

The Syrian Experience of Decentralization

From Sectarian Statelets to Emerging Local Councils



التجربة السورية على صعيد اللامركزية

من الدويلات الطائفية حتى المجالس المحلية الناشئة



2014 - 2015 - 30

Archival cover reproduced from the original Arabic booklet (Nahda Group, 2014).

Prepared by Ezzat Baghdadi in collaboration and consultation with the team of the Project to Support Emerging Local Council Structures

Original document date: 30 August 2014

Full English translation and new typesetting: 2026

Language of original: Arabic | English edition: translated with AI assistance; editorial diagrams added

This is a documentary translation of the complete booklet. The assessments and terminology reflect the original 2014 publication; they are not presented as current findings or as an institutional position of KMT Centre.

Translation and Editorial Note

This edition translates the full original Arabic booklet, including its introductory description, section and subsection headings, paragraph text, numbered and unnumbered lists, and accompanying source notes. The body follows the Arabic text in its original order. The maps are historical reproductions from the supplied booklet, with their original Arabic labels retained. Two newly drawn explanatory diagrams are explicitly labelled as editorial additions; neither appears in the original 2014 edition.

English phrasing and punctuation have been smoothed for readability without intentionally changing the underlying claims. Names, dates, amounts and evaluative language have been preserved as given in the source, including statements that may be contested today. Bibliographic entries have been carried over as cited in the original, without independently checking the continued availability of websites. One stray phrase in the Arabic source is flagged in square brackets instead of silently emended.

Translation method: AI-assisted first translation followed by source-paragraph comparison. This is not a certified translation. Any use requiring legal or archival evidentiary precision should consult the original Arabic PDF alongside this edition.

Original Description of the Document (2014)

This document examines the historical stages through which Syria's administrative divisions developed from the Ottoman period and the changes following the Sykes–Picot divisions. It briefly reviews the stages through which experiences of local government and administration evolved, from the establishment of sectarian statelets during the French Mandate to the promulgation of Legislative Decree No. 107 of 2011 concerning the Syrian Local Administration Law. It also sheds light on the experience of emerging local councils, how they were formed, their relationships with the armed opposition and the Coalition, the challenges they face, and the influence of donors on their development.

Contents

- Historical Background
- The Baath Party and Local Administration in Syria
- Emerging Local Councils
- Relations with the Armed Opposition: Rural Damascus as an Example
- Governorate Councils
- Policies for Channelling Support and Funding
- Supporting Organizations and Associations
- A Critical View of the Structures of Entities Emerging from the Revolution
- Why Decentralization and Local Government Are Necessary in Syria

Endnotes and Source References; Source Artwork and Editorial Figures

Historical Background

Although the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) has always constituted a cultural unit, we can distinguish three regions that historically had intensive internal economic and cultural ties. These were Aleppo (including the Euphrates River), Damascus (including the inland cities from Homs as far as Nablus and Jerusalem), and the coastal strip (from Latakia to Tripoli, Beirut and Jaffa). We see this distinction reflected in Ottoman administrative divisions until 1918. Changes occurred at the end of the Ottoman period, including the establishment of the Vilayet of Zor and two autonomous areas in Lebanon and Palestine. These regions were governed centrally, either from Istanbul or from regional capitals. With the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), towns witnessed the establishment of elected local councils, which were merely instruments in the hands of central government and had very little decision-making power at the local level.



Historical regional map reproduced from the original Arabic booklet, p. 4 (Arabic labels retained).

When Faisal's government was established in Syria in 1918 on the ruins of Ottoman rule, many members of minority communities opposed the new nationalist leaders' call to abolish the system of privileges. Many members of these communities stood against the state-building project, and the new authority was unable to offer a mature alternative to the Ottoman system, despite its shortcomings.^[1]

The Sectarian Statelets

Following the collapse of Faisal's rule in 1920, France based its Mandate policy, which lasted about a quarter of a century, on the contention that the Levant had not been a unified territory under Ottoman rule but rather a collection of provinces. Accordingly, an attempt to establish a central

authority would, it argued, add to the complexities of administering the territory. Robert de Caix, an adviser to the High Commission, was one of the leading advocates of dividing the Levant along sectarian lines, on the grounds that religious and sectarian differences should be accommodated within a federal system established under French supervision. De Caix therefore proposed separating Lebanon into an independent state and creating eight or nine cantons in Syria on the Swiss model. General Henri Gouraud, commander of the Army of the Levant and High Commissioner of the French Republic in Syria, however, believed that four independent governments would suffice: the costs of more governing apparatuses would be difficult to bear, and administering a large number of small statelets would be burdensome for the Mandate authority. Gouraud's view ultimately prevailed, and the territory was divided as follows:^[2]

— The State of Greater Lebanon: proclaimed on 1 September 1920, incorporating the districts of Baalbek, the Beqaa, Hasbaya, Rashaya, Sidon, Tyre, Marjayoun, Tripoli and Akkar, with Beirut as its capital.

— The State of Aleppo: proclaimed on 8 September 1920 by a decision of the High Commissioner separating the Vilayet of Aleppo from Syria and establishing an independent state bearing its name.

— The Alawite State: proclaimed on 23 September 1920; it comprised Latakia, Jableh, Baniyas, Safita, Tartus and Masyaf.

— The State of Jabal al-Druze: proclaimed on 20 April 1921, with a government headed by Salim al-Atrash and Suwayda as its capital.

— The State of Damascus: named after the capital.

The French authorities also administered the Jazira region separately. The Sanjak of Alexandretta retained its financial and administrative autonomy until its annexation by Turkey in 1939. The proposed Armenian state, which was to include Alexandretta, Antioch, Aintab, Marash, Urfa and Adana, likewise failed as a result of Turkish military advances in those areas.

The experiment with sectarian cantons soon proved unsuccessful. In 1924, the states of Aleppo and Damascus were united when the Mandate authorities realized that their expenditures had reached a level their revenues could not sustain. Establishing five complete administrative apparatuses—officials, employees and military personnel—and infrastructure, municipal, health and postal services in each of these statelets was a major undertaking in territories lacking the skills and capacities required for statehood. Jacques Weulersse argued that the French Mandate authority, which had encouraged the independence of the Alawite State, reversed its policy for two reasons: first, the popular classes had not reached a level at which they could appreciate the historic opportunity to build a state; and second, the Alawite State was too poor economically to bear the expenses of statehood, so the Mandate authority had to unite it with the other Levantine states under French rule. The decision to incorporate the Druze and Alawite regions into the Syrian state was made in 1936 but was not actually implemented until 1943. The territory ultimately took shape with Lebanon as an independent state and the Syrian Republic retaining the borders that exist today [as described in the 2014 text].^[3]



Map of French Mandate statelets, as reproduced in the original Arabic booklet, p. 6.

During the Mandate, the French sought to establish two parallel authorities at the same time:

- A civilian political authority that embraced no particular ideology and exercised a purely administrative role through its commercial and agricultural influence.
- A military authority embodied in a command structure in which sectarian elements predominated. Large numbers were recruited from Jabal al-Ansariyya, Jabal al-Arab and Mount Lebanon; most members of the special troops came from Alawite, Druze and Maronite peasant backgrounds, alongside new units recruited from Ismaili, Kurdish and Circassian minorities.^[4]

When the Mandate ended, this arrangement remained in place after independence. Members of prominent families occupied the presidency, ministerial posts and parliamentary seats, while the army exercised extensive power and intervened forcefully in the prerogatives of civilian government.

During the French Mandate (1920–1946), and excluding Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, which became separate countries, the Syrian coast and interior were divided into four autonomous regions (Damascus, Aleppo, the Alawite Mountains and Jabal al-Druze).

French administrative law was effectively abolished on 21 December 1957 with the enactment of Administrative Organizations Law No. 496. It provided for municipal and local councils at three different levels: governorate, district and town. Three-quarters of council members were supposed to be elected by local residents. Reality, however, differed from the law's provisions: the central government appointed every member of these councils.^[5]



Administrative map of Syria reproduced from the original Arabic booklet, p. 7 (Arabic labels retained).

The Baath Party and Local Administration in Syria

Soon after taking power in 1970, Hafez al-Assad issued a new Local Administration Law (No. 15 of 11 May 1971), providing for elected councils at all administrative levels: district, governorate, subdistrict and town. These councils were supposed to have legislative and executive branches. They were promised extensive powers and relations with the central government, on the assumption that they would play roles in national planning and legislation. In practice, however, councils were permitted to exist only at governorate level. Municipal elections were held regularly every four years from 1972, but candidates required approval from the Baath Party and various security agencies. In reality, the implementation of these local councils was a centralizing policy. The 1973 Syrian constitution introduced by Hafez al-Assad, and the Baath Party's wide-ranging powers, helped sustain a highly centralized administration. As noted in the preceding section, Baath Party representatives dominated all councils and municipalities. The party nominated its own members, most of whom were not previously known to the community. Councils operated behind a veil of secrecy, as did service centers and judicial authorities in governorate capitals. Public administrative decisions were concentrated at governorate level or in central ministries, including land registration, tax collection, the registration of births, deaths and marriages, courts, and the allocation of services. Syria's towns and villages had very few decentralized powers over administration and zoning. Even the local police were generally unresponsive and unhelpful in times of distress. For routine procedures, residents had to travel to city centers to complete transactions that often did not move forward without bribes.

Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as ruler of Syria. Despite numerous promises of reform and genuine change, local councils remained devoid of real powers, to the point that many Syrians did not even know of their existence. After popular protests erupted in March 2011, Bashar al-Assad issued a new law in August 2011 intended to improve local administration, hoping to appease an angry population, especially young people who had taken to the streets demanding freedom, dignity and economic opportunity. Representatives from cities and neighborhoods that had risen

in protest were granted numerous meetings in early summer 2011; at these, Bashar al-Assad promised administrative reforms, including more authority for the most local levels.

In 2005, Syria launched the Municipal Administration Modernisation (MAM) project, an ambitious initiative financed largely by the European Union, with a small financial contribution from the Syrian government. Its purpose was to help six major cities and the Syrian government modernize municipal administration, planning, finance and service delivery, and to advise on “delegation.” The project comprised 17 “packages,” directed toward giving local governments greater control over their affairs. One part of the project was preparation of the Local Administration Law referred to above. Its draft was in fact ready in 2008; delaying its promulgation until after the events of March 2011 demonstrated a lack of political will to change Syria's heavily centralized administration. In reality, the law contained obscure provisions allowing central authorities to circumvent promises to empower local councils and return powers to the old governorate councils and central institutions. It was thus rendered ineffective, except as a façade intended to improve the regime's image before the international community.^[6, 7, 8]

In 2003, the city of Aleppo took a bold initiative by proposing a German advisory partnership with GTZ to help revitalize the city and “investigate the problems and priorities involved in delivering services to its citizens in the most effective and efficient manner.” The initiative continued until the MAM project was completed. A report published in 2008 to document MAM's experience in Aleppo and lessons learned observed that “the decentralization process [in Syria] is far from complete.” It concluded that key elements still needed to be introduced, including decentralized budgeting and planning; strengthening the skills and knowledge of district managers; considering the implications for tasks and organizational arrangements at central level; transferring additional functions to district level; and establishing a strong system for monitoring performance and resource use at district level. The overall assessment of this group of activities was “very strong.” Despite the serious shortcomings of decentralization in Syria, the report remained optimistic about the future.^[9, 10]

The European Union's 2009 report on relations with Syria included a bold note about the MAM project, stating that it “laid the cornerstone for the next phase of the decentralization programme in Syria. Building on its results, the Decentralisation and Local Development Programme (DLDP) will further develop the capacities of regional and local authorities to exercise their newly acquired responsibilities in an accountable and transparent manner.” MAM was completed in 2009 and was to be followed by another project, DLDP, potentially addressing the same issues. Twenty million euros in grant funding were allocated to MAM, alongside an additional EUR 100 million in loans under the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) to “modernise municipal infrastructure throughout Syria.”^[11, 12]

Optimism appears to have given way to caution. In an assessment of European efforts to promote democracy in Syria, a researcher at Wegweiser GmbH Berlin Research & Strategy wrote in 2005 that “the current picture of European projects in Syria makes clear that hardly any democracy-related missions could be established with the Syrian authorities. The new Municipal Administration Modernisation project may be useful in the Syrian context; nevertheless, it remains within the administrative processes of the existing political system.” At a conference held in 2009 as a joint effort of Syria's Ministry of Local Administration and the German GTZ-UDP programme, sources likewise made clear that Syria still had a long way to go toward

decentralization. The conference endorsed MAM's central ideas, namely “more decentralization,” arguing that “cities should be empowered and governance within them improved so that they can perform their role in various fields.”^[13, 14]

The MAM project did enable six major Syrian cities to engage with administrative decentralization and its challenges. It also produced the 2011 Local Administration Law, which—once purged of its hidden recentralizing clauses—could be used by any future Syrian government genuinely committed to greater administrative decentralization.^[15]

In general, public administration enjoyed very little trust. Activists who participated in the early demonstrations often expressed, in repeated meetings with them, concern that the existing order lay at the root of corruption in these bodies and institutions, and that part of the revolutionary transformation was intended to address such problems in the country.

SYRIA: KEY ADMINISTRATIVE MILESTONES

Editorial visual guide based on the booklet's historical sequence

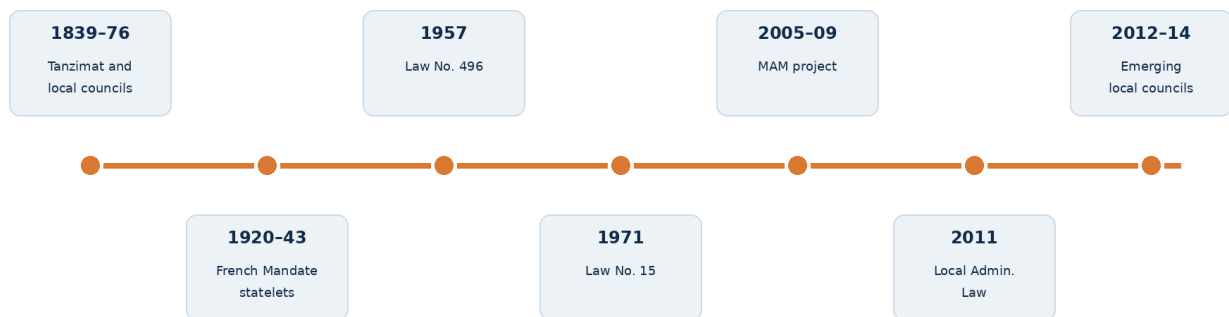


Figure 1. Editorial chronological diagram derived from dates mentioned in the 2014 text; not an original figure.

Emerging Local Councils

Emerging local councils began to appear in the second half of 2012 as the natural evolution of structures established earlier to respond to urgent local needs arising from violence and the absence of a state role. From the outset of the protests, local activists formed what became known as local coordination committees, as well as working groups to coordinate efforts to organize demonstrations and convey events to the outside world. As the regime's brutality increased, these committees moved into relief and medical work to meet the mounting needs of their social constituencies as the regime increasingly targeted them. Within a year, relief and medical work had become sufficiently specialized to organize itself and operate outside the coordination committees' tutelage, although substantial funding continued to pass through the committees because of their presence and their expanded networks of activists and aid intermediaries. By the end of 2011, calls were made to form popular committees to manage neighborhood and town affairs and bring together relief and medical efforts that were showing signs of growing fragmentation. On 6 March 2013, after a failed attempt to regain control of the town of Zabadani, west of Damascus, regime representatives negotiated with representatives of the Zabadani Council to arrange a truce with the town. The council comprised activists from leading families in the

town. This episode attracted the attention of international observers and residents of different parts of Syria. Yet the Zabadani Council was not an isolated initiative: many such councils emerged across Syria at roughly the same time. The role played by these early councils in their own areas remains unclear. What is clearer is the history of the organizations claiming to represent them. The second half of 2012 saw the rise of many such organizations seeking political benefits from the phenomenon of councils that had emerged independently across Syria to meet urgent needs. The Syrian revolution had not been able to establish a leadership or representative body. Nevertheless, every organization or group claiming to speak on its behalf in international forums needed a reality on the ground to support that claim. Local councils offered an opportunity to substantiate claims to national representation.

Among those who participated in establishing and/or operating local councils in Syria, two tendencies can be identified. We believe they reflect two distinct ways of thinking about government, how it is built and its role in society. The first tendency leads to the establishment of councils at city and town level that provide local services through local residents. The second leads to the creation of councils (under the same name) at governorate level, concerned with directing funds and exercising some control over town councils. The first appears more closely connected to the rapid provision of essential everyday services, with little concern for national politics. The second appears connected to the future central government in Syria and aspires to play a role within it. Yet the two tendencies depend on one another: town councils depend on governorate councils for funding and capacity-building expertise, while governorate councils depend on town and city councils for the legitimacy of representation and for distributing money with minimal accountability.

TWO TRAJECTORIES OF EMERGING COUNCILS

An interpretive diagram of the booklet's distinction — not an original 2014 figure

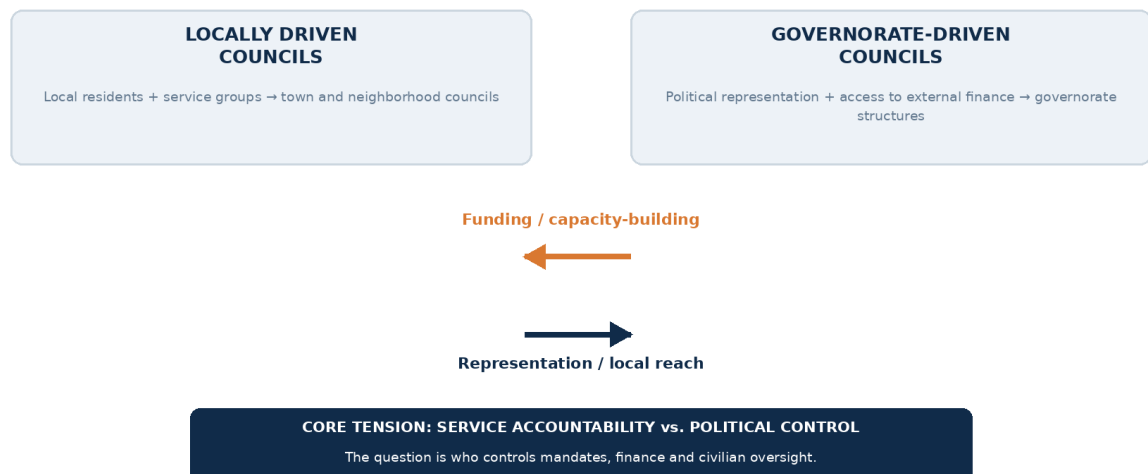


Figure 2. Editorial synthesis of the two institutional trajectories described in the booklet; not an original 2014 figure.

Councils in larger cities and governorates contain a legislative section made up of representatives of town councils and an executive section made up of those who initiated the councils' establishment. These initiators seek political gains from their initiative or believe town councils cannot govern themselves. They are generally in contact with the Coalition, regarded as one of the most important sources of funding and channels for converting funding into political

representation. Initiatives to form governorate councils predated the Coalition and its Local Councils Unit, and the Coalition remains attached to its privileged position as representative of local councils; that is why it is interested in governorate councils. The Ministry of Local Administration in the Interim Government was formed on this basis. What concerns us is that the philosophy of the Local Councils Unit and the local government is to produce local agencies of the central government—what we regard as the legacy of seventy years of centralization and fifty years of authoritarian rule.

As for the second type of councils, they are widespread across numerous governorates, particularly Rural Damascus, the northwestern governorates (Aleppo and Idlib), and predominantly Kurdish areas in the north. At present, we can identify the following categories of councils:

Nominal councils that appeared in recent months through patronage connections to the Local Councils Unit or the government, in order to obtain money from the Coalition.

Old municipal councils, most of them in areas under regime control.

Revolutionary councils, either with pronounced ideological orientations (Islamist or secular), or resulting from the transformation of coordination committees into local councils.

Brigade councils established by armed groups dominating an area. These councils aim to provide a civilian façade for the fighting groups, bring them closer to local residents and express their wish to secure a foothold in the political arena.

Traditional councils formed by prominent individuals from known families or tribes, or by traditional community notables.

Executive councils formed either by service providers active in relief work since the beginning of the revolution or by major local donors who acquired social standing through their financial support for local relief efforts.

Representative councils formed through consensus. These are rare and demonstrate an advanced awareness of the need for decision-making and executive authorities and of the necessity of separating them.

Relations with the Armed Opposition: Rural Damascus as an Example

The armed opposition emerged as an essential element in the conflict with the regime. Yet the presence of military force outside any legitimate civilian framework can create problems and sensitivities among inhabitants of areas in revolt. Revolutionaries therefore recognized the importance of establishing local councils as a channel connecting the armed opposition and civilians, and of bringing that force under a civilian framework after the fall of the regime, thereby mitigating the consequences of a transitional period and disorder. Armed opposition forces in Rural Damascus are diverse and can be divided into three main currents, within which further distinctions exist:

- Military councils.
- Islamist armed opposition forces.
- Independent armed groups.

Each has its own view of the idea of establishing local councils and whether to cooperate with them.

Military Councils: “Tutelle” or Guardianship

Military councils emerged as an organizational framework for military action against the regime's armed forces and security agencies. Chief among them was the Revolutionary Military Council of Damascus and its Countryside, which included five military councils covering Damascus and its countryside: the Revolutionary Military Council of Eastern Ghouta, the Revolutionary Military Council of Western Ghouta, the Revolutionary Military Council of Qalamoun, the Revolutionary Military Council of Wadi Barada, and the Revolutionary Military Council of Damascus. Here we focus on the Revolutionary Military Council in Eastern Ghouta as a practical example, since most of Eastern Ghouta had escaped the regime's security and political control. The Revolutionary Military Council in Eastern Ghouta endorsed the idea of local councils, incorporating them into the organizational structure of the unified command of the revolutionary military councils, which consisted of:

- Council leadership.
- Branches.
- Services.
- Subsidiary revolutionary military councils.
- Local councils in cities and towns.

Initially, the military council's proposal for local councils created few significant problems, for the following reasons:

- The military council had no time to devote to this task while fighting in Eastern Ghouta was at its most intense.
- The security apparatus was absent from Eastern Ghouta because of displacement following regime shelling of its towns.
- The existence of what was called an advisory office, made up of doctors, lawyers and people of social standing, whose function was to provide support and advice to the military council on administering civilian affairs. What happened, however, was that this advisory office was dissolved on the grounds that it conflicted with the military council's founding charter and internal structure. The military council instructed commanders of the military sectors in Eastern Ghouta to supervise the formation of local councils directly. This raised objections among civilians in some parts of Ghouta because a military officer—the sector commander, who came from outside the town—had been selected to supervise the establishment of a local council. [The source contains an apparent stray reference to “Al-Sham Center for Research and Studies” within this sentence.] The problem arose in areas such as Ain Tarma and Kafr Batna, but not in areas such as Douma or Hammouriya, where the military commander was a civilian leader and a resident of the locality. Some interpret the Revolutionary Military Council's inclusion of local councils in its structure as an attempt to become the principal authority for forming any political or local body in areas under its control—in other words, a form of guardianship. Military council personnel belonged to a traditional military institution that had never known separation from society, given

the military's control over society. It was as if the “military intervention in politics and society” was being reproduced—the very notion the revolution sought to transcend by keeping the military from intervening in political and social affairs. The military council's power and influence in imposing guardianship over local councils derived from its military force, its control of territory, the security it provided and its defense of civilians, as well as its material resources, including financial, medical and relief resources, which enabled it to exercise influence over civilians. Despite the military council's attempts to exercise one form of guardianship or another over local councils, both sides still agreed on the need to manage civilian affairs on a number of issues: establishing a mechanism for resolving civil disputes, forming committees to address theft and protect property and institutions, and documenting property ownership in records witnessed by representatives of both parties—civilian and military.

Islamist Armed Opposition Forces: Between Cooperation and Exclusion

We must distinguish among these forces. Some adopt a moderate orientation and accept the principle of a civilian state, while others seek to establish an Islamic state.

The first group tends to cooperate with local councils without joining them fully. The second considers its project of establishing an Islamic state incompatible with the idea of local councils; it therefore already attempts to exclude anyone who might compete with it, particularly those engaged in civilian affairs and support for citizens. Such people meet essential needs and therefore gain public trust. For this reason, the second group provides no form of support to these councils and is not represented in them.

Independent Armed Groups

These groups are spread across Rural Damascus and vary greatly in orientation and outlook. Some consist of civilians and military personnel who have preferred independence to prominence under another banner; another current has found in taking up arms and in the prevailing disorder an opportunity for personal gain. In the first case, they tend not to impose influence or guardianship on local councils, partly because their capacity to influence is weak in both military strength and material resources such as relief and medical supplies; consequently, they are more inclined to cooperate with civilians. Members of the second current, by contrast, are seen by some as remaining outside any structure that might regulate or restrain their conduct simply because they bear arms. Residents of many rural areas complain of irresponsible behavior by this current that brings calamity upon local inhabitants.

What should be emphasized here is the attempt to reach a form of cooperation between the two sides whereby armed opposition forces, whatever their names, recognize the importance of operating within a civilian framework, particularly when making decisions with consequences for civilians. Such an arrangement would strengthen the armed opposition's legitimacy by presenting it as the defender of civilians rather than an authority above them. Hence the armed opposition seeks cooperation with local councils through consultation on consequential decisions.

Governorate Councils

The structures supported by the Ministry of Local Administration in Ahmad Touma's Interim Government, and earlier by the Local Councils Unit, were limited to the formation of governorate

councils without first forming councils in neighborhoods, towns and villages. This produced a situation contrary to administrative decentralization: there was no local participation, decisions were not made at more local levels, no local consensus emerged, local problems did not receive local attention, and local solutions were absent. These councils thus lost the advantages of decentralized administration and became façades seeking aid and funding without the capacity to implement projects. Emerging governorate councils instead distributed funds received from supporters through representatives of different areas and towns, without financial systems or agreed common rules, and—more importantly—without public scrutiny or accountability. This opened the door to extensive control by governorate councils over councils of local administrative units, contradicting the principle of administrative decentralization.

A governorate council ought to develop gradually and naturally according to need, once local councils have formed in neighborhoods, villages and towns and the need for coordination among them arises. When some councils begin coordinating on particular projects, unions of councils can emerge at subdistrict or district level. When major projects are needed at governorate level, coordination among local councils across the governorate becomes necessary, and only then is it appropriate to establish a governorate council. The rush of certain actors to occupy the position of a governorate council, however, led to the form these councils actually took. It is notable that they drew up organizational structures and offices they proved unable to establish. Stakeholders' and interested parties' objections generally focused on the failure to use suitable methods and sufficient time to notify broad numbers of actors and citizens about the initiative, the insufficient professionalism of organizing committees, and the absence of rules agreed between communities and those setting up governorate councils.

Partial Elections and Revolutionary Legitimacy

Under normal conditions, elections are a good way of choosing people accepted by their communities. Deteriorating conditions, however, do not permit fair and transparent elections. Elections held by local councils emerging from the revolution were confined to an elite circle—what some call “selective citizenship,” which grants the vote only to those present. In many settings, vulnerable groups frequently do not attend community forums, and when they do, they remain silent; decisions are then made without their input. This perpetuates the marginalization of excluded groups and may renew the underlying causes of conflict, since the process is perceived as unfair and as favoring one group over another. Earlier experiences also show that the idea of “revolutionary legitimacy” was misused and distorted. This idea is connected to the concepts of revolution and law, which by their nature are contradictory. A revolution occurs when people decide that change within the existing system and the laws governing it is no longer sufficient or possible, and that the framework must be challenged and dismantled in order to rebuild society. One cannot imagine a revolution that respects the former legal order; otherwise it would be merely a reform or change movement. The contradiction between revolution and law is inevitable, at least for a period, until society believes that it has achieved the required transformations in the state, government and authority and begins establishing a new legal order from which legitimacy is derived. Speaking of “revolutionary legitimacy” therefore has a very specific meaning: at the moment when the inherited legal order has lost legitimacy, society accepts and welcomes decisions taken by popular leadership that may contravene formal law but express the people's wishes and hopes. Revolutionary legitimacy never confers on those who made the greatest sacrifices or participated most in the revolution the right to appoint themselves guardians over the

people. The search continues for effective mechanisms and standards by which to identify people accepted by their communities as representatives of their interests in local forums, how to form such councils, and what level of performance citizens expect before accepting the emerging councils as an umbrella under which efforts can come together to resolve local disputes and bring about positive change.^[16]

The Concept of Political Representation and Electoral Legitimacy

The Concept of Political Representation

Since not all citizens can participate directly in decision-making, the concept of “representation” arose: citizens express their interests and preferences by electing representatives to assemblies at national level (parliament or the legislature) and at local level (councils in governorates, centers and subdivisions). An election is the formal procedure for selecting someone for public office or for approving or rejecting a proposal or political decision by voting; it is therefore one means of political decision-making. This approach allows citizens to express their views freely and to choose someone to act on their behalf in administering the country, governorate or subdistrict. Citizens have the right to criticize or support their representative, who in turn works to express the interests of the constituency from which they were elected, while also serving the public interest.

The Concept of Electoral Legitimacy

This means that the system inspires confidence in its procedures and results, and that this confidence produces a state of general satisfaction in society with the electoral process and its outcome. Electoral legitimacy is the basis on which different parties accept election results.

When Should Elections Be Held, and Are There Alternatives?

— When the following conditions are present:

- A simple, realistic electoral system accepted by voters.
- A broad range of choices available to voters.
- The possibility of substantial electoral participation.
- Electoral campaigning by candidates and parties.
- The possibility of achieving fair representation through elections.

Representation through election requires a carefully designed electoral system that delivers electoral fairness, as well as a safe environment and a legitimate central authority to administer and oversee the electoral process. These conditions may not be available during conflict and social upheaval. Elections are not an end in themselves; they are a means of enabling people accepted by society to reach office. Common mistakes in the experience of emerging councils include:

- Assembling supporters alone to vote, then presenting their vote as legitimate as though it represented the entire community.
- Holding the voting meeting at a time and place that prevent many potential participants from attending.
- Failing to make the election rules and candidate lists known sufficiently far in advance.

Policies for Channelling Support and Funding

Policies for channelling support into structures emerging from the revolution produced negative side effects, and delays in addressing those problems aggravated the crisis. Funding and aid-disbursement policies failed to take into account their impact on society and on the structures emerging from the revolution. The responsibility associated with disbursing support—whether through individuals, groups, governmental organizations or quasi-governmental bodies—still requires common principles binding on all parties responsible for the flow of assistance and defining their responsibilities toward society and its institutions. In general, neither those working to secure support nor the organizations involved took sufficient account of social and environmental concerns and of the consequences of the activities they supported and funded. The limited capacity of major opposition institutions to exercise oversight and build well-designed, workable financial and administrative systems also reduced transparency and spread corruption and conflicts of interest, producing political rivalries that weakened the opposition. Opposition institutions have no policies or systems that define or regulate conflicts of interest. Principles and standards are needed against which policies for the disbursement of aid and funding can be measured and evaluated. It is essential to establish an alternative mechanism for regulating intervention when the notion of state sovereignty is shaken and no legitimate authority exists to set the rules for intervention. The ongoing violent conflict and the multiplicity of external parties intervening in Syria make it necessary for those concerned with stability to develop more effective intervention policies.

The principles adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) could be used to promote better, values-driven intervention:

Principles for Intervention

- Take context as the starting point.
- Do no harm.
- Make state-building a central objective.
- Give priority to prevention.
- Recognize the links between political objectives, security and development.
- Promote non-discrimination as the foundation of inclusive and stable societies.
- Align with local priorities in context-specific and differentiated ways.
- Agree on mechanisms for informed coordination among international actors.
- Act quickly, but stay engaged for a sufficiently long period to offer a real chance of success.
- Avoid pockets of exclusion.

The Most Important Negative Effects of Support-Disbursement Policies in General

1. Militarization of society and the separation of fighters' interests from those of their social constituencies.

- 2. Weakening of emerging institutions that aid policies inflated before their structures had been completed.

3. Conflicting regional and ideological factions within civilian service groups and military forces.

The spread of patronage, dependency and quota-sharing, accompanied by an absence of strict institutional rules.

Once the most basic state institutions providing services and ensuring the operation of infrastructure had disappeared, local communities were forced to shoulder the burden and create alternatives. Local groups seeking to meet fundamental humanitarian needs encountered difficulties caused by the flight of skills and expertise, as well as material deprivation that earmarked assistance from donors and supporters was unable to cover. Much of the allocated resources was lost through corruption and political rivalry. Surveys conducted by Nahda Group to evaluate the performance of emerging local council structures in seven Syrian governorates found the following:

Local initiatives to establish councils, led by service groups that had emerged from the revolution and by local leaders, collided with external projects brought in through relief-funding intermediaries used by competing political groups after they obtained foreign funding.

Injecting money into incomplete local structures strengthens the bonds of dictatorship.

Political and ideological rivalries accompanying the top-down movement of support and funding create divisions within emerging local structures and institutions.

Some armed factions seek, through their control of territory and supply routes, to absorb emerging local structures and bring them under their authority.

Some organizations and associations used armed factions as intermediaries for disbursing support and distributing humanitarian aid. This weakened civilian initiative and contributed to the militarization of society.

Areas in revolt experienced enormous waves of civilian armament in mid-2012, resulting from mistakes in policies that allocated resources according to the proportion of members belonging to each faction. This, too, contributed to the militarization of society.

The interests of armed groups became separated from those of their social constituencies as the groups' need for the legitimacy and support formerly provided by their communities declined after the arrival of an alternative: "external support."

Support-disbursement policies adopted by the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) were weak; the Unit accepted fictitious authorizations from fictitious local councils in the absence of an effective assessment and monitoring system.

Absence of Conflict-of-Interest Policies in Opposition Institutions

One important aspect of institution-building was neglected: most institutions emerging from the revolution lacked, in both their rules and among their personnel, a culture of preventing conflicts of interest. The most common forms include:

1) Self-dealing: an official controlling an organization enters into a transaction with himself or with another organization that benefits him, so that the "deal" gives him benefits on both sides.

2) Outside employment: working in another position incompatible with the organization's interests.

3) Family interests: employing a spouse, children, siblings or other relatives; or purchasing goods or services from relatives or a company controlled by a relative.

Supporting Organizations and Associations

Organizations are the principal instruments through which interventions take place. International law imposes significant restrictions on United Nations organizations: they cannot implement projects or undertake an intervention without the approval of the country's authorities (the regime). Even in matters concerning refugees, international organizations do not undertake projects without approval from the authorities of host states. Official development assistance (ODA) organizations attached to states are linked to their governments, and their responses are based on those governments' policies. Such organizations work under the banner of international development and enjoy greater freedom from the restrictions of international law. Consequently, in situations of state fragility or loss of control, they do not necessarily carry the burden of obtaining permission from the country's authorities. Their performance is assessed by specialized international organizations such as the OECD, which conducted a survey in 2011 evaluating their activities; the surveys showed that their performance was weak on four main levels. Most of the civil-society organizations (NGOs) intervening in Syria were established by Syrians living abroad, in countries whose tax systems treat money paid to civil-society organizations as tax-deductible. These organizations are subject to strict financial and banking oversight, and the threat of being placed on lists of organizations supporting terrorism acts as a deterrent governing their conduct. Unlike Western states, which developed governmental ODA agencies, quasi-governmental organizations from Eastern countries played a major role in channelling assistance. These organizations formulate their intervention policies in cooperation with political parties or groups close to them and are strongly influenced by the policies of their respective governments. High dynamism—by which we mean both high effectiveness and unpredictable actions—characterized the intervention policies pursued by clandestine associations in Syria. By “clandestine,” we mean that their objectives are not disclosed and they do not follow institutional rules.

It is not possible to count clearly all the organizations that intervened in Syria: they are numerous, and many may be unknown to us. We can, however, classify them according to how they operate and the effects of their interventions. We believe the five categories we identified can encompass all kinds of organizations, institutions and associations intervening in Syria. Each category contains several types of organizations sharing similar methods of intervention and producing similar consequences. It therefore makes sense to identify and analyze these categories rather than every organization individually.

Five Categories

Government Organizations Attached to States (Official Development Assistance Agencies—ODA)

Most governments in countries of the Northern Hemisphere operate agencies or departments—often located in their embassies—that provide financial assistance to non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations.^[17]

Two types of institutions, generally profit-making companies, operate under them:

Project implementation companies.

Facilitation companies.

Intergovernmental Organizations (United Nations Agencies)

These organizations originated in the “international conference” idea and developed from it. They acquired an independent will distinct from member states, an independent secretariat, decisions adopted by simple or qualified majorities, and bodies staffed by international officials from different countries. They also acquired autonomous powers stemming from genuine delegations by states, among other capacities that gave international organizations a strong institutional standing above states. In other words, intergovernmental organizations are established by states through international agreements; their members are states. They have international legal personality, meaning that they receive international rights and obligations directly under international law, participate in forming international legal rules through treaties and customary international law, and are governed in their conduct by international-law rules rather than the domestic laws of states. They also possess a mandate from governments covering their presence and activities and enjoy certain operational facilities, known in diplomatic terminology as “privileges and immunities.”^[18]

Civil-Society Organizations—Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

These are organizations serving a public interest, established and operating without control by national governments and not subordinated to a government or international institution. This does not prevent them from cooperating with governments or receiving assistance and funding from them.

The term is generally applied to legal persons (groups with a legal personality) whose objectives are not profit-making, which are mostly financed from private resources. Their principal characteristics include:

Private initiative in their establishment.

The non-profit purpose of their activities.

Financial independence.

A public-interest mission.

Eastern Quasi-Governmental Organizations

Eastern states, whose role in intervening in neighboring and regional countries is expanding, have not managed to develop governmental organizations able to perform the functions of Western ODA agencies. They have not developed instruments suited to handling complex files abroad. At the same time, institutions formed through the association of civil-society organizations sharing a common ideological orientation have succeeded in developing more effective intervention tools. We classify these as “Eastern quasi-governmental organizations” because they are close to, or relied upon to implement, their states’ policies in “development” interventions and humanitarian assistance. They were established in the traditional sense of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and adopt the general notion of such organizations, yet operate under national

government oversight and are subject to overall government policy. When necessary, they may serve as an arm of the government in implementing particular projects. These organizations are keen to remain connected to civil society and closely associated with their Arab and/or Islamic culture, while aspiring to the standing of international NGOs that have acquired wide recognition and credibility. They also intervene and provide assistance internationally, with branches and offices in several countries.

Clandestine Associations

These are associations formed in specific circumstances for a specific purpose, when a prominent individual calls for the need to help and gathers relatives, friends and supporters of the idea to establish a clandestine association. By “clandestine” we mean that it is not registered, is not sufficiently identified and its intervention is not governed by law or standards. According to Norman MacKenzie, “secret societies arise in times of crisis and social unrest.” They emerge as a natural consequence of individuals feeling that their interests are threatened by the fragility and weakness of the state, or from the desire of their founders to obtain political gains or social status through associations with extensive connections. Activities financed by influential regional groups or individuals outside government structures can also be placed in the category of clandestine associations because the outcomes and impacts of this type of intervention are similar.

A Critical View of the Structures of Entities Emerging from the Revolution

The parties that dominated Syria before the revolution were influenced by the structures of left-wing parties born of the communist and socialist experience. They therefore inherited the administrative arrangements and institutional systems that, as a logical consequence, produced new dictators who rose to the top of those parties and monopolized their leadership for life. They exercised dictatorship throughout their lives and knew nothing of the rotation of power, even as they demanded that a regime belonging to the same school of thought undertake democratic transformation and uphold the principle of alternation in power.

During the forty years before the revolution, the opposition knew no experience of party organization outside these parties and their organizational and administrative structures. Accordingly, the first revolutionary entities to emerge at the start of the revolution—the Local Coordination Committees, the Union of Syrian Revolution Coordination Committees, then the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution, and the subsequent revolutionary entities and councils in the governorates—copied the same organizational structure of leftist and communist parties. This consisted simply of a political office and service offices (media, relief, legal and others), deriving legitimacy from a general assembly and secretariat and governed by internal rules regulating relations among the offices. The Syrian National Council subsequently adopted the same organizational structure, except that it replaced the name “political office” with “executive office.” These entities adopted elections and nominations to offices and the general secretariat as a form of democracy, although most members had no previous acquaintance with one another because of the circumstances in which they arose and the way they were formed. Members were seldom able to assess one another's qualifications before participating in elections. The absence of defined standards for nomination

and voting thus gave better-organized blocs whose members already knew one another a greater opportunity to gain control of the general secretariat and influential offices.

Unfortunately, most of these entities, especially those operating within revolutionary areas, tended to adopt the practices of opposition parties that had existed before the revolution, in part by inheriting their administrative, organizational and cultural structures—particularly relations based on quota-sharing, patronage and regionalism, and exchanges of support and funding for leadership and representation. Thus, the same defects of earlier opposition structures were transferred to emerging bodies. Disputes arose, without agreed rules, over the number of seats and proportion of influence allocated to each governorate, coordination committee, grouping or component of these entities. Their organizational structures also failed to account for the absence of the judiciary that normally resolves disputes. They therefore lacked a superior authority or reference point capable of settling disagreements among their components or members. As a result, even a small dispute could grow and intensify without any possibility of an institutional solution. Most of these entities were also forced to rely on internet communication as their main means of contact because of security pressure inside Syria and the difficulty of meeting and communicating physically in normal ways. It did not take long for most to turn, in varying degrees, into elites detached from their realities, seeking to lead their constituencies and acquire legitimacy through the revolutionary and social services they provided. In the absence of an appropriate organizational framework, agreed rules and qualified personnel, and because Syrian society had lacked a culture of organized or institutional collective action for more than half a century, these structures were unable to develop into genuine institutions. In many cases they fragmented into smaller entities as their elites fought over positions of power and decision-making, or became inert bodies unable to produce or evolve. This is not surprising: in fact, eighty years of communist experience had not produced parties or entities capable of achieving better results.

Why Decentralization and Local Government Are Necessary in Syria

It is well known that local identities in the Levant are stronger than national identity. These local identities are reinforced by religious or sectarian identities, tribal or clan affiliations, and ethnic identities. In Syria, the sense of being Alawite, Druze, Christian or Sunni; Kurdish, Arab or Syriac; from Aleppo, Damascus or Daraa; or from one tribe or another, represents a genuine sense of belonging that guides competition for resources and economic opportunities and the choice of leadership. The Syrian revolution has made these identities sufficiently clear to neutral observers and participants alike. Despite repeated calls for national unity, these identities remain active. We believe that administrative decentralization and elected local governments empowered to enact regulations, collect revenues, resolve disputes, set budgets, prepare future plans and carry out projects of local importance can direct the local identities of Syria's different communities into constructive channels, rather than toward national-level competition to control central offices and powers that might later be used to serve their own local communities and exclude others.

The conflict in Syria is, on one hand, a struggle between dictatorship and its oppressed subjects; on the other, it is also a struggle between deprived groups and others perceived as controlling the central government. The latter dimension has now developed into a sectarian war between those claiming to represent the Sunni majority and those claiming to represent Alawites and Shiite minorities. This sectarian struggle has polarized the population, forcing people either to take one

side or to retreat into their local communities and remain neutral. Resolving the conflict requires a high degree of empowerment for subnational communities. Many Kurds and Alawites demand either self-government or federalism, while many Sunni Arabs regard these demands as opportunistic or even conspiratorial. We believe that administrative decentralization based on the Anglo-Saxon model—which is less centralized than the French model—offers a compromise acceptable to all, because it allows these communities to express their cultures and give them legitimacy through genuine local political decisions. The model also enables communities to develop through locally made decisions and plans without depriving them entirely of the resources and expertise of the central government. No Syrian region can form a viable and self-sufficient state on its own: in fact, Syria's regions complement one another and require some form of national unity and, consequently, redistribution of public wealth. Achieving the right balance between self-government and integration leads to stability in post-conflict Syria.

Today the idea of local councils has become popular and is pursued by everyone. Local councils must not be a form of top-down grouping that claims to represent the revolution and speak in its name; nor should they be a means of acquiring popular legitimacy or international funding. The idea of local councils developed domestically and was also promoted from abroad. Regardless of the idea's origin, internal development and external promotion converge on the envisaged form of the structures but differ in their aims. Local councils are structures for local government and service administration that can become self-sufficient if the central state collapses. The purposes behind establishing them, however, differ depending on who advocates the idea. The natural growth of revolutionary entities, for example, moved toward the idea of local councils but kept them in the hands of “revolutionaries.” They thus became instruments for consolidating revolutionary legitimacy and transforming it into institutions that provide services in exchange for leadership and representation, often in an exclusionary manner. The international community, for its part, advocates creating councils as a means of stabilization and as an initial stage in conventional intervention in failing or fragile states. For us, however, local councils mean:

1. Laying the first foundations of administrative decentralization, which we consider essential to preventing dictatorship and strengthening participatory governance. Local councils are among the few basic guarantees that the Syrian revolution can successfully bring about change. In the future, decentralization will allow every village, town and city to elect councils that administer its affairs with considerable freedom from an authoritarian central government; national legislative and executive elections and constituencies are distinct from elections to local councils.
2. Ensuring essential services for citizens during the crisis in which the state is collapsing before the regime. Councils are local administrative and political instruments that ensure the management of citizens' daily lives, the provision of basic services, the preservation of peace and the resolution of disputes.
3. Embedding a culture of participation, collective work, institutional action and civil society among the Syrian people. This will help confront claims of revolutionary legitimacy and exclusion, and prevent marginalization, which would only prolong the crisis.
4. Enabling religious and national minorities to elect their local governments in areas that are ideologically or ethnically homogeneous, and to enact their own local laws expressing their cultures and particular characteristics.

Notes and References from the Original Booklet

The entries below reproduce the citations and explanatory notes accompanying the corresponding paragraphs of the Arabic original. Numbers have been sequentially renumbered for this English edition; the original manuscript assigned them IDs 28–45 because the booklet’s text also appears as a chapter in a longer work. Web links are historical references and have not been re-verified.

- [1] Since the seventeenth century, European states and the Ottoman Empire concluded arrangements under which European countries sponsored interests and protected Syrian Christians and minorities; European powers eventually considered these privileges to be “rights” of their own.
- [2] Rabinovich, I. (1979), “The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State 1918–45,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 18, no. 4 (October), pp. 693–712. See also Dr Bashir Zain al-Abidin, research dated 8 January 2013.
- [3] Bilad al-Alawiyyin [The Land of the Alawites], pp. 120–121.
- [4] Gordon Torrey (1969), *The Army and Politics in Syria*, Arabic translation by Mahmoud Fallaha, Beirut, p. 52.
- [5] Khaled Issa , “al- l ā markaziyya al- Id ā riyya fī S ū riyya wa Q ā n ū n al- Id ā ra al- Mahalliyya .” *Gilgamish Center for Kurdish Studies and Research*. <http://gilgamish.org/printarticle.php?id=3412> . Last accessed on June 15, 2013.
- [6] Mainly the EuropeAID -MEDA program.
- [7] The executing firm was BMB Mott MacDonald <http://www.bmb.mottmac.nl/> . See <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/48571573/Municipal-Administration-Modernization-Project-Syria> . Last accessed on June, 15, 2013. We also noticed a tender dating to 2004 pertaining to the same project; <https://www.devex.com/en/projects/municipal-administration-modernization-in-syria/secure?mem=ua&src=tender> . Last accessed on June, 15, 2013.
- [8] “Draft Law: Local Administration - Text of the Law.” June 2008 <http://www.mam-sy.org/userfiles/file/AP1/Law-Local-Admin-eng.pdf>
- [9] *Municipal Decentralization in Syria - A Toolkit: Lessons and Tools from the Aleppo Experience* . A publication by MAM. June 2008, p. 1. <http://www.mam-sy.org/userfiles/file/AP3/HandbookDecentralisationV2.1gh2-eng.pdf> . Last accessed on June 15, 2013.
- [10] *Ibid*, p. 51.
- [11] *The Municipal Administration Modernisation (MAM) Programme* . The 2009 annual report on the Syrian European relations by the Delegation of the European Union to Syria, p. 41. http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/syria/documents/content/more_info/annual_report_en.pdf . Last accessed on June 15, 2013.
- [12] “FEMIP secures a EUR 100 million package to help modernise municipalities in Syria.” Release date: 20 November 2009. <http://www.eib.org/projects/press/2009/2009-227-femip-secures-a-eur-100-million-package-to-help-modernise-municipalities-in-syria.htm> . Last accessed on June 15, 2013.

- [13] Timo Rahmann, "The Al-Asads And The Dog That Did Not Bark. EU Democracy Promotion In The Middle East – The Case of Syria." GRIN, 2005, p. 26.
- [14] Towards a Syrian Urban Development Policy - Memorandum on Sustainable Urban Development in Syria. The First Arab International Conference on Sustainable Urban Development in Syrian Cities, 28 – 29 September 2009 in Damascus. Ministry of Local Administration - Syrian Arab Republic supported by GTZ-UDP, p. 5.
http://germany-wuf.de/upload/GTZ-Towards_susurbdev_policySyria.pdf. Last accessed on June 15, 2013.
- [15] The different reports produced by the MAM project can be found on <http://www.mam-sy.org> (the front page was not responding when accessed on June 15, 2013. However, the different subdirectories were accessible). Of particular importance to our project is the Governance and Institutional Reform part of the MAM project done in the Old City of Damascus, see http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/case-studies/syria_mam_en.pdf; also the Integrated GIS Solution part of the MAM project executed by the Italian firm GESP, see <http://www.gesp.it/ENG/3003.html> and the paper by Fabio Colombo, "An open-source Integrated GIS Solution (IGS) for Syrian Municipal Administration Modernisation project" FOSS4G 2008, 24 Jul 2008; finally, the video testimonies of the Preservation and Development part of the MAM project preserved at http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Development_Cooperation_Handbook/Stories/Preservation_and_Development_-_MAM
- [16] Murad Boubaker, "Revolutionary Legitimacy and Legal Legitimacy."
- [17] World Bank, "Official Development Assistance Agencies," online, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTARABICHOME/EXTTOPICSARABIC/EXTCSOARABIC/0,,contentMDK:20776209~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:1153968,00.html>
- [18] Jamil Awda, "Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations," Imam Shirazi Center for Research and Studies, online, <http://shrsc.com/articles/187.htm>

Artwork, Attribution and Source Status

Reproduced source visuals: historical maps on pages 4, 6 and 7, and the cover of the user-supplied original Arabic booklet. They are included as archival reproductions, not as independently verified present-day maps. Historical geographical labels are left as printed. Rights and original map-source attributions have not been independently determined.

New artwork: Figures 1 and 2 were drawn for the English edition as explanatory diagrams, based on relationships discussed in the source. The figures add visual organization only and do not introduce new historical evidence.

Archival source: "التجربة السورية على صعيد اللامركزية — من الدويلات الطائفية حتى المجالس المحلية الناشئة" (The Syrian Experience of Decentralization: From Sectarian Statelets to Emerging Local Councils), Ezzat Baghdadi in consultation and collaboration with the Emerging Local Council Structures Support Project team, 30 August 2014. The same text appears in chapter 5 of "نحو اللامركزية والحكم المحلي في سوريا" (Toward Decentralization and Local Government in Syria).