INSIDE WARS

LOCAL DYNAMICS OF CONFLICTS IN SYRIA AND LIBYA

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INTRODUCTION
THE LOCAL DYNAMICS OF CONFLICTS IN SYRIA AND LIBYA

LUIGI NARBONE

The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) is undergoing profound transformations. Long-term structural changes of a socio-economic and demographic nature combine with the dynamics triggered by regime change and/or the armed conflicts which ensued from the 2011 uprisings. Together, they are producing major effects at the transnational, national and local levels.

The pre-2011 regional order is being challenged, leading to a multiplication and intensification of geopolitical confrontations among regional and international powers which augment the risks of instability for the region and beyond. At the national level, political changes have led to instability which has sometimes deteriorated into armed conflicts. As a result, both the overall regional configuration and the internal situations of individual nation states are being redesigned and rearranged. New fault lines and new alliances have emerged. Borders have become flash points on the region's evolving political map, through reactivation of border tensions, a loss of central state control over border areas, and even a questioning of post-colonial national borders (Syria-Iraq; Libya).

In areas where conflicts have degenerated into armed confrontation, new forms of sub-national governance have emerged, often based on military control or ethnic-community/tribal/sectarian divisions which break up national territorial integrity. They pose long-term challenges to the eventual re-establishment of national sovereignty and increase the difficulties involved in meaningful conflict resolution. Jihadist groups are taking advantage of this situation to expand their activities, and thus are threatening the whole region.

Against this backdrop, Syria and Libya constitute two major crisis areas. These dramatic conflicts have consequences both for the region and for neighbouring Europe.

The human and economic cost of five years of armed conflict in Syria is tremendous. The UN estimates a death toll of over 400,000 people, while according to the Syrian Centre for Policy research the country is facing a total economic loss of 468% of 2010 GDP and an unemployment rate over 52%. By the end of 2015, about 45% of the population were displaced. Some 6.4 million of this population-in-movement continue to live in Syria as internally displaced persons (IDPs).[1]

However, the consequences of the Syrian conflict go far beyond the country's borders. The civil war has pushed over 4.5 million people to flee into neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, with destabilizing effects on these countries both politically and on their socio-economic fabrics. The Syrian refugee outflow has spilled over to Europe, creating the greatest refugee crisis since World War II and putting EU solidarity to test.

In Libya, the fall of Qaddafi has led to deep territorial fragmentation, a split between two main rival camps and many small-scale conflicts of varying intensity raging across the country. The inability of political forces to carry through a meaningful transition has resulted in armed confrontation between forces competing for power and resources. The conflict has been fuelled by uncontrolled migration flows and trafficking of all kinds, factors which are likely to further destabilize Libya in the future. The Islamic State (IS) organization's attempts to consolidate and expand its presence in Libya are the latest reason for concern and its success in consolidating its presence could have ripple effects in neighbouring countries, posing important threats to Europe's security.

The ongoing migration crisis and the terrorist attacks in Europe have brought the refugee issue and Jihadist radicalization to the fore. Both of

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1   Syrian Centre for Policy Research, "Confronting Fragmentation. Impact of Syrian Crisis Report," Quartely Based Report (2015), February 2016.

these issues appear inextricably linked to the developments and continuing violence in the Middle East and North Africa. Hence, these regional conflicts have attracted the growing attention of Western and European analysts.

The Syrian war and the intricate Libyan conflict are the object of much debate. Most analyses focus on geostrategic or geopolitical rationales and implications, on ideological and religious explanations, on the diplomatic processes at the national level, on the role of international actors, or on the ever-changing military developments on the ground. It is often said that, given the degree of territorial fragmentation and the importance of regional-tribal cleavages in Libya and sectarian-ethnic divisions in Syria, the inclusion of local actors should be key to a lasting resolution of the conflicts. In practice, however, these complex local dynamics are generally overlooked or neglected as information on local actors and the multiform and quickly-changing local scenes is difficult to gather and fieldwork in war-torn zones and regions is often impossible.

This ebook, Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya, aims to make a contribution to understanding of some of the under-researched local dynamics of the Syrian and Libyan conflicts. It is the result of two dedicated panel discussions during the inaugural Research Meeting of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS) Middle East Directions Programme, at the European University Institute, Florence on 10-11 March 2016.

The objective of the ebook is to create a new narrative of these conflicts which sheds light on their local dimensions by looking closely at the social, political, economic and religious transformations produced by the uprisings and the armed conflicts that followed. Only with a good understanding of these dynamics will it be possible to start an inclusive and meaningful process of conflict resolution and post-conflict transition.

On Syria, it explores issues such as the political and economic impact of Syria's implosion; the local governance dynamics in opposition- and Kurdish-controlled areas; and the limits of foreign influence in ensuring the success of armed groups in what is often perceived as a proxy war between external powers. On Libya, it focuses on a case study of local dialogue, mediation and reconciliation and its interplay with the overall national political and military process; on the role of local actors smuggling and trafficking in border regions and the development of trans-border economic spaces and its political dimension; on the role of youth culture in the development of jihadism; and finally on IS's penetration strategy and its reality on the ground. The various articles attempt to translate the findings of fieldwork-based research into policy recommendations in a language that can be of use to policy-makers.

The Middle East Directions Research Meeting, entitled Rethinking the Middle East: Transformations, Flows and (Dis)orders, brought together over 40 researchers, policy-makers and activists working on the MENA region. It was the inaugural event of the new Middle East Directions Programme at the RSCAS. This programme has the ambition of becoming a point of reference for researchers on the MENA region. It will favour exchanges and long-term collaborations between researchers and activists from the two shores of the Mediterranean, putting emphasis on empirical findings in order to produce academic analyses relevant for policy-makers. The main objective is to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the many problems which affect the region and have a direct impact on Europe.

PART 1.
THE SYRIAN CONFLICT
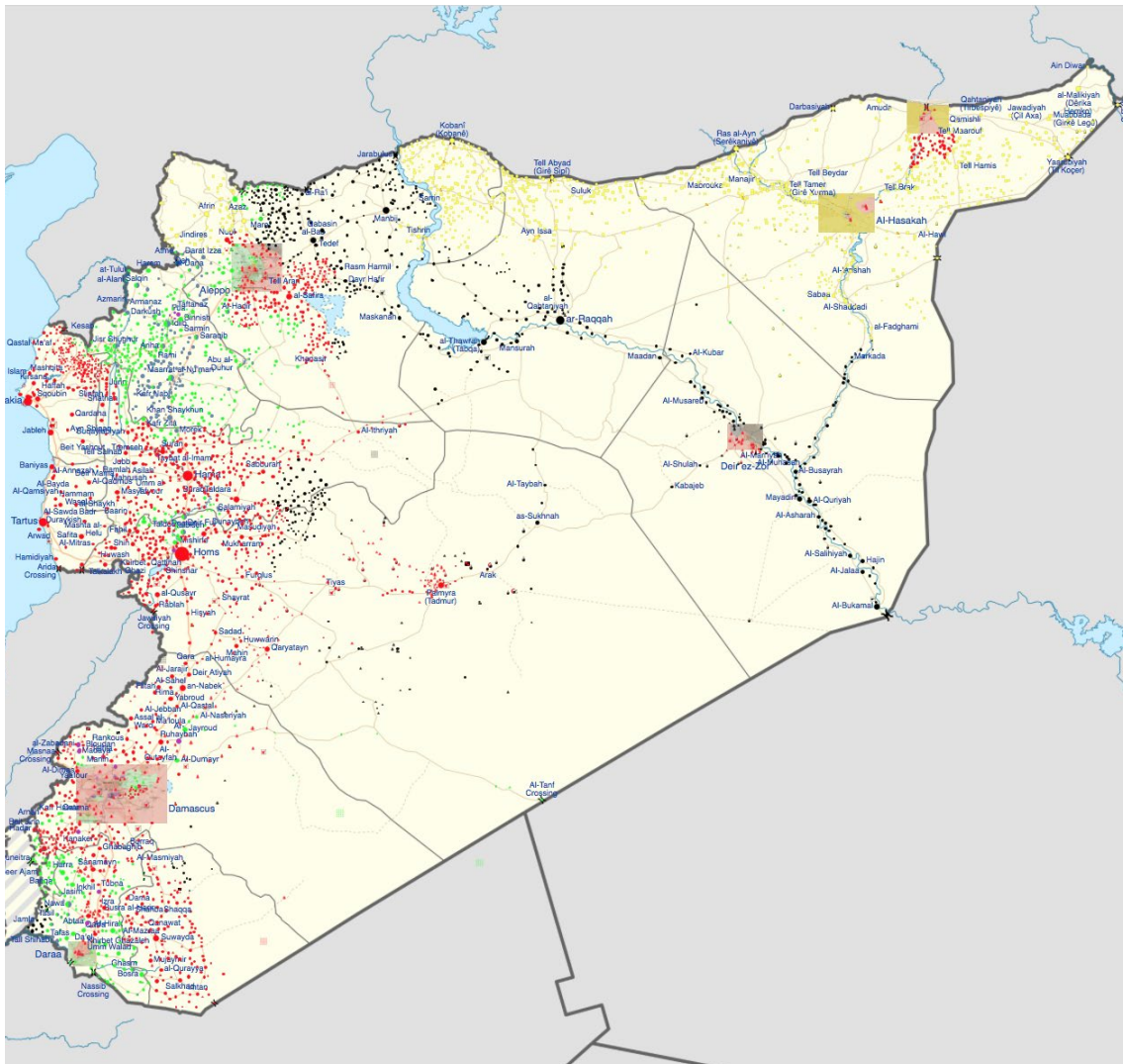
Source: "Wikimedia Commons"

SYRIA'S IMPLOSION: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

JIHAD YAZIGI
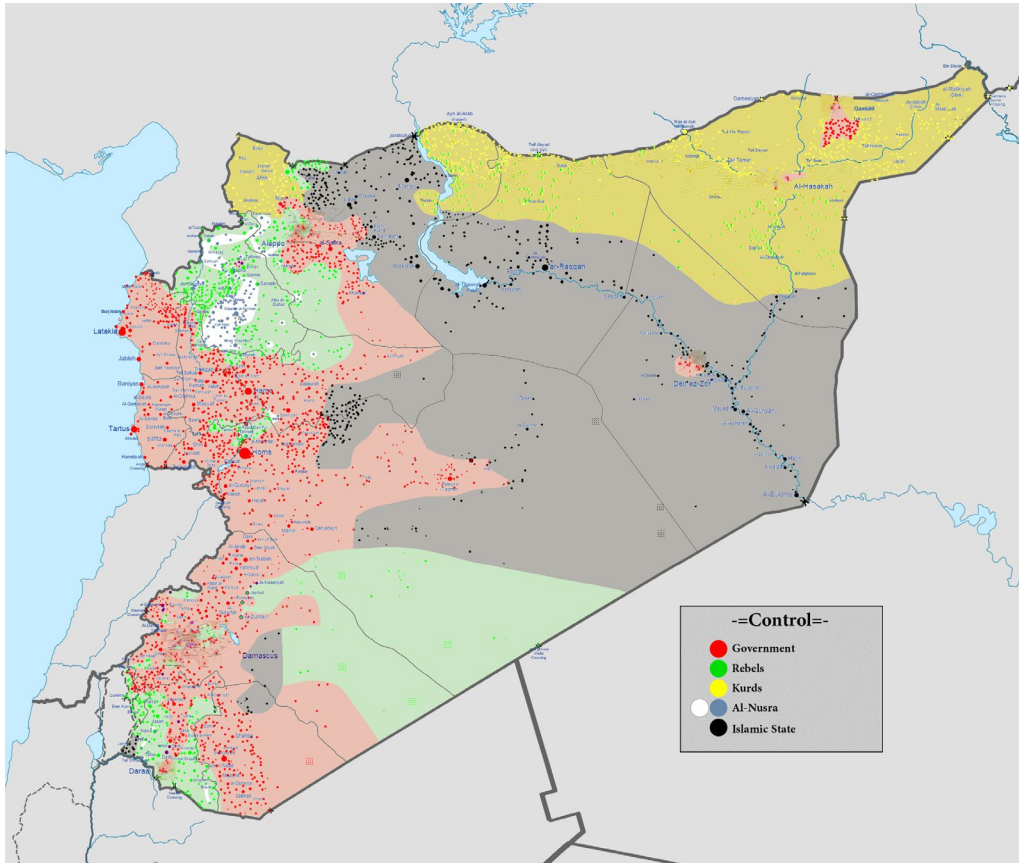
Source: "Wikimedia Commons"

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of 2013, Syria's front lines have broadly stabilized and the country is now divided into four main parts: one under the control of the regime, another of Islamic State (IS), a third of the Kurds, and the fourth of various opposition groups.

There is now a wide array of competing local autonomous administrations, school curriculums and currencies. Syria's economic map has also been modified with a transfer of private and public investments from the country's main economic backbone along the Damascus-Aleppo line towards the coastal area.

This paper will try to explain Syria's ongoing implosion and analyse the impact these changes are having on the country and on the terms under which the conflict will be resolved.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the uprising, from a socio-economic perspective Syria could be divided into two parts. The western part of the country, which comprises

the Damascus-Aleppo axis, including all the main cities in addition to the coast, was the more developed. The east and south of the country, consisting of the provinces of Daraa, Quneitra and Suweida (south), and of Deir-ez-Zor, Hassakeh and Raqqa (east), were much less developed in terms of their socio-economic indicators.

Exceptions obviously existed. The province of Idlib, west of Aleppo, was among the country's poorest. Mostly rural, this province was actually detached from Aleppo in 1958 in order to weaken Syria's northern metropolis. Similarly, the countryside around Aleppo had poor levels of economic and social development. The urban/rural divide in Aleppo is, indeed, one of the most stubborn lines of fracture in the country.

Meanwhile, the eastern provinces are rich in natural resources. Oil is extracted from fields around Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor as well as in the extreme northeast on the border with Iraq. In addition, wheat, barley and cotton, the country's three strategic crops are grown there. The country's water resources are also mainly located there. The resource-rich part of the country was therefore only reaping limited benefits from its underground resources, a pattern seen in many other developing countries.

Syria was also governed by a relatively strong central state. The state institutions were active and spread across the country; the government continued to supply services (schooling, education, etc.), to invest in infrastructure, and also to intervene in the pricing of goods sold to consumers (bread, heating oil, etc.) and to producers (farming inputs, electricity, concessionary loans). In underdeveloped areas, the government remained an important employer, partly as a consequence of weak private investment.

The decade of Bashar al-Assad, in particular after 2005, saw, however, a reduction in the role of the state. Public investment was on the decline and subsidies for most goods and services were reduced. Government economic policies were also geared towards the services sector and to the benefit of urban centres at the expense of the suburbs, the countryside and generally the more remote parts of the country.

In a departure from past policies of the Baath Governments, the responsibility for the development of these areas was transferred to the private sector. Hence, companies investing in remote areas of the country were given tax breaks and other incentives as well as more flexible regulations. In the absence of a strong political will, however, investment and development in these areas lagged. It is not that the government did not realize the existing divide and the need to address it, but it did so too late. At the beginning of March 2011, only weeks after the outbreak of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings and just days before that of the Syrian revolt, Bashar Al-Assad rushed to the north-eastern province of Hassakeh to announce the launch of the Tigris River diversion project, after more than three decades of delays – the project had an investment cost of USD 3 billion and was expected to irrigate large tracts of land, develop agricultural production and create jobs for thousands of people.

THE CONFLICT DESTROYS THE STATUS QUO AND DIVIDES THE COUNTRY INTO FOUR BROAD AREAS

Fast forward to 2016. The war has had a devastating impact on the economy and life of Syrians. The numbers are telling. According to a recent report published by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), by the end of 2015 the war had cost some USD 255 billion, GDP is less than half its 2010 value, unemployment is above 50 percent and poverty is over 85 percent.

Four distinct areas

An important and lasting impact of the war, however, is the fragmentation of the country into at least four distinct areas:

- One controlled by the regime, which corresponds to a very large extent to the western and wealthier part of Syria mentioned above: the coastal area and the main

Damascus-Aleppo axis except for some rural and suburban regions and around half the city of Aleppo, which are mostly under the control of the opposition, and to a lesser extent, the Nusra Front.

- Another is controlled by the Islamic State in the east of the country, along the Euphrates River, broadly corresponding to the Arab tribal areas historically tied to Iraq, around the oil fields of Deir-ez-Zor and Raqqa.

- A third area in the northeast and in a pocket west of Aleppo is controlled by the Democratic Union Party, the Syrian branch of the PKK. These areas are where Kurds form a majority of the population or at least the most numerous minority. They are not, however, the only areas with a high concentration of Kurds; the cities of Aleppo and Damascus together host hundreds of thousands of them.

- Finally, a fourth area is under the control of various opposition groups, in addition to the Nusra Front. The opposition parts of Syria are themselves fragmented and have no geographic continuity, unlike the previous three areas.

The three latter areas correspond to the underdeveloped southern and eastern parts of Syria.

Regime areas

Although much less destroyed than the rest of the country, and in spite of the appearance of stability, changes affecting the regime-controlled parts of the country are having a profound impact on the broader Syrian economy and society because of the economic, political and cultural weight of these areas.

In this part of the country, where almost two thirds of the Syrians still living in the country reside, a new balance is being established. The Damascus-Aleppo axis, which traditionally constitutes Syria's spinal column, has been significantly weakened by the physical destruction of its cities – half of Aleppo and Homs, the suburbs of Damascus – by the flight of its investors and its middle class, and by the weakening of the role, and institutions, of the state.

Private and public investment – or rather what has remained of it given that the current investment levels are only a fraction of what they were pre-uprising – is shifting to the coastal area. In 2015, for instance, 32 percent of the large private investments licensed by the Syrian Investment Agency were located in the Tartous and Lattakia provinces, while only 27 percent were located in Damascus and Aleppo. By comparison, in 2010 Damascus and Aleppo attracted a combined 40.5 percent of the projects licensed by the SIA compared with only 4.5 percent for Lattakia and Tartous. Similarly, last year in Tartous the number of small business projects doubled: the number of new individual companies created in that province increased from 867 in 2014 to 1,752. The number of shareholding companies increased from 119 in 2014 to 251 in 2015.

Private capital is attracted by the safety of the coastal area, in particular the Tartous governorate, which has witnessed almost no fighting or protests since the beginning of the uprising. In addition, the flow of people displaced from other regions of the country has brought investors that want to use their capital as well as to benefit from a relative increase in demand in that region. The shift to the coast is therefore partly a consequence of a change in the demographics – Alawites are no longer believed to constitute a majority of the residents in this part of the country.

To a large extent, public sector investment, meanwhile, has moved to the coast as part of the government policy of satisfying its core constituency. In autumn 2015, at a number of events widely covered by the state media, the Prime Minister, Wael al-Halqi, announced the launch of a combined SYP 30 billion worth of public investments in the provinces of Lattakia and Tartous. At the same time, it was announced that the government would allocate a meagre SYP 500 million to the city of Aleppo.

The coastal area also continues to maintain strong links with Damascus and the central Government through the state apparatus. A majority of working-age Alawites are believed to be employed by the state both in its military and civilian wings. The state has always been an important supplier of jobs and revenue for this community and this role has increased with the war and the contraction of the overall economy. This strong dependence of the Alawite community on the state is one important factor that stands against any prospect of autonomy for the coastal area and which raises the stakes for the control of Damascus.

The composition of the business community in these areas is also changing. To a large extent, traditional investors have left the country and have relocated in other parts of the region or the world, and have been replaced by new figures that have built their wealth from war-related activities. Elections at the Chambers of Commerce in Aleppo and Damascus at the end of 2014, for instance, saw a significant change in the membership of these chambers. In Aleppo, 10 of the 12 elected board members are new investors, many of whom were unheard of prior to the uprising. In Damascus, 7 of the 12 are in the same situation.

Outside the regime areas

The regions that are beyond the control of regime forces, some of them for more than three years now, have had to adapt to the situation and create new institutions and forms of governance. The traditional economic production patterns and centres have been destroyed, investors and the business class have left, and the trade and transport networks have been disrupted. This destruction follows decades of relative underdevelopment.

For the population in these areas, the new institutions that have been established to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the pre-war economy and the absence of the state, often – although not always – come with more legitimacy than the government because:

- many are elected, in particular in opposition areas, albeit election processes often leave much to be desired;

- they are run by people from the region, many of whom have worked and fought to protect their community from the regime;

- they form part of a wider political project that is accepted by the population (Kurds and opposition).

In practice, these institutions are now competing with those of the government, and Syria is in a situation where at least three different institutions call themselves, or pretend to act, as a government, at least four school curricula are being taught to schoolchildren, and three currencies are being used as a medium of exchange.

The Kurds are licensing investment projects and publications, and in the last two years have passed dozens of laws governing life in their areas; IS is raising taxes, licensing investments and operating a police force; the opposition areas have plenty of elected councils that run day-to-day life. The interim government of the opposition has several ministries and has established bodies to distribute wheat and bread, run hospitals and channel aid inside the country.

The value of the expenditures by these newly-created authorities has been steadily increasing. According to the estimates of SCPR, the combined value of 'public' expenditure in the opposition, Kurdish and IS areas – i.e. by the institutions that sprang up in these areas – is now equivalent to 13.2 percent of Syria's 2015 GDP, compared with 31.6 percent for public spending in regime areas. In other words, 'public' consumption in areas outside government control is now equivalent to more than a third of total public spending, a number that reflects the entrenchment and growing importance of the various new institutions that have been established across the country to replace the state.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: THREE ISSUES TO ADDRESS REGARDING THE COUNTRY'S IMPLOSION

The stability of Syria's internal borders in the past three years, the entrenchment of the newly-established institutions, and the empowerment of new actors will raise serious challenges when the conflict ends. One of these is decentralisation. Beyond the Kurdish issue, the resolution of which is likely to involve a strong level of autonomy, decentralization provides one of the rare options that will allow all the new forces that have emerged from the conflict to be brought in. Calls for more local power are being heard across Syria, and one of the main problems preventing the unification of the opposition is actually the strong sense of autonomy developed in local communities across the country. The conflict has also seen the expression of long-hidden suspicions and distrust between cities, between cities and their surrounding countryside, and between different regions. Among urban elites, in particular in Damascus, decentralisation is often associated with partition and a loss of sovereignty and will therefore be opposed by many on both sides of the regime/opposition divide.

Another issue, which is partly related to decentralisation, is the fair allocation of resources. We have seen that the most resource-rich parts of the country are also the least developed. It is unlikely that these areas will again accept control by Damascus of their resources. Expenses in the Kurdish areas, for instance, are to a large extent funded with the oil extracted in these regions. In Deir-ez-Zor, prior to the emergence of IS, local tribes and communities had fought for the control of oil fields, which many perceived as being 'stolen' by Damascus. Allocating more resources to the regions will face opposition from any future Government, which will be short of revenue, in particular given that any reconstruction drive as significant as that needed by Syria will require a strong and well-funded central state.

The Syrian conflict has also raised the issue of the role of community in a state formally made of equal citizens. Sectarian and ethnic tensions have been exposed by the conflict, including the minorities' fear of islamism, the Kurds' fear of Arabism, the Christian Assyrians' fear of the Kurds and the Sunnis' profound sense of injustice and repression by the minorities. Beyond fears, the need to express cultural identities that have long been repressed has also been exposed. The question of how to build a state that keeps an equal distance from all of its citizens but at the same time guarantees their political and cultural rights, as individuals and communities, remains unanswered

The European Union would be well advised to encourage Syrian opposition groups, in a first stage, and other parties, such as the Kurds, in a second stage to engage in discussions on decentralization. Resistance to the idea is to an important extent a consequence of a poor understanding of the concept and of the issues at stake.

Engaging the younger generation would be particularly useful given their attitude that is broadly more receptive to the idea.

The EU should in particular draw from the experience of several of its member countries such as Germany and Spain, where decentralization is put in practice.

The EU should also strengthen local institutions through funding and training and by encouraging them to develop cooperation and move from very localised institutions, i.e. at the town level, to more regional ones. Democracy must also be encouraged through the election rather than the appointment of local level representatives.

LOCAL GOVERNANCE DYNAMICS IN OPPOSITION-CONTROLLED AREAS IN SYRIA

AGNÈS FAVIER[1]
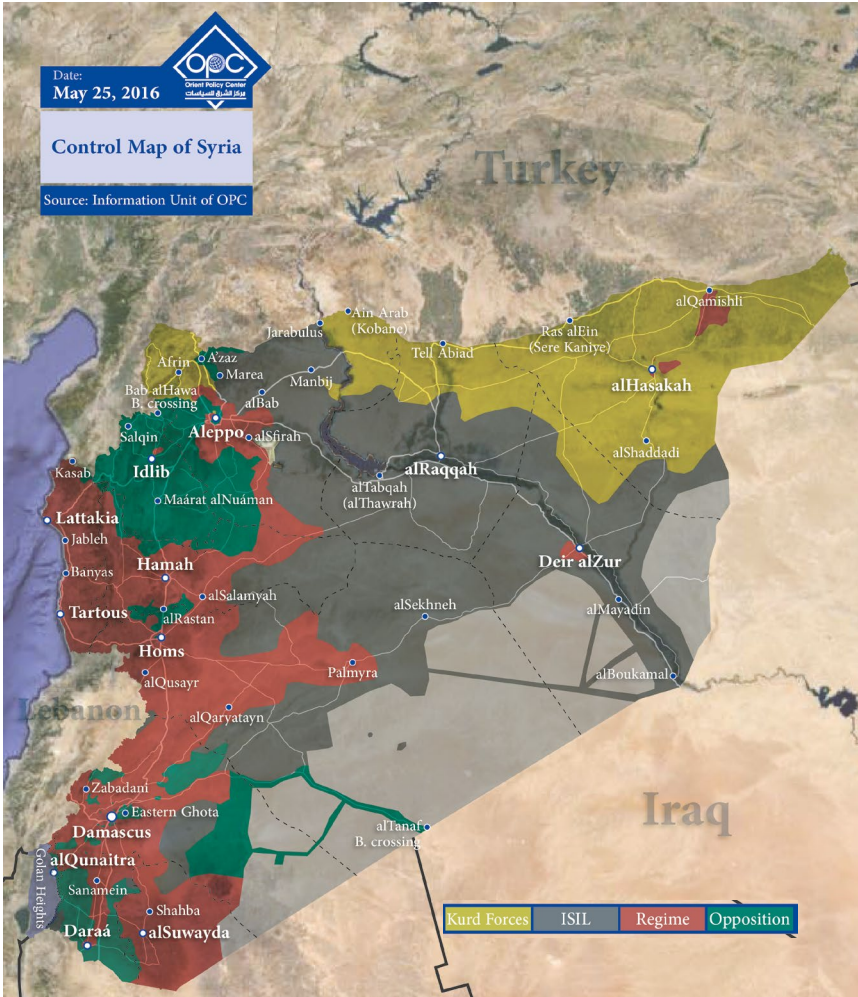
Source: Information Unit of Orient Policy Center, May 25, 2016

INTRODUCTION

After more than 40 years of centralized control in Syria, the nature and length of the conflict has led to a fragmentation of the territory and to a de-concentration of civilian and military powers, mainly in opposition-controlled areas but also to some extent in those under the regime's control.[2] In fact, and partly due to the nature of the regime's repression, the local dimension was

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1 This working paper has greatly benefitted from insights by Amer Karkoutly and Assaad al-Achi The author also thanks Jamil Mouawad for his careful reading of the text. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own.

2 Thomas Pierret, "Damas: l'heure de la décomposition", Politique internationale, n°150, winter 2016.

central to the framework of the uprising in 2011 and then its militarization.[3] Despite the escalation of the conflict into a total war, the local level has remained a laboratory *par excellence* where new actors have emerged and experimented with news forms of governance.

Among the local actors who have attempted to provide support for the population and to govern and administer territories, the local administrative structures that have been established by the revolutionary forces since 2012, also known as local councils, were originally conceived and developed to act as the main alternative to the state institutions at the local level, but also eventually as the cornerstone for any state-building efforts in Syria's post-war reconstruction period. Despite the continuous and enormous challenges facing these local councils on the ground, they remain active in providing daily public services. Alongside other locally well-anchored actors, they could constitute the steppingstone through the transition period.

This paper aims to study these local councils in their position within a network of dynamics and interactions, both vertically with respect to 'external' actors (such as foreign donors and Syrian political institutions in exile) and horizontally in relation to other competing or parallel local groups. Based on empirical observations and in-depth interviews with opposition members (local councils, civil activists, political figures and representatives of armed groups) conducted in Gaziantep between October 2013 and September 2015, it presents some general findings, structured in response to three main questions. How have local administrative structures been established and then consolidated or disappeared in relation to two main patterns: access to external resources and military developments? What is the relationship between opposition local and central authorities? How and to what extent do local councils gain legitimacy in specific local areas?

LOCAL COUNCILS[4]: BETWEEN GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES AND EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

In 2012, several local councils emerged as spontaneous initiatives in connection with the grassroots revolt, in a similar fashion to the appearance of the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and in cooperation with them. Beyond the main task of organizing and documenting peaceful demonstrations, the LCCs also started to focus on the provision of emergency healthcare and to provide support to the families of prisoners. In this context, the local councils had the main aim of responding to the immediate needs of the population, but also aimed to widen and expand on the activities originally undertaken by the LCCs. The thinking behind the idea of local councils[5] was that the revolutionary society should organize itself independently of the state. These self-managed local councils would serve as local alternatives to the state, with the primary objective of protecting the population rather than controlling the territory.

Even if the local councils were originally regarded and analysed as bottom-up institutions, created to fill the void left by disappeared or collapsed Syrian

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3   Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, London, Pluto Press, 2016.

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4   According to a survey of 405 local councils (that were formed or reformed during the Syrian revolution and were almost all active) in the first quarter of 2015, the total number of local councils was estimated at around 800. The survey was held in all Syrian districts except for Raqqa and Suweida. The number includes district or provincial councils at the governorate level, and municipal, city and neighbourhood councils at the local level. The majority of the local councils (almost 80%) were formed for the first time during 2012 and 2013. "Local Councils of Syria Indicator needs", published by the Local Administration Council Unit, July 2015.

5   The main architect behind the idea of the local councils was Omar Aziz, a 63-year-old activist who was arrested in October 2012 and died under torture in a regime jail in February 2013. His first call to establish 'local councils' appeared in October 2011, at the same time when the first political platform of the opposition was being created in Istanbul (the 'Syrian National Council', or SNC).

governmental institutions,[6] they were not in fact operating in a vacuum and their development hinged upon two main dynamics: first, the policy of donors; and second, direct confrontation with the regime and later with IS and the Kurdish forces.

A heavy dependence on external resources

The creation of local councils was affected from the very beginning by the intervention of external actors. In fact, donor policies over the last four years have been characterized by erratic and non-coordinated support. At the same time when the first local council was established in early 2012, wealthy Syrian opposition expatriates, in addition to European governments and foreign private companies, started to express their willingness to provide assistance to the local councils whenever they were in place. The year 2012 therefore witnessed the implementation of a policy of direct aid to the local councils by Western countries, mainly under the impetus of France, which organized an international meeting in Paris in October 2012 dedicated to supporting the local revolutionary councils. This involvement was,

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6 Most of the analyses of local administrative structures in opposition-controlled areas were published between 2013 and 2014, based on fieldwork conducted in 2012 and 2013 at a time when the armed insurrection was gaining more and more territory and when civil administrations were being established. See, for example, A. Baczko, G. Dorronsoro, A. Quesnay, "The Civilian Administration of the Aleppo Insurgency", Noria, October 2013; Menapolis, "Local Councils in Syria. A Sovereignty Crisis in Liberated Areas", Policy Paper, September 2013; Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, "Local Administration Structures in opposition-held areas in Syria", Research Report, April 2014; Institute For War & Peace Reporting, "Local Governance inside Syria", 2014; Rana Khalaf, "Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict", Syria Studies, 2014; Frantz Glasman, "Vie locale et concurrence de projets politiques dans les territoires sous contrôle de l'opposition, des djihadistes et des Kurdes en Syrie", October 2014, http://www.academia.edu/10032604/Vie_locale_et_concurrence_de_projets_politiques_dans_les_territoires_sous_contr%C3%B4le_de_lopposition_des_djihadistes_et_des_Kurdes_en_Syrie. For more recent studies in Arabic, Sabr Darwiche, *Syria: Experience of liberated cities*, Al Rayyes Books, January 2015; and Omran Center for Strategic Studies, The Second Annual Report, March 2016.

however, only for a very short period of time. In fact, with the creation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (or SOC, which replaced the Syrian National Council) in November 2012, many countries operating under the umbrella of the 'Friends of the Syrian People' group started to channel their funds through new units directly dependent on the newly-established SOC, with the aim of strengthening and legitimizing the new political body that has been recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

By the beginning of 2013, direct foreign aid to the local councils had significantly decreased, but the councils started to be the main beneficiaries of training and capacity-building programmes mostly provided by American organizations. Later, some Western donor countries also created 'semi-independent' units, such as the Free Syrian Police and the White Helmets to provide security and civil defence services, and they empowered these newly-established service provision units to work independently of both the local councils and the Syrian Interim Government of the SOC (established in November 2013).

Towards the end of 2013, when donor countries started to realise the shortcomings of the SOC and its units in delivering basic services through local councils inside Syria, they started once more to support the local councils directly in order to implement a huge number of projects such as food security, washing, electricity and waste management (mainly funded by US and UK agencies). However, the local councils have always lacked the financial and technical support needed for them to set up their own public policies in their respective territories and to develop autonomous and sustainable strategies based on internal resources. As the needs of the local communities increased, the ability of the local councils to impose themselves as the sole entities in charge of managing and administering their respective areas was also challenged by armed groups and NGOs (see below). Finally, with the surge of IS since mid-2014, the local councils have suffered from the new emerging priorities adopted by their main donor countries, which shifted to focusing

on fighting terrorism rather than maintaining strong support for the local opposition actors.

A target for the regime, the Islamic State and the Kurdish forces

At another level, even though local councils were established to fill the void left by the State, the regime's withdrawal was not complete. Since the first days of the uprising, keeping state institutions running seemed to be a key priority for the regime, which was keen on claiming and demonstrating that the Syrian state remained the irreplaceable provider of essential public services.[7] Therefore, the central government has maintained its presence in opposition-controlled areas by paying salaries to teachers, public employees and civil servants, and by preserving its monopoly over the provision of official documents. More empirical data are required in order to map more accurately the geographical areas where the state is still present and in which sectors. Nevertheless, in general the regime's policy has been characterized by a discriminatory approach whereby salaries are not paid to those alleged to be active members of the opposition, such as people who work for the local councils. Moreover, the regime has also played on the traditional rivalry between cities, securing services for some while suspending them from others.

On the other hand, the Syrian regime has deliberately attacked and targeted, both by bombing[8] and/or besieging, cities in which the local councils were considered the most successful (Daraya, Douma, Maarat al Nouman and Aleppo city, to name a few). This intentional targeting of all kinds of public facility in the liberated areas, which has also been Russia's systematic approach during the six last months, reveals the extent to

which these local administrations which broke the state monopoly in providing public services have been perceived as a major threat to the regime's legitimacy. Even though some local councils have survived these attacks and sieges, they have, however, been compelled to adopt a survival strategy in territories hollowed of their population (for instance, there is no more than 10 % of the initial population in some besieged cities). More broadly, it should be noted that approximately 45-50% percent of the Syrian population currently in Syria live in regime-controlled areas.[9] Many civilians, among them supporters of the revolution, have fled from opposition-held areas to regime-controlled ones in search of safety and public services. The huge internal displacements caused by the conflict have put the regime under economic and social pressure, but conversely have also weakened the revolutionary and opposition forces (including local councils), which rely on popular support in their struggle against Assad.[10]

Finally, the increasing power of actors with projects competing against the mainstream opposition (IS since the end of 2013 and then the Kurdish YPG – People's Protection Units – since the battle of Kobane in late 2014 have both succeeded to some extent in territorializing their respective political projects) has been built and developed at the expense of the various opposition groups. The takeover of some areas by IS and the Kurdish forces has undermined the work of the local councils. In the governorates of Raqqa and Deir-az-Zor (which counted very few operational LCs), some parts of Hassakeh and East Aleppo, IS opposed local councils by arresting some of their members and even dissolved them at a later stage to

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7   Kheder Khaddour, "The Assad Regime's Hold on the Syrian State", Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2015.

8   'Control' of territories by opposition groups has always been partial since to date the opposition forces have never been able to have control over, or even neutralize, air space. Moreover, the fact that the opposition-held areas have never had geographical continuity can be seen as a result of the military strategy of the regime.

9   While it is difficult to present accurate data, given the shifting situation and the considerable internal displacement, it is estimated that much of the population from the Aleppo and Idlib governorates is living in the coastal area, whereas many civilians from the rebel countryside area around Damascus have fled to the centre of Damascus.

10 While IDPs are often underrepresented on local councils, a few councils deliver humanitarian aid to local IDPs.

establish its own governance structures instead.[11] Consequently, most LC members have relocated internally (for example the local council of Minbij has established its headquarters in the city of Azzaz) or in neighbouring countries (mainly in Turkey). For their part, the YPG authorities have established their own administrative structures (Kurdish self-administration) in the three main cantons of Afreen, Kobani and al-Jazeera.[12] In some cities captured by the Kurdish forces, such as Tal Abyad, the YPG authorities have prevented former LC members from returning to their towns after their liberation from IS and have established alternative governing structures named 'the council of notables and the municipality.'

As a result of military developments and Russia's aerial military intervention mainly against territories controlled by opposition forces, the opposition-controlled areas shrank from approximately 40% of the Syrian territory at the end of 2012 to roughly between 13% and 15% in February 2016 (Jabhat al-Nusra-held areas included). Consequently, the number of local councils has also declined, and it was estimated in March 2016 that there were around 395 active councils, most of them located in the two largest liberated areas that have direct access to Turkey, the Aleppo and Idlib governorates.[13]

CENTRALIZED ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL A FRAGMENTED LOCAL REALITY

While the local councils have been perceived as an existentialist threat to the regime, they have also been considered a crucial stake for the opposition national structures in exile. The relationship between the local and central representatives of the opposition has effectively been subject to a twofold logic: representing the local councils within the SOC, and rationalizing and developing a centralized framework serving as an umbrella for the local councils. The second issue emerged with the establishment of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in Gaziantep. Among the several political groups or blocs within the SOC, some were more interested in the empowerment of the local councils, such as the Sabbagh political group (supported by Qatar)[14] and the Muslim Brothers, whereas other groups such as the Jarba bloc and its allies (supported by Saudi Arabia) have instead been reluctant to move forward in supporting the local councils.

The issue of political representation

The idea of integrating the local councils within the Syrian National Council was raised as soon as June 2012, but their representation only came with the establishment of the SOC. Several studies have highlighted the fact that the SOC's interest in integrating local councils within its structures was an attempt to overcome the lack of legitimacy of the previous political body (the SNC). This argument was based on the fact that none of the SNC members were elected but rather co-opted, while the assumption was that local council members were elected. In fact, the majority of local councils (over 55%) did not emerge through elections but were established by 'elite self-selection' mechanisms (i.e. a group of leaders

11 See, for instance, "Civilian Life in the areas controlled by the Islamic State in Syria", Orient Research Center, March 2015; and the research on "The Military and Administrative Structures of IS" (in Arabic), published by Ain al-Medina (a Syrian on-line opposition newspaper), May 2015.

12 D. Darwiche, "Local Governance under the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava", in this e-book.

13 According to the latest estimates provided by the Local Administration Council Unit (Skype interview with the author in March 2016), the estimated 395 valid local councils in the opposition-held areas count 6136 local council members and they are distributed as follows: 113 LCs in Aleppo (1850 members), 112 LCs in Idlib (1700 members), 45 LCs in Rif Damascus (892 members), 40 LCs in Homs (380 members), 35 LCs in Hama (664 members), 35 LCs in Daraa (523 members), 6 LCs affiliated with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Hassakeh (32 members), 6 LCs in Lattakia (50 members), 3 LCs in Qunaitra (35 members) and 10 local council members in Damascus.

14 M. Sabbagh is the head of the Syrian Businessmen's Forum and he was elected as the first Secretary General of the SOC in November 2012.

including rebel fighters, notables, tribes, families, and revolutionary activists agree to share the local council seats among themselves by consensus without elections).[15]

Moreover, the local council representatives within the SOC were selected based on a top-down mechanism. What was known as the 'local council bloc,' the second largest bloc in the SOC at the time of its creation, was made up of 14 provincial council representatives – 12 of them were previously nominated as heads of provincial councils and were close to M. Sabbagh. Most of these first provincial councils were not founded following a bottom-up approach (with the exception of the Aleppo Transitional Revolutionary Council), and in some cases they did not even have any presence in the field at the time. Nevertheless, the SOC chose to channel its funds to the local councils through these provincial councils, which has generated much tension between provincial and local councils in many areas.

Despite the fact that all the provincial council representatives lost their positions in their respective governorates following new elections after 2013 (local and provincial councils should be renewed every six months, like the executive bodies of the SOC), they have remained 'representatives of local councils' within the SOC until today. Indeed, the SOC only once enlarged the number of its members in May 2013 (from 63 to 114) but it never renewed them. Consequently, the new local councils that have been elected or recreated by consensus after this time have not been involved in the political decision-making process of the opposition. In the last two years, some local council members have demanded the replacement of the so-called 'representatives of local councils' within the SOC but their voices have gone unheard. Notably, since 2014 representatives of the local councils have been excluded from most of the initiatives seeking to unify the opposition forces in attempts to relaunch peace talks (such

as the Riyad conference in December 2015) and from all diplomatic consultations (Geneva 2 and Geneva 3). In a reaction to this marginalization, some local councils created the Supreme Council of Provincial Councils in December 2015 in order to voice their demands in political and diplomatic arenas.

The question of local governance as seen in the light of the SOC

Soon after its establishment, the SOC created many structures in Turkey dedicated to assisting local councils: the Assistance Coordinating Unit (ACU), which aimed to deliver humanitarian aid inside Syria (December 2012); the Local Administration Council Unit (LACU), which was supposed to help standardise the local councils under a unified framework (March 2013); and with the formation of the Syrian Interim Government (November 2013) its 'Ministry of Local Administration, Refugees and Humanitarian Relief' created the General Directorate for Local Councils (March 2014). All these units were politicized and polarized according to personal interests and partisan agendas, and were backed by rival regional sponsors (mainly the KSA and Qatar). At the height of regional rivalries in 2013 and 2014 these structures therefore mostly worked in competition with each other, seeking to secure their presence and impose their influence on local councils inside Syria through financial support. These internal conflicts delayed efforts to consolidate the local councils under a standardized administrative structure, which would only be developed at a later stage (when a single homogenous group took over the direction of all the units at the end of 2014).

It is worth noting that the local council framework has been perceived by the Syrian opposition and Western countries friendly to it as a practical step to obtaining a decentralized administration system in the country in the post-Assad era. Although the bylaws of the LCs differ from one location to another, most of the local councils were formed according to the administrative divisions provided for by a governmental decree

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15 Only 36% of the councils are formed through community nom-
    inations with a closed self-election process through an ad-hoc
    electoral body. 5% result from individual initiatives by activists
    and 4% are appointed by the military forces. "Local Councils of
    Syria Indicator needs", ibid.

(decree 107) promulgated by Bachar al-Assad in August 2011.[16] Moreover, the ministry of local administration of the SIG has adopted the same law (after dropping specific articles that referred to the regime), and it has been trying to impose it on the local councils as the main administrative law.

COMPETITION AND COOPERATION WITH THE OTHER LOCAL POWERS

Despite the continuous challenges – both external and internal – facing the local councils on the ground, they remain a necessary engine to secure everyday services or at least to continue to fulfil certain tasks. As mentioned, they are one among many other actors who operate on the ground to provide public services.[17] In general, their role has turned out to be more that of coordinators or intermediaries (in particular in civil defence, education, health and development projects) rather than direct implementers (which is more the case in supplying water, electricity, bread and street cleaning). They operate on a local scale and coordination of municipal services at a regional level is uncommon (the experience of the United Service Offices in East Ghouta in Damascus is an exception). Furthermore, the effectiveness of the local councils is highly dependent on the local context, in particular on their location (the local councils in Idlib and Aleppo provinces with direct access to Turkey are more efficient than elsewhere, whereas those in the south remain weak because of Jordan's unfriendly policy towards the development of local administrative structures near its borders). Their efficiency also depends on their relationship with armed groups and civilian organizations that operate in the same area.

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16 The decree has not been implemented, but it provides for a decentralized organization of the administrative divisions and grants them new prerogatives.

17 A main difficulty in providing a clear understanding of the local dynamics in opposition-held areas is that the local actors who attempt to administer these territories are diversified and are subject to a very rapid generational turnover, to the extent that some emerge and disappear very quickly.

The relationship with local NGOs[18]: from competition to coordination

Until recently, the relationship between local councils and Syrian NGOs was characterized by competition. A large number of NGOs have their headquarters in neighbouring countries, where they are registered and enjoy direct access to donors. At first, these local NGOs were competing with each other to act as implementers of INGO and UN agency programmes inside Syria. They then gradually succeeded in becoming the direct beneficiaries of some pooled funds, such as the Humanitarian Pooled Fund (HPF) managed by OCHA in Gaziantep, which is available to Syrian NGOs but not to the local councils, which are perceived by the UN agencies as a 'political structure of the opposition.' As a result, most of the local NGOs have imposed themselves as the *de facto* actors in humanitarian aid distribution and field hospital management while the local councils have concentrated more on maintaining and repairing local infrastructure. Until 2014, few Syrian NGOs were concerned about the necessity of cooperating with the local councils as a way of promoting 'state-building.' However, new dynamics of cooperation have emerged during the last two years. The shrinking of financial and human resources and the increasing military pressure together with the failure of the SIG to deliver aid inside Syria have led to a rapprochement between the local actors operating on the ground. This cooperation has also been stimulated by some Anglo-Saxon donors. For instance, since 2014 the 'Tamkeen program' funded by the UK has provided small grants to implement infrastructure and public service projects at the local level by associating local councils, civil society organizations and local communities in several localities in the north and the south of Syria. At the regional level, for example in Idlib, informal coordination (including all the NGOs, the provincial council of

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18 A recent study lists 802 active civil society entities (including relief, media, civil and advocacy groups, both inside Syria and abroad). "Mapping civil society in Syria", Citizens for Syria, November 2015, https://citizensforsyria.org/presentation-of-the-mapping-results/.

Idlib, the local councils in the governorate and the Health Directorate and Civil Defence Directorate) has also seen the light. This covered the health and civil defence emergencies in April 2015 when the regime bombed all the public infrastructure inside the city and the countryside. Another example of coordination between local councils and Syrian CSOs has been observed in the justice sector: many civil documentation centres and courts of arbitration have been established by the Free Syrian Lawyers Association in close coordination with the local councils in opposition-held areas.

The relationship with armed groups: from protection to competition

Military groups often have a strong influence on the local councils, but the nature of the relationship depends on several factors. In some places, the armed opposition has sometimes cooperated with local councils, and in others it has developed its own competing administrative structures.

At the very beginning of the conflict, armed groups encouraged and endorsed the creation of local councils. At this point the armed groups were largely composed of local fighters, native from the locality just liberated, and they predominantly relied on the support of the local community. In many locations, members of local councils and brigades shared similar social backgrounds and trajectories, which facilitated and led to close cooperation and harmony between the two groups. The city of Daraya offers a rare example where armed groups are fully integrated in the local council and fall directly under its authority. In cities such as Saraqib and some neighbourhoods of Aleppo, some Free Syrian Army brigades have fulfilled the task of protecting local councils from criminal elements, predatory bands and extremist groups that attempted to impose their control over these areas. More broadly, most FSA brigades have not attempted to publicly take control over local councils by force.

With the intensification of the conflict, increasing access to funding and weapons for armed groups

has encouraged them to set up their own local governance structures. This was particularly the case at the end of 2012 with the advent of Islamist-nationalist armed groups, which constitute the bulk of the mainstream opposition (Ahrar al Cham, The Army of Islam, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front and the Islamic Front, to name a few). These have developed their own governance structures known as Islamic committees or Shura councils (majalis al shura). These structures aimed to act as municipal administrations, and were hence in direct competition with the city councils and governorates.[19] This competition has been taking place in three main essential sectors: the supply of bread – a crucial means of gaining popularity and generating income, justice and police

Throughout the conflict, the dynamics of competition or confrontation have, however, been reduced by mutual interests. On the one hand, the opening of a second military front against IS early in 2014 relegated to second rank the ambitions of the armed groups to manage the population. Moreover, the aim of armed groups to dominate local administration has sometimes been confronted with popular dissent due to bad management, corruption, and a lack of expertise. By the end of 2015, a few armed groups had maintained their own administrative structures in the north of Syria, such as the 'Public Services Administration' of Jabhat al Nusra (JaN), which is operating in some areas of Idlib and Aleppo (but this body does not have a uniform presence in all the territories where JaN has a strong presence and the al Qaeda-affiliated group continues to allow the other local councils to operate),[20] the 'Civil Islamic Commission for the administration of the liberated areas,' mainly linked to Ahrar al Sham

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19 Frantz Glasman, op.cit.

20 In eastern Aleppo city, the public services administration (PSA) and the Aleppo city local council are the main municipal service providers and their relationship seems competitive and sometimes tense. The LC is reportedly a larger entity and plays a dominant role in sanitation services, in maintaining water pipes, and at times electrical wires. The PSA is a smaller body which controls key points in Aleppo City's electricity grid and water network, giving it an outsized role in the maintenance of these services, electricity in particular. It also plays a key role in the provision of flour to Aleppo's bakeries.

and still active in some parts of Idlib province,[21] and the Zanqi brigade, which continues to provide a considerable range of public services in the western countryside of Aleppo. Other armed groups have, however, relinquished their ambitions to govern local structures (such as The Army of Islam in Douma, for instance). Nevertheless, the influence of the armed groups remains strong as they sometimes nominate their own representatives on the local councils (such as in the city of Idlib in 2015).

On the other hand, local councils have no interest in adopting a confrontational approach towards the brigades as they do not have the means to provide security. In order to continue their work on the ground and to consolidate their fragile local power they needed to establish a healthy working relationship both with the armed opposition and civil society organizations. This healthy relationship has been cemented on previously existing personal networks such as tribal affiliations, solidarity between neighbours, friendship, and families. The daily and shared experience of the war has also contributed to forging new solidarity between civil and military groups.

In the light of the war fatigue that has drained both military and civil groups, a self-imposed mutual understanding has gained momentum and power over the previously-dominant dynamics of competition between armed groups, civil activists and local councils. The cessation of hostilities – partially respected during the first month of its implementation – could be an opportunity to redefine the respective roles of the local councils and the armed groups, by strengthening and empowering the councils to manage and administer their localities, as is currently being discussed in some opposition circles.

CONCLUSION

Like that of the conflict in which it is inscribed, the trajectory of local councils has never been linear. Even after five years of conflict that has caused widespread destruction, local councils, and more broadly networks of civil activists, remain embroiled in the struggle to create alternatives to the authoritarian practices of both the regime and extremist groups. Today geographically concentrated in the two strongholds of the opposition, Aleppo and Idlib, local councils chiefly draw their legitimacy from the services that they are still able to provide to impoverished local communities and from their daily interaction with them. Nevertheless, these councils have gradually been weakened, firstly by the systematic destruction policies adopted and implemented by the regime and its allies (which have to some extent achieved their main goal, that no state-like actors or governance structures should arise in the liberated territories) and then by Islamic State. At a second level, they have also suffered from the absence of a long-term coordinated donor strategy, from the internal political rivalry between opposition groups, and even from their ambivalent collaborative or competitive relations with armed groups. Their gradual marginalization, exacerbated by a dominant understanding of Syria focused only on war, whether civil war or by proxy,[22] has nourished various forms of radicalization and extremism.

The marginalization of local civil actors today presents a major risk for the future of Syria, specifically within the context of the two major aspects of the Syrian question as seen at this stage by the international community: the endeavour to find a political solution and the struggle against IS. On the one hand, sidelining these groups from

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21 This Commission is still in its formative stage, but it has been reported that it is outperforming in Idlib province, in particular in support of IDPs. Idlib currently constitutes a key area of competition between local councils, armed groups and NGOs in areas close to the Turkish border.

22 As noticed by Ghaleb Attrache, the struggle of individuals, organizations and civil activist networks for change "is actively erased when we speak only of civil war. Such an erasure, it should be noted, is not merely (or never only) discursive or symbolic; quite significantly, it helps reproduce these actors' marginalization from the current political process and perhaps also any future settlement and reconstruction phase", Ghaleb Attrache, "The Perils and Promise of Wartime Analysis: Lessons from Syria", Berkeley Journal of Sociology, March 2016.

the debates and negotiations that aim to define the framework of a political solution for the Syria of tomorrow could eventually undermine the foundations of a potential acceptable and lasting solution by and for all Syrians, especially because any potential agreement on a political transition will, in the end, be applied by the local actors present on the ground, and particularly if the regime is forced to make some concessions in favour of a decentralized system. On the other hand, the struggle against IS, which cannot only be strictly approached from a military angle, again poses the question that has already been addressed since 2014: who are the actors that can replace terrorist organizations wherever and whenever they lose control over certain territories?

LOCAL GOVERNANCE UNDER THE DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF ROJAVA

DARYOUS ALDARWISH
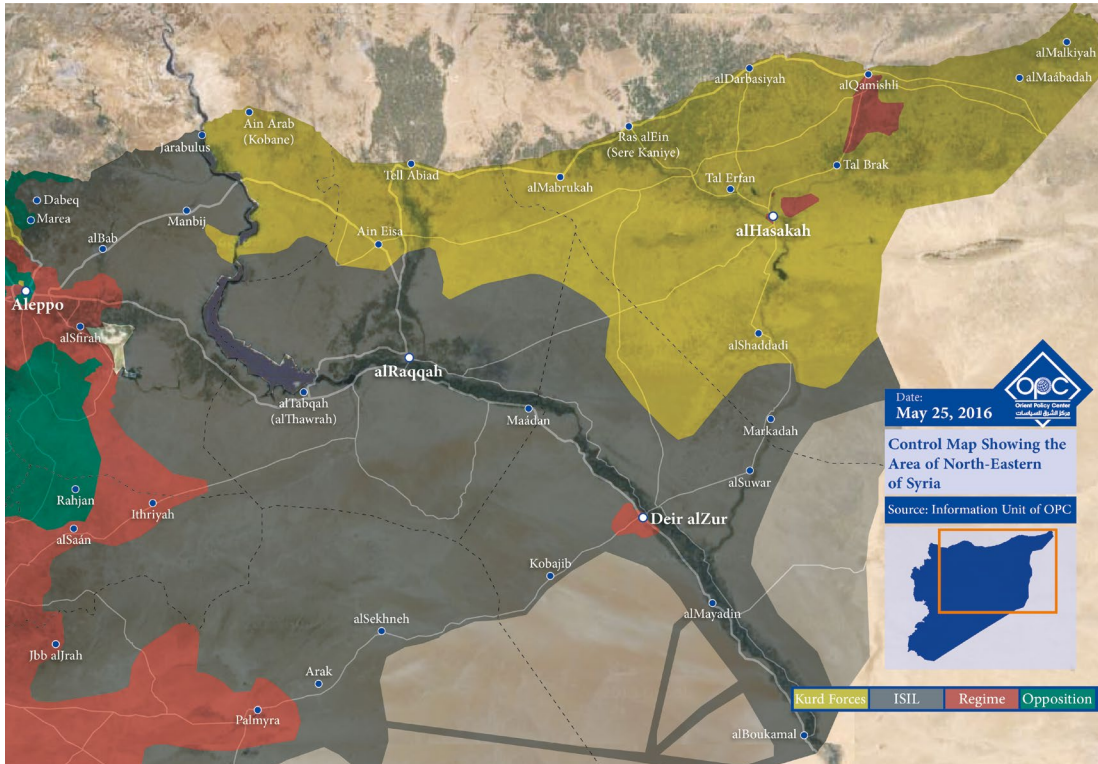
Source: Information Unit of Orient Policy Center, May 25, 2016

INTRODUCTION

If some parts of the Kurdish community were involved in the Syrian revolution at its beginning in 2011, the disengagement of the Syrian army from the Kurdish areas in the mid of 2012 and the gradual takeover of these areas by the Democratic Union Party (DYP) put an end to the protestations against the Syrian regime. Then the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM, which is a coalition of civil organizations and political parties, but in fact strictly controlled by the PYD), began to impose Kurdish rule over the Kurdish regions. On 12 July 2012, TEV-DEM and its affiliates reached an agreement with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) to establish the Kurdish Supreme Committee. This took responsibility for several aspects of administration, including establishing the Asayish (local police forces) and the YPG (local military), in addition to supporting locals with humanitarian aid. The Kurdish Supreme Committee did not last for long as the KNC withdrew from it in August 2013. Therefore, TEV-DEM took full control of the committee, to later abandon it and establish the Democratic Autonomous Administration

(DAA), which is continued to the present day and lately started preparing itself to establish a federal system exclusively in the areas under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), while avoiding declaring itself as an independent state or as a federal state.

Nowadays, the DAA rules most of the regions where Kurds have a significant presence in the northern and north-eastern parts of Syria which were always governed by non-Kurdish actors. These regions now are named Rojava. This chapter will analyse the local governance of the DAA, particularly in Qamishli and Jazeera Canton. It aims to explain how and to what extent the Democratic Autonomous Administration has succeeded in imposing Kurdish control over the Kurdish areas. This process has been largely determined by the competition within the Kurdish arena, by the intervention of regional and international actors and by the relationship of the new Kurdish administration with the multi-ethnic local community

Understanding the project of the DAA and the dynamics of its local governance structures in Rojava will help in understanding one of several administrations ruling in Syria, it may also help in determining the sustainability of this project inside Rojava (which is not only affected by the success or failure of the administration itself, but by the international and local powers agreements) and the ability of copying this project outside Rojava as the last statement of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) says.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

Benefiting from the security vacuum created in Syria after the outbreak of the civil war and responding to Kurdish demands for autonomy, the Democratic Autonomous Administration was officially established on 21 January 2014. This was a single effort by TEV-DEM, which is an umbrella organization grouping the PYD and

other organizations focused on issues such as civil society, gender, youth and creating a parliament (Western Kurdistan People's Council).

The establishment of the DAA took place in very complicated circumstances and resulted from a very strong desire of TEV-DEM to seize power alone. Once it fully controlled the Kurdish Supreme Committee after the KNC had withdrawn from it in August 2013 due to disagreements mainly about the killing of demonstrators in Amuda in June 2013, TEV-DEM continued to evade partnership with the KNC. However, in the second Erbil agreement in December 2013, the KNC and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (a TEV-DEM affiliate) agreed to run the Simalka border crossing jointly. Later, in February 2014, the KNC staff in Simalka stopped working because TEV-DEM made them choose between agreeing to work as DAA employees or leave their posts.

As it passed through these events, the administration in the Kurdish region slowly built up its structure. It had basically started as an administration concerned with security and mainly focused on possible political competition and protection of the Kurdish regions from attacks by Islamic forces. Later, by the time the DAA was announced, its structure as a government was roughly complete. It had its own legislative council, executive council and presidency, and its own judicial power (People's courts). Moreover, the YPG and Asayish changed allegiance from the Kurdish Supreme Committee to the DAA.

One of the key institutions of the DAA is the commune, whose role is to deliver humanitarian aid to the residents in their neighbourhoods. Although these communes did not previously have a notable role, later they started distributing consumable items which were in short supply in Jazeera canton. They have recently started distributing sugar, which was unavailable in the markets, and are covering shortages of cooking gas cylinders and other materials.

This system of aid delivered via the communes has received criticism from local observers. A Kurdish activist and journalist who refused to give

his name claims that the aid delivered through the commune system is not provided exclusively by the DAA but mostly by local NGOs, which are obliged to go through the commune system (or other DAA institutions) to be able to work in these regions. He adds that the authorities impose distribution lists on the NGOs according to the wishes of influential officials, and that "the NGOs face frequent obstruction of their distribution plans for months until a compromise is reached, which encourages corruption and favouritism in the DAA, as much of this aid (basically food baskets) is given as bribes to facilitate its work."

Most of the current institutions of the DAA were previously partisan organizations affiliated with TEV-DEM. Some of them are still under the direct control of TEV-DEM, which still has the power to assign the key leaders. The DAA Legislative Council, which replaced the former People's Council of Western Kurdistan, is one example of this, as it lacks any pretence of an opposition and only consists of parties affiliated, directly or indirectly, with TEV-DEM.

This is also the case of the YPG. The Social Contract of Rojava, which serves as a constitution, does not make it clear how the leaders of the YPG should be appointed and neither does it clarify to which constitutional institution it is affiliated, which leaves the door wide open for TEV-DEM, as the founder of the YPG, to exert direct control in appointing the entire command structure of the YPG, also giving it direct control of the YPG's political positions.

Other institutions act as strong arms of TEV-DEM but under the guise of the DAA. Foremost of these is the Committee of Martyr's Families. Even though it is a committee within the executive council of the DAA, it has much unconstitutional influence over the Asayish and the People's Courts. It has deported a journalist working with Rudaw, Peshewa Bahlawi, to Iraqi Kurdistan and forced several political activists to leave Rojava with threats, while the DAA closed its eyes to these unconstitutional acts.

The commune system is also playing a significant role in empowering TEV-DEM's control over DAA, as Majid Mohammad, a Kurdish journalist and activist, says: "The role assigned to communes can be summarized in the aim of the DAA, and consequently TEV-DEM, to establish popular support for their project. As a greater role for the communes is at the expense of DAA's institutions, and it is an attempt to ideologically attach locals to the DAA and TEV-DEM, as well as to amplify its regulatory systems to cover the daily life of the locals, it is a clear violation of the concepts of administration and the mechanisms of delivering services of the existing authorities."

Financially, in its 2014 public budget the DAA declared expenditures for that year of about 2.7 billion SYP (7.7 million USD), and indicated that it was aiming to reach revenues of 5.6 billion SYP (16 million USD) for 2015. The DAA depends on oil and gas production to cover its expenses, and according to a report issued by Jihad Yazigi in 2015,[1] this source provides it with revenues reaching 10 million USD per month.

Most of this money is being spent on the military operations of the YPG, so the DAA has increased its dependency on taxes collected by the general directorate of customs, and while there is no accurate information on the amount of this revenue, intense complaints about this issue can be found published in media outlets, including ones close to the DAA. Moreover, the sharing of revenue produced by running the Simalka border crossing together with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has been a major point of contention between TEV-DEM and the KNC.

THE DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION (DAA) PROJECT

As mentioned before, the DAA project was created and implemented by TEV-DEM, and the project as it was declared became the constitution of Rojava.

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1 J. Yaziji, "Le projet autonomiste kurde est-il économiquement viable en Syrie?", http://jihadyazigi.com/2015/11/01/le-projet-autonomiste-kurde-est-il-economiquement-viable-en-syrie/ 1 November 2015.

Even though the content of this constitution includes the main principals of human rights, civil peace, coexistence and gender equality alongside more problematic issues related to the DAA's institutions, it is clear that the goals of the project go beyond the simple content, and probably can be summarized as the following:

1. To represent the very core of Kurdish demands for autonomy after decades of ethnic persecution in Syria for being Kurds.

2. To achieve a victory in the internal Kurdish power struggle at the Kurdish national level.

Kurd demands for autonomy in Syria were not created by TEV-DEM's DAA project but have always been a main goal of the Kurdish people since the beginnings of the Kurdish political movement in 1957. Federalism is still the major demand of the KNC, which represents the traditional Kurdish parties.

However, although the mainstream ideology of TEV-DEM is not a matter of disagreement with the KNC, as the latter has always tried to participate in this administration under the condition of having a 'just' share, the DAA is continually distancing the KNC from participation in the administration by flooding almost every one of its institutions with ideological symbols and icons which are, by themselves, the most problematic issue between the two groups. This is in addition to TEV-DEM's continual refusal to hold elections for the legislative and local councils, and its repeated breaking of all its agreements with the KNC.

Nevertheless, while TEV-DEM has practically refused to remove its ideological symbols from the DAA institutions, it agreed to remove the name of Kurdistan from its official usage and accepted the presence of independent Arab and Assyrian military power in the region. At the same time, it refused to allow the entry of the KNC military (Peshmerga of Rojava), which has led to more alienation of the KNC but simultaneously a closer rapprochement of other ethnicities towards the DAA.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

When the DAA was declared, Western countries stopped their support for civil society in the Kurdish regions and boycotted the region entirely except for some humanitarian aid delivered by the UN. This situation lasted from the beginning of 2014 until early 2015, when a little aid recommenced after the international coalition against IS started supporting the YPG in its aim to liberate Kobani. Therefore, the humanitarian and civil society support continued after a gap of almost a year.

This military and civil support did not transform itself into political recognition, however. The DAA was not invited to the Geneva talks on Syria, and it was not even recognized as a legitimate power to rule Rojava. Neither has Rojava itself achieved recognition by the international community, as the French foreign ministry has recently declared that it will not recognize a DAA representative office in Paris.

Nevertheless, the international community's support for civil society in Rojava has had a large impact on the situation there. The many media outlets started with this support have resulted in an expansion of the margins of liberty in Rojava, and many civil society organizations working for democracy and human rights have been able to take part in reducing the human rights abuses of the DAA, which were targeting political parties and civil society organizations. Especially crackdowns on the media became less severe in both quality and quantity in 2015 compared to 2014 and before.

International humanitarian support has also improved the quality of life in the region, mainly for the displaced people who came from areas under the control of IS. Most of this aid is delivered through NGOs, while other humanitarian aid offered by the DAA is delivered to internally displaced personnes through its channels.

However, the international humanitarian aid is not playing a notable role in developing the region economically, "as the slow change from humanitarian support to development projects leads to the total dependency of the recipients on

these aids," according to Piroz Perik, a Kurdish journalist and activist.

As for DAA relations with regional states, its relations with Turkey are suffering an unprecedented crisis, even though TEV-DEM has made several attempts to reduce the tension politically via the PYD, and the YPG has announced several times that it wants 'healthy' relations with Turkey. These efforts have not borne fruit; on the contrary, relations deteriorated badly as the SDF made progress in the northern countryside of Aleppo, and they have ended up with Turkey now attacking the YPG-controlled Minagh airport and targeting the Kurdish regions of Afrin with mortars and cannons.

These bad relations with Turkey are affecting the DAA's ability to deliver services and build a real government in Rojava in two ways. First, Turkey is a NATO member and, compared to the DAA, it has a greater influence on the policies of Western powers, although this alliance was not able to prevent the USA-led international coalition from helping the YPG against IS contrary to Turkish will. Nevertheless, it is still playing a major role in excluding the DAA from the Geneva talks, and also in preventing its western allies from recognizing the DAA or the Kurdish people's right to autonomy in Syria.

Second, Ankara has the ability to destabilize Rojava by mobilizing its Syrian Arab and Turkmen allies to attack the YPG in various regions. It did this when it helped in the formation of the Jazeera and Euphrates Front, which tried to invade Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-Ayn) in Jazeera canton in November 2012. More recently, when the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose key component is the YPG, broke the Turkish red line to the west of the Euphrates to fight IS, the Turks backed the Islamic opposition forces, tried to invade Afrin, and slaughtered soldiers of the SDF.

The DAA also has tense relations with the KRG, which are running the risk of closing the only border crossing that Rojava has with the rest of the world. It is wasting an opportunity to enhance its ability to fight IS, as the KRG played a significant role in convincing the International Coalition to provide aerial support to the YPG. It is also wasting an opportunity to benefit from the experiences of the KRG in securing its regions from terrorist breaches, which frequently happen in Rojava. Most of this tension occurred after TEV-DEM's continual failure to meet its obligations under agreements with the KNC.

LOCAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE DAA

Even though the DAA uses the word 'Democratic' in the names of almost all its institutions, it has not yet called for general elections – not even for its first legislative council, which served as the constituent assembly in which the Social Contract of Rojava was adopted. This is a total contravention of international democratic norms which expect more than one party to participate in the process of writing and adopting a constitution. Due to the lack of democratic mechanisms in Rojava, it is difficult to determine precisely the level of local acceptance of the DAA, which only leaves us with the possibility of analysing the participation of local forces in ruling Rojava.

In spite of the relatively large number of political parties participating in the DAA, it represents only one spectrum of the political life in Rojava, while the other spectrum is kept absolutely outside of the DAA's orbit. Thus, we find that the KNC and ADO (Assyrian Democratic Organization), which are the main opposition to the DAA, are totally excluded from it, while TEV-DEM and its affiliated parties on the Kurdish side, and the Assyriac Union Party on the Assyrian side are co-founders of the DAA.

As for the Arabs of Jazeera canton, their tribes are divided between supporting the DAA and supporting the Syrian regime. Therefore, one of the most powerful Arab tribal alliances in the region (Shammar) is a co-founder of DAA and has formed a major military force which is fighting alongside the YPG, while the other powerful alliance (mainly the Tayy tribe) is supporting the Syrian regime and has formed the National

Defence Army, which is a part of the Syrian Arab Army (the regime army).

Another factor affecting the acceptance of the DAA among the people of Rojava is the activity of civil society organizations. Almost a hundred organizations exist in Jazeera canton. While most of them are not active, others are actively raising awareness about issues related to human rights, democracy, gender, transitional justice etc. and according to Zuhrab Qado, who is a Kurdish activist and a cofounder of the SHAR organization, "the impact of the political disputes between TEV-DEM and the KNC casts a shadow over their (local NGOs') activities, with some of them taking political positions supportive of one side, while the blurred approach of the DAA towards civil society organizations and the unclear laws regarding their activities are deterring them from efficiently responding to local needs."

There is also a large gap between the DAA and the media. This started with the DAA trying to impose its own agenda and terms on the media, like labelling other military groups as terrorists, and referring to YPG deaths as martyrdoms etc., with threats to ban journalists from work, deport them to Iraqi Kurdistan, or even to burn down the offices of media outlets which do not accept such conditions. These conditions had improved by 2014 and 2015: more media outlets could work in the region and media interventions by the DAA reached a comparatively low level. Nevertheless, it still keeps its main red lines intact. For example, expressing a significantly different political view to the DAA's still means the outlet will be banned, as happened recently with the Rudaw and Orient News TV channels, which are banned from working in Jazeera and Kobani cantons.

consider that they are 'ruling themselves' needs the application of democratic measures, which is not happening under the current rule of the DAA. It would be more accurate to describe the current situation of DAA rule as only at least 'non-Kurds are not ruling Kurds.'

Compared to other parts of Syria, the DAA has made much progress in terms of defusing ethnic and sectarian conflicts within the community of Rojava, and achieving the participation of almost all groups in its government, since religious considerations have been ruled out of question, and ethnic differences are neutralized in favour of increasing political acceptance.

TEV-DEM's total control over the DAA is impeding it from progressing more effectively, despite the relationship having helped it at the very beginning of its formation. The continuation of this dependency is worsening relations with the KRG and Turkey, and creating obstacles to DAA progress.

DAA is not open to political participation and does not allow the opposition to participate in its institutions. This results in opposition to the DAA as a whole without being able to distinguish between the DAA as a Kurdish autonomous entity and TEV-DEM as the party ruling this entity.

The future of this administration and its federal system is not positive now that it is not recognised by neither the regime, the opposition, the regional powers nor the international powers.

CONCLUSIONS

DAA represents a genuine need of the Kurdish people to rule themselves, but this kind of representation is most likely to be a result of the people's emotional attachment to this decades-long ambition, since the ability of Kurds to

STATES SPONSORS AND THE SYRIAN INSURGENCY: THE LIMITS OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

THOMAS PIERRET

Much of the discussion on state support for Syrian insurgents has been concerned with two key issues: first, the ultimate goals state sponsors try to achieve (countering Iran's regional influence, weakening Kurdish nationalists in northern Syria, etc.); and second, the preferences of these states in terms of rebel partners (sympathy or hostility towards Islamist factions, Saudi support for certain groups against Qatar-backed factions, and vice versa). However, aspects of the problem that have often been overlooked are the capabilities of the state sponsors of the Syrian insurgency and their resulting ability (or lack thereof) to guide their insurgent partners according to their wishes, regardless of their virtually unlimited financial means.[1] Compared to Iran, countries like the Gulf monarchies, Jordan and Turkey suffer from a significant disadvantage when it comes to supporting paramilitaries abroad due to political contradictions and a lack of expertise.[2]

One key reason for this imbalance is the non-revolutionary nature of the state sponsors of the Syrian insurgency, as opposed to the revolutionary character of the Iranian regime. This distinction is not based on the respective stances of these states towards the 2011 Arab revolutions, but rather on the origins of their regimes: whereas the Islamic Republic of Iran is the product of the 1979 revolution, the Gulf monarchies and Jordan are conservative regimes that have withstood

successive regional waves of revolutionary change since the 1950s, and Turkey's political system is the outcome of a transition that has seen the gradual subjugation of the military to civilian power through (so far principally) constitutional means.

Revolutionary states like Iran (or proto-states like the Islamic State) enjoy two distinct advantages when they engage in subversive activities abroad. First, revolutionary ideologies are inherently universal and militant, and therefore provide a model that is replicable by foreign insurgents. Whereas Iran's non-state proxies in Lebanon and Iraq (Hezbollah, Badr, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, …) are militias of strict Khomeynist obedience, no Syrian rebel faction actively promotes the establishment of a patrimonial monarchy of the Saudi or Qatari type. Certainly, the experience of the Turkish AKP is favourably perceived by moderate segments of the Syrian insurgency, but it is an inherently non-militant model, which is possibly seen as the final outcome of the revolutionary process rather than as a blueprint for insurgent mobilisation itself. A corollary of the absence of a revolutionary ideology among the state sponsors of the Syrian insurgency is the prominent role of third parties, which could be called 'cause entrepreneurs.' Because state sponsors do not provide their own ideological rationale for violent mobilisation, the void is filled by non-state actors ranging from pro-democracy local activists to transnational Jihadis. By contrast, such third parties are conspicuously absent from the relationship between Iran and its paramilitary proxies.

The second advantage of revolutionary regimes is the fact that their state apparatus includes an elite that is dedicated to relations with foreign paramilitaries as part of the agenda of exporting the revolution. Given the key role this elite played in the revolutionary process at home, it exerts sufficient influence within the state to secure significant resources in support of its overseas ambitions. Iran deals with its regional proxies through the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (Pasdarans), a fully specialised state agency that has accumulated more than three decades of uninterrupted experience in arming,

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1   Estimates of the amount of foreign funding for the Syrian rebels are purely speculative. Pro-Asad Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar has claimed that by the end of 2015 Syrian insurgents had received a total of $US 6 billion in external funding (al-Akhbar, 21 March 2016, http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/254596).

2   For a rare discussion of the imbalance between the policies of Iran and the Gulf states in Syria in terms of capabilities, see Émile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", Survival, 56/6 (2014), 59-86.

training and supervising foreign paramilitaries. As for the state supporters of the Syrian opposition, they do the same through intelligence services, whose chief concern is domestic security, and they have only occasionally, if at all, engaged in subversion abroad.[3] In other words, revolutionary states are able to minimise one of the main problems faced by state sponsors of insurgent groups: diverging political preferences.[4] This is the case because revolutionary states provide their insurgent partners with a coherent ideological rationale for violent mobilisation, and because they possess more, and better, organisational and human resources to shape their proxies in their own image.

Because they lack such advantages, non-revolutionary states suffer from three main weaknesses in the conduct of their subversive strategies: first, they are heavily dependent on the organisational capabilities of their rebel partners and possess few means to improve these capabilities, regardless of the financial resources they provide;[5] second, they have to cope with significant interference on the part of non-state third parties that either compete with state sponsors for the control of the insurgency (possibly, as will be shown below, by destroying the rebel proxies of foreign states) or mediate between these states and their rebel beneficiaries; and third, the insurgent partners of non-revolutionary states enjoy significant leeway to exploit rivalries between patron states, at least when the ideology of these insurgent groups makes them acceptable to more than one regional patron. fourth, due to their position in the international state system, non-revolutionary states are more amenable to

pressures from hegemonic global powers, in this case the United States.

In this chapter, I will illustrate the limits of foreign patrons' influence over the Syrian insurgency by focusing on the receiving end. I will show in particular that whether or not Syrian insurgent factions have proven successful (i.e. cohesive and militarily efficient) has had less to do with external support than with their inherent qualities or flaws. My focus here is thus not the performance of the Syrian insurgency in general, but variations between groups that have faced similar adverse circumstances over the last years: first, a significant imbalance between the half-hearted support they have received from their foreign state patrons, on the one hand, and the far more resolute involvement of Iran and Russia in the conflict alongside the Asad regime, on the other hand; second, the rise of third parties like the Islamic State and the Kurdish PYD, that have forced the rebels to fight on several fronts and transformed their foreign patrons' strategies at the expense of the struggle against Asad.

SAUDI ARABIA: A STORY OF MANY FAILURES

Among the main regional sponsors of the Syrian rebels, Saudi Arabia had the clearest idea of the shape the insurgency should take, or more exactly should not take. Indeed, besides anti-Iranian geopolitical calculations and a quest for domestic legitimacy, it seems that Riyadh's decision to start providing support to Syrian insurgents in the spring of 2012 was sparked by an anti-Islamist stance, and more specifically by the growing influence of factions closely tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and/or Qatar, such as the Committee for the Protection of Civilians, a Muslim Brotherhood-related front that secured the allegiance of several rebel factions in central Syria from February 2012 onwards, and that was formally allied with the founding figure of the Free Syrian Army, Col.

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3 Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf states", 81.

4 Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, David Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups", International Organization, /65 (2011), 709–44.

5 Here, I follow Paul Staniland's argument that the organisational capabilities of insurgent groups principally stem from the pre-war social networks upon which their leadership is built, and that the impact of foreign funding on those capabilities is limited. See Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion. Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014.

Riyad al-As'ad.[6] The Lebanese intermediaries first appointed by the Saudis to distribute aid to the Syrian rebels, such as Mustaqbal MP Uqab Saqr, were given a mandate that one of their Syrian interlocutors summarised as follows: "help anyone but the Islamists."[7]

Practically, "anyone but the Islamists" translated into a focus on army defectors such as Gen. Mustafa al-Sheikh, Col. Qasim Sa'd al-Din and Capt. Mahir al-Nu'aymi and ideologically amorphous factions embracing the FSA label.[8] One of the first rebel factions to benefit from Saudi largesse were the Faruq Battalions in Homs, an FSA flagship that during the first year of the insurgency was perhaps the most powerful and wealthiest insurgent group in Syria.[9] Faruq's financial resources were not only a consequence of Saudi support, but rather of the group's ability to play on its strength and prestige (as a pioneering insurgent force in what was then the 'capital of the revolution') to secure funding from competing sources. By September 2012, Faruq had joined the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, a nationwide alliance funded by Salafi networks related to veteran Syrian ideologue Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin, who publicly expressed his contempt for the Saudi regime and maintained close relations with Qatar.[10]

Besides its multiple and shifting loyalties, Faruq also disappointed Saudi Arabia (and its other patrons) with its organisational dysfunctions. The group's leadership was an ad hoc collection of military defectors (Lt. 'Abd al-Razzaq Tlass), civilian revolutionary activists (Hamza al-Shamali) and religious clerics (Amjad al-Bitar) that had joined forces after 2011. The loose character of al-Faruq's command structure was further exacerbated when the group used its considerable purchasing power to expand in the north of the country, where it acquired even more resources and made itself an essential partner to Turkey by taking control of border crossings.[11] The Northern Faruq Brigades were led by the controversial Nawras al-Muhammad, a.k.a. *al-brins* ('the Prince'), who was widely accused of large-scale exactions, and was later executed by the rebel court of Aleppo on that basis.[12] In late 2012, al-Faruq started to fragment as a result of personal rivalries that translated into the dismissal of key figures like Tlass and al-Bitar and the creation of splinter factions like the Independent Faruq Battalions.[13] By mid-2013, Faruq had become a minor faction, and within a year further internal disputes destroyed what was left of the group.[14] Former Faruq leaders then participated in the creation of the Hazm

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6   "The Free Syrian Army and the Committee for the Protection of Civilians Form a Joint Command Council" (in Arabic), Middle East Panorama, 29 February 2012, http://www. mepanorama.net/109303/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC% D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88% D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF/.

7   Interview with a Damascene activist who participated in discussions over arms deliveries from Lebanon, Istanbul, August 2015.

8   This pattern was clearly illustrated by the Saudi-organised delivery of Chinese-made HJ-8 antitank missiles in the spring of 2013. See Thomas Pierret, "External support and the Syrian insurgency", Foreign Policy, 9 August 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/09/external_support_and_the_syrian_insurgency.

9   Interview with a Syrian rebel leader from Homs, Istanbul, August 2015.

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10   Thomas Pierret, "Salafis at War in Syria: Logics of Fragmentation and Realignment", in Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (eds.), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's Power,* London, Hurst, 2016.

11   Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Up-and-Coming Rebels: Who Are the Farouq Brigades?", Time, 5 October 2012, http://world.time. com/2012/10/05/syrias-up-and-coming-rebels-who-are-the-farouq-brigades-2/.

12   Interview with a Syrian analyst, Istanbul, August 2015; "Sharia Court in Aleppo executes leader of Faruq Battalions in the North (in Arabic)", Al-Dorar al-Shamiyya, 21 avril 2015, http://eldorar.com/node/74664.

13   See Al Jazeera's interview with Farouk leader Usama al-Junaydi, Youtube, 17 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJIda5B1QHU.

14   Announcement of the dismissal of Usama al-Junaydi, Youtube, 20 July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rph11Qn5Fp8.

movement,[15] a US favourite whose frailty was exposed when it rapidly disintegrated under the attacks of the Nusra Front in early 2015.[16]

A considerable amount of Saudi money was also spent on the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades, a nation-wide alliance run by military defectors that in the first half of 2013 seemed able to compete with the largest Islamist coalitions.[17] Like the Faruq Battalions, Ahfad al-Rasul was initially appealing enough to secure funding from both Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but also like Faruq its leadership was based on loose (partly tribal) networks that proved dysfunctional and made the alliance unable to resist successive onslaughts on the part of Jihadi rivals: in mid-2014 Islamic State destroyed Ahfad al-Rasul's main strongholds in the Euphrates valley,[18] and at the end of the same year the Nusra Front annihilated the northern branch of the Syria Revolutionaries Front, the product of an earlier merger between Ahfad al-Rasul and Jamal Ma'ruf's Martyrs of Syria, another non-Islamist Saudi favourite.[19] Having lost its main assets in northern Syria by early 2015, Saudi Arabia had no choice but to engage in a cautious rapprochement with Ahrar al-Sham, Qatar and Turkey's main

Islamist ally in the area.[20]

Those Saudi partners that proved more resilient in the long term owed their relative success to factors other than funding from Riyadh. In the eastern suburbs of Damascus, the late Zahran 'Allush's Army of Islam has not only managed to survive a three-year siege by regime forces, but also to establish itself as the dominant rebel force in the area (sometimes through direct military action against rival factions like the Army of the Umma, that was destroyed by the Army of Islam in early 2015), eliminate the Islamic State's local sleeping cells, keep the Nusra Front in check, and expand nationwide. Yet the Army of Islam is hardly a Saudi creature. A Salafi group, and as such the one major exception to Riyadh's reluctance to deal with Islamist factions,[21] it once had Qatar-aligned alliances (Syrian Islamic Liberation Front and Islamic Front) and has received support from Surur's networks. The group's connection with Saudi Arabia stems from long-standing ties between 'Allush's father, a Salafi scholar, and the Saudi religious establishment, but certain Saudi decision-making centres have long distrusted the Army of Islam. In any case, it is the cohesiveness of the group's organisational structure (itself the result of a closely-knit pre-war semi-clandestine religious network) that has made it such an efficient and hence attractive target for various sources of funding rather than the other way round.[22]

The other main area of Saudi influence is the southern province of Daraa, which is virtually the only place where Riyadh's preference for a predominantly non-Islamist insurgency has prevailed and persisted in the long run. The

15 Jeffrey White, "Rebels Worth Supporting: Syria's Harakat Hazm", The Washington Institute Policy Watch 2244, 28 April 2014, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebels-worth-supporting-syrias-harakat-hazm.

16 "U.S. Syria strategy falters with collapse of rebel group", Reuters, 5 March 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-hazzm-idUSKBN0M10GV20150305.

17 Nicholas Heras, "Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool: A Growing Force in the Syrian Armed Opposition", Fair Observer, 20 May 2013, http://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/alwiya-ahfaad-ar-rasool-growing-force-syrian-armed-opposition/.

18 Saddam al-Jamal, a prominent commander of Ahfad al-Rasul in Abu Kemal, defected to IS and became its emir in the region. On the role of tribal ties in Ahfad al-Rasul, see Hassan, Hassan and Michael Weiss, IS: Inside the Army of Terror (Reagan Arts, 2015), p. 202.

19 "The rise and ugly fall of a moderate Syrian rebel offers lessons for the West", Washington Post, 5 January 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-rise-and-ugly-fall-of-a-moderate-syrian-rebel-offers-lessons-for-the-west/2015/01/04/3889db38-80da-4974-b1ef-1886f4183624_story.html.

20 Hassan Hassan, "Syria's revitalized rebels make big gains in Assad's heartlands", Foreign Policy, 28 April 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/28/syrias-revitalized-rebels-make-big-gains-in-assads-heartland/.

21 The two other main exceptions are the Front for Authenticity and Development (FAD), a politically moderate coalition supported by al-Turath ('Heritage'), a quietist, Saudi-aligned Salafi association based in Kuwait, and the Nur al-Din Zanki movement in Aleppo, which was affiliated with the FAD in 2013 but whose ties to Saudi Arabia rely on personal connections rather than on ideological affinities.

22 Pierret, "Salafis at war in Syria"; interview with Jaysh al-Islam's spokesman Islam 'Allush, Istanbul, August 2015.

Southern Front, a broad coalition of FSA-banner factions, remains by far the dominant force in the province with at least twenty-five thousand fighters as opposed to, probably, a mere four-digit number of Islamist rebels. This exception results from a combination of factors, among which is a tight control of rebel supply lines by the Jordanian authorities, whose anti-Islamist bias has been even more pronounced than that of Saudi Arabia.[23] In its relations with Syrian rebels, Amman has been advantaged by a sizeable and competent intelligence apparatus that is familiar with southern Syria's social and cultural context due to geographical proximity. However, even in such ideal conditions there have been limits to what local rebels can achieve in terms of unification. It is remarkable that despite the absence of a major ideological divide among them, and their shared dependence on a single source of logistical support, Southern Front members have retained separate command structures and have not been able to move from mere coordination towards a full merger.[24] Although Jordan might have feared that a more integrated Southern Front would become too independent of it, there seems to be no evidence that Amman actively discouraged unification moves within the alliance. Rather than external influence, the key variable for this persistent fragmentation is thus the social structure of the southern insurgency; that is, a collection of groups that are firmly entrenched within their local communities but whose respective leaders are too loosely tied together to achieve the level of trust required for full unification.

QATAR AND TURKEY: BETTING ON ALL HORSES

In 2013, Qatar provided the Syrian rebels with a small batch of Chinese-made, Sudan-sourced FN-6 man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS). The eight different groups that benefitted from this gesture of generosity before deliveries were interrupted, probably under US pressure, spanned across a broad ideological spectrum including local Military Councils of the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Shields Committee, and the hard-line Salafis of Ahrar al-Sham.[25] This eclecticism reflects a strategy that was primarily shaped by two of the small emirate's key characteristics: first, in spite of enormous financial means, it has scarce limited institutional and human resources to manage relations with foreign paramilitaries; second, in contrast to other Gulf monarchies, it has a relative indifference to the ideological orientation of foreign partners because of the Al Thani family's utmost confidence in the domestic stability of its own rule.[26]

Qatar's privileged relations with Syrian Islamist factions can be interpreted as a form of outsourcing, in the sense that these factions were brought into Doha's sphere of influence by non-state third parties that had long maintained close ties with the emirate. These parties were, to put it simply, virtually all the regional Sunni networks that were on bad terms with Saudi Arabia: the Muslim Brotherhood (Shields Committee; the Committee for the Protection of Civilians, rebranded in 2014 as the Sham Legion) and like-minded but non-affiliated factions (Ajnad al-Sham in Damascus, Army of Mujahidin in Aleppo), Salafi *haraki* ('activist') networks connected either to Surur

23 International Crisis Group, "New Approach in Southern Syria", Middle East Report n° 163, 2 September 2015, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/163-new-approach-in-southern-syria.pdf

24 This situation contrasts with the findings of Ostovar and McCants, who in 2013 identified ideological differences and multiple sources of funding as the major impediments to rebel unity in Syria. See Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, "The Rebel Alliance. Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify", CNA, Analysis and Solutions, 2013.

25 Other recipients of FN-6 missiles were the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades, the FSA-affiliated al-Qusayr Brigade, the Front for Authenticity and Development in Aleppo, and the Syria Islamic Liberation Front-affiliated Fath Brigade in Aleppo. FN-6 recipients have been identified by the author thanks to videos uploaded by these factions to Youtube throughout 2013.

26 Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution", Financial Times, 17 May 2013, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html.

Zayn al-'Abidin (Syrian Islamic Liberation Front-SILF) or to remnants of the Salafi Movement in Kuwait (Ahrar al-Sham's Syrian Islamic Front, which merged with the SILF in late 2013 to form the Islamic Front), in addition to Jihadi fund raisers whose operations in Qatar were tolerated by the local authorities (Nusra Front).[27]

In spite of this, Qatar's policy towards the Syrian insurgency has not been uniformly pro-Islamist. As the FN-6 episode illustrates, Doha has also provided support for FSA-affiliates dominated by military defectors. Indeed, since the emirate's partnership with Islamist factions was driven less by ideological preference than by the brokerage of non-state third parties, nothing prevented Qatar from trying to maximise its influence by betting on all horses, that is, by funding both Islamist and 'nationalist' factions. In 2012 and 2013, when FSA structures dominated by army defectors were established (Supreme Military Council, Headquarters, local Military Councils), Qatar worked to match Saudi influence within these structures, and to seize its share of what might then possibly become a major conduit of Western support for the insurgency. After this organisational scheme collapsed in late 2013, the US reorganised foreign support for 'moderate' rebel groups through the creation of two operation rooms, the Jordan-based Military Operations Command (MOC) and the Turkey-based Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (MOM). Instead of going through a central Syrian leadership, support (notably in the form of US-made Saudi-sourced TOW antitank missiles) would now be directly distributed to vetted (generally non-Islamist) rebel factions. Qatar was on board again, even hosting training sessions for TOW missile users on its

territory.[28] In the meantime, Doha continued to support Islamist factions and by the spring of 2015 emerged along with Turkey as the main sponsor of the Army of Conquest alliance, which expelled regime troops from the province of Idlib.[29]

To sum up, Qatar's policy of support for Syrian rebels was shaped by a combination of opportunities (the availability of non-state intermediaries) and constraints (rivalry with Saudi Arabia, Western pressure). Its utterly pragmatic strategy of wall-to-wall support for insurgent factions allowed Doha to have the best of both worlds as it found itself in a privileged relationship with the Islamist factions that turned out to be the most efficient and resilient components of the insurgency (in particular Ahrar al-Sham, which continued to expand by absorbing other factions after it lost much of its resources and leadership in 2014)[30] while maintaining ties with the more 'respectable' MOC/MOM affiliates. This was obviously the most rational course of action for a state that had the financial means to cultivate a wide array of clients and saw no reason to fear the spread of revolutionary ideals at home.

Qatar's association with such a cohesive and efficient faction as Ahrar al-Sham should not suggest that Qatari funding was the key variable behind their success, since Doha's support also benefitted factions that proved less convincing in the long term. For instance, the Tawhid Brigade (renamed Levant Front in 2015), for instance, was initially an Al Jazeera-favourite and a thousands-strong faction that played a leading role in the capture of the eastern part of Aleppo in July

27 Pierret, "Salafis at war in Syria". The Qatari sphere of influence among rebel factions was clearly illustrated by the list of signatories of the Revolutionary Covenant, a moderate platform that was prepared at a meeting convened by Qatar in Turkey: Islamic Front, Sham Legion, Army of Mujahidin, Ajnad al-Sham, and the Furqan Brigades, an Islamist group operating in the province of Qunaytra (Skype interview with an official from one of the signatory factions, May 2014).

28 "Main rebel factions that received TOW missiles: 'We received them from friendly states, and were trained in their use in Qatar'", Aksalser, 25 April 2014, http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=1d842ceddd4e5675291936be40531a20.

29 Hassan, "Revitalized Syrian Rebels".

30 In the first half of 2014, Ahrar al-Sham lost its oil wells in the east to the Islamic State, while some of its Kuwayti financiers were sanctioned by the US Treasury. In September, dozens of the top leaders of the movement, including its general commander Hassan 'Abbud, were killed in an explosion during a meeting in the province of Idlib. On Ahrar al-Sham's absorption of other groups, see Aron Lund, "Islamist mergers in Syria: Ahrar al-Sham swallows Suqour al-Sham", Syria in Crisis, 23 March 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59471.

2012. However, following the assassination of its charismatic military leader 'Abd al-Qadir Salih in October 2013, it gradually lost strength as a result of poor discipline and internal factionalism,[31] which in turn entailed a drop in external support. Unlike Ahrar al-Sham, whose core leadership was built upon a cohesive network of Jihadi veterans, many of which had formerly been detained together at the Seydnaya prison near Damascus, Tawhid was a frail coalition of local groups held together by Salih's charisma, by the short-lived momentum of crushing victories against the regime in 2012, and by foreign, notably Qatari, money. True, other foreign states (namely, Saudi Arabia and the United States) contributed to the weakening of the Tawhid Brigade/Levant Front by denying it access to MOM-supplied TOW missiles, thereby encouraging the creation of splinter factions such as the 1st Regiment in the spring of 2015.[32] This pattern had also been observed the previous year when another Aleppine faction, the Nur al-Din Zanki Movement, secured TOW supplies as soon as it left the Army of Mujahidin, whom Saudi Arabia opposed for its alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.[33] Yet, it is remarkable that Ahrar al-Sham's exclusion from the list of the MOM's vetted recipients did not prevent its continuous absorption of smaller factions. It seems, therefore, that foreign pressures have had a detrimental effect on the cohesion of rebel factions *when that cohesion was already fragile.*

31 "Divisions shake the Tawhid Brigade" (in Arabic), Aksalser, 5 July 2014, http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=d edf8a71626f82bdae322177bd39c182.

32 "Ideological differences and US pressures. Al-Sharq al-Awsat reveals the reasons for the dissolution of the Levant Front" (in Arabic), Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 20 April 2015, http://aawsat. com/home/article/340806/%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7% D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%A7% D8%A6%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B9% D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%- D8%AD%D9%84%D9%91-%C2%AB%D8%A7%D9%84% D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84% %D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9%C2%BB- %D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8.

33 International Crisis Group, "Rigged cars and barrel bombs: Aleppo and the state of the Syrian war", Middle East Report 155, 9 September 2014, p. 23, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/ regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria-lebanon/syria/155- rigged-cars-and-barrel-bombs-aleppo-and-the-state-of-the- syrian-war.aspx.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although quantitatively significant, foreign state support for Syrian insurgents has only had a limited impact on the resilience and cohesiveness of its rebel beneficiaries. Once-lavishly-funded factions like the Faruq Battalions, Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades and Tawhid Brigade have disintegrated or dramatically weakened, while others have continued to thrive despite temporary losses of resources, like Ahrar al-Sham, or under dire military and logistical conditions, as in the case of the Army of Islam. In all cases, the independent variable determining the success or failure of these groups has not been the level of external support they receive, but the nature of their leadership: tightly knit networks of long-standing partners on the one hand, as opposed to loose ad hoc coalitions on the other hand. Likewise, the cases of Daraa and Aleppo show that even when foreign influence was exerted by or through a single hegemonic foreign state patron (Jordan and Turkey respectively) over an ideologically homogeneous insurgent scene, dysfunctions stemming from the fragmented social structure of the rebel leadership proved hard to overcome for foreign patrons.

The major policy implication of the developments expounded above is that whatever financial resources state sponsors pour into their insurgent partners, they cannot make a rebel faction successful when its leadership is dysfunctional, nor can they lastingly impose unity on rebel groups against their inherent centripetal dynamics. Such implications were already acknowledged to some extent when the project for a fully integrated 'Free Syrian Army' was abandoned in favour of the more modest MOC/MOM approach, with coordination replacing overambitious unity schemes, and support being provided directly to select moderate factions that had survived the Darwinian selection process of the war. Scaling down their aims of shaping a foreign insurgency is probably the most realistic strategy for states that lack both a militant ideology to export and a fully-fledged agency designed for propping up foreign insurgents who embrace that ideology – that is, virtually all regimes except revolutionary ones.

PART 2.
THE LIBYAN CONFLICT

Source: "Wikimedia Commons"

DIALOGUE, MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION IN LIBYA'S LOCAL CONFLICTS

VIRGINIE COLLOMBIER[1]

Source: Google maps

INTRODUCTION

After months of divisions and deadlock within the General National Congress (GNC) elected in July 2012 and a failure to resolve the crisis through the election of a new parliament (House of Representatives, HOR) in June 2014, the political transition envisioned by Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) definitively collapsed during Summer 2014. Two rival parliaments and governments, based in Tripoli and the Eastern city of al-Bayda, started competing for recognition and authority. A major political and military conflict erupted and pitted national and local forces that became part of Libya's two main warring alliances against each other: Libya Dawn (*Fajr Libia*) and Operation Dignity (*Karama*).

In the Nafusa Mountains, the region located between the Tunisian border and Tripoli, the reverberation of the national conflict resulted in historical factional conflicts between towns and communities being reignited,[2] the map of local

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1   This chapter is based on fieldwork and the participation in 'Social Dialogue' meetings that were made possible thanks to the support of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF).

2   For historical background on the Nafusa Mountains, the region's role in the 2011 revolution and civil war, and the resurgence of factionalism after 2011, see Wolfram Lacher and Ahmed Labnouj, "Factionalism resurgent. The War in the Jabal Nafusa", in Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, Hurst, 2015, pp. 256-284.

alliances being redrawn, and a humanitarian crisis that lasted for months, with hundreds of families displaced and communication between towns and cities as well as the supply of basic goods (including fuel and medicine) rendered extremely difficult.

In September 2014, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) initiated a political dialogue between major Libyan actors aimed at solving the institutional crisis at the national level and forming a national unity government, as well as at reaching an agreement between rival factions on confidence-building measures and a comprehensive ceasefire.[3] Yet the question of how to secure the implementation and sustainability of such agreements at the local level appeared extremely challenging. Military confrontation, in particular, most often involved armed groups responding to the authority of local leaders, who enjoyed a high degree of operational autonomy from the leadership of the two main political and military coalitions at the national level. Overall, the fact that the political dialogue initially gathered representatives of the main factions competing within the political institutions but did not include representatives of the armed groups nor of other forces holding legitimacy and influence on the ground, such as elders and notables (because none were considered as political actors *per se*), would render the building of actual linkage and agreement between Libya's various power levels (national and local) and circles (political, military, social) very difficult.

Shortly after the UNSMIL-brokered political dialogue was set on track, in some regions influential figures from local civil society started taking matters into their own hands to put an end to the military confrontation and the resulting humanitarian crisis, as these had a direct impact on their daily lives and therefore constituted the main priorities for them. They also considered they were capable of bringing about positive results by acting at the local level, despite not being able to exert direct influence on the political dialogue.

In the Nafusa Mountains, where traditions and

experiences of local mediation and conflict-resolution in factional conflicts are well-anchored, the initiatives proved somewhat successful, confirming the widely-held view that any solution to the Libyan crisis has to involve local actors.[4] The involvement of influential figures from local civil society (elders and notables in particular) proved key to the conclusion of local ceasefires, prisoner exchanges and the reopening of the region's main communication axes for people and goods.

However, the dialogue, mediation and reconciliation processes conducted in the Nafusa Mountains since 2015 also highlight the fact that the interplay between local social structures, national political and military forces and international actors in such processes is more complex. The mediation conducted by local elders and notables would probably not have been able to lead to the same result without the intervention of new actors (local, national and international) in the mediation process. Moreover, local initiatives could not have been developed this way if the national context had not significantly evolved as a result of the UN-led dialogue. What made the dialogue successful is precisely the fact that several processes undertaken simultaneously at different levels and by different actors combined to bring about positive outcomes.

THE NATIONAL CONFLICT AND ITS REVERBERATION IN THE NAFUSA MOUNTAINS

In July 2014, the election of a new House of Representatives (HOR) intended to replace the GNC and solve the legitimacy crisis that plagued it eventually resulted in the division of the country into two competing sets of institutions supported by rival political and military coalitions. The new 'internationally-recognized parliament' was established in the eastern city of Tobruk and formed a government led by Abdullah al-Thini,

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3   http://unsmil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3543&ctl=Details&mid=6187&ItemID=1992890&language=en-US.

4   See for instance Jason Pack, "Pick-up the pieces: as the national-level dialogue exacerbates tensions, perhaps it's time to turn to a local approach", 27 October 2015 ; "Localizing Power in Libya", 26 November 2013, http://www.libya-analysis.com/?s=local.

but more than 20 newly-elected HOR members (aligned with the revolutionary camp) refused to sit and take part in the parliament's activities. In Tripoli, the GNC refused to step down and formed its own new government, led by Omar al-Hasi.

The institutional crisis was coupled with increased military tensions between the armed groups supporting the two camps. The launch of Operation Dignity by former army general Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi in May 2014 had already resulted in a reshaping of alliances at the city level – with Ansar al-Sharia and other revolutionary armed groups now fighting side by side against Haftar and his local allies. However, Operation Dignity had repercussions far beyond Benghazi, as it triggered military confrontation in various places across Libya between the forces supporting Haftar[5] and the forces opposing it gathered in the Libya Dawn coalition.[6]

Libya Dawn was launched with the declared objective of evicting Zintan armed groups from the airport and other strategic locations in Tripoli.[7] Groups from Zintan and Warshafana allied with Operation Dignity against Libya Dawn and fought together in Tripoli and al-Zawiya during Summer 2014, before being forced to withdraw from the city.

From late August until early October 2014, Libya Dawn forces advanced through the Warshafana area towards Zintan and the Nafusa Mountains. The fighting caused a humanitarian crisis, with indiscriminate shelling by both sides, civilian casualties, and at least 120,000 persons from Warshafana displaced.[8] In October, Zintan armed

groups started shelling and besieging the cities of Kikla and al-Qal'a, considered supporters of Libya Dawn. The fighting resulted in the killing of 170 persons, hundreds of injured and over 5,700 families displaced. In the following months, sporadic fighting continued in various parts of western Libya and the Nafusa Mountains as armed groups supporting either of the two main coalitions sought military advances or engaged in retaliatory attacks.[9]

A SERIES OF INCENTIVES FOR LOCAL ACTORS TO ENTER INTO DIALOGUE

Even though most of the fighting took place in late 2014 and military clashes later remained circumscribed within a few specific areas (the cities of Kikla and Gharyan, the al-Watiyya military base, al-Aziziyya), the blockade of the main access roads in the Nafusa Mountains and the subsequent cut-off in the supply of basic goods and the circulation of people (especially the sick and injured) rendered the situation unsustainable for the inhabitants and local leaders of the region. Consensus therefore grew among the population, as well as among the elders and notables from each camp in the Nafusa Mountains, that a peaceful resolution of the crisis was needed. This constituted the first trigger for local actors to engage and attempt to initiate dialogue among the warring community leaders.

The second trigger came from significant developments on the political and military scene at the national level that were expected to have an impact on local forces involved in the conflict. In particular, the assessments of their positions by the three main parties to the conflict in the region – Zintan, Warshafana and Misrata – changed, as a result of a series of factors.

The nature of the UN-led political dialogue, which gathered members of the GNC and the HOR, and was progressively widened to include other key

5 Essentially tribal militias and civil volunteers from the east, armed groups from the cities of Zintan, Rujban and the War-shafana region in the west.

6 Dominated by armed groups and politicians from the city of Misrata and including elements from the cities of Tripoli, al-Za-wiya, Janzur, Zuwara and the Nafusa Mountains, among which Gharyan and Kikla.

7 Wolfram Lacher and Peter Cole, "Politics by Other Means. Conflicting Interests in Libya's Security Sector", Small Arms Survey, October 2014.

8 UNSMIL & OCHA, "Update on Violations of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law during the Ongoing Violence in Libya" (revised), 23 December 2014.

9 UNSMIL & OCHA, "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Libya", 16 November 2015.

political figures as well as representatives of Libya's municipalities, also pushed civil society leaders to position themselves and make their voices heard. In particular, both the course of the UN-led dialogue[10] and the high pressure exerted by the city's business community resulted in a significant change in the position of the leaders in Misrata (municipal council and military council). In January 2015, they decided to support dialogue[11] and Abu Bakr Hreish from the municipal council joined the UN-sponsored Geneva talks. In a demonstration that the UNSMIL strategy of fragmenting the country's main political and military coalitions and promoting the formation of a new alliance of the 'moderates' from both camps was starting to bear fruit, individual cities and communities appeared increasingly convinced that they had to protect their own specific interests, irrespective of their alliances with one faction or the other. The municipal councils of Gharyan and al-Zawiya, both major forces within Libya Dawn, also decided to back the dialogue and participate in the talks.[12]

Misrata's participation in the UN-led talks was followed by the city leadership's decision to withdraw its forces from Western Libya and cease supporting its local allies. As a result, the latter became more inclined to compromise as the balance of forces on the ground was undergoing significant change.

In the rival camp, the Zintan forces were suffering from the state of siege they had been experiencing over the previous months as a result of the conflict

with neighbouring cities and communities. In addition, despite the use of the Zintan airport for arms deliveries, the Zintan and Warshafana forces felt weakened militarily, the support from Tobruk and the Libyan National Army controlled by general Haftar being considered insufficient.[13]

Overall, these developments contributed to modifying the balance of power between the local forces in the region and, most importantly, to decreasing the level of support and military resources available to them. Since foreign actors displayed relatively little interest in the region (compared to southern Libya, for instance, where the interests and stakes related to natural resources and trafficking were much higher), the local forces suddenly found themselves with a greater incentive to compromise and enter into talks with their rivals.

THE LIBYAN 'SOCIAL DIALOGUE' INITIATIVE AND ITS OUTCOMES IN THE NAFUSA MOUNTAINS

As the daily lives of the inhabitants in the Nafusa Mountains had become extremely difficult, local civil society actors pushed for dialogue between the warring parties and were willing to mediate. These local civil society actors included traditional social leaders (elders, wisemen and notables) from the warring communities themselves (here, most often meaning cities, tribes or ethnic groups), and traditional social leaders able to mediate between them, who had remained neutral in the most recent conflicts and could therefore be seen as third parties. Most of these were widely-respected figures within their communities, had wide networks including a variety of actors, and were considered to be capable of creating wide consensus and unity around them. Of the more prominent elders in the Nafusa Mountains, most had been members of the Popular Social Leadership (*al-qiyada al-sh'abiya*) under the Qaddafi regime, which did not *per se* deprive them of their popularity or legitimacy

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10 This was precisely the objective set by UNSMIL, whose strategy aimed at dissociating the interests of the various forces allied within the Libya Dawn and Dignity operations, pushing the more moderate forces from both camps to form a new alliance which was more centrist and favourable to all their interests, and to distance themselves from those more radical in their respective camps.

11 Misrata's business community, in particular, exerted significant influence in this decision. The deterioration of the city's image across the country following the 2014 military conflict with Zintan, and later on with forces allied to General Haftar, proved very detrimental to their interests, as did the overall deterioration of the security situation in the country.

12 https://unsmil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=3543&mid=6187&ItemID=1992895.

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13 The military units from Zintan and the east were to a large extent autonomous.

after the revolution, depending, of course, on the stance they had taken during the events of 2011.

The traditional social leaders now willing to engage in dialogue and conflict resolution at the local level were faced with a number of challenges, however. Old feuds between the communities and cities of the region had been reactivated and politicized by the recent conflict at the national level, making the confidence crisis between the communities wider. The security situation and the multiple checkpoints established by rival groups and factions on the main roads in the Nafusa Mountains made circulation and communication between the parties to the conflict extremely difficult, as well as that between them and neutral parties willing to mediate.

Against this background, the necessity of initiating dialogue and a mediation process outside of the region and the country soon became clear, yet this would require logistic and financial capacities that were not available to the mediators, or would come at the expense of comprising the independence and apolitical nature of the mediation (if support was requested from local businessmen, for instance). Finally, it was also understood by the potential mediators that they lacked the capacity to conduct their work in a way that would fit the new nature of the conflict. In particular, they acknowledged the need to use modern communication tools and to establish relations with foreign and international parties, all skills that most of them did not have.

An answer to these challenges was found with the setting up of an original mediation process. This built on the traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms in the region, with elders, wisemen and local notables identifying neutral parties among themselves to engage in talks with the rival groups and factions in the conflict. However, it also differed from it in that there was direct and indirect participation in the process by new actors: young activists and international organizations, in particular, ended up playing a part (although of a different nature and scope) in a somewhat complex mechanism of dialogue-facilitation and mediation.

In January 2015, what was branded a Libyan 'Social Dialogue' was launched on the initiative of a group of young activists from across Libya willing to work together with local notables (mostly elders and tribal leaders) to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Their view was that, while UNSMIL was mediating between prominent political figures at the national level, there was also a need to channel the view of the 'silent majority' that the political crisis should be solved peacefully and a comprehensive and durable ceasefire should be reached. Because the depth of the political and security crisis did not allow for the organisation of a meeting involving representatives of communities from all across Libya inside the country, and because the organisation of such a meeting outside the country required more substantial funding, the group of young social activists was entrusted with the mission of identifying and convincing potential foreign partners to support the initiative.

In contrast to traditional local mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms in Libya, the Libyan 'Social Dialogue' therefore brought together community leaders, among whom neutral parties were identified to play the role of mediators, young social activists from across the country partnering with the 'traditional' mediators to facilitate their mediation, bringing in resources that the older 'traditional' mediators did not possess, and a foreign organization[14] which agreed to provide light support (meaning financial and logistic, but without intervention in the choice of participants in the dialogue nor the setting of the agenda) to the Libyan facilitators and mediators. They also insisted that representatives of the international community, chief among which were representatives of UNSMIL, attend the meeting as observers so as to provide additional legitimacy – both international and domestic – to

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14 Support for the initiative was provided by the Norwegian Peace-building Resource Centre (NOREF). This was welcomed by the Libyan parties as Norway was seen as neutral in the conflict and NOREF agreed to back the initiative and respected and encouraged ownership of the initiative by the local facilitators and mediators.

their initiative and its expected outcomes.[15]

The first meeting of the Libyan 'Social Dialogue' was organized in Tunis and gathered around 40 Libyan community leaders from different cities and tribes across the country with no political affiliation but a commitment to re-establishing dialogue between the communities in the conflict.[16] In doing this, their intention was twofold: to encourage the UN-led political process and give it more weight by making it clear that the initiative enjoyed grassroots support; and to put pressure on the Libyan political figures participating in the dialogue by highlighting that their constituencies favoured a negotiated solution and strongly opposed the continuation of violence.[17]

The meeting was a success in that it allowed for the re-establishment of contacts and communication between influential community leaders from across the country. In the final joint statement of the meeting, the participants came out publically in support of dialogue and a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Preliminary agreements about the release of prisoners were also made between representatives from western Libya, specifically between Zintan and al-Zawiya, and Gharyan and Zintan. These directly facilitated several prisoner exchanges in the Nafusa Mountains in the following weeks, in particular a prisoner exchange mediated by elders from the city of al-Asaba'[18] between Zintan, Warshafana and Gharyan in late January 2015.

The situation in the Nafusa Mountains was the focus of the following step of the initiative, which concretized with the organization of a 'Dialogue for comprehensive peace and reconciliation in the Nafusa Mountains,' held in Djerba, Tunisia, on 17-19 March 2015.[19] This meeting, which gathered more than 40 representatives from the main Nafusa Mountain cities and from Libya's Council of Wisemen for Reconciliation, ended with the publication of a communiqué underlining the mediation procedures agreed upon to put an end to the conflict between Zintan and Kikla (considered the key point of contention in the region) and the concrete mechanisms for their implementation (in particular, the provision of humanitarian assistance to the peoples of the Nafusa Mountains and the return of displaced people). Since then, the mediation process has been ongoing and has brought significant results as regards the humanitarian and security situation and the free movement of people in the region. Even though they have proven difficult, the negotiations between Zintan and Kikla are ongoing. They have allowed for the progressive withdrawal of Zintan's forces from Kikla and al-Qawalish, and for the return of some families to their homes.[20]

CONCLUSION

Many foreign analysts and many Libyans themselves insist on the fact that 'a local approach' is indispensable to find a way out of the Libyan crisis and that the 'traditional social structures' (most often meaning tribes) should be given

15 By doing so, they also highlighted the influence that foreign actors have acquired on Libyan actors (be they political, military or social leaders) and how foreign recognition (in addition to financial or military support) has become a key determinant for domestic actors to gain prominence at the national and local levels.

16 A Facebook page has been created to report on the events and main achievements of the initiative: https://www.facebook.com/hiwar.mojtame/.

17 According to contacts by the author with the key people at the origin of the initiative from December 2014 onwards, as well as participation as an observer at the first Libyan Social Dialogue meeting organized in Tunis on 19-21 January 2015.

18 Elders from the city in al-Asaba' are generally well-positioned to conduct mediation in the Nafusa Mountains because of their stance during the revolution: while they were officially against the uprising, they remained neutral on the ground and did not get involved in the infighting, which explains them now being accepted by all the warring parties.

19 Author's participation as an observer at this meeting, organized in Djerba, Tunisia, on 17-19 March 2015. The meeting was organized with the financial support of the German Federal Foreign Ministry and the logistic support of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF). A representative of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) participated as an observer.

20 Author's regular phone conversations with one of the main leaders of the Social Dialogue initiative since March 2015; author's observations during a trip to the Nafusa Mountains and several interviews with elders and social activists from the region, February 2016.

prominence in the political transition.[21] In fact, the implementation and outcomes of the 'Social Dialogue' in the Nafusa Mountains provide an interesting case study of the role that local civil society actors can play in dialogue, mediation and conflict-resolution processes in Libya. Especially when they do not participate in the formal political scene within political parties or institutions (and are therefore not 'political actors'), and when they are not part of any military structure and do not hold direct control over any such group (meaning that they are not 'military leaders'), traditional social leaders (elders, wisemen and notables) are in a position to exert influence on the ground and contribute to conflict-resolution.

The 'Social Dialogue' in the Nafusa Mountains, however, suggests that traditional mediation processes might not be fully relevant any longer, as the overall pattern of conflicts has changed and the possession of specific skills and networks appears increasingly key to the conduct of successful mediation. One striking feature of the 'Social Dialogue' in this respect is that it consisted in traditional social leaders working hand in hand with young social activists, the latter facilitating the mediation work of the former, along lines that could be seen as contradicting most Libyan social norms.

The capacity of traditional social leaders to contain armed groups has also constituted a key challenge in Libya's recent conflicts. Here, the Nafusa Mountains experience tends to show that the degree of cohesion of the cities and communities involved in the conflict has played a central role, with, for instance, obvious differences between the capacity displayed by the elders from Nalut (a city rather homogenous in social terms) to communicate with and keep hold over the armed groups from their city and that of the elders from Jadu (characterized by a more diverse social fabric, with several big families rivalling for influence and power).

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21 This is generally the view of tribal actors (both leaders and simple individuals), especially in eastern Libya and in the tribes that were prominent under Qaddafi and were marginalized politically, socially and militarily after 2011 (chief among which are the Warfalla and Qadhadhfa tribes).

The interplay between the local context and developments at the national level (what could be called 'external factors', in the sense of being 'external' to the local communities) has also had a determining impact in the Nafusa Mountains case. In particular, developments in the UN-led political dialogue in late 2014/early 2015 and the decision of the city of Misrata, followed by other key Libya Dawn actors, to back the dialogue proved determinant in pushing the local actors to compromise, as they dramatically affected the features of the conflict at the local level.

The influence of foreign actors on local processes of conflict and conflict resolution has also been highlighted by the Nafusa Mountains experience. First, the local actors themselves acknowledged the importance of gaining support for and recognition of their mediation initiative by requesting financial and logistic support so as to remain independent from domestic sponsors, and by requesting the participation of representatives of the United Nations and foreign states at the 'Social Dialogue' meeting as observers. Second, the success of the mediation conducted by local civil society leaders in the region can probably be seen as a consequence of the little interest that foreign actors have in the Nafusa Mountains: the region is not perceived as strategic, and it does not have significant resources. According to local actors, this is key to explaining why mediation attempts have proved successful in the Nafusa Mountains, whereas they have been much more difficult in southern Libya, for instance, where the competition for access to energy riches has so far constituted a major obstacle to dialogue and reconciliation.

Foreign actors need to be aware of the capacity they have to influence processes of conflict and conflict resolution, and of the necessity of assessing and managing this influence with care. The support and recognition they give to local actors (either directly or indirectly), when it takes place in a context of conflict, will often trigger competition at the local level, affect the balance of forces, and eventually risk resulting in increased fragmentation. Efforts to support local actors, in a

conflict-resolution perspective and more broadly, therefore require serious assessment of the local context and of the actors' strategies.

Overall, the experience of 'Social Dialogue' in the Nafusa Mountains has underlined, however, that local actors (in that case local civil society actors) cannot be thought of as the sole and central piece of any strategy for successful conflict resolution in Libya. To bring about sustainable positive outcomes, their role has to considered within a much wider context, which also needs to include national and foreign actors and the interplay between them all.

SMUGGLERS, TRIBES AND MILITIAS. THE RISE OF LOCAL FORCES IN THE TUNISIA-LIBYAN BORDER REGION

HAMZA MEDDEB

Source: Google maps

INTRODUCTION

The 'Arab springs' have disrupted the security, the economy and the political situation on the long-marginalized Tunisian-Libyan border, which for decades has seen the flourishing of smuggling and border traffic. Both the Ben Ali and the Qaddafi regimes allowed illicit practices to develop to better control the population and rule over the border regions. On the Tunisian side, participation in the border economy used to be prerogatives of both the clientele of the hegemonic party – the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD) – and the various *protégés* of the security services: the police, the National Guard and the customs services. On the Libyan side, the Qaddafi regime used the border resources to consolidate its power through a politics of clientelism and co-optation of tribes. Only loyal tribes were allowed to participate in this border economy.[1] The fall of the Ben Ali and Qaddafi regimes and the outbreak of the Libyan conflict plunged the border regions into uncertainty and violence. Since 2013 and with

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1   For the Libyan-Egyptian border case, see Thomas Husken, "Tribal Political Culture and the Revolution in the Cyrenaica of Libya", Orient, Vol. 53, No. 1, 2012, p. 26-31.

the multiplication of attacks, security forces have come back, setting the stage for the militarization of the region and a decisive rearrangement of the border economy.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: it aims first to describe the reorganisation of the border economy in the current uncertain political times, and second to understand what triggered the rise in power of non-state actors. Today, through their participation in unofficial and hidden forms of regional integration, tribes, militias, smuggling networks and jihadi groups are the ones shaping local politics and driving the relationship between Tunisia and Libya.

THE TURMOIL OF 2011 AND THE IRRUPTION OF NEW ACTORS INTO THE TUNISIAN-LIBYAN BORDERLAND

While the toppling of the Ben Ali and Qaddafi regimes changed the stakes, the traffic and the informal economy along the Tunisian-Libyan border remain important to this day. Borders are more than a dividing line as they most importantly constitute political resources that regimes rely on to govern such regions. In this situation, the term 'border rent' offers a particularly apt description insofar as both the state and the security forces regulate access to the resources of the border.[2] In the aftermath of the fall of Ben Ali, when security forces withdrew from the Tunisian-Libyan border, participation in the border economy expanded beyond the circles previously formed of the police and the customs service's *protégés*. In this economy, the share of illicit commodities also increased: shotguns, drugs, more and more alcoholic beverages and many subsidised food products, along with phosphate and farm produce, all illegally exported to Libya. The transformation of Tunisia into a staging post between Algeria and

Libya for the trafficking of cannabis, narcotics and alcohol has had a magnetic effect, attracting new actors into this trade and encouraging smugglers to take even more risks to expand their businesses. Nevertheless, smugglers and traders are not the only actors profiting from the border rent. Both criminal actors involved in drug trafficking and jihadi groups looking to secure the crossing of fighters and arms have either tried to settle in the border region or have extended their field of action to include it.

In fact, the development of the border economy is closely linked not only to the political upheavals that have taken place in the region but also to the ways in which states have reacted to them. In 2011, the more Libya became bogged down in an armed conflict that divided its eastern and western regions, and the more isolated from the international community the Qaddafi regime grew, the more prosperous smugglers operating around Ras Jdir became, as this border crossing was Libya's last gateway to the outside world. The fact that the conflict focused on the Tunisian-Libyan border brought into play a sleight of hand in the border economy: traders operating around Ras Jdir supplied Qaddafi's forces, whereas at the Dehiba-Wazen crossing further south traders refuelled Libyan rebels. In this period the Government of Béji Caid Essebssi never discouraged such a division of labour as it effectively reflected Tunisia's ambivalence: officially, the country opted for neutrality vis-à-vis the Libyan infighting; unofficially, it acted as a support base for the Libyan rebellion and allowed the safe crossing of arms and logistical support.

In Ben Guerdane, the inhabitants called the system set up by smugglers which consisted in swapping foodstuffs subsidized by the Tunisian government for Libyan oil an 'oil-for-food programme.' In fact, the conflict ended up boosting Tunisia's food exports: mostly pasta, bottled mineral water and dairy products. At the beginning of summer 2011 after the rebels' takeover of the oil refineries and Libyan oil became scarce, Ras Jdir traffickers stepped in to supply Libya with oil from Tunisia, but mostly from Algeria, where the subsidized

2   Hamza Meddeb, "Rente frontalière et injustice sociale en Tunisie", *in* Irene Bono, Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb et Mohamed Tozy, *L'Etat d'injustice au Maghreb. Maroc et Tunisie*, Paris, Karthala, 2015.

price was infinitely cheaper than in Tunisia. Realizing the advantage to be derived from this situation, the Tunisian authorities, proving that they held sway over the border region, lifted the restriction that had previously limited Tunisian drivers refuelling in Algerian border petrol stations to a single tankful per car. In reality, traffickers had always easily bypassed these restrictions by paying bribes to gain the connivance of Algerian state officials, who themselves were fully aware of the final destination of the trafficked goods, while the Algerian authorities, unwavering supporters of the Qaddafi regime during the war, turned a blind eye. Smugglers from the Gafsa region played the most prominent role in the development of this new transnational supply chain by selling Algerian oil to Medenine- and Ben Guerdane-based traffickers, who in turn sold it back beyond the border.

Afterwards, Qaddafi's downfall plunged the border region into chaos. For some of the rebels, the traffickers from Ben Guerdane were 'Qaddafi's offspring,' who never failed to support and provide for him. Consequently, a few Tunisian smugglers and traders known for their connections with Qaddafi's troops refrained from crossing the border, giving free rein to their competitors. By 2012, the lure of money to be gained from border rent had attracted plenty of armed men who carried out all sorts of trafficking and racketeering. The ensuing clashes and the spread of violence and gunfights frequently led to the temporary closure of the Ras Jdir border crossing. Although the border arrangements collapsed in parallel with Qaddafi's downfall, the trafficking and the informal economy never stopped, but nevertheless remained extremely vulnerable to political change. Non-state actors such as tribes, militias and smuggling networks sought to adapt to the void created by the state authorities relaxing their hold.

THE NEW POLITICS OF BORDER CONTROL

In the wake of Qaddafi's downfall, the Libyan state lost control over entire regions to armed militias. In a way, the Tunisian Libyan border region is like an "area of limited statehood"[3] where non-state actors challenge and compromise state sovereignty. This dynamic has been progressively fuelled since 2011 by the politicization and the militarization of tribal and regional identities, which have induced a "militiafication of Libyan society."[4] The transitional process in Libya implemented after the fall of Qaddafi failed to contain or incorporate these local forces into a democratic future and this in turn accentuated the fragmentation of the country, especially after 2014 as the country entered a downward spiral of violence exacerbated by the implantation of the Islamic State organisation in the region of Sirte and in the city of Sabrata, close to the Tunisian border.[5] By setting up a camp in Sabrata, the jihadi group tried to take advantage of the security vacuum and attract Tunisian jihadists seeking to flee the country, especially after the crackdown on Ansar al-Sharia, a Tunisian Salafi jihadi group labelled a terrorist organization by the Ennahda-led government in August 2013.

Since 2011, non-state actors on the Tunisian side of the border have been seeking to adapt to the new political context. To cope with the uncertainty and instability generated by the frequent closures of the border crossings, Ben Guerdane traders have created an organization to protect their economic interests: the Tunisian-Libyan Fraternal Association (*Association de la fraternité tuniso-libyenne*). This association negotiated the re-establishment of the former border arrangements and played the role of mediator with the Tunisian authorities to keep the border open and ensure

3 Thomas Risse (ed.), *Governance without a State? Policies and Politics in areas of limited Statehood*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

4 Roland Marchal and Christine Messiant, *Les chemins de la guerre et de la paix. Fin de conflit en Afrique australe et orientale*, Paris, Karthala, 1997.

5 Wolfram Lacher, "The Libyan revolution and the rise of local powers centres", Mediterranean Politics, 2012, pp.167-140.

the fluid circulation of goods. During the phases of insecurity and border closure that became frequent in 2014, the association played an important role in liberating Tunisian traders arrested or kidnapped in Libya, negotiating their release with Libyan militias and the restitution of their goods and money. These mediating practices imply a capacity to rally support from across the lines: from bureaucrats, elites in charge of security, tribal leaders, and heads of militias in Libya.

Acknowledging this crucial role played by non-state actors helps us shed new light on the reign of insecurity that has extended over the Tunisian-Libyan border since 2011 in spite of the efforts of the Tunisian and Libyan central authorities. Between 2011 and 2013, the Tunisian and Libyan authorities – represented respectively by the Ennahda-led government in Tunis and Libya's successive transitional governments, and then the government formed by the elected General National Council (GNC) – both tried to consolidate their security cooperation by exchanging information, ensuring the opening of the border crossings and the free flow of goods and people across the border. In fact, on the Tunisian side, the lack of security resulted essentially from an autonomisation of the security forces and the disintegration of their hold over society, which manifested itself in a retreat of the security apparatus during 2011 and 2012.

On the Libyan side, the new authorities in Tripoli had little influence over the armed groups. Their failure to gain control over the borders and to regulate the competition over access to the border resources exacerbated the conflicts between armed groups and made a recourse to arms inescapable. Many militias feared that their control over the trans-border traffic or merely access to the border resources might be lost and did everything they could to prevent this happening. As the political and military conflicts have intensified since the fall of Qaddafi, the objective for all the communities in the region is to make sure that they have access to at least one channel to the outside world. The Zuwara militiamen operating around the border crossing of Ras Jdir, in particular, and the Zintan militias operating further south have been key actors in this struggle.

Before 2011, the Border Guards were in charge of the Libyan-Tunisian border. Qaddafi mostly used men from the Si'an and Nwa'il communities along the border. After the revolution, control over the Dehiba-Wazzin border crossing passed into the hands of the Nalut military council. In an attempt to counter the domination of the Amazigh over all the border crossings between Tunisia and Libya, the Zintan militias tried to obtain the opening of a new additional border crossing, *Mashhad Salah*. Zintan also attempted to use the Si'an – who own the lands located along the border across the Hamada Desert – in a way very similar to Qaddafi. Convinced that initiating an open conflict with Nalut was not in their interest, the Zintan militias avoided becoming directly involved in tensions or clashes with Nalut groups and preferred to support the Si'an.

THE BORDER IN A WAR ECONOMY: MILITARIZATION, REPRESSION AND CORRUPTION

Controlling and participating in the rent is all the more important than the border represents a major resource feeding the war economy. Armed groups rely on the revenue generated by this economy to finance their activities and pay their members, and therefore to further reinforce their military capacities and expand their political clout. Overall, the economy has also been subject to significant transformations triggered by local forces during wartime, as shown by post-2011 developments in the western coastal city of Zuwara (around 70 kilometres from the Tunisian border and Tripoli). There, the local council (*al majlis al mahali*) has demonstrated its interest in consolidating its income and in gaining autonomy. With this aim, it has tried to control the cross-border trade with Tunisia by investing in the construction of an airport and port facilities. These efforts result from a multitude of rationales: following an economic rationale, local businessmen have promoted the city as an import-export platform able to compete with the chaos-ridden capital Tripoli or with the allied city of Misrata; a military rationale relies on

the consolidation of the cross-border economy to provide for militias; and finally a political rationale induces the city to become more prominent within the Dawn Libya coalition and during the negotiations with the warring Libyan parties. The example set by Zuwara has repeated itself in Misrata and other Libyan cities and regions, demonstrating that the order that will emerge from chaos will be the result of fierce competition and perpetual attempts by the non-state actors to strengthen their positions on the ground.

In Tunisia, the security situation strongly deteriorated with the multiplication of terrorist attacks in 2015, driving the government to put border security systems into place to limit the risks of infiltration by jihadi groups. In the wake of the Sousse attack in June 2015, the head of the Nidaa Tounes-led Government, Habib Essid, announced that a double sand ditch would be dug along the 200km-long Tunisian-Libyan border, but this announcement was made after the work had already begun in April 2015. This attempt to turn Tunisia into a fortress illustrates the authorities' inability to cope in a highly unstable regional environment, abandoned to the incursive operations of armed non-state actors. As for relationships with Libya, both the foreign policies regarding Libya of the 2014 government of technocrats and Habib Essid's early 2015 government appeared guided by a common dislike of the Libya Dawn (*Fajr Libia*) coalition and by a vision of Tunisia as a "citadel under siege."[6] The ban on Libyan flights, the tightening of border control, and the arrest of Libya Dawn leaders, while confirming that Tunisia has abandoned its neutrality vis-à-vis the Libyan conflict, have inflamed relationships with its neighbour.

Furthermore, the closure of the Ras Jdir and Dehiba-Wazen border crossings by the Tunisian authorities in February 2016 triggered massive protests that reached a climax on 10 February when the Tatatouine Governorate and the City of Ben Guerdane organized a day of general strike. A crackdown on protests is keeping the pressure on the border high, and it has now been placed

under military control. However, in the absence of concrete measures to tackle the regulatory and economic discrepancies that exist on both sides of the border, its militarisation is proving unsuccessful at stopping traffic. On the contrary, state agent corruption is getting worse, which in turn undermines governmental control, increases the porosity of the borders, and finally fails to restore the only arrangements that can keep state violence in check.

Through the militarisation of the border, the Tunisian army has now entered the stage. While it was sent to regulate illicit economic flows, following the current example of the various state services this is most likely to result in its taking hold of part of the border rent through bribes. The failure of the army, the National Guard and the police to organize common patrols is partially explained by the fact that too much surveillance could curtail these practices. As a result, each body is organizing its patrols independently of the others. A spread of uncertainty is following this democratization of corruption: paying bribes no longer guarantees a border crossing and payments are required at each and every stop. Corruption is so widespread and sought after that it resembles what Frank Gunter calls "entrepreneurial corruption."[7] Some of the smugglers carrying gold, spirits or large sums of money are resorting to hiring a 'joker' – a state agent who sits next to the driver as a cash escort to secure the way.

This undiscriminating repression and the corruption that it generates are likely to fuel the discontent of the people living in the border region, a situation that jihadi groups have already sought to exploit in order to recruit and strengthen their troops. During the month of July 2015, around thirty 'youths' from Remada left the border region to join the Islamic State in Libya (ISL). On March 7 2016, ISL launched a major attack to take hold of the Tunisian border city of Ben Guerdane, and did so by attempting to set the local population against the state authorities. Radical Islam has provided a grammar for the revolt of the disenfranchised

6   Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le Syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali,* Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003.

7   Franck Gunter, *Political Economy of Iraq. Restoring Balance in a Post-Conflict Society*, Cheltenham Glos., Edward Elgar Publications, 2013.

in Tunisia.[8] They feed the jihadist threat and set the state services up for a form of "border game,"[9] which, instead of containing it, keeps the threat alive while at the same time strengthening the state services in charge of fighting it.

CONCLUSION

The insecurity in the Tunisian-Libyan border region needs to be addressed by folding the security component into a political strategy. On the Tunisian side, the situation in the border region is the result of a long period of central authority neglect. The inhabitants' discourse on the 'absence of the state' in a highly militarized region reflects a popular demand for a non-security presence of the state: improved infrastructure, health, education and basic services, economic opportunities and a development strategy that takes into consideration the historical and geographical ties that connect this region to western Libya. In this respect, a free trade zone could help the organisation of the informal cross-border trade and empower the population. Instead of isolating Tunisia's south-eastern region, it is important to regulate and coordinate regional integration with the Libyan Government of National Accord when it comes into function in Tripoli.

On the Libyan side, developments in the border region illustrate the extent to which local alliances and conflicts are not mainly, or not only, driven by national political cleavages. Local strategies related to control of the border rent indeed played an important role in their shaping and need to be taken into account by the political actors at the central level. The Government of National Accord led by Fayez al-Sarraj, in particular, should be aware of this fact in his endeavour to establish new and sustainable power arrangements.

The new central authorities in Tripoli therefore need to coordinate their efforts with the international community in order to foster a decentralized mode of government that would allow state-building and would gain legitimacy in the eyes of the local forces. Addressing the issues of disarmament and demobilisation of the armed groups should include paying attention to the economic challenges related to both dynamics – the war economy and the transformation of the peacetime economy in wartime – in order to successfully rebuild the security apparatus and the Libyan army.

8   Georges Fahmi and Hamza Meddeb, "Market for Jihad. Radicalization in Tunisia", Carnegie Paper, October 2015.

9   Peter Andreas, *Border Games. Policing the US-Mexico Divide*, Ithaca, Cornell University, 2001.

JIHADISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUTH CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY: THE CASE OF ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN LIBYA

MARY FITZGERALD

Ansar al-Sharia, the largest jihadist group to emerge in Libya after the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, quickly developed a presence in several cities and towns across the country. Its biggest branch in terms of membership was in Benghazi, the focus of this paper. While Ansar al-Sharia began as an armed group with its ranks comprising mostly young men who had fought in the various revolutionary brigades that sprang up during the uprising against Gaddafi, its strong focus on charitable and dawa (preaching) activities helped it develop a wider support base that cut across the socio-economic spectrum.

In many respects, Ansar al-Sharia presented a generational challenge to older jihadists (or those of a former jihadist background) who had come of age in the 1980s and 1990s. Its modus operandi – being at once an armed group but also a wider movement with social programmes designed to win hearts and minds – was different because the environment in which it operated between 2012 and May 2014 was different. Under the Gaddafi regime, Islamists of all shades were severely repressed and their activities driven underground, whereas the period after his ousting allowed for a flourishing of such currents. By drawing on interviews with members of Ansar al-Sharia and their family and social circles during field work in Benghazi between 2012 and May 2014 (when Khalifa Haftar launched his Operation Dignity against Ansar al-Sharia and other armed groups), this chapter will explore how and why the group became a social phenomenon.

A GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

In order to situate Ansar al-Sharia within the spectrum of jihadism in Libya, it is necessary to examine the three successive generations of jihadists that emerged there from the 1980s and the cleavages between them. All three were shaped by sharply different experiences both inside and outside of Libya and this tended to colour the very different ways they responded to the new political and social landscape created by Gaddafi's dislodging. The older generation comprises those born in the 1960s and early 1970s whose first experience of armed jihad was against Soviet-backed forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. Libyan veterans of the Afghan jihad created a number of groups, of which the largest was the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libiya), which operated in secret for a number of years before declaring its existence in 1995. Following several attempts to assassinate Gaddafi in that decade, the LIFG and other affiliated groups were subjected to a ruthless crackdown by the regime. LIFG redoubts in the Green Mountains area of eastern Libya, particularly around Derna, were bombed, and thousands were rounded up and jailed. That routing, along with the bitter experiences many LIFG members had in Algeria and Afghanistan in the 1990s, was instrumental in the decision by the LIFG leadership – most of whom were in prison by then – to rethink their strategy, a move that eventually resulted in their highly publicised disavowal of armed struggle in 2009. Two years later, however, the former LIFG leadership and cadres, many of whom had been released in 2010, were quick to join the uprising. Several former LIFG figures, including its last leader Abdelhakim Belhaj, played key roles in the revolution and went on to embrace the country's post-Gaddafi democratic transition, forming political parties and running in elections. This did not sit well with the second and third generations of jihadists, who gravitated towards more radical currents and rejected democracy as un-Islamic.

The older LIFG members had disagreed with the second generation of jihadists in discussions that had taken place in the cells of Abu Salim, the Tripoli prison where 1,200 dissidents, most of them Islamists, were killed by regime forces in 1996. It was in Abu Salim that the LIFG leadership drafted its revision of armed struggle. Many of the second generation – and the generation that followed it – had been radicalised by seeing older members of their families, including fathers, uncles and cousins, rounded up, tortured, jailed or killed by the regime during the 1990s crackdown. Others were radicalised by their own experiences of incarceration – a substantial number were initially jailed in Abu Salim on flimsy premises, including having relatives accused of opposition activity; hundreds more were radicalised by the experience of fighting as part of the insurgency in Iraq that followed the US invasion in 2003. According to the so-called Sinjar records seized by US forces, Libyans comprised the second-largest group among the 700 foreign fighters who joined al-Qaeda's Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) between summer 2006 and 2007. More than half of these recruits gave their hometown as Derna, while almost a quarter originated from Benghazi. Many of those who had become steeped in the more radical ideology of ISI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were jailed by the regime on their return to Libya. A number were later freed as part of prisoner releases that followed the LIFG rehabilitation process in 2009 and the rest later broke out of Abu Salim and other jails when Tripoli fell to rebel forces in August 2011.

While Ansar al-Sharia's leadership tended to be drawn from this second generation, the majority of its rank and file were from the generation that came after it. These were youths who were in their teens and early twenties when the uprising against Gaddafi began in February 2011. Many quit school or university to flock to the frontline, where they engaged in combat for the first time, an experience that changed them in several ways, making some more devout and later more radical. While Ansar al-Sharia's largest branch was in Benghazi, two other smaller branches later emerged in Derna

and Ajdabiya, another eastern town historically known for its militant currents. What all three places shared was a history of jihadism and the fact many local youths fought in the eastern frontline in 2011.

Very few of the revolutionary brigades that formed during the uprising were exclusively Islamist, let alone radical, but after the fall of Gaddafi more ideological elements began organising themselves into new groups and among these was what would become known as Ansar al-Sharia. Long before Ansar al-Sharia declared itself in summer 2012, senior figures from the former LIFG, including its main ideologue Sami al-Saadi, were privately expressing concern about the agenda of individuals such as Mohammed al-Zahawi, later the leader of Ansar al-Sharia, whom they knew from their prison days together.[1]

THE BIRTH AND EVOLUTION OF ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN BENGHAZI

In early 2012, radical elements in Benghazi's main revolutionary brigades split away to establish Ansar al-Sharia. Its leader, Mohammed al-Zahawi, claimed that the other brigades were insufficiently committed to pushing for the immediate implementation of sharia law.[2] That criticism notwithstanding, the group made its first public appearance alongside a number of other armed groups during a parade held in central Benghazi weeks before Libya's first post-Gaddafi elections later that June. While all the participants in the parade called for the introduction of sharia, some like Ansar al-Sharia also denounced democracy as heresy, an argument echoed by Zahawi in a TV appearance just before the polling day. Other Islamists in Benghazi who had embraced the democratic process, including some former Abu Salim inmates who were running for election themselves, tried to quietly remonstrate with Zahawi's circle. They managed to persuade

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1 Interviews with the author in Tripoli and Benghazi, February 2012.

2 Interview with the author, September 2012.

Ansar al-Sharia to, if not support the elections, at least agree to not physically disrupt them. They also succeeded in peeling away some younger members in the run-up to the ballot.[3] These efforts would continue over the next two years but never reached a critical mass, with Ansar al-Sharia's appeal proving stronger in the majority of cases than attempts by communities or even families to dissuade youths from becoming involved.

The fallout from the attack on the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi in September 2012 marked a turning point for Ansar al-Sharia. Its leadership denied involvement as a group but acknowledged that individual members may have taken part in the assault, which resulted in the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three compatriots.[4] Mass protests took place in Benghazi and Ansar al-Sharia's base was stormed. Partly as a result of pressure from interlocutors and partly as a way of gaining a stronger social foothold, the group began downplaying its armed component and instead tried to highlight its charitable work. It was encouraged to do so by local mediators, including mainstream Islamists, some of whom were parliamentarians in the General National Congress who believed that by finding a social space for Ansar al-Sharia and the young men drawn to its ideology the organisation could be managed and its armed wing eventually disbanded.

These older Islamists, several of whom were drawn from the first generation of jihadists, often spoke disparagingly of the Ansar al-Sharia rank and file as young 'hot-heads' unschooled in the nuances of theology. "We ask them what they want and they struggle to articulate it," complained one mediator, a sheikh who had spent decades in Abu Salim and ran for election in 2012. "All they know, or think they know, is that they are right, and we are wrong. They display a real arrogance of youth and it is worse because they are armed."[5]

Another mediator from Salmani, a disadvantaged Benghazi neighbourhood where many youths joined Ansar al-Sharia, was accused of Sufi leanings by young radicals, although he described himself as mainstream Salafist. Salmani residents regularly approached this mediator for help, asking him to persuade their sons away from Ansar al-Sharia, but his attempts at doing so brought him death threats. "These youths throw around words they have little understanding of," he said. "It is as though they are rebelling against everything, including their families."[6]

While Zahawi came from a modest background – he worked in an electronics store after his release from prison – the rest of Ansar al-Sharia spanned a broad socio-economic spectrum. Among them were former members of the Libyan military – one of whom served on the group's shura council – along with doctors, engineers, teachers and construction workers. Its spokesman at the time of the US diplomatic mission attack was an English-speaking teacher who had worked at one of Benghazi's private international schools which catered for the city's elite. While many of Ansar al-Sharia's rank and file came from Benghazi's poorer districts like Salmani and Laithi, where there was a long history of jihadist activity, others were the scions of middle class families. Some had 'found God' after overcoming troubled pasts that often included alcohol or drug abuse, the latter being a particularly acute social problem in Benghazi. Others were promising high school or university students. A number of these were 'weekend warriors' in that they volunteered to man checkpoints or do charitable work on their days off. Others quit school or university to devote themselves entirely to the organisation. Relatives of such young men tended to frame the appeal of Ansar al-Sharia as "giving them a stronger sense of identity through being part of something bigger than themselves."[7]

Many were recruited at neighbourhood mosques; if a young man was observed to be particularly pious, he would be approached by Ansar al-Sharia recruiters, very often of a similar age, and gradually drawn into their circle. A significant

3   Interviews with the author, Benghazi, June/July 2012.

4   Interview with the author, September 2012.

5   Interviews with the author, Benghazi 2012-2014.

6   Interview with the author, Benghazi 2014.

7   Interviews with the author, Benghazi 2014.

number of the group's foot soldiers were young men who had bonded with each other through the shared experience of fighting in the frontline and seeing friends die during the 2011 uprising.

The father of one recruit, a university student whose sisters studied medicine and architecture, described the diversity he encountered at one of Ansar al-Sharia's public events: "I wanted to know what my son was getting involved with. I didn't expect such a large crowd and I didn't expect to see people from so many different walks of life. There were people from all levels of society. What was striking was the sense of fraternity among them, though I told the leaders I met that while they appeared to be doing some good work I could not shake the sense of a dark cloud when it came to their ideology."[8]

HEARTS AND MINDS

Before summer 2014, when Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive against Ansar al-Sharia and other militias in Benghazi, the group had up to 300 men under arms in the city, along with a broader support base that ran into thousands. Key to building the latter was the outreach strategy Ansar al-Sharia adopted from late 2012. Its leaders saw this campaign, with its strong focus on charitable work and social services, as a crucial foundation stone for developing a society based on its definition of Islamic principles and leading to an eventual Islamic state overseen by its interpretation of sharia. The opening of public space in the wake of the overthrow of Gaddafi presented opportunities in this sense that had not been available to previous generations of jihadists, whose main focus, as a result, was armed struggle against the regime.

One of Ansar al-Sharia's most successful initiatives in Benghazi was its anti-drugs campaign. Tapping into concerns over the rise in drug consumption after Gaddafi – cities like Benghazi became flooded with illicit drugs as trafficking grew – the group launched a public awareness drive, with a strong focus on schools and universities. It also opened a medical clinic, an Islamic centre for women, and a religious school named Mirkaz al-Imam al-Bukhari Li-l-'Ulum al-Sharia. It organised food distribution for the needy (particularly on religious holidays, including Eid), arranged collections of household and other waste and held Quranic recitation contests and sports events for children.

Ansar al-Sharia's anti-drugs drive, which employed a slickly produced advertising campaign, gained the endorsement of several local entities including a rehabilitation clinic, a telecommunications firm and al-Ahli, the city's leading football club. Ansar al-Sharia also managed to get support from the Benghazi Central Blood Centre to launch blood drives and its road cleaning programme was carried out in cooperation with the city council. This buy-in by local partners was key to the group's sense of self as an important player in Benghazi. While local mediators eager to undermine Ansar al-Sharia's armed wing encouraged such collaboration, believing it would eventually result in the group becoming a relatively harmless part of civil society, its armed component remained the raison d'être for a large number – if not the majority – of its members and supporters.

Ansar al-Sharia also provided security at the al-Jala' hospital. This facility, which housed the only trauma unit in Benghazi, had been subjected to numerous attacks by militia and criminal elements since 2011. While acknowledging they disagreed with Ansar al-Sharia's ideology, the staff there praised its members for being more disciplined and reliable than other armed groups that had previously been tasked to guard the hospital.[9] On a number of occasions, rival groups drove Ansar al-Sharia from the hospital only for the staff to insist they return.

Ansar al-Sharia's local outreach activities as outlined above, as well as the humanitarian work its members undertook in Syria, Sudan and Gaza, were documented extensively on its social media network, which included active Facebook pages

8   Interview with the author, Benghazi 2014.

9   Interviews with the author, Benghazi, 2014.

and Twitter accounts. Its al-Raya media wing also produced high quality videos of its charitable programmes, as well as its armed drills and parades. In addition to understanding the power of social media when it came to reaching a younger audience, the group also clearly understood the importance of branding: its logo of an open Quran flanked by crossed Kalashnikovs was emblazoned not just across its social media and printed publications, but also on T-shirts, hats and other paraphernalia distributed at its public events.

CONCLUSIONS: THE IMPACT OF KHALIFA HAFTAR'S OPERATION DIGNITY

The public support Khalifa Haftar gathered in Benghazi for his unilateral offensive against armed groups, including Ansar al-Sharia, in May 2014 was due to mounting frustrations over deteriorating security. In particular, a series of assassinations of not only former regime security personnel but also civil society activists, judges and journalists had caused much anger, with many believing Ansar al-Sharia was responsible. In January 2014, the US State Department had designated Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi a terrorist organisation, which put further pressure on the group, as did the capture of one of its associates, Ahmed Abukhattalah, by US special forces that June.

The debate over how to deal with Ansar al-Sharia – or at least how to rein in its armed wing – had divided locals. Some believed dialogue was the answer: "they are sons of Benghazi and should be dealt with as such" was a frequent refrain. There were a number of attempts at mediation between the leaders of Ansar al-Sharia and military commander Wanis Bukhamada, whose Saiqa special forces clashed several times with Ansar al-Sharia fighters in the city.

With hindsight, some of those who advocated a policy of dialogue alone acknowledge they were naive regarding the intentions of the group's hardliners. Other observers, including former jihadists of the first generation, particularly LIFG

members, believed that as many as possible of the less ideologically driven should be peeled away through dialogue before the 'irreconcilables' were dealt with by force. In their view, Haftar radicalised a far larger cohort by declaring war on a wide range of armed groups.

Those who rallied in favour of Haftar, among them former jihadists of the first generation who had fallen out with their erstwhile associates in the LIFG, believed a 'force-only' approach was necessary. In fact, Haftar's actions initially served to swell the ranks of Ansar al-Sharia, transformed it back into a purely fighting group, and resulted in other less ideological Benghazi militias uniting with it in self-defence.

Almost two years on from the launch of Operation Dignity, fighting continues in Benghazi and Ansar al-Sharia's original leadership has been decapitated. With the group in disarray, a significant number of its rank and file – particularly those who were initially drawn to its swagger and perceived influence – have joined Islamic State's affiliate in the city for similar reasons.

The evolution of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi from an armed group to a wider social movement and back again offers lessons on the historical and social roots of extremism in Libya and how it may be addressed in the future. While Haftar claims to be eradicating extremism from eastern Libya, his tactics of violence and repression, much of it arbitrary – which echo those used by Gaddafi in the 1990s – show all the signs of sowing the seeds for another generation of radicalised youth seeking revenge.

THE ISLAMIC STATE IN LIBYA: STRATEGY AND REALITY ON THE GROUND

SEIF EDDIN TRABELSI AND
VIRGINIE COLLOMBIER[1]

From a country of either origin or transit for Libyan or foreign fighters wishing to join the forces hostile to Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria, Libya itself became a land of jihad and a target for the organisation of the Islamic State (IS) from the end of 2013. Taking advantage of the political and security vacuum prevailing in the country, IS succeeded in taking root and spreading its influence in various towns along the coastal strip. In 2015, the organisation was at least present – more or less visibly and with varying capacities and degrees of influence according to the locality – in Derna, Benghazi, Sirte and Sabratha. It was also able to conduct operations in Tripoli and Misrata.

As analysis of its installation and development specifically in Derna initially and then in Sirte after its defeat in Derna shows, IS did not have a comprehensive project for Libya. On the contrary, it was forced to adjust its strategy and its actions to the local situation and the characteristics of the towns that it identified as potentially suitable for its development.   Interaction with local actors, but also the interests and strategies of the principal political and military forces at the national level, thus considerably influenced the capacity of IS to assert itself and spread its control.

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1   This contribution is based essentially on groundwork conducted by Seif Eddin Trabelsi in Libya and on meetings he held with Libyan actors in direct or indirect contact with the Islamic State Organisation (IS). He also draws on an analysis of different IS communication supports, press releases and information published by the Rada' Special Deterrence Forces (a brigade in Tripoli attached to the Ministry of the Interior) and the Libyan security services. The reflections and the drafting are the result of the combined work of Seif Eddin Trabelsi and Virginie Collombier.

LIBYA AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR FIGHTERS HEADING TOWARDS SYRIA

To understand the birth of IS in Libya it is necessary to go back to 2011, in particular to the announcement of the end of military operations by the National Transition Council (NTC) in October. Among the many –mostly Islamist– prisoners who were then freed, at first several dozen and then several hundred made the choice to head towards Syria. There were in effect some similarities between the Libyan and Syrian situations (the repressive reaction of the two regimes to the popular uprising), so that for some Libyan revolutionaries the fight against the Syrian regime became a natural extension of the fight against the Qaddafi regime.

Those who chose to head for Syria had relatively varied profiles. The first to leave in 2011 were those who had joined a jihadi brigade (*katiba*) during the revolution and were willing to pursue the combat in Syria after Qaddafi's death. The majority, however, were not only motivated by religious conviction and the desire to join the jihad but equally by their solidarity with the Syrian people. Most of them went to join the Free Syrian Army (FSA) without the question of their religious or political inclinations playing a role in this affiliation.

The second wave of departures, in 2012, was different in that it contained some, essentially veterans from Afghanistan, who were considered 'leaders' of the jihadi movement. They chose to join the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra or to found their own combat units, mainly comprising Libyans and foreign fighters. This was the case, for example, of the Omar Al-Moktar brigade and of the al-Umma brigade, both founded by Libyans. At a later stage, these combat units were to join Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This wave of departures also included a second generation of Libyan jihadis, younger, who had made the choice to leave Libya to fight in the war against the US Marines in Iraq in 2003. In addition, there were numerous 'Abu

Salim veterans' (referring to the infamous Abu Salim prison, considered to be one of the worst of the Qaddafi regime's detention centres) among those who decided to leave.

The Libyan fighters' decision to join one or another group in the Syrian rebellion was increasingly made according to which group would welcome them on their arrival. In 2013, a large majority of the Libyans fighting in Syria were divided between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS. Later, these fighters were assigned the task of establishing and developing in Libya the organisation that welcomed them in Syria, of which they would become the core group.

THE CHOICE OF LIBYA AS THE PLATFORM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF IS

Until 2013, Libyans wishing to go to Syria benefited from the support of local networks that helped them in their endeavour. Libya was also a transit point or a springboard for foreigners wanting to go and fight in Syria, particularly Tunisians. From the end of 2013/early 2014 the situation changed: Libya ceased to be a point of departure or a transit zone and became a destination. IS decided to make Libya one of its main settlements beyond the Syrian-Iraqi borders.

Libya had several advantages considered to be particularly propitious for the development of the organisation. The collapse of the Qaddafi regime created a political, institutional and security vacuum and no force was able to take control of a large part of the Libyan territory or of its borders. The war in 2011 also contributed to worsening or creating new fractures in Libyan society, in particular between the February 17th revolutionaries and the followers of the former regime, but also between tribes, towns and communities, or again between the west, east and south of the country. Political divisions and the struggle for power and resources among groups and communities were sometimes grafted onto ethnic differences, such as, for example, that between the Tuaregs, Toubous and Arab tribes in the south, which in some cases led to violent clashes.

IS also sought to take advantage of Libya's geographical location to use it as a forward base in North Africa and a platform from which the organisation could envisage its expansion towards other territories. Thus, Libya provided a fulcrum for development towards the south, particularly towards other rising jihadi organisations such as Boko Haram. The presence of IS in Libya also enabled it to contemplate developing towards the north and establishing a network that would enable it to come closer to Europe and take the fight there. This was a destabilisation strategy aiming to divide the military and security efforts of Western countries by multiplying the fronts. Later on, by acting thus, IS also sought to detract attention from, and if possible to diminish the international coalition's military pressure on, Raqqa, the Syrian capital of the Caliphate.

In addition, Libya is a rich country. Its energy resources (oil and gas) make it especially attractive to an organisation in search of funding sources. The resources available are also linked with the presence of large quantities of arms abandoned by the Qaddafi regime or imported during the revolution.

From mid-2014 and former General Khalifa Haftar's triggering of military operation 'Dignity' (Karama) in Benghazi, Libya provided the organisation with a new war front. At first, the IS jihadis returned to Derna.

THE CHOICE OF DERNA AND THE FIRST OBSTACLES TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IS IN LIBYA

IS chose to concentrate on and invest in Derna, a city with 160,000 inhabitants close to the frontier with Egypt and known as one of the bastions of Islamist opposition to Qaddafi in the 1990s.[2]

2   From the 1990s, armed opposition to the Qaddafi regime was essentially led by Islamist groups who often found refuge in the east of the country, which was less loyal to the regime. The city of Derna became a particular focus point for this opposition, due to its environment and a terrain suitable for developing a maquis. The opponents of Qaddafi's regime were far more numerous in the east than in the west, and this gave the jihadi groups their most important recruitment base in this region. See Isabelle Mandraud, *Du Djihad aux Urnes. Le Parcours Singulier d'Abdelhakim Belhadj*, Paris, Stock, 2013.

IS hoped to take advantage of a suitable local site and the geographical proximity of Egypt to attract and profit from the radicalisation of the Islamists who were victims of the repression after General Sissi's coup in July 2013.

Like in the majority of the towns in Libya after 2011, local governance in Derna was essentially provided by two institutions: a municipal council in charge of services for the population and a military council formed of the town's principal brigades in charge of providing security. In Derna, the military council was the Consultative Committee of the Derna Mujahidin (*Majlis Shura Mujahidin Darna*) and was formed of three brigades: the Abu Salim Martyrs brigade (of Islamist tendency, the most important and the best armed), the Salah Eddin brigade and the Derna Revolutionaries' brigade.

On their arrival in Derna, the jihadis returning from Syria founded the Islamic youth consultative committee (IYCC, *Majlis Shura Shabab Al Islam*),[3] a structure whose activities were concentrated at first in the social domain.[4] In a city that had been totally abandoned by the state, their reception by the inhabitants was somewhat positive. From October 2014, the IYCC swore allegiance to IS, which aroused opposition from the Abu Salim Martyrs brigade.

Although it rejected IS control over the city, the Abu Salim Martyrs brigade nonetheless hesitated at first to enter into a direct confrontation with the IYCC. Then, Khalifa Haftar initiated the military operation 'Dignity' in Benghazi, which indistinctly targeted jihadi groups, Islamist brigades and revolutionary groups. The city of Derna was directly attacked by the operation in the form of air raids against the Abu Salim Martyrs brigade's positions and a siege of the city by Haftar's forces after various failed attempts on the part of the latter to advance. In this context, the Abu Salim Martyrs brigade chose not to open a new front within the city by directly opposing IS. This was

to better fight against Haftar, but also because it encountered a problem of arms and munitions owing to the siege of the city.[5]

Only in June 2015 following the assassination by an IS member of Nasser Al Akr, a council member, did the confrontation between the Mujahidin council of Derna and IS really explode. The population sided massively with the Abu Salim Martyrs brigade against IS, and a large number of civilians undertook to fight alongside the brigade. IS was forced out of the city at the end of a week of fighting and withdrew to the region of al-Fatayeh in the surroundings of the city. After enduring its first defeat in Libya, the organisation focused its strategy on the town of Sirte, believing that the local terrain would be more favourable. At the end of April 2016, when IS lost all its positions around Derna, the members of the organisation retreated to Sirte.

ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN SIRTE, A FOOTHOLD FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IS

Socially structured around the Qadhadhfa tribe, the city of Sirte had traditionally been one of the principal bastions of Qaddafi's regime, remaining faithful to him during the revolution and the 2011 war. The city then contained few opponents, with the exception of some dissidents organised in the Sirte Revolutionaries' brigade, for the most part jihadis. Many of these had fought in Afghanistan (the veterans) or in Iraq (the younger fighters). Most of them had been imprisoned in Abu Slim. Sirte was the last stronghold to fall into the rebels' hands. This happened in October 2011, during heavy fighting marked by bombardments that caused considerable damage.[6] After the end of the fighting, the vast majority of the revolutionary brigades chose to withdraw and refocus on Tripoli or Benghazi. Their presence on the ground in the country's largest cities (or in the area of the oil Crescent) was a decisive factor for groups wanting

3   http://www.newsabah.com/wp/newspaper/22166.

4   The IYCC mainly provides material aid for families in difficulty, medicines and care for the sick, gifts for religious occasions and school supplies.

5   http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2014/8/12/

6   http://elaph.com/Web/news/2011/10/690132.html.

to strengthen their influence and carry weight in the new political and security equation and gain new resources.

The retreat of the key revolutionary brigades after taking the city immediately posed the question of handling security. The responsibility for making the city safe and governing it after the end of the fighting was taken on by the Sirte Revolutionaries' brigade and other Jihadi brigades. Early in 2012, the majority of the members of the Sirte Revolutionaries' brigade pledged allegiance to Ansar al-Sharia. The activities of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte were not highly organised at first and did not have a clear plan or vision. These included keeping order and combating organised crime (especially drug trafficking), and social activities, which were particularly appreciated in a city that had been utterly destroyed by the war and abandoned by the new authorities in Tripoli. The city also became a destination for foreign jihadis, mainly Tunisians and Sudanese who arrived via the Ansar al-Sharia networks in Tunisia. The followers of the organisation effectively left their country following the Tunisian government's decision in August 2013 to consider Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organisation.[7]

In the jihadi field, in 2012 and 2013 Ansar al-Sharia's military action in Sirte was apparently limited to training and sending fighters to Syria and to supporting jihadi groups in the north of Mali by supplying them with weapons. The declaration of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in June 2014 marked a break. Initially, most of the Ansar al-Sharia leaders had reservations about IS, especially because of the relations between the organisation and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria (in particular the transport of fighters from Libya to Syria). However, there was a change with the arrival in Sirte of Turki al-Binali, originally from Bahrein and a member of the IS central Shura council. His arrival[8] was part of the organisation's strategy of moving into the city by sending leaders who were often charismatic and good speakers so that with their activities they would gradually reverse the balance of power within Ansar al-Sharia in favour of the group of IS partisans. Al-Binali and other IS leaders sought to recruit supporters in the city and they welcomed and organised jihadis arriving from abroad. Thus, new pro-IS leaders emerged within Ansar al-Sharia, while the old pro-Jabhat al-Nusra leaders were gradually forced into a minority and became isolated. Ansar al-Sharia then split between those taking sides with IS and al-Baghdadi and those who chose to remain in line with Al Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra. The division took place without clashes and the two groups co-exist.

IS undertook to communicate its presence in Sirte and decided to do so through terror. In February 2015, the organisation made its first public appearance, publishing a video of the throat-slitting of 21 Egyptian Copts captured three months earlier. The organisation's various communication channels now described Sirte as the capital of the province of Tripoli ('asimat wilayat trablus). Their strategy aimed to increase the ranks of its organisation there to strengthen it, while encouraging the dispersion of the international coalition's efforts against IS in Syria and Iraq and pushing for military action in Libya. For IS, the opening of a new front was perceived as a means of gaining more military and political power, fostering the arrival of new recruits, and legitimising a discourse based on confrontation between the Western and Muslim worlds.

This first media appearance of IS in Sirte was followed by its taking control of the city, through negotiation with its various social components, essentially the tribes, and by driving away from the city the Ansar al-Sharia minority that had refused to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The members of this group mostly joined Ansar al-Sharia in the city of Benghazi. Although IS had to deal with several attempts at resistance on the part of the local population, particularly the Ferjani tribe, these were repressed.

7   The confrontation with the Tunisian authorities had begun six months earlier.

8   In July 2014, according to testimonies gathered during interviews conducted by Seif Eddin Trabelsi.

THE SUCCESS OF IS IN SIRTE: ADAPTING TO LOCAL ACTORS AND TAKING ADVANTAGE OF RIVALRIES BETWEEN FACTIONS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

The choice made by IS to focus on establishing itself in Sirte was due to several factors that made the city a suitable terrain for the organisation and offered prospects for its future expansion. Sirte is a coastal city situated in what is known as the 'central region' of Libya, a particularly sensitive area because it lies between the ancient provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, in the immediate vicinity of the oil crescent. This proximity makes the city interesting: it provides a platform from which to take control of the oil fields and make a financial gain from them.[9] The location became even more decisive after 2014 and the de facto division of the country between competing political institutions: while Khalifa Haftar led Operation Dignity (*Karama*) in Benghazi and his Zintan allies threatened to launch an offensive against Tripoli, it was extremely difficult for the Libya Dawn coalition (*Fajr Libia*), ruled by the Misrata brigades, to mobilise troops against IS in Sirte without putting themselves in danger in the capital.

IS found the city of Sirte in ruins and permanently weakened militarily. The tribes defeated and disarmed in 2011 were no longer able to resist the organisation when it decided to conquer the city. On the contrary, scores or even hundreds of the members of the Warfallah and Qadhadhfa tribes chose to join IS. A proportion of them were dignitaries and security officials of the Qaddafi regime.

The strategy chosen by the jihadi groups in Sirte since 2011 enabled them to avoid clashing with the local population. In particular, the way in which they chose to treat the city's dignitaries and tribal chiefs, considered partisans of the old regime,

proved decisive. Ansar al-Sharia, like IS during the first phase of its control over the city, was sensitive to the tribes and local dignitaries and consulted them about how to manage the city.

Unlike what happened in most of the other Libyan cities, the jihadis used neither the great narrative of the revolution of 17th February nor its symbols, notably the new Libyan flag. They therefore adapted to the mind-set of the population of Sirte, which would rather "live under the black flag (of Ansar al-Sharia and IS) than under that of 17th February."[10] Ansar al-Sharia and then IS entered into a more religious debate, based on belonging not to the revolutionary camp or to the old regime but rather to the Ummah, the Islamic community. They also firmly insisted on the theme of repentance with regard to the followers of the old regime: an individual's political past was of little importance if they then repented of their past actions. Those who repented and swore allegiance to IS were considered full members of the group: they had access to weapons and benefited from immunity, whatever role they had played in the service of the old regime.

After 2011, in Sirte there were two types of affiliation with Ansar al-Sharia and then with IS: the younger members joined from religious conviction; the older ones joined to find refuge and a way of taking up arms again and then recover the status and social influence they had lost after the 2011 defeat. Some also had in mind to prepare their revenge against the neighbouring city of Misrata, symbol of the revolution.

The jihadi groups focused on keeping order in a city that had been left completely alone by the new central political institutions and left to the criminal militias that took over the city after the revolution. They also concentrated on activities with a social purpose, especially the provision of care and services. The reaction of the inhabitants of Sirte towards Ansar al-Sharia and then towards IS was one of indifference tinged with distrust. At the beginning, IS entered into dialogue and consultations with local leaders but then stopped

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9   After several failed attempts to gain control of the oil fields, IS changed its strategy and adopted the strategy of 'burnt oil', which consists of setting fire to the oil wells and depriving their adversaries of the revenue likely to flow out of them.

....
10 Interview conducted by Seif Eddin Trabelsi.

when they felt the balance of force was more favourable to them. Thereafter, the governance of the city became more authoritarian and repressive.

The increasingly strong coercion and repression of the population of Sirte had not yet led to an action of the kind and scope that would threaten IS's control over the city. The military weakness of the local actors (especially the leaders of the principal tribal groups) capable of organising the opposition largely explains this relative apathy. The IS strategy of not mobilising the repertoire of the 17th February revolution, as well as the virulence of their anti-Misrata and anti-Libya Dawn coalition statements moreover contributed to maintaining a degree of adhesion in a city still considered a stronghold of the followers of the Qaddafi regime.

Finally, IS has so far benefited from the political divisions and competition between the rival factions at the national level. Therefore, when in March 2015 the military council of Misrata undertook to move a large number of its troops towards Sirte to fight against IS, when the fighting had begun the forces of the city of Zintan allied with General Haftar used the threat of an attack on Tripoli. This caused the Misrata forces to return to the capital, the control of which was considered by the Misrata forces and the revolutionary forces in general to be far more important than the 'recovery' of Sirte.

As summer 2016 approaches, the situation could evolve, however. The growing nervousness of the western countries in the face of the lasting establishment and possible expansion of IS in Libya made regaining control of the city of Sirte a major challenge for the various Libyan parties, all anxious to prove their strength and assert their legitimacy on a national and international scale. A new 'battle of Sirte' is now expected. Despite IS being the target, it could end up in a confrontation between rival national forces – on the one side the forces allied to General Haftar and on the other the forces of Misrata now placed under the authority of the presidential council headed by Fa'ez Seraj – which could face the local actors in Sirte with the necessity of forging new alliances.

CONCLUSION

The various strategies implemented by IS in Libya after 2014 reveal that the organisation did not have a real agenda for the country. As the shifting of its centre of gravity from Derna to Sirte at the end of 2014 reveals, the organisation was on the contrary obliged to adapt its action plan to the situation on the ground and to the local logic and dynamics that it had to face.

Despite its presence in several cities, IS has already been defeated twice in Libya, in Derna and in Sabratha.[11] In both cases, the defeat was the result of action by local forces supported by the population, which firmly rejected the organisation's practices and ideology. The conclusion must be that the fight against IS cannot be fought without the direct participation, in the front line, of local forces which have already proved their ability to take successful action against the organisation.

Despite the temptation to intervene militarily on the part of several western countries, such action in Libya could prove counter-productive. It would in effect contribute to legitimising the IS theory of 'civilisational' and anti-Western confrontation and attract more foreign fighters. Moreover, it would put the local actors opposed to IS and the Government of National Accord derived from the Libyan Political Accord signed in Skhirat in December 2015 in great difficulty, highlighting their incapacity to take action in the face of a population with a majority hostile to any foreign intervention in Libya.

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11 In the city of Sabratha, used as a meeting point for Tunisian jihadis wanting to join the organisation in Libya or later to head for Syria, IS chose to use discretion. This choice is explained mainly by the fact that the military balance of power in and around the city was generally unfavourable to it. Sabratha is a city with a relatively strong military council and is close to the capital, like other militarily powerful cities such as Al Zawiya. In February 2016, a US raid on a house sheltering IS members killed more than 50 people and hastened the clash between the military council of Sabratha and the IS cells present in the city. In two days marked by violent street combat, the organisation's fighters were either killed or driven out of the city.

CONCLUSION
INSIDE WARS.
WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED WHEN LOOKING AT THE LOCAL DYNAMICS OF CONFLICTS IN SYRIA AND LIBYA?

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Although different in timing, scope and intensity, the Syrian and Libyan conflicts share common patterns and trajectories. In both cases, pro-reform civil protests which started in early 2011 rapidly gave way to bloody conflicts. As the regimes moved to repress these peaceful localized uprisings, protesters took up arms and were joined by army defectors. The growing intervention of regional and international powers has also contributed to the expansion of the armed conflicts.

Despite attempts at mediation and conflict resolution by the United Nations, the two conflicts have continued since 2011, with deep, destructive and lasting effects on the people and the infrastructure of the two countries. As is often the case in countries ravaged by civil wars, they have resulted in territorial, military and political fragmentation, radicalization of the groups and forces involved in the fighting, and major transformations in the economic, political and social spheres.

One major consequence has been the emergence and empowerment of new local actors. They have changed power arrangements and structures, and have put in motion new dynamics, consequently affecting the overall functioning of both the states and societies at different levels. For example, the various transformations have deeply changed the governance of territories, the relationship and balance of power between communities, regions and central authorities, the political economy of subnational entities and the way resources are distributed. These transformations need to be taken into account both in any analysis of the current situation and when looking at the future prospects for these countries.

This e-book has aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the various local dynamics and actors at work in Syria and Libya. The decision to address the local dynamics was based on our conviction that they play a determining role in shaping the overall evolution of the conflicts and cannot be neglected when reflecting on ways to overcome the crises, facilitate processes of conflict resolution and shape durable post-conflict settlements.

The eight articles in this e-book do not constitute a comparative study of the two conflicts. Instead, they try to open the way to more in-depth and systematic study of some of the themes which are common to both of them: the socio-political reality of communities, tribes, cities and villages; the challenges of inclusion and representation in mediation and conflict-resolution processes; the political economy of border areas and violent conflicts; the trajectories of Jihadist radicalization; the various dynamics of IS territorial penetration; and the modalities of intervention by regional and international actors and their effects on the local scene. In spite of the diversity of the topics covered by the different articles, the points below are worth stressing here.

1. THE EROSION OR COLLAPSE OF THE CENTRAL STATE AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FORMS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE.

As the conflicts in both Syria and Libya caused state institutions to withdraw or rendered them ineffective, new non-state actors, both civil and military (such as, for instance, local councils, elders and notables, charities and NGOs,

militias and armed groups), began to fill the political, institutional and security vacuums in neighbourhoods, villages, cities, communities and other local entities. This has led to the establishment of a multiplicity of new political 'orders,' at times overlapping, collaborating or competing.

In the case of Syria, the actors who have, to some extent at this stage, succeeded in anchoring their political projects to specific territories (the Islamic State and the Kurdish PYD) have ruled through exclusion, rejection of pluralism and monopolistic control of both the military and the administration. By contrast, the regions under the control of the various opposition factions have been characterized by multi-polarity, and marked by competing centres of military power and competition between both civil and military actors for power and resources.

In Libya, the governance structures (such as the local and military councils) established at the city level during the 2011 war to ensure the provision of security and basic services survived as attempts were made to create new central political authorities by means of elections in 2012 and 2014. In 2014, the incapacity of the new central political authorities to manage competition between rival groups and factions resulted in renewed military confrontation between local forces and national alliances. This led to a *de facto* institutional division between the west and the east of the country, accompanied by a resurgence of the local and community-based structures of governance and conflict resolution.

In both countries, the crucial role played by local forces must be acknowledged and taken better into account in the reconstruction of the institutional political and military orders. New representation and participation mechanisms need to be imagined to ensure the effective inclusion of consensual and influential local leaders in national political dialogues and mediation processes.

2. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY IMPLICATIONS OF CONFLICTS.

One of the reasons for the duration, violence and destructiveness of the Syrian and Libyan armed conflicts has been fierce competition for the control of resources. This struggle has caused fragmentation of the national economies, increased control by military forces over economic and financial flows, and the emergence or consolidation of new economic centres at the expense of pre-war ones, which have been either marginalized or destroyed.

The conflicts have caused a re-direction of trade and trafficking flows to serve the needs of war economies. This has contributed to fostering hidden integration between border regions and between frontline areas, and it is based on smuggling and trafficking of various kinds. As a result, new trans-national and sub-national economic spaces have emerged.

Financial and humanitarian support provided by regional and international powers to selected local partners has contributed to increasing the latter's dependency, and has also affected the balance of power between rival forces on the ground, even though the survival or disappearance of these actors has been demonstrated to be linked to other factors such as their organizational abilities.

New non-state actors profiting from these economic dynamics have gained autonomy from the central authorities, prominence at the local level and influence in shaping politics, both locally and nationally. The post-conflict reconstruction and development strategies will have to take fully into account the existence of these new networks and interdependencies which have contributed to reshaping the economic and political maps of Syria, Libya and the neighbouring regions.

3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION ON CONFLICT DYNAMICS.

In 2011, rapid and major foreign military intervention against Qaddafi in the Libyan case, and the absence of direct and significant support for the opposition when massive repression by the al-Assad regime started in Syria, dramatically affected early developments and the subsequent evolution of the two conflicts.

The involvement of external actors has played an unintended role in changing local dynamics. By providing political and material support (legitimacy, international recognition and resources) to selected military and non-military organizations, foreign actors have contributed to shaping new realities on the ground, favouring some local forces at the expense of others in a way that does not necessarily corresponded to their actual weights within the regions or communities they originated from. In some cases, their action has intensified the competition and increased the fragmentation, de-legitimation and corruption of the groups supported. Although sectarian, ethnic or tribal divisions and rivalries pre-existed in Syria and Libya, foreign intervention (including humanitarian aid) has often exacerbated them, as the competition for the control of territories and resources, military confrontation and forced displacements have deepened the cleavages between communities.

Similarly, the focus now put by foreign actors on the fight against the Islamic State is having major consequences for the local dynamics in Syria and Libya. Actual or claimed participation in this fight has become a major legitimizing tool for local actors, who have engaged in fierce competition for foreign support and recognition. Sometimes this support has been used more in the political and military struggle with their rivals than against IS. Although foreign powers have engaged in or threatened direct military intervention against IS, experience has shown that the fight against the jihadist organization is more successful when the various local forces see a common political

interest in allying against it (and when they have the military capacity to do so). Local political dynamics – especially the incentives to local forces to ally against IS or tolerate or use it in the competition for power – are therefore key issues to be taken into consideration in shaping an efficient strategy against IS.

This e-book did not have the ambition to reach definite conclusions on the new forms of local governance in Syria and Libya, the political economy of armed conflicts or the interplay between foreign interventions and local dynamics. Instead, in the observations summarized here we have highlighted just a few key trends and directions that seem to emerge from an initial focus on local actors and dynamics in these two conflicts. They now require much deeper analysis and this is precisely what the EUI-Middle East Directions Programme aims to do. The effort we are making to refine the analysis of realities at the micro level is indispensable to achieve a more general understanding of wider and longer-term trends and transformations in the MENA region. This is an essential step towards shaping and effectively using the policy implications that arise from our research.

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