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The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime-Sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities

Ayman Aldassouky and Sinan Hatahet

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**

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The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime-Sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities

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Executive Summary

The shift towards a market-based economy during the early 2000s prompted the Syrian regime to adopt a new flexible framework of authoritarian governance. This flexibility was partially manifested in the government encouraging Syrian civil society to compensate for the gradual state withdrawal from social welfare, but under its tutelage and supervision. Following the eruption of the Syrian revolution, the state increased its military expenditure to fight the opposition armed groups, and the country's infrastructure suffered much damage. To respond to the quickly deteriorating economic situation, government-organised non-governmental organisations (GO-NGOs) and loyalist charities were tasked with attracting international donations to finance service provision, to implement a large-scale reward system for Assad loyalists and to recruit volunteers for pro-regime militias and organisations.

The majority of loyalist associations rely on aid financed directly or indirectly by UN agencies. They usually start by providing food and energy supplies to loyalist communities. In a later stage, they gradually upgrade their role and begin engaging in service provision in water, sanitation and early recovery projects. As their expenditure increases, they diversify their revenue sources and invest in different ventures and activities such as the provision of micro-credits, rubble removal, small infrastructure projects and health services.

The evolution of these associations during the conflict shows three significant outcomes. First, the regime has instrumentalised GO-NGOs to exercise tighter control over UN-led humanitarian aid efforts and to provide assistance to its constituents. Second, the regime's closest associates have used organisations to boost their influence and consequently compete with their peers over the spoils from the associative field. Third, armed groups have shown a strong tendency to assert their local authority by providing services and infrastructure projects, thus increasing their autonomy.

Introduction

Over recent decades, the global focus on private sector development has paved the way for interest in the social role of civil society in Syria and the Arab world. This interest has triggered a socio-economic transformation as the Syrian regime was looking for alternatives to state-led social welfare. Since Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, public expenditure has increased but the state was still unable to meet its welfare obligations.¹ To remedy the dangerous implications of growing poverty, the regime eventually eased its restrictions on civil society and initiated a new phase in the associative sector. In this context, charities in Damascus and Aleppo increased in numbers and quickly became key actors in the field of social welfare provision in the next ten years.

A conventional neoliberal assumption is that such a transformation is an early indicator of the emergence of a new political class capable of challenging incumbent regimes over time.² Nevertheless, Steven Heydemann describes these dynamics in the Arab world as part of an “authoritarian upgrading” in which Arab regimes adapt to pressure for reform and political change.³ Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik agree to a large degree but argue that the Syrian regime chose this path unwittingly and conclude that authoritarian upgrading has reached its limit in Syria.⁴ Similarly, in one of the rare books on the subject, Laura Ruiz De Elvira states that the socio-political transformation witnessed between 2000 and 2010 reflected the unravelling of the old social contract and eroded the regime’s legitimacy, sowing the seeds of the 2011 uprising.⁵ Despite the absence of reliable statistics and the difficulty in accessing information, other studies have also attempted to evaluate the impact and shape of the associative sector in this period.⁶

The post-2011 associative landscape in regime-controlled areas is diverse and complex. It consists of legally registered and regulated NGO structures either under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour or the Ministry of Religious Endowment; informal charities associated with a plethora of social and military actors such as warlords, armed groups, business cronies, pious wealthy individuals, urban middle-class professionals; and local solidarity groups. These actors differ greatly in their modus operandi, orientations, relations with the regime and the international community, and the scope of their activities. A host of research papers have delved into different aspects of the Syrian associative sector, including the finances, beneficiaries, memberships and autonomy of associations, but the

¹ Samir Aïta et al., “Syria Country Profile. The Road Ahead for Syria,” Report (Cairo, France: *Economic Research Forum (ERF), Egypt and Institut de la Méditerranée*, August 2005), <https://bit.ly/2Mrfbki>

² Charles Tripp, “States, Elites and the ‘Management of Change,’” in *The State and Global Change*, Haasan Hakimian and Ziba Moshaver, (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 211-231; Toby Carrol and Darryl Jarvis, “The New Politics of Development: Citizens, Civil Society, and the Evolution of Neoliberal Development Policy,” *Globalizations*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2 April 2015, 281-304, <https://bit.ly/3eMonMp>

³ Steven Heydemann, “Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World,” Analysis Paper (Washington, D.C.: *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution*, 2007), <https://brook.gs/3gQc1oo>

⁴ Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, “Limits of ‘Authoritarian Upgrading’ in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41(4), (2009): 595-614, <https://bit.ly/2MrVsRK>

⁵ Laura Ruiz De Elvira, *Towards the End of the Social Contract in Syria: Charitable Associations and Redeployment of the State (2000-2011)* (in French), Karthala Editions, 2019.

⁶ Kjetil Selvik, “Business and Social Responsibility in the Arab World: The Zakat vs. CSR Models in Syria and Dubai,” *Comparative sociology*, 12(1), (2013): 95-123, <https://bit.ly/305cjle>; Sakina Boukhaima, “The Associative Movement in Syria” (in French) in *Pouvoirs et Associations dans le Monde Arabe*, Sarah Ben Nefissa, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002), 77-94; Mathieu Le Saux, “Freedom of Association and the Contradictory Dynamics of Syrian Civil Society” (in French), *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115-116 (2006): 193-209, <https://bit.ly/2A0MJTM>

regime's capacity to control it remains a subject of debate.⁷ Moreover, the philanthropic role of al-Assad's inner circle and loyalist armed groups has been understudied despite their active involvement in maintaining and reconstructing the regime's patronage networks both within loyalist associative communities and in areas it has recently regained from the opposition. This study attempts to fill this gap by investigating the motivations, tools, strategies and affiliations of some government-organised non-governmental organisations (GO-NGOs) and charities associated with armed groups.

This paper argues that the Syrian associative situation in regime-held areas during the conflict has evolved according to the regime's needs and has consequently involved different roles and responsibilities. While attracting international funds to compensate for the lack of public funds to provide basic services has remained a constant mission for these non-state actors, they have also assisted al-Assad regime in recruiting volunteers, arming militants, controlling access to aid and paying compensation to families of fallen soldiers and officers. The sheer volume of assistance needed to respond to the humanitarian crisis has also led to the emergence of a new class of philanthropists which includes warlords and militia leaders, increasing their autonomy and bestowing new responsibilities and authority on them. However, this obligation has also expanded their sphere of influence among the regime's social base and within its closest circles, creating new rivalries and sometimes putting them at odds with the presidential palace.

The paper starts with a brief but necessary description of the Syrian associative sector before the war. It then delves into the activities, funding and networks of relations of three main GO-NGOs: the Syria Trust for Development, the al-Bustan Charity Foundation and the al-Foz Charity Society. Next, the paper investigates the social welfare controlled by the National Defence Forces (a network of local loyalist militants) and the Local Defence Forces (a network of Iranian-backed fighters) to assess their governance and service-provision ambitions. The choice of these different actors is motivated by their engagement with the regime and the loyalist communities and their geographical distribution: along the Syrian coast, where the largest pro-regime communities live; in Homs, where the central authority of the State has greatly diminished; and in Aleppo, where Iranian-backed militias are still in control. The study mainly relies on public reports and fifteen interviews conducted between March and April 2020 with clerks and activists working in the associative field, including staff and volunteers.

⁷ Reinouds Leenders and Kholoud Mansour, "Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War," *Political Science Quarterly*, 2018, 133(2), 225-258. Jose Ciro Martínez, "Topological Twists in the Syrian Conflict: Re-thinking Space Through Bread," *Review of International Studies*, 2020, 46(1), 121-136. Center for Operational Analysis and Research, "Function Over Form: Rethinking Civil Society in Government-held Syria," February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2AU9toI>. Laura Ruiz de Elvira, "From Local Revolutionary Action to Exiled Humanitarian Work: Activism in Local Social Networks and Communities' Formation in the Syrian Post-2011 Context," *Social Movement Studies*, 2019, 18(1), 36-55. Assaad Al-Achi, "How Syrian Civil Society Lost its Independence in a War of Conflicting Agendas", *Carnegie*, 15 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3cO76Rt>

1. State Offloading and Maintaining Control

Under the rule of Hafez al-Assad, social, economic and political organisations were organised to support the authority of the regime rather than the economic welfare of the Syrian people. Festering with corruption and weakened by the decrease in oil rent and the growing population, this model in due course consumed itself and encouraged the regime to adapt and find new ways to underpin its rule. Often described as ‘reforms,’ the Syrian state underwent several waves of economic liberalisation, notably in the late 1980s and particularly after 2000 when Bashar al-Assad assumed power. During Bashar’s first decade of rule, the state’s readjustment aimed to introduce market relations in the economy while gradually ending decades of central planning. In 2005, the Tenth Five-Year Plan called for the “abolishing of expenditure that distorted prices and impacted production.”⁸ This meant dismantling the direct and indirect subsidy system. It also called for the establishment of cooperation between the state and society under the title of public-private partnership agreements (PPP). In theory these partnerships were meant to coordinate the activity of the state and the public and private sectors on an equal basis, but in practice they were reduced to contractual relationships between the state and the private sector ushering the Syrian economy into a phase of extreme liberalisation. Through these contracts, regime business cronies were able to manage and run the banking, tourism, media, real estate and telecommunication sectors. In exchange, their charitable arms were given responsibility for maintaining and managing certain public institutions.

This transformation eventually led to a revitalisation of Syrian civil society, which has evolved into a state partner. From the Baath coup in 1963 until 2005, the number of Syrian NGOs did not exceed 650, and fewer than 50 new organisations were authorised during this period. The associative field was mostly confined to charitable organisations founded and operated by religious institutions. By 2010, the number of associations had grown to 1485, with diverse interests such as development, environment protection, culture, advocacy and health services.⁹ The gradual roll-back of state social policies increased and so did the NGOs’ room for manoeuvre. It is worth noting that the ‘associative boom’ (2005-2008) coincided with the deterioration of Assad’s international position, particularly with the ramifications of Rafiq al-Hariri’s assassination and failing US-Syrian relations. The regime was not only looking for a partner to ease its financial burden but it was also seeking to appease the Syrian people through the renewal of civil society.

Benefiting from a relative détente between the regime and traditional Islamists in the mid-1990s, the Islamic charitable sector had a head start. It was already re-establishing itself when Assad finally eased restrictions on civil society in the following years. Moreover, Sunni urban merchants and businessmen have typically conceptualised their acts of charity with reference to Islam and thus have associated it with offering alms (Sadaqat and Zakat), privileging Islamic charities and further expanding their networks and influence. However, not all Islamic networks benefited in the same way: regime-friendly Imams and Sheikhs did not succeed in increasing their popularity. The urban mid-class typically mistrusted these religious figures, either because they simply associated them with the regime or because they suspected them of corruption,¹⁰ and generally donated their zakat to more ‘independent’ Imams.¹¹ The fall-out between the regime and many of the Islamic charities such

⁸ Samer Abboud, “Locating the ‘Social’ in the Social Market Economy,” in *Syria from Reform to Revolt 1* (2015), Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl: 45-66.

⁹ Laura Ruiz De Elvira, “State-Charities Relations in Syria: Between Reinforcement, Control and Coercion,” in *Civil Society and the State in Syria: The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility*, Laura Ruiz de Elvira and Tina Zintl, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012), <https://bit.ly/2XWBlAr>

¹⁰ Ahmad Kaftaro’s son was persecuted for public fund embezzlement following his father’s death. Abdullah Dak Bab, head of Damascus Waqf Islamic Endowments, was also arrested for fraudulent activities.

¹¹ Interview with an industrialist in Damascus over social media, 21 March 2020.

as Jamaat Zayd began in summer 2008. Bashar al-Assad's need for religious clerics had considerably diminished as Syria's international position improved and his priorities had shifted, seeking to project a modern and liberal image of Syria. Accordingly, the Ministry of Religious Endowments proclaimed measures to control and curb the expansion of Sunni networks, and ultimately forced them to take a step backwards.¹²

At the same time, NGOs established and sponsored by liberal businessmen or cronies associated with the regime remained elitist and failed to reach out to modest Syrian communities. The majority of these new associations were established within the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework, a concept supported by the UN Global Compact project to increase the private sector's financial contribution to the social welfare of the community. From the regime's point of view, the CSR framework was a lever to reduce public expenditure and also an opportunity to produce a new pattern of authoritarian rule while maintaining a deceitful façade of civic pluralism. To contain the associative sector, al-Assad urged his family network to participate in the CSR framework and to use it as a platform to monopolise certain activities and networks in the civil society scene in a corporatist fashion.¹³ The marginalisation of Damascene and Alepine Islamic relief networks would further facilitate this task, creating new venues for a circle of new social entrepreneurs to emerge and frame the purpose and work of the associative field.

To finance these new ventures, the Syrian associative field had to attract international donations and funds.¹⁴ The number of GO-NGOs mushroomed during the 2000s with a focus on environmental, cultural, developmental and women's rights issues. The regime sponsored and encouraged their establishment as part of its 'authoritarian upgrade' but also in response to global trends and interests. The influence of the international CSR discourse was undeniably felt in Syria and rejuvenating Syrian civil society was meant to discipline liberalisation aspirations in addition to replacing the old popular organisations. Nonetheless, few companies ended up adopting coherent CSR strategies,¹⁵ and the broader private sector was far less receptive to the concept, favouring the zakat framework and privileging donations via traditional channels.

The eruption of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 was perceived as both a challenge and an opportunity for some ambitious religious leaders. Able to preserve their influence and charity networks despite the tighter control of the state, several Sheikhs surfed the wave of growing discontent, while others showed more restraint and volunteered to play a mediating role between the regime and the mass of protestors.¹⁶ Often described as instigators of the uprising, in reality Sunni religious leaders were mostly reactionaries rather than masterminds of the revolution. Cornered into adopting the revolutionary demands, partly because their mosques became hotbeds of dissent and partly because of their constituency's early engagement in the uprising, these social figures quickly became targets of the regime oppression machine. By early 2012, most notable Sheikhs were either forced to leave the country or to retreat from the public sphere. The following crackdown on Islamic relief networks was primarily motivated by security concerns. However, it was also the culmination of a regime policy to reclaim complete control over the associative field after a temporary opening in the early 2000s.

¹² One of the measures in place, was a ban on any Imam registered at the Ministry of Religious Endowment registering on any association's board of directors. Sariya al-Rifa'i, for instance, renounced the Hifth al-Ni'ma presidency and handed it over to his lieutenant.

¹³ Ruiz De Elvira, "State-Charities Relations in Syria."

¹⁴ Le Saux, "Freedom of Association and the Contradictory Dynamics of Syrian Civil Society."

¹⁵ The list of CSR-compliant entities was dominated by big companies with strong political connections. It counted companies like Syriatel and Gulsands Petroleum (Rami Makhoulf), the Syria Trust (Asma al-Assad) the United Group (Majd Suleiman), the Alfadel Group, MTN Syria and the MAS Group among others, <https://bit.ly/3gLK9Si>

¹⁶ Bashar al-Assad hosted renowned Imams from Damascus, Daraa and Homs in March and April 2011.

2. Regime Close Circle GO-NGOs

During the pre-war decade, the encouragement of GO-NGOs was motivated by a desire both to control Syrian civil society and to attract foreign funds reserved for civil society promotion programmes in the Middle East. The examples of the Syria Trust for Development established by Asma al-Assad and the al-Bustan Charity Association founded by Rami Makhlouf are particularly clear in this respect. Both have supported numerous public institutions with funds either collected from the international community or using enormous resources made available thanks to their links with the regime and the Syrian state itself.

From 2011, the state increased military expenditure, which coupled with the destruction of the Syrian economy further amplified the relevance of NGOs and charities. With 80% of the Syrian people living below the poverty line, the country's productive sectors in shambles, crippling US and European economic sanctions and skyrocketing unemployment rates, the state's dependency on charities has never ceased to increase since 2011 and the associative sector will remain a vital source of income in the foreseeable future.

By examining three prominent organisations (the Syria Trust for Development, the al Bustan Charity Foundation and the al Foz Charity Society), this section will analyse how GO-NGOs have adapted to the international isolation of Assad regime since 2011, how they played various roles during different phases of the conflict and how the regime reacted to their growing influence in Syrian society. Each case represents a distinctive profile and demonstrates how its modus operandi and its sponsor ambitions have shaped its interactions with the regime and the Syrian state.

2.1. Motivations and Aspirations

Portrayed as a symbol of the transformation of the ruling family, Asma al-Assad established a plethora of GO-NGOs after she married Bashar al-Assad in 2000 (Figure 1). She also encouraged the establishment of other organisations such as the Syrian Young Entrepreneur Association (SYEA), the Junior Chamber International Damascus (JCI) in 2004, and Basma to assist children with cancer in 2005. In 2007, the first lady merged most of these organisations into the Syria Trust for Development, known as the Trust, which became the regime's most valuable public relations project vis-à-vis the West and the international community. In 2010, the Trust was the most important Syrian NGO in terms of financial and human resources and claimed to be an incubator for all civil society sector.¹⁷

The Trust was established as an effort by the first lady to highlight a civilian face of Assad's Syria and to promote a new image of inclusivity and modernity to attract foreign capital to invest in the country. According to one of her employees, "we cannot raise capital with an unqualified society like the Syrian one. Instead, we need to build its capacity and keep electing a new class of educated individuals to represent it before the world."¹⁸ The Trust has witnessed two phases of expansion, the first from its establishment to 2011, during which it initiated eight projects in different development and education sectors, and the second during the Syrian conflict from 2014 to the present day, in which eight new projects have been launched (Figure 1).

In the first years of the conflict, the Trust came under pressure, which can be seen in a transformation it witnessed in 2012 when Wissam Khashrouf took over the administration of the Trust branch in

¹⁷ Claudie Fioroni, "Civil Society" and the Evolution of Authoritarianism in Syria (in French), (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2011), <https://bit.ly/37n6QYU>

¹⁸ Karam Mansour, "The Syria Trust for Development, from the Civil Side to the Military Uniform" (in Arabic), *Al-Jumhuriya*, 14 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/3eMfcvm>

Latakia. During his tenure, he undertook a cleansing operation in the governorate branch by excluding non-Alawite employees from management and volunteer teams. This situation lasted until 2015, when Khashrouf was thanked and a new administration was appointed to appease other communities. The Russian intervention coincided with a revival of the organisation, and whether the return of Asma al-Assad to the front of Syrian civil society is linked to this event or not, the number of Trust employees and branches has considerably increased.

Figure 1. Projects and Programmes Sponsored by Asma al-Assad 2001-2020

| Project / Entity | Field | Year |
|--|---|------|
| FIRDOS (Funds for Integrated Rural Development of Syria) | Syrian rural development | 2001 |
| AAMAL | Provide rehabilitation and supportive environment for disabled people | 2002 |
| MAWRED (Modernising and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development) | Women empowerment and economic development | 2003 |
| MASSAR | Support education activities | 2005 |
| Strategy Highlighting and Building Abilities for Business (SHABAB) | Provide practical training and professional advice to university students | 2006 |
| Rawafed (rebranded to Living Heritage in 2017) | Protection of Syrian cultural heritage | 2007 |
| My project (previously was FIRDOS) | A microcredit programme to support projects | 2011 |
| National Microfinance | Small enterprise finance corporation | |
| Early recovery response | Support those affected by the crisis | |
| Syrian Crafts Company | Production, marketing, and distribution of handmade products | 2014 |
| Volunteer Club | Promoting the concept of volunteering | |
| The Nation Wounded | Support the "martyrs and the wounded" security and military institutions | |
| Initial legal response | Provide legal support | 2015 |
| Manarat | Community centres providing various services | |
| Diyari Construction | Implementing development projects for the secretariat | |
| Al-Manara University | Developing the human capabilities necessary to rebuild Syria | 2016 |
| Debate | Adolescent training for scientific debates | 2020 |

Source: Compilation from Syria Trust for Development <https://bit.ly/2Uz3g8x>

Rami Makhoul founded the al-Bustan Charity Foundation (BCF) in May 1999 as a local NGO in his father's birth town, Bustan al-Basha, near Jableh in Latakia province. The Foundation's first public agenda was to enhance the quality of social, cultural and health services provided to local communities in Latakia and to care for people with special needs. Before 2011, BCF worked almost exclusively in the health sector, signing several public-private partnership contracts with the Syrian Ministry of Health to restore public hospitals in the province and finance surgical operations for people in need.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ruiz De Elvira, *Towards the End of the Social Contract*, 78.

In 2011, Rami Makhlouf responded to the popular uprising by resigning from the top position in the Cham Holding Company and announced the debut of his philanthropy vocation.²⁰ He also proclaimed that he was transferring the ownership of his shares in Syriatel to Ramak Development and Humanitarian Projects LLC, a company which he owned and presided over.²¹ Nonetheless, this conversion was met with widespread scepticism from the opposition and was generally perceived as a superficial and cosmetic change to the regime.

There are different accounts of the origins of BCF. One is that Bashar al-Assad encouraged his cousin to establish it as his charitable arm before taking power,²² while another describes it as an idea to form an Alawite equivalent to the Ismaelite Aga Khan Foundation. While there is no way to confirm either explanation, BCF was accused early on of providing preferential treatment for Alawites and was driven to deny such allegations on various occasions.²³

Unlike the Trust and BCF, the al-Foz Charity Society for Orphan Care and Relief (FCS) was established during the conflict, in November 2015, by the Aman Holding Group chairman and headed by a rising businessman, Samer al-Foz. The organisation was founded in Latakia and according to its board of directors is an embodiment of the CSR principle.²⁴ The organisation's manifesto stipulates its aims to aid and provide financial support for orphans, support marginalised groups and finance development projects to serve the goals of the association.²⁵

2.2. Orientation, Organization and Selective Aid Distribution

The Trust is organised in four main departments: Human Resources, Research and Media, External Relations and Finance. Each of the departments is represented on its board of trustees, which is chaired by Asma al-Assad and is completed with 17 sub-entity national directors.²⁶ At the end of 2019, the number of Trust workers was estimated at 1300-1500 employees and 5000 volunteers, in comparison to 150 employees in 2010.²⁷

As a beacon of professionalism and competence, the organisation attempts to project an image of transparency and accountability and claims to employ personnel purely on the basis of merit and academic accreditation. However, after several employees left the organisation in protest against Assad's violent repression following the outbreak of the revolution, the latest appointments reveal that the top tier management is selected on the basis of other criteria, such as trust and loyalty.²⁸ Additionally, the Trust operates by executing thematic programmes and projects which receive different levels of media coverage, interest and funding depending on their Public Relations relevance as perceived by the first lady and her team.

²⁰ Hassan Nidaa and Martin Chulov, "Syria's Richest Man Promises Massive Charity Giveaway," *The Guardian*, 17 June 2011, <https://bit.ly/3gO5wSY>

²¹ Ignace Leverrier, "Rami Makhlouf, from Business to Illusionism" (in French), 28 June 2011, *Le Monde*, <https://bit.ly/301Xdgs>

²² FENKS website, "Al-Bustan Charitable Society, Twenty Years of Giving" (in Arabic), 29 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UR7zww>

²³ Dam Press, "A Statement by al-Bustan Charitable Society: a Model for Syrian Charity" (in Arabic), 11 January 2012, <https://bit.ly/2VcBNJr>

²⁴ Arabian Business, "Major Syrian Companies Compete to Implement the Concept of Social Responsibility in a Youth Initiative" (in Arabic), 14 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/3c7ykCS>

²⁵ Al-Foz Charity Society, "Licence Statement for the Al-Foz Charity Society" Facebook (in Arabic), 13 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2y8mj1o>

²⁶ Mansour, "The Syria Trust for Development."

²⁷ Manarat Nabil, "An Invitation to Volunteer for the Syria Trust for Development" (in Arabic), Facebook, 16 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2KbtbO5> for the estimated numbers in 2019, and Fioroni, "Civil Society" and the Evolution of Authoritarianism in Syria, for the numbers in 2010.

²⁸ Interview with a Damascus Manarat member via social media, 5 March 2020.

The STD claims to provide its services to all groups of Syrian people, targeting specific demographics through thematic programmes without discrimination in terms of race, gender or religion. Trust employees interviewed estimate the number of aid recipients in 2019 at between 1.2 and 1.5 million, which is close to the number of beneficiaries in 2018 according to the last organisation's public annual report.²⁹ Nonetheless, the Trust's activities have varied and evolved during the years of conflict. Before 2011, the organisation's presence was primarily focused on Damascus and its activities were mainly in education, rural development and cultural heritage sectors.

The Trust has considerably expanded over the last few years to meet specific needs. Among the new projects initiated during the conflict, the Nation Wounded programme to help the "martyrs and wounded" of the military and security apparatus is the number one priority of the presidential palace and may be considered as a marketing campaign for the social role of the ruling family. It is managed directly by the president himself and it also enjoys special government sponsorship.³⁰

The Trust has also expanded its geographical scope as part of a strategy to reach all Syrian communities. For instance, its best funded programme in 2017, Manarat (or Lighthouses) (Figure 2), inaugurated 15 community centres in 2018 in areas that had recently fallen under regime control and had 24 centres in 7 governorates in 2019.³¹ However, this strategy ultimately led to an ill-considered expansion, forcing the organisation to close some of its branches after they proved ineffective. For example, the Trust opened a community centre in Salamieh in 2017 and then had to close it three years later. A local activist in Salamieh analysed the reason for its closure as "a necessary precaution after it caused communal disturbances because of its lack of societal sensitivity and the Trust's inability to compete with the notorious Aga Khan Foundation." After the shutdown of a number of Manarat in Dummar, Sayyida Aisha and Salamieh, the number of Trust employees decreased by 40% at the beginning of 2020, as one volunteer estimated. Several positions such as aid coordinator, events and activities coordinator, psychotherapist, representative of internal activities and adolescent category coordinator were abolished. According to an interview with a Trust employee, the decision to restructure the organisation was possibly also motivated by the general reduction of international funding in Syria.³²

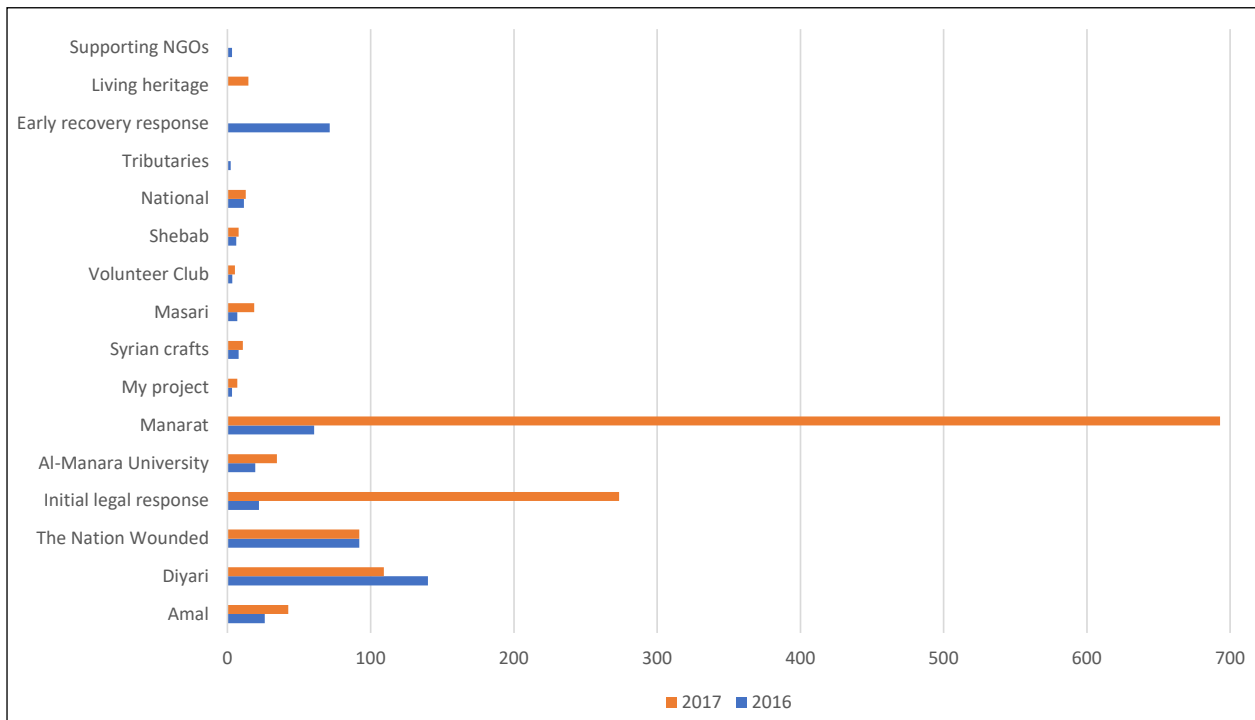
²⁹ The last annual report available covers the activities of 2018, Syria Trust for Development, "Annual Report 2018", January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2XRvsFI>

³⁰ Bashar al-Assad personally chaired the quarterly meetings of the Joint Committee for the Nation Wounded programme in 2018. A local Trust associate explained that "No other state official or organisation is allowed to work on this file unless it is approved by al-Assad." The Nation Wounded project received financial support worth 10 billion SP from the government in 2017. Dam Press, "The Government Allocates 10 Billion Pounds to the Nation Wounded Project" (in Arabic), 14 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/3eNwisL>

³¹ They were distributed as follows: 9 Manarat in Aleppo, 4 in each of the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus and Latakia, one in each of the governorates of Tartous, Hama and Sweida. SANA, "Community Centres of the Syria Trust for Development" (in Arabic), 6 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/36YWrC8>. Each Manara served between 30,000 and 50,000 people annually, but the number of beneficiaries began to decline in 2020 with a number of lighthouses being closed.

³² Online interview with a staff member at the Syria Trust for Development in Damascus, 11 March 2020.

Figure 2. Programmes Expenses in Million SYP (2016-2017)



Source: Syria Trust for Development - Reports <https://bit.ly/3fitUuz>

In comparison, the al-Bustan Charity Foundation (BCF) was entrusted with a vital role in the survival of the regime. Following the outbreak of the revolution, BCF amended its bylaws to operate outside Latakia, expanding into Damascus, Tartous, Homs and Quneitra. Consequently, the Foundation established centres in Aleppo, Hama and Daraa provinces and branch offices in Salamieh, Misyaf, al-Kiswah and Moadamiyat al-Sham, and an office in Qalamoun in February 2020.³³ In recent years, BCF has also witnessed an evolution in the type of services it provides, creating new departments for humanitarian aid and relief, development and also recruitment for its military apparatus.

As the regime’s repression increased and counter-violence escalated, the Foundation focused its assistance on specific beneficiaries, including employees of the regime’s security and military apparatus and members of the Alawite community. The aid consisted of salary payments, insurance, subsidies for families of ‘martyrs’ and scholarships for their children.³⁴ Additionally, BCF established armed groups, the number of which multiplied between 2012 and 2013.³⁵ Associated militias notoriously participated in several significant military campaigns³⁶ and operated in consortium with the Air Intelligence Agency and in many cases with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.³⁷

³³ Al-Bustan Charitable Association, “Opening of an Office in Jeroud” (in Arabic), Facebook, 29 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3auYsGw>

³⁴ Enab Baladi, “After the US Sanctions, al-Bustan Announces a Scholarship for Students in Syria” (in Arabic), 21 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/304KtWv>

³⁵ Aymenn Tamimi, “The Kameet Forces: Interview,” 20 December 2018, *Pundicity*, <https://bit.ly/3cv5snZ>

³⁶ Several groups were funded and supported by al-Bustan Charity, including the Kameet/Special Mission forces, the Shield of the Homeland Forces/Suqur Quneitra, the Fahud al-Mushrifah/Special Task Force Regiment, the Aswad al-Hussein Brigade, which has been subordinated to the Local Defence Forces since 2016, the Ahmed Ali Qazaq Group Regiment and the Popular Defence Forces/Al-Jabalawi Brigades.

³⁷ Interview with a former member of the al-Bustan combat groups on social media, 27 March 2020.

Monitoring of BCF activities between 2011 and 2020 on social media websites reveals the sectarian dimension of the Foundation's activities.³⁸ Of the 130 locations (cities, towns, villages) where the association registered continuous or occasional activity, 65% of the sites are located in Tartous and Latakia provinces and 27% in Hama and Homs – rural areas with an overwhelming majority of Alawite or Shiite inhabitants.³⁹ BCF's distinctive sectarian orientation is further evidenced by its cooperation with Shiite charity organisations, such as the al-Thaqalin Centre.⁴⁰ As for the rest of the Foundation's activities, they are distributed in the provinces of Damascus, its countryside, Quneitra, Daraa, Sweida and to a lesser extent Aleppo.

BCF's modus operandi varies from one location to another and it adapts according to the local context. In the rural coastal regions, the Foundation relies on Mukhtars and Alawite clerics to identify beneficiaries, recruit militants and collect data. In contrast, in regions where it lacks an organisational presence it depends on local administration councils and Baath divisions to guide its activities and implement its projects.⁴¹ The number of BCF beneficiaries during 2019 is estimated at 60,000 civilians (students and low-income families) and 40,000 military personnel, including families of 'martyrs' and wounded militants in its militias and members of the security and military apparatus.⁴²

Despite Samer al-Foz's ambition and growing investment portfolio, the al-Foz Charity Society is smaller than the other two and has refrained from expanding beyond one specific scope. The FCS consists of three main divisions: Orphan Care, Humanitarian Aid and Support, and Health Services. The organisation is managed by a board of directors presided over by Samer Al-Foz himself and his relative Hayam al-Foz as his deputy, in addition to a public assembly consisting of 70 people. There are no sectarian or regional criteria for selecting the members of the association's board of directors or its management, but the top-tier managers of the al-Foz companies are often relied on to occupy key positions in its organigram. For example, Samer Ismail, the FCS secretary, is the managing director of the Aman Holding Group and he previously held the position of human resources manager at Al-Foz Trading Company in 2016. Yasmina Azhari, a member of the association, is also the chairman of the Syrian Saudi Tourism Investment Company, which owns the Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus.

Al-Foz Charitable Society primarily focuses on delivering aid in Latakia and has only recently expanded to Damascus (in March 2019) and Daraa (summer 2019) after obtaining a temporary approval from the Ministry of Social Affairs to provide health services in the governorate. Al-Foz also attempted to branch out to Aleppo but eventually retreated after colliding with al-Qaterji, a notorious businessman associated with Rami Makhlouf.

³⁸ Describing BCF activities before 2011, "There was no discrimination on the basis of the sect, one of my relatives who did not belong to the Alawite sect had previously received the support of the association to have surgery." Interview with a local activist from Latakia via social media, 27 March 2020.

³⁹ Data gathered from public announcements published on BCF official Facebook pages. A source close to the Foundation reported that "70% of the BCF services during the crisis years were focused on Tartous and Latakia provinces." Interview conducted on 1 March 2020 via social media with a BCF associate in Damascus.

⁴⁰ The association had 41 civil, military and partisan partners between 2011-2020.

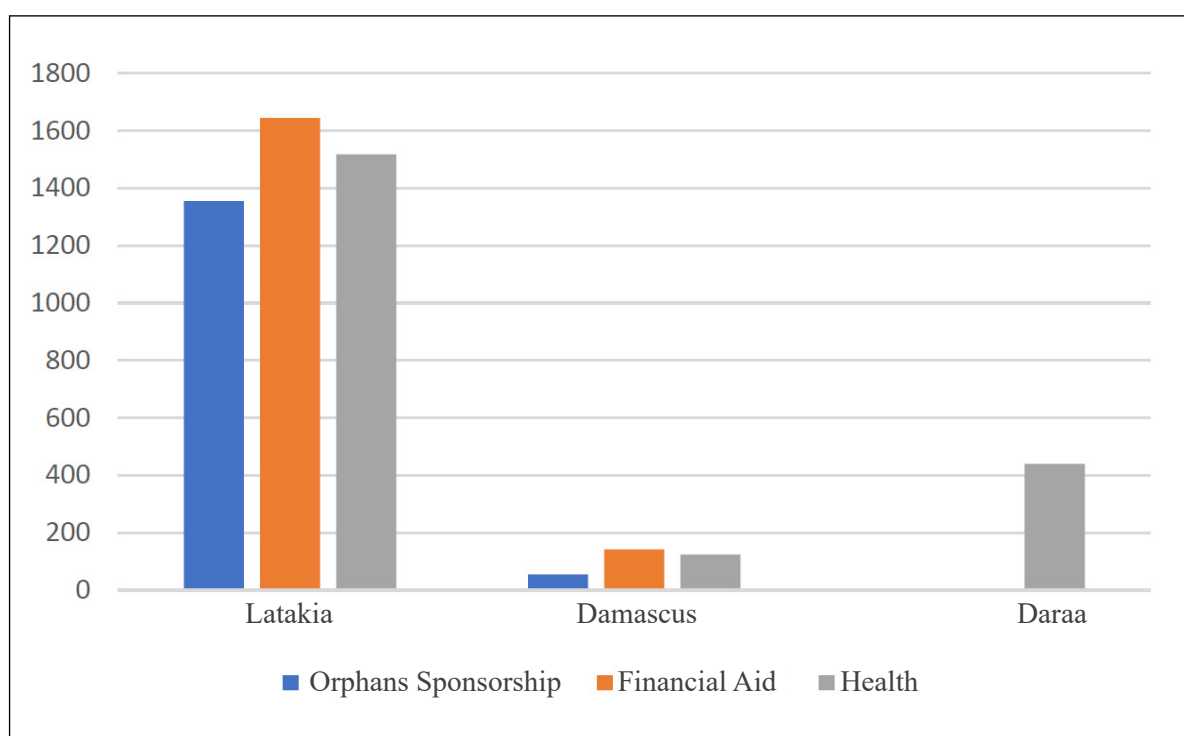
⁴¹ Interview conducted with a local activist in Latakia, 27 March 2020.

⁴² Interview with a former member of the al-Bustan combat groups on social media, 27 March 2020, Aslyra news network, "Memorandum of Cooperation to Provide Special Medical Services for the Wounded of the Syrian Arab Army and the Poor Between the General Authority of the National Hospital of Masyaf and the al-Bustan Charitable Foundation" (in Arabic), Facebook, 8 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bV231M>; "Distributing Salaries for the Shield of the Homeland Fighters in Quneitra", the official page of the al-Bustan Foundation in Quneitra (in Arabic), Facebook, 8 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2U6rEy5>

FCS internal auditing reports testify to the adoption of a strict regulatory system in terms of standards and mechanisms for providing aid and services to beneficiaries.⁴³ The association is subject to direct supervision by the Ministry of Social Affairs and periodically submits lists of its beneficiaries to the ministry. Nevertheless, the association has been accused of discrimination and providing assistance exclusively to the Sunni community.⁴⁴ The allegations mainly are because the association’s headquarters is located in the Sulaibah and the American neighbourhood in Latakia city, which are predominantly inhabited by Sunnis and Christians.

The number of FCS beneficiaries in Latakia in 2017 amounted to 3,000 according to its public reports. Nearly 72% of them were low-income families, 17% were individuals in need of hospitalisation and the remaining 11% were orphans. The number of direct beneficiaries then rose to approximately 11,000 in 2019, with nearly 88% of the recipients residing in Latakia, 8% in Damascus and 4% in Daraa (Figure 3) In addition to individuals, the association also relies on local partners, most notably the Islamic Charitable Orphans Association, the Islamic Charitable Endeavours Association, the Society for Righteousness and Social Services and the Orphans Sponsorship House. The FSC’s focus on Latakia could be explained by al-Foz’s desire to leverage his popularity among his constituency, although he has denied having any political ambitions. In 2019, the association announced it would freeze registration in Latakia but keep open in Damascus until there is a convergence in the numbers of beneficiaries in the two governorates.

Figure 3. Beneficiaries of FCS by Governorate in 2019



Source: FCS Data⁴⁵

⁴³ The association received an ISO certificate in September 2019.

⁴⁴ According to the testimony of local activists in the city, the association employs cadres from all communities and sects and offers services to whoever meets the conditions specified in its bylaws and internal charts. However, local activists have testified that most aid is exclusively distributed to Sunnis.

⁴⁵ Al-Foz Society Facebook Page, <https://bit.ly/2zoB9Sk>

2.3. Funding Regime Survival

The US and EU sanctions imposed on Syria since April 2011 are the most comprehensive on record. They have targeted entire sectors of the economy suspected of financing the regime's brutal military operation, such as the banking and oil sectors and key individuals and entities responsible for atrocities committed against civilians. Nonetheless, these sanctions have ultimately failed to curb the violence of the regime forces and crimes. The failure can be attributed to the valuable economic and military assistance primarily provided by its allies, such as Iran and Russia,⁴⁶ but part of it is also due to the UN relief programmes in Syria.

Some reports suggest that nearly 35% of the country's GDP is directly financed by the international community.⁴⁷ Needless to say, GO-NGOs and armed group charities have not been the sole beneficiaries of these funds and the international humanitarian response in regime-held areas has only represented a fraction of the aid destined to Syria. In accordance with UNSC resolution 2165 which authorises cross-border aid without the Syrian state permission,⁴⁸ north-western and north-eastern Syria have so far received the lion's share of assistance. However, UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 obliges its agencies to obtain the consent of the official authorities of a country before operating in its territory.⁴⁹ It also recognises the affected state's primary role in the initiation, organisation, coordination and implementation of humanitarian assistance delivered on its soil. Consequently, in regime-held areas the regime has effectively dictated to who, how and through whom international aid can be delivered.⁵⁰ In times of steep challenges, the benefits of aid have been critical to the regime's resilience.

Since 2012, the UN-led humanitarian effort in Syria has amounted to \$12.1 billion.⁵¹ Approximately two thirds of the UN yearly donations were allocated to the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund so far, and nearly \$4 billion were attributed to regime-held areas. At first, the regime imposed the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) as an obligatory partner on UN agencies and authorised INGOs to provide humanitarian assistance in Syria. In 2014, about 60% of the UN relief was implemented through the SARC,⁵² but other local NGOs were also allowed to receive international donations as long as it was approved by the Syrian authorities. According to OCHA official data, UN agencies partnered with at least 128 national NGO, among them the Trust and al-Bustan till 2016.⁵³ Further details on the exact amounts of funds received by Syrian charities is difficult to assess as most UN agencies do not fully disclose this information. Data available on the OCHA Financial Tracking Service website shows that the largest percentage of aid has been allocated to unnamed NGOs in regime-held areas where beneficiary organisations are clearly identified when they are operating from Turkey and in opposition-held areas.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Sinan Hatahet, "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria," Research Report (London: *Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme*, March 2019), <https://bit.ly/2MpMvZ1>

⁴⁷ Annie Sparrow, "How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped up Assad," *Foreign Affairs*, 20 September 2018, <https://fam.ag/3ctVJhu>

⁴⁸ United Nations Security Council Resolutions, Resolution 2165, <https://bit.ly/2Mn42kN>

⁴⁹ General Assembly of the United Nations, Resolution, G.A., 46/182, "Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations," December 1991, <https://bit.ly/3dy6KzU>

⁵⁰ Leenders and Mansour, "Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime."

⁵¹ Financial Tracking Service – OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic.

⁵² IFRC, "Emergency Appeal Syria: Complex Emergency," International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, December 2014, <https://bit.ly/2B1OEYI>

⁵³ Leenders and Mansour, "Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime;" OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Organizations Implementing Humanitarian Activities Based Within Syria."

⁵⁴ Syria Humanitarian Response Plan for 2019, <https://bit.ly/2N1mVdr> and for 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Aq4In0>

In addition to direct donations, businesses owned by regime associated cronies, such as Makhlouf and al-Foz, have benefited from UN stay in the country, in form of paid services and bills for telecommunication, fuel, food and accommodation.⁵⁵ The regime has also profited from aid agencies by obliging them to make financial transactions in dollars through the Central Bank and at the official exchange rate, which is 20 to 25 percent lower than the real value. More alarmingly, in 2016 an L2GP report estimated that only between 2% and 18% of UN aid had reached the intended beneficiaries while the rest of it had bolstered the regime.⁵⁶

In May 2017, the US Treasury added BCF to its list of sanctioned entities,⁵⁷ while Asma al-Assad and Samer al-Foz were already on EU and US sanctions lists.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, since the UN does not respect unilateral sanctions, GO-NGOs such as the Trust and similar entities are still capable of channelling international aid to regime loyalists and close associates. These entities not only rely on international assistance but also finance their activities from other sources.

The Syria Trust for Development has several strategic international partners, including UNHCR, UNDP, Syria International Islamic Bank, NRC, UNFPA, SOS, Rescate and UNICEF. According to OCHA official data, the UN has at least donated the following amounts to the Trust: \$751,129 in 2016, \$732,500 in 2017, and \$3.4 million in 2018.⁵⁹ A Trust internal report shows that UNHCR was the main external donor to the Trust between January and May 2018, with nearly SYP 2.814 billion (about \$6.5 million on an exchange rate of 435 SYP per dollar at the same period) (Figure 5). While there are insufficient available data to estimate the exact amount of funding provided by UN agencies to the Trust in later years, several national and international partners of the latter such as Basma, Dummar Charity and Caritas figure among the list of OCHA recipients.⁶⁰ The existence of Trust partners on UN list of beneficiaries is not a proof of collaboration, but there is considerable doubt to suspect the Trust's attempts to manage relief distribution and allocation. In 2019, the Trust also succeeded in developing new partnerships with newly established INGOs in Damascus, many of which are Christian-based NGOs, following their move from Lebanon and Jordan to Syria.⁶¹

The wages of Trust employees are fixed in US dollars but paid in Syrian pounds at the official exchange rate of the Central Bank, a tactic that allows the regime to obtain substantial foreign currency provided by INGOs and UN agencies. Not all INGOs and UN agencies disclose their funding and support to the Trust, as they can only mention the name of the Manara they have donated to, making it more difficult to measure the volume of aid the organisation has benefited from. For instance, UN-OCHA did not disclose the amount of funding channelled to the Trust in 2018.

In addition to international donations, the Trust has also resorted to expanding its investment portfolio through the ownership of companies such as the Syrian Crafts Company, Diyari Construction and

⁵⁵ Nick Hopkins and Emma Beals, "How Assad Regime Controls UN Aid Intended for Syria's Children," *The Guardian*, 29 August 2016. <https://bit.ly/30oFsYN>

⁵⁶ Christian Els, Kholoud Mansour and Nils Carstensen, "Funding to National and Local Humanitarian Actors in Syria: Between Sub-Contracting and Partnerships," Report (L2GP, May 2016), <https://bit.ly/3cuifqD>

⁵⁷ US Department of Treasury, "Syria Designations; Non-proliferation Designations; Transnational Criminal Organizations Designations Updates and Removal," 16 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/3dvOGGn>

⁵⁸ US Department of Treasury, "Syria Sanctions," <https://bit.ly/3gSuCjs>

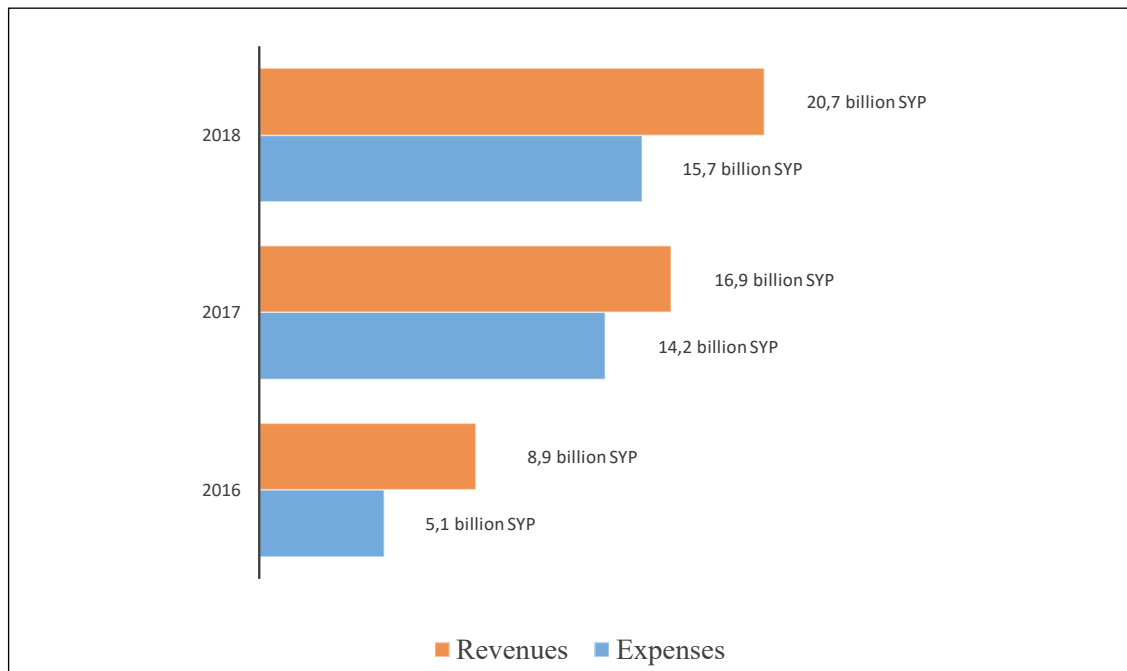
⁵⁹ For 2016, see Hopkins and Beals, "How Assad Regime Controls UN Aid"; for 2017, OCHA, "Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2017," <https://bit.ly/2C0sEhn>; and for 2018, OCHA "Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2018," <https://bit.ly/2UyevhK>

⁶⁰ OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Organizations Implementing Humanitarian Activities Based Within Syria" <https://bit.ly/3fiQPph>

⁶¹ These include ZOA International, Caritas Syria, Project Japan Platform (PJP), Cordaid, Tearfund, Hungarian Reformed Church Aid, FMEEC and Danish Church Aid, according to a humanitarian worker in Damascus (July 2019).

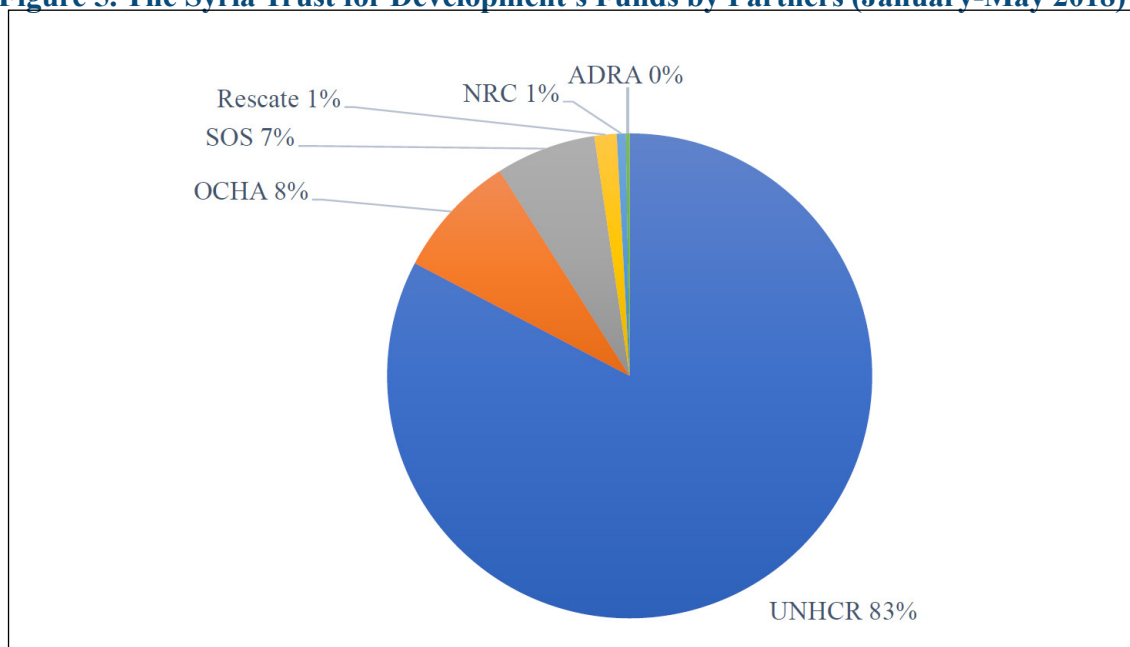
the National Microfinance Corporation and dividends from companies such as Black Ink and Ugarit in partnership with businessmen like Badie al-Doroubi, Fares Al-Shihabi, Sakher Alton and Samir Hassan. In the first five months of 2018, its investment portfolio covered nearly 21% of its expenses estimated at SYP 800 million.⁶²

Figure 4. The Syria Trust for Development Revenues and Expenses in Billion SYP (2016-2017-2018)



Source: Official annual reports of the STD, compilation from Syria Trust for Development - Reports <https://bit.ly/3fitUuz>

Figure 5. The Syria Trust for Development’s Funds by Partners (January-May 2018)⁶³



Source: Internal financial report for the Syria Trust for Development obtained by a former employee of the Trust

⁶² A financial report for the Syrian Trust for Development for the period between January and May 2018 obtained by a former employee of the Syrian Trust.

⁶³ These external funds represented 79% of the total STF budget for this period.

BCF relies mainly on funding provided by Ramak TP, a partner in seven national programmes and subsidiary entities, together with substantial financial support provided by Iran between 2011 and 2015.⁶⁴ Till 2016, the charity had received some direct funds from UN agencies, mainly UNICEF,⁶⁵ but no available information suggest it continued to receive it after being targeted by US sanctions in 2017. In addition, it also resorted to strengthening its relations with Christian charities to obtain aid and assistance, most notably the Jesuit Fathers in 2014-2015.⁶⁶

FCS is solely financed by its president Samer al-Foz, and its expenses have gradually increased, matching Aman Holding Group's growing investment portfolio. In 2016, the association donated 62 million SYP (nearly 248 thousand US dollars at the then exchange rate of 250). In 2018, its donations rose to 673,983,000 SYP (1,350,000 US dollars at an exchange rate of 500) and amounted to about a billion SYP (2,300,000 US dollars) by 2019.⁶⁷

2.4. Collaboration and Competition

Since 2011, the Trust has multiplied its efforts to control and lead Syrian civil society, either through containing or throttling different initiatives that have emerged. The Trust generally tends not to enter strategic partnerships with competitors or local organisations as long as it can work on its own. However, this policy has not prevented it from carrying out joint activities with a handful of NGOs with limited regional scope and over a short period, such as the Dummar Charitable Society, the volunteer reconstruction team in Damascus, the Syrian Society for Social Development in Aleppo, the Charity Society in Barzeh and the Association for the Development of the Needy in al-Tal. Around 200 organisations, charities and companies carried out activities with the Syria Trust for Development in Syria between 2017 and 2019.⁶⁸

The first lady primarily operates by offering grants, privileges and legal protection to projects and organisations which agree to affiliate themselves to the Trust and denies the same treatment for initiatives that choose to remain independent.⁶⁹ This strategy has mainly allowed the Trust to manage the distribution and allocation of international funds and assistance, and it has been further re-enforced by regime policies.

There is a clear overlap between the Trust and Syrian state institutions in terms of service provision and social welfare, but the organisation is neither subject to the government supervision nor the security and financial audits imposed on other NGOs. Moreover, the Trust has so far benefited from state resources, such as obtaining preferential leasing contracts for cultural centres affiliated with the Ministry of Culture. The organisation has also exploited government authority to consolidate its position and exclude competitors. According to local activists, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour issued a circular in October 2018 preventing organisations and associations from working in the legal support sector except for the SARC and the Syria Trust. This decision was accompanied by another circular addressed to lawyers from the Syrian Bar prohibiting them from working with unlicensed organisations active in this field.⁷⁰ An activist in a local NGO describes both decisions as “pressure exercised by the Trust to push to block *their* activities.”

⁶⁴ Iranian funds are largely used to cover the salaries of the Foundation's armed militants.

⁶⁵ Mauro Primavera, “Rami Makhoul and the Syrian War Economy,” *Middle East Economy* 8(4): 1–7, <https://bit.ly/2x57vR2>.

⁶⁶ Interview with a BCF member on the Syrian coast via social media, 5 March 2020.

⁶⁷ Interview with a FCS employee via social media, 12 March 2020.

⁶⁸ Interview with a Trust associate via social media, 26 March 2020.

⁶⁹ Interview with an NGO founder based in Damascus.

⁷⁰ These circulars were confirmed by security harassment of those who refused to comply, and most of them are civil society organisations that are not officially authorised. Interview with an employee of a local organisation in Syria via social media, 25 March 2020.

For a long time, Rami Makhlouf was often described as the financial Foundation of the presidential palace troika consisting of Maher al-Assad's military control and the political leadership and umbrella provided by Bashar al-Assad. Makhlouf was mainly entrusted with keeping the finances of the regime afloat, providing the necessary funds to loyalist militias while manoeuvring around US and EU sanctions and maintaining commercial interests with regional and international partners.

The Russian intervention in September 2015 provided Assad's forces with much needed air superiority to overcome the armed opposition and has expanded to reforming the Syrian military apparatus to re-consolidate state authority over the myriad loyalist militias that sprung up between 2012 and 2015. By spring 2019, the Syrian Army had regained the majority of the contested territories, and its need for the participation of militias subsequently diminished. As a result, Makhlouf was expected to re-channel his financial support from funding military activities to covering the regime's economic imperatives. However, he was reluctant to take on his new expected role. BCF was the first victim of the cousins' quarrel. The Foundation witnessed a hostile takeover in summer 2019, its military wing was dismantled and its board of directors was replaced with individuals appointed by the presidential palace. The General Supervisor of al-Assad Shrine, Eng. Maan Ibrahim, replaced Samer Darwish as director of the organisation and other vital positions followed suit in the strategic areas of Homs and Latakia.⁷¹

Some accounts explain the incident as a consequence of Asma al-Assad's growing sway over the presidential palace following the death of Anissa Makhlouf – Bashar al-Assad's mother and Rami's aunt. This version is backed by reported frictions between the Trust and BCF on the Syrian coast and by demonstrations of allegiance to the first lady by former Makhlouf associates. Others simply describe it as an attempt by Assad to reclaim undivided leadership of the Alawite community and to eliminate all sources of competition for influence, including his closest kin. This account is mainly supported by the dissolution of the General Secretariat of the Syrian National Social Party – a branch funded by Makhlouf,⁷² and by the latest economic pressure exercised in April 2020 over the tycoon to hand over the jewel of his financial empire, Syriatel.⁷³

Since the takeover in the summer of 2019, BCF has opened new branches in Quneitra and Qalamoun but under the direct auspices of Asma al-Assad. Its headquarters in Mazzeh still provides its services as usual, but some of its activities were affected, such as the distribution of salaries and relief baskets. A member of the Foundation described this interruption as a temporary phase caused by "inventory and inspection operations disrupting and changing the modus operandi of the organisation."⁷⁴

In comparison, Samer al-Foz's ventures in the charity sector seems less intertwined with the regime's societal policies. His organisation tends less to be subject to the higher sphere of power competition over control of the associative field. His nouveau riche status, and hence his relatively recent notoriety, oblige him to keep a more prudent profile. The volume of his annual donations and the scope of his charity are clear indications of this approach.

The evolution of the roles, duties, and resulting authority of GO-NGOs has been dictated by the regime's needs and crises. Economically, regime-sponsored NGOs' mission has been to attract international donations to finance service provision and to implement a large-scale reward system

⁷¹ Salim al-Nahhas, "The Palace Security Investigates Samer Darwish and Surround Al-Bustan Charity" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 4 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2VWHpci>

⁷² Shadi al-Ahmad, "The Ruling Family Dispute Targets the Syrian National Social Party" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 6 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/35yNgYz>

⁷³ Videos posted by Rami Makhlouf on his Facebook page testify to state-led pressure to resign from the Syriatel board of directors, <https://bit.ly/2AwZplw>; for all his statements, see <https://bit.ly/2Xre8Hs>

⁷⁴ Interview with a BCF associate via social media, 5 March 2020.

for Assad loyalists. Internationally, they were tasked with maintaining the last open communication channel with donor countries and UN agencies. Domestically, at the peak of battles with the Syrian opposition, the regime expected them to recruit volunteers and mobilise support among its loyal social base; following military victories on the battlefield, it used them to rebuild patronage networks in ‘reconquered’ Sunni communities. Following the Russian intervention, the shift in conflict’s dynamics brought the Trust’s more inclusive policies to the surface, created spaces for new Sunni businessmen like al-Foz to tend to the needs of their supposed constituencies and considerably diminished the sectarian approach adopted by the BCF. At the same time, the presidential palace’s tolerance of its associates’ autonomy considerably declined, as the recent rift between al-Assad and Makhoul demonstrated.⁷⁵

However, in many circumstances, regime-sponsored NGOs are challenged by the lack of competent staff, knowledge and social sensitivity to operate on their own. They thus resorted to local actors such as al-Baath sections, clerics, mukhtars, army veterans and also armed groups. This need in turn paved the way for the development of a philanthropist role of armed actors such as the National Defence Forces (NDF) and the Local Defence Forces (LDF), which witnessed their function evolving from being mere fighters to de facto local authorities.

3. Loyalist Armed Group Social Welfare

Through state incapacity and the high cost of the war, the number of under-serviced communities has considerably expanded over the last nine years. Towns, neighbourhoods and entire cities have effectively become stateless but are still governed. Instead of chaos in spaces where the state’s central authority is sparse or absent, local authorities arise. Militias, thugs (*shabiha*), warlords and local dignitaries have taken on roles previously considered the preserve of the state. Although their power is not likely to last long or is far from being secured, armed groups have established authority through violence, but also by providing services to their constituents.

In the majority of the cases observed, the public services provided by military non-state actors are either backed up by ideological or military justifications for their rule. Creating public infrastructure and delivering welfare are the primary services performed by warlords, followed by the organisation of sports teams, education for students and the establishment of economic projects. Their hierarchical organisation allows them to out-perform local and national NGOs, and in many cases they dictate how, where and to whom the latter can provide aid or services.

To study this phenomenon, this section investigates the charitable activities carried out by two armed groups: the Local Defence Forces (LDF), a network of Iranian-backed militants primarily present in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, and the National Defence Forces (NDF), a network of Syrian local militants initially supported by Iran but which eventually grew closer to Russia and the regime after 2015. Both have established charity bodies, respectively the Aleppo Defenders Corps (ADC) and the Martyr Foundation. At first glance, two major distinctions between the two groups emerge. First, Iranian-backed armed groups have used religion as a source of legitimation and access to resources, whereas the NDF have exploited the militarisation of Syrian society to transform their sacrifices into an inherent right to rule. Second, in areas where the LDF are active, Iranian NGOs have significantly assisted them in service provision in the health, energy and food sectors. In comparison, in areas under NDF control, such as the coastal region, Hama and to a lesser degree Homs, the influence of Iran is less felt and GO-NGOs are mostly prominent in financing aid and relief.

⁷⁵ Joseph Daher, “The Syrian Presidential Palace Strengthens its Concentration of Power: The Rift Makhoul-Assad”, Policy Brief, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 14 May 2020), <https://bit.ly/30rVC3K>

3.1. Upgrading Authority

The Aleppo Defenders Corps (ADC) was established as an umbrella for the Local Defence Forces operating in Aleppo and it initiated its activity in February 2017 after the fall of eastern Aleppo under regime control. According to General Ghassan Kikhi, the ADC field commander, the Corps is a volunteer project with a civil and military dimension aimed at improving services and the social and humanitarian reality of Aleppo.⁷⁶ The presence of the Corps considerably expanded in 2018 and became evident from the amount of equipment spotted around the city which was regularly used by the Governorate and City Councils.⁷⁷

The ADC was conceived as the soft power of Iran in Aleppo. Like other Iranian-backed militias, the Corps tends to hide its ideological identity and attempts to weave cross-sectarian relations in Alepine society, participating in both Christian and Sunni religious activities. Nonetheless, the Iranian imprint remains very clear and difficult to conceal. For instance, Haj Mohsen, an Iranian national, has been leading the Corps since its formation.⁷⁸ Moreover, in an interview he referred to the type of support and funding the ADC had obtained from the 27th Brigade, which is better known as the Muhammad Army, an IRGC-trained and -equipped armed group, thus indirectly confirming the connection of his Corps to Tehran.⁷⁹

Like the Local Defence Forces, the National Defence Forces (NDF) started as an Iranian project in response to the rapid gains made by armed opposition groups against the crumbling Syrian Army. The NDF was first established in Homs in mid-2012⁸⁰ with Iranian support in coordination with Major General Bassam Al-Hassan, commander of the Syrian Republican Guard in the governorate. Other branches were subsequently formed in several Syrian governorates. In spring 2013, it evolved into a nationwide institution recognised by the Syrian government and officially answering to a joint administration by the Baath Party and the Republican Guard.⁸¹ Engineer Saqr Rustom, a close associate of Major General Bassam Al-Hassan, first assumed command of the NDF in Homs after its establishment in 2012 and quickly became the most prominent official in the NDF General Secretariat in 2013.⁸²

In December 2013, the NDF formally established its charitable wing under the name of the Syrian Martyr Foundation. Its primary objective was to provide the family members of wounded martyrs with care and financial support. The Foundation's main office is located in Wadi al-Dahab in Homs, one of the most prominent Alawite neighbourhoods, from which popular committees formed the core of the NDF in Homs.⁸³ In May 2014, the Syrian Martyr Foundation witnessed a transformation, expanded nationally, and started to integrate smaller local NGOs such as the Martyr Association in

⁷⁶ Ayman Douri, "Colonel Ghassan Kikhi Explains to Dam Press the Goals and Aspirations of the Aleppo Defenders Corps" (in Arabic), *Dam Press*, 8 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/3anloaO>

⁷⁷ The Corps' equipment was obtained from multiple sources – either spoils of war against the opposition forces and ISIS, purchases thanks to Iranian funding or borrowed from Iranian associations in Aleppo. Ayman Hallaq, the head of Aleppo City Council, said in 2018 "Before the war, the council had 600 machines and today we only have 250, most of which are old and in need of frequent repairs"; Tishreen, "Tishreen Opens the File of Municipalities in Governorates. 'Procrastination' and an Absence of the Will to Work" (in Arabic), 24 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/3gPeGia>

⁷⁸ Contrary to rumours, Brigadier Haitham Al-Nayef is not the Corps commander; he was the previous LDF chief of staff and was killed in a traffic accident in May 2018.

⁷⁹ Ibrahim Kahil, "A Speech by Haj Mohsen During the Opening of the Preparatory School for Girls in al-Sakhour Neighborhood" (in Arabic), Facebook, 21 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2z10Lz8>

⁸⁰ Kheder Khaddour, "The Syrian Regime and Local Militias" (in Arabic), *Carnegie*, June 2014, <https://bit.ly/2zOq3q3>

⁸¹ Interview with an NDF volunteer on social media, 24 March 2020.

⁸² Rustom Rustom was targeted with European sanctions in the spring of 2020.

⁸³ Interview with a resident of Homs on social media, March 2020.

Homs. It is also worth noting that the Foundation is independent of the Martyrs Trust Foundation established in Damascus in August 2014 as one of the charitable entities funded and managed by Rami Makhlouf.

There are various accounts of the origins of the Foundation. One is that the Syrian Palace established it to contain and limit the increasing influence of Saqr Rustum in Homs among Alawites and to confine him to the honorary position of president of its Board of Trustees. Another story describes it as the result of a dispute between Rami Makhlouf and Saqr Rustum, which necessitated the formation of the Martyr Foundation to strengthen the NDF at the expense of the al-Bustan Charity. The Foundation has notably received financial support from circles close to Asma Assad, at odds with Makhlouf. A third account links its formation with a push by a local NDF commander, Alawite clerics and businessmen to form an institution to care for their community.

3.2. Providing Stipends, Services and Governance

The Aleppo Defenders Corps divides its territory into squares represented by security and military units, with an administrative mandate and flexible geographical boundaries, and each square is further divided into sectors.⁸⁴ Aleppo city is divided into three squares and its suburbs are divided into two. A square is managed by a military commander with the rank of lieutenant colonel or above, or a civilian provided he is a Syrian Shiite or politically aligned with Iran (Figure 6). For instance, Zuhair Zuhairi, the 1st square commander, is a colonel in the Army and he previously commanded the Corps' 2nd square. On the other hand, Faisal Hamid, the commander of al-Hader square, is a civilian with no military experience and he previously headed the LDF Wounded and Martyrs offices of the al-Thaqalin Charity. Similarly, Muhammad Sultan Zayat, the 2nd square's most recent commander, is a civilian from the Shiite town of Nubul and he previously held the position of 1st square commander.

As for sectors, they are managed by mini-administrations composed of local but loyal inhabitants, and they are in charge of providing services in the following sectors: security, logistical support, aid, media and culture. Corps leaders at the level of squares and sectors periodically meet to plan and discuss upcoming activities and events.⁸⁵ The Corps leaders are considered the ultimate commanders of their areas, and no organisation can carry out services in these areas without their prior permission. According to local sources, the ADC exerts pressure on associations operating in Aleppo, most notably the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, to distribute relief baskets and other forms of aid only through its personnel.⁸⁶ It is also worth noting that local administration officials at the governorate and city levels coordinate with the Corps' commanders in their service activities or field trips.⁸⁷ Moreover, the Corps shows a keenness to coordinate with the Baath Party, most probably to contain it and to monitor its activities closely.

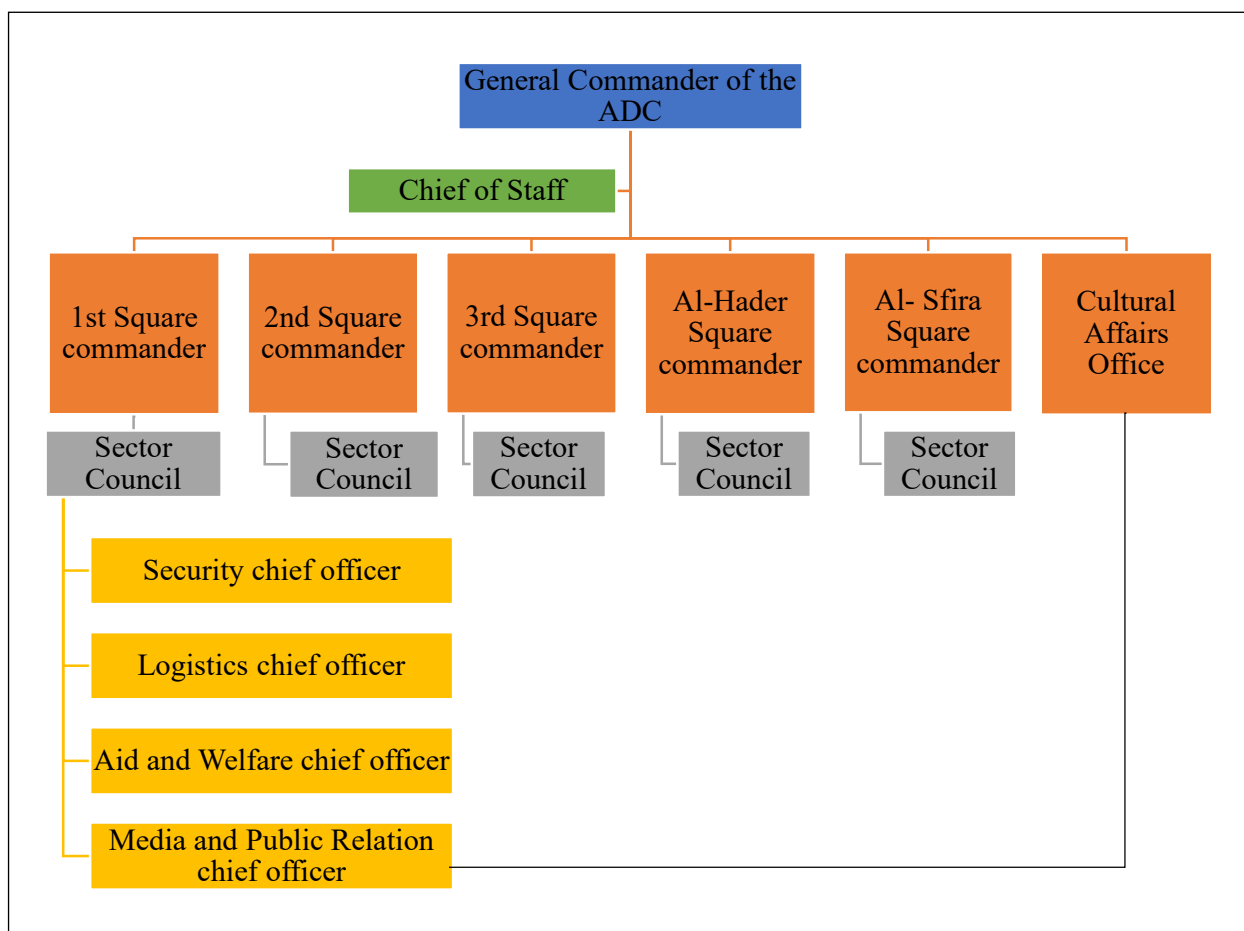
⁸⁴ Khaled al-Khatib, "Iran is Present in Aleppo and the Killing of a Leader of the Revolutionary Guards" (in Arabic), *Syria Today*, 18 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2xID2bu>

⁸⁵ Mahmoud Yassin, a field commander, "ADC Squares and Sectors Meeting to Discuss Cultural Activities" (in Arabic), Facebook, 21 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bqypl2>

⁸⁶ Interview with a local activist on social media, 26 March 2020.

⁸⁷ Aleppo City Council, "A Hygiene Campaign in Al-Midan Neighbourhood, in Partnership with the Defenders Corps" (in Arabic), Facebook, 21 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Y18Jb3>

Figure 6. Structure of the Aleppo Defenders Corps



Source: The authors, based on information gathered from interviews and online sources

The Corps provides the Alepine local population with various services, including debris and rubble removal from destroyed neighbourhoods, water and sanitation restoration, school renovation and the organisation of summer activities for students, social awareness seminars for local inhabitants and ceremonies for partner religious associations.

Service provision varies from one sector or square to another depending on specific needs. The second square in Aleppo is considered the most critical as it contains the headquarters of the Hajjis, the ‘Iranian Corps leaders.’⁸⁸ Social activities are mostly organised in the following neighbourhoods: Nile Street and Ashrafieh in the third square, Salaheddin and Seif al-Dawla in the first square and Sayyid Ali and Sakhour in the second square. Infrastructure restoration and humanitarian aid are concentrated in the first and third squares, and educational services and seminars are provided in the second. The Corps has opened several sports clubs and cultural development centres targeting young people and children, which are directly supervised by Colonel Shaban Soufan, the commander of the third square.⁸⁹ Indeed, the organisation has shown a specific interest in young people and has restored several schools in the neighbourhoods of al-Sikki, al-Andalus, Bani Zaid and al-Marjeh.

In comparison, the NDF has a more comprehensive national presence and its organisation spans a larger territory. Consequently, the structure of the NDF is more massive and consists of four different levels: first a central command in Damascus known as the General Secretariat of the NDF,⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Interview conducted with a local activist located in northern Syria on social media, 29 March 2020.

⁸⁹ In the neighbourhoods of Bani Zaid, Al-Jamiliya, Al-Sakhour and Al-Ansari.

⁹⁰ The structure of the General Secretariat of the NDF consists of the Organisation Office, the Office of Martyrs and Injured and Missing Persons, the Information and Guidance Bureau and the Field Operations Office.

second provincial commands, then military sectors and finally companies. Following the Russian intervention in 2015, the number of NDF volunteers dwindled from about 50-60,000 to fewer than 5,000.⁹¹ This reduction in size was the result of Russian plans to re-consolidate loyalist forces under the central command of the Syrian Army and a reduction of Iranian funding, which focused on the more ideological aligned LDF.⁹²

Nonetheless, the decline of the NDF's military role had little effect on its charity arm, which continued to grow and evolve despite the changing dynamics on the battlefield. In December 2014, the Foundation amended its bylaw allowing it to work in all Syrian governorates. Subsequently, it opened new branches in Tartous, Damascus and its countryside in 2014, in Latakia, Aleppo and the Neirab camp in 2015, in Sweida in 2016, in Hama in 2017 and its latest branch in Deir ez-Zor in 2020. Additionally, the Foundation also operates offices in smaller cities and towns such as Mahrda, Tal Kalakh and Rabla.

Like the ADC, the Martyr Foundation branches adopt different structures and organisation to match local needs. For instance, the Damascus branch only consists of technical, financial and legal departments⁹³ whereas in Aleppo it also has a community communication office⁹⁴ and in Deir ez-Zor it runs two more offices for PR and health services.⁹⁵ There is no public justification for this organisational variation. Additionally, the Foundation operates a separate independent structure to run and manage its various investment projects.

The number of the Martyr Foundation's beneficiaries has increased year by year. Qusay Ismail, the association's executive director, stated that their number rose from 7,000 in 2014⁹⁶ to 23,000 in 2016,⁹⁷ and local members estimate it further grew to 35,000 during 2019.⁹⁸ The Foundation claims to implement a strict and transparent mechanism to designate deserving aid recipients. Potential beneficiaries are identified through social surveys conducted during field visits to poor neighbourhoods in cooperation with local Mukhtars, or through direct registration in one of its branches. Demands and collected data are then saved in a secure database and are anonymously prioritised and ordered by degree of severity and need.⁹⁹ However, reality has shown that different practices, services and aid provided by the Martyr Foundation are mostly subject to personal considerations by the NDF local official. For instance, in Tartous, the Foundation has executed a relatively larger number of initiatives, primarily in response to pressure from NDF provincial commander Faisal Hassan.¹⁰⁰ Hassan is a close

⁹¹ Bassam Youssef, "National Defense Forces, the Assad's Basij" (in Arabic), *Madar Today*, 1 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/3ayYZXO>

⁹² For instance, the number of NDF volunteers under the command of Faisal Hassan in Tartous decreased from 2000 fighters before the Russian intervention to 250 fighters in 2019. Interview with an NDF member in Latakia, September 2019.

⁹³ Wael Hafyan, "Syrian Martyrs, Records Full of Sacrifices, Blood that Fences the Borders of the Homeland and Institutions that Look After their Rights" (in Arabic), *Juhayna*, <https://bit.ly/3cGDKEZ>

⁹⁴ Radio interview with Hazem Bilal, Director of the Martyrs' Branch in Aleppo on Syria Radio (in Arabic), YouTube, 13 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MnBg3m>

⁹⁵ Othman Al-Khalaf, "The Martyr Foundation in Deir ez-Zor Initiates its Fieldwork" (in Arabic), Facebook, 23 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/36Wfq0k>

⁹⁶ Sakina Muhammad, "Martyr Foundation, Local Work and Giving" (in Arabic), *SANA News Agency*, 2 September 2014, <https://bit.ly/2XrY1ta>

⁹⁷ Wael Hafyan, "Syrian Martyrs"

⁹⁸ Interview with an NDF member in Latakia, September 2019.

⁹⁹ Sama channel, "Interview with the Executive Director of the Syrian Martyr Foundation" (in Arabic), YouTube, 20 June 2015, <https://bit.ly/3cwwGpS>

¹⁰⁰ For example, NDF Baniyas, "The Martyr Foundation and the National Defence Centre in Tartous to Present Gifts in Kind on the Occasion of Mother's Day" (in Arabic), Facebook, 23 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/350VEj9>

associate of the Syrian Republican Guards and is considered the founder of NDF in Banyas and one of the most influential local leaders in Tartous, enjoying a vast network of relationships with Ba'ath officials and security services.

3.3. Funding Local Authority

The ADC has primarily received financial support from the IRGC through official donations from the Iranian government.¹⁰¹ The Corps has also benefited from funding provided by Iranian NGOs active in Aleppo and abroad, the most prominent of which are the al-Thaqalin Charity, Jihad al-Binaa and the al-Namaa Society. Additionally, the Corps manages several local ventures with revenue stemming from leasing and selling properties owned by IDPs displaced from Eastern Aleppo, royalties imposed on merchants and industrialists on its territory and profits made from monopolising water distribution in the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo.¹⁰² The Corps also demonstrates a keen interest in providing paid services such as cleaning projects and debris removal benefiting from government and international funding.

The ADC employs 10 to 12 thousand administrative and military personnel, who receive monthly salaries ranging from \$100 to \$150. The Corps also contracts several volunteers but with lower wages – partially funded by Iranian associations active in Aleppo, but either as temporary contractors with municipalities or as daily workers in projects funded by UN agencies.¹⁰³

As for the Martyr Foundation, its 2014 amendment declared its funding sources to be as follows: individual funds and donations from citizens, the proceeds from investment and commercial projects, and subsidies provided by the Syrian state or national NGOs. The Foundation owns the following investments: the al-Shaheed Medical Complex in Homs, textile factories in Damascus and Homs (2014), a private ambulance fleet in Homs (2015) and a commercial mall, a primary education complex, a kindergarten, agricultural land of 50 acres¹⁰⁴ and a pharmacy network in Damascus, Homs and Tartus Governorates (2017).¹⁰⁵ Additionally, Rashad Ali, the Foundation Branch Manager in Damascus, also revealed he had received funds from international institutions such as UNICEF,¹⁰⁶ UNRWA and the World Food Programme in addition to funds from the Syrian Red Crescent¹⁰⁷ and contributions from members of the Martyr Foundation's Board of Trustees. Hazem Bilal, the Foundation Branch Manager in Aleppo, announced the establishment of a new textile workshop in Aleppo, the headquarters of which was donated by Aleppo Governorate, and the machines and equipment by the head of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ The City of Al-Hadr and its Countryside News Network, "The Aleppo Defenders Corps Provides Services in al-Hader with Funding from the Iranian Government" (in Arabic), Facebook, 21 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XTHQWn>

¹⁰² Interview conducted with a local activist on social media, 29 March 2020.

¹⁰³ This has been observed in debris removal and cleaning projects funded by the UNDP. Interview with a local activist based in Syria on social media, 26 March 2020; Aleppo Service Network, "UNDP Announcement Requesting Workers to Remove Debris in the Old Aleppo Area" Facebook, 21 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2yB6Y9S>

¹⁰⁴ Wael Hafian, "Syrian Martyrs Records Full of Sacrifices," *Jouhina website*, <https://bit.ly/2z0LLGT>

¹⁰⁵ Interview with an NDF volunteer on social media, 24 March 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Visit of Ms. Amina Al-Shaqiqi, delegate of UNICEF, to the Martyr Foundation in Homs, Facebook, 23 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3by31RD>

¹⁰⁷ The delivery of food baskets stopped in 2019, which led to a decline in the Foundation's services. Beneficiaries and NDF employees were requested to go to the Red Crescent. Interview conducted with an NSD volunteer via social media, 24 March 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Syriana Radio, "Radio Interview with Hazem Bilal, Director of the Martyr's Branch in Aleppo" (in Arabic), YouTube, 13 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MnBg3m>

3.4. Affiliations and Autonomy

An essential element in the Iranian political toolkit in Syria is spreading Iran-friendly socio-cultural and religious norms and values in Syrian communities. Taking advantage of the governance vacuum and the state's inability to provide essential services and protection in some regions of the country, Iran has focused on several key elements in the Syrian social and cultural landscape to expand its influence and reshape society in a way that is favourable to its long-term presence and interests.

First, Iran has established Shiite religious centres. A study by the International Institute for Syrian Studies notes the foundation of twelve howzat or religious seminaries and three faculties of religious education between 2001 and 2006.¹⁰⁹ The first Shiite university in Syria was licensed in 2003. Other sources estimate that Syria has around 500 Husayniyat and 49 Shi'a shrines. Second, Iran has supported the formation of several charities with religious names that indicate Shiite affiliation since the beginning of the conflict. These include the Jaafari Charitable Society in Latakia and Tartous, the al-Fouaa Charity Association in Idlib, the Jaafar al-Tayyar Association in Latakia, the al-Zahra Charity Association in Aleppo, the al-Ghadir Charity in Aleppo and the al-Mustapha Charitable Society in the village of Umm al-Amad in Homs. Third, besides helping to establish local Shiite militias, Iran mobilised local Shiite communities, initially by forming local political and quasi-military entities such as the Jaafari Islamic Council in 2012 and the Khomeini Scouts Movement. The Khomeini Scouts Movement includes the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in Aleppo, Idlib and Damascus, the al-Wilaya Scouts in Homs, Latakia and the Damascus countryside and the Brotherhood Scouts in Damascus. The number of Shiite scouts in Syria is now estimated at around 5,000 in more than 25 regiments.

The Aleppo Defenders Corps is thus part of a more extensive Iranian network in Syria consisting of charities, military, security and services, and with different names and brands. Each of these has an independent administration, answers to a different executive branch in Iran but is still required to cooperate with the others. For instance, the ADC is affiliated with the IRGC, while Jihad al-Binaa answers to Khamenei's office and the Mahad Complex to the Iranian cultural advisory. There are clear overlaps and redundancy among these structures. Like the Corps, Jihad al-Binaa also consists of the following offices: martyrs' families support, governance and municipality support, media and sports, and a technical office in charge of executing infrastructure projects in cleaning and electricity. Jihad al-Binaa is more active in the countryside of Damascus and Sayida Zeinab but provides services in Aleppo through the ADC.

In comparison, the Martyr Foundation responds more to local cooperation and competition dynamics. The Foundation is undeniably the charitable arm of NDF, and Saqr Rustum has assumed both the presidency of the Foundation's Board of Trustees and the NDF General Secretariat. The existence of coordination between the two institutions is evident through the Foundation's focus on service and aid delivery to NDF volunteers, and occasional financial rewards granted by the NDF General Secretariat to Martyr Foundation employees.

In both cases, these nascent authorities have provided state functions where an institutional void exists to validate their prestige and leadership. Nevertheless, with the lack of a sufficiently strong national alliance or foreign support to create a viable alternative to Assad, these local leaders are willing to be co-opted by the regime rather than compete with it. Ultimately, they serve as intermediaries for the state in connecting with residents, and in return Damascus will allow them to continue.

¹⁰⁹ Abdulrahman Al Hajj, "The Shiite Renaissance in Syria" (in Arabic), *The International Institute for Syrian Studies*, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2TTG06h>

Conclusion

The transformation of the Syrian associative sector was the result of a readjusting state. It took place within a broader context of socio-political and socioeconomic transformations in response to the growing incapacity of public institutions to meet the needs of the population. The evolution of charities during the Syrian conflict has taken three different forms. First, GO-NGOs have remained an important regime tool to control the associative field. Their relevance has considerably increased because of their role providing welfare at a time when state coffers were emptied to fuel the war waged against the Syrian armed opposition groups. Previously encouraged to project a liberal and civic façade of the regime, they are now in charge of additional crucial missions attracting international funds, maintaining patronage networks and compensating the wounded and martyrs' families for their losses. Taking advantage of the lack of choices open to the UN agencies, these organisations funnel money from donors to loyalist militias and their families while enriching themselves and assuming a new benevolent role. Second, rich sponsors and 'philanthropists' have used their organisations to boost their influence and this has consequently triggered competition among the highest ranks of power. Third, armed groups have shown a strong tendency to assert their local authority by providing services and infrastructure projects, thus increasing their autonomy.

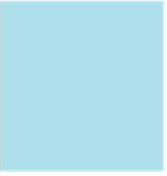
Distinct features emerge among the plethora of organisations active during the conflict. While business cronies and figures closely associated with the regime benefited from these relationships to assume a philanthropic role, red lines were quickly set up and all attempts to divide the loyalty of Assad's constituency were harshly punished. This was mainly the case of Ayman and Mohamad al-Jaber, who for some time were believed to have become the coast lords. Moreover, competition among Assad's close clique also shaped the trajectories of these organisations, which for a long time were perceived as a pillar of the presidential palace's power. Rami Makhoul succumbed to pressure from Asma and Maher al-Assad and had to abandon his charity al-Bustan. On the other hand, charities associated with fighting groups such as the Martyr Foundation of the NDF and the Aleppo Defenders Corps of the LDF were allowed to freely operate as long as they remained local and cooperated with the Baath party.

Nonetheless, common traits among these actors emerge. In terms of funding, businessmen such Samer al Foz and Rami Makhoul have funded their own charities in exchange of preserving and expanding their business ventures. Other organisations have relied on foreign aid to fund their projects and charities. The Trust has received funds from UN agencies (mainly UNHCR), the Aleppo Corps has enjoyed Iranian backing but has also carried out early recovery projects in partnership with the UNDP, and the Martyr Foundation received undisclosed aid from UN agencies but has also benefited from local donations offered by local businessmen. Additionally, they all started with a fundamental need to provide food and energy aid with an apparent inclination towards martyrs' and wounded soldiers' families, and then the largest loyalist communities. At a later stage, either prompted by donor agendas or as a product of upgrading of their profiles, these organisations engaged in service provision in water, sanitation and early recovery projects. Finally, a general trend of diversifying revenue sources such as by setting up an investment portfolio can be observed. These ventures and activities vary from rubble removal to small infrastructure projects, once again financed by international NGOs and UN agencies.

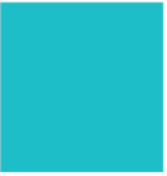
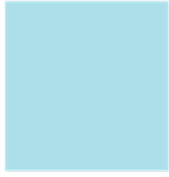
Undeniably, the dire economic situation of the Syrian people living in regime-controlled areas necessitates a collective international response to alleviate their suffering. However, these efforts should solely benefit the most vulnerable individuals, including women, children and the millions of IDPs who were forced out of their homes by the regime's war machine. Betting on small local but independent initiatives to counter the Syrian government's measures could endanger their founders and could potentially put them at odds with the authorities. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine how

they could improve their autonomy as long as the security apparatus, the presidential office and the Ministry of Social Affairs are all partners in setting the national agenda of early recovery and aid delivery.

For once, the Syrian case presents a rare opportunity to break with UN traditional deference to sovereignty. So far, the UN has justified its choice to work with Syrian GO-NGOs on legal grounds and the need to deliver services and aid to the most needy parts of the population. Yet, previously opposition-controlled areas such as Daraa, Eastern Ghouta and Homs are frequently denied access to vital assistance. More than ever, as the economic situation is falling free and will likely further deteriorate, al-Assad regime's vulnerabilities will increase. The Caesar Act allows the US president to waive the application of any sanction for NGOs providing humanitarian assistance in Syria. However, banks, insurance and shipping companies and sellers providing humanitarian goods could refuse to do business with humanitarian NGOs operating in Syria due to fear of inadvertently violating US sanctions. The Syrian regime's options are few, and it will resort to charities and the UN to ensure the continuity of the flow of cash to the country. Therefore, the UN can demand sole authority over its aid distribution, or at least to select its local partners without interference.



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