CONTENTS

03 PURPOSE
METHODOLOGY
READING THE REPORT

05 PART 1
Key Area Dynamics
  6 Political Power Centralized in Homs City
  6 Prominent Families as the Central Actors
  7 Agriculture: Short-term Issues and Long-term Concerns
  9 Scarce Livelihoods and Local Poverty

12 PART 2
Key Themes
  13 CONTEXT AND POPULATION
  18 GOVERNANCE AND SERVICES
  27 COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY
  32 ECONOMY
  39 SECURITY

45 ANNEX 1
Key Stakeholders
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 Needs-Oriented Strategic Area Profile (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 Northern Rural Homs, 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

Four key dynamics must be taken into consideration when attempting to address humanitarian and development needs in Northern Rural Homs (hereafter, NRH):

1. Governance capacity is concentrated in Homs city, rather than NRH itself. This is symptomatic of a chronic lack of government interest in the area, and limits the prospects for partnership and coordination support from local governance bodies.

2. The status of prominent families has been emphasized in the post-reconciliation period, but self-interest generally outweighs their sense of community solidarity. Though their involvement in recovery is limited, prominent families are key powerbrokers in local governance and security, and their influence must be carefully navigated if opportunities are to be leveraged successfully.

3. Agriculture has traditionally been the only real pillar of the local economy. Though this remains the case, conflict and reconciliation have heightened production costs and have exacerbated serious long-term natural resource mismanagement issues.

4. Much of the wider Syria response is shifting into development mode, but basic humanitarian needs remain very high in NRH. Humanitarian and development support must be carefully balanced, and a focus on livelihoods is essential if local capacity is to at least partially compensate for governance shortfalls.
POLITICAL POWER CENTRALIZED IN HOMS CITY

Higher Government of Syria political authorities have been reluctant to decentralize financial authority and administrative capacity to local governance bodies in NRH following the reconciliation agreement in May 2018, and have instead preserved power within the Homs City Council. The subordination of local political offices to Homs has likely been motivated by two factors: first, it partially masks the limited capacity and funding of local governance bodies in NRH, and; second, it allows for a greater level of government control and scrutiny over local affairs. Regardless of the causes, the weakness of local political bodies certainly impacts local recovery, and compounds the traditional neglect of the area by Syria’s central authorities. Hosting few strategic or economic assets of any serious concern to the government, this situation is unlikely to change over the medium term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• **POLITICAL AUTHORITY OVER NRH LIES IN HOMS CITY.** Formal local governance bodies in NRH have low capacity and low political autonomy. The area’s main political decision-makers are located in Homs-based institutions, and local municipalities and city councils have reportedly assumed a largely bureaucratic function post-reconciliation. Practical engagement must therefore be channeled through Homs, but structures in NRH should at least be consulted throughout the programme cycle.

• **THE WEAKNESS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IS LIKELY DELIBERATE.** Few public service projects have been undertaken in NRH since Russian Military Police largely withdrew in October 2018. Now that the local section of the M5 Highway has been restored, the government appears to have no apparent priorities beyond enforcing security, and chastising its real and perceived opponents. It is unlikely that local government will see much investment, and will remain weak over the medium-term.

• **PROJECTS MUST DEMONSTRATE CLEARLY MEASURABLE IMPACT.** With few financial and human resources, governance decision-makers are likely to strongly prefer projects with demonstrable impact. This means a focus on quantifiable evidence-based outcomes should be encouraged, and assessment findings and justifications for project area and type should be clearly articulated.

• **ENGAGE LOCAL TECHNOCRATS.** As in all government-controlled areas, Executive Offices within municipal government offer relatively independent insight into local needs and can play a useful role advising on programme design and coordination. Focusing on the particular staff skill sets is encouraged given all local Executive Offices have limited capacity. The Homs Directorate of Technical Services will also play an important role in project development and delivery given its responsibility to cover shortfalls in funding and technical expertise at the local level. Both bodies should be among the first government entities consulted by international aid actors.

PROMINENT FAMILIES AS THE CENTRAL ACTORS

Limited formal government capacity in NRH has inevitably created space for informal actors to move into the governance domain. As in the pre-war era, this space is dominated by prominent NRH families with linkages to the Syrian state; their status has been emphasized by heavy restrictions on civil society and aid organizations, the weak local business climate, and the focus of local security actors on monitoring and enforcement. Presently, however, reports indicate prominent family involvement in governance is focused mainly on transactional forms of service delivery linked to private business interests, and that their expression of community solidarity through service provision is currently limited. Moreover, several of the area’s most powerful families have capitalized on a particularly strong pre-war association with the military establishment to play a leading role in post-reconciliation security.

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1 Families retain a role in informal judicial processes, in so far as they continue to mediate local disputes settled out of court.
These findings suggest that prominent families in NRH mainly look to balance their own interests with those of the state, and that they are unlikely to serve as independent catalysts of local recovery. That said, they nevertheless represent the most feasible means of leveraging local capacity in support of humanitarian and development programmes given the weakness of other governance stakeholders. In part, this is because they are practically unavoidable: families occupy many leading positions within local government, and they are influential within local security bodies. However, it is also because they have the kind of elite connections, finances, and local authority to broaden the opportunities for programming—providing their interests can be balanced with the needs of the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ASSESS THE SCOPE OF PROMINENT FAMILY BUSINESS OBJECTIVES.** Several families have a stake in land and agriculture, whilst others have provided some local job opportunities by restoring local business operations post-reconciliation. Though their investment has so far been low, prominent families represent an important channel through which critical need for local development and livelihoods can be partially met.

- **CONDUCT A FAMILY MAPPING AND VETTING EXERCISE.** Given the shortfalls of formal government, families influence practically all facets of civic life in NRH. Their reach demands careful assessment by aid actors however, in part because of their common affiliation with government elites, but also because their interests, activities, and motivations are diverse. The identification of risks and opportunities presented by families must be identified if their importance is to be leveraged effectively.

- **EXPLORE POTENTIAL OF REVIVING COMMUNITY INITIATIVES THROUGH PROMINENT FAMILIES.** Prominent families have been reluctant to support civil society since reconciliation, but it is unclear whether this is because they are simply unwilling to do so. Families have the network and influence to work around local security restrictions, and have vested community interests which may provide a platform for civil society’s reemergence. This may require innovative forms of incentivization linked to private business (or family specific) interests, but family endorsement currently represents the only way to stimulate a stronger local third sector as an alternative to direct government engagement.

- **LEVERAGE FAMILY CAPACITY THROUGH LOCAL CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE.** Prominent families are widely represented in business and within local chambers of commerce. The Homs-based chamber provides formal contact points to engage family networks.

AGRICULTURE: SHORT-TERM ISSUES AND LONG-TERM CONCERNS

Agriculture provides the majority of livelihoods in the area, and fertile land around the Orontes River watershed is the area’s only real economic asset. Like practically all parts of Syria however, agricultural production costs in NRH are high, at a time when market prices are normalizing in government-held areas. This undermines the profitability of the sector, threatens to worsen already heightened levels of local poverty and unemployment, and is likely to accelerate pre-war trends towards rural to urban migration. Indeed, with a shortage of alternative options in the local labor market, the importance of addressing immediate market challenges around the cost of agricultural supplies, equipment, and production is high.

Of greater concern over the longer term are the potential consequences of decades of natural resource mismanagement. There has been a massive reduction in the water table of the Orontes River basin in recent years, yet water requirements for crops have continued to rise.2 With the majority of local agriculture reliant on rainfall, this has increased the sensitivity of yields, planted areas, and production levels to weather patterns. It has also placed greater pressure on the area’s inadequate, partially damaged, and costly irrigation systems. Restor-

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ing the water/land balance is beyond the capacity of aid actors alone, but small-scale interventions must be a priority if the sustainability of the area’s most important source of income is to be assured.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **MODERNIZE IRRIGATION SYSTEMS.** The Syrian government had embarked on a policy of irrigation modernization prior to the conflict. Evidence on the long term prospects of aquifer sustainability in the Orontes watershed suggests that these technologies are still badly needed. Without these systems, local agriculture will struggle to drive local recovery today, and could have a bleak long term future. Any such activity must consider tensions over land rights, and proceed only with a detailed understanding of ownership claims.

- **CONSIDER INCENTIVIZING NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT.** More careful water and land use is necessary, but interventions of this kind could negatively affect agricultural revenues at a time when unemployment and poverty are high. Efforts to improve natural resource management should generally focus on interventions with a low impact on incomes, but where the potential for resource management improvements are high, incentive-based approaches should be considered.

- **ENGAGE FARMING COOPERATIVES.** Farming cooperatives are local organizations with a strong tradition of collaboration. They offer essential insight into local needs, and are likely to present innovative solutions for navigating impediments to local production shortfalls, responding to weaknesses in the Syrian economy, and developing agriculture-related business in general. Seldom integrated into aid programming, they are found throughout NRH.

- **ESTABLISH WATER-USER ASSOCIATIONS.** Clearly defined structures and individual responsibilities should be established (or reestablished) to ensure the proper running and maintenance of irrigation systems, and to guarantee an equitable distribution of water to all users. Such an option should be explored in consultation with the local water ministry branch office in Homs.

- **DEVELOP FOOD-BASED MICRO-ENTERPRISES.** Train and support rural families, particularly female-headed households, to establish food-based small businesses, and provide additional production efficiency, quality standards, and marketing advice and support. This has already had some minor success in the area. Support to collaboration between pastoralists, farmers, and local food processing plants for developing integrated supply chains should be part of this process.

- **PROVIDE AGRICULTURAL INPUTS.** Farmers are currently struggling to procure high quality seeds and fertilizers from local and international suppliers at reasonable prices. This has decreased farming revenues across the board. Financial support for agricultural inputs is likely to enable farmers to divert their own resources to the restoration of their business, and could create more local job opportunities. Prior local aid agency efforts to divert resources into the local economy have been cut short by the security services, but farming cooperatives are less prone to security interference and are well positioned to oversee distribution to ensure fairness, accountability, and impact.

**SCARCE LIVELIHOODS AND LOCAL POVERTY**

Needs data indicates that food remains a concern for many in NRH. That food is cited as a major local need is surprising in a largely agricultural area where yields have been strong. However, it brings immediate attention to the state of the local economy, and is indicative of local poverty and an inability to meet other food needs. Reports from local sources claim that as much as 60% of NRH’s population may be unemployed, and those that are in work are largely in low-paid jobs in agriculture.
This may explain the higher demand for livelihood support in larger urban areas, where alternatives to agriculture are scarce. As would be expected, NRH residents (i.e. those that endured besiegement) generally report fewer needs than IDP and returnee populations. However, the difference is particularly acute in locations where IDP populations are concentrated, specifically in the larger communities of Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu.

**Figure 1. Northern Rural Homs Needs Snapshot, June 2019**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **RELIEF ACTIVITIES MUST REMAIN AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE LOCAL RESPONSE.** Relatively high need in terms of food, shelter, and NFIs amongst IDPs reflects the shortfalls of government and existing aid services. Development work is certainly necessary in NRH, but relief is of pressing importance to many and highlights the scale of local poverty.

- **CAREFULLY NAVIGATE CONFLICT-RELATED GRIEVANCES.** Available data shows Taldu (and likely the wider Houla sub-area) presents the highest need for humanitarian relief, but working here demands attention to particular local dynamics around Sunni-Alawite grievances exacerbated by the conflict. Aid actors are therefore advised to balance support across

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3 See section 1.2 for a definition of this sub-area.
Sunni-majority communities and with Alawite communities outside NRH, many of which are equally poor. This would ideally include coordination with neighboring governance bodies, such as those in neighboring Masyaf district.

- **FOCUS ON LIVELIHOOD SUPPORT, PARTICULARLY IN NRH’S LARGER TOWNS.** A lack of economic opportunity is at the heart of poverty in NRH. Needs data disaggregated by community shows that livelihoods are of acute concern to civilians, returnees, and IDPs alike. Employment and income are of greatest concern in larger urban areas, where opportunities within agriculture may be more difficult to access, and where few alternatives but military service and ad hoc menial work are available. Livelihood programmes are therefore likely to have the greatest impact in Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu.

- **PROVIDE SUPPORT TO THE LOCAL EDUCATION SYSTEM.** Schools have been heavily damaged and many teachers were fired subsequent to reconciliation. The Homs-based education directorate has embarked on a reconstruction programme for the sector, but progress has reportedly been slow. Meanwhile, families have struggled to meet the small cost of sending their children to school, and there are reports that growing numbers of students are dropping out to find work. Financial incentives to keep children in school are recommended, as is peripheral support to the government’s school reconstruction programme (equipment, supplies).

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4 COAR has engaged its data provider for clarification on the apparent anomalies in this graph. Preliminary discussions indicate a change in methodology.
GOVERNMENT-LINKED AID ORGANIZATIONS ARE AMONG THE ONLY PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES. Civil society in NRH is particularly weak, with few existing organizations and limited prospects for the emergence of potential new partners. Even local community charities which are normally present in communities across Syria are essentially nonexistent in NRH. This is a result of the comprehensive evacuations undertaken after reconciliation and the subsequent security restrictions imposed on the area. Partner options for relief and development actors are therefore limited largely to government-linked organizations, particularly SARC. The only other potential partner organizations uncovered during research were two small Homs-based charity organizations that have previously been subject to government pressure.
PART 2: KEY THEMES

Ar-Rastan Dam, low water level in 2018. Credit: Mapio
1. CONTEXT AND POPULATION

1.1 AREA INTRODUCTION

Northern Rural Homs (NRH) was besieged from 2013 until May 2018, when local armed groups opted to reconcile rather than confront a large-scale government offensive. Perhaps surprisingly, the area was never designated as ‘besieged’ by the United Nations (UN) throughout this period. Certainly, conditions were arguably better than many other siege locations; local producers were able to meet most food demand, commercial exchange was conducted via local smuggling routes, and violence resulted in relatively lower displacement and loss of life than most other besieged areas.\(^5\) However, NRH endured years of restrictions on the free movement of goods and people, frequent attacks by sectarian militias in peripheral pro-government communities, and persistent encirclement by state-affiliated forces, including the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), National Defense Force militias (NDF), Iran-backed foreign militias, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).\(^6\)

Following reconciliation, NRH was affected by many of the same issues observed in other post-reconciled locations, most of which derive from the government’s tenuous commitment to the terms of local agreements. Hundreds of arrests have been conducted, the state has largely ignored public service rehabilitation, and local political bodies have been beholden to higher authorities in Homs city. Despite a stabilization in the local security environment, services have therefore declined in quality since the end of the siege, and poverty and unemployment have remained particularly high. Outside the efforts of residents themselves, concerted attention to NRH’s recovery has been lacking since the M5 Highway was restored in summer last year.

NRH’s collective experience of besiegement and reconciliation is the area’s most evident unifying feature, but it is not the only one pertinent to a rounded understanding of the post-reconciliation political economy. State-linked families have occupied formal and informal positions of power for decades, serving as an extension of government power into an area which has traditionally received limited state investment and is of little strategic and economic interest to the Syrian elite. This remains the case, but it is notable that family clientelism has assumed an additional layer of complexity in a more heavily securitized post-reconciliation context. Indeed, families appear to have moved so close to the military and political establishment in NRH that most have shown limited interest in playing a significant role in local recovery.

The area is also defined by the critical importance of agriculture to the NRH economy. Stretching from Qattinah Lake to the Ar-Rastan Dam, the Orontes River watershed is amongst the most fertile parts of Syria. Renowned for their productivity, these lands are under growing strain however: Decades of land and water mismanagement have resulted in massive reductions in the water table, the effects of which are undermining local recovery in the present moment, and could have dire implications for community cohesion and the long-term sustainability of the local economy. As this report seeks to highlight, many of the area’s current challenges can be traced to (and at least partially addressed through) agricultural production, and a focus on the sector is strongly encouraged.

\(^5\) The imposition of a de-escalation zone in mid-2017 was also a factor, with reports that levels of violence decreased in the area from this time until the brief offensive that led to the area’s reconciliation. See, for instance: ACLED (2018) *Violence in Syria’s De-escalation Zones*

\(^6\) Conditions worsened in the lead up reconciliation, as aid convoys were obstructed, civilians authorized for travel were prevented from bringing food into the area, and local council organizations were forced to institute additional taxation in an attempt to fund ailing public services.
1.2 STUDY AREA

This report considers NRH to cover the former opposition-held enclave designated as a de-escalation zone by the Astana powers in May 2017. Its borders are therefore determined largely by the prevailing political dynamics of that time, and the area’s subsequent post-reconciliation security arrangements. Viewed from above, this area is a patchwork of fields punctuated by small-medium sized communities, the largest of which is Ar-Rastan (~40,000 people), which sits on the border of Homs and Hama governorates. The Orontes River skirts the northeastern fringes of the area until the massive Ar-Rastan Dam, whereupon it turns south and runs parallel with the M5 Highway into Homs city. The area is not recognized as a single administrative unit in its own right, and spans two districts, Ar-Rastan and Homs, and three subdistricts, Taldu, Ar-Rastan, and Talbiseh. These subdistricts are named after the three largest and most politically and economically important communities in the area. Of note, the study area includes a ‘sub-area’, colloquially (and commonly) referred to as ‘Houla’. This area encompasses the towns of Taldu, Kafr Laha, and surrounding villages.7

Figure 3. Conflict Timeline

Note that this report uses Houla when referring to the area encompassing Taldu and the other communities listed, and is specific in its use of Taldu when referring to the town alone.
1.3 DISPLACEMENT

NRH’s first experience of displacement came during the Syrian government’s offensive and besiegement of Homs city between 2012-2014, when a large number of civilians relocated from the city to the northern countryside. Further numbers arrived in the area subsequent to the government’s seizure of Homs in May 2014, which required the evacuation of remaining members of the armed opposition. Precise numbers are unavailable to COAR, but the total number of arrivals to NRH as result of conflict in Homs city is in the tens of thousands. As noted below, an estimated 35,000 people evacuated NRH after its own reconciliation in 2018, of which only around 10,000 are thought to have been original NRH residents.8

From this point onward, NRH received few IDPs owing to the enforcement of the government-imposed siege. Most new arrivals came subsequent to sporadic government-led attacks on nearby areas, but in general, the military cordon around NRH limited those able to settle in the area. This was the case throughout the intensified conflict brought by the Russian military intervention, which concentrated its earliest airstrikes on areas in the vicinity of NRH in September 2015, supported a limited government offensive on NRH in October 2015, and enabled the SAA’s intermittent shelling of NRH’s main urban centers until the area was designated as de-escalation zone in mid-2017.9 The area’s besiegement by government-linked forces on all sides had a similarly restraining effect on displacement from NRH throughout this time, and departures were further limited by the fact that local conditions compared favorably to many other opposition-held areas.

With the notable exception of Jaish Al-Tawheed,10 the reconciliation of NRH in May 2018 led to the evacuation of the majority of armed opposition combatants. In just under two weeks, nine convoys had transported an estimated 35,000 people to Syria’s northern governorates, with each group including a variety of armed opposition group members, opposition political representatives, and civil society activists. Although swiftly completed, the process was fraught with complications. Turkish authorities held several of the earlier convoys at Abu Al-Zindin crossing for unknown reasons, and it was not until armed groups in the north pressured Turkish

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8 See Figure 4 for population changes pre- and post-reconciliation in NRH.
9 This triggered the displacement of 6,000 people to NRH.
10 Jaish Al-Tawheed was one of the largest armed opposition groups in NRH; it reached a separate reconciliation agreement which allowed for its fighters to reform as a consolidated NDF unit in 2018. This dynamic is covered in more detail in section 5.1.
representatives that the first batch of evacuees were permitted to enter Turkish-controlled parts of Aleppo governorate. Ultimately, however, the disorganized evacuation process led to the redirection of seven of the nine convoys to Idleb and Hama governorates, and likely dissuaded many from leaving NRH entirely.

Following the evacuations, civilian committees comprised of former opposition local council members were established to coordinate vetting and returns with government authorities. An estimated 3,188 individuals returned as part of this process within the first two months of reconciliation. Ordinarily, returns after the reconciliation of former opposition-held areas mainly comprise government supporters and middle class families that fled the area at the first signs of local conflict. However, it is unclear whether returns to NRH at this time reflect common post-reconciliation patterns. It has been suggested that the majority of those to return to the area to date are people that were evacuated to Idleb as part of the reconciliation process, only to return owing to the dreadful conditions in northern Syria.11 Prominent family figures are reported to have exploited their connections with military elites to serve as intermediaries in this process, and this dynamic could feature in future returns.

<table>
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<th>November 2017</th>
<th>June 2018</th>
<th>June 2019</th>
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<td>7,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>107,924</td>
<td>121,673</td>
<td>98,071</td>
<td>100,389</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Northern Rural Homs Population Figures at last census (2004), pre-reconciliation (November 2017), post-reconciliation (June 2018) and latest available.*

### 14 HOUSING, LAND & PROPERTY

Local housing, land, and property rights-related issues in NRH are numerous and present several challenges to post-reconciliation stability. Combined with the various socio-political tensions outlined throughout this report, the failure to recognize the rights of residents and displaced people could mean that the residual effects of conflict do not fully dissipate, and that unresolved ownership issues will serve as the basis for renewed local conflict. This is not anticipated to take the form of outright confrontation, but could surface as localized inter-communal disputes and deeper civilian mistrust of governance actors, both formal and informal. Careful attention must therefore be paid to the potential for aid programmes to reinforce injustices and divisions around HLP rights.

11 For more information please see: Siege Watch, *Tenth Quarterly Report Part 2 - The Culmination of ‘Surrender or Die’* (2018). The report explains that there are two reasons that are likely to explain the large number of individuals return within one month of the reconciliation. First, northern rural Homs is of no strategic importance to the Government of Syria beyond the M5 Highway. Once they reopened the highway in June 2018, the area became a low priority. Second, there is a high proportion of defected military officers in the area that retain links with government officials that facilitated their return.
which could lead to future instability, as well as the disenfranchisement of conflict-affected residents, IDPs, and returnees.

At first glance, NRH’s built environment is not particularly complex; conurbations are small to medium in size, population density is low, and buildings are generally low-rise in design. Moreover, the likelihood that the Syrian government will apply legal measures to seize public property is low, even though circumstances in the area create multiple opportunities for doing so: Scope for the application of Laws 3, 40, and 16 arises from pockets of informal housing and large-scale destruction in some areas (especially Ar-Rastan and Taldu); the destruction of the cadastral records office in Ar-Rastan diminishes legal challenges to government ownership decisions; and thousands of displaced opposition-linked figures have yet to settle their status with the security services, creating space for the government to seize homes under anti-terror legislation. Realistically, however, NRH is low on the list of government reconstruction priorities and the most pressing HLP issues have instead emerged from more localized dynamics.

One such dynamic is the prevalence of disputes over farmland and agricultural infrastructure. Formal and informal justice mechanisms have so far failed to address these challenges — many of which predate the conflict — largely because more amicable pre-war relationships over agricultural boundaries have been disrupted by conflict-related political, sectarian, and inter-familial differences. The purest examples of this are found in the Houla area, where Syria’s Sunni majority heartland bleeds into the predominantly Alawite coastal governorate of Tartous. Houla was the site of numerous sectarian attacks and massacres, and grievances over such incidents have led to increased contestation of access routes, farmland, pastures, and agricultural infrastructure (mainly irrigation canals). With reports of inter-communal violence in the post-reconciliation period, the possibility that such differences will lead to prolonged disputes and the dispossession of farmers and pastoralists unable to defend their ownership claims must not be discounted. Indeed, NRH is already facing water shortages in the Orontes River watershed, and the possibility that this will drive further competition and conflict within the HLP space means that land use and improved water management practices are an essential complement to formal and informal legal proceedings.

An additional HLP issue in NRH arises from the difficulty property owners currently experience when seeking to reconstruct, rehabilitate, or improve their homes and businesses. Satisfactory ownership documentation is required by the security services upfront, but this presents several problems: first, property exchanges made outside of official government institutions are unrecognized unless a local notable can be leveraged to support the claim; second, local reports suggest that only claims made by women will be validated when the area’s cadastral records office is eventually restored; third, the use of legal channels to demonstrate ownership where none is recognized is expensive; and fourth, local reports suggest that securing official recognition of ownership often involves bribing government officials—and with no guarantee of success. Where the case is considered as clear-cut, repairs are of course underway across NRH. However, the destruction of the cadastral records office has combined with these various restrictions to effectively freeze many civilian-led property restoration efforts. It has also placed many at the mercy of a government which has shown little interest in promoting recovery and normalization.

12 Some concern was raised by researchers that the public is anxious that Law 10 will be applied in Ar-Rastan. To date, however, there have been no signs that this legislation will be pursued.
13 Most of which were committed in the early phases of the Syrian conflict, between 2011 and 2013.
14 This is common to all post-reconciled areas.
15 It is likely this directive is linked to the government’s broader returns policy in NRH. As described in section 5.4, the government and its security forces are actively obstructing male returns, particularly military-aged males, likely as a means of enforcing local control and punishment. Men residing in NRH have increasingly been transferring property ownership to female family members to get around this issue, but this is often too costly for many.
2. GOVERNANCE & SERVICES

SECTION SUMMARY

After having been under the administration of opposition-affiliated local council organizations since 2012, formal state governance structures were restored upon NRH’s reconciliation in May 2018.

However, these local governance structures have not resumed all pre-war functions, and have been subordinated to governance bodies in Homs city, particularly the Homs City Council. Local governance bodies in NRH are therefore characterized by weak decision-making and limited financial authority.

This is a result of the area’s limited strategic and economic importance to the political and military establishment, and efforts to enforce security and monitoring over former opposition-held communities.

Some state-administered public services were restored in the first six months following reconciliation, but the repair of the M5 Highway and the withdrawal of the Russian guarantor presence led to a halt in government spending and a deterioration in services.

Expectations that the government will broaden to serve the public interest beyond current levels are few. Syria’s central authorities have limited interest in doing so because there is little strategic value in resourcing recovery and, arguably, because they seek to punish a population strongly identified with the opposition.

Prominent local families in NRH have become the most meaningful local governance actor given their traditional linkages to the Syrian government and the military establishment, and the constraints imposed on civil society and the aid community.

Despite possessing the kind of networks, financing, and capacity to support recovery, they have shown limited community solidarity and are reportedly moved to act through mainly transactional forms of self-interest.

Aid actors are subject to the same constraints commonly found in government-controlled areas, but the operating context is arguably more challenging given the number of potential civil society partners is especially low.
2.1 FORMAL GOVERNANCE: STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

Formal governance structures in NRH are particularly weak, and there are currently few signs they will become more than merely bureaucratic partners for humanitarian and development actors out to the medium term. After having been under the administration of opposition-affiliated local councils for several years, formal state governance systems were restored upon reconciliation in May 2018. This process did not result in the immediate reimposition of local government authority however, and has instead seen a more staggered reintroduction of formal local governance bodies. For instance, in the area’s largest community, Ar-Rastan, the community’s municipality was subordinated to Homs City Council shortly after reconciliation, effectively placing this structure under governorate level authority. This remained the case after Syria’s local elections in September 2018, when the newly elected Ar-Rastan City Council was also subordinated to the city council in Homs. Local sources report this structure remains in place at the time of writing, and that all other city and municipal government bodies in NRH also fall within the purview of Homs City Council.

NRH FORMAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Three city councils are present in the study area, in Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu. As noted above, however, each of these has a lower degree of autonomy than most other city councils in Syria, and they are heavily dependent on the administrative and financial capacity of the Homs City Council. This equally applies to the area’s municipal government bodies headquartered in Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu, Ghanto, and Dar Khabira. Though each is comprised of an elected local council and an executive office, the ability of these bodies to fulfill the functions of their ordinary mandate is limited given the constraints described in this section. As a result, much of the practical decision-making power for NRH is located in Homs city, with local bodies rather more limited to local official bureaucratic functions. The main levers of political power and influence in NRH therefore, reside with the Homs City Council and the Homs Governorate Council (to include governorate council-linked ministerial committees and the Directorate of Technical Services). As in all other government-controlled areas, the Political Security Branch has final approval over all public spending in NRH.

Two factors likely explain the unhurried restoration of NRH’s local government bodies: first, the subordination of local political offices partially masks their limited capacity and finances, and; second, the incorporation of local governance bodies into higher level Homs-based authorities allows for a greater level of Syrian government control and scrutiny over local decision-making. Moreover, local government has traditionally been weak in NRH, and local sources argue that this has remained a deliberate feature of formal governance in the post-reconciliation period. Most of the rehabilitation work undertaken by local government was accomplished in the first six months after reconciliation: A number of government buildings were rehabilitated, the NRH section of the M5 was restored, and local power and water networks were repaired via ministerial-

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16 Homs hosts a governorate council, but its city council serves as a de facto governorate level authority as necessary.
17 Local sources report this includes mainly governmental department offices and some work to schools.
al directorate branch offices. However, after the Russian guarantor presence withdrew in October 2018, local government-managed public service projects have largely come to a halt. Local bodies have since shifted into what several sources describe as a bureaucratic role, concerned mainly with the collection of back taxes and coordination with local security services. Indeed, the withdrawal of the Russian ground presence and the repair of the M5 coincided with a sharp decline in service quality and consistency, deeper abnegation of government commitments to the NRH reconciliation agreement, and, in turn, greater public frustration with local authorities.

Expectations that local government functions will broaden to serve the public interest beyond current levels over the medium term are few. Local sources report that Syria’s central authorities have limited interest in empowering governance to improve conditions in the area, largely because there is little strategic value in resourcing local government to drive recovery, and because stymying recovery extends punishment for NRH’s past as an opposition enclave. This likely explains why there is currently little to no capacity within formal local government bodies to deliver meaningful public service projects, and why no government-led rehabilitation of any significance was uncovered in the course of this research.

Municipal and city council decision-makers are drawn largely from state-linked NRH prominent family members, many of whom relocated to government-held parts of Homs governorate during NRH’s besiegement, and were involved in advocating for local reconciliation. In most post-reconciled locations, the appointment of such political representatives is a source of tension, particularly where such figures are considered to have been placed into positions of power by an arguably discriminatory election process, and have failed to deliver on the promises of local agreements.\footnote{A. Favier & M. Kostrz, European University Institute (2019), \textit{Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?}} In NRH, however, there is reportedly considerable public apathy towards the area’s elected representatives. Voter turnout for the local council elections was particularly low,\footnote{See, for instance: OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies (2018) \textit{What are the Local Council Elections Telling us?} Low turnout was not necessarily just because locals decided not to participate. Many were actively and passively prevented from participation by the requirement to vote in one’s own constituency, effectively barring all IDPs and refugees from the process.} and whilst this reflected the broader national indifference to the election process in general, it also spoke to local reports that civilians feel they have no real influence over local power dynamics. This is symptomatic of the common expectations of communities that sided largely with the opposition and have since fallen back under government control. But it also echoes the deeply entrenched role of prominent families in NRH’s political economy, and the domineering influence these elites have over practically all aspects of civil life.
2.2 INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

Like other locations in which Syria’s central government authorities have finite capacity, few strategic interests, and little in the way of present or potential economic assets, informal actors serve multiple *de facto* governance functions. Prominent families have filled this gap in NRH for generations, and have been empowered to do so by a combination of links to (and service within) government and the military establishment. Since reconciliation, prominent families are effectively the only stakeholders with the network and capital to operate in the governance space given the constraints imposed on civil society and the aid community, the poor local business climate, and the focus of the security apparatus on monitoring and enforcement. However, their appetite for driving recovery appears limited, and in most cases, they have aligned with the priorities of the Syrian government.

**PROFUNDANT FAMILIES**

In many ways, the experience of opposition control and reconciliation in NRH represented a temporary disruption, rather than a fundamental restratification of prominent family status, activities, and inter-familial relationships. Continuity in prominent family dynamics can be traced to the broadly pro-government stance of many local notables throughout the conflict, as well as their common and longstanding association with the Syrian military and security establishment (especially in Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh). Such forms of prominent family loyalism provided a platform for the swift return of well-established pre-war prominent family dynamics, and the retention of their importance to the local political economy, both as patrons to a clientelist local state apparatus, and as independent economic, political, and social actors in their own right.

At the same time, however, conflict and reconciliation in NRH have also produced a series of important changes to prominent family activities in the governance domain. The first, and most obvious, is that a greater proportion of prominent family patronage has been directed towards local development. However, it is notable that most of this activity coincided with concerted government efforts to improve service provision between May (reconciliation) and October 2018 (the end of the Russian guarantor presence). Like most post-reconciled areas, prominent families helped finance the restoration and improvement of public buildings and transportation infrastructure, to include rubble clearance and road repair. Key investors in the early post-reconciliation period included those with strong government connections and/or major business interests in NRH’s largest communities, to include the Farzat, Ayoub, Qzeir and Omar in Ar-Rastan, and the Al-Khateeb, Bakkour, and Al-Dallah in Talbiseh.

Although delivered at the personal expense of families themselves, local sources claim that prominent family involvement in local recovery has been motivated largely by attempts to consolidate Syrian government authority, and to buttress prominent family standing. This is unsurprising, and is a common feature of all other post-reconciliation contexts. However, it is striking that COAR sources were deeply skeptical that a sense of community solidarity has been a factor in prominent family decision-making. Several sources drew attention to their belief that, since late 2018, prominent families seldom advocate for and/or support civil society and community-led initiatives. Based on previous research undertaken as part of the broader NOSAP project, it would appear that the involvement of NRH prominent families in this regard is indeed lower than other post-reconciled areas subject to similar dynamics. Of the seven sources contacted as part of this research, only one instance of family support to local civil society was uncovered, in Ar-Rastan, where the Farzat

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20 Several of these families are profiled in both the stakeholder section at the end of this section and in Annexe 1.
family have reportedly funded the Al-Afiye local charity organization to purchase equipment and materials for local health clinics\textsuperscript{21}. This is noteworthy given the massive wealth and local status of some local families, such as the Tlass, which is often regarded as pro-opposition.

Whether prominent family involvement in local governance is more transactional than altruistic is difficult to definitively determine. The assumption likely has its origin in a number of contributing factors, not least the heavily securitized local context, which strongly militates against the emergence and/or expansion of civil society and community-led initiatives. It may also partially derive from the comprehensive forced evacuation of community activists and civil society figures subsequent to reconciliation, as well as the longstanding inseparability of prominent family business and service provision dynamics in the area. Then again, none of these dynamics are especially unique to NRH compared to other post-reconciliation areas, and the most important consideration for relief and development organizations must therefore center around the potential motivations and interests of prominent families in recovery and rehabilitation.

The role of prominent families as primary governance actors in NRH is further enhanced by their relationship to local armed groups. Many prominent families were among the main agitators for a reconciliation agreement in May 2018, and several have since leveraged their influence over this process to develop a key stake in the formation and coordination of local NDF militias. This not only applies to largely pro-government families like the Al Dali, but is also observed in families more commonly identified with the opposition, most notably the Tlass family. There is reportedly contestation and occasional conflict between local NDF groups in the area,\textsuperscript{22} which reports suggest is linked to the various connections of families with different bodies within the Syrian intelligence and security establishment. In effect, divisions between NDF groups reflect divisions between prominent families, and serve as a reminder of family competition and the potential for the conflation of family activities with security-based objectives.

\section*{2.3 Aid Environment Overview}

Emergency needs and demand for public services have been rising in NRH over the past nine months, but these increases have not been met with a concomitant response from the aid community. The number of non-governmental and charitable organizations operating in the area is extremely low (Section 3.1), their operations are severely limited in scale and scope, and there is a general sense among the population that the area has been neglected by the humanitarian and development community at large. Presently, the only actor with any significant capacity in NRH is the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which has branch offices in Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu. SARC reportedly coordinates effectively with local municipal government bodies, and though it has a good local reputation, its low coverage and concentration on humanitarian activities is the cause of some local complaint. Sources in the vicinity of Talbiseh report that aid actors meet just 25\% of needs that they could arguably fulfill, and others insist this is a picture which is reflected across the area more broadly.

Local sources report the cause for massive aid shortfalls is linked to the discriminatory treatment of former opposition-held communities by the Syrian government. The issues confronted by aid actors in other post-reconciled areas are therefore equally present in NRH, and are likely to include: lengthy and inconsistent approval application processes; the sudden and unexplained revocation of project permissions by government ministries and intelligence services; restrictions on the conduct of independent needs, monitoring, and evaluation assessments; and a general resistance to projects which overstep the degree to which local authorities are willing to permit local aid dividends.

Regarding the latter, there is evidence to suggest that even limited aid operations can be consid-

\textsuperscript{21} Al-Afiye is reportedly a small charity organization focused mainly on the provision of medical equipment and grants for surgery undertaken outside NRH.

\textsuperscript{22} The most notorious example is found between branches of the NDF linked to the Al Dali and Ayoub families in Ar-Rastan.
erected controversial by the authorities in NRH. In early 2019, two local charity organizations, Al Berr Association and Um Al-Zinnar, were forced to indefinitely suspend a small-scale cash distribution project in Dar Al-Kabirah after permission was revoked by local security services. No reasons were given, but the case highlights the scrutiny under which aid organizations operate, as well as the extent to which the authorities intend to control the distribution of resources and, by extension, the local recovery process.

**THE TLASS FAMILY**

In reality, the relationship of the Tlass to the state is more complex than its common designation as a ‘pro-opposition’ family. Most assumptions around the Tlass derive from the fact that the family’s most prominent figure, Mustafa Tlass, former Defence Minister for over 30 years, left Syria in protest against the government’s besiegement of his hometown of Ar-Rastan. His powerful sons also took a strong stand against the government: Manaf, the former head of the Republican Guard and advisor to President Bashar Al-Assad, defected early on, whilst Firas, formerly the second wealthiest man in Syria, relocated much of his business abroad and pledged to finance the opposition.

After Mustafa Tlass died in 2017, his sons then acted (from abroad) as key negotiators in the reconciliation of NRH, but they have since reportedly done little to support local recovery. Why they were so active during reconciliation, and why they have yet to actively support local recovery, is unknown. The most obvious explanation is that Firas and Manaf have been effectively excommunicated from Syria’s elite inner circle, and the Tlass family name has thus suffered heavy reputational damage with the Government of Syria. However, it is also worth recalling that the wealth and status of the Tlass is founded on the family’s historic entanglement with the Syrian establishment, and that there are likely many hidden moving pieces between the two parties. Firas Tlass retains wide-ranging and important business interests in the country, and many Tlass family members in NRH maintained their support for the government throughout the conflict. Such factors highlight the intricacy of family-state relations, and the importance of a nuanced understanding of prominent family engagement by humanitarian and development actors.
2.4 SERVICES OVERVIEW

Though many state-provided services were disrupted when the armed opposition was in control over NRH, some, particularly health and education, were in fact better administered compared to the pre-war period in terms of their quality and availability. Local sources attribute this to partnerships between local aid organizations and cross-border INGOs, particularly within health, education, food security, and livelihoods. When the reconciliation agreement was reached, however, these activities were shut down, and opposition-linked civil society and charity organization staff were forced to leave the area. Initially, this did not result in a rapid deterioration of local services. Local sources report that the Russian government played an important role in pressuring the Syrian state to maintain service quality in the immediate post-reconciliation period. However, since the withdrawal of Russian Military Police in October 2018, state-provided services in NRH have deteriorated, and, as explained throughout this section, formal and informal resources to correct this situation are severely lacking.

POWER, WATER & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Power, water, and telecoms infrastructure have experienced considerable damage, most of which occurred during NRH’s besiegement.23 Regarding power, reports indicate that electricity networks in and around Ar-Rastan are most affected, though it should be noted that the nearby Az-Zara Power Station and Ar-Rastan Hydroelectric Dam are still in operation. Some repair and rehabilitation work was undertaken by the government shortly after reconciliation, leading to the restoration of power to all communities in the area. Supply from government networks is limited however: the majority of smaller communities (to include those in the Houla area, Ghanto, and Dar Kabirah) receive 3-6 hours of power per day, whilst the larger towns of Talbiseh and Ar-Rastan receive between 6-12 hours.24 Civilians have relied on solar panels as an alternative, which has proven cost-effective and accessible.

Though water network damage is not regarded as particularly significant, access to potable and non-potable water has been an issue of long-standing, growing, and major concern in NRH. Research undertaken elsewhere highlights that potable water issues are rooted in the inefficiencies of the current supply network and pollution at the Ain Altanour spring.25 These issues have prompted the government to deliver potable water by truck once or twice a week in many communities. Issues relating to non-potable sources are serious, and center mainly around the irrigation of farmland and the sustainability of the water table (these are covered in more detail in Section 4.1). Ultimately, the challenge of ensuring clean and reliable water supplies for both domestic and commercial purposes requires a concerted effort towards modernization of NRH’s entire water network. This equally applies to wastewater, for which most civilians are reliant on septic tank systems due to limited state-provided services.

State-managed telecom networks have reportedly improved after exchanges in Talbiseh, Ar-Rastan, and the Houla area were repaired, but internet services are both limited and inconsistent.26 Of note, the Minister of Telecommunication and Technology, Iyad Khatib, has stated that work is underway to restore internet to the entirety of NRH, but it is unknown when these works will be completed.27

ROADS & TRANSPORT

Both the Syrian government and prominent local families prioritized road repair in the immediate

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23 According to the Ministry of Electricity, it will cost nearly 12 billion SYP (~£18 million) to fully rehabilitate the network, and there is currently 200 million SYP (~£311,000) available to do so. For more information see: Enab Baladi (2018) SYP 31 Billion to Rehabilitate Infrastructure in Northern Rural Homs.
24 Local sources noted that civilians are required to pay a government fee in order to receive electricity. The fee is calculated as the following: the last paid electricity fee multiplied by the number of siege months (i.e. 36 payments) regardless of the fact that there was no electricity during the siege. Civilians are required to pay the full amount before state-provided electricity could reach their homes.
26 Indeed, it was only possible to contact researchers for this project at certain hours, and connections were often unsuccessful.
aftermath of reconciliation, but practically all of their efforts were concentrated on Syria’s most important land-based route, the M5 Highway, and roads in Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh. Notably, the M5, which passes through Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh, was repaired by government engineers within ten days of reconciliation at a cost of ~£3 million. Prominent families also stepped into to finance road repairs. But in line with claims that they have tended to focus on their own interests rather than the wider community, their sponsorship was concentrated mainly on routes linking wealthier urban areas.

Elsewhere, roads are in a poor condition and are impassable in places. State managed rubble clearance projects are also limited. For example, roads leading to Ar-Rastan’s main market remain damaged, and the majority of stores in this area are closed. The municipality has reportedly provided rubble clearance services to businesspeople for a fee, but unless a majority of market traders agree to pay for this service, the market cannot reopen.

As in many other reconciled areas, public transportation is limited, and private transportation is expensive given increased fuel prices across Syria. Civilians have therefore widely resorted to smuggled motorcycles for transportation, but the government has confiscated many of these vehicles and has prevented owners from refueling by implementing the smart card system. These measures are reportedly linked to efforts to remove unregistered vehicles from circulation and to enable closer monitoring of the local population.

HEALTH & EDUCATION
Health and medical care are likely the most neglected and nonfunctional services in NRH. The majority of the medical staff and specialist doctors left NR at the start of the conflict, and what private healthcare is available is expensive. Some communities, such as Farhaniyeh and Makrumiyeh, have no locally available health services whatsoever. For communities of their size, it is unsurprising that there are no major hospitals in NRH. Several medical centers are operated by SARC, but their services are limited and civilians must travel to Homs city to receive specialist care or surgery. There are currently no reported efforts to develop health services in the area.

Reports from last year indicated that 80% of schools in NRH had been completely destroyed. Since this time, the Education Ministry has implemented an ongoing project to rehabilitate 65 schools in the area, but it is understood that this initiative has yet to advance beyond the planning stage. In the meantime, some state- and community-led efforts to restore educational facilities have been undertaken in larger communities, namely Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh, but the state of the sector is reported as extremely poor. The recovery of the local school system has also been hampered by reports that the government has dismissed all teachers and school staff that worked under armed opposition control. Officials explained this was decision was taken for ‘security reasons’, but the move has inevitably worsened the quality of education in the area and lowered the baseline from which the local school system must now recover.

CIVIL DOCUMENTATION
Following reconciliation, a government civil documentation center was established in NRH for two months. This center received those seeking to register births, deaths, and marriages that took place during opposition control, as these events had yet to be recognized by Syria’s Interior Ministry. This center is now closed, and civilians are now required to travel to Homs to obtain recognition for events previously only registered by opposi-
tion-affiliated civil bodies. Importantly, however, those submitting a registration requests must be vetted and cleared to do by the intelligence services. This applies to collection of any official documentation, to include even university transcripts. As a result, many civilians are reluctant to apply for this documentation give then they risk scrutiny from intelligence and security services, or may be subject to military conscription.

GOVERNANCE STAKEHOLDERS

• **MUNICIPAL COUNCILS**: Local level formal government bodies comprised of two parts: the Executive Office (see below), and the local council. Though limited in their practical capacity, municipal councils play a role in coordinating mukhtars and other local figures.

• **EXECUTIVE OFFICE**: 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.

• **HOMS CITY COUNCIL**: Formal government body which effectively holds decision-making power and jurisdiction over governance bodies local to NRH. Led by the elected representative, Abdullah Al-Bawab.

• **PROMINENT FAMILIES**: Informal governance actors and the most influential local actors given limitations of formal governance structures, aid agencies and civil society. Some representation within local formal governance bodies but this affords limited power and influence. Several of the most important families are described in more detail in the social and economy stakeholder sections, and methods for their engagement are described throughout.

• **HOMS DIRECTORATE FOR TECHNICAL SERVICES**: Governorate level civil service institution which provides technical oversight for development projects which are beyond the capacity of local government. Staffed by engineering, management, scientific, and administration professionals. Practically all but the smallest projects are likely to invite the involvement of the Directorate given the low capacity of local local governance bodies in NRH.
3. COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

SECTION SUMMARY

Pre-war, social cohesion in NRH was generally good, and was based on widespread community reliance on agriculture for both livelihoods and a shared sense of culture and tradition. Some economic competition was in evidence between prominent families, and there were some nonviolent disputes over land ownership.

Relations between different social groups have inevitably been tested by conflict, besiegement, and reconciliation, which has exacerbated pre-existing social tensions and given rise to potential new social fissures.

First, prominent families retain their status as NRH’s leading figures by virtue of their association with the military and government and local business interests. Their relationship with the community has deteriorated however, and they are now more commonly identified with the government than the local community.

Second, civil society experienced growth during opposition control, only to recede to a point of extreme weakness subsequent to reconciliation. As a result, humanitarian, and development organizations will find it difficult to look beyond SARC.

Third, long standing competition between Sunni and Alawite populations over land and resources has the potential to devolve into violence as a result of conflict-related grievances. Balancing support across sectarian lines is necessary, but will be challenging given the strong influence of Alawites in the NRH security apparatus.

Challenges to increased participation of women in civic life are arguably greater in NRH given most opportunities outside the household lie in farming and agriculture.

The number of men in the area has massively reduced since reconciliation, and has likely been a factor in increased female school dropout rates, a higher number of family relocations, and more early marriages.
3.1 COMMUNITY COHESION

NRH is a predominantly Sunni Arab rural community, with small Sunni Turkman and Bedouin communities scattered on the fringes of urban centers. Social cohesion was reportedly high pre-war, which derived mainly from the community’s reliance on agriculture and the collective experience of working and trading in the same fields and markets. Indeed, local sources describe that agriculture has helped forge a shared sense of tradition, and contributes to fairly homogeneous societal values.

These relationships have inevitably been tested by the conflict however, and three dynamics have been identified as important to a revised understanding of the local social landscape. First, that prominent families still dominate social organization in NRH, but locals report that families now appear closer to the government than to the local community. Second, that civil society is practically nonexistent in NRH owing to reconciliation and tight security restrictions; civilians now have few mechanisms through which to take collective action. And third, NRH’s society is now more strongly defined by its ‘otherness’ than at any point in recent decades, especially with respect to several neighboring Alawite communities.

PROMINENT FAMILY DYNAMICS

As noted in the section on governance, prominent families in NRH have traditionally acquired local influence by dominating parts of the local economy and through association with the military and government. It remains common for prominent family members to inherit or enter the family business, or to join the Syrian political-military establishment.

This strategy afforded families a respected position in the community, and was a key factor in the retention of prominent family influence and authority throughout the conflict. The widespread affiliation of prominent families with government also made them important figures in reconciliation negotiations. Indeed, local sources report that populations were more willing to reconcile when community notables were involved in reconciliation negotiations.

After the Syrian government reinstated its control over NRH, pre-war prominent families resumed their authority, and became even more entwined with the security establishment. Their relationship with the community has deteriorated however; prominent families are blamed across NRH for failing to deliver on their promises subsequent to reconciliation, and their involvement with local armed groups has done little to improve their reputation. Local sources note that some prominent families have pushed family members to join state-linked NDF militia, and other major families, such as the Ayoub, have even opted to form their own NDF units. This has not only enhanced the authority of some families, it has also made many complicit in the security restrictions which weigh heavily on the majority of the population. With a few notable exceptions (such as the Farzat family), it is also notable that prominent families have done little to burnish their reputation by means of public service delivery or investment. This finding also applies to families which advocated for reconciliation, but which have since taken something of a backseat in local recovery, such as the Tlass family.

As noted in Section 2.2, the actions of prominent families subsequent to reconciliation indicate closer alignment with government and military elites than with the community. This suggests that

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33 Two main examples are the Tlass Family and the Farzat Family. The Tlass have had numerous international companies, run by Firas Tlass, and his brother, Manaf Tlass, was a former head of the Republican Guard and a close confidant of President Bashar Al-Assad. Despite the relocation of many of its members, the Tlass remain a very prominent family in Ar-Rastan. Meanwhile, The Farzat have several economic companies and have members who are members of the Air Force Intelligence.

34 Some families, like the Farzat, have contributed more greatly to local rehabilitation than others. Though it should be noted that most of these efforts were concentrated in the earlier post-reconciliation period.
their engagement in humanitarian and development programming may be fraught with many of the same risks as engaging government representatives directly. That said, the relative weakness of other actors in the area means prominent families are a key interlocutor for intervening agencies. Where prominent family interests align with project objectives, aid agencies are likely to experience fewer challenges securing and maintaining permissions, operating with greater safety, and harnessing a greater proportion of local political and economic capital in general. At the same time, projects must consider the potential impact of prominent family engagement in terms of community acceptance and the potential for elite capture.

**WEAK CIVIL SOCIETY**

Like much of Syria, pre-conflict civil society in NRH was limited, small-scale, and isolated from external support. After expanding during opposition control with support from foreign aid actors, civil society has since regressed significantly since reconciliation. The evacuation of opposition political administrations, activists, and civil society organizations is cited as the main cause of the sector’s sudden degeneration, but the prevailing operating context is also strongly prejudiced against the re-emergence of civil society organizations in general. For example, local sources note that there are currently no open community centers in NRH, and that a security permit is required for civilians to meet in groups of four or more. Despite working widely in other post-reconciled areas, this means that local charity organizations and religious-based charities are virtually nonexistent in NRH. The only charities found to be operating in the area are the Al-Birr w Al-Ihsan Association and Um Al Zinnar, both of which have had their relatively modest project portfolio trimmed by the local security services since reconciliation. Moreover, local intelligence branches are regularly tracking and detaining individuals that were (or claimed to have been) involved in civil society activities.

As noted, there is also an evident lack of support and funding for civil society from prominent families and business figures. Indeed, when prominent families do conduct local development projects, such as road rehabilitation or street cleaning, they generally hire private contractors as opposed to funding locally-led initiatives or foundation-type organizations. This is striking when compared to other post-reconciled locations, such as Eastern Ghouta, which hosts an array of community initiatives in receipt of support from local notable figures despite similarly restrictive security constraints. Under current conditions, it is highly unlikely that humanitarian, development, or peace-building organizations will be able to look beyond state-linked NGOs like SARC and Syria Trust for Development when working in NRH. Moreover, efforts to stimulate the emergence of formalized civil society structures are unlikely to meet with success, and pose considerable protection risks to those involved. Working ‘around’ the Syrian government through civil society is therefore largely unfeasible in NRH at this time.

**SUNNI-ALAWITE CONFLICT-RELATED GRIEVANCES**

Sectarian grievances and competition over resources have been a major source of tension both during the conflict, and in the post-reconciliation period. The two most serious examples are in the Sunni majority Houla region, which sits on the frontier of the predominantly Alawite coastal governorates of Tartous and Lattakia, and in the northern peripheries of Ar-Rastan, which neighbors the Alawite villages of Rabia, Zaha, and Qabu. Heavy fighting and (sometimes longrunning) disputes over agricultural lands erupted in these areas throughout the conflict, and a number of mass killings took place on both sides, particularly in Houla between 2011-2013. Reciprocal killings and kidnappings were widespread during the opposition’s control over NRH, and have left many communities with lingering concerns over the potential for future acts of revenge. Moreover, local reports suggest that sectarian differences are used as a basis to deny some civilians from accessing their land and using agricultural infrastructure which crosses sectarian lines.

The potential that sectarian differences will ex-
tend beyond land disputes and devolve into violence is a serious risk to humanitarian and development organizations. Areas affected by this dynamic also present a distinct experience of besiegement which must be acknowledged in the development and delivery of aid programming. To that end, local sources emphasize that assistance ensures it is regarded as fairly distributed by Sunni and Alawite communities. Equitable distribution will be challenging however, particularly because the Alawite community holds a disproportionate amount of influence over local political and security dynamics in NRH via their linkages to NRH-based NDF militia. Moreover, weapons were confiscated from Sunnis subsequent to reconciliation, yet Alawites were permitted to retain light arms. The firmer grip of the Alawites over local security means extended and/or expanded contestation is likely to disproportionately affect Sunni populations, thereby undermining the ability of many locals to fully recover from years of conflict and besiegement.
32 GENDER

NRH is a traditionally rural conservative Arab society in which gender-based discrimination against women reflects their general treatment throughout most of Syria. This is evidenced across education, employment, and politics, but is arguably more acute given that most opportunities for women to participate in civic life outside the household lie mainly in farming and agriculture. Field researcher impressions suggest around 80% of employed women in NRH work in crop farming and livestock, with most others working menial jobs and professions commonly taken by women in Syria (teaching and administrative positions). The overall number of women in the workplace has increased after reconciliation, largely because they experience greater freedom of movement compared to men, and are generally viewed as less of a threat to government authority. This has compensated for the fact that local men are often either under arms, have been evacuated in large numbers, or are at risk of conscription and arrest. However, whilst this is broadly positive for women, it must be acknowledged that a reduced male role has also had negative effects on women in NRH. Indeed, combined with increased post-reconciliation local poverty, fewer male breadwinners have likely been a factor in increased female school dropout rates, a higher number of family relocations, and more early marriages. Indeed, local sources report that the number of men in the area has diminished so much that polygamy has grown in popularity since reconciliation.

SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- **Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC):** Humanitarian organization renowned for close association with government and alleged links to security services. By far the most capable aid organization in NRH, but is only able to partially meet the needs of local communities and primarily works within relief.

- **Farzat family:** Prominent local business family that owns vegetable oil and plastic factories in the area. Provider of employment opportunities in Ar-Rastan since reconciliation, and have financed the municipality to issue contracts for rubble removal projects. Respected by locals, but forced to pay fees to NDF for ‘protection’.

- **Tlass family:** Mustafa Tlass served as Defence Minister for over 30 years. This created a strong association of military service within his own family, and across the wider NRH area. After the Syrian uprisings however, he fled abroad with other leading Tlass family members, to include his son, Manaf, who defected from his post as head of the Republican Guard and advisor to President Al-Assad. This led many to associate the Tlass with the opposition, but a large number remain in the area, they were heavily involved in reconciliation negotiations, and retain local business interests in the area, mainly via Firas Tlass. Firas is the second born son of Mustafa Tlass, formerly the second wealthiest man in Syria, and owner of the massive MAS conglomerate.

- **Al-Birr w Al-Ihsan Association:** National Syrian NGO with a branch office in Homs. Has a good local reputation, in part because of its Islamic orientation. Its activities are few, its influence is weak and has been subject to interference by security services. Operates a medical center in Ar-Rastan in collaboration with SARC and the municipality.
NRH confronts acutely challenging economic conditions stemming from a combination of its limited value to the national economy, severe local labor shortages, few potential opportunities, and the significant short and long term issues confronting its only real economic pillar, agriculture.

Land in this area supports a great diversity of crops and is renowned as one of the most fertile parts of Syria. However, production was beginning to suffer in the years just prior to the conflict, as a combination of drought, poor policy choices, and natural resource mismanagement triggered negative coping strategies and increased rural-urban migration.

In a reflection of national issues, the price of agricultural inputs have increased production costs at a time when local poverty and unemployment is high and commodity prices are stabilizing in government-controlled areas. Damaged, costly, and out-dated irrigation systems increase the risk these issues will exacerbate growing natural resource shortfalls and the sensitivity of agriculture to weather patterns.

NRH’s main urban centers have long been associated with military service and an unusually high number of military personnel, mainly through prominent state elites. This was an important source of employment pre-war, and has carried through to the post-reconciliation period in the form of recruitment and conscription into NDF militia.

Thousands of people were removed from the local labor market due to the forced evacuations that took place after reconciliation, and others have effectively been prevented from employment through security restrictions. Combined with reports of local poverty, this has caused major shifts in local labor patterns. Men are being driven into military service given the risk of detention and few alternative opportunities, and a reported 60% unemployment rate is pushing children to dropout of school and seek work.

Although some business has returned post-reconciliation, agriculture provides the bulk of opportunities for recovery. Efforts to create livelihoods and income from agriculture must, however, take place alongside resource management projects to ensure the sustainability of interventions by humanitarian and development actors.
4.1 SECTORAL OVERVIEW

PRE-WAR

With few resources but fertile agricultural land, NRH’s pre-war economy was (and remains) heavily weighted towards agriculture; however, even before the war, climate change, government policies, and infrastructure neglect were having a serious impact on local productivity. All other activities contributed relatively marginal revenues to the local economy, and the development of alternative industries and livelihoods was limited.\textsuperscript{35} That said, the association of the area’s prominent families with the Syrian military and political establishment created a local culture of military and government service, which had the indirect effect of generating additional public investment in urban areas pre-war—particularly via the now deceased former patriarch of the Tlass family, the long serving former Defense Minister, Mustafa Tlass. Centered mainly in Tlass’s hometown of Ar-Rastan however,
much of this was directed to the business interests of the Tlass and their elite affiliates, and did little to broaden the area’s economic portfolio.\textsuperscript{36} NRH’s economic resilience has therefore rested in the productivity of its land, but creeping problems of environmental and economic mismanagement were beginning to severely test the sustainability of the sector just prior to the Syrian uprisings.

**AGRICULTURE**

Land on either side of the Orontes River stretching from the Ar-Rastan Dam to the Qattinah Lake is considered as the bread basket of Homs governorate. The area has traditionally been planted year round with fruits (apples and grapes), vegetables (potatoes) and cereal grains (wheat and barley), with the key local cash crops being olives and almonds.\textsuperscript{37} NRH has long serviced the majority of local staple food demand, and surplus products were sold at markets in Homs city. It was reportedly common for entire families to derive sufficient income from a single family farm. Livestock and fisheries in the Orontes and at Qattineh Lake were also a strong feature of local agriculture, and there were also small-scale industrial food processing and packaging facilities, particularly in the vicinity of Ar-Rastan. Many of these facilities are linked to/owned by the area’s prominent families, particularly the Tlass, Ayoub, and Farzat, between which there was some (nonviolent) competition.

Although an ostensibly vibrant agricultural trade was in evidence pre-war, agricultural output was declining in the years leading up to the Syrian conflict. Certainly, part of this can be attributed to the country’s 2007-2010 drought. But it can also be traced to the impact of the government’s pursuit of food self-sufficiency through subsidies and strategic crops, rather than sound economic and environmental judgement.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, NRH has been amongst the main victims of Syria’s agricultural policy. Yields, planted areas, and pastures in the area are predominantly rain-fed, but infrastructure has increasingly struggled to keep pace with the demands placed on land and water resources even when seasonal rainfall was good. The lack of water was certainly compounded by climate change, leading to more frequent droughts, but was also a product of chronic resource mismanagement. The water table of the Orontes River watershed has reduced massively in recent decades,\textsuperscript{39} and the sustainability of local agriculture was of mounting concern. When these issues coincided with the late 2000s drought and the withdrawal of subsidies for fertilizers and fuel for irrigation systems,\textsuperscript{40} farming became an increasingly precarious livelihood in NRH. This was reflected in a steady stream of economic migrants leaving NRH for urban areas, and the illegal drilling of wells and waterways across the Orontes basin.

**MILITARY AND GOVERNMENT SERVICE**

NRH’s main urban centers of Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh have long had a strong connection with military service and an unusually high number of military personnel. This is due to two factors: the presence of an important military academy and a series of other military installations in the vicinity of Homs city; and the links of the area’s most powerful families with the Syrian military establishment. As previously noted, Mustafa Tlass, of Ar-Rastan, served as Syrian Defense Minister for over 30 years, and was a close confidant of former President, Hafez Al-Assad. In addition, his

\textsuperscript{36} Mustafa Tlass’s son, Firas, founded the MAS company in 1984. MAS deals in a host of commercial activities including the production of sugar, metal, cement, canned foods and dairy products. Some small facilities for several of these commercial interests are found in NRH.

\textsuperscript{37} Note, 2015 figures from the Homs Agriculture Directorate state that land committed to olives (95,000 hectares) and almonds (56,000 hectares) is greater than any other crop grown in Homs governorate. The next largest areas of land committed to crops in the area include wheat (37,000 hectares) and barley (49,000 hectares). See: Syria Times (2015) [Agriculture Directorate in Homs](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/theworldfactbook/geos/hs.html).\textsuperscript{38} This policy dates back to the 1960s. For more, see: de Chatel, F. (2014) [Leaving the Land: The Impact of Long-term Water Mismanagement in Syria](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/theworldfactbook/geos/hs.html).

\textsuperscript{39} The water table in the Orontes River basin has decreased by up to 57 meters in places. This caused the government to enact legislation to prohibit the drilling of new wells.

\textsuperscript{40} In the mid-2000s, President Al-Assad’s efforts to move Syria towards a market economy saw him abandon the country’s prior focus on agriculture and drive for investment in trade, housing, banking, construction and tourism.
son, Manaf Tlass, was head of the Republican Guard and an advisor to President Bashar Al-Assad. NRH’s two other major families, the Ayoub, and the Farzat, are also represented by high level generals within the Syrian Arab Army. In Ar-Rastan, it was commonly said that if a family had two sons, one would enter the family business and the other would join the military. Such practices were so extensive in Ar-Rastan that it was colloquially referred to as ‘Qardaha II’, in reference to the hometown of President Al-Assad.  

CONFLICT AND POST-RECONCILIATION  

Although some small-scale business has returned since reconciliation, NRH has been largely neglected by the government and private investors over the past 12-14 months. The extent to which this is a result of the area’s status as a former opposition-held enclave is likely marginal, particularly given the area has always been of low economic importance to the Syrian government and hosts a predominantly agricultural economy. Indeed, it is unlikely that the area will see much in the way of concerted state- or privately-led development, leaving much of the area’s economic recovery centered around agricultural production and in the hands of the resident population. Besides the effects of broader issues within the national economy, locals now confront two major economic issues: first, that agriculture faces serious immediate and long term challenges; and second, that heightened poverty levels and post-reconciliation dynamics have triggered shifts within the labor market which undermine locally-led recovery.  

AGRICULTURE  

With the start of the conflict, decades of pre-war water mismanagement have only had a deeper impact on local agriculture. Though adequate precipitation meant yields from main crops reportedly met expectations in most cases in 2019, water levels are an issue of both present and long term concern. The most immediate issues lie in the susceptibility of local agriculture to negative fluctuations in expected rainfall levels, particularly given damaged and/or poorly maintained and outdated irrigation systems, the high cost of fuel-powered water pumping systems, and a shortage of modern water and land management techniques. In addition, reports indicate that the consumption rate of fuel-powered irrigation systems has increased to around 25 liters per hour in many parts of NRH (up from 20 liters per hour last year). In the context of Syria’s ongoing fuel crisis, this places a heavy burden on the ability of farmers to meet production costs. It is also worth noting that local markets for the sale of agricultural produce have been damaged, particularly in Ar-Rastan. A Public Consumer Organization established by the Ministry of Trade has funded a temporary alternative in Ar-Rastan, but there are generally fewer local sales outlets in the area.

Farmer costs are also being heavily impacted by the challenges of procuring agricultural inputs, specifically seeds and fertilizers. This is not necessarily a question of supply (though quality is a problem), however, but one of unfavorable exchange rates and pricing. Farmers in NRH are often forced to purchase many necessary inputs from foreign importers in dollars. Given the depreciation of the Syrian pound however, this has markedly increased the cost of production at a time when commodity prices in NRH are the same as last year. For example, potato farmers in NRH explain that a bag of seeds is now twice the price it was 12 months ago (rising from 23,000 SYP to 45,000 SYP), but that they are at the mercy of

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41 Qardaha, in Lattakia governorate, is the hometown of the Al-Assad family and the birthplace of former President, Hafez Al-Assad. Both the village and surrounding areas are renowned for local service within the Syrian military and government.
42 For instance, local sources report that the main irrigation canal in Farhaniyeh has effectively dried up. Farhaniyeh is northwest of Talbiseh, and is considered locally as an extension of Talbiseh town.
44 Syria’s main fertilizer factory, owned by the General Fertilizer Company, is based in Homs governorate. Its three plants were repaired and put back into production in 2018 in partnership with a Russian chemical company. Fertilizers from this factory are sold to the local government distribution body but are reportedly too costly for local farmers.
the exchange rates given traders are unwilling to adapt to local prices.\textsuperscript{45} In addition, Syria’s main fertilizer factory is based in Homs, but its supplies to government distributors are reportedly two-four times more costly than 2011 prices.\textsuperscript{46} High prices are blamed on a variety of national level factors, from international sanctions to exploitative import companies, but the end result is that soaring costs and low sale prices are severely weakening farmer incomes. Indeed, such issues have reportedly prompted a number of farmers to pay the cost of storing harvests from this year in the hope that prices will better meet production costs next year.

**LABOR SHORTAGES AND SHIFTING LABOR PATTERNS**

Conflict, besiegement, and reconciliation have had a series of effects on the local labor market. The most evident is found in reduced population numbers in most communities, part of which can be attributed to the evacuation (and detention) of thousands of people, mainly males, subsequent to the NRH reconciliation agreement. The removal of these people from the local labor market has been compounded by the fact that reconciliation and post-conflict conditions have driven many of the area’s remaining men into military service. This is not necessarily a result of any concerted enforcement by government and security actors,\textsuperscript{47} but is rather more linked to heightened local poverty, the withdrawal of most humanitarian support, and a decline in comparable salaried opportunities. Indeed, the government appears to have leveraged these poor local economic conditions to indirectly compel recruitment by issuing a requirement for job seekers to be in possession of a statement from the local military recruitment division which proves they are not required for military service. As a result, most military-aged males that remained in the area through conflict and reconciliation are effectively excluded from securing a regular income unless they join the military or security services.

With traditional bread winners removed from the local labor force, the burden on other members of the family has increased. As noted in section 3.2, women have assumed a more public role in to compensate for a lower number of male laborers, and it notable that reports are surfacing that children are dropping out of school to take up work in the streets, fields, and industrial facilities across Homs governorate.\textsuperscript{48} Ultimately, however, anecdotal figures suggest as much as 60% of the population in NRH is unemployed, and that, despite its challenges, agriculture remains the most viable sector in which to find potential work opportunities. Some businesses have returned, but it is understood that unless these are owned by an individual closely linked to the local security services, there is an obligation to pay ‘protection’ money to the NDF. The return of commercial activity within urban areas is also challenged by reports that some NDF militia are taking goods from producers, keeping them from the market, and selling during more profitable periods. It appears unlikely that many employment opportunities will emerge until the business climate normalizes in the area, and small to medium commercial enterprise is therefore expected to remain a marginal contributor to the local economy.

\textsuperscript{45} Enab Baladi (2019) Farmers Resort to Refrigeration Units as Dollar Consumes Potato Crop (AR).

\textsuperscript{46} This facility, owned by the General Fertilizer Company, resumed operations in 2017/18 after effectively shutting down for several years. The Russian Stroytransgaz company reportedly takes a 65% share in profits in return for supporting the restoration and expansion of the plant and is entitled to export its products. Enab Baladi (2019) General Fertilizers Company: From Syrian stumbling and Iranian competition to Russian takeover.

\textsuperscript{47} To an extent, the government has fulfilled its reconciliation promise not to conscript locals. This is likely owing to the vigilance of Russian guarantors. Indeed, though hundreds of conscription-related arrests have been made, most have reportedly targeted defected military personnel and figures that worked in former opposition institutions rather regular civilians. See: Enab Baladi (2019) Homs Countryside Back to Poverty-stricken Bosom of the Homeland a Year after Settlement.

\textsuperscript{48} Syrian law prohibits this, but such rules are seldom enforced in NRH. Enab Baladi (2019) Children of Homs: Working to Compensate for Absent Breadwinners.
4.2 OPPORTUNITIES

NRH confronts acutely challenging economic conditions stemming from a combination of its limited value to the national economy, severe local labor shortages, few potential opportunities, and the significant short and long term issues confronting its only real economic pillar, agriculture. These factors have conspired with national level conflict effects to produce heightened levels of poverty, unemployment and military service, which have in turn weakened the capacity of civilians to stimulate post-reconciliation recovery. Moreover, the current business climate militates against the re/emergence of new and pre-war commercial activities. Efforts to develop alternative livelihoods are therefore unlikely to receive much support from local authorities.

A focus on agriculture is therefore strongly recommended, but this should ideally proceed from a long term view of addressing water shortages and resource mismanagement practices. This could begin with the rehabilitation of existing networks and installations, and later progress to promoting the use of efficient modern irrigation methods, water-harvesting, and sustainable land use techniques. Local farming cooperatives will be an excellent source of insight for such programmes, and may also support creation of informal water user associations to help monitor usage. Efforts to diversify local agricultural activities may also be worthwhile, with the creation of food production, processing, and packaging facilities being an option which has already had some local success. This could take the form of incentivizing the expansion of existing prominent family business interests. There are also opportunities in training and supporting rural families, particularly female-headed households, to establish small food-based micro-enterprises.

It may also be advisable to provide technical expertise and equipment to support the gradual development of water/crop quota systems, whereby planted areas are determined according to the specific water management needs and technologies in particular farms. Studies suggest such approaches are likely to meet with resistance from farmers owing to the potential for decreased revenues, even if implemented gradually over prolonged periods. However, without support for water conservation, the long term prospects for agriculture in NRH are unpromising and could ultimately render much of the recovery effort useless.

ECONOMIC STAKEHOLDERS

- **FARMING COOPERATIVES**: Longstanding civil society organizations scattered throughout NRH comprised of farmers, pastoralists, traders and a few administrators. Cooperatives seek to improve agricultural productivity and revenues through collaboration, resource and information sharing.

- **PROMINENT FAMILIES**: The business interests of prominent families are diverse and may represent platforms upon which to develop shared objectives.

- **FARZAT FAMILY**: Well respected family that has provided some job opportunities through partial restoration of business activities. The ‘leadership’ of the Farzat has remained loyal to the government but many members also joined the opposition. Mahmoud Farzat runs a stable of family companies, the largest of which, ‘Farzat for Economic Development’, has a presence in Homs, Aleppo, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Algeria. Reports indicate the Farzat have shown a greater sense of community solidarity than most other prominent families in the area.

- **TLASS FAMILY**: Most prominent and wealthy family in NRH. Leading business figure in the family, Firas, owns the MAS conglomerate and

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50 For instance, one local source suggested that locals are provided a grant to establish stores/businesses processing, selling, or distributing goods produced by prominent families as a means of creating livelihood opportunities and capitalizing on family business networks.
was the second wealthiest man in Syria until fleeing like his father, former Defence Minister, Mustafa Tlass, and his brother, Manaf, defected former head of the Republican Guard. Firas has since relocated most operations to Dubai and Amman but the family retains an interest in local small-scale industrial and commercial facilities.

- **AYOUB FAMILY**: Circassian family and owners of agricultural land and some food processing facilities. Alleged to use associated NDF militia to enforce protection fees on local businesses.

- **OMAR FAMILY**: Large local merchant family and owners of a variety of local businesses in Ar-Rastan.

- **HOMS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**: Access point for reaching the area’s primary economic stakeholders, to include leading figures within relevant government bodies and prominent families.

- **PUBLIC CONSUMER ORGANIZATION**: Ar-Rastan-based Interior Trade Ministry body. Established a subsidized market in Ar-Rastan to compensate for destruction of the two main city markets, the ‘Public’ market, and the Tarkawi market.
5. SECURITY

SECTION SUMMARY

The most notable security dynamic in NRH is that large numbers of former armed opposition fighters were quickly reconciled and remobilized into various state-affiliated militias, particularly the NDF. These NDF groups operate under the different government Military and Intelligence agencies present in NRH.

A network of checkpoints located on the M5 highway and the entrances of towns and villages creates a tight security grasp over the area and effectively restricts movement. Checkpoints are used for civilian monitoring and to conscript individuals wanted for their military service. Arbitrary checkpoints are also established in some communities, but their frequency and location are random and unable to be detected by local sources.

The Government of Syria conscription efforts shifted away from large-scale detention campaigns to various other methods, such as: arresting individuals at checkpoints under criminal charges, requesting vetting from the recruitment office when obtaining any official documentation, and offering tempting salaries for young males to join the military.

Recently, several former opposition individuals who promoted reconciliation and facilitated the entry of the government to NRH were arrested. The Military and Intelligence agencies deploy this strategy in post-reconciled communities to demonstrate their authority.

Return to NRH is fraught with protection risks; individuals wanting to return must be vetted by the Air Force Intelligence Branch and given approvals to return. Any individual who returns without obtaining an approval will be detained as soon as reaching NRH. Notably, an increasing number of NRH IDPs want to return to their hometowns fearing the ongoing northwestern Syria offensive. However, the majority of return requests are being rejected by the National Security Bureau.
5.1 MILITARY OVERVIEW

NRH was reconciled by the Government of Syria in May 2018, surrendering shortly after the fall of Eastern Ghouta and Eastern Qalamoun. Reconciliation entailed the evacuation of armed opposition combatants, but the agreement also allowed many former armed opposition combatants to settle their status with government security services and subsequently remobilize as government forces and state-affiliated NDF militia. The retraining and redeployment of former armed combatants is not unique to NRH, but it is certainly more prevalent than other former opposition-held areas. Indeed, one of the predominant security issues in NRH is the fact that so many opposition groups were reconciled and remobilized as entire groups. This includes the largest former opposition armed group, Jaish Al-Tawheed, which reached an agreement with the government entailing its wholesale redeployment as an NDF militia based in Talbiseh. The NDF have since become the main security actor in NRH, and coexist on the ground with state security agencies (Air Force Intelligence, Political Security and Military Security). A local Government of Syria police branch is also present in NRH, and is commanded directly from Russia’s Hmeimim Air Base.

The NDF in NRH is not a unified body, individual units do not operate under the same command structure, and a significant degree of contestation exists between the numerous groups in the area. The largest NDF group operates in coordination with the Military Security Branch, is led by the Russian-affiliated Manhal Dahiq, and is comprised of reconciled former Jaish Al-Tawheed combatants and local volunteers. A second NDF group is affiliated with the Tiger Forces, an elite government military unit led by Suheil Hassan. The Tiger Forces-linked NDF in Ar-Rastan is led by Kheiru Sha’ela; Sha’ela is from Ar-Rastan, and has been an NDF commander since the Syrian conflict began. Though Sha’ela is not a former opposition commander, the majority of his unit is comprised of former opposition combatants and local volunteers. A third NDF group is under the control of the Air Force Intelligence Branch. The Air Force Intelligence-linked NDF group is led by Munqeth Al Dali; Al Dali is also a former commander in Jaish Al-Tawheed, and the Air Force Intelligence NDF is comprised of former opposition combatants and volunteers from the local prominent Al Dali family. Other NDF groups are comprised solely of notable family members, such as the Ayoub. There are reports that the Military Security-linked NDF and the Air Force Intelligence-linked NDF compete over local power, territory, and resources.

Of important note, local sources report that there is a minimal Iranian footprint in the area, most likely comprised of military advisers. It is understood these operate in the southwestern part of NRH but their objectives are unknown. Russian Military Police were present in the area to act as guarantors of the reconciliation agreement but they have since largely withdrawn and only a small number now remain. There is evidence of some competition between Iranian- and Russian-affiliated elements in the area, most notably when the leader of the Military Security-linked NDF, Manhal Dahiq, was kidnapped by Hezbollah-affiliated militia and Air Force Intelligence. Dahiq was later released after Russian mediation.

5.2 CHECKPOINTS AND CONSCRIPTION

As in other reconciled areas, security and intelligence agencies combine with affiliated militia to retain a tight grip over NRH through the management of a local checkpoint network. Local sources were unable to collectively pinpoint all checkpoints in the area given most were unable to travel freely and/or feared detention. However, an array of confirmed checkpoints are located on major routes, such as on the M5 Highway and the Homs-Masyaf Highway, as well as roads linking major NRH towns. Temporary checkpoints are also reportedly installed within communities as neces-

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51 Checkpoints shown in the Security Overview map are the collective picture painted by the impressions of local field researchers. They have not been confirmed, and represent COAR’s best assessment of their most likely locations.
sary, and are sometimes removed within a matter of hours. Checkpoints are mainly used to monitor civilians, and to conscript individuals wanted for military service. Since the Russian guarantor presence was withdrawn, civilians have cited increasingly frequent harassment, theft and tariff charges at checkpoints, most of which reportedly targets individuals from poorer neighborhoods and minority families.

Notably, the government’s conscription strategy in NRH has shifted in recent months from large-scale detention campaigns towards the implementation of two different approaches. The first involves the arrest and detention of individuals at checkpoints, to include those wanted on criminal and/or terror charges and those in possession of military deferment paperwork. For instance, in May 2019, additional Military Security checkpoints were set up on the highway between Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh, and resulted in the arrest and subsequent conscription of 300 individuals that had previously obtained military deferment papers.\(^5^2\) The second approach involves compelling pseudo-voluntary recruitment through the application of pressure on everyday life. Official documentation such as certificates of ownership, employment letters, and education transcripts each require a preliminary clearance permit from the military recruitment office proving the applicant is not required for military service. However, local economic pressures mean life becomes increasingly difficult for males unable to access this documentation, meaning they are effectively forced into self-enrolment to support their families.\(^5^3\)

These methods have hindered the ability of military-aged males to move freely throughout NRH, as even those in possession of deferment papers and exemptions have no guarantee they will not be forcibly conscripted. This has had a major impact on the economy of NRH, which is based on the ability of workers to travel to farms, pastures, and urban centers. Current conscription practices will also impact the ability of humanitarian programs to reach beneficiaries, as individuals will likely be reluctant to reach distribution sites that require transit through checkpoints.

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52 Almodon (2019) *Northern Rural Homs: 300 Detainees on Regime Checkpoints*.

53 The average monthly salary of a military recruit in NRH is SYP 50,000 (~£80)
5.3 CONTESTATION BETWEEN LOCAL SECURITY FORCES

Like other former reconciled areas, the Syrian government has sought to reinstate its authority over NRH by engaging former opposition figures in the reconciliation process. These individuals are often identified as potential entry points for aid organizations given their strong local knowledge and relationships with both government and opposition entities. However, in recent months, several such figures have been detained in NRH, likely in an effort to prevent any destabilizing effects they may have and to demonstrate government authority. In June 2019, the Military Security Branch and Air Force Intelligence detained several former opposition commanders in Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh who were heavily involved in promoting reconciliation prior to the agreement. These individuals were reportedly encouraging civilians to join the NDF, and are believed to have been tied to the Russians via Manhal Dahiq. The incident speaks to the fact that security actors are still vying for influence in the post-reconciliation period, and is an issue of potential concern for the safety and stability of humanitarian and development activities.

5.4 RETURNS

Return to NRH is fraught with many of the complications experienced in other post-reconciled areas. At this time, it is especially challenging for military-aged men to return the area, as well as for people that evacuated to northern and northwestern Syria subsequent to reconciliation. Registration for mass returns to NRH began in February 2019, when the government distributed e-forms via Whatsapp groups to interested civilians. Upon the release of the forms, rumors surfaced that the Government intended to prohibit males aged 14 to 50 from returning, with recent local reports suggesting these rumours are borne out on the ground. For instance, local sources explain that unaccompanied women face unique challenges in returning, in so far as they are required to demonstrate that immediate military-aged male family members are deceased. As is likely in most cases, they will be unable to prove this to the security services, will be turned away, and asked to present the entire family unit for reconciliation at a later date.

Restrictions on the return of military-aged men is an issue of growing concern in given the intensification of the Government of Syria offensive in northwestern Syria. As the offensive moves deeper into Idleb governorate, IDPs originating from NRH are increasingly looking to return. However, recent media reports indicate that most aspiring returnees are notified that they do not have security clearance to do so from the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Homs city. In effect, the current security climate bars military-aged men from returning to NRH freely and, should the government ultimately capture northwestern Syria, many are likely to be exposed to arrest, detention and conscription.

54 This phenomenon is prevalent in other post-reconciled communities such as southern Syria, particularly Dar’a. There have been some reports of assassinations, but these are unconfirmed.

55 Interested civilians were canvassed by displaced people with links to community mukhtars (mayors), who then forwarded the information up the governance chain.

56 This is often difficult for many given male family members are likely to have been displaced elsewhere or in detention.


58 Evidently, this is a large-scale protection issue that will apply to the thousands of evacuees and opposition-affiliated people currently in Syria’s opposition-held northwest.
5.5 SECURITY FORECAST

It is extremely unlikely that the towns of NRH will witness a recurrence of popular uprisings and unrest given the robust control of the local security services have over the area. Some incidents have been observed, but these have each been met with tighter restrictions and heightened security postures by local state-affiliated armed groups. For instance, in July 2019, anti-Government of Syria graffiti appeared in Ar-Rastan, and seven civilians were subsequently arrested by the State Security. Several additional checkpoints were also established in Ar-Rastan, and a number of homes were raided. Though the likelihood of open confrontation and armed conflict is low, arrests, detentions, and raids are highly likely to continue. It is well understood by locals that the government associates Homs governorate with the civil uprisings, and this is likely to live long in the memory of the military and security establishment. Humanitarian and development actors must also acknowledge that some contestation between state-affiliated groups is ongoing, and could present safety and security issues for staff, partners, and the continuity of programmes.

SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS

- **NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF):** State-affiliated militia comprised mainly of former reconciled armed opposition combatants. Several different NDF groups are present in NRH, and are linked to different Government of Syria Security and Intelligence agencies. Each has poor local reputation.

- **MILITARY SECURITY-LINKED NDF:** Comprised of former reconciled Jaish Al-Tawheed combatants. Present mainly in Talbiseh and is responsible for pursuing individuals wanted for conscription. Reportedly, this NDF group is linked to the Russians.

- **TIGER FORCES-LINKED NDF:** Comprised of former opposition combatants and members of prominent families in NRH. Present throughout NRH, but has a larger presence in Ar-Rastan. Led by Kheiru She’ila, and affiliated with the Tiger Forces, an elite Government of Syria SAA unit.

- **AIR FORCE INTELLIGENCE-LINKED NDF:** Comprised of former opposition combatants and volunteers from the Al Dali family, a prominent family in NRH. Led by Munqeth Al Dali and is responsible for detaining individuals for intelligence gathering.

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

- **FOREIGN MILITARY ACTORS:** Limited presence of Russian Military Police throughout NRH. Their role was once extremely prominent immediately following reconciliation, but is insignificant as of July 2019. Limited Iranian presence in Ghanto and Dar Kabira; Iranian military forces reportedly serve as advisors for the Shia and Alawite communities adjacent to NRH.
ANNEX 1:
KEY STAKEHOLDERS

HOMS CITY COUNCIL

DESCRIPTION:
The Homs City Council is among the largest in Syria and has a jurisdiction which extends beyond the city. Currently, part of that jurisdiction extends into NRH. All municipal and city council bodies in NRH are subordinate to Homs City Council and its elected leader, Abdullah Al-Bawab.

COMMENTS:
Municipal and city council bodies in NRH are constrained by the fact that power has yet to be fully decentralized since reconciliation. The majority of local decision-making authority, governance capacity, and political influence therefore lies outside the area, in Homs city, and specifically, with Homs City Council. Although the city council is actively undertaking a range of reconstruction projects, none specifically targeting NRH were identified by local sources. It is likely that Homs City Council assigns lower priority to NRH than its core jurisdiction, and that this situation is likely to persist until the autonomy of councils in NRH is fully restored. Until this time, practical project coordination for NRH will be undertaken predominantly via the Homs City Council.
PROMINENT FAMILIES

Commonly owners or stakeholders in business activities and linked to the government and military establishment, prominent families are a critical feature in NRH’s political economy. There is a particularly strong tradition of military service among prominent families in the area, which has likely been a major factor in the involvement of family figures in post-reconciliation security services, specifically, the NDF. Families also boast widespread representation in local governance structures, but as frequently noted, these structures are weak, and posts within them do not afford noteworthy decision-making power. Notable families in the area are numerous, but the examples below are those which most frequently emerged during research undertaken for this report and therefore considered the most important.

**TLASS:** Prominent family in Ar-Rastan. Sometimes considered as opposition oriented following the defection of Manaf Tlass, the former head of the Republican Guard, but many Tlass remain in the area and have local business interests, local political positions, and social connections. The Tlass were involved in reconciliation negotiations and currently wield significant local influence in NRH.

**FARZAT:** Prominent local business family that owns vegetable oil and plastic factories in the area. Provider of employment opportunities in Ar-Rastan since reconciliation, and have financed the municipality to issue contracts for rubble removal projects. Respected by locals, but forced to pay fees to NDF for ‘protection’.

**AYOUB:** Owners of agricultural lands in the vicinity of Ar-Rastan and coordinators of an NDF group linked to Air Force Intelligence. The Ayoub family is alleged to have leveraged its involvement with the NDF to make the Farzat, other families, and business owners pay tariffs for ‘protection’.

**AL DALI:** Prominent family who are involved in security and local governance. Involved in the Air Force Intelligence NDF. Contestation between Al Dali and other prominent families exist, most notably the Ayoub, likely due to their involvement in another NDF group.

Prominent families were relatively active in the governance domain in the months shortly after reconciliation but have since scaled back their involvement. Families have shown limited interest in supporting local recovery despite their wealth, status and influence since this time, and have instead either taken a less public role or shown themselves as complicit in the security restrictions in the area. This applies strongly to several of the examples listed above, but also includes exceptions, such as the Farzat family, who may be suitable targets for stimulating the recovery effort.

As will have been gathered from a reading of this report, it is unlikely that aid actors will be able to avoid encountering prominent families. The challenge is to understand which notable families are relevant to a given programme, and to assess the ways their influence is a risk, or can be leveraged in support of meaningful forms of recovery. Given the closeness of prominent families to the military and government, it will likely be challenging to motivate their full engagement in NRH’s recovery, but there appears to be scope for incentivizing their involvement providing this does not exacerbate inter-family tensions.
**NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES**

**DESCRIPTION**

State-affiliated militia comprised mainly of former reconciled armed opposition combatants. Groups also include members of notable NRH families, and some exclusively so. Each group is linked to a state security and intelligence agency, either Military Security or Air Force Intelligence. NDF militia are responsible for manning checkpoints, pursuing individuals wanted for conscription, security monitoring, and detaining individuals for intelligence gathering. NDF militias compete with one another in NRH, particularly in relation to territory and distribution of resources. This competition is not known to be violent, and is reportedly more political and economic in nature.

**COMMENTS**

The involvement of the NDF and their affiliated security and intelligence agencies in enforcing and maintaining local security means that aid actor projects will be subject to their decisions. This equally applies to beneficiaries, who are closely monitored by the NDF and its affiliates in the local security and intelligence establishment. Project permissions will therefore be decided in part by the NDF, meaning territorial ‘lines’ between NDF groups must be understood to ensure aid actors are playing by the appropriate ruleset and balancing potential resource-based inter-NDF competition. The most evident project risk posed to beneficiaries by the NDF is at checkpoints. Aid actors should therefore seek to avoid programmes involving beneficiary travel through checkpoints given the risk of arrest and harassment by NDF forces.

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**HOMS TECHNICAL SERVICES DIRECTORATE**

**DESCRIPTION:**

The Homs Technical Services Directorate is a governorate level civil service institution which provides technical oversight for development projects. It is staffed predominantly by engineering, management, scientific, and administration professionals who advise on the design and implementation of plans which exceed the capacity city councils. Practically all but the smallest projects are likely to invite the involvement of the Directorate given the capacity of complementary Executive Offices and other governance bodies in NRH is low. This will include works to address power and water networks, or projects for which contracting is more efficiently undertaken at a higher level.

**COMMENTS**

Though part of the formal governance structure, the priorities of Syria’s central authorities do not interfere heavily with the activities of the Homs Technical Services Directorate. It is primarily concerned with developing technical responses to issues raised by local government where lower offices lack jurisdiction or capacity. As noted above, this applies to practically all but the smallest programmes in NRH given the poor finances, capacity and autonomy of local governance bodies. The Technical Services Directorate has a good local reputation owing to its technocratic remit, but some caution should be attached to the potential for partiality and politicization given it sits beneath the Homs Governorate Council and Governor Tala Barazi.
## EXECUTIVE OFFICES

**DESCRIPTION**

Executive Offices are a municipal government department that operates within the purview of the Ministry of Local Administration. Though Executive Offices are ordinarily staffed by technocrats and professionals in a variety of fields (engineering, accounting, and management), they are reportedly more limited in NRH, both in terms of their size and breadth of expertise. 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 (Homs City Council), and the Political Security services. Executive Office staff are generally supportive of the government, but their work is largely technocratic and they do not necessarily operate according to a political agenda.

**COMMENTS**

Executive Offices present an opportunity to engage a local 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 have a strong understanding of civilian needs and are likely to be for refining programme design and ensuring the efficiency of project implementation. Executive Offices are subservient to city councils and municipality-level local councils, but the interference of figures within these structures 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.

## SARC

**DESCRIPTION**

Humanitarian organization renowned for close association with government and alleged links to security services. By far the most capable aid organization in NRH, SARC has a positive local reputation but is unable to meet the expectations of local communities and focuses mainly on humanitarian, rather than development-related needs. Currently focused on food baskets and support to medical centers, mainly in urban areas. SARC coordinates with municipal governments in Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh, as well as the security and intelligence agency branch offices in NRH. Branch offices are located in Talbiseh, Ar-Rastan, and Taldu.

**COMMENTS**

Despite the diversity of need in NRH, SARC projects are limited to health clinic support and food baskets. Local sources report this is a reflection of the constraints under which aid organizations are forced to work in the area, but is also likely a consequence of the low priority assigned to NRH in general. That said, the organization remains the most viable and capable potential local partner organization for international agencies. It boasts strong community acceptance, but may be prone to interference given its alleged links to, and coordination with, security agencies.
FARMING COOPERATIVES

DESCRIPTION:

Farming cooperatives are civil society organizations found throughout NRH. Most have been in operation for decades. They are a special interest group with no declared political agenda. Membership mainly includes crop farmers, pastoralists, and traders, but as well as some administrators. The objectives of farming cooperatives are several, but they generally seek to: take measures to affect the pricing of agricultural products; increase agricultural productivity; share knowledge; and increase local access to equipment and supplies. Members are well respected.

COMMENTS

As pointed to in the recommendations of this report, farming cooperatives can play an important role in supporting the immediate and long term recovery of local agriculture and natural resources. They are strongly positioned to help aid actors identify and address needs within agriculture, and should be consulted as part of any projects concerning or affecting farming and rural land. Farming cooperatives also represent an opportunity to develop an established, uncontroversial, and well-regarded form of civil society with links to relevant government figures and departments. Moreover, they do not experience much interference from the security services in other post-reconciled areas.
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