Networks, Mobilisation and Resistance in the 2021 Presidential Election in Syria
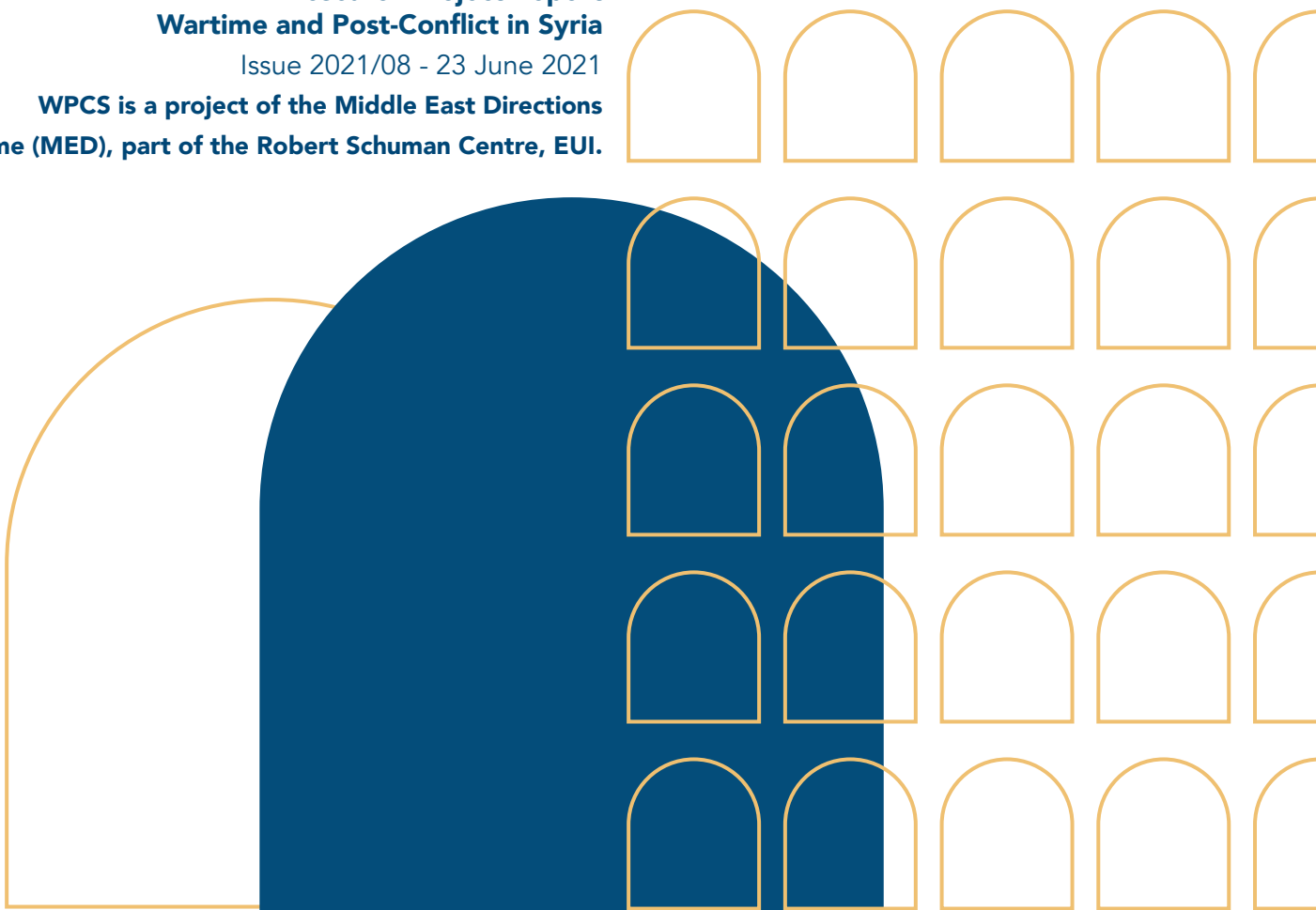
Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project's Team

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Executive Summary

On 26 May 2021, Syria held its second presidential election since the start of the conflict in 2011. Bashar al-Assad predictably won a fourth seven-year term in office with over 95 per cent of the votes. The electoral processes constituted a test of the mobilisation efficiency of the regime's networks. The efficiency varied and depended on the degree of the regime's penetration in particular areas, which is defined here by the area's: (1) wartime history; (2) the mode of regime return, if applicable; and (3) the role played by external actors in facilitating, restraining or undermining the regime's efforts to establish or exercise absolute authority.

A high degree of regime penetration, both in areas that remained under Assad's control throughout the conflict and in former rebel-held areas that the regime, backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, reconquered and re-established firm security control over, allowed the regime's various networks to incentivise or coerce the local population to show support for Assad. In Damascus, Aleppo city, Douma in Rural Damascus and the coastal region, for example, state institutions, the Baath Party and its affiliated organisation, wealthy businessmen, members of parliament, militia leaders and clerics operated to mobilise the masses during the election campaign and on the polling day and competed to demonstrate loyalty to Assad.

A low degree of regime penetration, together with a presence of armed groups characterised by uneasy relations with the central authorities, granted the locals more room for manoeuvre to express different forms of resistance and indifference towards the presidential election. In southern Syria, efficient mass mobilisation of the Assad campaign was confined to small pockets, and a low turnout, strikes and reported armed attacks beyond these enclaves were blatant on the election day.

In areas with a robust administration and non-state armed actors alternative to the regime, the mobilisation efficiency of the regime's networks was contained during the election campaign and on the polling day. In al-Hasakah governorate, the western-backed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) dominated by the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD) refused to facilitate voting in its territory and undermined the regime's efforts to achieve mass mobilisation.

Introduction

On 26 May 2021, Syria held its second presidential election since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. While the election in 2014 took place when the regime controlled 30 per cent of the country,[1] the 2021 election followed an expansion of its territorial control, which exceeded 65 per cent of the country.[2] However, it came amid a deepening economic crisis, worsening poverty and deteriorating living conditions. Standing against two obscure candidates[3] in an election dismissed by Western countries as "neither free nor fair,"[4] Bashar al-Assad predictably won a fourth term in office for a seven-year mandate with over 95 per cent of the votes (more than 13 million).[5] While the reported number of votes raises suspicions,[6] for the Syrian regime the 95 per cent – albeit fabricated – is more than just a figure; it represents the utter defeat of the domestic opposition, it grants Assad an aura of legitimacy and it constitutes an implicit message to the international community to give up on expecting political concessions.

At its core, the 2021 presidential electoral process in Syria put the regime's networks to the test. Although the regime has become greatly reliant on external actors – specifically, Russia and Iran – to survive and maintain its grip on power, it still needs to ensure that its networks of loyalty and support are functional and efficient. In their turn, overlapping networks of competing power brokers – which operate inside and outside state institutions – needed to demonstrate their capacity to trigger mass mobilisation and to, coercively or persuasively, convince the people to demonstrate loyalty and express support for Assad during his election campaign and on the polling day.

After ten years of war, the functions and capacity of the regime's networks have altered. The regime has gradually rebuilt a part of its power networks, the features of which began to clearly emerge after the People's Assembly election in 2016,[7] incorporating the emerging wartime elite in the parliament, local administrations, chambers of commerce and industry, unions and the Baath Party. Today, the effectiveness of the regime's networks greatly hinges on its degree of penetration in particular communities. A high degree of penetration gives the regime a capacity to control resources and individuals in the community. In contrast, a low degree of penetration makes it unable to do so, which in turn grants locals a degree of autonomy to contribute to the management of their local affairs and much room for manoeuvre to exhibit resistance against the regime.[8]

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1 The Economist, "Who controls Syria?" 26 May 2021, http s://econ.st/3gtKxXl

2 Fabrice Balance, "The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria," *The Washington Institute*, 10 February 2021, https://bit.ly/3gzrrPy

3 Abdullah Salloum Abdullah (a former minister and the candidate of the Socialist Unionist Party) and Mahmoud Ahmed Marei (head of the 'opposition' Democratic Bloc). Al-Watan, "Initial Acceptance…Three Candidates for the Presidential Election" (in Arabic), 3 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3pwcO2J

4 France 24, "Syrian Presidential Election Won't Be 'Free nor Fair' Warn US, Europeans," 25 May 2021, https://bit.ly/34KjbWz

5 SANA, "Dr. Bashar al-Assad as President of the Syrian Arab Republic by Obtaining an Absolute Majority of the Votes" (in Arabic), 27 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3zoPPL8

6 Nearly 6.6 million Syrian refugees are living around the world. See UNHCR, "The State of Emergency in Syria," last updated 15 March 2021, https://bit.ly/3xc8vfe. Voting by Syrians abroad was organised in embassies and consulates in about 40 countries on 20 May 2021 – but Turkey and Germany refused to allow the election on their territories – and there are no detailed results of the votes abroad. No voting took place in areas outside the regime's control (about 3 million people live in the Kurdish-controlled area in the north-east and more than 4 million in Idlib and in areas on the Turkish border). According to United Nations projections, the population in government-held areas is estimated at about 12 million, 40 per cent of whom are under the age of 18.

7 Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 30 April 2020), https://bit.ly/3qAMyVd

8 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2020), https://bit.ly/2SKkcYS

Whether high or low, the degree of regime penetration in a particular area is defined here by: (1) the area's wartime history; (2) the mode of regime return, if applicable; and (3) the role played by external actors in facilitating, restraining or undermining the regime's efforts to establish or exercise absolute authority. Based on these factors, this paper investigates the spatial variation in the mobilisation effectiveness of the regime's networks in three main areas. First, areas with a high degree of regime penetration, which include territory that remained under the regime's control throughout the conflict (Damascus and the coastal region) and former rebel-held areas that the regime, backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, reconquered after intense military offensives and succeeded in re-establishing firm security control over (eastern Aleppo city, Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus). Second, areas with a low degree of regime penetration, which include regions in which the regime's authority is largely restricted to outposts and in which armed groups with uneasy relations with the regime and a capacity to use, or threaten to use, violence are active. The low degree of regime penetration could either have developed from a post-'reconciliation' agreement (Daraa governorate) or as a result of a neutral stance towards the uprising and the ensuing armed rebellion (Sweida governorate). Third, areas where the regime has a limited sphere of influence, in which it engages in low-level intermittent communication with non-state armed actors but its control and exercise of authority are greatly bounded and contained by them (al-Hasakah governorate).

This paper draws on evidence collected through monitoring of Syrian official media and social media platforms before and on the election day. The paper also relies on original data obtained through semi-structured interviews with government officials and civilian and armed actors residing in regime- and opposition-held areas in the following governorates: Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Rural Damascus, Sweida, Daraa, al-Hasakah, Latakia and Tartous, all of which were conducted between March and June 2021. To ensure the safety of the interviewees residing in Syria, names and personal identifying information have been omitted.

Map 1: Proclaimed Numbers of Polling Stations for the 2021 Presidential Election

Aleppo	1245
Al-Hasakah	157
Idlib	40
Raqqa	94
Latakia	1008
Hama	1040
Deir al-Zor	317
Tartous	789
Homs	1216
Damascus	1870
Rural Damascus	2058
Quneitra	130
Sweida	356
Daraa	200
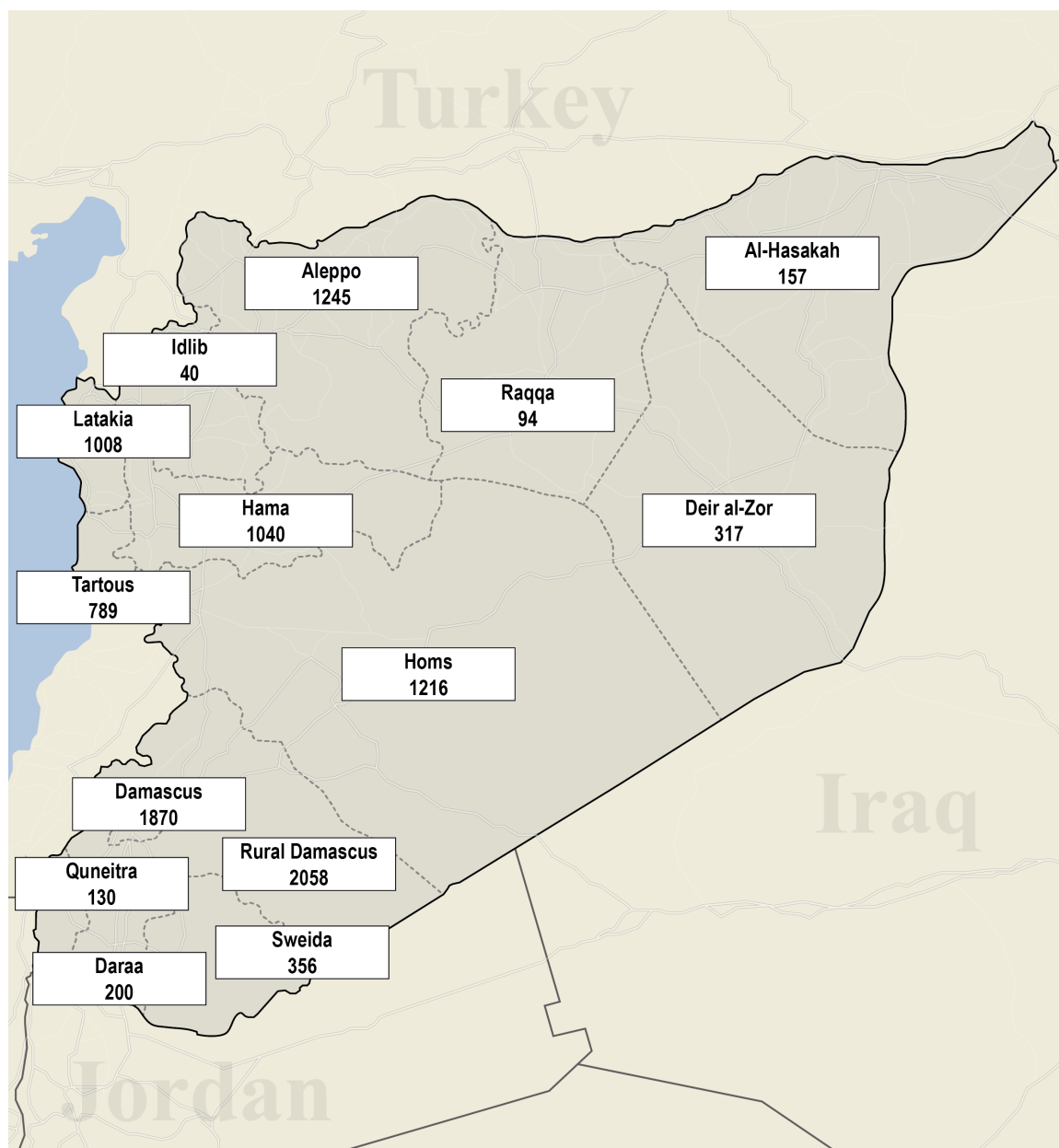
Source: SANA and Tishreen Newspaper.

1. Networks and Mobilisation in Regime Strongholds

Using a combined approach including incentives and threats of punishment, state institutions, security apparatuses, the Baath Party and its affiliated organisations aimed to trigger mass mobilisation during the election campaign and on the polling day. In major cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia) and towns in Rural Damascus, government institutions had gradually improved service provision since March 2021: water and electricity rationing levels had decreased,[9] subsidised foodstuffs had become available by means of smart cards and garbage and rubble had been regularly removed from many streets and squares. Simultaneously, in the capital, members of the Damascus branch of the Baath Party and the Damascus Governorate Council toured the city, listened to people's demands and encouraged them to participate in the election.

In many cases incentives to vote were accompanied with threats of punishment. Since the state workforce represented an important pool of votes,[10] higher coercive measures and guarantees of retribution, including arrests, dismissals and salary deductions, were threatened by regime agents to ensure participation during the campaign and on the polling day. For instance, in Aleppo the Baath Party, together with trade unions and professional associations in public sector institutions in which more than 100,000 employees work, was particularly active in mobilising its members, employees and workers to participate in marches and celebrations in support of Assad.[11] Furthermore, university and institute students were also forced to vote. After deliberately planning exams on the election day, the Ministry of Higher Education imposed voting as a pre-condition for students to sit their exams.[12]

In addition, businessmen and leaders of pro-regime militias – categories that often overlap and intersect – together with clerics simultaneously operated to mobilise the masses and competed to demonstrate loyalty to Assad. Wealthy businessmen and war profiteers, who under the watchful eyes of the regime and often in partnership with security and military officers, had taken advantage of the conditions created by the war to accumulate profits, renewed their loyalty to the regime by funding Assad's election campaign. As the new generation of businessmen is almost totally dependent on the survival of the regime to accumulate capital, they were highly involved in Assad's campaign in order to prove their loyalty and achieve supremacy over their peers. They contributed to providing basic subsidised food commodities and fuel. They also pumped large quantities of foreign currency into the market in a policy coordinated with the Central Bank to control the exchange rate of the Syrian Pound against the USD, which was stabilised at SYP 3,200 throughout the election campaign.[13]

Prominent businessmen boosted their activities during Assad's election campaign, covertly, such as Samer Foz, Wassim Qattan, Mazen Tarazi, Muhammad Hamsho and Ihab Makhlouf, or overtly like many MPs (re-)elected to the People's Assembly in July 2020.[14] For example, in the city of Aleppo MP Hussam Qaterji, owner of the Qaterji International Company, opened 300 centres to distribute

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9   For instance, power cuts have decreased to two or three hours a day in most areas, after cuts previously lasting more than 16 hours a day.

10   In 2019, 2.2 million people were reportedly registered with the Social Security Organisation, half of whom were government employees (1,078,000). The Syria Report, "New Data Highlights Massive Drop in Syrian Workforce," 27 February 2019, https://bit.ly/34SdYLt

11   Interview with a government employee in Aleppo city, 27 May 2021.

12   In Damascus, Aleppo city and the central and coastal regions, where six of the seven public universities are located, the Baath Party and the National Union of Syrian Students achieved a high rate of mobilisation among students. For example, 70 polling stations were set up in branches of Damascus University and dozens of centres and stations were opened in other universities such as Al-Baath and Tishreen. Jalal Bakour, "The Regime's Security Forces Are Chasing Syrians to Force Them to Participate in the Presidential Election" (in Arabic), *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 26 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3zbZtB3

13   Skype interview with a source familiar with the internal dynamics at the Central Bank, 8 June 2021. Syrian Pound Today, "The Central Bank of Syria Raises the Official Dollar Exchange Rate to Double and Sets It at 2,512 Pounds" (in Arabic), 15 April 2021, https://bit.ly/3vGdfZw

14   For more information on the backgrounds of these businessmen, see Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020: The Regime's Social Base Contracts," Syria Transition Challenges Project, *Geneva Centre for Security Policy* and *European University Institute Middle East Directions Programme*, Research Project Report No. 2, October 2020, https://bit.ly/3eGcVmL

pictures, banners and flags, and distributed meals near 'homeland tents' and festive platforms. In Eastern Ghouta, Amer Kheiti, a new MP and wealthy businessman, particularly emerged as a promoter of the election in Douma city. After organising a concert three days before the election day, he took part in the organisation of Assad and his wife's visit to the polling station in the Douma city council on the day itself in the presence of Khodr Ali Taher, one of the most influential businessmen in Syria today.[15]

Members of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry also made significant contributions to the mobilisation process, especially in Aleppo and Damascus.[16] The Aleppo Chamber of Commerce set up an operations room to organise Assad's election campaign under the slogan 'Your Economic Army.' It administered celebrations that took place at the al-Ittihad and al-Jalaa sports clubs, in the al-Shahba Hotel and at the Citadel of Aleppo, and bore the largest part of the campaign expenses, distributing aid and food baskets in some neighbourhoods of eastern Aleppo.[17] The Damascus Chamber of Commerce and Industry also funded many campaign activities and its members toured merchants and industrialists to urge them to vote.[18] The Chambers of Commerce and Industry encouraged affiliated businessowners to take part in Assad's election campaign. Owing to security concerns that might result in blackmail or hoping to establish closer ties with the regime officials, many businessowners and employers threatened their workers with dismissal should they refrain from voting, as reportedly happened in some pharmaceutical factories in the city of Aleppo.[19] In Latakia governorate, the head of the Chamber of Tourism, Hassan Kusa, was also prominent in organising various events in the city of Latakia and in villages in the countryside.[20]

Moreover, the regime-sponsored and allied militias that have shadowed the military and security forces during recent years contributed to the mobilisation process. Their leaders played a notable role in both propaganda and coercion. This was particularly the case of two main militias, the National Defence Forces (NDF) and the Baath Brigades, which enjoy a central command in Damascus and have more resources than others to mobilise in various regime-controlled areas. In Hama, many NDF leaders from different sects played similar roles in securing electoral centres, forcing their members to go out to support rallies and to attend the 'homeland tents' celebrations.[21] They urged local communities in the northern countryside of Hama governorate, which was previously under rebel control, to go and vote,

15   A great involvement of businessmen MPs in Assad's campaign was reported in many other governorates. In Idlib, Fouad Aldani, the economic backer of Brigadier General Suhail al-Hassan, bore the costs of transporting and feeding employees and participants at a popular support rally in the city of Khan Sheikhoun, and Sheikh Ahmed Jamil Aqrin, a local notable from the countryside of Maarrat al-Numan, invited workers and trade unionists to an Iftar feast at the end of Ramadan on Labour Day and used it to rally for the presidential election. In the city of Deir al-Zor, Omar al-Aziz, an oil smuggler, organised concerts and funded the printing and publishing of tens of thousands of posters and pictures of al-Assad. Bashar al-Makhsour, an MP from Raqqa and oil trader, was not only active in mobilising displaced people from Raqqa in the cities of Hama and Homs but also conducted a visit to Lebanon, where many residents of Raqqa governorate work, to encourage them to vote at the Syrian embassy in Beirut. Interviews with civilians residing in these areas and Facebook pages of these MPs.

16   Joseph Daher, "The Syrian Chambers of Commerce in 2020: The Rise of a New Business Elite," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 13 November 2020), https://bit.ly/3pKsfEp

17   WhatsApp interview with journalist Khaled al-Khatib, 2 June 2021. Among the members of the Executive Office of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, Mahmoud Assi, who has close ties with the Fourth Division, and Harout Qara Jamjian were particularly active during the election campaign.

18   On the election day, the official media focused on the presence of the prominent Damascene merchant Ratib al-Shallah, who came from Beirut to vote in the polling station located at the headquarters of the Chamber of Commerce, in a message of loyalty from Damascus merchants to the Syrian regime. Al-Watan, "In the Presence of Al-Shallah. Damascus Merchants Voted: The Country's Situation Is Improving" (in Arabic), 27 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3gxz87L

19   Interview with a pharmacist working in a pharmaceutical factory in western Aleppo, 23 May 2021.

20   Seventh Marine Regiment of Latakia Scouts, "Parade in Latakia" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 25 May 2021, https://bit.ly/ 353deUK

21   This is the case of the NDF leader and MP Fadel Wardeh from the predominantly Ismaili city of Salamiyah, of the leaders of the NDF in two predominantly Christian towns, Simon Wakeel in Mhardeh and Nabeel Abdullah in Suqaylabiyah, and of the NDF commander in Sunni-majority Taibat al-Imam, Awad al-Khalil. WhatsApp interview with an opposition political activist from the city of Taibat al-Imam, 29 May 2021.

which the farmers in the area responded to for fear of security restrictions during the harvest season.[22] In Rural Damascus, the regime relied on NDF leaders, who are active in the drug trade, such as Ahmad Khalouf in the Assal al-Ward area and Muhammad Aboud Hammoud in Yabroud city,[23] who financed Assad's election campaign and invited government, security and party officials to Ramadan banquets. In Latakia and Tartous, the Baath Brigades organised a loyalty march to the tomb of Hafez al-Assad in Qardaha in the presence of their leader, Bassem Sudan.[24] Finally, pro-Iranian local militias occupied an important part of the electoral scene in the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city. For instance, the al-Baqir Brigade erected the largest 'homeland tent' in the Balloura neighbourhood and invited recognised tribal leaders to banquets and feasts.[25] Moreover, the Aleppo Defenders Corps, one of the Syrian offshoots of Hezbollah, played a role in organising marches and sit-ins. On polling day, its militants were seen escorting people to vote and they reportedly arrested people who were said to have refused to participate in the election in the neighbourhoods of al-Fardous and al-Maadi.[26]

Finally, clerics of different religions and sects participated in the rallies and public meetings held in support of Assad. In particular, the state official media focused on Sunni clerics, who renewed their pledge of allegiance to Assad during Eid al-Fitr prayer at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on 13 May. Their highly publicised role in the presidential election campaign raises the question of the degree of their current importance to the regime, especially after they were marginalised in 'reconciled' areas such as Rural Damascus in the aftermath of the reconciliation agreements and in the People's Assembly elected in July 2020.[27] While they are reportedly increasingly subordinate to the intelligence services,[28] the Ministry of Endowments, which has tightened its grip over the Sunni religious space during recent years,[29] had a leading role in mobilising Sunni clerics. It instructed the mosque preachers to stress the necessity of participating in the election as "one of the complements of faith"[30] and organised mass meetings for Sunni clerics and their religious activists in the cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. More broadly, all the clerics participated in the rallies and public meetings held in support of Assad in the streets and squares, in a message aimed at demonstrating the unity of the Syrian people with all its religious components. In Damascus, the most prominent of these religious gatherings was held on 24 May in the Umayyad Mosque under the title 'Loyalty to President Assad,' which included the most prominent Islamic scholars, Christian clergy and female teachers of the Holy Qur'an. On the predominantly Alawite Syrian coast, Alawite clerics also urged the people to vote for Assad, in addition to heading groups of voters on the election day.[31]

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22 In the city of Deir al-Zor, NDF leaders organised celebrations in support of Assad and transported injured militia members and regime forces to polling stations.

23 Sawt al-Asima, "Rural Damascus: Election Campaigns Between Security Instructions and Flattering" (in Arabic), 23 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3g818jm

24 Baath Brigades in Syria, "Loyalty March in Qardaha" (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 21 May 2021, https://bit.ly/35ensBv. In Qardaha, the leader of the dissolved Saraya al-Areen militia, Yasser Talal al-Assad, also played a role in sponsoring some of the major celebrations in the city. In Tartous, businessman Ali Muhanna, former commander of the dissolved Sahabbat Regiment, did the same.

25 Al-Baqir Brigade members also raised pictures of Bashar al-Assad, of the former commander of the Iranian Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, and of Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. WhatsApp interview with journalist Khaled al-Khatib, 2 June 2021.

26 WhatsApp interview with journalist Khaled al-Khatib, 2 June 2021.

27 Mazen Ezzi, "Post-reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?" (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 27 November 2020), https://bit.ly/3pJKRnS; Awad and Favier, "Syrian People's Council Election 2020: The Regime's Social Base Contracts."

28 The intelligence services require clergy working in mosques to submit a summary of their general religious activities directly to them every week. Interview with a mosque Imam in Deir al-Zor city, 8 June 2021.

29 Thomas Pierret and Laila al-Refaai, "Religious Governance in Syria Amid Territorial Fragmentation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 June 2021, https://bit.ly/3vctCNk

30 This is what even some well-known and respected preachers induced, such as Sheikh Abdul Hadi Badla, the preacher of the Radwan Mosque in the al-Shahbah neighbourhood of Aleppo city. Interview with a Friday worshipper at the Radwan Mosque in Aleppo, 25 May 2021.

31 Interviews with two people from the towns of Beksa and Basnada, 28 and 29 May 2021.

In large cities and densely populated areas, such as Damascus, Latakia and Tartous, the regime sought to display its power and used all its available mobilisation networks. As for the areas that the regime militarily recaptured after 2016 and imposed a tight security grip on, it sought to reassert its dominance over the local communities, with a special interest in Aleppo and Rural Damascus, compared to the few towns under its control in Deir al-Zor and Idlib, which are sparsely populated. The exceptional attention the regime paid to Douma and Bashar al-Assad's deliberate vote for himself in the city aimed to reaffirm Assad's victory and to bring to the forefront the locals' happiness at "being rid of terrorism" and "the state's return."[32] It is noteworthy that Douma, which is heavily subservient to the Russian-influenced 'al-Khatib branch' of the State Security apparatus, was exposed to higher degrees of direct and indirect forms of coercion. Simultaneously with the huge security and military deployment to ensure the portrayal of a 'compliant' rather than a 'revolting' Douma,[33] threats to cut off humanitarian aid,[34] intimidations of arrest, vows to harm detainees and threats to submit malicious reports or to review opposition activities that predate the 'reconciliation' agreement are but some of the core reasons that prompted large portions of the population to participate in the election day and to show their loyalty, albeit without enthusiasm.

Map 2: Douma, Rural Damascus Governorate

Source: The authors

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32 SANA, "Douma's People: The Election Landscape in Our City Brings to the Fore the Victory against Terrorism" (in Arabic), 26 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3cvMH6B. The pro-regime al-Watan quoted the "people of Douma" as saying "God honoured us with the visit of President al-Assad" on the day of the election. Al-Watan, "Douma's People: God Has Honoured Us With President Assad's Visit" (in Arabic), 27 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3z2jcTs

33 Between 25 and 28 May, the military and security apparatuses prevented motorcycles from circulating in Eastern Ghouta. Megaphones in mosques called on people to obey the decision and to gather to stage rallies in support of Assad. This was accompanied by a security and military alert at all the checkpoints on the outskirts of Eastern Ghouta amid the deployment of patrols from the Baath Brigades to the area. Sawt al-Asima, "The Regime's Intelligence Bans Motorcycles from Roaming in Eastern Ghouta" (in Arabic), 26 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3ip9BQY

34 Skype interview with a human rights activist in the Damascus countryside, 1 June 2021. Similar incidents were reported in other parts of Syria. For example, in a leaked recording, the head of the municipality of al-Rastan in Homs governorate, Hassan al-Taybani, demanded that bread distributers come with 15 people to participate in the presidential election, and threatened to deprive people of bread if they refused. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "The Mayor of Al-Rastan: "If There Is No Election, There Is No Bread"" (in Arabic), 26 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3gmwSjJ

2. Civil Indifference and Resistance in Southern Syria

In southern Syria, the presence of armed groups that use, or threaten to use, violence together with nominal regime control over swathes of territory granted the locals more room for manoeuvre to express different forms of indifference and resistance to the presidential election. In these areas, efficient mass mobilisation networks for Assad's campaign were confined to small pockets, whereas low turnouts, strikes and reported armed attacks beyond these enclaves were blatant on the election day.[35]

In Sweida governorate, the Druze population, which largely opted for neutrality towards the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the ensuing armed rebellion, was indifferent to the presidential election and appeared unconcerned about its outcome. This was mainly due to a combination of two factors: a mistrust in the government's economic policies to bring any positive change to their deteriorating living conditions and the security chaos that plagued the governorate. Today, many Druze in Sweida are convinced that the regime squandered all the state's resources to finance the war and that its officials are not interested in finding solutions to the people's stifling livelihood crisis.[36] Moreover, the spread of gangs that have in one way or another links to the security apparatuses increased people's indifference to the entire electoral process. Therefore, mass mobilisation for the election and the turnout on the polling day targeted mainly the beneficiaries of the Baath Party and government employees and was largely confined to parts of the regime's strongholds in the governorate, which are Sweida, Shahba and Salkhad cities. Apart from a few polling stations in these three cities, dozens of them did not witness a significant turnout and the same pattern was observed in other relatively large towns and villages. Due to the people's fear of malicious reports to the security apparatuses, the voter turnout increased exponentially with the smallness of the population, so the smaller villages witnessed relatively larger voter turnouts.

Despite the regime's security grip on the city of Sweida, pictures of Bashar al-Assad on the main streets were torn down under the watchful eyes of the security services, which did not react fearing a possible escalation. In some locations where non-loyal militias are active, sound bombs were thrown at some polling stations, and another one was found planted in one of the stations in the west of the governorate. The election was preceded by reports circulating about the Syrian army's Fourth Division deploying forces under the pretext of "protecting the governorate from expected terrorist attacks and ending civil clashes in unstable places." This came with the old and renewed security threats to use violent force to end Sweida's neutrality.[37]

In the neighbouring governorate of Daraa, a 'patchwork' strategy, including a Syrian regime military offensive and Russian-led negotiations between regime representatives and those from the armed opposition, terminated rebel rule and allowed restricted regime return in summer 2018.[38] The parallel yet disjointed implementation of the two processes restricted the regime's authority in parts of the

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35   The town of Kanaker (located in the Qatana district, south-west of Damascus), which concluded a 'reconciliation' agreement in 2016, has similar features. While the agreement included the surrender of heavy armament and did not lead to a forced rebel displacement, the town came under nominal control of the 220 Military Security Branch, known as the Saasaa' Branch. While such configurations undermined effective mass mobilisation, the regime opted to overlook the role of its power network and to bargain with the population to facilitate the election process. However, following calls for a boycott that coincided with cutting off roads and burning tyres, few residents approached the Kanaker polling station on the election day.

36   On 23 May 2021, a government delegation headed by the Prime Minister made an unprecedented visit to Sweida to discuss the most prominent service demands of the people. Al-Baath, "Heading a Government Delegation, the Prime Minister Begins a Visit to As-Sweida" (in Arabic), 23 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3iuF9Vk The 'promise' to finance the governorate with five billion Syrian pounds (equivalent to USD 1.99 million at the official exchange rate) distributed among service institutions responsible for water, electricity and agriculture, does not seem to have changed the position of the majority of the population.

37   Khalil Youssef, "The Fourth Division in Sweida: Will the Presidential Election Draw a New Security and Political Map in Southern Syria?" (in Arabic), *al-Hal Net*, 20 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3cowTCK

38   Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations," Working Paper (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, January 2019), https://bit.ly/2CDpflK

region and contributed to a resurgence of violence. So far, Russia's desire to maintain the status quo has constituted a major obstacle and granted locals in many areas leeway to continue to demonstrate various forms of civil and armed resistance against the regime.[39]

Map 3: Reported Strikes and Protests in Daraa Governorate on the Polling Day
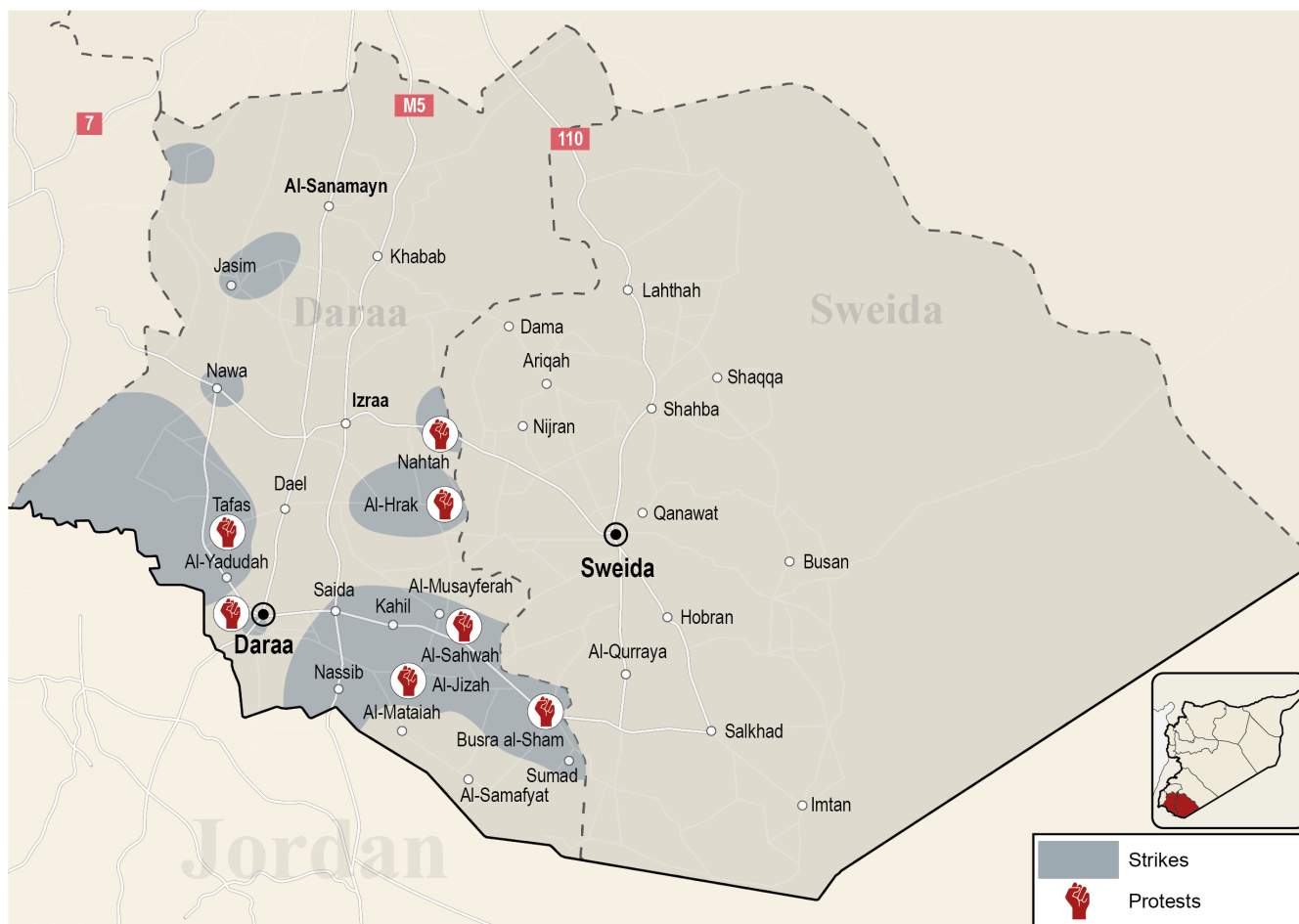
Source: The authors

Unlike other 'reconciled' areas, Daraa represented a source of concern for the regime during the preparations for the presidential election. At the beginning of 2021, the Central Negotiations Committee rejected a Russian request to prepare the atmosphere for the presidential election in exchange for promises to release detainees. [40] Moreover, the notables in the city of Busra al-Sham – the headquarters of the Eighth Brigade[41] – rejected a similar request to allow the setting up of a polling station in the city. As the election day approached, pamphlets calling for a boycott of the election were distributed, and threats and assassination attempts against polling stations and election promoters, including heads of municipalities and heads of Baath Party divisions, were reported (Map 3). The Syrian regime opted to close many polling stations, especially in eastern Daraa, given the escalation of threats and its inability to provide security in vast swathes of territory.[42]

39 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria", Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2020), https://bit.ly/34nt2jL

40 The CNC is an aggregation of former insurgents and civilian opposition figures which was established on 3 July 2018 to ensure the implementation of the outcomes of the Russian-led negotiations. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Rampant Violence, Military Escalation and the Role of Intermediaries in Daraa, Syria," *Middle East Institute*, 1 June 2020, https://bit.ly/3cllq3F

41 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria", Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2019), http://bit.ly/2oTzoXG

42   WhatsApp interview with an activist in eastern Daraa, May 2021.

The electoral process in Daraa revealed once again the weakness of the regime's security and military control and the abject failure of local officials to pacify and rule Daraa or mobilise its masses effectively. During the election campaign and on election day, mobilisation of the regime's networks was mainly concentrated in the cities of Izraa, al-Sanamayn and Daraa (except for Daraa al-Balad), in which the Baath Brigades and the Baath Party organised celebrations and effectively mobilised the masses for the election.[43] Nevertheless, Russian forces were absent from the scene, despite their pledge to run military police patrols to preserve security and to monitor roads and polling stations, perhaps not to draw the attention of the external audience to the fragmented security situation in the south. Protests, civil strikes (reported in at least 30 localities) and armed attacks carried out by unknown gunmen demonstrated the state of public discontent. Waves of civil and armed resistance prevented the setting up of polling stations in more than 80 per cent of the governorate's territory, and left the votes of more than 600,000 people (about 65-70 per cent of the total population) entirely out of the election process.[44] In parallel with the high rate of arrests of people in the governorate, which began shortly after the announcement of the election results, the regime, in cooperation with its Iranian allies, will continue to manoeuvre to emancipate itself from the outcome of the 2018 negotiations and to impose a firmer security and military grip over many areas.

43   Interview with a member of the Baath Brigades in Daraa, May 2021.

44   WhatsApp interview with a former government employee in Daraa, 27 May 2021.

3. Rejection and Containment in North-Eastern Syria

In the areas controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Deir al-Zor and Aleppo governorates, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which is dominated by the Kurd-led Democratic Union Party (PYD), refused to be part of any presidential election. In a statement released on 24 May 2021, the Syrian Democratic Council – the political wing of the SDF – announced that it "is not concerned with any elections that do not achieve the goals of the Syrians… [and] will not be a facilitator of any electoral procedure that violates the meaning of UN Resolution 2254."[45] The decision to boycott the election was reaffirmed after two visits made by US diplomatic and military delegations on 18 and 22 May. The Kurdish stance was strengthened after the People's Protection Units (YPG) expelled the loyalist NDF militia from the Tay and Halko neighbourhoods south of Qamishli city, the largest Arab neighbourhoods, at the end of April 2021.[46]

If the electoral mobilisation had a more symbolic meaning compared to its importance in regime strongholds, the setting up of polling stations in north-eastern Syria carried important political messages to both internal and external audiences. The first message was directed to the regime's local loyalists, who feel threatened by the hegemony of the Kurdish-led forces. The second was directed to the SDF and their Western allies to demonstrate the regime's ability to penetrate AANES territory and to mobilise its networks and re-affirm sovereignty over the north-eastern territories. The regime insisted on moving forward and held the election in the enclaves that fell under its control, namely the Security Square in the city of al-Hasakah, the State Institution Square, the National Hospital and the airport in the city of Qamishli, in addition to some small and scattered enclaves in the governorate (Map 4).

Map 4: Areas of Control in North-Eastern Syria (June 2021)
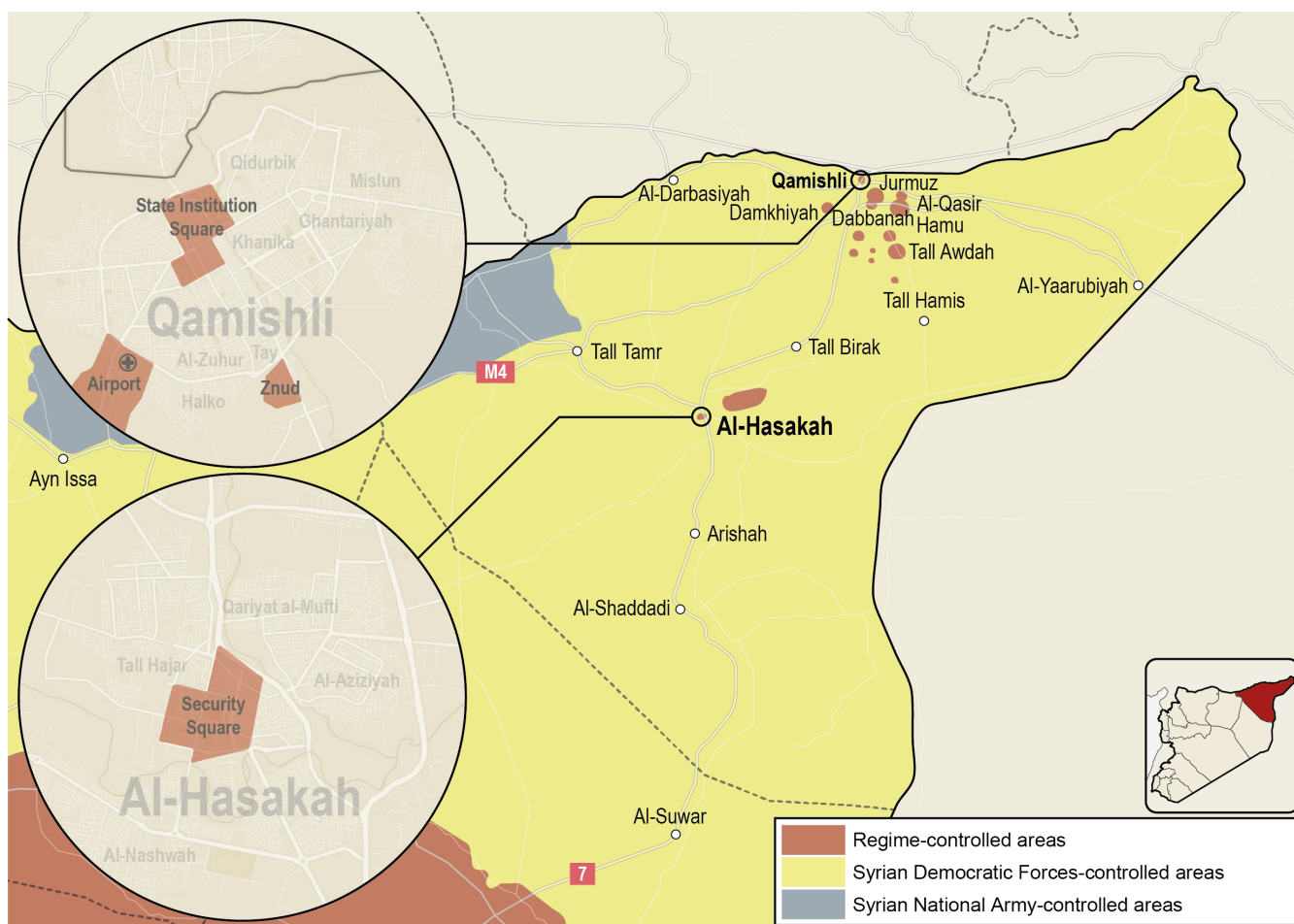
Source: The authors.

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45   The Syrian Democratic Council, "A Statement on the Presidential Elections in Syria," 24 May 2021, https://bit.ly/3wE7T2j

46   Manhal Baresh, "Amid Public Discontent in the Social Base of the National Defence: The Syrian Regime Promotes the Godfather of Its Loss in Qamishli" (in Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 1 May 2021, https://bit.ly/2Sh0erU

The Syrian regime aimed to raise Arab fears of the Kurds and attempted to mobilise the tribes. However, it failed to persuade most tribal leaders to play a significant role during the election campaign. For instance, the participation in the election of the people of the Tay tribe, many members of which are regime loyalists, was insignificant.[47] The low turnout could be attributed to frustration over the regime's inability to deter the Kurdish forces and its failure to support loyalists in the recent confrontation against the Kurdish units in the Tay and Halko neighbourhoods in Qamishli despite several promises made to the NDF leaders by some leaders such as the commander of the security and military committee in the eastern regions, Major General Muin Khaddour, about a battle planned against the Kurdish forces in al-Hasakah governorate.

On the election day, the SDF decided to block all the roads between the areas under their control and the areas and pockets under the regime's control, which also contributed to the low turnout.[48] This closure hindered the movement of regime loyalists in the city of Qamishli and confined the celebrations to squares without it being possible to roam the city's streets. Consequently, the regime was unable to open more than 40 of the 157 polling stations it had intended to open, and the election was limited to participation by government employees, security force members and police personnel.[49]

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47 Sheikh Muhammad al-Faris, leader of the Tay tribe, announced his support for Assad in March 2021 but showed apathy towards the electoral process. Sputnik Arabic, "'Tay' Tribe: We Support al-Assad's Candidacy for the Presidential Election and Thank Russia's Just Positions" (in Arabic), 20 March 2021, https://bit.ly/3iojgqJ

48 In an attempt to increase the number of polling stations, the regime distributed several within the same building and considered each centre to be several centres. WhatsApp interview with a resident in the regime-controlled area in Qamishli, 27 May 2021.

49 There are no official statistics on the number of government employees in al-Hasakah governorate, but local sources estimated the number to be 20,000-25,000 government employees and 1,800-2,000 soldiers, security force members and police officers.

Conclusion

According to wartime trajectories, the mode of regime return (if applicable) and the role played by external actors, the years of war caused a spatial variation in the efficiency of the regime's networks to mobilise the masses. In areas characterised by a high degree of regime penetration – which remained under regime control throughout the conflict or were former rebel-held areas that the regime, backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, reconquered and re-established firm security control over – the regime's networks effectively mobilised large sections of the population. For instance, in Damascus, Aleppo and the coastal region, Bashar al-Assad's election campaign relied on official mobilisation tools, such as the Baath Party, government institutions, chambers of commerce and industry, the army and the intelligence services, and on unofficial ones, such as loyalist militias and warlords, some of whom occupied positions in state institutions. While offering limited incentives, mass mobilisation focused mainly on the members of the population whose behaviour and responses to the electoral process could be monitored (e.g. state employees and students).

However, the regime's low degree of penetration in other areas was reflected in inefficient and circumscribed mass mobilisation. This was also because of the presence of armed groups with uneasy relations with the regime and a capacity to use, or threaten to use, violence. These armed groups – which either formed under conditions of conflict transformation in Daraa or derived their authority mainly from the affirmed neutral stance in Sweida – granted locals much room for manoeuvre to exhibit indifference or civil and armed resistance against the regime. In the areas under the control of the western-backed forces in north-east Syria, the AANES refused to be part of any presidential election and restricted the regime's efforts to achieve high mass mobilisation to limited spheres of influence in al-Hasakah governorate.

In sum, the 2021 presidential election reflected the de facto 'partition' of Syria into zones of influence and control. This brings to the forefront questions about the regime's ability to maintain efficient mobilisation capacity in its strongholds while it lacks any realistic solutions to help the Syrians out of their stifling economic crisis. Assad's election campaign slogan, 'Hope for Action', seemed to be an irrational promise detached from the real domestic socio-economic conditions Syrians are experiencing.

Bashar al-Assad's victory may lead him to attempt to enforce firmer security control over communities that continue to resist his regime. This was evident in the increase in arrests and additional military reinforcements sent to Daraa, reports circulating about the intention of the Fourth Division to bring Sweida under firmer regime control and the direct military escalation after the election in the al-Ghab Plain and Jabal al-Zawiya south of the rebel-controlled area in Idlib. The regime's ability to do this greatly hinges on its military capacity to operate on different fronts and on the role to be played by its Russian and Iranian allies.

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