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COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AT-TALL

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INTRODUCTION

Syrian front lines have seldom mirrored nation state boundaries at which discrete administrative, legal, and economic subtleties collide. At-Tall was among many examples of the tangled cross-line governance that has instead characterised the conflict, and it remains a typically complex operating environment for humanitarian and development agencies now it has returned to full government control. Complexity does not imply infeasibility however, and local intricacies do present several channels for interventions which align with the core elements of the HPD nexus approach.

Exploitation of these channels will require ingenuity and clear-sighted commitment however. Standing atop Mount Qasioun at night, one might see the glow of street-lights in government-friendly Dahiyet Al-Assad. Turning north to At-Tall, few such lights would be visible. Such disparities are not irreparable, yet neither are they coincidental. As a formerly opposition-held area hosting thousands of exiles from other such locations, the government is staunch in the expression of its renewed authority in At-Tall. Community notables may have previously mobilised funds for the rehabilitation of local infrastructure, but these works have been routinely blocked, and it is clear they remain politically impermissible for a weakened and warring regime.

Browbeaten since its reconciliation in late-2016, At-Tall therefore contends with a multitude of developmental challenges common to post-reconciled areas. At the heart of each such issue however, are additional, cross-cutting, and significant challenges of scale and displacement. Following massive IDP inflows, At-Tall's population has likely doubled since 2010, placing local services under pressures that would outstrip formal urban planning processes in even the most well-resourced societies. That At-Tall's growth has been almost entirely informal and wholly under-supported only makes the city's developmental challenges even greater. Four channels for meeting some of the city's most pressing problems in accordance with nexus principles have been identified for consideration:

- **Increasing civil documentation access** – with a view to supporting legal identity and conferring the rights of Syrian citizenship and access to other human rights via local civil registry services.
- **Leveraging aid outcomes via local elite initiatives** – in recognition of the fact that elites wield considerable influence in a local governance structure that is at least somewhat decentralised.
- **Engaging technocracies** – in order to develop relationships with local technocracies, respond to problems with long-term socio-economic effects, and test a potentially replicable model for principled assistance in government-held areas.
- **Creating sustainable markets for skilled tradespeople** – to stimulate local markets and improve access to livelihoods via a programme of built environment works which durably improve living conditions for IDPs.

PART 1: HDP NEXUS CHANNELS

Civil Documentation and Legal Identity Programming

Why?

Civil documentation is issued by civil registrars or any other authorised body and proves an individual's civil status and legal identity, in turn affecting communities' access to basic human rights. In Syria, repeated assessments find that many lack paperwork of this kind owing to conflict-related upheaval, and the issue is cited as a frequent concern by communities nationwide. Although more significant in opposition-held areas, the majority of At-Tall's population are IDPs from locations to which they have yet to return in any significant numbers. IDPs are more likely to have lost ID cards, marriage certificates, and family booklets, each of which facilitate access to a range of services and human rights, including the right to education, healthcare, and livelihoods, amongst others.

Marriage certificates, for instance, are essential for registering births and paternity, and therefore conferring Syrian nationality on a child, whilst

¹ Including the Smart Card system of state subsidised commodities.

ID cards are required for freedom of movement, property and land ownership, school registration, and other social security benefits.¹ The government's failure to provide adequate documentation to access these rights is likely to compound inequalities and weaken the platforms upon which development operates across multiple sectors. Notably, social norms and standard Syrian legal practice mean women are much less likely to have official documentation, in turn denying them access to a range of services.

How?

Assessments find that the most common impediment to accessing civil documentation in Damascus and adjoining areas is not service availability nor security but cost, both financial and time spent. In fact, security-related issues were not described

² World Bank (2020). [The mobility of displaced Syrians.](#)

as a barrier to individuals seeking civil documentation in the Damascus area post-reconciliation,² and it is notable that At-Tall's municipal government is working towards completion of a new local civil registry facility. Discussion continues as to whether this office will be authorised by the Interior Ministry to issue documentation, but if these talks reach a successful conclusion, it is reasonable to assume that residents will have access to the paperwork necessary to access services.

Besides the financial cost to service users, interventions should consider ways to mitigate the often extensive time spent to acquire civil documentation from state authorities, as well as reports of corruption and kickbacks within the registry system. Note also that civil registry services are unlikely to appeal to all locals, neither are they immune to abuse by service users. Many residents likely seek to avoid government attention, others will be unable to prove their civil status, whilst others still may look to abuse the system to acquire benefits for which they are ineligible. To a great extent, however, problems arising from the latter two issues are questions of institutional capacity which an adequately resourced registry could manage, fulfilling the obligation to facilitate access to other human rights as a result.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Civil documentation clearing house

OBJECTIVE

To increase access to legal and civil status as enshrined in Syrian and international rights law, with an emphasis on IDP groups and women. Acquisition of civil documentation facilitates basic rights across a range of sectors fundamental to dignity, self-recovery, and development including education and healthcare.

SCOPE

Partner with local municipal authorities and civil society to develop an internationally-supported clearing house for the preparation and amendment of civil documentation materials in support of formal applications to the civil registry. To include casework research to support civil documentation applications and sort through authentic/illegitimate/unprovable claims, translation of 'unrecognised' civil documentation issued by non-government entities, legal advice and guidance to individuals unable to file applications without additional support, and financial support to cover formal registration or application fees. Consider additional capacity building support to the At-Tall civil registry to enhance service quality and efficiency for end users.

RISKS

- Legal and gender-based information/service issues attract government scrutiny
- Potential for abuse by locals making illegitimate claims
- Possibility that government will withhold documentation for IDPs from certain locations to obstruct their return, in violation of their obligations under international customary law
- Caseload may require extensive 'translation' of paperwork from former opposition personal and legal status systems
- Permission for assessments is improbable
- Municipality may not be authorised to issue civil paperwork by central government.

MITIGATIONS

- Establish a set of criteria for dealing with enquiries agreed in partnership with government
- Support NGOs to document violations and/or discriminatory treatment of service users (whether human rights-, protection-, gender-, ethnically-, politically or religiously-based)
- Refuse to disclose details of service users unable to proceed with applications
- Ensure local civil society partners coordinate with relevant government offices
- Conduct consistent direct and indirect third party monitoring to ensure compliance of all parties to project terms
- Advise and work to protect providers of legal aid to service users.

Leverage Elite Influence and the Committee for Development

Why?

Links between the authorities and elite government affiliates are fundamental to state authority in post-reconciled areas. Even so, At-Tall's elites should not be uniformly regarded as vessels for the implementation of regime policy. Public resources and essential services may have been channelled via the government in order to restore At-Tall's dependency, but governance remains at least partially *decentralised* in ways that might be exploited by those seeking HDP outcomes. Elites are well-respected, hold influential positions, mediate vertically between government and society, and have already demonstrated an ability to unlock civic space beyond the reach of formalised NGO/CBOs.

Elites were instrumental to the construction of new water wells in At-Tall post-reconciliation, leveraging their influence with government and security officials to advocate for, fund, and help manage water supply improvement projects, in turn contributing to the realisation of the right to safe drinking water and sanitation. Such activities likely contributed to the formation of the Committee for Development Affairs in 2018, a structure comprising a combination of At-Tall elites and government officials for the administration of local reconstruction and recovery works.³ Elite representation on this Committee and their wider influence within the community is a major factor in the definition and exploitation of local civic space. Indeed, although the state has fundamentally reasserted itself in At-Tall, elites remain key to mediating stakeholder relationships, which in turn inform the attitude towards, and application of, legal aid frameworks used by the local authorities.

³ COAR (2020), *Arrested Development: Rethinking local development in Syria*.

How?

Clearly, engaging elites operating at (and within) the margins of state control would represent a novel form of engagement for aid agencies. At-Tall's elites are nebulous relationship-based social initiatives, do not conform to long-held (and misplaced) conceptions of civil society within international development, and their activities are not regulated by national legal frameworks for international aid. Moreover, elite engagement would bring western aid agencies into contact with questions to which they have yet to fully commit: Is support to Syrian civil society in government-held areas concerned with substituting for municipal service shortfalls? Is it a vehicle for reshaping regime politics and/or local rights and freedoms? Is it prepared to permit state-run communities to dictate their own recovery trajectories?

With a creative approach to programming, definitive project redlines, and adequate accountability mechanisms, elites could theoretically be engaged in pursuit of each such ambition by providing space and support to HDP-oriented goals. Given the manner in which elite networks operate however, flexibility must inform any elite engagement strategy, and they should be regarded as entry points for a consultative approach concerned with creating and acting upon civic space, likely on a case-by-case basis. Caution must be paid to the risks outlined below, several of which demand careful and concerted partner management given the fluidity and localised nature of 'space' for internationally-sponsored aid in At-Tall.

Technical service-centric (i.e. 'non-political') programmes are likely to gain most traction via elite engagement. Elites have successfully agitated for such work previously, and access to basic services remains high on the list of local priorities. Moreover, At-Tall's elites operate with some autonomy: The Committee for Development Affairs maintains an independent bank account, functions as a conduit for negotiation between the community and the city's governmental and security authorities, and was originally designed to appease public concern over state corruption. In theory, international engagement via elites may therefore also help engender greater accountability around basic local service needs.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Electricity infrastructure investment plan

OBJECTIVE

To develop, resource, and implement a plan for local power infrastructure investment in partnership with the local Committee for Development Affairs, other relevant notables, the private sector, and municipal and regional government. Such work could address immediate local service priorities, restore key infrastructure, develop an underappreciated form of civil society, and generate greater accountability.

SCOPE

Previously abandoned for reasons of excessive approval costs imposed by state-linked officials, local power infrastructure development plans are to be revived through a collaborative and community-informed implementation process. A revised programme of works featuring international support are to be presented for consideration by local officials and developed in consultation with local elites. Investment is to be conditioned upon transparency, and, where possible, community participation. In addition to standard power grid infrastructure development, renewable (solar) systems targeting informal settlements should be considered given the large number of buildings lacking a network connection. Consider also associated training programmes for local electrical engineers and technicians for maintenance purposes, in turn creating livelihood opportunities.

RISKS

- Exposure of project and stakeholders to increased government scrutiny and interference
- Heightened vetting and stakeholder assessment challenges
- Primacy likely given to formal infrastructure over informal and alternative power systems
- Submission of project cycle to a fluid relationship-based civic space
- Elites unable to bypass likely state interference attempts, especially those related to artificial project cost inflation
- Potential for entanglement with figures who may be sanctioned in future.

MITIGATIONS

- Work to flexible funding deadlines to ensure that (likely) long-term negotiations with government can proceed
- Partner selection policy to emphasise project independence and privilege competence over politics
- Partner eligibility to be determined through vetting which ensures quality and excludes actual (and potential) sanctioned entities
- Deploy multiple, lower value, small-scale tenders to mitigate diversion and monopolisation
- Publicly disclose all information relating to contractors hired by projects and/or project partners
- Embed monitoring, evaluation, and third party monitoring
- Conduct context analysis prior to and during project.

Engaging technocracies: Integrated education development plan

Why?

There is a clear problem of scale in At-Tall. Public services have been stretched by the massive number of recent IDP arrivals, placing heightened pressure on both public servants and local infrastructure. Population inflation has been keenly felt in local education, where schools are so oversubscribed that overcrowding is reportedly stretching human and physical resources well beyond minimum standards. Besides needing basic school supplies, facility rehabilitation and construction is also required, as are new staff to help cope with the increased demand and the integration of a recently dislocated population which participate only marginally in public life. The virtues of education and their importance to individual and societal wellbeing need no elaboration, but for a community like At-Tall, the size of the schooling problem should attract particular attention.

How?

In one sense, a response to local issues within education can draw from the standard aid and development playbook. Relevant government departments and offices must be engaged, logistics managed, and other programme cycle activities pursued. From a nexus perspective however, rehabilitating and re-equipping existing school systems in this way is insufficient. Activities must instead form part of a strategy which safeguards the right to education through development of a more resilient local school system that caters to At-Tall's increased population. Long-term partnerships between the Syrian state and international agencies are few and far between, but they must be explored as the cross-border response dwindles and international actors increasingly consider needs in government-held areas.

Education ministry offices at municipal, governorate, and national level are fundamentally state-run, but they are also technocracies with discrete bureaucratic objectives and budget lines. A dedicated sub-district plan for educational service improvement could be designed and/or resourced in partnership with these technocracies on condition that unacceptable state interference will result in project suspension or termination. If such a deal were reached, it has the potential to not only deliver long-term benefits to At-Tall's educational environment through a combination of in-kind and institutional support, but could reduce the burden of administrative approvals for aid to education in the area, emphasise impartiality, help enshrine transparent procurement mechanisms, protect INGO operations and civil society partners, and incentivise greater local authority adherence to the parameters of principled assistance more broadly. Large, well-funded agencies are likely best placed to engage in such partnership negotiations given the likelihood of initial pushback, but they could theoretically exploit the Syrian state's financial weakness to work in a relatively uncontroversial sector like education.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Sub-district school capacity plan

OBJECTIVE

To strengthen the availability and quality of primary and secondary education services across At-Tall sub-district via an integrated plan which accounts for the area's inflated population. Support may be conditioned in a way which improves the operating environment for internationally-funded education programming and civil society work.

SCOPE

Establish a comprehensive plan for developing local primary and secondary education across At-Tall which includes an integrated package of works focused on education facilities, teacher training, education policy and management, and teacher training, with a view to ensuring that the right to education is respected, protected and fulfilled. Undertaken as a partnership between the relevant technical ministries, local authorities and international and local organisations, such a plan would ideally comprise memoranda which permit local and international aid actors to work more freely on plan-related activities. This might, for example, reduce the requirement to secure approvals on a case-by-case basis to an obligation to notify the relevant authorities. It might also provide a degree of protection to local partners which allows for their own development. Fundamentally, the plan should not only address educational service shortfalls, but leverage support provided for these purposes to create an incubating environment for greater operational and civil society space for education sector work. This requires binding project delivery to the agreed plan of works, and for any deviations to be addressed firmly by donors, potentially via suspension or termination.

RISKS

- Aid agencies are reluctant to condition assistance and/or threaten project suspension in the event of government interference
- Adopting a threat-based approach over one of incentivisation may result in termination of registration
- Time consuming negotiations are probable and require flexible funding and donor deadlines
- Reputational risks associated with engaging government entities.

MITIGATIONS

- Condition delivery of plan on government adherence to agreed parameters in order to engender accountability to the community and principled assistance
- Establish clear vetting and procurement procedures and publicly disclose entities involved in project delivery
- Enter into discussions with a plan strongly supported by international partners in agreement over red lines
- Proactively communicate with state entities to anticipate, plan and respond to actual and potential change
- Third party monitoring throughout project implementation
- Monitor protection and rights issues related to the misuse, misappropriation, and malpractice of stakeholders, from diversion through to harassment.

Market development for socio-economic outcomes

Why?

At-Tall reportedly hosts a particularly large number of skilled industrial and construction tradespeople. Many of these workers are currently unable to put these skills to use however, and businesses that could contribute to the rehabilitation of the built environment and the local economy are widely dormant. This is a result of several factors, each of which are entangled with the deeply challenging dynamics at play within the broader Syrian economy: At-Tall's municipal budget is limited, household incomes are low, and currency and supply chain volatility inhibits business planning and investment. For the time being, COVID travel restrictions have also restricted business to At-Tall's internal marketplace, compounding the oversupply of trade-focused labour and a lack of corresponding demand.

The market for At-Tall's tradespeople is therefore both limited and localised, meaning that community-focused market stimulation is necessary if they are to be harnessed in support of HDP outcomes. Special thought is therefore recommended to the reinvigoration of this sector of the local economy, particularly because of the likely opportunities for tradespeople to contribute to the improvement of the city's largely informal built environment. Durable economic development theory entails any such initiative cannot be a 'one off' cash injection with only temporary stimulating effects however, and especially because At-Tall is at risk of economic stagnation.

How?

Market development initiatives are complex affairs around which there is limited theoretical consensus. It is known that market development can accomplish sustainable economic development, yet its direct contribution to peacebuilding is much less clear-cut. This is especially true in relation to industrial and construction tradesmanship in At-Tall, largely because these industries are small-scale (often one-man) skilled enterprises which are unlikely to respond to the kind of peacebuilding approaches commonly attached to market development strategies (e.g. cash for work for ex-combatants). More sensible, therefore, may be to regard investment in At-Tall's tradesmanship as an opportunity to address structural causes of local inequality through shelter, protection, and built environment programming which promotes market development and socio-economic outputs resulting from improved shelter conditions.

Reversing local market failures in this way is delicate terrain in post-reconciled communities like At-Tall and demands considered investment. For instance, At-Tall's Committee for Development Action has previously sought to implement key infrastructure projects, yet project costs were inflated by an arduous state-imposed approvals process, work was to be contracted to state-owned operations like the General Electricity Corporation, and projects were shut down for unspecified reasons by the security services. Several community service projects have therefore been abandoned, suggesting more incremental and small-scale approaches may be necessary. Local tradespeople could provide opportunities to sidestep the challenges faced by more comprehensive service development plans providing they are accompanied with careful market analysis, are cognisant of the potential to reinforce elite and/or regime interests throughout the value chain, and are careful to apply rigorous vetting and monitoring processes.

PROGRAMME CONCEPT:

Informal settlement shelter improvement and building works market stimulation

OBJECTIVE

To help reinvigorate built environment-related tradesmanship whilst helping to ensure the right to adequate housing for IDPs. Project is not only focused on construction market stimulation, but the right to adequate housing as a platform for addressing socio-economic inequalities arising from generally poor living conditions in At-Tall's large informal settlements.

SCOPE

Informal settlements are widespread in At-Tall, many of which lack even the most basic services, provide insufficient protection from the elements, and fail to meet minimum standards as per the right to adequate housing. Meanwhile, the city's relatively well-developed human capital within the construction and industrial trades remains untapped given limited municipal resources and poor household finances. A programme designed to conduct partial works on IDP homes whilst also enhancing market demand for the city's building and trades sector is recommended. Such a project could span provision of small business grants, equipment/materials, training/technical support, and voucher systems to enable both local businesses people and IDPs to stimulate informal property development. But it could also consider more exploratory approaches, such as education on international labour standards, supporting the unionisation of local tradespeople and the pooling of local resources to collectively exploit commercial opportunities within the city's existing building stock.

RISKS

- Heightened market analysis obligations given potential for interference (and prior local evidence thereof)
- Potential to reinforce illicit and/or war economy networks throughout the value chain and incur elevated costs
- Arduous, unpredictable, and invisible top-down approvals process
- Possibility there is only a medium-term impact on replenishing local demand for tradesmanship and construction services
- Complexities around land and property ownership may limit scope of works programmes.

MITIGATIONS

- Establish in-house expertise to set-up, monitor, and establish whether agreed works are completed to standard
- Feasibility study to assess informal housing stock and land and ownership issues
- Any unionisation effort to be conducted informally to avoid government scrutiny
- Conduct ongoing vetting and monitoring to ensure service providers meet standards and are eligible to receive payment for services provided to voucher holders
- Transparent and accessible complaint mechanisms
- Monitor protection and rights issues related to the misuse, misappropriation, and malpractice of stakeholders, from diversion through to harassment.

PART 2: PROFILE

Violence and Security

Calm amidst enduring disquiet

Though it may have been beyond government control for several years, the legacy of the armed opposition has little to no influence over the current state of violence and security in At-Tall. Free to evacuate voluntarily upon reconciliation, the vast majority of opposition militia members left the area in late-2016, and the small ISIS-linked presence found on the city's periphery was forced to retreat shortly afterwards.⁴ Presently, there are no active front lines of any import to day-to-day life in At-Tall, and the city has again fallen within the orbit of government-linked security services. Given the absence of any other notable threats, the prospect of localised insurgencies, bombings or other forms of kinetic violence is therefore assessed as low.

Enduring peace-building challenges nevertheless remain. As of October 2020, At-Tall has spent almost as much time as a reconciled community as it did under armed opposition control, yet quotidian humiliations feed a continued sense of grievance and disquiet. Over one thousand original residents were reportedly arrested during the 2011 demonstrations, the fate of whom remains unclear despite the best efforts of the community.⁵ Hundreds of others have since been taken or have been forced to leave their homes. No provisions for addressing the detainee issue were made in the city's reconciliation agreement however,⁶ and the government remains hostile to any such attempt.⁷ It remains to be seen whether grievances of this kind will trigger future violence, but it is worth recalling that maltreatment of dissidents and unresolved land disputes following the rebellion of the 1980s were a factor in At-Tall's 2011 protests, and were among the loudest complaints of local demonstrators at this time.

Reduced post-reconciliation protection risks

Patterns of arbitrary detention, incommunicado imprisonment, forced disappearance, and conscription are less pronounced now than they were in 2017-18.⁸ Most civilian targets have either left the city, or have already been dealt with by a combination of Political Security and the local Ba'ath Brigade formed pursuant to the reconciliation agreement.⁹ Notably, the Syrian state has worked to integrate the largely voluntary Ba'ath Brigade militia into its regular armed forces in recent years, but the At-Tall branch is one of only a few remaining such entities. As explored in more detail in Governance, below, this may be

⁴ At-Tall's main armed opposition group was Liwa Al-Ghurba, a small group composed primarily of resident locals and with no meaningful links to more regional and/or national opposition movements. The group was demobilised following the city's reconciliation and the majority of fighters relocated to Idleb and other northern governorates. The ISIS-linked Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham occupied several positions throughout At-Tall's hilly periphery during opposition control, but was similarly forced to abandon the area upon conclusion of the siege and the arrival of Syrian government forces.

⁵ EUI (2017), [Local reconciliation agreements in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding](#).

⁶ Item two of the At-Tall reconciliation agreement specified that no promises would be made concerning detainees, only that attempts could be made in future to release them.

⁷ In many ways, the government appears to be repeating its behaviour in response to the Muslim Brotherhood-led rebellion of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At-Tall was heavily implicated in this movement, and many of the locals arrested during this period remain unaccounted for 40 years later.

⁸ As is common to post-reconciled areas in Syria, dozens of events of this kind were reported in At-Tall during the 2017-18 period, some of which involved the arrest and/or conscription of groups of predominantly young males.

⁹ At-Tall's reconciliation agreement stated that a local 'protection committee' would be formed to oversee day-to-day local security. This responsibility was assumed by an At-Tall Ba'ath Brigade militia, formed mainly from local volunteer recruits and tasked with manning checkpoints and light operations. Of note, Ba'ath Brigades were found predominantly in regime strongholds but were widely integrated into the regular Syrian Army in 2018.

an indication of the careful balance the government seeks to strike between state and locality in At-Tall, insofar as it at least creates an illusion of local independence and a measure of trust in the fealty of local elites. Indeed, the Syrian army is not permitted to enter At-Tall, and instead operates at a series of checkpoints on the city's periphery unless authorised to conduct targeted security operations.

Aid access and freedom of movement

Occasional incidents commonly associated with recently reconciled locations are still reported,¹⁰ but these have become increasingly infrequent small-scale occurrences and complement a broadly stable local security environment. Of course, a climate of ongoing security monitoring and state-orchestrated control persists, yet there is nothing especially unique about this compared with other post-reconciled locations. For aid agencies, common access-related impediments therefore apply: Bureaucratic obstacles will affect project timelines depending on the ministry involved, the nature of programming, and location, whilst partnership with Syrian NGOs will be limited and opportunities for direct community engagement will be few.

10 A young male was reportedly arrested arbitrarily at a government checkpoint on the outskirts of At-Tall when attempting to travel to Damascus on October 2, 2020. The only other event of note found by this research occurred in February 2020, when nine At-Tall residents were arrested by state security forces and taken to an undisclosed location.

For residents, freedom of movement is not heavily constrained within the city, neither are there any special restrictions on travel to Damascus. Importantly however, At-Tall's population has been inflated by a high number of IDPs from former opposition-held areas which are under equally — if not more — intense state security monitoring. This may mean that many residents are living in a kind of self-imposed exile inside At-Tall to avoid the attention of the security services. It may also mean that there are a relatively large number of people who lack the documentation necessary for transit through government-manned checkpoints given IDPs are less likely to have such paperwork. As highlighted in the previous section, a lack of paperwork is not only a matter of freedom of movement, but is one which can negatively affect the expression of the most fundamental rights, reinforce inequalities, and weaken the quality of aid and peace programming.

Governance

Resistance, reconciliation, and state restoration

To a great extent, the causes of anti-government sentiment in At-Tall were (are) rooted in the state's violent and oppressive response to the national Islamist uprisings of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Spearheaded by a revitalised Muslim Brotherhood movement that had enjoyed broad support in Rural Damascus decades earlier, At-Tall was among the many communities that helped inspire this short-lived revolt. Indeed, many prominent local figures restored their membership of the Brotherhood during this period, and other residents emboldened by the unrest joined anti-Ba'athist militias in an effort to bring down the government.

With the ultimate failure of the insurgency however, the state immediately sought to weaken prospects for the occurrence of future such events in communities like At-Tall. Local Muslim Brotherhood members were imprisoned, the army appropriated

land throughout the city, urban renewal plans were shelved, and state institutions were flooded with regime security personnel. With local needs subsumed by a security-focused agenda dominated by state institutions, the city largely marched to a beat orchestrated by the government for the next 30 years.

Though it may have had strong reasons for riding the wave of demonstrations in 2011, At-Tall's opposition was never in a position to durably impact local governance. Not only was it split between traditionalists seeking a renewed compact with Damascus and more liberally-minded youth seeking full-scale revolution, the family council established to govern the city during armed opposition control was under near perpetual military and economic besiegement. Moreover, the government's Ministry of National Reconciliation worked tirelessly to engage pre-war intermediary networks and recruit new patrons from the city's prominent families, religious leaders, and traders, many of whom were amenable to co-option and the promise of enhanced local status.

As the siege wore on, it became increasingly clear that a reconciliation committee was needed to mediate relationships between the government, the opposition, and the locality. Traders linked to regime cronies had become the lifeblood of the city's economy, At-Tall's remaining religious leaders were divided, and as siege conditions intensified, powerful local voices called for the opposition to surrender. Following several rounds of concerted military pressure, broken truces, and preliminary negotiations, a committee comprising At-Tall's mayor, several clerics, and a number of prominent family representatives reached a reconciliation agreement in December 2016.

Opposition networks were subsequently dismantled, and the regime's preferred local intermediaries were assigned responsibility for ensuring state authority, often leveraging their role in the reconciliation process to take up senior positions within influential local institutions. All external support to At-Tall was also discontinued, meaning the city was again reliant on Damascus for resources and essential services. Ultimately, conflict may have changed some of the players in At-Tall, but reconciliation ensured that the game has remained fundamentally the same: pre-war reliance on central state resources has been restored, and the relationship between regime authorities and compliant local elites has again become an important feature of city governance.

Balancing localism and institutionalism

Today, the opposition exists nowhere but in the minds of At-Tall's general population and — for the time being — the prospect of serious unrest is improbable. Importantly, however, the need to mediate the reimposition of weakened state authority has forced the government to depend less on pre-war institutional hierarchies, and rather more on its relationships with influential local figures. As such, state resources may have been centralised post-reconciliation, yet the institutions responsible for the deployment of those resources operate within a more *decentralised* and informal governance model that is at least partly reliant on localism and local sponsorship.

This model is clearly demonstrated in the manner in which the government has steadily worked to reintegrate At-Tall's religious institutions into the state apparatus.¹¹ As is common to towns of At-Tall's size, prominent families play an important

¹¹ Much of what follows on this subject is derived from: Khaddour, K. (2019) [Localism, war, and the fragmentation of Sunni Islam in Syria](#). Reading is strongly recommended for a deeper understanding of the fragmentation within Sunni Islam in Syria both prior to and throughout the current crisis.

role in local social, political and religious organisation. In the pre-war era, the city's smaller Sunni mosques were places around which such communities coalesced, and were largely free to do so because their imams were drawn from families wielding considerable local legitimacy. With legitimacy came a measure of autonomy, which in turn allowed for more diverse expressions of Islam and the exploration of issues often unaddressed by more traditional state-managed religious practice.

By 2011, many of At-Tall's family-linked mosques had deviated from the security-focused lens through which Sunni Islam had been managed since the 1970s. This was not a significant departure; local religious leaders were still largely loyal to the state and their activities were conditional upon security service approval. However, a more fragmented religious landscape had been produced by the development of ties among local social, economic, political elites at places of worship, and mosques were inevitably drawn into balancing the wishes of their followers with the competing narratives of the conflict.

With the entry of the opposition, overtly pro-regime clerics like Badr Al-Khatib of At-Tall's Grand Mosque left the city, whilst other more locally-oriented imams mindful of their responsibilities to both the state and the population called for restraint.¹² Though their pleas were ignored and many such religious leaders were also forced to flee, most were able to return upon the defeat of the opposition because they were deemed to have sought balance between government and community interests. Clearly, such figures are useful for a regime looking to re-establish itself in a community where religious figures have long been key to social cohesion, and indicate the adoption of a prescribed kind of localism. Indeed, renowned Ba'athist Badr Al-Khatib has been reinstated at the Grand Mosque and has been assigned responsibility for the appointment of other local imams, yet pre-war patterns of religious practice and prominent family involvement are said to remain.

¹² On this point, Khaddour (Ibid), notes that protests in At-Tall 'mobilised around the mosque controlled by the Arnous family, rather than the Great Mosque controlled by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Arnous was ultimately unable to deliver on the demands of local protestors and, under pressure from residents, relocated abroad in 2012. Others in the town, however, were able to ride the waves of demonstrations

Tightening state authority

It must be noted, however, that the autonomy wielded by the community within this governance model appears to be shrinking. Balance between the state and the locality is increasingly weighted in favour of the government, and this has generated a growing sense of disenchantment throughout the city. From health to education, Ba'ath Party sub-branches have reportedly reasserted themselves across various local government offices, leading to increased central state direction of the financing, staffing, and activities of such institutions. Gains made within At-Tall's civic space for community-led initiatives are therefore being rolled back, and the space for bottom-up civil initiatives is withering.

Equally however, notables retain an influential position within local governance systems. Most notables are well-positioned to engage governance stakeholders vertically, with some individuals able to transcend the governance chain from community level through to the Head of Rural Damascus governorate. Such positions theoretically enable local notables to play a prominent role in the definition of local civic space, insofar as they are able to negotiate exemptions from, and latitude within,

Syria's legal frameworks for aid and the political/security imperatives that shape civic space. As noted in Part 1, notables have already been instrumental in this regard, pushing for projects to improve local infrastructure via the local Committee for Development Action.

Social

Socially cohesive

At-Tall is a religious, blue-collar town which has long absorbed large numbers of rural migrants ignored by the government and deprived of economic opportunity. It has retained this character in spite of a mass IDP influx throughout the conflict, largely because new arrivals are drawn primarily from the culturally, politically, and geographically proximate locations of Eastern Ghouta and Homs, both of which could be similarly characterised and have had comparable (albeit more violent) conflict-related histories. IDPs may therefore outnumber original residents (by an estimated ratio of 2:1), yet At-Tall has provided something of a home from home for its swollen wartime population. Indeed, most IDPs have reportedly slotted into city life without causing any significant identity-related intercommunal tensions.

Populated overwhelmingly by Sunni Muslim Syrians familiar with local societal norms, a common experience of conflict, and an extensive number of IDP host families, a strong sense of social cohesion is therefore apparent. In a sense, this is a continuation of the solidarity displayed by At-Tall's population throughout the pre-war and revolutionary periods, during which locals may have been divided as to their aspired form of government, but were broadly united around themes of freedom, national unity, non-violence, and anti-militarisation. Such hopes were ultimately dashed when Syria fell into conflict, yet extremism found little to no footing in At-Tall in the way that radical Islam took hold throughout much of opposition-held Rural Damascus. Revolutionary voices coalesced around the city's relatively progressive religious institutions and were at least accommodated by the religious leaders and local elites responsible for shaping this important aspect of public life.¹³

¹³ Notably, women's groups were active during this time and made strides towards greater recognition of women's participation in local politics and society. See: The New Humanitarian (2013), [Syria untold: The girls of Al-Tall weave ribbons and freedom](#). Regrettably, the groups listed in this piece ceased activities upon At-Tall's reconciliation.

'City of the displaced'

Whereas it was once known primarily as a tourist destination, At-Tall has now become synonymous with displacement. This is not because At-Tall has been a particularly stable destination for IDPs, neither is it because the city has enjoyed especially good public services, livelihood opportunities, and prospects for individual wellbeing. In fact, the city's population has grown at such a rate that the city's already limited resources have only been further overburdened, compounding the heightened everyday challenges faced by both original residents and recently arrived IDPs. Rather, At-Tall's popularity as a displacement destination is rooted largely in its status as a Damascene satellite town, insofar as it offers relatively low cost capital proximity living that — despite local challenges — compares favourably with more conflict-affected areas.

During the conflict, inward migration to the city has come from two main sources and in two discernible waves. First, from Homs and nearby areas, roughly between 2011 and 2014, and later, from Eastern Ghouta and other besieged parts of Damascus between 2015 and 2017. There is also a sizable number of people that originate from Deir-ez-Zor, most of whom arrived in greater numbers during especially pronounced periods of instability in their home governorate during anti-ISIS offensives. These inflows have massively inflated the local population from a pre-war figure of around 100,000-120,000 in 2010, to an estimated 213,000 in October 2020.¹⁴

¹⁴ The 2004 figure is derived from the national census of that year, available [here](#) (Arabic). The 2020 figure is from a HNAP dataset provided to COAR on a monthly basis.

Inevitably, growth of this kind has placed massive pressure on local infrastructure to the extent that the city's physical landscape has been irrevocably changed. However, it has also fundamentally restructured At-Tall's social landscape almost overnight, effectively transplanting recent arrivals onto the periphery of pre-war life and social systems. As noted, this has not produced any particularly acute grievances between residents and IDP communities. Indeed, IDPs are by far the city's largest constituency and a great many cohabit with original residents and/or family members. However, the phenomenon does emphasise the importance of engendering an urban environment in which IDPs can flourish as active citizens, including by creating platforms for aid agencies to work with local authorities to recognise IDPs as rights-holders and to address deprivations particular to IDP groups.

In At-Tall, those deprivations are broadly common to the urban poor of most post-reconciled areas, namely, informal housing, a lack of employment, and heightened vulnerability. Displaced people in the city also reportedly spend a greater proportion of their income on rent and other essential living expenses compared with original residents. International guidance highlights collaboration with government authorities as the most important response to these issues,¹⁵ but the exclusionary treatment of At-Tall's displaced population by the state makes this a sensitive problem in need of careful and assertive management. Moreover, a lack of state recognition and/or engagement with the city's informal housing, employment and service provision systems further stands in the way of a realistic response to urban development, and much remains to be done if At-Tall's IDPs are to more substantively contribute to city life.

¹⁵ IIED, JIPS and UN Habitat (2020), [IDPs in towns and cities – working with the realities of international displacement in an urban world](#).

Wartime urban development

The rate at which IDPs have arrived in At-Tall under conditions of conflict means they have been near impossible to assimilate into a formal land and property development plan. Self-construction, family provision, and squatting have become dominant alternative options, and housing poverty has risen sharply in step with Syria's broader economic decline. A 2016 study listed At-Tall as presenting amongst the highest severity of shelter and NFI needs in Syria,¹⁶ and it is unlikely the city would fall far down this list were another such exercise conducted today. Local reports describe many hundreds of poor-quality homes accommodating several families for which residents can afford only incremental and minor improvement. A number are understood to lack even basic services and utilities, and are essentially hollow shells that provide limited dignity to their inhabitants.

¹⁶ Shelter Cluster (2016), [Syria: Shelter and NFI Needs Assessment Report](#). Severity was assessed across several indicators, namely: shelter typology, presence of hosting population, rent affordability, presence of housing, land and property issues, availability of rental houses and shelter construction materials.

Of course, informal housing has always been a tacit feature of Syria's hybrid housing policy, and especially in the vicinity of its largest most productive cities. Ba'athist market-socialism has seldom produced enough housing stock to accommodate migrants to the urban fringe, whilst 'complementary' neo-liberal property development has been unaffordable for most rural-urban arrivals. In many ways, At-Tall's wartime urban development is therefore an acceleration of a practice that was already implicitly permitted by a government unable and unwilling to meet shifting market demand. The problem, however, is that it has not been possible to supplement the rate of wartime growth with corresponding levels of community investment, leaving thousands exposed to tenure insecurity, and many others trapped in homes that fall far short of minimum standards.

This is a matter of social interest insofar as there is strong evidence that poor housing contributes to educational under-achievement, poorer public health, and a host of other social effects. With much of the city now consisting of stagnant neighbourhoods lacking adequate services and economic opportunity, it is likely these impacts will calcify, lowering the baseline for a range of aid interventions. Longer-term, it is likely neighbourhoods of this kind will be more easily uprooted by change and instability, and their inhabitants may be less committed to At-Tall's development owing to their state of transience and personal insecurity.

Economy

Subsistence

There is little to differentiate day-to-day challenges in At-Tall from the everyday difficulties faced by most Syrians across other government-held areas. Under current national economic constraints, local reports described a community struggling to meet basic needs, and many within the city continue to prioritise daily subsistence over activities that might contribute to the development of community capital. Just 60% of household incomes in At-Tall are derived from livelihoods within the productive economy, with the remainder dependent on a combination of remittances and aid and development assistance.

One could identify any number of indicators to illustrate the scale of this problem for local growth and self-recovery, but household expenditure paints a particularly striking picture. In 2017, households in At-Tall were spending at least a third of their monthly income on food. Now, with food prices for basic staples rising by more than 100% over the past 12 months in the Damascus area,¹⁷ food expenditure has likely risen substantially in the intervening period. Mid-2020 has featured pronounced currency depreciation, diminished public and private sector wages, and the withdrawal of a number of state subsidies for staple items. Even if Syria is able to restore some measure of control over these macroeconomic challenges, it is unlikely to do so for some time. Meanwhile, the limited number of local livelihood opportunities, weak purchasing power, and poor public transport links with Damascus-based employment and vendor markets are likely to keep a majority of households focused primarily on subsistence.

¹⁷ Al-Araby (2020). [Food prices double in one year in Syria as conflict rages on.](#)

Local market dynamics

Public markets are adequately supplied and, notwithstanding temporary COVID-19-related restrictions, are not subject to any particular access constraints either in general, nor for any particular minority identity group. Though regime-linked elites were a pronounced feature of local market provision and commodity pricing during besiegement, these arrangements have since been scaled back and there were no reports of noteworthy state-orchestrated management of the private marketplace.

That said, it is worth noting that prices in At-Tall are an estimated 5%-10% higher than other parts of Rural Damascus. This is not necessarily a new feature of the local economy. Local sources report that price differentials between At-Tall and other settlements on the periphery of Rural Damascus pre-date the current conflict, likely because of the city's status as a tourist and summer destination, and because there has traditionally been relatively limited local agriculture and manufacturing compared to somewhere like Eastern Ghouta. At the same time, it is likely that population growth has resulted in an increased concentration of demand for goods and services, thereby creating new incentives for traders to issue higher local prices.

Supply-demand imbalances

Households in At-Tall display high reliance on external sources of income, primarily from aid agencies and remittances, and at least one third of the city's working-age population have no reliable income whatsoever. Of those in work, small-scale commerce, petty trade, and public sector work represent the most popular forms of employment. Such a labour force profile is comparable to locations which have a similar geography, size, and conflict history, yet At-Tall is notable for a sizable number of skilled artisanal craftspeople and construction and industrial tradesmen. Owing to everyday economic pressures on the average Syrian family however, demand for these skills is presently low and a sizable portion of this workforce is thought to lie dormant.

Besides currently incorrigible macroeconomic realities, part of the problem confronting the city's tradespeople is that concerted efforts by the community to bring power, water, and sewage networks back online have been deliberately stymied. Preferred (and more costly) state-linked contractors for community-funded infrastructure development works were identified by government officials, and excessive permission-related costs were applied which ultimately resulted in the termination of several local built environment projects in the post-reconciliation period. This has obviously undermined opportunities for a key form of local employment, and it has also left business owners throughout the city without the infrastructure for even basic business activities, planning and investment.

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