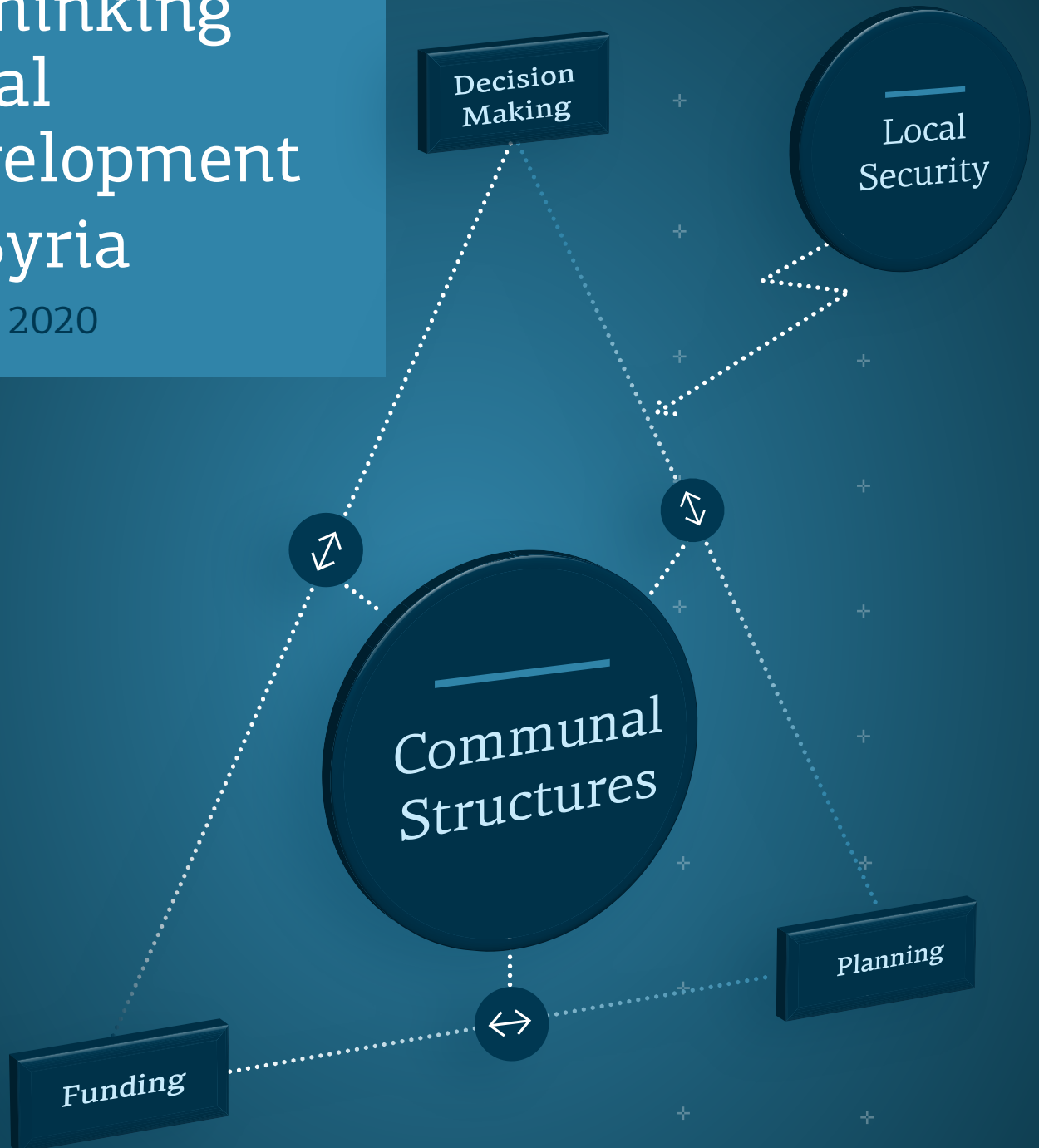


Arrested Development: Rethinking Local Development in Syria

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Contents

3 Executive Summary

4 Key Findings:

5 Local Development: Function over Form

5 Legal frameworks for development in Syria

6 Local communal structures

7 What Process? Local development in practice

9 Development in Action: Four Cases

11 Deir-ez-Zor: Monopoly on lobbying power

12 Tafas: Dysfunctional development, municipality in local isolation

13 At-Tall: Communal lobbying, local development at a cost

15 Al Qutayfah: More accessible governance, improved local development

16 Analysis: Local Development Challenges and Opportunities

17 Lobbying of local notables and elites: Costs and conflicts

17 Severe lack of resources:

18 Influence of security forces:

Executive Summary

Since the onset of the Syrian uprising, the Government of Syria has introduced multiple regulatory reforms to reshape its relationship with local communities. Ostensibly, the aim of these measures has been to empower local governance structures to take charge of their own development as part of a broader decentralization of the Syrian state. These measures have been the focus of considerable attention by the international Syria response. On the ground, however, these reforms have done little to change the reality of local development, for which central government authorities and security forces continue to hold much of the 'real' power. Central state institutions retain formal legal authority over planning for local development projects, while local security forces may still intervene to significantly alter projects, or terminate them altogether. Additionally, formal local governance structures such as city and municipal councils often lack sufficient expertise to carry out local development activities. Almost universally, financial resources are inadequate to meet community needs. Without doubt, these limitations appear daunting, in particular to the international humanitarian and development response. Notwithstanding the considerable challenges, however, space does exist for development activities to be influenced by bottom-up local actors, and potentially by the international response itself.

To this end, existing local communal structures may be indispensable entry points for local development activities in Syria. Entities such as civil society groups, prominent families councils, and individual 'notables' are capable of shaping local development planning and tapping into local and diaspora networks to plug budget shortfalls; perhaps most importantly, their personal connections also afford them considerable influence over decision-making at the level of the central government and among local security forces. There are limitations to this influence, however. Local actors' sway over development projects is not a product of formal legal frameworks; rather, it stems from factors such as the personal networks and the financial resources of the actors involved. Crucially, this influence can also impede programming. To a large extent, the success of local development activities seemingly depends upon avoiding conflict with the reputational, material, or financial interests of the local communal structures who often wield considerable influence on the local level.

In consideration of these challenges, this paper presents a preliminary framework to assess the processes and actor sets that are most relevant to the local development landscape in Syria. This paper is based on extensive field-based research, and provides case studies of four communities — Deir-ez-Zor, At-Tall, Tafas, and Al Qutayfah — to provide a clear analytical perspective on the reality of local development in Syria today. Each of the communities studied furnishes multiple examples of the diverse challenges facing development activities. Although the challenges vary, these examples highlight a crucial unifying element: the critical role played by local communal structures. In Deir-ez-Zor, prominent local actors successfully lobbied against a city council plan to rehabilitate a textile factory, thus overruling the interest of local farmers. By contrast, in At-tall, prominent local actors self-funded a much-needed well project, and successfully brokered its implementation despite resistance from local Political Security forces. In Tafas, the deliberate marginalization of once-active communal structures had a major negative impact on the community's development capacity. Finally, in Al Qutayfah, private funds collected by local actors contributed significantly to a major expansion of the local hospital. On the basis of these case studies, this research finds that the interests and influence of local communal structures are at the core of local development activity

in Syria today. Naturally, many additional considerations of foremost interest to international development actors are beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, it is our hope that this paper provides a useful conceptualization of the development activities that are already taking place in Syria, and will serve as a jumping off point for further research and debate.

Key Findings:

- Although regulatory frameworks grant individual municipalities a high degree of formal independence, local development activities remain strongly influenced by decision-making processes that take place at the governorate level, and by interventions by security forces — both of which are often arbitrary or opaque.
- On the local level, formal governance bodies often have little functional role in development activity. The 'real' power to take decisions and implement activities is generally in the hands of governorate-level officials appointed by the Government of Syria and security forces.
- In general, development programming occurs in three phases, each involving a distinct actor set. These are: planning, funding, and decision-making. Municipalities set their own planning priorities, which must align with those of governorate-level actors. Likewise, funding priorities are also, to some extent, determined by the municipality, but remain subject to considerable de facto limitations. Finally, decision-making authority for development projects ultimately rests with the governorate and local security actors.
- Despite these limitations, the role of local notables and prominent families is more pronounced today than ever before. Arguably, on the local level, prominent community-based stakeholders now play the most critical role in facilitating the implementation of local development activities.
- By leveraging pre-existing interpersonal connections, local communal structures are capable of aligning priorities across the three development phases, thus allowing them to break-up programmatic logjams and facilitate implementation.
- Thus, it is critically important for development actors to assess which local actors can play a constructive role in aligning mutual interests, but doing so may also require determining whether the project conflicts with the reputational, material, or financial interests of influential local communal structures whose opposition can impede a project.

Legal frameworks for development in Syria

Decree No. 107

In August 2011, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 107 in an ostensible effort to democratize local governance through decentralization. Specific articles in the decree theoretically granted local administrators increased responsibility planning, funding, and monitoring development projects. To date, however, Decree No. 107 has brought almost no meaningful progress on the ground. Superficial changes, such as the renaming of municipal committees, have taken place, yet even these 'reforms' are far from reaching universal adoption. In matters of substance, local governance has largely been unaffected by the decree, while municipalities remain highly dependent on inefficient central government institutions, and security forces continue to wield immense power over the actual implementation of development activities.

Law No. 10

In March 2018, the Syrian Parliament passed Law No. 10. The law granted municipalities the power to designate "re-development zones" within their jurisdictions, establish holding companies, and sign reconstruction contracts with private sector entities. However, among the law's many shortcomings is the fact that municipalities cannot take decisions without the approval of the central government. Moreover, municipalities remain under the influence of security forces, and are unlikely to reach favorable commercial agreements with a private sector ecosystem that is dominated by powerful businessmen with connections to security forces and central authorities. Ultimately, any project implemented on the local level still requires the approval of governorate councils and local security forces, thus preserving the effective control of central authorities over the development process. With projects perceived highly profitable as those planned in the "re-development zones," the influence of security forces may be insurmountable.

Baath Party Decree No. 108

What little independent authority municipalities have gained was abnegated in the latest round of municipal elections. In September 2018, days before municipal elections, the ruling Baath Party issued its own Decree No. 108. In practice, the order indicates that a majority of officials within municipal councils must be chosen from the party's slate of pre-selected candidates, described as the "National Unity List," leaving a few remaining seats for independents. Though the dominance of Baath Party persisted throughout the conflict, the latest local elections could be seen as a symbolic representation of the party's influence over local and national governance.

Local Development: Function over Form

¹Local development activities referred to throughout the paper will refer to any projects that are intended to improve the general well-being of the local population. This may include infrastructure rehabilitation, health and education support, rehabilitation of basic services, nutrition projects, job-creating activities, and so on.

Since 2011, Syria's central authorities have taken modest, but high-profile steps to reform the regulatory framework that governs local administrative and development activities.¹ Nominally, these reforms sought to delegate responsibility to municipalities and city councils, as stipulated in three primary regulations: Decree No. 107, Law No. 10, and Decree No. 108 (see: Figure 1). To some extent, the international Syria response has been compelled to view local development in Syria through this formal framework as a result of limitations on access, the historical opacity of governance in Syria, and the limited experiences with development programming in Government-held areas.

This formal understanding is highly consequential, as it implicitly anchors development activities in legal hierarchies that are not, in practice, the most critical factors in local development in Syria. In actual practice, the degree of governmental localization achieved in Syria has been highly limited. These limitations have come, first, from the oversight retained by central authorities, and second, due to the power wielded by local security actors. As such, in terms of oversight, actual decision-making power over development activity rests not with local administrative

entities, but with the central government, which continues to exercise power over programming activities in a local context, albeit through governorate councils. Likewise, intervention by the security forces is also powerful, and may significantly alter a local development project, or halt implementation altogether. This is true even when a project has acquired all necessary legal approvals. Thus, given the mismatch between the legal framework and the programmatic reality, the international Syria response faces a unique challenge in conceptualizing and approaching development programming.

Local communal structures

In practice, development activity in Syria is a highly localized, often ad-hoc process. For this reason, assessing the relationships between influential local stakeholders and the central government or local security forces may represent the most relevant entry point to ensure that programming can be planned realistically and carried out effectively. In this respect, the most important factor for local development is the capacity of what can be called local 'communal structures',² to include prominent families, local businesses, family councils, local 'notables', charities, and other civil society entities.³ In many cases, these actors wield considerable influence over the planning and execution of development activities on the local level, and are arguably more important today than ever before.

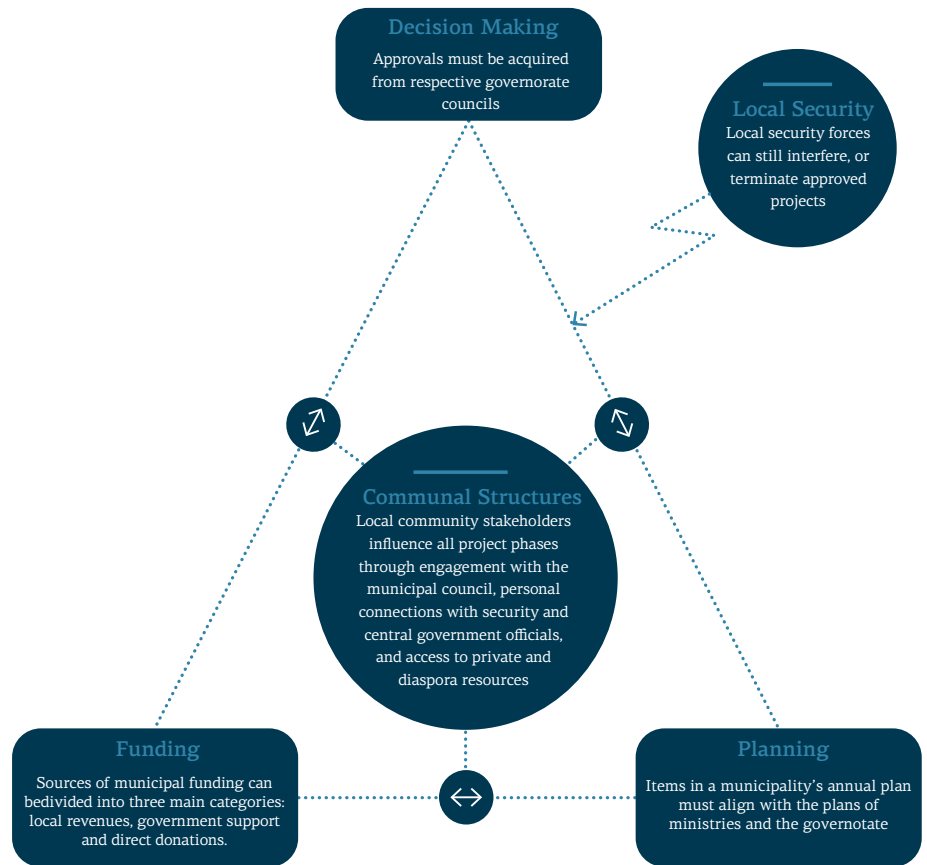
This effectiveness stems largely from the ability of these actors to address three of the most common challenges faced by development programming: inadequate funding, the need for permissions from central authorities, and the risk of interference from security actors. Indeed, these local stakeholders are frequently capable of soliciting monetary donations to fund projects, which can plug critical budgetary shortfalls that are the result of significant conflict damage and the lack of funding at all levels of government. Moreover, through their local reputations and personal connections to state apparatuses and security establishments, these local community actors often have considerable lobbying power. As a result, despite the fact that the central government and security forces wield de facto decision-making power over many parts of the local development project pipeline, effective lobbying by local entities can significantly impact decisions over local development.

2 Term 'local communal structures' is used throughout this paper to refer to local notables, prominent families councils, local charities, diaspora groups and other bodies or individuals with local influence outside the official municipal structure.

3 In "Function Over Form: Rethinking Civil Society in Governmentheld Syria," COAR defined Civil Society as "the means by which groups of individuals collectively interact with or shape their local context, communities, or government policies." See: <https://bit.ly/33vEKZs>.

What Process? Local development in practice

The 'Missing Link': Local Communal Structures in Development



4 Formally, several layers of governance structures are in place to coordinate these activities. In reality, however, this hierarchy is only a partial guide to the way such activities are carried out, as a parallel system of governance is also in place.

5 These are not official bureaucratic cornerstones through which local development passes, and they are by no means linear. Rather, they include interactions among both formal and informal actors, and were stipulated upon analysis of case studies and local development in Syria more generally, and after interviews with key informants.

In order to understand the unique impact of the influence exercised by local stakeholders, it is important to deconstruct the process of development activity in Syria. In actual practice, the way the local communal structures interact with municipal entities, security forces, the governorate council, and each other is determined not by formal legal frameworks, but according to communal actors' access to sources of influence, such as personal networks or financial resources.⁴ In this sense, there are three distinct phases at issue preceding the implementation of local development projects: planning, funding, and decision-making.⁵

6 Members of these committees are: President-appointed army Colonel or Brigadier-General, President-appointed Governor, Head of Bath Governorate Branch, Head of the Political Security Governorate Branch, Head of State Security Governorate Branch and Governorate Head of Police. Depending on the conflict level in the governorate, either one of the president-appointed officials acts as head of the committee.

Planning

Every year, governorate councils, ministries, and municipalities draft annual plans that lay out spending, revenue, and investment strategy. Items planned by municipalities must align with the plans of line ministries and the relevant governorate council in order to be implemented. Local planning processes vary among communities, but in general they include a considerable level of participation from the local community. In some cases, municipal plans are announced and discussed in town hall meetings organized by local notables and prominent families.

Funding

Local administrative units maintain budgets that are separate from that of the national government. It is through these budgets that municipalities are able to fund local development projects and provide services such as landline telephone, electricity and sewage networks, and waste management. Sources of funding for municipal budgets can be divided into three main categories:

1. Local revenues: local taxes and fees, as well as revenues generated from public spaces run by the local administration.
2. Government support: project-based funds that are made available to the local administration after a request is made to the governorate. Alternatively, the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment and the State Planning Commission can also allocate funds directly to municipalities as part of a national strategy.
3. Direct donations: funds directed toward municipalities from national and international organizations, or private individuals. These can come in the form of equipment, expertise, or cash. Notably, donations are increasingly becoming an important source of funding

Decision-Making

Prior to implementing any plans, municipal councils must acquire approval from the respective governorate council, after consultations with the governorate-level Political and Security Committee.⁶ Notably, in some cases, even when all approvals are acquired and a decision is made by the governorate council, local security forces can still intervene to halt or terminate local projects, often due to opaque “security concerns.” That being said, it is also possible for local notables and prominent economic actors to influence decisions regarding the implementation of local development projects.

Development in Action: Four Cases

The four case studies below examine how these dynamics impact local development in practice, with a specific focus on the local conditions that impede — or enable — development projects. In each of the communities assessed below, the development projects under study succeeded — or failed — for myriad reasons that were often locally specific, and in many cases are difficult to identify definitively.⁷ However, it is crucial to note that in all cases in which implementation was successful, local communal structures lent critical support to ensure a project was carried out, including by intervening to reverse security decisions that had threatened implementation.⁸ That does not mean that community stakeholder support for a program guarantees its success. On the contrary, many projects with strong local community support were not implemented (see: Figure 3). A multitude of factors is relevant to these failures. The technical and administrative resources of government institutions and state-owned enterprises remain inadequate to meet demand. Arbitrary security restrictions appear commonplace. Funding shortfalls are nearly universal. Finally, the cases demonstrate that local communal structures themselves can be successful in halting development activities that threaten their individual interests. Collectively, these projects furnish important lessons in the volatility and uncertainty inherent to local development in Syria. However, one through line is ultimately clear: the support of influential local stakeholders with lobbying power among central authorities and local security actors may be a necessary prerequisite for programming to overcome the impediments that are innate to the opaque 'decentralized' nature of local development in Syria.

7 The projects assessed in this study are by no means an exhaustive list of all development projects implemented in the communities under study. Rather, this sample was chosen to represent: 1) all notable projects deemed by key informants to have a high impact, and 2) projects for which detailed information was available. All efforts have been taken to obtain data concerning all relevant projects; regrettably, the information environment of local communities in Syria remains somewhat opaque.

8 In this sample, no projects were implemented without the support of local communal structures. Without doubt this is an important finding, but it is by no means guaranteed that this is universal throughout Syria.

Figure 3:

Community	Outcome			
	Implemented	Not Implemented*		
		Planning	Funding	Decision-Making
At-Tall	New water wells project		Water network rehabilitation Electricity network rehabilitation Sewage system rehabilitation Road rehabilitation	Establishing a new cemetery
Deir-ez-Zor	Local market rehabilitation	School rehabilitation	Industrial zone rehabilitation Electricity network rehabilitation Road rehabilitation	Local textile factory rehabilitation
Tafas	Road rehabilitation Electricity and telephone network rehabilitation	Sewage systems rehabilitation	Establishing industrial zone	
Al Qutayfah	Garbage collection Road rehabilitation	Expansion of industrial city	New bakery	

Key

- Implemented (with communal structure support)
- Failed (with communal structure support)
- Failed (with opposition of communal structure)

*Projects are categorized according to the phase at which a critical breakdown was most influential in preventing implementation

“Perhaps the central concern in implementing projects in Deir-ez-Zor is the influence of local elites, whose influence can be beneficial or harmful to the wider interests of the local community.”

Deir-ez-Zor: Monopoly on lobbying power

Deir-ez-Zor city is the capital of Deir-ez-Zor governorate, and had a pre-war population of approximately 500,000, which has currently fallen to 126,485, of whom 50,601 are IDPs. Government of Syria forces maintained a small presence in Deir-ez-Zor city throughout the conflict, yet significant portions of the city were taken over by ISIS, and many of these neighborhoods were subject to heavy bombardment by U.S.-led coalition and Russian airstrikes. The prolonged conflict and high level of destruction severely degraded living conditions, while services such as electricity and garbage collection were largely nonfunctional, and road functionality was minimal. Following a series of offensives, the city was retaken by the Government of Syria in 2017. As a symbol of the government's return, in September 2018 a new city council was elected, which saw the Baath Party's "national unity" list win in an electoral landslide.

The factors influencing local development in Deir-ez-Zor city fall into three main categories: a severe lack of resources; the inefficiency of government institutions and state-owned enterprises; and the influence of local non-governmental structures. Indeed, while the destruction of basic infrastructure and a lack of financial resources are surely significant impediments for a return to normal life in the city, the influence of powerful local actors has played a major role in steering development processes in the city. For example, even when resources are available for development projects, the political will required to implement them is limited by the degree to which the projects accord with the interests of influential local actors.

Available resources

Access to resources of all kinds was severely impacted by years of conflict. Revenues available to the central government were already highly limited when the Syrian pound's value dropped rapidly — to half of its value — between 2019 and 2020 essentially halving government revenues. To that end, the government's ability to provide services and maintain infrastructure is almost nonexistent. Previously, revenues collected by the city council in Deir-ez-Zor were generated from local taxes and fees, shares in real estate investments and transactions, and donations procured on a local basis. According to local sources, these revenues are now too low to provide any meaningful support to the city's rehabilitation. For example, the 2019 plans to rehabilitate the city's industrial zone were terminated due to insufficient funding from both the city council and the Ministry of Industry.

Additionally, there is inadequate equipment and machinery to carry out development work, and sufficient expertise is not available to the city council to provide — or even plan for — sustainable provision of basic services. A garbage removal project launched in early 2019 was reportedly terminated after covering only a few neighborhoods, due to lack of funds and equipment. The project was certainly an ambitious proposal even before it entered implementation, given that the city council's machinery was limited to one truck and four tractors. Other municipal equipment is also reportedly in need of repairs or replacement, and road rehabilitation in Deir-ez-Zor has largely been suspended.

“However, when the Deir-ez-Zor city council began planning to rehabilitate the textile production plant after its election in September 2018, it faced strong lobbying from the Sarraj Company, which viewed the rehabilitation of the plant as a threat to its business...”

Central government institutions

In some reported cases, basic service projects were terminated or failed to enter implementation due to inefficiency and lack of capacity on the part of the central government and local institutions. Several reasons were given for the termination of projects in the city: a lack of coordination between the municipality and central government institutions, a lack of capacity within public institutions, and the inadequacy of resources available for the city council. Again as an example, a project to remove rubble was contracted to the Establishment for the Execution of Military Construction — a Ministry of Defense subentity — likely without verifying whether available resources would be sufficient. The project was terminated a few months after its launch due to lack of capacity.

Influence of powerful local structures

Perhaps the central concern in implementing projects in Deir-ez-Zor is the influence of local elites, whose influence can be beneficial or harmful to the wider interests of the local community. The case of the Sarraj Company, currently one of the most important economic actors in the city, is a prime example. The company's business and local influence significantly increased when it established transportation networks linking Deir-ez-Zor farmers with agricultural processing facilities in Damascus. Deir-ez-Zor had the largest textile processing factory in the country, before it was taken out of service in 2014 due to bombardment and looting. However, when the Deir-ez-Zor city council began planning to rehabilitate the textile production plant after its election in September 2018, it faced strong lobbying from the Sarraj Company, which viewed the rehabilitation of the plant as a threat to its business, which nets considerable revenues from transportation costs paid by farmers. Reportedly, the company's strong connection to high-ranking security officials at the city's Military Security branch granted significantly more lobbying power than local farmers, and Deir-ez-Zor's processing facility remains offline.

Tafas: Dysfunctional development, municipality in local isolation

Tafas is a small town in western rural Dar'a, with a population of around 31,000, of whom 1,800 are IDPs. The town was brought under Government of Syria control through a reconciliation agreement signed in November 2018. As a matter of course, the agreement stipulated the complete dismantling of local administrative structures that operated in the city under opposition control, in addition to the absorption of armed opposition fighters into the central government's military ranks. As a result, the current municipal council was chosen largely in accordance with its members' acceptability to the Government of Syria. As a result, its popularity and reputation on the local level are in serious doubt. To date, the municipality council has implemented only one (currently incomplete) project to rehabilitate roads in the city. Despite the dire need for basic services of all kinds, including electricity, water, and waste management, the Tafas municipal council has reportedly done very little in this respect. Notably, the status of services in the town was significantly better prior to Government takeover, as the opposition local council operated in close coordination with local and international NGOs that carried out programming in the area. Currently, only a fraction of pre-takeover service projects remain functional — and at a limited capacity — as almost all of the organizations

“Influential local structures and notables in Tafas were either bypassed or displaced in an attempt by the government to dismantle opposition-affiliated administrative structures.”

involved in opposition-era service networks were either banned or disbanded, and Government institutions lack the capacity required to maintain existing services.

Available resources

Tafas is a small town, with few local sources of revenue available to the municipality. Prior to the conflict, the municipality generated income through local taxes and fees paid for municipal services, fines on informal housing, agricultural land violations, and by renting shops in the local markets. Currently, these shops are damaged and in need of rehabilitation, the cost of which is beyond the council's capacity. Furthermore, central government-allocated funds are reportedly insufficient for any meaningful project to be implemented.

Central Government Institutions

Based on reports from key informants, the town is of little importance to the Government of Syria for local development projects implemented by state enterprises. Reportedly, only two projects were carried out by central state institutions: rehabilitation of telecommunication and electricity stations in the city. These two stations, however, are not specifically focused on Tafas itself; their primary aim is to provide electricity and telecommunication services to more strategically important areas, namely Dar'a city and nearby towns. As of this writing, electricity and telecommunication services in Tafas remain inadequate.

Influence of powerful local structures

Influential local structures and notables in Tafas were either bypassed or displaced in an attempt by the government to dismantle opposition-affiliated administrative structures. Local reports indicate that Tafas' municipal council operates in isolation from the community, with little to no representation of any of the influential local structures. In mid-2019, local notables from Tafas and neighboring towns reached out to Russian officers, who were previously part of the delegation that negotiated the reconciliation of southern Syria, to inquire about the status of the promised return of services. However, this did not alter the dire shortcomings of government-provided services in the area, as health and education services, medicine, flour, electricity, and drinking water remain significantly lacking. The presence of Russian Military Police in southern Syria is solely to ensure stability in the area, without the ability to guarantee the return of promised local services, which remain provided by government institutions.

At-Tall: Communal lobbying, local development at a cost

In December 2016, At-Tall entered into a reconciliation agreement with the Government of Syria, stipulating the evacuation of civil society activists and armed opposition fighters and their families to Idleb. Although the agreement was similar to those in other opposition-held communities in south and central Syria, throughout the conflict the At-Tall community maintained a special relationship with both opposition groups and Government of Syria representatives. Local notables who had pre-existing relationships with the Government prior to 2011 maintained those

9 During besiegement, employees and university students could still use public transportation to travel to Damascus across front lines. However, they had to pay sporadic fees for foods or goods brought into the town.

“After funds were acquired locally, and a long bureaucratic process was completed, the necessary approvals were obtained and the project was ready for implementation. At the last minute, however, the local Political Security branch shut down the project for undisclosed security reasons.”

lines of communication throughout the period of opposition control. This permitted a level of coordination to persist,⁹ which allowed the town a relative level of stability under siege, attracting a large number of IDPs from other opposition-held areas. Reportedly, the town hosted as many as 700,000 IDPs during its siege. Indeed, throughout the conflict the town's reconciliation committee, whose members were respected notables living inside the city, and the relatively well-organized local families' council, were vital to maintaining relative stability in the town. These bodies were dissolved or sidelined shortly after government takeover, yet their former members continue to play an important role managing local affairs today. Many of those notables are now members of the municipality's Committee for Development Action, which is now arguably the most vital actor in the town's development affairs.

Available resources

The municipal council in At-Tall has access to several funding resources. Central government allocations to the town were resumed after the reconciliation agreement was signed in late 2016, but have proven inadequate. Another source of funding is the local tax base and user fees assessed for telecommunication and electricity services, as well as fines, which come mostly from informal housing and construction. Donations from the diaspora constitute a third funding stream, which also highlights the critical role of local notables in mobilizing funds.

After the formation of the At-Tall municipal council in 2018 and the Committee for Development Action in 2019, numerous projects were proposed and planned following town hall meetings. These projects concerned rehabilitation for vital roads and electricity, water, and sewage networks, but only one was implemented, due to a lack of funding, despite efforts by prominent local notables to raise money through remittances. Crucially, these projects would have been carried out by state-owned enterprises such as the General Electricity Corporation, and the lack of trust in these institutions reportedly prevented a more consistent flow of remittances.

Central government institutions

Several proposals to establish new wells and improve water networks in the city were rejected due to lack of available funds. Local notables, some of whom are seated on the Committee for Development Action, mobilized diaspora communities, mainly in the Gulf, and gathered sufficient private funds to implement the project. The Rural Damascus governorate and the Water Supply Authority of the Ministry of Water Resources did not have sufficient funds to implement the project, which was viewed as vital by town residents. After funds were acquired locally, and a long bureaucratic process was completed, the necessary approvals were obtained and the project was ready for implementation. At the last minute, however, the local Political Security branch shut down the project for undisclosed security reasons.

Influence of powerful local structures

After lobbying, pressure, and mobilization of local notables' connections, the project was eventually implemented. Reportedly, the implementation cost was much larger than the cost estimates. This was likely due to the cost of what one key informant

“... the reputation of the council remains relatively good among the local population. This was largely attributed to coordination among the different local structures in the city...”

described as “buying approvals” — which was evidently necessary for the project to go forward. This inflated not only the project’s financial cost, but also the time and effort expended by local notables to mobilize their connections. Despite these overruns, the project was successfully implemented, yet the costs incurred in the process have reportedly become a major disincentive to future efforts to mobilize local resources toward development.

Al Qutayfah: More accessible governance, improved local development

Al Qutayfah, being in the vicinity of critical Syrian military infrastructure, is the only major town in Eastern Qalamoun to remain under Government control throughout the conflict. The town’s formal governance structures remained in operation with little interruption, and the town as a whole suffered little to no conflict damage. At present, the Al Qutayfah and Dhameer municipal councils are the only two operating in Eastern Qalamoun, with the former having the widest jurisdiction, supervising the work of municipalities in Al Qutayfah, Raheiba, Jirud, and Nasriyeh.

Continued operation allowed Al-Qutayfah’s municipality to perform more effectively than its counterparts in neighboring conflict-affected areas. This also helped maintain stronger channels of communication with various communal structures in the town. Even after the formation of a new municipal council in September 2018 and the intervention of the Baath Party in local elections, the reputation of the council remains relatively good among the local population. This was largely attributed to coordination among the different local structures in the city, while the many failed projects were often attributed to issues related to lack of central government funding or capacity. Certainly, however, the lack of destruction spared the physical infrastructure, which has decreased the burden of governing the city.

Available resources

Several funding sources are available to the municipal council in Al Qutayfah. Notably, since 2011, the council has continued to receive government funding, and because the area’s service and infrastructure networks remained untouched by the conflict, the cost of maintenance has remained comparatively low, which has had the added benefit of allowing the council to collect fees, taxes, and rents from properties leased to traders and investors. Al Qutayfah also saw a surge in the number of local and international organizations operating in its administrative remit since the onset of the conflict, bringing additional funds and implementing humanitarian and development projects locally. Additionally, the town has sizable diaspora groups in the Gulf and Brazil. These populations have contributed to projects in the city, such as the expansion of the Al Qutayfah hospital. Additionally, waste management operations appear to function well in Al Qutayfah, especially when compared to towns that saw a shift of military control from opposition to the government, reportedly because heavy machinery and equipment remain fully operational.

Central government institutions

Al Qutayfah has less need to contract state-owned enterprises and other public institutions. In practice, this significantly reduces the level of coordination required

“... when larger activities are pursued, especially those that require coordination with national-level government institutions, the inefficiency of public institutions becomes apparent.”

Analysis: Local Development Challenges and Opportunities

between local actors and national institutions, when compared to other communities where more extensive rehabilitation is required. Nonetheless, when larger activities are pursued, especially those that require coordination with national-level government institutions, the inefficiency of public institutions becomes apparent. For instance, after acquiring necessary approvals to establish a new bakery in the town, the Public Company for Automated Bakeries failed to carry out the implementation, without providing an explanation. Moreover, a plan to expand the town's industrial zone was postponed because it “did not align with” the general plan of the Directorate of Industrial Zones, according to a key informant in the area.

Influence of powerful local structures

Local notables and civil society groups have a significant degree of influence on the municipality's planning and project implementation in Al Qutayfah. The municipal council holds periodic meetings with neighborhood-level notables and representatives of local civil society groups and prominent families. In addition to needs assessments, these meetings reportedly have a strong influence on the council's plans. For instance, the location of the planned bakery was determined based on the lobbying of notables. Also, the expansion of the Al Qutayfah hospital was made possible after coordination between the municipal council, the town's Health Charity Association, and local notables succeeded in mobilizing diaspora funds.

Local rehabilitation and development in Syria are complicated processes which often end in failure, severe cost overruns, or interference. However, that does not mean that all attempts at local development have failed, nor is it impossible to extract suggestive patterns from these examples. In At-Tall, private funds and lobbying of notable individuals and families succeeded in implementing the badly needed water wells project. In Al Qutayfah, private funds garnered by local entities contributed to a major expansion of the local hospital. Local economic actors in Deir-ez-Zor successfully lobbied against the rehabilitation of the local textile factory to protect their private economic interest. Indeed, the consistent through line of these cases suggests that robust support for a program on the part of influential local communal structures may serve almost as a precondition for the success of local development projects. Similarly, influential communal structures' opposition to a program may be all but guaranteed to prevent its implementation. In this sense, however, additional layers of understanding are necessary. Whether a community stakeholder will be successful in lobbying for a project is determined in part by the costs and conflicts inherent to doing so. Second, even with strong communal support, projects can fail as a result of inadequate funding or technical capacity. Third, security actors remain important project gatekeepers, often for reasons that are opaque or poorly understood. What is most important for development actors contemplating programming in Syria is that in each of these areas, local communal structures exercise a potentially crucial role in facilitating — or preventing — program implementation.

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Lobbying of local notables and elites: Costs and conflicts

To a large extent, in the examples studied in this paper, successful development plans reflect mobilization and organizing efforts by influential local community actors. In terms of cost-benefit analysis, three considerations are paramount in shaping a local actor's engagement in a local development project:

1. **Coordination cost:** This is seen most clearly in off-the-book payments to security officials and others, which are often necessary to acquire needed approvals or lift security restrictions.
2. **Reputational cost:** Engagement in a project may impact an individual's social standing. The more that an individual's reputation is undermined by engagement in a project (including as a result of coordination costs), the higher the reputational cost becomes, and the less likely an individual will be willing to engage.
3. **Opportunity cost:** A considerable outlay of time and effort is often required to lobby for a project. The perceived futility of influencing local development decisions may be a disincentive to engagement by local actors.

Conflicts of Interest

In terms of a project's success, it is also critically important whether the project conflicts with the reputational, material, or financial interests of influential local communal structures. This relationship is not always clear-cut. In some cases, personal reputational interests align with the public good. In such cases, successful lobbying by local notables and civil society actors enhances their reputation and can be a motivating factor for engagement with a project. For instance, in Al Qutayfah, the location of the planned bakery and road rehabilitation projects was largely dictated by influential local actors; with their reputations at stake, individual actors in the community were encouraged to lobby for options that were viewed as being beneficial to the public as a whole. In cases where local reputation is of secondary importance, however, the personal interests of powerful local actors can also thwart the public good, despite the potential for reputational harm. In Deir-ez-Zor, the prominent Sarraj Company was successful in lobbying against the clear public interest in the rehabilitation of local factories. Given the company's commanding market position and strong connections with security forces, its reputation mattered less than its interest in continuing to exercise a business monopoly.

Severe lack of resources:

The overwhelming destruction of the Syrian economy throughout has had a significant impact on the resources available for local governing bodies to carry out programming. This is manifest in two ways: the scarcity of funds available, and in the deterioration of capacities to implement development activities.

Funding

Ordinarily, funds are allocated from the central government to municipalities through the governorate itself. With the government's revenue sources significantly depleted, however, the limited funds that do reach municipalities are inadequate for meaningful development projects to be carried out. An additional source of funding

“The influence of security actors can decrease trust and disincentivize engagement by raising the fear of potential repercussions, should programming falter.”

to municipalities is the local tax base, including fines and fees, as well as diaspora remittances. As is the case nationally, however, such revenue streams have rarely been a reliable funding source, due to the inconsistent nature of tax collection. Notably, although diaspora donations are an unreliable source of revenue, when available, they do reportedly play an important role in funding local projects. In both Al Qutayfah and At-Tall, diaspora donations were critical to funding hospital expansion and well projects. Crucially, local communal structures can be important in channeling such funding.

Capacity

However, even when funds are available for projects, additional challenges due to capacity and implementation can arise. Implementing actors are often state-owned enterprises and public institutions; now more than ever, these actors lack the expertise, capacity and efficiency required to carry out projects, especially with the limited funds available. For instance, in Al Qutayfah, Deir-ez-Zor, and Tafas, multiple projects were declined or terminated following partial implementation due to such shortages.

Influence of security forces:

The role of the security forces in Syria remains a powerful factor shaping local development. This influence plays out centrally and on a local level. Centrally, the Political and Security Committee is arguably the most important body on the governorate level, and it includes the governor, head of the Baath Party branch, as well as State Security and Political Security branches, the head of governorate-level police, and an army general. Not surprisingly, the committee exercises considerable influence to shape the governorate's overall policy agenda, including development decisions — although the exact process for this is not well understood. On the local level, various security branches retain a local presence, where their presence is a de facto check on municipal authority. The impact of this influence is twofold, in that it affects local actors' willingness to engage programs, and it can be a cause of cost overruns.

Disincentive to collaboration

The influence of security actors can decrease trust and disincentivize engagement by raising the fear of potential repercussions, should programming falter. The Sarraj Company in Deir-ez-Zor had strong connections to high-ranking officers at the city's Military Security branch. This was arguably a decisive disincentive that overrode pressure from local farmers and prevented the rehabilitation of the local textile factory.

Cost overruns

Interference by security actors is likely to increase the amount of spending required for a project to see implementation. Among local actors in Syria, back-channel payments are often seen as a conflict-resolution device. There are examples of this proving successful, in terms of project facilitation. The well water project in At-Tall was halted by the Political Security branch, and was allowed to proceed only after negotiations between local notables and the security branch involved were

“Development actors will almost certainly be faced with the need to close-down some projects.”

concluded with 'gifts' to security and government officials. A key informant estimated that at least one-third of total payments made by local notables for planning and implementation in the project were gifts and bribes. While this was successful in facilitating the water project, implementation of more impactful local projects may require significantly more costly inducement on the part of local security actors.

Perhaps more than any other concern identified in these cases, such practices prompt an obvious concern for international response actors, and they will require creative solutions. Development actors may be forced to adapt existing red line policies, or develop new ones — including a clear, zero-tolerance 'exit strategy'. One such approach may be to shield local partners or contractors from such pressures, including by emphasizing that kickbacks to local security forces constitute grounds for project termination. By emphatically communicating that this prohibition is a top-down directive of the project funder — rather than an ad-hoc decision taken on the implementation level — local communal structures may be spared some of the pressures to 'pay to play'. Development actors will almost certainly be faced with the need to close-down some projects. Doing so may be a difficult decision, but the willingness to enforce such policies is likely crucial to their effectiveness. Ultimately, it is clear that if international response actors cannot find novel ways of engaging with communities in the long term, locally driven development alone will fall far short of community needs, well into the foreseeable future.

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