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REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib

Local Governance, Services, and the Competition for Legitimacy among Islamist Armed Groups

NOVEMBER 29, 2016 — SAM HELLER

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In Syria's rebel-held Idlib province, residents have established local governance bodies that provide needed services and simultaneously pose a political challenge to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. No overarching authority has replaced the state after it was forced from Idlib. Islamist and jihadist armed groups hold power at the local level, and have developed relatively sophisticated service coordination bodies. Yet ultimate decision-making power has typically sat with donor organizations outside the country. Localism and wartime conditions have also frustrated attempts to unify and rationalize service and governance in Idlib. Syrian rebels wanted Idlib to demonstrate an alternative to Assad's rule, but their efforts have been stymied by internal rivalries and problematic relationships between local rebel administrators inside Syria and international sponsors abroad. Idlib's trajectory mirrors the wider dynamics of Syria's war and fragmented opposition.

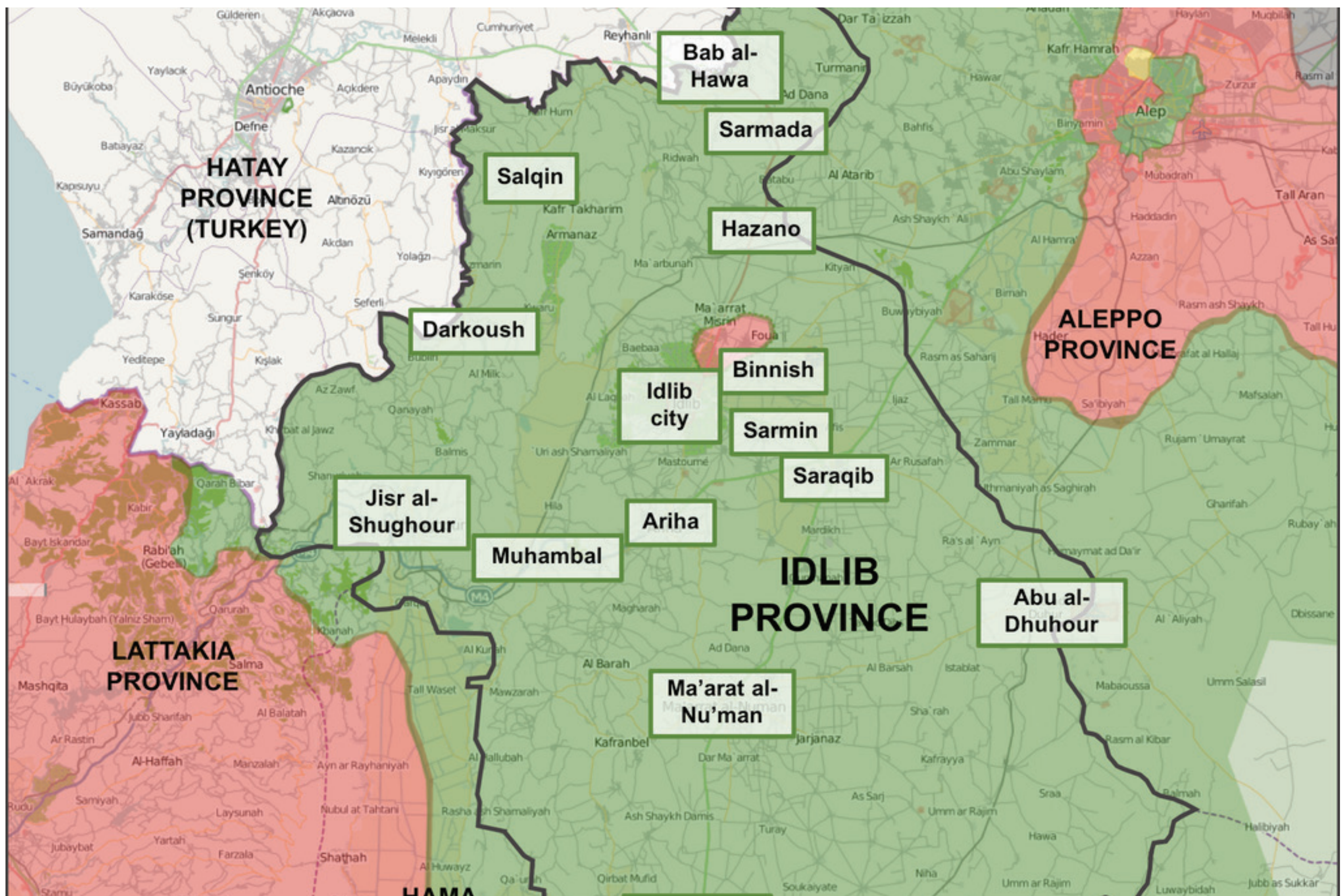
As the regime of Bashar al-Assad recaptured strategic sections of insurgent-controlled Syria in 2016, Syria's rebel-held Idlib province increasingly became the heart of the uprising in the north of the country, the dynamic center of the armed opposition. As the sole province almost entirely under rebel control, Idlib emerged as a key proving ground for Syria's rebels as they sought to demonstrate how they would govern Syria's "liberated" areas.

The Assad regime has staked its claim to legitimacy in large part on the continuity of its state institutions, including normal municipal services. Opposition governance and service provision in Idlib and elsewhere have thus posed a direct challenge to regime authority. Yet governance and public services in Idlib have also become another space for intra-opposition competition. Nascent civilian bodies have contended for resources and public support, but they have also been joined by major rebel factions and service institutions linked to armed groups.

The Syrian opposition has remained broadly united by its resistance to the Assad regime. But an examination of opposition governance in Idlib shows how civilian and military elements of the opposition, in parallel with their ongoing war against the regime, have engaged in a lower-key struggle behind the lines to secure influence and define the political order for which they're fighting.

The dislocating effects of Syria's war and a mechanism for international assistance that coordinates directly with local authorities have together produced a fragmented Idlib,

This report can be found online at: https://tcf.org/content/report/keeping-lights-rebel-idlib/



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administered by more than a hundred city- and town-level bodies, known as local or municipal councils. These miniature governments have provided the basic services that have maintained some minimum quality of life in Idlib's opposition communities, including utilities repairs, sanitation, sales of subsidized bread, and relief distribution. They have also served as an experiment in participatory government after decades of authoritarian control and, in theory, a center of popular legitimacy independent of both the Assad regime and armed factions.

Armed Factions Step In

The uneven performance of the local and municipal councils, their inconsistent foreign backing, and the lack of any supra-local organizing framework have provided an opening for service bodies linked to armed groups. Idlib's two main Islamist or jihadist factions, the Fateh al-Sham Front and Ahrar al-Sham, have backed service bodies that compete with each other as well as with civilian bodies supported by foreign donors, like the Idlib Provincial Council.

In the city of Idlib (the capital of the province), Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham have also jointly established an alternative to the purely civilian local council model, a civilian service administration under a council of armed factions.

According to local observers in Idlib Province, these bodies with links to armed groups have aimed at either rationalizing Idlib's governance and services sector or magnifying their respective factional backers' influence on the ground. But none have been perfectly successful, in part because of the impossibility of restoring normal civic life under periodic, indiscriminate aerial bombing, and these bodies' own limited resources and capacity.

The local councils, as the main vector for international support, have been made the focus of an assortment of Syrian parties interested in steering external assistance. Constituencies such as powerful local families have attempted to coopt or replace local councils and thus shape civic life in their communities, as have armed groups, both through linked service bodies and as individual hometown rebels.

"If you're not a guy with a gun or backed up by someone with a gun, then your connection to power is through assistance," said one Western development worker, interviewed on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak publicly.[1]

But it is often international relief organizations, charities, and development contractors based outside Syria's borders that wield ultimate control over assistance inside the country, and which armed groups and other actors have learned to operate with and around. The result is a rebel territory that is simultaneously atomized and bound up in overlapping, tangled relationships of influence and control between local service bodies, influential clans, armed groups, and international organizations.

Rebel-held Idlib is a showcase for how rebels can pursue influence in nonmilitary spaces, as they reverse-engineer international aid dynamics and, through relatively sophisticated administrative structures, compete with each other for legitimacy. It also demonstrates how, in a civil conflict, even seemingly mundane municipal services like trash disposal and road repairs can be inseparable from issues of political and military control. The civilian and military opposition in Idlib had hoped to create a revolutionary alternative to the Syrian state under the Assad regime. In important ways, they have fallen short. But the service bodies and administrations they have built have shown how insurgents can challenge an incumbent regime's claims to state legitimacy; how they can construct functioning, participatory government, even amid an ongoing civil war; and how they can invest those efforts to win local legitimacy.

This report is based on more than two dozen interviews conducted in person in Turkey and over WhatsApp with Syrians inside Idlib in May, July, August, September, and October 2016, as well as a review of relevant Syrian press and social media. Interviewees included Western development workers and Syrian activists, rebels, humanitarian workers, and officials involved in local governance and service provision. Restrictive border measures taken by the Turkish government and the security situation inside Idlib mean that access to Idlib is limited. Dangers include aerial bombing, but also the threat of kidnapping by entrepreneurial criminals and some of the groups referenced in this report. With some exceptions, independent Western researchers and journalists can no longer safely work inside Idlib province. This report instead relies on interviews conducted remotely, including with local council officials contacted through their councils' Facebook pages, or through in-person meetings in neighboring Turkey. This report aims to be transparent about its sources and methods, and its assertions should be considered in light of the limitations on qualitative research inside Idlib and the rest of northern Syria.

Revolutionary Idlib

Even before Syria's uprising, Idlib province was marginalized, rural, and poor. The mountainous northwestern province, which shares a long border with Turkey's Hatay, depended primarily on agriculture, including olive crops. Idlib's people were largely conservative Sunnis, with small Druze, Shia and Christian minorities. Yet the province was denied the political attention and investment given to other peripheral Sunni-majority provinces. That, coupled with lingering resentment over the Syrian government's 1980s crackdown on Islamists (many of them Idlibis), helped ensure the province became a hotbed for opposition.[2]

Idlib joined nationwide protests against the Assad regime in spring 2011 and became, from summer 2011, an early bastion of the country's armed insurgency. The Syria uprising's first major armed confrontation between proto-rebels and the regime's security services and military took place in the

western Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour in June 2011. (At the time, these fighters seem to have just been armed locals.) Jabal al-Zawiyah, a mountainous section of southern Idlib, served as a key early base for insurgents and nascent rebel factions, some of which would subsequently become some of the most powerful brigades in the country.

The regime's security forces and paramilitary auxiliaries initially managed to suppress opposition in the province's main urban centers, including the city of Idlib, Ariha, and Jisr al-Shughour. Yet they progressively lost their hold on the Idlib countryside, including the western border strip with Turkey and, in summer 2012, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. By 2014, the regime was confined to a few reinforced cities and towns and a set of fortified but mostly encircled military bases.

In December 2014, rebels overran one of the most important and stubborn of those bases, Wadi al-Deif. Then, in March 2015, the newly announced Army of Conquest coalition seized the provincial capital. The Army of Conquest, which was led by the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham and included several other factions, then swept south, taking the regime's remaining bases and the towns of Ariha and Muhambal. Separately, another rebel coalition made mostly of the same factions took the crossroads city of Jisr al-Shughour in Idlib's southwest corner in April 2015. From there, rebels joined up and pushed into the Ghab Plain in Hama, the next province to the south, menacing the regime's coastal strongholds and apparently prompting Russia's intervention later that year on behalf of the regime. With the exception of two loyalist Shia towns stranded and besieged in northern Idlib, the province has been entirely rebel-held ever since.

As rebel-held territory in neighboring Aleppo province has been broken and bisected by a 2016 Russian-backed regime offensive, the rebel north has mostly been reduced to Idlib and contiguous sections of adjacent Lattakia, Hama, and Aleppo provinces. For all of Idlib and its environs, the only outlets to Turkey are, officially, the Bab al-Hawa crossing, run by a nominally civilian administration controlled in practice by Ahrar al-Sham; and several smaller unofficial crossings used for humanitarian purposes, including the Khirbet al-Jouz crossing. There are also unofficial smuggling routes along the length of Idlib's western border with Turkey, mostly controlled by the Fateh al-Sham Front.

In October 2014, the Nusra Front and a smaller, hyper-extreme Nusra splinter called Jund al-Aqsa led a campaign to destroy a number of nationalist Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions in Idlib and Hama.[3]

Since then, Ahrar al-Sham and the Fateh al-Sham Front have been the twin dominant factions in Idlib. They have also, according to Idlib locals, been locked in a mostly bloodless contest for control across the province.[4]

A number of other, smaller factions have swum in their wake, including local FSA brigades and several Islamist and jihadist factions. Idlib's FSA was, by 2016, a largely spent force. Many of its factions are seen to operate under the effective protection of Ahrar al-Sham, which has intellectual and organizational roots in al-Qaeda-style transnational jihadism but has abandoned jihadism's commitment to universal, unending war in favor of a narrowly Syrian focus and a more populist, inclusive approach, an approach I have previously termed "revisionist jihadism." Ahrar al-Sham has aligned itself with the FSA rebel mainstream, while carefully cultivating a separate, more militant identity.[5]

The rise of Islamist and jihadist rebels in Idlib has been accompanied by the imposition of Islamic law (of varying degrees of harshness) and conservative social norms. Many of Idlib's religious minorities have fled. Jihadists obliged Druze towns to convert to Sunni Islam en masse. In one instance, Druze villagers were massacred.[6] The province's two holdout Shia towns have been encircled and periodically attacked as a tool of rebel pressure on the regime and its allies. The Assad regime, for its part, has been happy to hold up Idlib as the alternative to regime control in its own messaging.

Idlib province's residents numbered rough two million in mid-2016, according to one Syrian relief worker who agreed to speak on condition of anonymity,[7] including an estimated 700,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) from

across Syria.[8] They have had to get by in a half-functional war economy sustained in large part by international relief. Living conditions in Idlib were better in 2016 than they had been in 2013 or 2014, said the relief worker, “but not like a developed country.”

Some areas enjoy interrupted grid water and electricity. In many others, electricity is provided by privately owned generators for which residents pay subscriptions, and water is sold from tanker tanks. Residents work in small businesses, construction, smuggling. Many also work in agriculture, including on farmlands seized by Ahrar al-Sham, Fateh al-Sham, and other factions, and leased back to tenant farmers. Some public-sector employees—teachers in particular, but also municipal workers and others—regularly cross into regime-controlled Hama to collect wages from the Syrian state.[9]

But many Idlibis depended on food, sanitary products, temporary housing, and other relief provided by aid organizations including the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Mercy Corps, People in Need, and GOAL. Much of that relief was, in turn, quietly sponsored by the United States and other donor governments.[10] And it has largely run through the province’s local councils.

Idlib’s Local Councils

City- and town-level local councils as well as subsidiary, village-level “branch councils” have filled the service and governance void left by the Assad regime across Idlib province and Syria’s other rebel-held areas.

As with nearly everything in Syria’s war, arrangements for local governance vary from one area to the next and from town to town, but councils typically amount to a central administrative council and a set of specialized executive offices focused on areas like relief and municipal services.

There are 144 local councils across Idlib, including thirty city councils, according to former Saraqib Local Council head and Idlib Provincial Council member Osama al-Hussein.[11] The Saraqib Local Council, he said, is responsible for 150,000 people in Saraqib and the surrounding area and has thirteen subordinate branch councils.

Much of local councils’ importance hinges on their relationships with “munazzamat” (organizations), a catchall term that includes everything from development contractors to international NGOs. Although some donors that still recognize the Syrian state in Damascus prefer to work with local NGOs and relief associations instead of local councils that operate in defiance of Assad regime authority, most relief organizations and charities have designated the councils their go-to civilian partner at the local level.

Local councils are thus the main vehicle for external support to their community. They routinely submit lists of vulnerable relief recipients and help coordinate and oversee relief distribution, including going house to house with donor organizations’ representatives to deliver food baskets and other assistance.

“[Local councils] know they need to provide certain things for an NGO to come work with them,” said Alaa’, a Syrian humanitarian worker with an international relief NGO based in Antakya, Turkey, who spoke on the condition that only his first name be used. “They need a ‘focal point,’ they need stamps, they need credibility with the list [of aid recipients], they need to represent everyone.”[12]

In addition to helping organize relief distribution, councils also provide some intermittently successful municipal services, ranging from operating bakeries[13] to street-cleaning and trash disposal,[14] repairs to the water grid,[15] and road maintenance.[16]

Many of these more resource-intensive services are supported by international donors such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DfID), which have made support for civilian governance and service provision a priority. The United States has provided support through a number of offices, including both USAID proper and USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI), whose “Syria Regional Program”

has a more directed, political mandate to support moderate opposition organizations and promote values of tolerance.[17] Some international assistance has been delivered through discrete, branded projects such as "Bil-Akhdar" (In Green) and "Tamkeen" (Empowerment), supported by donors including USAID,[18] the United Kingdom Conflict Pool, and the European Union.[19]

Local councils coexist and cooperate with other nascent local institutions, including Syria Civil Defence emergency first responders (the "White Helmets") and the Idlib Free Police, that are also supported by international donor governments.[20]

All these councils' work is typically broadcasted on their Facebook pages, complete with thanks to their various organizational partners and donors.

Local councils originally had their roots in early, local activist collectives ("local coordinating committees") and relief associations. Various donors later pushed to standardize the local council model across rebel-held areas and fold those councils under the then-nascent Idlib Provincial Council and Syrian Interim Government, the exiled opposition's executive body.[21]

Councils are elected or nominated in local arrangements that differ from town to town, from variations on indirect elections to consensus among town notables.

In Saraqib, the city's main constituencies (including large families, revolutionary youth, civil society organizations) contribute representatives to a 166-member "notables council" (majlis a'yan). The notables council elect an advisory "shura council" and the head of the main administrative council, who staffs executive offices and runs the city.[22]

In Khan Sheikhoun, local council head Osama al-Sayyadi said that the Idlib Provincial Council formed and led a committee that reviewed thirty council nominees according to a set of common criteria, including educational attainment and their track record of work in the community. The committee then referred the twelve nominees with qualifying scores to a meeting of local organizations, including rebel factions, but also various charitable associations, for consensus approval.

Council elections or nominations, in whatever interpolation is deemed locally workable, represent a first-of-its-kind experience in participatory government for Syrians accustomed to life under an authoritarian security state.

"Before the revolution, people would be named [to municipal positions] by the security services, or there would be show elections in which the votes weren't counted," said Muhammad al-Mustafa, director of the opposition-leaning research organization Toran Center. "We used to hear about someone winning before the elections—[we'd say] 'Congrats, you won.'"[23]

Still, these first attempts at self-governance have run up against a number of challenges.

A major obstacle to councils' effectiveness and professionalism, both according to council members themselves and others who work with them, is that council members typically aren't paid a regular living wage.

Many employees of dedicated municipal service offices, such as water maintenance teams, continue to collect wages from the Assad regime. This is the case in many areas that have slipped out of government control, including areas now ruled by the Islamic State.[24] But members of the councils themselves largely work on a volunteer basis. Some councils receive donor stipends or collect "jibayah" (fees for utilities or bread), which they can use to defray costs and pay some partial wages. But external support for local councils is mostly in-kind, such as food baskets or service equipment like dumpsters and generators. In practice, that means that local council work is often done by wealthy residents who can spare the time, or by less well-off, distracted locals who moonlight at their day job to provide for their families. Many qualified Syrians are drawn to better-paying work for international NGOs or development contractors, and the well-intentioned dentists and lawyers who can afford to volunteer on councils often aren't the best-equipped to handle the actual work of administering a town.

After years without real taxation, it seems impossible for a local council that provides only a few spotty municipal services to ask its community to start contributing more. "People would burn down the council," said Saraqib's Osama al-Hussein.[25]

Without a tax base, the continuity of service projects depends on continued external support. Amr Tarrisi, Director of Programs with Syrian relief organization Binafsaj, said his organization had supported municipal services in some areas with dumpsters, equipment, and fuel. But after his organization's support stopped, the projects, initially successful, fell into disrepair. "There's no sustainability, because they can't fund themselves," he said. "And any project might be a target for bombing."[26]

Corruption, Nepotism, and Armed Group Interference

Local councils' work has been marred by corruption and, more often, nepotism, favoritism, and waste in local council staffing and aid distribution.

Irregularities are often more pronounced in rural areas and small towns than in Idlib's cities, where local councils tend to be more organized and professional. Many of these city councils have simply assimilated the Assad regime's existing municipal service offices, complete with most of their staff, who proceed with their work more or less normally. But in smaller villages and rural areas, more municipal responsibilities are arrogated directly to a council whose seats might be divided between a handful of big families or clans.

"If the family is rich, or if it's big, you know how they deal with this—'One family, one pocket,'" said humanitarian worker Alaa'. "So if you're my cousin and you're rich, then I'm rich."[27]

"The mindset is that you have the headman of the family who serves as the family authority and reference point, so you put him forward as your representative on the LC," said Nour Hallak, who trained local council members for an international development contractor. "But then you end up with old men who can distribute largesse without real qualifications."[28]

Local councils must also contend with local rebel factions, which may intervene in their work either directly or through indirect tools of pressure. Rebels may be formally involved in approving key local council appointments, as in Khan Sheikhoun and Sarmin, or may impose civilian members understood to be linked to a faction. Local commanders can also take it upon themselves to investigate and arbitrate in a claim of council malfeasance.

"We don't have policemen, or an army," Alaa' said. "So the same soldier who's fighting for four months on the front line, he comes back and becomes a policeman. He's got the same mentality."[29]

Some factions also maintain Islamic courts that enjoy varying degrees of formal independence from their factional sponsor, but these courts seem not to meddle normally in councils' work.

In many areas, rebels have seized the property of regime supporters and divided public property as "spoils." That can sometimes mean that rebels control the local sources of revenue that could help make the area council self-sustaining.

"For example, the local council doesn't control the water," said Hallak, "so it can't collect a utility bill for water, so it can't [afford to] operate the water pump. So the local faction gets to keep selling the water in tanker trucks."

In the ideal case, a popular, well-resourced local council can reverse this power dynamic and either dictate to or establish a mutually beneficial working relationship with area factions. But no local council can operate in a hermetically sealed bubble, isolated from the wartime context and the armed groups around it.

"Part of what makes a local council successful is that it can navigate relationships with armed groups, not that it insulates itself from them," said another Western development worker

who also spoke on condition of anonymity. "The challenge is to be as independent as possible while meeting as many needs as possible."[30]

Most interviewees for this report said they thought the majority of local councils were hard-working and honest. (Ones that weren't, they said, often saw support for their communities cut off by frustrated aid organizations.) Many local council members are professionals with means who could have made a life abroad. Instead, they've remained inside Idlib to literally keep the lights on in their home communities and deliver needed assistance, all for minimal pay.

"I think the people doing this work are a sort of 'administrative combatant,'" said Mustafa, of the Toran Center. "The people who do this work in the liberated areas are no less brave than those fighting on the front lines."[31]

But when irregularities happen, there's nobody to systematically supervise councils and hold them accountable.

"There's no authority on the ground to check them," said Fouad Sayyed Issa, another relief worker with Binafsaj. "They don't answer to the factions; at the start, they fell under the Interim Government, but now they answer to no one."[32]

The Idlib Provincial Council

In theory, Idlib's local councils exist within an official, donor-promoted superstructure of opposition institutions. These include the Idlib Provincial Council, an opposition counterpart to the regime's provincial authority; the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the opposition's deliberative body in exile; and the Syrian Interim Government, the opposition's executive authority.

At one point, these bodies were a Syrian state-in-waiting, a sort of simulacrum of the regime's structures. They represented an inclusive, civilian-led, revolutionary alternative to the regime and its institutions.

Yet as Syria's war has dragged on and a political transition has become increasingly improbable, the political rationale for an opposition shadow state has become increasingly unclear. The Coalition and the Interim Government have seen dysfunction and allegations of corruption tarnish their image. Donor support has fallen off.

Still, the Idlib Provincial Council has continued to work to serve the province's residents. It can claim some functional relevance as a channel for important donor assistance and, amid a vacuum of legitimacy in the province, it can claim at least a partial democratic popular mandate. And, at least on paper, it should be the supervisory authority Idlib's local councils need.

The Provincial Council was established in 2013, but for several years it remained based in Turkey and only semi-functional. It took on a more active role in 2015, when it moved its headquarters to Hazano, Idlib, with another office in Gaziantep.

Yet unlike the relatively influential provincial council in neighboring Aleppo, the Idlib Provincial Council has struggled to assume a really central, authoritative role in a province where Islamist and jihadist armed groups—many with mixed or negative feelings about civilian opposition institutions like the Coalition—hold sway.

"It's a tough thing to work in Idlib," said one Western development worker.[33]

Like a super-sized local council, the Provincial Council has a set of specialized offices focused on areas like education and agriculture, as well as representative offices across the province. Yet the real measure of the Provincial Council's impact is not its own programming, but its direct support for local councils and for projects implemented in conjunction with councils.

Some key support for local council service provision runs through the Provincial Council, including larger projects from USAID/OTI's Syria Regional Program aimed at linking

and strengthening the province's civilian institutions.[34] A service project might come from an OTI implementer as part of the Syria Regional Program, said Osama al-Hussein of Saraqib, but the local council would sign the contract with the Provincial Council.[35]

The Provincial Council's influence depends on what it can provide, especially to local councils, according to current Provincial Council head Ghassan Hammou. "We need to meet these local councils' needs—for basic goods, electricity, water, food, transportation," he said. "We need to provide, so we get legitimacy and strength, so the people are with us."[36]

But the council has otherwise had to grapple with scant resources and limited influence over local councils. In practice, the Provincial Council is closer to another "munazzamah" (the singular of munazzamat, or organizations) among many furnishing support and projects to these councils than it is to a supreme body. Many relief organizations opt to deal directly with local councils, weakening the Provincial Council's leverage.

The Provincial Council "doesn't have anything at all," Hammou said, frustrated. "If some organization comes along with $500,000 to distribute, for that much I could get loyalty for more than a hundred Provincial Councils."

"We want to provide something tangible on the ground," he said. "We want to go back and say that, with the hands of Syria's sons, we restored a modern, prosperous Syria, a Syria of security and peace."

"The Provincial Council is both the strongest and weakest link," said Saraqib's Hussein. "Strongest in that it is the only party that has legitimacy, inside or outside the country, as a representative, elected body. So it's the strongest, and it can affect [foreign] support. But it's the weakest in that it isn't given resources, something that could pull together the province."[37]

The council has taken tenuous steps to fix that. In August 2016, it convened a meeting of Idlib local councils, where it announced work on establishing a central oversight body to supervise those councils, and a planning body to define their relationship with external organizations and donor bodies.[38] If successful, the move could institutionalize the work of Idlib's local councils.

The Service Administration Commission

But a weak Provincial Council and local councils that are, in important ways, structurally deficient have helped invite other bodies to set themselves up as a partial alternative—in particular, the Service Administration Commission (SAC) backed by Islamist faction Ahrar al-Sham.

Ahrar al-Sham official Ammar Labib ("Abu al-Zahra"), an engineer by trade, established the SAC in September 2015 to coordinate service bodies in Syria's rebel-held north.[39] It was Labib's idea to establish an independent, civilian body, "out from under the skirts of these military organizations," said SAC external relations official Firas al-Raslan.[40] Raslan said the SAC's leadership had recognized the importance of dealing with the outside world to build a functioning civil administration in Syria's opposition-held areas.

The SAC's primary mission is to coordinate and complement Idlib's local councils, although it has provided a broad range of its own support and service projects across Idlib and adjacent areas of Lattakia and Hama, ranging from road repairs[41] to the regulation of public property,[42] the maintenance of civil registries,[43] and relief for IDPs.[44] The SAC has typically formalized its work with "memoranda of understanding" with local councils and various relief bodies, agreements that in some cases have given the SAC oversight of councils' work and finances.[45] The SAC has also supervised the formation and restructuring of local councils in areas where they've been nonexistent or dysfunctional.[46] Among its specialized offices, it has advertised an Oversight and Follow-up Administration meant to check corruption and misuse of public funds in local councils.[47]

SAC officials and Ahrar al-Sham have deliberately kept their relationship ambiguous. Labib, for example, has stressed in media interviews that the SAC is "civilian and independent."[48] But Idlibis interviewed for this report all understood the SAC to be quietly backed by Ahrar al-Sham, something Raslan himself acknowledged.

"A body that belongs to Ahrar?[49] Sounds good," Raslan told me. "I don't have a problem saying that it's a body that belongs to Ahrar if Ahrar protects us."

"Our work and organization are independent," he said, "but Ahrar protects us because they see that as being in the public interest."[50]

Both Raslan and his deputy, Qutaiba al-Shiqran, had served with Ahrar al-Sham, although they said that so long as they were working for the SAC, they were outside Ahrar. They said only a handful of top SAC officials, including the two of them and Labib, had been with Ahrar al-Sham and that the SAC's other employees were civilian technocrats.[51]

But the SAC's case for its efficacy and legitimacy hangs in part on its relationship with Ahrar al-Sham. The SAC claims resources, technocratic expertise, and a tangible presence inside rebel-held Syria, with which it can link and coordinate local councils inside Idlib and in neighboring provinces. It also says it can credibly play the sort of oversight role these councils need, putting a stop to the sort of corruption and dysfunction that persists in many towns.

But it can do that in large part because of its ties with Ahrar al-Sham, which also give it the weight it needs to keep other, more menacing armed factions out of civilian life.

The SAC's case is a realist one: it can make things work. As for armed group influence, it's just a fact inside the country, and civilian actors need to align with a faction to protect themselves. "The councils need to build relationships with whoever's closest to them if they're going to succeed," Raslan said. "That's a reality."

But the SAC's ties to Ahrar al-Sham had complicated its outreach to donor organizations, Raslan said, exasperated. The SAC had approached some development contractors to forge partnerships and even to appeal for direct support, he said, but had been rebuffed because of concerns over armed group control. The SAC's military "cover" had proved to be a problem, he said, even though he emphasized that this cover was a practical necessity inside the country and that the SAC enjoyed popular support.

"The same way 'Abu Lahya'"—a nickname meaning "Father of the Beard," or some guy with a beard—"is considered a terrorist in America, the SAC is considered Ahrar," he said. "I don't know how to convince them we're a civilian body."

Still, Raslan said he thought the SAC had been successful so far, given its limited means, and he thought the SAC could be a service component within Syria's future, post-revolution state. "Anything we can do for people inside, we'll do," said Raslan. "But within a specific framework that we won't go beyond. We don't work for anyone."[52]

The SAC Builds Relationships

Relief workers in neighboring Turkey said they had sat with representatives from the SAC in meetings that had been, on the whole, positive.

"In comparison with the Nusra Front's PSA, Ahrar's SAC is more intelligent and more flexible," said a Syrian relief worker who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They're not stubborn. They come here, and we've had more than one meeting with them. And their cooperation with the Turkish side here is good."

"Their officials are engineers, doctors, educated people," he said. "Whereas the Nusra Front's people are a little stubborn, it can be difficult to deal with them." He added, however, that his organization only works with local councils and had no memorandum of understanding with the SAC.[5]3

Some officials involved with governance inside Idlib were more critical of the SAC. They agreed that Idlib's local

councils needed some sort of supervising authority, but they said the SAC didn't serve that function.

Saraqib's Osama al-Hussein said that the SAC had deliberately brought on locally influential people from across the province who could turn around and convince their respective local councils to sign memoranda of understanding with the SAC. To appeal to local councils, he said, "They'd offer a little project, and a wage to the head of the local council—like a bribe."[54]

Other local council officials said the SAC had made some headway in winning over local councils, but that its reach was more limited than it claimed. It had mostly established itself in areas with poorly resourced local councils or councils that had been denied outside support, they said.

"There are areas that are weak, with weak local councils, and minimal services that have been forced to join the SAC so they can cover these sectors and provide services to citizens," said Ibrahim Nabhan, deputy head of the Sarmin Local Council and head of its media office.

Nabhan said his council had signed a memorandum of understanding with the SAC but that it was voided after the Sarmin council bristled under the SAC's oversight. "They wanted everything inside Sarmin to go back to them—what comes to us, they would take it, then it would be distributed through them," he said. The SAC's promised services weren't enough to keep the Sarmin local council on board, Nabhan said. "They would provide services like they do to any area under the SAC, which isn't enough," he told me. He also said there were problems between the SAC and Sarmin's shura council, which includes a member from Ahrar al-Sham but also representatives of a number of other jihadist and Islamist rebel factions[55]

Part of why the SAC has run into resistance from some foreign donors may be concerns that the SAC is edging out the Idlib Provincial Council. Raslan said the SAC coordinates and has a strong relationship with the Idlib Provincial Council.[56] But speaking about the SAC, Provincial Council head Ghassan Hammou was clearly unnerved by the body's appeals to some local councils.

"They come and say, 'We're with you,' or they offer some wages," he said. The SAC and other military or military-linked actors, he said, were "frustrating the people's will."

The previous leadership of Provincial Council had signed a memorandum of understanding with the SAC, Hammou said, but only for a single project to provide flour. He said he now considered that memorandum expired.

"If we're weakened, that's a problem," he said, "It'll take years to recover the people's right to decide for itself."[57]

The Public Service Administration

The Fateh al-Sham Front's PSA[58] seems, like Fateh al-Sham itself, less interested in managing its image outside the country and juggling a complex, political set of relationships. The PSA is Fateh al-Sham's service administration, which is more or less how it presents itself.

"[The SAC] shows Ahrar's sophistication in terms of its longer vision and sense of the bigger picture, with things like its mergers-and-acquisitions strategy," a Western development worker told me. "It's just better at navigating these relationships and being the glue that holds things together." The PSA, he said, "is much less nuanced."

The PSA and its approach seem to be a sort of translation of Fateh al-Sham's operating philosophy as an armed faction into the service sector. Like Fateh al-Sham itself, it is dislocated from dynamics outside the country and cut off from foreign backing. Yet, even as it has lined up local revenues to ensure its own sustainability, it lacks the sort of resource base that would allow it take sole control of the service sector in its areas of operation. Instead, it has mostly focused on a few extremely visible, high-impact services and sectors that demonstrate its value and indispensability to the local public, not unlike how Fateh al-Sham's car bombs and shock troops have served as the tip of the spear for rebel offensives.

Also like Fateh al-Sham, the PSA exists parallel to but clearly apart from the opposition mainstream, in this case the local councils. The result is a sharp contrast to the bridging and coordinating role Ahrar al-Sham has played between Syria's nationalist and jihadist armed factions, as well as the SAC's own efforts to link revolutionary bodies.

The PSA was originally established in and around Aleppo city, where it focused mainly on maintaining and operating key infrastructure, including the Suleiman al-Halabi water station and sections of the electrical grid.[59] The body expanded into Idlib in summer 2015. Ahmed al-Shami, an engineer and head of the PSA's media office, said the PSA entered after the capture of Idlib city "to fill the administrative vacuum that followed after the liberation of these huge areas, to preserve public facilities, and to provide public services to residents."[60]

Like the PSA in Aleppo, the Idlib PSA maintains key electrical infrastructure, including the main electrical line that runs north from Hama to Aleppo[61] and secondary electrical connections across Idlib province.[62] (On its Facebook page, it posts regular updates about the status of the electrical grid in northern Syria.[63]) The body also provides additional municipal services in Fateh al-Sham strongholds, including Idlib's western countryside; sections of the southern Idlib countryside (which the PSA calls, confusingly, its "Hama Branch);[64] and the Badiyyah desert.[65]

The PSA at the Local Level

Instead of complementing and reinforcing existing local councils, as the SAC does, Fateh al-Sham's PSA seems instead to have taken more overt control of service provision and to have filled service gaps itself through PSA offices.

The actual shape of the PSA and its executive offices seem to vary by area. In southern Idlib, the PSA advertises the work of its Electricity Directorate,[66] a Water Directorate,[67] and a Service Office[68] responsible for miscellaneous municipal repairs. The PSA's Hama Branch has highlighted services including electricity and water provision, bakeries, and road repair.[69] In western Idlib, it's not clear what bodies the PSA now maintains. Unlike local councils elsewhere, service institutions in this area seem not to advertise their work to their constituents and foreign donors on Facebook, perhaps due to Fateh al-Sham's concerns about photography and operational security.

In December 2015, Fateh al-Sham (then the Nusra Front) advertised the work of a "municipality" in the west Idlib town of Darkoush that was handling sanitation, bakeries, relief provision, and repairs to sewage lines.[70] Interviewees said the Nusra Front had moved in 2015 to change at least some local councils in the western countryside to "municipalities," but Nusra later retreated after its municipalities ran up against objections from relief organizations that insisted on working with local councils. Now these areas have both local councils that handle relief and communication with outside organizations, and PSA municipalities that handle service matters like phone lines, water, and sanitation.[71]

Some of these western Idlib towns, such as Salqin, had long-standing local councils. In September 2016, Fateh al-Sham tweeted photos of the "PSA"—no clarification on precisely what subsidiary body—paving roads in Salqin.[72] "With respect to these names, this is just normal," the PSA's Shami said. "Every city, town, and village has its own way of life, so this has to do with the residents of these areas."[73]

Khan Sheikhoun Local Council head Osama al-Sayyadi said Fateh al-Sham's PSA bears much of the service burden in his city, including the operation of bakeries and water and electricity provision.[74] "Every [service] institution needs support," he told me. "It needs generators, maintenance, operating costs. The council doesn't have these things. Whereas the PSA, in principle, has the resources—even if they're not much—to provide these services."

Sayyadi said his council, which he described as chronically under-resourced, had recently agreed with the PSA to take over sanitation services in the city.[75] He said he hoped the council could take over water provision next; he had already approached donors to apply for the necessary equipment. "The local council, in general, is the designated, formal body

for organizations to work with," Sayyadi said, "whereas only a few organizations will deal with the PSA."

"The PSA is providing services within its means, but it can't handle all these portfolios in the city," he said.

Sayyadi estimated that 90 percent of the PSA's employees in Khan Sheikhoun were locals. "Given that they've been hired from the city of Khan Sheikhoun," he said, "we deal with them in terms of serving the city."[76]

Interviewees said the PSA was mostly civilian, but that its managers were Fateh al-Sham members.[77] The PSA denied this, saying all the PSA's employees were civilian. "The PSA is a wholly civilian service body," the PSA's Shami said. "It doesn't have any military or political activity." Critically, the PSA pays its employees a regular wage, albeit not a particularly large one.

The PSA Works (Mostly) Alone

The PSA's Shami acknowledged that many relief and development organizations would not work with the PSA. "Every organization has its own policy," Shami wrote. "Some refuse to deal with us, while others deal and coordinate with us in some way." He declined to name the organizations that coordinate with the PSA, so as not to "embarrass" them.

But he said a lack of cooperation from foreign organizations wasn't a major obstacle; there are alternative sources of support, and the PSA relies on resources inside the country, including revenue-generating projects. He declined to specify the PSA's sources of revenue "for fear they might be targeted and dried up."

Fateh al-Sham and, by association, the PSA have also had real and reasonable concerns about security and the role of outside organizations, which may collect data on local demographics and atmospherics to further their programming. "[Fateh al-Sham], or any other faction, has to intervene in the local councils' work and impose some things, particularly related to security," said Binafsaj's Fouad Sayyed Issa. "So with [outside] organizations in particular, sometimes they might forbid dealing with a particular organization."[78] Binafsaj works in a number of areas controlled by armed factions, including Fateh al-Sham.[79]

By late 2016, the PSA seemed to have stopped growing. PSA spokesman Shami said the PSA was ready to expand to any newly liberated area,[80] and some interviewees said it had previously approached local councils to establish ties or tried to establish service outposts in areas of mixed factional control.[81] But at least its normal municipal service provision seemed confined to clear zones of Nusra dominance.

In these areas, it likely makes sense to treat PSA as part of a larger apparatus of Fateh al-Sham control, a suite of institutions that also include "Dar al-Qada" courts and the Islamic Police. Although these bodies have operated separately from the PSA, the cumulative effect has been that Fateh al-Sham had imposed order in its areas of control, including accountability for workers in the municipal service sector.

"The country needs something like [Fateh al-Sham's authority]," said one relief worker. "There are arms everywhere. There needs to be someone whose word is carried out by everyone."[82]

The PSA's Shami was, for his part, relatively humble about the PSA's performance, calling it "not bad." The PSA had managed to ensure some service continuity in these areas, he told me, despite what he called the Assad regime's systematic destruction of local infrastructure. "In general, there have been some failings," he wrote. "But in light of these conditions and the means available, it's possible to justify them."

The strategic objective behind the PSA is somewhat vague. The SAC has the relatively clear aim of becoming the connective tissue of local governance in the north, even as it has fallen somewhat short of this goal because of its limited resources and donor resistance. But beyond capturing some raw popular support and, more altruistically, serving

Fateh al-Sham members' communities, it's not obvious what justifies Fateh al-Sham's investment in the PSA. Its expansion into Idlib may have been basically defensive, meant to counterbalance Ahrar al-Sham's newly established SAC and to give Fateh al-Sham some rural leverage in a contest for influence within the Army of Conquest's Idlib Administration.

The Idlib Administration

The origins of Idlib's armed group-linked service institutions all seem to trace back, one way or another, to the Army of Conquest's string of victories in spring 2015. The capture of nearly the entire province raised the ceiling for the political ambitions of the entire Syrian opposition, civilian and military.

The opposition's Interim Government, for one, hailed the Army of Conquest's "great victory," promising it would instruct its directorates to go to work inside Idlib city and the Idlib Provincial Council to relocate its headquarters from the Idlibi village of Hazano to the provincial seat.[83] That Interim Government statement met with a sharp denial from jihadist evangelist and Army of Conquest judge Abdullah al-Muheisini, who tweeted that the opposition National Coalition would have no place inside Idlib. The province would only be governed by "God's law," Muheisini wrote.[84]

The capture of Idlib city was seen by many in the opposition as a second chance to govern responsibly after their failure in Raqqa city.

Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front, and several FSA units took the northern city of Raqqa in March 2013, making it the first provincial capital to fall to the Syrian insurgency. But then, in April 2013, most local Nusra Front fighters flipped to the newly announced Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and ISIS subsequently expelled the FSA from the city. The city was divided between ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham tried to fill the service vacuum in the city and present a model for mature Islamist government but, by its own leaders' admission, mostly failed.[85] In January 2014, ISIS seized sole control of the city, which has since served as its de facto Syrian capital and, for the Syrian opposition, a bitter reminder of what they lost.

"When Raqqa was liberated, it was fertile ground to build the institutions of a state, or an alternative government," said an Idlib activist who asked to use the pseudonym "Sirajjedin Ahmed" for fear of retribution by armed groups. "But Raqqa didn't stay in the revolutionaries' hands for long, and the revolutionaries didn't realize what it meant to set up the institutions of a state, or to preserve the state institutions and facilities that were already there—hospitals, civil defense centers, medical centers."

"They weren't able to liberate another provincial capital until Idlib city," he said. Idlib is near to the border with Turkey, a friendly country through which rebels could bring supplies and relief and humanitarian organizations could come and go. With Idlib, he said, "you could accomplish something on the ground."[86]

The capture of Idlib city was also followed by confusion and looting, witnesses told me,[87] and then months of debate over how the city would be run. But eventually, the Army of Conquest's member factions agreed to establish the Idlib Administration under their Shura Council, the province's first real experiment in joint governance by Idlib's Islamist factions.

While PSA spokesman Ahmed al-Shami said the PSA entered Idlib to manage the large sections of Idlib province taken by the Army of Conquest, both the PSA and the SAC have, in fact, mostly stayed out of the sections of Idlib seized by the Army of Conquest. Instead, it is the Army of Conquest's joint Idlib Administration that has run Idlib city, Ariha, and Muhambal since summer 2015.

The Idlib Administration is "like a local council, but bigger," said its external relations representative Muhammad Jaffa. It comprises a set of directorates responsible for areas like education, telecommunications, health, and municipal services that all answer to a central administration. It also operates the faculties of Idlib University, which Jaffa said had enrolled 4,500 students at nominal tuition.

Jaffa had been head of the local council in the town of Armanaz, as well as a coordinator for the Qatari Red Cross. He chose to work for the Idlib Administration because it was the center of the province, he said, and he thought its work could have a positive impact across Idlib.[88]

The Idlib Administration is "a more advanced experiment than al-Raqqa," said Uqba al-Sayyid Ali, a humanitarian worker with Binafsaj. Binafsaj has provided relief and other assistance in Idlib city.[89]

The Idlib Administration answers to the Army of Conquest's Idlib Shura Council, made of representatives from the Army of Conquest's various factions. Order in these areas is maintained by the Executive Force, a police unit manned by rebels from various factions.

The Administration itself is mostly civilian and technocratic, but leadership of the Administration, the Shura Council, and the Executive Force rotates between the Army of Conquest's factions. Of the four heads of the Administration to date, three have come from Ahrar al-Sham and one from Fateh al-Sham.[90] The first head of the Administration, Mudhar Abdussalam Hamdoun ("Abu Abdussalam al-Shami"), was fatally wounded fighting with Ahrar al-Sham against the Assad regime in south Aleppo.[91]

Jaffa stressed that the Army of Conquest's military factions don't intervene in civilian affairs and that the Shura Council is primarily concerned with inter-factional disputes. Civilian city residents have also formed a notables' council that can receive complaints and appeal for change.[92]

The relationship between the Army of Conquest's factions themselves has occasionally been tricky. Some say that, as in the rest of the province, Ahrar al-Sham and the Fateh al-Sham Front have also vied for influence inside Idlib city, including within nominally joint institutions.

One Idlib activist who requested anonymity for his safety said members of the Executive Force from the Nusra Front and Jund al-Aqsa (which subsequently withdrew from the Army of Conquest[93] and the Idlib Administration[94]) had done an end-run around the Ahrar al-Sham head of the Executive Force to seek approval to break up revolutionary protests in the city in March 2016.[95]

"The Nusra Front and Jund members of the Executive Force didn't listen to the Executive Force head, they listened to [Shura Council head and Nusra Front commander] Abu Abdurrahman al-Zirbeh," he said. "He brought other Nusra Front members with him who attacked the protest and abducted six activists."[96]

Jaffa said the problems had been caused by activists from outside the city, but that the issue had been resolved. The Executive Force members who had overstepped their bounds were removed, he said.[97]

The Idlib Administration and the Army of Conquest eventually softened on cooperation with the National Coalition and other opposition bodies, although interviewees said the Interim Government's role is still minimal inside Idlib city and elsewhere in the province.[98] The Idlib Administration's Education Directorate, administered jointly with the Coalition, has unified the education sector across Idlib, including setting examination times and dates. Idlib's health sector is also now run out of Idlib city. Jaffa said the Administration was working to unify Idlib's telecommunications and that it had achieved some cooperation on agriculture.[99]

The hope, he said, was that the Idlib Administration could administer the entirety of Idlib province and eventually be the nucleus of a mini-government. But he also said the Administration was struggling with resistance from donors. "In Idlib, they look at the military element that's in control, and use that as a pretense [not to provide support]," he said. "Even though no military faction ever interferes in the work of the civil administration in Idlib."

He said some foreign backers had been intimidated by the Army of Conquest's success and by its unified political-military front.[100]

Some outside organizations seem to have been deterred by

issues of armed group control and by mandatory licensing with the Idlib Administration's Organizations Office. This has not been the case for all, however: foreign relief organizations like Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH)[101] and German relief organization arche noVa have both donated equipment to the Administration.[102]

Jaffa said that a lack of resources was a persistent problem facing the Idlib Administration and that it had so far been unable to return to the level of service provision in the city under the Assad regime. "We don't have countries that support us, and we don't have some national product to take care of these costs," he said.

The Administration collects some limited fees, Jaffa said, but not much, and it receives no support from the Army of Conquest's military factions. Many employees work on a volunteer basis, he said. The Administration had appealed to donors to sponsor wages, but had been turned down.[103]

Interviewees were sharply divided on the Idlib Administration's performance. Some said it had been a success, albeit one sabotaged in part by regime bombing, while others said it had been paralyzed by factional dysfunction. Significantly, the city's notables' council has itself sharply criticized the Administration's poor performance. In a September statement, it alleged, among other complaints, that Idlib "lacks a real, civilian administration that's independent of this factional tug of war and enjoys sufficient authority."[104]

Some have argued for the establishment of civilian local councils that could work with foreign organizations and receive more expansive international support.

"The Army of Conquest's Administration has failed everywhere," said Ariha's Nour Hallak. He and others have been lobbying to reinstate a local council in Ariha. Ariha is now administered by a local counterpart to the Idlib Administration whose service bodies operate, as in Idlib, under a supreme council of Army of Conquest rebels.

The Idlib Administration had been able to skate by thanks to limited outside support, he said, but it didn't have the resources or capacity to handle its service burden over the medium and long term, in Ariha and elsewhere.

"We told them [Ariha] needs a local council, because [relief] organizations will bring you food baskets, but big companies won't enter a city that's under military authority," Hallak told me. A civilian Ariha local council could benefit from projects from USAID and DfID contractors, he said.

"We've offered to use a different name; a 'revolutionary council,' for example," he said. "They think the name 'local council' means that it belongs to the National Coalition."[105]

Idlibis against Each Other

Even as the Syrian opposition in Idlib remains united in its resistance to the Assad regime, Idlib's service sector has opened up secondary and tertiary cleavages among Idlib's residents, splits over issues ranging from the province's civic character to super-local familial disputes. Yet the imperative of keeping the province functioning has also brought its service bodies and residents together in counterintuitive ways.

Saraqib's Osama al-Hussein described a race for influence between the Idlib Provincial Council, the PSA, and the SAC. "The struggle is between those three axes," Hussein said, "and each one is trying to win the local councils for itself."

In one extreme example, PSA-SAC competition helped lead to actual bloodshed between Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham in the west Idlib city of Salqin. As outlined in a subsequent judicial ruling[106] and according to knowledgeable interviewees, the PSA was already operating in the city, but, in coordination with the local council, the SAC established a service office. A scuffle between the locals responsible for each service office escalated into a deadly shootout and a larger mobilization of Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham's fighters before calmer heads ultimately prevailed.[107]

The deadly clash was, on some level, between Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham, and between the SAC and PSA. But interviewees also emphasized the specific, local dimension

of the Salqin episode. As with so much of the big-picture, faction-on-faction tension in the province, they ascribed the Salqin episode to an essentially local contest for influence between two Salqin families who happened to fly different factional flags.

"You're from a family, and I'm from a family," said the Idlib Administration's Muhammad Jaffa. "So we bring our disputes into our work. You want to help with electricity, and so do I. You want to win over people, and so do I. So that leads to a clash."[108]

"When a city is liberated, who takes control of it? Its sons," activist Sirajeddin Ahmed said. "The kids who were driven out, and who belong to various factions, they go back to their town and control it. So each one of them wants to control the city, to be the power in the city. And the smartest one runs things."

"But the meaning of control can differ from the military sense," he went on. "You can do it by providing services, building a strong base of popular support… And weapons are everywhere, and there are no controls."[109]

PSA spokesman Ahmed al-Shami said the province-wide competition between various service authorities had both an up- and a downside for Idlib's residents.

"It has a positive side, in that there's competition to provide better services for the civilian public," he said. "And it has a negative one, because of this division and unilateralism you see sometimes." He said he thought these service bodies had managed to mitigate this negative aspect by coordinating with each other.[110]

And it is true that, even as these service bodies attempt to edge each other out and occasionally inflame local divisions, they sometimes collaborate and intersect in unpredictable ways.

Khan Sheikhoun and the surrounding area, for example, are also served by the SAC in addition to the PSA and the local council, although the PSA is the most active locally. The SAC has a representative office in Idlib city and Ariha, although the Army of Conquest's Idlib Administration serves both cities. And in one update on a disruption to the northern electricity grid, the PSA described repairs coordinated between the PSA, the Idlib Administration, the Idlib Electricity Directorate, and maintenance teams from the Assad regime sent north from Hama.[111]

Idlib judge Ziad al-Basha, who helped supervise Provincial Elections in 2016, said he'd expected resistance to holding elections in Jisr al-Shughour from the Fateh al-Sham Front and the Turkistan Islamic Party, jihadist factions which jointly control most of the city. "I was ready to try to build confidence with them based on the principle of shura on a consensual model," Basha said. "But I was surprised when they insisted that [local delegates to choose the Provincial Council] be chosen based on an election."[112] The SAC also advertised its role in helping organize Provincial Council elections in Jisr al-Shughour,[113] as well as in cities like Harem[114] and Ariha.[115]

Where political or ideological imperatives have conflicted with practical needs, these bodies have often erred on the side of the functional. A relief worker recounted how Fateh al-Sham's PSA had hired a former regime supporter to run its office in one west Idlib town. "With the head of the municipality, now a PSA member, residents rebelled against him and said he was a 'shabih,'" the relief worker said, using a derogatory term for a pro-regime thug. "But [the PSA] had advertised the job, and no one applied but him. And his qualifications were good, so they hired him."[116]

Jaffa, of the Idlib Administration, said that in the immediate aftermath of the capture of Idlib city, rebels were sensitive to bringing on former municipal employees seen as sympathetic to the regime. With time, though, they recognized the need to benefit from these civilians' expertise. "If they hadn't taken up arms, it's normal," he said, "If they were with the regime rhetorically, no problem."[117]

Binafsaj's Amr Tarrisi put it succinctly: "You can't have a university run by someone who's illiterate."[118]

At the Mercy of Outside Forces

Yet even as Idlib's service bodies and residents compete with each other, they must also grapple with forces beyond their control.

The regime's aerial bombing seems to be the main obstacle to predictable, sustainable civic life in Idlib. "Any discussion always needs to focus on the bombing," said Binafsaj relief worker Fouad Sayyed Issa.[119]

Idlib judge Ziad al-Basha described going through the work to procure, install, and operate mechanized bakeries in Idlib towns—only to have the regime's air force to bomb the bakeries into fragments, and then have to start all over. "Every time we try to improve civil society," Basha said, "we run into aerial bombing that destroys these institutions' infrastructure and empties the area of its residents."[120]

These service bodies must also contend with the galaxy of local and international organizations on which they and their constituents depend for support.

Without some supervising or organizing authority for the province's local councils, oversight of service and relief projects is mostly left to the sponsoring NGOs and contractors. Continuing support for these councils and the communities for which they are responsible is essentially at the mercy of these organizations, which can, per their own assessments, build up a council or abruptly cut it off.

"The local council is integrally linked to this [external] support," Ariha's Hallak said. "If it ends, the local council ends."[121]

Donors "are creating these little cantons, where they don't accept anyone else being involved or any interference," said Provincial Council head Ghassan Hammou.[122]

In some instances, interviewees involved in governance complained, development programming had deliberately targeted specific towns and not others. Instead of highlighting model governance and spurring the other councils to reform, they said, it had only turned resentful councils against each other.[123]

And the specific focus on local councils and many organizations' refusal to work with other bodies have likely incentivized armed groups to try to coopt and infiltrate them. The SAC's Firas al-Raslan made this point himself when criticizing donors' unwillingness to work directly with the SAC.[124]

Yet those same organizations also find themselves in a profoundly insecure position inside the country, particularly as they try to work around armed factions. Aid shipments into Idlib regularly require three or more approvals, including from the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the court in Sarmada backed by Fateh al-Sham, and the Ahrar al-Sham-backed court in Binnish.

"Issues in north Idlib could ruin everything," humanitarian worker Alaa' said. "Because the same people manage everything—civil life, the army, and the police."[125]

When NGOs encounter dysfunctional local partners, interviewees said, they had limited options if they want to continue to work in that area. In theory, they could do anything from giving councils polite recommendations to coordinating the formation of a new local council with civilian actors in the town.[126] But according to Alaa', "the last thing we want to do is intervene to form a local council," which he said would be "nearly impossible" for an NGO. "We're already facing challenges related to our assistance itself, our funding: 'Why are you here?' 'You're thieves,' 'you're spies.'"[127]

At least some foreign organizations are also sensitive to the legal and ethical complications of providing material support or reputational benefit to armed factions, particularly those that the United States and United Nations have designated terrorist groups.

For Syrian civilians on the ground, the effect can be frustrating. "Suppose I'm from so-and-so Organization," said

Muhammad Jaffa of the Idlib Administration. “If I provided support for the service sector in, say, Harem, and Harem is an area that Nusra controls militarily, then that means Nusra might succeed. No! You’re providing for the regular citizen. He’s the one who benefits. I don’t know how they’re figuring it, it’s backwards.”[128]

Khan Sheikhoun Local Council head Osama al-Sayyadi said he had appealed for support for his city, but that the city and its council had become locked in a sort of vicious cycle—he couldn’t get support because Fateh al-Sham (or the Nusra Front) was providing services, and he couldn’t take over service provision because no one would provide him with support.

“Recently, some organizations have avoided working in our area because of the presence of the Nusra Front,” he told me. “More than once, we sent them messages saying the local council has a service role in the city and isn’t related to the Nusra Front, and the Nusra Front doesn’t interfere in the work of the local council. More than once, we delivered this message, but they’d get the opposite message. They’d hear that the LC doesn’t have any role.

“I told you before that the local council doesn’t have any resources, that it hasn’t received any operating costs to work,” he said. “So who’s provided most services in the area? The Nusra Front.”[129]

A Microcosm of the War

Idlib’s governance and service sector has been, in many ways, a microcosm of the Syrian war and Idlib’s fractious rebel scene. As with the province’s armed opposition, an existing tendency towards localism and disparate, uncoordinated streams of external support have resulted in a service sector that is discombobulated and fractious.

Foreign donors have propped up a nationalist, democratic model—but instead of FSA armed factions, they have backed local councils and a provincial council that, at least in theory, answer to internationally recognized opposition institutions like the Coalition. And like the FSA, these donor-approved service bodies have coexisted with less palatable actors that collaborate with and occasionally try to displace them.

The entrance of Ahrar al-Sham and the Fateh al-Sham Front into the service sector has mirrored their domination of Idlib’s military scene. Fateh al-Sham’s PSA, like Fateh al-Sham itself, is a blunt instrument, considered toxic by international backers. Meanwhile, the Ahrar al-Sham-linked SAC and its coordinating mission are another illustration of Ahrar al-Sham’s relative sophistication. Yet even as the SAC, like Ahrar al-Sham, has been willing to engage with outsiders, those outside parties have remained unwilling to provide it with normal support—it has gotten meetings, but not money. Both the PSA and SAC have complemented the foreign-backed local councils, as Fateh al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham have done with the FSA. For its part, the Army of Conquest’s Idlib Administration has shown similarities to rebels’ improvised factional coalitions, and it seems to have been subject to many of the same centrifugal forces.

The end result, as with conditions in Syria’s rebel-held areas more generally, has been a service sector that doesn’t really fit together. “To the extent I’m willing to see some signal in the noise, I think Ahrar probably has it,” said a Western development worker. “In most other cases, we’re probably looking at static.”[130]

Governance and service provision in Idlib are another reminder that, as with the opposition’s armed factions, in Syria results have been the currency of legitimacy. Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front), apparently earned the support of opposition Syrians not because of those Syrians’ ideological predisposition to al-Qaeda’s worldview and mission, but because they saw Nusra fighting and sacrificing for them. In the service space, results likewise have mattered. That local councils are, to varying extents, representative and accountable appears to have earned them goodwill. But democratic experiments aside, Idlib’s people have also had to worry about basic questions of service functionality just to stay alive.

"The way they have to live, their lifestyle—they're preoccupied with things you take for granted, that you don't even think of," said humanitarian worker Alaa'. "You don't think of how you'll get to a place, you have multiple choices for transportation. You don't think about when your phone is out of charge, how you'll charge it. When you want to do laundry, you do laundry."[131]

Gaps and failures in service provision have been an opening for armed groups to meet civilian needs and earn popular support; to advance their specific alternative to regime order; and even, as the SAC's Firas al-Raslan suggested, to position themselves for a role in a possible postwar system.

It's not clear that any of this will be successful, of course. Projects like the SAC point to the complexity of these armed groups, as well as to their evident ambitions beyond simple warfighting, even as armed conflict is ongoing. Yet their efforts have been stunted by larger dynamics, including the prevailing mechanism for international assistance and the disruptive effect of Syrian regime airpower.

And it isn't obvious that whatever goodwill services earn these armed groups will merit the investment in terms of resources and time, or that Syrian civilians will even attribute these service bodies' work to their factional sponsors. Even many of the Syrians interviewed for this report, including interviewees involved in relief and service provision themselves, confused the similarly named PSA and SAC. Binafsaj's Amr Tarrisi said the mix of service-centric names reminded him of the interchangeable, miniature leftist parties that, along with the Ba'ath Party, made up the Patriotic Progressive Front under the Assad regime. "It's like the Democratic Communist Party, the Democratic whatever Party," he joked.[132]

Still, these service efforts are evidence of the continuing evolution of non-state armed actors. Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham in particular belong to a broader continuum of Islamist militant groups that have attempted governance, one that includes Afghanistan's Taliban and Yemen's al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Whatever the outcome of Syria's war, it seems likely that these factions' experiments in governance and services will inform other Islamist armed groups around the world.

Idlib's service scene and how armed groups have acted in and around it also highlights how, in a civil conflict such as Syria's, outside aid and more politicized support for governance are not dictated from without. This sort of assistance is a sort of dialogue with local actors, including armed groups that are ready to work around prevailing aid dynamics and even, in some instances, lobby donors directly for support.

And, when taken in the broader context of the Syrian war, Idlib's experience raises larger questions about the logic of a humanitarian or development intervention in a military conflict that donor states are unwilling or unable to end.

Provincial Council head Ghassan Hammou highlighted the apparent absurdity of Western civilian intervention in Syria when recounting a capacity-building exercise with a development contractor. "We got training on financial systems," he said, "but what's the point when there are planes overhead?"[133]

The scope of the violence and disorder of Syria's war has seemed magnitudes bigger than anyone's means, individually or collectively. None of Idlib's service and relief bodies, whether Syrian or foreign, civilian or military, working together or at cross-purposes, have been capable of rationalizing life inside the province. And none of the province's competing service institutions have been in a position to somehow take control of the entirety of Idlib.

Any project to build and re-build semi-normal, functioning governance amid Syria's war—and, most importantly, as Assad regime and Russian aircraft continue to indiscriminately bomb opposition-held cities and towns—has been, on some level, Sisyphean. Nearly every attempt at civic organization has been partially frustrated by aerial bombing and violence. The people best-equipped to help, Syrian professionals educated before the war, continue to leave the country. And none of these civilian institutions and exercises in participatory self-government have built toward a broader political transition that, nearly everyone now acknowledges, will not happen.

"I'll be honest with you," said humanitarian worker Alaa', "When I started doing this job, I always wondered, why is the U.S. paying this money? Why is the UK paying this money? Why don't they just stop the war instead of fueling the war and…" He left the thought unfinished.[134]

Despite this, the Syrians interviewed for this report all seemed genuinely concerned for the well-being of their towns and families. Even when some of them fudged issues of armed group control, or angled for donor funding, or talked down rivals, they all seemed moved by their loved ones inside Idlib.

And even when Idlib's various civilian- and militia-linked service bodies have competed with each other to repair the water pipes or replace road signs, they have been, at base, competing to make Syrians' lives marginally better.

These bodies' attempts to serve Syrians have been, on some level, about a competition for influence and legitimacy between nascent civilian institutions and armed factions. Yet the inverse also seems to hold: This contest for a role in local governance and a foothold in the service sector has been, for civilian administrators and militants, about serving Syrians.

Together, the efforts of these competing and overlapping service bodies have helped ensure that rebels have had somewhere worth fighting for; that they have been defending their home communities and an alternate political order, not simply waging a mountain insurgency. And these service projects have also given Idlibis experience organizing and governing themselves independently of the Assad regime, or really any larger political authority. The question now is how and whether these bodies survive continued war—and, if the regime manages to retake some of these areas, whether it can reinstall its control over Idlibis who have, over five years, learned to rule themselves.

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About This Project

This report is part of "Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism," a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

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