مركز حرمون
للدراسات المعاصرة
Harmoon Center
For Contemporary Studies

In Defence of the Syrian Revolution: How Bashar al-Assad Created Syrian Radicalism, and How the Syrian People are Winning it Back

International Visiting Researchers Program

Alexandre Aston-Ward

12 Feb 2018

HARMOON CENTER
FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

Harmoon Centre for Contemporary Studies is an independent, nonprofit, research, cultural and media institution. Its main focus is to conduct studies and researches about the Arab region, especially Syria. It also works towards cultural and media development, enhancing the civil society performance, and spreading democratic awareness and values of dialogue, as well as respect for human rights. The Centre also provides consultation and training services in political and media fields to all Syrians on the basis of Syrian national identity.

To achieve its objectives, the Centre conducts its activities through five specialized units, (1) Policy Studies Unit, (2) Social Researches Unit, (3) Books Review Unit, (4) Translation and Arabization Unit, and (5) Legal Unit.

A set of action programs are also adopted, such as the program for Political Consultations and Initiatives; Program for Services, Media Campaigns, and Public Opinion Making Program; Program for Dialogue Support and Civil and Cultural Development Program; Syria Future Program. The Centre may add new programs depending on the actual needs of Syria and the region. In implementing its programs, the Centre deploys multiple mechanisms, including lectures, workshops, seminars, conferences, training courses, as well as paper and electronic press.

Doha,Qatar
+974 44885996
Gaziantep,Turkey
+90 342 326 5112
harmoon.org

Contents

"We are not less than the workers of the Paris Communes…. They lasted 70 days and we have been here since a year and a half"

Anarchist Intellectual Omar Aziz on the revolution in Syria. Aziz was martyred in Adra Prison on the 17th February 2013.

The issue of state failure as a result of internal conflict continues to pre-occupy the attention of scholars, policy makers, and indeed increasingly the public in view of its implications on cross border issues such as immigration and national security [(1)]. Concern lies primarily in the fact that such areas of state failure can act as harbours and breeding grounds for terrorism and extremist groups, and the fact that such regions constitute threats to regional and international security more broadly [(2)]. Perhaps the most pertinent state failure in the contemporary world is the partial collapse of the state in Syria during the country's bloody 7 years conflict.

The concerns of the international community regarding the situation in Syria are not unfounded. Syria's revolution first erupted in 2011, when peaceful protests calling for the removal from power of Bashar al-Assad deteriorated into open and bloody conflict. While protesters took to the streets calling for *ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam,* "The people want the fall of the regime"[(3)], the emerging grassroots revolution became increasingly dominated by armed groups driven not by ideologies of democracy and egality but of a potent blend of

---

[(1)] See Mary Kaldor, "The Idea of Global Civil Society", *International Affairs,* vol. 79, no. 3, 2003, pp. 583-593. Also see "Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators", *The Wilson Centre,* 2013, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/statefailureandstateweaknessinatimeofterror.pdf.

[(2)] See Edward Newman, "Weak States, State Failure, and Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence,* vol. 19, no. 4, 2007, pp. 463-488. See also James A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism", *International Studies Quarterly,* vol. 52, no. 3, 2008, pp. 469-488. And Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror", *Council on Foreign Relations,* vol. 81, no. 4, 2002, pp. 127-140.

[(3)] Lina Sinjab, "Middle East Unrest: Silence Broken in Syria", *BBC,* 19th March 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12794882.

Islamic statehood and violent Jihad. Within Syria's ungoverned spaces, the battle for the soul of the revolution has played out, often with a paucity of international interest which remains unfailing focused on the ongoing campaign against Islamic State and other extremist armed groups [(4)]. This focus reflects how Syria is characterised and envisioned within the western public consciousness. There exists a sadly misplaced assumption within the western popular mind that the Syrian conflict is fought between Jihadist factions (for which western backed "moderate rebels" are only a euphemistic description), and a government battling against them [(5)]. Against this backdrop, Kurdish forces are broadly, if not quite naively seen, as a force for human rights, the emancipation of women, and anarchistic experiments in governance [(6)].

However, despite this portrayal, within the un-governed spaces of Syria a new form of governance and civil society has emerged from the rubble of battle; Local Coordination Committees (LCC), Local Councils (LC) and a host of new, dedicated Civil Society groups. These emerging systems of local governance created a new geography of liberation, not rooted in traditional, often orientalistically imposed narratives of socialism, nationalism, or Islamism, but through structures that pointed to a far more radical emancipation [(7)]. This paper will seek to shed light on these emerging systems of governance in Syria's "ungoverned" spaces. It will endeavour to dispel the myth that the Syrian revolution is one of extremism and violence, and present the Local Council as a key building block of any future political transition in the country. Firstly, this research focuses on analysing the ways in which the armed Syrian revolution became increasingly dominated by Jihadist groups, and the impact this has had on western perceptions of international intervention and assistance to the Syrian revolutionary opposition. Secondly, this research will attempt to position these emerging democratic,

---

(4) US Department of State, "The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS", *US Department of State,* 2014, https://www.state.gov/s/seci/.

(5) Alexander Ward, "Jeremy Corbyn and the Failure of the European Left in Syria", *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies,* October 2017, https://harmoon.org/en/archives/7194.

(6) See David Graeber, "Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria", *The Guardian,* October 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis.

(7) Leila al Smali, "The Life and Words of Anarchist Omar Aziz, and his Impact on Self Organisation in the Syrian Revolution", 2013.

representative, grassroots organisations at the heart of political discourse on the Syrian conflict, countering the notion that all that remains of the opposition in Syria are disparate groups of violent Jihadists or extremists. Lastly, it will assess the challenges that face these organisations, presenting a roadmap through which foreign assistance and structural change within the Syrian opposition movement can help sustain and develop these organisations into effective political structures, capable of resisting both regime and jihadist influence, and form a constituent part of any future democratic transition in the country.

Radicalisation of the Syrian war: "Assad or we burn the country"

Syria, a country long characterised by its moderate Muslim population [(8)], has certainly developed into one of the world's most radicalised zones of conflict. Since the beginning, the conflict has become a magnet for the worlds disaffected Muslims, keen to redress what they see as injustice delivered by oppressive, secular Arab leaders against the Ummah, and construct what they believe to be a truly Islamic state, guided by the principles of the Quran and a fight against the trappings of modern, secular law [(9)]. The ways in which the conflict has become radicalised are far from the ways in which Assad, and indeed a considerable portion of the Western political establishment [(10)], explain it. Far from being a foreign inspired and funded attempt to overthrow the apparently secular Assad regime, the radicalisation of the conflict is rooted in the regime's conduct of hostilities and the ways in which it has radicalised Syrian society as a whole on both sides of the conflict.

[(8)] William R. Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post Assad", *The Atlantic,* December 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/.

[(9)] Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants", *The Atlantic,* March 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/.

[(10)] Nick Cohen, "Who, on the Left or Right, Will Stand up for Syria?", *The Guardian,* October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/15/syria-aleppo-jeremy-corbyn-far-left.

While some authors such as Wiess and Hassan give a balanced account of the conflict's early years, including insights into vital civil society movements [(11)], according to authors such as Patrick Cockburn the Syrian opposition only "shoots children in the face for minor blasphemy"[(12)]. While he suggests that, at birth, the Syrian revolutionaries fought for democracy, he still refers to an "uprising by the Sunni's of Syria"[(13)] that by 2014, was dominated by ISIS and other extremist groups. However, by this time popular pressure had forced the Syrian opposition to declare war on ISIS and force it from its territory in Syria's north-west at terrible cost. Despite the successes of these "farmers and dentists" as Barack Obama condescendingly described them [(14)], Cockburn repeats the line that the Syrian opposition has "allowed or encouraged the conflict to become a vicious sectarian war"[(15)], failing to consider the ways that Bashar al-Assad himself has encouraged the conflict's radicalisation.

The turbulent relationship between radical Islamic groups and the Syrian regime dates back long before the outbreak of war in Syria. Following his father's policy of co-option of Islamist groups within Syria, Bashar sought to reinforce the legitimacy of his new, economically faltering regime following the Damascus Spring which heralded the emergence of a plethora of secular opposition groups [(16)]. These Islamist groups, fearful of resurgent secularism and approving of Assad's hard-line stance against Israel, allowed themselves to be co-opted by the regime, biding their time until a suitable opportunity presented itself.

[(11)] Micheal Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror,* Regan: New York, 2015.

[(12)] Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution,* Verso: London, 2015, p. 25.

[(13)] Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution,* Verso: London, 2015, p. 41.

[(14)] Micheal B Kelley, "Barack Obama Swept Aside the Entire Free Syrian Army in One Sentence", *Business Insider,* June 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/barack-obama-and-the-free-syrian-army-2014-6.

[(15)] Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution,* Verson: London, 2015, p. 31.

[(16)] L. Khatib, R. Lefevre and J. Qureshi, *State and Islam in Baathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-optation,* Lynne Rienner Publishers, Fife, 2012, p. 33.

This opportunity came with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Assad regime, fearful of American attack should the invasion prove successful, began to sponsor and facilitate the smuggling of arms and mujahedeen across the border into Iraq [17]. The call for Jihad was openly encouraged by the regime and promoted through regime religious organs such as the Grand Mufti of Syria who issued a fatwa legitimising the use of suicide attacks against US targets in Iraq, and the regime's security forces trained jihadists in Iraq and allowed their return to Syria [18]. The regime also reached out to and courted a number of violent jihadist groups previously banned by his father for agitating against the regime, resulting in cities such as Aleppo becoming hotbeds of virulent trans-national jihadism [19]. Indeed, Syria became the transport hub of the trans-national Jihad in Iraq with intelligence suggesting almost all foreign fighters entered through Syria [20]. The regime's co-option of the extremist message remained crucial in "maintaining the unity and survival of the regime long before the region began its decent into sectarian conflict"[21].

This policy, sitting between toleration and outright facilitation, has remained crucial in the survival of the Syrian regime during the current crisis. In order to propagate the notion that he is fighting against violent radical extremist [22], Assad has conducted a strategy of scorched earth, effectively creating ungoverned spaces in which extremism can emerge. According to Nader Hashemi, director of the Center for Middle East Studies, the very nature of the conflict is a key driver of radicalism. "It is not a coincidence that we are seeing the spread of Islamic

---

[17] G. Abdul-Ahad, "The Road From Syria: On the Trail of Iraq's Insurgents", *The Guardian,* June 7th 2005, accessed on 18/7/17, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/08/iraq-al-qaida.

[18] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency,* Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 44.

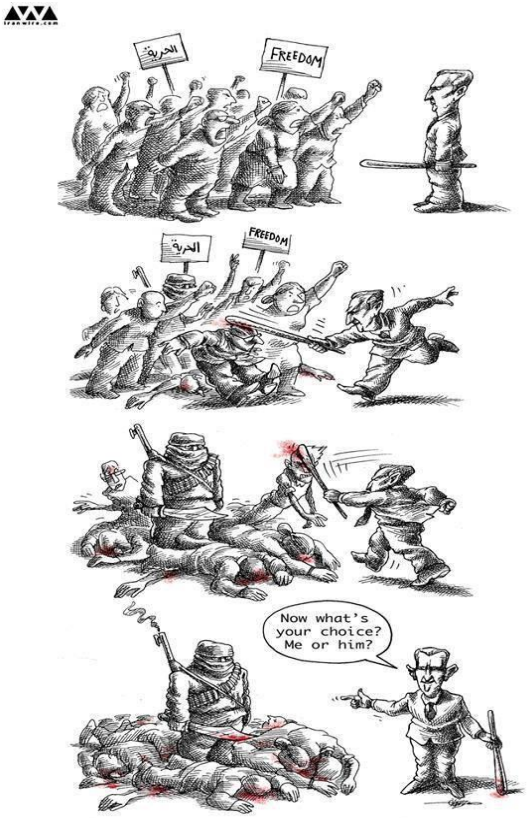
[19] T. Pierret, "State Management of Religion in Syria: The End of Indirect Rule", in S. Heydemann and R. Leenders (eds), *Middle East Authoritarianism,* pp. 83- 107, p. 96.

[20] Central Intelligence Agency Cable, "Syrian Intelligence Chief Attends CT Dialogue", *Wikileaks,* 2010, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10DAMASCUS159_a.html.

[21] L. Khatib, R. Lefevre and J. Qureshi, *State and Islam in Baathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-optation,* Lynne Rienner Publishers, Fife, 2012, p. 33.

[22] Interview with Bashar al-Assad, "Barbara Walters interview with Bashar al-Assad", *ABC NEWS, Youtube,* 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL9h9vSOHDk.

radicalism in Syria as a direct result of the barbarity of the regime" explains Hashemi. "In the midst of the chaos, mayhem, bloodshed and crimes against humanity, you don't produce liberal, democratic opinion, you produce the antithesis of it."[23] It is beyond doubt that the way in which the regime has conducted the conflict, the bombing of villages, the sending of sectarian death squads into Shia villages to commit sectarian massacres, and way it has restricted any space for progressive, moderate, government in opposition held areas have all contributed greatly to the emergence of radical groups in Syria.[24]



[23] Nader Hashemi interviewed in Katarina Montgomery, "Understanding the Drivers of Radicalisation in Syria", *News Deeply,* December 2014, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/12/11/understanding-the-drivers-of-radicalization-in-syria.

[24] Leila al-Shami, "The Sectarianization of Syria and Smearing a Revolution", *Al Araby,* October 2016, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/10/30/The-sectarianization-of-Syria-and-smearing-a-revolution.

The regime denying the ability of the opposition to construct new forms of governance in opposition areas has been a key factor in constructing Islamic radicalism, a practice widely noted in literature [25]. In order to create ungoverned spaces, Christopher Kozak suggests the regime inflicts mass punishments against civilians in opposition held areas to force mass displacement, thus denying the opposition population it needs to build legitimacy and sustain services [26]. The regime also targets bakeries, hospitals, schools, electricity and water stations and other crucial public infrastructure [27], to further inhibit the operations of emerging political institutions. Through this tactic, the regime not only denied the opposition the ability to form alternative governance structures, but it created ungoverned spaces in which extremism can develop unhindered.

However, the regime has taken a far more direct role in the fostering of the extremist takeover of the revolution. With the escalation of protests in 2011 into open armed confrontation, the regime decided to release hundreds of political and Islamist prisoners through a series of presidential amnesties [28]. Such prisoners included Zahran Alloush, the leader of Battalion of Islam, Hassan Aboud, the leader of Ahrar al Sham, and Abu Mohammed al-Julani, a former commander of Islamic State of Iraq and leader of arguably the most powerful Syrian Jihadist faction Jahbat Fatah al-Sham [29]. At the same time, the regime facilitated the transfer of hundreds of militant Islamists from their hideouts in Iraq into the deserts of eastern Syria. According to Mahmoud al Nasr, a former Syrian intelligence

---

[25] See Angel Rabasa et al, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risk,* Rand Corporation: Santa Monica, 2007. See also Omer Taspinar, "Fighting Radicalism, not Terrorism: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined", *SAIS Review,* vol. XXIX, no. 2, 2009.

[26] Christopher Kozak, "An Army in all Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria", *Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report 26,* April 2016, p. 10

[27] Kheder Khaddour, "Survival through Destruction", *Carnegie Middle East Center,* November 2017, www.carnegie-mec.org/diwan/74842.

[28] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency,* Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 51.

[29] Ambassador Addullahl Alazreg, *ISIS: Management of Savagery,* 2016, Dorrance Publishing: London, p.33.

operative, while officially, orders were given to hunt down and kill them, the jihadists were housed in Syrian intelligence headquarters and held strategic meetings in intelligence offices. The message was given; "stay away from them. Don't touch them"[30]. Reports also suggest that the intelligence agencies have some control over Daesh operations, including the attack at an Istanbul nightclub on New Year's Eve 2016 [31]. Syria's Mufti Ahmad Hassoun also threatened Europe and America, suggesting the regime had control over Daesh foreign operations and were willing to use suicide attacks in Europe to retaliate to any actions against the regime [32]. While the regime presented an image that it was engaged in a battle against terrorism, behind the scenes, it was busy attempting to turn the revolution into a sectarian conflict, facilitating terrorist organisations with which it had historical relations.

According to a former Syrian Security Officer, "the regime did not just open the door to the prisons and let these extremists out, it facilitated their work, in the creation and support of armed brigades"[33]. This support has continued throughout the Syrian conflict. The regimes approach to these groups is twofold. Firstly, it has focused it attacks on more moderate opposition areas as previously noted, allowing Daesh, Jahbat al-Nusra and others to capitalise on the power vacuum, and present themselves as the only groups capable of controlling opposition areas, a facet of immeasurable propaganda value for the Jihadists. Secondly, the regime, through its fostering of a complicated war economy, has maintained economic relations with these Jihadist groups in order to both sustain its own forces and maintain the fighting strength of the armed groups themselves [34].

---

[30] Mahmoud al-Nasr interviewed in Roy Gutman, "How ISIS returned to Syria", *Daily Beast,* May 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-isis-returned-to-syria.

[31] Roy Gutman, "Was Istanbul's Terror Attack State Sponsored?", *Newsweek,* January 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/was-istanbuls-terror-attack-state-sponsored.

[32] Mufri Ahmad Hassoun, "Syria Mufti Ahmad Hassoun Threatens Europe and America", *Youtube,* October 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8lHZxZOgA0.

[33] Khaled al-Hariri, "How Syria's Assad Helped Forge ISIS", *Newsweek,* June 2014, http://www.newsweek.com/how-syrias-assad-helped-forge-isis-255631.

[34] Hamoud Al-Mahmoud, "The War Economy in the Syrian Conflict", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* December 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/12/15/war-economy-in-syrian-conflict-government-s-hands-off-tactics-pub-62202.

It remains clear that the Assad regime and Daesh often colluded through deals on the battlefield. According to the Financial Times and other leading newspapers, Syrian businessmen regularly make deals with the jihadists to sustain the Syrian army's oil supplies, and mitigate the loss of energy domestic supplies. The Wall Street Journal has suggested that EU intelligence agencies believe the regime became dependent on Daesh for "gas produced in ISIS territory in the Palmyra area for a large part of its power generation"[35]. These transactions account for a considerable amount of Daesh funding [36]. Moreover, opposition activists suggest that Assad forces advanced alongside Daesh and provided an air umbrella to cover their advance against opposition forces in Iblib and Aleppo governates [37]. Reports also suggest that Russian and regime forces willingly abandoned their positions to ISIS in Palmyra, effectively donating a large amount of heavy weapons and equipment including tanks and rocket launchers to Daesh [38]. Such dealings were discovered in papers abandoned by Daesh when forced out of East Aleppo in 2014 [39].

Therefore it seems apparent that far from being a foreign funded campaign against a regime dedicated to the defeat of terrorism, the emergence of radical groups in Syria has been an historical tactic of control used by the regime. Perhaps Assad did indeed, "burn the

---

[35] Benoit Faucon, "Islamic State Steps up Oil and Gas Sales to Assad Regime", *The Wall Street Journal,* Jan 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-steps-up-oil-and-gas-sales-to-assad-regime-1484835563.

[36] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Unseen Islamic State Financial Accounts for Deir Az-Zor Province", *Jihadology,* October 2015, http://jihadology.net/2015/10/05/the-archivist-unseen-islamic-state-financial-accounts-for-deir-az-zor-province/.

[37] Christopher Reuter, "Why Assad is Uninterested in Defeating Islamic State", *Speigel Online,* December 2015, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-helps-assad-gain-legitimacy-in-west-a-1066211.html.

[38] UA Position, "How Russia Gave a Huge Number of Weapons to ISIS in Palmyria", *UA Position,* December 2016, www.uaposition.com/latest-news/russia-gave-huge-number-weapons-isis-palmyra-42-tanks-7-ifv-artillery-500-ton-ammo-photo-video/.

[39] Christopher Reuter, "Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State", *Spegiel Online,* April 2015, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html.

country", living up to the slogan of his thugs [40]. However, despite these attempts by the Assad regime to delegitimise the revolutionary movement in Syria, at a local level, revolutionary groups are working to present a viable, representative system of government resisting both radical elements and regime onslaught. While many in the west are throwing their weight behind a regime, and more often behind the Kurds who they believe present a new and anarchistic experiment in governance, the ideology of revolutionary opposition politics in Syria remain criminally neglected.

The resilience of the revolution: local governance during the conflict in Syria:

This radicalisation is far from a complete picture. Despite the best efforts of the regime to create them, according to Ali Abdul Kadir Ali, there are no ungoverned spaces in Syria, but rather states governed at different levels by different groups [41]. In the wake of the revolution and the ensuing destructive conflict between the regime and its opponents, Local Councils and civil society groups emerged to immediately fill the governance gap left by the retreating regime and ensure the longevity of democratic values and respect for human rights. As a result of sieges, blockades, intense bombardments, and the collapse of social services that were regularly experienced once areas were liberated from regime control, Local Councils formed to provide an alternative and representative form of governance and vital humanitarian assistance [42]. According to Alexander Starritt, "to end this chaos, Syria needs infrastructure,

[40] Emile Hokayem, "Assad of the We Burn the Country: Misreading Sectarianism and the Regime in Syria", *War on the Rocks,* August 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/assad-or-we-burn-the-country-misreading-sectarianism-and-the-regime-in-syria/.

[41] Ali Abdul Kadir Ali, "The Security Gap in Syria: Individual and Collective Security in 'Rebel-Held' Territories", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development,* vol. 4, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-20.

[42] See Esther Meininghaus, "Humanitarianism in Intrastate Conflict: Aid Inequality and Local Governance in Government and Opposition controlled Areas in Syria", *Third World Quarterly,* April 2016. See also National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, "Establishment of Local Councils", *National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces,* 2013, http://en.etilaf.org/syrian-local-councils/establishment-of-local-councils.html.

public services and effective government"[43]. This section will endeavour to explore the emergence of these local governance bodies, and provide an understanding of the social and ideological transformation that they embody. It will further assess the challenges that these grassroots organisations face, the problems inherent in their operation, and ways in which those in the international community who support the Syrian peoples struggle for dignity and freedom, can assist them in providing a representative and effective alternative to the tyranny of Assad.

Omar Aziz and the Transformation of Syrian Society:

Omar Aziz, or Abu Kamel to those who knew him well, was a Damascene anarchist and economist, who, by the time revolution came to Syria in 2011, had committed himself to revolution [44]. Initially, Aziz dedicated himself to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the organising of protests. However, during his work he became inspired by the numerous different ways in which Syrians had begun to unite in opposition to the regime. In the various forms of peaceful protest, the voluntary organisation of hospitals and legal support, and the turning of homes into field hospitals and food collection points he saw "the spirit of the Syrian people's resistance to the brutality of the system, the systematic killing and the destruction of community"[45]. Aziz understood that while protests were vital in spreading discontent and uniting communities behind the revolutions ideals, they were insufficient in building a radical transformation, and one that was strong enough to permanently break the hold of regime over Syrian society. For Aziz, new structures had to be built, new systems of value had to be

[43] Alexander Starrit, "Syria's Local Councils, not Assad, are the Answer to ISIS", *The Guardian,* 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/14/syria-local-councils-assad-isis.

[44] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Activist Dies in Jail, Second Feared Dead," *Human Rights Watch,* Febuary 2013, https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/22/syria-activist-dies-jail-second-feared-dead.

[45] Omar Aziz cited in Leila al-Shami, "The Life and Work of Anarchist Omar Aziz, and His Impact on Self-Organisation in the Syrian Revolution", *Leilashami.wordpress.com,* October 2013.

constructed based on equality, democratisation, and human rights, and such revolutionary activities should permeate all aspects of people's lives [46].

Writing in the early months of the revolution, when protests remained largely peaceful and communities still lived under the all-powerful yoke of the regime, Aziz argued, that "the revolutionary movement remains separate from daily human activities", observing that "there are divisions of daily work between day-to-day activities and revolutionary activities"[47]. The risk however, lay in the "absence of correlation between the spheres of daily life and the revolution itself"[48]. Aziz argued that the revolutionaries should build upon the coordination committees that emerged at the beginning of the revolution, organising demonstrations, documenting atrocities, and providing humanitarian assistance [49]. These committees embodied the relations that were being formed, for the first time enabling the Syrian people to break free from the states dominance, and are evidence of the transformation in Syrian social relationships and transformation of values that characterise the true heart of the Syrian struggle.

According to Aziz's comrade Muhammed Sami al Kayyal, "Omar Aziz stood for the complete break-up of the state in order to achieve collective liberation without waiting for regime change or for one ruling power to replace another. He believed that communities are capable of producing their own freedoms regardless of political vicissitudes"[50]. This is a truly grassroots, democratic ideology that points to the transformation of Syrian society in the early months of the revolution [51]. For the first time, the Syrian people began to speak openly about their political and social ideals, uniting and taking to the streets in great numbers and

---

[46] Leila al-Shami, "The Legacy of Omar Aziz: Building Autonomous, Self-Governing Communes in Syria,"

[47] Omar Aziz, "A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria", *The Anarchist Library,* 2011, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/omar-aziz-a-discussion-paper-on-local-councils-in-syria.

[48] Omar Aziz, "A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria", *The Anarchist Library,* 2011, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/omar-aziz-a-discussion-paper-on-local-councils-in-syria

[49] Omar Aziz, "The Formation of Local Councils in Syria"

[50] Muhammed Sami al Kayyal citied in Budour Hassan, "Radical Lives: Omar Aziz", *Novara Media,* 2015, http://novaramedia.com/2015/02/23/radical-lives-omar-aziz/.

[51] Salam Kawakibi, "Syrian Voices from Pre-Revolutionary Syria: Civil Society Against All Odds", *Hivos,* 2013, https://hivos.org/syrian-voices-pre-revolution-syria-civil-society-against-all-odds.

organising fledgling civil society organisations. For decades, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Syria had been banned, with only a small number of religious charities tolerated, and freedom of association and political opinion had been effectively suppressed [52].

Despite efforts following the death of Hafez al-Assad to foster demands for political, legal, and economic reform in what became known as the Damascus Spring, at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian people were denied their freedoms, individualism, and social collectivism [53]. This brief period of flux was characterised by the emergence of private forums, such as now opposition president Raid Seif's forum on human rights [54], and public statements such as one issues by 99 public academics that called for a freer and more just society [55]. These fledgling attempts to open Syrian society were eventually crushed, and their leaders thrown in jail or into exile. Now, in the throes of conflict, civil society has once again opened the space for discussion on how to build a new, more equal and representative society. Omar Aziz, and others in the Syrian revolutionary movement, saw the opportunity for a resetting of Syria's social clock through the creation of a unified movement that fostered individualism, communities, and the decentralisation of government control. According to protestors in Homs, "freedom is like a magnet, it attracts people that have been silenced too long... the chance is now available to scream in the face of the suppresser, to prove all of Syria's identities have been concealed by a tyrannical iron fist"[56]. For Aziz, the goal behind the councils was to "assist people in running their lives independently from state institutions...;

[52] See Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution,* Cambridge University Press: New York, 2011.

[53] Carnegie Middle East Center, "The Damascus Spring", *Carnegie Middle East Center,* April 2012, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en.

[54] Robin Wright, *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East*, Penguin: London, 2008, p. 224.

[55] Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, "Statement by 99 Syrian Intellectuals", MEIB, 2000, http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0010_sdoc0927.htm.

[56] Robin Yassin-Kassab, "Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War", Pluto Press: London, 2016, p. 43.

the creation of a space for collective expression, which supports solidarity between individuals and elevates their daily lives into political action"[57].

Filling the Governance Gap:

While Omar Aziz's revolutionary ideas first appeared in 2011, opposition groups took notice but not action. It was not until the town of Al Zabadani, a popular tourist suburb of Damascus set up a local council in 2012, that Omar Aziz's ideas could be implemented [58]. As the war dragged on, local councils began to proliferate as citizens lost trust in state institutions and moved towards family, clan, religion, and neighbourhood affiliation for protection and support [59]. According to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, Local Councils "fill the void of services left by the government and may become the foundation of a transitional government and future democratic elections." The goals of the local councils aim to; administer civil life, assist and monitor those working to provide services, and guarantee the quality and improvements of such efforts; distribute aid whether from individuals, groups, or nations with "justice and transparency"; provide relief, medical, legal, reconstruction, and media services as well as civilian police forces; become the nucleus of future municipalities in a transitional government and ultimately assist in the formation of an elected government; build national solidarity civilian work free of ideology, party, or politics [60].

---

[57] Daou Walid, "The Experience of Local Councils in the Syrian Revolution: In Memory of Omar Aziz", *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres,* April 2017.

[58] Leila Al-Shami, "The Cleansing of Zabadani", *Leila Sahami Wordpress,* August 2015, https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2015/08/29/the-cleansing-of-zabadani/.

[59] See Rana Khalaf, "Governance Without Government in Syria", *Syria Studies,* vol. 8, no. 3, 2015, pp. 37-72, p. 46. See also The Syrian Centre for Policy Research, *The Syrian Catastrophe: Socio-Economic Monitoring Report First Quarterly Report Jan-March 2013,* Damascus: UNRWA.

[60] National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, "Establishment of Local Councils", *National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces,* 2013, http://en.etilaf.org/syrian-local-councils/establishment-of-local-councils.html.

At the beginning, "there was just a group of people who cared about the country"[61]. Many local councils emerged in a largely decentralised and ad-hoc fashion, and often out of youth organisations who mobilised around protests against the regime that became known as Local Coordination Committees (*Tansiqiyat*) [62]. According to interviews with Local Council members conducted by Swiss Peace, "during the formation of the local council, it was simply a group of about ten leaders who supported those organising the revolution. When the government and its forces withdrew from the town, they formed what they called the Revolutionary Local Council"[63]. From these fledgling organisations, these committees have expanded, sometimes with the assistance of foreign based governance structures such as the Syrian National Council, into organisations often with structures albeit ones that develop over time, and specialist units influenced by the changing priorities of their inhabitants [64].

With this expansion, the structure of many local councils has expanded alongside it, including a hierarchical structure and specialist units dedicated to the administrative and practical needs of the council and the people they represent. According to research by the Institute of War and Peace Reporting [65], Swiss Peace [66], and Syrian civil society organisation

---

[61] Interview with LAC council member cited in Bahjat Hajjar et al, *Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition Held Syria*, Swiss Peace: Geneva, January 2017, p. 6.

[62] Carnegie Middle East Center, "Local Coordination Committees of Syria", *Carnegie Middle East Center,* December 2012, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50426?lang=en.

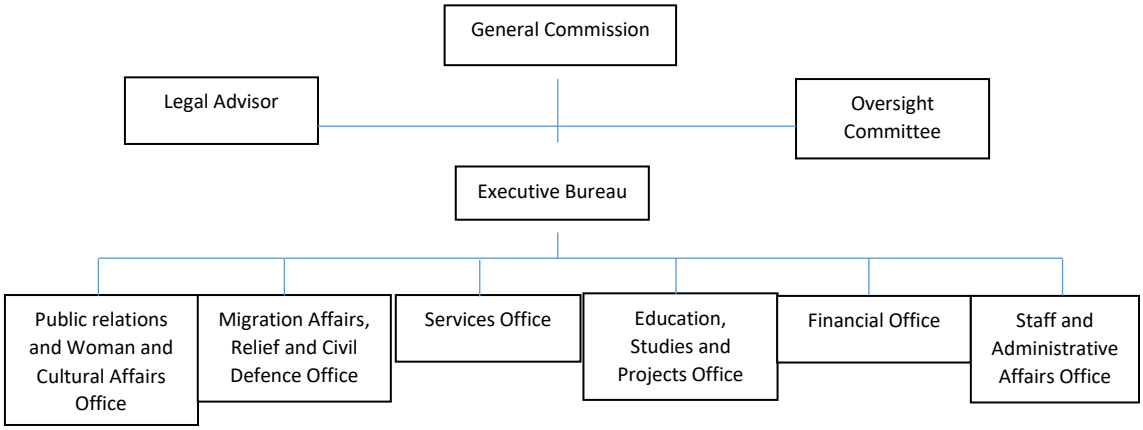
[63] Interview with LAC council member cited in Bahjat Hajjar et al, *Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition Held Syria*, Swiss Peace: Geneva, January 2017, p. 8.

[64] Agnes Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition Controlled Areas in Syria", in Luigi Narbone and Agnes Favier (eds), *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya,* Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies: Hague, pp. 6-16.

[65] Ghias Aljundi, *Local Governance Inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations,* Institute for War and Peace Reporting: London, March 2014.

[66] Bahjat Hajjar et al, *Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition Held Syria*, Swiss Peace: Geneva, January 2017.

The Day After [67], the average local council consists of between five and ten specialised offices depending on the area of council operation that coordinate work with other units inside the council structure itself, and with other councils in opposition held areas. Moreover, these structures are overseen by an oversight committee which is dedicated to monitoring and evaluating the performance of the council, as well as liaising with the local community regarding their needs. Almost all of the local councils surveyed in the available literature are structured around a presidential general commission and executive bureau that meets once a week to discuss updates and provide a community focal point [68]. Where possible, the whole local council meets once a month to take decisions regarding the council's work, and decisions are often taken by a two-thirds majority or by basic 50/50 majorities where age takes precedence [69]. Swiss Peace and the Local Administration Councils Unit provide a useful breakdown of the general hierarchical structure of Local Councils [70].



[67] The Day After, "Syrian Local Councils in the Eyes of Their Communities", *The Day After,* September 2016, http://tda-sy.org/en/publications/opinons-of-syrians-on-local-councils.html.

[68] Local Council Constitution provided to the author by al-Atareb local council, Aleppo Province, Translation provided by Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, p. 28.

[69] Local Council Constitution provided to the author by al-Atareb local council, Aleppo Province, Translation provided by Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, p. 31.

[70] Bahjat Hajjar et al, *Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition Held Syria*, Swiss Peace: Geneva, January 2017, p. 8.

It remains clear then, that far from being un-governed spaces filled with Jihadist organisations, opposition held areas are often characterised by fledgling attempts at local governance. These grassroots organisations constitute the first attempts at representative, democratic governance in Syria in the country's recent history. According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, "the democratically elected local councils are a glimmer of that hope surviving in the midst of all this chaos"[71]. However, there is little unity regarding the ways in which members of the councils are selected [72]. According to The Day After, "local councils in Syria have been formed in different ways; while armed factions control elements of councils in some areas, other were formed in consociation between local prominent figures or through in local elections" [73], with only 55% of councils emerging through electoral process [74]. While council members reported to researchers from the Institute of War and Peace Reporting that nominating and electoral procedures are used, there is little evidence from across a range of Local councils to support this claim [75]. Indeed, the local council constitutional document that aims at unifying structure and procedure makes no reference to electoral practice, rather the technocratic selection of council members depending on the job they are required to perform [76]. While far from ideal, the difficulties in conducting open elections in a conflict zone and the necessities of operating alongside armed groups present a more considerable roadblock to representation than the ideology of the local councils or the people they represent. In all

[71] Robin Yassin-Kassab cited in Daniel Moritz-Rabson, "In Wartime Syria, Local Councils and Civil Institutions Fill a Gap", *PBS,* July 2016, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/civil-society-emerges-syria-war.

[72] Bahjat Hajjar, "The Indicator of Needs for the Local Councils of Syria", *Local Administration Council and Norwegian People's Aid Organisation,* 2016, p. 12.

[73] The Day After, "Syrian Local Councils in the Eyes of Their Communities", *The Day After,* September 2016, http://tda-sy.org/en/publications/opinons-of-syrians-on-local-councils.html, p. 9.

[74] Agnes Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition Controlled Areas in Syria", in Luigi Narbone and Agnes Favier (eds), *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya,* Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies: Hague, p. 10.

[75] Ghias Aljundi, *Local Governance Inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations,* Institute for War and Peace Reporting: London, March 2014, p. 18.

[76] Local Council Constitution provided to the author by al-Atareb local council, Aleppo Province, Translation provided by Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies.

populations interviewed by The Day After, the vast majority reported elections as the best way to select their representatives, again suggesting that local councils are striving for electoral representation [77].

However, despite these considerable difficulties, a number of councils have held representative elections. In opposition areas such as Saraqib in Iblib governorate, elections have been held to select local councillors after a growing awareness of the necessity of councils to answer to residence needs rather than revolutionary or social status determining appointment. Elections were conducted after a week of debates which were broadcast on the local radio station, Alwan, and across social media [78]. Similar elections were first held in Yabrub in 2011, and by representative groups of NGO's and activists in Ar Raqqah in 2013, however continuing democratic development was stifled following the capture of the city by Daesh in 2014 [79]. The elections in Saraqib in 2017 were perhaps the most recent and most remarkable sign of the continued resilience of revolutionary governance structures in the face of far more well-armed, well-funded armed jihadist groups, and contradicted well established social political norms where political affiliations are dictated by family loyalties [80]. The town sits in Eastern Idlib, a governorate described by Brett McGurk, spokesman for Coalition anti-Daesh forces, as "the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11", and is predominantly under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) [81]. Such democratic, or representative, resilience suggests that local councils are perhaps the organisations best situated to resist Syria's slide towards extremism.

---

[77] [77] The Day After, "Syrian Local Councils in the Eyes of Their Communities", *The Day After,* September 2016, http://tda-sy.org/en/publications/opinons-of-syrians-on-local-councils.html, p.9.

[78] Manhal Bareesh, "Saraqib's Local Elections Show How Democracy Can Break Through in Syria," *Chatham House,* 2017, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/saraqibs-local-elections-show-how-democracy-can-break-through-in-syria.

[79] [79] Ghias Aljundi, *Local Governance Inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations,* Institute for War and Peace Reporting: London, March 2014, p. 19-27.

[80] Zaman al- Wasl, "Saraquid Votes in its First Local Election", *The Syrian Observer,* July 2017, http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/33039/Saraqib_Votes_Its_First_Local_Council_Elections.

[81] AlShahid, "Hayy'at Tahrir al-Sham's Attempts to Consolidate Power and Govern Idlib Province Backfire", *AlShahid,* August 2017, https://alshahidwitness.com/hts-govern-idlib-province-backfire/.

Syria's Local Councils: Popular Alternatives to Extremism:

Far from being the lackeys of local or transnational Jihadist groups, Local Councils in Syria represent the greatest hope of defeating this ideology on the ground. While local councils often, by necessity of their situation, are forced to ally with, indeed cede some control to, armed groups, they often display heroic discretion regarding the groups they work alongside. According to USaid, the influence of local actors in strategic areas where extremist groups are vying for control, and the ways local councils meet the urgent needs of their communities and promote reconciliation and inclusiveness increase community resilience to extremist ideology [(82)].

According to research conducted by Chatham House, the Local Council in al-Atarib provides a clear example of the role of such organisations in the battle against Daesh and other extremist groups [(83)]. When Daesh took the city in 2014, intent on utilising its local council delivered services for its own propaganda value, it attempted to take control of the council, courts and other civic bodies through a campaign of violent coercion. However, the presence of a strong civil society and local council in the town, backed by local armed groups, meant Daesh was frustrated in its efforts [(84)]. After the Local Council banned the wearing of masks in public areas in an attempt to restrict Daesh kidnappings, skirmishes erupted between civilians and Daesh forces, in which the Local Council and their allied local armed groups forced Daesh from the town. This local resilience was demonstrated in the town's resistance to HTS in the months following Daesh's retreat. The town council also implemented reconciliation policies that allowed local Daesh fighters to reintegrate into the community [(85)]. This highlights how local councils not only provide and foster resilience to

---

[(82)] USaid, "Syria: Political Transition Initiatives", *USAID,* 2016, https://www.usaid.gov/political-transition-initiatives/syria/.

[(83)] Haid Haid, *Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib*, Chatham House: London, June 2017.

[(84)] Haid Haid, *Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib,* Chatham House: London, June 2017, p. 6.

[(85)] Haid Haid, "How my Syrian Hometown Fought the Islamic State and Won", *Middle East Eye,* September 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/how-my-syrian-hometown-fought-islamic-state-and-won-2083666410.

extremism, but also constitute grassroots rehabilitation, a project that will be so crucial in building sustainable peace in Syria.

Towns such as Idlib, Saraqib, and a number of other local towns have repeated this demonstration of the importance of local councils in reinforcing grassroots resilience to extremist ideology [(86)]. Alongside such physical resistance to extremism, local councils also prevent extremist elements from capitalising on the lack of services and humanitarian assistance in opposition areas. According to Haid Haid, groups such as HTS use their provision of public services, courts, and aid delivery to weaken competitors and fast track its dissemination of its ideology [(87)]. However, this ability is clearly hindered by the work of local councils, which through their provision of humanitarian assistance, restoration of public services and human security have clearly presented considerable roadblocks to extremist proliferation [(88)].

Conclusion: Challenges and Recommendations:

It appears obvious then, that the emergence of local councils contradict the popular narrative of the Syrian conflict. Far from being a conflict between the regime and a plethora of opposition groups characterised by their extremist ideology, the Syrian crisis includes grassroots democratic institutions that have for too long been ignored in popular analysis.

---

(86) See Syria: Direct, "After the Idlib City Council Refuses to Hand Over Administrative Control, HTS Takes it By Force", *Syria Direct,* August 2017, http://syriadirect.org/news/hts-storms-idlib-city-council-after-its-refusal-to-surrender-control-of-civil-institutions/. See also Sailer Perkins (trans), "Saraqib Turns Local Council Selection into a Mass Election… and Women Turn Out in Force", *Syrian Voice,* July 2017, http://syrianvoice.org/saraqib-turns-the-local-council-selection-into-a-mass-election-and-women-turn-out-in-force/?lang=en.

(87) Haid Haid, "Resisting Hayat Tahrir al Sham: Syrian Civil Society on the Frontlines", *Adopt Revolution,* 2017, https://www.adoptrevolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_11_10_HTS_Studie-eng.pdf.

(88) Haid Haid, "Resisting Hayat Tahrir al Sham: Syrian Civil Society on the Frontlines", *Adopt Revolution,* 2017, https://www.adoptrevolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_11_10_HTS_Studie-eng.pdf.

Such views ignore, indeed, belittle, the role of emerging systems of truly revolutionary governance that have resisted the bombardments and attempted radicalisation by the regime, and their continuing ability to provide representative governance, humanitarian relief, and human security for their populations in the most trying of situations. Alongside the relentless targeted bombardment and pressure from regime facilitated extremist groups, these organisations face a considerable number of challenges if they are to continue to develop.

Firstly, local councils have been at the mercy of external donors and fluctuations in their priorities since their emergence. In 2012, mainly under the impetus of the French, western donor nations implemented a policy of direct humanitarian aid to councils. However, in November of the same year, with the creation of the Syrian Opposition Council, many countries within the 'Friends of the People of Syria' group shifted their funding structures towards units dependent on the Syrian Opposition Council rather than those independently forming on the ground [(89)]. This support of what essentially remains a "high-browed movement of exiles"[(90)], denied grassroots organisations in Syria the financial and technical support they needed to set up public policies and develop autonomous and sustainable strategies of governance and assistance. What remained of this support dissipated following the emergence of Daesh in 2014, when donor policy shifted yet again to focusing on fighting terrorism rather than maintaining strong support for local opposition actors [(91)]. It is vital that, in order to build sustainable governance structures, that international donors recognise the importance of local councils and provide adequate support for them.

Moreover, there exist divisions amongst Syria's opposition movements regarding the role of local councils, and local councils often fall prey to political interests. Soon after its establishment, the Syrian Opposition Council created the Assistance Coordination Unit, the

---

[(89)] Agnes Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition Controlled Areas in Syria", in Luigi Narbone and Agnes Favier (eds), *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya,* Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies: Hague, p.8.

[(90)] Zachary Laub, "Who's Who in Syria's Civil War", *Council on Foreign Relations,* 2017, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/whos-who-syrias-civil-war.

[(91)] Agnes Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition Controlled Areas in Syria", in Luigi Narbone and Agnes Favier (eds), *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya,* Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies: Hague, p. 9.

Local Administration Council Unit, and with the formation of the Syrian Interim Government in 2013, the Ministry of Local Administration, Refugees and Humanitarian Relief, and it's associated General Directorate for Local Councils. All of these units have been highly politicised and polarised according to personal and political agendas, and are often backed by rival regional sponsors. At the height of these regional rivalries in 2014 (notwithstanding the current 2017 Gulf Crisis), these structures worked in competition with each other, seeking to secure their legitimacy within Syria itself by offering financial support to the struggling Local Councils [(92)]. This internal strife delayed efforts to consolidate a standard Local Council structure and administrative process, thus hindering any attempts to present the Local Councils as a Syria wide alternative to regime governance [(93)]. These external rifts should be prevented from restricting this endeavour, and financial aid should be made unconditionally to political allegiance. Moreover, Local Councils should be afforded a seat at negotiations with the regime, particularly at the Geneva peace process without being subject to such political considerations.

Lastly, the local councils have suffered from a serious brain drain, and continue to battle with issues of revolutionary credentials when selecting membership. When, at the beginning of the conflict, the regime began its strategy of targeting doctors, teachers, and other experienced public servants, the activists remained while these experienced professionals fled the country [(94)]. As experienced across the history of revolutionary movements, only those with credentials in fighting the regime are seen as suitable candidates for local council positions [(95)]. While this is perhaps understandably given the circumstances in which they operate, these activists whose resilience and tenacity in fighting the regime must be

---

[(92)] Agnes Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition Controlled Areas in Syria", in Luigi Narbone and Agnes Favier (eds), *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya,* Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies: Hague, p. 10.

[(93)] Bahjat Hajjar et al, *Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition Held Syria*, Swiss Peace: Geneva, January 2017, p. 14.

[(94)] Ghias Aljundi, *Local Governance Inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations,* Institute for War and Peace Reporting: London, March 2014, p. 32.

[(95)] The Day After, "Syrian Local Councils in the Eyes of Their Communities", *The Day After,* September 2016, http://tda-sy.org/en/publications/opinons-of-syrians-on-local-councils.html, p. 13.

commended, must cede control of local councils to those best trained, and democratically elected to lead them. Local Councils themselves must seek to hire and elect the most suitable candidates for the positions available, or else they themselves become prey to exclusivity, rather than developing into truly meritocratic, representative, institutions of governance. This includes giving access to women, who, at present, are essentially refused positions based on their gender [(96)].

With the defeat of Daesh, the international community and public opinion in the west must restore its focus on these emerging governance structures and assist them in overcoming these hurdles. Instead of accepting the Assad regime's continued rule in Syria without conditions, negotiations should use the local council as a building block to any future political transition, integrating them into post-war systems of governance. If the opposition in Syria is to be given any voice over the coming years, it is vital that the work of these groups become recognised and supported.

[(96)] Bahjat Hajjar et al, *Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition Held Syria*, Swiss Peace: Geneva, January 2017, p. 11.