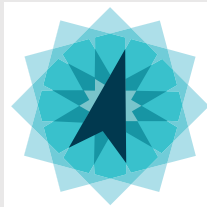


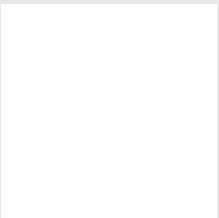
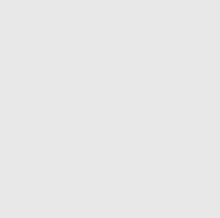
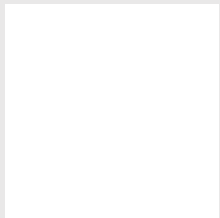
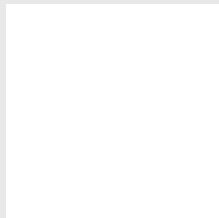
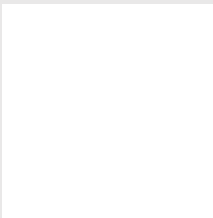
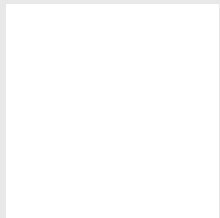


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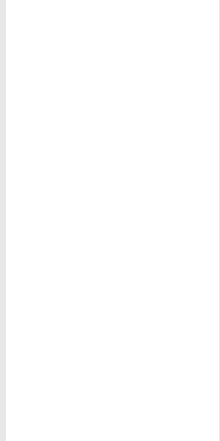
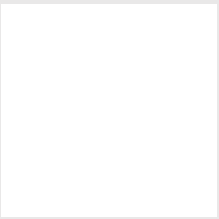
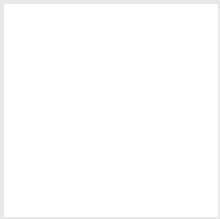
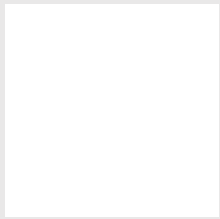
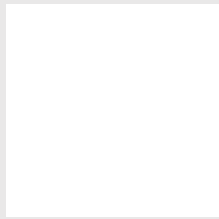
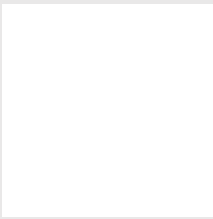
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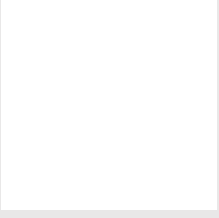
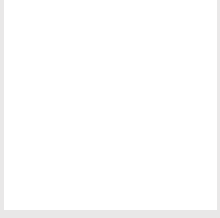
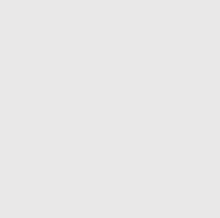
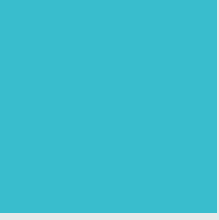
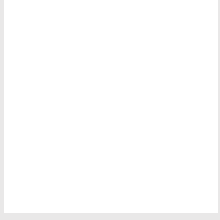
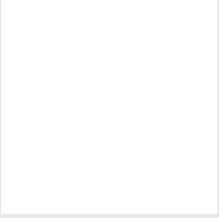
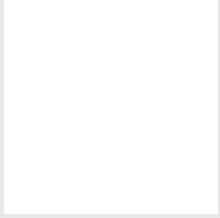
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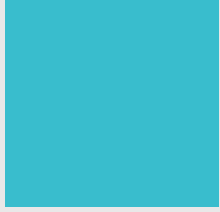
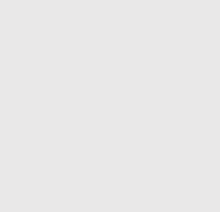
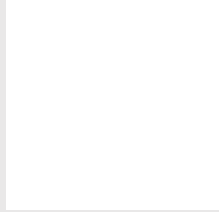
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LOCAL ELECTIONS: IS SYRIA MOVING TO REASSERT CENTRAL CONTROL?



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Local elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?

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Executive summary

Analysis of the local elections held in Syria on the 16th of September 2018 reveals a significant gap between the high level of regime mobilization to bring them about and the low level of civilian expectations regarding their process and results. Voter participation was low, due to a significant lack of confidence among the citizens and unequal access to voting centres across the governorates. The elections themselves were officially held at the national level across the country. However, polling stations were not opened in areas outside the Government of Syria's control such as Idlib governorate. In the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the Self-Administration led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) had organised its own local elections in late 2017 and refused to let the Syrian authorities hold another round in the areas under its control.

The elections concluded with the return of the Baath party, the regime's traditional tool of social control at the local level. The party played a central role in election organizing and in the successful return of faithful members to positions of local power: it was thus able to reward those who had remained loyal to the regime during the course of the conflict. These people may now be empowered to rebuild the mechanisms of social and political control traditionally exerted by the party, which include surveillance of local populations. The sheer weight of the Baathist presence at the local level signals that going forward, the regime will in no way proceed with the opening of a political space for other parties or civil society groups.

Recently adopted laws (Decree 107 of 2011, Decree 19 of 2015 and Law 10 of 2018) give local administrative bodies (municipality, city and provincial councils) more autonomy in the management of local development projects. These new capacities will be critical to shaping of the reconstruction process. Yet, the laws could eventually be used to tighten regime control over the country's localities: despite presentation as tools of decentralization, they give the last word to those at the apex of power (the president, his ministers, and governors). The regime could now be set to head up the reconstruction process its ability to set parameters ensured by a legal structure streaming power to the top and a newly installed set of local government allies defending its interests and following its policy orientations from below.

The newly elected administrations may soon be challenged, however. While local administrators traditionally acted to contain dissent, they could well be the first targets of discontent if they do not succeed in reconnecting their populations to the basic services they now so desperately need. Discontent could be further fuelled by the double standard those managing some development projects will apply to distribution of, hence access to, restored services and housing.

Introduction

On the 16th of September 2018, at a point when the war was far from over, the Government of Syria (GoS) held local elections throughout the country. Roughly 40,000 candidates ran for 18,487 seats distributed over 1,444 administrative units. The positions open were as members of councils at four administrative levels: governorate, city, town, and township². A month later, a second round was held to elect council heads and members of their executive offices, positions that concentrate the power resident in the council at large and offer their holders status as state employees³. These elections were the first of their kind since December 2011, the term of which the Syrian government had extended beyond 2015.

Local administrations have not had significant decision-making power in Syria since Baath seized power in 1963. The party has been used to strengthen regime control over its territory and people from that time, providing symbolic positions within local administrative units to empowered the local elites charged with developing patronage networks. Law 15 of 1971 pertaining to Local Administration ultimately centralized the management of the administrative units by locating the final decision-making powers of local councils in the governorship - a position filled by presidential decree - and imposing a hierarchical structure of command from the central authority in Damascus to the local governing bodies⁴. The liberalization of the Syrian economy initiated in 2000 by Bashar al-Assad disrupted these traditional patronage networks and destroyed the social contract established by his father, Hafez al-Assad between the central power, traditional elites and the population at large⁵. The new power configuration weakened the ability of local administrations to control the population and contain the discontent that erupted in 2011.

Eight years of conflict have significantly altered the Syrian state's administrative structures. The country has been fragmented into competing centres of power. Since 2011, alternative local governance structures affiliated with the opposition have emerged and challenged state institutions in areas over which the GoS lost control⁶. Moreover, the principle Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has, since 2013, developed an autonomous administration to govern localities in the areas under control of its armed branch, the

² At the governorate level, the provincial councils (*majlis al-muhafaza*) oversee the activities of municipality and town councils within the governorates. City councils (*majlis al-madina*) are established for urban centres with populations of 50,000 and up. Town councils (*majlis al-baladia*) are established for centres with populations of 10,001 to 50,000; and township councils (*majlis al-balada*) are established for centres with populations of 5,001 to 10,000 inhabitants. We refer in this paper to all four as local administrations. We use 'locality' (al-mahalla) to refer either to an urban area or a rural village. A Syrian locality "also carries a particular socio-political significance far more profound than the Western conception of a neighbourhood. [Its] boundaries [...] are clearly understood by those who inhabit them. Residents are linked by a common sense of identity that is rooted in a feeling of shared guardianship, with families often able to trace their histories and inter-relations back hundreds of years." Khaddour, K. (2017) 'Local wars and the chance for decentralized peace in Syria', Carnegie Middle East Center, p. 4, available at <https://bit.ly/2WajPST> (accessed 22 January 2019).

³ This research focuses on these people, that is, on the election of provincial and city councils and on the profiles of their council heads and members of their executive offices.

⁴ Balanche, F. (2008) 'Les municipalités dans la Syrie baathiste: déconcentration administrative et contrôle politique', *Revue Tiers-Monde* 193 (1): 169-187, available at <https://bit.ly/2RMfgV5> (accessed 31 January 2019).

⁵ Khaddour, K. (2017), *ibid.*

⁶ Favier, A. (2016) 'Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition-Controlled Areas in Syria', in L. Narbone, A. Favier and V. Collombier (eds), *Inside wars. Local dynamics of conflicts in Syria and Libya*, European University Institute, available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/41644>. (accessed 31 January 2019).

People's Protection Units (YPG)⁷. In this context, many analysts argue that a decentralised framework would offer the only viable path to a negotiated post-conflict settlement⁸. In fact, Decree 107, adopted in the first year of the uprising and presented as a legal framework for decentralisation, defines a wide range of responsibilities for the elected councils of cities and towns. The decree later became a key component of the peace negotiations in Geneva and was perceived by many actors, both local and external, as a device to be used during a political transition to incorporate *de facto* decentralisation dynamics on the ground⁹. However, the decree has not, to this writing, been implemented. Further, it left ultimate control over the work of local administrations to those most closely affiliated with the central power; it can be used, therefore, to reinforce the regime's position at the local scale.

While pro-government forces have embarked on a process of military recovery of the Syrian territory, most of the opposition-affiliated local councils have gradually been dismantled (in Homs governorate since 2014, Eastern Aleppo city in 2016, Rural Damascus and Daraa governorates between 2016 and 2018). In the meantime, as mentioned, the Kurdish leadership has laid the foundations for a federal system, establishing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria¹⁰ and organising local elections within its territory (2015 and 2017). In this context, the September 2018 local elections seem to represent a crucial step for the Syrian regime. According to the Minister of Local Administration and Environment (MoLA), Hussein Makhoul, the electoral process "reflect[ed] the real and sincere will of the people to complete the journey of victory over terrorism, [to] focus at this stage on strengthening services and enhancing the role of local communities in development, and to focus on reconstruction to enable displaced people to return to their homes"¹¹.

Beyond the regime's narrative, an in-depth analysis of these elections is key to an understanding of the ways in which the Assad regime will attempt to rebuild state institutions and to reassert its political power across Syria. To what extent do these elections contribute to the reconstitution of the regime's networks of power at the local level? What do the organization and the results of the elections tell us about the current political dynamics? Can local administrative units, which now in theory have broader prerogatives than they had in the past, be considered as relevant entry-points for programmes of stabilization and reconstruction?

This paper will first examine the unequal access to polls and to competition that prevailed for both voters and candidates across the fourteen governorates. Secondly, it will discuss the ways in which these elections enabled the return of the Baath party as the dominant

⁷ The PYD began to establish its own institutions (collectively referred to in this paper as the Self-Administration) to govern the regions within its territorial control in northern Syria after the withdrawal of the Syrian regime in 2012. In late 2013, the Kurdish authorities declared the three regions of Afrin, Cizre (Jazeera in Arabic) and Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) as three autonomous administrative units linked to a central administration. Khalaf, R. (2016) 'Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria', Chatham House, 8 December, available at <https://bit.ly/2hXH7Mc> (accessed 24 January 2019).

⁸ e.g., Khaddour, K. (2017), *ibid*; Yazigi, J. (2016) 'No going back: Why decentralisation is the future for Syria', European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 September, available at <https://bit.ly/2FMn42H> (accessed 24 January 2019).

⁹ Araabi, S. (2017) 'Syria's decentralization roadmap', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 23 March, available at <https://bit.ly/2KS6iyB> (accessed 23 January 2019).

¹⁰ Drwish, S.M. (2017) 'Syrian Kurds press on with elections despite divisions', *The Monitor*, 13 December, available at <https://bit.ly/2QPNXUf> (accessed 23 January 2019).

¹¹ JP News, 'What are the requirements to register for the local elections?' (in Arabic), *JP News*, 25 June 2018, available at <https://bit.ly/2rDyiNO> (accessed 23 January 2019).

actor in local administration bodies. Finally, it will analyse the potential of the recently adopted laws, providing local administrations with more autonomy in the implementation of development projects, for dissimulation to reinforce the regime's control over the country's localities, especially with the possibility of major reconstruction work.

Research here relies on existing literature, government sources (the websites of MoLA and pro-governmental media), and online media monitoring. The WPCS team also carried out case studies of several areas across the country (Deir Ez-Zor, Eastern Ghouta, Hasakah, Raqqa, Sweida and Daraa) using direct monitoring and information collected by researchers inside Syria, and interviews with inhabitants conducted by the team via Skype and WhatsApp¹².

¹² If no specific annotation is given in the text, data supporting statements are derived from interviews and direct observations conducted between October and December 2018.

1. Local elections: a non-event?

Local elections are not usually a major event in Syria: citizens normally consider local administrations to have neither the financial means nor the level of autonomy to significantly affect decision-making at that scale. Following the lead of the last local elections in 2011¹³, when opposition actors launched a 'strike for dignity' and called for an election boycott, those in September 2018 had an exceptionally low turnout and weak competition. Many factors thus made them a non-event for the great majority of Syrians despite intense mobilisation within regime circles to prepare them.

Map of the governorates and areas of control in Syria¹⁴



¹³ In 2011, about 43,000 candidates competed for 17,629 seats, which was considered to be a “very low ratio even by Syrian standards”. Hallaj, O. A. (2017) ‘Geographies of Absence: Radicalization and the Shaping of the New Syrian Territoriality’, *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29 (1, Article 10): 16, available at <https://bit.ly/2FAvdX5> (accessed 31 January 2019).

¹⁴ Administrative divisions of Syria, University of Texas at Austin, 2007 <https://bit.ly/2DXZ1fa> and Syria Live Map, 6 February 2019 <https://bit.ly/2oEyUmY>

Millions of citizens excluded from the electoral process

According to the head of the Supreme Judicial Committee for the elections, just 4.342 million or 26.5 % of the Syrian people went to the polls^{15 16}. The turnout varied from one governorate to another: 30% of electors in Homs governorate reportedly voted, while the figure for Tartous governorate was 50 %¹⁷. These official figures could be overestimated. One inhabitant of Tartous - a governorate which has, since 2011, been under the regime's control and largely been spared destruction - contested the official rate, arguing that authorities had inflated it.

In fact, many categories of Syrians were excluded. More than 5 million refugees were not given the right to participate, even though they had qualified to vote in the previous presidential elections. In addition, the participation of around 6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) was a particular challenge. Syrian election law mandates that citizens vote in the locality where they were born or where their civil status is registered, rather than that within which they currently live. IDPs living outside their areas of registration were thus forced to travel in order to vote. According to several sources in areas recently retaken by the Syrian regime and its allies (Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs, Daraa), the security threats that such a trip represented discouraged many from participating. Indeed, in these previously besieged areas, also now called 'post-reconciled areas'¹⁸ men between the ages of 17 and 42 must 'normalise their status' (*taswiyeh awda*) to be free of any charges related to the war. In fact, most are accused of having participated in anti-government activities and are wanted by state security agencies. At the same time, all men between the ages of 17 and 42 are required to register for compulsory military service. Traveling across pro-government checkpoints thus exposes them to arrest. Indeed, in Daraa and Eastern Ghouta, civilians and former rebels are regularly arrested, despite the 'reconciliation procedures'¹⁹. In Eastern Ghouta, voters were primarily IDPs who had settled in Damascus city; residents of the area who had remained during the course of the siege, however, were reluctant to participate for fear of reprisals.

In addition, eligibility conditions excluded de facto opponents and many other candidates, who had to meet several conditions such as that "to enjoy his civil and political rights" and "not to be convicted of a felony or misdemeanour infamous or disturbing the public trust"²⁰.

¹⁵ According to the MoLA, the total number of voters was 16,349,357: 8,222,701 females and 8,126,156 males. 'Al-Qaeda: 16349 million citizens are entitled to vote to choose their candidates for the local administration' (in Arabic), MoLA website, 13 August 2018, available at <https://bit.ly/2Cfornp> (accessed 23 January, 2019).

¹⁶ Hamjo, M. (2018) 'Losers have five days to contest the results after release of the decrees and the decisions... Al-Qaeda to Al-Watan: more than 4.3 million voted in the local elections,' (in Arabic), *Al-Watan*, 23 September, available at <https://bit.ly/2Qyj6fu> (accessed 31 January 2019).

¹⁷ Al Dessouki, A. (2018) 'The regime's administration of the local units... What do the results of the local elections tell us?' (in Arabic), Omran Center for Strategic Studies, November 16, p.8, available at <https://bit.ly/2BcE4eE> (accessed 1 February 2019).

¹⁸ The so-called 'post-reconciled areas' are localities where the regime and its allies have retaken military control following local 'reconciliation' agreements between representatives of the regime and the opposition. Adleh F. and Favier, A. (2017) 'Local reconciliation agreements' in Syria: a non-starter for peacebuilding', Research Project Report, Middle East Directions, June, Florence: European University Institute, available at <https://bit.ly/2RZghZT>.

¹⁹ Al-Jabassani, A. (2019) 'From Rebel Rule to Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behavior During Negotiations', Working paper, Middle East Directions, January Florence: European University Institute, available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/60664>.

²⁰ JP News (2018), *ibid*.

Elections without competition

The ratio of candidates per seat was low in general, and it differed from one governorate to the next. The competition was fiercest in Lattakia (with an average of 7.3 candidates per seat) and Tartous (3.8 candidates per seat). In Aleppo and Rural Damascus, an average of just 2.1 candidates stood for each seat. Competition was weakest in Daraa (1.004 candidates per seat) and Idlib (0.78 candidates per seat)²¹. In many localities, the local seats outnumbered the candidates who stood for them, and a great number of councils were elected without competition. This was especially the case in areas outside government control.

In these areas, the election of the local administrative bodies took place in cities under the regime's control. Polling stations were opened in Hama city to elect representatives of the governorates of Raqqa and Idlib, and in Aleppo city to elect those for the northern and western countryside of Aleppo governorate. However, IDPs native to these areas and living in Hama are primarily state employees who tend to vote for pro-regime candidates, either because they support the regime, were forced to vote, or for fear of losing their positions.

The participation of both candidates and voters was, here, very restricted. For example, in Idlib governorate, no candidates ran for 24 municipality or town councils, and in 25 others, fewer had registered as candidates than there were seats to be filled. In most cases, the 'National Unity' lists, gathering candidates from the Baath Party and its allies of the National Progressive Front (see part 2), ran unopposed. Its candidates thus won *by tazkieh*. This was the case for Raqqa provincial and city councils and their executive offices, which had been dismantled after the kidnapping of the former governor of Raqqa in 2013 and then re-established in the city of Hama in 2015. The 2018 elections confirmed the nomination of six members of the Raqqa provincial council's executive office, who had previously been appointed to it in May 2018 by MoLA.

The election process was also very limited in areas controlled by the PYD. As local elections in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria had been run in late 2017, the Self-administration refused to let Syrian authorities organize another round in September 2018²². In Hasakah governorate, polling stations opened only in areas under regime control, such as a neighbourhood in the city of Qamichli, to elect the members of Tal Shaer, and Western Rayaah's City Councils in Qamishli's countryside; and in two neighbourhoods in the city of Hasakah. The 'National Unity' lists therefore won *by tazkieh*²³ after several other candidates willing to participate were forced by the PYD to withdraw. As a result, elections there were marked by very weak Kurdish participation despite their representation of roughly half the governorate's population. Just two Kurds were elected, one in the provincial council's executive office, and another in the city council's executive office.

²¹ The head of the Supreme Judicial Committee for Elections in Syria, 2 August 2018; see also Al-Dessouki, A. (2018), *ibid.*, p. 7

²² Artafm.com (2018) 'The Self-Administration will not allow the local elections to be held in its area' (in Arabic), *artafm.com*, 16 September <https://bit.ly/2BnZhCk> (accessed 8 February 2019).

²³ Muafaq, M. (2018) 'Hasakah is ready... and candidates won by *tazkieh*' (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 16 September, available at <http://alwatan.sy/archives/166212> (accessed 23 January, 2019).

A general state of indifference

Many people both inside and outside country, moreover, reported not being informed of the elections, although government media and officials advertised them well. “We would not have known that an election was happening if the polling centres had not been decorated”, reported a civilian of Tartous. Similarly, many civilians reportedly did not know about the election results. More broadly, the state of indifference toward the elections of a large part of the population, including those within areas known to support the Assad regime, is generally explained by the widespread feeling that the authorities had a lock on them.

In governorates considered strongholds of the regime (Tartous, Lattakia) or that had remained neutral during the conflict (Sweida), many citizens were reportedly reluctant to participate as they considered the election process to give no room to candidates not approved beforehand by the regime. “I barely heard about these elections or noticed them, as they are not real, they are just to show that the country is back to normal (and our normal is a disaster of a dictatorship already) but this is part of the regime plan, and its allies in the world, to promote that there is normal life in Syria”, an inhabitant from Tartous said. The pro-regime Tartous²⁴ Facebook page organized a poll, asking its members if they would vote²⁴. 87% of respondents said they would not²⁵, accusing the political leaders of stealing the election, choosing the winners before the ballots had even been cast; and citing their inefficiency in solving the population's daily issues. Direct interviews with residents of Tartous and Sweida revealed that participation was even lower than that during the previous elections as people had had no confidence that lists of freely chosen candidates would be provided to represent them. Such a reluctance to accept regime-approved candidates was also reported in Lattakia²⁶. In Daraa governorate, civilians carried out protests against the results of elections perceived as “orchestrated by the regime” in several localities such as Busra Al-Sham, Mzereib and Tafas.

The turnout would have been even lower if many state employees and even university students had not reportedly been coerced into voting - a practice that had been enforced by the Syrian regime for decades. In Deir Ez-Zor city, civil servants, members of the student unions and members of the Baath party-affiliated organizations were forced to participate. In Sweida governorate, many employees of state administrations also voted for fear of being fired or suspended. In Hasakah, state employees were required to come to work with their voting cards and vote under threat of suspension of their salaries and being sued²⁷. This atmosphere helped to spread rumours and raised fears of being arrested as people unwilling to participate were seen as “not being friends of the nation”²⁸. In Daraa, people also voted in order to be considered regime supporters and to avoid arrest.

²⁴ Middle East Monitor (2018) ‘Polls open for Syrian local elections despite boycott’, *Middle East Monitor*, 17 September, available at <https://bit.ly/2PFDbiO> (accessed 23 January 2019).

²⁵ Tartous24 Facebook page (2018) ‘Are you going to participate to the elections today? Explain your answer’ (in Arabic), 16 September, available at <https://bit.ly/2FnsUao> (accessed 24 January 2019).

²⁶ Zawan, R. (2018) ‘350 objections have been raised in Lattakia after the announcement of results and the committee decides to call new ones in some electoral centres’, *Hashtagsyria.sy* (in Arabic), available at <https://bit.ly/2SKumGC> (accessed 31 January 2019).

²⁷ Syrians for Truth and Justice (2018) ‘A special report highlights the procedures for selection of the members of local administrations in some areas of Syria’ (in Arabic), *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, 21 October, available at <https://www.stj-sy.com/ar/view/928> (accessed 23 January 2019).

²⁸ Syrians for Truth and Justice (2018), *ibid.*

The elections eventually indicated a significant discrepancy between the general indifference and reluctance of the Syrian population to participate and the careful preparation of, and massive advertising by, regime circles (from state institutions such as the MoLA and the Supreme Judicial Committee for the elections to the Baath Party and several influential local personalities).

2. The return of the Baathist Republic?

The Baath party, which presented by far the greatest number of candidates and won by a large majority, dominated the September 2018 local elections. Election results show the Assad regime to have put the Baath party back in play, to have helped it rebuild its functional influence after being weakened by, and losing a large part of its membership in, the uprising²⁹. Among Baathist candidates, those who actively supported the regime over the last eight years were rewarded with a seat on a local administrative body.

From the decline to the reshaping of Baath party

Entrenched in Syria's 1973 constitution was the Baath party's status as "the leading party in the society and the state" (article 8). It lost ideological credibility, however, with the 1970 assumption of power of Hafez al-Assad, who transformed it into an instrument of social control and mobilization. The years following were characterized by mass enrolment in the party with the objective of maximally broadening the popular base, to the point of admitting former members of the Muslim Brotherhood and rural notables³⁰. The party was accustomed to penetrating the country's localities and binding them to the central authority³¹. Baath activists were often reduced to the role of "institutional informants"³² in the service of the powerful state security agencies³³. From a total party membership of 65,398 in 1971, it rose to 1,008,243 by June 1992³⁴, and to 2 million (including about 400,000 active members with voting rights in governing bodies) in 2004³⁵. In the space of three decades, the party had come to dominant in every aspect of public life (from school to army and public sector employment) but had been transformed into a mere framework for clientelism and patronage.

When Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, he redefined the relationship between the Baath party and executive power in favour of the government and gave more authority to some figures new to the regime, such as technocrats and businessmen. This move aimed

²⁹ Belhadj, S. (2012) 'The Decline of Syria's Baath party', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 5 December, available at <https://bit.ly/2Gk0EGW> (accessed 23 January 2019).

³⁰ Perthes, V. (1995) *The Political Economy of Syria under Assad*, New York, London: I.B. Tauris, p. 155

³¹ Khaddour, K. (2017), *ibid*, p.4

³² Dalle, I. and Glasman, W. (2016) *Le cauchemar syrien*, Paris: Fayard, p. 41

³³ Since 1970, there have four main security agencies which exist to this day: The General (formerly State) Intelligence Directorate, the Political Security Directorate, the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate. All four agencies nominally report to the Bureau of National Security of the Baath Party. All have local branches at the governorate and city levels. Khatib, L. and Sinjab, L. (2018), 'Syria's transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power', *Chatham House*, 10 October, available at <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/syrias-transactional-state-how-conflict-changed-syrian-states-exercise-power> (accessed 18 December 2018). In this paper, we use the terms of 'state security agencies' or 'intelligence services' to refer to these agencies.

³⁴ Batatu, Hanna (1988) *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 174

³⁵ Belhadj, S. (2013) *La Syrie de Bashar al-Assad. Autonomie d'un régime autoritaire*, Paris : Belin, p.159

to assert and consolidate his personal power. It challenged and weakened the role of, and privileges enjoyed by, many in the Baath party, including some at the local level³⁶. Within the party, Assad orchestrated a massive turnover in leadership and elite cadres that reached its height at the 10th Congress in 2005, when the old guard led by the first vice-president Abdel Halim Khaddam was removed from power and replaced primarily by technocrats with no bases of support³⁷. The president eventually cancelled the 11th Baath party Congress, which was scheduled to be held in 2010. He used the same tactics in his response to the uprising which began in 2011 and marginalized the party in processes of crisis management. Several leaders and activists opposed to the violent crackdown of the regime resigned and the party lost a portion of its popular base. In 2012, article 8 of the Constitution was withdrawn in response to a key opposition demand which had been voiced since 2000. This constitutional amendment officially ended the Party's leading role in the state, although that role had been waning for decades.

The Party's internal crisis in the face of the 2011 uprising was met with what Bashar al-Assad himself called a "self-cleaning operation"³⁸. Its regional direction (*al-qiyada al-qutriya*) was completely renewed in July 2013³⁹; in April 2017, half of the members were replaced again. At the local level, the office of the Baath Party's regional leadership conducted an operation by which members were required to prove their loyalty to the party membership (*tathbit adwiya*) and their readiness to work for the party. The process, which began in 2014 as a way to remobilize party ranks after the uprising, was also intended to clean house, removing from the party elements that had not remained faithful. Until mid-2017, about 439,000 of the estimated 900,000 'real members' had 'established their membership'. About 445,000 of the 3.5 million 'registered members' had been expelled from the party⁴⁰.

Baath party dominates the local administration

The 2018 elections appeared to show a willingness on the part of Bashar al-Assad to restore the Baath party to the position it had held under his father's rule: that of a mandatory entry point to employment in state institutions and of a tool for extending – or retaking – regime control over localities.

The Baath party played a crucial role in the establishment of electoral lists. In 2018, its Regional Assistant Secretary-General, Hilal Hilal, issued party Decision 108, empowering the Baath Supreme Leadership Committee to set the criteria for candidature (in particular that of "national belonging"⁴¹) as well as the number of Baath party candidates on the 'National Unity' lists⁴². Although the selection of Baathist candidates was ostensibly based

³⁶ Belhadj S. (2013), *ibid*, pp.137-190

³⁷ Hinnebush, R. (2016) 'President and Party in Post-Baathist Syria, from the struggle for reform to regime destruction', in R. Hinnebush and T. Zintl (eds), *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Volume 1, Political Economy and International Relations*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, p. 37

³⁸ Al Dessouki, A. (2018), *ibid*, p. 9

³⁹ With the exception of Bashar al-Assad, every member was dismissed, including the deputy head of the regional direction, Farouk al-Shareh, who had criticized the way Assad had handled the uprising.

⁴⁰ According to Rafiq Youssef, a member of the Baath party's regional direction, the party had 3.5 million registered members in 2014 on the books. He claimed, however, that this figure was false and estimated the real number to be around 900,000. Al-Baath Media (2014) 'The member of the regional direction of the Baath party Rafiq Youssef says: our party is at the first stage of real change' (in Arabic), *Al-baath media*, 4 April, available at <https://bit.ly/2Eo94um> (accessed 23 January 2019).

⁴¹ One's national belonging depends upon one's support for the Syrian regime and army during the uprising and civil war.

⁴² Enab Baladi (2018) "' Decentralization" from the Baath party's viewpoint', (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 5

on suggestions from the leadership of party branches, the process remained opaque and was likely made in coordination with the governors and state security agencies.

Formerly called 'National Front' lists (referring to the National Progressive Front (NPF)⁴³), these were renamed under the banner of 'National Unity' in 2011 and 50% of the seats available on local administrative bodies were reserved for them at this time. The National Unity lists normally include Baath candidates, their NPF allies, and sometimes independents loyal to the system⁴⁴. Two weeks before the elections, Mohammad Chaabane Azouz, a member of Baath's regional direction and head of the workers and peasants' offices, announced that 70% of local administration seats would be filled by National Unity lists, and 30% by lists of independent candidates⁴⁵.

But in the event, even this allowance for independents, and for Baath's historical allies, went unfulfilled. For example, in Rural Damascus, lists for the city council seats contained 172 Baathists, just three members of the NPF and no independent candidates. The same kind of marginalization was observed in other governorates. In Lattakia, the 'National Unity' list contained four NPF candidates for city council seats and just three for those of the provincial council. Among traditional allies of the Baath party, this led, in some areas, to discontent. The local branch of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in Sweida – a dissident section of the SSNP – decided to withdraw its candidates and to boycott the elections in protest. The party's local branch in Homs city reportedly did the same.

Baath's ascendancy over the electoral lists naturally led to the party's domination of the election results. Most of the seats on the provincial councils, councils in the larger cities and especially those of the provincial and city councils' executive offices⁴⁶, are now filled by Baathists (about 80% of the newly elected members in Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zor, for example). This is not something new; the two-stage election has always been run so as to give the Baath party exclusive control over municipal affairs⁴⁷.

The elections essentially enabled the party faithful to succeed. Many new heads of provincial councils and members of executive offices are indeed 'organizational activists' (*nashitin tanzimiyyin*). In contrast to the regular membership, they are salaried employees, who in theory work for the party full-time. The head of Hasakah provincial council, Ahmad Awaid al Sa'id, is for instance a traditional Baathist who was head of the governorate's Baath Party preparatory school. The head of the Aleppo provincial council, Mohammed Hannoush, is a former activist and leader of Syria's Students Union. Among other members of the executive office of Aleppo's provincial council is Bakkar Hamadi, a well-known activist in the party's Minbij branch.

September, available at <https://bit.ly/2HM4vgI> (accessed 23 January 2019).

⁴³ The Front was established in 1972 by Syrian president Hafez al-Assad to incorporate socialist, communist and Nasserist parties into parliamentary life. The Baath party remains the main component of this coalition, which is composed of ten other political parties.

⁴⁴ These lists may include 'independents' as defined by the regime, but the term only designates candidates who belong to no other party than the NPF.

⁴⁵ MoLA website (2018) 'Al-Azouz: 30% of candidates for the local elections will be independent and 70% will come from 'National Unity's lists' (in Arabic), 2 September, available at <https://bit.ly/2RLZ8IC> (accessed 23 January 2019).

⁴⁶ Decision 108 also specifies that the Supreme Leadership Committee "shall nominate the party representatives for the executive offices of the provincial councils, the executive offices of the cities which are the capitals of the governorates and the heads of city councils, in presence of the Minister of Local Administration, the secretary of the branches and the governor.", *Enab Baladi* (2018), *ibid*.

⁴⁷ Balanche, F. (2008) *ibid*, p. 6

The elections also saw the victory of many members of the Baath-affiliated professional and popular organizations⁴⁸, which Hafez al-Assad's regime had organized into "hierarchical bodies that would at the same time represent, mobilize and contain all important segments of the population"⁴⁹. These organizations, which since 2012 had wound down or suspended activities, have recently been reactivated, particularly those for the youth, and were involved in the elections at all levels. Omar al-Saati, a member of the Baath regional directorate and Youth Office, for example, was very involved in the preparation of the 'National Unity' lists⁵⁰. Several activists and leaders of the Revolutionary Youths Union were also active during the campaign and were elected in Deir Ez-Zor and Aleppo provincial councils' executive offices. The revival of Baath youth organizations (particularly the Baath pioneers, an organization enrolling all children from the age of six, and the Revolutionary Youths Union) has been observed in almost all governorates. This phenomenon, as well as the significant role played by their leaders in the local elections, demonstrates the regime's intention to re-establish the functions of social and political control initially given to these bodies, and in the process, to reconstitute a base of new militants.

Local elections to reward and promote active supporters among loyalist figures

Beyond renewal of Baath affiliation, the elections provided an opportunity to reward those, influential figures and ordinary people, who had remained loyal to the regime during the course of the conflict. The newly elected heads of provincial and city councils and their executive offices have diverse profiles: traditional, such as local government officers and technocrats⁵¹; and new, such as those profiting from the business of war, and the leaders of pro-regime militias. Whatever their profiles, most have received strong support from the *de facto* power holders at the local or national levels.

Winners often have close links to both intelligence services and the governor, who seem to be the strongest figures at the local level. In Syria's most eastern governorate, Deir Ez-Zor, the head of the State Security (a branch of the General Intelligence Directorate) reportedly had enormous influence over the selection of members of the provincial council as well as those of the executive offices. Among the 11 members of the executive, eight benefited from the direct support of the governor and of the heads of military and air force intelligence services. This is a pattern observed in other governorates such as Daraa. Here, the provincial council head is known to have close ties to security agencies as well as the governor, Khalid Al-Hannous. He is described by many pro-opposition outlets as a "security agency informer". In Eastern Ghouta, Hammourieh city council members are infamous for their cooperation with Syrian intelligence services, having contributed to the transfer of many young men to the security branches. In post-reconciled areas such as Eastern Ghouta, several victorious candidates are members of

⁴⁸ There were traditionally six of these organizations: The Revolutionary Youths Union (*ittihad al shabiba al thawra*), Syria's Students Union (*Ittihad talaba suria*), the Women's Organization, the Peasant Federation, the General Federation of Trade Unions and the People's Army.

⁴⁹ Heydemann, S. (2000) *War, institutions, and social change in the Middle East*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p.150

⁵⁰ Al Dessouki, A. (2018), *ibid*, p.9

⁵¹ According to the Law related to Local Administration (1971), at least 60% of the seats are to be reserved for candidates from the college of manual professions (workers, peasants, artisans); candidates from the college of intellectual professions (professors, liberal professions, civil servants) must not represent more than 40% of elected officials. Balanche, F. (2008), *ibid*. p. 5

the reconciliation committees in their respective cities: they had, for the most part, remained in the regime-held capital, Damascus, during the conflict, sometimes playing key mediating roles alongside the state security agencies and the governor in the surrender of armed opposition groups. They had returned to their localities of origin only recently, after return of their control to pro-government forces. Their election may be a reward for their efforts in the process of 'reconciliation': the head of the Arbin local council, for example, was a member of the Arbin reconciliation committee and the head of Kfar Batna city council is a regime supporter who has worked in coordination with the cleric Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa⁵².

These elections also served to promote pro-regime warlords who had gained influence at the local level during the eight-year conflict. Some are local businessmen, such as Hassan Mughir, a member of the Deir Ez-Zor provincial council's executive office, who had had strong ties to the regime for decades before extending his activities and influence during the war. Other major business players enriched during the war, such as high-profile businessman and member of parliament Hussam Qatarji, used their influence to support pro-regime candidates; Qatarji supported candidates in Aleppo, Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates⁵³.

Also promoted by the elections were pro-regime militia leaders, especially in Aleppo governorate, where several members now sit on the Aleppo provincial and city councils⁵⁴. Most of these were not appointed to executive positions on city and provincial councils⁵⁵, but will almost certainly have significant influence over management of security at the local level. The fact that these militia leaders are backed by Iran has led several observers to conclude that Teheran is attempting to increase its influence over the local administration⁵⁶. It seems, however, that the Iranians had no unified plan across the governorates to coordinate their approach to the elections. They often simply left local intermediaries known for their close ties to the Iranians to create candidate lists and organize polls in line with the strategy followed by the regime. At the same time, they maintained strong relations with local officials in the intelligence services, the police, the Baath Party and the governors. Unsurprisingly, this strategy gave the active Baathists the biggest slice of the pie. For their part, the Russian officers had no visible influence over the selection or appointment of members of local administration.

Finally, among the elected were a good number of technocrats, particularly engineers. Many engineers now occupy positions in executive offices and as council heads in

⁵² Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa was a member of the reconciliation committee in the Faylaq al-Rahman faction. He encouraged families to reconcile, creating conditions conducive to surrender of the opposition and movement to the side of the regime.

⁵³ Hussam Qatarji is the business partner of his brother, Muhammad al-Qatarji. M. Qatarji recently and quickly amassed his wealth mainly as an intermediary for oil and wheat transactions between the regime on one hand, and the Kurds and Islamic State, on the other. H. Qatarji was elected to the Syrian Parliament in 2016, representing Aleppo Governorate.

⁵⁴ For example, Hussein Alloush, elected to the provincial council, occupies a leading position in the Baqir Brigade (supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards); Ali Othman al-Nabhan, elected to the Aleppo city council as an independent, has been commander of the Al-Nairab regiment of the Local Defence Forces (affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards); Muammar Fateh al-Dandan, head of the Ra'ad al-Mahdi militia (within the Local Defence Forces) is the new head of Khirbet Bashar municipality in the countryside of Minbij.

⁵⁵ Although there are exceptions: Mohamed Ali Al Hassan, who leads the National Defense Forces in Raqqa, was elected to the executive office of the Raqqa provincial council.

⁵⁶ Al Dessouki, A. (2018), *ibid.* p. 11

Hasakah, Deir Ez-Zor, Aleppo and Homs cities.⁵⁷ Most of these technocrats, however, seem deprived of any real decision-making power, as illustrated by many examples in Homs and Deir Ez-Zor. Even as heads of local administrations, many have a reputation as weak and have no real power to influence strategic policy⁵⁸ Indeed, it would be rare for an uncorrupted technocrat placed as council head to take the kind of risk that would jeopardize his position. In light of their low profile within the party, it is as if their professional standing has been chosen to burnish the regime's reputation: their respectability as figures who have avoided corrupt civilian activity or black-market war profiteering are there to showcase the state's legitimacy.

In contrast to the high turn-over of city mayors orchestrated by the regime in the past, in particular to prevent amassment of the kind of popular base and local power that would challenge central authorities, the 2018 poll results revealed the re-election of many heads of provincial councils. The head of the Aleppo provincial council for instance, had occupied his position since 2016, and before that, the position of deputy head from 2011 to 2016. In Sweida, the head of the provincial council, Bashar al-Ashqar, known locally as a strong supporter of the regime, had been deputy head during the previous term. His deputy head, Wael Jarbou, is the former head of the Sweida city council. In Raqqa, both the provincial council head and deputy head had been members of the Raqqa provincial and local councils prior to 2011.

Whatever the profile of the newly elected, the feature they share is loyalty to the regime throughout the conflict; for this each was rewarded with an executive position in a local administrative unit, a move that amounted to a promotion within the bureaucracy. A typical case is the young Sheikh Mu'tasim Bilallah Al-Saleh, appointed to the executive of the Raqqa provincial council. As an individual, he had served in the Syrian Arab Army for eight years (2010-2018), but he is also a member of an influential family. He is the nephew of the former Awqaf Director in Raqqa⁵⁹, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Saleh who was killed in 2012 for his pro-regime stance. Appointment to a local executive position ensures the central authorities that administrators, here, will remain under their influence. It is also a way for the regime to renew or extend its patronage networks, reinforcing its social and political control over its citizens at the local level.

⁵⁷ For instance, the Deir Ez-Zor city council head, Raed Mandil, is an agricultural engineer without significant or visible support from regime circles. The head of Aleppo city council, Maad Thabet Madalji, is a professor in the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the University of Aleppo and seems to enjoy a good reputation. In the Aleppo provincial council's executive office, Muhammed Qumaid Hassan Assi Al Cheikh is a civil engineer, specialized in infrastructure, who was active in the delivery of services on the Bab al-Nairab frontline during the conflict, earning him a good reputation among the top-ranking system officials.

⁵⁸ The Homs city council head, Abdallah al-Bawab, an engineer who worked in the central office of the national telephone company, reportedly has a reputation as a serious worker, but almost no decision-making leverage.

⁵⁹ Awfaq Ministry (Religious Endowments) oversees Islamic affairs in Syria.

3. Laws giving more leverage to local administrations: a backhanded means of reinforcing regime control?

A few months into the uprising, Syrian authorities issued Decree 107 of 2011⁶⁰. This was presented as a “decentralization law” meant to calm the popular discontent against the regime⁶¹. In fact, the decree had been in the works for several years: since 2007, the European Union has been pushing “for political and administrative reform, including modernization of the administration, decentralization, rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights”⁶². Such a reform was, and is, understood by the GoS as a means to better its international reputation and encourage donors to invest.

Window-dressing: decentralization as a screen for a pyramid of power limiting decision making at the local level

Along with Law 15 of 1971, Legislative Decree 107 provided the legal framework for the 2018 elections. It was, in theory, meant to move the country from a high level of centralized decision-making to a high level of decentralization in five years. Article 2 does strengthen the legal capacity of local administrative units, particularly those of municipalities: it gives them the mandate to elaborate development plans and community support projects as well as the responsibility “for services, economy, culture and all matters of interest to citizens”⁶³. The decree also increases the budget and number of employees of local administrative units. The GoS, however, did not move ahead with its implementation. In any case, the law does not touch the hierarchical structure of power that it was meant to replace: it leaves intact the central power of the governor, national ministries and particularly the Ministry of Local Administration. Damascus continues to closely control local administration work, decision-making and budgets.

The leverage of the Minister of Local Administration over local administrations is significant. He approves the formation of the executive offices in governorates and cities, as well as the distribution of work amongst their members. He also has the power to dismiss one or two members of the executive office of cities and villages at the request of the council president (article 29). Since 2016, the position has been occupied by Hussein Makhoulouf⁶⁴, a relative of Rami Makhoulouf who is himself a cousin of president Assad. Appointing a businessman close to the presidential circle to the head of the MoLA - Syria’s largest land owner - ensures not only regime control over local administration, but management of large parts of the Syrian territory.

Structurally dependent on the Ministry of Local Affairs but appointed directly by the

⁶⁰ MoLA website (2011), Legislative Decree 107 of 2011 related to Local Administration (in Arabic), updated August 28, 2011, available at <https://bit.ly/2PFHVVC> (accessed 23 January 2019).

⁶¹ Araabi, S. (2017) ‘Syria’s decentralization roadmap’, *ibid*.

⁶² ENPI (n.d.) ‘Syrian Arab Republic, Strategy Paper 2007 – 2013 & National Indicative Programme 2011-2013’, available at <https://bit.ly/2Bww07Q> (accessed 23 January 2019).

⁶³ MoLA website (2011), *ibid*, Article 2, paragraph 3

⁶⁴ Hussein Makhoulouf occupied several posts at the Coast Company for Construction and Building and the General Establishment of Construction and Building, and he chaired a project for expanding the Port of Lattakia. He then became Director of the Water Resources Department (2006-2011), chairing joint committees with Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey on their shared waters, and became Governor of Rural Damascus in 2011.

president, governors remain central to the architecture of local power⁶⁵. Decree 107 gives them a broad mandate: as representatives of the central authority, they oversee the work of local administrative units and are in charge of executing the instructions of the ministries concerned with their planning and technical projects (article 42). They have extensive power over provincial councils as heads of their executive offices. They also have the power to make any decision they consider appropriate on matters of security and public order (article 44). As mentioned above, governors had a decisive role in the selection of candidates and the composition of electoral lists in September 2018. At that time, governors were tied very closely to Syria's central political power and military apparatus. Six of fourteen governors are high-ranking officers within the country's intelligence agencies, the army or the police⁶⁶. Others could be categorized as 'businessmen' or 'technocrats' but have strong ties to security agencies and even to the Assad family⁶⁷.

New administrative units: increasing the territory's framework of control?

Prior to the last local elections, a number of new administrative units were created by the MoLA. The 2011 elections were held in 1,341 administrative units; the 2018 elections were held in 1,444. In 2011, about 6,000 villages were aggregated into 682 townships. Administrative units are ideally created to meet the service needs of an increasing population. Granting administrative status to a locality here, however, is essentially a method to "spread [regime] patronage even deeper into the local community of the rural countryside"⁶⁸. It is indeed a way for the regime to ensure that its administration – and hence its patronage network – has the best possible coverage of its territory.

The process has been used before. After the 2004 Kurdish revolt in Qamishli, a five-year economic and administrative development plan for Hasakah governorate (2005-2010) was created in part to give the status of municipality to each of its urban areas⁶⁹. Decree 107 of 2011 clarifies the political potential of such a process: for cities, the decision is made by the Prime Minister, on the advice of the MoLA; for towns and municipalities, the decision is made by the MoLA on the advice of the provincial council's executive office. A municipality or town may also be created by the Supreme Council of the Ministry of Local Administration at its pleasure, without a set minimum of inhabitants (articles 9 and 10).

In such a context, Decree 107 does not create conditions for decentralization. On the contrary, it keeps the centralized management of the administrative units intact and can reinforce central control when a local administration is locked into election of members

⁶⁵ Although they report to their hierarchical superior, the Minister of Local Administration, in the course of routine duties, the President remains their reference authority as he sets their overarching goals and priorities. Belhadj S. (2013), *ibid*, p.152

⁶⁶ The governor of Sweida, Amer al-Ashi, is a former general of the political branch of the General Intelligence Directorate. In Daraa, Mohammed Khalid Al-Hannous is a retired Syrian army general who spent his military career in Daraa governorate. In Lattakia, Major General Ibrahim Khader al-Salem (from Homs) is a former commander of the Aleppo police. The governor of Aleppo, Brigadier General Hussein Diab (from Zabadani) was head of the Criminal Security Branch in Rural Damascus. The governor of Hasakah, Major General Jayez Hammoud Al-Mousa, is a pilot who acted as Chief of Staff of the air force, close to the Russians and present on the list of European sanctions issued in July 2017. The last governor of Raqqa was Brigadier Hassan al-Jalali, a police officer who served as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Civil Affairs.

⁶⁷ In Rural Damascus, Alaa Mounir Ibrahim is the son of a former army officer who was commander of the coastal region in the 1990s. His wife is Rim Najib, daughter of Fatima Makhoulf (Bashar al-Assad's aunt) and sister of Atef Najib, who was head of the Political Security Branch in Daraa in 2011.

⁶⁸ Hallaj, Omar, A. (2017), *ibid*, p.16

⁶⁹ Balanche, F. (2008), *ibid*, p.2

who have been supported, or selected, by the regime. The use of a decentralization law to centralize its weakened power is also not new to the Syrian regime. Indeed, in 1983, the enforcement of Law 5 of 1971 related to Local Administration was also an answer to the Muslim Brotherhood's armed revolt, which occurred between 1979 and 1982⁷⁰. This law enabled the elections of the city, municipality and town councils. However, it did not lessen the regime's control over its local administration, which became an even more effective tool of central authority over its territory and population. By issuing laws presented as enhancing autonomy but which, in fact, strengthen central control, the regime demonstrated its capacity to “reconfigure and adapt strategies of governance” at a time when its legitimacy and control had been considerably weakened, proving its recombinant authoritarian nature⁷¹.

Controlling local administrations: creating tools of central authority to pilot reconstruction

The positioning of active supporters and loyalist representatives at the head of local administration units, which enjoy more autonomy in the implementation of development projects, is clearly a strategy to allow the regime to pilot the reconstruction process at the very local scale. Such a combination of personnel and power ensures that local administrations will take their lead from the central authority, tailoring development projects to its own political and economic interests.

Indeed, in April 2015, the government issued Decree 19⁷² which enables administrative units to create public holdings for property management and building license issuance. These can create subsidiaries in joint ventures with private partners⁷³. The Governorate of Damascus created the Damascus Cham Private Joint Stock Company in December 2016 to manage the implementation of Marota city, an urban project in the neighbourhood of Basateen al-Razi⁷⁴. According to the decree, the head of the holding company is the governor of the administrative unit, in this case, the governor of Damascus. The proximity between the governor and the President of the Republic ensures that the holding companies created will be of most benefit to businessmen supporting the regime.

Decree number 10 of 2018 also gives broad authority to local administrations over the reconstruction process. As a countrywide extension of Decree 66 of 2012, this law allows expropriation of property owners living in government-designated development zones where urban reconstruction projects will take place. Designation itself is carried out by the President of the Republic, on the advice of the Ministry of Local Administration, on the basis of Master Plans provided by each local administration. Once a zone is designated, however, the local administrative unit is in charge of its development (identification of property owners to be expropriated, assessment of land value, reallocation of housing for those expropriated, etc.). In this context, it is likely that Decree 10 will be used by the

⁷⁰ Balanche, F. (2008), *ibid*, p.176

⁷¹ Heydemann, S. and Leenders, R. (eds) (2013) *Authoritarian governance and Syria and Iran, Challenged, Reconfiguring, and Resilient*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p.9.

⁷² Syrian Arab Republic Prime Ministry website (2015) Decree 19 of 2015 (in Arabic), available at <https://bit.ly/2LqoW0b> (accessed 23 January 2019).

⁷³ Yazigi, J. (2017) 'Destruct to reconstruct, How the Syrian regime capitalises on property destruction and land legislation', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, July, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/13562.pdf> (accessed 23 January 2019); Syrian Arab Republic Prime Ministry website (2015), *ibid*, article 2

⁷⁴ Five joint ventures were created with partners from the private sector who are very close to the regime. 'List of Joint-ventures Established Between Damascus Cham Holding and Private Investors' (2018) *The Syria Report*, 17 April, available at <https://bit.ly/2R9AX0c> (accessed 23 January 2019).

newly elected heads of local administrations to adapt reconstruction to the political and demographic priorities of the central authorities. For instance, the head of Daraa city council, Amin Shuhada Al-Omari, appealed to the governor of Daraa not to allow the inhabitants of the city's 'Palestine Camp'⁷⁵ to return to or reconstruct their properties. In this context, the leverage given to local administrations is, once more, intended not to provide more local democracy but to protect and strengthen the central authority's interest and control at the local scale.

Despite their increased prerogative over development projects, the local administration units will have difficulty responding effectively to their population's needs. One of their most important mandates is to provide essential services (e.g., roads, water and electricity). After almost eight years of war, the need for these services and the work required to restore them are huge. However, it does not seem that local administrations will be sufficiently funded to do this. The head of Aleppo city council gave an eloquent example in December 2018: Maad al-Madlaji declared that the funds allocated to Aleppo to rebuild the areas destroyed are far from enough to meet the city's needs. He criticized the urban planning and management done for the city by the GoS, arguing that the reconstruction of informal areas is too often carried out for profit, to the detriment of the people who actually live there. The citizens of these destroyed areas, he said, were not involved in the development of reconstruction plans.⁷⁶ This statement probably aimed to contain the growing discontent of the city's population at the underfunding of the very basics of rehabilitation.

⁷⁵ The area was an opposition stronghold until pro-government forces seized control in July 2018.

⁷⁶ Syrian Observer/Al-Ayyam (2018) 'Aleppo Experiences a Shortfall in Reconstruction Funds', 10 December, available at <https://bit.ly/2FBdtG9> (accessed 23 January 2019).

Conclusion

At a time when regime legitimacy remained seriously challenged, the 2018 local elections were organised by the regime as a step in its reassertion of central control over the country's localities. The elections witnessed the return of the Baath party as the primary actor in local administrations. They facilitated their staffing by party faithful who will attempt to propel the construction of a new popular base. Yet, it is doubtful whether Baath can rebuild the "complex structure of vertical hegemony and horizontal patronage"⁷⁷ that ensured regime control over Syria in the past. The low turnout and general scepticism with regard to the elections indicates just how weakly representative these newly elected local bodies are. The decision to favour overwhelmingly Baathist representation on candidate lists for local administrative bodies, to the detriment of loyal allies such as the SSNP, also shows the narrowness of the regime's perceived base. Finally, the failure of the central authorities to provide the resources actually required to reconstruct the country will make it very difficult for the local administration units to satisfy the need for basic services within their populations.

Although the recently adopted laws give more prerogatives to administrative units to implement development projects, their actual designation remains the exclusive purview of the central power. Having these local units in the hands of regime loyalists will further ensure that the regime's interests will be defended at the local level. Some local administration bodies may benefit from the opportunity to create public holdings, enabling private investors to supply funds for reconstruction in selected areas. However, this will almost certainly create a double standard policy. Some citizens will be financially able to live in newly rebuilt areas, most of which will be designed for the Syrian upper classes and wealthy Gulf investors. Others will have their properties expropriated to make way for the projects or will not have the financial means to stay once reconstruction is complete. Without decent and real provision for those who will be *de facto* excluded, the impact of reconstruction will be highly unequal, leading again to population discontent. In this way, the regime seems to be reconstructing its local administration along the same lines that led to the 2011 uprising.

The effort expended by the Syrian regime to publicize the local elections – in the face of widespread public distrust of the electoral process – seems to demonstrate that they were held for investors and donors *outside* the country. What the regime was almost certainly doing was providing a window onto the process of post-war normalization: showcasing a renewed and empowered local administration for foreign actors. This administration ought not to be considered a legitimate partner in the nation's social and political stabilization, however, or in the extensive series of reconstruction projects needed to get the Syrian local communities back on their feet. As laid out here, it provides no real connection to those populations. The regime's firm hand in appointment of loyal Baathists to local administrations demonstrates a determined unwillingness to allow any political opening as it moves ahead with its post-war plans.

⁷⁷ Hallaj, Omar, A. (2017), *ibid*, p. 7

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