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Mosaics of power: Fragmentation of the Syrian state since 2011

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MOSAICS OF POWER

Fragmentation of the Syrian state since 2011

This report is written by Senior Researcher Helle Malmvig and published by DIIS.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Syrian government-held areas	7
Dispersion and fragmentation of means of violence and coercion	7
New business and patronage networks	9
Opposition-held areas	13
Northern Syria – Rojava	19
Borders and security	19
Services and Economy	20
Conclusion: a state forever changed	23
Notes	25
Bibliography	26

INTRODUCTION

On a stony hillside in rural Idlib, a group of men in dirty blue trousers and greyish shirts are preparing asphalt for a new road. They belong to the infamous al Qaeda-linked group Hayat Tahrir al Sham, who have just been kicked out of a neighbouring village by protesting locals. Not far from there, the White Helmets, an NGO of rescue workers associated with the Syrian opposition, is driving the wounded to a makeshift basement clinic, while at a local council meeting, members are discussing whether it can take over the electricity plant from one of the armed groups. Further south, close to the Lebanese border, pro-government militias, some foreign, others Syrian, are setting up checkpoints and distributing cheap bread to the people, just as the Syrian government used to do before the war. The regime has in effect outsourced violence to these para-military groups, who are helping to ensure its survival. At the same time, they are not under the direct command of Damascus and will not obey orders that threaten their lucrative smuggling and trading routes. Travelling further to the northeast, Kurdish local authorities are running what even their enemies call 'the best functioning local government structures'. However, the Assad government and foreign Shia militias continue to secure and control Qamishli airport, just as many civil servants, teachers and faculty members remain employed and paid by the Syrian state, not by the Kurdish authorities.

All over Syria, multiple groups are enacting and performing what are perceived to be key state tasks, sometimes living side by side, and sometimes fighting, competing and negotiating in overlapping networks of power. These cross-cutting ties defy any easy dichotomies between rebels and government of the sort we have become all too familiar with from military control maps. As this report will show, governing structures in Syria have become extremely fragmented, overlapping and above all localized, not at all resembling the highly centralized Syrian state from before the 2011 uprising, even though the Assad regime is keen to portray an uninterrupted image of the all-powerful dawla (see also Khatib, 2018, Dimasqui, 2011, Kheddour, 2017).

This does not imply that the Syrian state as a territorial sovereign entity is unravelling, but rather that governing structures are highly dispersed in loose networks of multiple actors who either share or compete over tasks of government. This devolution and loosening of central state power is therefore also likely to have profound consequences for how Syria will be governed after the war and the kind of political framework that can be negotiated.

This report is divided into three main parts:

- governance in regime-held areas
- governance in opposition-held areas
- governance in Kurdish-held areas.

These distinctions are, of course, a heuristic device in so far as one of the main points of this report is that the boundaries of authority and governance between these areas are blurred, not being under the 'control' of any one actor, just as there are instances of greater differences in governance structures within the three areas rather than between them.

The report is based on more than forty interviews Malmvig has conducted with Syrian stakeholders (Syrian intellectuals, FSA fighters and commanders, activists, journalists and former regime officials and affiliates in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon) in 2014, 2017 and 2018, as well as interviews and conversations with Iranian and Hezbollah officials, Western diplomats and international organizations working in Syria.

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT-HELD AREAS

Overall government-held areas have been calmer, with fewer active frontlines or aerial bombardment and better access to international aid. This has obviously created more conducive conditions for governance in providing basic public goods, administering daily life and providing a relative sense of security for the civilian population. Importantly, the regime has been able to draw on the Syrian state's existing institutional and administrative capacities, as well as its international status as a sovereign state. Yet there are vast differences between the territories nominally under Assad government rule. As will be explained in greater detail below, in, for example, Aleppo or As-Suwayda, the dynamics of governance are more fragmented, chaotic and violent than in Damascus, Tartus or Latakia on the west coast, which have largely kept free of the fighting.

DISPERSION AND FRAGMENTATION OF THE MEANS OF VIOLENCE AND COERCION

During the last three decades under the Assad family's reign, the line between the state apparatus and the regime has practically dissolved. Through strong patron – client relations, fierce repression by the security apparatus and later the spread of crony capitalism, the ruling family has captured Syrian state institutions and literally molded them in their image. Posters, statues and footage of the Assad family thus fill public spaces, shop windows and state television (see also Malmvig, 2016, Wedeen, 1999). But above all else the Assad regime has relied on its control of the means of violence and coercion.


Over the course of the war this has changed markedly. The use of force is now dispersed, fragmented, and outsourced to multiple groups in the form of pro-regime paramilitaries, foreign powers and local militias. These operate under loosely connected umbrella terms such as Local Defence Forces (LDF) and National Defence Forces (NDF). In parts of Homs, eastern Aleppo and Hama a range of armed pro-regime non-state actors are manning checkpoints, policing the streets, and engaging in extraction and protection rackets with little or no central command from the Syrian government (see e.g. Leenders and Giustozzi, 2017, Aron Lund, 2018, Tamimi, 2018). In Suwayda Province in the south, several interviewees indicate that the Syrian state is completely absent and that lawlessness reigns. Druze militias and tribal leaders seek to govern in its place, for instance, running tribal courts and civil affairs with substantial support from the Druze community in Lebanon (see also Fabrice Blanchard, 2016, Syria Direct, September 2017).

The use of force is now dispersed, fragmented, and outsourced to multiple groups in the form of pro-regime paramilitaries, foreign powers and local militias.

Foreign influence also holds sway over several NDF and LDF forces, who are trained and partly financed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and Lebanese Hezbollah, and some of the militias, such as the Fatimiyun and Liwa Abu Fadl al Abbas, are entirely made up of foreign Shia fighters from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Other militia groups such as Liwa al Baquir have been created and are run by foreign powers such as Hezbollah and Iran, while the rank and file is composed of local Syrians. There are also powerful paramilitary groups that are more closely linked to the regime's inner circle in respect of their finance and control, such as Liwa Imam al Baqr and the Tiger Force run by the Syrian intelligence agencies, Fahud Homs, Suqur Sahra Dir and the Fourth and Fifth Volunteer Assault Corps run respectively by the infamous regime oligarchs Rami Makhoul, Ayman Jaber and Maher al Assad (al Masri, 2017). In addition there are LDF militias linked to political parties such as the Baath Battalions and the SSNP or to the tribes in Deir Ezzour and Suwayda.¹

These multiple pro-regime paramilitary forces, foreign militias and government forces appear to live side by side, complementing, substituting and sometimes competing with each other in overlapping local dynamics, at times fighting together, at others filling the void where the state is unable to do so (see e.g. al Masri, 2017,

Dagher, 2018). In this sense, out of necessity the regime has informally outsourced a defining element in its performance of statehood to foreign and local semi-private agents, whether tribal or clan leaders, powerful businessmen or foreign actors. In the short run, this has paradoxically enabled the Syrian government to perform and maintain its claim to statehood and ultimately to survive.² In the longer run, however, delegating or outsourcing violence to such a plethora of armed actors is not without its costs. It challenges the regime's claim to central control and sovereignty, including decision-making and implementation. The fact that key figures within the regime's inner circle all have their own armed or paramilitary forces suggests the existence of rivalry and fragmentation within a hybrid set of arrangements rather than centralized and systematic order.



Out of necessity the regime has informally outsourced a defining element in its performance of statehood to foreign and local semi-private agents.

These dynamics may become even more acute after the war. Already there have been occasional clashes and some tensions between the Syrian MoD/government forces and the many pro-regime militias.³ Reportedly there are also some concerns on part of the regime and Russia that Iranian-sponsored militias have become too independent and will seek to establish a permanent presence in Syria once the war has ended (al Masri, 2017, Tamimi, 2018). Russian proposals to enrol the NDF and the LDF into the Syrian army structures were allegedly met with strong Iranian and Hezbollah opposition (Leenders and Giustozzi 2017), and today the NDF continues to operate entirely outside of the Syrian army and state institutions, while the LDF is more closely connected to the Syrian armed forces, though with strong Iranian ties and only very partial command and control (Jawad al Tamimi, 3 May, 2017).⁴ Hezbollah and Iran favour this situation of overlapping and fragmented local security orders, as this allows them to maintain influence in ways that are somewhat similar to what happens in analogous situations in Iraq and Lebanon.

NEW BUSINESS AND PATRONAGE NETWORKS

This overlapping and very localized force structure is closely tied to Syria's war economy and business patronage networks, which have enabled the regime to provide a minimum of government services to local communities while also

nourishing its powerbases, both old and new. Militia leaders and their families, both foreign and Syrian, perform this role, consequently playing a crucial role not only in the war, but also in their local communities, where they provide public goods and welfare in place of, or alongside, the state. Militia leaders, affiliated businessmen and close relatives act as the heads of charities and so-called NGOs that take care of families with martyrs, rebuild schools and even run some public transport (Khaddour, 2016, Chatham House, 2018). In areas deprived of state services, they may also distribute bread and gas, basic goods that Syrians traditionally consider to be a key task of the state, and in this sense have a pathway with which to gain legitimacy (Martinez and Eng, 2018).

In the short term the Assad regime may not be very concerned with reconstruction on a grand scale. Instead it appears to be focused on controlling and managing reconstruction and property development so as to ensure its survival and enable only the 'right people' to return.

Local business leaders who help fund these armed groups are given rewards and remunerations in return for these services, such as government positions in the public sector or with local intelligence bureaus. They may also be appointed as sheiks or heads of one of the many new charitable organizations that act as intermediaries for the regime. This allows the government to maintain some degree of surveillance over and penetration of civil society, although to a lesser extent than in the pre-2011 political order. To access international funding and aid, notably from the UN, larger NGOs need to register with the Syrian Foreign Ministry, and as always NGO registration requires connections and bribes. To stay on the approved Foreign Ministry list, charities are reportedly told to appoint, for example, regime-affiliated militia leaders, and declining to do so likely to lead to removal from the list altogether (Khaddour, 2016). Local businessmen may also serve as intermediaries in order to circumvent international sanctions and access funding from international donors. Similarly, business leaders have engaged in smuggling and trading in oil from, for example, Islamic State-controlled areas to the regime or in illegal trading from regime-held territory to besieged areas (see e.g. Sottimano, 2016). However, it should be emphasised that the boundary between the regime and the business elite is extremely thin, so that the two may be referred to as one and the same thing. Big charities, those which fund the pro-regime militias and even pay the salaries of civil servants, are thus set up by the regime's inner circle of oligarchs such as Mohammed

Hamsho, George Haswani or Rami Maklouf's Bustan Organization. Many of our Syrian interviewees pointed out that the crony capitalist order of illegal trading, transfer of public assets and licenses to business leaders closely associated with the Assad regime that flourished before the war still is intact, merely having intensified under the war economy (see also Sottimano, 2016). In the words of one of the interviewees with close ties to the regime, 'The geometry of power remains the same'.

Another means whereby the Syrian government keeps its patronage networks loyal is its use of contracts, properties and urban development rights. Prior to the war, major cities in Syria were marked by large suburban areas of illegal housing caused by the regime's economic liberalization programme, urbanization and drought in the 1990s and 2000s. There are estimates that up to half of all the residents in Damascus and Aleppo were living in these impoverished belts around the urban centres, which became the heart of the uprising. Now many of these poor suburbs have been demolished and destroyed as a result of the war, their residents having either fled or been forced to move. A number of infamous decrees and laws (Decree 66, Decree 19, Law 10) have enabled the Syrian government to expropriate land, and the regime is now generating funds through property development or using it to compensate its new and old networks of business-militiamen (see e.g. Erwin Van Veen, April 15, 2018, Maha Yahya, 2018). These expropriations have also enabled novel forms of demographic change. Syrians who have fled the Assad regime may not be able to present claims to property in time and/or in person out of fear of reprisals if they return. Moreover, the way that certain areas are being developed – for instance, the Damascus Basatiin el-Razi in Mezzeh, which is being turned into upmarket apartments – make it impossible for their former poor Sunni inhabitants to come back (Tamimi, May 18, 2018). Many Syrians opposed to the government see these laws as a tool of the regime to punish those who rose up against Assad:

“
It's the loyalists who will be given our properties, only the 'safe' people will be allowed to come back. This is the way the regime approaches reconstruction. ”

Interview with Syrian activist, May 2018

However, the war has also forced even loyal business leaders into exile or into relocating from war-torn cities to Tartus or Latakia, and a new cohort of crony businessmen has emerged (Sottimano, 2016, Khaddour, 2016). According to Chatham House, in Aleppo's Chamber of Commerce, ten of its twelve members are entirely new, and in Damascus seven out of twelve (Chatham House, 2018). On the one hand, these new business figures have made it possible for the regime to circumvent some international sanctions and create a new loyal power base, who feed on the war economy and bank on the regime's continued survival (Van Ewan, 2018, Khaddour, 2017, Chatham House, 2018). On the other hand, the new networks are highly decentralized, heavily involved in the illegal war economy and greatly influenced by foreign powers, thereby potentially giving the Syrian state less control than it had before the war. For instance, local pro-regime militia leaders have refused to abide by local ceasefires negotiated by the regime when these have hindered their otherwise lucrative smuggling routes into besieged areas, just as local militia leaders are known to have demanded government positions or parliamentary seats.

Finally, the Syrian economy has witnessed a massive flight of capital and a brain drain. Despite some recent positive indicators, the economy is in dire straits, with hyper-inflation, extremely low foreign currency reserves and a BNP at a quarter of its level before the war. Humanitarian aid from international donors and Russian and Iranian credit lines have kept the Syrian economy afloat, but it is estimated that reconstruction will cost 200-300 billion dollars (Yazigi, Chatham House, 2018), and external powers, including Assad's allies, appear unwilling and unable to take on reconstruction on a major scale (Malmvig, 2018). However, in the short term the Assad regime may not be very concerned with reconstruction on a grand scale. Instead it appears to be focused on controlling and managing reconstruction and property development so as to ensure its survival and enable only the 'right people' to return.

OPPOSITION-HELD AREAS

“ Inside Syria, it is hard to plan and think. It’s a luxury to be able to think about anything else than the day to day of providing bread and electricity. ”

Interview with Syrian activist, May 2018

Opposition groups and activists have from early on aimed to create alternative structures of governance to that of the Assad government in Damascus⁵. Local councils, NGOs and armed groups have sought to enact ‘stateness’ by providing basic services and regulation, thus partially filling the void that the withdrawal of the central government has created. However, governance by the opposition has been heavily affected by a hostile environment of rebel infighting, military attacks by the regime, sieges and inconsistent donor-funding. Moreover, the Assad government has deliberately targeted opposition attempts to build alternative institutions, its actions ranging from military attacks on health-care facilities and bakeries to ‘evacuating’ members of local administrative councils (see e.g. Martinez and Eng, 2018).

The key civilian body, the so-called Local Administrative Councils (LAC), initially grew out of the activist networks. In the early days of the uprising, Local Coordination Committees coordinated and documented demonstrations, and over time the LAC structure was copied all over opposition-held areas, in part at the request of international donors,⁶ just as provincial councils were revived and organizational

links established with external opposition structures in the Syrian National Coalition and Syrian Interim Government (SIG). Opposition governance became, in the words of one interviewee, 'A simulacrum of the Syrian government'. Importantly, the opposition's efforts were not intended to create a new territorial sovereign entity or to break up Syria – a common misconception – but rather to replace Assad's state institutions within Syria's existing national framework (Vignal, 2017). Indeed, many of the opposition's administrative laws have been taken over from Syrian state law 107 with some modifications, thus allowing the opposition's legal structures to be integrated more easily into Syrian state law in the future.

In practice governance structures have all along been extremely localized and scattered, with very weak vertical linkages to, and support from, ETILAF and SIG.

In principle the opposition structures have a formal hierarchy of local, provincial and supra-national levels, where SIG coordinates and supports LAC through the provincial councils, while LACU offers technical assistance and ETILAF provides the overall policy framework. However, in practice governance structures have all along been extremely localized and scattered, with very weak vertical linkages to, and support from, ETILAF and SIG (see also Heller, 2017, Mazen et al., 2016). According to LACU at present 354 local councils⁷ are struggling to meet daily needs, with little central coordination or accountability. One interviewee associated with local councils in Idlib describes the situation as follows:

“ Today the situation is chaotic, we only have small focal points here and there that are not really linked. We have no centre, and too many armed groups. ”

Indeed, for years the northwest has been riven by rival Islamist groups and continues to be partly governed by Hayat Tahrir al Sham. HTS has set up its own so-called Salvation Government in Idlib city and controls about 16% of the LACs according to LACU, while fiercely battling a rival alliance of Islamist groups under the new name of Jabhat Tahrir al Suriya.⁸ Moreover, while the technical and administrative capacities of the local councils have improved over time, they have not always been up to speed. Some members have been (s)elected on the basis of merit, but

influential families and/or people with a so-called 'revolutionary mind-set are prominent' (interview, civil-society activist, May 2018; see also Walid Daou, 2017, Heller, 2017, Khaddour, 2017). Issuing formal documents such as birth and marriage certificates, property documents or passports has evidently also been difficult. Documents in opposition-held areas have instead been issued by local religious figures, doctors, judges and at times by SIG. Reportedly Syrians living in opposition-held areas are increasingly questioning their validity and long-term use, and many fear reprisals if opposition-stamped documents are presented to the Syrian government in Damascus (Syria Direct, January 15, UN). Today, in order to obtain a passport, (re)claim property or undergo more sophisticated medical treatment, Syrians living in opposition-held areas need to enter government-controlled territory (Asad Hanna, Chatham House, May 2018).

Armed groups, local councils and a myriad of NGOs have competed for legitimacy and ultimately for their survival by providing identical or overlapping services. As in regime-held areas, for instance, militias and NGOs are engaged in infrastructure projects and in providing electricity or emergency care.

Performing key tasks associated with 'stateness', such as delivering basic health care, electricity and water, or even running local bakeries and delivering cheap bread, have from the beginning been important vehicles for building local support in opposition-held areas. Yet this has also created a situation in which armed groups, local councils and a myriad of NGOs have competed for legitimacy and ultimately for their survival by providing identical or overlapping services. As in regime-held areas, for instance, militias and NGOs are engaged in infrastructure projects and in providing electricity or emergency care. Instead of focusing primarily on these governmental tasks, local councils may often be preoccupied with the day-to-day coordination and sometimes implementation of humanitarian assistance, for instance, by distributing food baskets themselves, and they depend almost exclusively on international donors, whose funding has ebbed and flowed. Local councils have had few independent income-generating options and may lack the ability to extract resources from the local population. According to one interviewee associated with civil-society organization in Idlib, some councils have experimented with placing small fees on food baskets. But generally there is a wariness about levying taxes, in part because there is no strong history of taxing incomes in Syria

and elsewhere in the Arab world, but also out of a fear that taxation could lead to a loss of popular support or increase the demand for extra services. In any case, even if taxation was levied, LACs have few enforcement mechanisms if people choose not to pay.

Local councils have retained a form of popular legitimacy in their local communities that has not been bestowed on armed actors. As several interviewees stress, legitimacy cannot be reduced merely to the provision of services and security, it must also include how governance is delivered, by whom, and on what values it is based.

Armed groups have obviously fared better when it comes to the extraction of resources, as they can employ their coercive means to tax goods and services and use their lucrative channels of trade, smuggling and looting. The powerful armed groups, such as Jaish al Islam, Ahrar al Sham,⁹ FSA-related groups or HTS, are omnipresent and unavoidable. In order to govern, councils and NGOs have therefore needed to cooperate, include, negotiate and submit to armed actors, who at times have set up their own parallel governance structures rivalling the LACs, at others imposing their 'own civilian representatives' on the council, or taking up their 'main functions' as security providers and police. Armed factions have set up checkpoints, guarded warehouses, convoys, water pumps and electricity plants, and they have all been taking their 'cut', including favouring the distribution of aid and services to their own clients and extended families. Some interviewees stress that relations with the armed groups have become smoother and that a division of labour has developed:

“ The men with the guns take care of security, policing and larger infrastructure projects such as road-building and leave LAC's to govern. ”

But LACs have also become hostage to rebel infighting, and armed groups have coerced and imprisoned LAC members (Turkmani et al.) or taken over LACs altogether. Conversely throughout the conflict civilians and LACs have protested against the predatory behaviour of armed factions and at times have even managed to kick extremist groups out of their villages, as was recently the case with HTS in Maart Shurin and Saraqeb cities in Idlib (24, June 2018).

However, relations with armed groups are clearly a double-edged sword. In Atarib in rural Aleppo, for instance, armed groups and the LAC have shared the revenues from checkpoints (Turkmani et al., 2015: 60), while in rural towns in Idlib armed factions have provided local councils with gas bottles, which then have been sold to the local population at reduced prices, or they have paid the salaries of civil servants. This has been done 'to show who has the upper hand', one civil-society activist noted. However, such practices also have served to distribute resources and provide everyday goods. Similarly, the armed factions' smuggling routes and shady wheeling and dealing with regime intermediaries have served as sources of self-enrichment and have inflated the prices of basic goods for the civilian population, especially in Eastern Ghouta (see e.g. Lund, 2018), while in some cases these dodgy deals have facilitated the delivery of goods to besieged areas (Rim Turkmani, 2018)

However, local councils have retained a form of popular legitimacy in their local communities that has not been bestowed on armed actors. As several interviewees stress, legitimacy cannot be reduced merely to the provision of services and security, it must also include how governance is delivered, by whom, and on what values it is based. For many Syrians being governed by local councils has been a whole new experience of participatory and representative politics. 'Before we had an extremely centralized government, and nobody asked for your opinion....at least today with the local councils, we have our own governing structure. People have their own voice. This will be marked into history'. However, crowded and poor living conditions, high levels of insecurity and a sense that the opposition has lost the war for good are now steadily causing Syrians to move from opposition-held to government-held areas. As Eastern Ghouta and Deraa have been recaptured by the Assad government, those remaining in the northwest expect that Turkey, extremist groups or the regime will inevitably take over.

NORTHERN SYRIA – ROJAVA

Jan Pêt Khorto has contributed to this chapter on Rojava.

Early in the conflict the regime tactically withdrew most of its forces from the northern parts of Syria, allowing the Kurdish PYD¹⁰ to establish relatively well-functioning local institutions there¹¹. Seeking a new form of grassroots democracy based on the principles of feminism, ecology and self-defence, TEV DEM announced an autonomous canton-based system in Afrîn, Kobani and Jazeera in 2014¹². The cantons are formally ruled through a form of provincial council called Democratic Self-Administration (DSA). Each canton has its own legislative, judicial and executive councils, together with one general coordinating council acting for all the cantons (Khalaf, 2016). Communes are the smallest cells in TEV DEM, being formed at the basic levels of society. TEV DEM oversees the DSAs and acts as a parliament for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

BORDERS AND SECURITY

The YPG/YPJ¹³ forces are responsible for defense and security, including protecting the 'external borders' with Iraq, Turkey and the rest of Syria, while the so-called asayish functions as an internal police force. The former has largely been preoccupied with fighting Islamic State, and they have been careful not to target the Syrian regime's forces directly. The Kurdish forces have gained recognition from their effectiveness in fighting Islamic State. However, reports of human rights violations against Syrian rebel groups, the suppression of alternative civil-society voices and pragmatic relations with the regime continue to cause friction both within and outside the Kurdish community.

Since its withdrawal, the Syrian regime has in practice, but not formally, outsourced parts of its sovereignty and territorial control over its borders and border crossings to Kurdish forces, including flows of fighters and goods (see also Vignal, 2017). This has freed much needed resources for the regime to use in fighting elsewhere, while at the same time retaining an administrative and military foothold in the Kurdish area.

Since its withdrawal, the Syrian regime has in practice, but not formally, outsourced parts of its sovereignty and territorial control over its borders and border crossings to Kurdish forces, including flows of fighters and goods.

While the Kurdish forces control some of Syria's vital outer borders, they are also subject to a harsh economic embargo imposed by the Turkish government and at times by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which occasionally closes the border and prevents the flow of trade and goods, including oil. Kurdish interviewees indicate that the embargo and sanctions have affected the local economy and governance structures heavily, causing a lack of basic equipment and thus preventing the development of solid infrastructure and agriculture.

SERVICES AND THE ECONOMY

Overall, DSA administrations have been able to provide some basic services to their local populations, such as electricity, health care and security. Most of these services are provided for a fee. The DSAs are also raising revenues from construction permits, taxes on land, cars and the border trade (Narbone, Favier, & Collombier, 2016). The most prominent source of income, however, comes from oil revenues. Due to the sensitivities surrounding oil revenues and the ambiguous collaboration between the Kurdish administration and the regime, there are currently no estimates of how much the Power Commission is generating from oil production (Al-Tamimi, 2018).

Even though the main administrative institutions and service provision are run by the DSA, the Syrian regime remains in control of several government institutions, including the airport and a military base, and the Syrian government continues to pay the salaries of many state workers and civil servants. Indeed, the DSAs coordinate with regime institutions and to a large extent work in parallel with them.

Thus, some services are planned, coordinated and paid for by the Syrian regime, such as higher education and transport, and the regime continues to provide key official state documents such as passports and certificates. Other governing functions are run and financed exclusively by the Kurdish authorities, such as road construction, provision of electricity and health clinics (Khaddour, 2017, 2015).


The shadowy presence of the Syrian regime and the pragmatic division of government functions between the regime and the Kurdish authorities have allowed the DSA to build relatively well-functioning and autonomous institutions without being targeted by the Syrian regime.

The shadowy presence of the Syrian regime and the pragmatic division of government functions between the regime and the Kurdish authorities have, on the one hand, allowed the DSA to build relatively well-functioning and autonomous institutions without being targeted by the Syrian regime. For its part the latter has willingly accepted these co-governance arrangements and outsourcing of sovereignty because it has freed valuable resources for use elsewhere, while at the same time reminding the local population of its continued administrative presence (see also Khaddour, 2015). On the other hand, Kurds fear that, when the Assad regime has finished fighting the opposition, it may very well seek to re-capture and gain full control over the Kurdish areas and Syria's external borders. Its continued presence and administrative foothold is a constant reminder that it intends to reclaim its full authority in due course. The extent to which Kurdish authorities can sustain some degree of autonomy depend on external powers such as the US, Russia and Turkey and the renewed talks with Damascus. If the US remains committed to staying in northeastern Syria to contain Iranian influence and secure some leverage in any future political negotiations, this may enable the Kurds to persevere. If not, the Kurds may stand to lose most of what they have so preciously created.

Kurds fear that, when the Assad regime has finished fighting the opposition, it may very well seek to re-capture and gain full control over the Kurdish areas and Syria's external borders.

CONCLUSION: A STATE FOREVER CHANGED

After years of war, the Syrian state apparatus has fragmented into a loosely knit network of overlapping and competing authorities that hold sway over different areas. This does not imply that the Syrian state is on the verge of collapse or sectarian ethnic division. Rather the Syrian government has continued to function internationally as a sovereign state, and it has been able to draw on its administrative and institutional capacities, and even to nurture new and old local power elites in the form of prominent families, business leaders, clans and sheiks.



The Syrian state has not crumbled, but its central power appears to have been permanently devolved and dispersed.

Yet in order to survive, the Assad regime has paradoxically outsourced or co-shared key state functions – the means of violence, border control, taxation and service provision – to or with a multiplicity of foreign and local actors, whether foreign Shia militias, the Kurdish YPG or Local Defense Forces. Many of these foreign powers and militias are likely to remain in Syria after the war in order to secure so-called strategic depth, and they thrive on a certain degree of ‘controlled state chaos’. Similarly, the multiplicity of local actors and intermediaries that have been empowered during the war will not easily relinquish their new found autonomy, and may, just like the Syrian opposition, push the Syrian state towards greater localization and decentralization. The Syrian state has not crumbled, but its central power appears to have been permanently devolved and dispersed.

NOTES

- 1 In the Syrian state media, three terms are used to distinguish between some of these groups: "armed forces", denoting the government-controlled conscription-based army; "auxiliary forces", to denote volunteer-based local militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF); and "allied forces", referring to foreign forces such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian, Iraqi-Shiite and Russian forces.
- 2 On the performance of statehood in Syria, see also Martinez and Eng (2018). On the outsourcing of violence, see also Leenders and Giustozzi (2017).
- 3 For instance, Suqur as Sahr, run by the Ayman brothers, allegedly stopped a government convoy from entering an area under its control (Semenov, Feb. 14, 2018).
- 4 The boundaries and command structures between the many pro-regime militias are in any case blurred. Local NDF units, for instance, have been incorporated into the LDF or transferred to the 4th and 5th Corps, just as foreign Shia fighters have been found wearing NDF identity cards (Tamimi, 2016).
- 5 With the Syrian government's takeover of Eastern Ghouta and the ongoing assault on Deraa, opposition-held areas are effectively Idlib province and parts of rural Aleppo.
- 6 Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Study (2014).
- 7 According to interview conducted with LACU, Gazientep, May 2018.
- 8 The Afrin and the Euphrates Shield areas are in effect run by Turkey. Local councils and police report to Turkey and coordinate their activities directly with Turkish ministries (Young, 2018, Haid Haid, 2017).
- 9 After the merger with Suqor Al-Sham and Harakat, Nouredine Zenky and Nuridin al Zinki under the name of Jabhat Tahrir al Suriya.
- 10 Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat.
- 11 We include here only the Kurdish cantons, not territories further to the southeast of Raqqa and Deir Ezzour, which have their own separate dynamics.
- 12 Democratic Society (Kurdish: Tevgera Demokratîk). Tev-Dem is an umbrella organization that has been established with assistance of PYD, which later itself became a member of TEV DEM.
- 13 YPG: Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel / YPJ: Women's Defense Units, Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Jin.

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