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COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT DAR'A

November 2020

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INTRODUCTION

It is often with good reason that Dar'a is invariably described as the 'cradle of the Syrian revolution. Displays of anti-government sentiment were widespread in 2011, and even today — over two years since reconciliation — semi-autonomous rebel groups still patrol the city's southern neighbourhoods of Dar'a Al-Balad. Convention seldom captures nuance however, and Dar'a's characterisation as an opposition stronghold fails to recognise the complexities produced by nearly a decade of warfare, geopolitical wrangling, and multi-dimensional social, economic, and political rivalries.

Whereas Eastern Ghouta fell by way of bloody battle and besiegement, the government-led southern Syria offensive was comparatively short and far less destructive. To be sure, the suffering witnessed in Eastern Ghouta likely weakened the resolve of Dar'a's rebels. But the city had deployed its social networks to enable cross-line coordination for years, leveraging family, tribe, and pre-war ties to carve out supply routes, retain a role for central government, and hold a largely static front line that has split the city in two since 2012. When they were approached with a reconciliation deal which broadly upheld many of these arrangements in mid-2018, local armed groups were therefore swift to accept the terms offered.

In return for the right to keep their petty fiefdoms, local armed groups were required to help cover Syrian government security shortfalls and calm international anxiety over the infiltration of Iranian proxies. No longer united by direct opposition to the Syrian government however, local militia have been free to wage a low level insurgency throughout the post-reconciliation period, and have pursued their own violent feuds with one another. Ambiguity over their future only fuels this insecurity, and it remains to be seen how long this situation will be tolerated before prompting more concerted Russian and/or Syrian government action.

In this context, the space for aid is limited. With Dar'a's future in the balance, the Syrian government has imposed stringent aid criteria, has tended to concentrate available resources in the more politically compliant northern neighbourhoods of Dar'a Al-Mahata, and has favoured humanitarian action over development assistance. Despite these conditions, recent weeks may suggest a forthcoming change in policy, as local governance bodies have reportedly initiated talks to strengthen the redistributive role of the state across Dar'a governorate, including through foreign aid actors.

If these reports are accurate, a wider range of activities should be possible, yet donors will encounter a precarious security environment that may be subject to mid-term, uncertain, and potentially significant change. Were donors to work in Dar'a in a manner consistent with HDP nexus principles, they are recommended to do so cautiously, and potentially along the following three channels:¹

¹ Local sources were eager to emphasise that the civil documentation clearing house project proposed by the Al-Tel nexus report in this series is also a potentially impactful option in Dar'a.

- **'Non-traditional' civil society development** - through capacity building of alternative third sector actors including trade unions, professional associations and cooperatives.
- **Advancing women's socio-economic participation** - given limited efforts to date to enable women's contribution both their own independence and the wellbeing of their communities.
- **Agricultural livelihood resilience** - to help restore the city's most viable livelihood option for the poorest residents in support of equitable poverty reduction.

PART 1: HDP NEXUS CHANNELS

'Non-traditional' Civil Society Capacity Development

Why?

Before reconciliation, civil society in opposition-held Dar'a governorate was fairly diverse and benefited from international cross-border support via the Ar-Ramtha crossing. Much of this capacity has since been dismantled however, as the reimposition of state administrative authority, continued insecurity, and a range of restrictive bureaucratic controls ended cross-border aid and compelled many civil society actors to either cease their activities or leave Dar'a entirely. Outside of government-linked NGOs stationed largely in Dar'a Al-Mahata, little in the way of 'traditional' civil society therefore remains, and much of the civil society capacity development undertaken between 2012 and 2018 has been squandered.

If conceptions of civil society actors are expanded however, alternative partners for HDP nexus work are found in the form of trade unions, professional associations, and cooperative organisations. Operating within and across multiple sectors, these bodies are unified by their contribution to the development and function of local assets and industry. For example, market associations in Dar'a Al-Mahata coordinate tradespeople in service of the common business interest, but their activities have humanitarian, development, and peace-related outcomes insofar as they regulate prices, stimulate economic growth, and promote intra- and inter-communal exchange. Such organisations therefore play an important role in community wellbeing, and moreover boast well-established coverage and networks which might avail further opportunities. In recent years however, Dar'a's unions and professional bodies have struggled to deliver owing to resource and staffing shortfalls.

How?

In keeping with long-running efforts to uphold state patronage and clientelism networks, Dar'a-based unions, professional associations, and cooperatives are variously registered with organisations like the General Federation of Trade Unions and Workers (GFTUW) or the General Federation of Peasants. They are therefore linked to, funded, and overseen by the Syrian government and in most cases their activities are managed and/or condoned by prominent local Ba'athists. Though this might generate immediate caution amongst western aid actors, the reality is that these organisations are fundamentally issue-specific and community-oriented. Dar'a-based branches of union bodies, professional organisations, and cooperatives are staffed by professionals, their reputations amongst stakeholders are generally good, and they are well-established in the community. Partnership with such organisations is therefore essentially a partnership with an accepted form of technocracy, and offers a potential route to working both with and without government.

This is not necessarily a novel form of engagement. There have been other instances of foreign support to cooperatives and professional associations in government-controlled Syria, such as an EU-funded programme undertaken in partnership with the FAO and several local organisations.² This large-scale project reached an estimated 82,000 farmers with livelihood development support, implementing a combination of relatively straightforward in-kind distributions, agricultural extension services, and micro-enterprise development. Activities benefited from coordination with a range of stakeholders reached via local agricultural associations, including water associations and local specialists.

² Although aware of this project, more details were not found by this research. It is likely the current project builds on a prior EU-funded partnership with FAO in the Hama region between 2016-2018.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Veterinary Association Development, Dar'a Branch

OBJECTIVE

To strengthen the capacity of the Veterinary Association in order to enable its improved support to pastoral livelihood resilience and its ability to coordinate with governmental, technical, and private sector stakeholders. Project will provide immediate and sustainable livelihood support whilst simultaneously developing an important but underappreciated form of civil society.

SCOPE

Multi-year project to promote rural livelihoods by strengthening the resilience of pastoralists in partnership with the Dar'a Veterinary Association. Activities to address weak productivity of pastoral systems caused by inadequate access to services and essential inputs through in-kind support (e.g. veterinary services, nutrition, breeding stock,) skills and knowledge development (e.g. weather data, herd management, market information), and business development (e.g. credit, micro-enterprise development). Currently modest Dar'a-based Veterinary Association staff will need capacity development support if they are to effectively align their activities with programme aspirations and local and national agricultural priorities. Such support will be necessary from the outset if the Association is to absorb the input of stakeholders including multilateral technical and financial partners, the Syrian government, and the private sector.

RISKS

- Links between Veterinary Association and Syrian government may pose sanction risks
- Reputational risks arising from partnership with government-linked entities
- Activities may be subject to government interference
- Veterinary Association capacity is low, implying slow project start-up
- Beneficiaries of Association support are predominantly rural, where operational security risks to programme continuity and staff are higher.

MITIGATIONS

- Establish clear vetting and procurement procedures and publicly disclose entities involved in project delivery
- Proactively communicate with state entities to anticipate, plan and respond to change
- Monitor protection and rights issues related to the misuse, misappropriation, and malpractice of stakeholders, from diversion through to harassment.

Transitioning from Relief: Women's Socio-economic Participation

Why?

As is common to post-reconciled areas, aid management lies largely in the hands of Syrian government response actors. This has lent a biased approach to the distribution of third sector support, concentrating the limited resources made available to Dar'a in the more state-friendly northern half of the city, Dar'a Al-Mahata. Meanwhile, Dar'a's southern half, Dar'a Al-Balad, remains a victim of its longstanding status as a bastion for local militia, and ongoing negotiations to resolve the status of the area's armed groups detract from the entire city's move towards a more stable 'post-conflict' state. Having yet to fully establish its authority, the government has therefore restricted the scale and scope of aid work, focusing overwhelmingly on humanitarian responses and establishing bureaucratic hurdles to international engagement that are higher than those found in most other post-reconciled locations.

In this context, there remains an urgent need to expand more development-oriented approaches, and to put the potential of the city's population towards peacebuilding goals. Women will be critical to Dar'a's future, but limited investment in their human capital diminishes their potential to contribute to public life. For Dar'a's women, prevailing cultural and social norms disproportionately disadvantage their socio-economic participation in several ways, from labour market exclusion, under-education, to limited access to income and financial services. Weakened women's autonomy in such areas not only constrains their wellbeing, but the wellbeing of their households and the community as a whole. Similarly, young people of both sexes may struggle to access socio-economic resources in a city where job opportunities are few, and where conflict has disrupted their education and earning potential.

How?

In December 2020, the Syrian government reportedly held preliminary discussions to open civil society space in Dar'a city. If these reports are accurate, the move likely results from a combination of factors which indicate longer-term potential for more wide-ranging international engagement. First, the Syrian government recognises that it requires international support if it is to restore the redistributive role of the state given the current paucity of its own resources in Dar'a. And second, the Syrian government may be content with the extent to which local armed groups have been corralled in service of citywide security. Whether this results in an operating environment similar to those found in other post-reconciled locations remains to be seen.³ However, any such opening would create space for donors to help address Dar'a's most pressing needs and theoretically introduce a climate better suited to HDP thinking.

In the early phases of any such potential transition, the Syrian government, its ministries, and local state-affiliated governance bodies are likely to tread carefully. Preference will be given to activities which build on the priorities of Dar'a's various local administrations and/or which operate in less controversial sectors. Promotion of the economic and social participation of women and youth through education, skills training, and limited forms of social protection programming likely corresponds with the government's initially cautious approach. Any such work will need to integrate a gender-focused lens and appropriate market analysis to help direct investment towards positive sustainable outcomes. But such activities are unlikely to fall foul of administrative and security-related barriers providing they account for local cultural and political sensitivities, have a demonstrable impact on community wellbeing, and operate via partners that have a good track record on socio-economic participation and/or prior experience working under the controls of the Syrian government.⁴

³ Operating space may even become more permissive. As the broker of Dar'a's reconciliation deal, Russia bears primary responsibility consolidating local armed actors into a more cohesive command and control structure. Where Russia has orchestrated security in Syria previously, there has generally been a more secure environment in which local actors have been able to conduct their activities. Again, however, it is unclear whether such a context will follow from Russian efforts to consolidate local militia, nor whether that environment will persist in the event of greater Syrian government control.

⁴ Notably, current aid programming in Dar'a seldom makes use of local (i.e. Dar'a-based) staff. New programmes should look to capitalise on local capacity, but be cognisant of the often security-related problems that currently prohibit their contribution to civil society.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Productive social safety net programming for women

OBJECTIVE

To enhance women's ability to advance socially and economically through the acquisition of skills and resources to compete in the labour market, and develop women's capacity to take independent economic decisions. Achieving greater gender equality through women's economic empowerment promises to not only support increased household income and the fulfil basic rights, but is recognised as a gateway to long-term development outcomes and women's more meaningful participation in community-level decision-making.

SCOPE

A combined conditional cash transfer and livelihood enhancement programme conducted through community management committees responsible for neighbourhood-level programme management. Management committees to include the membership of men, women, and other representative social groups, working alongside implementing partners to determine community livelihood needs and ensuring cash is put toward its most productive use in service of women's economic empowerment. Complementary skills training to be provided to women to support their contribution to community needs, with a focus on skills which support sustainable livelihood options.

RISKS

- Common cash transfer risks, including diversion or theft of funds, corruption in beneficiary selection, fraud, and security risks to beneficiaries
- Potential for competing risks across committee members
- National economic difficulties may drive negative attitudes around women's empowerment
- Women may be sidelined
- Limited local civil society to oversee implementation and management.

MITIGATIONS

- Analysis of fraud and corruption risks to determine contextually appropriate cash modality
- Strong monitoring systems and formalised contingency plans to identify and response to fiduciary risks
- Cash distribution planning
- Careful committee composition and management to reduce negative impacts on local power relationships and to avoid reinforcing existing gender inequalities
- Establish transparent and accessible complaint mechanisms
- Monitor protection and rights issues related to the misuse, misappropriation, and malpractice.

Agricultural Development

Why?

Having once been Syria's main fruit and vegetable producing region, agriculture in Dar'a now faces many of the same practical constraints as other parts of the country. Farming outputs may have steadily grown across Dar'a through 2020, but high fuel, fertiliser, and other raw material input prices continue to hit production costs and the city has been replaced as the centre of southern agro-industry by the relatively less damaged and insecure As-Sweida. Food security is also a matter of priority concern amongst IDPs and the governorate's population at large. Combined with intermittent market, road, and border closures prompted by the COVID pandemic, the success and sustainability of farming livelihoods are challenged on several fronts. A 40%-100% price increase for state-provided fertilisers indicates the scale of the problem, yet initiatives to help offset such costs are reportedly inadequate, unevenly distributed and seldom go so far as to meaningfully increase the resilience of the average Dar'a-based farmer.⁵

⁵ As reported by Enab Baladi, current grants and in-kind support provided to Dar'a-based farmers by the Syrian government and SARC are difficult to access for the average smallholder or labourer, and are notorious for providing poor quality materials.

Besides civil service employment, no sector of the local economy can offer as many actual and potential employment options as agriculture and agro-industry. At current production costs however, the output from many local farms is still at less than 50% pre-war volumes, and the industry is squeezed at the other end of the value chain by low household incomes and limited investment. Indeed, local processing facilities, inadequate infrastructure, machinery shortfalls, and insecurity have prompted much local agro-industry to relocate elsewhere. This, in turn, fails to capitalise on cross-border trade opportunities with Jordan, and does little to support the reinvestment of agricultural income into more economically and environmentally sustainable cultivation practices.

How?

Agricultural cooperatives are amongst the proactive and cohesive industry bodies in Syria. They are well-established across practically all parts of the country, benefit from long standing local membership and leadership, and coordinate closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform at multiple levels of government. Dar'a-based agriculture unions are currently working with SARC to address problems of costly agricultural production, and were engaged with the FAO in a Kuwaiti-funded agricultural resilience programme until September 2020. The Syrian government clearly recognises the importance of agricultural livelihoods to Dar'a, to exports, and to the food security of the wider population. It is therefore likely that direct support to the farming community provided through a combination of agricultural cooperatives and the relevant ministries will meet with limited resistance, especially if the security situation in rural Dar'a improves.

Besides security issues, agricultural support programmes will need to be conscious of the Syrian government's efforts to manage nationwide food security. Ongoing food security challenges have driven an increasingly securitised approach to agricultural production, leading to the frequent intervention of the security services in the allocation of resources and the individual practices of farmers. This is an issue which disconnects ground level practice from rural planning, and has often resulted in forms of state-managed 'socialised' agriculture that produce questionable outcomes for individual and community farming livelihoods. Dar'a has felt the effects of this practice as recently as December 2020, when the government ordered that subsidised fertilisers be sold only to farms that agreed to concentrate on wheat production.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Enhancing agricultural resilience and natural resource sustainability

OBJECTIVE

To reduce agricultural production costs through in-kind distributions, and to develop local agro-industry in ways which promote sustainable use of, and equitable access to, natural resources. The immediate security and longer-term sustainability of agricultural livelihoods will be improved through in-kind and agricultural extension service support. Inclusion of a natural resource element intends to promote sustainable and equitable access to natural resources.

SCOPE

Farmers operating at reduced capacity and/or seeking to re-establish their businesses post-displacement to be targeted with in-kind distributions and training undertaken in coordination with Dar'a-based agricultural cooperatives. Grants to the most vulnerable farming households for quality agricultural inputs and extension services which promote sustainable use of natural resources (land and water) are to be included. Where possible, opportunities to develop the higher end of the agricultural value chain are to be explored, specifically as this might apply to the development of food and animal processing facilities and other micro-enterprises with potential to capitalise on markets and cross-border trade. Agricultural unions can operate as both a local implementing (e.g. seed distributions and training) and consulting partner. Some capacity development is likely necessary to ensure cooperatives are able to perform programme support functions.

RISKS

- Dissonance between government agricultural policy and local economic and food security priorities may prompt state interference
- Insecurity may compromise project activities and increases risk of investment in agro-industry
- Risk of diversion and/or misuse of in-kind support
- Damage to infrastructure and operational capacity
- Immediate financial need and operational costs may reduce commitment to sustainable natural resource exploitation practices.

MITIGATIONS

- Retain a line of communication with governorate-level agricultural bureaucracy to ensure interventions complement agricultural policy
- Adopt a policy of non-interference, agreed through extensive pre-project planning and consultation
- Emphasise and promote positive project outcomes to stakeholders
- Implement low cost natural resource management techniques
- Publicly disclose all information relating to contractors hired by projects and/or project partners
- Enable relevant local actors to document rights, protection and discrimination issues.

PART 2: PROFILE

Violence and Security

Partial Reconciliation

Owing to the intersection of international interests at the confluence of the Syrian, Jordanian, and Israeli borders, reconciliation has been far from straightforward in Syria's southwesternmost corner. Agreements reached with opposition-held communities throughout 2018 were not only a reflection of the geopolitics that shape the region, but were in many cases a manifestation of the intransigence that characterise these international tensions. This is very much true in and around Dar'a city, where a combination of Israeli insecurity, Jordanian vigilance, Iranian opportunism, and Syrian government pressure has triggered several uniquely complex arrangements by which Russia has sought to guarantee stability to all stakeholders via its sponsorship of local patrons. In many respects however, such arrangements have served only to transform conflict into low-intensity resistance, and persistent ambiguity over the implementation of reconciliation deals across the south has fed an ongoing climate of regional instability.

As the provincial capital and just 10km from Jordan, Dar'a has inevitably been engulfed by these complexities. Though subject to the return of government institutions, a citywide Russian-brokered reconciliation did not allow for the full return of government security forces, and instead emphasised compromise with the former armed opposition in the southern neighbourhoods of Dar'a Al-Balad. Like other internationally sensitive border towns in the governorate, that compromise has involved a process of rebel military integration, undertaken by Russia to limit the infiltration of pro-Iranian government militia, and to fill the void left by the state's overstretched security apparatus. In return for a measure of local autonomy and protection from government attention, militia enlisted in service of these dual functions have therefore walked a fine line between their own ambitions, those of Damascus, and Russia's ostensibly conflicting commitments to the Syrian government, local partners, regional neighbours, and other international actors.

Instability and Russian Pragmatism

In many respects, the current arrangement has preserved the status of the armed opposition in Dar'a, allowing local armed actors to leverage their position under the Russian umbrella to pursue a low level and localised anti-government insurgency. As in other southern communities subject to similarly permissive Russian-brokered peace deals, local militia therefore operate as focal points for the mobilisation of local responses to perceived state-inflicted transgressions of the Dar'a reconciliation agreement. Indeed, they have frequently exercised their relative autonomy to defy the Syrian government: December 2018 saw a number of anti-government protests and several small-scale attacks against government checkpoints on the outskirts of the city, both of which have continued intermittently through to the present and have received little in the way of a concerted response.⁶ Similarly, when the Syrian government attacked and secured the town of As-Sanamayn in early 2020, local armed actors in Dar'a city mobilised against government interests and even arrested dozens of state-linked personnel.⁷

⁶ Elsewhere in the governorate, some reports estimate there were as many as eleven separate demonstrations, fifteen sit-ins, and numerous instances of anti-government graffiti found between November 2019 and January 2020. Such levels of anti-government sentiment drew parallels with the initial uprisings and show that, well after a year since reconciliation, the south is far from pacified.

⁷ Syria Direct (2020), [Clashes in Daraa evoke memories of the start of the revolution](#). Local actors have also [refused](#) entry to senior Syrian government security officials to areas under their control without consequence.

Activity of this kind is unprecedented outside the reconciled south, and results largely from the limited reach of the Syrian government and the nature of the city's Russian-brokered reconciliation agreement. Contrary to the observations of some analysts however, the climate of instability to which it

contributes does not indicate a 'second revolution',⁸ and neither does it appear part of a Russian strategy to capitalise on anti-government sentiment and expand its influence at the expense of its Syrian and Iranian partners.⁹ Rather, the excesses of former opposition actors are tolerated providing they do not compromise the longer-term aspirations of the Syrian and Russian governments to reduce regional violence and eliminate overtly opposition-oriented elements.

⁸ Guardian (2020), [A second revolution? Syrians take to streets under Russia's watchful eye](#).

⁹ Institute for the Study of War (2020), [Russia and aligned former opposition fighters leverage growing anti-Assad sentiment to expand control in southern Syria](#).

This much is obvious in the recent assassination of prominent Dar'a-city based militia leader and Central Committee member, Adham Al-Krad. Killed alongside several other notable affiliates whilst returning from a rare journey outside Dar'a city in October this year, Al-Krad had been among the local leaders involved in the Dar'a reconciliation negotiation process. As such, he had agreed to work with the Russians to provide local security, was committed to leveraging military assets under his command against Iranian expansion, and was in return granted both protection and the right to represent local interests in discussion with the Syrian government. He was also, however, a vocal proponent of revolution, had refused to subordinate his forces to Russia's preferred vehicle for the consolidation of former opposition groups — the Syrian Arab Army's 5th Corps — and had even gone so far as to publicly denounce inconsistent Russian adherence to local agreements. Ultimately, it is likely that Al-Krad's disobedience was considered untenable. Allegations that both the Syrian and Russian governments were at least complicit in his assassination are likely close to the mark.

Outlook

Over the longer term, it remains to be seen how (and how much) Russia will work to fully reintroduce Dar'a into the orbit of Damascus. Continued instability provides the kind of uncertainty necessary for the Syrian and Russian governments to quietly erode adversarial interests, most viscerally through assassination of figures like Al-Krad, but also indirectly, through the political and economic uncertainty that continued violence creates. This likely entails the steady manipulation of a more compliant armed actor landscape in Dar'a Al-Balad rather than an all-out assault. But the extent to which this is achieved by incorporating Dar'a's constellation of militia into a more consolidated 5th Corps unit orchestrated by Russia and under only nominal Syrian military command is unclear.¹⁰

¹⁰ Of note, the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps is not formally recognised by governmental decree as a Syrian government military unit. It is therefore a semi-autonomous formation under Russian stewardship and is only nominally linked to the government.

¹¹ This has taken a violent turn on occasion, such as in June 2020, when there were intense clashes between 5th Corps units and state security services in eastern rural Dar'a. Checkpoints in Sayda and Kahlil were captured by the 5th Corps, just 10 km east of Dar'a. This event followed an incident in which a funeral for nine 5th Corps recruits turned into a mass anti-government demonstration. Iranian proxies were widely blamed for the bombing.

There are several reasons why the 5th Corps may expand into Dar'a city, most crucially because the Syrian government is unwilling and unable to deploy an adequately authoritative force to a city which is both volatile and broadly hostile. Damascus is therefore reliant on Russia holding the south together through systems of patronage and protection, even if this means that a more cohesive armed bloc under Russian influence has a platform to exert greater collective resistance.¹¹ Indeed, the 5th Corps has secured a variety of post-reconciliation concessions in areas under its control, increasingly cultivating its status as a regional power broker and elevating the status of several local commanders.¹² For Dar'a-based militia with shrinking independent power bases, the 5th Corps may therefore be regarded as the most viable option for retaining a measure of local influence. It is, however, an open question as to whether Russia will oversee any such process in ways which are responsive to the preferences of the Syrian government.

¹² The most well-known such commander, Ahmed Oudeh, has emerged as the leading figure in the 5th Corps and has this year [called](#) for the formation of a unified military force to defend the interests of the south, presumably with implicit Russian sponsorship. Oudeh does not command universal support, but is the most credible partner for many former opposition groups and is a key interlocutor for the Syrian and Russian governments.

For the time being, no sudden change is anticipated. The city's militia are likely to retain the fiefdoms they have carved out in recent years providing they do not overtly compromise Syrian and Russian military objectives. At some point, they may be brought into the fold of the 5th Corps as part of a broader attempt by Russia to enhance its standing as a regional security guarantor. This could in turn imply an aid environment which is not subject to the same conditions as other parts of government-held Syria. However, it is presently difficult to assess the probable shape of such an environment, as well as whether any such merger of local armed groups is in fact feasible over the longer-term.

Indeed, Russia's mixed treatment of armed group leaders across the south over the past two years has created grounds for potentially irreconcilable feuds when combined with the legacy of localised conflict and mixed tribal interests. Some rebel leaders are even rumoured to have conspired with the Syrian government to undermine their rivals, undermining potential for any 5th Corps plan and showing the extent to which they will go to maximise their own private gains. In this context, the threat of assassinations will likely persist on all sides, both because of competition between national level actors (Syria, Russia, Iran), and because of the depth of political, economic, personal and inter-familial enmity created by nearly a decade of conflict.¹³ Given these dynamics, incremental shifts in the local security environment have the potential to provoke violent outbreaks, meaning the city's transition into a post-conflict state will remain in the balance for the foreseeable future.

13 In 2019, Dar'a governorate reportedly witnessed over 300 [assassination attempts](#). Though most occurred in the western Dar'a countryside (70%) where Syrian government influence is most limited, there were around 3 per month in Dar'a city. It is also likely that Dar'a city residents account for a fair number of those attacked in locations outside the city.

Governance

State penetration during opposition control

Famously described as the 'cradle of the revolution', the extent to which Dar'a was embedded in state governance systems throughout opposition control is often underappreciated. Dar'a has in fact served as a longstanding pillar of Syrian Ba'athism, is notorious for producing prominent government officials and large numbers of public servants, and was split for several years between the opposition-held southern part of the city, Dar'a Al-Balad, and the northern neighbourhoods of Dar'a Al-Mahata, where most city government buildings are located. With protection from tribal ties, many former municipal officials with links to the state therefore remained in the city during opposition control, serving as proxies for coordination between state and non-state actors. These informal channels were crucial for the continuation of cross-line commercial trade, the supply of public services from state-run networks, and the retention of public sector workers across Dar'a city and much of the opposition-held south. Indeed, the integration of state and opposition governance systems was so formalised during opposition control that public sector workers regularly commuted cross-line and received consistent salary payments.

State penetration into formal and informal governance systems later played an important role in Dar'a's reconciliation. Relations between government and opposition actors were such that cross-line Russian-brokered negotiations were swift despite Dar'a's reputation as an opposition stronghold, and went a long way to forestalling the worst effects of the government-led military offensive on the south in mid-2018.¹⁴ Certainly, numerous figures in the city were opposed to reconciliation: Some armed opposition actors publicly condemned talks, and several interlocutors were assassinated during the negotiations process. However, the speed with which alternative governance institutions were disbanded and armed actors aligned

14 The destructiveness of Syrian government-led offensives on communities across west-central Syria in early 2018 also likely influenced local armed actor decision-making. Communities that had put up a stronger resistance were bombarded into submission and subsequently saw mass evacuations and arrests upon reconciliation.

themselves with the city's Russian-brokered plan highlights that state-linked individuals were influential at a time when opposition control was regarded as strong.

'Return' of the State

As in most reconciled areas, local interlocutors were 'rewarded' with roles in political office, predominantly through the September 2018 local election process. For many, this marked a return to their pre-war positions in the Dar'a municipal government, yet local reports indicate the expression of government patronage through such channels has not been especially effective. Having yet to fully establish its authority in the city, and with instability a matter of abiding concern, state investment in Dar'a has been limited, the reach of the municipal government has been constrained, and local sources describe the local administration as effectively moribund. Moreover, most local political representatives are linked to and legitimised by clan-based kinship structures, many of which have experienced internal and inter-communal fragmentation as a result of political differences caused by conflict.

The weakness of local administrative systems is compensated somewhat by Dar'a's status as the provincial capital and the seat of the Dar'a Governorate Council. Located in the northern portion of Dar'a city, Dar'a Al-Mahata, the governorate council is the city's primary administrative decision-making body, including for matters of reconstruction, rehabilitation, and urban planning. It has also operated as the main conduit for non-violent efforts to restore government authority, primarily via the reassertion of the redistributive role of the state through service provision. Given the dwindling resources of the central government however, the governorate council has made few dents in existing service shortfalls and city development has been limited. Combined with the discontinuation of pre-reconciliation I/NGO, civil society, and opposition-led aid and development projects, activities to improve conditions in the city have been led mainly by the usual cadre of government-linked (GO)NGOs found in reconciled areas, SARC and Syria Trust.¹⁵ This has entailed the concentration of most aid resources in the more government-oriented Dar'a Al-Mahata, despite the fact that the former opposition-held Dar'a Al-Balad presents with greater needs across practically sectors.

¹⁵ Other NGOs working in the area include Al-Bir wa Al-Khadamat Al-Ijtima'ya, a well-respected local charity working on psychosocial support, small-scale infrastructure, and livelihoods and closely linked to the Syrian government. Also GOPA, a Christian charity with a broad remit and working almost exclusively in government-held areas, and MECC, also a Christian charity with broadly similar coverage and a focus on humanitarian and psychosocial support.

Also of note are reports that interfactional rivalry has penetrated governance structures at multiple levels in the city and may further hamper the efficacy of local decision-making. Working at the intersection of geopolitical interests that reach far beyond local politics, civil servants in Dar'a may therefore be exposed to competing networks of Russian and Iranian-linked state and non-state security, military, and intelligence organizations (including Hezbollah). Although widely rumoured, it is impossible to either confirm or quantify the nature of external influence over Dar'a city governance. Firstly, because local government structures are not especially active at this time. And secondly, because government institutions have yet to demonstrate any notable behavioural differences across communities besides favouring areas that have demonstrated greater allegiance to the Syrian government.

Informal governance and tribalism

Factors commonly attributed to the cause of revolutionary movements in Syria were arguably amplified in Dar'a by the density of the region's social networks manifested by tribe and clan, family, labour migration, and cross-border movement. Such networks were instrumental in the diffusion of anti-government grievances, activism, information sharing, and resource mobilization under prohibitive conditions of state suppression, and their overlap in Dar'a was essential to the development of local solidarity. As would be expected, this connected individuals from across distinct social backgrounds in support of the revolutionary objective and the protest movement. What has followed,

however, is what social theorists have rightly learned to fear from experience, namely, that the romanticization of the oppressed ignores the all too common reality that power relations among subordinates are “not necessarily conducted along democratic lines at all”.¹⁶

¹⁶ Scott, J. (1990:26). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Across Dar'a governorate, conflict has recast tribal loyalties, fractured internal and external tribal relationships, and has eroded the socio-political importance of pre-war tribal connections. This does not mean that tribal affiliation is no longer a factor in matters of governance, local security, economy, dispute mediation, and state patronage. Neither does it mean that bonds forged through the experience of conflict have uniformly lessened. Tribe remains Dar'a's dominant informal governance system. However, it does mean that conflict-related fragmentation has broadly diminished local tribal unity, thereby weakening its power broker potential. Indeed, whilst major local tribes retain representation in key local political, social, and economic fora across the city, they are now less capable of mobilizing the breadth of tribal opinion in support of their objectives and are thought to more frequently operate independently.

Of course, fragmentation within and across Dar'a's tribes not only results from the effects of the current conflict. Seeds of discontent were planted within tribes well before 2011. Much like other regions where tribe is a prominent feature of social organisation, tribal political influence in pre-war southern Syria was determined by the degree to which tribal leaders were connected to the state and its security and intelligence services.¹⁷ This was a product of a nationwide alliance between President Hafez Al-Assad's government and tribal figures prepared to buttress Alawite rule, often in return for development assistance and/or positions of military and political authority.¹⁸ However, Assad's techniques seldom produced the most representative outcomes at the local level, as figures selected by the government were often the most willing to offer their support rather than the most respected, powerful, or established. Some individuals were therefore 'promoted' at the expense of those higher in the tribal social order, likely as part of a deliberate government strategy to sow divisions within such alternative power structures.¹⁹

¹⁷ Evidently, tribe size was also likely a factor, with a larger tribe theoretically presenting more latitude for greater influence.

¹⁸ Al-Musarea (2019) [The Role of Syrian Tribes: Betting on a Lost Cause](#).

¹⁹ Hafez Al-Assad “hoped to internally dismantle the power of tribes by placing obstacles between the Sheikhs and their people”. Dukhan (2012) [Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Revolution](#).

These most politically influential tribal figures may have variously entered a relative state of dormancy during opposition control in Dar'a, but they remained quietly instrumental in maintaining the cross-line links described previously. Now broadly back in power following reconciliation, pre-war patronage structures have been largely re-established and the standing of the state's preferred tribal interlocutors has been restored. As such, these figures widely preside over political office in Dar'a much as they did before the war, serving on practically every local committee and governorate level board. However, they now do so with less accountability to the wider tribal structure given their wartime behaviour, whilst their alignment with the state has diminished their ability to speak for, command, and shape tribal opinion.

Society and Community

Family and Tribe

Having been a powerful source of social organisation in the pre-war period, the meaning of tribe in Dar'a has shifted. Changes related to matters of governance are covered in the previous 'Governance' section, specifically regarding a reduction in political consensus within and across tribes. Similarly, in the social domain, tribal political fragmentation has naturally weakened the role of tribal identity in collective decision-making, and as connections between individuals of varied origin and socio-economic strata have frayed, the extent to which tribe now dominates self-identification in the city has decreased. Local family-based connections have not been negatively affected to the same extent, in part because the everyday activities of the city's main family groups have seldom overlapped outside of political affairs.²⁰ However, the potential for interfamilial tension can equally arise from political differences that may be exploited by the Syrian government and/or other national level actors looking to expand their influence post-reconciliation.

20 The four main families of Dar'a city have tended to act primarily within their own dedicated interests: The Al-Muhameed are known for business and trade, the Masalmeh as Bedouin traditionalists, the Abazid as a leading religious family, and the Abu Naboud as civil society actors.

Instrumentalisation of family and tribal ties by national actors is reported to have occurred with growing frequency since reconciliation. In large part, this likely stems from the fact that families and tribes across the south have often reached different reconciliation agreements with the Syrian and/or Russian governments, which have in turn produced different relationships and group outcomes. The most prominent such example is that of the Al-Mahameed family, which was a conduit for cross-line communication throughout the conflict and remains philosophically divided to this day. Indeed, members of the Al-Muhameed family include not only serving members of parliament and former Dar'a city councillors,²¹ but relatively important figures in the military and political opposition.²² Evidently, such diverse outlooks add a layer of complexity to prominent family dynamics in the city that was not so noticeable before the war, and which can produce competition over local assets and policy decisions.

21 Respectively, Member of Parliament, Shukriyeh Al-Muhameed, and Ayman Faisal Al-Muhameed, a former Dar'a city council member and Dar'a representative.

22 Opposition-linked figures from the Al-Mahameed family include Khaled Al-Mahameed, vice-chairman of the High Negotiations Committee, and Abu Ashrad Al-Mahameed, a prominent local armed group commander.

For aid and development actors, such dynamics have important implications for community engagement. Neither tribe nor family should be assumed as representative of the group as a whole, especially across different geographies and even within the city itself. Certainly, the 'front line' that separated Dar'a Al-Balad and Dar'a Al-Mahata throughout much of the conflict helped foster a stronger sense of community on either side of the line. Yet while this separation can still be deployed as a rough line of distinction, more careful context analysis should supplement programmes where there is potential to play into social divisions manifested by intra- and inter-group differences. This is especially because of the possibility that members of the same group may be variously connected to Syrian, Russian, and even Iranian government interests which may affect factors influencing beneficiary selection, programme locations, contracting parties and other programmatic decisions.

Civil Society

Prior to reconciliation, an influx of foreign aid contributed to the considerable growth of local civil society. Regrettably, this was only a temporary development, as practically all programmes were discontinued upon reconciliation and local and international aid agencies engaged in a near full-scale withdrawal and/or shutdown. Any vestiges of the local aid industry were furthermore undermined by the fact that, unlike most other reconciliation processes, the majority of people evacuated from Dar'a city were not militiamen, but civil activists.

Supplanted by state-linked aid agencies and now subject to security restrictions that pose a risk to their personal safety, the city's remaining civil society actors are largely bound to working in Dar'a Al-Balad under cover of Russian-sponsored armed groups. They do so with extremely limited resources however, and many are concerned that their prior association with opposition armed groups and governance structures mark them as long-term targets for the Syrian government's security services. As such, community-level and even faith-based organisations are few, and their number and capacity compares poorly to even more overtly belligerent reconciled communities like Eastern Ghouta.

According to sources contacted in late-2019, state-imposed bureaucracy pertaining to aid programming is particularly harsh in Dar'a city.²³ As in all of government-held Syria, aid organisations wishing to work in Dar'a must register with the Ministry of Local Affairs, yet doing so confronts several practical and ethical challenges. At least seven people must serve on the organisation's board of trustees, none of whom can be wanted for military service nor revealed by government security vetting as associated with past or present opposition-linked entities. This process is reportedly an onerous one however, as local sources explain that organisations applying to work in Dar'a can submit as many as 25 names in the hope that the required number clear initial government checks. Moreover, local sources add that practically each step in the registration process is littered with demands for bribes and side-payments, and whilst this is nothing especially unique to Dar'a, the scale of demands uncovered by research were striking.²⁴

23 Owing to continued insecurity in Dar'a, it is unlikely the kind of requirements listed here have changed in the interim.

24 One local source noted that an individual attempting to receive a permit for local NGO work was asked to bring two gold bullions to the municipal staff responsible for granting permits as a 'gift'. Some organisations are also claimed to have paid up to \$25,000 in gifts to security service representatives and local administrative officials.

In this context, it is unlikely that donors will be able to look beyond state-linked NGOs like SARC and Syria Trust. Importantly, however, local sources report that the prospect of opening the civil society space was discussed by the Dar'a Governorate Council in early December 2020. If these reports are true, it is likely the Syrian government considers the re-introduction of more wide-ranging aid work as complementary to its current objectives given its limited military control, weak service provision capacity, and apparent contentment with Russia's approach to the city's pacification.

It remains to be seen if third sector space will be expanded to the extent that new activities can enhance the fairly modest portfolio of ongoing local aid projects. Were agencies to develop their interest in Dar'a, they would need to be especially cognisant of bifurcations within tribe and family, including how these differences can be instrumentalised by parties to the conflict.²⁵ Attention should also be given to the fact that,

25 Insistence on the involvement of Tribal Shura Councils may be one way to help mitigate elements of risk in this regard. For instance, the familiarity of Shura Council members with local needs and power structures could inform appropriate beneficiary selection processes and generate increased community buy-in.

in order to sidestep the vulnerabilities of local partners to the Syrian security services, agencies working in Dar'a have tended to hire staff from other areas. This has done little to harness the city's own civil society potential, and local partner protection should rank high on the list of programme planning activities. Inevitably, this will require engagement with relevant security actors. Whether Russia is able to exert greater influence over this process given its orchestration of local armed militia in support of citywide reconciliation remains to be seen. It is also unclear whether this would necessarily result in a more permissive environment for programming by western agencies.

Economy

Cross-border trade

Dar'a's economy relies greatly on cross-border trade via the Nasib border crossing, at the southern tip of the M5 highway on the Syria—Jordan border. Linking Dar'a with Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo, the M5 is Syria's most important land transport route, and has revitalised trade passing through, to, and from Dar'a since it was brought under full government control two years ago. For much of the conflict, local trade-supporting industry and logistics such as warehousing, export processing facilities, and freight trucking services had suffered greatly from long running and often intense contestation of the M5. As a result, Jordan refused to open its borders until security to nearby portions of the M5 had been restored, furthermore curtailing exports and weakening logistics and associated business activity in Dar'a.

With the exception of temporary COVID-related closures, Nasib is now fully open to regular trade. Dar'a has reportedly benefited from the increased flow of people and goods, helping it to absorb some of the deeper effects of Syria's present macroeconomic malaise. Any growth from trade is not necessarily because there has been concerted investment in local trade-related activity by either the state or the private sector however, and rather more results from cross-border Jordanian purchases of comparatively cheaper Syrian products. Demand for locally-produced Syrian agricultural produce from the Jordanian side reportedly remains high, and is thought to outstrip supply. This is a welcome market for producers in the Dar'a area, yet elevated sales to foreign buyers may have longer-term implications for pricing, availability, and, potentially, local food security.

Agriculture

Though it may be a largely urban area, agriculture is perhaps the most important source of livelihoods for the less wealthy and less well-established members of the population. As in much of Syria however, Dar'a's rural paradigm remains bound to systems of government management, and there have been few efforts to diversify the local agricultural economy, to introduce private investment, and to engage the full variety of local agricultural stakeholders. As such, the city has laboured against nationwide problems of expensive production costs spanning practically all links in the agricultural value chain. Prices for basic agricultural inputs are high, financing options for business development are few, unexploded ordnance remains a factor, power services are unreliable, road networks are in a poor state of repair, and besides Jordanian customers, many residents have low purchasing power.

A dedicated 'Agricultural Working Group for Southwestern Syria' had administered a range of cross-border farming projects via the Amman-based food security cluster prior to reconciliation. Minutes from a cluster meeting in October 2018 explain that over a quarter of a million beneficiaries had been reached in Dar'a governorate throughout the conflict, with interventions ranging from the supply of agricultural inputs, livestock and asset restoration, animal treatment/vaccinations, infrastructure rehabilitation, small-scale food production support, and other income generating activities.²⁶ Due to the southern Syria offensive and its aftermath however, many of these activities were brought to a close in Autumn 2018.

²⁶ Food Security Cluster (2018) Food Security Cluster Meeting Minutes.

Since the retreat of cross-border aid operations and the restoration of government institutions, the Ministry of Agriculture reinstated Agricultural Association (AA) branch offices in Dar'a governorate. AAs fall under the Department of Agricultural Extension within the Directorate of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform.²⁷ Though they undertake extension functions at no cost to farmers, a

²⁷ In Dar'a governorate, these offices are located in As-Sanamayn, Izra' and Dar'a city, with SWD generally falling within the jurisdiction of the As-Sanamayn office.

lack of funding has frustrated their ability to deliver training, technology transfers, advice, and agricultural inputs to rural communities. This has been felt acutely in Dar'a, which further contends with the securitisation of AA activities given reports that strict vetting criteria are attached to the use of government extension services.²⁸ Farmers eager to avoid the scrutiny of state security are therefore compelled to use lower quality alternatives, effectively excluding them from accessing resources that might better improve their productivity. Many farmers may avoid available government extension services altogether, heightening the burden of self-reliance and the importance of foreign support and community initiatives.

28 For instance, quality fertilizers sold by AAs in SWD are much cheaper than those available on the open and black markets (~50% cheaper in April 2019), but clearance from the Military Security branch is required prior to purchase. However, farmers are required to submit themselves to local Military Security offices to provide identification documents, personal information, and fingerprint IDs.

Water resource management

Workers have little control over broader issues within the rural economy, yet they have been driven to agriculture given limited alternatives. Part-time and subsistence farming has risen as families seek to supplement household incomes, and has continued to do so since reconciliation. Heightened reliance on agriculture is not only an indicator of the struggles of the local economy however, it has also exacerbated pre-war problems of natural resource management, particularly water use, which is an issue of immediate and pressing concern.

Owing to the local climate, crop farming in southern Dar'a governorate is more heavily reliant on fuel-powered groundwater pumping systems than rain-fed irrigation. As demand for irrigation water has risen, wells have therefore proliferated in number, and farmers have dug deeper into the water table. Much of this activity was unregulated under opposition control however, and there are reports that as many as 3,000 illegal wells have been built across Dar'a governorate. Though it falls within the purview of the state to manage commercial water resource use, it has done little to manage the situation to date and shrinking surface water bodies attest to the potential long-term negative consequences for agriculture.²⁹

29 In mid-2019, Lake Mzeireb, in western rural Dar'a governorate disappeared entirely. Pre-war water levels were known to fluctuate in summer, but water level changes last year are thought to have been driven by increased use of fuel-powered extraction systems.

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