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**Research Report**

## Losing the Syrian grassroots: Local governance structures urgently need support

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# Losing the Syrian Grassroots

## Local Governance Structures Urgently Need Support

Doreen Khoury

The Syrian grassroots civilian opposition has been the primary engine of the popular uprising against the regime of Bashar Assad. Local arrangements for self-organization have evolved from so-called local coordination committees (LCCs), which are mainly involved in media work and the organization of protests. They have created sophisticated structures of civilian administration in the liberated areas of Syria. Currently, the protracted violence, sectarianism, radicalization, lack of coordination among rebel forces and deteriorating social conditions are putting the survival of these LCCs and local opposition councils in serious jeopardy. The achievements in bottom-up mobilization and organization, as well as the inclusiveness of these new organizations, could be crucial assets in building a democratic Syria. However, without outside support, already fragile state institutions, as well as the LCCs and local opposition councils, are in danger of collapse as communities face the dangers of disintegration.

The Syrian popular uprising against the Baath regime did not occur in a vacuum; it was the result of accumulated grievances, of young people in particular. Upon assuming power in 2000, President Bashar Assad had attempted to project an image of openness and modernity, both domestically and internationally, by easing state repression and allowing for the formation of dozens of political discussion forums. Yet, when the regime began to feel that it was losing its monopoly over the public arena, forums were closed down, activists – including elected members of parliament – were imprisoned and the “Damascus Spring” came to an abrupt end. To control this newly discovered public space and use the momen-

tum for its own purposes, the regime created a structure of top-down “civil society organizations” (CSOs) under the umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development – organizations that were emptied of political content and under strict regime tutelage (notably, by the First Lady, Asma Assad). Some activists continued to work in these structures, simultaneously muting their political and social reform ambitions and trying their best to get some implicit reform messages across. Many of these activists emerged as revolutionary organizers when the uprising broke out in 2011.

Besides these mainly urban-based networks of educated and well-connected individuals probing a precarious margin of dis-

sidence, informal networks of young people with common grievances also existed in the huge, partly illegally constructed belts of settlement that surround the major Syrian cities, populated mostly by recent migrants from the increasingly impoverished countryside. Sharing overcrowded areas at close quarters, young people in these suburbs forged relations and lines of solidarity. Internet clubs and groups to clean and improve neighborhoods, for example, sprang up that had no political agendas but were still closely monitored – and at times suppressed – by a regime suspicious of any form of social organization that it did not control. In 2011, these two types of networks, which developed outside the Syria Trust umbrella, provided activists with valuable resources of mutual trust and local knowledge that were crucial during the initial phase of the uprising.

### **Syrian youth grievances**

By 2011, severe pent-up grievances began to surface, in particular among the younger generation populating the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo and provincial cities like Deraa and Homs. A particular source of rancor was the glaring disparity between the modern, glamorous image projected by the presidential couple and the dim prospects of most young Syrians. Syria's free higher education system allowed many young people to enter university, but it also created a huge gap between their aspirations and the available opportunities. In addition, many discovered that their degrees had not prepared them for many professions due to an education system that allowed little space for free initiative. Young Syrians had also tired of the regime's radical foreign policy rhetoric, which isolated Syria and made it difficult to travel or connect with other people. This was compounded by the flagrant corruption of the regime and the excessive activities of state security officers and the infamous *shabiha* (mafia-like structures of extortion linked to the secret services), who paraded their

privileges, thus contradicting the regime's discourse of equal opportunity, which had originally given it legitimacy, and aggravating feelings of inequality.

### **Development of the grassroots opposition in 2011–2012**

Young activists were inspired by Tunisian and Egyptian mass protests and bolstered by the newly discovered Arab solidarity in the popular struggle against dictators. The initial stages of the revolution were a genuinely spontaneous popular revolt against the excesses of the regime. In mid-March 2011, residents of the southwest city of Deraa reacted with outrage at the brutalization by the security forces of young boys who had sprayed anti-regime graffiti around the city. Deraa was already under severe social pressure because of the influx of internal migrants from the drought-ridden northeast. Protests and ensuing clashes with security forces escalated, culminating in the first nationwide mass protest after Friday prayers on March 25, 2011.

It was mostly the youth that led the grassroots mobilization in the months that followed. They sustained the revolution by organizing and documenting protests and acts of civil disobedience and by motivating people to join protests. The grassroots movement constructed a new public space as it overturned the Baath party's political and cultural hegemony, often employing satire and humor. Crucially, during much of the revolution, it succeeded in consolidating and prioritizing national affiliations over sectarian and ethnic ones.

Organization and mobilization were achieved primarily through the formation of the *tansiqiyyat*, or local coordination committees, which began as meetings of young activists in neighborhoods and towns across the country. For a generation that grew up in a repressive police state, this was a crucial first step in breaking the regime's psychological grip on society, as activists built trust among each other. In many areas,

they built on the years of underground local dissidence mentioned above.

Except for organizing protests, media work was initially the primary activity of the LCCs. Activists with no prior media experience became “citizen journalists,” communicating with eyewitnesses and international media outlets. Their media offices expanded to include many expatriate activists who had either already been abroad for some time or fled regime persecution. Activists smuggled in mobile phones, satellite modems and computers, allowing them very early in the revolution to offer a narrative of the uprising that countered the regime’s, mainly through social media networks such as Facebook, but later also through websites and online LCC magazines. Video clips of protests and regime violence filmed on mobile phones were uploaded onto social media websites and aired by the major satellite television stations – Al-Jazeera in particular.

As a rule, membership of an LCC was originally constituted in a spontaneous fashion. Committees would typically begin with about 15 to 20 people and then often expand to include hundreds. It was important for the activists to have a body that spoke for them and shielded them from the regime, by arranging safe houses and helping citizens flee from intelligence officers, for example. This kind of solidarity gave people a sense of ownership of the streets and created a sense of community – an important fuel for activism.

Street protests consisted of more than just people shouting slogans. They often required extensive organization. Not only did lighting and sound systems have to be arranged, but slogans also had to be coordinated between LCCs so that the political message would be unified and consistent. The Friday protest themes became a defining feature of the revolution. Thousands of people voted on a theme for an upcoming Friday protest through the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, indicating strong solidarity and communication among activists and citizens. Around

mid-2011, armed divisions (later known as the Free Syrian Army, or FSA) – made up of civilians and defected Syrian Army soldiers – began to form in response to regime violence. Activists in many places then coordinated with FSA divisions and posted lookouts to warn of approaching regime security forces. Medical teams and shelters were also set up to treat wounded demonstrators. Over time, media teams became more sophisticated in documenting demonstrations and regime violence against protesters and conveying information to the outside world.

In the tightly controlled capital of Damascus, acts of civil disobedience were organized to rattle the regime and break its confidence. For example, *Ayyam al Hurriya* (Freedom Days) – a loosely structured civil society network of activists, mostly from Damascus and Aleppo – organized numerous acts of defiance, including placing loudspeakers in the central squares of Damascus for playing revolutionary songs. These actions countered the regime’s propaganda that the capital city was untouched by the revolution.

### **Building a national narrative**

Behind the supposed nationalism and secularism of its official ideology, the Baath regime had, for decades, deliberately worked to divide society along sectarian, ethnic, regional and, increasingly, social cleavages. Its military strategy for suppressing the uprising used similar tactics, cutting off towns from each other, by disrupting road travel and communication. LCCs, in turn, created networks of solidarity that had never existed before. Many activists discovered regions in their own country they had not known before, especially peripheral, neglected villages, which became important centers of defiance against the regime. By early 2012, there were approximately 400 different *tansiqiyyat* in Syria. Volunteers were from all backgrounds.

The dangers of sectarianism were on the activists’ minds early on. Regime propa-

ganda consistently portrayed opponents as Islamist extremists. The regime resorted to the same tactics as the uprising gained momentum, thus scaring religious minorities (and secular Muslims) into remaining loyal to the regime, and preventing the type of broad social alliances that had occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. Memories of past violence (above all, the Hama massacre of February 1982, which occurred during the regime's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood after an armed revolt), as well as the disproportionate presence of Alawites in the security services and *shabiha* paramilitaries, further increased the danger of the uprising sliding into a sectarian confrontation between Alawites and Sunni Muslims.

Moreover, Syrian Kurds, who have historically suffered under the Assad regime from discrimination and repression, have also been subjected to sectarian attacks, both vocal and military. Whereas many young Kurds joined anti-regime protests, traditional Kurdish political parties took a more cautious view of the revolution, simultaneously fearing regime reprisal and the Arab nationalist and Islamist tone of the opposition. The Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or PYD) – which is the main Syrian Kurdish party and an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) – has been accused of being co-opted early on by the regime, and there have been clashes in the northeast (where Syrian Kurds are predominant) between the PYD militias and opposition armed groups.

Hence, young people formed groups to prevent a rise in sectarianism. For example, the Nabd Coalition for Syrian Civil Youth is a cross-sectarian movement with branches in several cities that was set up spontaneously by young activists in mid-2011. The Coalition has addressed the increasing influence of Jihadi fighters, has promoted unity among sects, distributed flyers, and organized campaigns against sectarianism and violence. Activities have included Alawite women smuggling mobile phones to anti-regime areas as well as visits

by Alawite women to Sunni neighborhoods.

### **Building structures of local governance**

The initial success of the LCCs was due to their decentralized and non-hierarchical structures and their integrative nationalist message, which allowed them to adapt quickly to changing situations and made them radically different from the traditional opposition parties and figures, which were beset by rigid hierarchies and ideologies. As the revolution gained momentum, however, there was a realization that better organization was needed to withstand the regime's pressure.

Activists working in LCCs at the village or neighborhood level began to coordinate with nearby committees, thereby creating a more networked structure. At the district and city levels, revolutionary councils were formed to coordinate the activities of local LCCs and, after mid-2011, also with armed opposition groups. At the national level, the Syrian Revolution General Council, as the main national grassroots coalition, promoted the activities of the regional revolutionary councils, and served as the main media outlet and interlocutor.

By mid-2012, regime forces started to withdraw, or were ejected by opposition armed groups, from a growing number of areas, in particular in the north and northwest of the country. In the void they left behind, those grassroots organizations started to evolve into ad hoc structures of local government. LCC activists were the main nuclei of the local councils, which were planned for – and developed in – various secret meetings in March 2012, and endorsed by a number of FSA leaders anxious to consolidate their gains on the ground. LCC activists also sought and obtained the support of citizens and local community leaders. When the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (more commonly known now as the Syrian National Coalition) was

formed in November 2012, local councils representing the 14 Syrian provinces (*muhafazat*) joined. In early February 2013, the 14 provincial councils met in Istanbul to discuss an internal regulations charter and setting standards on the expenditure of donations. Heads of councils discussed the humanitarian situation in their provinces, their attempts at resuming some state services (like reopening schools, for example), and the many problems they face in terms of food shortages, poor access to medical care, etc.

Beyond resuming some state services, a main objective of these structures has been to maintain the social fabric and provide leadership in communities threatened with disintegration, in particular because of the worsening humanitarian crisis and growing displacement.

Local councils in Manbij, in the north-east of Aleppo Governorate, where regime forces withdrew in late July 2012, have been more successful than others in taking control of abandoned state institutions and have striven to keep life going (e.g., by organizing a health insurance system; clearing rubble caused by bombardment; fundraising; and aid distribution), despite aerial bombardment. In al-Bara village (Jebel Azzawiyah region in northern Syria), the local council set up a five-member council of elders, which deals with all legal issues and is part of a traditional system of conflict resolution.

In some cases, a local council's strength can be gauged by its ability to negotiate with the regime on equal terms on, for example, electricity distribution (e.g., in Kabboun, a Damascus suburb, as was the case in early 2013) or the exchange of prisoners of war (e.g., in Zabadani, a resort town outside Damascus, in March 2012). These cases suggest the regime's tacit acknowledgment of the opposition local councils as the *de facto* authorities in the areas over which it has lost control.

### **Civilian and military structures**

Since the rise in power of the FSA battalions and Jihadist armed groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the main questions to be raised is about their relationship with the LCCs and local councils. Critics of the armed groups have accused them of weakening the grassroots movement and eroding popular support for the revolution, and of transforming the newly democratized public sphere into an area of conflict. It is too simplistic, however, to put the grassroots and the armed opposition on opposing sides, as both are struggling against the regime – and they are cooperating, if to varying degrees. Most FSA divisions are made up of Syrians; they not only include defected soldiers, but also many civilians who have taken up arms against the regime. They mostly stem from the economically disenfranchised rural and urban lower classes. Their legitimacy is derived mainly from their role as the protectors of the revolutionary street, especially in the absence of international protection. The state's weakness in rural areas gave legitimacy to the local tribal leaders who first led protests against the regime, and later headed local FSA divisions.

But while the FSA and the grassroots opposition may be on the same side in the fight against the regime, there have been conflicts over priorities in some regions. The FSA's priority has been to take over key spots in a number of towns, whereas activists' priorities have been to limit destruction and protect civilians. Locals in Manbij, for example, were angered when a planned cultural festival had to be cancelled because the local FSA division decided to take a small local airport without coordinating with the local council, leading to regime airstrikes in the area.

In some areas, battalion leaders have started to act as warlords, claiming liberated areas as "their" territory. Some FSA battalions have also committed human rights violations, such as extra-judicial executions, looting, kidnapping and extortion. Such behavior undermines any attempts to

build civilian structures, and opposition activists claim that the regime deliberately spares battalions acting in this way, hoping that they will help undermine the popularity of the revolution as a whole.

However, there are numerous examples across Syria of successful cooperations between the civilian and armed opposition. In Idlib, Deraa and Kafriyeh, LCCs and local councils have remained strong, despite the presence of armed groups. In Kabboun, activists have said that there is a clear division of responsibilities between the LCC (media outreach, political activism), the local administration council (municipal services and local judiciary), and the local FSA division (security, aid and resource distribution on behalf of the local council).

In principle, several factors can be identified that affect the quality of the relationship between local civilian structures and fighters operating in a given area:

#### **Cooperation works better where militants are rooted in their area of operation**

This is obvious in Aleppo province, where there was a stark difference in how the revolution progressed in Aleppo city and the countryside. In the countryside, where there was greater support for the revolution, LCCs were formed first to organize revolutionary activity. As soldiers defected from the regime's army, LCCs from their hometowns sheltered them. The local FSA division in Atareb village began, for example, with two defected soldiers from the area and then grew as more defected soldiers joined. In this case, there was cooperation between the FSA division and the LCC because they were bound by village ties.

In Aleppo city, in contrast, support for the revolution was more ambivalent, partly because the regime, until mid-2012, maintained very tight control of security over the city and partly because Aleppo citizens were mostly reluctant to openly move against the regime (with Aleppo university students being the general exception).

Thus, when FSA battalions – comprised of non-local fighters – entered Aleppo, civilian opposition structures formed afterwards, thus giving armed rebels supremacy. FSA divisions launched military operations often without coordinating with the civilian structures, and activists began to demonstrate against FSA and Islamist groups. In general, local civilian opposition structures are weakened when FSA divisions – expanding their operations – move outside their localities to liberate other areas (often joining other divisions), and fail to adequately coordinate with the locals. Civilian-military relations can become especially acrimonious, when FSA divisions entrench themselves in the town center, thus provoking heavy regime bombardment.

#### **Cooperation suffers when there are several armed groups in one area**

Armed rebels of Islamist orientation have been a main focus of media coverage, yet the plethora of armed groups operating under the label of the FSA is differentiated by far more than just religious zeal. What is also important is their attitude toward civilian structures. Some armed groups simply fail to grasp that the military's role is to provide security and not to control society, as had been the case under the Baath regime. In East Ghouta, for example, a district in the Rif Dimashq Province, the local military council formed a local council within its own structure, appointing a military man from outside the area to lead it. In this case, the military council saw itself as the main political authority.

Several FSA divisions also sometimes operate in the same area without coordinating with each other, making it impossible for the LCC or local council, in turn, to coordinate with them. As many citizens do not differentiate between civilian opposition structures and FSA divisions, activists and local council members have to deal with citizens' anger toward violations or excesses committed by FSA divisions, over which they have little influence.

### **LCCs and local councils are financially weak vis-à-vis FSA and Islamist-armed groups**

The ability of LCCs and local councils to remain active and hold their ground vis-à-vis armed groups has also been affected by poverty. Many activists are fleeing the country not just to avoid persecution by the regime's security forces, but also because they lack the money to support themselves or their families against the backdrop of Syria's economic collapse. Consequently, LCC activists either give up their activities because they cannot afford to continue, ask the FSA for money – thus losing some of their independence to the FSA – or accept foreign funding, which sometimes comes with strings attached. Also, many donors refuse to give funding to the civil structures because they fear it will be used by the FSA.

In Arbeen (a Damascus suburb), the LCC's influence, for example, has dropped because it lacks money vis-à-vis the local FSA division. Local councils also require much more funding than they are receiving at the moment to remain in operation. An \$8 million donation from Qatar to the Syrian National Coalition was distributed to the 14 provincial local councils in late 2012, but this is a minuscule amount and does little to address the humanitarian crisis, at least in the medium-term. Many towns need material donations (i.e., medicine, food, shelter, etc.) more than they need money, since in many "liberated areas" there is little left to buy.

Conversely, some FSA battalions – but in particular Islamist groups, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra (which, contrary to some reports, is not comprised of only foreigner fighters) – are awash with cash from foreign sources. Not only do they lure some activists by paying salaries, but they are providing food and money to populations that are on the brink of starvation, thus further adding to the generally positive image they have acquired through combat prowess and disciplined behavior, in contrast to other rebel units.

Islamist funding has also extended to LCCs and local councils; Midan (a Damascus neighborhood) LCC, for example, is reported to be receiving its funding from local sheikhs, who in turn receive donations from foreign Islamist sources; several members of Douma LCC were also reported as receiving considerable Salafist funding (with the remaining secular members receiving considerably less from other sources).

### **Self-organization falters where sectarianism prevails**

Initially, reports of some armed groups engaging in sectarian violence were whitewashed by Syria's internal and external opposition. But as sectarianism became an unavoidable problem – with resentment increasingly expressed by radicalized segments of the opposition against Syrian religious and ethnic minorities perceived to be siding with the regime – civil society organizations have campaigned extensively against it. Many commanders of major rebel groups as well as local activists have worked against sectarian attacks, but more and more people want revenge against regime militias and supporters, many of whom are Alawites. Acts of retribution have been reported not just against Alawites, but against Christians as well, who are perceived to be on the regime's side.

Rising sectarian sentiment has also affected the formation of local councils in areas where there is an ethnic and sectarian mix. For example, tensions (between Arabs and Kurds; and between Muslims, Druze and Christians) in the Damascus suburbs of Jaramana, Tadamon and Rokn Aldeen have made the formation of local councils difficult.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Syria's future political culture and its ability to continue as a united and inclusive country once the Baath regime falls depends in many ways on the civilian grass-



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#### Further reading:

*Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen*  
**Civil War in Syria. External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict**  
SWP Comments 43/2012, December 2012  
[www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C43\\_ass\\_wmm.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C43_ass_wmm.pdf)

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roots opposition. As the violence continues in Syria, the sustainability and legitimacy of the civilian opposition structures are in jeopardy, however. While some LCCs and local councils have had some success in fulfilling the roles of the state and providing much needed services in their towns and villages, others, due to the challenges noted above, are finding it difficult. The danger is that without adequate and consistent support from the international community, local grassroots organizations are in danger of becoming merely a voice and not a meaningful actor, mainly because they are not in a position to address the humanitarian crisis. In the mid-term, this will also have huge effects on who calls the shots in Syria: the weaker the civilian structures are, the less likely armed groups – whether FSA or Jihadi – will allow civilian leadership to take over.

Western governments have been too slow in taking significant action in support of these domestic civilian structures, while regional actors, like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have channelled funding to specific armed groups in Syria, particularly the ones with Salafi or Jihadi orientation. This indecision on the part of Western governments has led to the loss of credibility on the Syrian streets and has enhanced the profiles of the well-funded Jihadi groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, in many Syrian areas. In a war-torn country, where destitution and displacement are rife, the ability to provide humanitarian aid and protection becomes a political issue: failure to do so not only affects the local opposition leadership, but also people's perceptions of the West.

To maintain the relevance and power of Syrian LCCs and local councils and to improve the chances of post-conflict peace and an inclusive political system, European policy-makers should adopt the following measures:

**Provide sufficient funding, through the Syrian National Coalition (recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people by all EU countries and the United States), to local councils** to allow them not only to maintain themselves, but to provide humanitarian assistance to citizens and to carry out essential state services. This will give local councils, rather than warlords and Jihadists, control over the provision of services, and thus boost their role.

**Provide funding to private initiatives and international NGOs** (such as Medecins sans Frontières, Medico International or Adopt a Revolution) who can deliver aid unbureaucratically and effectively in liberated and embattled areas, and help to provide for the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Syrians.

**Provide funding to LCC and CSO activists** to prevent them from burning out and leaving the country. The multiple networks created on the ground still exist, even if an increasing number of activists have fled. These networks, especially those working on combating sectarianism, need to remain solid through financial support. Recently exiled activists need financial support as well, so that they stay in the region and come back during the transition. Instead of donors spending most of their funding on capacity-building training, activists should be funded so they can survive and remain active on the ground.

**Establish a donor office for the coordination of support**, in close cooperation with the Syrian National Coalition, to channel funding to, amongst others, authentic homegrown civil society organizations. The Trust Fund to be established by Germany and the Emirates for the Friends of Syria Group will certainly be a step in that direction. It is important, however, that all principle donors join forces so as to avoid cross-funding effectively in the future.