SOUTHWESTERN DAR'A
NEEDS ORIENTED STRATEGIC AREA PROFILE
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PURPOSE

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

METHODOLOGY

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

1. An alarming rise in lawlessness demonstrates that the government has yet to stabilize SWD. The July 2018 reconciliation agreement was inconclusive, and continues to have negative implications for living standards and efforts to improve local conditions. Current levels of instability cast an uncertain shadow over SWD’s medium-term future.

2. Further to the above, reconciliation has produced multiple local authority structures variously linked to the competing geopolitical objectives of several interested parties. This is the result of a reconciliation process informed by SWD’s position at the intersection of the Syrian, Jordanian, and Israeli borders, and cold war-type rivalry between Russia and Iran over the Syrian state apparatus.

3. Historically a rural economy, SWD’s recovery lies in a rejuvenated agribusiness sector. Diversification tempered by natural resource management considerations will be essential for long term local economic sustainability, and must be integrated into programmes targeting inefficiencies within local agricultural infrastructure and nationwide problems of affordable quality farming inputs.

4. Civil society has effectively collapsed, leaving few options for international actors seeking local interlocutors and partner organizations. Having previously hosted numerous cross-border aid programmes and experienced a period of development, reconciliation, evacuation, insecurity, and government-imposed restrictions mean little to nothing of this legacy now remains.
PERVASIVE INSECURITY

The Syrian government’s southern offensive produced the official defeat of the armed opposition in SWD, but it would be inaccurate to state that the area is now under full government control. Reconciliation entailed that a mixture of state-linked security, intelligence, and military actors secured command over discrete territories, but geopolitically-charged competition between these groups has enabled a fragmented security environment and unprecedented levels of lawlessness for a post-reconciled area. The reasons for these divisions are described below in ‘Multiple Authority Structures’, but the key point here is that a climate of instability pervades SWD and is a major drag on the area’s recovery. Indeed, the frequency of local incidents has caused such alarm as to prompt speculation that SWD might be a key front in a new nationwide anti-government insurgency.

Such assessments are likely an exaggeration, but the fact remains that the current context presents numerous security-based challenges for relief and development actors. Chief among these is the violence itself, which through a series of seemingly random and often unclaimed assassinations, bombings, and hit-and-run assaults creates considerable local uncertainty. This violence is exemplified by the Popular Resistance, a group which has become increasingly bold in its attacks against government targets activities since the turn of the year, but whose origins, membership, and affiliations are largely unknown. Such issues are further complicated by SWD’s position at the intersection of the Syrian, Jordanian, and Israeli borders and the sometimes competing geopolitical interests of the Syrian government’s main allies, Russia and Iran. In this context, the sustainability of aid programming cannot be guaranteed: Projects will encounter limited governance capacity, competing local interests, high levels of securitization, limited local partner options, and may be subject to sudden disruption.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT HIGH LEVELS OF INSECURITY ARE LIKELY TO PERSIST AT LEAST OUT TO THE MEDIUM-TERM.** With little to no concerted government effort to curtail the violence or act in full accordance with the provisions of reconciliation agreements, instability is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Moreover, having secured the southern portion of M5 Highway, the Syrian government is now focused on objectives elsewhere in the country. Barring an improbable major escalation, the Syrian government is unlikely to take action to enforce its authority in the area and may in fact be content to allow violence to play out as retribution for SWD’s prior association with opposition bodies.

- **START SMALL UNTIL GREATER STABILITY IS ACHIEVED.** Security risks to programmes and partners are such that donors and relief and development actors should focus on simple small-scale interventions with scalable potential. Activity could be ramped up when local security improves, taking into account that the influence of different security actors in different areas may mean that programme acceleration could capitalize on and reinforce favourable local developments.

- **WORK THROUGH DIPLOMATIC CHANNELS.** Multiple international interests collide in SWD. A start to concerted relief and development activities in the area will likely demand diplomatic engagement of both those with a direct/proxy presence, as well as those with a strong stake in SWD’s stability. The former group includes Russia, Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, with the latter including these four nations in addition to Israel and Jordan.

- **IMPLEMENT HIGH DO NO HARM THRESHOLDS.** The potential for relief and development work to be captured by (and exacerbate) war economy dynamics is high in SWD given the competitive local security climate. This applies to dynamics pertaining to both the local security situation and SWD’s entanglement with the objectives of foreign military actors. If programmes are planned in the current operating context, they must proceed from extremely well-informed and principled engagement.
MULTIPLE AUTHORITY STRUCTURES

As noted in ‘Pervasive Insecurity’, the southern Syria reconciliation process allowed for a diversity of security actors to assume control across SWD. Given these actors are variously linked to the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies, this has created multiple lines of authority which often compete at the local level. It is increasingly clear that Russia and Iran intend to strengthen their influence over Syria’s post-war future by capturing the levers of power. This mainly finds expression in SWD through the efforts of Russian- and Iranian-linked groups to recruit the thousands of former opposition combatants left in the area following reconciliation in order to: A) strengthen their local position, and; B) advance both their own ambitions and those of their international partners. Such rivalry is important for the stability of SWD, in part because of the differences between the two countries’ policies with respect to neighboring Israel. However, it is also important for SWD’s recovery given different locations may present different ‘micro’ operating contexts within which different localized rules apply. Indeed, the infiltration of foreign elements has not only been observed within the security establishment; there are also reports that formal and informal political figures have been variously co-opted. Given the limited capacity of governance in the area, it is too soon to assess the extent to which this has meaningful implications, but it nevertheless highlights the importance of an approach which is especially attentive to a community’s particular local circumstances and the role that broader geopolitical issues play in local political-military decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• **ACCOUNT FOR DISTINCT COMMUNITY AUTHORITY STRUCTURES.** Dominant political-military actors can vary from one community to the next (see Figure 5), with likely implications for local level decision-making. This research did not uncover major inter-communal differences with regard to the demands placed on prospective aid programming, but it is reasonable to assume that if/when programmes begin, different requirements and expectations will be applied by local authorities. Failure to understand the particular community level operating context may at the very least cause delays, and could at its worst compromise local partner safety.

• **ENGAGE INFORMAL POLITICAL ACTORS.** Shura Councils are well connected to community level security and governance actors and understand the area’s acutely local political economies. Engagement of Shura Councils is likely to help regulate any individual biases on local politics owing to diverse tribal representation. Engagement of individual tribal leaders should be undertaken with caution however; Syria’s southern tribes (sometimes referred to as clans) have experienced considerable internal fragmentation since the conflict began and individuals may only speak for a single constituency.

• **AVOID PROGRAMMING WHICH HAS THE POTENTIAL TO EXACERBATE POLITICAL-MILITARY DIVISION.** Programmes must not feed tensions between rival political and security interests. This requires extensive consultation with formal and informal governance bodies and ground-level partner organizations from project inception through to delivery and completion.

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1 Whereas Russia seeks to prevent an escalation, Iran has reportedly been working to infiltrate SWD via state and no-state proxies to pressure its Israeli adversary.
AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCE SUSTAINABILITY

Like other rural areas in Syria, SWD’s predominantly agricultural economy was contracting prior to the current conflict. Much of this decline can be traced to the government’s pre-war macroeconomic policy (i.e. a focus on urban development over agricultural production), its withdrawal of farming subsidies, and appointment of corrupt local officials concerned more with supporting preferred business partners than rural development. Indeed, in the lead up to 2011, these factors had combined to cause rising youth unemployment, stagnant growth within agriculture, and shrinking household incomes. Further challenges arose when the conflict began: SWD’s links with national and international agricultural export markets were cut by border closures and regulatory barriers, and quality agricultural inputs and farming supplies became difficult to procure owing to national conflict conditions.

Several communities in SWD became ‘aid hubs’ for the Amman-based cross-border response during opposition control, but this provided only temporary relief until operations were shut down upon conclusion of the government’s southern offensive in June 2018. Despite the sector’s continued challenges, few alternative livelihood opportunities meant many in the area were compelled to seek an income in agriculture. A near total absence of local economic development and recovery activities since reconciliation means SWD’s heavy reliance on agriculture continues, but this has exacted an increasingly heavy toll on the area’s natural resources. With a larger number of people digging deeper in search of irrigation water, Lake Mzeireb disappeared completely this summer. Though it is expected to recover with autumn/winter rains, the example highlights the severity of local natural resource challenges and the inefficiencies of current methods for collecting potable and non-potable water. Decreasing the burden on local freshwater reserves is essential for the sustainability of the local economy, but must be achieved in spite of a persistent set of macro-economic issues which are beyond the reach of local communities and aid actors alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• FOCUS ON THE DIVERSIFICATION OF THE RURAL ECONOMY. Although agriculture will remain the only feasible livelihood for the foreseeable future, the strain it is placing on local aquifers means it is also an increasingly unsustainable one. Efforts must be made to move more people out of agricultural production and into different parts of the agribusiness chain. For instance, relatively few food processing facilities currently capitalize on the area’s current agricultural production and could add value and diversity to SWD’s farming output.

• RESTORE REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKET NETWORKS. Prior to the conflict, Souk Al-Hal, in Tafas, was a key market for the sale of local agricultural produce to traders from Damascus, Dar’a, and As-Sweida governorates, as well as international merchants from Jordan and eastern Iraq. Presently, the market functions normally, but local sources report trade volumes are down, particularly to international partners. Engaging market committee members on ways to rejuvenate this trade is strongly advised.

• PROVIDE AGRICULTURAL INPUTS. As in much of rural Syria, the availability and affordability of quality farming materials (seeds, fertilizers), supplies and equipment is poor. In-kind distributions are an option, but items which promote less water intensive practices should be preferred. For instance, seeds with lower water demands should be offered if appropriate, and could be tied to incentive or subsidy programmes as necessary. Farming cooperatives are well-placed to advise.
• **SUPPORT EXTENSION SERVICES.** The number of people engaged in subsistence and full- and part-time farming has grown considerably in the past 8 years. However, this growth now far outstrips the capacity of locally available farming extension services at a time when reliance on agriculture is high. Notably, some government-administered extension services reportedly discriminate against individuals identified by the security services as associated with the opposition. Caution as to the most appropriate way to complement existing services and reach in-need populations is therefore recommended.

• **ENGAGE FARMING COOPERATIVES.** With a strong tradition of community collaboration, farming cooperatives are a form of civil society which is well-positioned to advise on local agricultural needs. They are also likely to offer innovative solutions for mitigating the macro-economic effects on local production, as well as the most viable agriculture-related business opportunities. Seldom integrated into aid programming, they are found throughout SWD.

• **PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO SUPPORT REGULATED WATER USE.** Regulation of water usage falls squarely within the purview of government, but the provision of technical advice to existing local water use committees and farmer cooperatives (or support for the creation of such committees where they are absent), could: A) Improve and/or ensure the proper running and improve of wells and irrigation systems; B) decrease pumping costs and water wastage, and; C) support equitable distribution to the hundreds of thousands of people reliant on the Yarmouk Basin’s freshwater reserves. Any such project should consult with Dar’a city-based interlocutors for the Ministry of Irrigation.
COLLAPSED CIVIL SOCIETY

SWD witnessed a growth in status during opposition control owing to the influx of international support from the Amman-based cross-border aid response. Formerly opposition-held communities such as Nawa served as hubs for the delivery of assistance across SWD and beyond, seeing an associated increase in the number of locally-based aid actors and improvements in the local economy. The government’s southern offensive definitively punctured this bubble however: Programmes were discontinued almost overnight, staff were let go with no alternative employment options, and conditions began to deteriorate rapidly as local governance systems failed to pick up service shortfalls.

Recent data indicates that multiple basic needs are now going unmet, and that conditions for civilians have plummeted since reconciliation. This is particularly the case for resident populations, who in sectors such as health and water, present twice the need of local IDPs. This situation is a product of the government’s inability (and apparent unwillingness) to intervene, and the constraints it has placed on the civilian response. Few vestiges of the earlier response remain, no civil society actor is undertaking programmes at any scale, and there are reports of a labyrinthine and deeply corrupt registration process. There is also considerable anxiety amongst civilians that their participation in relief and development will result in their arrest. Meanwhile, the lack of state or civilian activity has opened the doors to alternative aid providers, with reports that Iranian aid organizations are active where Iranian-linked state security agencies are dominant.

Figure 1. Southwestern Dar’a, Needs Snapshot, June 2019
Figure 2. Southwestern Dar’a, Needs by Sector, Jan 2019-June 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **TAKE EVERY PRACTICABLE PRECAUTION TO DECREASE LOCAL PARTNER RISK.** Authorities across SWD clearly intend to ensure that assistance to the area is funnelled through preferred channels. The discovery of any deviation from state-approved processes is likely to be met with a strong response and responsibility to local partners must therefore be a primary consideration.

- **WOMEN-FOCUSED PROGRAMMING MAY PROVE EASIER.** Locals would assume high levels of personal risk in supporting aid programming, but this risk is likely lower for women given they are subject to less suspicion and have greater freedom of movement. Many local women have also developed experience of working with international agencies after SWD served as something of an aid hub under opposition control. That said, it is absolutely essential that risks posed to individuals engaged in the delivery of relief and development are mitigated to the extent possible, and at all stages of the project process, from inception through to post-completion.

- **LARGE-SCALE PROJECTS MUST GO VIA SARC, THE UN, OR PARTNERS THEREOF.** The Syrian government has made it unfeasible for significant support to be provided to partners other than SARC and the UN. It must be noted, however, that SARC does not have a base of operations in SWD, and that much of the response will therefore need to be channeled via Dar’a city.
• **CHAIN SMALL-SCALE PROJECTS ACROSS LOCAL PARTNERS.** International investment of more than $25,000 in a single local partner is likely to draw considerable state suspicion and is expected to invite interference. Though limited in their fundraising capacity, local partner impact could be amplified if smaller investments across multiple partners are combined into an overarching programme comprised of several components.

• **WORK THROUGH DAR’A CITY-BASED PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS.** No local partners of any significant capacity are present in SWD, but government registered alternatives are based in Dar’a city and may look to operate in rural areas. One such example is UFUK for Humanitarian Development. UFUK works within infrastructure, resource conservation, and local economies, and is associated with the Turkey-based Farah Organization.

• **CONSIDER PROFESSIONAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMMING IN KEY NEEDS SECTORS.** The association of experienced health and other professionals with the opposition means many have been prevented from continuing their employment, leaving often new and inexperienced graduates in positions of senior responsibility. Enhancing the professional skill-sets of these individuals through training support is unlikely to be considered as controversial by the government.
1. CONTEXT AND POPULATION

1.1 AREA INTRODUCTION

Southwestern Dar’a (SWD) forms part of the Houran, a region which extends from the southern suburbs of Damascus to northern Jordan’s desert steppe. Having been an important agricultural hub throughout the Ottoman period, the Houran’s importance declined in the mid-20th century when massive agricultural investment in northeastern Syria coincided with the formation of the new international boundaries subsequent to the two world wars and the Arab-Israeli conflict. SWD nevertheless retained many of its historic socio-economic characteristics, and remains a predominantly agrarian society in which local politics is oriented around both tribal and national concerns.

It is often appealing to understand tribe as a primary driver of the uprisings in southern Syria, but the reality is that many tribal leaders in the area were close to the Syrian government and the Ba’ath Party, and were in fact hesitant to mobilize tribal populations in support of a nationwide anti-government rebellion. Indeed, although tribal leaders were able to leverage transnational tribal networks to channel funds and weapons via international partners, they were never fully committed to anti-government military operations and demonstrated much greater concern with issues local to Dar’a governorate. Whilst pre-war bonds were therefore severely tested, tribal leaders and the government ultimately maintained a working relationship which saw the establishment of cross-line economic and governance arrangements and, with the exception of short-lived moments in some locations, little all-round fighting.

The area’s relatively static conflict conditions were consolidated in July 2017, when SWD was incorporated into the southern de-escalation zone framework as part of the Astana (now Nur Sultan) process. This effectively paused the conflict in the area, and was at least partly concerned with preventing a regional conflagration. Syria’s south lies at the intersection of Jordan, Lebanon, and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and the potential for a collision of geopolitical interests between these actors, their proxies, and their international supporters was of mounting concern as the wider conflict turned increasingly in President Al-Assad’s favour. De-escalation was only temporary however; despite Jordanian and Israeli fears over the humanitarian fallout and the nearby presence of Iranian-backed militias, the Syrian government recaptured southern Syria with Russian support in early 2018.

All communities in SWD were reconciled preemptively without a need for a sustained military operation. This was a product of earlier discussions between local interlocutors and Syrian and Russian military officials, as well as the shock and awe-type beginning to the southern offensive in eastern Dar’a governorate. Although celebrated by the government as the south’s return to the ‘bosom of the heartland’, the reality is that a patchwork of agreements were reached across SWD which created space for the emergence of unprecedented levels of instability for a post-reconciled context. Carved into petty fiefdoms managed by state security, military, and intelligence agencies variously aligned with the sometimes competing objectives of their Iranian or Russian clients, SWD cannot be regarded as under government control at this time. Assassinations, hit and run assaults, and arbitrary arrests against a variety of targets have increased in frequency since October 2018, causing some to speculate the area’s fragmented local security environment may be among the major triggers for a new wave of nationwide conflict. Such assessments are likely an exaggeration, as are suggestions that SWD might play host to significant conflict between Russia and Iran, but they nevertheless speak to the area’s prevailing insecurity and the apparent inability of the Syrian government to curb the ambitions of relevant local security actors.

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2 The Houran is bound by the Ghouta oasis in the north, by the al-Safa field in the east, by Jordan’s desert steppe in the south, and by the Golan Heights in the west.

3 The meaning and function of tribe in the southern context is described in more detail in section 3.2.

4 As well as ultimately worthless warnings that the U.S. would “take firm and appropriate measures” in response to violations of the de-escalation arrangement.

5 The offensive began in shock and awe fashion in Eastern Dar’a governorate, and was likely sufficient following the defeat of other nearby opposition enclaves that western Dar’a’s fate was sealed.
In this context, there has been a near total absence of recovery-related activities and problems of local governance and economy show few signs of improvement. Non-state actors that might help reverse this situation are in short supply, and those that are in the area have been systematically disempowered to a point of peripheral importance. Neither tribe, the business community, nor civil society are particularly active in mobilizing resources to improve community wellbeing. Indeed, local sources are pessimistic that the government will invest in the area given its past (and continued) identification with the opposition, and little should be expected until long after the current phase of the war has ended.

1.2 STUDY AREA

SWD lies immediately east of the Yarmouk River basin, at the intersection of Syria's border with Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Communities in the area are scattered around a roadway which had served as the main route between Dar’a and Damascus until the M5 Highway was opened to the east. The old Dar’a—Damascus main road nevertheless remains in operation, and serves as something of an unofficial dividing line between western and central parts of Dar’a governorate. Communities covered by this study include: Nawa, Sheikh Saed, Mzeireb, Tal Shihab, Da’el, Abtaa, Tafas, and Edwan. Nawa, Edwan and Sheikh Saad fall within Nawa subdistrict, Tal Shihab, Tafas and Mzeireb in Mzeireb subdistrict, and Da’el and Abtaa in Da’el subdistrict. All subdistricts fall within Nawa district, of Dar’a governorate.

Figure 3. Conflict Timeline
13 DISPLACEMENT

The first wave of conflict-related displacement from SWD took place between 2012-2014, during which the area’s proximity to Jordan and prevalence of cross-border family ties catalyzed substantial departures across Syria’s southern border. Exact numbers are difficult to determine, but the total number of people thought to have left Dar’a governorate over this time was estimated in the hundreds of thousands, of which the majority arrived through the Nasib and Tal Shihab border crossings. Simultaneously, SWD witnessed the flight of its entire Shia community, and most government supporters. Militarization of the protest movement generated concerns over potential sectarianism among the former, whilst fear over the possibility of armed opposition attacks caused many of the latter to leave the area for Damascus and As-Sweida governorates.

When Jordan partially sealed its borders in December 2014, displacement in SWD became predominantly internal, but it also became more temporary, or ‘elastic’. From 2014 onward, intermittent localized spikes in conflict produced elastic movements to nearby areas, with tens of thousands changing locations in this way throughout this period. Similarly, SWD was a site to which Dar’a city residents temporarily displaced when airstrikes and shells struck the city and other parts of the governorate. The only other notable displacement trend in the early-to-middle phase of the conflict came when the ISIS-affiliated Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Walid (JKBW) took control of several communities in SWD in late 2016. This drained a large proportion of the population in western parts of SWD in particular, and also reportedly caused a number to relocate entirely to Europe.

Upon the designation of Dar’a as a de-escalation zone in mid-2017, a trickle of refugee returns from Jordan were observed. These came to a halt shortly after they began however, as returnees sent reports of the poor local living conditions to relatives. In June 2018, the Syrian government launched an offensive against armed opposition groups in the south, causing one of the most rapid and significant displacement events in the history of the Syrian conflict. Within the space of a month, shelling and airstrikes caused an estimated 40,000 civilians to displace from the communities.
of Nawa, Tafas and Da’el alone.\(^6\) Again, however, this was temporary in the majority of cases, in part because of the limited duration and intensity of the offensive in SWD and the speed with which reconciliation deals were reached in key communities.

The majority of southwestern Syria underwent a ‘soft’ reconciliation variously brokered by the Syrian and Russian governments.\(^7\) Like reconciliation deals reached across Dar’a governorate, evacuations to Syria’s north from SWD were limited in number, with only around 450 armed opposition combatants leaving the area as part of an organized evacuation process.\(^8\) By contrast, former aid workers, NGO staff, activists, and local governance actors were forced to evacuate in much greater numbers, around 4,500 people, or 90% of the total number of evacuees.

As of Summer 2019, it appears that a new form of displacement is underway in southern Syria. According to an August report by the Syrians for Truth and Justice Organization, approximately 25,000 people have fled from Dar’a and Quneitra governorates since the beginning of 2019. The report alleges that around 20 smugglers are involved in smuggling people out of these areas in military vehicles to Turkey (via Idleb) and Lebanon (via Homs city), and cite the involvement of several military officials. Exact numbers are unavailable to COAR, but it is notable that the only major local community to have witnessed a population increase since August 2018 (i.e. post-reconciliation) is Tafas, which is technically beyond full government control. Some analysts explain the departures as linked to fear of detention and conscription, while others point to deteriorating public services. Though these are likely factors, the most compelling explanation is that the Syrian government is in fact facilitating this new displacement, thereby depopulating selected areas in order to create an environment that is more manageable for local security agencies.

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6 The total number of departures across the entirety of SWD was almost certainly higher than this, perhaps as many 55,000.
7 ‘Soft reconciliation’ refers to the limited application of military force to compel the surrender of the armed opposition and the agreement of the opposition to reconcile.
8 Local sources report that armed opposition groups were informed that Idleb - the destination for most reconciled and evacuated armed opposition combatants - would be the next target of an offensive by the Government of Syria and its allies.

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Figure 4. Southwestern Dar’a Population Figures at last census (2004), De-escalation (May 2017), post-reconciliation (August 2018) and latest available.
14 HOUSING, LAND & PROPERTY

For a former opposition-held area, SWD presents with relatively low levels of structural damage to property and infrastructure, and other HLP-related issues were not reported as an issue of serious concern. To date, the Syrian government has shown no interest in the application of the kind of punitive land redevelopment legislation issued in places such as Eastern Ghouta,9 likely because SWD contains mainly low-rise, low value buildings in a neglected rural area too distant from economic centers to be considered as valuable real estate. The likelihood of any state-led redevelopment or property appropriation is therefore considered as low out to the medium-term, and is exemplified by the government’s total disinterest in supporting reconstruction and maintenance of domestic and commercial property across all key communities. Indeed, there have been no reports of concerted government-led efforts to renovate property and infrastructure in SWD, with only the Dar’a city-based Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) showing any interest in addressing built environment issues through modest rubble clearance programming.

This has placed the burden for reconstruction and renovation squarely on the shoulders of the local population at a time when few have the financial resources to invest in property repairs. Given damage levels are relatively low, the main property-related issues civilians confront result mainly from the looting of homes undertaken whilst many thousands of civilians were temporarily displaced during the government’s southern offensive in mid-2018. Furniture was stolen, kitchens and bathrooms dismantled, and even piping and cable work was taken. One upside for residents is that building material prices have reportedly stabilized in Dar’a governorate in the post-reconciliation period, particularly since government control was restored along the southern portion of the M5 and checkpoint tariffs were removed at the Da’el checkpoint.10

Property issues most likely to arise in SWD are threefold: 1) Ownership documentation has been either lost or destroyed; 2) The government refuses to recognize purchase and sale documentation issued by opposition governance structures, and; 3) There is a strong likelihood that the state will intervene to regulate the proliferation of wells drilled on private property. Regarding the former two issues, the government is consistent in its demand that new ownership documentation is procured where existing copies were issued by former opposition bodies. However, this is often an arduous process and leaves those faced with updating documentation in need of expensive legal support. Some may even elect to avoid making property claims given the likelihood that their claim will be scrutinized by the security services and could result in unwanted attention.

Regarding the matter of privately-drilled wells, the government has yet to take any concerted action to regulate the overuse of water throughout SWD. However, it is clearly aware of the issue, having previously required land owners to purchase well drilling licences in the pre-war period. It remains to be seen how local authorities will address the many thousands of wells pulling freshwater from the SWD’s aquifers at a record rate, particularly because local governance bodies likely lack the capacity to address longer term natural resource problems. Should it eventually intervene on the issue, either by means of licencing, regulation, or well closures, it is likely to have negative socio-economic consequences for the many residents reliant on groundwater resources for agriculture and household incomes. This, in turn, is likely to represent yet another source of grievance for an area which has long suffered at the hands of the government’s mismanagement local of agriculture.

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9 For more on this legislation, please see COAR’s Eastern Ghouta NOSAP, June 2019.
10 Enab Baladi (2019) At Their Own Expense: People in Dar’a Governorate Restore Their Destroyed Houses.
2. GOVERNANCE & SERVICES

SECTION SUMMARY

Prior to reconciliation, formal governance systems under opposition administration were marked by close coordination and even integration with those in government-held areas. This was a result of the historic links between southern authority figures to Ba’athist systems and leaders.

Reconciliation has resulted in the reinstatement of government institutions, but their capacity and authority is constrained by a combination of neglect and insecurity. As a result, multiple sources describe a state of paralysis with regard to state-provided public services and a decline in their quality and availability.

Although major tribes retain representation in key local political, social, and economic sectors, they have become less capable of mobilizing the breadth of tribal opinion in support of their objectives.

Dar’a Negotiations Committee made important contributions to civilian security, protection, and rights in the immediate post-reconciliation period. However, their influence has declined in tandem with a less prominent Russian presence, and the Committee is now largely limited to serving as a vehicle for public complaints.

Restrictions on aid actors are reportedly particularly tight, and the operating context is further complicated by local insecurity, multiple local authority structures, the limited number of local partner opportunities, and allegations of corrupt approval and registration processes.
2.1. FORMAL GOVERNANCE: STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

Compared with other former opposition-held areas, formal governance systems in southern Syria were more integrated into their government-held surroundings than other rebel-held enclaves. This dynamic was rooted in the south’s historic status as a pillar of the Ba’athist system, as well as its notoriety for producing prominent government officials, a contingent of Ba’ath Party leaders, and a large number of public sector workers. Somewhat contrary to common depictions of the south as a rebel stronghold, this legacy persisted throughout opposition control, and had a defining impact on the manner in which the southern opposition was managed and reconciled by the Syrian government and its political and military allies. As in southern Syria more generally, many former municipal officials and Mukhtars with links to the state and the Ba’ath Party remained in SWD throughout opposition control. With protection from tribal ties, these figures served as proxies for coordination between state- and opposition-held areas. Indeed, it is likely that these informal channels were crucial for the continuation of cross-line commercial trade and transit, the supply of power and water from government networks, and the retention of public sector workers across much of the south. During the opposition’s control over SWD, the integration of state and opposition formal governance systems was reportedly so formalized as to enable public sector workers to commute cross-line and receive regular salary payments.

State penetration into formal and informal governance systems in areas under opposition control later played an important role in southern Syria’s reconciliation. Relations between state and opposition actors were such that pre-emptive cross-line negotiations were both swift broadly successful, and went a long way to forestalling the worst effects of the government-led military offensive in June/July 2018. Certainly, numerous powerbrokers in SWD were against reconciliation: Local opposition groups publicly condemned talks, and a number of state interlocutors were assassinated. But events leading to the pacification of SWD highlight that state-linked individuals were influential at a time when opposition control was regarded as strong, and, notably, when foreign donors were content to invest in civil institutions under cover of the 2017 de-escalation agreement.  

The International Crisis Group states that Jordan, the U.S. and the UK had worked to develop municipal local councils and governorate level bodies at this time. This report claims some programmes were based in Nawa. International Crisis Group (2018) Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria.
As in most reconciled areas, government interlocutors have been ‘rewarded’ with a return to political office, predominantly through the September 2018 local election process. Local reports support this statement, noting particular consistency between formal political authority figures both pre-war and post-reconciliation. The expression of state patronage through these established governance channels has not been particularly effective however, mainly because SWD cannot be described as under full government control. As detailed later in this report, SWD is embroiled in instability marked by inter-factional rivalry and insurgency. Inevitably, the prevailing climate of insecurity has curtailed the influence of government patrons, the reach of local governance bodies, and the investment of the state, with local sources describing effectively moribund local administrations in most communities. Moreover, some locations, including the entirety of Tafas, appear to have been reconciled in name only. Reconciled opposition military and political actors may operate under the Syrian flag in these areas, but they do not fall within the official purview of the government and have a certain latitude over local political decision-making given their continued role within local security management.

Continued insecurity and a lack of state control explains the acute lack of formal governance capacity in SWD. At both local and governorate level, sources describe chronic disregard for service provision and severely underfunded governance institutions. Moreover, rather than integrate ongoing I/NGOs, civil society, and opposition-led projects, the state discontinued these programmes upon reconciliation and governorate level technocrats are now unable to cover the subsequent governance shortfalls. Indeed, there are reports of post-reconciliation “paralysis” within education and commerce in SWD, no recovery projects of any note have been announced, and progress towards the normalization of local conditions has been extremely slow. Rumours of a 600 million SYP fund for road rehabilitation works emerged in February 2019, but only minor road repairs have been carried out so far, none of which have reportedly

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12 Notably, in Tafas, no government troops are permitted to enter the area by agreement between the reconciled commander of the now Russia-linked Jaish Mu’taz Billah, Abu Murshid Al-Baradan, and the Syrian and Russian militaries. For more on this, see section 5.2.

13 Officials from Dar’a’s Technical Service Directorate reportedly visit SWD often in response to requests from civilians and the Dar’a Negotiations Committee. However, local sources report the Directorate is seldom able to act and are able only to apologize.


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BOX 1: SOUTHWESTERN DAR’A, FORMAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

With the exception of Edwan, local sources report that municipal government bodies are present in every community of SWD. This therefore includes: Tafas, Da’el, Abta’a, Nawa, and Tal Shihab. Local reports state that higher city council level administrations are found in Tafas, Da’el and Nawa. As described in section 2.1, these various local administrations operate at a much reduced capacity compared with pre-war standards. Local sources describe that a number of departments are effectively in a state of dormancy, and add that both municipal and city council bodies are shorn of significant decision-making power, and that much of the authority over local affairs lies in Dar’a city and with local security actors, to include Military Security, the 4th Armoured Division, Air Force Intelligence and, in Tafas specifically, opposition legacy institutions that closely coordinate with the government under the protection of the reconciled militia, Jaish Mu’taz Billah. Public spending in SWD is reportedly extremely limited, but that which has been approved will have been previously studied by the Political Security Branch.
drawn from any such fund.\textsuperscript{15} Meanwhile, civilians report that water and electricity services have worsened since reconciliation, whilst an array of staple goods have doubled in price. Unable to compensate for the loss of foreign and local humanitarian and development funding, the reputation of formal government bodies has been poor for much of the post-reconciliation period.

It is unlikely that formal governance actors will be able to address local service provision issues with any consistency across SWD whilst the security environment remains in flux. This is not only because problems of capacity are likely to persist, but also because local sources report that inter-factional rivalry within the security domain has reportedly infiltrated local governance structures and further hampered the efficacy of local decision-making. Working at the intersection of geopolitical interests that reach far beyond local politics, civil servants in SWD have reportedly been drawn into the competing networks of Russian and Iranian-linked state and non-state security, military, and intelligence organizations (including Hezbollah). Although widely rumoured, it is impossible to either confirm or quantify the nature of external influence. Firstly, because local government is effectively in a state of dormancy, and secondly, because it government institutions have yet to demonstrate any notable behavioural differences across communities. However, it is considered that Russian and Iranian-linked affiliates are likely active within local government, presenting an important consideration for humanitarian and development organizations working across different communities. Of note, some indication of the probable distribution of Russian and Iranian influence over formal governance can be gleaned from Figure 5.

\textsuperscript{15} Confirmed by local sources with contacts on local councils in SWD. There is scepticism as to whether any such funds will materialize.

\textsuperscript{16} Evidently, tribe size was also likely a factor, with a larger tribe theoretically presenting more latitude for greater influence.

\textsuperscript{17} Al-Musarea (2019) \textit{The Role of Syrian Tribes: Betting on a Lost Cause}.

\textsuperscript{18} Hafez Al-Assad “hoped to internally dismantle the power of tribes by placing obstacles between the Sheikhs and their people”.

2.2. INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

TRIBALISM

Tribal dynamics in SWD (and the wider south) have experienced their most sudden upheaval since the Tanzimat land reforms of the 19th century. In essence, the current conflict has recast loyalties, fractured internal and external tribal relationships, and eroded the socio-political importance of tribal connections. This is not to suggest that tribal affiliation is no longer a factor in matters of local security, economy, dispute mediation, and state patronage: Tribe remains the area’s dominant informal governance system. But it does mean that conflict-related fragmentation has diminished the ‘unity’ of tribes and weakened their status as local power brokers in the current context, including in SWD. Indeed, whilst major tribes retain representation in key local political, social, and economic fora, they are now less capable of mobilizing the breadth of tribal opinion in support of their objectives.

Seeds of discontent within SWD’s tribes were planted well before the current conflict began. In the pre-war era, tribal political influence across the Houran was determined by the degree to which tribal leaders were connected to the state and its security and intelligence services.\textsuperscript{16} This was a product of a nationwide alliance between President Hafez Al-Assad’s government and tribal figures prepared to buttress Alawite rule, often in return for development assistance and/or positions of military and political authority.\textsuperscript{17} This process was seldom representative however; those selected by Al-Assad were often the most willing to offer their support rather than the most respected, powerful, or established tribal figures. Some individuals were therefore ‘promoted’ at the expense of those higher in the tribal social order, likely as part of a deliberate government strategy to sow divisions within alternative power structures.\textsuperscript{18}
This cadre of tribal leaders entered a state of relative dormancy during the opposition’s control over SWD, but they remained quietly instrumental in maintaining links between the state and opposition governance functions described in the previous section. Their coordination with the government throughout this period appears to have been recognized upon the defeat of the opposition, with reports that many tribal leaders effectively walked back into seats of local power following the September 2018 local elections. Having largely re-established pre-war patronage structures and restored their standing, leaders from key local tribes are now present on every committee and remain important local figures for everything from informal dispute resolution to local decision-making. It must be emphasized, however, that though they may represent important interlocutors for aid and development agencies, their wartime behaviour and alignment with the state has diminished their power to speak for, command, and shape local tribal opinion.

DAR’A NEGOTIATIONS COMMITTEE

Following the reconciliation of Dar’a city in July 2018, several local notables and former opposition commanders involved in negotiations with the Syrian and Russian governments formed the Dar’a Negotiations Committee. Initially, members of the Committee were drawn primarily from Tafas and Dar’a Al-Balad (Dar’a city), likely because of the importance of these two locations to the southern opposition. As the public legitimacy of the Committee grew however, reconciled militia commanders, civil activists, scholars, and legal professionals from other locations joined on the basis of their local prominence and social capital.19

The Committee’s enhanced status in the immediate post-reconciliation period was linked to the role played by Russian representatives in the affairs of southern Syria. Russian Military Police were deployed to both Dar’a city and western Dar’a shortly after reconciliation, and numerous armed opposition leaders and combatants were incorporated into Russian-linked militia. Committee members leveraged open channels with these representatives to prevent property raids and civilian detentions, helped delay the conscription of residents across areas under Russian influence, and also made strides towards recovery by securing ad hoc detainee releases20 and facilitating the rehabilitation of key local services.21 The Committee also played a noteworthy role in promoting civilian returns to Dar’a governorate by securing protection guarantees from Russian military liaison officers and communicating these to those displaced residents.

The Committee was also involved in a series of panel discussions hosted by the National Security Bureau on the government’s response to the escalation of post-reconciliation violence across southern Syria in Spring 2019. It is unknown if these channels remain open since Ali Mamlouk was replaced as National Security Advisor by Deeb Zeitoun in July 2019, and it does not appear that they have been particularly consequential given local security appears to be worsening across western Dar’a. However, the involvement of the Committee highlights its importance as a vehicle for the submission and management of civilian complaints by government officials, and positions it as the most representative community-focused governance body with a footprint in SWD.

It must be said, however, that as direct Russian presence in SWD has declined, the Committee has become increasingly redundant. Since the turn of the year, the Committee’s work has only partially touched upon issues of concern to local


19 The most notable members of the Committee are Adnan Al-Masalmeh, a Dar’a based lawyer, and Abu Murshid Al-Baradan, leader of the reconciled armed militia, Jaish Mu’taz Billah. Both of these figures are listed as stakeholders below.

20 This activity was undertaken primarily during the six month period immediately after reconciliation.

21 Local sources reported the Committee was instrumental in supporting the rehabilitation of schools in Dar’a city. One example being the Abaseen School, in October 2018.
civilians, and its earlier successes are becoming something of a distant memory amongst communities struggling to meet everyday needs. Indeed, it is now the target of some criticism for the involvement of some Committee members in a reconciliation process which has yet to provide any semblance of normalcy to people across the south. The Committee remains vocal on the failure of the government to abide by its reconciliation promises, and has advocated for a return to ordinary life for civilians, to include a return to work for legal, medical and other professionals. But it has largely been reduced to providing quotations to media, and is no longer in a position to leverage much local power in support of recovery. Given the absence of alternative local options however, it represents the most organized, professional, and well-informed civil society contact point for humanitarian and development agencies in SWD.

2.3. AID ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW

With the return government institutions to SWD, practically all cross-border aid operations were discontinued. In the context of the area’s weak and fragmented formal and informal governance systems, such an immediate disruption to public service provision caused a sharp rise in humanitarian needs across multiple sectors. Compared to the pre-reconciliation period, the number of charitable and humanitarian organizations operating in Dar’a governorate is now low, with aid activities practically atrophying entirely in SWD. Although the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) operates in the majority of government-controlled areas, few of its activities reach communities in SWD and it has no branch office in the area. Since the defeat of the opposition in July 2018, local sources state that SARC has only conducted a few visits to major SWD communities such as Nawa, preferring instead to focus its work on Dar’a city and eastern rural Dar’a governorate.

Restrictions for humanitarian and development programming in SWD appear particularly harsh when compared with those in effect in other post-reconciled areas. Like other parts in Syria, all aid organizations wishing to work in SWD must register with the Ministry of Local Affairs, but doing so reportedly confronts several practical and ethical challenges. Two challenges stand out in particular. First, at least 7 people must serve on the organization’s board of trustees, none of whom can be wanted for military service. In addition, if vetting by government-linked security services reveals the association of any prospective trustee with past or present opposition-linked political or military bodies, an alternative must be found. This process can have unpredictable outcomes however, with local sources explaining that organizations commonly nominate 20-25 potential trustees in the hope that at least seven of the names clear initial checks. It must also be noted that the body to which names must be submitted can vary by community depending on the most dominant community-level security body, likely resulting in some inconsistency in the criteria applied to an acceptable trustee profile. Second, well-informed sources report that practically each step in the registration process is littered with demands for bribes and side-payments. Some organizations are believed to have paid as much as $25,000 in gifts and cash to representatives from the security services and Department of Local Affairs officials.22

If registration and permission to work is secured, local aid actors must then confront risks posed to partner staff safety and programme integrity. As described in section 5.3., the majority of arrests and interrogations conducted by state security, intelligence, and military officials in SWD have targeted former civil society activists and aid workers, often on arbitrary charges, or for their alleged involvement in ‘terrorism’ (i.e. association with the former opposition).23 Anxiety therefore

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22 One local source noted that an individual attempting to receive a permit for a local NGO work was asked to bring two gold bullions to the municipal staff responsible for granting permits as a ‘gift’.

23 These claims are often made on the basis of the association of the individuals with the opposition or for involvement in aid or development activities.
surrounds local participation in humanitarian and development work, and has combined with the area’s multiple lines of command to pave the way for the emergence of alternative local aid providers. Hezbollah-affiliated aid actors are reportedly operating in SWD, most probably in areas under the influence of Iran-linked state security actors (Nawa, Sheikh Saed, Mzeireb, and Tal Shihab). One such example is Tajammo Muhbin Al-Kaed Al-Khaled, which is known to have implemented food, NFI, and cash-based programmes in SWD since the turn of the year.

2.4. SERVICES OVERVIEW

POWER, WATER & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

According to UN and local NGO partners, civilians report high levels of need in basic services, including power and water. Owing to the relatively low-level local conflict intensity observed in SWD, basic infrastructure needs are the result of neglected maintenance work rather than massive damage. For instance, the Ash’ari Power Station, in Nawa, is reportedly in need of major reconditioning. The station supplies power throughout SWD, and although it has seen investment of SYP 1 billion (~£1.5 million) since the outset of 2019, locals report that it only has capacity to service 4 hours of state-provided electricity per day. Some civilians in SWD have reportedly turned to solar panels as an alternative, but whilst these are relatively affordable, they are most commonly deployed for agricultural purposes rather than personal use.

Lying on the periphery of the Yarmouk River basin, SWD hosts ample freshwater reserves and is scattered with numerous lakes and springs. Civilians have long dug into the water table to collect both potable and non-potable water for both personal and commercial use, but these have increased in number as socio-economic conditions in the area have deteriorated, including in the pre-war period. This method of water collection has become increasingly unsustainable however, as increased use has required civilians to delve deeper into the water table, thereby increasing the cost of fuel-powered pumping systems and undermining the long-term viability of local aquifers which service SWD and beyond. This has had evident implications for surface water levels in SWD this summer, with Lake Mzeireb drying out entirely for the first time in recent memory. Water levels are therefore an issue of great concern for the sustainability of communities throughout SWD, both in terms of their long-term viability as settlements and as predominantly agricultural economies (see section 4.2). This problem shows few signs of improvement given the government has yet to undertake serious repairs to local pumping stations, with only two hours of regulated state-provided water available across the area per day. Wastewater disposal systems are also in need of attention given soak pits are growing in usage and threaten to pollute an increasingly pock-marked water table system.

Much like the majority of post-reconciled communities, state-run telecoms have improved after telephone exchanges connecting large sections of Nawa, Tafas, and Da’el were rehabilitated. Six hours of landline services are now available in most neighborhoods in these communities each day. Conversely, home internet services are both extremely limited and expensive, with the majority of civilians relying...
instead on 3G mobile data.

**ROADS, TRANSPORT & WASTE**

Local sources report heavy damage to road networks in some areas, particularly between key communities and in Tafas and Nawa. In line with its strategic objective to restore national and international land-based trade, government repair works in the south have concentrated on the country’s most important route, the M5 Highway. The more peripheral SWD has only seen some minor works, but local sources report these are cheap interim solutions that are unlikely to endure long-term use and will require more concerted attention. Notably, rumors of a SYP 600 million budget for road repairs and network improvements in Dar’a governorate have abounded for several months, but no official announcements have been made in this regard to date. Meanwhile, options for public transport are both limited and unaffordable. A return bus journey from Nawa to Dar’a city can cost as much as SYP 500, but making such a trip for anything but emergency purposes is beyond the reach of the average resident salary of just SYP 1000 per day (£1.60). State-managed rubble clearance and garbage collection projects are also limited and insufficient. Trucks collect garbage from communities just once per week, disposing it in the only landfill site in SWD, west of Tafas.

**HEALTH & EDUCATION**

Figures obtained from UN and local NGO partners indicate that civilians of all categories (residents, IDPs, returnees) cite health as the priority need in the majority of SWD’s communities. This data was corroborated by local sources, each of whom stated that medical care has been severely neglected since the defeat of the opposition in southern Syria. Two national-level hospitals are currently in operation in SWD, in Nawa and Tafas, both of which reportedly lack adequate equipment and are unable to provide surgical and a variety of advanced care services. The area’s hospitals are complemented by numerous small health centers, but the range of available services at these centers are even more limited and do not benefit from any additional financial, staffing, or material support from non-governmental sources. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that health needs in the area are outstretching the capacity of local governance providers after the government downgraded the Tal Shihab Hospital to a vaccination center in February 2019. The suspension of medical that were formerly associated with the opposition or foreign aid and development activities has further weakened the operational capacity of local medical services, with a mass of largely inexperienced professionals now staffing hospitals, clinics and pharmacies. Indeed, there are reports that unqualified personnel are working in pharmacies across SWD, and have been supplying the public with medicines left behind by discontinued pre-reconciliation NGO projects.

Prior to the return of government, NGOs had worked to rehabilitate some damaged and destroyed schools and carried out training for teaching professionals across SWD. Though residents have reportedly sought to continue these programmes wherever possible, the sector has seen a considerable decline since reconciliation, and especially since the government dismissed all teachers and school staff that worked during opposition control. Like their medical counterparts, many staff were replaced by inexperienced graduates, and the profession has become increasingly unappealing after the Ministry of Education reportedly shifted to an hourly wage system. Teachers in the area no longer paid throughout the year, and their wages no generally amount to the same daily amount as the average earner in the area (SYP 1,000).

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29 This estimate was provided by a single local source and is not based on any detailed assessment.
30 Tal Shihab was a vital medical center for SWD and accommodated specialty doctors and nurses and provided a variety of surgical services that were unavailable in other hospitals in the area.
CIVIL DOCUMENTATION

As part of nationwide government policy, the Syrian Interior Ministry refuses to recognize civil documentation issued by opposition-linked institutions. The slow return of government civil documentation service centers to SWD has therefore made obtaining official documents an arduous process, and is made all the more difficult by the involvement of intelligence agencies in vetting civilian requests. Any request from an individual with links to the opposition is refused, even where that connection is indirect. For example, the wives and children of former opposition combatants have no access to official documentation, meaning a significant number of births have yet to be recognized. Locals note this has created issues for families seeking to register children at school and obtain basic health services. For those permitted by the security services to access and amend their documentation, there are reports that local officials demand fees for providing documentation services.

GOVERNANCE STAKEHOLDERS

- **Ali Al-Salkadi**: Lawyer and former Governor of Dar’a during opposition control. Now critical of the government’s management of the post-reconciliation context and is likely connected not only to the Dar’a Negotiations Committee, but also similarly influential figures of a similar opinion.

- **Adnan Al-Masalmeh**: Lawyer, member of the prominent Al-Masalmeh tribe, and the most publicly vocal member of the Dar’a Negotiations Committee.

- **UFUK FOR HUMANITARIAN DEVELOPMENT**: Local development organization operating in Dar’a governorate. Works on strengthening the infrastructure in Dar’a governorate, and restoring livelihoods and economic capabilities of young men and women.

- **Dar’a Negotiations Committee**: Formed in July 2018 by former opposition commanders and local notables involved in reconciliation negotiations with the Syrian and Russian governments. The committee plays an important role in negotiating civilian affairs, such as detentions, conscription, and property raids.

- **Tribes**: Various tribes coexist in SWD, most notably Zou’bi, Al-Baradan, Johmani, Shehadat, and Al-Hariri. Most retain representation in key local political, social, and economic fora, but they are now less capable of mobilizing tribal opinion in support of their objectives.

- **Government Intelligence and Security Agencies**: Includes Air Force Intelligence, Military Security Branch, and the Political Security Branch. Aside from maintaining local security, these organizations are responsible for providing civilian security clearances and security permits to aid actors.

- **Municipal and City Councils**: Although limited in reach and capacity, these bodies are the primary formal governance interface and main channel to Ministry of Local Administration officials. Council locations are listed in Box 1.

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31 The Air Force Intelligence or the Military Security will likely refrain from granting security clearances and claim that these individuals (i.e. wives and children) will always have links to opposition combatants.
3. COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

SECTION SUMMARY

Pre-war social cohesion in SWD was generally strong, with no reported local tensions. Tribes were important local actors, and had important roles in political, social and economic life. Since the return of government institutions however, tribal allegiances shifted and their influence has since decreased.

It is apparent that the influence of tribes depends heavily on the relationship of tribal leaders with government security and governance actors. Inevitably, rivalry between local security actors could therefore be reflected across and within tribes. In addition, elements within tribes also remain sympathetic to the opposition, and tribe must be viewed as hosting a diversity of opinion on the area’s recovery.

Civil society experienced massive growth during opposition control, only to recede to a point of extreme weakness in the post reconciliation period. This presents a local operating context devoid of active partner opportunities, whilst existing local capacity has been forced into a state of dormancy by tight security restrictions.

Relationships between Islamic sects have been tested by conflict, besiegement, and reconciliation. This has created potential for division between the area’s majority Sunni and returning minority Shia populations. Indeed, national and international actors may capitalize on these previously nonexistent sectarian differences to advance their own local agendas.

Having shifted from predominantly traditional roles to widespread involvement in civil society, service provision and the economy, women experienced increased status under opposition control. This capacity has been tempered by the return of government, but women experience greater freedom of movement, lower levels of state suspicion, and find it easier to obtain security clearances.
3.1 COMMUNITY COHESION

SWD is a traditionally agrarian society comprised mainly of Sunni Arab tribes and a scattered Shia minority. Three dynamics currently inform the area’s social landscape. First, tribes were important figures within political and social decision-making in the pre-war period, but have since seen their influence weaken as their membership has fragmented under the strain of conflict. Second, the relatively vibrant civil society present in the area under opposition control has been systematically deconstructed by the return of government, and civilians now have few mechanisms through which to take collective action. And third, conflict has given rise to previously nonexistent sectarian grievances upon which national and international actors may capitalize to advance their own local agendas.

TRIBAL DYNAMICS

Previously a powerful source of socio-political mobilization, the meaning of tribe in southern Syria has undergone profound change as a result of conflict in the area. Having been amongst the most dominant forms of self-identification in the pre-war period, the importance of tribal association to individual and group decision-making has weakened, acting more like any other source of personal identity. This is a result of differences between and within tribes caused by the current conflict, and also has its origins in the divisive patronage structures established by President Hafez Al-Assad. These explanations are covered in more detail in section 2.2, specifically with regard to the role of tribe as an informal governance actor. Within the social domain however, change within tribe warrants further discussion for two reasons: first, because tribes are still important social groupings with a long history in SWD, and second; because tribal fragmentation has the potential to present a challenge to humanitarian and development actors, specifically in terms of which tribal figures can be considered as legitimate community representatives.

An array of tribes are spread across SWD, most notably the Zou’bi, Al-Baradan, Al-Hariri, and Shehadat, each of which are thought to originate from the Al-Na’ime tribal confederation which dominates Dar’a governorate. Members within these groupings have variously fallen on multiple sides of the conflict however, strengthening old or building new networks, allies, and spheres of influence. As a result, it is unlikely that engagement of a single Zou’bi tribal leader will necessarily speak to the diversity of Zou’bi opinion, and may in fact exclude other Zou’bi constituencies. Evidently, this has implications for humanitarian and development actors in terms of community engagement, specifically, that tribe should not be assumed as a unified socio-political actor. Additional caution should be applied in post-reconciliation period given the potential for tribal figures to have been captured by the multiple competing authority structures in the area, to include Russian and Iranian state and non-state security actors (Hezbollah).

Humanitarian and development actors are also advised to have modest expectations of local Shura Councils as vehicles for community outreach and coordination. During opposition control, tribal figures were heavily represented on Shura Councils, serving to effectively compensate for a number of governance shortfalls left by the absence of formal government institutions. Shura Council representatives served as key contact points for humanitarian and development organizations, and were reportedly influential in mobilizing local resources and experience in support of aid programming. Since reconciliation however, the government has increasingly marginalized the role of Shura Councils and its tribal membership, likely because of their prior association with the opposition, civil society, and foreign aid organizations. Local sources were of the opinion that in post-reconciliation SWD, Shura Councils are effectively restricted to dispute resolution, but conceded that Council tribesmen nevertheless maintain extensive contact networks which are worth engagement.
WEAK CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society underwent considerable growth when SWD was under opposition control, largely because of the significant resources brought into the area by an influx of foreign aid programming. This was only temporary however, as practically all ongoing programmes were discontinued upon reconciliation and aid organizations comprehensively withdrew. Any vestiges of this bubble were also critically undermined by an evacuation process which saw mainly local activists and aid workers leave the area owing to personal security concerns. Indeed, extremely tight government-imposed security measures now pertain to civil society and aid work in SWD, and local sources report that locals fear even holding small-scale meetings to discuss local recovery needs. This is reflected by the fact that community-level and faith-based organizations are practically nonexistent in SWD, even though they are found widely in locations such as Eastern Ghouta. The securitization of the operating environment is also evident in local reports that the only charity in operation in the area is the Hezbollah-affiliated Tajammo Muhibin Al-Kaed Al-Khaled. Moreover, local intelligence branches are also closely tracking and detaining individuals involved in civil society activities.

In this context, it is unlikely that donors and stabilization actors will be able to look beyond state-linked NGOs like SARC and Syria Trust for Development. Further to the point made above in the section on tribal dynamics, local sources stressed that any programmes undertaken through these entities must engage the most comprehensive consultation, coordination and implementation processes possible to ensure that they do not contribute to local social divisions or feed into the partial agendas of local power brokers. Insistence on the involvement of Shura Council members with local needs and power structures could inform appropriate beneficiary selection processes and generate increased community buy-in. Finally, efforts to stimulate the (re)development of civil society is unlikely to meet with success at this time and poses considerable protection risks to those involved.

SUNNI-SHIA CONFLICT-RELATED GRIEVANCES

Sunni-Shia relations in SWD were reportedly amicable prior to the conflict but reportedly became fractious as the protest movement militarized and the ensuing conflict adopted increasingly sectarian overtones. No evidence of attacks and reprisals between the two sects was found in SWD, but fears thereof were reportedly sufficient to prompt the area’s Shia minority to leave the area on an almost wholesale basis in the early part of the wider Syrian conflict. Local sources explain that these populations have been returning now that state-linked forces have re-established a foothold in SWD, and particularly in areas where Iranian-linked military and security state and non-state actors are present (northern and southwestern SWD). Their return is not known to have caused any sectarian tension to date, and the area’s pre-war demography appears to be restoring itself. That said, these populations are returning to an area where Iranian-linked actors are present to varying degrees, and the possibility that this might colour the area’s future social landscape is a consideration.

32 Most Shia from the area reportedly relocated to Damascus and As-Sweida governorates until returning steadily over the course of the past year.
**3.2 GENDER**

SWD’s historical tribal ruralism meant that traditional conservatism and gender-based roles were a common feature of the area’s pre-war society. Like women across Syria’s rural communities, SWD’s female population was traditionally marginalized from higher education and employment, and their political participation was limited. The status of women has undergone some notable shifts since the beginning of the conflict however, with women filling socio-economic gaps left by men drawn into the political-military domain by conflict. Increased aid activity in SWD during opposition control provided opportunities for women to participate in civil society like never before, whilst local and international organizations were reportedly instrumental in helping shift perceptions of women in rural areas by providing work and training in health, legal affairs, public administration, and development work.

A large percentage of women suddenly found themselves under/unemployed when the southern cross-border aid operation came to a close. However, they have since recovered somewhat owing to their prior training and experience and, crucially, because women tend to experience greater freedom of movement and fewer protection risks from government compared to resident males. Indeed, local sources add that current local circumstances are such that women are changing traditional gender roles in several ways. The number of female breadwinners has increased markedly, and women now dominate public sector jobs in the area.

**SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS**

- **TRIBAL SHURA COUNCIL:** Formed of representatives from major tribes in SWD, most notably the Zou‘bi, Al-Baradan, Al-Hariri, and Shehadat. Shura Councils are responsible mainly for mediating tensions and disputes between tribes and civilians.

- **ZOU’BI TRIBE:** The most numerous tribal group in Dar’a governorate which maintains extensive cross-border links with Zou‘bi counterparts in Jordan. Dominant mainly in and around Dar’a city, with a significant presence in Tafas, Mzeireb and Da’el.

- **AL-HARIRI TRIBE:** The Al-Hariri tend to inhabit the same areas as the Zou‘bi, and is concentrated mainly in Da’el, Abtaa, Tafas, Sheikh Saed.

- **AL-BARADAN TRIBE:** Mainly located in Tafas and Mzeireb, the Al-Baradan tribe is renowned for its links to the former opposition. A leading figure within the Al-Baradan, Abu Murshid Al-Baradan is commander of the reconciled opposition militia, Jaish Mu’taz Billah, a group which retains partial control over Tafas by agreement with the Russian government.

- **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 southern Syria, but is only able to partially meet the needs of local communities and primarily works within relief.
4. ECONOMY

SECTION SUMMARY

SWD suffers from challenging economic conditions originating from a combination of its limited value to Syria’s national economy and the significant problems facing its only real economic pillar, agriculture.

Prior to the conflict, land in the area supported a diversity of summer and winter crops and relied surface irrigation drawn from groundwater sources. Agriculture was sufficient to support local needs, but often suffered supply shortages and water management issues.

SWD’s economy improved somewhat with the arrival of international humanitarian and aid organizations, but this was a temporary improvement only. Practically programming was brought to an end when the Syrian government’s southern offensive began.

The challenges faced by rural communities in SWD are huge, particularly because many arise from macro-economic effects over which locals have little control. In farming, for instance, expensive fuel and supplies, unreliable power, and a decrease in export sales owing regulatory barriers are having a major impact on local incomes.

Local issues of water usage are also an issue of growing concern. Unregulated well drilling has increased as people have increasingly turned to agriculture in search of an income, but this has caused an unsustainable strain on local groundwater resources.

Hundreds of local professionals (doctors, teachers, aid workers) have been prevented from working for prior association with the opposition and/or foreign aid operations. Though the gap has been partially filled by recent graduates, local health and education services have lost a wealth of experience and capacity.

Diversification of the rural economy and adjusting incomes within agriculture must be the priority for humanitarian and development actors. Agricultural programmes must consider their impact on natural resource management as amongst their primary parameters, with the objective to develop lower levels of reliance on groundwater reserves.
4.1 SECTORAL OVERVIEW

PRE-WAR

SWD’s pre-war economy was typical of a predominantly rural area. Besides a limited portfolio of small commercial enterprise and public service employment, the economy was heavily truncated, and was weighted towards agricultural production and trade with nearby cities and neighboring international export customers. However, like the majority of southern Syria, agriculture was struggling in the lead up to the current conflict. Nationwide economic reforms initiated by President Al-Assad in the 2000s reduced farming subsidies in an effort to redirect state support to urban development, thereby exacerbating common challenges of rural development across the Hauran. Youth unemployment in SWD rose, growth within agriculture came to a standstill, and the prospects for the sustainability of the local economy appeared increasingly bleak. No real effort was made to shift SWD’s rural paradigm from one of government management, to one which harnessed broader sectors of the rural economy, privileged investment, and engaged a diversity of rural stakeholders. Indeed, water management was an issue of rising concern, but rather than address the inefficiencies of local irrigation systems, the government instituted exorbitant fees for well drilling licences, pricing many out of livelihoods which had been passed down for generations.33

Though SWD’s pre-war agricultural decline can largely be traced to President Al-Assad’s macroeconomic policy, the government’s approach to the application of government decisions through the selection of controversial local patrons also had an important role. Handpicked by the President, Alawite urban elites

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33 Local sources report that a pre-war well drilling licence was priced at over 2 million SYP (~£3,177).
were often placed in important positions of local authority over the predominantly rural Arab tribal south in the early 2000s. More concerned with ensuring that locally available economic resources were shared with preferred businesspeople than with job creation, these figures compounded the public’s growing sense of political and economic frustration.

**AGRICULTURE**

Local sources estimate that agriculture accounted for around 60-70% of employment in SWD in the months prior to the conflict, around 30% of which was undertaken on an informal or part-time basis. The richness of local soils and the suitability of the climate lent itself to arable farming, but an estimated 25% of agricultural activity was also pastoralism. Crops were fed predominantly by surface irrigation drawn from groundwater sources, but this had long been sufficient to support year-round harvests. Potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, beans were common choices in summer, while winter saw a shift to the cultivation of wheat, cabbage and cauliflower. Livelihoods derived from alternative rural activities were relatively few, with only a few inland fisheries and tourism at Lake Mzeireb in any real evidence. The significance of crop cultivation to the local economy is reflected in the colloquial names given to people from two of the area’s largest communities, Nawa and Tafas, who are known respectively as ‘Ahel Batata’ (People of the Potato) and ‘Ahel Banadora’ (People of the Tomato).

As the area’s only source of consistent livelihoods, agriculture was a source of income to which an increasing number of people in SWD turned as local economic conditions deteriorated in the 2000s. A marked increase in informal, part-time and subsistence farming placed increased pressures on the land however, particularly groundwater resources, which had witnessed reductions in both water levels and flow rates since at least the mid-1980s. Much of this is attributed to the proliferation of unregulated well drilling, and although this did not result in immediately obvious fluctuations in surface water, it presaged an issue of serious concern to the sustainability of agricultural production over the long term. As noted previously, the government’s response was to effectively prevent further well drilling by outlawing its unofficial practice and charging exorbitant fees for drilling licences. It did comparatively little to support alternative irrigation methods, and its support to SWD’s agriculture was pitiful relative to the importance of the industry to the area.

**MARKETS & SERVICE SECTOR**

Most local agricultural production from SWD was sold at the area’s most important market, Souk Al-Hal, in Tafas. Although goods were sold directly at the market, Souk Al-Hal was also a site for wholesale and export deals between national and international merchants. Local sources report that local agricultural producers had long profited from SWD’s position on the Syria-Jordan border and the area’s direct links to northern Jordan and eastern Iraq. Both merchants and producers from SWD regularly gathered at the market to meet traders from Damascus, As-Sweida, and Dar’a governorates, as well as international export partners from Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf.

Of note, the only notable exception to the SWD region’s predominantly agricultural economic profile is Da’el, which sits on the old Dar’a—Damascus highway, parallel to the M5. Da’el hosts a relatively stronger services sector than much of SWD, precisely because of its position on...
this old highway. Until the M5 was constructed, Da’el was something of a transit hub on the main route between Dar’a and Damascus, and skills and businesses found in the town are effectively a holdover of that previous status. This role continued under different circumstances during the conflict, when Da’el became an important meeting point for negotiations between armed opposition groups and Government of Syria forces.

**CONFLICT & POST-RECONCILIATION**

For a time, SWD had been a key node in the Amman-based cross-border aid response and saw several communities evolve from largely rural towns into more diverse service-based economies. The conclusion of the government’s southern offensive laid waste to SWD’s experiment with parallel non-state governance systems and civil society however: All local and international NGOs ceased operations in the area, with around 150 organizations shutting down almost overnight across Dar’a governorate. Thousands of people were subsequently left without support, whilst employers evacuated staff and closed offices. The sudden dismantling of a local economy that had been heavily reliant on NGO and foreign support during opposition control effectively placed SWD in a state of recession. Unemployment has rocketed, the government has prevented a significant number of health, teaching, and civil society professionals from returning to work as ‘punishment’ for their service under opposition control, and fears over local insecurity and national problems of exchange rate instability mean few residents are investing in re/developing new businesses. Pre-war problems within agriculture have also deepened. Water resource management issues have combined with nationwide conflict-related effects on markets, pricing, and material availability to undermine the area’s most fundamental source of household income both now and over the long term. With few alternative economic resources, immediate attention to agricultural production and rural development will be essential if SWD’s economy is to chart a course to recovery.

**AGRICULTURE**

Prior to reconciliation, a dedicated ‘Agricultural Working Group for Southwestern Syria’ administered a plethora of cross-border farming projects via the Amman-based food security cluster. Minutes from a cluster meeting in October 2018 explain that over a quarter of a million beneficiaries had been reached in Dar’a governorate throughout the conflict, with interventions ranging from the supply of agricultural inputs, livestock and asset restoration, animal treatment/vaccinations, infrastructure rehabilitation, small-scale food production support, and other income generating activities. Due to the southern Syria offensive and its aftermath however, many of these activities were brought to a close in Autumn 2018.

Since the retreat of cross-border aid operations and the restoration of government institutions, the Ministry of Agriculture reinstated Agricultural Association (AA) branch offices in Dar’a governorate. AAs fall under the Department of Agricultural Extension within the Directorate of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. Though they undertake extension functions at no cost to farmers, a lack of funding has been a major drag on their capacity to deliver training, technology transfers, advice, and agricultural inputs to rural communities. This has been felt acutely in SWD, which must also contend with the securitization of AA activities given reports that strict vetting criteria are attached to the use of government extension services. For instance, quality fertilizers sold by AAs in SWD are much cheaper than those available on the open and black markets (~50% cheaper in April 2019), but clearance from the Military Security branch is required prior to purchase. Farmers eager to avoid the scrutiny of

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38 In Dar’a governorate, these offices are located in As-Sanamayn, Izra’ and Dar’a city, with SWD generally falling within the jurisdiction of the As-Sanamayn office.
39 Farmers are required to submit themselves to local Military Security offices to provide identification documents, personal information, and fingerprint IDs.
state security are therefore compelled to use lower quality alternatives, effectively excluding them from restoring their productivity to the fullest extent. Fear of exposure also likely means many avoid available government extension services altogether, heightening the burden of self-reliance and the importance of community initiatives like local farming cooperatives.

The challenges faced by rural communities in SWD are huge, particularly because many arise from macro-economic effects linked to shortages and high costs of farming inputs, limited and expensive fuel supplies, unreliable power services, and a decrease in export sales due to border closures and regulatory barriers. Rural communities have little control over these broader issues, yet they have still been driven to agriculture given security restrictions impede a return to ordinary economic activity and the development of alternative livelihood opportunities. Part-time and subsistence farming has risen as families seek to supplement household incomes, and has continued to do so since reconciliation. Heightened reliance on agriculture is not only an indicator of the struggles of the local economy however, it has also exacerbated pre-war problems of natural resource management, particularly water use, which is an issue of immediate and pressing concern.

Owing to the local climate, crop farming in SWD is reliant on fuel-powered groundwater pumping systems rather than rain-fed irrigation. As demand for irrigation water has risen, wells have therefore proliferated in number, and farmers have dug deeper into the water table, particularly around Da’el and Tafas. Much of this activity was unregulated under opposition control however, and there are reports that around 3,000 illegal wells are now present in Dar’a governorate. The government has done nothing to manage the situation to date, and tribes have declined to intervene to avoid potential inter-tribal conflict.

Damage to surface water bodies across the area this year highlight the extent to which current levels of well exploitation threaten agriculture and potable and non-potable freshwater supplies in SWD. The most striking example is found at Lake Mzeireb, where minor pre-war fluctuations in the water level have worsened to the point that the lake has all but disappeared this summer. Though it is expected to recover with autumn/winter rains, the current state of Lake Mzeireb is indicative of the unsustainability of current water collection practices, as well as the urgent need to improve and modernize irrigation systems and local farming approaches. For example, after having been drawn from the water table by means of expensive fuel-powered pumping systems, water is most commonly distributed through inefficient gravity-based methods. Alternative livelihood opportunities must also be a priority if the integrity of local agriculture and freshwater supplies are to be assured for future generations. In the meantime, drought response planning should also be considered.

On water resource management, it is worth adding that the scale of water extraction in SWD likely contributes greatly to Syria’s violation of a water sharing agreement between Syria and Jordan subsequent to the construction of the Al-Wehda Dam, on the Yarmouk River, northwest of Tal Shihab. Jordanian officials complained that Syrian farmers were exceeding entitled amounts of water as early into the conflict as 2012. This issue has only likely worsened as downstream extraction has increased throughout the conflict, and lends a political dimension to sustainable water management options in SWD. Efforts to address water use in SWD may therefore benefit from engagement of Jordanian officials, at least during project design and development.

40 Also known as flood, surface, or furrow irrigation, this method is regarded as inefficient, at around 40-50%, and results in considerable water wastage.

41 Aside from controlling flow into southern Syria’s river system and the Yarmouk Basin, the Al-Wehda Dam feeds freshwater canals in Jordan which (after treatment) service Amman with drinking water.
ELIMINATION OF THE AID SECTOR

SWD was a focal point for the southern Syria aid response until direct operations in the area were effectively abandoned upon reconciliation in June/July 2018. During opposition control, communities throughout SWD received considerable international support, much of which came in the form of cross-border aid operations conducted via the Syria-Jordan border crossing at Ar-Ramtha, south of Dar’a city, and, to a lesser extent, through the unofficial crossing at Tal Shihab. For six to seven years, this support was pivotal to the strength and diversity of SWD’s labour market behind frontlines and provided livelihood opportunities to those who refused to abide by the politics of the government. As a result, some communities, particularly Nawa, evolved from peripheral farming communities into important local aid hubs with an increased number of middle class professionals and public and private services.

The government-led southern offensive changed all this almost overnight. After a short period helping to address the massive displacement caused by attacks on the southern opposition, the international aid community ceased deliveries via Ar-Ramtha, closed its offices across the south, brought and end to projects, and paid off staff contracts. With its customer base decimated, the enterprise that had sprung up to support temporary growth in former aid hubs like Nawa slowed, leaving many thousands without a source of reliable income. Options for those that worked on behalf of the aid response also became severely limited. Though the area presents major needs across most sectors and is in dire need of commercial development, the government refuses to employ professionals previously associated with civil society organizations it associates with the opposition. More politically trustworthy professionals have therefore stepped into open public sector positions, but this has inevitably left many of the area’s most skilled and experienced professionals without employment, and a limited role in SWD’s recovery.

4.2 OPPORTUNITIES

With the drawdown of the aid operation and the prevailing state of insecurity, it is difficult to foresee how investment into SWD’s economy could have a meaningful impact outside of agriculture. Certainly, the sector confronts many challenges which go far beyond the control of rural communities, the capacity of local government, and the reach and influence of aid organizations. However, there is scope to support the kind of agricultural extension activities which are currently left undone, and to harness the wealth of agricultural expertise and ambition present in the area.

If this path is to be pursued responsibly, plans must be tempered by water resource management considerations. Failure to apply this lens is only likely to worsen concerning overuse of freshwater, thereby eroding the sustainability of the local agricultural economy and the area’s long-term economic prospects. Water management is also of critical importance given neighboring areas are reliant on SWD’s responsible use of freshwater reserves. This not only applies to Jordan, but also parts of southern Syria which are experiencing similarly challenging socio-economic conditions.

Evidently, reducing the burden on local groundwater resources within agriculture requires fewer people working the land. More diverse income generating activities must therefore be opened up within agribusiness as a priority. Indeed, local sources complain that for an area with such a high agricultural output, the number of crop and animal product-based processing, packaging, logistics and other agribusiness companies is low. However, the people likely to benefit the most from the development of local agribusiness will be those that have settled their status with the security services, and are therefore deemed ‘eligible’ for establishing new factories. This will necessarily exclude people reluctant to interact with the government and its security forces. That said, reducing the pressure on agricultural production will not only support its sustainability, but give local
farmers and pastoralists more options for sales.

Provision and application of agricultural inputs, equipment, and expertise should also be undertaken in a manner consistent with responsible natural resource management. For instance, there is a high need for quality seeds in SWD; like most of Syria, these are both challenging to procure and costly when found. In providing these items however, aid providers should emphasize provision of less water intensive crops wherever feasible. In a related vein, modernization of irrigation methods is also strongly recommended. Modernization of antiquated irrigation methods is an important step towards enhancing agricultural productivity, but would also help reduce the considerable water wastage in evidence across SWD’s farmland.

ECONOMIC STAKEHOLDERS

• MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND AGRARIAN REFORM (MAAR): Responsible for the sensible use of water for agricultural purposes, for minimizing water consumption and encouraging the use of modern irrigation techniques.

• FARMER COOPERATIVES: Longstanding civil society organizations scattered throughout southern Syria comprised of farmers, pastoralists, traders and a few administrators. Cooperatives seek to improve agricultural productivity and revenues through collaboration, resource and information sharing.

• SOUK AL-HAL COMMITTEE (TAFAS): Every souk (market) in Dar’a has a management committee that represents stakeholder interests. Management committees are comprised of elected market vendors. In general, the committee works to: regulate prices; coordinate import and export; and lobby for the interests of local stakeholders. Prominent tribes often have a role in the various souk committees.

• AGRICULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS: Formal government bodies which administer agricultural extension activities and fall under the Department of Agricultural Extension within the Directorate of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform.

• DAR’A MINISTRY OF WATER RESOURCES OFFICE: Dar’a city-based governorate-level ministerial branch office responsible for irrigation, energy distribution, potable water, and waste management.
5. SECURITY

SECTION SUMMARY

Multiple reconciliation agreements were negotiated across SWD’s communities by the Syrian and Russian government. This has resulted in distinct patronage systems across communities and has given rise to an absence of stability and security.

State-linked security, military and intelligence organizations operate in diverse coordination with the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian governments. The differing objectives of these actors have created space for inter-factional competition, but these differences are likely to remain isolated to a cold war-type rivalry for influence over the Syrian state apparatus than result in a serious confrontation.

Post-reconciliation lawlessness has paved the way for local guerrilla movements to emerge, most notably in the form of the Popular Resistance. The group has undertaken a series of increasingly bold attacks on government-linked targets since the turn of the year, but its origins are unknown, and it is rumoured to be a vehicle for carrying out attacks against figures the government considers problematic.

Much like other reconciled areas, the government has failed to deliver on its reconciliation promises, particularly with regard to arrest, conscription, and service provision. Since reconciliation, approximately 690 people from have reportedly been detained in Dar’a governorate since reconciliation, a great many of whom were arrested in SWD.

No change in the current situation is expected given the Syrian government remains focused on conflict theatres elsewhere in the country and has largely achieved its objectives in the south. A climate of insecurity is likely to persist given the current violence is likely creating new targets and the state and its allies have shown limited willingness to bring attacks to an end. Meanwhile, international conflict is unlikely despite the proximity of Israel to an area in which Iran retains notable influence by proxy, largely because of Russian diplomatic efforts to keep a lid on any potential escalation.
5.1 INTRODUCTION

Dar’a governorate is the most violent and lawless post-reconciled area in Syria. Dozens of assassinations, sporadic clashes, and hit and run checkpoint assaults have taken place since the start of 2019, many in SWD, and the increasing lack of state control has caused some analysts to question whether the south may become a front in a new nationwide insurgency.\footnote{McLaughlin, P. (2019) Is a New Anti-Assad Insurgency Emerging in Syria?} Such assessments are likely an exaggeration. Events in the area are certainly concerning, but they do not indicate that an organized rebellion is imminent, nor do they indicate that the government and its allies will be unable to restore order. In reality, the alarming rise in insecurity is symptomatic of a reconciliation process which has been anything but conclusive, and which has allowed local and international security actors to compete for forms of local power and influence which the state cannot — and does not intend to — exercise at this time.

With the exception of a (now abandoned) series of panel discussions between senior government officials and local security stakeholders,\footnote{In April 2019, the National Security Bureau initiated what was intended as a series of panel discussions to address rising violence in southern Syria. High ranking military officers were in attendance, to include the Minister of Defence, and plans were made after the first meeting to develop an action plan in partnership with local stakeholders. No further meetings were held however, and it is unclear what the mechanism even achieved but to temporarily placate public frustration.} the state has shown little apparent interest or ability in calming the current situation. The reasons for this lie in a combination of self-evident military reality, geopolitics, and punitive (in)action. Regarding military realities, the Syrian government remains preoccupied with its ongoing offensive in Syria’s northwestern governorates and is known to have few resources to spare elsewhere. Geopolitics emerges in the form of Iran and Russia, which have become increasingly competitive over Syrian state resources and infrastructure now that a post-war era is on the horizon. And as to matters of retribution, it must be acknowledged that a certain level of lawlessness is likely useful for a state which has demonstrated a long memory when it comes to the punishment of its adversaries. There are still many individuals in southern Syria who have
escaped government attention, and an uncertain security space allows the state greater latitude to mitigate (or eliminate) any past, present, or potential rival interests.

Any prospective engagement by aid and development actors in SWD must understand the most critical dimensions of the instability produced by these circumstances. Three dimensions are of interest. The first is that although all state-linked security, military and intelligence organizations in the area now operate under the Syrian flag, they do so in diverse coordination with the Syrian government and its international partners, Russia and Iran.

Tied to the largely similar but sometimes competing interests of their larger client body, local security actors have been drawn into forms of inter-factional rivalry which manifest in a fragmented local command structure and speculation over potential Russia-Iran conflict in Syria. The second issue arises from a local guerrilla movement, the Popular Resistance, which has undertaken a series of increasingly bold attacks on government-linked targets since October 2018. The third issue is the result of the government’s failure to deliver on its reconciliation promises, particularly with regard to arrest, conscription, and service provision.

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44 June 23 [facebook](https://www.facebook.com) post by former opposition commander, Adham Al-Krad.
**BOX 2: MILITARY OVERVIEW**

Figure 5 presents COAR’s best community-level assessment of the territorial presence/influence of the Russia-linked Military Security Intelligence agency, and the Iranian-linked Air Force Intelligence agency and the 4th Armoured Division in SWD. The reconciled former opposition militia, Jaish Mu’taz Billah, is also shown given it retains partial autonomy in Tafas. This map should be viewed with caution and is presented for indicative purposes only. The picture is likely more nuanced than shown here, and a considerable amount of overlap is almost certainly present.

Officially, the Military Security Intelligence Agency is the primary security authority in SWD. But as the map strives to illustrate through its use of ‘dominant’ and ‘secondary’ terminology, the reality is that diverse security structures may be more influential in certain communities. The assumption that the Military Security agency is therefore the ‘go to’ local security interlocutor for aid and development agencies is therefore likely a simplification. In all cases, it is strongly recommended that the subtleties of local security arrangements are carefully studied prior to engagement.

**5.2 RECONCILIATION AND OPPOSITION MILITARY INTEGRATION**

Though the pacification of southern Syria was touted by the government as the area’s ‘return to the bosom of the homeland’, the reality is that there has been no real political-military reconciliation in southern Syria. As noted in the previous section, reconciliation afforded such latitude to local military, security, and intelligence actors that it is unclear when or how full government control will be established. Several lines of command exist between local security actors and their national and international partners, and the competing local, national, and geopolitical interests of these various stakeholders contribute to a fragmented security structure and a prevailing climate of instability.

Both Russia and Iran seek the government’s full territorial control of Syria, but the two are equally determined to increase their own influence over the government’s monopoly on violence via state military, security, and intelligence agencies and non-state proxies. This saw something of a race between the two to capture the remnants of the armed and political opposition following reconciliation in southern Syria, manifested most obviously by efforts to integrate thousands of former combatants into local branches of affiliated state and non-state security organizations.

Russia was particularly active in seeking to curb Iranian ambitions in western Dar’a, likely as part of a commitment to Israel to prevent the entrenchment of Iranian forces in the vicinity of the Syria-Israel border. Most notably, it reformed reconciled armed opposition groups into Russian-administered 5th Corps SAA brigades to prevent localized security vacuums and decrease opportunities for Iran to capture potential armed recruits. This pressured the Russian military into accepting individual reconciliation terms proposed by some of Dar’a governorates more powerful reconciled opposition leaders however, with some opportunistic commanders leveraging foreign involvement to: A) avoid conscription of former opposition combatants into the SAA; B) retain some measure of autonomy over their base of operations (often hometowns), and; C) mobilize

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45 The 5th Corps is a Syrian Arab Army unit sponsored the Russians since 2016. Reliant on Russian orders and acting in the interests of the state, the 5th Corps is likely concerned with supporting Russian efforts to reform Syrian government institutions and penetrate the Syrian military establishment.
to exact revenge on the ISIS-affiliated Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Waleed in the Yarmouk Basin. The most notorious such example in SWD is that of Jaish Mu’taz Billah, a reconciled former opposition militia which retains a bastion of partial authority in Tafas under the command of Abu Murshid Al-Baradan.

Jaish Mu’taz Billah was initially incorporated as a 5th Corps brigade under Russian command subsequent to an agreement reached between Al-Baradan and Russian liaison officers at the Hmeimim Air Base, in Lattakia governorate. This agreement entails that no government forces are permitted to enter Tafas, and that troops under Al-Baradan’s command may retain light weapons without direct government oversight. For a time, Al-Baradan appeared a willing associate. But in January 2019, he refused a request to support the government offensive in Syria’s northwest and saw his militia reduced in size at Russian insistence. For the time being, government troops remain on the periphery of Tafas, but Al-Baradan’s relationship with the Russians appears increasingly strained and highlights both the flaws in the miscellaneous approach taken to reconcile the area.

Al-Baradan is an extreme case, but his example highlights that reconciliation has produced a fragmented security environment in which Russia and the Syrian government have yet to fully curb the independent ambitions of local leaders. The 5th Corps project has now been effectively abandoned by the Russians in western Dar’a, and it is clear from the frequency of security incidents across the south that the state has yet to reclaim a monopoly on violence. Efforts to close off western Dar’a to Iranian influence have also faltered: Local sources repeatedly emphasized that Iran has been quietly strengthening its state security affiliates and local proxies across the area in recent months, adding an extra layer of complexity to an already uncertain security climate within reach of the Israeli border.

**BOX 3: OPPOSITION MILITARY INTEGRATION RATIONALE IN SOUTHERN SYRIA**

It is often assumed that a former Syrian opposition combatant’s decision to join government and state-allied forces subsequent to reconciliation is motivated primarily by economic rationale. Former opposition-held enclaves tend to experience extremely challenging living conditions, and there are few alternative livelihood opportunities for unreconciled individuals able to evade government attention in the post-reconciliation period. This is certainly the case for many in SWD, but recruitment to state-linked security actors in the area must also be understood as a result of scepticism over the government’s adherence to its reconciliation promises in a security climate littered with arrests, assassinations, and harassment. Enlistment with one’s erstwhile enemy may therefore offer some protection and, according to local reports, was a major driver for the alignment of Jaish Mu’taz Billah with Russia’s 5th Corps initiative. Evidently, this protection appears to be fading now that Russia has all but abandoned the 5th Corps project in SWD, but the phenomenon is also likely reflected in recruitment to state-linked and proxy forces attached to the Iranian military, particularly the 4th Division, the Air Force Intelligence Agency, and, to a lesser extent, Hezbollah.

46 Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Waleed (JKBW) is an ISIS-affiliated group that emerged in May 2016 in the Yarmouk Basin to the immediate west of SWD. JKBW clashed frequently with rebel groups in Dar’a governorate, and is blamed by many in the south for the failure of the southern opposition’s military rebellion.

47 Also of note is Adham Al-Akrad, and, in Eastern Dar’a (Busra Esh-Sham), Ahmed Oudeh. Oudeh’s 5th Corps brigade is the subject of a report by Al-Jabassini (2019), *From Insurgents to Soldiers: The 5th Corps in Dar’a, Southern Syria*.

48 Though remains ongoing in eastern Dar’a governorate and may witness an expansion to As-Sweida governorate in the near future.


5.3 DIMENSIONS OF INSTABILITY

INTER-FACITIONAL RIVALRY

In the current security context, some have speculated that competing Russian and Iranian efforts to strengthen their grip over Syria’s post-war future are evidence of mounting conflict between the two countries. These assessments cite brief clashes between Russian- and Iranian-linked state security actors further north, and often draw on competition over economic and military resources throughout the country as probable explanations. However, and as touched on previously, the reality is that disputes between the two are rather more representative of a cold war-type rivalry for influence over the Syrian state apparatus than a serious confrontation. Indeed, the likelihood of minor skirmishes inside Syria is low, and is regarded as equally unlikely in SWD despite two points of local tension; namely, competition over recruits for allied security bodies, and differences over Israel.

As a proportion of the total number, relatively few former opposition combatants are believed to have evacuated southern Syria following reconciliation. This is evident in the example of the Southern Front, an opposition umbrella organization which had been in receipt of significant financial and materiel support from the U.S via the Amman-based Military Operations Command until January 2018. At its height, the Southern Front comprised an estimated 30,000 troops and dozens of ‘moderate’ local groups, many of which were based in SWD. Reconciliation led to the evacuation of no more than 5,000 people however, meaning many thousands of former Southern Front combatants remained in the area. These individuals were quickly targeted as potential recruits to bolster the ranks of the area’s major security actors, the Military Security Intelligence Agency, the Air Force Intelligence Agency, the 4th Division, and the 5th Corps, each of which is tied in some way to either the Iranian or Russian military.

It is unknown if competition over former opposition combatants (and other willing locals) has been a direct source of insecurity, nor whether it has triggered violent expression of Russian-Iranian rivalry on the ground. For as long as the area is beyond the control of a unified military command structure however, the possibility that such forms of competition will exacerbate local insecurity cannot be discounted. Whether in the domain of politics, economy, or security, the potential for competition in the current climate of instability should be an important consideration for aid and development actors working in SWD. This is particularly because of the potential for any such incidents to be inflamed by the second potential source of tension between the two countries; Israel.

Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria have increased in the past year. To date, Iran’s response has generally been conducted indirectly, often via Hezbollah in Lebanon, and it is unlikely that the current tit-for-tat dynamic will worsen to such a point that it implicates SWD in a more serious conflagration. This is largely down to Russia, which is strongly opposed to an escalation because this could draw in regional and international powers and critically undermine its efforts to: A) ‘win’ the Syrian war, and; B) stabilize the country to such an extent that Russia’s political, economic, and military gains have long term sustainability. Russia is therefore expected to work via diplomatic channels to manage Israeli-Iran tensions, and would likely adopt a stronger posture in the event of any escalation, potentially through troop deployments. Again, this is unlikely, but it points

49 Incidents of note include: a skirmish between a 5th Corps brigade and the Iran-backed 4th Division in the Al-Ghab Plain of Hama governorate in January 2019; clashes between between the same forces in Aleppo city in April 2019; and raids by Russian-backed groups on a Hezbollah base in the Homs suburbs.

50 For example, on September 14 2019, President Putin reportedly refused to grant his consent to planned Israeli strikes on several targets in Syria. The case was a prime example of Russian efforts to compel others in the region to exercise restraint when it comes to Syria’s stability.
to the highly securitized operating environment in SWD and probability this will persist for the foreseeable future.

**INSURGENCY AND THE POPULAR RESISTANCE**

In October 2018, three months after reconciliation, a Military Security checkpoint was attacked in Dar’a.\(^{51}\) The incident was later reported as carried out by a guerrilla group calling itself the ‘Popular Resistance’. It wasn’t until mid-November that the group formally announced its objectives via social media, stating that ‘in order to eradicate the criminal regime, we must eradicate all of its agents in the region’.\(^{52}\) Graffiti calling for the “overthrow of the regime” appeared across Dar’a, including in SWD,\(^{53}\) and prefaced a series of sporadic attacks against government-linked targets which have become increasingly bold in nature since January 2019. Military headquarters and major checkpoints have been struck by hit and run assaults and bombings, and the group has claimed responsibility for the assassination of several reconciliation interlocutors and reconciled opposition individuals which have shifted allegiance to the government.

Despite the seriousness of the incidents attributed to the Popular Resistance, concern over its potential to evolve into a major insurgency movement is unwarranted for several reasons.\(^{54}\) First, public endorsement of the group is low: Civilians are war weary, and have no appetite to invite conflict back into SWD. Second, the group’s activities are more indicative of a guerrilla group than an organized insurgency. And third, state-linked forces have not engaged in a serious effort to root out the Popular Resistance even though the majority of its attacks have struck locations in the governorate which are under the control of Military Security and/or Air Force Intelligence. Indeed, this latter point suggests that the Popular Resistance may even be endorsed by government-linked forces to some extent, and could in fact be some kind of front for these forces to engage in inter-factional rivalry.

Conspiracy theories of this sort abound in an area where it is now difficult to know quite where some figures stand in relation to the area’s various local security actors. For instance, the reconciled opposition commander, Adham Al-Akrad of Tafas, reportedly meets twice weekly with high-ranking security personnel, but has also recently promised a ‘campaign of civil disobedience’ if forced to redeploy forces to Idlib.\(^{55}\) It is hard to imagine a reconciled commander from another area having the freedom to make such statements without serious repercussions, and indicates a confusing local security picture where all is unlikely to be as it might first appear. So understood, it is not a massive leap to entertain the possibility of Israeli involvement in the Popular Resistance, particularly given the opportunity this would provide to target Iranian-linked elements in SWD. Of course, it is difficult to verify any of these claims. However, their very discussion indicates that the Popular Resistance must be considered as a source of continued local instability in the context of its mounting activity across Dar’a governorate, to include in SWD.

**RECONCILIATION UNFULFILLED**

More than a year has elapsed since reconciliation, but the government has neglected to fulfil many of the terms to which it agreed as part of this process. This is particularly the case with regard to provisions of local reconciliation deals concerning civilian protection, specifically in terms of arrests, detentions, and conscription. Between July 2018 and July 2019, the Houran Free League media

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\(^{52}\) Orient (2019) *The Popular Resistance in the South Delivers a Message* (AR)

\(^{53}\) MEMRI (2019), *As Syria War Enters Ninth Year, Anti-Regime Protests And Armed Operations Resume In Daraa Governorate*.

\(^{54}\) Several videos have been issued by groups and individuals based in Dar’a governorate announcing their alignment with the Popular Resistance, to include Zarba Brigade and the Houran Brigade.

\(^{55}\) Shaam News (2019) *Adham Al-Akrad Threatens with Civil Disobedience* (AR)
organization documented the arrest of 690 civilians in Dar’a governorate, many of whom were detained in SWD despite being in possession of reconciliation paperwork issued by government security forces. Notably, most of those arrested in SWD have reportedly been targeted for prior association with the opposition and/or aid organizations, with local sources describing that such incidents have been so frequent as to prevent local activists and aid workers from travelling within the governorate, and even discussing their prior involvement in aid work over the phone.

As shown in figure 5, local sources have confirmed the location of 16 checkpoints in SWD. These are just part of an extensive network which spans Dar’a governorate and reportedly numbers 118 checkpoints in total. Local checkpoints are variously manned by state-linked security actors and could be subject to change without notice, but no real differences in the behaviour of checkpoint personnel have been reported. Local sources explain civilians concerned over their post-reconciliation status will avoid checkpoints without hesitation because of the prevalence of arrest at these locations. Indeed, many of the arrests of former aid workers described above were carried out at checkpoints, and possession of reconciliation documentation is no protection against harassment or detention. This is equally the case for military-aged males in possession of military service deferment papers, who are amongst the most likely group to be harassed, detained and/or arrested at checkpoints. The scale of the checkpoint challenge is now such for military-aged males that it is now amongst the main factors driving voluntary recruitment into government security forces.

5.4 SECURITY FORECAST

The Syrian government’s ongoing offensive in the northwest means that SWD (and likely Dar’a governorate as a whole) is not a priority at this time. Providing the current security situation does not escalate, the government is unlikely to intervene, particularly because it has achieved its main objective in southern Syria with the capture of the M5 Highway. As for areas which are still technically ‘beyond’ government control, specifically Tafas, it is likely that the town’s current controlling actor, Jaish Mu’taz Billah, will be officially brought into the state security structure by means of a negotiated settlement with the Syrian and/or Russian government. Where the group would fall within this structure is unknown given the rivalry between the different state-linked security actors over local armed recruits. Meanwhile, differences at the international level are likely to persist and will inform the security landscape in SWD for the foreseeable future. First, in so far as Russia and Iran are expected to continue competing over the spoils of the Syrian state in SWD now that an end to the Syrian war is on the horizon. And second, because Russia is expected to work to prevent an escalation between Iran and Israel.

56 The others being: an absence of alternative income generating opportunities; and the possibility that conscription would result in their deployment to a unit on a distant front line elsewhere in Syria.
SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS

• **GOVERNMENT INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY AGENCIES:** Includes Air Force Intelligence, Military Security Branch, Political Security Branch, and the 4th Armoured Division. Responsible for manning checkpoints, conscripting individuals into the SAA, and detaining individuals wanted for their military service. All of the following are officially state entities, however each are allied with a different configurations of national and international actors.

• **ABU MURSHID BARADAN:** Former commander of Jaish Mu’tazz Billah. Initially reconciled into the Russian-established 5th Corps in southern Syria. Despite defying Russian orders to redeploy to Idleb and although reports emerged that Russia abandoned his group, local sources claimed he still maintains covert relationships with the Government of Russia.

• **ADHAM AL-KRAD:** Former commander in the Engineering and Missiles Regiment within the Bunyan Al-Marsous Operations Room. Openly against the regime and regularly calls for protests, however, reported to be meeting with high-ranking security personnel.

• **FOREIGN MILITARY ACTORS:** Limited Russian Presence throughout SWD. Their influence comes through their directly- and indirectly-affiliated security and military groups in the area. Iranian military presence is nonexistent throughout SWD, however, there are government personnel and individuals within security groups who are affiliated with Iran. Additionally, the only aid organization working in SWD
ANNEX 1: KEY STAKEHOLDERS

LOCAL TRIBES / TRIBAL SHURA COUNCIL

Numerous tribes are spread across SWD, most notably the Zou’bi, Al-Baradan, Al-Hariri, and Shehadat, each of which are thought to originate from the Al-Na’ime tribal confederation which dominates Dar’a governorate. Members within these groupings have variously fallen on multiple sides of the conflict however, strengthening old or building new networks, allies, and spheres of influence. During opposition control of SWD, tribes in SWD formed a Tribal Shura Council and had significant influence over decision-making in the area. However, since the return of the government institutions to Dar’a governorate, the Shura Council role diminished to dispute mediation between tribes.

DESCRIPTION

Zou’bi: The most numerous tribal group in Dar’a governorate who formed extensive cross border relationships with Zou’bi tribe in Jordan. They are mostly dominant in and around Dar’a city, with significant presence in Tafas, Mzeireb and Da’ell.

Al-Hariri: Inhabit the same areas as the Zou’bi tribe, with the tribe’s mostly concentrated in Da’el, Abtaa, Tafas, and Sheikh Saed.

Al-Baradan: Mainly located in Tafas and Mzeireb. The Tribe has links with the armed opposition, especially considering their leader, Abu Murshid Al-Baradan is the former commander of Jaish Mu’taz Billah.

COMMENTS

As described in both the governance and social sections of this report, the role of tribes in SWD has changed as a result of the conflict. Internal divisions have diminished the ability of tribal leaders to mobilize tribal populations in support of unified action and their importance as local interlocutors has therefore declined. That said, tribe remains one of the few socio-political identities in SWD which presents a channel for humanitarian and development actors to access civilian stakeholders via both formal and informal governance structures. Tribes are well-represented in city and municipal council bodies, and were the driving force behind the establishment of the area’s Shoura Councils. Evidently, this allows for access to diverse networks and deep local insight, but careful attention must be paid to the constituency to which local tribal leaders may be attached.
### SOUK AL-HAL COMMITTEE

**DESCRIPTION**

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

**COMMENTS**

The Souk Al-Hal committee provides critical insight into local agricultural market needs across the entire value chain. The challenges and solutions of improved agricultural trade will be well known to members, as will potential solutions. The Souk Al-Hal Committee in Tafas likely enjoys a certain amount of liberty autonomy at this time given the town is under the control of the reconciled opposition commander, Abu Murshid Al-Bardan. Even if (as expected) Tafas were to fall back under full government control, it must be recalled that souk committees elsewhere in Syria are independent and freely elected bodies comprised of vendors and direct market stakeholders. Decision-making therefore prioritizes markets needs over political considerations, and there direct government interference in market activities is therefore unlikely.

### DAR’A TECHNICAL SERVICES DIRECTORATE

**DESCRIPTION**

The Dar’a 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 of 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 SWD is low.

**COMMENTS**

Though part of the formal governance structure, the central authorities are not known to interfere with the activities of the Dar’a Technical Services Directorate. It is primarily concerned with developing technical responses to issues raised by local government where lower offices lack jurisdiction or capacity. Although representatives from the Technical Services Directorate are known to have visited SWD, local sources note that they are frequently unable to do more than consult with local officials and seldom deploy additional resources to the local level. That said, the Technical Services Directorate has a good local reputation owing to its technocratic remit.
EXECUTIVE OFFICES

DESCRIPTION

Executive Offices are a municipal government department that operates within the purview of the Ministry of Local Administration. Executive Offices are staffed by technocrats and professionals in a variety of fields (engineering, accounting, and management). The duties of the Office are to design municipal level public service projects, conduct feasibility assessments, and manage the implementation of approved projects. Approval for Executive Office project proposals comes from the municipality’s local council, the relevant city council and the Political Security services. Executive Office staff are sympathetic to 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 help refine programme design and ensuring the efficiency of project implementation. Given the breadth of Executive Office expertise in SWD is likely limited, 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 the Syrian security services. By far the most capable aid organization in southern Syria, SARC has a weak local reputation because it seldom visits the SWD. Indeed, it has no known branch offices in SWD, and local sources emphasize that SARC has yet to conduct any programmes of note to support community needs.

COMMENTS

SARC’s neglect of SWD is likely a reflection of several factors including: the generally low priority status attached to the area; the climate of insecurity; and, arguably, deliberate government policy. On the latter point, this paper has outlined several cases where it is reasonable to suspect that the government may be punishing SWD for its opposition-linked past, ostensibly as a matter of policy. Certainly, the state’s resources are strained, as are those of SARC, but it is rare for an area with a population of nearly 200,000 people to have no SARC presence whatsoever. That said, SARC remains the most viable and capable local partner organization for international humanitarian and development agencies should programme permission be secured. As ever, the potential for interference is relatively high given the reported links and coordination of SARC with state security agencies.
## FARMING COOPERATIVES

**DESCRIPTION**

Farming cooperatives are civil society organizations found throughout southern Syria. 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, as well as some administrators. The objectives of farming cooperatives are several, but they generally seek to: take measures to manage pricing of agricultural produce; increase agricultural productivity; share knowledge and technical expertise; and increase local access to equipment and supplies. Members are well respected.

**COMMENTS**

This report recommends that farming cooperatives are engaged to play an important role in supporting the immediate and long-term recovery of local agriculture and natural resources. They are strongly positioned to identify and address needs within agriculture, and should be consulted as part of any projects concerning or affecting farming and rural lands. 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 (e.g., Agricultural Associations). It is unlikely that farming cooperatives will experience interference from the security services unless these forces are engaged to enforce the regulation of well-drilling.

## FOREIGN MILITARY ACTORS

**DESCRIPTION**

The role of foreign military actors in SWD is not overt, but the presence of Iran and Russia is felt in several domains pertaining primarily to security and governance. This is a function of rivalry between these actors for control over the Syrian state apparatus, and is influenced SWD’s proximity to the Syria—Israel border. Russia’s presence in the area is shaped by its objectives to bring a swift end to the Syrian conflict and secure the spoils of its involvement in the Syrian government’s expected victory. Iran shares these objectives, but its actions in SWD are further conditioned by Iran-Israeli rivalry, and it is believed to have expanded its influence in SWD through proxy actors, both state and non-state. Israel is thought to influence developments in SWD, but precisely how it does this in support of its national security objectives vis-à-vis Iran is currently unknown.

**COMMENTS**

Barring an unlikely escalation, the geopolitical status quo is likely to continue in SWD for the foreseeable future. Russia is expected to intervene via diplomatic channels where Iran-Israeli tensions heighten, whilst neither Iran nor Israel appear set on direct confrontation in Syria. That said, intermittent attacks are a possibility should Israel consider Iran is entrenched in SWD, but these are most likely to take the form of isolated aerial bombardments. Similar dynamics are found in Russia and Iran’s competition over the Syrian state apparatus and the Syrian economy. In SWD, rivalry between the two countries has so far played out mainly in terms of competition for local military recruits to their preferred state military, security, and intelligence actors. Owing to an absence of alternative local resources, this is likely to remain the case until the area’s thousands of potential recruits have been acquired. There will be little that humanitarian and development actors can do to shape this overarching geopolitical context. Real-time conflict analysis support to programmes is recommended, and should look to respond to changes in both the international and local arenas. Particular attention should be paid to any shifts in the influence of Russian and Iranian-linked security actors in SWD as this may indicate stronger alignment of the local governance and security actors with different international clients.