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THE REBUILDING OF SYRIAN REGIME NETWORKS IN THE CITY OF DEIR EZ-ZOR: IDENTIFYING KEY LOCAL PLAYERS

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**The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir Ez-Zor:
Identifying Key Local Players**

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This research project report has been translated from Arabic by Zachary Davis Cuyler.

Executive Summary

Over the course of four decades of Assad rule, first by the father and then the son, organic mechanisms for producing local elite members who were effective and legitimate leaders were paralyzed as a result of the security, economic and social policies that the regime pursued in the city of Deir Ez-Zor. This produced a weak local society with a weak elite who were side-lined by the course of events immediately following the outbreak of the revolution in 2011. Then, during the war and the siege that Islamic State imposed on the enclave in the city under regime control, new influential actors emerged with diverse affiliations and backgrounds. In the war economy network that has formed in this region, some of these new actors have been able to build relationships and partnerships with the heads of the intelligence services, prominent army officers and the governor.

The regime regained complete control over the city of Deir Ez-Zor in autumn 2017 following a joint military campaign that included Syrian Arab Army units and their auxiliary militias, Russian forces and militias affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. The city then entered a transitional phase in which a local elite has re-formed. This new elite includes local warlords and members of the previous elite who had steered clear of the events of the previous years and then returned to resume their roles and become directly influential actors. To a lesser extent, the new elite also includes individuals who enjoy 'professional competences,' but such actors remain weak in comparison to the main centres of power, clout and influence.

The precise boundaries of this new elite stratum are not yet fully apparent, but its main features and characteristics have become clear. Competence, qualifications and inherited social capital matter very little as criteria for joining it. Instead, the most important criteria are absolute loyalty to the regime, wealth acquired by any means and the ability to build and consolidate relationships in decision-making circles – both at the local level with the heads of the intelligence services and at the national level with the regime's highest security and economic clique.

Intelligence and military domination alone are not sufficient to achieve firm long-lasting control over society. The regime therefore has to rebuild the civilian arms of its power, including in the political dimension, pursued through a revival of the Baath party and its attendant organizations; in the economic and services dimension, through re-opening government agencies, companies and directorates; in the legal dimension, through reconstruction of the judicial and police services; and in the administrative dimension, through the reconstitution of local governance units via *pro-forma* elections fixed in favour of candidates hand-picked by the regime.

Following a contentious period in which army officers from other provinces gained transient partial control over the local hierarchy of authority, the heads of the intelligence services are recovering their domination over the highest ranks of local power. Deir Ez-Zor's new elite – which the intelligence services helped create, if they did not create it single-handedly – is likewise currently being subordinated to them.

Introduction

The Syrian revolution which broke out in March 2011 constituted the historical beginning of a series of major transformations. Deir Ez-Zor, the largest city in eastern Syria, sitting on the banks of the Euphrates River 450 kilometres northeast of the capital Damascus, witnessed a series of wars within the wider conflict. First, it experienced the war that the regime forces prosecuted against the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which had emerged from the ranks of revolutionaries in autumn 2011 and had come to control more than three-quarters of the city by summer 2012. Islamic State, which had emerged outside the city, drove the Free Syrian Army out of the neighbourhoods that it controlled in summer 2014. Islamic State then imposed a suffocating siege on the regime enclave in the city, starting in early 2015. This siege was not broken until September 2017, following a major military operation mounted by the combined forces of the Syrian Arab Army and its Russian and Iranian allies. The regime then regained military control over the entire city. The province of Deir Ez-Zor, on the other hand, remains fragmented and disputed between areas subject to the control of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and those under the control of regime forces.²

These events deeply altered the social foundations of the city, which fragmented under the pressures of war, displacement and political polarization. More than a year and a half after the regime regained complete military control over the city, can it now rebuild networks of power at the political and societal levels? On which local actors and agencies can the regime depend to assert its authority? How have the war years regenerated the city's elite, and what roles does this new elite now play in the regime's attempt to reproduce itself?

This research paper first analyses the long-term transformations of the local elite in Deir Ez-Zor, first focusing on its weakening from Hafez al-Assad's seizure of power in 1970 to the outbreak of the revolution in 2011. After explaining the process through which the city was gradually emptied of its populace and elite, the paper turns to the war economy that subsequently developed. It focuses particularly on the siege that some of its neighbourhoods faced between 2015 and 2017, which greatly influenced the production of a new local elite, helping generate new actors. The paper then delves into a discussion of various examples of the city's main current actors. It examines the trajectories of individuals described as warlords, and of other figures who play important roles in the city. Finally, it studies the political party, government and security agencies that the regime has rebuilt in the city, the positions that some of the new influential figures occupy in some of these agencies and the tools of rule that give shape to the regime, and through which the regime maintains its grip on local society.

The study is based on information and data that the researcher has collected from direct field observation and observation via the media and social media, together with meetings and interviews with previous government employees, with activists and with other well-informed individuals inside and outside the city of Deir Ez-Zor.

² Awad, Z. (2018) 'Deir al-Zor after Islamic State: between Kurdish self-administration and a return of the Syrian regime,' Research Report, *Middle East Directions*, March, Florence: European University Institute, available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu//handle/1814/52824>

1. The City Elite: Transformations Between Peace, War and Siege

Decades of a Weakening Local Elite

Despite its distance from the capital Damascus and its recent origin in the last third of the nineteenth century,³ the city of Deir Ez-Zor became involved early in the emergent Syrian state's patriotic and national affairs.⁴ From the era of the French Mandate (1920-1946) and in the first decades of independence, the various political parties found many supporters – and sometimes key leaders – among the city's inhabitants.⁵ Local society seemed capable of producing its own elite independently of its successive rulers.

In this period, the possession of wealth and membership of an important family – generally one that traced its lineage to an important Arab clan from the local countryside or further afield – were attributes shared by the (traditional) elite members. A cohort of elite members made up of educated individuals and political or religious activists began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s and constituted a second (modern) type. However, just as the local society of Deir Ez-Zor took its first steps forward in its political, economic and religious experiments, Hafez al-Assad's 1970 coup aborted these experiments before they came to fruition.

The policies that the Hafez al-Assad regime pursued vis-à-vis local society in Deir Ez-Zor, as in other Syrian cities, had a deep impact. They weakened these societies to such an extent that they lost their ability to generate elite members independently of the central authorities. With the passage of time, the importance of the pre-Assad elite receded in favour of new risers, mainly Baathists coming primarily from lower or middle social and educational backgrounds. These individuals were appointed to leadership positions in the local branch of the ruling party, in organizations and unions affiliated with the party, in syndicates that had lost their independence since the beginning of the 1970s,⁶ or in the presidencies of government offices.

Bashar al-Assad, who inherited power in 2000, continued his father's policies toward the local societies in Syria's cities. He maintained the regime's hegemony over the public sphere while leaving margins of autonomy in the economic, social, religious and cultural spheres, so long as these margins did not produce any threat to the regime's hegemony. By the end of the first decade of Bashar's rule, this had produced a non-homogenous elite structure that can be divided into three categories.

³ Barout, J. (2013) *The Modern Historical Formation of the Syrian Jazeera* (in Arabic), Beirut: The Arab Center for Political Research and Studies.

⁴ Hanna, A. (2018), *Pages of the History of Syrian Political Parties in the Twentieth Century* (in Arabic), Beirut: The Arab Center for Political Research and Studies.

⁵ These include: Jalal al-Sayyid, one of the founders and leaders of the Baath Party between the 1940s and 1950s; Colonel Jasim 'Alwan, the prominent Nasserist; Muhammad 'Aid al-'Ashawi, the Baath leader in the February 23 movement and Minister, first of the Interior and then Foreign Affairs between 1966 and 1970; and Hassan Huwaydi, who was elected General Supervisor of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1980.

⁶ During the rule of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000), eleven consecutive Branch Secretaries held the presidency of the Baath Party branch in Deir Ez-Zor, among which were eight individuals from the city of Deir Ez-Zor. None of these individuals belonged to an important family in the city. Almost the same was true for the presidencies of the important syndicates, like those of the doctors, teachers and lawyers, especially after 1980.

The first category included figures who belonged to deeply rooted families, inheritors of wealth, mosque preachers and other figures from the strata of doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers – and members of other key professions – who refrained from entering the circles of power. Ahmad Tu'mah al-Kheder, a famous dentist from Deir Ez-Zor who emerged in the 1990s as a religious activist and intellectual, and who began oppositional political activism after 2000, represents an example of this type.⁷

The second category of elite members had the same structure as the first but was ultimately connected to the regime through a network of relationships and interests that proliferated with the rise of government expenditure in the Bashar al-Assad era.⁸ Former Member of Parliament Muhammad 'Abd al-Fattah al-Fatih can be considered an example of this category. Despite his membership of a deeply rooted family – his grandfather was a member of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies⁹ – he only became a member of parliament as a candidate on the Baath Party list in 2007. His father, the lawyer and syndicate official 'Abd al-Fattah al-Fatih, failed to be elected to the parliament despite running as an independent four times.

The third category included those who owed their rise – however it happened – entirely to the regime. It particularly included new businessmen whose relationships and partnerships with intelligence officers allowed them to accumulate enormous fortunes. Members of this category included, for example, the former blacksmith 'Umar Kuwaydar, who used a little tax evasion and connections to the intelligence services to become a prominent steel merchant in Deir Ez-Zor province. Kuwaydar's great advancement came via the relationship that he built with Brigadier General Muhammad Kamil Sulayman, Bashar al-Assad's former advisor, whom Kuwaydar came to know through the brother of his second wife, Rim Shawish, a native of Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁰

⁷ Tu'mah, born in 1965, was active in the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society and was a signatory of the Damascus Declaration in the 2000s. After the revolution, he was appointed president of the Syrian Interim Government, established by the Syrian opposition in Turkey, from April 2013 until May 2016. See al-Hayat (2013) 'Who Is Ahmad Tu'mah, President of the Syrian Interim Government' (in Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 15 April, <https://bit.ly/2Ru89vq>

⁸ During his visit to Deir Ez-Zor in 2007, Assad inaugurated various projects worth 250 million SYP. See Shahin, M. (2009) *The History of the Province of Deir Ez-Zor* (in Arabic), Dar al-Sa'ib li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi'.

⁹ Al-Hajji, M (2009) 'The Lawyer 'Abd al-Fattah al-Fatih, Assistant General Secretary of the Union of Arab Lawyers' (in Arabic), *esyria.sy*, 5 January, <https://bit.ly/2HI54s1>

¹⁰ Skype interview with a friend of al-Kuwaydar, who asked to remain anonymous.

A Weak Elite Whose Influence Dissipated Amidst Revolution and War

On the eve of the outbreak of the uprising, the city of Deir Ez-Zor lacked a bourgeois class capable of producing local leaders, key influential men of the cloth or figures with influence extending beyond their families into the city and the surrounding rural clan structure. When protests reached the city in June 2011, the local elite members split according to their individual principles and beliefs in the possibility of change or according to their fears and interests. Each individual either sided with the protestors, maintained neutrality or sided with the regime. Without doubt, the popular character of the rising protest movement played a critical role in the rapid erosion of the already limited influence of the city's elite members, whether they supported the revolution or stood with the regime. No one on either side undertook any significant mediating role, with the exception of a few individual initiatives that resulted in the release of prisoners.

For just a few of months, a leadership emerged from among the youth of the neighbourhoods from which the protests had originated.¹¹ Starting in autumn 2011, some of these youth leaders established FSA brigades. Eventually, elite support for the revolution dissipated, since most of the supportive members¹² were forced to flee waves of bombardment by regime forces. At that time, the leaders of the armed groups, who came from primarily popular backgrounds, emerged as major influential actors in the opposition camp. This stratum was followed by civilian revolutionaries involved in aid, medical and media activities, and in the activities of the local council of the city of Deir Ez-Zor.¹³

The first clash between the civilian revolutionary movement and the al-Nusra Front took place when the latter expanded from the Deir Ez-Zor countryside into the city in autumn 2012. Al-Nusra attempted to restrain civilian mobilization in general, but without success. Among hundreds of civil activists, it received the *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) from no more than five.¹⁴ The same pattern repeated itself during the reign of Islamic State, which attacked the city's opposition-controlled neighbourhoods in summer 2014: only seven activists pledged *bay'ah* to IS. The stratum of revolutionary actors left the city fleeing Islamic State and quickly lost any real influence on the ground. These activists were internally displaced into rebel-held areas in northern Syria or became refugees in Turkey or in Europe.¹⁵ As a result, the number of inhabitants in this part of the city declined to fewer than 1000 people by the time it fell to regime forces in September 2017.

In the other part of the city that remained under regime control, including the districts of al-Joura, al-Qasour and Harabish, members of the loyalist elite also gradually left the city fleeing

¹¹ Particularly the neighbourhoods of al-Matar al-Qadim, al-Hawiqaq, al-Jbaylah, al-Jorah, al-'Ummal and al-Hamidiyyah.

¹² Most of these were doctors, engineers or teachers.

¹³ The formation of the first Deir Ez-Zor local council was announced in December 2012. It was re-formed three subsequent times until it was finally dissolved by Islamic State in summer 2014.

¹⁴ Telephone interview with Dr. Fakhr al-Jori, an activist and former local council member, December 2018.

¹⁵ The activists who remained in the portion of the city controlled by Islamic State faced various degrees of oppression, the worst of which was the atrocity of the execution of five media activists. See the Islamic State publication 'The Satanic Revelation' (in Arabic), June 2016.

war conditions, the lack of security and the deterioration of public services, and then the siege imposed by Islamic State in January 2015. In September 2017, the number of residents in this part of the city was fewer than 80,000 people.

The revolution and then the war and the siege gave the regime new priorities to meet its urgent needs. At the security level, it needed to renew and expand a network of agents and spies inside and outside the areas under its control. It also had to establish armed militias to fight alongside the regular army, which had suffered from defections and continued to endure grievous human losses. Finally, it had to provide various supplies, especially oil and grain and then foodstuffs and medicine, as the siege progressed.

Most members of the loyalist elite which had formed in peacetime were unable to meet these needs. This opened the door wide for the emergence of new service providers who were bolder and better suited to the exigencies of the period. Most of these new service providers came from lower – or, to a lesser extent, middle – social strata. Between 2011 and 2017, a few of these new actors came to exercise much influence in the city.

The War Economy and Its Merchants

During the war years, the city of Deir Ez-Zor entirely lost its importance as an economic and services centre for the villages and towns of rural Deir Ez-Zor province. Business flows connected to the petroleum industry – which constituted part of the labour market although petrol was a scarce resource in the city's economy – halted. The war economy that developed to a large extent shaped the production of the local elite.

Particularly in the regime-held enclave, thousands of small craftsmen¹⁶ became unemployed. Thousands of government employees were unable to ensure their means of subsistence due to the increasing price rises, then the cutting off of roads because of the siege and then the rapid depletion – or hoarding – of reserves of food supplies, fuel and essential goods. A special economy was established that was entirely under the control of the governor and the main officers of the Syrian Arab Army and its intelligence services,¹⁷ in partnership with the leaders of auxiliary militias and a number of war merchants and brokers. The main activities in this emergent economy in the besieged pocket of regime control fall into four main approximate categories.

First, trade in food, medicine and other essential goods constituted a source of rapid and large-scale accumulation for certain influential merchants. These goods were generally transported on military transport planes (Ilyushin) together with the supplies and munitions sent to the regime forces. At the end of June 2015 this halted as Islamic State approached the airport, at which point helicopters became the only supply channel. At that time, transporting a ton of

¹⁶ Qasiyun (2018) 'Professionals of Deir Ez-Zor are in the Same Situation as Their City' (in Arabic), *Qasiyun*, 6 May, <https://bit.ly/2GtJ077>

¹⁷ Especially those of the units of the 17th Division, the Republican Guards and the officers at the military airport, together with the heads and the main officers of the Military Intelligence branches, of the General Intelligence Directorate known as 'State Security,' of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate and to a lesser extent the Political Security Directorate.

food by plane was sufficient to secure a fortune.¹⁸ In several instances, influential merchants rented Ilyushin planes and loaded them with almost forty tons of food, paying large commissions of up to 30 million SYP (equivalent to almost 50,000-60,000 USD) to be distributed among the Air Force Intelligence Directorate in Damascus and Major General Muhammad Khaddour, head of the Military Security Committee in Deir Ez-Zor at that time.¹⁹ Starting in February 2016, the World Food Programme began coordinating with the Syrian Red Crescent to provide food and medical aid, which was dropped from the air by parachute into the besieged neighbourhoods.²⁰ On the ground, volunteers of the local Red Crescent, alongside National Defence militiamen, gathered these packages. However, some packages were immediately looted and most of this looted material went to the emerging network of corrupt local influential officials.²¹ The scraps were then distributed to the besieged populace in a disorganized fashion.²²

Second, brokering activities employed an entire network, starting at the bottom with middlemen and ending with an official authorized to grant permissions. These activities were aimed especially at securing exemptions to leave the city on transport planes that were returning to Damascus, and then in helicopters returning to Qamishli or Hama.²³ On the eve of the siege, the number of inhabitants of the besieged neighbourhoods was estimated at between 130,000 and 140,000 people, of which 10,000-20,000 fled by land after paying tremendous sums in bribes and roughly 40,000-50,000 fled on transport planes and in helicopters. During the siege, the cost of getting permission to leave increased week after week, ultimately rising from 200 to 2,000 USD per person.²⁴

Third, direct extortion of the besieged populace was a primary source of income for the heads of militias, certain intelligence officers and even a rank of fighters. The latter threatened to arrest families' sons, to conscript them into compulsory service in the Syrian Arab Army or to force them into dangerous labour digging trenches or erecting dirt barriers at the front lines. These threats forced many to pay money, pawn gold or cede ownership of homes and cars.²⁵

¹⁸ At that time, a single egg sold in the market for 500 SYP. Hana, E. (2016) 'Al-Akhbar in Deir Ez-Zor: Between Siege and Massacre' (in Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 17 January, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/222425>

¹⁹ Major General Muhammad Khaddour was head of the Military Security Committee in Deir Ez-Zor from August 2014 to June 2016. He returned to Deir Ez-Zor in autumn 2017 as a leader in the military campaign advancing from the Syrian Desert to break the siege on the pocket of regime control.

²⁰ According to statements published by the Red Crescent, 3500 tons of aid were transported in this way in 200 drops until March 2017. Syrian Arab Red Crescent (2017), 'Syrian Arab Red Crescent and World Food Program: delivery of more than 3,500 tons of humanitarian aid to Deir Ez-Zor with 200 airdrops' (in Arabic), *SARC*, 6 March, <https://bit.ly/2Tobu0l>

²¹ Skype interview with a former employee of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent organization, January 2019.

²² Mere'i, A. (2016) 'Corruption Allies with the Islamic State: All of Us Against the People in Deir Ez-Zor' (in Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 9 February, https://al-akhbar.com/PDF_Files/2809/pdf/p10_20160209.pdf

²³ These mainly included the head of the Military Security Committee, the governor, the heads of the branches of the four security apparatuses, the head of police and the Branch Secretary of the Baath Party.

²⁴ Skype interview with an individual in the besieged area who secured an exemption to travel by plane granted by the head of police in exchange for 1,100 USD, January 2019.

²⁵ Internet interview with a witness of the siege in Deir Ez-Zor, January 2019.

Finally, humanitarian projects funded by international donor organizations such as UNICEF, the International Red Cross or the United Nations Development Programme constituted another door for the network of war entrepreneurs and officials. This was especially true of the governor, who headed the relief sub-committee²⁶ and became the primary overseer for all humanitarian aid in the besieged neighbourhoods. The free bread project, which the International Red Cross funded and the Deir Ez-Zor branch of the Syrian Red Crescent implemented from the beginning of November 2016 until August 2017,²⁷ was one indicative example of corruption. The Red Cross paid the Red Crescent for almost 30,000 tons of wheat out of 40,000 that had already been stocked in government warehouses before the siege.²⁸ The individuals who were centrally involved in corruption in this project were the governor at the time, Muhammad Qaddour 'Ayniyyeh, the head of the Military Security Committee and the former head of the Red Crescent branch in Deir Ez-Zor, Ahmad Dahmush.²⁹

The war economy activities allowed a small group of around fifteen important merchants, along with forty brokers and minor traders, to accumulate a tremendous fortune during the war and siege. This clique – especially those among them who were able to build partnerships with key officers, officials and businessmen in Damascus – constituted a main tributary to the stratum of the new elite that took shape after the siege was broken.

2. A New Elite and a Returning Elite

Upward Trajectories During the War

More than a year since the regime regained control over the entire city of Deir Ez-Zor, the boundaries of the new elite circles have not yet been well defined. Nevertheless, its primary features have become clear, but it is an open club to which warlords and merchants have privileged entry because of their direct participation in shaping events during the previous years. Today, it is possible to categorize these rising figures into three types: war merchants, militia heads and exploitative middlemen. These three groups followed distinct trajectories during the war but have several features in common.

²⁶ Mere'i, A, *ibid*.

²⁷ This began with the distribution of 10,000, and then 20,000, packages of free bread among the populace.

²⁸ Sana (2017) 'The Governor of Deir Ez-Zor looks for stakeholders for the bread situation in Deir Ez-Zor' (in Arabic), *Sana*, 23 August, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=613503>

²⁹ Source: A Red Crescent employee.

War Merchants: Hassan al-Mughir and His Cousins

In the local elections held in September 2018, Hassan bin 'Ali al-Mughir 'won' membership of the executive office of the provincial council of Deir Ez-Zor. It was an easy victory because of his partnerships and interlaced connections with the new governor, 'Abd al-Majid al-Kawakibi (appointed in February 2018), with the head of the State Security branch in the province, Brigadier-General Da'as Da'as, and with centrally influential figures like the Qatarji brothers.³⁰ Since the beginning of his career as a merchant and contractor in the 1990s, al-Mughir has depended not on his experience and qualifications as the son of a greengrocer and as an economics graduate³¹ but on the support of two consecutive governors of Deir Ez-Zor.³² Starting in 2001, al-Mughir became active in the ranks of the National Vow Movement, one of the parties in the National Progressive Front. He became president of its local branch and won membership of the executive office of the provincial council in the local election in 2007. From this position, al-Mughir's capabilities increased as his private activities widened. He awarded many tenders to many trusted contacts for work as nominal contractors in his projects.³³ The most prominent of these contractors was his youngest cousin, Zayn al-'Abidin bin Sa'id al-Sulayman, the son of the *mukhtar* (village or neighbourhood headman) of the al-Joura neighbourhood situated on the western side of the city.³⁴

When the revolution broke out, al-Mughir announced that he stood against it. He was motivated by his interests and his relationships with the heads of the security apparatuses. In particular, he had links with the head of State Security, Brigadier-General Da'as, who facilitated the role of al-Mughir and of the 'Ghaith Development Association' that he had established in September 2013, in implementing most of the projects of the Syrian Red Crescent and the United Nations Development Programme. During the siege, al-Mughir was one of the heads of the commercial network that brought food and medicine to the besieged neighbourhoods on transport planes and then in helicopters,³⁵ whether on behalf of al-Mughir himself or in partnership with the Qatarji brothers.

This network was composed of al-Mughir's cousins, who had been destitute before the revolution. Zayn al-'Abidin continued to work sometimes as a nominal contractor and sometimes as a contractor provisioning the National Defence militia. Nasser al-Mukhtar, a physical education teacher, received shipments of food transported by plane and stored them

³⁰ The Qatarji brothers are important and widely influential merchants and businessmen. Their name is linked to very important commercial activities on behalf of the Damascus government.

³¹ Al-Mughir was born in the city of Deir Ez-Zor in 1961 and comes from a small family. During his studies at the University of Aleppo, from which he graduated in 1989, he benefitted from relationships that he established with key merchants in Aleppo. This helped him to widen his private commercial activities following his graduation. After 1996, he entered the field of public sector contracting.

³² The two governors were Salah Kanj, from 1996 to 2000, and Khalid al-Ahmad, from 2003 to 2009. These governors were his two main supporters.

³³ The law forbids members of local administrative councils and government employees from working as public sector contractors.

³⁴ The position of *mukhtar* of the neighbourhood in the city of Deir Ez-Zor is no longer important. The individual who holds it is not an important figure, even at the neighbourhood level.

³⁵ Private source: al-Mughir rented Ilyushin planes between 10 and 15 times until the summer of 2015. He then began to rely on helicopters.

in a giant warehouse before selling them. The third cousin worked in the trade in medicines transported by plane. The fourth cousin, Juma'a al-Mukhtar, had worked as an informant and provider of special services to the intelligence services since the beginning of the revolution, and then founded a militia made up of native sons of the city under the leadership of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate at the end of 2012.³⁶ This militia helps augment the influence of the family, especially in the role that it has played since summer 2018 in the trade in oil coming from the area controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces toward regime territory on behalf of Qatarji, who became the militia's main funder.³⁷

Al-Mughir accumulated wealth during the siege, built partnerships with the decision-makers in Deir Ez-Zor and Damascus and consolidated power through the militia that his cousin leads. Thanks to these three factors, he has become one of the heavyweights in the world of contracting and business activities connected to public sector partnerships and agencies in Deir Ez-Zor.

Militia leaders: Ra'ed al-Ghadban, a Particular Kind of Baathist

Until the end of 2017, Ra'ed bin 'Ali al-Ghadban was the head of the 'Baath Brigades' militia, which was nominally affiliated with the party branch.³⁸ He also was – and still is – a member of the leadership of the Baath Party branch in Deir Ez-Zor. He seems to be the most powerful of its members, thanks to the solid relationships that he established during the war years with important officers in the Air Force Intelligence Directorate in Damascus, with local intelligence heads and with Russian officers in their Deir Ez-Zor military airbase. With these diverse strands of support, al-Ghadban was appointed member of the leadership of the Baath branch in Deir Ez-Zor in September 2016 for the first time. He was appointed to the same position two subsequent times, and likewise became a member of the Central Committee of the Baath Party in April 2017.³⁹ Eventually, he was appointed as member of the regime delegation to the 'Syrian-Syrian Dialogue' held in January 2018 in the Russian city of Sochi, where he became a member of one of the committees that emanated from that conference.⁴⁰

Before 2011 al-Ghadban was unknown except within the narrow limits of the village of al-Jafrah, where he was born in 1977, in the adjacent neighbourhood of Harabish, where he grew up, and in his work, in which he was employed through a middleman as a supervisor in an agricultural advisory unit in the Deir Ez-Zor countryside to help his impoverished father. In the first months of the revolution, he became one of the Military Intelligence Directorate's most important informants and then a provider of various services – logistical, security and military – to the army officers in the military airport adjacent to the neighbourhood of

³⁶ The number of fighters in the militia grew from 20 at the beginning to almost 400 by the end of 2018. Internet interview with an individual from the al-Joura neighbourhood, December 2018.

³⁷ Private source close to the militia.

³⁸ He was replaced in this position in 2018. Facebook (2018) 'Men of the Syrian Arab Army in Deir Ez-Zor' page (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2N2aAVw>

³⁹ Bashar al-Assad heads the Central Committee, which is made up of 81 members. See al-Baath (2017) 'Formation of the Baath party's central committee and changes in the regional leadership, Rafiq al-Assad: the work for the party is on the field' (in Arabic), *al-Baath*, 22 April, <https://bit.ly/2UPeuUq>

⁴⁰ Sana (2018) 'Approval of the formation of the committee in charge of discussing the constitution at the Syrian National Dialogue conference in Sochi' (in Arabic), *Sana*, 31 January, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=701248>

Harabish and the village of al-Jafrah. Al-Ghadban's services extended to Air Force Intelligence, which supervises the Air Force and airports. In 2013 in the airbase, which became one of the regime's most important positions in Deir Ez-Zor, al-Ghadban and his brother Hassan established a private militia named the 'Baath Brigades.' This militia fought alongside regime forces in numerous battles in the east of the city.⁴¹

In the Harabish neighbourhood, which fell under his direct domination, al-Ghadban opened a large store for the sale of foodstuffs, which his fighters acquired as a fixed share of the aid dropped by parachute during the siege. He acquired other sources of capital by extorting the populace through threats to arrest the inhabitants' sons or conscript them into the army and by facilitating evacuation by plane. As a result of the siege, he accumulated a tremendous fortune made up of money, gold, cars and houses between Deir Ez-Zor and Damascus.⁴² In his effort to gain more power and influence, and satisfying his personal desire for popular status and leadership, al-Ghadban has opened a private office in the neighbourhood of Harabish, where every Friday he wears Bedouin clothes, takes people's requests to resolve their problems and grant them exemptions, and listens to people's complaints.⁴³

Profiting Middlemen: The Madhhur Brothers and Reconstruction

In an indication of his rise in rank, Firas al-Madhhur stood alongside the governor and army heads in public celebrations sponsored by the 'Madhhur company,'⁴⁴ which he established with his brother 'Umar at the beginning of 2018. Today it is one of the most important local private companies in Deir Ez-Zor.

The Madhhur brothers descend from a poor little family originating in the western countryside. They grew up in the al-Joura neighbourhood. Their father was a street vendor of vegetables and then head of a paint workshop. The two sons then expanded the activities of the workshop to small contracts, which grew thanks to the relationship that the older brother had built since 2008 with the deputy head and then the head of the State Security service, Colonel, then Brigadier-General, Da'as Da'as. Da'as enabled the brothers to win many public sector contracts, especially with the Water Supply and Sewerage Authority.⁴⁵ Firas al-Madhhur's support by State Security, and his eagerness to play social roles, allowed him to gain some prestige in the poor neighbourhood of al-Joura.

On the outbreak of protests in 2011 – in which the inhabitants of al-Joura played a prominent role – Firas worked as a mediator, attempting from time to time to release prisoners, especially those held by State Security.⁴⁶ In the fall of 2012, soon after the FSA took control of the

⁴¹ Facebook (2017) 'Arab Socialist Baath Party, Deir Ez-Zor Branch' page (in Arabic), 17 October, <https://bit.ly/2UPSrwS>

⁴² It is difficult to estimate the wealth that al-Ghadban has accumulated, although a source close to him confirmed that he now owns more than 30 houses in the city of Deir Ez-Zor in addition to other houses in Damascus. His brother similarly owns more than 10 houses in Deir Ez-Zor.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Facebook (2018) 'Abd al-Meneem Khalil' personal post (in Arabic), 29 August, <https://bit.ly/2RYPMPh>

⁴⁵ From an interview with a former engineer in the Water Authority of Deir Ez-Zor, in the Turkish city of Urfa, January 2019.

⁴⁶ A series of internet interviews with acquaintances and neighbours of the Madhhur brothers, December 2018.

countryside of Deir Ez-Zor province and parts of the city, Firas left the al-Joura neighbourhood for the village of al-Hissan on the opposite bank of the Euphrates River. There he began new activities such as opening a water and electrical appliance store and establishing a brigade under the label 'The Free Army' to protect his commercial activities, which also extended to trade in crude oil and fuel from nearby oil wells. This also provided cover for his intelligence activities as a spy for State Security. With the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013, Firas consolidated his relationships with the group's leaders and then with the leaders of Islamic State, starting with *al-wali* 'Amir al-Rafidan. He also completed many contracts for Islamic State's 'Service Bureau' before pledging *bay'ah* to the organization and becoming an official in the bureau.⁴⁷

As for the younger brother, 'Umar, he continued the family business in the area of the city under regime control, in particular smuggling between the banks of the Euphrates River during the siege, importing foodstuffs and fuel, and exporting appliances that were in high demand in Islamic State territory but remained abundant in government warehouses located in the pocket under regime control. 'Umar also oversaw the exploitation of two oil wells on behalf of the godparents of the family and its protector, Brigadier-General Da'as, on the outskirts of regime territory. When Firas al-Madhhur defected from Islamic State in November 2017, Brigadier Da'as stood and welcomed his spy as he crossed the Euphrates River.⁴⁸

With the money that they had accumulated during the war, and the close relationships that they had established with the State Security service – formally as providers of services that were reported to the central branch in Damascus, and personally as business partners of Brigadier Da'as – the Madhhur brothers became some of the most important new influential figures that the war had produced in the city. Indeed, Da'as expanded their influence, helping them win more than 10 important projects implemented in 2018 at the city level.⁴⁹ The value of five of these projects taken together is 250 million SYP (around half a million dollars), a very large sum in the city today.

More than a year after the siege was broken and the battles ended, the above three types have developed new styles and have acclimatised to the new conditions. In order to safeguard their gains, they have transformed themselves from fighters, merchants and war middlemen into party leaders, local officials and businessmen. These three types of figures, with their common descent from marginal and weak social origins, share a capacity to renew their relationships with the intelligence services and consecutive governors and to widen them toward the centre in Damascus. They also share absolute loyalty to the regime and an ability to provide it with a variety of services.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jorf Media (2017), 'In Deir Ez-Zor, the Head of State Security Welcomes His Spy Returning from Islamic State' (in Arabic), *Jorf Media*, 27 November, <http://jorfnews.com/portal/?p=7080>

⁴⁹ According to a private source, the five projects are: renovating the main entrance to the city on the Deir Ez-Zor-Damascus road, renovating the civil defence building in the al-'Ummal neighbourhood, repairing the road between the city and the al-Assad hospital and removing debris from some streets, in addition to removing debris from the main street near the city.

Not All Are Warlords

The new elite in the city of Deir Ez-Zor is not limited to warlords. Some individuals in the previous elite remained loyal to the regime, maintained their distance from events in the city following the outbreak of the revolution and then renewed their local influence or returned to their positions of power in the city after the regime regained complete control. Similarly, technocrats who did not have any previous important roles constituted another source of new elite members.

Among the loyalists in the previous elite, for example, we find the scion of a wealthy family Mazen Daoud Ganamah, president of the Deir Ez-Zor Chamber of Commerce and Industry since 2009.⁵⁰ He preserved his seat and position throughout the preceding years despite residing in Damascus, from where he returned at the beginning of 2018 to renew his local influence through the relationships that he had garnered with businessmen and major officials in Damascus since the 1990s,⁵¹ when his family's companies began activities in oil and various related services.⁵² Today, he aspires to resume his business through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and also through his company, depending on the fate of the main oil fields in the areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

'Umar 'Adnan 'Alawi has emerged along a distinct path: he had previously headed a number of government agencies,⁵³ before being isolated in a famous corruption scandal, from which he ultimately emerged without a conviction in 2007.⁵⁴ In the first two years after the outbreak of the revolution, al-'Alawi opted for silence and distance by fleeing to Damascus. In 2014 he suddenly re-emerged as leader of the National Defence militia for a short period.⁵⁵ He then distanced himself again until he was elected in Damascus as the General Secretary of the Arab Socialist Movement,⁵⁶ one of the parties in the National Progressive Front. From his central position in Damascus, 'Alawi has rebuilt his local influence in the city of Deir Ez-Zor without engaging in any particular activity there so far.

As for the new officials from the technocratic class, they are not linked by name to any corruption suspicions or scandals and they generally hold university diplomas and enjoy good

⁵⁰ Al-Fares, Q. (2009) 'Ganamah becomes head of the Deir Ez-Zor's Chamber of Commerce and Industry' (in Arabic), *e-syria*, 12 January, <https://bit.ly/2UUC0iT>

⁵¹ A private source reports that these individuals are from the Makhlof family.

⁵² Al-Hamidi, S. (2018) 'Head of the Chamber of Commerce in Deir Ez-Zor to al-Watan: 'We are working from the governorate and invite all the economic actors to contribute to the return of life in the governorate'' (in Arabic), 18 February, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/139900>

⁵³ The General Company for Building and Construction, then the Directorate of Industrial Projects, then the Water Authority.

⁵⁴ This involved projects for the construction of major water purification stations in the cities of Deir Ez-Zor, al-Mayadin and al-Bukamal.

⁵⁵ Abdallah, K. (2014) 'Umar 'Alawi, new leader of the *Shabihah* of Deir Ez-Zor: he stole everything to the families of the countryside and destroyed your houses in the city' (in Arabic), *Ayn al-Madina*, 28 March, <https://goo.gl/q9qPJo>

⁵⁶ Dahi, S (2017) 'The Arab Socialists elected their General Secretary. The Party's affairs keen on maintaining its unity... and those who withdrew: 'We are representing the movement' ... Al-Alawi to al-Watan: 'We have 4,000 fighters to support the army against the terrorists' (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 25 May, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/105244>

reputations in their careers. However, they lack a capacity for initiative, and they are still in a position of weakness relative to the heads of the intelligence services and the governor. In most cases, they meet an apparent need to enhance the regime's image. Two important examples of these technocrats are the president of the provincial council of Deir Ez-Zor, Malik al-'Umar – a university professor in the Faculty of Agriculture at al-Furat University – who was elected in September 2018, and his deputy and also deputy-governor, Kan'an 'Abd al-Wahhab, who had previously chaired unimportant government agencies. During the war years, the two men had no relationship with centres of power in the intelligence services or with war business activities.

3. Reproducing Oneself in the Image of the Past

Since it regained full military control over the city of Deir Ez-Zor, the regime has worked to rebuild the various civilian dimensions of its local power represented by the Baath Party, government institutions and units of local administration. These bodies provide the positions occupied by the members of the city's club of new actors, as a formal reward for the services that certain of them rendered to the regime during the war. These agencies, through which the regime aims to portray itself as a 'state' on the road to recovery, constitute tools of rule through which the regime incorporates people and tightens its velvet grip on them. The highest security apparatuses rely on these tools, which provide absolute and long-term power, to impose their grip on society.

A Party is Necessary, and There is Nothing but the Baath

From the outbreak of the revolution until the end of 2018, the leadership of the Baath Party branch in the province of Deir Ez-Zor was reconstituted five times and there were three consecutive branch secretaries.⁵⁷ During the first two years of the war, the Baath Party seemed to have dissipated, and its presence was reduced to the Branch Secretary and two or three members from the branch leadership after the rest of the members fled.

In March 2013, the newly appointed regional leadership (*al-qiyada al-qutriya*) of the Baath Party embarked on a 'review of all of the organizational experiences and policies that have brought the party to where it has arrived.'⁵⁸ It put in place a plan to tighten the ranks, which was not implemented in Deir Ez-Zor until the fall of 2016, when the new leadership of the Baath Party branch was constituted for the fourth time and Sahir al-Sakr became the Branch Secretary. Ra'ed al-Ghadban became a member of its leadership and the head of the Youth Bureau. Despite attempts to revive the party, which began before the regime regained complete military control over Deir Ez-Zor, the local party did not begin to function until afterwards. During 2018, the organizational bodies of the party were reconstituted in the city,

⁵⁷ The leadership of the Baath Party branch today has 8 members in addition to the Branch Secretary and the governor, who since October 2013 has been in a functional capacity in the Deir Ez-Zor branch of the party. The same has been true of the president of al-Furat University since September 2016.

⁵⁸ Al-Baath (2018) 'Interview with Rafiq Yusuf Ahmad, member of the Baath regional leadership and head of the Organization Committee to al-Baath: 'We are the sons of the party, we don't negotiate its principle or discuss its foundations' (in Arabic), *al-Baath*, 7 April, <https://bit.ly/2UNwUeL>.

and also in the parts of the countryside that were under regime control, at the levels of party sections, divisions and cells. Likewise, work has intensified to 'confirm the membership,' requiring members to attend meetings and pay the symbolic monthly fee (25 SYP for a supporter (*nasir*) and an active member). Sometimes, accountants directly deduct this fee from the salaries of Baathists employed in the public sector.

Mobilization to enrol new members has also intensified. Between September and November 2018, almost 2,700 new members enrolled in the Baath Party at the city level, most of whom were students in university and institute departments. The number of people holding 'active membership' reached 300 in the same period.⁵⁹ Likewise, the offices emerging from the leadership of the party branch returned to take up their previous roles, supervising all of the public sectors and directing them through regular meetings held by every bureau with the heads of public agencies and bodies in their domains, submitting regular reports about these meetings to the central leadership and taking orders and instructions from the leadership. To increase links with the party, the 'Branch School of Party Preparation' became active in setting up special training sessions for members. The most important signal of the resolve of the regime to reconsider the Baath Party a tool of control over local society was the regime's call for the return of any state employee resident in the areas outside its control to their positions, pending the approval of the party branch in Deir Ez-Zor and the security services.

Under the supervision of the party and in coordination with its central leadership, all of the local branches of the organizations, unions, and syndicates were reconstituted and reactivated. The same was true of the parties in the National Progressive Front. It is significant that the regime paid particular attention to the Baath Vanguard, the Revolutionary Youth Union and the Syria's Students Union, which began to force students in schools, institutes and universities to join them.⁶⁰ Under the slogan 'We begin together hand-in-hand to rebuild Syria,' the Vanguard organization held its annual conference on 10 January 2019.⁶¹ Under the slogan 'The youth are an offering and sacrifice... knowledge, action, and building,' the Revolutionary Youth Union held its annual meeting on 5 February 2019 with the attendance of the Minister of Education, the central president of the union, the Party Secretary, and the governor.⁶²

⁵⁹ Private source.

⁶⁰ Facebook (2017), 'Ceremony of the Baath Vanguard for the graduation of the first rank students of the Baath party, unit of Martyr Aziz Matar Asmir, in Deir Ez-Zor on 29/11/2017', 'Vanguard of Deir Ez-Zor' page (in Arabic), 29 November, <https://bit.ly/2TG9Asq>

⁶¹ Facebook (2019), 'The Baath Vanguard - party branch of Deir Ez-Zor - holds its annual conference on Thursday 10/01/2019', 'Syrian children, Vanguard of Deir Ez-Zor' page (in Arabic), 14 January, <https://bit.ly/2TG3fx5>

⁶² Facebook (2019) 'The Revolutionary Youth Union - party branch of Deir Ez-Zor - holds its annual conference', 'The Revolutionary Youth Union - Deir Ez-Zor branch' page (in Arabic), 4 February, <https://bit.ly/2HY6Hlh>

Rebuilding State or Regime Institutions?

The Return of State Employees Without Work

Following ministerial decisions issued at the beginning of 2018, the employees in the public sector who were from the province of Deir Ez-Zor and who had fled – especially those who were in Damascus – were compelled to return and resume their jobs in their institutions. Most of these institutions had retained the appearance of a presence within the pocket under regime control. According to estimates by former employees, the number of public sector employees who had lived in the city of Deir Ez-Zor before the revolution was 30,000. The number of government employees who live in the city today – former inhabitants or people from the countryside who live there temporarily – is estimated at around 20,000. The number of inhabitants of the city has increased to around 200,000 people as a result of the return of employees who had fled with their families, and who are now congesting neighbourhoods that were spared destruction.

Despite having more cohorts of employees than were necessary, the activities of public sector companies and agencies during 2018 remained very scanty in comparison with the level that one might imagine for a city that has just concluded a destructive war. This is a result of the tremendous discrepancy between the weak financial resources that have been allocated and the huge resources that are required for major works of infrastructure repair, especially in the neighbourhoods that had previously been outside the regime's control.⁶³

Until January 2019, the work of the government agencies had yielded no apparent results, except in the neighbourhoods that had remained under regime control, where a minimal repair of infrastructure and service provision made life possible despite very adverse circumstances. However, in the neighbourhoods that had been outside the regime's control, activities were for the most part limited to removing rubble from the streets. As a result, these neighbourhoods remain empty of inhabitants except for a few hundred people. There is no drinking water except by filling buckets in the streets, and there is no electricity, health care, schools, landline network or public transport. Most importantly, there are no inhabitable houses, because all of them have been either completely or partially destroyed.

⁶³ In January 2017, the governor of Deir Ez-Zor estimated the proportion of destroyed property in the neighbourhoods of the city outside the regime's control at 80%, saying 'Around 12 million USD have been allocated to rebuilding and repairing the infrastructure, electricity, water and sanitation, and to cleaning.' Sputnik (2017) 'Deir Ez-Zor governor talks to Sputnik about the situation in the governorate after the siege as well as the reconstruction process' (in Arabic), *Sputnik*, 8 November, <https://bit.ly/2tcHUzP>

'We Are Not a Gang, We Have A Judiciary and Police'

Among the state institutions, a re-establishment of the judiciary and police is an important dimension of repairing the instruments of power, following years of war in which members of the intelligence services, army and militias violated all aspects of the law. The regime retained as much judicial authority as it could – however limited this ultimately was – in the pocket under its control and continued to support judges whether they remained in the besieged neighbourhoods of the city of Deir Ez-Zor⁶⁴ or had fled to other cities. This patronage may have produced beneficial results, perhaps limiting the number of judges who defected: of 45 judges in the city's courts, only 4 defected. In 2018, the judges that had fled returned,⁶⁵ and almost all of the judicial institutions⁶⁶ resumed work according to their purviews in the legal system of Deir Ez-Zor. Recognizing his role throughout the siege years, the Minister of Justice commended Attorney General Majid al-'Ali,⁶⁷ the supreme head of the judiciary, who is well-known for both his integrity and meekness before the intelligence services.

The regime is also working to repair the local police service, which over the course of the war transformed into a fighting formation, leading it to suffer a great reduction in its ranks due to severe human losses on the fronts in which it participated, and also defections. The police academy⁶⁸ was re-opened in autumn 2018: the first cohort of new volunteers graduated⁶⁹ and former members were retrained⁷⁰ following the interruption of their employment as policemen. Likewise, police units and police stations were reopened in the city. The criminal security service was also reactivated to investigate crimes and apprehend suspects, as were the anti-narcotics branch and even the traffic police, which have returned after a long absence from the city's streets.

Until the end of 2018, there were no notable signs that the regime was intending to integrate militiamen into the ranks of the police. Two factors will perhaps make this difficult. First, the regime needs these militias as fighting bodies in a war that has not yet been decided in its favour in Deir Ez-Zor province. Second, the regime is interested in avoiding the permanent salaries, benefits, and cost-of-living allowances that these militiamen would receive if they joined the police service. In fact, the revival of the police service does not mean that the regime

⁶⁴ During the siege, seats were allocated to judges on plane trips, a practice that was regarded as luxurious and special treatment by the regime. Private source.

⁶⁵ Hamijo, M.A. (2018), "Judges of Deir Ez-Zor will come back for the city's justice: 'We will build and increase the courts in the safe areas'" (in Arabic), 9 October, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/122543>

⁶⁶ The main institutions are the Public Prosecutor, the Criminal Court, the Civil Court of First Instance, the Magistrate's Courts (*sulh*) and the Shari'a Court in charge of personal matters.

⁶⁷ Facebook (2018) 'Tribute from the Minister of Justice to Deir Ez-Zor's Attorney General Majid al-'Ali' (in Arabic), 'Twasol' page, 23 July, <https://bit.ly/2GxWdqt>

⁶⁸ Facebook Live (2018), 'Leadership of Deir Ez-Zor police reopens the police training school' post, 'Syrian Defence Ministry' page (in Arabic), 30 August, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=267980113848838>

⁶⁹ Facebook (2018) 'Graduation ceremony of the police academy in Deir Ez-Zor' 'Police.of.Syria' page (in Arabic), 6 October, <https://bit.ly/2UJVYf0>

⁷⁰ Sana (2018) 'Graduation of two classes in Deir Ez-Zor police ' (in Arabic), *Sana*, 31 August, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=805335>

intends to curb the militias or disband them under the current conditions. This would be the role of the intelligence services, which are capable of doing so at any time if the regime decides.

Elections Without Competition

In the absence of any kind of competition in the city of Deir Ez-Zor, local elections were held in September 2018 with predetermined results for the 'National Unity' list, which had been drawn up by the central leadership of the Baath party.⁷¹ An executive office of the city council was formed made up of 9 members, among them the president of the council, Ra'ed Muhammad Mandil, with only one member who lacked any known special connection to powerful actors. The other seven members, including one woman, owed their seats to the support of the governor or the heads of the intelligence services. Two of these seven held security clearance cards during the years of the war.⁷² It is said that none of these members come from a powerful family.

In a city like Deir Ez-Zor where the authorities raise the slogan 'reconstruction,' one might imagine that the head of the municipality would be a person of exceptional capacities, strong in his personality, leadership ability and the vocal support of his constituents. But Ra'ed Mandil, an agricultural engineer, does not have any of these characteristics. During his career before the war as an employee in the Planning Service, and then as its director, Mandil displayed the personality of an ineffective but un-corrupt public sector employee. In his career after the outbreak of the war, he was secluded in his house within the pocket of regime control until he fled to the city of Damascus in 2015.

Since the new city council of Deir Ez-Zor began its activities in November 2018, it has continued to remove debris from the streets and to repair small portions of the water network, and has undertaken public cleanliness campaigns with the support of the Syrian Red Crescent.

Under the Authority of the Intelligence Services

Before the revolution, the secretary of the Baath Party headed the security committee in the province of Deir Ez-Zor, which included the heads of the four security apparatuses, the head of police and the governor. But since the 1980s, the more influential and effective powers were generally in the hands of the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate. With the failure of this outright security approach to confront the brigades of the Free Syrian Army, and with the deployment of military forces from various Syrian Arab Army units from outside the province, a so-called 'Military Security Committee' was formed at the end of 2012 to take the place of the security committee and undertake additional responsibilities directing battles and coordinating between the security services, army units, militias and allied foreign forces. The president of this committee was considered the equivalent of a military governor of the city.

Following the cessation of the armed struggle in the city of Deir Ez-Zor at the end of 2017, the influence of the military commanders receded. The heads of the intelligence services

⁷¹ Favier, A and Kostrz, M. (2019), 'Local elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?', Research project report, *Middle East Directions*, February, Florence: European University Institute, <http://cadmus.eui.eu//handle/1814/61004>

⁷² Private sources: president of the executive office Ra'ed Mandil and member of the office Muhammad al-Mufti.

recovered their positions at the top of the actual architecture of power. Under them today in Deir Ez-Zor is the governor 'Abd al-Majid Kawakibi and then the secretary of the Baath party branch – theoretically, on the basis of his rank, and in accordance with the regime's aim to rehabilitate the Baath party.

The head of police is under the close supervision of the Political Security Directorate, which usually oversees the activities of the police. Any report of a breach of security could cause a series of difficulties that could undermine him. Despite the immunity that the judiciary theoretically enjoy, they also remain weak with respect to the intelligence services, since the appointment of the heads of the judicial apparatus requires the approval of these services.

Descending to the level of municipalities, the directors and employees of government agencies are insignificant compared to the 'Economic Bureau' within each branch of the intelligence services. These bureaux supervise the actions of the agencies, from directors to employees. Any internal file, document, record or speech – old or new – can be opened and an 'expert' in the subject chosen by the intelligence services can begin an inquiry into it. The consequence of such inquiries is always a horrifying dilemma in the dungeons of the security headquarters that can last for weeks or months.⁷³

Conclusion

The conflict has produced a new constellation of networks of local control in the city of Deir Ez-Zor. Warlords today occupy influential positions that they have reached as a result of the vacuum left by the departure of the previous elite, which was too weak to preserve its already limited position and importance during the war. In addition, new roles opened up that these new influential actors occupied. During the siege, these roles were consolidated and became firmly rooted.

In the new elite-in-formation in the city of Deir Ez-Zor, there is little regard for inherited social capital unless it is combined with absolute loyalty, money and close relationships with policymaking circles, locally at the level of the heads of the intelligence services and centrally at the level of the highest circles of influence and policymaking. Because of the absolute control of the intelligence services over local society, members of the elite do not need to legitimately represent any social, party or occupational milieu. Reputation and local public opinion have no value, except to the extent that the authorities occasionally allow as they manage these elite members. These factors will increase these appointees' distance from the people and their dependence on – and patronage relations with – the regime. The warlords did not arise individually but did so at the level of nuclear and extended families. This will leave major and growing social effects, in which the regime's mechanisms of control over society will become rooted.

However, relationships with powerful local men are not sufficient to maintain control over positions of influence at the local level, especially given that these men are continually cycled in and out. The support and patronage of men with central authority in Damascus is a

⁷³ Interview with a former engineer in the municipality of the city of Deir Ez-Zor, Yasir al-Shaykh.

necessary condition for local influence and a longer-term position. In the club of new influential actors, as in the era of the previous influential actors, there are no permanent guarantees of protection from important men closer to the centre of power. Much more important are local influential actors' abilities to pursue the centre's interests and continue to provide it with services. Likewise, greed, self-interested behaviour and also a continual feeling of danger and a desire to overcome rivals will push certain major local influential actors to attempt to build special relationships with the two major centres of foreign power – Iran and Russia – while maintaining their loyalty to the regime.

Ultimately, the elite members that the regime has constituted today lack any of the general features connoted by the word 'elite.' They do not seem to have accomplished anything more than their peers, and do not seem capable of engaging in any mediation or initiatives by themselves. This reduces each individual among them to a proxy to help tighten the grip on society and 'the state' on behalf of the centres of power within the regime, but one that can be replaced at any time without perceptible consequences.

At the same time, the scantiness of the regime's financial resources and the exorbitant funds that it needs to rebuild a minimum amount of the damage left by the war will constitute a primary impediment to its ability to reproduce itself, build its state and consolidate its fragile flanks on all sides. Despite the intelligence services' ability to wield the instruments of rule and networks of authority – which emerge from their iron grip – they will not be able to protect their instruments and networks from rotting away from the inside as they face the lack of resources or a failure to confront current and coming crises.

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