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PURPOSE

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.

METHODOLOGY

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.

READING THE REPORT

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 Qalamoun, 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.
PART 1
KEY AREA DYNAMICS

Three key dynamics must be taken into consideration when attempting to address humanitarian and development needs in Eastern Qalamoun:

1. Formal government capacity is weak, largely because the area is of low interest to the central authorities in Damascus. This presents practical challenges, but means the operating context is not as heavily politicized as many other formerly besieged areas.

2. Two of the three pillars of the local economy have been captured by local political and military elites, meaning opportunities for inclusive economic development are limited largely to the struggling agriculture industry.

3. Needs are rising in Eastern Qalamoun, and generally reflect a legacy of service quality differences between government- and former opposition-held areas.
NEGLECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENT, LOWER POLITICIZATION

Following the reconciliation and evacuation of the opposition in April 2018, Syrian government institutions were restored and a robust military and security presence was established. The region has since fallen far down the list of Syrian government priorities however; formal governance institutions have been neglected, and there has been little post-reconciliation investment in public services. Moreover, some of the most basic functions of governance are absent, particularly in former opposition-held areas, and a considerable amount of local governance authority has fallen into the hands of military and security actors and state-affiliated notable families.

Naturally, low formal governance capacity has seriously affected the service provision quality and consistency. But it is highly noteworthy that Eastern Qalamoun’s neglect by the central Syrian authorities means that the area is less overtly politicized than many others that have hosted a former armed opposition presence. Moreover, though local security policies are tight, they do not appear to actively disenfranchise people living in former opposition-held areas. For these reasons, the provision of humanitarian and development support may not be considered as a serious infringement on the priorities of locally influential political, security, and economic actors. This, in turn, may mean that restrictions within the operational environment are fewer, that barriers to direct monitoring and evaluation are lower, and that interference in procurement and partner selection is less likely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• COORDINATE MAINLY THROUGH AL QUTAYFAH CITY COUNCIL. Al Qutayfah City Council is the most capable formal governance body in the area and its jurisdiction now covers much of formerly opposition-held Eastern Qalamoun. It is also closely linked with the two main aid actors in the area, SARC and Syria Trust for Development, both of which generally partner with community-level organizations.

• ENGAGE LOCAL TECHNOCRATS. Local technocrats may be limited in what they can achieve owing to the constraints of local government, but they are a reliable source of information on local needs and the fulfilment thereof. Executive Offices within municipal government are widely respected and should be involved to the extent possible in assessment, design, and coordination. Their work is generally undertaken independent of political agendas, meaning they represent a potentially appropriate entry point for international organizations. Harnessing the particular professional skill sets of technocrats within different Executive Office bodies is encouraged.

• ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WHILE EASTERN QALAMOUN IS GOVERNMENT-HELD, IT IS NOT NECESSARILY GOVERNMENT-RUN. Lower government capacity has emphasized the role of military and security actors and local notable families. This has been tacitly permitted by central government authorities and is an expression of the traditional application of Syrian government patronage systems. The priorities of informal governance actors, particularly the 3rd Armored Division, can therefore be more influential than central government policy. Engagement of the 3rd Armored Division is therefore unavoidable, but can be negotiated via formal governance bodies and prominent family and business stakeholders. The development of guidelines for operational independence is strongly advised.

• CONDUCT DETAILED PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER VETTING. No locally-active aid organizations were found to have poor reputations in the area, but this does not decrease the importance of partner vetting. This is particularly true given the influence of state-linked military and security forces and family and business notables over formal and informal local governance systems.
SMUGGLING, EXTRACTIVES AND AGRICULTURE: PILLARS OF A STAGNATING ECONOMY

Key sectors of Eastern Qalamoun’s post-reconciliation economy are unchanged from the pre-war period. However, smuggling and extractives (mining and quarrying) have increasingly fallen into the hands of powerful military, security, and family elites, leaving agriculture as the most viable option for inclusive economic development. Agriculture confronts several major challenges however: Pastoralists are grappling with the legacy of a sharp downturn in livestock numbers, essential supplies, and market access, yet have fewer resources to support self-recovery. Untended farm-land is also at risk of desertification, and could irrevocably cripple crop production. These issues require urgent attention, and demand thought as to how Eastern Qalamoun’s agriculture can re-connect with markets and diversify its output.

It must also be recognized that civilians are effectively barred from accessing more diverse income opportunities in the nearby Damascus area because of the extremely high cost of private transport, limited public transport services, and the risks posed by an unpredictable local checkpoint regime. Access to more diverse employment markets is therefore limited, and poses an additional risk to the stagnation of Eastern Qalamoun’s local economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• **ENGAGE FARMING COOPERATIVES.** Farming cooperatives are local organizations with a strong tradition of collaboration. Though officially managed by the Syrian state, they offer essential insight into local needs, and are likely to present innovative solutions for navigating impediments to local production shortfalls, structural weaknesses in the Syrian economy, and physical access constraints to both new and pre-war markets. Farming cooperatives are seldom integrated into aid programming, but are found across Eastern Qalamoun. They may provide a platform for sharing sustainable and low-cost natural resource management techniques (such as water and land use).

• **REPLENISH LIVESTOCK AND PROVIDE AGRICULTURAL INPUTS.** Livestock numbers have fallen massively and are recovering slowly, whilst needs for fodder, veterinary care, seeds and equipment are high. Farming cooperatives are likely able to oversee distribution to ensure fairness, accountability, and impact.

• **DEVELOP THE ANIMAL AND DAIRY PRODUCT INDUSTRIES.** Despite its reputation for quality livestock, few dairy and animal product-related activities are currently undertaken in Eastern Qalamoun. Animals are most commonly raised in the area and then sold for slaughter, mainly in Damascus city. Some milking facilities are present, but this is currently a minor dimension of the local livestock industry and could be expanded.

• **FINANCE LOCAL TRANSPORT SERVICES.** Whether public or private, more accessible and affordable transport services would reduce the prohibitive cost of travel for students, labourers, and those seeking public services outside Eastern Qalamoun. Need is highest in communities furthest from Damascus, namely in Jirud, Nasriyeh, and Raheiba.

• **WORK TO ESTABLISH AN ECONOMIC CONNECTION WITH THE ADRA INDUSTRIAL ZONE.** Pre-war, Eastern Qalamoun played a role in servicing workers at the massive Adra Industrial Zone. This linkage was severed after the opposition secured control of much of Eastern Qalamoun however, and trade across these former front lines has yet to be fully restored. Given the government reportedly intends to expand Adra in the direction of Eastern Qalamoun, opportunities to reconnect with the area may be presented over the medium-term.
LEGACY OF TERRITORIAL DIVISIONS REFLECTING RISING LOCAL NEEDS

Differences between these areas may be exacerbated by the fact that needs information suggests that Syria’s deepening economic and fuel crises are also straining other services, with needs across livelihoods, NFIs, health, and water rising since spring 2019. It is essential that beneficiary and community selection ensure programs do not reinforce these paradigms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **CONCENTRATE ASSISTANCE IN FORMER OPPOSITION-HELD COMMUNITIES.** As noted above, services are more consistent in Al Qutayfah than Dhameer, Jirud, Nasriyeh, and Raheiba, largely because the town has been under government control since the conflict began and accommodates large military housing projects.

- **FOCUS ON THE REHABILITATION OF EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE.** Whilst services are better in Eastern Qalamoun compared to areas which experienced higher levels of destruction, maintenance has fallen behind. Rehabilitation of pre-existing productive infrastructure, including irrigation systems, will likely be considered largely uncontroversial by local authorities.

- **AVOID FORCING BENEFICIARY AND PARTNER TRAVEL VIA CHECKPOINTS WHEREVER POSSIBLE.** Implementing partners and civilians can theoretically travel across checkpoints with advanced permission, but delays and abuses are a possibility, particularly for vulnerable and at-risk groups. Protection concerns related to checkpoint passage should be clearly identified and addressed.

- **IMPLEMENT STRINGENT PROCUREMENT PROCESSES.** Smuggling in Eastern Qalamoun is a function of both the formal and informal economy. The prevalence of smuggled goods in local markets increases the risk that local procurement will feed into the illicit economy.

- **ENGAGE LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS.** Although local civil society is not especially vibrant, lower levels of politicization means there is potential for existing charity, voluntary, and faith-based organizations to expand as potential service providers.

- **COORDINATE WITH LEBANESE NGOS WORKING ON REFUGEE ISSUES.** Should Eastern Qalamoun’s refugees leave Lebanon and receive permission to return, proactive information gathering via Lebanese NGOs should be undertaken to determine needs upon arrival, specifically in terms of documentation, HLP, protection, and public services.
Residents

IDPs

Figure 1: Eastern Qalamoun Needs Snapshot (June 2019)

Figure 2: Eastern Qalamoun Needs by Sector (November 2018 - April 2019)
PART 2: KEY THEMES
1. CONTEXT & POPULATION

1.1 AREA INTRODUCTION

Prior to the Syrian uprising, the Qalamoun Mountains were best known for smuggling, livestock, and cherry orchards. With the start of the Syrian conflict however, the entire region became a site of critical strategic interest to the Syrian government and brought the area considerable attention: ISIS operations took place on the Lebanese border, Hezbollah and other Iranian-proxy militias have been highly active, and refugee-related issues have been of near constant interest.

Unlike western parts of the Qalamoun Mountains however, the lesser populated Eastern Qalamoun lies amongst the grasslands that border the western edge of the eastern Syrian desert. Further from Lebanon, and further from the mind of key military and political actors, dynamics commonly associated with the Qalamoun Mountain region are of much lower relevance in Eastern Qalamoun than they are to the stability of peer communities on the northwestern side of Damascus. Instead, Eastern Qalamoun has been considered a largely peripheral region where conflict dynamics were focused predominantly around the presence of key civilian and military infrastructure.

On the military front, that infrastructure includes the Dhameer and Nasriyeh air bases, as well as the headquarters of the Syrian Arab Army’s (SAA) 3rd Armored Division, an important military force comparable to the fiercely loyalist Republican Guard. Civilian infrastructure includes the international Damascus-Baghdad highway, the M5, the Tishreen power station, dams in Jirud and Dhameer, and gas pipelines originating in Deir-ez-Zor and Homs governorates. The importance of these facilities to both the stability of Damascus and the pursuit of broader Syrian government political-military objectives has been a defining factor for the fate of Eastern Qalamoun’s communities throughout the current conflict. Indeed, though much of the area was captured by the armed opposition and only reconciled by the Syrian government in April 2018, continuous negotiations surrounding the status of this infrastructure helped ensure that Eastern Qalamoun largely avoided intense conflict despite its territorial division. Though intermittent clashes were observed, informal arrangements generally held, and were sufficient to ensure that red lines largely went uncrossed.

The relatively low levels of violence perhaps explain why Eastern Qalamoun has arguably been forgotten by the aid community. However, very real issues persist, and there are considerable needs in the area. First and foremost, it has been neglected by Syria’s central authorities, leading to considerable dysfunction within formal governance institutions. Service provision falls far short of need, and there is currently limited capacity within local formal governance to improve local conditions. Second, revenues from the area’s three pillars of economic activity have either been monopolized by elite family, business, and military/security actors, or have been so degraded by broader conflict conditions that their profitability has greatly diminished. And third, pre-war linkages with Damascus and its peri-urban surroundings have been problematized by security- and cost-related access issues. Yet whilst weak local government and a stagnating legal economy make for a challenging context, the relatively low priority the Syrian state currently assigns to the area could present operational space for relatively broad programming and engagement with local civil society.
**1.2 STUDY AREA**

Eastern Qalamoun is not designated as an administrative unit in its own right, and is rather more identified as a unified area by virtue of its geographic and socio-economic characteristics. These characteristics are based on the distribution of conurbations within the shallow valley formed by the Qalamoun mountain region northeast of Eastern Ghouta. This positions several of Eastern Qalamoun’s communities as practically the last inhabited area before Syria’s eastern desert, provides ample mining and quarrying opportunities, and supports enough grassland to sustain a profitable livestock industry. Populations living in communities within the study area are also united by virtue of the fact that they are required to transit a consolidated local checkpoint network managed by government-affiliated military and security actors in order to reach Damascus and its peri-urban periphery.

Under current administrative boundaries, the parts of Eastern Qalamoun considered by this study therefore fall mainly within Al Qutayfah district, as well as northern parts of Duma district. Key communities include Al Qutayfah, Raheiba, Jirud, Dhameer, and Nasriyeh, each of which sits within its own subdistrict with the exception of Nasriyeh, which falls within Jirud subdistrict.

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**Figure 3: Conflict Timeline**
The armed opposition uprising in nearby Eastern Ghouta was a major trigger for the departure of many Eastern Qalamoun’s Syrian government supporters and upper-middle-class residents. Reliable displacement numbers in the early phases of the conflict are unavailable, though it is understood that the majority to leave the area at this time had the resources to flee to Damascus, Lebanon, and the Gulf. By the end of 2012, military confrontations in Eastern Ghouta became increasingly intense and thousands of IDPs from Eastern Ghouta relocated to the relative safety of Eastern Qalamoun, particularly to Dhameer and Jirud.²

The communities of Dhameer, Jirud, Raheiba and Nasriyeh fell under armed opposition control in 2013. Displacement from this time control until the reconciliation of the opposition in April 2018 was limited however, largely because of Eastern Qalamoun’s relative stability, which was founded on an informal 2013 understanding between government and opposition forces. This arrangement stipulated that, so long as the armed opposition did not target critical infrastructure serving Damascus or local SAA and Syrian Air Force installations, it would be permitted to stay within the confines of towns under its control, and would not be targeted by government forces. Violent incidents were therefore limited in frequency and scale, reducing the potential for significant internal and external displacement within/from Eastern Qalamoun.³

² Traditionally, the populations of Eastern Qalamoun and Eastern Ghouta have solid social and familial ties. This has supported the integration of Eastern Ghouta IDPs into Eastern Qalamoun.

³ As time wore on, this arrangement also served as a useful buffer for Syrian government forces against potential incursions by ISIS, as ISIS forces would be forced to capture towns in the Eastern Qalamoun under the control of the armed opposition prior to attacking any government-held areas.
Only two notable incidences of displacement took place during the armed opposition’s control over much of Eastern Qalamoun. The first took place in 2015, when Eastern Qalamoun (particularly Ji-rud and Raheiba), received civilians fleeing the ISIS offensive on Tadmor (Palmyra) and areas on the western fringes of eastern desert. The second occurred in 2017, when Hezbollah and the Syrian government reached an agreement with several opposition groups to relocate opposition combatants from Western Qalamoun and Arsal (Lebanon) to Raheiba, Nasriyeh, Atna and Dhamer. Neither had a particularly heavy impact on host communities, and likely only partially offset the earlier departure of government supporters and the local middle-class in 2012/13.

Upon the reconciliation of opposition-held Dhamer on April 17, 2018, the majority of local fighters and their families were required to leave the area.

As a result, approximately 1,700 fighters from Jaish Al-Islam and the locally-based Forces of Martyr Ahmad Al-Abdo and Maghawir Al-Sahra left Dhamer for Jarablus and Al-Bab, in Aleppo governorate. Fighters were accompanied by their families and irreconcilable civilian activists. Further evacuations were carried out when the remaining opposition-controlled towns of Ji-rud, Raheiba, Nasriyeh, Atna and Mansura reconciled two days later, on April 19. An estimated 3,734 fighters and their families were sent to Syria’s northern governorates as part of these coordinated evacuations. Population figures suggest that very few residents who evacuated the area have since returned, though it is unknown whether they have been denied permission to do so, have elected to avoid the potential security repercussions, or have sought to make a better life than Eastern Qalamoun can currently provide. Notably, population figures indicate that displacement to and from Eastern Qalamoun since the conflict began did not result in major changes to the absolute population numbers across key communities.

![Figure 4. Eastern Qalamoun population figures in key communities](image)

(figures from 2004 are included as these are the latest available Syrian Census figures. April 2019 figures provided as these are the latest available at the time of publication.)

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4 Armed opposition groups involved in this deal included Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham and Saraya Ahel Al-Sham, a prominent armed group based in Western Qalamoun. The agreement entailed evacuating Saraya Ahel Al-Sham fighters and their families from Jurud Arsal, Lebanon, to Eastern Qalamoun.

5 For example, in the case of the second example provided here, the Government of Lebanon declared that 3,500 people were relocated when local sources claim that arrivals did not exceed 600.

6 The total number of evacuees from Dhamer city was estimated at 5,000 individuals.
14 HOUSING, LAND & PROPERTY

Housing, land and property issues were not identified as a source of considerable concern in Eastern Qalamoun. In large part, this is because the area is not urban, and has not been subject to major levels of damage. Buildings are overwhelmingly low-rise in design, property is commonly detached and well demarcated, and boundaries are well understood by locals. It is rare for disputes to emerge, and where they do, they are often addressed by reference to well kept cadastral records. Of the few cases that are likely to require further investigation, local sources report that disputes are most likely to be between individuals, and that court decisions will be both definitive and respected.

Much has been written about the Syrian government’s application of legal mechanisms to expropriate property, but these are unlikely to be a factor in Eastern Qalamoun for a number of reasons. To a great extent, this is because Eastern Qalamoun is not considered as particularly valuable real estate, and is therefore unlikely to witness any serious government efforts to seize land and property for redevelopment purposes. It is also because there are fewer grounds for the application of legal mechanisms in general: cadastral records are both accurate and updated, weakening the utility of Law 10; there is relatively little informal housing in the area, decreasing prospects of the application of Laws 40 and 16; and the limited damage to properties means Law 3 is unlikely to be actively pursued. Certainly, this explanation does not discount the possibility that seizures may happen on a case by case basis, nor does it diminish the possibility that property will be seized under pursuit of antiterror legislation. Indeed, several thousand former opposition-linked figures were forced to evacuate upon reconciliation and have yet to settle their legal status with the security services. With the exception of local pro-government NDF militia combatants reportedly occupying several properties owned by evacuees however, there has been little to suggest that local security services intend to actively implement property expropriations.

Of all communities in Eastern Qalamoun, Dhameer is perhaps at highest risk of government intervention in local land and property ownership matters. This is largely owing to its position on key national and international highways, its proximity to Damascus and the expanding Adra Industrial Zone, and because it has experienced higher—but still marginal—levels of damage when compared to other Eastern Qalamoun communities. Presently, however, local sources report that no serious urban planning is currently being undertaken by municipal authorities, and there is little concern that state intervention in land and property would be designed to have a substantial impact on ownership across the city’s built environment.

Given the absence of serious legal challenges to housing, land and property rights in Eastern Qalamoun, aid actors seeking to have an impact in the HLP rights space are advised to work on tenure and ownership issues indirectly, specifically through the restoration of local agriculture. Eastern Qalamoun lies on the border of Syria’s eastern desert, and there is a strong risk that if farmland is left untended it will be irreversibly desertified. This would effectively dispossess farmers and pastoralists of their land, and is a particularly acute risk for locations nearest the desert where agricultural production has decreased significantly.

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7 Law 10, 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.
8 Laws 40 and 16 authorize municipal government to expropriate informal housing.
9 Law 3 permits the municipality to demand property owners repair damaged buildings in the interest of “public safety”. 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.
2. GOVERNANCE & SERVICES

SECTION SUMMARY

Although much of Eastern Qalamoun was under the control of the opposition for several years, an informal truce centered around the protection of critical military and civilian infrastructure largely held until April 2018. The area was then swiftly reconciled in the immediate aftermath of the government-led Eastern Ghouta offensive.

State governance structures were then restored, and, in keeping with the area’s historic political character as a longtime Ba’ath Party stronghold, local elections in September 2018 were tailored to ensure the installation of government loyalists and Ba’ath Party members.

Having been under government control throughout the conflict, Al Qutayfah hosts the most effective local city and municipal councils. Though these organizations compare favourably to local governance institutions elsewhere, it must be noted that they cannot be considered as authoritative, well-funded, and capable government institution.

Low government capacity reflects the longstanding neglect of Eastern Qalamoun by the central authorities, and has created space for informal actors to expand their interests and influence into the political space.

The loyalist 3rd Armored Division has assumed considerable informal governance authority in the post-reconciliation period. It has autonomy over the management of local security, is instrumental in the management of local patronage networks, and is positioned as the ultimate decision-making authority within local politics.

Patronage networks are heavily reliant on the reputation and notoriety of prominent local family members. Though there is a strong thread of local elite connections to the Ba’ath party, these local notable networks arguably serve as a ‘front’ for the 3rd Armored Division to coordinate local affairs. Notable families are nevertheless important informal governance actors in their own right, and have strong representation across local business and health services.

Subject to lower levels of politicization, there may be scope for more wide-ranging aid programming in Eastern Qalamoun than in other government-held areas. Doing so will depend on effective navigation of elite interests within the local military apparatus, and capitalizing on notable family network contributions to local recovery.
2.1 FORMAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

Al Qutayfah and areas in the immediate vicinity of critical Syrian military infrastructure have been under Syrian government control since the beginning of the conflict. The town has therefore retained formal governance institutions from before the conflict. Conversely, Eastern Qalamoun’s four other major communities, Dhameer, Raheiba, Nasriyeh, and Jirud, fell to the armed opposition in 2013, and state governance structures were only restored when these areas reconciled in April 2018. The entirety of Eastern Qalamoun subsequently participated in the September 2018 local administration elections, which resulted in the selection of new local council representatives, most of whom are Ba’ath Party members and Syrian government loyalists. This is in keeping with the area’s historic political character as a longtime Ba’ath Party stronghold, and reflects its traditionally agrarian and pastoralist socio-economic profile.

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<th>EASTERN QALAMOUN GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE</th>
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| Following reconciliation, municipal and city councils are now in effect across the entirety of Eastern Qalamoun, each of which is subordinate to the Rural Damascus Governorate Council and its Presidentially-appointed Governor, Alaa Mounir Ibrahim. Presently, there are two city councils in Eastern Qalamoun, in Al Qutayfah and Dhameer. Al Qutayfah City Council has the widest jurisdiction, and supervises the work of municipalities in Al Qutayfah, Raheiba, Jirud, and Nasriyeh. As in other government-held parts of Syria, Eastern Qalamoun’s municipal governments are comprised of two parts, an executive office, and a local council. The former is staffed primarily by technocrats and professional experts who undertake feasibility studies and design and implement projects, whilst the latter is the primary local level decision-making body and is led by elected officials. Where local councils cannot agree upon the implementation of a given project following the advice of the executive office, or where higher political approval is required, decision-making authority is passed to city council level. 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 also intervene when additional expertise or funding is required. All public spending, no matter the level at which it is approved, is subject to approval by the Political Security Branch. Importantly, and as presented in Section 2.2, the 3rd Armored Division takes an active interest in local political affairs, both in terms of its ability to shape local policy and authorize local decision-making.  

As described above, two city councils are present in the area, in Al Qutayfah and Dhameer. The greater capacity of Al Qutayfah City Council is partly the result of the Syrian government’s continued control over the area throughout the conflict. Central government tended to privilege Al Qutayfah over opposition-held parts of Eastern Qalamoun over this period, and has reportedly continued to do so despite enforcing a ‘soft’ reconciliation on former opposition-held areas over a |

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10 As others have convincingly argued, Syria’s 2018 local council elections lacked transparency in numerous ways, and can be considered as an exercise in the deliberate extension of the central government to the most local levels of government. See, for instance: A. Favier & M. Kostrz, European University Institute (2019), Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?  
11 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.
year ago. That said, even Al Qutayfah city council operates far below a level that would indicate an authoritative, well-funded, and capable government institution. This compounds the challenges faced by its notoriously weak peer institutions in Dhameer, Raheiba, Jirud and Nasriyeh. Local sources report that the activities of local government across Eastern Qalamoun are limited largely to the local coordination of national-level projects, such as the smart card system, as well as rubble clearance, road and public space rehabilitation, and some partial administration of power and water networks through electricity and water directorate branch offices. No significant reconstruction projects of any kind are reportedly managed by local government at this time, and these limitations must be acknowledged when engaging local government bodies in aid programme processes.

This lack of capacity is exacerbated by poor coordination between formal governance institutions. Linkages between branches of local ministerial directorates and the area’s city and municipal council offices are particularly dysfunctional. Indeed, their engagement is rather more ad hoc than organized, which reportedly leads to duplication and costly service delivery failures. Recent fires on agricultural lands in the vicinity of Al Qutayfah are a case in point: Initially, Al Qutayfah City Council sought to hand responsibility for dealing with the fires and their effects to the local Agricultural Directorate, but the Directorate refused, citing its access to just one emergency response vehicle. As a result, the City Council failed to provide an adequate response given it had no pre-existing plan, no immediate capacity, and no recourse to support from other governmental bodies. Some of the most fundamental mechanisms of the state are therefore absent in Eastern Qalamoun, and local sources report there are currently no plans to address the machinations of local government.

### 2.2. INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

Eastern Qalamoun is similar to other areas where central government authorities have low capacity and few exigent strategic interests. Specifically, that formal governance structures are weak, and informal governance actors serve as de-facto governance providers across the area. Two informal governance actors deserve consideration in this regard: the local military establishment, which is dominated by the 3rd Armored Division, and local notable families. Naturally, there is considerable overlap and coordination between the two; in many cases, notable families effectively serve as state-linked patrons ‘handled’ by the 3rd Armored Division. But even as arms of the clientelist Syrian state, they are also distinct governance actors in their own right. Each has distinct interests, and their relationships with the local population are equally diverse.

#### MILITARY

Local military actors have assumed considerable authority over decidedly civilian processes, even acting as governance providers where formal state

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12 ‘Soft reconciliation’ refers to the limited application of military force to compel the surrender of the armed opposition and the agreement of the opposition to reconcile. Eastern Qalamoun reconciled shortly after nearby Eastern Ghouta fell to the government. Events in Eastern Ghouta were likely a major factor in demonstrating the likely fate of Eastern Qalamoun, though it should be noted that relations between government- and opposition-held Eastern Qalamoun were never so factious as to result in intense conflict. Indeed, the two sides shared an informal truce centered around ensuring the integrity of local military and public service infrastructure, namely, the Dhameer Airbase, gas pipelines, and the Tishreen power station.

13 Smart cards allow citizens to prepay for gas and fuel and present the card at designated outlets. Not all citizens qualify for the card however, and it is not available in all parts of Syria.

14 As noted later, in Section 2.2, the Tishreen Power Station is undergoing a massive expansion. With implications for Damascus and beyond, the project is therefore being managed by the Ministry of Electricity. Local level governance likely has an extremely small role.
systems are unable to do so. As the most prominent Syrian Arab Army (SAA) force in the area, the 3rd Armored Division has a major influence over local politics in Eastern Qalamoun, including in all communities beyond its headquarters in Al Qutayfah.

In both character and status, the 3rd Armored Division is similar to the Damascus-based Republican Guard. It is a cohesive and fiercely loyalist military unit with a direct line to President Assad, and is subordinate only to the Ministry of Defence and powerful central government figures, such as Head of the National Security Branch, Deeb Zeitoun. With Eastern Qalamoun now low on the list of Syrian government priorities, the intervention of such figures is limited, and the 3rd Armored Division therefore acts with considerable local autonomy. Its powers over local affairs are such that it is permitted to determine local security arrangements in accordance with its own priorities, rather than at the sole instruction of the state. This has enabled the 3rd Armored Division to overstep its original mandate, and developments subsequent to reconciliation have created political space into which it has willingly expanded.

Its expansion has been founded on the group’s military strength and relative local autonomy, but it is also the result of how this capacity has been leveraged in response to changes in Eastern Qalamoun’s post-reconciliation political economy. Reconciliation entailed the evacuation of thousands of opposition-affiliated actors to northern Syria, many of whom held formal and informal positions of local authority. Opposition-linked combatants, activists, notable families, and political figures were each compelled to leave, and the roles they vacated were overwhelmingly filled by pro-government Ba’athists endorsed by the 3rd Armored Division. This produced a new cadre of local elites tied to the Syrian government via the 3rd Armored Division, and emphasized the role of the 3rd Armored Division as a government proxy for the management of local patronage systems. The 3rd Armored Division therefore takes an active interest in scrutinizing formal and informal governance activities, and local sources go so far as to report that little happens in Eastern Qalamoun unless it has been sanctioned by the 3rd Armored Division.

LOCAL NOTABLE FAMILIES

Like much of Syria, Eastern Qalamoun’s socio-political landscape is heavily influenced by the role, status, and interests of notable local families. This has long been a dominant feature of the area, largely because the region is not a priority for Damascus elites and has been entrusted to state-affiliated clients for decades. Inevitably, however, the configuration of politically influential notable families has been disrupted as control over parts of Eastern Qalamoun has changed hands. Though not all notable families associated with the opposition lost their status subsequent to the pacification of local armed opposition groups, many were forced to leave the area, whilst others saw their local prominence eroded. This, in turn, created opportunities for new state-affiliated family elites to move into vacant roles of political and economic influence.

Positions of political power were further reordered by the national local council elections in September 2018. As has been comprehensively covered elsewhere, the elections involved a controversial candidate selection process, and Eastern

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15 For instance, the 3rd Armored Division reportedly uses its own generators to provide power to an unknown number of civilians. Local sources claim that this is an unprecedented use of state-affiliated military equipment for local service provision.
17 For example, the Al-Buwaydhani family were compelled to leave Dhamar after reconciliation was agreed, leading to the seizure of the family's quarry business.
18 A. Favier & M. Kostrz, European University Institute (2019), Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?
Qalamoun was not spared any apparent bias. The candidacy of state-affiliated family notables was overwhelmingly preferred, meaning loyalist local notable families willing to accede to the authority of the 3rd Armored Division were major beneficiaries of the selection process. Such figures now occupy many positions of political authority across the area, ranging from city council, to municipal council leaders. Today, the most influential local families within the formal governance apparatus include the Na’anous, Denif, Kaser, and Saadeddine, each of which have senior representation within local governance institutions from city to local council level. Several families also have an influence on local political culture through informal channels based on their status, reputation, or positions within local institutions, such as the Zakariyeh, Baqer, and A’jaj.

Part of the state-driven patronage reconfiguration process has also arguably involved purposeful selection of notable families linked to the Ba’ath Party to positions of political power. In reality, however, the Ba’athist character of the local political establishment provides only a facade of legitimacy. Local sources report that, although Eastern Qalamoun’s Ba’athist civilian political leadership reflects the area’s traditional association with the Ba’ath Party, expression of Ba’athist politics is subordinate to the application of 3rd Armored Division priorities. Rather than prominent figures in their own right, notable Ba’athist families within political leadership positions are therefore regarded more as a ‘front’ for the 3rd Armored Division enabled by their Ba’athist and pro-government affiliations.

In addition to their involvement in formal political structures, notable families are important components of Eastern Qalamoun’s broader governance ecosystem. They have strong representation within local health services in particular: Hussein A’jaj, of the A’jaj family, leads Al Qutayfah Hospital, and the family is heavily involved in the town’s local charity organization; Mohamed Denif, of the Denif family, is head of the Jirud National Hospital; and the Baqer family are regarded as a respectable and well-educated family with representation in the medical, legal and academic professions. In general, the association of many notable families with the formal political and military establishment does not heavily detract from their local reputation, and they are well integrated into civic life. Certainly, the post-reconciliation political economy in Eastern Qalamoun gives rise to questions over their motivations and the potential interference of the 3rd Armored Division and the central authorities. However, providing necessary due diligence and vetting procedures are undertaken, they represent important interlocutors for aid agencies and are well-positioned to mobilize resources and local support.

AID ACTORS

Securing permission to conduct aid operations in Eastern Qalamoun is challenging. As a government-held location, permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the intelligence services may be insufficient to guarantee adequate operational space. Moreover, the involvement of the 3rd Armored Division in governance decision-making increases the prospect that project proposals may be denied on arbitrary grounds, and that counter

19 See list of governance stakeholders, as well as the prominent notable families in Annex 1.
20 More detail on these families and their activities is provided in table format at the end of this section.
21 For example, Mahmoud Saadeddine, of the Saadeddine family, who serves as Secretary for the Al Qutayfah Ba’ath Party and is effectively the highest Ba’athist in Eastern Qalamoun. Also, the Jirud-based Ba’athist Denif family, which, subsequent to reconciliation, secured positions for members as Jirud Local Council heads.
22 More examples of notable families are provided in Annexe 1.
23 Of note, the Ministry of Social Affairs is also responsible for determining pre approved local partner organizations.
-proposals will be made which include accountability and partiality risks. As in other government-controlled areas, there is therefore a strong risk that project approvals result from what local authorities consider acceptable vis-a-vis their own interests, rather than what is most needed. Aid agencies are more likely to be granted permits for relief work rather than development-focused projects, but the highly localized negotiating process to which most project proposals are subject means that decisions can be inconsistent.

Four types of active aid actors have been identified in the area: the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC); Syria Trust for Development; UN agencies, and local charity organizations. SARC and Syria Trust are not regarded as particularly reputable, with civilian criticism of these agencies based mainly on claims that they have limited capacity, that key needs are going unmet, and that more should be done to increase coverage. SARC is the most active organization in the area however, and although based in Al Qutayfah, it has offices in each key community from which it administers small-scale relief and development projects. These include: food basket programmes in partnership with WFP; psychosocial support; vocational training programmes in partnership with UNDP (in Al Qutayfah); rubble clearance and street cleaning in partnership with UNDP and volunteer groups in several communities; and minor WASH information projects. Syria Trust works predominantly through local voluntary groups to deliver legal advice services and some limited psychosocial programming. Local charity organizations and voluntary groups are rather more ad hoc in their operations, but reportedly receive some support from notable families and are well-regarded for their understanding and proximity to community needs. Of note, research did not uncover any programmes currently being administered by international organizations other than those run by UN agencies.

2.3 SERVICES OVERVIEW

Services in Eastern Qalamoun were insufficient prior to the conflict, and have been deteriorating ever since. Al Qutayfah has been, and remains, the best-serviced town in Eastern Qalamoun for several reasons. First, large military housing neighborhoods are located in Al Qutayfah, and accommodate the majority of 3rd Armored Division personnel, as well as a number of senior Syrian Arab Army officers. Of note, although neighborhoods hosting government military personnel tend to receive more consistent services as a rule, they still experience quite considerable shortfalls across most sectors. Second, Al Qutayfah City Council is the most well-funded city council in Eastern Qalamoun, meaning the availability and consistency of local services is generally higher. Third, Al Qutayfah has generally been stable throughout the conflict, and has not suffered the same level of disruption as former opposition-held areas.

POWER & WATER

Infrastructure in Eastern Qalamoun has experienced limited destruction given conflict intensity in the area has been low. That said, all key communities suffer from dysfunctional power and water services owing both to national level infrastructure issues and longstanding poor maintenance of local facilities. Government-provided electricity is limited throughout former opposition-held towns in particular, with local sources explaining that inadequate maintenance of local electrical infrastructure results in 10-14 hours of power cuts per day. This situation has been exacerbated in recent months as the Tishreen power station in Jirud has experienced mounting difficulty in securing enough fossil fuel inputs. Al Qutayfah, on the other hand, suffers less extended cuts, with 6-8 hours of electricity cuts per day reported.

24 Namely, Qutayfah, Jirud, and Raheiba.
25 Perhaps as much as half of Al Qutayfah is dedicated to housing for government military personnel.
26 Tishreen is reliant on natural gas, oil, and diesel. A project to significantly expand Tishreen was initiated by an Indian company in 2010, and, after being temporarily suspended, was restarted in May 2019. These works are expected to take five years. In the meantime, power networks serviced
On water, dams in Dhameer and Jirud should be sufficient to service non-potable water needs across Eastern Qalamoun, but dysfunctional turbines impede water from entering public networks. Summer months are particularly challenging, with Raheiba, Jirud, and Dhameer reporting month-long water stoppages in recent years. Unreliable water networks increase local reliance on alternative options, but these are typically expensive. It currently costs SYP 1250 (~£1.93) to fill a 200 litre water tank.  

ROADS, TRANSPORT & WASTE

Road networks have been most heavily damaged in Dhameer, and between key Eastern Qalamoun communities. Some sections of these routes are impassable for heavy goods vehicles, and state-led road maintenance efforts have concentrated mainly on repairing damage to the section of the M5 highway that passes through Al Qutayfah. Meanwhile, public transportation falls far short of need and is unaffordable for most people living in the area. Private transport is extremely expensive relative to the average £50.00 civil servant monthly wage: Indeed, a single one-way trip from Eastern Qalamoun can reportedly costs around SYP 4,000 (~£6.18). It is highly noteworthy that transportation costs are not just a result of national issues surrounding fuel shortages, but also result from additional checkpoint tariff expenses.  Finally, local sources report a chronic lack of state-provided waste management and garbage collection services. Voluntary organizations have reportedly filled part of this gap, but there is a massive shortfall in garbage truck numbers.

HEALTH & EDUCATION

Eastern Qalamoun accommodates two national hospitals, in Jirud and Al Qutayfah, but both lack private and surgical care. This is not necessarily a major issue relative to the area’s population, but the requirement to obtain security permission to access specialized medical care elsewhere is reported as a challenge, and particularly in emergencies. The Director of the Rural Damascus Health Directorate stated that three health centers had been rehabilitated following reconciliation, in Raheiba, Dhameer and Jirud. Though these centers have reportedly been adequately staffed and equipped, there have been no further reports of efforts to improve local health services.

Though absolute population figures have not changed, local sources report that schools are under increasing pressure from increasingly large class sizes. In part, this is because some school facilities have been repurposed as IDP shelters, meaning classes in some locations can reach up to 45 students. Teachers in Raheiba reportedly work both morning and evening shifts to accommodate student numbers, and there is reportedly a severe shortage of textbooks at primary level (one to two textbooks per class in some cases).

CIVIL DOCUMENTATION

As in all former opposition-held areas, the Government of Syria’s Interior Ministry refuses to recognize civil documentation issued by the opposition-affiliated civil registries, courts, and police services. A large number of local births, marriages, and deaths are therefore unrecorded. That said, pre-war civil registries were fully maintained in Eastern Qalamoun, to include property ownership records.

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by Tishreen are likely to privilege Damascus.

27 Pre-conflict, a family of four members needed 25 tanks per month. This approximates to SYP 32,000 (~£49.4).
28 Local sources report that each checkpoint imposes taxes between SYP 200-500 (~£0.3-0.7). A trip from Nasriyeh to Damascus must pass at least 7 checkpoints. A passenger could therefore pay around SYP 3,500 in checkpoints additional to the cost of transport.
29 In the event of an emergency, patients must travel with security officers and are then vetted in the hospital.
30 See: 14 Health Centers and a Hospital Rehabilitated in Ghouta and Qalamoun, Health Official Says.
31 Families have been forced to photocopy textbooks at their own expense.
GOVERNANCE STAKEHOLDERS

- **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 bodies to the community itself and have a strong understanding of local needs.

- **ALAA MUNIR IBRAHIM**: 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 Qalamoun’s management and development.

- **AL QUTAYFAH CITY COUNCIL**: Most powerful local governance body in Eastern Qalamoun with additional jurisdiction over municipal governments in Jirud, Nasriyeh, and Raheiba. Capacity is relatively low however, and it is poorly equipped to undertake large-scale relief and development projects.

- **SYRIA TRUST FOR DEVELOPMENT**: NGO established by President Al-Assad’s wife, Asma. Syria Trust focuses mainly on youth and education programmes in Eastern Qalamoun and is the second most active aid organization in the area after SARC.

- **DHAMEER VOLUNTARY TEAM**: Civil society organization based in Dhameer established by the Syria Trust for Development. Though Syria Trust is associated with President Al-Assad’s wife, Asma, the Voluntary Team has a good local reputation. Currently led by Dhameer resident and local school teacher, Osama Nakrash.

- **NOTABLE FAMILIES**: Notable families play an important role in local governance both in terms of their representation within local government, but equally as a dominant element within Eastern Qalamoun’s socio-political culture. Several are particularly pertinent to governance in the area, to include:
  - **Denif**: Prominent members of the Denif family include Samir Denif, who serves as the Head of the Jirud local council, and Mohammed Denif, Head of the Jirud National Hospital.
  - **Zakariya**: The Zakariya family reflect the generally more opposition-orientated character of Raheiba, and several members of the family were prominent in the opposition. However, members of the Zakariya family still have a role in local political culture and remain somewhat influential.
  - **A’jaj**: Relatively recent arrivals from Damascus, the A’jaj are a family comprised of numerous educated professionals. The most prominent such figure is Hussein A’jaj, who is Head of Al Qutayfah Hospital and Al Qutayfa's health-orientated local charity organization.
3. COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

SECTION SUMMARY

Eastern Qalamoun presents as a relatively cohesive society in which the potential for social tensions is limited despite the impact of the current conflict.

Two broad social groups are found, united generally by their Sunni majority demography, but divided by their inhabitation of areas under government or former opposition control.

Al Qutayfah is strongly identified with the Syrian government, and has historically attracted pro-government individuals, retired SAA members, and Alawites from Syria’s coastal governorates.

Though there has been division between Al Qutayfah and former opposition-held communities for several years, conflict-related grievances are few, and are unlikely to devolve into serious social tensions.

Islamism spread into former opposition-held parts of Eastern Qalamoun, only to retreat rapidly with the evacuation of the Eastern Ghouta-based Jaish Al-Islam from Duma to Syria’s north in April 2018.

Eastern Qalamoun retains socio-economic links with Eastern Ghouta which pre-date the current conflict, and which have been a factor in the smooth integration of Eastern Ghouta IDPs.

Like much of Syria, women were marginalized from political and economic participation in Eastern Qalamoun. With the exception of a short period during which Islamism was locally influential however, they have in fact seen their involvement in society deepen owing to the widespread detention and conscription of males.
3.1 COMMUNITY COHESION

Reflecting the territorial division of the area between the Syrian government and the opposition from 2012 to 2018, two broad social groups are identified in Eastern Qalamoun. The former opposition-held communities of Raheiba, Jirud, Nasriyeh and Dhameer host a largely conservative, predominantly Sunni Arab population, with a small Sunni Turkman minority. Al Qutayfah, however, is strongly associated with the Syrian government, and though it is similarly comprised of a Sunni majority, it has historically attracted pro-government individuals, retired SAA members, and Alawites from Syria’s coastal governorates. These government supporters mainly live in dedicated housing estates for military personnel which occupy around half of the city’s built-up area. Combined with the proximity of Al Qutayfah to Syria’s main highway, the M5, these residents have been an important factor in the government seeking to retain the town throughout the current conflict.

Besides these demographic differences, several other social dynamics serve as defining features of the local landscape. First, though there has been division between Al Qutayfah and former opposition-held communities in the area for several years, conflict-related grievances are few, and are unlikely to devolve into serious social tensions. Second, Islamism spread into former opposition-held parts of Eastern Qalamoun, only to retreat rapidly with the evacuation of of the Eastern Ghouta-based Jaish Al-Islam from Duma to Syria’s north in April 2018. And third, Eastern Qalamoun retains socio-economic links with Eastern Ghouta which pre-date the current conflict, and which have been a factor in the smooth integration of Eastern Ghouta IDPs.

COEXISTENCE ACROSS FRONT LINES

Though politically and territorially divided for much of the past eight years, social differences between Al Qutayfah and the rest of the Eastern Qalamoun population have not been so great as to trigger competition, tension, or conflict in the post-reconciliation period. This represents a continuation of the pre-war relationship between the two groups, which was based mainly on socio-economic similarities. Some conflict-related sources of potential tension nevertheless deserve acknowledgement, the first of which arises from the fact that Al Qatayfah witnessed little to no direct conflict when compared to the rest of Eastern Qalamoun, and that residents in military estates receive more consistent services than other communities. The second potential source of tension is found in 2014, when Dhameer-based members of Jaish Al-Islam attacked the Adra Industrial Zone and kidnapped dozens of Alawites, subsequently inciting clashes on front lines between the government and the opposition. This incident was soon defused however, and the two groups have since coexisted relatively peacefully. There is little evidence to suggest that conflict-related grievances between the two communities are likely to serve as the basis for serious local tensions for the foreseeable future.

32 Children from both communities go to the same schools, and civilians largely use the same health facilities.
**RETREAT OF ISLAMISM**

During opposition control over much of Eastern Qalamoun, religious figures such as the Dhamar-based Abdelrahman Ka’keh gained increased influence over local political affairs. This was largely the result of pre-conflict socio-economic linkages between Eastern Qalamoun and Eastern Ghouta, which provided a path for the spread of Islamism in the form of Jaish Al-Islam from nearby Duma. This influence carried into local reconciliation negotiations between the Syrian government and the armed and political opposition several years later, with figures like Ahmad Kilany assuming a prominent role in discussions. Following the withdrawal of Jaish Al-Islam however, the involvement of such figures in local politics has decreased, and they have stepped back into their pre-war roles within local religious institutions.

**CONNECTIONS WITH EASTERN GHOUTA**

Social connections between Eastern Qalamoun and Eastern Ghouta pre-date the temporary ascent of Islamism in former opposition-held areas. Marriage and cohabitation between residents from these areas is commonplace, and there has historically been some trade, albeit at a limited level currently. These connections were likely a major factor in the arrival of several thousand Eastern Ghouta IDPs in the early phases of the conflict, and later, subsequent to the most intense phases of the government-imposed siege and offensive between February and April 2018. Most new arrivals came from Duma, and they are now reportedly well-integrated into civic life in Eastern Qalamoun. Eastern Ghouta IDPs living in former opposition-held areas are likely to harbour some mistrust of the many Al Qutayfah-based military personnel likely involved in enforcing Eastern Ghouta’s besiegement. Presently, however, these differences are unlikely to devolve into any notable local stability issues.

**3.2 GENDER**

Eastern Qalamoun’s conservative nature means gender-based discrimination is a longstanding feature of local society. This is not exclusive to the area, and is rather more reflective of the national context pertaining to female roles in rural Syrian society, politics, the economy, and culture, as well as the recognition and respect for women’s rights more broadly. Like much of Syria, women in Eastern Qalamoun have traditionally been marginalized from participating in politics, higher education, and employment, but it is worth noting that their status has undergone some notable shifts as a result of the conflict.

In 2014, conservative Salafism took hold in several opposition-controlled areas via Jaish Al-Islam and other, similarly Salafist, armed groups. Inevitably, this curtailed women’s freedoms even further, but it also occurred at a time when the conflict was beginning to introduce dynamics into local society which went some way to improving conditions for women in some areas. Rather more by accident than design, calls for conscripts and the widespread detention of military-aged males emphasized female roles in the local economy. Indeed, women are now more frequently the breadwinner of the family, and their increased freedom of movement since government control was restored enables them to access opportunities beyond the reach of males fearful over their post-reconciliation status. This necessarily comes with risks however; the behaviour of checkpoint personnel in and around Eastern Qalamoun is notoriously reprehensible, and incidents of sexual harassment and rape have been reported in some locations with alarming frequency.33

33 See description of the Al Qutayfah checkpoint, explored in more detail in section 5.2.
SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

• **LOCAL CHARITIES:** Well-respected organizations that pre-date the conflict and are found in every major community. Many receive financial support from INGOs and other Syrian non-profits, are connected to prominent families and community members, and have expanded their operations in recent years. Two examples are provided below, and others are listed in Annex 1:

  • *Jirud Charity Organization:* Activities have expanded since 2011 and the organization now undertakes relief and development work in: livelihoods, food baskets, and small-scale cash programming. Supported by SARC and currently led by Abdo Baqer, of the Baqer family.

  • *Al Qutayfah Health Charity Organization:* Established by the Ministry of Social Affairs in 2011. Provides health and medical services, subsidized treatment, health awareness campaigns, reproductive health, vaccines for children, and psychosocial support across the area. Currently led by the head of Al Qutayfah National Hospital, Hussein A’jaj, of the A’jaj family. Supported by WHO, SARC, and the Ministry of Health.

• **NATIONAL YOUTH TEAM:** Jirud-based civil society organization established and funded by Syria Trust for Development. Locally-led initiative that delivers street cleaning and psychosocial support services within the local community.

• **NOTABLE FAMILIES:** As well as playing an important role in local governance and local economy, notable families in Eastern Qalamoun are also important to social cohesion and civil society. Key local families in this regard include:

  • *Saadeddine:* Al Qutayfah-based notable family and the most prominent Ba’athist supporters in Eastern Qalamoun. Mahmud Saadeddine serves as Secretary for the Al Qutayfah Ba’athist Party and is the most prominent Ba’athist in the area. The Al Qutayfah Ba’athist Party effectively covers the entirety of Eastern Qalamoun.

  • *Smadi:* Originally from Al Qutayfah, the Smadi are the largest local family. Regarded as an educated and progressive family, some have relocated to Damascus, whilst others have acquired important roles in the local economy, education, and academia.

  • *Baqer:* Spread across Nasriyeh and Jirud, the Baqer are widely recognized as a well-educated and respectable family with representation in the medical, legal, and academic professions. Abdo Baqer leads the Jirud local charity organization.
Eastern Qalamoun’s economy has traditionally centered around three industries: agriculture, extractives, and smuggling. This remains the case in the post-reconciliation period, but some notable conflict-related changes have occurred.

Livestock has been the focus of local agriculture, but pastoralists are struggling to recover from a legacy of decreased supply from breeders. Diminished cattle numbers have severely affected sales, with knock on implications for pastoralist purchasing power. Access to old and new markets is problematized by road damage and checkpoint tariffs.

A family member of President Al-Assad, has benefited heavily from the evacuation of opposition-affiliated figures and the support of the political and military establishment in the post-reconciliation period. Operating through several notable intermediaries, Al-Assad has seized much of the excavation, processing, and sale of local stone and mineral products.

Even when considered in isolation from more significant structural issues within the national economy, challenges to the rehabilitation of Eastern Qalamoun’s economy are great. It is unlikely the government’s neglect of the area will change in the foreseeable future, and the capture of lucrative legal and illegal economic activity by state-linked elite institutions and personalities decreases the potential of inclusive recovery processes.

There are opportunities to contribute to the rejuvenation of local agriculture and the facilitation of access to more diverse trade and employment markets. This could take shape in the form of re/establishing trade linkages between pastoralists and markets such as the expanding Adra Industrial Zone, the provision of essential agricultural supplies and equipment, and support to the diversification of local agricultural outputs.
4.1 SECTORAL OVERVIEW

PRE-WAR

Eastern Qalamoun’s pre-war economy was centered around agriculture, extractives (mining and quarrying), and smuggling. Though the area has a reputation for these activities, none was particularly lucrative, and the prevalence of smuggling was a symptom of the area’s generally poor economic performance. Poverty and unemployment were relatively high when the Syrian uprisings began, a situation others have justifiably attributed to inadequate public and private investment and dwindling opportunities for the area’s largely unskilled workforce.34

AGRICULTURE

Eastern Qalamoun’s grasslands have long served as an ideal location for the husbandry of cattle. Young livestock was commonly purchased from Deir-ez-Zor governorate and raised in Eastern Qalamoun in line with regulations for the use of animal products for human consumption. Animal slaughter was not commonly undertaken in Eastern Qalamoun itself however, with the area serving rather more as an incubator for animal processing industries elsewhere, particularly in the Adra Industrial Zone. Minor dairy production facilities were in operation, and the area hosts its own cattle market, in Raheiba. Soils in Eastern Qalamoun are ill-suited to a great diversity of crops owing to the semi-desertified landscape. The area has nevertheless produced some plant-based agriculture, but this is generally confined to crops that can flourish in light, sandy, and well-drained loams, such as olives, watermelons, barley, and chickpeas. It should be noted, however, that agriculture received little government attention in the pre-war period, and was a major contributor to rising local poverty, unemployment and a subsequent shift to smuggling.

EXTRACTIVES

A number of mines and quarries are present, as well as stone, marble, and mineral processing plants. In the pre-war period, the extractive industry predominantly lay in the hands of local notable family business elites, but no single family had reportedly monopolized a majority of sites. Extractives have long been a key source of local employment for the area’s largely unskilled workforce, many of whom also traditionally sought similar manual labour work in industrial facilities closer to Damascus, particularly in the nearby Adra Industrial Zone, and in the fields and small-scale workshops of Eastern Ghouta. Of note, the proximity of Eastern Qalamoun to employment opportunities in Damascus and its peri-urban periphery was an important source of more diverse income opportunities.

SMUGGLING

Smuggling has long featured in Eastern Qalamoun’s economy, particularly during times of economic hardship. Declining agriculture was among the main reasons locals resorted to smuggling in the pre-war period, and the entry of goods such as wood, food, and fuel from Lebanon was widespread. In late 2010, the Syrian government launched a security campaign targeting smuggling operations on border regions, including in Eastern Qalamoun. The subsequent shutdown of smuggling networks adversely affected thousands of people who were dependent upon smuggling as a principal source of income, and compounded the population’s resentment toward a government held responsible for the area’s marginalization. Dhameer was most heavily affected, largely because of its position on direct land routes between Damascus and Deir-ez-Zor, and Beirut and Baghdad.

34 The Qalamoun Battles: Calculations and Stakes, The Doha Institute, Unit for Policy Studies.
CONFLICT AND POST-RECONCILIATION

There is little available information on the current state of the economy in Eastern Qalamoun. The area seldom features in reports or media, and it has arguably been ‘forgotten’ by both the government and the aid community. This is both a symptom of the area’s size and currently low political importance, as well as the fact that its economic value is limited. Local sources therefore provide the bulk of information for this section, and describe three main post-reconciliation economic dynamics: First, that both the livestock and plant-based agriculture industries have both declined owing to a plethora of supply, sale, and market access-related challenges; second, that local extractive industries have fallen into the hands of Syrian government-affiliated elites, and; third, that Eastern Qalamoun’s pre-war involvement in smuggling has been redeveloped by profiteers seeking to exploit the area’s position on key land-based trade routes. Combined with broader structural issues within the Syrian economy, the limitations of local government, elite capture of local political and economic capital, and severely reduced civilian access to alternative employment markets, these challenges paint a concerning economic picture.

AGRICULTURE

Local sources report that issues at either end of the livestock value chain have severely hampered profitability. First, the purchase of calves from key suppliers in Deir-ez-Zor governarate largely came to a halt when ISIS secured control across much of eastern Syria, causing local businessmen to turn to more expensive, lower capacity, and lower quality suppliers for several years. Although access to pre-war suppliers has now been largely restored, pastoralists in both locations are still reportedly recovering from the legacy of this downturn. Second, and relatedly, sales of animal products and livestock for human consumption have been weakened by lower local cattle numbers. And, third, lower pastoralist revenues have compounded the challenge of acquiring adequate veterinary care, animal fodder and other essential supplies. The combined effect of these issues is that the local livestock industry is no longer able to exploit its traditional customer base to anything like the same extent. In particular, local sources report that trade with important buyers in the Adra Industrial Zone has slowed massively. This is not only the result of lower production levels however; physical access to Adra and the wider Damascus area has been undermined by severe damage to roads linking Dhameer with Adra and Eastern Ghouta, whilst checkpoint tariffs represent additional production costs to small business owners both within and on the periphery of the area.

Such issues have similarly afflicted local plant-based agriculture, though it should be noted that crop production levels and revenues have been less exposed to the challenges in the wider access environment and rather more impacted by the degradation of fields, facilities and equipment. Indeed, revenues from plant-based agriculture are reportedly more reliant on the functionality of markets within Eastern Qalamoun, rather than those further afield. Of greater concern to local crop farmers is the fact that, although available, agricultural inputs such as quality seeds, pesticides and fertilizers have become increasingly unaffordable in the context of Syria’s wider economic issues and ongoing fuel crisis. Reliable water supplies and irrigation systems are also reportedly a challenge, and this could lead to the neglect of farmlands and their irrevocable desertification.

35 Making these routes practically impassable for heavy goods vehicles.
SMUGGLING
Eastern Qalamoun’s geography and the diverse economic impact of the Syrian conflict have accelerated the return of smuggling following its closure by the government until the armed opposition secured control in 2012. Both the 3rd Armored Division and the government-linked National Defence Forces (NDF) are reportedly involved heavily involved in smuggling, and likely accrue considerable revenues from the sale of illicit goods including weapons, drugs, and fuel transited from Lebanon. As in the pre-war period, there is also likely considerable civilian involvement in smuggling. Though illegal, it should be noted that goods smuggled from Lebanon, to include rice, flour, sugar, and burghul, play an important role in supplementing locally available staple food items. Without these supplies, it is unlikely that the Eastern Qalamoun directorate for bakeries could guarantee that local bread needs could be met.

EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES
State-affiliated notable families have been among the main beneficiaries of the evacuation of opposition-affiliated figures. Nowhere is this more apparent in Eastern Qalamoun than in the local extractive industry, where a relative of President Al-Assad, has effectively monopolized the area’s mining operations. In the space of just over a year, he has come to dominate the excavation, processing, and sale of stone and mineral products, particularly in Dhameer, Raheiba, and Batra. His activities are undertaken through a number of local partners from Dhameer and Harasta (Eastern Ghouta). Most of these facilities are protected by government-affiliated security forces commissioned by the 3rd Armored Division. They also operate without permits from local councils, weakening competition in the market, undermining the authority of formal governance, and decreasing local government resources.

4.3 OPPORTUNITIES
Even when considered in isolation from more significant structural issues within the national economy, challenges to the rehabilitation of Eastern Qalamoun’s economy are great. The area has long been neglected by the authorities, and this is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. It nevertheless presents some opportunities for intervening aid actors, most of which are centered around the restoration of pre-war agriculture. Efforts to wrest a measure of economic control away from elites and into the hands of the community are unlikely to meet with success at this time, particularly within the extractive industry. Basim Al-Assad’s control over the extractive industry is buttressed in the post-reconciliation period by a state which is consolidating its patronage networks and a cohesive military and security apparatus.

Within livestock and agriculture, a focus on engaging local farming cooperatives and the Raheiba cattle market is strongly encouraged. Farming cooperatives are found in practically every town in the area, and are positioned to advise on the specific needs within each farming community, as well as the measures to be taken to better harness resources across towns. Similarly, both Raheiba cattle market and local pastoralists can provide insight into how international support can navigate local and regional access issues to help connect traders with old and new markets. Notably, there are plans to expand the Adra Industrial Zone, which could rejuvenate Eastern Qalamoun’s pre-war connections with the area and present new opportunities for producers of agricultural products. Support to land maintenance is recommend-

36 Note that large element of the local NDF operate under the authority of the Al Khalaf family. See Annexe 1.
ed in partnership with local farmers to prevent the loss of farmland, and is enabled by few associated HLP risks. Finally, limited local economic opportunities emphasize the importance of civilian access to more diverse employment markets in Damascus and its peri-urban eastern fringe. Certainly, physical and security-related access concerns are an issue, but improved public bus services are unlikely to be uncontroversial, and would represent an important step towards rolling back Eastern Qalamoun’s growing economic isolation.

**ECONOMIC 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.

- **NOTABLE FAMILIES:** Many local business leaders are drawn from notable families. Most are owners of relatively small-scale local operations in Eastern Qalamoun in the post-reconciliation period.

  - **Wahbe family:** Al Qutayfah-based business family that own a large number of small market stores and other shops across the area selling a diversity of goods ranging from food to electricals and clothing.

  - **Dahaan family:** The Dahaan family owns several industrial facilities in the nearby Adra Industrial Zone and neighboring Eastern Ghouta. The family’s wealth is based mainly on the production of soap products.

  - **Abdullah family:** Jirud-based family with a large stake in the local construction industry. Owners of heavy machinery and a network of contractors across Eastern Qalamoun.
5. SECURITY

SECTION SUMMARY

The 3rd Armored Division is headquartered in Al Qutayfah, and is the ultimate military and security authority in Eastern Qalamoun. Deployed throughout the area, it coordinates the operations of all local military and security actors, to include the NDF, the Air Force and Military Security intelligence agencies. Around half of Al Qutayfah is home to military and security personnel responsible for local security management and ensuring the continuity of operations at the Nasriyeh and Dhameer air bases.

No travel between Eastern Qalamoun and Damascus is possible without passing through at least one of the checkpoints overseen by the 3rd Armored Division. This is also the case for travel between the area’s key communities. Checkpoints are used predominantly for population monitoring, to conscript individuals wanted for military service, and to effect the arrest of those wanted by the government and/or the 3rd Armored Division on criminal and terror charges.

The 3rd Armored Division acts with considerable local autonomy, and has the authority to implement security measures which may differ from the directives issued by the central authorities.

3rd Armored Division checkpoint activity is cited as a major source of concern for local civilian protection, particularly for those with any uncertainty surrounding their post-reconciliation status. Abuses are reportedly frequent and sometimes grave, and decision-making can be inconsistent.

Few residents have obtained reconciliation papers from local security actors, meaning many in the area are still vulnerable to arrest and investigation. Advanced security permissions required to both exit and travel within Eastern Qalamoun are provided by Military Security, but they are reportedly difficult to obtain and may be ignored by security officials.

Changes to local security arrangements are unlikely in the foreseeable future given the importance of civilian and military infrastructure located in Eastern Qalamoun. The overbearing influence of security actors will therefore remain a major factor in aid programming. Engagement of the 3rd Armored Division is unavoidable.

There is little evidence that local security policy is used to actively disenfranchise Eastern Qalamoun’s former opposition-held communities meaning levels of politicization are lower, and that there may be scope for more wide-ranging aid programming.
5.1 SECURITY OVERVIEW

Under government control since April 2018, Eastern Qalamoun comprises a mixed presence of state and state-affiliated security and military armed groups including the 3rd Armored Division, Air Force Intelligence, Military Security, and the NDF. After the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division, the 3rd Armored Division is the third most powerful SAA force and is commanded by the President. Headquartered in Al Qutayfah, the 3rd Armored Division is the ultimate local military and security authority, and is deployed throughout Eastern Qalamoun. It coordinates with Military Security and the NDF on matters related to checkpoints, arrests, and detentions. Though it largely assigns responsibility to these subordinate forces for day to day checkpoint management, the 3rd Armored Division stations at least several of its own personnel at every checkpoint in the area.

Since 2015, there has been a noticeable increase in Russian involvement in the administration of the 3rd Armored Division, mainly through secondment of Russian military advisors. Russian military are scattered across Eastern Qalamoun as part of the Syrian government’s commitment to guarantee implementation of the reconciliation agreement, but their presence is barely noticeable and there are no reports of Russian intervention in the everyday lives of civilians. Notably, in February 2019, it was reported that Nasriyeh Air Base was handed to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps after weapon storage facilities in Damascus were targeted by Israeli airstrikes. Sources note that Nasriyeh Air Base is now jointly controlled by the Iranians and the 3rd Armored Division. Russian forces also reportedly use Nasriyeh Air Base as a base of operations.

5.2 SECURITY & CIVILIAN PROTECTION

Despite having functional local police services and a Political Security Directorate, all ground-level security matters are handled by the 3rd Armored Division, the NDF, and the Air Force and Military Security intelligence agencies. These actors retain a tight grip over the area through management of a comprehensive checkpoint network which covers all major routes linking Eastern Qalamoun, both internally and externally. A reported twelve formal checkpoints are used predominantly for population monitoring, to conscript individuals wanted for military service, and to effect the arrest of those wanted by the government or the 3rd Armored Division on criminal and terror charges. It should be noted, however, that there is little evidence that local security policy is used to actively disenfranchise Eastern Qalamoun’s former opposition-held communities, particularly when compared to more heavily politicized post-reconciliation contexts such as Eastern Ghouta. No reports were received that civilian returns were blocked, there is little to no concern over the potential for security-based property expropriation, and, with the exception of the requirement to be in possession of advanced permission, (which can be challenging), civilians have the right to access communities both internal and external to the area. Providing Eastern Qalamoun does not witness increased instability, this overarching security context may therefore provide some flexibility to aid actors and allow for a broader scope of programmes.

The local security context does present noteworthy programme risks however: Beneficiary and programme staff travel is theoretically feasible, but it can be delayed by permissions and comes with

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37 Of note, there is no reported Iranian military or security presence in the communities of Eastern Qalamoun.
38 The role of the Political Security Directorate is limited to municipal duties in Eastern Qalamoun.
39 See later in this subsection.
serious protection concerns for certain groups; approvals and permissions may be revoked even where they have been agreed with ‘higher’ state authorities; and the instrumentalisation of aid by military and security actors notorious for local abuses and illicit economic activity is a distinct possibility. Moreover, some form of engagement with the 3rd Armored Division and its affiliated security forces cannot realistically be avoided, either directly, or through formal local governance structures. Evidently, due diligence around the interests of security stakeholders will be necessary, and will need to be responsive to any changes in local conditions or security actor decision-making. If adequate measures are taken however, Eastern Qalamoun could be potentially facilitative to aid programming.

Particular care must be taken over the interaction of programmes and beneficiaries with local checkpoints. Following reconciliation in April 2018, there was a noticeable increase in the number of checkpoints in the area, likely to withhold any attempt for an opposition insurgency and to arrest individuals wanted for military service. Though checkpoint numbers have since decreased and conscription is reportedly less frequent, local sources claim that civilians are still harbour serious checkpoint-related protection risks. These sources add that the checkpoint of most concern is that fully managed and manned by 3rd Armored personnel. Referred to locally as the ‘Checkpoint of Death’, it is located at the Al Qutayfah junction of the M5 Highway, and is the main obstacle to unimpeded travel between much of Eastern Qalamoun and Damascus. Approximately 300 3rd Armored Division personnel are stationed at the checkpoint, and local sources report these forces maintain their own unpublicized lists of individuals wanted on criminal charges in addition to lists provided by the Ministry of the Interior.

The risks associated with travel to Damascus are therefore considerable for those uncertain over their post-reconciliation status, and possession of security approval to transit the checkpoint may not guarantee incident-free passage. The Al Qutayfah checkpoint is also notorious for frequent civilian harassment, theft, and high tariffs, and there have been reports that travellers have been raped by military personnel. An associated issue lies in the fact that sources report that only a small number of residents have obtained reconciliation papers from the local security apparatus. Without these documents, civilians are more vulnerable to detention and arrest. Indeed, since early 2019, there have been several incidents in which Military Security and Air Force Intelligence have conducted raid and arrest campaigns in Jirud, Dhameer, and Raheiba. Moreover, advanced security permissions required to both exit and travel within Eastern Qalamoun are provided by Military Security, but they are reportedly difficult to obtain and may be ignored by security officials (though this would presumably be less of an issue for travel associated with an approved aid programme).

**5.3 SECURITY FORECAST**

It is highly unlikely that the towns of Eastern Qalamoun will witness a resurgence of popular protests and unrest given the comprehensive and stranglehold government forces have over

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40 As noted in the economy section of this report, the 3rd Armored Division and its affiliates are reputedly involved heavily in local smuggling and black market activities.

41 Criminal charges include, but are not limited to, opposition of the regime; terrorism; possession of light weapons; evasion of military service; and communication with Syria’s northern governorates. Local sources noted that arrests often occur due to name similarities; these individuals are nevertheless transferred to the 3rd Armored Division Headquarters and forced to confess of terrorism acts.

42 This is because security permission is issued by the Military Security intelligence agency, and its decisions may not be respected by the area’s ultimate security authority, the 3rd Armored Division.

43 In one of the campaigns in May 2019, more than 150 civilians were arrested from Dhameer and Jirud. For more information, see: Almodon (2019), Eastern Qalamoun, the Detentions Continue, (AR).
the area. Some isolated incidents are a possibility however: In April 2019, anti-Government of Syria graffiti appeared on the walls in Jirud, and ten civilians were subsequently arrested. Such events have been a precursor to localized armed insurgencies elsewhere in Syria, and there is likely a strong sense of ill will towards the Syrian government across much of former opposition-held Eastern Qalamoun. Certainly, flare ups cannot be discounted, but any threat to local military and civilian infrastructure which services the military interests of the government and the city of Damascus is likely to be robustly addressed. Local government military and security forces can therefore be expected to retain strict security policies in the area, strengthening measures in response to any demonstrations of resistance to government authority.

SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS

- **3RD ARMORED DIVISION**: SAA unit and one of the Syrian government’s most reliable military divisions. Based in Al Qutayfah, it serves as Eastern Qalamoun’s ultimate military and security authority. Similar to the Damascus-based Republican Guard, it is a cohesive and fiercely loyalist military unit with a direct line to President Assad. All security-related decisions are driven by the 3rd Armored in Eastern Qalamoun.

- **KHALAF FAMILY**: A prominent family originally from Dhameer involved in smuggling, drug trafficking, and mining. One of its members, Kasem Khalaf, is the commander of the NDF in Dhameer and coordinates directly with Military Security.

- **GOVERNMENT INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**: Includes Air Force Intelligence and the Military Security Branch. Responsible for manning checkpoints, conscripting individuals into the SAA, and detaining individuals wanted for their military service. Poor reputation amongst locals.

- **NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF)**: Comprised of former armed opposition from Forces of Martyr Ahmad Abdo, Liwa Shuhada Al-Qarayaten, Lions of the East Army, and Ahrar Al-Sham. Responsible for manning checkpoints, and arresting individuals wanted for military service. Poor reputation across communities.
# ANNEX 1: KEY STAKEHOLDERS

## 3RD ARMORED DIVISION

### DESCRIPTION

Prominent SAA unit, and one of the Syrian government’s most reliable military divisions. Similar to the Damascus-based Republican Guard, the 3rd Armored Division is a cohesive loyalist military unit with a direct line to President Assad. Headquartered in Al Qutayfah, it serves as Eastern Qalamoun’s ultimate military and security authority. It also has a strong influence over local politics, and has been a decisive player in the reconfiguration and expansion of central government patronage networks. Patrons are often more answerable to the 3rd Armored Division than formal government bodies, and the group’s influence over local affairs is such that rotating commanders of the 3rd Armored Division are regarded as governor-type figures.

### COMMENTS

The involvement of the 3rd Armored Division in both local security and political decision-making means it is largely unavoidable for any actor seeking to work in Eastern Qalamoun. This equally applies to beneficiaries, who are subject to close monitoring and control by the 3rd Armored Division and its affiliates in the local security establishment, particularly as a result of the comprehensive checkpoint regime in place across the area.

It must also be recalled that the group operates with some autonomy in the area, and that its decisions can be inconsistent with those of the Syrian government. No great divergence is found, but the uniquely local focus of the 3rd Armored Division in increases the need to understand its priorities and interests. These are difficult to ascertain at a distance, and will likely require close coordination with formal governance bodies and other informal stakeholders, such as notable family members used to working within the confines of 3rd Armored Division policy and decisions.

## AL QUTAYFAH CITY COUNCIL

### DESCRIPTION

Al Qutayfah City Council is the most powerful local formal governance body in Eastern Qalamoun. Its 25-person membership was chosen in the September 2018 local elections, and comprises a combination of technocrats, Ba’athists, and notable family representatives. The Council is currently led by Ba’ath Party member, civil engineer and well-reputed, Tharwat Fares Moulqet. The Moulqet family name carries no particular weight in Eastern Qalamoun, but Tharwat Fares Moulqet is broadly respected by the population. Al Qutayfah City Council currently oversees the delivery of a fuel and gas smart card service (a national government project available in a variety of locations), and a street maintenance public works project.

### COMMENTS

Despite being the largest city council with the widest jurisdiction in Eastern Qalamoun, Al Qutayfah City Council is regarded as a low capacity governance body. Local sources report that it is heavily reliant upon support from the Rural Damascus Governorate Council. The extent of its limitations are evidenced by the fact its vehicle fleet is too small to support consistent meetings with other formal governance actors. Notably, it is poorly integrated into the wider formal governance structure across Eastern Qalamoun and Rural Damascus more broadly. Engagement with the council must therefore proceed with a recognition of these constraints from the outset, and may look to harness the particular capacities of council members and their associated networks. Well connected with charity organizations based both in the city and across the wider area, the city council likely represents a useful first point of contact for the identification of local needs and project partners.
EXECUTIVE OFFICES

DESCRIPTION

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 Qalamoun public.

COMMENTS

Executive Offices offer 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 bodies. Moreover, Executive Offices are the formal government structure closest to the community, granting them a strong understanding of civilian needs. Executive Offices are subservient to city councils and municipality-level local councils, yet whilst the interference of figures within these structures is a possibility, it is unlikely. Given Executive Offices are subject to the kind of capacity constraints which affect all other formal governance bodies in the area, working in tandem with the particular professional skill sets of Executive Office staff is strongly encouraged.

MOUNIR ALAA 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 Qalamoun’s management and development. Ibrahim is not reported to have intervened heavily in local affairs in Eastern Qalamoun despite his ability to act unilaterally at his own discretion. He is not known to have visited the area with as much frequency as his visits to Eastern Ghouta. His local reputation is reportedly good to neutral.

COMMENTS

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

**DESCRIPTION**

SARC office, headed by Mohamed Khair Mor’ee, is based in Al Qutayfah and operates out of a ‘Community Service Center’. The office is shared with Syria Trust for Development but is mainly managed by SARC. Being the largest aid actor in the area, their work focuses on livelihood, health, food baskets, humanitarian aid, and psychosocial support programs. They maintained a positive reputation throughout the conflict. SARC conducted very limited cross-line activities due to the lack of permits from the Government of Syria. Coordinates with Al Qutayfah city council and the Ministry of Local Administration branch office.

**COMMENTS**

SARC is the largest local NGO in Eastern Qalamoun and wields the capacity to implement a variety of projects both independently, and in coordination with formal governance structures. Its positive local reputation means it boasts strong community acceptance, and it is understood to have established partnerships with international actors and UN agencies to support ongoing relief and development projects.
Eastern Qalamoun’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 eroded the pre-war status of mainly opposition-linked notable families and prompted others to leave the area entirely. This gave rise to a new cadre of family elites linked to high profile figures within the Syrian government and the 3rd Armored Division. Many Several important For the purposes of giving a rounded sense of their activities in Eastern Qalamoun however, several important examples are presented here:

**Al-Ali:** The Al-Ali family is a prominent Alawite family in Al Qutayfah; they were the first Alawite family to secure representation on the Al Qutayfah City Council.

**Denif:** The Denif family is a prominent family in Jirud, and several prominent members are members of the Ba’ath party. Samir Denif serves as leader of the Jirud City Council, whilst Mohammad Denif is Head of Jirud Hospital.

**Wahbe:** Al Qutayfah-based business family with numerous stores selling everything from electronics to clothing in market areas across the town. No known security or political involvement.

**Baqr:** Spread across Nasriyeh and Jirud, the Baqr are widely recognized as a well-educated and respectable family with representation in the medical, legal, and academic professions.

**Smadi:** The largest family in the Eastern Qalamoun (in terms of size), generally based in Al Qutayfah and Damascus. The Smadi are generally split between business people and educated professionals. The Smadi are considered to be well-connected, and are locally respected.

**Saadeddine:** The most prominent longtime loyalist family in Eastern Qalamoun, based in Al Qutayfah. Mahmoud Saadeddine is Secretary for the Al Qutayfah Ba’ath Party. This branch effectively covers the entirety of Eastern Qalamoun.

**A’jaj:** The A’jaj are Damascene in origin, but are now prominent in Eastern Qalamoun. The A’jaj are influential in the local health system through Husein A’jaj, who serves as Head of Al Qutayfah Hospital and leads a health-oriented charity organization in the town.

As described in section 2.2, and as presented above, notable families in Eastern Qalamoun have strong representation within formal and informal local political organization. Though many effectively serve as state-affiliated patrons and have been selected as Ba’athist ‘fronts’ for the domineering 3rd Armored Division, it is also worth recalling that their interests are diverse, and that they play an important role in mobilizing and enhancing civil society, driving small local businesses, and procuring local goods.

The challenge is to understand which notable families are of relevance to a given programme, how their interests and responsibilities intersect, and then determine the extent to which their involvement is an enabling or inhibiting factor for everything from community acceptance through to project delivery and project risk. Cases will seldom be clear cut; for instance, some notable business families are reportedly key players in the supply of essential goods unavailable to the area through any other means but smuggling. Assessing the consequences of direct and indirect engagement when such practices are present is therefore an essential part of the programme design process, and requires careful monitoring throughout the programme cycle.
**DESCRIPTION**

A prominent family originally from Dhameer and with a presence in Raheiba. Differentiated from other local families listed above because of the family’s deep involvement in smuggling, drug trafficking, and the management of local military/security services. The most locally significant member of the Khalaf is Kasem Khalaf, who currently serves as Commander of local National Defense Forces (NDF) and coordinates directly with the Military Security intelligence agency. NDF forces under Khalaf’s command are drawn from reconciled armed opposition groups including Ahmad Abdo, Liwa Shuhada Al-Qarayaten, Lions of the East Army, and Ahrar Al-Sham. Notorious for looting, conducting arrests, and imposing arbitrary fines, the NDF has a universally poor reputation across Eastern Qalamoun. Moreover, Kasem Khalaf reportedly provides NDF forces to serve as protection for mining operations across the area. Of note, a prominent Khalaf family member was arrested on the Syrian side of the Syria-Lebanon border after attempting to smuggle drugs in May 2019.

**COMMENTS**

Given the distribution of the NDF across Eastern Qalamoun, it is likely that aid activities requiring the movement of goods and people will encounter the NDF and, by extension, the Khalaf family. Indeed, there is an NDF presence on all checkpoints in the area, and, with support from the 3rd Armored Division, they have comprehensive control over civilian use of road routes. The Khalaf’s involvement in smuggling of both licit and illicit goods also poses a risk to procurement for humanitarian and development programming.
Local charity and faith-based organizations are found in each major community in Eastern Qalamoun, as well as in many of the area’s lesser townships. 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.

**Dhameer Voluntary Organization:** Civil society organization based in Dhameer established by the Syria Trust for Development. Though Syria Trust is associated with President Al-Assad’s wife, Asma, the Voluntary Team has a good local reputation. Currently led by Dhameer resident and local school teacher, Osama Nakrash.

**Raheiba Charity Organization:** Civil society organization established in 2009 under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Its activities prior to 2011 focused on support for education and orphan support. After a brief hiatus during which it pared back its activities to small-scale cash programmes, the organization recently resumed pre-conflict activities and expanded to provide include garbage collection, vocational training workshops, and the distribution of SARC-provided food baskets. The organization is currently led by Ahmad Akraa.

**Al Qutayfah Health Charity Organization:** Established in 2011 under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Supports the health sector in Eastern Qalamoun by providing health and medical services, subsidized treatment, health awareness campaigns, reproductive health, vaccines for children, and psychosocial support. Currently led by the head of the Al Qutayfah National Hospital, Hussein A’jaj. Supported by WHO, SARC, and the Ministry of Health.

Civil society organizations led by and comprised of local residents generally wield high levels of community acceptance. This is equally the case in Eastern Qalamoun. Local charities in the area commonly have the support of local notables or important community-level institutions. Notably, they have grown in both scale and scope since the Syrian conflict began, and have come to adopt some NGO-type characteristics. Through some partner with international organizations, local charities are generally limited in terms of what they can achieve given they remain largely community-led enterprises. That said, they are spread widely, are well-respected, and have the potential to benefit from a broadly cohesive social fabric. Local charities should be among the first actors that international actors consult when designing programmes and exploration of partnership and capacity building options is strongly recommended.