LOCAL WARS AND THE CHANCE FOR DECENTRALIZED PEACE IN SYRIA

Kheder Khaddour

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About the Author

Kheder Khaddour is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. His research focuses on issues of identity and society in Syria.

Khaddour has been a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago, has conducted independent research for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and has worked as an independent journalist for Reuters. He has authored and co-authored articles for a number of publications, including the Middle East Research and Information Project.

Summary

For decades, the Assad regime rallied support and crushed dissent in Syrian society through mobilizing networks of local intermediaries. Since 2011, the varying relationships between the central authorities in Syria, these local intermediaries, and the country's different localities have played a fundamental role in shaping the outbreak of protests and descent into armed conflict. While six years of war have left the state's administrative structures in tatters, Bashar al-Assad's regime has focused on maintaining, reviving, or renewing its network of local intermediaries to keep control in its areas and retake lost territory. However, the conflict has crucially and irreparably changed local politics in Syria, and a return to the pre-2011 status quo is impossible. For any negotiated settlement to be sustainable, these changes will need to be incorporated into a new, decentralized power-sharing bargain, which will shape Syria's economic and physical reconstruction and postconflict recovery.

Syria's Localities Amid Conflict

- The Assad regime has long relied on networks of local agents and intermediaries to enforce its authority, and it is currently seeking to reassert control over each opposition area either by luring local elites back into its networks or by crushing the area with military force.

- The Syrian uprising and subsequent insurgency have never been a unified national movement; from the beginning, the opposition has been defined and divided by local identities. The brutality of the war and the chaotic nature of foreign aid have entrenched local divisions and undermined efforts to create a unified leadership.

- While most groups opposing Assad have sought to replace the regime's administrative structures in the areas they control, Kurdish forces in Syria have instead focused on a less centralized and more geographically based vision of power sharing, controlling their territory without attempting to replace the central authorities.

A New Bargain for Decentralization

- Six years of conflict have irreparably altered the Syrian state's administrative structures of governorates and districts, making the country's politics more localised than ever. This often empowers new local elites and provides them with new areas of decisionmaking and policy implementation.

- For there to be an effective decentralization framework in any negotiated peace settlement, the areas of decisionmaking and policy implementation under the purview of new local intermediaries should be incorporated and formalized.

- Local communities with greater influence over local politics would likely help mitigate the corruption emanating from Damascus. This is necessary to avoid the possibility of reconstruction funds re-empowering a cadre of regime-affiliated, kleptocratic elites, similar to those against whom much of the population rose up in 2011.

Introduction

Since the Baath Party took power in 1963, the Syrian central government has worked to penetrate local Syrian society to mobilize support and crush dissent. It began with attempts to organize local elites under the umbrella of Baathist organizations and later by relying on Syrian state administrative structures to embed clientelist networks and enforce its authority across the country. This strategy, built up and refined under former president Hafez al-Assad, began to unravel under the rule of his son Bashar as economic reforms brought to power a new kleptocratic class of regime affiliates who undermined the prevailing social contract.

The 2011 Syrian uprising revealed a deep dissatisfaction with Damascus's management of local affairs across the country as protesters mobilized against the regime's networks of local affiliates. Soon, the local elites who had traditionally functioned as the regime's intermediaries—distinguished families, tribal and religious leaders, wealthy traders, and others—were no longer able to manage the population or contain dissent.

As the uprising morphed into an armed conflict, the Assad regime rapidly expanded its networks of local intermediaries in an attempt to maintain its authority. Meanwhile, a new class of local power brokers emerged in many of the localities that joined the opposition, often serving as intermediaries between their regions and the foreign donors who began backing the Syrian opposition. However, the opposition had started the uprising without any central leadership, resulting in localized and fragmented power in areas under the control of regime opponents. The brutality of the war and the incoherence of foreign support further undermined efforts to unify command and control.

After six years of war, the regime is now moving aggressively to re-establish Damascus's political authority over opposition-held localities by centralizing the flow of resources to these localities from the capital. With Russian assistance, the regime is attempting to either co-opt current local intermediaries or create new ones and absorb these intermediaries within the regime's networks—or, failing that, to crush localities through military force, as with the brutal siege and subsequent recapture of opposition-held East Aleppo in late 2016.

Looking ahead, the most important power dynamics in Syria will continue to be those that exist between the central authorities in Damascus and the

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various localities, as manifested in local networks of respected family members, wealthy businessmen, prominent religious figures, and other influential people. The search for a resolution to the conflict and the establishment of a meaningful peace should place a renewed focus on these local networks, something that will be central to the success of any future political arrangements as well as any economic plans for reconstruction. Syria will likely remain a centralized state, but a renewed focus for peace negotiations must aim to resolve the parameters of the Syrian central government's federal authority relative to the areas of local decisionmaking authority enjoyed by various localities.

Damascus and Syria's Localities Before 2011

The Development of Centralized Control Under the Baath Party

Since the Baath Party's inception in Syria, its leadership has been preoccupied with how to penetrate the country's localities and bind them to the central authority.[1] A locality (*al-mahalla*) in Syria can refer to either an urban area or a rural village, but it also carries a particular sociopolitical significance far more profound than the Western conception of a neighborhood. The boundaries of these localities are clearly understood by those who inhabit them. Residents are linked by a common sense of identity that is rooted in a feeling of shared guardianship, with families often able to trace their histories and inter-relations back hundreds of years.

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When the Baath Party took power in Damascus in 1963, it was keenly aware that while it remained strong in the capital, its presence in the country's peripheries was limited. At that time, a class of traditional leaders and landowners dominated local politics. The second wave of Ottoman reforms (*tanzimat*) at the end of the nineteenth century had created administrative positions to govern Syria's localities, which remained in place and were passed down through families during the French Mandate from 1923 to 1946. One of the Baath Party's priorities was thus to replace this class of traditional local leaders with a new local leadership loyal to the regime, consolidating political authority within the various localities into a centralized power structure operating from Damascus.[2]

During the 1960s, Baathist attempts to penetrate the localities took different forms. They created new organizations in the localities, such as peasant unions, to which they appointed young, educated cadres loyal to the party who could challenge the authority of traditional local elites.[3] However, the family structures that had dominated the localities for nearly a century largely remained intact. The new local elites promoted by the Baath Party grew into parallel, competing power structures within the community, albeit ones that served the regime as a nexus through which it could organize and exert control.

For example, the historian Hanna Batatu, when visiting the village of Ibbin Samaan west of Aleppo in 1985, noted that the same landowning families of the pre-Baath era had maintained their social prominence and still collected a percentage of the local peasant farmers' earnings, although the regime in Damascus wielded political dominance.[4]

To manage the animosity between new and traditional local leaders, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 to 2000, worked to absorb both groups into the state's administrative framework. To this end, its various branches and appointments (such as governors, heads of provincial councils, heads of districts, and so on) became important channels through which the regime could co-opt and contain local elites by offering them posts in the local administration without granting any significant decisionmaking power.[5]

Local administrators therefore became useful to the regime as a way of containing political dissent. The regional expert Fabrice Balanche has highlighted the link between the proliferation of local administrative bodies and social unrest. In 1983, only a year after the Muslim Brotherhood revolt, Damascus issued the Law of Local Administration.[6] This law introduced a system for regulating local administration that de facto increased the regime's sway over localities, as it made local administrative bodies—such as governorate councils and local councils—organize the local elites into functionaries, or intermediaries, who would operate between Damascus and the localities.

In parallel with local administration's evolution, Hafez al-Assad also drove a major expansion of the Baath Party, bringing diverse social groups and interests under its umbrella and thereby further helping absorb local elites and power brokers into the regime apparatus. However, an important distinction remained between those elites who were the regime's direct agents and representatives—in many cases members of the intelligence agencies (*mukhabarat*)—and those who were merely intermediaries between the regime and a local community, who were not necessarily antagonistic to the regime but also not directly a part of it.

Decisionmaking power for political, security, judicial, and budgetary affairs remained centralized in Damascus. The responsibility of implementing decisions made by the central authorities was dispersed to the localities through the regime's networks, local intermediaries, and security agencies, which operated in parallel to the official local administration.[7]

Local Intermediaries and the Regime's Networks

Before the Syrian uprising began in 2011, local intermediaries (*wasata mahallyn*) were typically prominent members of the locality, often members of powerful families and tribes, religious figures, or businessmen. While lacking independent decisionmaking power over the affairs of their locality, local intermediaries acted as informal go-betweens—contact points for locals to access the centralized regime's decisionmaking process and power structure, as well

as a means by which regime leaders in Damascus could exert their authority in the localities. These intermediaries could be employed in either the private or public sector. A key characteristic was that they were respected members of the community and enjoyed a degree of prominence in their respective localities.

Official regime representatives, or members of the regime's network (*shabakat al nizham*), derived their legitimacy from the regime in Damascus, which granted them decisionmaking powers within their localities. They, too, would hail from the locality in which they worked or resided. However, where intermediaries would generally seek to advance the interests of their localities and improve their reputation among their own people, the regime's representatives acted as clients of the regime in their areas and often prioritized personal benefit over their reputations. Thus, it was through a combination of these formal and informal channels that the regime in Damascus maintained control over the population.

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Importantly, although the Assad regime is dominated by members of the Alawite sect, its approach focused on the sociopolitical dynamics of each locality rather than on the sectarian affiliation of the residents. This was illustrated by the clashes that broke out between members of the Alawite and Ismaili sects in the coastal town of Qadmous in the summer of 2005. Ismaili notables—teachers, well-educated professionals, and the heads of large families—subsequently stepped in to resolve the conflict. Some proposed contacting the spiritual head of the Ismailis who lives outside Syria, the Aga Khan, for assistance, but they were overruled by those who preferred to reach out to their Alawite counterparts to find a solution at the local level. The regime, for its part, wanted the tensions resolved but also insisted that these intercommunal meetings be held under state auspices. To defuse the sectarian element of the dispute, it deployed troops from the army's Fourth Division to the area, mostly Sunnis from eastern Syria.[8] In this particular instance, when some Ismaili delegates refused to meet in government offices, those who did attend acquired a new status as local intermediaries for the regime.

When Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, the regime's means of managing local politics did not fundamentally change. However, Bashar's program of economic liberalization reforms profoundly impacted the regime's ability to manage the population. Within the first four years of his rule, Bashar al-Assad embarked on a series of reforms ostensibly intended to open up Syria's economy. Dozens of Damascus-based firms working in real estate, technology, and other fields were established. These companies were highly centralized in the capital and large cities, and rather than fostering wider economic activity across Syria, the country's wealth began to orbit these business interests. The regime's network of local affiliates added growing segments of the business community. Under Hafez al-Assad, the regime's networks had been primarily engaged in politics and attempting to create a degree of cooperation with the

localities. However, under Bashar, the new breed of regime representative was far more profit-motivated. Many of them treated localities as personal business projects to be exploited, effectively establishing a new kleptocratic elite.

As Syrian sociologist Mohammed Jamal Barout has noted in detail, this new network of businessmen in Syria began to rapidly buy up land at artificially deflated prices.[9] For instance, in the areas of Daraya and al-Moadhimiyah around Damascus, Barout found that up to 70 percent of available land plots were purchased by these regime-affiliated businessmen. As a result, the social contract and balance of control between Damascus and the localities, which Hafez had carefully cultivated over decades, started unraveling under his son Bashar. This has only worsened during the war.

The 2011 Uprising

The Syrian uprising and subsequent insurgency against the ruling regime has never been a unified national movement. While many attempts have been made to create an umbrella organization to unite the various regions and groups that joined the opposition—such as the simultaneous country-wide demonstrations on Fridays, followed by the establishment of the ostensibly national Free Syrian Army—none proved successful at creating a sustainable common front. Rather, the Syrian opposition has been effectively defined and divided along the lines of various localities. For instance, Moadamiya and Barzeh, on the outskirts of Damascus, joined the opposition, and armed groups formed within both localities. In 2013, one of the armed groups from Barzeh went to Moadamiya and fought alongside local fighters there for more than a year. Despite sharing a common Sunni background, people within Moadamiya continually referred to Barzeh's fighters as *gharbatlyeh*—meaning foreigner or alien.[10]

In April 2011, with protests breaking out in city peripheries and rural towns across the country, the regime in Damascus began bringing in delegations from various localities to try to negotiate an end to the demonstrations on a case-by-case basis. The regime was still operating by the old system, which no longer applied in the new context. While many opposition localities had by then formed their own popular committees to represent their areas, Assad was receiving the delegations and would only agree to meet with local intermediaries who had remained loyal to the regime.[11] Being called to a meeting with the Syrian president had previously been considered an honor reserved almost exclusively for society's elite. In addition to this gesture, Assad made other concessions, such as releasing prisoners from various localities.[12]

At the local level, however, regime intermediaries who were permitted to attend the meetings represented the very system of centralized control the protesters were demonstrating against and thus no longer held the influence they had once enjoyed in their localities. The brutal violence and siege tactics

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the regime unleashed against rebellious areas and the opposition's subsequent militarization entrenched the divisions and competition between opposition localities and reinforced the localized nature of the conflict.

Yet the affiliation of each locality with one side of the conflict was not always clear-cut. This ambiguity is demonstrated by the town of Dumair, in the Qalamoun region. During the 1980s, housing for Syrian army officers was built around Dumair but not within the city itself. Tensions rose as the uprising progressed throughout 2011, with the original locals largely supporting the opposition and contributing fighters to the Free Syrian Army, and the army families considered members of the regime apparatus. People from Dumair began to distinguish themselves by the part of the city they were from—the army housing (Dumair al-Masaken) or the city's interior (Dumair al-Balad). At one point in 2011, the two areas even received entirely separate public bus services from Damascus. Yet local communities maintained basic economic links and a shared interest in isolating Dumair from the quickly escalating war, and prominent locals and army officers from the two areas coordinated to ensure the city remained peaceful.

Syria's Localities Post-Uprising

The sociopolitical dynamics inherent in Syria's localities have shaped, and been shaped by, all the major actors in the Syrian conflict. The Assad regime has significantly expanded its networks of intermediaries in the areas where it has maintained control, even as the functions of these intermediaries have been adapted to fit the conflict's new realities; in areas where the regime lost control, it has often pursued a strategy of either trying to co-opt a new cadre of local elites back into the regime's fold or seeking to crush the locality with military force. Kurdish forces, for their part, have sought to build a network of their own intermediaries and new governance structures in predominantly Arab areas where they have seized control. The opposition more generally, which entered the conflict without a centralized authority, has never been able to build an effective center in large part due to competition and rivalry between opposition localities over access to foreign resources and funding. This has left a number of localities stuck in the middle.

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Hama: A City Under Continuous Regime Control

Hama has a highly urbanized Sunni population with a history of conflict with the Assad regime. In 1982, a regime crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in the city led to a siege by the Syrian army and the deaths of some 20,000 people, mostly civilians.[13] In 2011, some of the largest demonstrations

against the regime took place in Hama. While all areas in Syria where protests broke out experienced a regime crackdown in response, Hama was spared the sort of extreme violence that was regularly meted out in more rural localities. Indeed, the regime began increasing public service provision in the city following the outbreak of protests, for instance by opening a new university.[14] As other areas of the country descended into armed insurgency, there was no comparable development of armed opposition groups in Hama.

Hama has thus remained under regime control throughout the conflict. While the structure of the regime's relationship with its local intermediaries has remained fundamentally unchanged, the substance of these relationships has changed significantly. Before the uprising, it was relatively simple for the regime to contain and control local politics by employing its intermediaries in matters related to security, politics, public services, trade, and the local economy. After the uprising, the regime significantly expanded the number of local intermediaries to address the increased scope and intensity of the conflict's rapidly changing dynamics. Their concerns now relate to items such as the needs of the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people who have sought refuge in Hama, and the bribes that businesses must pay to get commercial goods through the checkpoints surrounding the city, among many others.

After the uprising, the regime significantly expanded the number of local intermediaries to address the increased scope and intensity of the conflict's rapidly changing dynamics.

The social structure in Hama has historically been based around dozens of large, mercantile families, which typically also include prominent religious figures and educated professionals. Prior to the uprising, these families were key contact points for the regime to access the local community due to their prominence. At the same time, this process helped these families maintain social capital in their localities and facilitated their business interests. As the conflict has isolated Hama from the rest of the country, these families have become even more integral to providing support for the local population through aiding local charities and helping provide services. The focus of these families has remained highly localized and focused on Hama, as has their increased cooperation with local regime representatives.

One of these families, whose history stretches back generations, currently includes seven brothers, most of whom are businessmen and factory owners while one is a Sunni sheikh. This family has well-established ties with local regime figures through its businesses, and the family also has maintained ties with opposition activist networks through the sheikh and works actively with charities to support internally displaced people since the beginning of the uprising.[15] This has allowed the family to remain an important intermediary while being neither a direct part of the regime apparatus nor a part of the opposition. This, in turn, has ensured that the family can secure and advance its social status and maintain its business interests. Given their local legitimacy, local intermediaries, such as this family, could gain formalized authority over the areas of

decisionmaking and policy implementation that have already effectively come under their purview as the conflict has evolved, thereby providing an effective decentralization framework for Syria. Such a framework could also help mitigate corruption emanating from the central authorities in Damascus and give local communities greater influence over politics in their communities.

Al-Tal: Regime Relations With an Opposition Locality

Al-Tal, a city on the periphery of Damascus, has also had a long history of tensions with the Assad regime even before 2011. Members of prominent families in the city had joined the Muslim Brotherhood during the unrest of the 1980s and were subsequently jailed. The Syrian army had appropriated large swaths of land in the city, the regime had shelved prospective urban renewal plans for it, and, throughout the 1990s, local state institutions had seen a large influx of regime security personnel, leading to an increased sense of oppression among the local population. When protests erupted in al-Tal in 2011, the demonstrators broadly fell into two categories: one group demanding the return of lands the Syrian army had appropriated during the Muslim Brotherhood uprising and calling for a new deal between al-Tal and Damascus, and another group led by educated professionals demanding that Syria's entire system of government be changed.[16] From the middle of 2012, armed opposition groups took control of al-Tal, and civilians began to establish civic administration bodies to address the locality's needs.

> **Throughout the 1990s, local state institutions had seen a large influx of regime security personnel, leading to an increased sense of oppression among the local population.**

In mid-2012, the regime created the so-called Ministry of National Reconciliation in Damascus. A general in the Republican Guard was appointed to head the ministry's operations in al-Tal.[17] This general and his team then sought to work with the former networks of local intermediaries and to establish new ones among prominent families, technocrats, small traders, and religious leaders, even while the battles continued between the armed opposition groups in al-Tal and the Syrian army outside. Over time, recognizing the need to be able to communicate with the regime, a reconciliation committee (*lijnat al-musalaha*) evolved in al-Tal, whose members, often technocrats, included family members of former regime intermediaries from the locality.[18]

The Syrian army and associated groups, including the Russians, began to enforce a severe siege on al-Tal that lasted through mid-2014, which brought large-scale suffering to the civilian population and put pressure on the armed groups in the locality. By February 2016, the Russians had created their own center for reconciliation in the coast city of Jableh, led by a Russian general and his staff.[19] After the regime's prolonged bombing campaign and siege against al-Tal, the local reconciliation council contacted an officer from the Russian reconciliation center in Damascus. This led to a series of stop-and-start negotiations between the armed rebels and the regime. The reconciliation committee

acted as the primary intermediary between the two, while the Russians acted as the guarantor that, as long as the negotiations were under way, the regime would refrain from bombing the locality. When negotiations broke down, the bombing resumed, only to halt again when negotiations restarted. The result was that, at the end of 2016, an agreement was reached under which regime forces ended the siege in return for the armed opposition groups leaving al-Tal for Idlib Province.[20]

Families in al-Tal, the reconciliation committee, and other local bodies then selected more than 200 local people whom, after being vetted by the regime, formed the new Lijnat Hemayat Madenat al-Tal—the al-Tal City Protection Committee. The regime security services then established a process dubbed Taswiyat al-Awdae (Settle your situation); the security services submitted to the al-Tal Protection Committee a list of more than 1,000 names of people who, to varying degrees, had been involved in the opposition. The committee then arranged for those people to be interviewed by regime security personnel at the University of Damascus's School of Political Science, located between al-Tal and the capital. Following the interviews, the security services sent a list of names back to the al-Tal City Protection Committee indicating who would be permitted to remain and who must leave for Idlib (as the rebel fighters had), with some sixty-two people obligated to leave.[21]

Throughout this process, the regime dismantled the opposition networks and institutions that had been established inside al-Tal after 2011 and fostered a new type of security relationship between Damascus and al-Tal in which the locality itself became charged with maintaining security. The regime also ended all independent external support for al-Tal, with it again dependent on Damascus to provide services such as electricity and healthcare, as well as official documents. As one resident said: "It is almost as if the revolution never happened because we went back to negotiating with the regime as before."[22] Although some independent actors remain, the reconciliation process in al-Tal is a prime example of the regime's methods when attempting to reintegrate itself into the localities. This process is likely to be replicated in various locations throughout Syria in the near future although it is a problematic model for decentralization. By decentralizing local security policies while keeping the distribution of state resources, aid, and development money centralized, such policies will create long-term friction in local communities, which could lead to future conflict.

Localities Under Opposition Control

Unlike the regime, the opposition did not enter the conflict with a strong central structure to guide it. This lack meant that each opposition locality quickly became its own power center: each employed a different model of self-governance and each made different arrangements between the armed groups and the civic authorities . This led to varying degrees of success. The regime's brutal

violence against opposition areas and the chaotic nature of the foreign aid supporting them then further entrenched their isolation and animosity, which in turn undermined attempts to form a unified opposition front.

In areas where the regime lost control, opposition figures within the localities organized local councils under the banner of the Syrian revolution. Prominent local families became involved in these councils to help manage resources in the localities. After 2015, their involvement became increasingly conspicuous as advisory *shura* councils spread across northern Syria, where they helped staff executive offices and run city affairs.[23] Yet despite their local prominence, in practice these local councils were unable to consolidate under a centrally managed framework. The official national Syrian opposition, represented at various times by the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, nominally speaking for opposition-held areas in Syria at international forums, but it never had effective or sustained decisionmaking authority in the localities on the ground. Attempts were made at various times to establish a system of influence over the opposition localities that mirrored the Syrian state's centralized administrative structures. Governorate councils (*muhafadhat*) were meant to act as hubs between the central authority and its intermediaries in the various localities.[24]

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Several factors undermined efforts to establish centralized opposition leadership. One was the ineptitude of the central leadership and the *muhafadhat* in effectively delivering funds and aid to the localities under their jurisdiction, helping to foster local distrust of the central leadership. Another was that localities established their own intermediaries with the outside world and thus independently procured aid and funds from a multitude of international donors. This created competition among the localities for access to resources, thus further splintering political action and undermining the significance and influence of the centralized opposition leadership at the local level.

The Syrian conflict has attracted massive inflows of resources to opposition areas in the form of weapons, food, medicine, equipment, money, and more. A common conception among international donors, especially Western-based organizations, was that supporting local groups on the ground could empower them to challenge the central authority in Damascus. What these donors did not grasp was the rigidity of the identity boundaries of these localities, reinforced by decades of Assad regime policies. They were thus unable to foresee that the localities would not easily coalesce. Furthermore, regime bombing campaigns and jihadi insurgencies, the disunity among international donors and policymakers, and the short-term, project-based nature of the aid all led to wildly inconsistent outcomes and provided few sustainable results while also exacerbating competition among the localities.[25]

The inability of international donors' personnel to operate on the ground in Syria has also meant that they have been almost entirely dependent on their own local intermediaries to deliver aid. The power to provide access to foreign aid and redirect it has turned these intermediaries into a new class of elites in many areas and has often created fissures within the local leadership as the new elites have fought for influence and authority. Rather than empower localities to challenge Damascus, foreign aid has often helped create rifts within the opposition that the regime has exploited. Local networks in areas outside regime control have been specifically targeted by the Ministry of National Reconciliation, the Syrian army, and security agencies to co-opt them into the regime's centralized network, or, if they refuse, to crush them with military force.

The towns of Dana and Sarmada, in Idlib Province near the Turkish border crossing of Bab al-Hawa, demonstrate how the war has changed traditional trade and distribution networks inside Syria, and how this, coupled with a sudden inflow of foreign aid, has upset the power balance across the region.[26] By the end of 2014, the war had severed many of the established supply routes to northern Syria from the country's south. Dana and Sarmada then became hubs for new trade routes from Turkey into Syria's northern Idlib Province. This in turn led to Syrian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and various international NGOs (INGOs) to locate their offices in and operate their programs out of the two towns. In an attempt to expand its own networks and economic influence throughout Idlib's localities, the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra began infiltrating the Dana and Sarmada local councils, leading many donors to halt funding for these local councils. Meanwhile, the sudden enrichment of the two towns sparked competition, resentment, and animosity with other localities in Idlib. At the end of 2015, the Russian air force commenced a bombing campaign against the towns, putting an end to their status as hubs for trade, NGOs, and INGOs.[27]

What international donors have not grasped is the rigidity of the identity boundaries in Syria's localities, reinforced by decades of Assad regime policies.

Even when various opposition localities were crushed, however, the identity and structures of the locality often survived among the displaced. For instance, when al-Qusair fell to regime forces and allied Hezbollah fighters in 2013, many residents fled across the border into Lebanon, accompanied by members of their opposition-supporting local council. After settling in the same area, these members took the lead in securing aid for the community. Similarly, when the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) took Tal Rifaat in 2016 from the rebels, the displaced locals moved with their council to Azaz, where they settled apart from the greater Azaz community. Foreign donors, who had been aiding the community in Tal Rifaat, continued to channel their aid through the displaced intermediaries and the council for the benefit of the displaced community.[28]

The result of these trends is that the opposition now faces a serious dilemma. All the structures it has built in Syria have been developed in response to fast-moving developments on the ground and have thus been temporary in nature—in short, the opposition has always been reacting and has never developed a truly proactive strategy. Meanwhile, local power structures have become increasingly entrenched. If the opposition were to empower regional power centers, they might be accused of separatism. However, a heavily centralized structure is no longer possible because of local divisions.

The Kurdish Exception

In June 2015, a military campaign by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed fighting force in Syria's north—pushed Islamic State fighters out of the northern town of Tal Abyad. This was followed by Kurdish forces capturing the town of Manbij from the self-proclaimed Islamic State in August 2016.

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After doing so, the SDF implemented a new model of a state administrative structure that was a departure from the state model, which was based on fourteen governorates (or provinces). The SDF created the so-called Federation of the North, which took parts of Aleppo, Raqqa, and al-Hasakeh Provinces and integrated them into one entity, within which they created *majles al-aeyan*, or councils of notables.

A figure from the military cadre of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) who implemented a council of notables described the experience in an interview.[29] He visited Tal Abyad after Kurdish forces had expelled the Islamic State and met with seven prominent members of the local community. He asked them to reach out to other people in their network, and soon the council grew to eighty people. This council then helped broker the release of 700 people, out of a total of 1,000, who had been arrested during raids that were aimed at capturing suspected Islamic State militants. The council members were able to offer their personal guarantee for the individuals because they knew the local population.

These council members functioned as intermediaries between the PKK and the local population. Their primary qualifications were that they were from the local area, were in good standing with the local population, and were not affiliated with any political or military group. However, the council members do not wield direct authority or power.

In Manbij, the Kurdish security units created a security committee (*lijan amnia*), from local notables, the police, and Kurdish-associated cadres.[30] The role of the security committee has been to vet local community members, with the local notables required to vouch for their fellow community members. For instance, in the area of Solouk, near Tal Abyad, Kurdish forces allowed people who had previously been displaced by the conflict to return to their homes

under the guarantee of the local notables.[31] The committee thus has become the most important intermediary and assumed a role of social surveillance in the community.

It should be noted that this arrangement falls short of power sharing with the local community, given that real power and control of resources—in terms of access to services and fuel, running the bakeries, and control over polic-ing—in these primarily Arab towns remain in the hands of the Kurdish forces.

Looking Ahead

Policy discussions related to Syria in international diplomatic circles often posit that some form of decentralization of power in Syria will be necessary for the long-term success of any peace settlement. Decentralization, as it is usually discussed among experts and officials, refers to the power relationship between the authorities in Damascus and governorates, such as Idlib, Hama, or Homs. In this sense, however, Syria was already decentralized in accordance with Law 107, issued in 2011.[32] The more important relationships have been, and will continue to be, those that exist between the central authorities and the locali-ties, as manifested in local networks of family notables, businessmen, religious figures, and others. On the ground, Syria has historically seen a continuous bargaining process and struggle for authority between the regime and these groups, which have enjoyed varying degrees of independence and autonomy. In the search for a means to resolve the current conflict and establish a meaning-ful peace in Syria, there should be a renewed focus on these local networks, as they will be central to the success of any future political arrangement as well as any economic plans for reconstruction.

Syria's political situation has been significantly complicated by the breakup of administrative boundaries and state administrative structures over the course of the war, particularly in northern and eastern Syria. For instance, Aleppo no longer functions as a single governorate but has large sections that have been captured and incorporated into separate politi-cal projects of Kurdish militias, the Islamic State, Turkish-backed opposition groups, and the regime.

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Further compounding the challenges, a decentraliza-tion process assumes that there is, or can be, a functional relationship between the center and the periphery (or the localities), but this is not a certainty in the context of a country that has been at war for six years and the mas-sive grievances this entails between the central authorities and many of the localities. Even opposition groups that are ostensibly on the same side have been unable to establish a decentralized means of governance among them-selves. Earlier in the conflict, the opposition created a temporary government (*hakuma moaqata*) that was meant to replicate the centralized Syrian state.

However, because the uprising was heavily localized from the beginning and developed very much with a bottom-up approach, the temporary government found itself confronting empowered localities that were not always willing to cooperate. Faced with this hurdle, the opposition has struggled to construct a new model without being perceived as separatists, an accusation that the Kurds received after declaring a federalist system that had effectively no relationship with any central authority.

For any political settlement to be effective, it will need to take into account the relative power of localities and the prevailing dynamics. A division of power based solely on geography would not likely work for Syria because each region is fragmented into various localities with different levels of power and authority and different relationships with the outside world. Similarly, a power-sharing agreement based exclusively on reform of the Syrian central government is unlikely to gain traction because it is doubtful that the regime will let anyone into its internal structure in a meaningful sense. In this sense, decentralization, as it is often conceptualized, will not resolve the current conflict. Instead, the long-term peace negotiations must aim to resolve the parameters of the Syrian central government's federal authority relative to the areas of local decision-making authority enjoyed by the various localities. This approach would help ease long-term tensions between local communities and the state, as well as among the localities themselves, and would contribute to the establishment of a lasting peace.

Conclusion

In many areas of Syria, the localized structure inherent in the country's socio-political dynamics has persevered through six years of war, even while the ways and means of its functioning has changed radically and the Syrian state's previous administrative structures of governorates and districts have been irreparably altered.

The Assad regime has expanded its networks of local intermediaries in areas it controls to maintain its centralized authority amid the conflict's rapidly changing scope and intensity. Many localities under opposition control have meanwhile seen the rise of new elites who act as intermediaries to the litany of discordant foreign donors, fueling competition and rivalry between these elites and their localities while fragmenting attempts to centralize opposition leadership. Kurdish forces of the SDF have brought in an entirely new administrative structure to ensure security in the areas they have conquered, while the basic sociopolitical and geographic dimensions of these localities have persevered.

One of the regime's apparent aims in the current phase of the conflict is to re-establish Damascus's political authority over opposition-held localities in Syria by centralizing the flow of resources to them from the capital and, with Russian assistance, attempting to either co-opt current local intermediaries (or

create new ones) and absorb these within the regime's networks, or crush the locality entirely by military force, as exemplified late last year in East Aleppo and previously in Daraya.

A meaningful peace following the conflict, however, will almost certainly require political negotiations resulting in a new bargain between the central government and the localities, one that defines the limits of federal authority and formalizes local control and decisionmaking in various areas of local interest. Constitutional reforms enacted to achieve decentralization will amount to empty gestures, however, if the regime is able to recentralize resource control and re-establish authority over intermediaries within opposition-held localities. Were such a situation to take place, the funds that would inevitably pour into Syria for reconstruction would likely re-empower a similar cadre of regime-affiliated, kleptocratic elites against whom much of the population rose up in 2011. Given the vast destruction of wealth resulting from the conflict, economic disparity and resentment would be severely exacerbated. In such an environment, the long-term stability of any peace agreement would be highly questionable.

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Notes

1. Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Local Politics in Syria: Organization and Mobilization in Four Villages Cases," *Middle East Journal* 30, no. 1 (January 1976): 1–24.
2. Fabrice Balanche, "Les Municipalités dans la Syrie Baathiste: déconcentration administrative et control politique," *Revue de Tiers Monde* 183, no. 1 (2008): 169–87.
3. As Hinnebusch (cited above) highlights, through land reforms and organizations such as the peasant unions the Baath attempted to erode landlords' power, promote a new class of intermediaries, and mobilise the masses.
4. On this point, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23; and Dawn Chatty, "The Bedouin in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2010).
5. Ibid., 172–75.
6. Balanche, "Les Municipalités dans la Syrie Baathiste."
7. Heiko Wimmen, "Syria's Path From Civic Uprising to Civil War," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 16, 2016, http://carnegieendowment .org/2016/11/22/syria-s-path-from-civic-uprising-to-civil-war-pub-66171.
8. Author interview with Qadmous resident, Istanbul, March 2016.
9. Muhammad Jamal Barout notes that much of this land was sold to the regime affiliates at 1985 market prices, which were approximately one hundredth of their 2010 market value. See Muhammad Jamal Barout, "Syria in the Last Decade: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform," Doha Institute, 2012, 317.
10. Author interview with local NGO worker (via phone), January 2016.
11. See Alassa yastaqbel Wafdan Mn Alijan Alsha'bia mn Homs Wa Douma, *All4Syria*, April, 14, 2011, http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/3473.
12. See Azmi Bishara, *Suriya, Darb al-Alam nahwa al-Huriya: Mu-hawala fil-Tarikh al-Rahn* [Syria, a path to freedom from suffering: An attempt in contemporary history] (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Arabi lil-Abhath wa-Dirasat al-Siyasat, 2013), 125.
13. See Jason Rodrigues, "1982: Syria's President Hafez al-Assad Crushes Rebellion in Hama," *From the Archive* (blog), *Guardian*, August 1, 2011, https://www .theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2011/aug/01/hama-syria-massacre-1982-archive.
14. See the text of the decree, published by the Syrian Parliament, May 13, 2014, http:// www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=4224&ref=tree&.
15. Author interview with a civil society activist from Hama (via phone), February 2016. The name of the family has been withheld for security reasons.
16. Author interview with a resident from al-Tal (via phone), February 2016.
17. See "Al-Amid Qais Farwa, Arrab Almosalahat wa Zirae Iran Fi El Ref Al Dimashqi" [The General Qais Moruwa, the godfather of the reconciliation, and the arm of Iran in Damascus outskirts], *All4Syria*, January 21, 2017, http://www.all4syria.info/ Archive/381224.

18. Author interview with a resident from al-Tal (via phone), February 2016.

19. "Russia Opens Talks Center at Air Base in Syria: Agencies," Reuters, February 23, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-centre-idUSKCN0VW1S4.

20. See Al-Assad Yosharef Ala Inhae Almuaradeh Almousalahe Fi Dimasheq wa refaha, *Enab Baladi*, April 12, 2016, http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/117243.

21. See this post from the City Protection Committee in al-Tal, February 16, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1193652974089638&id=847546085366997&match=2LLZg9ix2YrYpyDZhdi12YXYtQ%3D%3D.

22. Author interview with a political activist from al-Tal (via Skype), January 2016.

23. See Sam Heller, "Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib," Century Foundation, November 29, 2016, https://tcf.org/content/report/keeping-lights-rebel-idlib/.

24. See Luigi Narbone, Agnès Favier, and Virginie Colombier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition-Controlled Areas in Syria," Middle East Directions, 2016, http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20wars_2016.pdf.

25. Author several interviews with Syrian opposition council members, March and August 2016.

26. Author interview with the head of a Syrian NGO, Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2016.

27. Author interview with an employee of an international organization based in Turkey, Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2016.

28. Author several interviews with local NGO workers, Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2016.

29. Author interview with a member of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) from Kobani (via phone), February 2017.

30. See Kheder Khaddour, "How Regional Security Concerns Uniquely Constrain Governance in Northeastern Syria," Carnegie Middle East Center, forthcoming.

31. Author interview with a cadre member from Tal Abyad (via phone), February 2017.

32. See Syrian Arab Republic, Legislative Decree 107, "Local Administration Law," August 23, 2011, http://www.syrianlawjournal.com/index.php/main-legislation/constitutional-law/#l1-4.

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