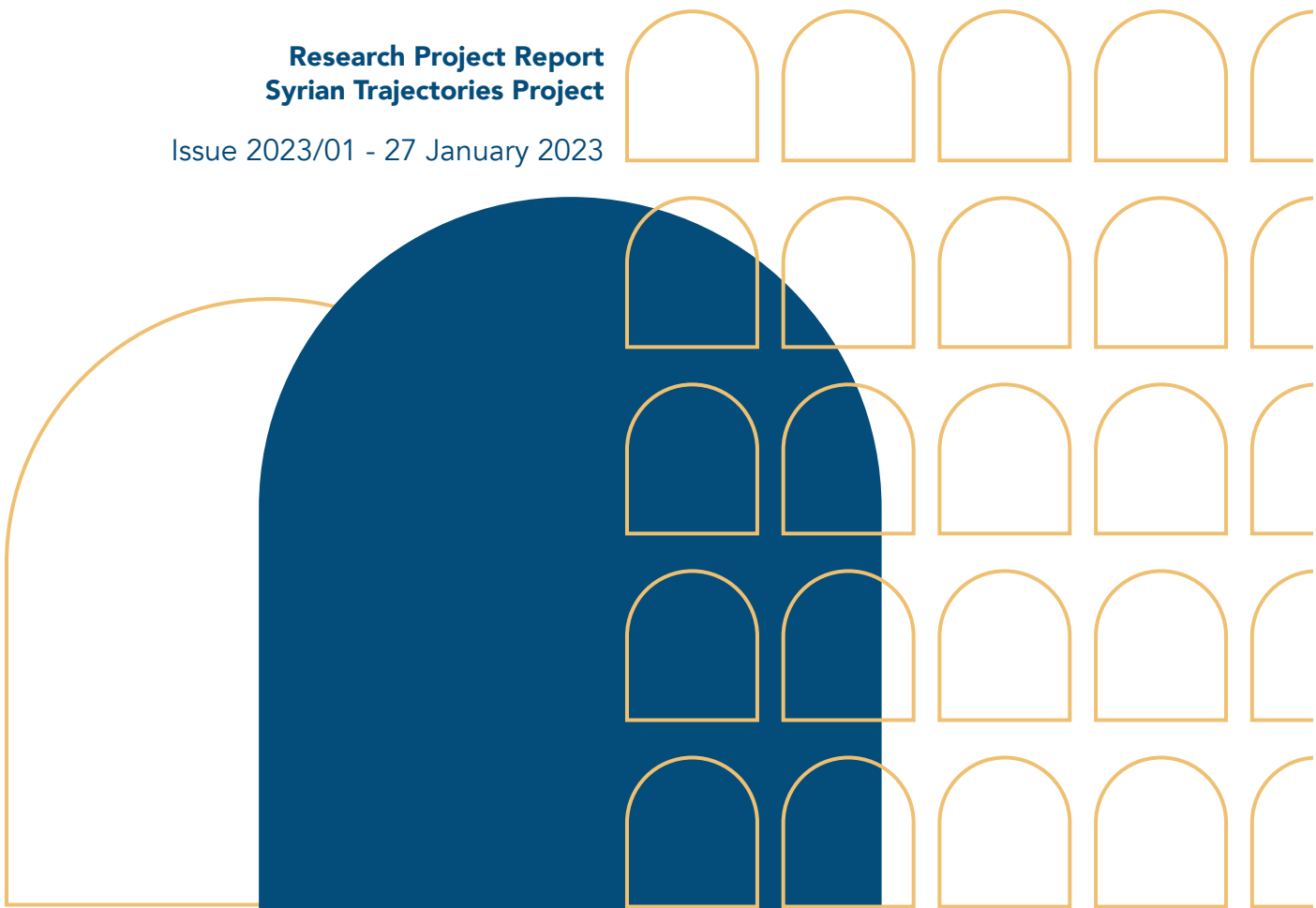


# The 2022 Syrian Local Elections: A Leadership Rooted in Regime Networks

Ziad Awad

**Research Project Report  
Syrian Trajectories Project**

Issue 2023/01 - 27 January 2023



© European University Institute, 2023. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.  
Editorial matter and selection © Ziad Awad, 2023

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by  
European University Institute (EUI)  
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014  
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy

This project is funded by the European Union and Germany as part of the Syria Peace Initiative implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Views and opinions expressed in our publications are solely those of the individual authors and do not represent those of donors, GIZ, or European University Institute.

# The 2022 Syrian Local Elections: A Leadership Rooted in Regime Networks

Ziad Awad\*

---

\* Ziad Awad is a Syrian researcher working on the Syria Trajectories project hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. His research focuses on political, security and social dynamics in regime-held areas in Syria.

Agnès Favier, director of the Syria Initiative at the European University Institute and scientific advisor for the Syrian Trajectories project, participated in drafting this study.

This paper is a translation of the original version published in Arabic on 9 January 2023.

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Local Councils Closely Linked to Central Power</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 The Dominance of the Baath Party	7
1.2 Councils Led by Civil Servants	11
<b>2. Power Centres Influencing Elections: Supporting Local Clients to Serve Private Interests</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 The Regime's Networks in the New Councils	14
2.2 The Benefits of Council Membership	17
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>20</b>

## Executive Summary

In the 2022 local administrative council elections, as in earlier local and parliamentary elections, the Baath Party maintained its dominant role. It put up a large number of Baathist candidates for the purpose of propaganda, organised the electoral process and controlled the results. Predictably, the party secured significant majorities in the new councils, with some variation across governorates.

Civil servants form the backbone of executive officers in the new local councils. Their predominant presence links local councils to the government and political centre. Among them, technocrats guarantee that local councils achieve a minimum level of performance. Contrary to official narratives and instructions from the Baath leadership, the representation of women and young people remains low.

While the Baath Party implemented the regime's strategy to secure its control over local councils, patronage relationships also played an important role in selecting the winning candidates. Influential figures and centres of power intervened in the final selection of executive office members. The outcome of the elections was largely shaped by these interventions, together with the political capital of each member. The positions of powerful actors who sponsored council members varied from one governorate to another. While some officials at the national level exerted influence in Damascus, there were more frequent interventions by localised power centres such as the intelligence services, Baath Party leaders and some powerful local figures in other governorates.

In their new positions, the presidents of local councils and members of executive offices might develop further ties with their backers and serve their economic interests in return for support and protection. Moreover, local councils provide their members with various opportunities to advance their personal interests. These are primarily business interests given the competencies of councils in various economic sectors, particularly construction and real estate. Being a council member might also allow further political ascension and enhance the social status of those from humble origins or reinforce the prestige of those from influential families.

## Introduction

On 18 September 2022, Syrian residents were called to the polls to elect 19,086 members of 1,470 local councils at four administrative levels (governorate, city, town, township).<sup>1</sup> For local councils in areas outside the regime's military control, elections were held in polling stations set up in regime-controlled areas, and many candidates won with no competition. A month later, the new councils organised internal elections to select the presidents and members of their executive offices, positions which concentrate the power of the councils.

These local elections were the third since the outbreak of the revolution in March 2011 and they took place at a time when the Syrian government had become unable to address the unprecedented economic crisis the country was facing. Meanwhile, both of the regime's main allies were facing their own crises: Russia's war in Ukraine; and Iran's economic woes and popular protests. To overcome the stalemate, the Syrian regime has been relying on aid provided by United Nations agencies, which have increasingly promoted the implementation of early recovery projects in government-controlled areas. Therefore, despite the decline in the capacity of government institutions to deliver services, the official narrative around the local elections emphasised the role of councils in development, targeting international donors.<sup>2</sup> Amidst dire economic conditions, however, popular apathy regarding the local elections was more evident than ever.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, unlike previous wartime elections, the political establishment did not deploy all its mobilisation arsenal.<sup>4</sup> All this indicates that these elections were not a significant political event for the regime but instead a routine response to constitutional requirements.

Studying the composition of the new local councils can provide insights into the changes in local regime networks during this complex phase of the conflict. Since the start of Assad rule in 1970, local councils have not had decision-making power but have been used as tools to control the territory and the population.<sup>5</sup> Following the revolution and the ensuing war, elections have also been opportunities for the regime to rebuild its networks and renew its social base.<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to deepen knowledge on local elections, which have rarely been studied,<sup>7</sup> this paper aims to investigate the relationship between local council members elected in 2022 and the Syrian regime. It examines this relationship at two levels. First, it looks at the criteria the Baath Party used to select candidates in order to identify the main profiles of council members; second, it sheds light on the positions of these members within the regime's patronage networks.

---

1 The local administrative structures consist mainly of 14 governorate councils (with no fewer than 50 members and no more than 100) and 147 city councils (with no fewer than 25 members and no more than 50), among which 11 are main city councils in cities which are administrative centres of governorates. The most numerous but least significant local units in the administrative hierarchy are town councils (no fewer than 10 members and no more than 25) and township councils (10 members).

2 These elections coincided with several high-level official visits to Damascus by UN agency directors. On 19 September, the Minister of Local Administration and Environment (MoLA), Hussein Makhoulouf, met the head of UN-Habitat and stressed the need to implement projects that help develop the capacities of local councils. SANA, "Makhoulouf to the Director of UN-Habitat: Necessity of Implementing Projects That Enhance Local Administration Services" (in Arabic), 19 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Wr98yi>. The same week, the commissioner of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Filippo Grandi, met the Minister of Interior, Major General Muhammad Rahmoun, to discuss the return of refugees. It is notable that many UN agencies promote an 'area-based approach' to implementing early recovery projects. See Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), "Syrian Arab Republic UN Strategic Framework 2022-2024," March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3vKDRuU>

3 Agnès Favier and Marie Kostrz, "Local Elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?" Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project), 18 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3ZmBrA9>

4 These elections were characterised by poor media coverage and little to no coercion to vote was reported. Unlike the 2018 elections, rhetoric referring to "a political victory after a military victory" was absent.

5 The Assad regime has completely subjugated local councils to its authority and made their elections a monopoly for the Baath Party. See Fabrice Balanche, "Municipalities in Baath Syria: Administrative Decentralisation and Political Control" (in French), *Revue Tiers Monde*, 2008/1, no. 193: p. 169-187, <https://bit.ly/2RMfgV5>

6 Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)," Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project), April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3XkEs2i>; 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 (MED), October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3W51f0V>

7 Favier and Kostrz, "Local Elections;" Ayman Aldassouky, "The Regime's Management of Localities: What Do the Results of Local Administration Elections Tell Us?" (in Arabic), *Omran Center for Strategic Studies*, November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2R04EgZ>; Myriam Youssef, Rim Turkmani and Mazen Gharibah, "Progress in the Wrong Direction: The 2018 Local Council Elections in Syria," Conflict Research Programme, *London School of Economics and Political Science*, February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3Zqi6OG>

The sample in this study covers five governorates – Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia – and includes five governorate councils and three city councils.<sup>8</sup> These five governorates followed different paths during the conflict and are known for their large populations, their demographic diversity and their political and economic significance for the Syrian regime. The study focuses on the leadership of these eight councils, i.e., their presidents and members of executive offices (82 council members),<sup>9</sup> and where possible makes comparisons with the council members as a whole. The data collection was mainly through online interviews conducted between September and November 2022 with 50 people from the selected governorates and cities. The interviewees included current and former council members, candidates who lost in the local elections, Baathist and non-Baathist civil servants, and relatives, friends and colleagues of newly elected council members.<sup>10</sup> The paper also draws on official statements and data, news coverage by official state media outlets and the press offices of governorate and city councils, and public and personal Facebook pages of elected council members.<sup>11</sup>

## 1. Local Councils Closely Linked to Central Power

As has been usual for decades in every local and parliamentary election, the Baath Party played a crucial role in the 2022 local elections, both by organising the electoral process and by selecting candidates. The composition of the new councils reflects the regime's strategy of maintaining control over the councils, as is shown by the distribution of seats by political affiliation and by dominant professional background. Yet, the composition of these councils raises the question of whether the regime is able to renew its base at the local level.

### 1.1 The Dominance of the Baath Party

The 2022 local elections once again highlighted the importance of the Baath Party to the regime. By utilising the party's membership of 1.25 million,<sup>12</sup> the regime attempted to conceal the population's low interest in these elections, including among its supporters. In the early stage of the electoral process, thousands of Baathists submitted candidacy applications in response to instructions to governorate branches from the party's Central Command. This resulted in a total of 59,498 final approved applications – an increase of 25,000 compared to the 2018 local elections.<sup>13</sup> With these inflated numbers, the party created a critical mass of candidates. This, however, did not succeed in masking the weak mobilisation outside the party, as was evidenced by the small number of applications submitted by independent candidates<sup>14</sup> – 4,825 in all the governorates.<sup>15</sup> After the submission window closed, the party branches

---

8 The governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus have a special administrative status with only a governorate council (100 members). Aleppo, Homs and Latakia each have a governorate council (100 members) and a central city council (50 members). In Rural Damascus, there is no central city as administrative centre of the governorate but 27 city councils, which have been partially studied in this research.

9 In addition to the president of a council, each executive office has ten members in governorate councils and eight members in city councils. It should be noted that presidencies of governorate councils have a special legal status: each council has an elected president but its executive office is headed by the governor, who is appointed by presidential decree.

10 The data presented in this paper are sourced from the interviews unless otherwise noted in the footnotes.

11 This research has faced methodological challenges, mainly due to the lack of transparency in the electoral process and the scarcity of official data. For instance, there are no clear figures for the number of candidates and their distribution in local administrative units, no official voter turnout figure and no centralised data on the website of the MoLA. Accessing accurate information on some council members with little-known backgrounds has also been a challenge.

12 According to Yasser al-Shoufi, a member of the Baath Central Command and head of the Offices of Organisation and Education. Al-Baath TV, "Review of Local Administrative Election Results with the Party Leadership" (in Arabic), YouTube, 27 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3BJ4dAL>

13 SANA, "The Supreme Judicial Committee for Elections to SANA: The Number of those Accepted for the Local Administration Elections Is 59,498 Candidates" (in Arabic), 21 August 2022, <https://bit.ly/3V8G79G>

14 An independent candidate is someone who is not affiliated with the Baath Party or any other party in the National Progressive Front.

15 Al-Baath TV, "Review of Local Administration," Data for the governorates of Homs and Tartous show that more than 90% of the candidacy applications were submitted by Baathists. Homs Governorate Press Office, Facebook, 15 August 2022, <https://bit.ly/3iWRhAl>; Tartous Governorate Press Office, Facebook, 22 August 2022, <https://bit.ly/3XYOCXo>

in each governorate held non-binding primary elections (dubbed 'consultations') to select its candidates on the National Unity lists, which usually also include candidates from the nine other parties allied with the Baath in the National Progressive Front (NPF).<sup>16</sup> Apart from the candidates on these lists, all the other Baathist applicants were dropped,<sup>17</sup> thus reducing the number of candidates actually running on the election day.

In addition to its direct role in this initial selection, the Baath Party also played an indirect role in the organisation of the elections through its influence on governors and the Supreme Judicial Committee for Elections (or its sub-committees at the governorate level), the two bodies which officially oversee the electoral process. Each governor, who is a member of the leadership of the Baath Party branch in his governorate, is responsible for forming a judicial sub-committee and appointing directors of polling stations. Additionally, most if not all of the judges who usually oversee elections are affiliated with the party, which calls into question their impartiality.<sup>18</sup>

As predicted, all the National Unity lists won in all the governorates, with only minor breakthroughs in smaller city, town and township councils.<sup>19</sup> Baathists and their NPF allies therefore formed overwhelming majorities in the elected councils, ranging between 71% and 95% in the fourteen governorate councils and between 70% and 82% in the eleven city councils (administrative centres of governorates) (Figures 1 and 2). In the subsequent stage of the elections, Baathists secured the presidency of all the councils and together with their allies formed majorities in all the executive offices (Figure 3).

---

16 For more explanation of the primary process introduced in the 2020 parliamentary elections, see Awad and Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020."

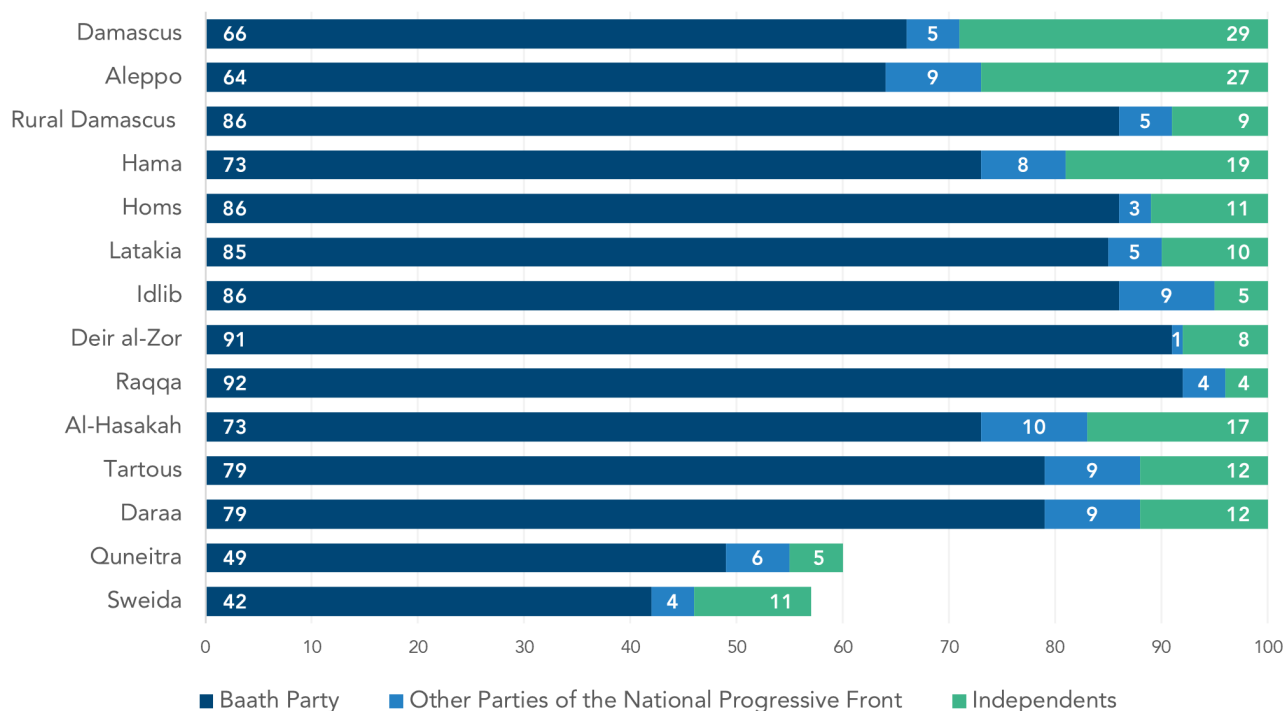
17 The party's by-laws prevent Baathists from running in elections alone outside the National Unity lists.

18 In the fieldwork for this study, three main profiles of heads of judicial committees were identified. First, former Baath Party leaders such as Jihad Murad, head of the Supreme Judicial Committee for Elections, who served as secretary of the Hama party branch between 2011 and 2013, and Amal Shawsha, head of the judicial sub-committee in Aleppo, who is a former leader of the Aleppo party branch and is daughter of a former officer in the Political Security Directorate. Second, former heads of terrorism courts, which were established to legitimise the political repression of dissidents, such as Maymoon Ezzeddine, head of the sub-committee in Damascus, who previously headed a terrorism court and served as an advisor in the Supreme State Security Court. Third, former intelligence agents in the judiciary, such as Yasser Ghazi, head of the sub-committee in Rural Damascus, who is known among Rural Damascus lawyers as a long-time informant of the Military Intelligence Directorate.

19 The most notable breakthrough was in the city of Sednaya in Rural Damascus, where 7 of the 18 candidates on the National Unity list failed to be elected.

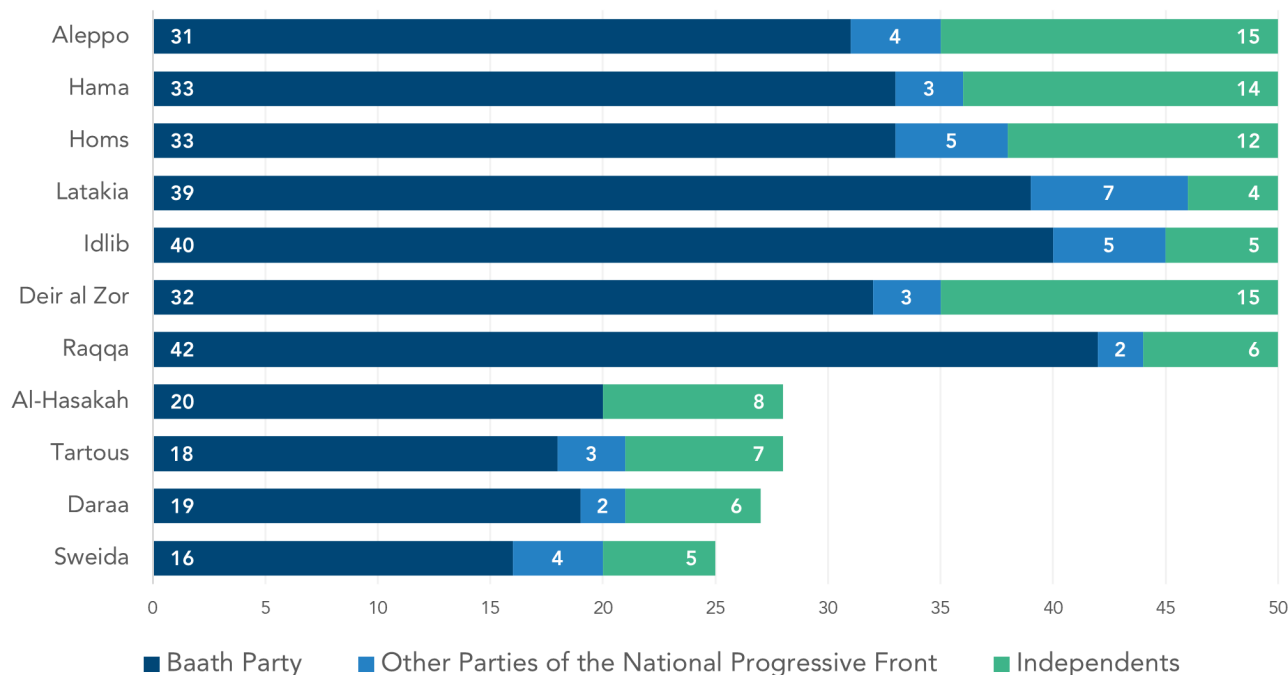


**Figure 1: Distribution of Seats in the 14 Governorate Councils by Political Affiliation**



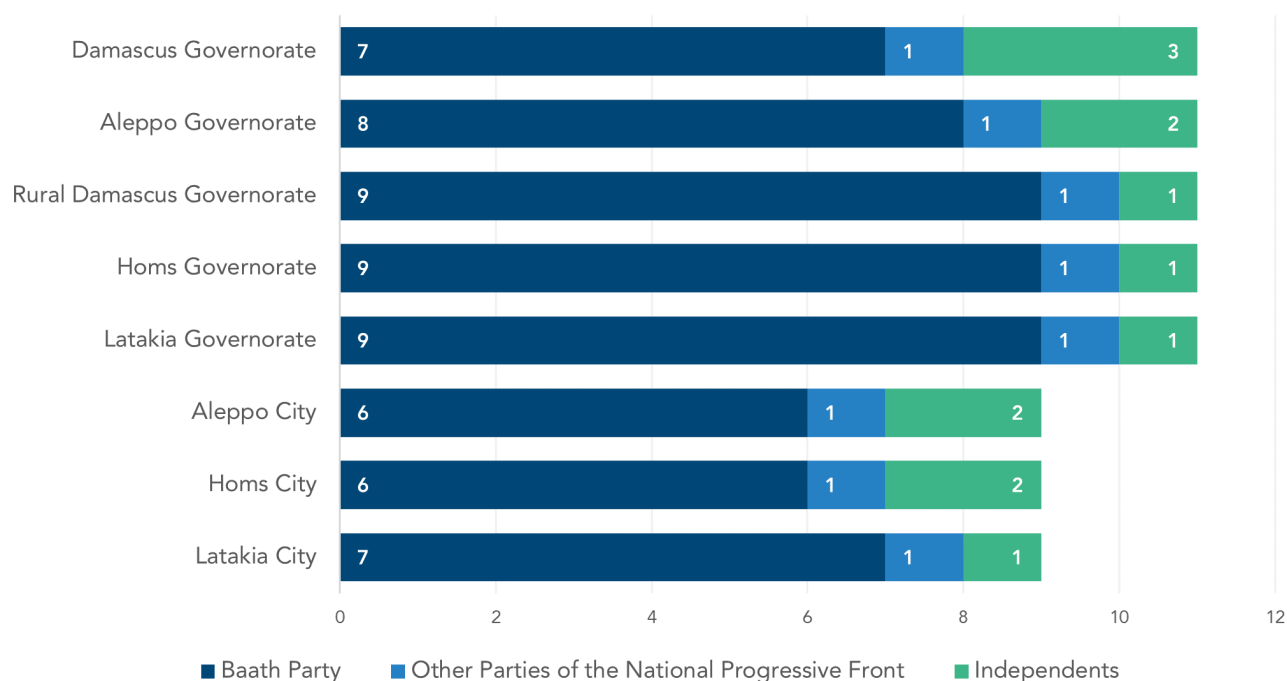
Source: The author, based on a comparison of the National Unity lists published on 12 September 2022 and the lists of elected members published by presidential decree on 2 October 2022.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Seats in the 11 City Councils (Administrative Centres of Governorates) by Political Affiliation**



Source: The author, based on a comparison of the National Unity lists published on 12 September 2022 and the lists of elected members published by presidential decree on 2 October 2022.

**Figure 3: Distribution of Seats in the Executive Offices of Governorate and City Councils by Political Affiliation (Study Sample)**



Source: The author, based on the results of executive office elections published on the Facebook pages of councils between 18 and 19 October 2022

While the Baath Party announced how it selected its candidates through primaries, the other NPF parties did not do so, and most of them did not publicly release the names of their candidates.<sup>20</sup> That said, a few representatives of all these parties were elected in governorate and city councils, except for the Arab Socialist Movement which suspended its membership of the NPF due to internal leadership conflicts. The NPF parties are also represented by a member in almost every executive office in the study sample.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the marginal place allocated to other NPF parties on the National Unity lists, the Baath Party left more seats open for independents, the number of which differed from one governorate to the next and according to the type of council (Figures 1 and 2). Three factors seem to explain these variations. First, the location of councils on the map of military and security control. The number of seats left for independents was lowest in governorates with large areas outside the control of the regime, such as Raqqa, Deir al-Zor and Idlib,<sup>22</sup> which suggests the regime relied on the Baath Party to maintain the structures of government institutions in areas that were still in a state of war, even if these structures were largely inactive and were managed remotely. Second, the prerogatives of different types of councils. Baathists obtained higher numbers of seats in governorate councils, which have more powers than city councils. Third, a tradition of leaving more room for independents in large cities like Damascus and

20 This lack of transparency makes it difficult to compare the representation of the various NPF parties. The sample in this research is not sufficient to make such a comparison.

21 With the exceptions of the executive office of the Idlib Governorate Council, which includes two NPF members, and the executive office of the Quneitra Governorate Council, in which these parties are absent. In the study sample, the following NPF parties have a seat on executive councils: in governorate councils, the National Covenant Party in Damascus, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in Rural Damascus, the Syrian Communist Party in Homs and the Arab Socialist Union Party in Aleppo and Latakia; in city councils, the Arab Socialist Union Party in Homs, the Socialist Unionists Party in Aleppo and the Syrian Communist Party in Latakia.

22 Latakia Governorate stands out. Despite the stable military and security control there, the Baath Party secured a large majority in the governorate and city councils, far exceeding councils in other similar governorates.

Aleppo to represent business communities (merchants, industrialists and artisans). However, partisan labels no longer have political meanings as all independents are just as loyal to the regime as Baathists, and in some cases even more so. Some independents have held leadership positions in organisations affiliated with the General Federation of Trade Union Workers, which is closely associated with the Baath Party. Others have led pro-regime militias or have held the position of *mukhtar*, which is usually filled by security service informants in city neighbourhoods.

In an electoral environment that is entirely loyal to the regime, the dominance of the Baath Party confirms its central role in controlling local councils. This pre-eminence also enables the party's Central Command to distribute local council seats as rewards within its active bases, thus maintaining the organic relationship between council members and the party, and by extension the regime. While representation of independents reflects an attempt to assimilate loyal members from outside the Baath, the continued reliance on other parties within the NPF – an outdated political phenomenon that has turned into inherited family fiefdoms – raises questions about the meaning of this representation and its political utility to the regime. Maintaining this representation is rooted in the nature of the regime itself, which is based on a left-wing version of Arab nationalist ideology that is consistently used to justify its foreign policy and most of its domestic policies. This also might mean that the regime lacks real alternatives to these parties. Indeed, the ten parties licensed after 2011 have much smaller memberships (tens to hundreds of members) than the NPF parties (hundreds to thousands), they have no clear ideology and some of them suffer from internal disputes.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, these recently established parties participated only limitedly in the election. Although some of them announced candidate lists, they won very few seats, and none obtained membership in any executive office.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.2 Councils Led by Civil Servants

In addition to distributing seats based on political affiliation, the Baath Party leadership imposed several other criteria for members to be elected. Some of these criteria drew on the official narrative that focused on the representation of women and young people,<sup>25</sup> together with the presence of skilled and experienced candidates, as indications of the success of the role of the councils in local development. This narrative was concretely translated into a requirement for members of executive offices to have university degrees and the establishment of unofficial quotas for women during the party primaries, in addition to the organisation of several campaigns to promote the participation of the young and women. However, the top priority of the Baath leadership appears to have been to secure central government control over the councils through the selection of many civil servants to head them.

Research into the careers of the presidents of local councils and the members of executive offices, a sample of 82 members, reveals that 78 members hold university degrees and two are graduates of military colleges. In each executive office there is at least one graduate in engineering, one in economics, one in medicine or dentistry and one in law, who is often a practising lawyer. This, however, does not necessarily mean that all the current members have had practical experience in their field of study, as diplomas do not always match the profession exercised. In addition to a university degree, the Baath Central Command also required the members of executive offices to have had at least four years of administrative or party experience. In fact, the main common denominator of the presidents of local councils and members of executive offices appears to be their affiliation with the government public sector and Baath-led professional organisations.

---

23 For example, the Syria Homeland Party almost disappeared after the death of its founder Majd Niazi in 2019. The founder of the National Youth Party, Maher Merhej, was charged with fraud and forgery.

24 Dozens of candidates from the People's Party, the National Youth Party, and the Modernisation and Development Party ran for various council elections in different governorates. Most failed. For example, of 18 candidates from the National Youth Party in several governorates only one candidate won a seat on the Hama Governorate Council.

25 Young people are defined as those under forty in official and Baath statements.

All presidents of governorate councils and of central city councils, and most of their deputies, are civil servants. In the executive offices in the study sample, there are at least 42 civil servants, nearly half of whom have held – in the past or until the election – important administrative positions in institutions affiliated to various ministries.<sup>26</sup> This further strengthens the links of local councils, through their leadership, with the government centre. Furthermore, most presidents and members of executive offices belong to professional unions, all of which are affiliated with the Baath Party. For example, all engineers, whether or not they are government employees, are registered with the Union of Engineers. The same applies to lawyers, doctors and pharmacists. Through subordination of these professional sectors either to the government or to the Baath Party, local councils are brought under central control, ensuring that they operate in line with centralised policies and objectives.

Among government employees, the presence of technocrats, mostly Baathists, appears vital to maintain the minimum functions of a council. The percentage of them in executive offices ranges from 30% in Rural Damascus to 50% in Damascus. Moreover, if many civil servants have private businesses and investments in real estate, it is worth noting that merchants and industrialists running for elections in this capacity are poorly represented in executive offices, and only relatively so in councils – in contrast to the high percentage of businessmen in the People’s Council elected in 2020. This can be attributed to the fact that, given its low status in the political hierarchy, local council membership is not attractive to most merchants and industrialists. The full-time nature of executive office positions may also deter businessmen as it may impede their ability to prioritise their own business interests.

At another level, the representation of women remains low in the new local councils, despite instructions by the Baath Central Command to governorate branches to promote it. Women made up 18.8% of candidates but only 14.3% of the members elected in the eight councils in this study, and just 6% in their executive offices. Women are even completely absent from the executive offices of Aleppo (governorate) and Latakia (governorate and city). Most of these women were elected thanks to the Baath practice of granting them an unofficial quota. In the eight councils studied, 83 of the 93 elected women were candidates on National Unity lists. Of the five women members of executive offices, four are Baathists (Figure 4).<sup>27</sup> The gradual decline in the percentages of women from one stage in the electoral process to the next suggests that their participation was used for propaganda purposes during the election campaign.<sup>28</sup> The results also reveal their marginal position within the regime’s patriarchal networks. Many women in executive positions were backed by an influential personality. A prominent example is civil engineer Samar Kario, a member of the executive office of the Aleppo City Council who is the wife of Jean Maghamez, the executive director of the Syria Trust for Development office in Aleppo. Overall, the weak presence of women in the local administration structures contrasts with their increased role in the economy and society during the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

---

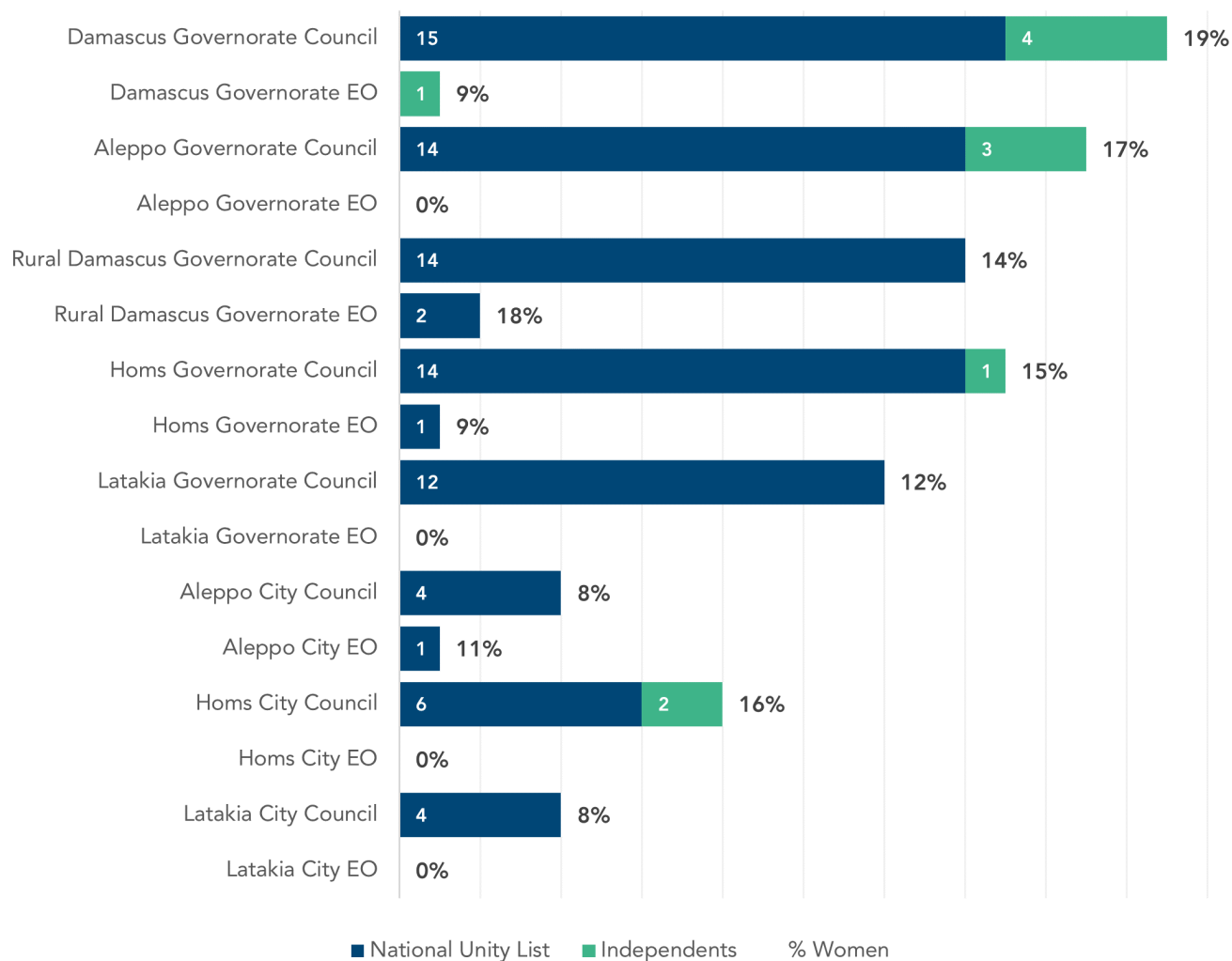
26 For example, the president of the Damascus Governorate Council, Muhammad Iyad al-Shamaa, was director of the Local Councils and Development Department at the MoLA. The deputy president of the Latakia Governorate Council, Firas al-Sousi, was director of the Transportation Directorate in Latakia until he won his current position for the first time in 2018.

27 A comparison with the 2007 local elections reveals a decrease in women’s representation in leadership positions. In 2007, in the same eight councils as this study’s sample, ten women were members of executive offices, one headed the Homs City Council and another was the deputy president of the Damascus Governorate Council.

28 Among several activities to promote the participation of women, the Syrian Commission for Family and Population Affairs, a government agency, launched a campaign in which certain government departments participated aimed at increasing women’s involvement in local elections. See Syrian Commission for Family and Population Affairs, “Launching the National Campaign to Promote Women’s Participation in Local Councils Under the Slogan ‘You Can, You Deserve’” (in Arabic), 9 August 2022, <https://bit.ly/3WmsZ2d>

29 Synaps, “Syria Becoming: Women’s Tough Bargain,” 15 August 2022, <https://bit.ly/3QGzryP>

**Figure 4: Representation of Women in Councils and Executive Offices by Political Affiliation (Study Sample)**



Source: The author, based on the results of executive office elections published on the Facebook pages of councils between 18 and 19 October 2022.

Similarly, the use of propaganda about representation of young people was loose and indistinct. Although the official published data on candidates does not indicate their ages, except for Homs governorate, research on university graduation dates and work starting dates reveals a low representation of the young. In the Homs executive offices only one member is under forty in the city council, and none in the governorate council. In the few cases where this study has identified young people (under thirty) elected in executive offices they came from leadership positions in Baath-affiliated organisations, in particular the National Union of Syrian Students. For example, Bassel Ali Zaidan (executive office of Aleppo Governorate Council), a graduate of the Faculty of Law and son of a former member of the People’s Council, was a member of the leadership of the Student Union Branch at Ittihad Private University. Alaa Muhammad Samir al-Sheikh (executive office of Rural Damascus Governorate Council), a graduate of the Faculty of Pharmacy and former head of its student administrative body, had served as a media representative for the Baath Brigades and in the leadership of the Baath Party’s Damascus University branch.

The recent elections highlighted the regime’s inability to renew the structure of local councils, either due to a lack of alternatives or to a lack of confidence in making changes that could have political and security consequences. This resulted in a narrowing of options for the ruling authorities, which only made minor adjustments when selecting local council members. The results indeed show a relative

renewal of members,<sup>30</sup> who were selected using the same tools and mechanisms and who represent the same segments and categories of the population from one election to another. Baathist civil servants thus continue to be the dominant figures in local council leadership positions. These figures formed the traditional social base of the Assad regime in local councils even before 2000, and they remain the base on which the current regime is trying to rebuild its power locally.

## 2. Power Centres Influencing Elections: Supporting Local Clients to Serve Private Interests

While the regime consolidates its control over local councils with a majority of Baathist civil servants, patronage networks, which played a decisive role in the selection of candidates, create another level of local council dependence on the centres of power. Many members of these councils, and in particular their presidents and executive offices members, received support from influential figures in the regime's networks. Such interventions varied from one governorate to another. Most of them, however, were primarily driven by personal interests. Local clients are often backed in exchange for them to use council membership to pay back their backers. Therefore, councils are used predominantly to accumulate wealth and to gain political influence and social prestige, always at the expense of the public interest.

### 2.1 The Regime's Networks in the New Councils

Each candidate's specific political capital, such as long experience in government institutions and the party, having had security and military functions during the war or belonging to a prominent family, contributed to them being elected in local councils. However, this alone was not sufficient to access leadership positions, which required direct support by powerful actors. The specifics of each governorate seemed to play a role in determining the centres of power that intervened in these elections. In Damascus, officials with influence at the national level were prevalent. In Rural Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and Latakia, there were more frequent interventions by local power centres such as intelligence officers, leaders of Baath Party branches, members of the People's Council and high-profile warlords.

The Damascus Governorate Council is somewhat unique due to its location in the capital, which is directly under the watchful eye of the Presidential Palace. The network of Asma al-Assad, the president's wife, and to a lesser extent those of some ministers, seem to have influenced the composition of the leadership of this council. Notably, intervention by the intelligence services was less prominent than elsewhere. As an example of direct ministerial influence, the new president of the council, civil engineer Muhammad Iyad al-Shamaa, who worked at the Ministry of Local Administration until the election day, benefited from his personal relationship with the Minister Hussein Makhoul. In addition to this decisive support, al-Shamaa is a typical example of a technocrat with long administrative experience and belonging to a prestigious Damascene family.

In contrast with other governorates, the associative sphere led by Asma al-Assad, chairwoman of the Syria Trust for Development (STD), are also represented in the Damascus executive office, in which three members can be considered part of this sphere.<sup>31</sup> Proximity to the STD provides an opportunity to build additional ties within the regime's networks. For instance, the track record of the deputy president of the executive office, Muhammad Ali al-Moubayed, shows an accumulation of various forms

---

30 Of the 82 members in the study sample, 30 were former council members who were first elected in the 2007, 2011 or 2018 electoral cycles.

31 They are civil engineer Muhammad Ali al-Moubayed (deputy president), lawyer Muhammad Qais Ramadan, who works with the UNDP in Damascus as a legal consultant and at the same time heads the Youth Charity Association, and lawyer Majd Hallaq, a board member of the same association.

of support. In the past, al-Moubayed served in many government positions, the most important of which was assistant to the Minister of Culture (2016-2019). In that position he developed a relationship with the STD, before working as director of a UNDP-funded cultural heritage project in the Sarouja neighbourhood of Damascus, in which the Ministry of Culture and the STD participated (2020-2022). Al-Moubayed also had the backing of powerful figures such as Ammar Saati, a member of the Baath Central Command close to Bashar al-Assad, and Tarek Kreishati, Governor of Damascus, whose rapid rise since 2020 is reported to be due to his ties with Asma al-Assad.<sup>32</sup>

To some extent, the Governor of Damascus had a pivotal role in forming the executive office, especially as he strived to form his own team in the office, which only has new members. However, he had to come to terms with the political and sectarian affiliation quotas tacitly imposed by the Baath Party. These quotas facilitated interference by other personalities. For example, the Secretary-General of the National Covenant Party intervened in favour of his brother engineer Abdel Aziz Othman to fill the seat reserved for NPF parties. Bishop Arsanios Dahdal, a cleric close to the Presidential Palace, supported schoolteacher Nadim Dahdal, his friend and distant relative, for the council seat reserved for Christians. Lastly, retired officer Ammar Ghanem, who had worked with the Russian forces from his retirement until the elections, relied on many centres of power – from Major General Kifah Melhem, head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, to retired Major General Adnan Makhoul, head of the Veterans Association – to secure the seat that seems to have been allocated to Alawites since the 2018 local elections.

In contrast to Damascus, the intelligence services heavily influenced the elections in Rural Damascus, an area that has experienced armed conflict and has seen the emergence of new local actors. The president of the governorate council, Ibrahim Jumaa, received decisive support from Major General Ali Mamlouk, head of the National Security Bureau. Jumaa also exploited political capital from his former position as a leader member of the Baath Party's Damascus University branch and from his Baathist family, which had produced prominent officers in the army, intelligence and police.<sup>33</sup> The deputy president of the council, Jassem al-Mahmoud, followed a different path. Coming from a large tribe in the town of Adra al-Balad, which remained close to the conflict lines until 2018, al-Mahmoud served as president of its local council between 2007 and 2022. From this position, he established strong connections with the Air Force Intelligence and became an indispensable informant for it when the town was under the control of the opposition (2013-2014). He then emerged as one of the most prominent local figures in the area.<sup>34</sup> While some people who were involved in security or military activities were elected to the Rural Damascus Council, mediators who played a role in brokering 'reconciliation agreements' are almost not represented. Only one member, Ibrahim al-Asheq, who was secretary of the Baath Party branch in his hometown Yalda, south of Damascus, played a local intermediary role and was elected to the council.<sup>35</sup>

In the elections of the city councils in Rural Damascus, the influence of the intelligence services was also apparent. The results, however, involved various configurations of relations between diverse power centres. For example, the election of the city council of Daraya seems to show a tacit agreement between the Air Force Intelligence, the leadership of the Baath branch in Rural Damascus and influential local

---

32 After serving as director of the Tourism Directorate in Damascus (2018-2020), Kreishati was appointed Governor of Quneitra (2020) and then of Hama (2020-2022) and finally of Damascus (since July 2022). Kreishati and al-Moubayed share three common points: they come from the Sarouja neighbourhood of Damascus, they have served at the Ministry of Tourism and they are affiliated with Asma al-Assad's network.

33 These include his father Muhammad, a former Major General in the army, his uncle Issam, a former Brigadier General in military intelligence, and his son-in-law Hussain, a Major General and Head of the Criminal Security Directorate. Jumaa's sister, who is Hussain's wife, is a member of the 2020 People's Council.

34 In a similar trajectory to that of al-Mahmoud, Adnan al-Hassan, a schoolteacher who presided over the local council of the Khiara Dannoun township, became secretary of the governorate council due to support from the Rural Damascus command of the National Defence Forces, in which he served as a leader.

35 These 'reconciliation agreements' resulted in the military takeover of the last opposition-held pockets by regime forces. Mazen Ezzi, "Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?" Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project), 27 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3XsCtZG>

personalities known for their proximity to the Assad family.<sup>36</sup> In the neighbouring city of Moadhamiyat al-Sham, the influence of the Air Force Intelligence was also apparent but without full agreement of the Baath Party, three candidates of which lost to independents affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence.<sup>37</sup> The city of Sednaya, which has a predominantly Christian population, stood out as an exception in these elections. Local influential figures were able to break away from the domination of the Baath Party and instead relied directly on the Presidential Palace. Expatriates from the city, especially wealthy individuals who send money to maintain public facilities or help the poor, had a crucial role in defeating seven Baath candidates and securing seats for independent candidates who enjoy popular acceptance. This, however, would not have occurred without the special relationship that some Christian clerics enjoy with the Presidential Palace.<sup>38</sup>

The further away from the capital, the greater the influence of local power centres, which in turn derive their influence from larger power centres. In Aleppo, Rana al-Youssef, a leader member of the Baath Party's Aleppo branch, played a pivotal role in forming the National Unity lists on behalf of Hilal Hilal, her friend and Baath Assistant Secretary, who comes from Aleppo governorate.<sup>39</sup> She was accused of receiving bribes to support some candidates by using her connection with Hilal.<sup>40</sup> That said, the clear influence of Hilal Hilal, who succeeded in ousting another member of the Baath Central Command (Shabaan Azouz, who is also from Aleppo) did not prevent the intervention of other influential actors. The Qaterji brothers, well-known as major war profiteers, backed Muhammad Jamil Kneifati, an architect who manages some of Qaterji's real estate projects, in his bid for the executive office of Aleppo city. Moreover, the Abbas brothers, who are prominent officers in the army and intelligence services,<sup>41</sup> were the main supporters of Ibrahim Maktabi, the former commander of the Monitoring Department of the National Defence Forces, who entered the executive office of Aleppo city.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the powerful Governor of Aleppo, Hussein Diab, a former police officer, helped appoint civil engineer Kunit al-Sheikh as deputy president of the executive office of Aleppo governorate. In all these cases, the local power centres usually rely on larger centres of power, notably within the Presidential Palace, whose orientations towards them can lead to their decline (Shabaan Azouz), their promotion (Abbas brothers) or longevity in the same positions (Hilal Hilal as Baath Assistant Secretary for the past nine years, and Hussein Diab as Governor of Aleppo for six years).

As in Aleppo, the power centres involved in the formation of the executive office of the Homs Governorate Council were somewhat similar. The intelligence services played the most prominent role, followed by the Baath Party branch and then local influential figures. For instance, due to the support of the Military Intelligence, the former Director of Finance in Homs, Fawaz al-Hashimi, became president of the council. The Air Force Intelligence, namely Major General Salem Daghestani, backed Ammar

---

36 Of the 25 members of the council, seven are affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence, three are affiliated with the al-Azab brothers, natives of the city (Hikmat, a member of the People's Council, and Imad, the former Minister of Education), both known for their ties with Asma al-Assad, and two members are associates of local dignitary and influential businessman Abdo Nouredine al-Haw, a member of the Rural Damascus Governorate Council who has longstanding ties with the Fourth Division's leadership.

37 The Administrative Court in Rural Damascus annulled the results of the elections in this city. World News Syria, "The Judiciary Issues its Ruling in the Case of Rigging Local Administrative Elections and Dissolves the City Council of Moadhamiyat al-Sham" (in Arabic), 30 November 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Vbe7C7>

38 Dr. Abdullah Saadeh was elected president of the city council for the second time. Among the clerics close to the is George Najma, priest at Our Lady of Sednaya Monastery, which Bashar and Asma al-Assad have visited several times.

39 Al-Youssef was behind the election of the president of the governorate council, Muhammad Hijazi, who has no notable professional or partisan experience. Apart from being al-Youssef's friend, Hijazi has been director of the General Organisation of Books and the National Theatre in Aleppo.

40 Another intermediary broker was lawyer Samer Jneidan, brother of Fares Jneidan, a member of the People's Council. According to one losing candidate and a civil servant in Aleppo, the cost to obtain a seat in the executive office of the governorate council or the city council was around USD 30,000, and around USD 10,000 for seats on both councils.

41 Major General Riyad Abbas is head of the Syrian military police and he previously served in Aleppo, and Colonel Fadi Abbas is a prominent officer in the Air Force Intelligence in Aleppo.

42 As another example, Judge Zakaria Houran, who was elected in the executive office of the Aleppo Governorate Council, was backed by significant traders in the economic networks of the Fourth Division, namely the sons of Brigadier General Mustafa al-Tajer, a former leader of the Military Intelligence branch in Aleppo.



Daghestani, an engineer and director of the Technical Institute for Oil and Gas until the election day, for the seat reserved for NPF parties. Additionally, prominent parliamentarian Firas al-Salloum, whose family amassed a fortune during the war, helped his younger brother Fadi become a member of the same executive office. Others, such as engineer Ahmed Shahoud, who filled the seat reserved for Shiites, took a different route. Through his close association with prominent Shiite cleric Abdullah Nizam, Shahoud secured support by leveraging his work in Nizam's charity network, in addition to his parallel involvement in the charity network of Hezbollah and the wealth he accumulated through these activities.

Finally, the local elections in Latakia highlighted the specificities of the local political dynamics in this governorate. It seems that major interventions were made by the Presidential Palace, the influence of which was not exerted through soft and covert means as in Damascus but primarily through officers who are from the governorate. The former personal guard of Bashar al-Assad (until 2021), Brigadier General Rabih Ajeeb, who now serves as director of the 'special office' in the Council of Ministers,<sup>43</sup> intervened in the formation of the executive office of both Latakia Governorate and Latakia City Councils.<sup>44</sup> The elections in Latakia were not controlled by a single actor, however. The Military Intelligence also played a significant role, particularly through the head of its branch in Latakia, Brigadier General Taher Suleiman, and its head at the national level, Major General Kifah Melhem. Both Suleiman and Melhem backed Tayseer Habib, who enjoys a strong personal relationship with the two officers, for re-election as president of the governorate council. They also supported lawyer Dureid Martakoush for a seat in the executive office of the same council.<sup>45</sup> In the composition of Latakia City Council, the influence of other power centres was also evident, including the Fourth Division, with which the head of the city council, engineer Hussein Zenjarli, has ties. Zenjarli's former position as director of investments and operations at Latakia port further solidified his connections with the Fourth Division's economic network, which manages various revenue-generating operations in the port.<sup>46</sup> Another affiliate of this network is Ramez Jamil al-Kashi, a wealthy and influential vegetable trader who financed rallies in support of Bashar al-Assad during the 2021 presidential election and provided the families of fallen regime soldiers with financial aid. As many examples in Latakia show, elected members had often performed favours for their backers in the past, and they may have been asked to pay bribes to be elected. According to a civil servant in the area, "the headline of the Latakia elections was corruption," and there was even corruption competition between candidates.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.2 The Benefits of Council Membership

Local councils provide their members, particularly those in leadership positions, with opportunities to advance their personal interests and those of their sponsors. This creates a constant exchange of benefits between patrons and local clients. Additionally, council membership provides opportunities to build connections with other forces, strengthens members' positions in the regime's networks, and increases their chances of political and social ascension.

---

43 This special office is considered the eyes of the Presidential Palace in the Council of Ministers. Ajeeb is from the town of Harf al-Mseitra, near Qardaha, the birthplace of the Assad family.

44 For example, Ajeeb supported contractor and civil engineer Naji Hmeidoush to remain in the executive office of the governorate council, despite Hmeidoush's notoriety as a major figure in Latakia's corruption circles. Hmeidoush was removed from Rima, a state-owned company, by a decision of the Prime Minister in 2007. However, his son-in-law, Major General Raqi Ammar, who was director of the Naval Military College and then the Martyrs' Office until his retirement in 2013, helped clear Hmeidoush's legal record and protect him from various corruption scandals when he began working as a construction contractor.

45 Martakoush is the son of the former head of Latakia's General Federation of Peasants, an ally of Tayseer Habib. Together, they brought about the dissolution of Latakia City Council for the second time in 2020 after a dispute with its president. See Snack Syrian, "Dissolution of Latakia City Council Nearly a Year After its Formation" (in Arabic), 26 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3W5jGTP>

46 Ayman Aldassouky, "The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict," Research Project Report (Florence, European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project), 24 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3WbmGNO>

47 For instance, wealthy civil engineer and contractor Wael Layqa offered gifts and bribes estimated at USD 10,000 distributed between Latakia and Damascus to gain support. He was elected in the governorate council, but he failed to secure a seat in its executive office (because the bribes were not big enough, according to the same source) despite the backing of the head of State Security, a personal friend, and of his uncle Thabet Layqa, an influential officer working with the Minister of the Interior.

## Partnership or Protection in Exchange for Services

Interventions by powerful figures in favour of certain candidates indicate a developed and strong relationship between the two parties. After the election, council members require continual protection from their backers, and this comes in exchange for services, especially material ones, from within the councils. For instance, it is likely that the new president of the Rural Damascus Governorate Council, after being sponsored by Major General Mamlouk for this position, will facilitate the business of the general's son, Nuzhat Mamlouk, who owns companies that work exclusively on projects funded by UN agencies and other INGOs in the governorate. In most cases, the relationship between a high-ranking security officer in Damascus and a local official in one of the governorates was established during the officer's previous tenure in the governorate. For example, the business partnership between the head of the Military Intelligence, Kifah Melhem, and the president of the Latakia Governorate Council, Tayseer Habib, dates from when Melhem, a native of Tartous, was appointed head of the Military Intelligence branch in Latakia in 2012 and Habib worked as a real estate contractor in addition to his government job at the Water Corporation. This partnership continued after Melhem was transferred to Damascus in 2015 and was later promoted to the top of the intelligence apparatus in 2019. With Melhem nearing retirement, his primary interest became in accumulating wealth, and his private investment business expanded to several governorates. This increased the importance of Habib, who managed to secure a second consecutive term as president of the governorate council, of which he has been a member since 2007.

Significantly, the local councils in central cities play a role in urban development. As real estate remains a viable investment in a country with a disrupted economy, the services that members of local administrations can provide to those interested in investing in these markets remain valuable. In Damascus, it is probable that architect and civil servant Malak Hamsho, who has held several government positions in the field of urban planning, will continue to be involved as a member of the executive office of the governorate council in developing real estate projects in the outskirts of Damascus for the benefit of prominent personalities.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in the city of Aleppo, architect Muhammad Jamil Kneifati, is likely to provide various services to his sponsors, the Qaterji brothers, who have invested in purchasing land for construction both located within the city's zoning plans and in future expansions and modifications.

The small privileges granted by law to the presidents of councils and members of their executive offices, such as a service car and a monthly salary (equivalent today to no more than USD 40), are certainly not incentives to reach the leadership of a local council. However, such positions may facilitate illicit enrichment activities. For example, bribery in exchange for licences in the various sectors supervised by councils and implicit partnerships with contractors and real estate traders are common practices. Moreover, council membership offers opportunities to develop private businesses, or at least protection from fines and penalties in sectors such as construction, tourism, trade, transport and crafts. This protection is ensured in particular thanks to connections that council members can establish with the directors of most government institutions, and more importantly with some security services, which appoint officers as delegates in each local council to monitor and supervise it.

Corruption and self-benefit in local councils is finally evident from the multiple professions practised by council members, particularly their presidents. These professions range from public, often civil servant, work to undisclosed activities often in the real estate sector. Engineer Ammar Daghestani (Homs Governorate Council) is a clear example of somebody using a local council position for personal financial gain. In addition to his job in the Ministry of Oil, Daghestani has worked in land and real estate trade. During his tenure as president of the council of his hometown Deir Foul (2007-2011) in rural Homs, he took advantage of his position to buy agricultural lands at low prices, especially ones that were subject to ownership disputes, and then legally prepared them for sale using his connections with

---

<sup>48</sup> Hamsho has been a member of the 'procedure simplification team' in the coordination office between the Presidential Palace and the Damascus Governorate secretariat for years. She has also contributed to several urban studies, notably within the framework of Decree 66 for the development of Marota City.

relevant government institutions, before selling them at high prices. At that time, according to a local source, the council of Deir Foul turned into a “real estate office for Daghestani rather than a council serving the town.”

## Climbing Political and Social Ladders

Local council membership can serve as a steppingstone for political aspirants looking to ascend to higher positions.<sup>49</sup> Many council members elected in 2018 went on to secure seats in the executive offices in 2022 (four in Damascus Governorate Council and three in Aleppo City Council). Similarly, presidents of councils in smaller administrative units have been promoted to be executive members in their respective governorate councils (four in Rural Damascus). Notably, many governors began their political careers in local councils, such as the current Governor of Damascus (Tarek Kreishati), his two predecessors (Adel Olabi and Bisher al-Sabban) and the current Governor of Rural Damascus (Safwan Abu Saadi). Their trajectories then evolved according to the support they received from the centres of power.<sup>50</sup> Finally, some local elected officials in 2018 became MPs in 2020. Conversely, local council membership in 2022 was an alternative for some losing candidates in the 2020 People’s Council election.

In other cases, local councils serve as a first step for political succession in families. Many executive office members are sons or brothers of current or former members of the People’s Council. Examples include Majd Muhammad Hallaq (Damascus Governorate) and Bassel Ali Zaidan (Aleppo Governorate), both of whom are sons of former members of the People’s Council. As for members of NPF parties, having relatives in local councils can serve as support for inheriting the leadership of the party or its governorate branch. For instance, Kulthum Hassan, a member of the Aleppo Governorate Council, is daughter of Thanaa Fakhreddine, who heads the Aleppo branch of the Socialist Union Party.

Finally, council membership can be used to enhance social status. For those ascending from the bottom of the social hierarchy, winning elections enables transition from one class to another. This can be perceived as official recognition of rising social status, notably for war profiteers and militia leaders with humble backgrounds. For example, Walid Omar al-Boushi, a former leader of the Tiger Forces militia who obtained a seat in the Aleppo Governorate Council, is from al-Waha, a poor town inhabited mostly by workers in the Defence Factories Establishment. Another member of the same council, Abdul Hamid Mashnouk, who turned from organising gambling (before 2011) to the drug trade, is from the Bab al-Nairab neighbourhood of Aleppo. Unlike Mashnouk, however, it appears that al-Boushi has broader ambitions, as is indicated by the range of his public activities and his role as chairman of a charity. Both individuals have benefited from council membership consolidating their positions, at least within their local communities.

Local councils also serve as platforms for inherited social leadership. For example, Iyad al-Nader (executive office of the Rural Damascus Governorate Council) is preparing to inherit the leadership of a small branch of al-Naim tribe from his father, an MP. Similarly, Muhammad Shaaban Berri (executive office of Aleppo City Council) anticipates inheriting the leadership of the Berri family and Jays clan in the city of Aleppo from his uncle, Hassan, a current MP. Muhammad Shaaban’s current role overseeing neighbourhood committees as part of his work in the executive office suggests that he aspires to gain social prestige and to strengthen his personal status and that of his family at the city level.

In contrast with these hereditary leaders, some council members have built their social leadership from within councils. For example, the president of the Latakia Governorate Council since 2018, Tayseer Habib, has gained a prominent social position due to the numerous services he provided his friends and acquaintances with, especially in his hometown Zaghrin and its neighbouring villages north of Latakia.

---

49 Conversely, in some cases, local council membership may be the ultimate goal for some individuals, either due to their advanced age, which reduces political ambitions, or to their intrinsic personalities. This explains the long service of some members. For example, in Damascus Governorate Council, industrialist Muhammad Shamseddine Dukhan has had a seat since 2011, soft drinks maker Ayman Abdel Wahed since 2007 and sweet manufacturer Maher Nafisa was elected in 2007, 2011 and 2022.

50 For example, the rise and decline of al-Sabban, Governor of Damascus between 2006 and 2018, was attributed to his affiliation with businessman Rami Makhoul, Bashar al-Assad’s cousin.

These services included assisting with government employment, issuing licences and special exemptions within the governorate and other government institutions. It is noteworthy that Habib, a civil servant, is curiously referred to as 'sheikh' by the council staff and visitors, which is indicative of his newly acquired social standing.

Every personal benefit achieved by the members of local councils is at the expense of the public interest. The internal structure of councils, which is heavily dependent on patronage connections, exacerbates already existing challenges such as limited resources in a context of high demands for services from the population.

## Conclusion

As in previous elections, in 2022 the Baath Party maintained its dominant role in leading the electoral process and forming new councils. Despite party instructions and the official narrative about promoting women and young people, both remain underrepresented in the current councils. Meanwhile, the distribution of seats by political affiliation and professional category illustrates that council leadership positions are dominated by Baathist civil servants. This confirms the stability of regime policy, whether it is a deliberate choice to grant the Baath Party a quasi-monopoly role in regaining or consolidating control over localities, or a forced choice imposed by the limited ability of the regime to mobilise outside the party or even within its social base.

Against a potential dynamic of administrative decentralisation, the composition of the new local councils also reveals two layers of regime control over them. At the formal level, the presidents and members of the executive offices are linked in an organic relationship with the central powers (the party and the government). At the informal level, they are bound in patronage relationships with influential figures in the regime's networks. Patron-client ties indeed played a decisive role in the selection of winning candidates, some of whom also benefited from their own political capital. The identity of the centres of power which intervened in the elections varied according to the specifics of each governorate. However, apart from the special situation of Damascus, the heads of intelligence services and Baath Party leaders were the most active in the formation of executive offices, along with governors appointed by presidential decree. Interventions by powerful actors in favour of their local clients often seemed driven by private and mutual economic interests. This fuels a recurring and escalating cycle of corruption in local councils.

In comparison with earlier elections held after the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, especially the 2018 local elections and the 2020 People's Council election, the 2022 local elections did not reveal significant changes in the regime's networks. In all the governorates studied, the composition of local councils was not determined by a single centre of power, which could have resulted in the formation of 'political blocs' affiliated with this centre, but rather by overlapping interventions (in a consensual or competitive way) by several influential personalities and centres of power, which remain essentially the same as in previous elections. The main dynamics in the formation of councils remained unchanged, but the weight of personal political capital decreased to some extent in favour of patronage networks.

Finally, it does not appear that these elections were used to serve specific political and social interests of the regime. They did not attract new profiles of local actors and neither did they result in specific promises to improve the state of public services or messages of reconciliation with the opposition. In the ongoing period of no war and no peace, which is marked by continued and prolonged socio-economic deterioration, these elections reaffirmed the regime's steadfast approach to local councils, which, as governmental institutions, are shaped by the regime's centres of power, not by voters. These elections also confirmed the unalterable nature of the regime and its inability to transform itself despite its growing vulnerability. It continues to manage its weakness at the expense of the population, as if no conflict had taken place and as if it did not see the country disintegrating.

**Research Project Report**

Issue 2023/01

27 January 2023

doi:10.2870/52247

ISBN:978-92-9466-358-0

QM-08-23-022-EN-N



Publications Office  
of the European Union