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# Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria

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## Executive Summary

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, the United States and other Western donors have provided over one billion dollars<sup>1</sup> in politically oriented assistance to local councils in opposition-held areas.<sup>2</sup> These programs, often described as civilian stabilization or local governance, represented a significant component of broader U.S. efforts to advance its policy objectives in Syria. At least initially, they aimed to enable better local governance to take root in the period immediately after the envisioned departure of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.<sup>3</sup>

This paper asks two primary questions: How did these local programs integrate into the United States' higher-level strategy for Syria over the years?<sup>4</sup> And how did these programs relate to the broader political and security trajectories of the war?

The central argument of this paper is that, as the years passed, the objectives and assumptions of local political assistance in Syria diverged further and further from U.S. high-level policy decisions. Further, as the conflict wore on, local stabilization programs became increasingly obviated by the political-military realities of the war.

In the early years of the conflict (2011 to mid-2013), stabilization programs largely aligned with the United States' stated, optimistic high-level Syria policy and with local political will. The programs also were consistent with the presumed trajectory of the conflict. However, unsurprisingly given the context, implementation challenges abounded.

In the middle years of the war (mid-2013 to 2016), the objectives and underlying assumptions of local political assistance increasingly diverged from higher-level policy decisions made by U.S. officials and from the overall political-military trajectory of the war. Particularly after 2014, stabilization programs foundered on confusion over two aspects of U.S. high-level Syria policy. First, it was unclear whether local council programs were still advancing a policy that prioritized the defeat of Assad or if, instead, they were meant to support the new objective of countering the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Second, and related, it was unclear whether stabilization assistance was still intended to help prepare local councils for a regime change outcome—which would entail rebuilding the Syrian state after Assad's ouster—or for a regime restructuring outcome, in which the Assad regime would devolve power to local councils through a negotiated framework for decentralization.

In the most recent years of the conflict (2017 to the present), the political-security context has marginalized the previous hopeful aspirations and assumptions of local council programs. Three

recent trends have exacerbated the disconnect between stabilization assistance and higher-level conflict realities: mass civilian displacement; the enactment of so-called reconciliation agreements as the foreign-backed Assad regime forcibly retakes territory; and armed extremist group ascendancy in areas currently still under opposition control.

Next, this paper examines why the United States and other Western donors continued to support stabilization programs, even as they grew increasingly incongruent with U.S. high-level Syria policy decisions and increasingly marginal to Syria's political-military realities. First, even as the political objectives of stabilization projects became untenable, they were perpetuated by pragmatic, humanitarian, and normative considerations. Local programs had become adept at critical service delivery and donors viewed their participatory processes as worthwhile in their own right. Second, bureaucratic and organizational factors preserved the programs. Senior policymakers and legislators viewed the policy-program contradictions as less problematic than practitioners did, fragmentation undermined overall assessments, and different agencies competed to maintain their programmatic capacity. Third, perception biases fueled undue optimism: policymakers and practitioners focused disproportionately on successful local political projects and invested stakeholders perpetually saw potential for Syria (or Syria policy) to “turn a corner.”

Finally, this paper identifies lessons the international community can learn for stabilization assistance in future conflicts. In Syria, local assistance programs were engulfed by a dramatically deteriorating broader policy and conflict environment. But Syria will almost certainly not be the last time this happens. A key lesson is that stabilization assistance can only succeed when it coheres clearly and closely with high-level strategy. As U.S. policy in Syria became increasingly marked by tensions and ambivalence over the years, stabilization practitioners were forced to translate the evolving policy environment into operational programs. Second, stabilization efforts can only succeed when they pursue objectives that are viable within the broader political-military context: despite practitioners' painstaking refinement of programmatic “theories of change” over the years, local programs ended up hostage to high-level conflict dynamics. Third, the international community must think more deeply about how it conceives of “progress” and “success” in dynamic stabilization environments—and reconsider how it measures them.

Although stabilization assistance was not part of the Syrian political transformation initially envisioned, it did help cultivate expectations and processes for more inclusive, capable governance. A key question will be what endures into the future—within select geographic enclaves, within any new national political bargain, and within the vast Syrian diaspora.



## Introduction

In the seven years since Syria's civil war began, the United States and other Western donors have provided over one billion dollars in politically oriented assistance to local councils in opposition-held areas.<sup>5</sup> This aid, often described as civilian stabilization or local governance programs, was intended to foster more democratic, capable, and legitimate subnational structures that would positively contribute to Syrian governance in the presumed "day after" the Assad regime.<sup>6</sup> From the early years of the conflict, these grassroots civilian initiatives have been a significant component of broader U.S. efforts to advance its policy objectives in Syria.<sup>7</sup>

The United States embraced local political assistance in Syria as part of its own broader move toward bottom-up stabilization initiatives in areas affected by conflict. Since the end of the Cold War, the international community has been met with only limited success in interventions that aimed to build governance structures in the midst or wake of conflict. Many observers have criticized the dominant donor approaches for being too top-down, template-driven, and focused on national institutions and elites. As an alternative, the approach of engaging communities alongside complementary local security initiatives began to (re-) emerge. These bottom-up approaches address two dominant critiques of donor conflict interventions: the imperative to undertake more context-specific, locally informed efforts and the need to build upon fragile states' preexisting capacities and strengths. Western donors, including the United States, have adopted a broadly similar local stabilization approach in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, and Somalia.

In practice, the term "stabilization" has signified a wide range of strategies but, by 2018, the U.S. government had codified its approach in its Stabilization Assistance Framework document.<sup>8</sup> The framework defines stabilization as "a political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict." It also states that practitioners must connect local stabilization endeavors to national-level policy objectives.<sup>9</sup> In Syria, foreshadowing this guidance, U.S. officials emphasized from the start that local council programs were intended to advance these national policy objectives. As one senior State Department official described the strategy in early 2013:

What we're supporting here are two things. There is the top-down process of the [Syrian Opposition Council (SOC)] getting stronger in Cairo in its ability to support alternative administration in liberated areas, and there's a bottom-up process of the

SOC providing the goods and services and support and training that those at the local level in the political opposition . . . need to demonstrate to the people in their neighborhood, the people in their towns, the people in their villages, that a better day is coming.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the heated debates that bedeviled U.S. Syria policy over the years, policymakers and legislators consistently supported the concept of stabilization aid for local councils. Officials viewed the programs as a positive step in laying the foundations for eventual democratic state building and responsive governance, and maintained their support for local political assistance—in some form or in some locations—until mid-2018.<sup>11</sup>

Given this longstanding support for Syria's local stabilization programs, this paper evaluates two primary questions: how has the United States integrated these local programs into its higher-level strategy for Syria, and how do these programs relate to the political and security trajectories of the war? It finds that, over time, the objectives and assumptions of local political assistance in Syria increasingly diverged from U.S. high-level policy decisions. Further, the political-military realities of the war in Syria progressively undermined the intended effects of local U.S.-backed stabilization programs. Prompted by this analysis, this paper then examines why the U.S. government continued its stabilization programs in spite of its shifts in Syria policy and despite the fact that the programs were increasingly marginal to Syria's political-military realities. Explanations include normative, humanitarian, and bureaucratic considerations, as well as information biases and gaps in policymaker decisionmaking.

Finally, this paper charts recommendations for future stabilization endeavors. In Syria, Western donors' local stabilization objectives ended up captive to a dramatically deteriorating broader policy and conflict environment. But Syria is only the most recent case in which the international community has attempted local political programs under inauspicious conditions. For future stabilization engagements to be more successful, it is essential to consider lessons learned from the Syria experience.

## **Stabilization and Local Governance Programs: Parameters and Goals**

Before looking at the evolution of civilian assistance to opposition local councils in Syria, it is crucial to define the parameters and goals of these programs. It is also important to understand the four

interrelated “theories of change” behind the initiatives, which were all intended to support effective, legitimate local governance in Syria in the wake of a high-level political transition.

### Defining the Programs

Throughout the Syrian conflict, donors used various terms to describe the civilian assistance projects supporting opposition local councils. Such terms include political transition, local governance, or stabilization.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the fluidity of programs operating in the wartime Syrian context and the inconsistency in donor terminology, this paper uses “stabilization programs,” “local governance programs,” and “local political programs” interchangeably, while acknowledging that specific programs varied in their approach, and that these types of program would differ in more stable environments.<sup>13</sup> It focuses on U.S. high-level Syria policy and U.S. local-level Syria programs, though it references UK and European local council programs in cases where they paralleled U.S. initiatives.<sup>14</sup> Non-Western actors, such as the Gulf nations, Turkey, and private individuals, also engaged heavily with opposition local councils. This paper does not focus on these efforts but notes their existence as part of the complexity of delivering local political assistance.

### Defining the Goals

From the outset, U.S. officials consistently stressed that providing local assistance served their higher-level policy objectives for Syria. These higher aims were first articulated in August 2011, when France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States issued coordinated official statements calling for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step aside. These declarations were repeated in the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.<sup>15</sup> The imperative for political negotiation and transition in Syria was further codified in 2015 in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which set out a road map for a peace process, although Russian objections prevented the resolution from calling for Assad to be removed from office.<sup>16</sup> This objective remained official U.S. policy until at least early 2018, despite the increased geopolitical and policy complexities that emerged in Syria over the subsequent years.<sup>17</sup>

To address the question of how these local political programs would support the United States’ broader policy aims for Syria, U.S. policymakers and practitioners articulated several distinct yet ostensibly compatible objectives: (1) democracy and participation objectives, (2) legitimacy and popular support objectives, (3) capacity and administration objectives, and (4) political state-building objectives, aimed at connecting disparate opposition councils to a larger, more cohesive opposition political body. When describing the rationale for their initiatives, donor officials

frequently merged these goals, reflecting their belief that “all good things go together” in paving the path for high-level political transition. However, analytically, one must disaggregate the four donor objectives, and their associated theories of change, in order to understand how the programs were intended to promote overarching policy aims.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Democracy and participation objectives.*

Western officials believed that programs that fostered local councils’ consultative decisionmaking processes and accountability mechanisms would increase Syrians’ familiarity with and support for a participatory, inclusive local political order. These objectives attempted to shift local norms and practices away from the historically centralized, authoritarian Syrian state in preparation for a more democratic post-Assad era. They also reflected donors’ belief in the potential of “building demand” for better governance and local democracy. In the ideal outcome of this approach, short-term participation in community-driven development programs will lead to longer-term transformation of local power structures. Participation-oriented programs often also delivered much-needed services to communities, but with the complementary objective of promoting good governance.

#### *Legitimacy and popular support objectives.*

An additional theory viewed stabilization programs as a way for opposition local councils to deliver services to their constituencies. The popular support they earned from successful service delivery, in turn, would encourage the public to regard the councils as a legitimate, capable alternative to the Assad regime. As one implementer noted, this approach rested on the assumption that “legitimacy of a governance was based in part on the provision of public provision of services”; it also assumed that the services provided were visible and timely enough to attract notice.<sup>19</sup> These assumptions mirrored dominant practice in liberal state-building models and “hearts and minds” counterinsurgency theories, where effective service delivery is seen as key to securing popular support and legitimacy.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Capacity and administration objectives.*

Donors also sought to address the capacity deficit that Syria’s emergent local governments faced after decades of administration by the highly centralized state. First, programs intended to develop the burgeoning array of local councils as codified administrative structures that could ultimately evolve into the bureaucratic subnational building blocks for a post-Assad Syria. Further, individual local

council members would be supported in building technical skills so they could perform governance functions within that new state. The initial wave of donor programs around 2011—which initially were not framed as stabilization projects—involved courses on “civil resistance, media production, promoting anti-sectarian thought, and avoiding communications monitoring.”<sup>21</sup> After opposition local councils began to hold territory in 2011 and 2012, these projects grew to include capacity-building sessions on local governance skills such as planning, consultation, and management.

*Political state-building objectives.*

The United States and its donor partners viewed the Syrian opposition’s fragmentation as a major weakness in its potential to emerge as a viable counterstate. Consequently, they devised local projects to build up a more cohesive, broader political opposition body to the Assad regime.<sup>22</sup> The scores of local councils that surfaced early in the uprising had clear revolutionary credentials and grassroots energy, but donors believed that these activists needed to cohere into a larger “political mass” to counterbalance the regime.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, donors focused on umbrella opposition bodies, based largely in Turkey, such as the Syria Opposition Council (later the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces), the nominal exiled deliberative body, and its Assistance Coordination Unit (SOC/ACU). Later, they also supported the opposition’s ostensible executive body, the Syrian Interim Government, and its sectoral directorates. Donors often coordinated local council assistance through the nominally higher-level exiled opposition political bodies, in hopes this would help the local councils gain legitimacy in the eyes of the war-ravaged population. Programs also aimed to knit together the disparate local councils into more cohesive provincial- and regional-level units, to encourage these councils to communicate more with higher-level bodies, and ultimately to help the opposition leverage this cohesion at high-level political negotiations.<sup>24</sup>

To act on these four objectives, local stabilization programs entailed a wide range of activities. Projects included capacity building on project prioritization, planning cycles, consultative engagement, and beneficiary list preparation; civil documentation provision; emergency supply distribution; and assistance to local councils in providing services such as water, sanitation, waste removal, bakery operation, and power generation. Alongside these politically oriented programs, Western donors provided tens of billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance in opposition Syria, often also working through local councils. On the ground, the differences between humanitarian assistance and stabilization or local governance projects often blurred. For simplicity of analysis, this paper reflects donors’ stated characterization of a program as political (i.e., intended to bolster local governance in opposition-held or post-Assad Syria) or humanitarian (i.e., distributed according to humanitarian assistance principles).<sup>25</sup>

## The Evolving Relationship Between Local Political Assistance and Higher-Level Conflict

As the high-level security and political dynamics of the Syrian conflict evolved between 2011 and the present, U.S. policy also shifted. The changing security and policy contexts shaped three distinct periods of local stabilization programs: first, the aspirational early years between 2011 and mid-2013; second, the years of increasing complexity from mid-2013 to 2016; and finally, the years of fragmentation from 2017 to the present. Admittedly, this delineation oversimplifies the complexity of the conflict and the multitude of actors—neither the conflict nor the policy changed abruptly at each demarcation—but it is a useful framework for structuring an analysis of the political shifts inside and outside Syria. As the conflict wore on, the objectives and underlying assumptions of local-level programs continued to diverge from the broader trajectory of the conflict. At the same time, deep contradictions emerged between stabilization programs’ assumptions and objectives on one hand, and U.S. policy decisions on the other.

### Aspirational yet Coherent Objectives: 2011 to Early 2013

The Syrian war began in 2011 as a mostly peaceful civic uprising against Assad. The Assad regime soon escalated violence against protesters and Syrian citizens picked up weapons in response, largely under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. By August 2011, the United States and allied nations stated the coordinated position that Assad should “step aside.”<sup>26</sup> By mid-2012, the uprising had transitioned into a civil conflict between the Assad regime and the geographically disparate opposition forces. Meanwhile, the events of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, as well as the opposition’s military gains, fueled many Western policymakers’ assumption that Syria’s “day after” Assad was coming—perhaps soon.<sup>27</sup> According to analyst Mona Yacoubian, “Informed by this fundamental miscalculation, the focus inside the US government was less on strategies to ensure Assad’s exit and more on managing the day after to prevent a chaotic transition.”<sup>28</sup> Western powers levied financial sanctions on the regime but, despite wide debate, chose to limit their military assistance to the opposition. Meanwhile, Arab Gulf states and individuals provided increasing security aid to the local opposition proxies in a largely uncoordinated, and often competitive, fashion.<sup>29</sup>

Against this backdrop of optimism, the earliest local political assistance programs were aspirational but aligned with the United States’ high-level policies toward Syria.<sup>30</sup> They seemed consistent with the presumed trajectory of the conflict, which most, though not all, U.S. policymakers viewed as

headed toward Assad's departure. Yet the implementation challenges of the wartime context, unsurprisingly, undermined the effectiveness of many of these early programs.

### *Evaluating Local Political Programs: Reasonable Approaches Based on Optimistic Assumptions*

Viewed in the context of Assad's presumably imminent departure, local political programs were consistent with overall U.S. policy, the presumed conflict trajectory, and local political will. Western donors' democracy and participation objectives aligned with the early ethos of the Syrian uprising, a genuinely organic civic movement that encompassed a wide swath of society. As the uprising transitioned from protests organized by "local coordination committees" to direct governance and administration by local councils, donors began to pivot toward community-driven development approaches to respond to conditions in opposition-held areas. Donor programs focused on supporting local consultative processes that aligned with many Syrian citizens' own demands, which centered on greater accountability, participation, and voice in shaping their local political order. At the same time, some councils faced reports of elite capture or corruption—a phenomenon that would continue throughout the conflict.

Objectives centered on legitimacy and popular support also aligned with facts on the ground. Emergent councils, often made up of the activists who had spearheaded the initial wave of protests, were eager to show that they could deliver for their populations and be a viable governing alternative to the Assad regime. Similarly, donors' capacity and administration objectives also matched their high-level policy approaches, which assumed almost inevitable regime change. Emergent local councils were seen as the potential building blocks of an eventual transitional governing body; consequently, donors felt that it was most important to simply identify who the local councils were and start *some* sort of administrative processes within them. However, these local council members generally were not paid, and financial difficulties often constrained who could volunteer their time to serve.

Finally, political state-building objectives intended to build the opposition's cohesiveness, connections, and popular support also rested on reasonable logic. From the outset, donors correctly noted that the disparate nature of local councils would make it difficult to establish them as a successful counterforce to the Assad regime. (Donors also recognized the disparate nature of the armed opposition as a related key obstacle, but local political programs did not explicitly tackle that challenge.) Moreover, any eventual transitional governing body would require a much stronger overarching structure. To mitigate these concerns and support the (aspirational) higher-level coordinating bodies outside Syria, several aid agencies established their own bureaucratic structures

to deliver projects through the SOC and ACU. Donors tried to empower and equip the SOC to distribute goods and services to local councils; in turn, they hoped that the SOC would “accrue credit” in the eyes of Syrian communities.<sup>31</sup>

### *Reasonable Principles Facing Implementation Challenges*

As donors outside Syria scrambled to set up early stabilization programs in a conflict-ravaged, previously opaque environment, they faced significant implementation challenges that negatively affected the impact of their programs. To begin, donors were unfamiliar with local actors and with features of the Syrian environment, which hindered both democracy and participation objectives. The emergence of local councils represented the semi-formalization of new political roles. Although local councils often contained long-standing community notables, donors readily admitted that they were largely unfamiliar with these actors and their roles. The Assad regime had largely restricted previous Western development assistance to apolitical technical sectors, forcing local project staff to interact only with the regime’s decentralized apparatus. As one former official recalled, “Early on there, was a realization that we didn’t know who these people are, and they weren’t the usual suspects. We needed action learning.”<sup>32</sup> Compounding the difficulties, donors had to manage their participatory projects remotely from neighboring countries, and so they relied heavily on Syrian intermediaries who could shuttle between the exiled donor hub and local communities inside. International officials openly acknowledged that their unfamiliarity with, and physical distance from, local actors increased the challenge of their work.

In fact, the Syrian environment was a textbook worst-case-scenario for community-driven development. Comparative evidence on participatory development stresses that understanding local context is crucial to ensuring equitable outcomes.<sup>33</sup> Conflict and fragmented settings both diminish effectiveness, especially without a top-down state reinforcing bottom-up participation.<sup>34</sup> In conflict-affected contexts, risk for elite capture is exacerbated, and community-driven development programs have a better record at affecting economic outcomes than in generating social cohesion or inclusive governance.<sup>35</sup> These limitations were especially pronounced in the Syrian context, where officials acknowledged that they had to rely upon elites or English-speaking, urbane intermediaries rather than more marginalized individuals. As an independent evaluation of one local council program reported, local councils largely comprised “individuals from influential and power wielding entities in the community” rather than people chosen through “genuine public selection.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to challenging democracy objectives, these disparities in participation similarly undermined legitimacy and public support objectives. But even with these impediments to broad-based participation,



donors viewed the programs as a first foothold. They hoped that over time, as higher-level transition occurred, projects could be shifted to encompass more of local society.<sup>37</sup>

Capacity and administration projects also faced implementation challenges. Donors' haste to embrace self-pronounced local councils, without universally observed support criteria, had unintended consequences.<sup>38</sup> Reports surfaced of overlapping or competing local councils in some places, undermining efficient aid provision and confounding accountability relationships.<sup>39</sup> As the rapidly expanding but minimally coordinated donor community initiated further capacity-building efforts, they duplicated efforts. Representativeness also was a problem. Sophisticated English-speaking activists were overrepresented in training sessions, and observers reported the phenomenon of "laptop shopping," in which the same cadre of local council representatives would rotate between donor trainings in Turkey, taking advantage of the perks of travel more than the additive value of the training.<sup>40</sup> As is often the case in conflict interventions, capacity-building training (with some notable exceptions) often entailed episodic modules, accommodated only limited numbers of participants, and was divorced from local conditions.<sup>41</sup>

Above all, donors had an uphill battle to operationalize their political state-building objectives. Unsurprisingly, they faced deep resistance in generating popular goodwill for the Turkey-based political opposition; the population inside Syria, which was literally under fire, lacked meaningful connections with the leaders who frequented international conferences in luxury hotels. In retrospect, some U.S. attempts to help curry popular favor for the SOC/ACU verge on the farcical. Officials recalled laboring to ensure that SOC/ACU logo stickers were on all ambulances that were sent across the border from Turkey; when the Assad regime targeted these SOC/ACU-branded vehicles, officials switched the logo stickers to more easily removable magnets.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as one official recalled, "Nobody on the ground was ever fooled. The extent to which these exiled opposition folks were not in touch with people on the ground, and did not have credibility on the ground, was extreme."<sup>43</sup>

Some donor efforts emphasized delivering "maximum big stuff" to communities, all with SOC/ACU branding, to make up for the ACU's lack of personal connections on the ground.<sup>44</sup> This approach was largely ineffective; for example, one population perception survey, profiling over 1,200 respondents in nineteen communities, emphasized that communities in opposition-held Syria prioritized "local embeddedness" and "symbolic relevance" to the revolution as a key determinant of support to governance entities, not primarily delivery of goods and services.<sup>45</sup> Several donor officials expressed frustration with the SOC: "We prodded, we pushed, we tried [to make them connect with local councils inside Syria]. But it was an incredibly uphill battle, getting these guys to participate on the ground other than only in the grand *realpolitik* within the ACU."<sup>46</sup> Most broadly, as one

development expert remarked, these programmatic approaches to build SOC/ACU legitimacy did not have a clear basis of evidence for their efforts.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Western donors undermined their own desire to build internal legitimacy for the SOC and ACU by giving those bodies only conditional recognition in the international arena.

In addition to the challenge of building support for the external opposition in Syria, divisions within the SOC and ACU frustrated efforts to improve their capabilities. Both Syrian and international observers cite management problems within the ACU in these early years. As one recalled, “The wheels were perpetually almost about to fall off with the ACU.”<sup>48</sup> The entity faced constant crisis and adjustments, and then eventually fell apart again. The exiled opposition’s fractious internal relationships compounded the problem.<sup>49</sup> Finally, paralleling the armed proxy competition, many non-Western donors funded their own SOC and ACU proxies, further fragmenting the organizations.

#### *The Aspirational Early Years in Retrospect*

In sum, during this early period, stabilization program objectives generally aligned with local political will, the conflict’s perceived trajectory, and high-level U.S. policy. Donor objectives largely reflected many Syrian citizens’ own demands, as opposition actors also wanted to expand participation and democracy, foster councils’ technical capabilities, and build their legitimacy through effective service delivery. Early programs also were consistent with the presumed trajectory of the conflict: at the time, donors assumed that the conflict was in the first stage of a lengthy but ultimately successful transition to a post-Assad Syria. The still-hopeful ethos of the young “Arab Spring,” the overthrow of other dictators in the region, and high-level U.S. policy statements that “Assad must go” all fueled optimism that Assad’s days were numbered. Viewed in this light, local political program objectives all appear reasonable, even though their timeline for transforming local norms seems ambitious.

Early implementation challenges were unsurprising in such a difficult context. Multiple Syrian and international interviewees described a sense of “building the plane while we were flying it”—trying to propel a state-formation endeavor toward an undetermined final product.<sup>50</sup> Western actors hoped that, over time, they would become more familiar with local counterparts, refine implementation systems, and improve inclusiveness and effectiveness. In parallel, donors correctly identified problems with external political opposition bodies and made efforts to strengthen them—despite the myriad problems with these reform efforts that now are apparent in retrospect.

Had the Syrian conflict ultimately evolved in a different direction, these early years of local political assistance programs would have been the first stage in adaptive iteration and improvement. With the benefit of hindsight, the original sin in local stabilization programming was its flawed assumption of the inevitability of a post-Assad Syria—a remarkable example of cart-before-the-horse thinking. But, at the time, internationals and Syrian opposition activists alike shared a hopeful vision for the future. As one U.S. official recalled, “There was this ethereal aspirational idea of unified, democratic Syria, and there was nothing more. That was all the international community could point to—that we were doing this in the ambition that what would ultimately emerge was a unified democratic Syria.”<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, events unfolded differently.

### Local Political Objectives Increasingly Diverge from High-Level Realities: Mid-2013 to 2016

Between mid-2013 and 2016, the rise of armed extremist groups complicated high-level U.S. policy formation, while the trajectory of the war shifted in Assad’s favor. By late 2013, the Syrian conflict was no longer a binary one between the Assad regime on one side and the opposition on the other: the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, also known as ISIS, and other armed extremist groups shifted the logic of the war. As the subsequent months passed, U.S. policymakers increasingly feared that, if Assad actually fell, these armed extremist groups, rather than the “moderate” opposition, would fill the resulting power vacuum.<sup>52</sup> With no good policy options apparent, some observers described U.S. policy as a “calibration” of support to the opposition—intended to be strong enough to force Assad to the negotiating table but not strong enough to topple him outright—and inevitably would be dwarfed by the military escalation of other powers.<sup>53</sup> Others described it as “hedging” or “half-measures.”<sup>54</sup>

During this time, a series of critical milestones cumulatively shifted the momentum of the conflict toward Assad and called into question the viability of an opposition-centered governance project. In August 2013, when the Syrian regime launched an egregious chemical weapons attack that killed over 1,000 civilians, the United States and its European allies ultimately did not militarily enforce the putative “red line” they had drawn against chemical weapons use.<sup>55</sup> For many observers, this landmark episode demonstrated the United States’ lack of commitment to its statement that “Assad must go.”<sup>56</sup> By early 2014, fighting between “moderate” rebels and the Islamic State diminished the rebels’ territory, as well as Western countries’ visibility within previously opposition-held areas. In mid-2014, in response to the Islamic State’s dramatic expansion across Iraq and Syria, the United States and its allies formally prioritized and resourced a military fight against the terrorist group.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the first half of 2015, Syrian rebels, a jihadist-led coalition in the northwest, and the Islamic State all expanded their battlefield control, shaking the Assad regime. In response, Russia intervened militarily to support Assad in the autumn of 2015. Russia's entrance into the war, combined with escalating Iranian support, ultimately shifted battlefield momentum in the regime's favor. By early 2016, opposition enclaves were divided among Syria's southwest, internal enclaves without viable supply routes, parts of Aleppo, and greater Idlib, with an increasingly prevalent armed extremist presence.<sup>58</sup> The Assad regime steadily regained territory throughout 2016, finally recapturing the rebel-held eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo, Syria's second city, in December.

The United States and its allies faced an array of policy challenges during this time. Western support to local councils was caught up in the contradictions of this high-level policy picture, particularly after the U.S. decision to formally prioritize the counter-Islamic State campaign in mid-2014. Further, the rise of armed actors throughout this period, and their impact on many local councils, directly complicated local stabilization programs.

### *Regime Change vs Regime Restructuring*

From the perspective of field-based stabilization program managers, it became unclear in this period whether the United States still prioritized a regime change policy or had settled for regime restructuring—a policy that favored de-escalation of the Syrian conflict and a negotiated political solution that would lead to state reform and the devolution of power. This lack of clarity, in turn, greatly undermined stabilization programs' capacity and administration objectives.

Particularly by 2015 and 2016, the political-military trajectory of the war had rendered hopes for a day after Assad increasingly unrealistic. Yet programs continued apace, nominally intending to prepare local councils for their administrative roles in a transitional governing body. On the ground, many officials acknowledged that the more plausible best outcome might be regime restructuring and decentralization.<sup>59</sup> As one implementer reflected, "It was never clear if we were building a new government, or we were building something that we would merge with the existing government."<sup>60</sup> Donors continued to build up the administrative capacities of councils, even though they could not agree on how the councils ultimately would function. One international observer recalled an environment with "multiple different training programs all building around a different conceptualization of local council capabilities."<sup>61</sup> A Syrian implementer recalled learning intricate local council "good governance" practices within one donor-funded program, only to find that the same donor's follow-on program introduced different local council procedures.<sup>62</sup>

Donors' capacity and administration objectives also suffered from the uncertainty over whether high-level U.S. policy prioritized regime change or regime restructuring. Constructing a new bureaucracy or merging two existing bureaucracies are both challenging, decades-long undertakings that require thoroughly different approaches. Meanwhile, capacity-building projects meant to build up local councils' administrative functions were more episodic, fragmented, and short-lived than the lengthy reality of building a new bureaucracy. As one analyst recalled, "The idea that you can do a few workshops" and launch a new subnational structure was "completely naive."<sup>63</sup>

Democracy and participation objectives foundered on similar challenges. It was unclear whether the United States and other donors aimed to build a fully democratic, participatory revolutionary counter-bureaucracy or (more realistically) a less undemocratic, less exclusionary opposition structure that eventually would merge with the central Syrian state. Here, too, the short time horizon and episodic approach blunted local programs' ability to achieve either end-state. One observer described the approach as "ridiculous . . . given the fact that building stable democracies takes decades. [There were] problems of scale, of fragility of the context."<sup>64</sup>

#### *Complexities in Implementing the Good Governance Agenda*

Lacking clarity on their ultimate objective or overarching structure, some local council programs chose to simply emphasize cultivating good governance principles in the localities where they operated. In particular, they stressed the idea of building Syrian communities' *demand* for good governance principles to be utilized in service delivery, reflecting democracy, participation, and legitimacy objectives for programs. As one adviser explained: "We were trying to demonstrate to people what good governance looks like when it is part of the service delivery cycle, so people can see what it looks like, and so it becomes a norm, and people will expect it, and articulate a demand for it."<sup>65</sup> Even in the overarching confusion, many Syrian activists praised this tactic. As one noted, "Before this began, I didn't know the words 'good governance.'"<sup>66</sup>

Still, these demand-side approaches to good governance faced implementation challenges. Similar to the operational hurdles that affected earlier community-driven-development methodologies, opposition-held Syria during this timeframe was the almost complete opposite of textbook conditions for viable demand-side governance interventions. Ideally, demand-side governance projects clearly define who will make the demands (population/civil society actors) and who will respond to them (usually government actors), before bringing the two into dialogue. Instead, local councils in opposition-held areas were quasigovernmental but lacked any official sanction or overarching framework; at times, donor support encouraged them to also serve as a makeshift civil

society, compounding the confusion around supply and demand for good governance. In addition, demand-side interventions often require a relatively sophisticated “toolkit” of supporting initiatives, including population access to information, participatory budgeting, citizen monitoring, and public interest advocacy. The violent, volatile Syrian context posed deep challenges to any of these initiatives.<sup>67</sup> Though situations varied widely across localities, some councils reportedly were corrupt or had been captured by elites, which undermined genuine, effective participation objectives.<sup>68</sup>

Donors also faced challenges in cultivating good governance principles because their programs were often just one of many financial inputs on the ground. For many local councils, remittances and private donations dwarfed Western donors’ support, lessening the incentive to undertake lengthy consultation or procurement processes for projects. Above all, the deteriorating security situation impaired good governance breakthroughs in many areas. A 2016 evaluation of one local council program found that “the more stable areas not on the frontline of any ground offensive and with less intensive aerial bombardment provided more favorable conditions for substantive improvements in governance practices.”<sup>69</sup> “The volatile context” thus constituted “the major impediment to intended outcomes.”<sup>70</sup>

### *Countering Assad vs Countering the Islamic State*

Meanwhile, the confusion regarding the United States’ policy priorities in Syria increasingly confounded programs’ legitimacy and popular support objectives. Initial U.S. efforts had been aimed at helping local councils demonstrate that they could be a viable governance alternative to the Assad regime. But by mid-2014, these efforts did not align with the U.S. government’s revealed preference for a counterterrorism mission, as expressed in its diplomatic and military preparations to convene the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. As one former Western official recalled, “It drove people insane wondering ‘What are we doing? Is this transitioning from Assad or countering ISIS?’”<sup>71</sup> Another said, “I [was] managing two different programs with sometimes competing objectives. To advance one prong of the strategy is to undermine the other.”<sup>72</sup>

On the program level, many implementers attempted to reconcile this contradiction by helping civilian local councils compete for popular support against both the Assad regime and armed extremist groups such as the Islamic State. Some U.S. officials gamely tried to sell the approach through a contortionist rationale: one recalled telling subordinate colleagues, “Our local stabilization work is the bridge between the two contradictory [policy] objectives. Our work can serve either or both at the same time.”<sup>73</sup> In practice, however, this was a heavy lift. Whereas U.S. policy in the early

aspirational years had largely aligned with local political will, subsequent confusion over high-level U.S. policy led to increasing clashes with Syrian actors.

For one thing, Syrian staffers charged with implementing this new approach often did not want to do so. Most Syrians involved in donor programs were activists who had enthusiastically joined the initiatives to advance a revolutionary project against the Assad regime, and had not been consulted in the shifting tides of U.S. policy discourse. As one recalled, “Before 2013 and 2014, [the] vision was the right one. But then the policy shifted. Then the donors said, ‘We are fighting ISIS now.’”<sup>74</sup> Many pointed out that the Assad regime was responsible for many more deaths than the terrorist group: “Look at the map, look at the number of kills, and you tell me who’s extreme?”<sup>75</sup>

In a related problem, the counter–Islamic State efforts were built upon a broader U.S. emphasis on countering violent extremism (CVE) that didn’t readily translate to many Syrian counterparts’ context. CVE had become mainstream in Western development agencies by 2014, as donors launched such programs—with countless associated documents and high-level events—in countries from Pakistan to Tunisia.<sup>76</sup> But for Syrians, who had been under siege in Aleppo rather than hobnobbing at the White House or United Nations summits, these new donor projects characterized “extremism” in ways that did not fit their experience.<sup>77</sup> As one Syrian analyst recalled, “When we asked grassroots people, they weren’t defining [extremism] in terms of religion. They would say that extremism is being strict about your opinion and using force. That applies to [the] regime and that applies to Hezbollah. These people saw regime jets every day. They would say, whoever targets a hospital or school is extreme. So you want me, as a Syrian, to sell CVE to these people? *I will be the hypocrite.*”<sup>78</sup> Another Syrian recalled, “People also saw the armed forces as potentially moderate, if they did not point their gun at me, and fought for me and for my children.”<sup>79</sup>

Likewise, Syrian communities often did not share the Western blanket aversion to “armed extremist” groups. Extremist groups went through their own organizational learning; many competed with each other to provide population services, and several successfully rebranded themselves to appear more like civilian entities.<sup>80</sup> As one Syrian noted, “They weren’t always carrying their flags.”<sup>81</sup> Some groups provided competent policing in a security vacuum, addressing a pragmatic concern from the local community. One U.S. official admitted that, because of the external Syrian opposition’s well-known dysfunction and charmed conference-hopping existence, “civilians increasingly looked to extremist groups as the only ones who are willing and able to fight for them, [and as] potentially less corrupt.”<sup>82</sup> Another former international official recalled that Syrian communities “got into bed with Nusra, and all these Islamist groups, because those groups fought against Assad.”<sup>83</sup>

### *Complexities in Implementing the Counter-Armed Groups Agenda*

As the counter-Islamic State agenda evolved, many programs acknowledged this complexity and aimed to “build communities’ preferences” toward engaging with civilian authorities rather than armed actors.<sup>84</sup> Despite this, the logic of helping unarmed actors compete for popular support through the delivery of public services often was not straightforward in practice. For example, contrary to the assumptions inherent in the theories of change, civilian local councils did not have automatically adversarial relationships with armed extremist actors; the relationships between local councils and armed groups varied widely. At times, civilian councils chose to cooperate with armed actors to fulfill unmet needs for services or security, or to coexist by opting for what one analyst described as a “division of labor.”<sup>85</sup> As the analyst added, “It’s only a fight when someone picks a fight. And if this turns into a confrontation, then armed actors win.”<sup>86</sup> Although donors saw local councils as political entities that might compete with armed actors, on the ground many councils were viewed as service-providing bodies with a largely technocratic identity—and therefore, they were not a threat to jihadists’ ambitions.<sup>87</sup> In other cases, armed actors overtly or quietly infiltrated an extant local council. Further, the “fog of war” greatly muddied the information environment, often making it unclear which actors were providing which services. Observers recounted instances in which donors launched projects so that a civilian council could benefit from popular gratitude, only to see an extremist group claim the credit.

In addition, some Syrians noted that, in the wartime context, the urgency of needs undermined the theory of garnering support through service delivery. “People really don’t care who is providing the service. If the local council is providing bread for 10 lira, and Jabhat al-Nusra for 5 lira, people will buy from Nusra.”<sup>88</sup> Western donors’ regulations complicated their own objectives of helping civilian actors compete. Given onerous U.S. vetting requirements and procurement procedures for potential aid recipients, many communities found it easier to seek support from non-Western supporters of various stripes.<sup>89</sup>

More broadly, some observers questioned the assumption that local council service delivery would yield legitimacy in any context. Independent survey data noted that the service provision was just one of several factors shaping community support for local councils.<sup>90</sup> Echoing comparative evidence on the relationship between service delivery and legitimacy in other settings, communities often cited issues like “local embeddedness,” symbolic relevance to the revolution, and participatory processes as determinants of local councils’ legitimacy.<sup>91</sup>



## *Fragmented Donors, Fragmented Opposition*

Along with these immediate practical concerns, donors' other objective for stabilization programs—political state building—also diverged from both local political will and the changing political-military context. The United States continued to hope that Syrian local council actors would see obvious value in a unified, empowered political opposition body. As one official recalled, internationals continued to wonder, “Who is going to reknit this country back together? How are we going to connect this community with a broader structure?” But Syrians on the ground were not persuaded. The same official continued, “Their response was ‘That’s not my problem, and it’s not going to be some schmuck in Istanbul. I’m not holding out any allegiance to them.’”<sup>92</sup> Inside Syria, some nominal higher-level bodies at the provincial level, specifically the Aleppo Provincial Council, successfully organized themselves as a potential governing entity. Yet despite donors’ intentions, most others failed to take hold as a genuine oversight locus in their particular areas.<sup>93</sup>

Squabbling among Syrian opposition members explains many shortcomings in efforts to unify the political opposition, but donor fragmentation was also to blame. Even as donors urged the opposition to become more cohesive and connected, many of their own aid provision mechanisms bypassed the umbrella bodies and coordinated directly with local councils, reinforcing local actors’ belief that these external bodies were marginal. Meanwhile, local actors quickly learned to play donors off of one another. As Carnegie nonresident scholar Khedder Khaddour notes, “Each opposition locality quickly became its own power center. . . . 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.”<sup>94</sup> Financial fragmentation further complicated the picture.

The donor community made efforts to mitigate the fragmentation. The United States attempted to synchronize its own assistance by establishing the Southern Syria Assistance Platform in Jordan and the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team in Turkey, focused on southern and northern Syria, respectively. Various donors and Syrian activist organizations tried to move local councils toward consistent practices, those these efforts bore limited fruit. As described, efforts to coordinate projects through the SOC/ACU largely stalled. But even as Western donors struggled to coordinate, non-Western donors such as the Gulf states greatly affected local power structures. In the early years of the conflict, the Gulf states paid the salaries of some SOC/ACU members. And because diaspora Syrians and other donors directly funded some local councils, these councils essentially became rentier mini-states, undermining any efforts to structure their budgets to make them more self-sufficient. In a striking parallel with the multiplayer proxy competition underway the military arena, as one Western official admitted, “For all our donor coordination, even when we got to a collective

position that was okay on assistance, that position failed to recognize the amount of political money that was already involved among non-Western donors.”<sup>95</sup>

Finally, crucially, donors’ political state-building initiatives foundered because there was no clear road map for how these efforts related to a subnational governance framework in a hypothesized day after, echoing the lack of clarity between U.S. regime change and regime restructuring objectives. Though donors tried to help the ACU develop capacities that would “be relevant and useful in any future scenario,” a chicken-and-egg problem emerged.<sup>96</sup> As one program evaluation noted, the “ACU’s unclear role [was] a key reason why external stakeholders [had] been reluctant to engage with ACU.”<sup>97</sup> Political state-building efforts did achieve some modest short-term successes: for example, by 2016, the Syrian Interim Government had developed a system of electoral committees, aiming to select representatives from local councils toward provincial councils. But efforts to move this particular initiative forward stalled without a vision for how these provincial councils fit into a political endgame. Donors also undertook considerable analytic and consultative work on Syria’s extant decentralization legislation, known as Legislative Decree 107, which had been passed in 2011 but largely not implemented.<sup>98</sup> Some stakeholders advocated for reform based on the National Decentralization Plan called for in the law. But donors and opposition actors lacked a unified stance on how they wished to advance this reform—which it itself would have been difficult to insert into any political negotiating framework.

### *The Complex Middle Years in Retrospect*

Stabilization programs are intended to advance higher political objectives, yet between mid-2013 and 2016, the local programs’ assumptions and objectives began to diverge from topline U.S. policy priorities. As U.S. policy itself became increasingly muddled, local program managers found it difficult to know which broader objectives to support— regime change or regime restructuring, countering Assad or countering the Islamic State. This policy confusion hindered programmatic objectives of expanding democracy and participation, building legitimacy and popular support, and growing technical and administrative capabilities. As one former official reflected, “The assistance has to fall in line with the overall policy, and if we don’t know what that is, we aren’t equipped to move it forward.”<sup>99</sup> Programs that sought to use service delivery approaches for the counter-Islamic State agenda faced obstacles in achieving their desired effect. Finally, continued fragmentation within the Syrian opposition and within the donor community undermined political state building.

Still, stabilization programs continued apace and, as the programs matured, program managers were able to address some of the implementation challenges of the early years. Most crucially in the eyes

of many on the frontlines, they provided urgently needed basic services on the ground. Many locally based practitioners readily acknowledged the decreasing likelihood of eventual political transformation, but saw no real alternative to continuing the programs: opposition-held areas needed some governance structures, and providing services through accountable, inclusive processes was better than any other approach. However, during this period, it became evident that military force, rather than civilian programs, would shape the broader contours of the conflict. The once-close linkages between local stabilization projects and U.S. high-level policies began to fray, and local programs' relationship to the overarching political and security trajectory seemed unclear.

### Political-Military Realities Eclipse Local Stabilization Objectives: 2017 to the Present

Since the fall of rebel-held eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo in December 2016, Syria's civilian opposition has been increasingly geographically constrained and subject to multiple, disparate conflicts shaped by armed actors. In July 2017, the newly inaugurated administration of U.S. President Donald Trump terminated the Central Intelligence Agency's program to arm and train "moderate" rebels, thereby formalizing the position that U.S. policy objectives no longer sought to overthrow Assad.<sup>100</sup> Trump continued and intensified president Barack Obama's counter-Islamic State campaign and, by October 2017, the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had liberated Raqqa city and large swathes of eastern Syria.<sup>101</sup> The armed extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has held sway in greater Idlib since early 2017, when it seized the crucial Bab-al-Hawa border crossing and established a so-called Salvation Government. Meanwhile, Turkey holds large portions of northern Syria, under first the Euphrates Shield and later Olive Branch operations. Finally, the Assad regime, backed by Russia and Iran, is forcibly consolidating control over remaining opposition redoubts elsewhere, including a summer 2018 military offensive that routed the opposition from a southern (so-called) de-escalation zone.

Against this backdrop, local stabilization efforts have grown more geographically limited and programmatically fragmented. Some programs pivoted to supporting local administrations in SDF-held areas, previously not an area of U.S. government emphasis. In the northwest, where the Salvation Government assimilated local governance structures, an already challenging programming environment became even more so—by mid-2018, donors had ceased governance support.<sup>102</sup> Until summer 2018, governance and stabilization programming in the southwest expanded, aligned with commitments to de-escalation in an area negotiated by Jordan, Russia, and the United States. Ultimately, however, this progress was wiped away by mid-2018, as the regime reasserted military control over the area.

Over this most recent period, the political and security realities of Syria have obviated the previous aspirations and assumptions of donors' local stabilization programs. Three high-level trends now shape local dynamics and exacerbate the disconnect between stabilization assistance and overarching conflict realities: mass civilian displacement, the so-called reconciliation agreements enacted as the Assad regime retakes territory, and armed extremist ascendancy in areas outside government control. Shaped by military factors, these trends have upended much previous progress in advancing democracy, participation, legitimacy, administrative capabilities, and political state building. A key question is whether some of these principles can emerge in any future political bargain.

### *Regime Consolidation, Mass Displacement, and Reconciliation Agreements*

In present-day Syria, the Assad regime, backed by external sponsors, has “reduced the opposition’s ability to govern” by choking off economic connections and services in opposition-held territories and steadily reconstituting control over opposition areas.<sup>103</sup> As the regime expands into former opposition areas, its troops force local communities to accept so-called reconciliation agreements, a euphemism for the forcible re-imposition of the Syrian regime’s military and administrative control. Meanwhile, with more than 6.6 million Syrians internally displaced and an additional 5.6 million refugees outside Syria’s borders, less than half of the country’s prewar population remains in its original location.<sup>104</sup>

The political-military trajectory of the war has thus overturned previous advancements in democracy and participation objectives. In enacting its reconciliation agreements, the Syrian regime disbanded the opposition’s local councils, whose highest-level officials often have had to flee their homes. The agreements also expand to the civil society sphere, as community-based and nongovernmental organizations that are not registered with the regime have had to cease or greatly curtail their projects. The consequence is a weakened civil society, less able to successfully advocate vis-à-vis the newly reasserted government actors. In particular, donor objectives centered on a more inclusive vision of Syrian local political order are in jeopardy, in the face of Assad’s desire for a “healthier and more homogenous society.”<sup>105</sup>

Civilian displacement and reconciliation agreements have also rolled back advancements in capacity and administration objectives, which had rested on hopes that iterative, cumulative progress could improve local governance in Syria. In earlier years, several donor programs labored to shepherd local councils through repetitive cycles of community engagement, project planning, and execution as a learning experience in governance. Multiple Syrians interviewed cited their compressed experience with multiple rounds of electoral processes as an advantage: as one put it, “We have gained much

more experience in local governance than other countries in the past eight years.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, under more auspicious conditions, this iterative “learning by doing” approach would have been promising, as it reflects comparative evidence on how state capacity is built.<sup>107</sup> However, this paradigm depended on the assumption that the Syrian opposition map would remain unchanged or continue expanding, allowing councils to build on their modest progress in technical and administrative abilities. Instead, the restored regime has largely wiped away these tentative advances. Reconciliation arrangements vary considerably; the best-case scenario is a so-called soft reconciliation, in which the regime permits some less-senior local council staff to stay on in administrative municipal roles. In the worst-case scenario, a hard reconciliation, all former members of the local council are disempowered and banished, destroying their hard-earned local expertise on beneficiary lists, service providers, and technical governance.<sup>108</sup>

Further, when skilled Syrians are displaced elsewhere in the country, they often are unable to apply their skills in their new locales. One activist recounted the tale of the Aleppo City Council, previously a capable opposition body whose leadership fled after the regime retook the city of Aleppo. Some tried to re-create the council in absentia from Idlib, intending to represent the displaced persons from Aleppo now based there. But the initiative faced problems in securing donor support and in relation to existing Idlib councils.<sup>109</sup> More broadly, members of displaced local councils also tried to embed within councils in their new locale to transfer skills, but, unsurprisingly, incumbent members did not necessarily welcome outsiders.

As for the theory of “creating demand for better governance,” in the immediate term, the upheaval has obviated any raised expectations for democracy inside the country. Internally displaced persons generally are not allowed to vote for local councils in their new settlement areas; the process of moving civil registration is complex even during peacetime.<sup>110</sup> The Syrian government has taken additional steps to undermine the status of displaced people, passing legislation that many argue serves to punish people in opposition-held areas and reward loyalists.<sup>111</sup> Norms of accountability and consultation may transfer into parts of the diaspora but, within Syria—now that the state’s military power matters more than the demand for better governance—previous hopes for local political programs seem, in the words of one donor, “hopelessly naïve.”<sup>112</sup>

Mass displacement and the regime’s military expansion have also meant that previous political state-building objectives diverge even more dramatically from reality. The moderate opposition, always fragmented, has far less sway on the ground. The Syrian Interim Government is becoming increasingly more marginal; although it is still nominally active in the Euphrates Shield area, it and its local councils are largely under the thumb of Turkey.<sup>113</sup> Donors have largely abandoned earlier efforts to help externally based bodies “accrue legitimacy” in the eyes of the Syrian populace. Donors

have examined Decree 107, which remains a viable potential means to devolve power, but have no common road map for an ideal decentralization framework. Even implementing the law would not lessen the powers of Damascus-appointed governors, and would not loosen the grip of the state's security apparatus.

### *Armed Extremist Group Ascendancy*

Meanwhile, in parts of the country still held by the opposition, the ascendance of armed extremist groups has undermined stabilization programs' legitimacy objectives. In Idlib, one official recalled, donor programs had been built "squarely on the assumption that local councils are the end-all, be-all, and we are going to build their legitimacy through services."<sup>114</sup> Yet in recent years, armed elements have become more influential even in nominally civilian councils, in some cases co-opting, coercing, infiltrating, or extorting from them. As described above, during the 2013–2016 timeframe, stabilization programs often tried to help local councils "compete" for popular support among the population by providing services; when illiberal actors gained influence over these local councils, donor programming struggled to keep up. The same official continued: "Guys with guns run Syria. And those guys are using those very influential tools [local councils] that we all helped build up, and were ripe for the picking. And the councils went with the prevailing power center, which for Idlib now is [the armed extremist group] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham."<sup>115</sup>

Until mid-2018, a dwindling number of donor programs around Idlib attempted to "keep moderate civilians relevant" in an environment marked by extremist groups. In some cases, they aimed to ensure that civilian authorities were the ones to negotiate reconciliation agreements with the regime.<sup>116</sup> It is difficult to gauge the success of these initiatives within the deteriorating security context. Some U.S. interviewees noted that the local council support would have needed "all three Ds"—diplomacy, defense, and development—but instead received mostly development aid and a complementary effort (which faced significant challenges) to support community security, the Free Syrian Police, and access to justice.<sup>117</sup> As some observers suggested, citizens may have supported their civilian local councils but, in Syria, it is better to be feared than loved.<sup>118</sup>

### *Uncertain Silver Linings*

Against this bleak backdrop, those who previously championed stabilization programs and their objectives see two tentative silver linings: in limited geographic enclaves and in the vast Syrian diaspora.

The first modest hope for lasting governance improvement endures in the two primary areas currently not held by the regime or by armed extremist groups: the northeastern area held by the SDF, and northern parts of Aleppo Province held by Turkish-backed rebels. The SDF-held area, where a “democratic confederalism” experiment is underway, has had remarkable administrative and technical success in building up local government structures.<sup>119</sup> However, the specific influence of donor-backed local governance programs on the enduring governance outlook for this region is unclear. Donors did not prioritize governance programming in the area before its takeover by the Islamic State, and only recently reengaged with the region after the group’s fall. Further, the Kurdish-led administration has shown debatable commitment to the norms of participation, inclusion, and accountability that Western donors support.<sup>120</sup> The United States’ uncertain security commitment has undermined its ability to shape processes on the ground: Trump openly questioned ongoing troop presence in the area, though more recent statements by senior administration officials have indicated that U.S. forces will stay for the foreseeable future. Spurred by the unpredictability of its partner, the SDF itself has begun what will likely be lengthy negotiations with Damascus, to formalize some degree of autonomy in its area rather than direct regime rule.<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, local councils are still active in the Turkish-secured Euphrates Shield area. However, its governance and administration increasingly resemble a Turkish annex, so the institutional residue from previous Western local council efforts is difficult to assess.<sup>122</sup> More broadly, it remains highly uncertain whether or for how long these two enclaves can achieve semi-autonomy in some larger-scale political and security bargain.

The second modest prospect is that the animating ideas of the revolution may live on within the vast Syrian diaspora. Several interviewees noted that “even Assad cannot kill the spirit of the revolution.”<sup>123</sup> Many exiled activists interviewed refer fondly to previous donor programs, which modeled a better mode of governance and injected ideas such as accountability, inclusiveness, and representation into their conception of the possible.<sup>124</sup> Others predicted that these ideals will plant the seeds of future mobilization. Yet at the same time, activists (who formed the bulk of the stabilization program staff) do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of the broader mass of Syrian civilians still residing under opposition control. Some recent research indicates that many of these civilians are “willing to accept any solution that will bring an end to the war and will provide some degree of stability, even if it entails the Assad regime staying in power” and are “disillusioned with the Syrian revolution, disgusted with the rebel factions, and dissatisfied with the local opposition government structures and NGOs operating in their region.”<sup>125</sup>

Even in the best of circumstances, democratic state building is a generations-long and often violent endeavor. Some Syrian activists emphasize that these programs’ legacy of new governance norms may live on in some other fashion. Other analysts point to the 1982 Hama uprising, when then president

Hafez al-Assad, the father Syria's current president, massacred an estimated 20,000 of his own citizens. If this event was part of the long-dormant groundwork for the rebellion thirty years later, then the future of revolutionary seeds planted by the current uprising is unknowable but potentially significant.

### *The Fragmented Recent Years in Retrospect*

The political and security realities of Syria today have overturned most donors' earlier hopes for beneficial outcomes from local political assistance. In the immediate term, Syrians' raised expectations for better governance will not help them in places where the Assad regime is re-exerting its control over political space, civil society, and the economic sphere.<sup>126</sup> Though some observers argue that the regime likely cannot reconstitute control, much less functional governance, everywhere, others stress that Assad is already implementing "an ambitious vision of reconstruction as a process of authoritarian stabilization" that will succeed on its own terms.<sup>127</sup>

For those who championed the aspirations and assumptions of local stabilization programs, the present-day outlook is bleak. International armed actors, rather than grassroots civilian councils, shape outcomes in Syria today. The moderate opposition, never a paragon of unity or relevance, has become even less so. The trends of mass civilian displacement, reconciliation agreements, and armed extremist group ascendancy in areas still under opposition control have all driven a wedge between local political assistance and higher-level conflict realities. The Trump administration's new Syria team has announced shifts in U.S. policy toward counter-Iran objectives and a re-invigoration of the political process in addition to countering the Islamic State; however, policy details and level of realism are uncertain. Consequently, it is unclear what larger political outcome the remaining local stabilization programs are intended to support—although for many practitioners, supporting local-level participation, inclusion, capacity, and effectiveness will continue to be a worthy objective in its own right.

## **Explaining Donor Persistence**

As the Syrian conflict evolved, macro-level political and security developments—and the massive scale of human suffering—upended the initial aspirations of stabilization programs. By the middle years, program objectives increasingly were in tension with both high-level U.S. policy and the trajectory of the war. And today, internationalized military and political forces have almost entirely obviated the goals of local political aid.



The analysis raises an uncomfortable question: why did the United States continue to fund local political programs for all seven years of the Syrian war, even as these programs' objectives were at odds with the United States' own policy choices and with overarching conflict dynamics? In hindsight, several factors preserved the momentum for local political programs. First, even as the political objectives of stabilization programs slipped out of reach, pragmatic and normative considerations perpetuated them, especially because many local councils had become adept at critical service delivery. Second, bureaucratic and organizational factors perpetuated these programs, as senior policymakers and legislators viewed the policy-program contradictions as less problematic than program practitioners did, and different agencies competed for stabilization resources. Finally, perception biases fueled undue optimism: the information environment caused policymakers to focus disproportionately on successful local political projects, and invested stakeholders perpetually saw potential for Syria to "turn a corner."

### Pragmatic, Humanitarian, and Normative Considerations

Local political programs aimed to shape governance in a future Syria but also had considerable impact in providing much-needed services to besieged populations. As years passed and the transformative political goals of stabilization programs became ever more unrealistic, their implementation mechanisms and counterpart local councils became increasingly proficient. Consequently, local council programs were often seen as the best means to improve the lives of a war-ravaged population, apart from the viability of their overarching political goals.

On the ground in Syria, the line between local governance/stabilization programs (which often delivered basic services) and humanitarian aid had long been blurred. The United States distinguished between the categories based upon whether the service-delivery program was designed in service of a governance objective, or operated under humanitarian principles of providing assistance based solely on need. By the later years of the war, as stabilization programs' political goals grew more untenable, their well-honed mechanisms to collaborate with local councils were often the best way to deliver desperately needed aid in an inclusive fashion. Bolstering stabilization programs' local council engagement processes became an objective in its own right: in the words of one longtime practitioner, "Good stabilization and recovery principles suggest that we implement with an eye on inclusion, consultation and equitable access. We are predisposed as a profession to such principles regardless of whether it is part of concerted effort to change political culture or leadership."<sup>128</sup> As another implementer recalled, even without a likely post-Assad transition, "We always had service delivery and poverty reduction to fall back on" as a compelling rationale to keep

working.<sup>129</sup> For many practitioners and independent analysts, this imperative was more than enough to justify the continuation of programs—whatever the professed label. As one longtime official recounted, in light of the 2015 Russian intervention, “I wanted to be honest that we really had one country-level objective: Make life less sh---y for Syrians. I wanted to make that our one strategy.”<sup>130</sup>

In a related yet distinct vein, many donors and implementers who were deeply committed to supporting democratic ideals felt a moral imperative to continue local governance programs, even after the programs’ transformative objectives became unviable. Many Western officials argued that supporting inclusive, democratic, and participatory local councils in their resistance to the brutal, illiberal Assad regime and violent extremist competitors was simply the right thing to do. One respondent explained that as a professional discipline, many stabilization practitioners choose to “Back inclusive actors and give them capacity as much out of a sense of [a] professional ethic and a best practice imperative” as out of any linkage to a foreign policy objective.<sup>131</sup> In Idlib Province in recent years, for instance, certain local councils continued to show democratic defiance in the face of extremist ascendancy. The United Kingdom and United States have withdrawn support from stabilization programs in the province because it likely will be reconquered by the regime and because the extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham exerts its influence in so many councils. But some internationals argued that, even without the desired political change, donors should “stick with the local councils until the end” because these partners continue to deserve loyalty and support.<sup>132</sup> Many maintained that these moral considerations also have strategic implications—by abandoning local councils, donors prove that the jihadis were right that the West ultimately would abandon the Syrian opposition.<sup>133</sup>

Consistent with the idea that service-delivery and normative considerations, rather than high-level political objectives, could justify local stabilization programs, a limited number of programs continue to adapt their objectives to suit the changing context. The U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI) intentionally designed its political programs in Syria with considerable flexibility, reformulating objectives after each pivot point in the overall conflict, such as the emergence of the Islamic State and Russia’s intervention. USAID/OTI’s programs thus articulated goals that were more grounded in realistic strategic context than some other programs: rather than continue to plan for an elusive day after, the programs focused on “maintaining space for moderate civilian actors” and “continuing the spirit of the revolution.”<sup>134</sup> Documents illustrate the evolving objectives of other programs—from aiming to increase “support for a democratic political transition”<sup>135</sup> to shifting to aiming for “more measurable, localized” outcomes, rather than “more distant notions that could only be achieved if a number of other factors far beyond the scope of the program fell into place.”<sup>136</sup>

Additionally, in 2017 and 2018, several U.S.- and UK-funded programs, originally focused on northwest Syria, pivoted to relatively more promising new geographic areas. Some relocated to the southern de-escalation area in 2017 and achieved considerable progress in supporting provincial and local councils until the territory was retaken by a foreign-backed Syrian military offensive in summer 2018.<sup>137</sup> Other programs pivoted to the SDF-held areas of the northeast, where, as of writing, security is deteriorating but still holds. These relocated programs focused on new challenges, such as managing Arab-Kurdish tensions and ensuring that governance processes are inclusive and consultative. Some programs have also refocused on the northern Euphrates Shield area, which, for the moment, enjoys a relative security umbrella.

Notably, this remaining generation of stabilization programs articulates objectives of advancing inclusive, capable local governance, without weighing in on how this aligns with any broader U.S. policy objectives in Syria. This injects a hard-earned dose of realism into assumptions about the ability for local political programs to shape outcomes in Syria. However, conversely, supporting local political aid *without* any coherent theory of how it factors into the overall political bargain in Syria invites serious questions.<sup>138</sup>

### Differing Perceptions of Policy and Program Contradictions

As years passed, the practitioner community managing local political programs strained to reconcile the tensions between their programs' assumptions and U.S. high-level policy choices. But from the perspective of senior U.S. policymakers and legislators, continuing to support these programs was a relatively easy choice in an otherwise deeply contested policy environment.<sup>139</sup> Local stabilization programs were seen as an almost obvious good, broadly in line with stated policy objectives. Terminating them would have seemed defeatist. Further, ongoing engagement with local councils provided policymakers insights into the otherwise opaque context of opposition-held Syria.

In the middle years, program practitioners voiced concerns over whether their efforts were supporting a U.S. policy objective that prioritized regime change, regime restructuring, or countering the Islamic State. But within the White House Situation Room, these distinctions were immaterial: stabilization programs were worthwhile because they broadly supported local good governance. Policymakers juggling the big picture of potential increased military escalation with Russia, a major terrorist threat, and concerns over regional allies' security unsurprisingly did not have the bandwidth to interrogate programmatic details.<sup>140</sup> Some observers suggested that continuing to support local councils was a way for the U.S. policy community to feel better about its tepid military support for the opposition. As one U.S. official recalled, "We did a little of this and a little of that,

and the result is our strategy”—and in this context, why wouldn't we continue supporting local political programs?<sup>141</sup> Conversely, to stop funding for local political assistance would have undermined the (still official) policy stance that “Assad must go.”

Some policymakers and lawmakers also particularly valued stabilization programs because they provided (at least some) insights into the otherwise nonpermissive environment inside Syria. Looking ahead, many senior officials believed local councils would play an important role in informing, legitimizing, and operationalizing any actual settlement negotiated at Geneva or elsewhere.<sup>142</sup> Western diplomatic ministries wanted durable connections with opposition local councils; these connections, in turn, depended upon the continued flow of aid. On the other hand, practitioners based closer to the local level had little sense of how the priorities of local councils were to be channeled into higher political negotiations. In their view, Western officials engaging with the Geneva and Astana peace talk processes were preoccupied with armed actors, at the expense of civilian participation.<sup>143</sup> One field-based international official who managed stabilization programs recalled that the relevant diplomatic officials were “so busy, at 30,000 feet, that they don't understand what's going on on the ground. They think that voice on the street is working its way up somehow. It's a recurring problem.”<sup>144</sup> In fairness, several efforts were made to include more grassroots civilian voices in Geneva talks, from “local council” representatives to civil society seats. However, none was viewed as transformative.<sup>145</sup>

The U.S. government's own structures undermined attempts to connect high politics with local perspectives. Policy decisionmaking and political negotiation efforts were often not led by the same bureaucratic actors as the offices that oversaw local programmatic interventions. Since U.S. policy continued to hinge on the stated objective of a negotiated political transition, the diplomatic bureaucracy provided an ongoing demand signal for continued engagement with local councils. Meanwhile, the same donor bureaucratic divides that undermined top-down and bottom-up connections in negotiations meant that senior policymakers did not necessarily see a reason to focus on the diverging policy and program approaches that were worrying local stabilization practitioners.

## The Pathologies of the Information Environment

Against increasingly long odds, many Syrian opposition local councils demonstrated tremendous courage and resourcefulness. The U.S. government information environment often caused policymakers to make the analytic error of focusing too heavily on these compelling yet discrete examples of achievement and progress to perpetuate broader optimism on the overall prospects of success for opposition political assistance.

Over the course of this research, numerous international interviewees cited local councils in the towns of Saraqib and Maraat an-Numaan, where local democracy activists demonstrated remarkable courage in standing up to armed extremist groups and the regime. Yet inspiring as these examples were, they did not necessarily change the prospects of the broader opposition project, which was steadily losing ground militarily. Notably, as armed extremists expanded their control and the space for viable programming continued to shrink, this dynamic intensified. If battlefield losses or legal restrictions meant that the United States was able to support only five opposition local councils in a given area, then it reported on those five mostly positive cases rather than the dozens of cases where it could not operate.<sup>146</sup> One review of a Western donor-funded local council program illustrates how field-based monitoring obscured just how severely the conflict was undermining stabilization programs' viability. The report notes that a number of the program's councils were "lost when overrun by the regime, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or Da'esh affiliates."<sup>147</sup> Yet when local councils were eliminated due to the conflict environment, these data points were dropped from aggregate statistics about the program's success.<sup>148</sup>

Even beyond donor government pathologies, the broader communications ecosystem further perpetuated this sense of hope. In such a highly networked conflict, the proliferation of social media allowed prominent hubs of resistance to communicate their compelling stories to the outside world. Carnegie Nonresident Senior Fellow Marc Lynch notes that, from the start of the revolution, "With very few journalists on the ground to provide independent verification, videos captured on mobile phones were uploaded" by "activists who actively curated their contents to support the rebellion. . . . Western media relied heavily for information and sources upon activists they came to trust, thus acting as megaphones for one side of a complex war."<sup>149</sup> More recently, researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov recapped interviews with hundreds of Syrians inside opposition-held areas, arguing that media outlets have underreported the views of many rural Sunnis who became disillusioned with the revolutionary project. She attributes this phenomenon to local and international media outlets which

are heavily reliant on local fixers who are supporters of the revolution and motivated by the desire to highlight the atrocities perpetrated by the regime and its allies against the population. The stratum of the population inside Syria that succeeded in establishing connections with the outside world are mostly local activists, NGO workers and rebels, not the impoverished who cannot afford a smartphone.<sup>150</sup>

Recognizing their lack of visibility on the ground, Western donors worked hard to set up innovative monitoring, evaluation, and independent research mechanisms in Syria, producing considerable progress in aid accountability against a challenging backdrop. These detailed weekly reports and surveys of community attitudes also provided donors and implementers with firsthand insight into the depth of courage and commitment of many local councils. However, inevitably, these monitoring mechanisms also had stake in the continuation of the opposition governance project. And even when evaluators clearly identified locations in which a program had “failed,” these cases often received scant attention due to limitations on reporting, such as the security situation in these areas or the reluctance of locals to speak out. Western officials thus received ample “atmospheric” reporting demonstrating how specific local community councils were earning greater local popularity but less data describing why others had failed.

As a result, within Washington, understanding of local councils gravitated toward particularly impressive but not necessarily generalizable examples of success. One field-based U.S. staffer recalled that the only time he was asked for reporting on program effectiveness was when “some DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary of State] was headed into a meeting at the White House, and needed some colorful good news story from the field.”<sup>151</sup> Reports to the purse string-holders in Congress took on the same logic. Decisions about local political assistance often depended upon anecdotal, rather than more broadly applicable, reports of trend lines. Amid inspiring examples, locally focused donors, implementers, and Syrian counterparts alike could focus on pockets of hope rather than the broader conflict.<sup>152</sup> Yet even the most robust demonstrations of local civic resistance were unable to withstand internationalized armed pressure.

### The Allure of “Turning a Corner”

Today, it is evident that opposition governance ambitions bore increasingly little resemblance to reality in a future Syria. But this is only fully apparent in retrospect: at several earlier stages in the war, advocates of local stabilization programs had reason to think the opposition might prevail, and that local political programs might achieve their objectives.

In her study of critical junctures in U.S.-Syria policy decisionmaking, analyst and former U.S. government official Mona Yacoubian argues that the U.S. bureaucracy broadly underestimated Assad’s durability. Senior officials, for instance, had dismissed him as a “dead man walking” who would be ousted by Christmas 2013.<sup>153</sup> The Americans, she claims, also underestimated Russia and Iran’s commitment to Assad’s survival.<sup>154</sup> These early misperceptions likely had considerable staying power in shaping U.S. assumptions behind local-level programs.

Even after the conflict tested these expectations, at several points, invested stakeholders hoped that Western policy might be on the verge of shifting toward stronger military intervention against Assad that might have changed the war's outcome. The Obama administration's statement that "Assad must go" in 2012, Assad's violation of Obama's "red line" in using chemical weapons in 2013, and recurrent press reports of proposals to arm the opposition or enforce no-fly zones all provided basis for those advocating U.S. policy change. Even after the Russian military intervention in 2015, some local activists expressed hope that the West would finally be moved by the devastating civilian death and displacement tolls to step in.

Syrians who staffed local political programs were a salient part of this dynamic. Stabilization program personnel were often young, passionate activists; as one international recalled, "Activists themselves were part of this equation. The programs *were* the revolution."<sup>155</sup> Field-based international officials recalled the excruciating challenge of telling Syrian counterparts not to get their hopes up, that "the cavalry's not coming."<sup>156</sup> Still, as one stated, "We created a moral hazard problem. The White House continued to come out and tell Syrians that we are behind them, but you and I knew that the White House isn't going to do anything to protect civilians. I get it, the USG [U.S. government] will not risk global escalation by counterbalancing Russian engagement, but they should have just stopped making the statements from the podium."<sup>157</sup>

By 2016, advocates for stronger intervention placed their hopes on the election of Hillary Clinton as U.S. president, as she reportedly had been a strong advocate of more interventionist policy.<sup>158</sup> (Of course, had she been elected, Clinton's actual Syria decisions also would have been shaped by the risk of escalation with Russia and the different context than when she had reportedly advocated for more interventionist position.) Instead, the election of Donald Trump, who had expressed his distaste for the "waste" of U.S. dollars in regime change projects in the Middle East, largely quashed the hopes of those who hoped for a military counter-Assad intervention.

But once the Trump administration took office, its messaging on Syria proved as open for interpretation as a Rorschach inkblot. Amid all the noise and contradictions, advocates for U.S. engagement could find plenty of material to imbue with meaning for Trump administration policy. Trump opted to strike the Syrian regime after Assad deployed chemical weapons in April 2017 and again in April 2018, a marked departure from Obama's unwillingness to enforce his purported "red line." In early 2018, many pointed to then secretary of state Rex Tillerson's public call for the departure of Assad as evidence of increased U.S. military commitment to shaping Syria's future.<sup>159</sup> Even after Tillerson was fired and Trump announced that U.S. troops in eastern Syria would be coming home "very soon," the U.S. Department of Defense continued to voice the need to maintain its presence in eastern Syria in order to consolidate gains from the military campaign against the

Islamic State. More recently, senior administration officials have signaled that the troops will stay to counter Iranian presence.

In parallel, perceptions of “turning a corner” at the local level also perpetuated momentum throughout the war. As the years ticked by, local implementers identified a succession of novel approaches intended to improve their prospects for success. As one longtime implementer recalled, “There’s always a new-new thing. Syria’s new-new things were local councils when we started,” as donors believed that support for these nascent bodies could help deepen opposition success at the community level. “Then it was [higher-level coordination bodies] the LACU, then the ACU, quasi-governmental structures which were set up by the coalition,” which were meant to build the opposition into a more forceful political counterweight to Assad. “Then it was the SIG [Syrian Interim Government], then people became interested in provincial councils, and [opposition government] directorates.”<sup>160</sup> Simultaneously, donors honed processes for remote management, attempting to improve program implementation and thereby yield better outcomes. When program approaches were constantly “novel” and evolving, it was difficult to evaluate them against preset goals and make hard decisions about their prospects for success. It was easy to hope that the “new-new thing” would resolve the gaps between ambitions and reality.

### Geographic Fragmentation and Bureaucratic Competition

The “chaotic,” fragmented nature of the assistance apparatus undermined effective assessment of whether stabilization programs were making progress on achieving their goals.<sup>161</sup> International conflict interventions nearly always struggle with assistance coordination problems, and Syria stabilization efforts presented even more coordination obstacles than usual.<sup>162</sup> Rather than having a single geographic hub for coordination, as in most conflicts, Syrian donor and implementer offices were arrayed across several cities in Turkey, as well as Lebanon, Jordan, northern Iraq, and, more recently, Germany. Each regional government exerted distinct influence on programs based from its territory. Consequently, these remotely managed programs, scattered across local councils in noncontiguous areas, could not benefit from an “opposition capital” within Syria itself.<sup>163</sup> Within the U.S. and several European donor governments, Syria local governance or stabilization programs were frequently split between foreign ministries and aid agencies. Non-Western donors such as the Gulf states further complicated coordination.

In the first years of the conflict, practitioners described a “mad rush” as donor agencies scrambled to respond to the “Assad must go” policy direction.<sup>164</sup> By 2013, as another former official described it, “the circus came to town.”<sup>165</sup> As international aid efforts ballooned, the United States sought to



rationalize its approaches by standing up the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team in Turkey and the Southern Syria Assistance Platform in Jordan. But the plethora of other players, multiple geographic locations, personnel turnover, and remote management environment resulted in a messy local aid apparatus. One official recalled that even after concerted attempts to devise a coordinated donor strategy, “We were tripping over each other. Everyone was fighting for partners or activities, like watching five-year-olds play soccer. No one played their position.” Even when programs were assigned clearly defined lines of effort at the top level, “they all bled into each other at the bottom. [Coordination] was still not working at the ground level.”<sup>166</sup> Efforts to develop the Syrian exiled opposition into coordinating assistance also foundered.

The consequence of this unpredictable environment was that, within the U.S. government, bureaucratic actors responded in predictable fashion: striving to demonstrate relevance, perpetuate programs, and ensure that they had the means to keep operating. One former official recalled, “Because of the total lack of a USG strategic plan for Syria that could be enunciated, [then secretary of state John] Kerry was having to go to Capitol Hill every quarter and say, ‘I need another \$500 million’ and having to justify it.”<sup>167</sup> It led to an escalatory cycle: “What that meant was that every quarter, each of the U.S. government operating units was in an existential fight to demonstrate that their stuff was the most relevant on the ground. If you couldn’t demonstrate you had accomplished stuff, you would be cut out—so you had to pretend that your one governance advisor was providing systemic governance reform. Everyone was fighting for their programs.”<sup>168</sup>

Ultimately, this pervasive fragmentation and uncertainty within the aid apparatus and the broader Syria policy context propelled the momentum for designing, advocating for, and funding another round of stabilization programs. Bureaucratic agencies and implementers felt the need to sustain programmatic capacity and flexibility; because assistance programs can take years to design and procure, no one wanted to predict that the policymakers or legislators would *not* want them in some form at some future point.

## Conclusion: Implications for Future Stabilization Engagements

In Syria, Western donors’ local stabilization objectives were embedded in a dramatically deteriorating broader policy and conflict environment. Stabilization programs ended up captive to these circumstances: an effort initially conceived to support local governance under a new regime grew increasingly incongruous with political-military realities as the current regime refused to leave. Despite the unique features of the Syrian war, this will not be the last time the international

community attempts to maintain local political programs under inauspicious circumstances. A close investigation of implications for future engagements presents several key lessons for review.

First, stabilization assistance can succeed only when it coheres clearly and closely with high-level strategy. The 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review calls for U.S. government practitioners to “set realistic, analytically backed political goals” in stabilization environments—an obvious yet necessary reminder of the imperative of matching ends to means. As ambivalence toward and tensions within U.S. Syria policy grew more pronounced over time, stabilization practitioners were thrust into the unenviable position of having to represent these complexities to local counterparts. Stabilization programs faced tremendous challenges trying to operationalize ambiguous and highly nuanced donor policies on the ground.

Second, stabilization efforts must pursue objectives that are realistic within the broader political and security context. Even with practitioners’ painstaking refinement of “theories of change,” local political programs fell hostage to high-level conflict dynamics. As one longtime Western practitioner reflected, “Everyone thinks they have a Theory of Change. But unfortunately, the question of what are we really trying to change, and how the activities will lead to it, is often not well answered, vis-a-vis the big picture.”<sup>169</sup> In Syria, shifts in local governance processes and norms did not durably affect the overall balance of power; increasingly, armed actors shaped the balance of power for them. As one Syrian implementer reflected, “Theories of change don’t give you genuine meaning for how change actually occurs [in Syria]. It should be, ‘If we do this governance program, this will be the governance result, *unless* one or two or three things also happen. For example, if we help this local council, people will support them because they want an alternative to the regime, *unless* some other people hijack them with a Kalashnikov, and unless they arrest the whole local council.’”<sup>170</sup>

Finally, the international community must think more deeply on how it conceives of “progress” or “success” in dynamic stabilization environments. It must further reconsider how it measures them. The Stabilization Assistance Review highlights the importance of iterative, adaptable measurement to capture nonlinear progress; Syria and other conflict contexts have witnessed huge technical and technological innovations in monitoring and evaluation techniques. Yet in the case of Syria, analytic gaps, perception biases, and organizational fragmentation have undermined a sober assessment of the effectiveness or viability of programmatic approaches. Although stabilization programs amplified considerable local political will for improved subnational governance, stabilization practitioners are among the first to acknowledge that ultimately the programs’ objectives proved unrealistic and their legacy incomplete.<sup>171</sup> As one international official put it, “The future is contingent, and we predicted the future wrong.”<sup>172</sup> Better conceptualization of “success” would help policymakers identify when to

end ineffective policies, and better measurement would help prevent biased judgments that fuel false optimism.

Syria's story is still being written. Perhaps the Syrian diaspora will harbor the seeds of the next revolution; perhaps some of the more participatory local governance norms supported by stabilization programs will find their way into a future decentralized political bargain. At present, the outlook ranges from uncertain to bleak. As one Syrian activist summed up the enduring impact of local political programs, "I would like to say that our legacy is that we cultivated a seed of democracy in these areas. And that no matter what happens, people will rise up. To be honest, I think this is our only legacy. If you took those away from me, that means I spent seven years getting nothing done. I truly hope not. But I have no reason to think the regime will change."<sup>173</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because of the fluid nature of programs and donor terminology, exact figures for stabilization and governance support to local councils are unavailable. This paper arrives at the sum of approximately one billion dollars by tallying nonhumanitarian aid for stabilization and governance support from three key Western donors: the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. While the following figures show that these three donors spent roughly two billion dollars in nonhumanitarian aid to support governance, not all of this funding specifically targeted local councils. This paper conservatively estimates that approximately half of such resources were dedicated to local political programming. Nonhumanitarian aid for stabilization and governance in the aggregate breaks down as follows. First, since 2011, the United States has spent \$420.6 million in nonhumanitarian aid dedicated specifically to “governance” in Syria. Second, between 2012 and 2018, the United Kingdom has provided £234.8 million (approximately \$308 million) in nonhumanitarian aid to Syria, including targeted support for local councils and stabilization. This estimate comprises £101.8 million given between 2012 and 2015 through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as well as £133 million provided between 2016 and 2018 by the U.K.’s Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund, which was launched in April 2015. Finally, as of April 2018, the European Union has spent €1.035 billion (approximately \$1.210 billion) in stabilization and related nonhumanitarian assistance, including €758 million via the European Neighbourhood Instrument, €249 million through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, and €28 million through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. Other Western donors, including Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, have also funded programs to build local governance capacity in Syria. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, for instance, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has given \$48.8 million in aid to “Government and Civil Society.” See: “U.S. Foreign Aid by Country: Syria,” USAID Foreign Aid Explorer, accessed September 27, 2018, [https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/SYR?measure=Obligations&fiscal\\_year=2018](https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/SYR?measure=Obligations&fiscal_year=2018); “UK Non-Humanitarian Aid in Response to the Syria Conflict,” UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, December 1, 2015, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/481277/Syria\\_UK\\_Non-Humanitarian\\_Support\\_-\\_Public\\_Document.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/481277/Syria_UK_Non-Humanitarian_Support_-_Public_Document.pdf); “Annual Report 2016/17,” UK Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund, July 2017, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/630077/conflict-stability-security-fund-annual-report-2016-2017.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630077/conflict-stability-security-fund-annual-report-2016-2017.pdf); “Annual Report 2017/18,” UK Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund, July 2018, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/727383/CSSF\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2017\\_to\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/727383/CSSF_Annual_Report_2017_to_2018.pdf); “Syria Factsheet,” European External Action Service, April 16, 2018, accessed August 22, 2018; Richard Youngs, “Bolstering Europe’s Localist Approach to Syria,” Carnegie Europe, April 4, 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/04/04/bolstering-europe-s-localist-approach-to-syria-pub-75914>; “Sida’s Aid to Syria,” Open Aid, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://openaid.se/aid/swedish-international-development-cooperation-agency/syria/all-organisations/government-civil-society/2018/>.

“Politically oriented” here reflects that these programs supported a political objective of empowering governance structures in rebel-held areas, in opposition to the sovereign government of Syria, rather than providing needs-based humanitarian assistance. U.S. local council programs varied in their level of political emphasis. Some emphasized more technical aspects of development, capacity building, and service delivery, but still aligned with overarching political objectives.

<sup>3</sup> Donors also generally included support to the justice sector, the Free Syrian Police, community security, and civil defense as part of their stabilization portfolios; those activities are not included in this paper. In addition, donors provided humanitarian assistance, oriented under humanitarian principles rather than political objectives, through local councils.

<sup>4</sup> This paper focuses on U.S. high-level Syria policy and does not attempt to characterize the evolutions of the wide range of other Western powers’ high-level Syria policies. It also focuses primarily on U.S. local-level Syria programs but does occasionally make note of other Western donors’ local council programs where they parallel American ones.

<sup>5</sup> See endnote 1 for an explanation of how this paper arrives at the sum of approximately one billion dollars. See endnote 2 for this paper’s definition of “politically oriented” assistance.

<sup>6</sup> On this concept, see, for instance, the U.S. Institute of Peace’s “Day After” Project, which brought together members of the Syrian opposition to participate in an independent transition planning process: “The Day After Project,” U.S. Institute of Peace, accessed September 28, 2018, <https://www.usip.org/publications/day-after-project>.

<sup>7</sup> See endnote 3 for a clarification of the parameters of the programs examined in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> “Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas,” U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/283589.pdf>. Other donors, most notably the United Kingdom, also formalized

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their own approaches to stabilization; see “Building Stability Framework,” UK Department for International Development (DFID), 2016, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5968990ded915d0baf00019e/UK-Aid-Connect-Stability-Framework.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> One key lesson is that practitioners must “[l]ink subnational engagements with national diplomacy to advance stabilization.” See “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 8.

<sup>10</sup> “Background Briefing on Additional Nonlethal Assistance to Syria,” U.S. Department of State, February 28, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/02/205461.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> This steadfast support diminished in 2017, as donors limited governance programming in northwest Syria but pivoted some programs to southwestern and eastern Syria. Only in mid-2018, with the Trump administration’s freeze of stabilization assistance and the Assad regime’s reconquest of southwestern Syria, did this support fully fade, although several programs have relocated to northeastern Syria.

<sup>12</sup> The scope of programs examined corresponds to the U.S. government’s newly codified definition of stabilization as “a political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict,” although these programs were not always labeled as such. See “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 4.

<sup>13</sup> Several interviewees mentioned the inconsistent donor terminology. As one former official noted, “There was no agreed-upon parlance or vernacular with which the civilian programs could talk about their programming. This was part of the problem we had from mid-2015 onwards, particularly as it related to stabilization programming in eastern Syria. This problem was exacerbated when the civilians tried to communicate with their military counterparts who were using completely different terms for stabilization.” Author email correspondence with former Western official, July 2018.

<sup>14</sup> U.S., UK, and European member states’ high-level Syria policies often varied, even when their programs took similar approaches. Recognizing the complexity of this picture, the paper focuses its analysis on U.S. policy.

<sup>15</sup> Liz Sly and Jason Uzman, “Obama: Syrian President Assad Must Step Down,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/obama-syrian-president-assad-must-step-down/2011/08/18/gIQAM75UNJ\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/obama-syrian-president-assad-must-step-down/2011/08/18/gIQAM75UNJ_blog.html).

<sup>16</sup> “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks,” United Nations, December 18, 2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> In terms of official policy statements, the United States under president Barack Obama consistently adhered to this policy goal. Official U.S. policy statements have become more inconsistent since the inauguration of President Donald Trump. In March 2017, then White House spokesman Sean Spicer acknowledged the “political reality” of Assad’s grip on power. However, in April 2017, the Trump administration suggested a harder line on Assad after his use of chemical weapons, and in January 2018, in a high-level policy speech at Stanford University, then secretary of state Rex Tillerson reiterated that Assad’s departure was an official U.S. policy objective. Since Tillerson’s departure in March 2018, U.S. Syria policy has not been formally articulated. In June 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated support for “the political process set forth in the UNSCR 2254;” in July, Pompeo stated in testimony that, “There’s been no change in U.S. policy, with respect to our activities in Syria.” See Mike Pompeo, “Support for Ongoing Defeat ISIS Operations in Syria,” U.S. Department of State, June 5, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/06/282958.htm>. See also “Hearing on American Diplomacy to Advance our National Security Strategy,” Senate Foreign Relations Committee, CQ Congressional Testimony Transcripts, July 25, 2018, <https://plus.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5365258?0>.

<sup>18</sup> USAID defines a “theory of change” as “how and why a project purpose is expected to be achieved in a given context,” including the “If-then (causal) outcomes needed to achieve the desired change; major interventions that USAID and others will undertake to catalyze these outcomes; and key assumptions that underlie the success of this theory.” See “How-To Note: Developing a Project Logic Model (and Its Associated Theory of Change),” USAID Learning Lab, July 2017, [https://usaidealarninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/project\\_logic\\_model\\_how\\_to\\_note\\_final\\_sep1.pdf](https://usaidealarninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/project_logic_model_how_to_note_final_sep1.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Author interview with Western practitioner, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>20</sup> A key difference between Syria and other state-building interventions is that in Syria, this support was directed to “rebel governance” units rather than the host government. See Frances Z. Brown, “Seeing Like a State-Builder: Replication of Donor Reconstruction Dilemmas in Syria,” in “The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction,” Project on Middle East Political Science, September 2018, 8–13, [https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_30\\_Post-Conflict\\_Web.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/POMEPS_Studies_30_Post-Conflict_Web.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Justin Vela, “Holding Civil Society Workshops While Syria Burns,” *Foreign Policy*, October 12, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/10/holding-civil-society-workshops-while-syria-burns/>.

<sup>22</sup> Author interviews with Western officials, Washington, DC, December 2017, and Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Author interview with Western official, Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Author interview with Western official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>25</sup> The “political” programs studied here varied: some, such as those managed by USAID’s Middle East Bureau, focused on development and technical aspects of service delivery, rather than emphasizing the political character of local councils. This paper characterizes them as political because they aligned with the U.S. policy of supporting local governance in a post-Assad Syria but acknowledges that a wide range of political emphasis existed.

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<sup>26</sup> Obama first released a public statement calling on Assad to “step aside” and announcing financial sanctions against the regime in August 2011. See Macon Phillips, “President Obama: ‘The Future of Syria Must Be Determined by Its People, but President Bashar Al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way,’” White House, August 18, 2018, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Tabler, “How Syria Came to This,” *Atlantic*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/syria-chemical-weapons/558065/>.

<sup>28</sup> Mona Yacoubian, “Critical Junctures in United States Policy Toward Syria: An Assessment of the Counterfactuals,” Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, August 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Yacoubian-Critical-Junctures-US-Policy-Syria.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, reprint ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017), 105–38.

<sup>30</sup> Not all U.S. government policymakers shared this optimism, even at this early juncture. As one recalled, “In 2011, there was a split between those who had worked on more protracted conflicts and felt we might be settling in for a more protracted conflict (veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Bosnia) and those who had a more optimistic outlook.” Email correspondence, former U.S. government official, July 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Author interview with U.S. official, Washington, DC, December 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, “Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?,” World Bank, 2013, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/11859>; Elisabeth King, “A Critical Review of Community-Driven Development Programmes in Conflict-Affected Contexts,” International Rescue Committee, March 2013, <https://www.rescue.org/report/critical-review-community-driven-development-programs-conflict-affected-contexts>; Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, “Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Programme: Final Report,” World Bank, 2013, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/16637>.

<sup>34</sup> Mansuri and Rao, “Localizing Development.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 4; King, “A Critical Review of Community-Driven Development Programmes,” 3.

<sup>36</sup> “Formative Evaluation of the Support to Emerging Governance Structures (Tamkeen) Programme in Syria,” IMC Worldwide, May 2016, 3, <http://rmteam.org/media/1141/2016-11-22-external-tamkeen-report.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> DFID’s own stabilization guidance recommends this approach of “broadening inclusion over time” in conflict-affected contexts as best practice. See “Building Stability Framework,” 1.

<sup>38</sup> Some donors delineated clear, specific conditions for local council assistance: for example, the U.S. government’s START platform in Turkey and the United Kingdom’s Tamkeen program both laid out their own internal criteria for local council (and Tamkeen Committee) support. However, the fluidity of the environment, the evolving composition of councils themselves, and the multitude of programs operating meant that it was nearly impossible to implement universally observed criteria.

<sup>39</sup> Author interview with former Western official, Washington, DC, December 2017; author interview with Western practitioner, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Author interview with former Western official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>41</sup> There were exceptions: for example, the United Kingdom’s Tamkeen program undertook a sophisticated approach to systemic training and “learning by doing.” Author interviews with Western practitioner, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Author phone interview with U.S. official, November 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Author interview with former U.S. official, January 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with U.S. official, Washington, DC, December 2017.

<sup>45</sup> “ICAM Community Profiles: Key Takeaways,” Report Prepared for USAID, n.d., on file with author, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Author phone interview with donor official, December 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Author email correspondence with former Western official, July 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Author phone interview with U.S. official, December 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.

<sup>50</sup> As other observers have remarked, this is a challenge inherent to many conflict or postconflict interventions.

<sup>51</sup> Author phone interview with U.S. official, December 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Yacoubian, “Critical Junctures in United States Policy Toward Syria,” 26.

<sup>53</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the lack of good U.S. policy options as Syria’s multiplayer proxy war escalated, see Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, 105–38, 189–224.

<sup>54</sup> Author interview with international official, Washington, DC, March 2018.

<sup>55</sup> In August 2012, Obama declared that Assad’s use of chemical weapons would be a “red line” that would “change [his] calculus” on use of military force in Syria. The Assad regime used chemical weapons in relatively small-scale attacks in late 2012 and early 2013; in August 2013, it made a more egregious attack that killed over 100 civilians and was quickly confirmed by the U.S. intelligence

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community. A coalition of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States emerged to strike in response, but the British House of Commons refused to support strikes. Obama then sought and received congressional authorization for a strike, but the United States ultimately chose to endorse a Russian-backed plan to (allegedly) dismantle Syria's chemical weapons capability. See Ben Rhodes, "Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis," *Atlantic*, June 3, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/inside-the-white-house-during-the-syrian-red-line-crisis/561887/>.

<sup>56</sup> This paper does not take a position on the question of whether the "red line" strikes were appropriate but merely notes the sentiments of many Syrians and Westerners in local stabilization programs. For balanced discussions of the considerations at play in the "red line" decision, see Yacoubian, "Critical Junctures in United States Policy Toward Syria"; Tabler, "How Syria Came to This;" and the insider account from Rhodes, "Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis."

<sup>57</sup> The counter-Islamic State campaign included an air campaign, the formation of a "global coalition" of partners, and eventually a military partnership with the Kurdish-led, Arab-Kurdish-constituted SDF.

<sup>58</sup> On the armed extremist groups in Idlib and the increasingly doubtful viability of an opposition-centered governance project, see Sam Heller, "The Home of Syria's Only Real Rebels," *Daily Beast*, June 17, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/17/the-home-of-syria-s-only-real-rebels>.

<sup>59</sup> Whether genuine reform of the Assad regime was even possible was a separate yet related topic of debate. Many argued that it would assent to cosmetic decentralization concessions but maintain its security apparatus throughout Syria, thus not changing the real balance of power on the ground.

<sup>60</sup> Author interview with Western practitioner, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Amman, February 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Carothers and Diane De Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 137.

<sup>68</sup> Reports of elite capture, nepotism, and corruption are difficult to assess given the array of local councils and the fluidity of the context. For discussion in the context of Idlib, see Sam Heller, "Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib," Century Foundation, November 29, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/report/keeping-lights-rebel-idlib/?agreed=1>.

<sup>69</sup> "Formative Evaluation of the Support to Emerging Governance Structures (Tamkeen) Programme in Syria," IMC Worldwide, May 2016, 23, <http://rmteam.org/media/1141/2016-11-22-external-tamkeen-report.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Author interview with former Western official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Author correspondence with former Western official, July 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Author interview with former Western official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, "Development Assistance and Counter Extremism: A Guide to Programming," USAID, October 2009; Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Peter Romaniuk, and Rafia Barakat, "Evaluating Countering Violent Extremism Programming: Practice and Progress," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, September 2013, [http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Fink\\_Romaniuk\\_Barakat\\_EVALUATING-CVE-PROGRAMMING\\_20132.pdf](http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Fink_Romaniuk_Barakat_EVALUATING-CVE-PROGRAMMING_20132.pdf); Daniel P. Aldrich, "First Steps Towards Hearts and Minds? USAID's Countering Violent Extremism Policies in Africa," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (2014): 523–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.738263>; and Jeffrey Swedberg and Lainie Reisman, "Mid-Term Evaluation of Three Countering Violent Extremism Projects," USAID, February 2013, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDACX479.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACX479.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> "Fact Sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism," press release, White House, February 18, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>; Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, "Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism – The Way Forward," United Nations, May 28, 2018, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/geneva-conference-preventing-violent-extremism>.

<sup>78</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>80</sup> For in-depth discussion of these complex dynamics, see Heller, "Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib."

<sup>81</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.

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- <sup>84</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>85</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.
- <sup>86</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.
- <sup>87</sup> I am grateful to Sam Heller for developing this point. Email correspondence, July 2018.
- <sup>88</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.
- <sup>89</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.
- <sup>90</sup> “ICAM Community Profiles: Key Takeaways,” USAID/START Independent Monitoring Unit, May 26, 2016, 2.
- <sup>91</sup> Hamish Nixon and Richard Mallett, “Service Delivery, Public Perceptions and State Legitimacy: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium,” Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017, [https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/Service-delivery-public-perceptions-and-state-legitimacy\\_Findings-from-the-Secure-Livelihoods-Research-Consortium.pdf](https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/Service-delivery-public-perceptions-and-state-legitimacy_Findings-from-the-Secure-Livelihoods-Research-Consortium.pdf); and “ICAM Community Profiles: Key Takeaways.” Notably, and incorporating these insights, some U.S. and UK programs emphasized inculcating participatory processes, rather than delivering services.
- <sup>92</sup> Phone interview with international official, November 2017.
- <sup>93</sup> These reasons varied, reflecting almost every aspect of the challenging Syrian context. According to one analyst, “The Aleppo provincial council was one governance success story, but most other provincial councils failed to really establish themselves. Some were only nominally responsible for provinces mostly or entirely under hostile control, whether by the government or the Islamic State. Others were tangled up in accusations of mismanagement and corruption, or their leadership was deemed unacceptable by neighboring countries and they were denied international assistance. In all cases, they struggled to assert themselves over local councils that had their own autonomous sources of support and relationships with donors.” Email correspondence with Sam Heller, August 2018. See also Heller, “Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib.”
- <sup>94</sup> Kheder Khaddour, “Local Wars and the Chance for Decentralized Peace in Syria,” Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2017, 1, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/28/local-wars-and-chance-for-decentralized-peace-in-syria-pub-68369>.
- <sup>95</sup> Phone interview with international official, November 2017.
- <sup>96</sup> “Business Case and Summary 300011,” UK Department for International Development, January 2017, 1, <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300011/documents>; “Annual Review 300011,” UK Department for International Development, February 2018, 2, <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300011/documents>.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> See, for example, James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, “A Peace Plan for Syria II,” RAND Corporation, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE202.html>; James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, “A Peace Plan for Syria III,” RAND Corporation, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE233.html>.
- <sup>99</sup> Author interview with former Western official, Washington, DC, January 2018.
- <sup>100</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, “Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html>.
- <sup>101</sup> Hashem Osseiran, “A Look at the Remaining Rebel Territory in Syria,” *News Deeply*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/05/14/a-look-at-the-remaining-rebel-territory-in-syria>.
- <sup>102</sup> Donors continued to support civil society elements in the northwest through 2017 and early 2018 but worked with a diminishing number of local councils given that many had become affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. By mid-2018, the freeze of U.S. stabilization funding and other donors’ strategic considerations had terminated even these programs.
- <sup>103</sup> Anthony Elghossain, “The Disappointments of De-Escalation and Decentralization,” *Salon Syria*, July 11, 2017, <https://salonsyria.com/the-disappointments-of-de-escalation-and-decentralization/>.
- <sup>104</sup> The number of internally displaced and refugee Syrians has been growing rapidly in 2018, and the numbers are likely higher than those reported in the UN statistics of registered refugees and displaced persons. See “Syria Emergency,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), last updated April 19, 2018, accessed September 27, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>; “Syria Refugee Regional Response,” Operational Portal: Refugee Simulations, UNHCR, last updated September 24, 2018, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>; Noor Al Hussein, “Syrians in Displacement,” *Forced Migration Review 57* (February 2018): <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/forced-migration-review-issue-57-february-2018-syrians-displacement>.
- <sup>105</sup> Quoted in Steven Heydemann, “Beyond Fragility: Syria and the Challenges of Reconstruction in Fierce States,” Brookings Institution, June 26, 2018, 3, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-fragility-syria-and-the-challenges-of-reconstruction-in-fierce-states/>.
- <sup>106</sup> Author interviews with Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.
- <sup>107</sup> See, for example, Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>108</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.
- <sup>109</sup> Author interview, Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.



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- <sup>110</sup> Author interviews, Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.
- <sup>111</sup> Maha Yahya, “The Politics of Dispossession,” *Diwan* (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, May 9, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76290>.
- <sup>112</sup> Author interview with U.S. government official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>113</sup> Author interviews with Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.
- <sup>114</sup> Author phone interview with Western official, December 2017.
- <sup>115</sup> Author phone interview with Western international official, December 2017. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is largely viewed as a rebranded al-Qaeda affiliate.
- <sup>116</sup> Author interview with Western official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
- <sup>117</sup> Donor support to the justice and security sector was distinct from and complemented local stabilization programs; it is beyond the scope of this report. For more on the inherent challenges of these programs, see “UK Aid ‘Diverted to Syria Extremists,’” BBC News, December 4, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42217132>.
- <sup>118</sup> This phenomenon is not unique to the Syrian case; many authors argue that in wartime, military control determines popular support, not vice versa. See Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Jacqueline Hazelton, “The ‘Hearts and Minds’ Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare,” *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 80–113, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00283](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00283).
- <sup>119</sup> Author interviews with international officials, Washington, DC, January 2018; Istanbul, February 2018, and by phone, March 2018.
- <sup>120</sup> Emily Burchfield, “Is Local Government Legitimacy Possible in Eastern Syria?,” *Syria Source* (blog), Atlantic Council, April 3, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/is-local-government-legitimacy-possible-in-eastern-syria>; Dan Wilkofsky, “The Commune System: A Look at Local PYD Governance in Northeastern Syria,” *Syria Source* (blog), Atlantic Council, March 13, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-commune-system-a-look-at-local-pyd-governance-in-northeastern-syria>.
- <sup>121</sup> Richard Hall, “Syria’s Kurds Prepare for a Future without the US,” *National*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/syria-s-kurds-prepare-for-a-future-without-the-us-1.757187>.
- <sup>122</sup> Laura Pitel, “Turkey Holds up Jarablus as Blueprint for Role in Syria,” *Financial Times*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/75995068-512f-11e8-b3ee-41e0209208ec>.
- <sup>123</sup> Author interviews with Syrian stakeholders, Istanbul and Amman, February 2018.
- <sup>124</sup> Author interviews with Syrian stakeholders, Istanbul and Amman, February and April 2018.
- <sup>125</sup> Elizabeth Tsurkov, “The Breaking of Syria’s Rebellion,” Forum for Regional Thinking, July 10, 2018, <http://www.regthink.org/en/articles/the-breaking-of-syrias-rebellion>.
- <sup>126</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.
- <sup>127</sup> Jennifer Cafarella, “Don’t Get Out of Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-07-11/dont-get-out-syria>; and Heydemann, “Beyond Fragility.”
- <sup>128</sup> Author correspondence with international practitioner, August 2018.
- <sup>129</sup> Author interview with international implementer, Amman, February 2018.
- <sup>130</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>131</sup> Author correspondence with international practitioner, August 2018.
- <sup>132</sup> Author interview with international official, Istanbul, February 2018.
- <sup>133</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Istanbul, February 2018.
- <sup>134</sup> Author interviews with U.S. officials, Washington, DC, Istanbul, and by phone, December 2017, January 2018, and February 2018.
- <sup>135</sup> “Tamkeen Project Completion Review,” Department for International Development (DFID), January 2017, 41.
- <sup>136</sup> Ibid.; “Formative Evaluation of the Support to Emerging Governance Structures (Tamkeen) Programme in Syria,” IMC Worldwide, May 2016, 25-26, <http://rmteam.org/media/1141/2016-11-22-external-tamkeen-report.pdf>.
- <sup>137</sup> Author interviews with Western officials, Amman, February and April 2018. For press reporting on the progress in this region, see, for example, Nicholas Heras and Shadi Martini, “The One Place in Syria That Works,” *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/23/the-one-place-in-syria-that-works/>.
- <sup>138</sup> It also contradicts the U.S. government’s own recommendations for effective stabilization, which call policymakers to set analytically-backed political goals. See “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 6.
- <sup>139</sup> This distinction did not break down fully as a division between those in Washington versus those in the field, but rather as one between those with a programmatic versus a policy focus. In interviews, some Washington-based former officials with direct oversight of local stabilization programs were the most vocal in articulating the tension between U.S. policy choices and local stabilization program objectives.
- <sup>140</sup> Author interview with former U.S. officials, Washington, DC, July 2018.
- <sup>141</sup> Author interview with international official, Washington, DC, March 2018.

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- <sup>142</sup> Sections of the Syrian opposition also deployed this argument to maintain Western investment in their projects.
- <sup>143</sup> As one former U.S. official recalled, “I asked the Special Envoy who was representing the average Joe in Khan Shaykhoun in Geneva or Astana. He said, ‘Well, the armed actors in that area may be participating in Geneva.’ I had to remind him that the USG had multimillion-dollar local governance projects in place . . . and that representing their constituencies in Geneva and elsewhere is exactly what should be happening. He was too caught up in the armed actor world (read: [the jihadist group] *Ahrar al-Sham*) to be aware of anything going on outside of it.” Author email correspondence with former U.S. official, July 2018.
- <sup>144</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>145</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018; author interview with former U.S. official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>146</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.
- <sup>147</sup> “Tamkeen Project Completion Review,” Department for International Development (DFID), January 2017, 3.
- <sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>149</sup> Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, 109–10.
- <sup>150</sup> Tsurkov, “The Breaking of Syria’s Rebellion.”
- <sup>151</sup> Author interview with international official, Istanbul, February 2018.
- <sup>152</sup> Author interview with Western analyst, Beirut, February 2018.
- <sup>153</sup> Yacoubian, “Critical Junctures in United States Policy Toward Syria,” 6.
- <sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>155</sup> Author interview with international official, Istanbul, February 2018.
- <sup>156</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>157</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>158</sup> Hillary Clinton had been known for her support for a plan, during Obama’s first term, to arm and equip rebel forces in Syria. Then Central Intelligence Agency director David Petraeus also supported this plan.
- <sup>159</sup> Rex Tillerson, “Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria,” U.S. Department of State, January 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm>.
- <sup>160</sup> Author interview with international official, Amman, February 2018.
- <sup>161</sup> Khaddour, “Local Wars and the Chance for Decentralized Peace in Syria,” 1.
- <sup>162</sup> For a comparative overview of international coordination challenges in historic interventions, see Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace* (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner, 2008).
- <sup>163</sup> The Syrian Interim Government launched shadow “ministries” in later years, but they were not all based in the same places within opposition-held Syria.
- <sup>164</sup> Author phone interview with former international official, December 2017.
- <sup>165</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>166</sup> Author interview with former international official, Washington, DC, December 2017.
- <sup>167</sup> Author phone interview with former international official, December 2017.
- <sup>168</sup> Author phone interview with former international official, December 2017.
- <sup>169</sup> Author interview with Western implementer, Amman, February 2018.
- <sup>170</sup> Author phone interview with Syrian stakeholder, March 2018.
- <sup>171</sup> Of course, even with different high-level security interventions, it is by no means certain that a democratic, post-Assad Syria would have been realized. Russia and Iran may have escalated counter-pressure, as many have argued.
- <sup>172</sup> Author interview with international official, Istanbul, March 2018.
- <sup>173</sup> Author interview with Syrian stakeholder, Amman, April 2018.





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