

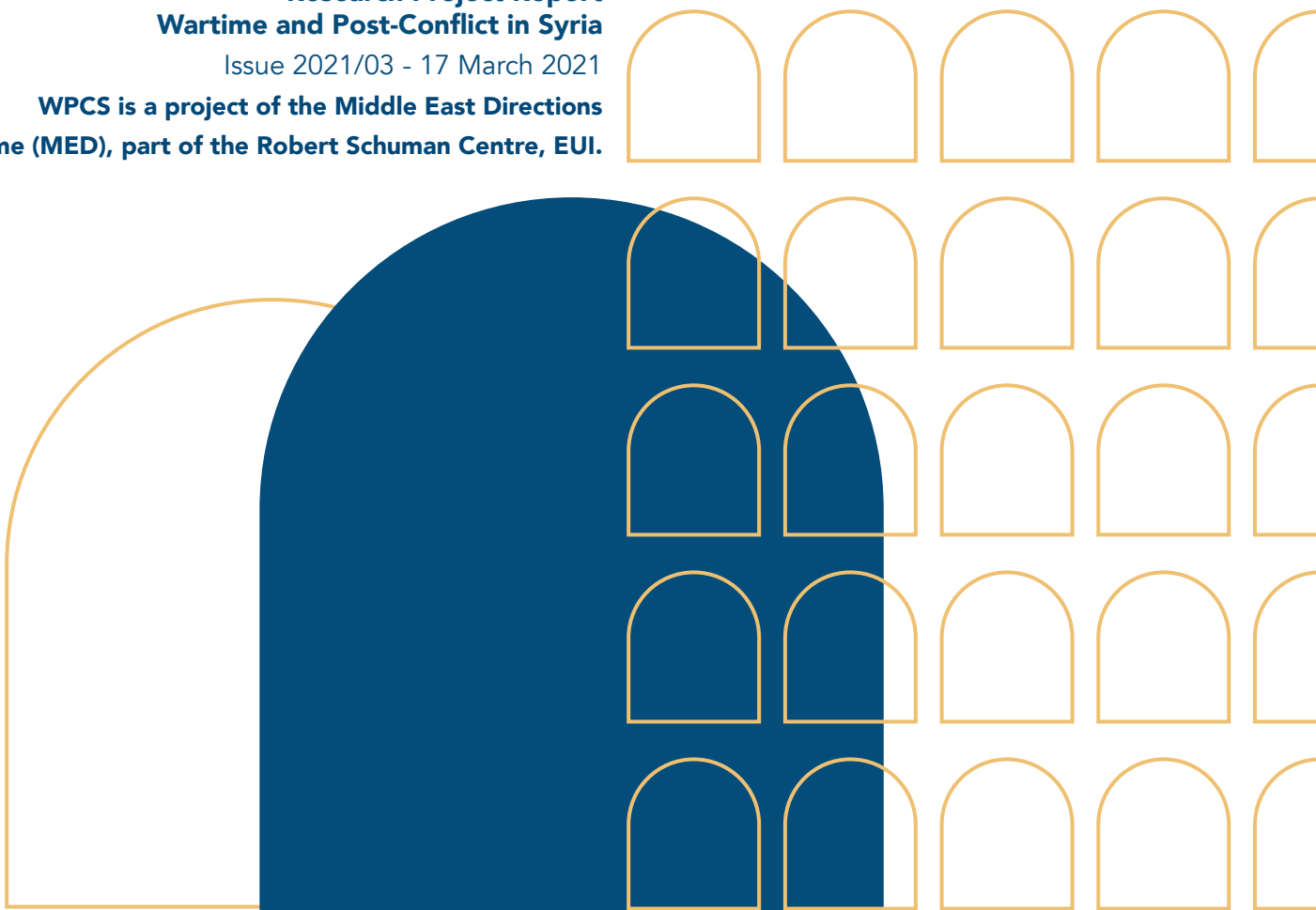
What Role for Syrian Non-Governmental Organisations in Deir ez-Zor after the War?

Ziad Awad

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What Role for Syrian Non-Governmental Organisations in Deir ez-Zor after the War?

Ziad Awad*

* Ziad Awad is a journalist and researcher who works under the aegis of the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project in the Middle East Directions programme at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence.

This research report was translated from Arabic into English by Alex Rowell.

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Executive Summary

During the years of war in Deir ez-Zor and the siege imposed by Islamic State (IS) on the pocket of territory in the city controlled by the Assad regime, Syrian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) failed to alleviate the suffering experienced by the local residents who remained there. Indeed, NGOs would have probably vanished altogether because of the paucity of financial and human resources – due to the significant displacement out of the city – were it not for the intervention of the ruling authorities, which maintained their structures by reconfiguring some of their boards of directors.

After the fighting ended in the regime's favour in late 2017, and the extent of the destruction left in its wake became apparent, UN agencies and International NGOs (INGOs) expanded their intervention in Deir ez-Zor, which encouraged a number of local charitable and development NGOs to resume their activities. It also encouraged a growing number of national associations to implement projects and open offices in the city.

The profound transformations undergone by Syrian associations during the war and siege led to a major change in their composition, turning them into vehicles representing the commercial and family interests of some of their directors. They also lack general institutional characteristics in terms of structure and performance, while also lacking support from the community. This has given rise to numerous weaknesses and challenges, from which they continue to suffer.

Amid a worsening economic crisis, government institutions are unable to provide residents with services and social care. Despite this, the regime has not eased the various restrictions and interventions it imposes on charitable and development NGOs. These take the form either of administrative laws governing the operations of the associations or direct interventions by local officials, such as the governor and senior intelligence officers. In addition, the Fourth Division's Security Bureau imposes fees on all goods and materials coming into the city, including those going to NGOs. The network of cronies to which most of the current chairmen of these associations belong has also given regime officials a greater ability to intervene, especially in the implementation of the four most significant local associations' projects. These associations' chairmen all owe their rise to the regime, whether in terms of the leading government positions they have acquired or the wealth they have illicitly amassed.

Introduction

In the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's reign, as under his father before him, the NGOs that were established in Deir ez-Zor were semi-official copies of parent associations mostly founded in the capital, Damascus, under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Until 2010, only three of the 25 licensed associations in the governorate¹ were not local copies or branches of associations in other governorates. All three dated back to before the start of Hafez al-Assad's rule in 1970.²

Deir ez-Zor city was left untouched by changes in the field of civil volunteer work, which mostly occurred in Damascus, during the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's term. It was of no interest to First Lady Asma al-Assad, who led an elite civil movement that spawned numerous secular civil society organisations, most of which came under the umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development, founded in 2007.³ Only one organisation promoted by Asma al-Assad reached Deir ez-Zor: the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association, which opened a branch in the city in 2009 and implemented just one project. Deir ez-Zor was also excluded from the partial revival of the traditional charitable sector spearheaded by the Sunni religious movement during that period after the easing of restrictions against it in the main cities. An exception was the branch of the al-Birr Association for Charity and Social Services, originally founded in Homs, which was licensed in Deir ez-Zor in 2003.

This study constitutes the first attempt to study officially registered NGOs in Deir ez-Zor city after the revolution. It focuses on the Syrian charitable and development NGOs and foundations operating in the city, but excludes those sponsored or supported by Iran due to their concentration in the governorate's countryside. The paper aims to answer the following question. What are the roles of these NGOs in the city after the devastating war it has experienced, and what are the key challenges they face in terms of their relationships with the ruling authorities and local communities? It first reviews the history of associations during the stages of peaceful struggle and then war. The subsequent sections address the structural and intrinsic challenges facing these associations, together with the external challenges created by the regime.

The study is based on 25 interviews, mostly carried out by the researcher over the internet, with current and former Syrian employees in a number of UN agencies and international organisations working in Deir ez-Zor, former directors and board members of certain NGOs, and colleagues, friends and relatives of current association chairmen. It also makes use of open-source information found in news articles and reports published in the media – particularly the official and loyalist media – and on the Facebook pages of certain associations, government institutions, ministries, association chairmen and board members.

1 Muhammad Ahmad al-Othman, "Islamic Charitable Associations, a Comparative Jurisprudence Study, the Examples of the Dar al-Aytam and al-Birr Association" (in Arabic), doctoral dissertation, Damascus University, 2011/2012, 55-56.

2 The Islamic Charitable Association in 1932, the Arab Women's Association in 1959 and the Women's Renaissance Association in 1960.

3 Ayman Aldassouky and Sinan Hatahet, "The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime-sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, July 2020), <http://bit.ly/3qU6xwD>

1. A New Form of Civil Volunteer Work in Wartime

NGOs in the city of Deir ez-Zor underwent two main phases after the outbreak of the revolution in 2011. The first stage of peaceful struggle (2011-2012) witnessed competition between civil volunteers loyal to the regime and peaceful revolutionaries and ended with the outbreak of armed clashes and the partition of the city in the summer of 2012 between areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and others held by regime forces (Map 1). During the war (2012-2017), NGOs underwent radical changes. The time of the siege imposed by IS on the regime-controlled enclave between 2015 and 2017 constituted the most significant period of these transformations (Map 2).

1.1. Competing with Revolutionaries

The revolution created a new environment for civil volunteer work that challenged the regime's security crackdowns, arrests and climate of repression. The main products of this new environment during the first year of the revolution were coordination committees that led the revolutionary movement. A number of revolution-oriented NGOs sprang up under the FSA, which controlled most of the city's neighbourhoods in summer 2012. The revolutionary movement attracted most of the young volunteers who had joined – as early as 2005 – the Syrian Family Planning Association, the only licensed association which involved young volunteers in Deir ez-Zor city.⁴ By 2013, there were as many as 29 such NGOs active across the opposition-controlled areas of Deir ez-Zor governorate,⁵ all of which were dissolved after IS took over the area in summer 2014.

This active revolutionary civil movement existed in parallel with a weak civil movement loyal to the regime. Attempts by the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) and the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU) of the Baath Party, backed by the intelligence apparatus, failed to create new civil networks capable of mobilising against the revolution. In summer 2011, only two initiatives were launched and they were led by the same person, a NUSS activist accused of collaborating with the intelligence agencies.⁶ These initiatives were the Syria National Team for Voluntary Work and the local branch of the Syria Youth Fingerprint Foundation (SYF), which was established in Damascus in February 2011. Just as they shared the same leader, they also shared most of the same members, no more than 60 young men and women, mostly from the NUSS and RYU. The visible activities of the two groups were limited to organising pro-regime rallies and a cleaning campaign at an archaeological site outside the city, together with distributing gifts to children on Eid al-Fitr.⁷ The state media were keen to portray this marginal movement as a spontaneous show of popular opposition to the revolution.⁸

With the exception of the SYF, the officially registered NGOs in the city – estimated to number 10 at the time – adopted a position of neutrality, departing from a public scene that was moving away from their fields of work, irrespective of the scale and scope of their previous activities. With the outbreak of armed battles and the wounding of civilians, first aid became a key role, played mainly by the local branch of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

4 Interview with Anas al-Fatih, co-founder of the association's youth centre in the city and one of the first demonstrators against the regime in Deir ez-Zor, January 2021.

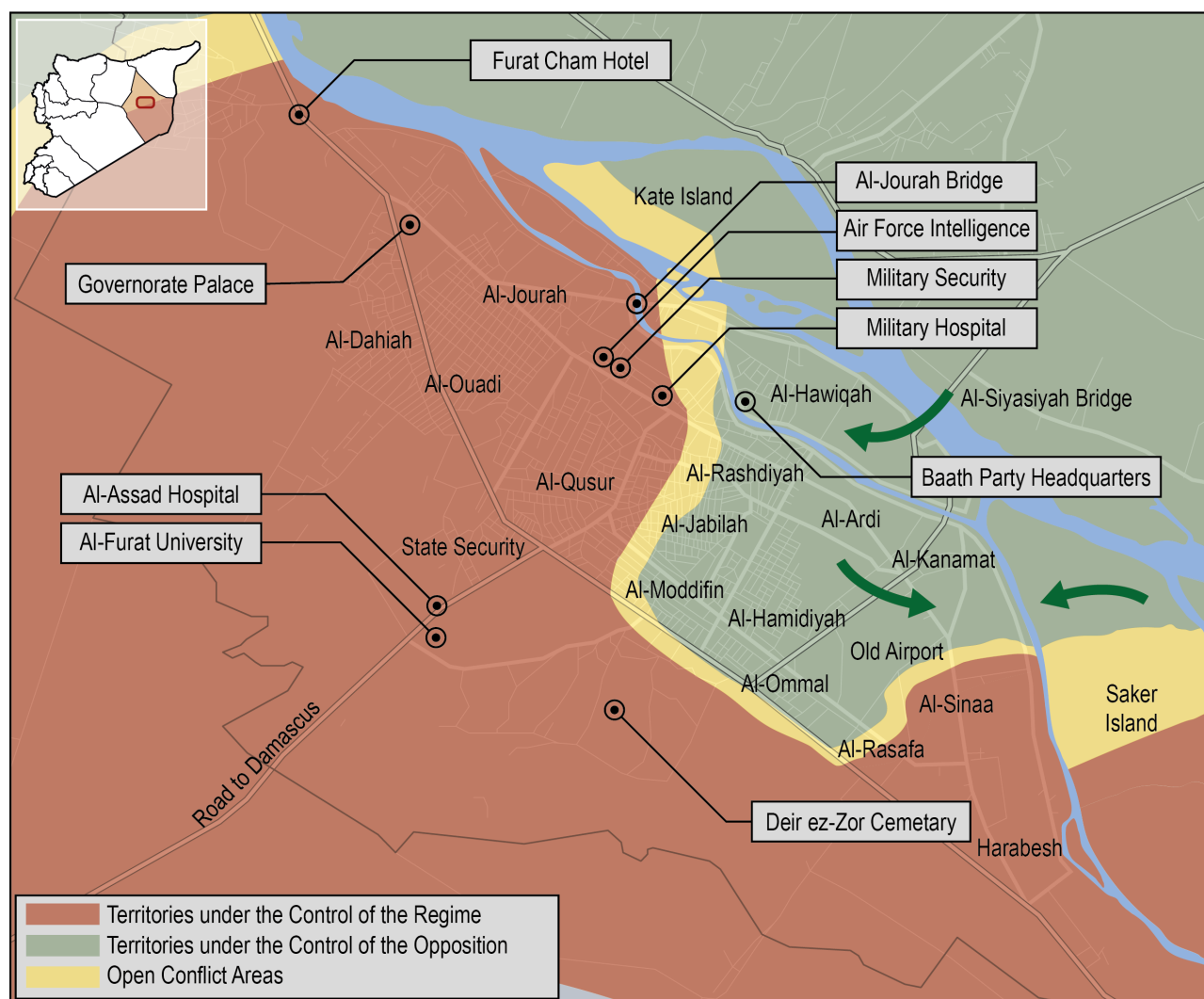
5 Karam Alhamad, "Deir ez-Zor: A Legacy of Marginalisation and Suffering," *APPG Friends of Syria*, 24 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/3syaBUG>

6 Interview with an acquaintance of Azzam Sibahi, first head of the Syria Youth Fingerprint Branch in Deir ez-Zor, January 2021.

7 Ismail al-Najm, "'Halabiya and Zalabiyya,' Deir ez-Zor Youth Meeting" (in Arabic), *eSyria*, 25 September 2011, <https://bit.ly/2Nu7yxP>; Ismail al-Najm, "The Eid Bus Visits the Children of Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), *eSyria*, 1 September 2011, <https://bit.ly/37UKgrN>

8 Ismail al-Najm, "Syria Youth Fingerprint in Deir ez-Zor Denounces TV Channels of Chaos" (in Arabic), *eSyria*, 12 December 2011, <https://bit.ly/2MqKz5U>

Map 1: Military Control over Deir ez-Zor City (2012-2014)



Source: The author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui.

1.2. Near-Disintegration in War

The war years, and especially the siege, exacerbated the vulnerability of NGOs in Deir ez-Zor city. The population's needs mounted due to a steady deterioration in the services, health and education sectors, a sharp decrease in the supply of food and fuel, rising rates of inflation and unemployment, and an accompanying decline in purchasing power. Despite this, only two new associations were established in the regime-held part of the city: the Ghayth Development Association, founded in 2013, and the Imaar Charitable Association, founded in 2014.

This weak involvement in organised volunteer initiatives to help residents may be explained by three main factors. First, the regime continued to dominate civil volunteer work. The governor – in his capacity as the most senior representative of the state in Deir ez-Zor – chaired the relief sub-committee from the first months of 2013. The Social Affairs and Labour Directorate, which oversees NGOs, worked within the framework of this sub-committee. Security services, especially the Political Security and General Intelligence (State Security) agencies, also monitored associations and intervened in their affairs at will.

Second, the educated and religious elite which had previously led charitable activities was gradually displaced.⁹ Third, financial resources became scarce, with most donations – especially from expatriated city locals – going to relief organisations and initiatives in opposition-controlled territory, or else to relatives and friends in need of assistance due to the war and displacement.

These factors affected not only the number of associations but also their structures, particularly after their leaders and active members left the city and their original offices fell under opposition control. In 2013, this prompted six associations – or their remaining board members – to enter into a temporary union called the Group of Charitable Associations in Deir ez-Zor under the aegis of the Social Affairs and Labour Directorate.¹⁰

During the entire period of the siege that IS imposed on the regime-controlled enclave, these associations were unable to participate in any significant relief work. They seemed so weak and corroded that they were on the brink of shutting down until the regime intervened, endeavouring to maintain their structures as part of its non-governmental network. In June 2016, the governor of Deir ez-Zor issued a decision to form temporary boards of directors for the six associations which had previously formed the Group of Charitable Associations. Until the siege was lifted in September 2017, the activities of these associations were limited to distributing food aid provided by the World Food Programme (WFP).¹¹

The WFP's partnership with these local associations remained, however, secondary, while its primary partner was the local branch of the Red Crescent in the city. The SARC enjoys special status as it is officially licensed as a national institution while at the same time it is a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which has granted it greater protection and independence than other Syrian associations and foundations have, especially during the peaceful phase of the conflict. However, the organisation was unable to protect some of its members. Two paramedics volunteering with it were killed by the regime in June and July 2012,¹² while in 2013 Military Intelligence arrested two other volunteers, whose fate remains unknown to this day. From 2013 until 2018, the local branch of the organisation was headed by Muhammad Diaa al-Din al-Dahmouh, a food merchant loyal to the regime who later became a major war profiteer.¹³ Despite a number of challenges amid the escalating violent conflict, owing to its partnership with the WFP the SARC remained the primary and almost sole actor in the charity sector during the siege. It was particularly active in coordinating the provision of food, medicine, fuel and other necessities which were dropped by parachute into the besieged enclave starting from February 2016.¹⁴ The interference of certain regime representatives and local merchants in receiving and distributing this aid enabled them to accumulate large amounts of wealth.¹⁵

9 The population of the city decreased from around 500,000 in 2010 to about 80,000 in the regime-controlled neighbourhoods and about 1,000 in other neighbourhoods at the time the siege was broken in September 2017. During the first few months of the war, thousands of families fled to the part of the city controlled by the regime to escape its bombardment of the part outside of its control. Waves of displacement continued towards Damascus, al-Hasakah and Qamishli, in addition to the opposition-controlled villages and towns in the countryside of the governorate.

10 This group included the Islamic Charitable Association, the al-Birr Association for Charity and Social Services, the Arab Women's Association, the Women's Renaissance Association, the Syrian Family Planning Association and the Association for Blind Care.

11 Syriasteps citing Tishreen Newspaper, "Tables of Rahman Absent from Deir ez-Zor, and New Aid Distributed by Charities" (in Arabic), 27 August 2013, <https://bit.ly/2Ykrh4O>

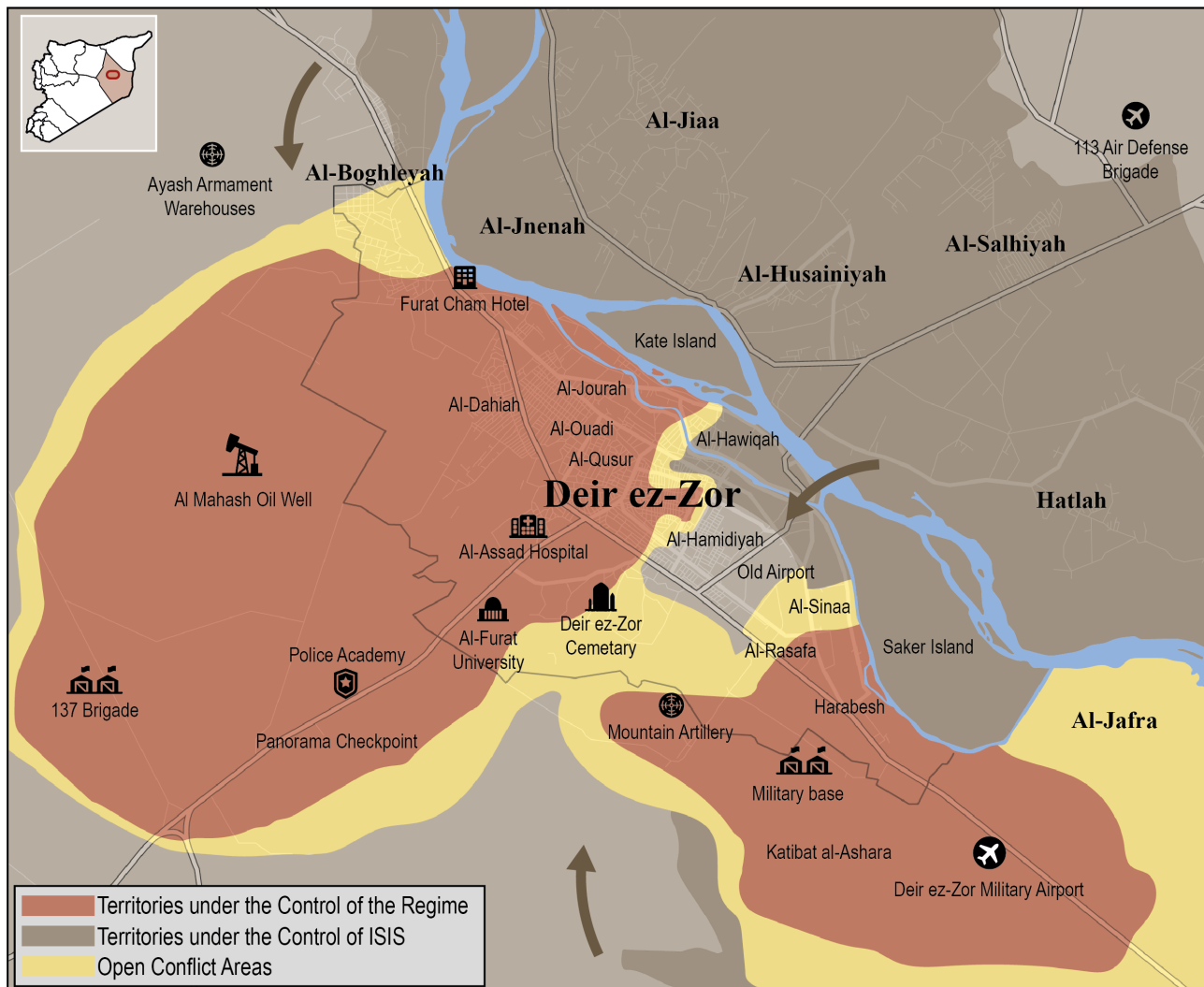
12 The two are Bashar al-Youssef and Khaled Khafaji. Syrian Arab Red Crescent, "Martyrs of the Organisation" (in Arabic), undated, <https://bit.ly/301q6lt>

13 Ziad Awad, "The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir Ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, March 2019), <https://bit.ly/3vA4vW4>

14 UN News, "The United Nations Starts Airlifting Aid in Deir ez-Zor, Syria," 4 February 2016, <https://bit.ly/3aXV3nc>. According to statements published by the Red Crescent, 3,500 tonnes of aid were transported in this way – the sole supply line until the end of the siege – in 200 drops until March 2017. Website of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent organisation, 6 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/2TobuOl>

15 Awad, "The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir Ez-Zor," ibid.

Map 2 – Military Control over Deir ez-Zor City (2016-2017)



Source: The author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui.

2. An Unsteady Rise from the Rubble

Once IS was defeated and the regime regained control of the entire city along with nearly half of the administrative area of Deir ez-Zor governorate, the full extent of the massive destruction was revealed. It was especially significant in neighbourhoods that had been outside the regime's control.¹⁶ Also apparent was the extent of the division within local communities. After displaced government employees were forced to return, the city's population rose to nearly 200,000 by the end of 2018.¹⁷ Meanwhile, UN agencies and INGOs expanded their activities in the city, which came to be considered a secure zone. This revived the roles of Syrian charitable and development NGOs, in parallel with the regime endeavouring to revive all official structures affiliated with it. In consequence, the total number of charitable associations and entities operating in the city between 2018 and 2020 rose to 22 (as identified by the author in the Appendix).

¹⁶ Muhammad Qaddour Ayniya, then governor of Deir ez-Zor, estimated the percentage of damage to the city at 80%. Sputnik, "The Governor of Deir ez-Zor Briefs Sputnik about the Situation in the Governorate Following Siege and Reconstruction Plans" (in Arabic), 8 November 2017, <https://bit.ly/2tcHUzP>

¹⁷ Awad, "The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir Ez-Zor," *ibid*.

These associations differ in terms of their identities, nominal jurisdictions, affiliations, launch dates and places of incorporation. Despite the significant variations between them, we can classify them in two main groups. The first are local NGOs with a local board of directors, even if they were established in Deir ez-Zor as branches of other NGOs (12 organisations). The second are NGOs originating from outside the governorate which have not established a local branch with its own board of directors in Deir ez-Zor (10 organisations). This classification helps identify the intrinsic vulnerabilities and internal challenges faced by these two groups.

2.1. Local NGOs

The local NGOs, most of which underwent the experience of war and siege in Deir ez-Zor city, attest to the profound transformations brought about by the conflict at the political, economic, social and religious levels. Analysing their composition and performance between 2018 and 2020, it appears that today they face three main internal challenges, which are the identity of their leadership, their lack of institutional characteristics and an absence of community support.¹⁸

On the one hand, local NGOs fell under the leadership of new local actors who emerged from the war, most of them belonging to the regime's network of local cronies (see section 3). They range in age from being in their 50s to their 60s. None had any previous interest in civil volunteer work or involvement in initiatives for the public good. As such, they lack the qualities necessary to lead charity and development associations, such as experience, determination and dedication. In many cases, personal interests were their prime motivation to get involved in NGOs. Examples include the chairman of the Ghayth Development Association since its establishment in 2013, Hassan al-Mughir, who is a merchant and contractor and who implemented certain UN Development Programme projects the same year. It is also the case of the civil engineer Maher Nuwaiser, the owner of a construction company, who worked as a contractor to carry out a project to rehabilitate centres for internally-displaced persons in the regime-controlled enclave in 2013 with funding from Islamic Relief France,¹⁹ before founding the Imaar Charitable Association in 2014.

On the other hand, none of these NGOs possess the characteristics typical of an institution in terms of the composition of their board of directors. The upshot is a lack of transparency – reaching the point of extreme secrecy and concealment of information in some cases – and disorderly organisational structures. In most of the 12 local NGOs, the chairmen have been in place for at least four years (except where chairmen have died) and much ambiguity has surrounded the election of the board.²⁰ What little is known about some boards gives the impression they have almost turned into private institutions. In other words, they are either an extension of the interests of their chairmen – for instance, three of the Imaar Charitable Association's board members work in the construction company and real estate development company owned by the Imaar chairman – or an extension of family interests, as in the case of the Ghayth Development Association, the board of which includes two relatives of its chairman.²¹

Finally, despite their local origin, these associations lack the support of the local communities, even among the social segments with which they are nominally associated. For example, unlike in the years before the

18 The four most active local NGOs appear to be the Islamic Charitable Association, the al-Birr Association for Charity and Social Services, the Ghayth Development Association and the Imaar Charitable Association (Table 1 in the Appendix).

19 Interview with an employee of Islamic Relief France, January 2021.

20 In the election for the Imaar Charitable Association board of directors, for example, which was held in November 2018, the association did not announce the names of the elected board members. It only announced that the seven members were headed by Maher Nuwaiser. Sada al-Deir, "Imaar Charitable Association Elects its Board of Directors" (in Arabic), Facebook, 10 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/3q1kwjJ>

21 One of them is the chairman's sister's husband and the other is his cousin who, was his partner in medicine trade during the siege.

war,²² the two Islamic NGOs – the Islamic Charitable Association and the al-Birr Association for Charity and Social Services – have no particular constituency in the city’s religious circles. Their new leaders are to a large extent responsible for severing ties with the community as represented by the Sunni religious movement and the local faithful at large. They neither belong to this movement or to the wider religious community, nor have they expressed any serious interest in establishing strong relations with them. In addition, the size and capabilities of the current official leadership of the city’s religious community also explain the lack of community support, since this leadership is unable to grant legitimacy to the chairmen of the two Islamic NGOs. Given the sharp political division that left no middle ground in Deir ez-Zor, clerics who enjoyed prestige and influence indeed chose either to side with the revolution – and are therefore now displaced or in exile – or to remain neutral and withdraw from the public scene and from preaching in the city’s mosques.²³ Although Friday sermons repeatedly urge worshippers to donate to charities, in line with the recommendations of the Endowment Directorate, the response has remained very limited. In the largest mosque in the city, the al-Fateh Mosque, which is adjacent to the upscale al-Baladiyya Villas neighbourhood inhabited by wealthy residents, the total value of donations made to charities during each Friday prayer in the last months of 2020 did not exceed SYP 150,000 (less than USD 70).²⁴ It therefore appears that the Endowments Director, who is known for his unswerving loyalty to the regime and his closeness to some Iranian officials who work in Deir ez-Zor, is unable to persuade the wealthy to donate to local NGOs.

Just as the Islamic NGOs have lost their connection with their religious constituency, it appears that other NGOs pertaining to other segments of society are also without communal support.

The Arab Women’s Association, for example, has no particular connection with local women, despite its increased activity after 2018, as it does not limit its activities to women, but instead implements all the available projects financed by UN agencies. The gender imbalance in its leadership has reached the point of a man assuming the position of its executive director.²⁵ Similarly, the Association for Blind Care has provided care to just 50 of the 150 blind persons registered in the city.²⁶

2.2. NGOs from Outside the Governorate

Starting in the final months of 2017, an increasing number of Syrian charitable and development NGOs hailing from outside the governorate began opening offices and launching projects in Deir ez-Zor without creating a local branch led by a local board of directors. Of these ten NGOs (Table 2 in the Appendix), five are affiliated with religious authorities: four charities affiliated with Christian churches and one organisation patronised by the Mufti of the Republic, Ahmed Hassoun. Five others are affiliated with large active parent associations and institutions, such as the Syria Trust for Development and the Social Development Association. As for the Martyr Foundation, which is affiliated with the National Defence Forces and began its activities in Deir ez-Zor in March 2020, it represents a unique case as it is the only NGO in the city affiliated with a militia group that has opened a branch with a local board

22 In the past, the Islamic Charitable Association was run by prominent clerics, such as Sheikh Muhammad Saeed al-Urfi, who died in 1956, and educated dignitaries such as the teacher Naji al-Sanad and the doctor Yasser al-Hamad between the 1990s and 2010. See Mazen Shaheen, *A History of Deir ez-Zor Governorate* (in Arabic), Dar Saeb (Deir ez-Zor 2008), 344. The same applies to the al-Birr Association, the board of which was chaired from its establishment in 2003 until 2010 by the Sufi doctor Ahmed Qarboun, with the patronage of the famous sheikh and pharmacist Ahmed al-Sarraj. Interview with Ahmed Qarboun, former chairman of the association, January 2021.

23 The total number of mosques where Friday prayers are held has decreased to around 40, compared to 100 or even more prior to the revolution.

24 Interview with a resident of the Villas neighbourhood who is privy to the affairs of the al-Fateh Mosque.

25 Tawasul, “Appeal and Response ... Mr. Suhaib Luay al-Karma al-Khalaf, Executive Director of the Arab Women’s Association” (in Arabic), Facebook, 7 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3aKKJim>

26 Association for Blind Care and Rehabilitation in Deir ez-Zor, “Article About the Association for Blind Care in Deir ez-Zor, Its Objectives?” (in Arabic), Facebook, 4 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3uqlk0>

of directors.²⁷ Looking at the characteristics of most of the NGOs hailing from outside the governorate, they appear to outperform the local NGOs, most notably due to their internal capabilities and their networks of relations with decision-making circles in Damascus.

On the one hand, these NGOs enjoy the auspices of circles that are both influential and close to donors, which provides them with easier access to UN agencies and INGOs, which are considered the main source of funding for Syrian NGOs. For example, the charitable arm of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East in Damascus, known as its Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, enjoys immense financial resources²⁸ and appears to have been the most active association in Deir ez-Zor since 2018. Such NGOs also enjoy the backing of various power centres, which provide their Deir ez-Zor offices with a great deal of protection. An example is the Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society in Aleppo governorate, patronised by the Mufti of the Republic and chaired by his son Inayatullah Hassoun. The association started providing medical services in Deir ez-Zor city in November 2019 with funding from the World Health Organisation (WHO).

On the other hand, most of the local directors and coordinators of the NGOs hailing from outside the governorate have higher qualifications and capabilities than the heads of local NGOs. Some are natives of Deir ez-Zor and were displaced to Damascus, al-Hasakah and Qamishli, from where they created work relations with a number of associations and organisations before proceeding to manage the offices of these same organisations back home in Deir ez-Zor city after the war.

For example, the pharmacist Zubair Hiza runs the local office of the Mar Assia al-Hakim Centre, which is affiliated with the Syriac Catholic Archbishopric in al-Hasakah governorate, after having been involved in the implementation of some projects led by this centre during his displacement in Qamishli from 2013 to 2017.²⁹ Through their career paths and their relationships with parent institutions, the heads of offices and project coordinators of these NGOs have acquired skills they would not otherwise have gained had they remained in Deir ez-Zor, their own motives notwithstanding.

Despite the advantages that make charities and other foundations originating from outside the governorate more effective in the short term, their reach inside Deir ez-Zor suffers from major challenges. First, the city is not the foremost priority of their central headquarters, the long-term strategies of which typically focus on their cities and governorates of origin or on Damascus and the coastal region. After a relatively significant launch in Deir ez-Zor between late 2017 and late 2018, the Syria Trust for Development then suspended its projects in the city, most probably due to funding constraints that prompted it to focus on areas deemed more important than Deir ez-Zor. Second, due to these NGOs' weak links with the local environment, Deir ez-Zor is merely viewed as a temporary and occasional operational arena, contingent on funding circumstances. For example, the Blue Wing Foundation ceased its activities in the city as soon as the funding for its project to protect breadwinning mothers and their children ended.³⁰ Third, ignorance of the local environment can lead these NGOs to be deceived or misled by local authorities. For instance, Maryam Salem al-Mitras, a member of the People's Assembly and daughter of the Baath Brigades commander in Deir ez-Zor, nominated two of her friends to run offices opened by the Syria Pulse Association in the city, neither of whom possessed the requisite qualifications. This caused problems for the association, forcing it to temporarily suspend some of its activities in the city.³¹

27 The parent organisation of the Martyr Foundation was established in Homs in 2013 and opened a branch in Deir ez-Zor to take care of the families of its dead soldiers. One other similar but less prominent case is the charity office of the Iran-backed Local Defence Forces.

28 The Department has 22 international partners and 44 offices across most of the Syrian governorates, in addition to 1,600 employees working full-time or part-time. Marianne Ejdersten, "Fr Alexi – a peacemaker in Syria," *World Council of Churches*, 21 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/3czXQCL>

29 Interview with a friend of Hiza, February 2021.

30 This project was funded by the Humanitarian Fund in Syria and implemented over the course of a year and a half. The project's Facebook page, "Sukkar to protect breadwinning mothers and their children in Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/3bKnnZx>

31 Interview with a person close to al-Mitras.

3. Various Forms of Regime Penetration

The economic policy pursued by Bashar al-Assad during his first decade in power encouraged charitable and development associations and foundations to “compensate for the gradual state withdrawal from social welfare.”³² However, at the time the state was internally strong enough and capable of providing the population with an essential minimum of services and social care, to the extent that it could do without civil society organisations. With the outbreak of the war and then the deepening of the economic crisis, the role of the state in the provision of jobs and services declined. To maintain its social support base, the regime appeared to accept a greater role for NGOs, especially charitable and developmental ones, with the aim of complementing certain functions of government institutions. At all times, however, Deir ez-Zor remained far from the central authorities’ attention. Damascus has always favoured the allocation of resources to government-organised non-governmental organisations (GO-NGOs), such as the Syria Trust for Development and the al-Areen Charitable Foundation, which succeeded the al-Bustan Charity Foundation at the national level.³³ As for NGOs in Deir ez-Zor, they remained under-resourced and subject to various forms of regime penetration, whether through interventions by the state apparatus and its representatives or through local crony networks affiliated with the regime, to which most local association directors belong.

3.1. Multiple Ways of Direct Intervention

The legal framework and especially the procedures for obtaining a license and approvals for the implementation of each project open the way to multiple interventions. Establishing or trying to establish a new NGO in Deir ez-Zor involves a long and arduous process of obtaining security and civil approvals, first at the local level – from the Governorate Social Affairs and Labour Directorate, the Political Security branch and the Governor – and then at the headquarters in Damascus – from the Political Security Department and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.³⁴ These procedures may take an entire year before the issuance of a final response, whether it be a rejection or acceptance, and sometimes result in no response.³⁵

While this process hinders the emergence of new NGOs in Deir ez-Zor, the administrative and security approvals required before and during the implementation of each project also impede the NGOs attaining their objectives. For instance, NGOs are prevented from choosing the neighbourhoods and streets in which they implement projects. The al-Rashidiyah and Western Hawiqa neighbourhoods remain outside the reach of NGOs, for instance, due to security directives preventing the launch of any projects there, which are attributed to their proximity to the main headquarters of the intelligence services in the west of the city.³⁶ As for NGOs that work on restoration projects for destroyed homes,

they must strictly abide by lists of beneficiaries approved, after a series of procedures, by the National Security Office in Damascus. These lists exclude anyone who has been detained and stripped of civil rights for political reasons and anyone closely related to a regime opponent.³⁷

32 Aldassouky and Hatahet, “The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War,” *ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*

34 Recent decisions issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in January 2021 aimed at facilitating the operations of local NGOs and limiting conflicts of interest within their boards may have no significant effect, with the exception of the decision prohibiting both the presence of two family members in the same board of directors and the employment and contracting of relatives. Snacksyrian, “To Curb Corruption ... Decision Prevents Associations’ Administration from Contracting Family Members” (in Arabic), 23 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/2OYTUDb>. As for the decision to extend fundraising license terms from three months to a full year, it will not significantly increase the donations provided to NGOs, given the other major obstacles to donating that exist, as discussed above.

35 Interviews with a board member of an NGO and with a person who tried to establish an NGO.

36 Interviews with an employee of an organisation that finances home renovation projects and a government employee familiar with NGO work, February 2021.

37 *Ibid.*

Moreover, the governor has complete authority over all governmental and non-governmental institutions and bodies in the city. He enjoys special authority as chairman of the relief and reconstruction sub-committees. As such, he is always able to intervene in the implementation of any project. On the pretext of ensuring the structural integrity of the homes earmarked for restoration, former Governor Abd al-Majid al-Kawakibi imposed on some NGOs an obligation to contract with the governorate's technical office in order for it to conduct engineering inspections of homes, with the NGO having to pay the office at least SYP 50,000 for each inspection.³⁸ Similarly, on the pretext of granting a greater role to the Bar Association, the governor, along with the head of the Bar Association's Deir ez-Zor branch, interfered in a project implemented by the Red Crescent's legal team since 2018 – a project which aims to tackle late registrations of births, marriages and divorces with the Civil Status Department.³⁹ Furthermore, despite the failure of a project to revive the Fouad Cinema Street market, which was implemented by the UN Development Programme,⁴⁰ the new governor, Fadel al-Najjar, who was appointed in October 2020, intervened to put the street back on the list of streets targeted in a project for the rehabilitation and restoration of shops and homes, which the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development began implementing in February 2021.⁴¹

Finally, certain military units deployed around Deir ez-Zor, particularly the Fourth Division, create additional obstacles to the work of charitable and development NGOs. At its checkpoints at the city's main entrances, the Division's Security Bureau imposes fees and levies on all types of materials and equipment entering the city, including those supplied for the benefit of NGO projects. This practice increases the implementation costs of any given project and leads to a reduction in the quality of implementation or the number of beneficiaries.⁴² Similarly, members of the National Defence Forces habitually confiscate rations of food baskets distributed periodically by the SARC, a practice approved by the current local director of the organisation, Sufyan al-Mashali, as it was by the previous one. In addition, the SARC's ambulance team is obliged to participate in transporting sick or wounded soldiers from their military outposts or their place of injury to the military hospital in the city.⁴³

3.2. Clientelist Networks within NGOs

The conflict has provided various types of upward mobility within the pro-regime environment, whether economically for traders and businessmen who accumulated wealth, particularly during the siege, or professionally for those who sought promotion and leading positions in governmental and semi-governmental institutions. The emerging local cronies differ from their predecessors in their extreme closeness to the regime and the types of services they have provided it and its officials with.

As is evident in the case of the four most important local NGOs in Deir ez-Zor, most of the associations' directors are part of the regime's network of local cronies. Amer Majeed Agha, chairman of the Islamic Charitable Association since 2016, is known for his connections with some heads in the intelligence services, to which he was accused of having reported oppositionist students when he was a professor at the Faculty of Agriculture in 2011, an act that won him favour with the regime

38 Interview with an employee of an organisation that worked in home restoration, January 2021.

39 On the initial request of the governor, this project was to be implemented after obtaining the approval of the Bar Association and in coordination with it. Interview with a lawyer from Deir ez-Zor, February 2021.

40 This project was implemented between 2018 and 2019 in cooperation with Deir ez-Zor City Council, relying on local contractors. The failure of the project was illustrated by the fact that most of the stores remained closed until the beginning of 2020 and that some buildings that housed them collapsed after their restoration.

41 Interview with a government employee in Deir ez-Zor, February 2021.

42 Interviews with an employee of an organisation that finances home restoration projects and with a government employee familiar with NGO work, February 2021.

43 Interview with a nurse working at the Military Hospital in Deir ez-Zor, February 2021.

and paved the way for him to become dean of the faculty.⁴⁴ Jamal Alloush, who chaired the al-Birr Association from 2016 until his death in August 2020, was a foodstuff dealer who provided the Republican Guard forces with large quantities of food during their campaign against the city, which included horrific massacres in the al-Joura and al-Qusour neighbourhoods in late September 2012.⁴⁵ Likewise, the Ghayth Development Association has been chaired since 2013 by a trader close to the local authorities, Hassan al-Mughir, who became one of the largest siege profiteers through his involvement in the transport of goods by military cargo planes and helicopters.⁴⁶ Finally, the example of the civil engineer Maher Nuwaiser, who has chaired the Imaar Charitable Association since 2014, illustrates the intimacy of the relationships between the heads of local NGOs and power centres in Deir ez-Zor. Nuwaiser, who owns two construction companies, is known for his wide influence and close relations with officials, especially with the former governor of Deir ez-Zor, Abd al-Majid al-Kawakibi, and the secretary of the local Baath Party branch, Raed al-Ghadhban. His proximity to local authorities has made him one of the figures to whom other local associations and sometimes international organisations turn to overcome obstacles and hindrances.⁴⁷

Like the directors of these four local associations, most heads of the other NGOs operating in the city derive their influence from local power centres – the governor, the intelligence services and the Baath Party – and in a few cases from certain Iranian leaders and officials. For example, due to support from the head of General Intelligence in Deir ez-Zor, a former driver employed by the Governorate Supply Directorate, Ahmed al-Safi, was able to become the head of both the Deir ez-Zor Fire Brigade and the Juvenile Protection Association. The head of the Women's Renaissance Association, Ibtisam al-Dibs, who was formerly a member of the People's Assembly and a former vice-president of the General Union of Syrian Women, draws part of her influence from her close relationship with Iranians, especially the director of the Iranian Cultural Centre. This relationship is reflected in the Iranians renting a building owned by her NGO, which they turned into a medical centre, and the joint activities carried out by her NGO in collaboration with the Iranian Cultural Centre.⁴⁸

Furthermore, most boards of directors also include the directors of some government institutions and leaders of the Baath Party and its affiliate organisations and unions. The vice-chairman of the board of the Ghayth Development Association is Muhammad Atallah al-Ani, director of the local branch of the Central Agency for Financial Oversight, while the secretary of the Association is Shiraz al-Hasbat, who is also the secretary of the institutes' division of the Baath Party's Higher Education Department.⁴⁹ The same is broadly true of the Imaar Charitable Association, the treasurer of which is Hammoud al-Sheikh, who is also the director of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate Finance Directorate and a member of the Baath's Second Countryside Section leadership. As for the al-Birr Association, its board included the head of the Deir ez-Zor pharmacists' syndicate, Muhammad Badran al-Sheikh, until his death in September 2020. From 2016 to 2018, the Syrian Family Planning Association was headed by the director of the Governorate Health Directorate, Abd Najm al-Obaid.

44 Interviews with a university professor who knows Agha and a former student at the Faculty of Agriculture, January and February 2021. Agha recently won the documentary story competition organised by the Watan Document Foundation, headed by Buthaina Shaaban. He participated with a personal testimony in the form of a tale retelling his observations and experiences of war in accordance with the regime's narrative. Al-Baath Newspaper, "Watan Document Foundation Honours Winners of 'This Is My Story' 2020 Award" (in Arabic), 18 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/37BVPnS>

45 Interview with a merchant from Deir ez-Zor who was familiar with Jamal Alloush's activities during that time.

46 Al-Mughir was a member of the executive office of the Governorate Council in 2007-2011. He returned to this position in 2018 while serving at the same time as head of the local branch of the National Covenant Party, a National Progressive Front party. Awad, "The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir Ez-Zor," *ibid.*

47 Interview with a current employee of a foreign NGO operating in Deir ez-Zor, February 2021.

48 Ziad Awad, "Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, October 2019), <http://bit.ly/3ePiQbi>

49 Al-Furat Newspaper, "Ghayth Development Association Elects its Board in Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), 21 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/3pYUYUB>

Just as government institutions include certain well-reputed technocrats who are nonetheless weak and uninfluential, so most NGOs in Deir ez-Zor contain a number of educated and reputable people who are included either to reach the legal quorum for the number of board members⁵⁰ or to create a degree of legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the local community, UN agencies and foreign organisations, which sometimes check the qualifications of board members when evaluating NGOs.

Conclusion

Syria's worsening economic crisis puts greater burdens on NGOs operating in cities such as Deir ez-Zor that have emerged from the war devastated. At the time of writing, with the exception of some relief and medical projects which have been implemented, charitable and development NGOs do not appear to have had an impact on the lives of the population. They do not, in fact, appear able to do so because of their lack of the necessary financial and human resources and constant interventions by local regime officials in their activities.

This situation complicates the humanitarian activities of UN agencies and INGOs, which need local partners to implement their projects. So far, these agencies and organisations have often acceded to demands from the Syrian government for fear of losing access or being shut down.⁵¹ It appears unlikely that they will change their habits and adopt a stricter approach to the regime, even though they could do so by threatening to withdraw from projects which the regime's security services or local officials intervene in pursuing their private interests. Threats of this kind might push the regime to compromise, given its inability to match the benefits provided by foreign-funded projects.

In addition, international agencies and NGOs can prevent the regime from imposing specific local partners as the only available options, whether they be large charitable and development NGOs and foundations in Damascus or intermediary consulting firms that provide services such as monitoring, evaluating and nominating job applicants. For international organisations, this could entail working with non-Syrian intermediary consulting firms, the Syrian officials and employees of which the regime would not be able to appoint, either directly or indirectly. Finally, donor states could make a significant contribution by requiring UN agencies and INGOs to be transparent, which includes publishing detailed budgets, declaring the names of the local associations, organisations and private contractors partnering with them and ceasing to omit these names from their published annual reports on security pretexts.

⁵⁰ This number varies between 5 and 11.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, "Rigging the System. Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria," 28 June 2019, <http://bit.ly/38PHVPD>

Appendix:

Table 1: Local NGOs in Deir ez-Zor City (2018-2020)

Name	Date of Incorporation (if External to Deir ez-Zor, Date of Start in the City)	Main Projects in 2018-2020	Partners-Donors Supporting the Projects in 2018-2020	Own Resources
Islamic Charitable Association	1932	Distribution of production equipment to 81 professionals and supporting 11 medium-sized workshops with conditional financial support	UNDP, WFP, International Medical Corps	Leased real estate properties
Arab Women's Association	1959	Distribution of 1,500 wool quilts and 1,000 chairs for children	UNDP	
Women's Renaissance Association	1960	Distribution of winter clothes to 250 orphan children with provision of healthcare and organising public ceremonies to honour orphans and women	Iranian Cultural Centre, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour	Leased shops and a leased building in the al-Qusour neighbourhood for an Iranian-funded medical centre
Juvenile Protection Association	1960 Suspended between 1970-1991	Organising awareness sessions for prisoners under 18 and providing them with intermittent relief aid	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Directorate of Endowments in Deir ez-Zor through fundraising in mosques	
Syrian Family Planning Association	1974 in Damascus 1989 in Deir ez-Zor	Medical: paediatric and gynaecology clinic Developmental: organising vocational training courses for 380 women beneficiaries	UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund	

Association for Care of Prisoners and their Families	1961 in Damascus 1997 in Deir ez-Zor	Relief: providing meals and sometimes medicines to inmates of the civil prison in the city of Deir ez-Zor	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Directorate of Endowments in Deir ez-Zor through fundraising in mosques	
Al-Birr Association for Charity and Social Services	1956 in Homs 2003 in Deir ez-Zor	Relief: distributing 27,000 food baskets, distributing shelter improvement kits to 156 beneficiaries, distributing 2,800 solar-powered lighting units, providing monthly financial aid of 18,000 pounds to 152 families	WFP, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UNHCR, Oxfam, Parent Association in Homs, other benefactors	
Association for Blind Care and Rehabilitation	2007	Providing 50 blind people with intermittent food, health and financial aid	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Directorate of Endowments in Deir ez-Zor through fundraising in mosques	
Syria Youth Fingerprint	February 2011 in Damascus June 2011 in Deir ez-Zor	No significant projects except for participation in collective projects and campaigns with other associations such as an afforestation campaign, the National Campaign for Early Detection of Breast Cancer and the National Campaign to Combat the Coronavirus Pandemic	Parent Foundation in Damascus, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour	
Ghayth Development Association	2013	Relief: distributing 2,800 food baskets Educational: English tutoring for students Cultural: organising social and legal education lectures	Syrian Red Crescent, Local Defence Forces office in Deir ez-Zor	

Imaar Charitable Association	2014	Distributing shelter improvement kits to an unidentified number of beneficiaries	UNHCR	
Juvenility Social Club	October 2020 - The campaign Do Not Stop Benefaction started in April 2020 under the aegis of Mazen al-Ani	Covering transport costs for the frequent travel of people with chronic diseases (cancer, kidney failure) for treatment in Damascus and distributing food and sanitary baskets	Donations and private financing, especially from businessman Mazen al-Ani	

Source: The author. Due to the lack of official data that clearly identify the number, names and activities of NGOs in Deir ez-Zor, this table is based on publications of associations and institutions, news articles and interviews with people familiar with the work of these associations.

Table 2: Charitable and Development NGOs From Outside the Governorate Operating in Deir ez-Zor City (2018-2020)

Name	Date of Incorporation Date of Start in Deir ez-Zor	Affiliation	Main Projects in 2018-2020	Partners – Donors Supporting the Projects in 2018-2020
Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development	1994 2018 in Deir ez-Zor	Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East	Developmental: Restoring 125 houses, rehabilitating a vocational training centre and a secondary school Relief: distributing thousands of food baskets	UNDP, WFP
Mar Assia al-Hakim Centre		Syriac Catholic Diocese in al-Hasakah	Our Monastery, We Build It project, with its most prominent undertakings being restoring some parks, moving rubble and cleaning public buildings. Restoring a lecture hall inside the building of the Islamic Charitable Association and making it available for public use White Point project for children and adolescents	UNDP, UNICEF
St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee, Jazira and Euphrates office	2013 in Damascus 2018 in Deir ez-Zor	Syriac Orthodox Patriarchy of Antioch and All the East	Their Sake for Care of Children project, which included the opening of three childcare centres, distributing high-energy foodstuffs to children and pregnant women, and opening and operating a dispensary	UNICEF

Deir Mar Yaqoub Association in al-Maqtaa	Late 2017 in Deir ez-Zor	Melkite Greek Catholic Church	<p>Relief: distributing 6 truckloads of humanitarian aid after the siege, opening a charity kitchen that provided 5,000 daily meals in early 2018, opening a medical centre</p> <p>Developmental: Organising educational courses for 300 people, launching a campaign to recycle scrap barrels and convert them into garbage containers</p>	UNHCR, WFP, United Nations Population Fund, Dorcas Organisation
Amelioration of Sanitary and Social Level Society	<p>1960 in Aleppo,</p> <p>2019 in Deir ez-Zor</p>	Mufti Ahmed Hassoun	<p>Medical centre and mobile clinic</p> <p>Provided 500 medical services within a week of its opening in November 2019</p>	WHO
Syria Trust for Development	<p>2007 in Damascus, with some projects implemented in Deir ez-Zor before 2011</p> <p>Late 2017 briefly in Deir ez-Zor until 2018</p>	First Lady Asma al-Assad	Distributed 200 tons of humanitarian aid after the siege and restoring 150 houses	Unspecified UN agencies
Blue Wing Foundation	<p>2016 in Damascus</p> <p>2018 in Deir ez-Zor</p> <p>The foundation emerged from a campaign with the same name launched by the Syrian Centre for Child Rights headed by the same woman</p>		Sukkar Humanitarian Centre, which provides care and protection for children, targeting 1,200 children in the regime-controlled part of Deir ez-Zor	Humanitarian Fund in Syria

Syria Pulse Association	2017 in Damascus 2018 in Deir ez-Zor		Al-Taif Medical Programme, which includes 6 clinics for internal diseases, gynaecology and childhood diseases, and a mental health clinic. Vocational training	WHO
Syrian Association for Social Development	2009 in Damascus 2019 in Deir ez-Zor		Education: Courses to compensate drop-out children, educational courses for secondary and high school students Awareness and cultural campaigns: organising workshops and campaigns to combat violence against women	United Nations Population Fund, UNHCR
Youth Charity Association	2005 in Damascus 2019 in Deir ez-Zor		Medical activities: Opening two mobile clinics the beneficiaries of which reached 100 patients daily	Humanitarian Fund in Syria

. Source: The author. Due to the lack of official data that clearly identify the number, names and activities of NGOs in Deir ez-Zor, this table is based on publications of associations and institutions, news articles and interviews with people familiar with the work of these associations.

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