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Key Stakeholders
When intervening in complex crises, the alignment of programs with needs is necessary, but also often insufficient. For several years, humanitarian actors have focused almost exclusively on needs, without examining the broader context in which these needs arise and in which subsequent interventions are delivered. As a consequence, outputs meet needs without necessarily addressing their underlying causes. This can contribute to the perpetuation of existing conflict drivers, and, in cases with complex war economies, may create new drivers entirely. The NOSAP is a pilot project that seeks to identify and deconstruct the ambiguities of conflict-affected areas in Syria to support a needs-based humanitarian strategy with an awareness of the various stakeholders, spoilers, and broader socio-political and economic dynamics that shape not only communities, but also interventions. Rather than concern itself with geographical areas determined by Government of Syria administrative boundaries, the NOSAP instead defines geographies based on social self-identification, communal solidarities, and political and economic linkages.

A combination of primary and secondary qualitative data and secondary quantitative data has been synthesized to produce this paper. COAR has employed a field researcher network that is based across in Syria as well as those in neighbouring countries with close linkages to Syria; researchers were selected based on demonstrated expertise and knowledge of critical geographic and thematic concepts relevant to each NOSAP, and drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds. Secondary research undertaken by COAR’s desk-based analysts has triangulated, contextualized, and assessed the validity of primary data, with sources ranging from English and Arabic language media (including social media), academic and INGO studies, outputs from the Urban-S project, and engagement with peer researchers. Quantitative data is deployed to support a needs-based reading of the area and for contextual purposes (population figures, displacement and return trends), and has been derived from the UN and local NGO partners.

NOSAPs are divided into two parts. The first part is an overview of key thematic topics that are most relevant to an understanding of Eastern Ghouta, with each theme followed by a series of accompanying recommendations. The second part of the NOSAP is divided into the following indicative topics: Context and Population, Governance and Services, Community and Society, Economy, and Security. Each section includes an executive summary, granular insight and analysis into relevant local dynamics, key stakeholders within that theme, and discussion of issues associated with the local humanitarian and human ecosystem.
Five key dynamics must be taken into consideration when attempting to address humanitarian and development needs in Eastern Ghouta:

1. Humanitarian and development aid has been used as a means of both altering Eastern Ghouta’s political demographics, and re-consolidating the Syrian state.

2. Partially for this reason, residents in Eastern Ghouta are in greater need than IDPs or returnees, which is related to security policies which have benefitted ‘vetted’ returnees.

3. The traditional, largely agriculturally focused, economy of Eastern Ghouta is in need of redevelopment.

4. Housing land and property rights are a critical area of risk, and urban development programming may contribute to these risks.

5. While Eastern Ghouta is socially cohesive, social fault lines exist, and must be addressed in order to prevent future conflict or discriminatory practices.
HUMANITARIAN AID AS CONSOLIDATION OF THE STATE

Eastern Ghouta’s reconciliation in April 2018 led to the dismantlement of the opposition and the restoration of the Syrian government’s political and security apparatus. The Syrian government is still in the process of imposing its authority, and has adopted a variety of legal, governance, and security-based mechanisms to enforce both passive and active forms of political, economic, and social control through formal and informal channels. One of these mechanisms is attempts to control humanitarian and development programming; utilizing governance and security mechanisms, the Government of Syria prioritizes selective rehabilitation of key state apparatus, as well as servicing ‘loyalist’ populations at the expense of ‘untrusted’ populations. For that reason, it will be essential that donors take a more active role in beneficiary and community selection to ensure programs do not reinforce these paradigms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **AVOID REINFORCING INEQUALITIES IMPOSED BY THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT ON ITS OPPONENTS.** Close attention to aid diversion risks should be paid throughout the programme cycle. Strict beneficiary selection criteria should be established and program implementation should be closely monitored. Attention in this regard should even extend to review of local partner public relations policies. Strong and innovative third party monitoring activities should therefore be built into projects, from design through to completion. In addition, full due diligence should be conducted to ensure risks arising from projects are accurately assessed and mitigated, to the extent possible.

- **SYRIAN GOVERNMENT NEGLECT IS NOT ONLY POLITICAL, BUT STRATEGIC.** Residents that lived under former opposition control are critically underserved, and needs remain high for the vast majority of Eastern Ghouta’s population. Implementing agencies may lack the power to ‘push back’ on Government-identified priorities, and donors must therefore take a more active role in program design, project implementation, and beneficiary selection. Assessment findings and justifications for project area and type should be clearly articulated to government coordination bodies to ensure implementation of programmes of the desired geographical and programmatic scope.

- **LEVERAGE NON-TRADITIONAL CIVIC, VOCATIONAL, AND BUSINESS STAKEHOLDERS.** Informal governance figures can coordinate between multiple formal and informal constituencies to deliver services, lobby central authorities, and consult on local needs.

- **ENGAGE LOCAL TECHNOCRATS.** Political agendas dominate in Eastern Ghouta, but technocratic governance stakeholders like the Executive Offices of municipal government and Development Work Committees could pro-

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1 The consequences of this policy are numerous: trusted intermediaries have been inserted into local government structures or assigned informal governance duties; tight security restrictions represent persistent protection risks to real and perceived government opponents; and the dividends of the area’s relative political stability are likely to be shared unevenly. These features impede a shift into a post-conflict phase in which conditions might permit more wide-ranging recovery activities, and they provide scant evidence that the Syrian government can serve as a good faith partner in addressing the most pressing civilian needs.

2 Efforts to meet the needs of larger Damascene suburbs and Syrian government strategies to insulate the capital must not divert attention from less prominent communities, especially in more rural areas further east. Indeed, assistance may face fewer obstacles in these locations owing to lower levels of politicization.

3 Partiality and self-interest are probable features of engagement in many cases, but an expanding culture of governance provision among informal actors, and the opportunities therein, demands careful examination.
vide less partial, ground-level insights and a more appropriate entry point for the UN and Damascus-based INGOs. Focus on projects with technical components to ensure involving these actors. For such purposes, livelihood and small-scale rehabilitation programs might be an appropriate entry point.

- **CONDUCT DETAILED PARTNER VETTING.** Avoid partners with poor local reputations, low community acceptance, or problematic relationships (both from a conflict sensitivity and policy perspective). Look to engage small grassroots organizations and avoid partners with too high of a public profile.

- **MONITOR DEVELOPMENTS RELATING TO CHECKPOINTS.** Limited reductions in checkpoint numbers have been observed and travel restrictions have been relaxed in some areas. While further developments in this regard may be indicative of the Syrian government’s readiness to accept greater external involvement; this is more likely a function of the Syrian government’s strategic priorities, with the securitized approach to service provision unlikely to change.

- **AVOID FORCING BENEFICIARY TRAVEL VIA CHECKPOINTS WHEREVER POSSIBLE.** This is particularly necessary for vulnerable and at-risk groups. Protection concerns related to checkpoint passage should be clearly identified and addressed.
RESIDENTS IN GREATER NEED THAN IDPS AND RETURNEES

Needs data shows that Eastern Ghouta residents report greater needs than IDPs and returnees across all sectors. This runs counter to some common assumptions around those most affected by conflict, and highlights a dynamic which is likely unique to Eastern Ghouta and other reconciled areas. 4 Though counterintuitive, evidence suggests this phenomenon is a product of the Syrian government’s securitized returns policy, which overwhelmingly favors those that left for government-held areas prior to, or shortly after, the opposition secured control. 5 This has also been reflected in the government’s provision of services to these different groups, which has so far privileged returnees over residents.

4 For example, see COAR’s recent paper on political demographics in Eastern Ghouta, linked here.
5 This has been a factor in the stagnation of IDP and return numbers despite the area’s relative stability, and it must also be recalled that Eastern Ghouta is still at an early stage of recovery. Significant resettlement of Eastern Ghouta is therefore improbable for the foreseeable future.

Figure 1. Eastern Ghouta Needs Overview (April 2019)
RECOMMENDATIONS

• **FOCUS ON SUPPORT TO RESIDENT POPULATIONS.** The most chronically underserved populations are those currently living in former opposition-held areas that also experienced the worst of siege conditions. Overtly targeting residents in the beneficiary selection process would likely face resistance during coordination with the state however, increasing the need for discreet selection criteria.

• **BUILD ROBUST MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCESSES, AND SELECTION CRITERIA INTO PROGRAM DESIGN.** Tight government restrictions, population monitoring, and influence over beneficiary lists increases the need to create a strong criteria for beneficiary selection to ensure the integrity of a needs-based approach.

• **PURSUIT OF RETURNS IS UNLIKELY TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT THE PRESENT TIME.** Local incentives for returns are widely absent, and many will require long term solutions: Security vetting is in effect, service quality is poor, the local economy has yet to recover substantively, massive amounts of damage are in evidence, and numerous HLP issues remain unresolved.

INDUSTRIAL/AGRICULTURAL DECLINE AND ALTERED MARKET CHAINS

Eastern Ghouta’s industrial base has been devastated, both as a result of conflict conditions, government policy, and pre-war structural vulnerabilities within the Syrian economy. Skilled workers have fled, and facilities have been widely relocated, shutdown, or destroyed. Ultimately, the recovery of pre-war manufacturing is likely to be limited to factories processing local agricultural outputs and a small number of traditional craftsmen. Yet despite this industrial decline, the area retains its agricultural prominence; however, agricultural production alone is unlikely to serve as a sufficient basis for the local economy in its current state.

Critically, the Government of Syria has engaged in security and economic policies, which have fundamentally altered Eastern Ghouta’s pre-conflict value chains. Prior to the conflict, Duma city served as the economic hub of Eastern Ghouta; it hosted the region’s most prominent marketplaces and agricultural industrial processing facilities. On account of both the conflict and post-siege security policies and access restrictions, peripheral communities have lost their connection to Duma, and now link more directly to business networks and markets in Damascus. This has not only impacted farmers abilities to negotiate prices, it has also impacted social connections and resilience within Eastern Ghouta itself.

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6 Lower needs amongst IDPs are difficult to explain since most have likely been displaced within Eastern Ghouta since besiegement began, but may be the result of increased assistance and attention to this traditionally more in need group. Communities hosting large relatively large numbers of returnees are likely to receive disproportionate support from the Syrian government given most are state supporters.

7 For example, irrigation relies on costly fuel-powered well systems; farmers have low purchasing power, often making quality fertilizers, animal fodder, and veterinary care unaffordable; local marketplaces are isolated; access restrictions and infrastructural damage limit farmers’ influence over pricing; and years of besiegement and limited state regulation have made food markets both more localized and atomized.
RECOMMENDATIONS

• PRIORITIZE AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT PROGRAMMES, AS WELL AS SUPPORT TO FACILITIES PROCESSING LOCAL AGRICULTURAL OUTPUTS. These are likely to provide the bulk of livelihood opportunities in local manufacturing for the foreseeable future. A tradition of agriculture is present, but is in need of external support. Ensure careful vetting and monitoring of traders to avoid reinforcing monopolies over agricultural goods supply.

• RE-ESTABLISH VALUE CHAINS LINKING DUMA TO ITS RURAL PERIPHERY. Re-establishing pre-conflict value chains will have a broadly positive effect on restoring equitable economic development and social linkages.

• CONSIDER SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL MANUFACTURING BUSINESSES. Eastern Ghouta is rich local resources and has a relatively skilled workforce. Developing businesses reliant on these locally available resources could take the form of small-scale cottage industry-type facilities and workshops linked to the outputs of other such facilities and larger facilities elsewhere, such as the nearby Adra Industrial Zone. This would not only represent a low profile option for the restoration of local manufacturing, it could also be designed to be largely self-sufficient and self-contained (i.e. reliant almost exclusively on locally available resources and trading partners).

• REHABILITATE TRADITIONAL SOUKS AND MARKETPLACES. Locals in Eastern Ghouta have attempted to independently repair various market areas, such as Souk Al-Kheir in Kafr Batna, or traditional souks in Duma. However, trade falls far short of pre-war levels and much has been lost to nearby markets in Damascus. In addition to a vital platform for agriculture sales, Eastern Ghouta’s souks were major hubs for trade in many other items and their repair would likely help rejuvenate social and economic linkages within Eastern Ghouta. Rehabilitation of markets will also reduce risks arising from civilian and trader travel through checkpoints.

• ENGAGE FARMING COOPERATIVES. Smallholders have a strong tradition of collaboration, and enhanced coordination amongst farmers will deliver greater economic influence and empowerment. Farmers cooperatives are found in nearly every community in Eastern Ghouta; however, are rarely integrated into formal humanitarian programming.

STATE-LED REDEVELOPMENT AND HOUSING, LAND, AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

Eastern Ghouta has been a major destination for both middle class and rural-urban migrants for several decades owing to its proximity to Damascus, cheaper cost of living, and quality of life opportunities. Having grown relatively quickly over this time, land and informal housing was frequently earmarked for expropriation by government authorities, but such plans were never seriously pursued. The post-reconciliation period has seen renewed government interested however; conflict has depopulated entire communities, and infrastructure has been widely destroyed. Now viewed through the lens of real estate speculation, there are major incentives for state authorities and state-affiliated private sector actors to seize land and property.

A series of legal instruments enabling property expropriations have been applied in recent years, most of which merely lend a veneer of legality to the government’s pursuit of political objectives, the punishment of its opponents, and the enrichment of itself and its crony capitalist affil-
iates. There is serious concern that entire neighborhoods will be seized and reengineered in the interest of these objectives, particularly where depopulation, damage, and informal settlements are greatest. Urban development plans issued by City Councils are likely to be instructive in this regard and are anticipated in 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ENSURE ASSISTANCE DOES NOT SUPPORT LAND APPROPRIATED IN VIOLATION OF THE RIGHTS OF OWNERS.** Consult residents and verifiable land and cadastral records, and conduct other due diligence before any programs are implemented.

- **INCLUDE AN HLP COMPONENT WITHIN LIVELIHOOD AND SMALL GRANTS PROGRAMS.** Agricultural support and small grants should support legitimate land ownership, and impede land reappropriation. Ensure all proper documentations are present and consult field teams as many of the current HLP issues are related to the property ownership activities during the opposition control time. Donors to decide if they can acknowledge the ownership of a land sold in the time of opposition as a program-approved document.

- **MONITOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN MASTER PLANS.** The scale of depopulation and destruction across Eastern Ghouta has triggered local governments to develop urban plans which will reconfigure land ownership across the area. Given serious concern over the potential for expropriation of thousands of homes, attention to the implications of forthcoming plans is therefore necessary. Note that urban master plans may be issued in other parts of Syria before Eastern Ghouta and may be instructive.

- **CONTINUE TO FUND IMPARTIAL CIVIL SOCIETY HLP SUPPORT.** For example, the Equal Citizenship Center provides legal and civil documentation advice in Damascus. Expansion to Eastern Ghouta would decrease civilian reliance on the government-linked Syria Trust. Engagement of such civil society actors would also reduce risks arising from cooperation with the Syrian Ministry of Interior, an entity known to have neglected civilian HLP rights.

- **FOCUS HLP PROGRAMMES IN WESTERN PARTS OF EASTERN GHOUTA.** Ownership issues are most pressing in the more densely populated, heavily damaged, and higher value land found in western Eastern Ghouta.

COHESIVE YET FRAGILE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

Eastern Ghouta is remarkable for the level of cohesion amongst its various social groups given the otherwise catastrophic impact of the conflict on the local population. Indeed, conflict conditions have very likely reinforced a collective identity that has served as a mobilizing force for locally-led project delivery and the improvement of public goods. In a demonstration of considerable solidarity with place, some communities have raised funds for municipal governments despite having previously been strongly anti-government, and there are reports that others have worked to develop urban reconstruction plans.

This represents a potentially significant force multiplier for aid programming, but certain local tensions must also be acknowledged. Blame and
responsibility may be attributed to certain areas for their role in perpetuating the siege, whilst alienation and detachment are also a factor for both resident and returnee populations. Though no tensions are currently observed on the ground, such grievances are likely to endure and could weaken recovery. Ultimately, the form that such grievances take is difficult to assess, but their potential highlights the need to reestablish economic and social connections between communities, preferably through economic means, and ensure that reconstruction dividends are distributed in ways considered equitable by relevant stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **PURSUE INTER-COMMUNAL SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH SOCIO-ECONOMIC LINKAGES.** It is difficult to work across Eastern Ghouta’s communities given the local security climate. That said, economic recovery is likely to accelerate and provide a channel for reconnecting communities and promoting social cohesion.

- **BUILD TRUST WITHIN COMMUNITIES.** Inter-communal conflict-related grievances are a barrier to civilian-led recovery. Conciliation should be an important component of multi-sectoral programming but current access restrictions make reconnecting communities challenging. Economic development may be the most feasible way of restoring inter-communal relationships at this time, and, as suggested above, could take the form of support to numerous interconnected cottage industry-type businesses.

- **DEVELOP A CULTURE OF LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY.** Civil society in Eastern Ghouta takes various forms, including informal civilian-led initiatives, development committees, local charity and faith-based organizations, farmer unions, and other special interest groups. Reputation and elite connections are often critical to the operations of these organizations, meaning investment in civil society to support locally-led recovery should be tied to careful stakeholder analysis.

- **DELIVER PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT.** While needs in other sectors appear more pressing, residents are nevertheless in need of psychosocial support, both for their own wellbeing and for improved inter-communal relations.

- **EMPOWER WOMEN TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE.** It is now more socially acceptable for women to work, and this could help to address the legacy of conservatism left by opposition Islamists. Complement livelihood and women empowerment programs with a protection component to mitigate the heightened security concerns with respect to exposure to checkpoints or social reactions to women’s work.
PART 2:

KEY THEMES

 Newly rehabilitated small shop in Duma displaying vegetables.
Credit: Bawaba
Islamic tradition considered Eastern Ghouta as one of the few paradises on earth. Historical accounts describe an area abundant with wildlife, waterways, and vegetation, evoking the oasis after which Eastern Ghouta was named and the ‘Green Halo’ that once crowned the city of Damascus. Though the oasis has long since been ruined by the encroachment of Syria’s urbanizing capital and industrial expansion, the area’s rural history remains a source of great unity in modernizing times. Indeed, ruralism has sustained a local economy renowned for the quality of its natural produce, raw materials, and craftsman- ship, each of which are an integral part of Eastern Ghouta’s socio-economic identity to this day.

Eastern Ghouta’s family councils and rooftop farms are the most immediate reminder of how a spirit of agricultural collectivism endured throughout the current conflict. In 2011, several of its constituent communities became the first to escape government control and establish opposition-affiliated local councils and militias. Yet before the protest movement had even engulfed Syria, Eastern Ghouta’s tree growers and fine furniture makers had taken to the streets to demand government protection from cheaper foreign imports, effectively setting the stage for an unprecedented wave of civil activism.

Regrettably, Eastern Ghouta’s near term trajectory is not being written by its historic solidarity, but by the effects of its six-year besiegement, militarization, and subsequent reconciliation. Acts of violence and predation committed by belligerents on all sides have led to the displacement of around three quarters of Eastern Ghouta’s pre-war population, the decimation of its built environment, failing public services, extreme economic hardship, and a plurality of protection concerns. The restoration of government control in April 2018 has done little to alleviate these issues, instead replacing warfare with a frail state apparatus seemingly bent on self-enrichment and the disenfranchisement of its former opponents, both real and perceived. This takes form in a variety of legal, political, and security instruments as well as access restrictions, all explored throughout this report.

1.2 STUDY AREA

The parts of Eastern Ghouta covered by this study are not currently recognized as an independent administrative unit in their own right, and do not encompass the entirety of Eastern Ghouta, either in the colloquial, historic, or geographic sense. Borders for the purposes of this study are instead determined by a combination of common land use and conflict-related characteristics: A) a collection of peri-urban suburbs in which dispersive growth has produced a hybrid landscape of mixed urban and rural land use; B) communities subject to besiegement by Government of Syria forces since November 2012 and which were reconciled by agreement with armed opposition groups in April 2018, and; C) communities falling within the perimeter of what amounts to a cordon of checkpoints manned by Government of Syria forces and

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8 Family councils in Eastern Ghouta have been active for centuries, and were established by farming communities.

9 Of interesting note, the area’s population has been at the forefront of Syria’s most trying periods for over 100 years. In the early 20th century, Eastern Ghouta served as a center for the Great Syrian Revolt against French occupation.

10 Prior to Ba’ath Party rule in Syria, a state law was implemented in 1958 (Law 93) which determined that registered civil society would be subject to monitoring by the security services. Moreover, the Syrian penal code criminalizes cooperation with international organizations or the receipt of funds from abroad without prior approval. Such approval was ordinarily denied, meaning civil society in Syria remained underground, small-scale, and cut-off from external support.
aligned security actors. Under current administrative boundaries, the parts of Eastern Ghouta considered by this study therefore fall within Duma district, and are spread mainly across five subdistricts: Duma, Arbin, Kafr Batna, Harasta, and Nashabiye.

**Figure 2. Conflict timeline**

- **March 2011**: Civilians join anti-government protests and incipient armed opposition movement.
- **Nov 2012**: GoS expelled, local councils emerge, becoming effective administrations.
- **April 2013**: SAA imposes siege with support from Hezbollah.
- **August 2013**: Chemical attack on Zamalka and Ein Terma, major international escalation averted.
- **September 2013**: 50 AOGs based mainly in Eastern Ghouta merge to form Jaish al-Islam.
- **May 2016**: GoS exploits collapse of AOG coordination, making advances in southern and eastern areas.
- **April 2016**: Conflict, competition, and tension between AOGs escalates.
- **January 2015**: Siege tightened, Wafideen crossing and tunnels only link to outside world.
- **April 2017**: Further bouts of inter-AOG conflict arguably hastens fall of Eastern Ghouta.
- **May 2017**: Eastern Ghouta designated as ‘de-escalation’ area but plan effectively enables GoS military objectives.
- **September 2017**: GoS bombing of Eastern Ghouta begins, local conditions deteriorate rapidly.
- **February 2018**: The GoS ground offensive begins in earnest. Russian-facilitated ‘humanitarian corridors’ largely unused.
- **March 2018**: Faylaq ar-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham forced to surrender, reconcile and evacuate.
- **April 2018**: Chemical attack in Duma prompts surrender of Jaish al-Islam, and the full reconciliation of Eastern Ghouta.
1.3 DISPLACEMENT

Although no figures are presently available to COAR, the early phases of the conflict in Eastern Ghouta reportedly witnessed the flight of most local government supporters and middle class populations. Their departure was triggered largely by the armed opposition’s seizure of Eastern Ghouta over 2012 to 2013, with most relocating to the wealthier suburbs of Damascus. This phenomenon was also observed among minorities traditionally associated with the Syrian government, particularly Christians. In the absence of reliable data, local sources report that longtime members of Eastern Ghouta’s middle-class were as likely to leave the area as recently arrived middle-class economic migrants during this period.

Having been under siege between 2013 and April 2018, displacement phenomena over this time were largely internal. While a feature throughout besiegement, the vast majority of internal displacement occurred during the final phases of the siege, between February and April 2018, which ultimately concluded with the Syrian government’s full seizure of Eastern Ghouta. Movement to and from the area was severely restricted at this time—including for humanitarian aid actors—and many were displaced internally on several occasions.11 By the end of the offensive, over 50,000 people had been displaced within Eastern Ghouta alone.12

11 Indeed, a Protection Monitoring Task Force report from April 2018 states that over 50% of respondents were forced to relocate between 2-6 times over this period. Airstrikes were identified as the primary reason, but hunger and ground level hostilities were also noted as key drivers.

12 UNOCHA (2018) Flash Update, Syria Crisis Update, Eastern Ghouta
Upon the reconciliation of the entirety of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018, local surrender agreements stipulated the evacuation of most armed opposition combatants and political figures. Civilians were permitted to leave or remain as part of these agreements, but with many distrusting the Government of Syria, displacement was effectively enforced, and entire communities were gutted. Nowhere was this more evident than following Faylaq Ar-Rahman’s reconciliation in March 2018, whereupon 41,984 people variously left communities in Arbin, Kafr Batna, and Harasta subdistricts via Russian-managed humanitarian corridors, predominantly for Idleb governorate. Jaish al-Islam-held Duma witnessed similarly large displacement figures in early April 2018. An estimated 19,181 people left for Aleppo governorate upon reconciliation, to include approximately 8,000 Jaish Al-Islam combatants.

Amongst those displaced from Eastern Ghouta, roughly 40,000 currently reside in crowded and under-serviced collective shelters scattered across Rural Damascus governorate. Access to all but state-linked humanitarian agencies is limited, but reports suggest that in addition to challenging living conditions, Eastern Ghouta IDPs residing in collective shelters widely lack civil documentation (birth, marriage certificates, property ownership etc.), have experienced family separation and gender-based violence. Many living in collective shelters also remain under the scrutiny of state security and intelligence agencies, have been targets for conscription, and are subject to prolonged interrogation and vetting procedures, as well as movement and livelihood restrictions. For these IDPs, collective shelters amount to a form of internment, though residents are not formally detained.

In all areas covered by this study, those seeking to return must secure approval to do so from the Government of Syria’s National Security Bureau, headed by Deeb Zeitoun. The few to obtain this approval reportedly share a common characteristic, namely, that they are considered as residents likely to willingly or passively comply with Government of Syria policies. Notably, this is not necessarily demonstrated by going through the reconciliation process, whereby settling one’s status with the authorities does not equate to evidence of an individual’s trustworthiness. Rather, compliance in Eastern Ghouta appears to be demonstrated by renunciation of the opposition at the

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13 Importantly, not all such individuals left the area. Many were selectively incorporated into state security and political institutions to reconfigure local governance and consolidate government control. This dynamic is explored in more detail throughout this paper.

14 Of note, some civilians were reportedly unaware that reconciliation agreements allowed for their evacuation.

15 Civilians who opted to stay cited several reasons for their choice, including maintaining their property, emotional ties to home, the implications of displacement, and old age. Security screening procedures were not highlighted as a major risk but were cited as an issue of concern for a minority.

16 The most prominent such shelters Dweir, Fayhaa Al-Sham, Adra, the ‘Electricity Complex’ in the vicinity of Adra Industrial City, Nashabiyeh, Harjelleh, and Najha. See page 48.


18 Numbers in collective shelters have changed little in the year since Eastern Ghouta’s reconciliation, reportedly decreasing by no more than 10,000 [UNOCHA (2018), Syrian Arab Republic, East Ghouta Displacement Situation Report No.1]. In many ways, this is indicative of the challenges to returns faced by those forced from the area: homes have been destroyed and property ownership documents have been lost; tight government security precludes many from restarting an ordinary life for fear of arbitrary detention, conscription, and harassment; and public services and infrastructure are so poor as to make collective shelters a more livable option. UNOCHA reported in April 2018 that collective shelters housing Eastern Ghouta IDPs accommodated around 50,000 people.


20 At the time of writing, the most recent incidents of this kind were reported on May 21, 2019, when 35 former opposition combatants were arrested for a variety of reasons in the towns of Kafr Batna, Saqba, and Hammura, in Kafr Batna subdistrict. Reasons include criminal charges and conscription, but all those arrested had reconciled and passed security vetting procedures.
earliest opportunity: Most of those that have so far returned were among those that left for government-held areas before the opposition seized control, are religious or ethnic minorities, and have never been subject to the rule of the armed and political opposition.21

Figure 3. Eastern Ghouta population figures in key communities

21 This is evidently the case in Harasta, where few of the 19,000 people that left the area during the final stages of the siege have been permitted to return. Instead, the 2,314 returnees to the area recorded as of April 2019 are overwhelmingly former residents of Harasta that left the city before it fell to the armed opposition. COAR has equally observed these dynamics in other Eastern Ghouta communities, to include the larger Duma and Arbin, and explains the application of stringent returns procedures as linked to the exertion of a policy of political and security consolidation. This policy is explored in more detail in the governance section given its multifaceted implications, but is pertinent to displacement in so far as it highlights that returns are simply unfeasible for the majority of Eastern Ghouta’s most conflict-affected people.
14 HOUSING, LAND & PROPERTY

There are significant and serious HLP concerns throughout Eastern Ghouta. These risks are most acutely felt in western communities as these areas lie in the path of the natural expansion of Damascus’s built environment. Prior to the conflict, Damascus was already expanding eastwards, with urban expansion projects in Duma, Harasta, Kafr Batna, and Arbin leading to their increasing recognition as Damascus suburbs. As a result of the cheaper cost of living, higher quality of life, and relative proximity to the capital, these communities have witnessed the arrival of middle class civilians from Damascus and migrants from rural areas in increasing numbers. Much of the eastward expansion took place in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, as economic migrants and a dispersing middle class purchased or rented land from Eastern Ghouta’s pre-existing large landowners.22 Prior to the conflict, the Syrian government frequently suggested it would remove or expropriate informal housing and land in the area, but such policies were never seriously pursued. The drawdown of hostilities in April 2018 has reignited state interest in these areas however; Eastern Ghouta has been heavily depopulated, much of its infrastructure and property has been devastated, and the area is now considered highly valuable real estate. As a result, there now exist major incentives for the government and business actors to expropriate property and speculate on land to facilitate a “profitable reconstruction”.

The Syrian government’s mechanisms to expropriate land and property can be divided into two categories: security and administrative mechanisms. Security mechanisms involve the expropriation of land under the authority of state security services, generally via the application of various antiterror laws issued by the National Security Bureau. In theory, this framework allows government security forces to confiscate the land, property, or finances of any individual branded as a terrorist, which is particularly relevant in Eastern Ghouta given the post-reconciliation evacuations to northern Syria and the consequent absence of personal status reconciliations.

Of greater concern, however, are the administrative instruments generally applied under municipal authority. Such mechanisms are wide ranging, and generally include four types: enforcing or changing zoning laws; demanding cadastral documentation; expropriations for the purposes of public safety (i.e. damage rehabilitation); or blanket expropriations of informal areas. The most well known of these mechanisms is Law 10, which requires public real estate authorities to issue lists detailing property ownership in a given area. Upon issuance of the list, a period of one month is given to claimants whose ownership is not recognized. Proof of ownership is required and, if this is not forthcoming, claimants will forfeit their right to a share in designated redevelopment zones.

Though it is the most notorious such decree, Law 10 is not necessarily the most effective means of expropriation and has rarely been implemented in Eastern Ghouta. More common is application of Laws 40 and 16, which give municipal government the ability to expropriate informal housing, and Law 3, which permits the municipality to demand property owners repair damaged buildings in the interest of “public safety”. In the case of Law 3, property owners are notified by the city council, and are given a one month period to repair damaged properties. If the property is not repaired during that period, then the property can be expropriated and/or demolished, and the building owners will be fined for the cost of demolition.23

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22 Most of this land was still zoned agricultural non-residential land.
23 Notably, the implementation of this law is not undertaken by means clearly communicated to civilians. The municipality report-
Western areas, to include Duma, Harsta, Arbin, Kafr Batna, and Saqba, are at greatest risk of the application of both security and administrative mechanisms. A large percentage of the population in these communities was forcibly evacuated and is therefore subject to property expropriation law. Additionally, communities in these areas are heavily damaged and may be targeted under municipal “public safety” concerns. Furthermore, large parts of Eastern Ghouta are officially zoned as agricultural lands and are targeted for expropriation under zoning violations, in particular the lands between Rihan and Duma. Finally, there are numerous informal housing areas subject to blanket housing expropriations, most significantly in the Rakhleh and Askalani neighborhoods of Harasta, and the Arab and Hajariyah neighborhoods of Duma.

Ultimately, the fate of HLP in Eastern Ghouta is heavily dependant on the various urban plans currently being devised by the municipal government and subject to approval by the Ministry of Local Administration. There is a serious risk that many of the communities in western Eastern Ghouta in particular will face significant expropriations on the individual level. However, the greater concern is that the aforementioned informal housing neighborhoods could face the application of measures which result in state-led tabula rasa redevelopment. Of note, the main actor providing support on cadastral documentation issues is the Syria Trust for Development. The organization reportedly establishes a neighborhood committee in each community which is given limited legal training. These committees then provide support to civilians in the area. Notably, however, this is a process which is heavily dependent on the composition of the committees as well as the quality of training provided by the Syria Trust, which is widely perceived as a state-linked organization with a poor reputation for neutrality.
Syrian state governance bodies were restored in April 2018. A local election process in September led to the selection of figures closely aligned with the central authorities and mirrored the Syrian government’s long-standing approach to elite patronage.

The denial of public services to former opposition-held communities, obstruction of civilian returns, and arbitrary application of property law raise concern over the continued application of partial, retributive, and economically-motivated government policies.

Formal governance bodies have limited capacity however, increasing space for informal providers to partially fill governance gaps.

Notable families and business figures are the most prominent such actors, many of whom are engaged in a mutually-beneficial arrangement with the government in which their financial, political and reputation support is rewarded with the facilitation of elite interests.

At the same time, state-affiliated notable families and business figures are critical catalysts of the local economy, important public service providers, and major supporters of local civil society initiatives.

Navigating local notable and business figure interests is essential to aid programming, but given their activities can often be as indispensable as they are self-interested, due diligence, vetting, and aid actor transparency burdens are heightened.

Given high levels of local politicization, aid actors are subject to a highly inconsistent permissions and approvals process. Access for relief programmes is more likely to be granted.

A relatively vibrant civil society is present, and is comprised of active local charities and faith-based organizations, agricultural and market cooperatives, and civilian-led development committees in receipt of support from local notables.

Many of these bodies are well-positioned to promote recovery both on the fringes of the Eastern Ghouta’s complex political economy, as well as in partnership with key figures within this hybrid structure.
As observed nationwide, new powers were handed to Eastern Ghouta’s city councils and municipalities following implementation of Administrative Decree 107 in 2011. Among its various articles, this decree designates discretionary budgets to city councils, enabling them to allocate public spending independent of regional and national government. Similarly, municipalities were mandated to produce development plans and community projects, and have been handed responsibility for enhancing service provision, diversifying local economic opportunities, and improving living standards. With this decentralized model in effect since reconciliation in April 2018, Eastern Ghouta’s local administrations wield increased autonomy over the management of development projects, and are positioned as important interlocutors for humanitarian and development actors.

As Eastern Ghouta transitions away from conflict, the extent to which such a model will be implemented responsibly is of critical importance. Following Syria’s local council elections of September 2018 however, questions have arisen as to the objectivity of Eastern Ghouta’s local political authorities. In accordance with Decrees 107 and 108, the Presidentially-appointed Governor of Rural Damascus, Alaa Mounir Ibrahim, played a decisive role in the composition of Eastern Ghouta’s electoral lists. Combined with an election process which others have convincingly argued lacked transparency, Ibrahim’s choices led to the overwhelming selection of three types of figures: technocrats linked to government ministries; Government of Syria-orientated figures connected to the Ba’ath Party; and prominent local family members and business figures. Powerful government supporters therefore appear to have been ‘rewarded’ with positions of local political authority in return for their (continued) allegiance, mirroring the Syrian government’s long standing approach to elite patronage as a means to extend the reach of central authority.

24 Ministry of Local Administration Decree 107, Article 2, Paragraph 3.
26 Many incumbents served as reconciliation committee members involved in the mediation of reconciliation agreements, whilst others were involved in (or, in some cases, dominated) cross-line trade during Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement. For instance, in Arbin and Kafir Batna, incumbent local council leaders played key roles in developing local reconciliation agreements. A further example is found in Duma, where the Hasaba family monopolized electricity generator supply during the siege and later became local council members.
The return of Eastern Ghouta to Government of Syria control in April 2018 witnessed the restoration of state governance structures. As in all government-controlled areas, three levels of government are pertinent to the formal governance in Eastern Ghouta, the most local of which is the community-level municipality. Municipalities are subordinate to city councils, which are present in each Eastern Ghouta subdistrict (Kafr Batna, Duma, Arbin, Harasta, and Nashabiyeh). In turn, Eastern Ghouta’s Municipalities and City Councils are subordinate to the Rural Damascus Governorate Council and its Presidentially-appointed Governor, Alaa Mounir Ibrahim. All public spending, no matter the level at which it is approved, is subject to investigation and approval by the Political Security Branch.

Municipalities are comprised of two parts, an Executive Office, and a Local Council. The former is staffed primarily by technocrats and subject experts who undertake feasibility studies and design and implement projects; the latter is the primary local level decision-making body and is led by elected officials. Where the local council cannot agree upon the implementation of a given project following the advice of the local executive office, or where higher political approval is required, decision-making authority is passed upward to the relevant city council.

Project decisions may also be submitted for the review of the relevant ministerial committee at the governorate level, whilst the governorate level Directorate of Technical Services may intervene when further subject expertise or additional funding is required.

Given the extent to which the government is regarded to have politicized the aid response and the ostensibly nonpolitical basic rights of its citizenry, Eastern Ghouta’s new local administrators pose apparent risks to a needs-based recovery process. There is also a significant threat to local government-led land appropriation, especially through the implementation of urban master plans. The consistent denial of public services to populations that formerly lived under opposition control provides troubling signs in this regard, so too the widespread obstruction of civilian returns by local security services and the arbitrary application of property laws. As Eastern Ghouta’s local government bodies reflect the political and economic interests of the central government and its elite supporters, it should be assumed that urban plans will be as partial, retributive, and economically-motivated as current state policies in the area.

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28 The Political Security Branch intelligence agency mainly monitors political dissent.

29 Note that not all towns fall within the purview of a city council, and that some are subject only to the municipal government and, in turn, the relevant governorate council.

30 Of note, projects undertaken within the purview of city councils and municipalities draw from governorate level funding and expertise only when municipal or city capacity fails to meet project needs.

31 Summarily, these include legislation that permit the seizure of: state-designated zones slated for reconstruction (Law 10); damaged and abandoned homes (Law 3); and informal housing (Law 40).

32 The most notable such example is that of the Marota City redevelopment project, which dispossessed residents of their homes in western Damascus and failed to provide adequate compensation or alternative housing. See: Samaha, N. (2017) Elites, war profiteers take aim at Syria’s economic future.
suggest. Harasta local council is reportedly closest to finalizing its urban plan, and is therefore likely to provide the earliest indication of the extent to which this will compound the partisanship of Eastern Ghouta’s political authorities.\(^{33}\) That said, the rate at which urban plans will be enacted is likely to be slower than expected, as both municipalities and city councils across Eastern Ghouta possess limited finances and lack capacity.\(^{34}\)

The consolidation of state authority in Eastern Ghouta is buttressed by the presence of numerous governance stakeholders with connections to the highest levels of government. This is a product of the area’s relative value, size, proximity, and socio-economic connections to Damascus, and reflects the interest of the central political establishment in the governance of Eastern Ghouta as a major Damascene suburb. Several senior governorate level officials are directly engaged in local affairs, some of whom have a direct line President Assad, to include Governor Mounir Alaa Ibrahim, and the Head of the Ministerial Committee for Rural Damascus (and Minister for Electricity), Mohammed Kharboutli. These figures are the two principal decision-makers in the area, and oversee a cohesive non-linear chain of command in which lines between the formal political establishment and informal governance actors are indistinct.

33 Aside from the reported progress of the local council on this matter, Harasta will likely be first to publish a new urban master plan because it is effectively deserted, hosts few original residents, and has been subject to extreme levels of destruction. Moreover, those currently living in the area are overwhelmingly returnees that fled before besiegement, and are therefore widely regarded as ‘politically compliant’.

34 Municipal and city council decision-makers are widely regarded to have failed to fulfill the promises of reconciliation agreements, instead appearing complicit in the application of continued restrictions, the denial of services, and imposition of central government policy. For instance, in Duma, Arbin, and Kafr Batna, there has been an apparent focus on the restoration of security, judicial, and governance institutions by the government and its patrons, and much less attention paid to the poor state of public services. This is common to reconciled areas across Syria, but is worth highlighting here to emphasize the extent to which the resources of Eastern Ghouta’s local administrations are directed towards the political, economic, and security interests of the central government and its affiliates. Indeed, each of these subdistricts has seen the refurbishment of local police stations, courthouses, government offices, and civil registry buildings, but comparatively little in the way of quality of life improvements for civilians. Enab Baladi (2019) A year after the Syrian alienation: How has the situation in Eastern Ghouta changed?
2.2 INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

Capacity, financing, and legitimacy gaps within Eastern Ghouta’s formal governance systems have been at least partially filled by informal non-government providers. Two main types are in evidence: 1) the activities of international (INGOs), national (NNGOs), and local relief and development organizations, and; 2) a mutually beneficial arrangement in which the government rewards the financial, political, and reputational support of notable state-affiliates with the facilitation of elite interests. Presently, the most active informal governance actors in Eastern Ghouta are notable families and business figures, both of which have been permitted by (and actively encouraged) by the government to stimulate economic development, deepen their engagement in civic life, and deliver public services. Indeed, family and business notables are among the few actors with the access, capital, network, and appetite to drive development programming in Eastern Ghouta at this time.

NOTABLE FAMILIES & BUSINESS FIGURES

The majority of prominent families and business figures in Eastern Ghouta have historically allied with the Government of Syria and have maintained this stance throughout the current conflict. Given their often wide-ranging business interests, this not only positioned them as major beneficiaries of the siege economy between 2012 and 2018, it also strengthened their candidacy as trusted government intermediaries. As noted, many prominent family members were appointed to reconciliation committees to establish the terms of the opposition’s surrender, and were later selected by the Rural Damascus Governor to run for local elections in September 2018. Prominent families subsequently secured broad representation in local government, and have deftly navigated Eastern Ghouta’s dynamics to consolidate their wealth, elite status, and loyalist credentials during periods of both opposition and government control.

Official appointments naturally empower prominent families and business figures to wield increased influence, but it is the manner in which such forms of influence have been used in the post-reconciliation period which is of particular interest to Eastern Ghouta’s current governance model. In Duma, for instance, the Al-Khiti, Abdel Dayem, and Al-Wazir families have each increasingly deployed their economic, social, and political capital in recent months, including in ways which simultaneously buttress their own standing and that of the state. Though often linked to areas of mutual interest and the unique capacity of the informal stakeholder, this activity has equally been observed in sectors far from the official roles of prominent figures. Amer Al-Khiti is a notable case in point: Although appointed to serve as Chairman of the Fruit and Vegetable Import and Export Committee for Eastern Ghouta, Al-Khiti has personally financed the renovation of Duma’s military conscription office and its judicial compound. As one of the most significant reconstruction projects undertaken in Duma to date (despite the presence of more pressing civilian needs), the example highlights the extent to which government patronage is ‘for sale’ in Eastern Ghouta.

35 This dynamic is not unique to Eastern Ghouta in Syria, neither is it unique to the Syrian conflict, indeed, it is an extension of traditional forms of governance employed by the Syrian state both before and during the current conflict.

36 Examples are listed in the stakeholder table, but for the purposes of clarity here, one could cite the example of the Abdel Dayem family, based predominantly in Duma, which thanks in part to siege dynamics and its pro-government of Syria sympathies, has secured a monopoly over the supply of building materials and electricity generators.

37 This committee oversees Syria’s fruits and vegetable trade and has developed a decisive influence over trade with Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf.
For humanitarian and development actors, the challenge will be to balance the fact that the involvement of Eastern Ghouta’s prominent families and business figures in governance and development activities can often be as indispensable as it is partial and self-interested. As such, the hybrid nature of governance in Eastern Ghouta expands the risk of encountering exploitative power dynamics present within the formal state apparatus noted in the previous section, necessarily heightening the burden of due diligence, stakeholder vetting, and aid actor transparency. Indeed, though informal governance interlocutors in Eastern Ghouta can provide local capacity unfound in local government, serious reputational and acceptance risks are present, and damaging forms of elite capture are a very real programme risk. A recent case in point is that of a contract signed between the Government of Syria’s Military Residence Institute and notorious war economy actor and businessman, Mohieddine Manfoush. In May 2019, the two parties reached a deal to conduct badly needed rubble clearance in Eastern Ghouta, but the reality of this arrangement is that it will focus mainly Manfoush’s hometown and could allow the poorly regarded Military Residence Institute to develop cleared land in accordance with its own priorities rather than those of the community.  

Regarding capacity, the willingness and ability of local notables and business figures to deliver public services has been noted, so too has their role as levers to create operational space for aid agencies. A notable example of this was observed in late May 2019, when, after a year of suffocating movement restrictions, the Syrian government relaxed requirements for civilians travelling to and from Duma. This marked a substantial change in local access conditions, and reports on the issue state the decision to adjust local security policy was in response to the appeals of local businessmen seeking to accelerate Duma’s economic recovery. In line with their ultimate authority for local political matters, both the Rural Damascus Governor, Alaa Mounir Ibrahim, and the Syrian Member of Parliament, Mohamad Khayr Saryoul, were instrumental in enforcing the change to checkpoint policy in the area. But what is notable is that they were reportedly moved to act by virtue of their personal and professional connections with the lobbyists rather than as a result of a formalized decision-making process. Such examples highlight the fluidity of exchange between formal and informal governance stakeholders in Eastern Ghouta. And they remind us that, whilst the influence of the state apparatus is overbearing, formal government systems are reliant on satisfying the interest of patrons that can be expected to leverage their political and economic weight to reshape local recovery in areas of personal or economic interest.

Much of that weight has so far been directed towards ‘hard’ recovery and reconstruction projects, such as the rehabilitation of road networks and government security institutions. But there are signs that Eastern Ghouta’s informal governance actors are increasingly stepping out of the shadow of central government recovery policy as security incidents decrease in frequency. In recent months, there have been reports of notable and business figures engaging in a mixture of independent development initiatives ranging from the development of civilian-led bodies for the coordination of recovery activities (so-called Development Work Committees), to supporting the expansion of local charity organizations (for instance, in Nashabiyeh.) These nascent forms of support to civil

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38 The contract likely draws from the reported 5bn SYP fund for rubble clearance and reconstruction mentioned by Rural Damascus Governor Alaa Mounir Ibrahim in June 2018, and will also enable Manfoush to additionally conduct a large-scale scrap metal salvage operation. The Military Residence-Manfoush project will be undertaken primarily in Manfoush’s hometown of Misraba, as well as neighboring Beit Sawa and Madyara.

39 Both as a result of direct coordination with formal government stakeholders, and through ordinary business activities.
society from local notables are an important counterpoint to the impression that figures engaging in state-sanctioned recovery activities in Eastern Ghouta do so only to enhance their own wealth and status. They also demonstrate the complexity of the governance picture in the area, and again reinforce the need to carefully assess the motivations and interests of informal governance stakeholders to ensure the complementarity of aid programming.

**AID ACTORS**

The operating context for aid actors in Eastern Ghouta is little different to other government-controlled areas in Syria. Even if local partners have been approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and vetted by the Syrian intelligence services, it is deeply challenging to obtain necessary permissions to undertake aid work in Eastern Ghouta as a whole. Project proposals are often denied by the Syrian government on arbitrary grounds, counter-proposals are made frequently, and complete and independent needs assessments are seldom permitted. Approved projects are therefore often the result of what the Syrian government considers politically acceptable, rather than what is most needed. Currently, aid agencies are more likely to be granted permits for humanitarian relief projects as opposed to those which the state construes as development-focused, but the negotiating process to which most project proposals are subject means that decisions can be inconsistent, particularly across different formal government offices. This much is evident in reports that the UN is unable to secure consistent access to Duma, but faces fewer problems in other areas for unknown reasons.

The current aid portfolio is instructive as to the type of interventions that state authorities currently consider acceptable in Eastern Ghouta. For INGOs, this is largely split between the rehabilitation of pre-existing infrastructure, and the provision of emergency relief and mental health services. UN agencies are restoring schools across Duma, Arbin, and Kafr Batna, and are undertaking the rehabilitation of hospitals in partnership with the Ministry of Health, and have delivered mental health support, predominantly via a UNICEF-administered outreach programme. INGO projects reach little further, with known operations including the rehabilitation of a school in Harasta by the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the management of several WASH and water tank distribution programmes by OXFAM in Duma and Harasta.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is the most prominent NNGO and local implementing partner in Eastern Ghouta. Presently, however, SARC capacity is limited, and the organization maintains only one branch office in the area, in Nashabiyeh, after the larger Duma office was severely damaged. SARC nevertheless oversees the implementation of a range of projects including the provision of mental health support services from dedicated centers, the administration of vaccines in Shifouniyeh, Bala, and Nashabiyeh, and the distribution of NFIs in Ein Terma, Arbin, Kafr Batna, and Duma. It also conducts the majority of in-kind emergency distributions in the area, and delivered the most recent food aid project to fam-

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40 Of note, the Ministry of Social Affairs is also responsible for determining pre approved local partner organizations.

41 Upon successful submission of a project proposal, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Local Administration determine target populations in coordination with the relevant city council or, where no city council is active, the local council of the municipal government.

42 Most notably, in the severely depopulated Harasta.

43 (NNGO) National Non-Government Organization.

44 Including, mainly, electrical appliances and other household goods procured from Damascus.
ilies in Arbin, Duma, Kafr Batna, and Nashabiye subdistricts in April 2019. Other notable NNGOs active in Eastern Ghouta include the Syria Trust for Development, which is presently focused on providing legal aid to civilians on housing, land and property rights-related issues, and forming youth volunteer groups to implement education and street cleaning projects.

Eastern Ghouta also hosts numerous local and faith-based charities which deliver a variety of relief and development services. The work of secular charities registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs is overseen locally by the Ministry of Local Administration, whilst the more religiously-oriented charities register and coordinate with the Ministry for Religious Endowments. In general, local charities of these two types are the most numerous and well-respected such organizations in Eastern Ghouta. They receive financial support from a variety of sources, to include local notables, zakat, INGOs, Syrian non-profits, and community members living outside the area. Local charities have been gaining in importance since the Syrian government secured Eastern Ghouta. Prior to the conflict, they were occupied mainly with a narrow portfolio given the limitations imposed on civil society as a matter of government policy. However, massive service shortfalls have seen local charities carry some of the functions they assumed during opposition control and expand their mandates. That said, most are small, and are narrowly focused on particular social groups, areas, and issues.

2.3 SERVICES OVERVIEW

Efforts by the state to restore services have been limited, and have focused mainly on state security, governance and judicial institutions. When one considers that the heavily depopulated Harasta has received a disproportionate level of investment in state services for its majority returnee population, the government’s strategy is evident, namely, that it views the restoration of services primarily through a security- rather than needs-based lens. Harasta’s current population is 2,616, but it hosts more ongoing and longer term UN- and INGO-funded service rehabilitation projects than the considerably larger Duma (38,265). It has also reportedly received more investment from the Damascus-based business community than other larger communities.

State officials have explained that Harasta has received this support because of its role as part of the greater Damascus rehabilitation plan and as a key entry point for reconstructing the Damascus suburbs. But as COAR has argued elsewhere, Harasta has likely been prioritized for support because it hosts a relatively high proportion of civilians considered as willing to comply with state politics (whether actively or passively). In December 2018, around 65% of Harasta’s population was comprised of returnees, most of whom reportedly left during the earliest phases of the conflict and did not live under opposition control. This percentage is much higher than other - more densely populated - communities, and is indicative of the government’s strategy of prioritizing returns and associated services in locations populated by more politically compliant populations.

POWER, WATER & TELECOMS

With the exception of several neighborhoods (which receive just three hours of Government-supplied power each day), electricity is as widely unavailable as it was during Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement. To date, there are few Government-led projects to fully rehabilitate local state-run power networks, and only 6 of 82 local transformers have

45 An estimated 4,500 families received direct support as part of this project.
46 Those noted in the course of this research are listed in the stakeholder table appended to this paper.
been repaired, mainly in Saqba, and Kafr Batna. Engineers have been commissioned to repair the power station that services Harasta, Modira, and Misraba, but this work has not been completed. State-managed water and sewage networks are in equally poor state of repair, with local sources estimating that 70% of water network utilities are damaged. As a result, there is an over-reliance on water tanks delivered and maintained by state-affiliated and UN agencies, and existing capacity for repairs is overstretched. The scale and cost of power and water service repair likely to entails that current conditions will persist at least out to the medium term. Meanwhile, state-run telecoms services have been gradually improving after the restoration of four telephone exchanges in Saqba, Zamalka, Kafr Batna and Ein Terma. However, these projects have only connected communities in Eastern Ghouta with Damascus, not with one another. Two further such projects are reportedly underway in both Duma and Harasta.48

ROADS, TRANSPORT & WASTE

Road networks remain heavily damaged, particularly interior roads linking Eastern Ghouta’s various towns and townships. To date, government efforts to rehabilitate the road network have focused mainly on connecting Eastern Ghouta with Damascus as opposed to internal interconnectivity. Currently, the most significant road rehabilitation project targets the Harasta-Damascus section of Syria’s most critical land route, the M5 highway, which passes through Syria’s most populated areas, and connects the southern Syria-Jordan border with Aleppo and, in turn, Syria’s northern border with Turkey.

Public transport across the area is very limited, with local sources reporting that the few available bus services are inadequate.49 Taxi prices are also extremely high relative to local source estimates of the average Syrian monthly wage (£65.00): a 25 minute trip from Duma to Damascus costs 2,500 SYP (~£3.85). Inevitably, Syria’s broader fuel crisis is likely a major cause for the difficulties faced by public and private transport from Eastern Ghouta. At the time of writing, the three petrol stations that were functioning prior to the fuel crisis in Eastern Ghouta (Duma, Harasta, and Arbin) were each out of service.

Garbage collection is a related issue and is reported as one of the largest public service failures in the area. Only two garbage trucks and several small tractors reportedly collect waste in Eastern Ghouta, and the only local landfill, the Al-Ghazlane Landfill, has reached full capacity. Waste is sometimes transported to Eastern Qalamoun northeast of Eastern Ghouta, but high transportation costs mean garbage is increasingly collecting in the streets.

HEALTH & EDUCATION

Health and education are perhaps the public services in which the Syrian government appears to have made most progress. Quoting the Head of the Rural Damascus Health Directorate, government-affiliated media reports that 14 health centers were opened across the area over the past year, and that a further 14 are planned, in addition to the construction of two new hospitals in Kafr Batna and Harasta (in partnership with the UN Development Programme).50 In Duma alone, local sources estimate that there are over thirty five pharmacies and seven private clinics. At the

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48 Of note, landline services are widely in use across Syria owing to the fact they are: 1) less costly for consumers; 2) do not require the restoration of power to individual properties (voltage required is sent along the line with the signal by telephone exchanges).

49 For example, only 14 public buses service the 18,597 people currently living in Arbin.

50 Note that these sources likely consider Eastern Ghouta more broadly than the areas covered by this study. The Head of the Health Directorate added that a hospital will also be constructed in Maliha, which is also part of the wider Eastern Ghouta area (but not included in this study). See: SANA (2019), A year after liberation from terrorism, 14 health centers put into service again in Eastern Ghouta.
same time however, it must be noted that these clinics offer limited services, and that Eastern Ghouta lacks a functional surgical hospital. Security permissions are required for travel to Damascus for more advanced care, and, in the event of an emergency that cannot be handled locally, patients must travel with security officers and are vetted in the hospital.

The Rural Damascus Education Directorate has stated to government-affiliated media that it has developed an emergency plan for the rehabilitation of schools in partnership with “locals, INGOs, and civil society groups”. These sources add that 219 schools were damaged and/or closed during the conflict in Eastern Ghouta, and claims that the emergency plan has since seen 211 put back into service. Moreover, tens of thousands of students have also been pursuing curricula intended to help make up for time out of school and to integrate them into age appropriate classes. These figures should be treated with a degree of caution however; information on the education system in Syria is scarce, and it is highly unlikely the government has yet to invest anything like the estimated 32.5 billion SYP required to restore damaged school buildings. Education is also cited as a priority need by 24.5% of people living Eastern Ghouta at the time of writing.

CIVIL DOCUMENTATION

The government’s Interior Ministry does not recognize documents previously issued by opposition-affiliated civil registries, courts, and police services, meaning numerous births, marriages, and deaths are effectively unrecorded. Many have also lost documentation owing to damage destruction of their homes or displacement, and require the state to re-issue numerous papers. The process of obtaining papers to evidence registration of such civil matters is challenging however; having previously been a purely administrative process, the concerned individual must now secure documentation through legal means, presenting themselves to a local court in the company of a legal professional. This presents two problems: first, it requires payment of expensive legal fees; and second, it requires residents to: a) obtain security permission to travel to Damascus; and b) assume the risk of crossing multiple checkpoints. Owing to the tightness of state security across the area and the sheer poverty experienced by most of those living in Eastern Ghouta, most find it challenging to access rights afforded to those holding civil documentation.

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51 Of note, women, children, and the elderly are likely to be granted permission to travel to Damascus for medical attention more quickly than adult males, who are subject to heavier vetting procedures.

52 Every Damascus hospital is associated with a branch of state security and conducts vetting of emergency patients.

53 SANA (2019), Relentless efforts to upgrade educational sector in Eastern Ghouta

54 See Figure 1.
GOVERNANCE STAKEHOLDERS

- **MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT**
  Local level formal government bodies comprised of two parts: the Executive Office (see below), and the local council. Local councils were elected in September 2018, and are generally comprised of a combination of government-affiliated businessmen, individuals with linkages to local security forces, local notables, and technocrats. Local councils deliberate and issue decisions, making municipalities the primary local level decision-making body.

- **EXECUTIVE OFFICES**
  Formal municipal government bodies staffed by technocrats and professional experts. Responsible for designing, conducting feasibility assessments, and implementing local projects approved by the security services and higher levels of the government bureaucracy. Executive offices are often the closest formal governance body to the community itself and have a strong understanding of local needs.

- **DEVELOPMENT WORK COMMITTEE**
  Informal locally-led development initiative based in Duma that intends to improve services and restore community functionality. It was formed in 2019 in Duma City by a group of prominent businessmen, business families, and local notable families in Duma, several of whom who have linkages with the newly elected Duma city council. The Duma Development Committee was formed to conduct, promote, and advocate for development in Duma city, and has funded several municipal projects in Duma, largely using the personal funds of the committee members. The Duma Development Committee has also used its members’ connections to lobby Government of Syria security services to adjust their policies in Duma.\(^{55}\) Anecdotally, the Duma Development Committee is highly popular with the residents of Duma City.

- **MOHAMAD ZEITOUN**
  Civil engineer from Harasta and serving Administrator of the Urban Planning Office in the Harasta Executive Office. Currently leading an independent initiative to develop an urban plan for Harasta in partnership with Eastern Ghouta environment professionals and the Harasta local council.

- **WALEED DAWOOD**
  A prominent Sunni clergyman in Kafr Batna and a member of the Kafr Batna reconciliation committee who has close linkages to the Government of Syria. Dawood is locally respected and highly popular, and regularly is involved or consulted in local service provision projects.

- **ADNAN AL-WEZ**
  A member of the Harasta Municipal Council, who also has his own engineering business. While he is not permanently living in Harasta (he primarily resides in Qudsaya), he is locally popular and is considered to be a competent technocrat.

- **ABU ZIAD NASSER NAJJAR**
  Abu Ziad Nasser Najjar is a prominent local businessman the head of an informal neighborhood committee in Kafr Batna; he has personally donated several vehicles to the Kafr Batna municipality to conduct street cleaning, and is locally popular and respected.

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\(^{55}\) For example, in June 2019 members of the Duma Development Committee successfully convinced the Governor of Rural Damascus and the Republican Guard to allow registered residents of Duma to leave Duma and return without presenting official identification; the primary reason given to the Governor of Rural Damascus justifying this decision was that movement restrictions were hindering the economic development of Duma City.
• **HUDA DEFDAA**
Huda Defdaa is the daughter of Bassam Defdaa, a prominent Sunni cleric with close linkages to Government of Syria security services. Huda was elected to the Kafr Batna local council in September 2018, largely due to her relationship with her father, Bassam Defdaa. Both Huda and her father are locally unpopular due to Basem’s role in coordinating with the Syrian security services.

• **SYRIAN ARAB RED CRESCENT**
Syrian national NGO based predominantly throughout Eastern Ghouta. Main ground-level humanitarian and development assistance provider.
Eastern Ghouta has traditionally been (and remains) a largely cohesive, predominantly Sunni Arab, agrarian society in which historic forms of family politics play an important role in socio-political organization. That said, in many cases there are new social tensions created by the conflict, to include between: those that endured the siege vs. those that fled; old middle-class vs. new middle-class; those regarded as ‘responsible’ for the war vs. those subject to its effects. Such divisions may surface if the dividends of Eastern Ghouta’s development are not shared equitably in the eyes of local populations.

Prominent families have secured broad representation in local government, navigating Eastern Ghouta’s conflict dynamics to consolidate their wealth, elite status, and loyalist credentials. These official appointments naturally empower prominent families and business figures to wield increased influence and economic, social, and political capital. These prominent socio-political stakeholders have the capacity to lobby political decision-makers within central authority to adapt government policy, with potentially beneficial or harmful outcomes.

During the opposition control of Eastern Ghouta, a confined wave of Salafism started to emerge and attempted to dismantle the preexisting Government of Syria religious systems. However, the return of the state to Eastern Ghouta in April 2018 witnessed the return of trusted religious actors as a form of state patronage. Religious figures are now important stakeholders in reinstating of government control.

Gender-based discrimination has continued to be a prevalent feature of Eastern Ghouta society post-reconciliation, owing partly to the area’s traditional religious and social conservatism. However, as a result of the crackdown on males in Eastern Ghouta, women’s traditional roles have altered to become those of decision-makers and breadwinners. The status of women in Eastern Ghouta society has therefore improved and should be encouraged further.
3.1 Community Cohesion

Eastern Ghouta is in some ways an extremely socially cohesive area. The entire area is predominantly a Sunni Arab agrarian community, with a strong focus on prominent family politics. However, the aftermath of the Eastern Ghouta siege witnessed the formation of new identity groups that may in time come to create social divisions that are evident and are found between: ‘Old’ and ‘New’ residents; those that ‘fled’ and those that remained throughout the siege; and those viewed as being ‘responsible’ for the siege, and those that assign responsibility. Eastern Ghouta’s widespread depopulation and uncertain demographic future means it is hard to assess the form these social grievances will take. However, as movement restrictions are relaxed, the possibility that they will arise in future highlights the need to ensure that reconstruction dividends are distributed equitably. Ultimately, programs targeting Eastern Ghouta must take these social fissures into account, and must ensure that the benefits of programs (both in terms of implementing actors, and beneficiaries), do not overtly benefit one group over another in order to avoid exacerbating these growing tensions.

‘Old’ and ‘New’

Since the 1980s, the area’s historically agrarian character has been diluted by the arrival of large numbers of middle-class migrants from Damascus, rural-urban migrants from across Syria, and the conversion of agricultural land to other uses. As a conservative society in which social groupings are cohesive, yet closed, new arrivals have tended to live amongst one another rather than integrate fully. The cultural similarity of this new constituency means its presence is not necessarily at odds with Eastern Ghouta’s more established residents, but there is an observable disconnect between ‘new’ and ‘old’ constituencies manifested in levels of social participation and engagement in the local economy.

‘Fled’ and ‘Remained’

Social dichotomies are increasingly being formed between those that lived under the intense besiegement in Eastern Ghouta, and those that fled for government-held areas before the worst of the violence, generally in 2012 and 2013. Local sources report a sense of dislocation amongst those that fled their homes for government-held areas and have since returned, perhaps best described as a lack of belonging produced by an absence of shared experience. For the majority of civilians that remained and reconciled, they have described increasingly unrecognizable communities: Patterns of everyday life are unfamiliar,

56 Family councils established by the area’s farming communities have mediated disputes for centuries, and are among the features that have bound the social fabric despite the impact of intense conflict conditions. That have bound the social fabric despite the impact of intense conflict conditions.

57 Minorities might also be a target of community tensions, although minorities in Eastern Ghouta are relatively small communities, and were not a major part of Eastern Ghouta’s demographics. For instance, there was a small population of Turkmen and Christians in Eastern Ghouta prior to the conflict. Many from such populations may therefore find returning to Eastern Ghouta difficult for purely social reasons, let alone the significant political barriers imposed by the Syrian government.

58 Tight security regimes and the lack of connectivity between neighborhoods have likely stifled their emergence for the time being.

59 In search of economic opportunity and/or a lower cost of living, middle-class newcomers have tended to settle in planned developments appended to major urban centers, namely: Duma, Saqba, Arbin, and Kafr Batna.

60 For residents, IDPs, and returnees alike, these differences are matters of sentiment and fairness, with the former concerning mutual but distinct forms of alienation, and the latter related to matters of equity and legitimacy.
neighbours are returning that they do not know, and they are subject to systems of governance they wish neither to accept nor abide. With the government’s current focus on promoting the return of politically compliant loyalists and passive supporters, the engagement of Eastern Ghouta’s population in reconstruction may be fraught with issues of local ownership and legitimacy.

‘RESPONSIBLE’ AND ‘ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY’

Those that most actively resisted the Syrian government were forced to evacuate upon reconciliation, but blame and responsibility are still likely to influence community cohesion. Local sources note that Eastern Ghouta’s peripheral communities increasingly regard the population of Duma as being partially responsible for the start of the conflict and their effect on the wider population. This feeling is not without justification: Armed and political opposition groups in Duma were prominent on the national stage, and there is a growing perception that Duma effectively ‘forced’ other communities in Eastern Ghouta to join the opposition, thereby making it responsible for the conflict, siege, and reconciliation agreement. Naturally, these sentiments could grow into more serious community tensions over the long term.

‘COHESIVENESS’ AND ‘LOCAL RECOVERY’

Finally, it must be noted that there is evidence to suggest that conflict conditions have reinforced identities that have served as mobilizing forces for locally-led project delivery and the improvement of public goods. It is remarkable, for instance, that Duma’s municipal government has reportedly received funds raised by members of Duma’s local and expatriate communities. Further evidence of social solidarity and local initiative is also found in Harasta, where civilians and business actors have reportedly formed a committee which has presented Harasta City Council with its own vision for urban planning. Such examples provide powerful reminders that residents have a solidarity with people and place which can supersede their differences with a government they likely hold responsible for Eastern Ghouta’s destruction.

3.2 RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Eastern Ghouta is a relatively conservative, predominantly Sunni Islamic region. During Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement, Gulf-based religious networks were strongly supportive of the area’s Salafist armed groups, including in their military, political, and religious competition with the political Islamism embodied by Faylaq Ar-Rahman. Ultimately however, the influence of both doctrines was short-lived, lasting only as long as the presence of their armed evangelists and the interest of their international supporters. Indeed, since the siege has ended it has come to light that some religious figures prominent in Eastern Ghouta throughout the siege had remained closely linked to the Government of Syria since the start of the conflict.

62 Duma is also the site of one the few Hanbali schools of Sunni Islam in Syria which was fundamental in the reinforcement of Salafism in Eastern Ghouta.

63 Indeed, the emergence of Ahrar Al-Sham was in large part due to Duma’s robust Saudi Arabia-based diaspora.

64 For instance, Zahran Alloush was the leader of Jaish Al-Islam until his death in 2015. Alloush hails from a large established family in Duma City and reportedly has contact with and support from the government of Saudi Arabia through his father, a religious official living in KSA. His father, Abdullah Alloush, was a prominent Sheikh in Duma prior to his relocation to KSA.

65 Perhaps the most notable such case is that of Sheikh Bassam Defdaa, a Sufi cleric of the Omari Mosque in Kafir Batna. The term Defdaa, which translates to “frog”, was later used to describe opposition members who had switched allegiances to Government of Syria. Defdaa openly advocated for the opposition during much of Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement, but in maintaining links with clerics who had left for government-controlled areas, ultimately capitalized on armed opposition infighting to mediate support for
Post-reconciliation, neither Salfism nor political Islam has remained an enduring or important feature of Eastern Ghouta’s religious landscape. Like Eastern Ghouta’s former opposition armed and political structures, figures advocating these doctrines have been replaced and their institutions dismantled. In Duma, for instance, local sources report that prayers at major mosques are now led by more moderate, pro-government clerics. Imams closely linked to the government and the Mufti of Rural Damascus have also been appointed widely, and have reportedly been using religious doctrine to encourage military-aged males to join the SAA. The return of the state in April 2018 thus witnessed the return of religious actors trusted by the Government of Syria as a form of state patronage. This is evident in the important role played by Eastern Ghouta’s religious figures in the reinstatement of government control across the area, and aligns with the government’s historic use and appointment of prominent religious figures for political purposes and/or to reward support.

Local religious minorities are perhaps more notable for their large-scale departure from the area in advance of the worst of the violence, and for the overtures the government and religious charities are now making for their return. Eastern Ghouta’s Christian Orthodox community mainly lived in Arbin until largely fleeing to Damascus during the earliest phases of the siege, whilst its Circassian community relocated from Marj Al-Sultan to nearby Qudsayya and Rikn Al-Din at a similar time. Having generally complied with Syrian government politics, these religious minorities are more likely to be permitted to return and could be targeted for disproportionate levels of government-sponsored development assistance in line with state-centric policies of rewarding loyalists and passive supporters. That said, Christians have only returned in limited numbers given conditions in Arbin, despite the appeals of leading Christian Orthodox figures. Of note, Christian NGOs have been important aid providers in Eastern Ghouta throughout the current conflict, and are generally well regarded.

66 Of note, the Alloush family, which was the leading figure in the development of Jaish Al-Islam, still wields a degree of local influence according to local sources.

67 Under laws in effect since the mid-1960s, the Syrian Prime Minister is responsible for appointing religious staff at Syria’s mosques.

68 For example, Sheikh Walid Dawoud, Imam of the Grand Mosque in Ein Terma, retained lines of communication with Government of Syria Republican Guard forces throughout besiegement, and was appointed as head of the reconciliation committee after government forces recaptured the area. Local sources report Dawoud retains this role, and, despite his involvement in negotiation Ein Terma’s surrender, wields enough local credibility to support civilian-led recovery initiatives. See: Enab Baladi (2018), Civilian Initiative to Clean the Streets of Ein Terma.

69 Some also relocated to Jaramana, in Damascus’s southern suburbs.

70 For example, in the case of Arbin: Boutros Lahham, a prominent Christian Orthodox religious leader, has begun to organize many of the Christian IDPs from Arbin in order to facilitate their return with the approval and coordination of the National Security Office. Lahham has also reportedly begun to lobby for the restoration and rehabilitation of churches in Arbin.

71 In June 2018, local sources noted that Boutrous Lahham, a Christian Orthodox religious figure, held a meeting in Hmeimim airbase with members of the Russian Reconciliation Center, and Christian families of Eastern Ghouta to discuss the return of the Christian community to Arbin.
3.3 GENDER

Gender-based discrimination has been a prevalent feature of Eastern Ghouta society in both the pre-war and post-reconciliation period owing partly to the area’s religious and social conservatism. However, the conflict has in some ways had a positive impact on gender dynamics in Eastern Ghouta, as women were quickly exposed to political and civil engagement after the 2011 uprisings, and openly participated in humanitarian, civil society, and local governance activities. Though the legacy of this engagement has been challenged by government-led efforts to systematically deconstruct civil society, the importance of women to Eastern Ghouta’s society has nevertheless increased.

The widespread conscription and detention of adult males has had a particular influence on the distribution of livelihoods between genders. Women have assumed the role of breadwinners and primary decision-makers in around one third of local families, and it is now more socially acceptable for women to engage in a greater variety of jobs. These are dynamics that should be preserved; programs which target Eastern Ghouta should ensure that women retain an important voice in Eastern Ghouta’s economic landscape.

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72 This is not necessarily unique to Eastern Ghouta, women have traditionally faced challenges engaging in politics, employment, and education across Syria, and particularly in more rural areas. In 2010, women constituted 22% of the formal labor forces in Syria. The female employment rate dropped to 14% in 2015. See: Syria Deeply (2019), *The Shifting Role of Women in Syria’s Economy*.

73 Eight women out of 14 candidates won the election of the Duma Local Council General Committee, and many women activists in Duma became icons for the peaceful and moderate activism.
SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

EASTERN GHOUTA’S PROMINENT FAMILIES

Eastern Ghouta’s social landscape is dominated by prominent local families. These families generally are involved in local governance structures (both formal and informal) as well as being important business stakeholders. Many prominent families were largely evacuated following the reconciliation agreement, meaning those that remain are linked in one way or another to high profile individuals within the Syrian government. Every community has its own prominent families, the most important of which currently include: the Hasaba, Al-Khiti and Abdel Dayem in Duma; the Kharboutli and Khamis in Kafr Batna; the Zeitoun and Faraoun in Harasta; the Kahala in Arbin; and the Abaza in Marj El-Sultan.

- **SHEIKH BASSAM DEFDAA**

Sheikh Bassam Defdaa, is a cleric at the Omari Mosque in Kafr Batna. Defdaa openly advocated for the opposition during much of Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement, but in maintaining links with clerics who had left for government-controlled areas, ultimately capitalized on armed opposition in-fighting to mediate support for reconciliation. The surname, Defdaa, which translates to “frog”, was later used to describe opposition members that switched allegiance to the Syrian government. Of note, Defdaa’s daughter, Huda, is a member of the Kafr Batna Local Council.

- **WALED DAWOOD**

A prominent Sunni clergyman in Kafr Batna and a member of the Kafr Batna reconciliation committee. Closely linked to the Syrian government, but is well-respected in the community. Dawood regularly consults on local service provision projects.

- **MUHAMMAD ABD EL-TALEB**

A well known media presenter from Duma city who works for SamaTV, a Syrian media network owned by Muhammad Hamsho, a prominent Syrian businessman. Muhammad Abd El-Taleb is not well respected by the population of Duma city due to his role in pro-government media, but he has an important role in the Duma Development Work Committee.

- **LOCAL AND FAITH-BASED CHARITIES**

These organizations are based in practically every community across Eastern Ghouta and are staffed by local residents. Some have grown in size and scope as the conflict has continued, securing partnerships with INGOs.
Eastern Ghouta’s economy has traditionally been based on three pillars: productive agricultural lands; industrial processing (of both agriculture and small scale workshops); and local markets that focus on the sale and export of locally produced goods. As the most populated community in the region, Duma city was traditionally the center of all three of these pillars.

The conflict has destroyed or altered all three of these pillars. Agricultural infrastructure is damaged or neglected, agricultural production has shifted into ‘wartime’ agriculture, and important inputs are prohibitively expensive. Local industrial facilities in Eastern Ghouta’s population centers are damaged or destroyed. Local markets are damaged, and movement and access restrictions have altered pre-conflict value chains. There are now few livelihoods opportunities available to Eastern Ghouta’s residents as a result, contributing to the deterioration of humanitarian needs.

The Government of Syria has enacted policies which have created new channels for Eastern Ghouta’s agricultural production; essentially, these policies have isolated Duma city and other populated centers, and thereby severed pre-conflict commercial linkages among peripheral communities in Eastern Ghouta. This has impaired producers’ ability to negotiate prices, and reduced the area’s overall cohesion and resilience.

International organizations will be unable to address all of these economic deficiencies, as many are now structural concerns or are outside the scope of individual programs. However, there are opportunities to positively contribute to Eastern Ghouta’s economy. By ensuring that different pillars of Eastern Ghouta’s traditional economy are targeted simultaneously, and targeting linked value chains within the Eastern Ghouta region itself, international organizations can encourage equitable pre-conflict economic processes which will benefit the region as a whole.
4.1 SECTORAL OVERVIEW

PRE-WAR

Eastern Ghouta’s pre-war economy rested on three central pillars: agricultural production, industrial processing, and trade and export.

AGRICULTURE

Historically, agro-industry has served as the basis of Eastern Ghouta’s economy. Rich in land suited to rearing livestock and the cultivation of fruits and vegetables, the area’s privately-held smallholdings are a major supplier of food and animal products both to Damascus and beyond. Crops are grown year-round: in winter, wheat, barley, legumes (beans and peas), and winter vegetables (cauliflower and cabbage) are grown, whilst the summer season sees the cultivation of fruit trees, tomatoes, courgettes, cucumbers, aubergine, and corn.

INDUSTRY

Agricultural production was among the main drivers of Eastern Ghouta’s industrialization in the 1960s, and also features in local manufacturing and craftsmanship. Duma and other heavily populated communities in western parts of Eastern Ghouta hosted numerous industrial agricultural processing facilities. Additionally, Harasta was known for its textile industry (fabric and garments), whilst Saqba and Arbin had a national reputation for the manufacture of fine wooden furniture, often making use of locally grown walnut trees. Both industries were in decline prior to 2011 however; and it should be recognized that the large numbers of locals to have abandoned their livelihoods over the past 8 years is indicative not only of conflict conditions, but of the area’s long standing economic struggles. Indeed, unregulated imports, customs corruption, high material costs, and inadequate legislation had already been exacting a heavy toll on most local industries.

TRADE

Much of the pre-conflict economy of Eastern Ghouta was also based on the role of Duma and Kafr Batna as trade and market hubs for the different agricultural producers and industries in Eastern Ghouta. Agricultural goods were grown in peripheral agricultural villages such as Nashabiyeh and Hammuriah, then sent to industrial facilities in Duma, Arbin, Kafr Batna, and Saqba. Once processed, they would then commonly be forwarded for sale at important souks and markets in Duma and Kafr Batna, or sent to Damascus. Communities involved in this commercial exchange therefore hosted a thriving middle class business community comprised of traditional business families. Ultimately, however, much of this ‘trade’ economy was reliant on the free movement of goods and labor between Eastern Ghouta’s communities and has subsequently been severely affected by current restrictions.

74 For more on this, see: Woertz, E. (2013) Syria’s War Economy and Prospects of Reconstruction.

75 For instance, Eastern Ghouta’s furniture industry has suffered from the availability of cheaper Turkish imports. Items are often sold at lower prices in Syria than in their home market, but the state has failed to implement adequate anti-dumping regulations to support Syrian manufacturers.
CONFLICT AND POST-RECONCILIATION

The conflict has fundamentally damaged or altered all three of the pillars of Eastern Ghouta’s economy. Naturally this has destroyed local livelihoods, and Eastern Ghouta’s economy is now barely functional.

AGRICULTURE

During Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement, activity across agriculture and agriculture-dependent sectors diminished greatly. Between 2011 and 2016, livestock numbers in the area reportedly fell by an estimated 85%, whilst farmers shifted production priorities to staple grains for local consumption and internal distribution. Irrigation networks were damaged, or fell into neglect. Local production was captured by local business elites, the most notable of whom was a prominent cheese manufacturer Mohieddine Manfoush.

Government of Syria-affiliated media frequently reports that agriculture has recovered substantially since the area was recaptured by government forces, largely owing to a combination of improved local security, state subsidies, and the provision of agricultural supplies and machinery. However, there is an absence of quality data, and local reports strongly contest claims issued by the government. Local sources note that although many residents may have returned to work in the fields, some farmland is restricted for unspecified security reasons, damage to irrigation systems has been unaddressed, and essential agricultural inputs such as quality seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers are unaffordable. Moreover, adaptations made by local producers under these conditions are less than optimal; for example, sewage water is often used instead of specialized fertilizer. Syria’s current fuel crisis has further increased the cost of agricultural production across the board, particularly given much of Eastern Ghouta’s arable land is reliant on fuel powered irrigation.

INDUSTRY

Many of the industrial facilities in Eastern Ghouta’s major communities are heavily damaged. Government of Syria figures state that physical damage to industry in Eastern Ghouta totals 81 billion SYP, and it is expected that rehabilitation of pre-war facilities will cost double that amount. Little effort has been paid by the Government of Syria to rehabilitate the industrial sector, and considering the cost it is unlikely that funds will be forthcoming. For that reason, since the earliest phases of the conflict many industrialists in Duma have reportedly sought approval from the Damascus Ministry of Commerce to move industrial operations to the neighboring Adra Industrial City. If a shift of Eastern Ghouta’s manufacturing to Adra takes place, (which is likely given the lack of state investment in Eastern Ghouta’s severely damaged infrastruc-

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76 Figures from the Eastern Ghouta Veterinarians Syndicate, as cited by Enab Baladi (2018) Economic Gains Awaited by the Syrian Regime in Damascus’s Ghouta. This report adds that between 2011 and early 2018, dairy cattle numbers had fallen from 120,000 to 7,000, and sheep numbers from 200,000 to 40,000.
77 See, for instance: SANA (2019), Cultivated areas in Eastern Ghouta exceed 20 thousand hectares, a promising agricultural season.
78 Animal fodder and vaccines are also cited as important needs among the farming community.
79 Enab Baladi (2018) Assad’s Government Aims at Accelerating the Economic Cycle in Ghouta. Note that this cost likely refers to a larger area than that considered by this study. That said, the study area is, with the exception of Jobar, the most heavily damaged part of Damascus’s eastern periphery.
80 Intensive discussions have been held between government and industrial representatives regarding the rejuvenation of industry in Damascus and its periphery, and there are reportedly plans to develop 191 additional units in Adra as part of a nationwide plan to incentivize business to move to designated industrial zones. Adra is already the largest such zone in Syria, hosting facilities variously engaged in engineering, textiles, chemicals, food, building materials, metals, and craftwork.

EASTERN GHOUTA
ture), then this will fundamentally, and potentially permanently, reshape Eastern Ghouta’s industrial sector.

Notably, tertiary economic activity has also not recovered to any remarkable degree. Tertiary sector activity is limited largely to small privately-owned businesses ranging from street vendors to independent service providers. Employment of Eastern Ghouta locals in Damascus has evidently been constrained by the effects of besiegement and continued access restrictions.

TRADE

As noted, several communities in Eastern Ghouta, namely Duma and Kafr Batna, served as market hubs for agricultural produce. Until very recently however, Duma’s markets are heavily damaged, and are now isolated from the wider Eastern Ghouta economy by road damage. Kafr Batna’s market area is also damaged, and is still reportedly unequipped to handle pre-war levels of trade. Furthermore, Eastern Ghouta’s onerous checkpoint network has a built in cost. The tariffs imposed by armed actors at local checkpoints are not exorbitant, and are generally a 5% ‘fee’ on the total value of goods being transited; however, this is still difficult cost for consumers and small scale producers to absorb.

81 No major tertiary employer was identified in the course of this research, with the exception of the national print media services based mainly in Arbin.

82 Unconfirmed local reports claim that some work is currently underway to rehabilitate this market.
4.2 ECONOMIC TRAJECTORY

The Government of Syria has enacted policies which intend to fundamentally alter economic processes in Eastern Ghouta. In effect, these policies seek to isolate the economies of Duma city and other population centers from their rural peripheries (thereby severing pre-conflict commercial linkages) and redirecting commercial traffic directly to Damascus city. Several policies have contributed to this strategy, to include: selective road rehabilitation; access and mobility constraints, and preferential rehabilitation of specific communities.

ROADS
As noted, damage to road networks has significantly impaired commercial transport, which is necessary to rejuvenate Eastern Ghouta’s pre-conflict agricultural value chains. To date, the Syrian government has prioritized the restoration of roads linking Damascus with Eastern Ghouta’s main communities (including some limited efforts to improve public transport), but has done little to connect the communities with one another to support their mutual recovery. Duma, despite being Eastern Ghouta’s largest community and the hub of the area’s agro-industrial value chain, remains partially isolated from the wider periphery of Eastern Ghouta.83 Having previously based much of its local economy on its local agriculture market, limited commercial access means that Duma has lost much of this agricultural trade to markets in Damascus, such as Souk Al-Hal in Jobar.

ACCESS & MOBILITY
Severe movement restrictions have been used as a means of preventing the restoration of ordinary market conditions in terms of both labor and goods. First, travel to, from, and within Eastern Ghouta is subject to an onerous checkpoint network (covered in greater detail in section 5.2) which effectively prevents the movement of laborers for whom travel entails the risk of fines, arrest, or conscription. In terms of the movement of goods, these restrictions effectively privilege large-scale businessman who exercise a monopoly over key commodities, as these are the only businessmen who can sustain the costs of checkpoints or can negotiate regular commercial access. While access restrictions therefore have a serious impact on small-scale businessmen, important business networks tied to the Government of Syria such as those linked to prominent families like the Mansous, the Abdel Dayem or the Hasaba, are actually afforded a competitive advantage.84

SELECTIVE REHABILITATION
Selective rehabilitation has, in effect, further economically isolated some of Eastern Ghouta’s major communities which were central to the armed and political opposition. Harasta, for instance, has received a disproportionate share of public and foreign aid spending compared to the larger and more economically central, yet less politically ‘compliant’ populations of Arbin and Duma. Moreover, communities hosting a larger proportion of compliant residents generally have greater access to services, while extensive damage to banks, currency exchange services, and hawala offices means those seeking banking services are obliged to travel to central Damascus.85

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83 It is unclear how long the new freedoms permitted to Duma residents will remain effective.

84 Many local businessmen rose to prominence as a result of cross-line trade during Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement, developing working relationships with state and state-linked actors. Since Eastern Ghouta’s checkpoints are unofficial, are managed by a diversity of armed actors, do not systematically apply tariffs and restrictions, and operate according to tacit government approvals, these figures are far more capable of navigating these impediments than small-scale traders.

85 Or other nearby locations, such as Jaramana and At-Tall.
4.3 OPPORTUNITIES

While the challenges are daunting, there are opportunities for international organizations intervening in Eastern Ghouta to positively contribute to Eastern Ghouta’s economic recovery, thereby addressing local livelihoods needs as well as basic humanitarian needs. In Eastern Ghouta, interventions should attempt to target the pre-conflict economic pillars of Eastern Ghouta simultaneously in order to rebuild pre-conflict value chains. Furthermore, these value chains should be focused on building economic linkages within the Eastern Ghouta region itself, in order to prevent the economic isolation of Eastern Ghouta’s pre-conflict economic centers, especially Duma.

Interventions should also seek to engage the small or medium sized organizations and industries which are fundamental actors in the Eastern Ghouta economy. This includes agricultural cooperatives, which are found in nearly every community in Eastern Ghouta and have a strong tradition of cooperation, knowledge-pooling, and equipment sharing. This also includes Eastern Ghouta’s local industrial base, especially the small and medium sized workshops and agricultural processing facilities (ideally focusing on locally produced agriculture), as well as support and rehabilitation of the traditional souks and marketplaces in Eastern Ghouta’s now isolated market hubs. These entities are essentially the ‘nodes’ of Eastern Ghouta’s pre-conflict economy which have been marginalized by current government policies, and are traditionally excluded from formal humanitarian and developmental programming. International actors will not be able to repair all the structural deficiencies of the Eastern Ghouta economy. However, by targeting small-scale nodes within the area’s economic value chain, these interventions can encourage the rejuvenation of elements of the pre-conflict economy, and contribute to rebuilding social and economic linkages within Eastern Ghouta’s communities.

ECONOMY STAKEHOLDERS

- **FARMING COOPERATIVES**
  Civil society organizations comprising farmers, accountants, and local agricultural stakeholders working to enhance local agricultural capacity on issues ranging from pricing, supplies and equipment, and productivity. Cooperatives are a result of the strong culture of coordination around agricultural matters dating back centuries.

- **MOHIEDDINE MANFOUSSH**
  An unremarkable man before the Syrian conflict, Mohieddine Manfoussh leveraged connections with government elites to secure a monopoly over Eastern Ghouta’s dairy industry throughout the besiegement period. Trusted government-affiliated business family now with a diverse portfolio ranging from agriculture to property development projects.

- **DEVELOPMENT WORK COMMITTEES**
  Informal locally-led development initiative based in Duma working to improve services and restore community functionality. Managed by local notable family members and businesspeople, and harnesses membership personalities to work alongside formal governance bodies. No accountability oversight, and potential for membership to use power inappropriately.

- **HASABA FAMILY**
  Major beneficiaries of the siege economy, supplying food and power generators cross-line via the no defunct Wafideen crossing. Based in Duma, pro-government.
**ABDEL DAYEM FAMILY**
Pro-government Duma-based notable family that managed government-sanctioned cross-line supply of fuel and power generators during besiegement. The family continues to supply these and other commodities to the area, and has secured representation on the Duma Local Council.

**FRUIT AND VEGETABLE IMPORT AND EXPORT COMMITTEE**
Manages the Eastern Ghouta’s fruit and vegetable trade within the area and with buyers and sellers in Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf. Chaired by Amer Al-Khiti, who also serves as Head of the Souk Al-Hal committee. Al-Khiti is closely linked with the upper echelons of the Syrian government.

**SOUK COMMITTEES**
Every souk or market in Eastern Ghouta has a management committee that represents the interests of the souk. These management committees are elected from among the vendors in each market. The souk committee generally regulates standard prices, coordinates import and export, and lobbies for the interests of its vendors. Additionally, several souk committees in Eastern Ghouta have lobbied their local municipal council to prioritize rehabilitate damages during the conflict. Naturally, prominent families often have a role in the various souk committees.
5. SECURITY

SECTION SUMMARY

The April 2018 reconciliation brought an end to the Government of Syria siege that was imposed on Eastern Ghouta since 2012. Eastern Ghouta has since become one of the most highly securitized regions of Syria. The hegemony and authority of the Republican Guard over Eastern Ghouta’s various military actors has further enhanced the degree to which the Government of Syria has enforced this securitization policy, and decreases the likelihood of inter-Government of Syria conflict.

Due to Eastern Ghouta’s extreme securitization, movement restrictions in Eastern Ghouta are extreme. The estimated 35 checkpoints in Ghouta have both socially and economically isolated communities within Eastern Ghouta from each other, and have prevented a return to everyday life for most residents.

Related to the extreme movement restrictions in Ghouta is near constant conscription campaigns. Nearly the entire military aged male population is subject to conscription, and even those that are exempt are at risk of being forced into military service. Naturally, the fact that the entire adult male labor force is at risk or arbitrary conscription will hinder Eastern Ghouta’s post-conflict recovery and contribute to growing humanitarian needs.

In addition to movement restrictions, armed groups in Ghouta regularly extort the population, harass individuals, loot homes, and conduct arbitrary arrests and detentions. Russian Military police sometimes patrol in Eastern Ghouta; however, they are few in number, sporadically deployed, and are largely unable to curb abusive practices.

It is unlikely that Eastern Ghouta will witness a recurrent popular uprising, as extensive securitization prohibits the possibility of a serious opposition insurgency in eastern Ghouta. That said, movement restrictions are likely to be relaxed over time given their limiting effect on economic recovery. As observed in Duma, following pressure from local businessmen, the requirement for security permissions to leave and enter Duma was annulled. Considering the efforts undertaken by businessmen and prominent families for community recovery, other areas in Eastern Ghouta might follow this decision.
5.1 SECURITY OVERVIEW

There are three primary security-related issues that will impact humanitarian or development programming in Eastern Ghouta: Movement restrictions; conscription policy; and abusive armed actor practices. Critically, the Government of Syria’s securitization of Eastern Ghouta has impact not only on the ability of aid organizations to operate in Eastern Ghouta; but for the degree to which normal economic processes can continue, and thus contributes to deteriorating humanitarian needs in the region.

Eastern Ghouta was reconciled by the Government of Syria in April 2018, which brought an end to the debilitating siege conditions that had been in effect since 2012. Eastern Ghouta has since become one of the most highly securitized regions of Syria; indeed, due to this extreme securitization Eastern Ghouta is in some ways more inaccessible to international aid organizations than during the siege. At present, there are numerous Government of Syria armed groups in Eastern Ghouta, to include the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division, several state-affiliated militias (to include the NDF, Liwa al-Quds, and the Palestine Liberation Army). However, the ultimate military and security authority in Eastern Ghouta lies with the Republican Guard. Due to this clear command and control, Eastern Ghouta rarely witnesses clashes between different Government of Syria armed groups as seen in other parts of Syria. Partially for that reason, the Government of Syria has been able to clearly apply a comprehensive security apparatus throughout the entire Eastern Ghouta region.

5.2 MOVEMENT AND ACCESS

Alongside severely damaged road infrastructure and inadequate local transport, security restrictions have served to effectively isolate communities in Eastern Ghouta from each other for a prolonged period. The Ministry of the Interior’s General Security Branch provides oversight for security and coordinates the operations of all locally-active security agencies, to include the Political Security Directorate and local police services. Alongside the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division, and state intelligence agencies (Air Force Intelligence and Military Security), these actors are responsible for manning a suffocating network of internal and peripheral checkpoints. An estimated 35 checkpoints are found across Eastern Ghouta, predominantly on routes linking heavily populated areas. With the recent exception of Duma, advance permission from the security services is required for travel to Damascus, and for travel between communities within Eastern Ghouta. This policy has effectively ‘marooned’ civilians concerned

86 Armed opposition combatants were either forcibly evacuated to northern Syria, or were incorporated into existing government of Syria military units. An estimated 16,000 fighters from Faylaq Ar-Rahman, Jaish Al-Islam, and Ahrar Al-Sham variously left for Syria’s northern governorates following reconciliation of the entire area, but not all evacuated Eastern Ghouta. Unknown numbers were permitted to ‘settle their status’ with the Syrian authorities, and were subsequently retrained and remobilized into state-affiliated militia, mainly the National Defence Forces (NDF).

87 The NDF in Eastern Ghouta are comprised mainly of the former armed opposition group, Jaish Al-Wafa’ (Army of Loyalty). Most Jaish Al-Wafa’ combatants are loyalists that fled in the early stages of the conflict. As an NDF unit, the group is led by Ahmad Sarboul, and is stationed in Duma. The NDF has an extremely poor local reputation, largely owing to reports that it has engaged in looting, harassment, and property confiscation.

88 COAR sources indicate that Iranian forces do not maintain a notable ground presence in areas covered by this study. Please note that COAR’s assessment differs from that presented by others, and therefore demands careful review. See, for instance, Middle East Institute/ Etana (2019), Forgotten Lives: Regime Rule in Former Opposition-held East Ghouta. Also note that both Liwa Al-Quds, and the SAA’s 4th Division are often conflated with the Iranian military establishment.

89 Coordination between armed groups occurs in relation to checkpoints, distribution of conscription lists, and settling the status of civilians wanted for their military service.

90 Naturally, this has serious economic and social impacts, which are discussed in greater detail in their respective sections.

91 As with the distribution of Government of Syria military actors, there is a considerable degree of overlap between security and intelligence
over their post-reconciliation status, particularly unreconciled individuals, former opposition affiliates, and potential conscripts, each of whom are at high risk of detention, harassment, and fines.

Inevitably, the checkpoint network has strained pre-existing tensions between local communities and state security services. These have not devolved into protests, clashes or an armed insurgency however, with tensions instead reportedly manifested as begrudging compliance. Where civilians have criticised state and state-affiliated security forces, it has been through official channels. In some cases, this has led to the intervention of Russian Military Police, which have the authority to compel the withdrawal and/or disbandment of state-affiliated actors that threaten an increase in local instability. Serious movement restrictions also persist for individuals returning to the area. For example, on March 5, 2019, Syrian Air Force Intelligence arrested 12 returnees in Harasta even though these individuals had received assurances over their safety from a renowned reconciliation broker. This is not an isolated incident, and highlights the failure of Syrian government security forces to uphold their commitments to reconciled civilians.

5.3 CONSCRIPTION POLICY

Closely related to the severe movement restrictions in Eastern Ghouta are the near constant conscription campaigns. As a component of Eastern Ghouta’s reconciliation agreements, individuals that were permitted to remain in Eastern Ghouta were compelled to ‘reconcile’ their status, a process which requires registration with the National Security Office. Any military-aged males required for service were given a period of six months to either willingly join a Government of Syria military branch, or ‘resolve’ their status by claiming an exemption or paying an exemption fee. However, the terms of the reconciliation agreement were quickly abandoned; some estimate that as many as 1,500 people have been arrested between April 2018 and February 2019, many of whom have reportedly been arbitrarily detained or forced into military service despite having resolved their status with the government as per the reconciliation agreement. Of note, security procedures at Government of Syria checkpoints were tightened shortly after a list of individuals wanted for conscription was issued in December 2018.

Naturally, the Government of Syria’s conscription efforts have drastically impeded the ability of military aged males to move throughout Eastern Ghouta, as even those that are exempt have no guarantees that they will not be forcibly conscripted. This has had a major impact on Eastern Ghouta’s economy, which was based on the ability of laborers to travel to agricultural fields, or agricultural workers to travel to more urban centers. Additionally, conscription policy has also impacted the ability of humanitarian programs to reach beneficiaries, as individuals may be reluctant to reach distribution sites that would require them to cross checkpoints.

92 For instance, the Harasta branch of the NDF is comprised of former Harasta residents who fled in 2012, only to return upon reconciliation. They were frequently accused of looting by local civilians however, and Russian Military Police reportedly ordered the Harasta NDF to withdraw to neighboring Dahiet Al-Assad (2km northwest).

93 In this incident, the 12 individuals were among a large group of refugees that returned to Harasta via the Syria-Turkey Kasab-Yaldagi border crossing. This crossing had been closed for two years but opened briefly on 5 March, 2019 to allow returns.

94 Exemption from military service costs approximately $9,000, which is far beyond the means of most of Eastern Ghouta’s residents.

95 MEI/Etana (2019) Forgotten Lives: Life Under Regime Rule in East Ghouta, p.7. This report adds that no civil society actor is currently monitoring these numbers. They could therefore be higher.

96 Of note, this list includes 4,500 military-aged males wanted for regular service, and 1,000 reservists. Although the Government of Syria is unlikely to actively pursue all of these potential recruits, checkpoint procedures will likely remain in place, effectively trapping several thousand men.
5.4 ARMED ACTOR PRACTICES

Despite the fact that armed actors in Eastern Ghouta are all controlled by the Republican Guard, armed actors have a reputation for regularly abusing the population of Eastern Ghouta. Arbitrary arrests, detentions, and harassment is reportedly common; this is more common with respect to state affiliated militias such as the NDF. For example, armed groups such as Jaish Al-Wafaa (comprised mainly of loyalist residents of Eastern Ghouta), and the NDF have an extremely poor reputation with the Eastern Ghouta population. In addition, looting and extortion at checkpoints is also extremely common.

Russian Military Police deployed to Eastern Ghouta subsequent to reconciliation and conduct weekly patrols. There is no known pattern to Russian activity in the area however, and civilians are reportedly confused over the purpose of their continued presence. Originally, Russian troops were assigned to guarantee the provisions of local reconciliation agreements; however, their presence across Eastern Ghouta is unevenly spread, they are virtually non-existent in many communities in eastern communities, and they have done little to nothing to address civilian complaints of looting and harassment by the NDF. Indeed, many individuals reportedly fear reporting abuses to the Russian Military Police due to the fact that there are no guarantees that the Russian Military Police will protect them from Government of Syria reprisals for filing complaints. Thats said, Russian troops have a better local reputation than Syrian military and security forces.

5.5 SECURITY FORECAST

It is unlikely that Eastern Ghouta will witness a recurrence of local popular uprisings for two reasons. First, the application of civilian movement restrictions amounts to the partial continuation of siege conditions. These restrictions have likely been imposed to compensate for a reconciliation process that has done little to resolve the long term status of former opposition-linked individuals, and to stifle discontent amongst Eastern Ghouta’s underserved population. Moreover, security forces in the area have comprehensive coverage, state-affiliated military, security, and intelligence actors coordinate effectively, and state intermediaries are increasingly recapturing local levers of power and influence. As a result, any insurgency would find it difficult to launch even isolated attacks of any significance. Second, there is little to no appetite among the local population for a return to conflict conditions and an exacerbation of currently challenging living conditions.

Though the likelihood of armed conflict is low, a continuation of detentions, arbitrary arrests, restrictions and other abuses by state security forces is expected at least out to the medium term. The Government of Syria has demonstrated a long memory when it comes to addressing perceived and actual crimes against the state, and the volume and nature of arrests made in Eastern Ghouta suggest it will continue to pursue civilians regardless of their post-reconciliation status. Eastern Ghouta’s reconciliation cannot therefore be considered as having granted immunity to the local population, particularly given numerous reports of the pursuit of outstanding criminal and terror charges, many of which are likely been concerned only with diminishing challenges to state authority.

That said, movement restrictions are likely to be relaxed over time given their limiting effect on economic recovery. This has already been observed in Duma, where in late-May the requirement for civilians to be in possession of a permit to travel to and from the city was annulled.\footnote{Local sources report the decision to relax travel restrictions was taken in response to appeals by local businessmen seeking to accelerate local reconstruction. With this precedent now set in a part of Eastern Ghouta most notoriously associated with the armed and political opposition, other communities may follow in short order if local business communities are both active and adequately connected to relevant political figures. At the same time however, it is unknown whether, and for how long this arrangement will hold.} Local sources report the decision to relax travel restrictions was taken in response to appeals by local businessmen seeking to accelerate local reconstruction. With this precedent now set in a part of Eastern Ghouta most notoriously associated with the armed and political opposition, other communities may follow in short order if local business communities are both active and adequately connected to relevant political figures. At the same time however, it is unknown whether, and for how long this arrangement will hold.
SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS

- **REPUBLICAN GUARD**
  An elite Syrian Arab Army unit, also known as the Presidential Guard. Serves as the ultimate military and security actor in Eastern Ghouta, manages the area’s 35 checkpoints, and oversees and coordinates with all the armed groups in the area. Commanded by Saad Aldeen, but it should be noted that the commander is changed every 3-4 months.

- **4TH ARMoured DIVISION**
  Syrian Arab Army unit commanded by President Al-Assad’s brother, Maher Al-Assad. The 4th Armoured operates under the authority of the Republican Guard, and is responsible for manning the majority of Eastern Ghouta checkpoints and conscription.

- **STATE-AFFILIATED MILITIA**
  Including the National Defense Forces (NDF), Liwa Al-Quds, and the Palestinian Liberation Army. The NDF in Eastern Ghouta are comprised mainly of the former armed opposition group, Jaish Al-Wafa’ (Army of Loyalty), who were permitted to reconcile. As an NDF unit, the group is led by Ahmad Sarboul, and is stationed in Duma. The NDF has an extremely poor local reputation, largely owing to reports that it has engaged in looting, harassment, and property confiscation.

- **RUSSIAN MILITARY POLICE**
  Originally, Russian troops were assigned to guarantee the provisions of local reconciliation agreements; however, their presence across Eastern Ghouta is unevenly spread, they are virtually non-existent in many communities in eastern Eastern Ghouta, and they have done little to nothing to address civilian complaints of looting and harassment by the NDF. Russian Military Police were deployed to Eastern Ghouta following the reconciliation and conduct weekly patrols. There is no known pattern to Russian activity in the area however, and civilians are reportedly confused over the purpose of their continued presence.

- **STATE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES**
  Including the Air Force Intelligence and the Military Security Branch. They are responsible for manning checkpoint, conscripting individuals into the Syrian Arab Army, and detaining individuals wanted for their military service. They largely have a very bad reputation among the civilians in Eastern Ghouta.
## ANNEX 1:
### KEY STAKEHOLDERS

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<tr>
<th>EXECUTIVE OFFICES</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DESCRIPTION</strong></td>
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<td>Executive Offices are a municipal government department that operates within the purview of the Ministry of Local Administration. The Executive Office is staffed by technocrats and professionals who are experts in a variety of fields, to include engineering, accounting, and management. The duties of the Office are to design municipal level public service projects, conduct feasibility assessments, and manage the implementation of approved projects. Approval for Executive Office project proposals comes from the municipality’s local council, the relevant city council, and the Political Security services. Executive Office staff are generally pro-government, and the majority have ties with the Ba’ath Party. That said, the Executive Office is not political in outlook and is generally accepted by the wider Eastern Ghouta public.</td>
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<td><strong>COMMENTS</strong></td>
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<td>The Executive Office offers an opportunity to engage a governance body which is as politically distant from Syria’s ruling elite as can be currently found within the formal state apparatus. The information it provides is therefore likely to be more transparent, reliable, and impartial than other government offices. Moreover, Executive Offices are the formal government structure closest to the community, granting them a strong understanding of civilian needs. It must be recalled, however, that Executive Offices are subservient to city councils and municipality-level local councils, and that the interference of structures more strongly aligned with Syria’s ruling elite is a possibility.</td>
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<th>RURAL DAMASCUS TECHNICAL SERVICES DIRECTORATE</th>
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<td><strong>DESCRIPTION</strong></td>
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<td>The Rural Damascus Technical Services Directorate is a governorate level civil service institution which provides technical oversight for large-scale development projects. In doing so, it is commonly required to work alongside the Executive Offices of municipal government. It is staffed predominantly by engineering, management, scientific, and administration professionals who advise on the design and implementation of plans which exceed the capacity or purview of city councils. Examples of projects which are likely to exceed the capacity of city councils are those with elements spanning several city council jurisdictions, such as works to address power and water networks, or projects for which contracting is more efficiently undertaken at a higher level. Despite its duty to work on larger-scale projects, the Technical Services Directorate is reportedly underfunded.</td>
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<td><strong>COMMENTS</strong></td>
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<td>Though it is part of the formal governance structure, the priorities of Syria’s central authorities do not heavily influence the activities of the Technical Services Directorate. It is primarily concerned with developing technical responses to issues raised by local government where lower offices lack jurisdiction or capacity. Though it is therefore unlikely to be among the primary contact points in the early phases of the programme cycle, it may be drafted in by the Rural Damascus Governorate Council to provide additional expertise and funding as necessary. The Technical Services Directorate has a strong local reputation owing largely to its technocratic remit, but as a formal government body linked to the Rural Damascus Governorate Council, some caution should be attached to the potential for partiality and politicization.</td>
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## DEVELOPMENT WORK COMMITTEE

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<td>Established in Duma in May 2019, the Development Work Committee (DWC) is an informal civil society organization comprised of 15-18 members, most of whom are local businessmen and members of notable local families with linkages to Duma’s formal governance structures and Syrian government elites. The DWC was formed to conduct, promote, and advocate for development in Duma in the aftermath of the Eastern Ghouta siege and the Duma reconciliation agreement. It has conducted or funded several small-scale projects in Duma, largely using the personal funds of the DWC membership or by soliciting funds from Duma’s local notables. Most commonly, funds are given to municipal governments to support specific initiatives. For example, the DWC currently funds transportation costs for local schoolchildren, has built a small sports field, donated a private ambulance, and paid for street cleaning. The DWC has also used the connections of its members to lobby Syrian government security services to adapt local security policy. Most notably, in June 2019, members of the DWC convinced the Governor of Rural Damascus and the Republican Guard to allow registered residents to leave and return to Duma without presenting official identification. The primary motivation for this decision was that movement restrictions were hindering Duma’s economic development. Anecdotally, the DWC is popular amongst Duma residents.</td>
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<td>The DWC is likely to offer important insights into civilian priorities, provide contact points for securing approvals from the Syrian government, and could enhance the credibility of aid actors and programmes. In addition, a more active Duma DWC is likely to stimulate the development of similar civil society organizations elsewhere in Eastern Ghouta.</td>
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<td>The potential for the expression of economic self-interest and partiality depends on the nature of activities undertaken by the DWC and the relevant interests of the DWC membership. The DWC is personality and status driven, and conflicts of interest may therefore emerge on a case by case basis. For example, several figures from Eastern Ghouta’s prominent families serve on the DWC, some of whom profited greatly from the siege and retain a monopoly over the supply of a variety of goods to Duma and beyond. The risk that such actors will negatively influence programme delivery is compounded by the fact that the DWC is not subject to an effective accountability mechanism. Overall, however, the DWC is respected by the community, and it is one of the few local civil society organizations in Duma that is calling for greater public services and development assistance.</td>
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## FARMING COOPERATIVES

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<td>Farming cooperatives are civil society organizations that have been present in the majority of Eastern Ghouta communities for decades. They are a special interest group with no declared political agenda. Membership includes crop farmers, pastoralists, and professionals such as accountants. The objectives of farming cooperatives are several, but they generally seek to: take measures to affect the pricing of agricultural products; increase agricultural productivity; share knowledge; and increase local access to equipment and supplies. Members are well respected in the communities where cooperatives are present.</td>
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<td>Cooperatives are well placed to help aid actors identify and address needs within local agriculture. They also represent an opportunity to develop an established, uncontroversial, and well-regarded form of civil society which could help counteract the atomization of Eastern Ghouta’s agricultural industry.</td>
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LOCAL CHARITY ORGANIZATIONS (JAMA'YAT KHA'IRIYAH) AND FAITH-BASED CHARITIES

**DESCRIPTION**
Local charity organizations are found in each major community in Eastern Ghouta, as well as in many of the area’s lesser townships. Some are even found within particular neighborhoods. Most have been present since the pre-war period, and largely undertake community-based programmes centred around social welfare and community cohesion. The majority of their funding comes from charitable donations from local notables and zakat, though local charities are also known to serve as an implementing partner for SARC. They generally operate with limited interference from government authorities owing to their limited geographic focus and support from local notables.

Faith-based charities are similarly well-represented across Eastern Ghouta. Practically every community hosts a faith-based charity organization, and each is commonly associated with a local mosque, church, or particular neighborhood. Although described as faith-based, they are not explicitly tied to religious institutions, and are better understood as religious in character. They may be registered either with the Religious Endowments Ministry or the Social Affairs (MOSA), but are subject to little government interference. In part, this is because faith-based charity portfolios are limited and tend to focus on specific social groups or local issues, but their independence also derives from the fact that their funding is secured from religious institutions and tithe. Like local charity organizations, some faith-based charities in Eastern Ghouta have restructured to incorporate NGO-type operating modalities, have expanded into development-orientated activities, and have begun to accept international funding.

**COMMENTS**
Civil society organizations led by and comprised of local residents generally wield high levels of community acceptance, and this is equally the case for Eastern Ghouta’s local charity organizations. Moreover, both local charities and faith-based organizations commonly have the support of local notables or important community-level religious institutions. Though a number have harnessed this local legitimacy to expand their capacity through partnership of international organizations, local and faith-based charities are generally limited in terms of the scale and scope of projects they can undertake. Given their prevalence and closeness to the community, both organization types should be among the first that international actors should consult when designing programmes.
### SOUK COMMITTEES

**DESCRIPTION**
Souk committees effectively serve as management committees for the various individual markets across Eastern Ghouta. Each souk has its own committee, which is elected from amongst the vendors in the souk. They are represented by a mixture of traders and management professionals from the local area. Committees take decisions on market policy (such as setting prices), planning, and strategy, and play an active role in the restoration of market connections with traders and suppliers.

**COMMENTS**
Souk committees provide critical insight into market needs within local communities, likely across the entire value chain, from commodity needs within the local marketplace, to supply and demand blockages. Importantly, Souk Committees are an independent and freely elected body comprised of vendors and direct market stakeholders. Decision-making therefore prioritizes markets needs over any political considerations, and there is no known direct government interference in market activities.

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### ALAA MOUNIR IBRAHIM, RURAL DAMASCUS GOVERNOR

**DESCRIPTION**
Ba'athist Governor of Rural Damascus who was personally appointed by President Al-Assad as per Syrian law. Closely linked to several of the most powerful figures within the President’s inner circle, including President Al-Assad himself. Leader of all ministerial committees attending to matters relating to Eastern Ghouta’s management and development. Ibrahim has the capacity to act unilaterally and has done so in recent weeks when, at the request of local notables, he required the Republican Guard to relax security procedures impeding civilian mobility and trade to and from Duma. Ibrahim frequently visits communities in Eastern Ghouta and is widely recognized and well liked across the area.

**COMMENTS**
Alaa Mounir Ibrahim is the highest formal political authority of direct relevance to the governance of Eastern Ghouta. His office can therefore intervene in decisions taken by formal political bodies and other actors, to include those relating to humanitarian and development programmes.
## NOTABLE FAMILIES

Like many parts of Syria, Eastern Ghouta’s socio-political landscape is heavily influenced by the role, status, and interests of notable local families. They are commonly owners or stakeholders in large business activities, and boast widespread representation in local governance structures. Reconciliation prompted many pre-war notable families to leave the area, giving rise to a new cadre of family elites linked to high profile figures within the Syrian government. Notable families are found in each of Eastern Ghouta communities and are too numerous to list comprehensively. For the purposes of summarization however, two important examples are profiled here:

### ABDEL DAYEM

The Abdel Dayem are a pro-Government of Syria notable family based in Duma which profited greatly from the Eastern Ghouta siege after securing a government-sanctioned monopoly over the cross-line supply of electricity generators and fuel. Having substantially increased its wealth and influence, the family’s enhanced status was reflected in September 2018, when it secured several local government seats following the local council election process. For many living in Eastern Ghouta, the electricity generators supplied by the Abdel Dayem are the only source of power given the limitations of public power networks. Notably, the family has reportedly lobbied against the restoration power networks in Duma so that it can maintain the profitability of its main business interest.

### MANFOUSH

Mohieddine Manfoush is perhaps the most notorious war profiteer in Eastern Ghouta. His family is based in Misraba, in central Eastern Ghouta, where his “Al-Marai” dairy company retains a number of livestock farms and food processing plants. An unremarkable man before the Syrian conflict, Manfoush struck deals with both the Syrian government and the opposition to enable smugglers to transport food (often his own products) across conflict lines in 2014. After all parties had received their respective cuts, an item was sometimes sold in opposition-controlled areas at twenty times its price in government-held Damascus. Enhancing both his wealth and elite credentials as a Syrian government-sanctioned trader, the Manfoush family has subsequently widened its business interests to include formal and informal trade activities.

### COMMENTS

Though many notable families in Eastern Ghouta have risen to prominence after having capitalized on conflict dynamics, this does not necessarily mean that they are a uniquely negative local influence. Certainly, they have profited from the conditions to which the wider public have been subjected and are variously held in poor regard by locals; they have also leveraged their connections with the Syrian government to retain and expand their influence. However, one would expect little different from business-orientated actors in any other context, and the fact remains that notable families are among the most important political, economic, and social figures in Eastern Ghouta. Indeed, it must be recalled that notable families frequently deployed their local capital to mobilize community-led recovery initiatives, support local charity activities, and restore government and market functionality.

For those looking to engage in relief and development programming in Eastern Ghouta, notable families are therefore largely unavoidable. They are important goods suppliers, they are present within political institutions, and they are capable of mobilizing and enhancing civil society. The challenge is to understand which notable families are of relevance to a given programme, assess their interests and the extent to which this is likely to compromise programme integrity, as well as the extent to which their involvement is an enabling or inhibiting factor for everything from community acceptance through to project delivery.
The content compiled and presented by COAR is by no means exhaustive and does not reflect COAR’s formal position, political or otherwise, on the aforementioned topics. The information, assessments, and analysis provided by COAR are only to inform humanitarian and development programs and policy.