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Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta

Ninar al-Ra'i

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Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta

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Executive Summary

Following the Bashar al-Assad regime's successful takeover of Eastern Ghouta – which had constituted the largest opposition stronghold neighbouring the capital from 2011 to 2018 – the regime has reintroduced facets of the state that had disappeared during the conflict. Several days after Faylaq al-Rahman, the main armed opposition faction in the middle sector of Eastern Ghouta, concluded a surrender agreement with the regime in March 2018, Syrian Arab Army (SAA) units, auxiliary forces and security services took up positions in the area. These forces erected checkpoints and dirt roadblocks between the towns of Eastern Ghouta. The goal of the security and military apparatus was to launch a campaign of interrogations, arrests and conscriptions as the auxiliary forces drafted youths into their ranks. All of this has left unanswered questions concerning the fate of those who chose to remain in the area following the regime takeover.

However, one year after the regime regained military control, the Syrian government has not made any noteworthy effort to resume the provision of public services. Signs of the war remain in these towns: rubble is strewn about and there is a lack of basic public services. The Syrian regime has therefore implemented conditional partnerships between the government and UN bodies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to meet its needs and fill the gaps left by state institutions.

Despite this near total lack of services, the Baath party was revived in local administrative elections held on 16 September 2018. This has allowed it to regain control over the minutiae of political, social and security affairs, reinforcing the regime's authority. The regime has simultaneously strengthened its relationship with the Ministry of Religious Endowments and endeavoured to deepen its ties with religious and political figures who played a role in facilitating the surrender process.

The regime has rewarded this network of trusted individuals. It has delegated a wide array of responsibilities and tasks to them that help entrench their positions. Simultaneously, it has marginalized and excluded figures that it does not trust. Russia and Iran have begun to demarcate their interests and deepen their own influence, benefitting from the vacuum that emerged in the Syrian state during the war.

Introduction

When the Syrian revolution broke out in 2011, Eastern Ghouta – which neighbours Damascus to the east and south – was among the first regions to rebel against the Assad regime. The region then became the most important Syrian opposition stronghold flanking the capital. Eastern Ghouta witnessed numerous transformations during this period, from peaceful protests in 2011 to the military mobilization of early 2012 when Free Syrian Army (FSA) units emerged to protect peaceful protests and residential neighbourhoods against the violence of the SAA and the security services. Eastern Ghouta then came under siege by SAA units and Iranian-backed militias in the middle of 2013.

For eight years, Eastern Ghouta represented a special case of local alternative rule. The area was administered by civilian bodies (local councils, civil society organisations, peaceful activists and doctors) in addition to armed factions.¹ After 2014, with the intensification of the siege and the accelerated tempo of the conflict, armed factions took over the towns of this region. These factions then began to dig tunnels from Eastern Ghouta to the Berzeh and Qaboun neighbourhoods of Damascus in pursuit of military, political and economic goals.²

A number of battles for control over Eastern Ghouta broke out between armed factions in 2016. This resulted in the division of the region into three pockets: the Duma sector, the middle sector and Harasta.³ When the regime took control of the neighbourhoods of Berzeh and Qaboun in May 2017, Eastern Ghouta faced a near total siege. At this time, the only supply line into the area was the al-Wafideen crossing in Duma. Despite a May 2017 de-escalation agreement,⁴ the regime launched systematic air raids and artillery bombardments against Eastern Ghouta. By August 2017, with the closing of the al-Wafideen crossing a total siege was imposed. At the beginning of 2018, the regime and its Russian allies decided to resolve matters in Eastern Ghouta militarily. They started a fierce battle, making the area hell for 400,000 civilians. The regime used a large variety of weapons and destroyed 70 percent of the local infrastructure.⁵

¹ These armed factions included: Jaysh al-Islam, which was founded in 2013 under the leadership of Zahran Alloush and established its headquarters in Duma (Alloush was killed in 2015 and Issam al-Buwaydani succeeded him); Faylaq al-Rahman, founded in 2014 under the leadership of Abdel-Nasser Shmeir, a Captain who defected from the SAA; Ahrar al-Sham, which emerged in 2015 under the leadership of Issam al-Basha, had a minor presence in Eastern Ghouta, established a base in Harasta and joined Jaysh al-Fustat in 2016 before withdrawing; Ajnad al-Sham, under the leadership of Yasser al-Qadri, which was established in 2013 and joined Faylaq al-Rahman in 2016; Liwa Fajr al-Ummah, which was established in 2014 in Harasta under the leadership of Abu Muhammad Zabadani and joined Jaysh al-Fustat in 2016; Jaysh al-Fustat, which was established in 2016 under the leadership of Abu Khaled Daqr and allied with Faylaq al-Rahman in the same year, itself an alliance between a number of armed factions; Jaysh al-Ummah, which was established in 2014 under the leadership of Abu Ali Khibiyyeh and Abu Subhi Taha but crushed by Jaysh al-Islam; and Jabhat al-Nusra, under the leadership of Abu Essam, which had a weak presence in Eastern Ghouta in the Marj area, allied with Jaysh al-Fustat in 2016 and changed its name to Fatah al-Sham. The researcher personally tracked these developments between 2014 and 2018.

² Aron Lund, “Into the Tunnels: The Rise and Fall of Syria’s Rebel Enclave in the Eastern Ghouta,” *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016, <http://bit.ly/2KMiJ1X>

³ The Duma sector (Duma and the areas around it) was under the control of Jaysh al-Islam. The middle sector (Ein Terma, Zamalka, Arbin, Hezzeh, Hammourieh, Jisreen, al-Mohamadieh, Kafr Batna) and the Damascus neighbourhood of Jobar were under the control of Faylaq al-Rahman and Harasta was under the control of Ahrar al-Sham.

⁴ The Astana talks began in the Kazakh capital in 2017 as negotiations between a delegation from the Syrian government and representatives of the armed Syrian opposition. The discussions sought to establish a truce that included the entire country. This political process was separate from the Geneva negotiations overseen by the United Nations.

⁵ Deutsche Welle, “The Observatory: Casualties of Regime Attack on Eastern Ghouta Exceed 1,000” (in Arabic), 10 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2RX1v2r>

Simultaneous negotiations with the armed factions were taking place on three separate tracks, and the regime eventually came to separate surrender agreements for each pocket of territory: on 21 March, it reached an agreement with Ahrar al-Sham regarding Harasta; on 23 March, it came to an agreement under direct Russian supervision with Faylaq al-Rahman regarding the middle sector; and on 8 April the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that it had achieved an agreement with Jaysh al-Islam in Duma.⁶ Now, more than a year after the conclusion of the surrender, which was also known as a ‘reconciliation agreement’⁷ in Eastern Ghouta, the current situation in the area foreshadows what the complete return of the state might entail.

This paper focuses on three towns – Saqba, Kafr Batna and Zamalka – located in the middle sector, which remains under-studied compared to Duma. The middle sector of Eastern Ghouta was under the control of Faylaq al-Rahman, which used Zamalka as its main headquarters. This town was distinctive because of the expansiveness of its built-up environment, the multi-sectarian background of its residents and its proximity to the Damascus neighbourhood of Jobar and the areas around the Damascus southern ring road. It also constituted the gateway from the middle sector to Damascus. The middle sector also includes several other towns, including Kafr Batna, known for its agriculture and its Christian and Druze residents, and Saqba, which was well-known for its furniture manufacturing.

The paper aims to analyse the social, political and security policies through which the Syrian regime is attempting to reassert its authority in these three towns. Can these policies return stability to these towns? Who are the Syrian regime’s international and local allies in these efforts? And to what extent are they responsible for enacting these policies?

The study relies on data and information gathered through observation of conventional and social media, and through consistent tracking of the development of the conflict. It also relies on 35 remote interviews conducted between December 2018 and May 2019 with activists, civilians and parties active in civil society. Given the conditions prevailing in Eastern Ghouta, and with a view to preserving the safety of the informants, no names or locations of these interviews will be mentioned.

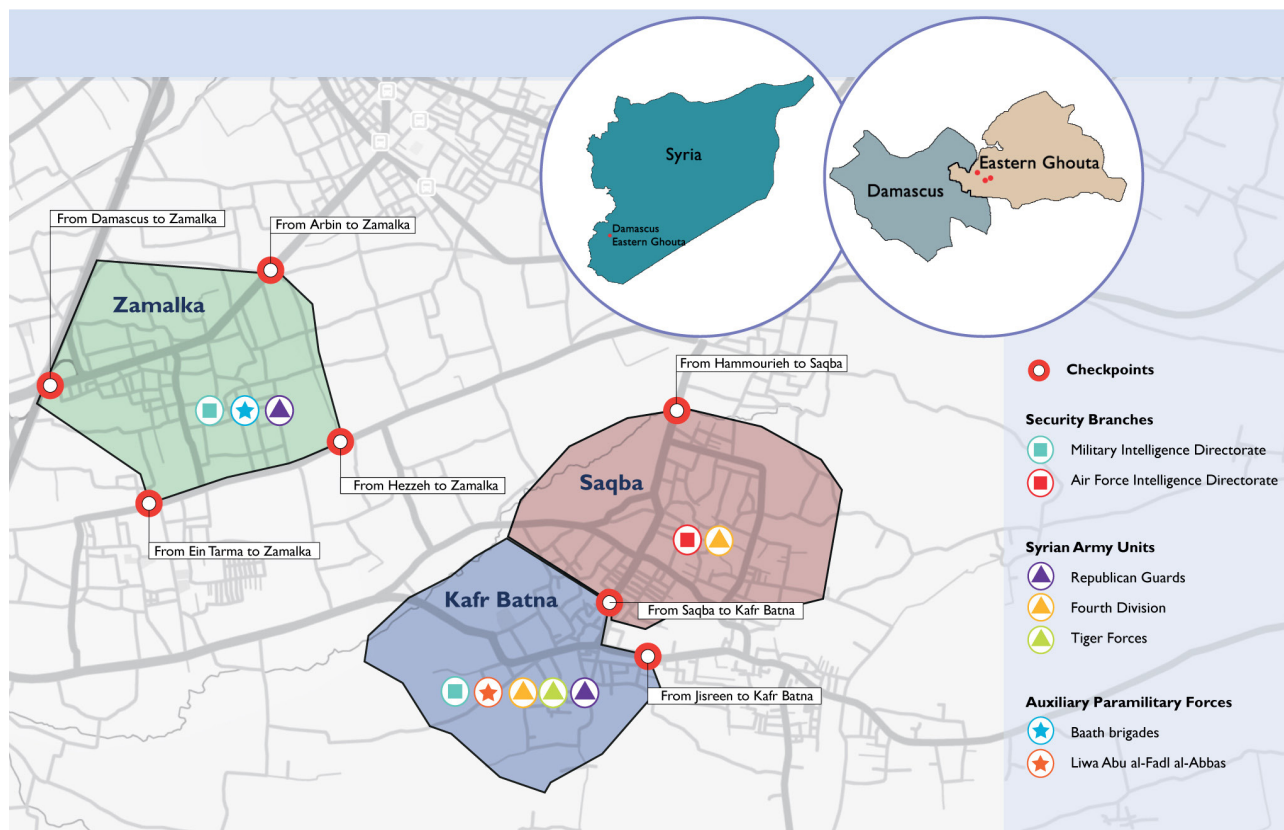
⁶ Mercy Corps’ (Humanitarian Access Team) meeting with international non-governmental organisations, Beirut, April 2018.

⁷ Fadi Adleh and Agnes Favier, “‘Local Reconciliation Agreements’ in Syria: a Non-Starter for Peacebuilding,” Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 19 June 2017), <https://bit.ly/2SEvblx>. This paper generally uses the term ‘surrender’ instead of ‘reconciliation.’

1. The Return of the Security State

Following the SAA's entry into the middle sector on 23 March 2018, the regime took three specific measures to ensure its control over the towns of Eastern Ghouta. First, it used the security services to engage in their main task of arbitrarily arresting civilians. Second, it employed the SAA to undertake enforced conscription campaigns. Third, it allowed Iranian- and Russian-backed paramilitary organisations to draft youths into their ranks in exchange for protection from the security services and SAA units.

Map 1. Deployment of security and military forces in Eastern Ghouta (Zamalka, Saqba, Kafr Batna)



1.1. Security Branches and Army Units: The Policy of Arrests

The Military Intelligence Directorate has established itself in Kafr Batna and Zamalka, and is charged with carrying out various tasks that do not pertain to its official mission.⁸ The Air Force Intelligence Directorate – which has been the most-feared security branch in Syria since the 1980s – was assigned to Saqba.⁹

⁸ Military Intelligence has been officially granted responsibility for supervising employees, officers, all branches of the army, the progress of aggression against Syrian territory, terrorism, information, communication devices, electronics, military investigations and the state of emergency. I'm Not Just a Number, 'Restructuring of Intelligence Agencies in Syria is Main Reason for Regime Strength' (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 4 July 2014, <http://bit.ly/2HBXH12>; Anouar al-Bunni, "Security Services in Syria: Reality and Change" (in Arabic), *Geroun*, 8 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2XyaRmD>

⁹ Air Force Intelligence has overseen the files of the inhabitants of Eastern Ghouta since 2011. It is responsible for investigating and prosecuting youths and arbitrary arrest campaigns.

SAA units were also deployed in all three towns: the Fourth Division in Saqba and Kafr Batna and the Republican Guards in Zamalka and Kafr Batna. Security and military units have erected security checkpoints and inspection points on the main roads between the towns in Eastern Ghouta and have used dirt roadblocks to close side roads. As a result, the movement of people between towns remained greatly constrained as of March 2019.¹⁰

Arbitrary Arrests and Enforced Disappearances

The security branches are the main bodies responsible for arrests in Syria. Once the regime reasserted its control over Eastern Ghouta, the towns of Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna witnessed waves of arbitrary arrests. This fit the same basic pattern as in other areas that were recovered by the regime from the opposition between 2016 and 2018.¹¹

Since April 2018, the security branches have been arresting civilians in the three towns. Most of those arrested are non-violent activists and former fighters. Organisations engaged in documenting violations have provided no precise information on the number of people who have been imprisoned there. This is due to the stranglehold that the regime’s security services have over the area, the sheer number of arrest campaigns that they have undertaken for various ends and the fear that families of the imprisoned have of discussing the topic. It is worth noting that arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances have been especially common in Zamalka.

Table 1. Numbers of arbitrary arrests between April 2018 and April 2019

	Zamalka	Kafr Batna
Former fighters	200	100
Former activists	245	150

Source: Approximate estimates by a Syrian activist who works on the issue of prisoners in Duma, 12 June 2019

In August 2018 alone, the Syrian regime arrested 170 individuals in Zamalka. These included gravediggers, doctors, employees of civil society organisations, aid workers, civil defence employees and journalists. The regime also launched a wide arrest campaign targeting witnesses of the 21 August 2013 chemical attack against the population of Eastern Ghouta. It did this in order to hide evidence of the massacre.¹² Arrests have also targeted families of former fighters who had evacuated to northern Syria on the accusation that they had been ‘working with terrorists.’

Kafr Batna was the second town to face arbitrary arrests. In August 2018, the regime arrested Zaher Blour, Wafi al-Bahash and Fadi al-Bahash, who were members of the Kafr Batna local council during the siege. These individuals were arrested despite promises made during the surrender negotiations that they would not face any legal proceedings. In both towns, arbitrary arrests were sometimes accompanied by house raids or ‘security reports’¹³ on former Faylaq al-Rahman fighters.

Despite an agreement to ‘settle the status’ of individuals who had previously demonstrated their disloyalty to the regime and had chosen to remain, detainees were accused of dealing with wanted individuals who had fled to northern Syria.

¹⁰ Interview via the internet with activists and journalists in the middle sector, March 2019.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas,” 21 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2KVrZQI>

¹² Montaser Abu Zayd, “Eastern Ghouta: Arrests Target Gravediggers” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 11 August 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Wp9E4q>

¹³ A ‘security report’ entails spying on a civilian via an informant who is a civilian or an individual with a relationship to the security services. The report covers the activity of the individual, his or her relations, and his or her opinion on the security and political situation in Syria.

Arbitrary arrests also targeted civilians who had fled to shelters during the military campaign via safe corridors opened by the regime on 10 March 2018, who had had their identity cards confiscated. Zamalka doctors and aid workers are still in regime prisons at the time of writing this paper in June 2019.

Arrests to Extract Ransoms

Since May 2018, arrests have been conducted for the purpose of extracting ransoms. The security agencies either detain residents in their outposts in each town or take them to their branch headquarters to interrogate them about their activities during the eight years of the war. They then impose fines of as much as 2,000 USD in exchange for the prisoner's release. Some individuals have been arrested multiple times by multiple security agencies. As one survivor of detention in Zamalka put it, "I was not arrested three times for having committed a crime. I was arrested three times to extort money. Each time I was released after paying the fine, and the total amount that I paid added up to 3,500 USD. Eventually, my family was forced to sell its property to secure my freedom."¹⁴

The reason for the increase in the number of persons arrested to raise revenue is that the security agencies are able to make arrests without involving the relevant legal bodies. Most arrests are therefore random and take place without serving notices or even accusations that the detainees have committed crimes. Many individuals have been arrested after engaging in the 'reconciliation' process and without having committed any crime.

The regime has probably deployed the security agencies to these three towns to encourage them to compete with one another. In this context, arrests constitute a means of demonstrating the branches' loyalty to the regime.¹⁵ This is expressed through the extent of violations against citizens and the pace of arrests, which branches in towns like Zamalka – which until recently represented the main bastions of Syrian opposition to the regime – use to prove their great loyalty.

Arrests and Conscription

Once the 'reconciliation' procedures with the Syrian authorities were concluded,¹⁶ the towns witnessed a massive campaign of arrests that were intended to support conscription efforts.¹⁷ SAA units arrested dozens of youths between the ages of 18 and 42, most of whom were not enlisted in the Iranian- and Russian-backed paramilitary forces stationed in the towns. The arrests targeted university students, employees, civilians and individuals who had attempted to 'settle' their status. In arrest operations, security and military forces generally surround a particular area, then youths are taken by truck to the '350 Aghrar' Special Forces base in al-Dreij. These draftees are forced to sign papers enlisting them in the ranks of the SAA, and then they are trained. The goal of these military conscription campaigns is probably to remove youths from the towns in which they live and thus diminish the number of individuals who constitute a threat to the stability of the Syrian regime in the short term.

¹⁴ Interview via Skype with a former detainee who was able to leave for Afrin in northern Syria, 6 May 2019.

¹⁵ Maen Tallaa, "Syrian Security Services and Requirements for Structural and Functional Change" (in Arabic), Study (Istanbul, Turkey: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 14 July 2016), <http://bit.ly/2QpQfLg>

¹⁶ The agreement between Faylaq al-Rahman and Russia announced on 23 March 2018 stipulated in one of its clauses that those who wanted to remain in the locality would be able to regularize their status within a period of six months after the conclusion of the surrender agreement.

¹⁷ The Syrian Network for Human Rights, "No Fewer Than 557 Arbitrary Arrests in Syria in May 2018, Most with the Goal of Conscription" (in Arabic), 5 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Hj2hmM>

1.2. Militias in Military Uniforms: Auxiliary Forces

Alongside the security agencies and SAA units, the regime has relied on militias and armed factions to exert its authority. To this end it has formed auxiliary paramilitary forces. The auxiliaries operating in Eastern Ghouta currently include militias like the Baath Brigades and Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas. Russia and Iran support these groups with ammunition, fighters and military training.

The Baath Brigades entered Zamalka following the local elections of 16 September 2018. Since February 2017 they had been operating under the aegis of the Fifth Assault Corps with Russian support.¹⁸ In Eastern Ghouta, Baath Party members and all the fighters in Jaysh al-Wafaa – which was established at the end of 2014¹⁹ – joined the Baath Brigades. The Brigades use Baath party offices to draft into their ranks youths who have joined the party. In exchange, conscripts receive a monthly salary of around 50,000 Syrian pounds (around 87 USD)²⁰ and they are exempted from compulsory service and interrogation by law enforcement.²¹ The Baath Brigades also give their fighters security cards that facilitate crossing checkpoints. Members of the Brigades are also given tasks within the party and wear the party's symbol on their hands. The Baath Brigades cooperate with SAA units and security agencies to suppress the population, and their members receive specific military training to deal with protests. The apparent roles of these brigades in Zamalka are to seize property from people's houses, to blackmail residents to extract ransoms from them and to force them to stop at checkpoints.²²

For its part, Kafr Batna became a headquarters for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-linked Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, which entered the town in May 2018²³ to search for the corpses of Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese fighters who had participated in battles against the armed opposition factions during the war. Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas has engaged in the conscription of youths, who then serve in exchange for monthly salaries estimated at 40,000 Syrian pounds (around 70 USD) together with protection from interrogation and arrest. Two former fighters who previously served in the leadership of Faylaq al-Rahman – Abu Dagher Jadyan and Zaquq al-Bahash, a relative of the president of the municipality²⁴ – oversee conscription efforts in Kafr Batna. They work under the supervision of a former commander in Faylaq al-Rahman's security office, a man called Abu Jamal al-Amm Shanbo from Arbin. None of these three men played any role in negotiating the middle sector's surrender agreement²⁵ but have risen in the ranks of Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas. The brigade has engaged in arrests, gang activity and conscription. 150 former Faylaq al-Rahman members make up the majority of the group's conscripts in Kafr Batna.

¹⁸ Raed al-Salhani, "The Fifth Assault Corps: A Russian Idea to Dissolve Shabiha Militias" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 22 December 2016, <http://bit.ly/2HJR9j5>; Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: the Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria," Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 14 May 2019), <http://bit.ly/2J9hx5z>

¹⁹ Most of the fighters in Jaysh al-Wafaa are from Eastern Ghouta. They left for Damascus because of the intensity of the siege in 2014. This armed faction engaged in numerous battles alongside the regime on the Duma front. The leader of this group is Khalid al-Deyri, from the city of Duma.

²⁰ Given the changes in the value of the Syrian pound relative to the USD in the first six months of 2019, this paper uses the March 2019 value (570 Syrian pounds per USD).

²¹ Interview via internet with a civilian activist in the middle sector, March 2019.

²² Interview via Skype with an activist in the middle sector, March 2019.

²³ The headquarters of Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas is in the town of Mliha, on the Damascus airport road. The brigade has adopted a second headquarters between Kafr Batna and Mliha. Interview via WhatsApp with a journalist, 7 April 2019.

²⁴ Interview via Skype with an activist and humanitarian worker, January 2019.

²⁵ Interview via Skype with activists and journalists in the middle sector, January 2019.

In April 2019, the Usud al-Nimr Forces, affiliated to the Tiger Forces under the leadership of Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan,²⁶ took up positions in Kafr Batna following an attempt by the residents to protest against the behaviour of the Military Intelligence Directorate and its pattern of arrests. In this protest residents wrote slogans on the town's walls stating their opposition to the Assad regime and the Military Intelligence Directorate.²⁷ The regime then used SAA units like the Tiger Forces, which launched a wide campaign of arrests that even targeted Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas militiamen, many of whom were probably former members of Faylaq al-Rahman.

It is worth noting that auxiliary forces have been deployed in accordance with plans of international forces. The Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade gradually grew in Kafr Batna, which is adjacent to Mliha, which has hosted a number of Damascus-aligned Iranian militias since 2014.²⁸ Russia has exerted control over the gateway to the middle sector. To this end, it has employed the Baath Brigades stationed in Zamalka, adjacent to the Damascus neighbourhood of Jobar, which has become a military centre since being taken over. These auxiliary forces follow the regime's repressive policy toward residents of this sector who are not affiliated with any military unit or security agency.

Russia seems to have deployed the Tiger Forces to Kafr Batna in order to parry Iranian influence in the middle sector. The Russian-Iranian rivalry is most clearly manifested in the auxiliary forces' conscription campaigns, the provision of protection and the payment of salaries to those who enlist in these units. Russia has also attempted to restructure the security apparatus. It has deepened its relationship with the General Intelligence Directorate, more commonly known as the 'State Security,' which became responsible for monitoring the inhabitants of Eastern Ghouta in July 2018.²⁹ On Russian advice, on 1 May 2019 the Syrian Ministry of Defence issued a decision to dissolve certain militias and integrate them into SAA units. This process included the Baath Brigades and a number of Iranian-backed militias and aimed to give SAA units control over the military situation.³⁰

It seems that the return of the security state to Eastern Ghouta brought a degree of variation in security and military policies, especially as pertains to arbitrary arrests. Since the regime takeover, Zamalka has witnessed a higher tempo of arrests than Saqba and Kafr Batna. Observers attribute this to Zamalka's distinctive role during the conflict. The town was the centre of operations for armed opposition factions fighting against regime forces; it hosted a command centre for Faylaq al-Rahman, which followed Free Syrian Army principles; and it was a major centre for fighters who had defected from SAA units. Zamalka was also known for the large number of military tunnels that connected it to the towns of Eastern Ghouta and the Damascus neighbourhood of Jobar, which became a military zone. The regime inflicted a great deal of violence on Zamalka during the conflict, and in reasserting its authority over the town it is regaining its ability to use military force to repel any threat to the capital Damascus. To this end, it is following a policy of punishment, especially against the most rebellious areas.

²⁶ The Tiger Forces are a unit of the Special Forces of the SAA that operates primarily as an assault unit. They have participated in efforts to suppress the opposition and have fought numerous battles on behalf of the Syrian regime since 2014, the most important of which was the battle for Aleppo. The Tiger Forces entered the final battle in Eastern Ghouta with full support from Russia in terms of weapons and materiel. They entered Harasta after the surrender.

²⁷ Al-Modon, "Kafr Batna: Freedom Forever" (in Arabic), 9 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2WdXx7f>

²⁸ Montaser Abu Zayd, "Mliha: Completion of Shi'i Stranglehold Around Damascus" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 20 September 2018, <http://bit.ly/2VVO8A6>

²⁹ Raed al-Salhani and Alexander Haddad, "The General Intelligence Directorate: An Arm of Moscow in Damascus" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 20 July 2018, <http://bit.ly/2U6uc0w>

³⁰ MENA Monitor, "Special – Mina: Assad Turns Against Russia Militarily to Appease Iran" (in Arabic), 1 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2MaXfMc>

2. Limited Public Services for Disparate Local Communities

More than a year since the dramatic shift in the military situation in Eastern Ghouta, the return of the regime has not been followed by the return of residents to their homes. Regime policy had contributed to the displacement of more than half of the residents of the middle sector, and only a small proportion of the area's original inhabitants have returned. State institutions are also unable to provide these smaller local communities with public services. The government therefore had no choice but to rely on new actors, including international and local organisations, and to sign partnership agreements with these actors in order to compensate for the state's limited service-provision capacity.

2.1. Destruction of the Social Fabric

Following the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, the towns of Eastern Ghouta hosted large numbers of civil activists from across Syria. In turn, increasing regime violence against protests forced numerous families to flee Eastern Ghouta for Damascus after 2012. The intensification of the siege helped consolidate the division between people from the three towns residing in Damascus and those residing in Eastern Ghouta, and the fierce military campaign of February 2018 led to outright social disintegration. During that campaign, the regime opened safe corridors to allow some civilians to leave, while the surrender agreement negotiated between Russia and Faylaq al-Rahman allowed fighters and their families to flee to northern Syria. The regime's security agencies then facilitated the return of some of the populations of these towns who had fled to Damascus during the siege.

On 10 March 2018 the regime opened safe corridors to Damascus. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Eastern Ghouta were admitted to eight shelters belonging to the Ministry of Social Affairs under the supervision of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate.³¹ Between 10 March and 2 April, these centres admitted 44,474 individuals from the middle sector,³² including residents of Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna.³³ The regime followed a policy of family separation, using separate facilities for men on the one hand and women and children on the other. Displaced persons were also prevented from leaving these centres for Eastern Ghouta or Damascus. The only exceptions to this policy were women, children and the elderly who had relatives in Damascus, who were allowed to leave after applying for 'guest' status.³⁴ As for men between the ages of 18 and 42, they were made to settle their status, were interrogated and were then drafted into compulsory service. After June 2018, people displaced from Eastern Ghouta were able to return to their homes without their male relatives, resulting in the disintegration of families. Around 400 individuals have returned to Kafr Batna, and an estimated 260 individuals have returned to Zamalka.³⁵

³¹ The centres are al-Herjalleh, Najha, al-Nashabiyah, al-Dweir, Adra (the Electricity Institute and Schools Compound), al-Fayhaa and the Akram Abu al-Nasser centre.

³² Office of UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, "UN Syria Response: Eastern Ghouta and Afrin," update, 2 May 2018.

³³ The hosting of refugees was halted because of the end of the war and the end of the exodus from the towns of Eastern Ghouta.

³⁴ Al-Jumhuriya, "Centre for Eastern Ghouta Displaced People in Damascus: The Diverse Syrian Prison" (in Arabic), 9 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2YIDAgf>

³⁵ Interview via Skype with a journalist, 7 April 2019.

Following the surrender agreement in March 2018, 40,890 individuals,³⁶ including fighters, their family members and a number of civil activists, fled to northern Syria. A large number of men left their families behind. 150 young men left from Kafr Batna alone. These individuals were evacuated via Arbin by bus to the countryside around Idlib and Aleppo, and especially Afrin.³⁷

Table 2. Numbers of families displaced to Afrin city and rural Afrin

Kafr Batna		Saqba		Zamalka	
Afrin city	Rural Afrin	Afrin city	Rural Afrin	Afrin city	Rural Afrin
78	2	313	17	189	58
80		330		274	

Source: Census by Rural Damascus Committees in Afrin, and by the Syrian Interim Government, Rural Damascus Governorate, 7 March 2019.

As for the inhabitants who chose to remain in the three towns in the middle sector, the regime intensified its stranglehold on them. Simultaneously, it allowed people from Eastern Ghouta who had been residing in Damascus during the siege to cross checkpoints without inspection or security checks. The latter have therefore been able to return to Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna and repair their damaged houses.³⁸

Table 3. Comparison of numbers of residents between 2004 and 2019

	Number of residents according to the census of 2004	Number of residents in November 2017 (including IDPs)	Number of residents in May 2019 ³⁹
Kafr Batna	22,535	19,544	6,631
Zamalka	44,661	15,039	5,976
Saqba	25,696	27,407	10,246

Source: Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), “Political Demographics: The Markings of the Government of Syria’s Reconciliation Measures in Eastern Ghouta,” 13 December 2018, restricted access.

Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna are examples of social and familial disintegration. Large numbers of the residents of these towns have been displaced to Damascus since 2011. As the chart above makes clear, a small proportion of them have returned since March 2018. Activists have observed that regime practices toward residents who had fled to Damascus before the siege, and those who remained in these towns through the siege, have engendered fear and a lack of trust that have prevented these communities from integrating with one another.⁴⁰

2.2. Restoring Infrastructure and Basic Services

In addition to local social relations, this general deterioration has affected government service provision. Around 70 percent of Eastern Ghouta’s infrastructure was destroyed in the war years.

³⁶ Humanitarian Response Coordinators Syria, “Campaign of Displacement from Eastern Ghouta and Damascus from March 2018 to the Present” (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 21 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2JzROqk>

³⁷ Interview with a member of the Rural Damascus Committees, 7 April 2019.

³⁸ Interview via Skype with a former aid worker from Kafr Batna, 21 January 2019.

³⁹ Data sent to the author via the Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (all figures courtesy of UN agencies and local NGO partners).

⁴⁰ Interview via Skype with a citizen in Eastern Ghouta who interviewed former activists there about the reasons for the lack of integration between local communities, May 2019.

The last military operations in February 2018 caused widespread destruction of housing, state institution buildings and public services. During the conclusion of the agreement with Faylaq al-Rahman, Russia announced that it considered the rehabilitation of damaged buildings a priority. However, restoring and rendering operational war-damaged infrastructure require large amounts of money.

In April 2018 the Syrian government rushed to form a ministerial committee tasked with studying the question of how to return services to Eastern Ghouta, and with creating a timeline for the restoration of infrastructure and public facilities decimated by the war.⁴¹ Under the premiership of Imad Khamis, the government decided to reconstruct Eastern Ghouta by clearing roads, repairing buildings, restoring and reopening Saqba's furniture stores, resolving the issue of tunnels and reviving the area's urban master plan in coordination with the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment and the Ministry of Public Works and Housing.⁴² Following the September 2018 local administrative elections, the government handed the task of restoring basic services like electricity, water and roads to the municipalities. Since early 2019, periodic meetings have been held by the municipalities to discuss the projects that have been implemented. However, the restoration of services in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna has remained slow and uneven.

Basic Services: Electricity and Water

Although Zamalka is considered an urban extension of Damascus, some of its neighbourhoods continued to lack electricity in April 2019. According to the president of the municipality, restoring power was difficult because the town gets its electricity from power plants in Sinjab and Qabun, which have been out of commission since 2016.⁴³ The municipality of Zamalka has been working to restore electricity since May 2019⁴⁴ but some of its residents are still trying to informally connect their homes to the grid, or are relying on diesel generators for power. The power plant in Saqba, which is the main power provider in the middle sector, reopened and provided 12 hours of electricity a day to most of Saqba's neighbourhoods in April 2019. Kafr Batna also received 12 hours of power per day in April.

The water station in Kafr Batna reopened in September 2018, and 75 percent of the town's neighbourhoods now have access to water. In Saqba, 60 percent of neighbourhoods have water access. In Zamalka, residents have resorted to using hand and diesel water pumps, which were widely used during the siege.

Destroyed and Pillaged Infrastructure

There has been a tremendous amount of destruction in Eastern Ghouta as a whole. 34,136 buildings in this area have been damaged, including public facilities, houses, schools and health centres. 9,353 of these buildings have been totally destroyed.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Sana, "Implementing a Matrix of Works to Return Services to Towns of Eastern Ghouta" (in Arabic), 17 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2JA165G>

⁴² Premiership of the Syrian Arab Republic, "Meeting Headed by Engineer Khamis Specifies Executive Procedures to Rebuild and Reconstruct Eastern Ghouta Along a Variety of Organisational and Administrative Axes" (in Arabic), 9 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Een6xJ>

⁴³ One civilian from Zamalka questioned the inability of the municipality of Zamalka to return electricity to the town. Skype interview, April 2019.

⁴⁴ Badie Tayfour, "Following up on the Implementation of Electricity Works in Zamalka" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 16 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2XAkVeX>

⁴⁵ REACH Initiative and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research – Operation Satellite Applications Program, "Syrian Cities Damage Atlas" (Geneva, Switzerland: 20 March 2019), <http://bit.ly/2VqA8hz>

The municipalities continue to promise to remove rubble from the streets. The municipality of Zamalka has gathered funds from residents for this purpose. As of April 2019, rubble removal was limited to the main roads in the middle sector. The state of side roads remained the same as during wartime,⁴⁶ while the main six-kilometre road from the Zablalani area to Jisr Ein Terma, Jisreen, Saqba, Kafr Batna and Zamalka reopened in March 2019.⁴⁷

Moreover, repairing a damaged building requires approval from the security agency responsible for the area in which the building is located. But permission is not granted to all residents⁴⁸ and is often denied on the pretext that repairs do not fit within the government's existing reconstruction plan.⁴⁹ Therefore, numerous residents have resorted to selling their homes at deflated prices because they are unable to make their buildings habitable.⁵⁰ The Ministry of Finance has also expropriated the property of certain residents of these towns under a seizure decision issued in accordance with Counter-Terrorism Law No. 19 of 2012⁵¹ and Legislative Decree No. 63 of 2012, which concerns crimes against the security of the state.⁵² Individuals subject to this seizure decision include leaders of armed factions, members of local councils, media activists and employees of civil and aid organisations who had fled to northern Syria. Moreover, the Ministry of Local Administration is tasked with implementing Law No. 10 of 2018, which covers the towns of Eastern Ghouta⁵³ and permits the establishment of redevelopment zones where the state has the right to expropriate properties for which ownership is not proven within a few months.⁵⁴ As of May 2019, this law has not been put into effect in the three localities but the local population remains threatened by arbitrary laws and expulsion from their towns of residence.

Priority for Schools

Schools in this area suffered near-total destruction during the war. However, the Syrian government focused on reopening schools in time for the beginning of the school year starting in September 2018. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, the Directorate of Education was able to reopen six schools in Kafr Batna, twelve in Saqba and eight in Zamalka, which serve all levels.⁵⁵ But it did so without repairing them: doors, windows and seats remained damaged and students suffered from poor heating during the winter and a lack of basic necessities for learning. In June 2019, only 15 percent of primary school students were provided with textbooks and there were averages of 24 classes per school and 45 students per class.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Interview via Skype with a civilian activist, April 2019.

⁴⁷ Interview with an aid worker who visited Eastern Ghouta many times during 2019.

⁴⁸ This is especially true for families in which a family member is a former activist, fighter, civil society worker or doctor. Interview via Skype with a civilian in Kafr Batna, April 2019.

⁴⁹ Majid Hallaq, "Regime Prevents House Repairs in Eastern Ghouta... How Does Iran Benefit?" (in Arabic), *Syria Television*, 27 September 2018, <http://bit.ly/2InhqD3>

⁵⁰ Interview via Skype with a journalist, May 2019.

⁵¹ Syrian Arab Republic – People's Assembly, "Law No. 19 of 2012 on Counter-Terrorism" (in Arabic), 28 July 2012, <http://bit.ly/2VQ64wH>

⁵² Syrian Arab Republic – People's Assembly, "Legislative Decree No. 63 of 2012 on the Powers of Judicial Authorities" (in Arabic), 16 September 2012, <http://bit.ly/2w62fZa>

⁵³ Sana, "President Assad Issues Law Authorizing Creation of Development Zones within Urban Plan" (in Arabic), 2 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2KYMTjp>

⁵⁴ Most residents are unable to prove their ownership given that most have lost the relevant documents and are unable to recover these documents in the three towns, given the scale of displacement.

⁵⁵ Interview via Skype with a civilian activist, April 2019.

⁵⁶ For example, 1,350 students joined the primary school level in one of the schools in Kafr Batna, and 1,300 the primary and secondary school levels in one of the schools in Saqba. Interview via Skype with one of the teachers in Kafr Batna, June 2019.

The three localities also suffer from a lack of teachers because of low salaries: teachers receive 40,000 Syrian pounds (around 70 USD) a month, which has made many leave the profession. Some have also stopped teaching due to a requirement that teachers join the Baath party, and others are unable to teach because they have been drafted into compulsory service.⁵⁷

The Syrian government seems to lack sufficient funds to cover basic services in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna. It is therefore forced to rely on external and non-governmental resources, and forge partnerships with United Nations agencies and other international organisations to fund public services.

2.3. The Restoration of Public Services: Main Actors

When the Syrian regime regained control over Eastern Ghouta in March 2018, it dissolved all the local councils and civil society organisations that had provided aid and public services to residents during the siege. This resulted in a vacuum in service provision in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna.

In the besieged areas, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) was responsible for providing humanitarian assistance through inter-agency convoys in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).⁵⁸ At the beginning of 2018, OCHA coordinated with cross-border organisations to put in place a humanitarian response plan to meet Eastern Ghouta's needs stemming from the deteriorating situation.⁵⁹ OCHA has continued to operate in this area since the return of the regime. It implemented the humanitarian response plan in April 2018.⁶⁰ Since then, it has been cooperating with the relevant ministries and organisations registered with the Syrian government. Alongside UN agencies, some international NGOs registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)⁶¹ resumed their activities in Eastern Ghouta following the conclusion of the surrender agreement, in partnership with certain local associations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA).⁶² Christian and Islamic religious charities are also active. The Baath party has also operated and forged partnerships in these areas through its various associations.

For example, international organisations like Oxfam and the Norwegian Refugee Council are allowed to operate in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna to cover the gap in the restoration of infrastructure, services and buildings damaged during the war. These organisations provide sanitation services and equipment, which helps compensate for the lack of electricity, in addition to providing water from tanks and reservoirs and removing debris.

As pertains to health, UNICEF coordinates with the Ministry of Health and SARC to provide mobile clinics that serve the three towns. The SARC and the United Nations Population Fund visit each town once a week. The Ministry of Health has also repaired Kafr Batna hospital⁶³ and clinics in Zamalka

⁵⁷ Marie al-Omari, "On the Eve of Exams: Schools of Eastern Ghouta Without Teachers," *Enab Baladi*, 16 December 2018, <http://bit.ly/2MLh9Py>

⁵⁸ The UN office used to present requests for approval to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to bring humanitarian aid convoys into besieged areas.

⁵⁹ Direct observation by the researcher through regular communications with civil society organisations in 2018.

⁶⁰ OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Eastern Ghouta – Response to the Eastern Ghouta Crisis in Rural Damascus – Situation Report No. 4," 12-18 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2Xv3Esr>

⁶¹ The MFA grants registration to international NGOs and assigns one of the following national organisations to oversee their operations: SARC, the Syrian Family Planning Association, the Child's Rights Society or the Syria Trust for Development.

⁶² NGOs operate in Syria according to Law No. 93 of 1958. They operate as associations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs. They are registered on approval by the four main security branches, which also oversee their activities and the projects they implement. The Syrian Arab Republic – People's Assembly, "Law No. 93 of 1958, Law of Associations and Private Institutions and its Amendments" (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2JtOXvY>

⁶³ Council of Kafr Batna, "Restoration of Kafr Batna Clinic by Ministry of Health Following Donation to Ministry by Anti-Tuberculosis Association" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 24 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2NjGZKT>

and Saqba. Some INGOs and local associations, like the Monastery of Saint James the Mutilated and Al Tamayoz for Orphan Sponsorship, provide vaccines and basic medicines. These services target marginalized members of the population like the elderly, those with special needs and widows. SARC ambulances also transport pregnant women to Damascus hospitals. Despite the involvement of these NGOs, and their cooperation with the Ministry of Health, needs in the three towns remain great.

In the education sector, a large number of international organisations work through local associations in cooperation with the Ministry of Education to cover the major gap in basic needs, repair schools, sponsor school activities and campaigns to return children to school and build child-friendly spaces. Christian religious organisations are especially active in this respect, including the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East's Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development in cooperation with UNICEF, and the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee. Al Tamayoz for Orphan Sponsorship, which is funded by the UNHCR, and the Child's Rights Society, which is funded by donations from a large number of businessmen, are also active in this field.

Certain other associations, such as the Mobadarah Sham organization in Saqba and the al-Nada charity, provide psychological support, awareness-raising against violence, and food supplies to needy families. Moreover, the Syria Trust for Development provides legal advice and takes up cases involving prisoners, enforced disappearances and families that have lost their papers. This institution is run by First Lady Asma al-Assad and works with the families of the missing and detainees in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batha in coordination with the Syria Trust community centre in the neighbourhood of Berzeh, known as Manarat Berzeh.⁶⁴

Most of these associations are subordinate to the Ministry of Social Affairs and operate in coordination with OCHA and the relevant ministries. This suggests that the funds they spend on rehabilitation projects come from OCHA. The Syrian government has also created space for charitable associations funded by religious institutions – especially Christian ones – to work in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna.⁶⁵

In forging partnerships with UN agencies and international NGOs, the Syrian government has found a means of transitioning to the post-conflict stage. In pushing international organisations to cover the gap left by the government's lack of funds, the Syrian regime is likely to find a means of coping with the destruction of the built-up and social infrastructure of Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna.

Nevertheless, economic activity has not resumed in the three towns. In Saqba, for instance, the town's famous furniture markets were destroyed during the war.⁶⁶ Prime Minister Imad Khamis ordered the furniture stores to reopen, but many store owners in the area report that they are unable to reopen their stores because doing so requires the approval of the Political Security Directorate,⁶⁷ according to a memo issued by the Ministry of Local Administration.

Moreover, although the Ministry of Agriculture claimed on 17 April 2018 that the orchards of Eastern Ghouta were being cultivated and that the farmers of Kafr Batna could still sell their harvests to merchants in town and deliver them to Damascus, the farmers remain unable to plant because their orchards were burnt during the last military operation.

⁶⁴ Syria Trust cooperates on legal issues with the Ministry of the Interior and the Civil Affairs Department.

⁶⁵ Most of the information about the organizations present in the three towns was gathered by a humanitarian worker in Damascus who collected this information through direct observation and interviews with numerous NGOs active in Eastern Ghouta between 27 May and 8 June 2019. Not all of the NGOs that were able to enter Eastern Ghouta are named in this paper because many of them worked for limited periods of time.

⁶⁶ Saqba has been distinguished for its trade in furniture and handicrafts since the 1970s.

⁶⁷ Syrian Arab Republic – Ministry of Local Administration, Damascus Governorate, "Licensing of Remaining Handicrafts like Knitting, Blacksmithing, Metalworking, Fabric Working, Chocolate and Pastry Making, Coffee Grinding and Woodworking" (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2QWGwwx>

3. Networks of Trust

Since the SAA and the security agencies have returned to Eastern Ghouta, the Syrian regime has attempted to restore its power in Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna. It has done this through the Baath party – Syria’s vanguard party and the base of support for state institutions and local administrative councils. It has also used new figures who emerged during the negotiations of March 2018 and played a role in facilitating the reassertion of regime military control over the towns. At the same time, the regime has benefitted from normalizing its relationship with religious authorities who still played an active role in the towns by establishing partnerships with the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which is known to hold close links to the Baath party.

3.1. The Baath Party as the Leading Party in Society and State

Prior to the local elections of September 2018, the Baath party issued Decision No. 108 of 2018 through its Regional Assistant Secretary-General.⁶⁸ This decision set the criteria that must be met for candidacy on the National Unity lists.⁶⁹ The elections were held with Iranian support, and the Baath regional leadership received two million USD to organise them.⁷⁰ The National Unity lists were issued in the absence of a propaganda campaign in Eastern Ghouta. 70 percent of the lists were made up of Baath party members. Following an eight-year absence, the party has returned to the political and social life of the three towns to support the Syrian regime.

The Party and the Local Administrative Councils

The Baath party emerged in its new form in the towns of Eastern Ghouta with the publication of the results of the local administrative elections. In Kafr Batna, for instance, Bassam al-Khatib won the municipal presidency. He was a previously unknown figure in the Baath party from a middle-class family in Kafr Batna. However, the Baath regional leadership issued a decision to remove him and appoint Tawfiq al-Bahash in his place without giving any official reason.⁷¹ Al-Bahash was president of the Baath party branch and head of the Kafr Batna municipality before 2011. He has a close relationship with the Syrian government, the Fourth Division and the Republican Guards. He played a role in the reconciliation process alongside Bassam Dafdaa, a sheikh from Kafr Batna, by promising the population that no one would face interrogation by the security agencies after surrendering. It is worth noting that Tawfiq al-Bahash is a member of an important wealthy Kafr Batna family. Other such families are the Tomeh, Blour and Dafdaa families.

In Saqba, the lawyer Khalid al-Quwatly was named president of the municipality. He had occupied the same position previously, and his family was well known before 2011 for its loyalty to the regime. Wajih Khamis – a relative of prominent Baath Party member Prime Minister Imad Khamis⁷² – was appointed as an independent candidate on the National Unity list. Wajih Khamis participated in the Saqba reconciliation agreement, as did the Prime Minister, who called on people to form civilian and military negotiation committees to reach an agreement with the regime in an attempt to render the town neutral during the last military campaign. Samir Obeid was also granted a seat in the

⁶⁸ Agnes Favier and Marie Kostrz, “Local Elections: is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?” Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project, European University Institute, 12 February 2019), <http://bit.ly/2wpMPiF>

⁶⁹ Osama Abu Zayd, “Local Administrative Elections: Who Woke up the Baath Party?” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 8 September 2018, <http://bit.ly/2WcCNzC>

⁷⁰ Majd al-Khatib, “What Does Iran Want from the Local Administrative Elections?” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 16 September 2018, <http://bit.ly/2HcuuT>

⁷¹ Interview via Skype with activists, January 2019.

⁷² Al-Jazeera, “Imad Khamis ... Assad’s Internationally Sanctioned Prime Minister” (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2GC9cHi>

municipality. Obeid is a relative of retired Colonel Osama Obeid and he also had an intermediary role in the reconciliation process. The Obeid and Khamis families are two of the most prominent families in Saqba and are known for having a number of talented family members. The Khamis family is considered one of the wealthiest families in town.

In Zamalka, Badie Tayfour – who had taken a position against the revolutionary movement – was appointed president of the municipality. Tayfour had occupied the same position before 2011 and had also worked as an educational counsellor in the Ministry of Education. His nephews fought in the ranks of Faylaq al-Rahman during the siege.

The local elections concluded with the return of the same figures to the municipal administrations under party sponsorship. Given that under Syrian law these figures could not remain in their positions without winning elections, the party needed to occupy the electoral scene in order to return them to these elected positions.

Baath Party Offices

Following the local elections, the Baath party opened branch offices that included recruitment centres. The party holds meetings in the municipalities and in its own centres. It invites the local population to attend and to enlist in the Baath Brigades, and emphasizes the importance of their ‘reconciliation’ with the regime.⁷³

The party coordinates with the Syrian government, constituting a link between recruitment and employment in state institutions. Indeed, it is incumbent upon all state employees to join the party if they hope to return to their jobs in one of the three towns. As a citizen of Saqba remarked, “I was unable to return to my job in the water administration until I had filled out my ‘reconciliation’ documents and secured my approval for recruitment by the Baath party.”⁷⁴ Students who want to return to university must also join the party before they can secure approval.⁷⁵

The relationship between schools and the Baath party has also been revitalized. The Baath Vanguard organisation has come to exert influence in primary schools through its activity among students, just as the Revolutionary Youth Union and the Union of Syrian Students have returned to preparatory and secondary schools. Since the party’s activities have restarted, they have revolved around celebrations of national occasions like March 8th and the Corrective Movement. Members of the leadership of the Eastern Ghouta branch have also taken students on tours of the military positions in Zamalka that had belonged to Faylaq al-Rahman. The party is, moreover, working with school teachers to deepen its influence, to highlight the importance of joining the party and working within its ranks, and to enjoin people to take part in the activities that it is organizing in schools.⁷⁶

The reality is that the three towns have witnessed significant transformations with the return of the Syrian regime. It appears that one of the goals of the local elections was to bring the Baath party back in order to rebuild the mechanisms of social control traditionally exerted by the party and to allow it to administer certain sectors of the state. The local elections also enabled trusted figures who had helped bring about the return of the regime to obtain municipal seats. The party has most likely entered schools to oversee the affairs of students and their families, and to consolidate its role starting from Syrians’ childhood.

⁷³ Interview via Skype with a journalist, February 2019.

⁷⁴ Interview via Skype with a citizen, March 2019.

⁷⁵ Interview via Skype with a journalist, March 2019.

⁷⁶ Interview via Skype with an activist, April 2019.

3.2. Religious Institutions and Intermediary Sheikhs

Social and political conditions were not the same in the three towns during the last military campaign against the middle sector. Kafr Batna and Saqba were distinguished by the presence of intermediaries who tied them closely to the Syrian government, facilitating the entry of SAA units into the two towns on 17 March 2018. In an unprecedented event, demonstrators in Saqba and Kafr Batna welcomed SAA units into the two towns after eight years of absence and celebrated the halt of bombardments. As for Zamalka, negotiations continued between Faylaq al-Rahman and Russia until 23 March, and the surrender agreement guaranteed that the residents and IDPs in the town would be granted protection. This contrast shaped the post-conflict era in the three towns.

In this context, Bassam Dafdaa emerged as an intermediary in Kafr Batna. He is from an important old family that has produced sheikhs of high stature in the town. Dafdaa is a Sufi sheikh who taught at the Fatah Islamic Institute and was elected to the People's Assembly before 2011. During the siege he gave religious lessons in Kafr Batna and had many students. Since the regime took Jisreen, he has worked to form a reconciliation delegation, which 400 individuals ultimately joined, including fighters who had defected from Faylaq al-Rahman. Dafdaa thus participated in facilitating the entry of the SAA into the town. Simultaneously, he was coordinating with the Fourth Division and the Kafr Batna municipal president, Tawfiq al-Bahash. He was also in communication with the Fatah Islamic Institute in Damascus⁷⁷ and certain religious leaders through the 'Young Imams.'⁷⁸ He worked to convince people to remain in Kafr Batna rather than leave for northern Syria, making promises guaranteeing that no individual would face interrogation or investigation by the security agencies. Two other sheikhs from Kafr Batna emerged alongside Dafdaa – Ahmad Saadiyeh and Abd al-Khaleq Wehbe – before they were assassinated by Faylaq al-Rahman.⁷⁹ After the regime took control of the town, Dafdaa was appointed by the Ministry of Religious Endowments as imam of the main mosque in Kafr Batna. With his close relationship with the Baath Party and the Fourth Division, he plays the role of intermediary between the security agencies and the families of detainees who want to know the fate of their children. In Saqba, Zaher Abou al-Joz emerged to play an important role during the reconciliation process. He used his pulpit to preach that it was incumbent on the people of the town to 'return to the protection of the state'. After the regime took control of the town, the Ministry of Religious Endowments appointed Abou al-Joz to the imamate of the Safa mosque in Saqba and entrusted him with supervising the municipality's delivery of services.

These links between the regime and the sheikhs suggest that the Ministry of Religious Endowments plays an important role in managing the relationship between Sunni religious institutions and regime policy. For decades – since the Hafez al-Assad era – the state has understood the religious question from the perspective of security policy.⁸⁰ When Bashar al-Assad gained power, the Sunni institutions witnessed a variety of transformations as Assad asserted his control over them starting in 2008.⁸¹ When the uprising broke out in 2011, the Sunni institutions were divided between those who sided with the regime and those who joined the opposition.

⁷⁷ Layla Rifai, "Syrian Regime Has Given the Fatah Islamic Institute Influence, but at What Cost?" (in Arabic), *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2 January 2019, <http://bit.ly/2WnxU6Z>

⁷⁸ Khalid al-Khatib, "The Sunni 'Religious Youth:' Preaching for Regime 'Butchery' Against the 'Lost Sheep'" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 1 September 2018, <http://bit.ly/2EyqkwI>

⁷⁹ Enab Baladi, "Abd al-Khaleq Wehbe Was Not Killed Recently in Kafr Batna... Details About Finding His Corpse" (in Arabic), 18 August 2018, <http://bit.ly/2FzyxQL>

⁸⁰ Hadeel al-Saidawi, "How Syria's Regime Used Local Clerics to Reassert Its Authority in Rural Damascus Governorate" (in Arabic), *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 17 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Yj23Cn>

⁸¹ Layla Rifai, previous reference.

The Syrian regime worked to support the clergy through the Ministry of Religious Endowments, issuing Legislative Decree No. 16 of 2018, and then amendments to it in Law 31 of 2018.⁸² These laws augmented the Ministry's effort to strengthen the regime's relationship with the clergy, as in the cases of Sheikh Bassam Dafdaa in Kafr Batna and Sheikh Zaher Abou al-Joz in Saqba.

It is by these means that the regime has made alliances with new religious figures who have gained more prominent roles following the surrender agreements. It has used these figures to influence local communities that suffered from the military campaign by directing religious discourse from mosque pulpits supervised by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. The regime has also given these religious figures a social role, establishing connections between local communities, the security agencies and service-provision institutions. Thus, it has allowed them to monitor the provision of basic services by the municipalities and to act as intermediaries for the security agencies in determining the fates of prisoners. It has thereby integrated them into the process in which local communities are coming to rely on state structures to meet their needs.

Whether they act as religious or political intermediaries, these figures share their loyalty to the Syrian regime. This loyalty is the only factor that gave them their prestigious positions within their communities. Moreover, the Baath Party's recovery of its role in state institutions guarantees that the regime maintains control over society and influence over trusted personalities. The regime has thereby consolidated its mechanisms of social and political control.

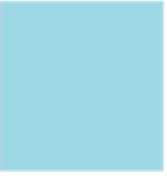
⁸² Sana, "President Assad issues Law No. 31 Organizing the Ministry of Religious Endowments" (in Arabic), 12 October 2018, <http://bit.ly/2LS3jdT>

Conclusion

The Syrian regime has succeeded in reasserting its authority and recovering its role in the administration of Zamalka, Saqba and Kafr Batna using military, security, social and political power. However, it has not been able to impose its authority without recourse to various local and international forces, and without coordinating with them in the implementation of its security, political and social policies.

At the security and military levels, the Syrian regime was unable to assert its control without relying on Iranian-backed auxiliary forces and Russian support for certain security agencies and military units. At the political level, the regime has resorted to local political and religious intermediaries under the aegis of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the Baath party to shroud its policies in legitimacy and control society in the post-surrender context. At the social level, the regime has forged partnerships with humanitarian organizations with the aim of making up for the weakness of state institutions in guaranteeing basic services in the fields of education, health, water and electricity.

There is no doubt that the regime has established its presence in Eastern Ghouta, even though it relies on various mechanisms and networks to deepen its authority, and on other actors to enact its policies. The regime's fragility has shaped its role in the areas that were outside its control during the war years. It is no longer capable of ensuring long-term stability alone.



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