. To fill gaps in the curriculum, local councils instead focus on the educational process, though in many cases Baathist ideology has been replaced with an Islamist one. This is often imposed by the parties that finance the education sector or bodies that operate under military groups. At the same time, local councils struggle to protect the civil and secular aspects left in the curriculum, which are threatened with removal.

### **The activities of economic actors**

The lives and economic activities of Syrians have changed significantly since the start of the revolution in March 2011, resulting in major transformations in income sources for Syrian families. Many Syrians in areas outside the control of the Assad regime have lost the income from their government jobs. Many professionals lost their clients with the collapse of their markets and the forced cessation of their activities. Agricultural land was also hit by the destruction, leading to a significant decline in agricultural production in Syria over the past few years. These circumstances have forced economic actors to take up multiple jobs – often different from their pre-war activities – in order to provide for their daily needs.

Land is a primary source of income in rural towns and villages. This is the case in Tasil,<sup>7</sup> where farming and livestock production are the main sources of income for a large segment of the population.<sup>8</sup> The city produces milk, cheese and meat, covering local market needs and exporting the surplus to Jordan and Damascus when conditions permit. Around a third of the families in Tasil – about 1700 – work in the agricultural sector. The rest works in a wide range of professions such as education, retail, agricultural machinery and car repairs, bakeries and animal feed factories.

The situation in Qalaat al-Madiq is similar, given the comparable agricultural nature of the region. While many families in Qalaat al-Madiq rely on fish farming as their major source of income, agriculture and farming are generally the main sources of income in the city.

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<sup>6</sup> Information about Qalaat al-Madiq was obtained from Marwan Hamada, Director of the Educational Office in the city, in June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> As of June 2016, the population of Douma is 138,000, the population of Tasil is 17,500, and the population of Qalaat al-Madiq is 22,000.

<sup>8</sup> Some 850 families work in animals breeding in Tasil.

According to the head of the local council, wheat production accounts for about 70 percent of families' income.

In Douma, economic activities and sources of income are different due to the small amount of arable land and the siege imposed on the city. Heavy bombings by the Assad forces have destroyed much of the land used for farming, machinery and good seeds. Despite this, local agriculture and livestock production provide important sources of income for many families and cover most of the city's need in milk and wheat. The local council provides farmers with free fertilizers, insecticides, and other services.

In addition to farming, there are many small family-owned shops in Douma, with many supported by local and international civil society organizations to help provide work opportunities to families, especially women. They include tailors' workshops and handiwork projects as well as milk and cheese shops, with production sufficient to covers a portion of the demand from the local market in Douma and in nearby Eastern Ghouta.

People are struggling to find income to provide for their families but sources of income are scarce and unstable. This has caused some young men to earn their income by fighting for military groups in their region. Most of these groups guarantee a monthly income for their fighters along with humanitarian support for their families when it is available. The support that military groups provide is contingent on the loyalty of the fighters and their families to the group's ideology, which often has an Islamic character and varies from moderate to fundamentalist.

A variety of illegal activities, such as selling weapons and smuggling, have also proliferated in Syria as a consequence of war. In many cases, this has escalated to stealing and other activities that go against social norms and morals.

### **Food scarcity and inflated prices**

There is great disparity in food prices across the different regions in Syria. Most food commodities in Douma are priced higher than in Tasil and Qalaat al-Madiq which are close to Syria's southern and northern borders, and thus connected to trade lines from Turkey and Jordan. It is also easier for international aid to arrive to these regions than to Douma. More importantly, both Tasil and al-Madiq are able to utilise large areas of agricultural land to provide for the needs of the population. In contrast, Douma and the areas around Damascus are in the heart of Syria, far from international borders and closer to areas with a heavy presence of the Assad forces that have imposed a crippling siege on these regions and isolated them.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In Syria, a distinction must be made between opposition military groups and local civilians. There is currently a broad debate about whether opposition military groups are democratic, *takfiri*,<sup>9</sup> or something else. What is clear is that the majority of those injured in the conflict are civilians – they are the ones who bear the brunt of the ongoing fighting. They must be aided in order to be able to continue with their lives and overcome the crisis.

Therefore, in providing assistance to local communities in liberated zones, humanitarian agencies must address the following questions: How can their support reach civilians? How can the civil society organizations that play a critical role in the absence of state institutions be supported and encouraged? Can fruitful partnerships be built between local communities?

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<sup>9</sup> *Takfiri* refers to Muslim groups who accuse other Muslims of apostasy.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### ABOUT ARI

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