Conflict Research Programme

Progress in the wrong direction: The 2018 Local Council Elections in Syria

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The Syria conflict research programme focuses on five interrelated research topics. The function and legitimacy of public authority, identity politics, economic drivers of the conflict, civicness and reconstruction. The programme uses a mixed methodology using primary and secondary sources. The programme collaborates with the Middle East based **Governance and Development Research Centre**.

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Executive Summary

By examining both the legal framework for local elections in Syria and the actual 2018 elections this paper reveals substantive gaps between legal procedures in Syria, their implementation and the way they are perceived by people. It exposes the level of mistrust people have with the overall system of governance which they believe it works only for the top corrupt elite inside and outside the government.

Based on field research conducted by the by the leading author during all the stages of the 2018 elections, the paper presents a detailed account of the September 2018 local council electoral process in the government-controlled areas, shedding light on the most important elements pertaining to the candidates and their electoral campaigns; women in this process; and how the elections were carried out on the election day.

The paper goes beyond the government-controlled areas and discusses how elections for opposition-controlled areas and Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) controlled areas in northeast Syria were conducted. The paper also presents an opportunity for understanding in part the situation in areas that were regained by the government from 2018 on such as Ghouta, where many expressed their frustration as they see those who profited from their suffering when these areas were under siege becoming the new figures in the councils. Disinterest and the position of 'Our apathy is even greater now than it was before 2011' is widespread in these areas.

The ratio of the number of candidates to the number of seats was lower than previous elections (2.24 compared to 2.43 in 2011 and 3.3 in 2007). The majority (70%) were candidates from the Ba'ath Party and their allies, most prominently the Communist Party and the Syrian Social National Party, two main parties in the Ba'ath-led National Progressive Front, while the remainder (30%) were independent candidates. Although the new 2012 constitution in Syria removed article eight which was part of the old constitution and which declares the Ba'ath Party as the 'leader of state and society ', the election process was still dominated by the party. The previous Ba'ath Party dominated 'Progressive National Front' lists was replaced by "The National Unity List" in which Ba'ath Party candidates had the lion's share. Some exceptions were observed, such as the independent candidates in Tartus who came together and formed an independent electoral alliance which won the elections against the National Unity List.

Very little campaigning took place before the elections, very few candidates had manifestos and most people interviewed for the paper said they knew little about the candidates and showed a position of strong disinterest in the whole process. The election day was not declared as a public holiday. The government announced that 56% of those eligible for voting did turn up to the election, but our observation, through our field visits, showed that the actual figure is so much lower. Most of the voters observed in the field research for this paper were either university students or civil servants who have been asked by their institutions to go and vote. In al-Ba'ath University in Homs, students were even kept inside the campus and only allowed to leave if they vote. Many violations took place, some of which were reported in the media and social media. In a rare incident, the Supreme Administrative Court had ruled that the vote in 18 constituencies in Tartus was void and that re-elections should be held there, based on the complaints of some candidates. Civil society played hardly any role in observing the elections although some civil society organisations ran campaigns to encourage people to take part and to run for the elections.

The paper helps to increase understanding of why elections were held at this stage of the Syrian conflict, reasons which include: particular political and economic gains made by the regime; the implication that the conflict was nearing an end, and therefore the readiness to begin the upcoming reconstruction process; the ability to accommodate refugees and give them incentives to return; and finally the importance for the Syrian

government to–in its own words–fight terrorism, which was one reason for the delay in holding elections approximately a year and a half before.

In analysing the political economy of these elections the paper notes that Law 107 gave the local councils local authority over some aspects of the economy and construction investments, and thus the elected councils will have a strong role in the upcoming reconstruction phase, regarding both planning and implementation. It was important therefore for the regime to ensure to ensure that members of these councils are strong supporters. Earlier in 2014, the Reconstruction Committee had been formed by the government and the Minister of Local Administration had been appointed as its president. Among the committee's tasks was the implementation of projects regarding the return of essential services and the rehabilitation of infrastructure in the destroyed areas. It is this which explains the interest of Holding companies and businessmen in funding those close to them to gain access to the local councils.

Similarly, Law 10 issued in April 2018, which allows for the introduction of new "redevelopment zones" based on the suggestion of the Minister of Local Administration and Environment. It also gives the executive office within the administrative unit wide-reaching powers in planning and implementation for the new redevelopment areas. And it is here that the importance of electing new local councils to start to apply this law becomes important since it would not be legal to apply the new law with council members whose term has already ended. It is also advantageous to apply the law with the implication that it is part of Syria's decentralisation, giving a more positive outward image of the country in the hope of convincing regional and western governments to invest in a Syria whose climate is one of "democracy, openness and decentralisation".

The paper reflects a very big the gap between the text of the law and its implementation in Syria. It asks why people, not even those who do not oppose the regime, were not interested even in taking advantage of the increased powers of the local authorities offered by law 107. The gap comes not only from the way the Syrian government applied the law but also because of the citizens' impressions of the law and of the overall system of governance. Other reasons included the big loss of confidence people have in the overall system of governance including the regime and its laws, the significant spread of a sense of futility and losing hope for real change, even when the law provided a legislative opportunity for this change, a strong belief that the electoral process in Syria made a mockery of elections and finally the significant deterioration in the standard of living of most Syrians and their preoccupation with survival priorities.

Although female representation seemed to be better than the 3% of 2011, the figures are still very low and did not exceed 10% in most areas. We also noted the reluctance of leading women figures in the country to participate in the elections and that they mobilised their parties to boycott the elections because they did not believe in their usefulness.

On policy implications, the paper stresses that constitutional and legal changes are a necessary but insufficient condition for the process of democratic transition in Syria. Any meaningful political transition process will indeed require substantial changes in constitutional and legal frameworks and should be based on electoral processes at several levels. But these amendments and procedures alone will remain futile and could end up as a facade for the authoritarian regime, if not accompanied by other conditions and measures.

Besides legal changes, real change requires actions that restore confidence in the overall system of governance and at all levels. Several insurance policies are needed in order for the Syrians to believe in any legal change and to be more likely to complying with it and thus giving it meaning or legitimacy. What is needed is; first, wide consultation and participation in the construction of these laws; second, for them to have confidence that these laws and procedures, such as elections are designed to serve their public interest, and third, that the

process should be as inclusive as possible.

A genuine democratic process of change in Syria also requires a structural change in the political economy that allows the dismantling of the relationship between power and money, that opens for all the possibility of equal and fair participation and benefiting from the process of development and reconstruction, and that allows citizens to exercise their supervisory and monitory role in a manner protected by law.

The increase in the proportion of female breadwinners in Syria and their increased participation in the labour market in Syria presents another reason for the calling for quotas for women in elections, at all levels, to ensure their fair representation. Increasing their representation is also an important entry point for changing the political economy structure of the local councils, thus weakening the networks of private interests and reducing corruption, especially since these networks are usually dominated by men. It is important to note that it is not enough just to allocate a quota to women to encourage them to participate in the elections and to run for them. What is also required is a number of procedures and programs of political empowerment and capacity building for women.

Certainly, the process of change in Syria will not be easy and will take a long time, but not putting the process of change on the right track from the outset will only ensure progress in the wrong direction.

1 Introduction

Last June, just as the Syrian conflict had entered its eighth year, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued Decree No. 214 for 2018, stipulating that elections for members of the Local Councils would take place in September of that year.

As a matter of fact, and in accordance with Local Administration Law No. 107 issued in 2011, these elections should have taken place at the beginning of 2016, when the term of the local councils–elected in December 2011–had come to an end. However, the Syrian government decided to extend the term of the councils, under the pretext that elections could not be carried out while Syria was in the midst of a war on terrorism. This was despite the fact that parliamentary elections were in fact carried out as planned in 2014. The reality was that the central government had lost control of many areas as a result of the war, including local councils, vital civilian facilities, as well as military and security control. The Syrian government had lost governing power and, as a consequence, its capacity to manage any kind of election at a local level. It was this that which ultimately prevented the Syrian government from holding local council elections at their proper time in 2016.

During the most recent term of these councils in government-controlled areas–from 2011 until the elections held in September 2018–local residents did not feel many tangible changes. Public services and the pace of development remained poor, notwithstanding that most of these areas which remained under government control did not descend into conflict, and were safe from the most brutal aspects of the war. Moreover, despite the removal in 2012 of the eighth article from the Syrian constitution designating Syria's Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (Ba'ath) as the leading party in state and society, the members of the local councils remained Ba'athist, and likewise Ba'ath branches and security apparatus remained in control of most of the local administrations, in all sectors. In this way, the hiring, firing and informal nepotistic practices remained unchanged; council members continued to be dismissed for unknown reasons, and others appointed without elections. Likewise, the weakness of the regime during the conflict in keeping its hold on the locally run services increased the concentration of such services at the central level. The representation of women in these local councils, elected in 2011, did not exceed 3%.[1]

This was reflected in the atmosphere surrounding the 2018 local elections; many expressed a sense of despondency, and a disinclination to participate in both the elections and the nomination process. The feeling was that the election process was merely for show, and would simply result in councils that were not reflective of local community needs. Equally, many others did not know elections were happening until polling day, given their preoccupation with day-to-day stresses and economic strains. There was no sign that previous councils had been effective in real terms in the government-controlled areas. Syrian cities saw tentative publicity campaigns which were limited to a few signs, photographs and election tents, in stark contrast to previous electoral campaigns, both local and parliamentary. The day of the election was met with a meagre turnout at the polling stations, and many electoral lists succeeded by default because there were not enough candidates to fill all the assigned seats. These lists were predominantly those of the Ba'ath Party.

This paper presents a summary of the local council electoral process in Syria in September 2018, shining a light on the most important elements pertaining to the candidates and their electoral campaigns; women in this process; and how the elections were carried out on the election day on 16 September. This paper will help to increase understanding of why elections were held at this stage of the Syrian conflict, reasons which include: particular political and economic gains made by the regime; the implication that the conflict was nearing an end, and therefore the readiness to begin the upcoming reconstruction process; the ability to accommodate refugees and give them incentives to return; and finally the importance for the Syrian government to–in its own words–fight terrorism, which was one reason for the delay in holding elections approximately a year and a half before.

This research paper relied on interviews by the leading author with several candidates for the local council elections, active members of Syrian public life, and a random sample of residents in different districts and provinces of the country. All names were kept confidential for security reasons and in the interest of their safety given their residence in Syria. The paper also relied on personal observations by the leading author during field visits. Observations were made of the electoral campaigns and the prevailing atmosphere in the weeks

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[1] المرأة السورية ومجلس الشعب, National Center for Research and Opinion Poll website: https://goo.gl/ywbmE5, date of publication, March 30, 2016, last accessed, October 18, 2018

leading up to the elections; of the election day itself in several polling stations and government institutions; and also of the days following the election with the end of voting, the vote count and the announcement of results. The paper also relied on several media and government reports which were published in July, August and September 2018, and analytical papers on the development of local administration laws and electoral laws in Syria, which were developed by the Syria Team in the Conflict Research Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part (section 2) discusses the general background and legal context particular to the local elections in Syria, beginning with the issuing of the Local Administration Law No. 15 issued in 1971, and the subsequent updated version, Law No. 107 issued in 2011.

In the second part (section 3), we will look into what happened prior to the elections in question, from the nomination mechanisms for these elections, to how the articles of Law 107 were applied. We will also look at a sample of candidates from different regions and political traditions, including reasons for their nomination, and their campaigns and manifestos. We will shed light on the experiences of the areas outside government control and areas of local reconciliation which were for many years under opposition control and were then retaken by the government. We will also discuss the reasons some active members in the public sphere chose either not to take part in this process or to withdraw from it.

In the third part (section 4), we will talk about election day itself, which fell on 16 September, 2018. We will examine the atmosphere on polling day in several provinces of Syria; the violations which were observed in all stages of the polling and vote count; and the participation or lack thereof by the media and civil society. We will then study the results of the elections and how they were announced, looking at several areas, and the gender representation of the election winners.

2 Background and Legal Context

In this section, we will discuss the most important articles of the two most recent laws which deal with local administration in Syria: Law 15/1971 and Law 107/2011.

We will also look at the General Election Law which addresses the processes of nomination and voting and which was issued in 2014.

Local councils in Syria are subject to Decree 107/2011 which comprise the Local Administration Law,[2] and which is considered as an amended version of the Law issued by Decree 15/1971[3] a short while after former president Hafez al-Assad assumed power following the coup termed 'the Corrective Movement' in 1970.

> 66 *Despite the removal in 2012 of the eighth article from the Syrian constitution designating Syria's Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (al-Ba'ath) as the leading party in state and society, the members of the local councils remained Ba'athist, and likewise the al-Ba'ath branches and security apparatus remained in control of most of the local administration, in all sectors.* 99

Law 15 was issued as an attempt to increase the authority of the Ba'ath Party, which had been in power in Syria since 1963, throughout the country. This was codified through the division of tasks between the central government and the local administrative units, whose delegation level was itself increased by the central government. This was done by transferring certain responsibilities and authorities– related to planning, implementation, and control of financial resources–from central control to a group of specific elected representatives on the local level. However, the governor – who was appointed centrally and was not an elected official – continued to have the power of oversight, wide-reaching authorities and unprecedented judicial immunity.[4] The result was the near-absolute authority of the Ba'ath party branches and the security forces. Local units ended up acting as a scaled-down version of the existing divisions in the National Progressive Front,[5] with representatives of the Front's parties sitting in the provinces' councils. The Ba'ath Party also monopolised the largest portion of the seats and effectively wielded singular control over many remote towns and villages' councils, where there was a

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[2] The full text of the law is found on the Syrian Parliament website: http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=4390&ref =tree&
[3] The full text of the law is found at https://goo.gl/GLkLvA
[4] Gharibah, M. 2018, Local Elections in Post-Conflict Syria, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science: https://goo.gl/dd31Av, date of publication December 2018, last accessed December 2018.

[5] The Progressive National Front is a coalition which was formed in Syria in 1972 from a group of 12 communist, socialist and nationalist parties and forces; within the central leadership, the Socialist Arab Baath Party is represented by a proportion of 50% plus one compared to the other parties, making it the dominant party within the Front. For more information, see the Front's website: http://www.pnf.org.sy/index.php

minimal representation of other parties. It was in this way that Law 15 was enacted, as a codification of the relationship between the administrative units and the central authority without an actual application of the concept of decentralised power.[6]

President Bashar al-Assad issued law 107 in mid-2011, as a part of changes he was trying to implement during the first few months of the uprising, hoping to calm and containing the popular anger. The formulation of Law 107 had been initiated in the middle of the first decade of his rule, which began in 2000, to avoid the shortcomings that presented themselves in the previous law. But the law was not finally issued, however, until 2011.[7]

The law divides Syria into administrative units which are granted legal personality and have financial and administrative independence. These units are provinces (also known as *governorates*), cities, townships and towns.[8] A province is a geographical jurisdiction which comprises several cities, townships, towns, villages and farms. A city is the centre of a province, district, or residential area whose population is over 50,000. A township is the centre of a sub-district or residential area or group of residential areas whose population ranges between 10,001 and 50,000. A town, meanwhile, is every residential area or group of residential areas whose population ranges between 5,001 and 10,000.[9] The number of residents in each administrative unit is set based on data from the Central Office of Statistics; each person is included in the unit in which his/her information was recorded at birth in the civil record – or what is known in Syria as '*nufus*' – and not within the unit in which she/he lives. Therefore, the division of administrative units and distribution of roles and authorities to them depends wholly on the number of citizens born there, and not on the number living there.

Law 107 stipulates the decentralisation of powers and their devolution to the people. This would be done through the creation of administrative units able to set and implement developmental plans pertaining to civil society and to determine the necessary financial revenue in order that these units can fulfil their developmental role.[10] In principle, this law also devolves additional and wide-reaching authority to the elected local councils, which

therefore become a link between the Syrian people and their government. This is through transferring decision-making power in sectors such as education, health, private investments and revenue management, from the central ministries to local authorities, and giving the local councils the upper hand in the provision of services to their communities. In this way, the role of the central authorities would be limited to planning and enacting large-scale projects which the administrative units could not themselves carry out. Law 107 also presented several new principles which had not been present in the old version of the law, such as local societal development, the application of the principle of democracy, the application of the decentralisation of powers and responsibilities, accountability, and transparency.[11]

A constitutional change which extended all the way to the status of the Ba'ath Party accompanied the issuing of this law. While through article eight of the old constitution, the Ba'ath Party was designated as the 'leader of state and society', this article was amended in 2012 to specify the political pluralism of the state's political system. Law 107 was also accompanied by the issuing of Legislative Decree[12] 100/2011, which comprises the Parties Law and allows for the forming of political parties and membership. The new constitution, issued in 2012, meanwhile affords the local administration system a constitutional guarantee; article 130 stipulates that "The Syrian Arab Republic is made up of administrative units, and the law determines their number, borders, domains, temporal limitation to their being a legal personality, and their financial and administrative independence". Article 131 thereafter stipulates that "the organisation of local administrative units is based on the application of the principle of decentralisation of powers and responsibilities, and the law determines the relationship between the units and the central government, as well as their responsibilities, financial income and the supervision of their work; the law determines how their presidents are selected or elected as well as the latter's' responsibilities and those of the heads of the departments; the local administrative units have councils elected by general, secret, direct and egalitarian elections."

Regarding the election mechanisms, these had been

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[6] Gharibah, M. 2018, Local Elections in Post-Conflict Syria, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science: https://goo.gl/dd31Av, date of publication December 2018, last accessed December 2018.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Article 7 of Law 107/2011
[9] Article 1 of Law 107/2011

[10] الإدارة المحلية في سوريا بين الواقع والآفاق, Damascus Center for Research and Studies website: https://goo.gl/7gYfLC, date of publication July 5, 2017, last accessed October 18, 2018
[11] Gharibah, M. 2018, Local Elections in Post-Conflict Syria, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science: https://goo.gl/dd31Av, date of publication December 2018, last accessed December 2018.
[12] The entire text of the law can be found on the Discover Syria website: http://www.discover-syria.com/news/12028

identified in the General Election Law, specifically Law 5/2014.[13] It is relevant here to look at some articles within this law as laid out below:

- The local councils are elected according to constituencies whose number is based on Syria's administrative divisions. Each area elects a certain number of candidates according to the number of seats allocated to the area in question. The Minister of Local Administration and Environment sets the number of constituencies for the councils of the provinces, centres of the provinces, and cities whose populations exceed 100,000. Meanwhile, all other cities and administrative units [in one province] are considered one constituency. The number of members in the councils of the provinces and other administrative units is set by the Minister of Local Administration according to the percentages set in the Local Administration Law. Meanwhile, the seats in the constituencies allocated to the province-level councils, and in the constituencies per city, are distributed according to a decision by the governor.

- The local administrative units are made up of representatives of sector A, which is made up of agriculturalists and workers, and of sector B, which is made up of other groups in society. The first sector should make up at least 50% of the local council membership, and it is the Minister of Local Administration who decides the number of members set per sector according to each constituency.[14]

- The elections are overseen by the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections made up of seven members known as the Higher Judicial Council,[15] with help from other bodies. These include the Branch Committee, which sets the polling stations and oversees the results process; the Nomination Committee, which oversees the acceptance and vetting of nomination requests; and the Election Centre Committee, which runs the polling stations and the voting process.

- Syrian citizens have the right to vote in general, secret, direct and egalitarian elections, in a free and personal vote, and this right cannot be delegated to a third party.[16]

- Every citizen has the right to apply to move his polling area, namely the area in which he or she votes – on the condition that his residency for a period of over two years is proven.[17]

- Candidates who obtain the highest portion of the vote after it is counted in all constituencies are declared winners.[18]

- State media outlets and newspapers are able to monitor the processes of voting and vote count.[19]

- The approved sources to fund election campaigns are the candidates' own financial contributions and financial support from political parties.[20] In practice,

Image 1 - Campaign posters in a square in Damascus. Credit: Myriam Youssef

[13] The entire text of the law can be found on the SANA website: https://www.sana.sy/?p=342119
[14] Articles 24, 25, 26 of General Election Law 5
[15] Articles 8 and 10 of General Election Law 5
[16] Article 3 of General Election Law 5

[17] Article 59 of General Election Law 5
[18] Article 77 of General Election Law 5
[19] Article 16 of General Election Law 5
[20] Article 54 of General Election Law 5

between the holding of the 2011 council elections and the new elections in 2018, Syrians in government-controlled areas did not experience many of these changes on the local administrative level in real terms. The elections were never satisfactorily transparent, the local councils did not fulfil their role and the decentralisation which was demanded and which was promised in Law 107 did not become a reality. Rather, these councils merely remained a front for central power, which continued to govern in all areas. Likewise, the mechanisms for appointing governors continued as before, through a decree from the President of the Republic, and with a clear and significant link to the Ba'ath Party and security forces. The governor continued to enjoy absolute authority regardless of the elected councils as well as immunity from general accountability and judicial prosecution; this was because the authority to prosecute and put on trial the governor rests solely with the High Judicial Council[21] which is itself headed by the President of the Republic, and the governor is not able to be referred to the Council except through a decree issued by the President. In other words, the President of the Republic is the only person able to appoint the governors, and the only person able to refer them to a judicial institution, which was itself headed by the President.

As for the transfer of roles and authorities from the centre to local units, this was linked to the setting and implementation of the National Decentralisation Plan by the High Council of Local Administration during the first year and a half of the law's issuance. The idea behind this plan was to outline a detailed vision for the devolution of power from a number of ministries and central institutions to the elected local councils. In reality, this High Council was not formed, such a national plan did not materialise, and the scheme remained ink on paper.[22] Consequently, new powers were not devolved to the local councils, and the situation remained unchanged, and as it had been outlined in Law 15/1971. Within this context, the newspaper *al-Ayam al-Suriya* (or *al-Ayam*), published from Damascus, quoted public and economic affairs expert Samer Abu 'Ammar in that Law 107 and the concept of decentralisation was never truly put into practice, and that authority remained with central power, the spectre of which hung over the local council elections.[23] It did not seem that the government could implement

decentralisation in real terms, in fear of weakening or losing authority over the whole of Syria – particularly considering the conflict, and of the opposition control over swathes of the country.

❝ *The President of the Republic is the only person able to appoint the governors, and the only person able to refer them to a judicial institution, which was itself headed by the President.* ❞

It should be recognised that Law 107 had from the start created a shared space to a significant extent between the different areas controlled by various sides of the conflict in Syria, primarily government-controlled areas, opposition-controlled areas, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlled areas in northeast Syria. This law gained consensus during the Geneva Peace talks whereby the agreement to decentralise formed part of these negotiations. It was likewise accepted by the opposition because of the delivery of greater authority to the local councils. The Syrian Interim Government published an implementing regulation for Law 107, applied by many of the local councils in the opposition areas, with some amendments to the original wording. As for the SDF-controlled areas in northeast Syria, they also accepted it despite a core difference in relation to the army and security forces which, according to Law 107, remain under central control, contradicting the concept of self-administered autonomy which requires independence in this area.

❝ *Law 107 had from the start created a shared space to a significant extent between the different areas controlled by various sides of the conflict in Syria, primarily government-controlled areas, opposition-controlled areas, and the Kurdish Self-Administered area.* ❞

This section has gone into the most important legal articles pertaining to local administration and their election in Syria. In the second part, we will shed light on the candidates from the 2018 election, from the mode

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[21] Article 56 of Law 107

[22] على الملأ، الشروط المطلوبة, Ministry of Local Administration and Environment website: http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-04-

19-13-25-40/item/6821-2018-09-02-10-48-45, date of publication September 2, 2018, last accessed October 10, 2018

[23] انتخابات الإدارة المحلية على الأبواب al-Ayam website: https://goo.gl/BB9bsg, date of publication July 22, 2018, last accessed October 22, 2018

and mechanisms of their nomination to the election campaigns and manifestos in the different provinces of Syria. We will look at government-controlled areas, opposition-controlled areas, those in the SDF-controlled areas in northeast Syria, and those which the government regained from 2016 on. We will study a sample of candidates: those with particular partisan leanings and independents; men and women; those who chose not to put themselves up for nomination; and those who withdrew following their nomination.

3 Candidates, Nomination Mechanisms and Election Campaigns

On July 26, 2018, the Ministry of Local Administration started receiving nomination requests from those who wished to join the local election race.[24] The deadline for this was August 1, 2018, and by that date, the number of candidates was 41,482 for a total of 18,478 seats; this is compared to 2011, in the previous round of elections, when there were 17,588 seats competed for by 42,889 candidates.[25] The increase in seats was the result of certain villages being recognised as townships following their population increase.

However, the number of candidates per number of seats had in fact reduced, from 3.3 in 2007 to 2.4 in 2011 to 2.2 in 2018, an indication of the reduction in the number of candidates despite the increase in the number of seats (*see table 1*).

Electoral Term	No. of Candidates	No. of Seats	Ratio of No. of Candidates/ Number of Seats
2018	41482	18478	2.24
2011	42889	17588	2.43
2007	32058	9697	3.30

Table 1 - Number of candidates and seats in the last three local elections in Syria, Source: Ministry of Local Administration and Environment.

In comparing the number of candidates to the number of seats using figures from the Ministry of Local Administration, the ratio can be seen to plummet to less than one in some provinces, such as in Deir Ezzor. This is a further indication of the decline in candidate numbers, in comparison with the seats being competed for. It should be noted that there is a lack of clear and precise data for these figures, with regard to the election in question. The figures are not easily accessible on the Ministry's website, and there are several errors, including the publishing of multiple figures inconsistently for particular areas. Moreover, in one-on-one meetings, journalists described their inability to obtain clear and precise data on the candidate numbers and their distribution per province, and on the numbers of female and male candidates. This indicates a lack of real engagement in these elections on the part of the Syrian government and their treatment of them as nothing more than a superficial exercise.

3.1 Who Are the Candidates?

As mentioned above, there were over 41,000 candidates to fill the local administration seats in the different provinces of Syria, demonstrating the number of requests accepted from among over 49,000 requests that the High Judicial Committee announced they received by the nomination deadline.[26] The majority (70%) were candidates from the Ba'ath Party and their allies, most prominently the Communist Party and the Syrian Socialist National Party, while the remainder (30%) were independent candidates.[27] The candidates were divided into two groups: Group A, for farmers and workers, and Group B, for all other sectors.

> 66 *I will not be putting myself up for election, and I will not be part of the results-fixing process, and likewise I will not participate in painting a rosy picture of the current Syrian government. What elections are we talking about when the war has not yet ended?* [28] 99

24 شروط الترشح لعضوية إدارة المجالس المحلية Ministry of Local Administration and Environment website: http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-04-19-13-25-40/item/6623-2018-07-26-11-33-24, date of publication July 26, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

25 انتخابات مجالس الإدارة المحلية General Organization of Radio and TV website: http://www.ortas.gov.sy/index.php?p=21&id=84056, date of publication October 8, 2011, last accessed October 18, 2018

26 انتخابات الإدارة المحلية أكثر من 49 ألف طلب ترشيح Ba'ath Media website: https://goo.gl/AFgyaE, date of publication August 2, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

27 قيادة البعث تحدد حصة قوائمها في المجالس المحلية القادمة Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/teKWqP, date of publication August 30, 2018, last accessed October 12, 2018

28 From an interview with an activist working on feminist and legal issues in Damascus

The deadline for accepting nomination requests was extended by a few hours to midnight on August 1, 2018. Explanations as to why this took place differ. According to Syrian state media, the deadline was extended because of "the huge turnout of candidates to submit their requests to the province-level Nomination Committees,"[29] while activists and journalists cite the reason as being the decrease in the number of nomination requests and the inclusion of additional names by the Ba'ath Party.

In the first three days of the nomination process, the number of submissions did not exceed 1800,[30] and by July 31 it was up to 10,000.[31] In one day, the number jumped to over 40,000 candidates, as was confirmed by the head of the High Judicial Committee for Elections in a statement to *al-Watan* newspaper, in which it was confirmed that "the last day of nomination witnessed a huge turnout."[32] In the same context, *al-Ayam* pointed out that "turnout on the first day of nomination was low in Homs province, with a number of people in the local councils spreading news and rumours that the lists which would win in the election had already been set and that it would be their names in these lists. This reflects badly on the nomination process, and will certainly be detrimental to the elections in terms of the voter turnout, with the prevailing atmosphere being one of boycott or lack of active participation in the election."[33] The website *Snack Syrian* further highlighted this, drawing attention to instructions from the Ba'ath Party regional leadership to its officers in Syria to put themselves up for nomination in the last days before the deadline, with the resulting increase in the number of candidates and perception that Syrian turnout and interest in the elections was high.[34]

Other media reports spoke about the inclusion of unqualified candidates or those living outside of Syria, as was the case in Qudsaya in Rural Damascus[35] and in Hama.[36] They also talked about the presence of some candidates who were subject to judicial charges, including the former mayor of Jaramana in Rural Damascus,[37] and candidates from pro-regime militias.[38]

This was among attempts to raise the number of candidates and participants in the elections despite the fact that some were not eligible to run.

While the election law allows for candidates as young as 25, the participation of young people in the race remained low. Perhaps the most significant reason for this was that many young men between the ages of 25 and 50 had left the country to avoid military service, whether conscription or reserve. Others, meanwhile, chose to stay at home – far from public life – in order to avoid being recruited to military service at military or security checkpoints, permanent and temporary, which are scattered across the government-controlled areas. Moreover, 25 is roughly the age at which students' complete university, and therefore the age at which the postponing of military service is no longer an option. There are no official statistics available for the age of the candidates, yet field-level observations suggested a low representation of young candidates compared to those of 40 and above.

3.1.1   Party Candidates

The norm in Syria was that the names of allied candidates for the local and parliamentary elections were released within electoral lists. While the Progressive National Front set what was usually called "The Front List," during the elections in question the name was changed to "The National Unity List". Often these lists would be closed lists, permitting voters to choose the list as a whole and not to specify names within it or add other names. At other times, voters would be able to add names to a particular list in empty boxes which had not been filled in beforehand. Syrians were used to the National Progressive lists coming top in any elections whether parliamentary or local, with the resulting impression that the elections were merely for show.

The elections in question sustained the norm of closed candidate lists limited to National Unity candidates, while other lists contained independent candidates or allowed you to add other names. Within the National Unity lists

29 Tishreen News تمديد قبول طلبات الترشح لانتخابات مجالس الإدارة المحلية website: http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=199716, date of publication August 1, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

30 al-Watan website: 1800 طلب ترشح للانتخابات في الأيام الثلاثة الأولى http://alwatan.sy/archives/160452, date of publication July 29, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

31 فقط عشرة آلاف مرشح لانتخابات الإدارة المحلية قبل يوم واحد من إغلاق باب الترشح Damas Post website: https://goo.gl/wXJYnC, date of publication July 31, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

32 al-Watan website: 46 ألف طلب ترشح للانتخابات المحلية http://alwatan.sy/archives/161287, date of publication August 2, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

33 al-Ayam website: الأيام تواصل استقراء أجواء ما قبل انتخابات الإدارة المحلية، على موقع جريدة الأيام https://goo.gl/eT8dCS, date of publication July 29, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

34 Snack Syrian website: انتخابات الإدارة المحلية عرس وطني قومي بغياب العريس https://goo.gl/H57TSZ, date of publication September 1, 2018, October 18, 2018

35 Sham موقوفون وغير مؤهلون في قائمة الجبهة الوطنية لانتخابات مجلس بلدية قدسيا Times website: https://goo.gl/VDWPLJ, date of publication September 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

36 سوريا تنتصر وأبناؤها إلى صناديق اقتراع انتخابات مجالس الإدارات المحلية الأحد المقبل, al-Watan website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/166072, date of publication September 13, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

37 Snack Syrian قبل ساعات على التصويت ناخبو جرمانا لا يعرفون المرشحين website https://goo.gl/GP7JZx, date of publication September 15, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

38 Snack Syrian website: قائد لواء الباقر مرشح لانتخابات الإدارة المحلية https://goo.gl/Vyq5hR, date of publication September 6, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

themselves, Ba'ath Party candidates had the lion's share. As *Snack Syrian* reported, these lists were closed and the number of seats given by the Ba'ath Party to the parties of the National Progressive Front was minimal.[39] There were also some lists which were incomplete up to a day before the elections owing to the lack of sufficient independent candidates.[40]

> 66 *These problems [in the election process] call for civil society to act as a safety valve and to monitor what happens down the line.* [41] 99

In terms of Ba'ath Party lists, it is important to look at the law issued by the regional leadership of the party on August 15, 2018, which defined the standards by which candidates should be chosen for local administration within the lists. Among these were their sense of national belonging – by which is meant their position on the conflict and its different sides in Syria – as well as honesty, sincerity and integrity. It was effectively a signal to exclude any candidate opposed to the regime from nomination and to put an end to their electoral ambitions. The regional leadership sent a copy of this decision to the Ministry of Local Administration, in an indication of the continued authority of the Ba'ath Party.[42]

> 66 *Nomination mechanisms are still subject to corruption and bribery, so that he who pays the most is able to get onto the Progressive National Front lists, in expectation of rewards directly after the elections.* 99

In terms of the parties which were included alongside the Ba'ath Party in the National Unity lists, according to

official media reports, most were relatively satisfied with their representation in these lists. This is what was reported by *al-Watan*, which quoted the General Secretary of the United Syrian Communist Party, Hanin Nimr; the General Secretary of the Arab Socialist Union Party, Safwan Qudsi; the General Secretary of the Covenant Party Ghassan Othman; and the President of the Political Office of the Syrian Socialist National Party included in the Front, Safwan Salman.[43] However, one-to-one interviews with candidates from these parties did not reveal this same sense of contentment. One of the members of the Syrian Socialist National Party spoke furiously about "nomination mechanisms are still subject to corruption and bribery so that he who pays the most is able to get onto the Progressive National Front lists, in expectation of rewards directly after the elections." Meanwhile, a member of the Communist Party pointed to "the continuation of favouritism and clientelism in the nomination process disqualified many whose ambitions in joining the local councils are really to serve their community."[44]

It is relevant to look at the stances of some of the players considered to be internal opposition, parties outside of the National Progressive Front, and active members of civil society within the government-controlled areas. It was these stances which were the focus of significant local state media coverage, as they aimed to portray the local elections as a political action taking place in a healthy democratic climate. There was, so it went, clear civil society participation and political pluralism, alongside the furtherance of political stability, and a readiness for these elections which were only delayed in their previous term because of the "war on terrorism".

The first of these stances were recorded by the Syrian Youth Party, led by Berwin Ibrahim, which announced its entry into the electoral process in August.[45] But it did not take long before the party had withdrawn, with its chairwoman announcing she would send a letter to the President opposing the election on the grounds that it was nothing more than an appointment process.[46] The chairwoman of the Suriya al-Watan Party Majd Niyazi, in

39 Snack Syrian البعث يعلن قائمة اللاذقية، أحزاب الجبهة والمرأة نالوا من الجمل أذنه website: https://goog.gl/aAAbXZ , date of publication 9 September, 2018, last accessed, 18 October 2018

40 Snack Syrian قبل ساعات على التصويت ناخبو جرمانا لا يعرفون المرشحين website: https://goo.gl/GP7JZx, date of publication September 15, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

41 al-Watan معارضة الداخل: الانتخابات دليل على التعافي ورصيد إيجابي إضافي website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/159527, date of publication July 22, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

42 متجاوزة الدستور قيادة البعث تضع أسساً لاختيار أعضاء المجالس المحلية وترسلها إلى وزير الإدارة المحلية Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/yZe8U2, date of publication August 23, 2018, last accessed October 11, 2018

43 سوريا تنتصر وأبناؤها إلى صناديق اقتراع انتخابات مجالس الإدارات المحلية الأحد المقبل al-Watan website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/166072, date of publication September 13, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

44 Personal interviews for report preparation with members of the Front's parties in Damascus

45 الأحزاب الجديدة تتطلع لانتخابات حقيقية توقف ممارسات حزب البعث Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/6n56Rq, date of publication August 22, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

46 بعد الانتخابات، رسالة من رئيسة حزب معارض إلى الرئاسة السورية Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/aS7VXW, date of publication September 17, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

turn, confirmed that she was not interested in following the election since as far as she was concerned it was merely celebratory posturing with no real impact.[47]

66 *The continuation of favouritism and clientelism in the nomination process disqualified many whose ambitions in joining the local councils are really to serve their community.[48]* 99

Meanwhile, some figures considered by local state media as critical voices had different views. Diana Jabbour, journalist and president of the board of the cultural organisation 'Ta Mabsouta' said that "lack of participation in the public sphere has been one of the issues at the root of the crisis; by getting involved with the experiment [of local elections] we can positively shape ourselves and our country," as reported by *al-Watan* newspaper, published in Damascus. The paper also quoted Anas Joudeh, the President of the Nation Building Movement, as saying that the timing of the elections was a "sign of recovery," while indicating that there were still serious problems in the election process. These were, he said, illustrated by "the dominance of traditional powers and the ability of the Ba'ath Party to control the elections, the inclusion of closed lists, and corruption allied with the administrations in areas of reconstruction and upcoming investments. These problems call for civil society to act as a safety valve and to monitor what happens down the line."[49]

3.1.2   *Independent Candidates*

This section will now turn to the independent candidates. On the basis of field observations and interviews, we can classify them within the following groups:

- Candidates which believed they had the capacity to effect change. These were mostly those who in the preceding years had entered civil work of some kind, including in relief, psychological support, and education. These were individual cases, however, which could not be grouped into one category and were unable really to penetrate the National Unity lists or even the lists of other independent candidates. In this context, one of the candidates said, "I am full of hope that I can succeed and implement my manifesto, which includes serving the community and consolidating the role of civil society. Nevertheless, I cannot hide my fear that we, as independent candidates, will not be allowed to take any effective decisions to oppose the National Progressive Front candidates and their continued control in all areas of the state."

- 66 *Law 107 gives local councils powers to make economic, financial and constructional investments which give companies and businessmen a future foothold for any expected investments and reconstruction.* 99

- Businessmen or those backed by businessmen or companies; this is where the expected economic gains post-election become pertinent. Local Administration Law 107 gives local councils powers to make economic, financial and constructional investments,[50] which give companies and

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[47] Snack Syrian بعد الانتخابات، رسالة من رئيسة حزب معارض إلى الرئاسة السورية website: https://goo.gl/aS7VXW, date of publication September 17, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
[48] Personal interviews for report preparation with members of the Front's parties in Damascus
[49] al-Watan معارضة الداخل: الانتخابات دليل على التعافي ورصيد إيجابي إضافي website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/159527, date of publication July 22, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
[50] Article 2 of Law 107: This law aims to:
Establish Administrative Units capable of planning, executing, and applying the development plans pertaining to local society and implementing related projects effectively and efficiently, by modifying the levels of the Administrative Units and determining their local structure in line with their basic purpose; add a number of quality jobs within them; make the Administrative Units at every level directly responsible for services, the economy, culture, and all affairs which concern citizens within these units. The role of the central authorities shall be limited to

planning, enactment, organization, and supply of modern technical methods and implementing major projects which the Administrative Units are unable to implement.
Implement the decentralization of powers and responsibilities and concentrate them in the hands of the people from different social statuses, in accordance with the principle of democracy which posits the people as the source of all authority, through expansion, clear definition and non-duplication of the powers and authorities of the Administrative Unit Councils in order to enable them to perform their functions and duties in developing the Administrative Unit economically, socially, culturally and structurally.
Article 34 of Law 107: The Governorate Council may approve the funding of investment development projects with a yield not exceeding 25 percent of the independent budget in the interest of the Governorate. This Article shall be considered as an amendment of the methods of expenditure of the independent budget.
Article 60 of Law 107: The City, Town or Township Council shall develop plans and follow up their implementation to guarantee equitable and

businessmen a future foothold for any expected investments and reconstruction. Candidates who are driven by a particular sectarian or geographical affiliation, such as certain candidates from old Damascus neighbourhoods, or those backed or paid to put themselves up for nomination seeking certain gains for their area or neighbourhood, with this, in turn, most likely being sectarian-driven. During an interview, a resident of Shaghour spoke about "the nomination of people wholly unqualified to represent Shaghour in the local councils along with neighbouring areas such as al-Ameen and al-Qaymariyya. Some have not even completed their secondary education, but they were backed for nomination by residents and dignitaries of these areas, with the aim of representing certain sects in the council and ensuring that the voices of individuals from these sects reach leadership."

Within this context and in a rare occurrence, it was reported by *Snack Syrian* that independent candidates in Tartus had formed an electoral alliance in a list named "Loyalty to Tartus." This list entered the race against the National Unity list, even though the number of those in the alliance was small compared to the number of available seats for Tartus city council (6 versus 27).[51] The list was later declared victorious in the elections.[52]

3.1.3   *Withdrawals and Lack of Nomination*

Many of those who put themselves up for nomination withdrew during the electoral process. Some of these withdrawals were collective, such as in al-Hasakah and Qamishli, where over 100 candidates withdrew against the backdrop of a wave of arrests, which included the detention of candidates. These arrests were made by the security forces of the SDF-controlled areas, which refused to hold elections for the Syrian government in areas where they held power.[53] News outlets reported frequent withdrawals of As-Suwayda branch[54] candidates from the National Syrian Socialist Party; this was, it was reported, "a response to the dismissal and marginalisation by the Ba'ath Party's As-Suwayda branches of allied parties and national figures from the area in general, and of the Syrian Socialist National Party in particular."[55] This was denied by the as-Suwayda branches the next day.[56]

Image 2 - Female candidate poster in the city of Damascus. Credit: Myriam Youssef

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sustainable development in the Administrative Unit. In order to do so it may follow up and approve organizational schemes in accordance with laws and regulations.

[51] مستقلون في طرطوس يشكلون تحالفاً لخوض الانتخابات، على موقع سناك سوري Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/bzHc41, date of publication September 15, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[52] 'Loyalty to Tartus' list victory announced in local elections on local Facebook page: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=241783323152966&id=124610534870246

[53] الحسكة انسحابات بالجملة من انتخابات الإدارة المحلية Snack Syrian website https://goo.gl/q9ZzV2, date of publication September 5, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[54] According to the constitution of the Syrian Socialist National Party and its laws, the party is divided into administrative areas according to decrees issued by the president of the party, called 'Branches' or 'منفذيات'

[55] من بيان انسحاب مرشحي الحزب السوري القومي الاجتماعي من انتخابات الإدارة المحلية في محافظة السويداء as-Suwayda News Network website: https://goo.gl/byzpuk, date of publication September 11, 2018, last accessed October 7, 2018

[56] في سابقة تاريخية حزب جبهوري ينسحب من الانتخابات Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/HJeDhY, date of publication September 11, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

الحزب السوري القومي الاجتماعي ينفي انسحاب مرشحي الحزب في محافظة السويداء as-Suwayda News Network Website: https://www.swaidasnn.com/2018/09/87698-12.html, date of publication September 12, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

Additionally, many individual withdrawals were observed during the days before the election. Reasons cited included "the persistence of the same old mentalities, in particular, those of Ba'ath Party leaders and officials in their control of the elections," and the "loss of hope in the capability to penetrate the Ba'ath Party lists or implement any change post-election."[57] In one of the interviews, a candidate who had withdrawn her nomination from Damascus city said, "I wanted to nominate myself as an independent candidate in order to serve my community, but I was not able to confront the blocs in the National Unity lists. A few days after submitting my nomination request, I decided to withdraw it to avoid any potential problems."

Meanwhile, some of those working in the public sphere were reluctant or unwilling to nominate themselves. Reasons for this include the following:[58]

- The loss of hope in a change of mentality of the Ba'ath Party and the belief that the results were preordained. One interviewee said: "Yes I am interested in change and I believe that the Local Administration Law 107 represents a significant chance to develop administrative work in Syria. I also believe that I am able to implement some changes in my area of Qalamoun in Rural Damascus. However, I refuse to nominate myself given the current conditions and with the continuation of the Ba'ath Party control of the elections and other areas of governance. I would prefer to wait until the next electoral term perhaps, with the hope of far-reaching changes in this regard."

- Nominating oneself as an independent candidate requires a significant budget to cover the costs of the election campaign and also the ability to oppose the National Front lists which receive significant support predominantly from the Ba'ath Party.

- A disinclination to get drawn in politics at the current time, given the presence of the existing government and without a political solution to the Syrian conflict having been reached. In this context, an active member in civil society and Damascus resident expressed her interest in the local elections, and at the same time stated her refusal to nominate herself

when no conclusive political solution had been reached: "I will not have my name be associated with the current government, which has itself contributed in one way or another to the continuation of the bloody conflict in the country. I am not particularly optimistic about the prospect of a change of the status quo anytime soon, so I would prefer to continue my civil society work, far removed from any governmental or political affiliation."

Within this context, *al-Ayam* quoted a member of the Reconciliation Committees in Rural Damascus: "In our district, we will not be putting ourselves up for nomination for several reasons. Most significantly, the current mayor made it clear that he will serve another term before the nomination process had even started. We are not millionaires, and will not, therefore, have the capacity to compete."[59]

Snack Syrian likewise quoted a number of media figures who said they would be boycotting the elections completely, with some of them pulling out of the race, following the Ba'ath Party's announcement of the National Unity lists with which they were affiliated. Among the reasons for this was the inclusion of closed lists without the possibility of adding new names, the rejection of nomination requests, and the continuation of the 'who-you-know' attitude governing the process.[60]

The Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* also addressed this issue; they referenced "nominees receiving congratulations as soon as their names were announced on the National Unity lists, which included the Ba'ath Party nominees and those from allied parties."[61]

3.1.4   *Female Candidates*

Female representation in the nomination process appeared to be relatively low. This is a conclusion that can be drawn from looking at electoral lists and the candidate numbers published online by the Ministry of Local Administration, given the lack of complete data on the number of female candidates from either the Ministry or the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections.[62] Significantly, neither Local Administration Law 107 nor General Election Law 5 contains any indication about

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[57] Interviews with a number of people who put themselves up for nomination and later withdrew from the electoral process
[58] Interviews with a number of people concerned with public affairs in Damascus
[59] Al-Ayam website: الأيام تواصل استقراء أجواء ما قبل انتخابات الإدارة المحلية, https://goo.gl/eT8dCS, date of publication July 29, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[60] Snack Syrian website صحفيون ينتقدون مسار الانتخابات: سنضع ورقة بيضاء https://goo.gl/wm1vAJ, date of publication September 11, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
[61] al-Akhbar website: تعيينات الإدارة المحلية احتكار سياسي وبرود شعبي https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/257898, date of publication September 14, 2018, last accessed October 12, 2018
[62] Snack إنخفاض عدد المرشحات السوريات انعكاس لواقع مجتمعي كرسته السلطة Syrian website: https://goo.gl/n3UMro, date of publication August 21, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

assigning a specific portion of seats, or quota, for women.

One female candidate from as-Suwayda spoke in an interview about her motivations for joining the race and her role in "changing the stereotype about women's ability to enter into politics and public life – a woman's role should not be confined to domestic work or to particular professions, as if she is inferior to others. I want to prove that women are capable of working in any profession, and to a high standard of work. I want to move on from this idea of quotas, with women filling a certain number of seats regardless of ability." During another interview, a female candidate from al-Qalamoun expressed her wish to become a decision maker side by side with men and expressed her hope that she would be able, in cooperation with her male colleagues, to put forward a number of services in her area.

The following is a list of examples about the representation of female participation in the elections:[63]

- One of the female candidates from Aleppo stated to *al-Ayam* that female representation in the Aleppo lists was no more than 3%, with just one woman from the whole of Rural Aleppo in these lists.[64]

- The proportion of female candidates in Hama was 7.8% and in Daraa 7.4%.

- The lists for Latakia province – the district constituency – was devoid of any female representation. Meanwhile, in the Latakia city list, 7 seats out of 50, or 14%, were occupied by women.[65]

- Jabla lists: 5 women out of a total of 52 candidates, 9.6%.

- Shahba lists in as-Suwayda province: 5 women out of a total of 219 candidates, 2.3%

- Qalamoun lists: 43 women out of a total of 328 candidates, 12.8%

- Constituency Two of Damascus: 2 women out of a total of 16 candidates, 12.5%

- The constituency of Qudsaya in Rural Damascus, National Unity list: 2 female candidates out of a total of 7 candidates, 28.6%

- The council of the city of Qudsaya Suburb in Rural Damascus, National Unity list: 5 women out of a total of 26 candidates, 19%

- Constituency Five of Damascus Province: no women among 30 candidates.

Against this backdrop, a number of officials from the Ministry of Local Administration indicated in conversations with local journalists that female participation reached an estimated 15% in all lists. However, the aforementioned examples show that the highest estimate would not exceed 8%, significantly lower than the official announcements by the Ministry to media outlets. This shows how the Syrian government worked to propagate a certain public image – one in which women were indeed participating in the country's political process. This moreover served to strengthen the comparisons made by state media with the opposition-controlled areas, where women are rarely seen in public life as a result of hard-line Islamic rule.

3.2 Electoral Campaigns and Manifestos

The manifestos of most of the candidates were unclear. Most of the National Unity candidates either did not have manifestos or did not broadcast them publicly. Other candidates, most of them independent and not part of the Unity list, took care to broadcast their manifestos on social media.[66]

❝*The majority of eligible voters had no idea about any of the candidates' manifestos.* ❞

Some of the manifestos observed were simply slogans, without clear and tangible steps laid out. Among these were: "*Activating our local council out of respect for the martyrs and the sacrifices of the Syrian army*"; "*Respecting the principles of the constitution, and equality between all citizens in their rights and duties*"; and "*Local administration is our way towards overpowering the conspiracy against Syria*." Other manifestos spoke clearly about the improvement to local service provision, the implementation of a number of developmental programs, and the strengthening of the role of civil society.

[63] These figures were gathered from: different media reports, data from the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, data from the High Council for Elections, and through signs put up on main streets
[64] إنتخابات مجالس الإدارة المحلية لا تغيير في الذهنية أو التطبيق, al-Ayam website: https://goo.gl/96xL33, date of publication September 9, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[65] البعث يعلن قائمة اللاذقية, Snack Syrian website, Snack Syrian website: https://goog.gl/aAAbXZ , date of publication 9 September, 2018, last accessed 18 October 2018
[66] Example: Manifesto of Candidate Mayas al-Khoury from Deir Attiya, Facebook post: https://www.facebook.com/296496841142595/photos/a.301863203939292/303532330439046/?type=3&theater

Through interviews with people living in different provinces, it became clear that the majority of eligible voters had no idea about any of the candidates' manifestos. They had no idea as to where they might find them and had no interest in taking the time to go into them, given that the results, as far as they were concerned, were already decided. One interviewee expressed this as follows: "In the week leading up to the election I tried to find a manifesto from any of the candidates, but I was totally unsuccessful. How could we vote, supposing we wanted to, without knowing who we are voting for and why?"

The election campaigns themselves were also extremely modest, limited to a few city centres, and not starting until a few days before the election.[67] This poses the question of how serious these elections were and whether they were not simply a posturing exercise for the acquisition of specific political and economic gains.

Indeed, there was still no announcement of the elections up to twenty days before polling day, with promotion limited to a few pages on social media.[68] The campaigns started to appear more significantly about a fortnight before the vote and continued tentatively until the day of

Image 3- A man takes a break in the shadow of a campaign sign in Damascus. Credit: Myriam Youssef

the elections themselves.[69]

A sample of the signs and photographs put up during the campaigns, either from the National Unity lists or from independent candidates, makes evident that the latter were self-funded, and generally modestly. In other cases, the funders were friends or family of the candidates, or businessmen or companies standing behind the nomination for personal gain. As an example, the holding company Khayti funded the campaign of candidate Rafiq Mohammad, from Salihiya district in Damascus province. The company, founded in June 2018, works in the industry, agriculture, commerce and real estate among other sectors;[70] it is possible that the company was motivated to finance the campaign because of the influence the local administration had over economic interests, specifically in the construction sector, as detailed above.

Campaign slogans were varied and included the following:

- *The vibrant voice of youth*

- *Your vote… Your interest*

- *Hand in hand we will build Syria anew*

- *We will build it*

- *Working for the strengthening of infrastructure services*

- *Striving for the civil rehabilitation of al-Qadam and al-Maydan districts*

- *To my family and loved ones in you we grow*

- *Together for the Jasmine Capital*

- *Working to meet the demands of reconstruction and urban development*

Electoral tents, meanwhile, were observed in some cities and townships. This was one way in which candidates could drum up support, by approaching and talking to voters, telling them about their manifestoes, and petitioning them for their vote. Such tents are typically put up in public spaces, with photographs of the candidates and their campaign material. Visitors are offered refreshments and are invited inside to speak in person with the candidates. All tents observed belonged to the National Unity lists, with occasional participation from independent candidates. On being asked, a candidate stated that the tent in which he was campaigning had been privately funded by the candidates, and not by any

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[67] al-Watan website: فقر في الحملات الإعلانية لانتخابات الإدارة المحلية http://alwatan.sy/archives/164512, date of publication September 3, 2018, last accessed 18 October, 2018

[68] عشرون يوماً تفصلنا عن الانتخابات، الحملات غائبة والانسحابات على قدم وساق, Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/qQ7Ch8, date of publication August 27, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[69] Snack Syrian بانياس، تعليق أول يافطة انتخابية قبل 12 يوماً من موعد الاقتراع website: https://goo.gl/zTjFK5, date of publication September 5, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[70] al-Iqtisadi تأسيس شركة قابضة برأسمال مليار ليرة سورية لمستثمرين من ريف دمشق website: https://goo.gl/s64phu, date of publication June 25, 2018, last accessed October 16, 2018

party or businessman. A journalist in the same tent said that the independent candidates were spending large amounts of money to have their photographs mounted in the tents as an electioneering technique.

3.3 Reconciliation Areas and Local Agreements

It is important to examine the different areas that had been retaken by the Syrian government after years of opposition control. These areas are mostly those surrounding Damascus in the east, west and south, namely Darayya, al-Muadamiya, and the neighbourhoods of Barzeh, Qaboun and Tishreen, Eastern Ghouta, Sahel al-Zabadani, Wadi Barada, al-Tall, Qudsaya and al-Hamah, Yalda, Babbila, Beit Sahem, al-Qadam, al-Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk camp; additionally the districts of eastern Aleppo, areas in central and rural Homs in the middle of the country, and wide expanses in Daraa in the south of the country.

These are areas which for up to six years were outside Syrian government control, and made up the strongholds of the armed opposition. They went through periods of self-governance, with local councils either appointed or elected, most working under the administration of the Syrian Interim Government, and the armed factions and religious authorities there. They were also subject to years of besiegement and military operations of varying intensities, as the regime and its allies attempted to take back control of these areas.

Performance of the local councils outside government control varied, as did their ability to meet the needs of residents, depending on the human and material resources afforded to them, and the intensity of the military campaigns that they were subject to. Indeed, these campaigns affected both their capacity to provide services, and the extent of the need for these services in the first place. These councils grew with time, and they established executive offices and specific apparatus for implementing different kinds of projects and services. They worked on reforming and expanding their structures, their mechanisms for appointing or electing their members, and on developing a legal framework for their work. Many of these councils held general, direct elections, in which members of civil society, armed factions and local leaders participated. Among the areas where this took place were Douma, Saqba and Zamalka in Eastern Ghouta between 2015 and 2016, and these

councils sought to be more inclusive and transparent by consulting the local communities and letting the public know about the projects and schemes being implemented.[71]

From August 2016, the Syrian regime was able to gradually take back control of the areas which were under the rule of armed factions and opposition councils, through brutal military campaigns followed by local agreements. This started with Darayya in Rural Damascus and culminated with Daraa in the south of the country. Local agreements were termed reconciliation or settlement agreements, and they were carried out through bodies known as "Reconciliation Committees"

Image 4 - A man casts his vote in Arbeen, Ghouta, an area previously under opposition control. Source: Social Media

made up of prominent figures who held influence and connections within the areas in question. They became something like middlemen, with armed groups on one side, and the governmental negotiation committees on the other. They worked under the supervision of the Ministry of National Reconciliation Affairs, and the Reconciliation Centres set up by Russia following their military intervention in Syria at the end of 2015 with the aim of reaching a conclusive local reconciliation deal, along with its conditions and application mechanisms.

[71] Gharibah, M. 2016. *The Perception of Governance: The Experience of Local Councils in Opposition-Held Syria.* SwissPeace website http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Mediation/Arabic_

Synthesis_Paper_Peceptions_of_Governance.pdf, date of publication January 2016, last accessed October 13, 2018

> 66 *Most people here are not interested in the local elections. Some photos of the candidates were put up in the neighbourhood, but we know they are all corrupt and that they accumulated wealth during the siege; they benefitted from the trade and transfer of goods from Damascus and their sale here at inflated prices. I can say we have lost confidence in all of them. No-one here is concerned with the elections. Our apathy is even greater now than it was before 2011.[72]* 99

Under these agreements, a large number of opposition fighters, civil activists, and their families were forcibly removed to the north of the country. This was a key condition to stopping the military offensives, and it was after this that the reconciliation areas saw a gradual return of the administrative, service, military, and security apparatus of the Syrian regime, with constant governmental promises of the return of public services and the improvement of living conditions. There were also assurances of safety for those who chose to stay and

assurances that they would not be detained or subject to harassment by the security forces. These were mainly empty promises; according to residents' testimonies from some of these areas, the harassment remained, as did the detention, which a large number of residents were subject to. Moreover, there were areas which did not see the return of all essential public services.

As for the local elections of 2018, outward signs of the nomination and election processes were few and far between. There was hardly any electioneering witnessed, nor were any independent candidates observed. Campaigning was limited to a few signs, photographs and electoral tents affiliated with the National Unity lists, and was carried out under the predominant supervision of the Ba'ath Party. It was clear that these lists would win by default, and most residents showed little interest in the elections. Some, indeed, had not even heard that the elections were being held in the first place.[73]

By way of example, *al-Ayam* spoke with one of the members of the Reconciliation Committees in the al-Tall city in Rural Damascus in the north-west, which was outside regime control for five years, and for which a reconciliation agreement was signed in 2016. Abd al-Latif al-Bunni stated the following: "Today, we as activists in the public sphere are confronted with a certain reality, namely the people's loss of hope in change. The old mentality that we saw five years ago has returned. Ba'ath Party sub-branches are in control of the Educational Council, school managers, and their finances, and are appointing and firing whomever they want in al-Tall's

Image 5 - Election campaign tent in Arbeen, Ghouta, an area previously under opposition control. Source: Social Media

[72] Resident of al-Barzeh district in Damascus in interviews held during the writing of this paper

[73] في الجنوب السوري العين على المصالحات لا الانتخابات :Snack Syrian website https://goo.gl/2PDWwN, date of publication August 25, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

from التركية تحرم سكان درعا من الانتخابات، وبلدات من دون مرشحين https://goo.gl/2v1EFA, date of publication August 30, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

institutions. The corruption has started to grow, and the good has begun to wither."[74]

> ❝ *Everyone who wants to leave [Ghouta] in order to start working in Damascus, or set up their own work in Ghouta, is made to pay bribes daily to the security forces. Will the local councils be able to solve all these problems?* [75] ❞

In interviews held during the writing of this paper, one resident of al-Barzeh district in Damascus said, "Most people here are not interested in the local elections. Some photos of the candidates were put up in the neighbourhood, but we know they are all corrupt and that they accumulated wealth during the siege; they benefitted from the trade and transfer of goods from Damascus and their sale here at inflated prices. I can say we have lost confidence in all of them. No-one here is concerned with the elections. Our apathy is even greater now than it was before 2011."

A woman from the area of Kafr Batna in Eastern Ghouta communicated a similar feeling of disinterest, saying, "I would vote for the local councils if they are capable of protecting us and of providing us with job opportunities. Residents of Eastern Ghouta do not care about anything except living in a safe place and ensuring their protection from detention, which many young men are still being subject to despite promises to the contrary. We also want to get job opportunities and to be allowed to work as before without having to pay royalties to the security branches. Most of the families of Ghouta live off some kind of help coming in from abroad, and we still have not been able to get our lives back to like they were before the war. Everyone who wants to leave in order to start working in Damascus, or set up their own work in Ghouta, is made to pay bribes daily to the security forces. Will the local councils be able to solve all these problems?"

3.4   Areas Outside Syrian-Government Control

By polling day, there were three main provinces that the Syrian government had still not retaken, these being Raqqa, Idlib and al-Hasakah. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units, was in control of al-Hasakah, the Syrian Democratic Forces in control of Raqqa, and the armed opposition factions in Idlib. It was therefore not possible to hold elections in these areas in the same way as they were being held in other areas.

In Raqqa and Idlib, special constituencies were set up for

Image 6 - A polling station in Harasta, Eastern Ghouta, an area previously under opposition control. Source: Social Media

them in Hama province, as per an announcement by the Ministry of Local Administration issued on July 29, 2018.[76] It was Hama in which the local administration had set up temporary centres for both Raqqa and Idlib since they left government control in 2014 and 2015 respectively. The deputy governor of Raqqa province spoke about how the government was running elections in the parts of Raqqa over which they had control, and how ballot boxes had been set up in the different provinces where people from Raqqa were now residing. This was particularly concentrated in Hama, where Raqqa's administrative affairs had been being carried out for several years.[77]

Those who wished to put themselves up for nomination from these two provinces were told to go to any of Hama's administrative units to submit their request, as confirmed by one of the candidates of Raqqa now living

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[74] انتخابات الإدارة المحلية على الأبواب, al-Ayam website: https://goo.gl/BB9bsg, date of publication July 22, 2018, last accessed October 22, 2018
[75] A woman from the area of Kafr Batna in Eastern Ghouta in an interview conducted by the author
[76] بوائر انتخابية خاصة بإدلب والرقة في حماه Ministry of Local Administration and Environment website: http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-

04-19-13-25-40/item/6663-2018-07-31-09-02-12, date of publication July 29, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
[77] إقبال كبير على الترشح للإدارة المحلية في حلب والرقة ودير الزور، على موقع وزارة الإدارة المحلية والبيئة Ministry of Local Administration and Environment website: http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-04-19-13-25-39/item/6672-2018-07-31-13-23-30, date of publication July 31, 2018, last accessed October 11, 2018

in Damascus. In an interview carried out in person, he said that he had put his name forward in Hama because it was the temporary headquarters of all administrative matters for Raqqa.

Judge Ahmad al-Siyadi, the head of the Nomination Committee in Idlib province said that "Despite the exceptional circumstances facing the province and its departure from Syrian-government control, citizens from some of the areas under the control of armed factions have put themselves up for nomination in their designated centre in the city of Hama."[78]

The Judicial Branch Committee in both Raqqa and Idlib announced their coordination with the Administrative Committee to set up polling stations according to the geographic distribution of the residents of the two provinces, many of whom had been displaced to other areas of Syria. Despite this, some residents and Ba'ath Party members from Idlib requested that the elections be delayed until the Syrian government had regained complete control and all those displaced had the possibility of returning.[79] Perhaps these factors partly accounted for the low levels of nomination in the lists of these two provinces, particularly of women, and for the tens of withdrawals that happened a few days before the election. It could also account for the violations of the nomination conditions which stipulate that the current bureau chiefs in the province cannot be nominated for membership of the local councils, with the Idlib lists including two active bureau chiefs.[80]

Al-Hasakah province, as mentioned above, witnessed mass withdrawals against the backdrop of detentions of tens of candidates by the security forces of the Autonomous State of North-East Syria, which refused to hold elections for the Syrian government in its area of control.[81] This was reflected starkly on polling day, with the electoral process only taking place in the security square which was under the control of Syrian government forces. The rural centres were absent from the electoral process completely, out of fear of the restrictions that might be enforced by the security forces of the Autonomous State.[82]

In this section, we have discussed all that concerns the process and mechanisms of nomination, and have shed

light on different candidates or stakeholders who chose to stay away from the elections. We focused on the different experiences of those areas which were retaken by the Syrian government during the last two years and of those which remain outside of their control.

In the next section, we will discuss the electoral process that took place on September 16, 2018, by looking at what went on in the course of that day, the violations that were witnessed, and the role that was played – or not played – by civil society and the media. We will then examine the results both on the province and district level, as well as the gender distribution of the election winners.

4 The Electoral Process and Results

Ahead of the elections themselves, there was no noticeable enthusiasm surrounding the elections on the streets of Syria. Field-level observations and face-to-face interviews with around 50 people (from Damascus, Rural Damascus, Tartus and Homs) revealed a sense of apathy and a low turnout to the polls, as a consequence of the despair felt with the predetermined nature of the results.

Image 7 - University students queue to cast their votes at the Student's Residence at Damascus University. Source: Social Media

[78] Snack إلصيادي لسناك سوري هناك مرشحون جاؤوا من مناطق خارج سيطرة الحكومة Syrian website: https://goo.gl/6DyMyr, date of publication August 16, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[79] حرصاً على تمثيل حقيقي مطالبات من أهالي إدلب بتأجيل الانتخابات في محافظتهم, Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/obyvJ2, date of publication July 29, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[80] Snack Syrian website: قائمة مرشحي البعث تخالف الشروط التي وضعها https://goo.gl/12pY17, date of publication September 10, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[81] Snack Syrian website إلحسكة انسحابات بالجملة من انتخابات الإدارة المحلية https://goo.gl/q9ZzV2, date of publication September 5, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

from Jorf News website: الإدارة الذاتية تقاطع الانتخابات المحلية للنظام http://jorfnews.com/portal/?p=15909, date of publication September 2, 2018, last accessed September 21, 2018

[82] Snack خوفاً من الاعتقال والتوقيف، أمناء صناديق ينامون في مراكز الاقتراع اليوم, Syrian website: https://goo.gl/AYkyYU, date of publication September 15, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

❝ *It's all just for show. We know nothing of the candidates except for their photos and have no idea what they will offer us. Most of them know they will win before the votes are even in.[83]* ❞

Even the responses of those who showed some interest in the election betrayed a similar sense: "We will go to the polling station and cross out all the names from the list because all are known to be corrupt"; "I am participating purely out of respect for the constitution and my right to vote, but I haven't the slightest hope that anything will actually change"; and "I will be boycotting these elections as an expression of my frustration."

Against this backdrop, *Snack Syrian* carried out an online opinion poll about the attitudes of Syrians towards the elections. The results were clear: "81% of those who participated in the poll do not believe that these elections will be any better than the last ones." Among the cited reasons was "frustration with the last round of elections whereby candidates were effectively appointed to their seats rather than being voted in. They will succeed regardless, having been brought in through closed and pre-prepared lists, just like in the past elections. Even if these are slightly better than the previous elections, the election winners are still backed by the government, most were not up to the responsibility of the job, and they put distance between themselves and the citizens. Likewise, they applied the law only in part and ignored those articles which were supposed to increase trust in the councils. Most importantly perhaps, in terms of what affected public opinion, instructions were issued on the last day of nomination to state employees and party members that they should put themselves up for a nomination. This would make it seem to media and news outlets as though there were a large number of candidates and that the turnout to the nomination process was high."[84]

The same website held an opinion poll at the University of Aleppo on interest in the election. The results were clear: "The majority of university students are not interested in the election, and one out of ten will be participating in the upcoming election. Eight out of ten said that the election will not change anything, and six out of ten see that these are bogus elections whose process is little more than selection. Meanwhile, seven out of ten students see that the local councils have no actual power and that the decisions will be coming from the capital, namely from the central power which commands the authority of the local councils."[85]

Image 8 - University students wait outside a polling station to cast their votes at the Student's Residence at Damascus. Source: Social Media.

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[83] Interviews with a random sample of Damascus residents
[84] Snack Syrian, استطلاع رأي، الانتخابات القادمة لن تكون أفضل من سابقاتها website: https://goo.gl/SuzWKM, date of publication August 21, 2018, last accessed September 22, 2018

[85] Snack Syria لهذه الأسباب ينظر طلاب في جامعة حلب بسلبية للانتخابات القادمة website: https://goo.gl/SuzWKM, date of publication August 26, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

Further to this, the website *Enab Baladi* carried out an opinion poll on August 31 in which they asked participants if they had previously voted in local elections, with the result being that 77% had not.[86]

Al-Ayam, in turn, asked a number of citizens about the local councils in their districts. They responded that they knew nothing of either the local councils or of Law 107 and that they had lost hope in the idea of real elections because of previous experiences.[87] The newspaper also indicated the results from the first local election experience had not been encouraging for the candidates or the voters, since many mayors and council members were selected, in order to replace the members who were dismissed for some reason or another. It was assumed that the newly elected members had been selected by the previously elected members.[88]

4.1 Election Day, September 16, 2018

Local administration elections took place in Syria on September 16, 2018. This was not to be a national holiday, but rather a normal day of work and study in all governmental, private and educational institutions.

Turnout to the polls in the different Syrian towns and cities was poor, according to field observations and interviews with people from these areas.[89] Most of the voters were state employees or students who were instructed by their employer or university to go to the polls or were friends and family of the candidates themselves. There were attempts outside the polling stations and government bureaus to get passers-by to go in and vote, by handing out the National Unity lists in the street, without significant success.[90]

Against this backdrop, an incident was observed in Darayya in western Rural Damascus which revealed how greatly the Syrian government sought to misrepresent reality, and revealed, in turn, the level of interest there was in the districts where the government had control over the elections. The city of Darayya left Syrian government control in 2012, and its people suffered a brutal war and ruthless siege until August 2016 when a reconciliation deal was signed between the Syrian regime and the opposition factions. All the residents were forcibly removed and Syrian government control was restored. Since that time, and up until the day of the local elections, the residents of Darayya were not allowed to return to their homes. However, one day before the elections, the regime-led executive office of the municipality sent an invitation to the people of Darayya on its Facebook page to return and to cast their votes at the ballot box.[91] According to field testimonies, no-one was forced to vote, but many residents preferred to take part, raise flags and cheer for the government in order to avoid trouble. This incident was then exploited to falsely demonstrate the interest of the reconciliation areas in the local elections.[92]

Furthermore, many violations of the Local Administration Law were witnessed, according to several media reports. This was in stark contrast to the assurances of the High Judicial Committee for Elections about the preparedness of the polling centres and their utmost commitment to the law.[93]

The following are examples of violations of the law witnessed and spoken about in the media:[94]

- No scrutiny with regard to 'election ink', meaning that people were able to vote more than once;
- The entry of candidates' agents – or the candidates themselves – into the polling booth and their monitoring of the electoral process; this even amounted to them casting others' votes and preventing the voters from writing names of others they wanted to elect;
- The placing of the National Unity lists next to the ballot boxes or within the polling booths, with these sometimes being the only lists available within the polling station, and the independent lists being excluded on purpose;

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86 Opinion poll on Enab Baladi website: https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249124#ixzz5PleXxdLi, date of publication August 31, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
87 انتخابات الإدارة المحلية على الأبواب al-Ayam website: https://goo.gl/BB9bsg, date of publication July 22, 2018, last accessed October 22, 2018
88 الأيام تواصل استقراء أجواء ما قبل انتخابات الإدارة المحلية al-Ayam website: https://goo.gl/eT8dCS, date of publication July 29, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
89 بدمشق إقبال ضعيف ومقر طلائع البعث مركز انتخابي Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/FTb7Tr, date of publication September 16, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
90 According to numbers from the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, the number of eligible voters on election day was roughly 16,350,000

91 Facebook post from the Executive Office of Darayya Town, found at: https://goo.gl/KTXN33, date of publication September 15, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
92 الانتخابات المحلية جاءت لتكرس الحالة الوطنية والشعور العالي بالمسؤولية والمساهمة في مسيرة البناء الديمقراطي Ministry of Local Administration and Environment website: http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-04-19-13-25-39/item/6893-2018-09-17-11-43-39, date of publication September 17, 2018, last accessed October 24, 2018
93 السوريون إلى صناديق الاقتراع اليوم al-Watan website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/166207, date of publication September 16, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018
94 The "Your Turn" campaign was set up by the Nation Building Movement to strengthen the role of civil society in the local council elections, and which also observed a number of violations on polling day; its Facebook page can be found at: https://www.facebook.com/dawrak/?ref=br_rs

- Lack of private booths at all polling stations, which is a condition of vote casting;
- Lack of scrutiny of those voting more than once;
- Lack of introductory lists with all the names of candidates in front of the ballot boxes;
- The mass turnout of employees and workers from certain areas, suggesting that they were sent with that purpose;
- Registering identity documents of voters who were not there and voting on their behalf;
- Removal of ballot boxes from some polling stations such as al-Mukharram, Jab al-Jarrah and al-Mazineh in Rural Homs and the assumption of victory of the National Unity lists despite the presence of independent candidates;
- Coercion of students from the Ba'ath University in Homs to vote as a condition of their departure from campus.[95]

As for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who left their homes during the war, they could vote in their new residence on the issuing of a document confirming their place of residence without a particular minimum time of residence required.[96] According to interviews with IDPs from the provinces of Homs and Deir Ezzor, as well as Eastern Ghouta and those residing in Damascus, the local council elections were not an area of interest for them. One said, "What can the local council, whose nepotism we are all accustomed to, offer me after we lost our property and were displaced from our land? We were not interested in these elections when we were in our city [of Deir Ezzor], so why would we take an interest now?"

4.2 Role of Civil Society and the Media

Given the nascent nature of civil society in Syria, its huge criss-crossing divisions in the different areas of regime control, and the transfer of large numbers of them during the war years to the relief sector, it is hard to ascertain the scale of their efforts during the local elections. However, according to personal accounts, these did not seem particularly significant, and they were not able to really penetrate the electoral process with all the nepotism, corruption and violations that accompanied it.

Discussion can here be made about those campaigns that were set up to strengthen the role of civil society during the elections. The most prominent and impactful of these was the 'Your Turn' campaign, launched by the

Nation Building Movement in Damascus; it increased awareness about the elections, their conditions and key legal stipulations, built the capacity of some of the candidates in affairs of local administration and observed the electoral affairs and campaigns. This included election day itself, where it monitored violations and rule breaking.

The efforts of particular activists and journalists should also be discussed, especially those who had some knowledge of the Local Administration Law. These efforts became clear through awareness-raising about the elections in the weeks preceding them, and through the observation and monitoring on election day.

In an interview with a civil society activist, the interviewee spoke about "the difficulty of acknowledging the existence of an effective and real role of civil society and the media during the local elections. There are civil society groups which have completely boycotted the elections, and there are people who believe in their ability to enter into the elections and succeed in creating change. However, these are few and far between and they do not have a real impact. This is first and foremost down to the continued grouping of civil society efforts as if they are simply parties or NGOs or charities, and the lack of understanding about what the real role of civil society is. This would require an in-depth knowledge of electoral law, not to mention the ability to act as auditor and invigilator in these elections and other political action in Syria."

4.3 Election Results

On September 20, the Ministry of Local Administration announced the completion of the vote count in the local councils, as well as a five-day grace period in which an appeal of the results could be made. The Ministry stated that the turnout had been 56% of eligible voters, who total approximately 16,300,000 people.[97] This is significantly higher than what was observed through field observations, one-on-one interviews, and media reports mentioned above, which cite voter participation as being poor in some areas, and almost non-existent in others.

The announcement of the results was done in each province separately, it is the remit of the province-wide branch committees and not the High Judicial Committee which was overseeing the elections. Many constituencies announced the results starting on polling day before the

[95] طلاب في جامعة البعث بحمص يجبرون على الانتخاب Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/ognsGo, date of publication September 16, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[96] يوم انتخابي حافل ينتهي باختيار مرشحي المجالس المحلية Tishreen news website: http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=218023, date of publication September 17, 2018, last accessed October 12, 2018

[97] انتهاء عملية فرز الأصوات في انتخابات الإدارة المحلية، على موقع وزارة الإدارة المحلية والبيئة, Ministry of Local Administration and Environment website: http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-04-19-13-25-40/item/6924-2018-09-20-10-34-30, date of publication September 20, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

vote count was completed; the National Unity lists won by default in more than one constituency because of a lack of enough alternative candidates to fill the seats designated in the local council. Among these constituencies are the following:

- In the provinces of Idlib and Raqqa – two areas outside the Syrian government control – the National Unity lists won by default,[98] with the absence of effective election proceedings in Hama, as confirmed by many people who are from one of these two areas and residing in Damascus;
- In the area of Talkalakh in Homs, ballot boxes were eliminated given the withdrawal of independent candidates, and the National Unity list was left to win by default;[99]
- The National Unity list won in the two areas of al-Shajara and Yarmouk Basin in Daraa province by default with elections not having been held, and ballot boxes not having been sent there at all, given that these two areas had only just been retaken by the Syrian government.[100]
- The National Unity lists won in the province of al-Hasakah by default, with the elections being merely a symbolic exercise given mass withdrawals of candidates, out of fear of detentions that were being carried out by the SDF.[101]

Other constituencies did not announce their results for two or three days, with a delay in some areas on account of counting errors, or vote manipulation.[102]

Regarding female winners, there are no official statistics, as was the case with the candidate lists. However, some figures can be drawn from the results announced online, and these indicate that the number of women who attained seats in the incoming local councils was low.

To give an example, by looking at the results which give the names of the winners, there appear to be 173 female winners out of a total of 1303 people who gained seats, namely 13%.[103] In some of the lists of winners that were published online, the number of female winners in particular cities and provinces can be seen, including in the following:

- Province of as-Suwayda council: 1 woman among 28 winners in Group A and 1 woman among 25 winners in Group B
- City of Al-Safira council: no women among 33 winners
- Al-Qatifa council in Rural Damascus: no women among 8 winners
- Nahiet al-Kiswah council in Rural Damascus: no women among 6 winners
- Area of al-Nabek council in Rural Damascus: 1 woman among 8 winners
- Town of Rabiaa council in Rural Hama: no women among 10 winners
- Jobar and Barzeh and al-Qaboun in Rural Damascus council: 4 women among 35 winners
- Darayya and Babbila council in Damascus: 1 woman among 11 winners
- Al-Midan and al-Qadam council in Damascus: 3 women among 34 winners
- Douma council in Rural Damascus: 3 women among 24 winners
- Sarouja and Amara and Shaghour council in Damascus: 3 women among 35 winners
- Arabayn and Jaramana and al-Malayha and Kafr Batna council in Rural Damascus: 1 woman among 10 winners
- Arabayn council: no women among 25 winners
- Qudsaya council in Rural Damascus: 2 women among 7 winners
- Qatna council in Rural Damascus: no women among 8 winners
- Al-Qanawat and Kafr Susa and Mezze and Kiwan and Damer council in Damascus: 9 women among 35 winners
- Muhajireen and Salihiya and Akrad council in Damascus: 2 women among 37 winners
- Yabroud council in Rural Damascus: 1 woman among 4 winners
- Candidates from the Syrian Socialist National Party across Syria: 1 woman among 18 winners

[98] مرشحون نجحوا قبل بدء الانتخابات, Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/2cSvYF, date of publication September 16, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[99] News on the Dimashq Now Facebook page, found at https://goo.gl/yr9yoG, date of publication, September 16, 2018, last accessed, October 18, 2018

[100] بدرعا: المسؤولون معجبون بالعملية الانتخابية ومواطنون ينتقدون Snack Syrian website: https://goo.gl/ZD3SJc, date of publication September 16, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[101] فوز قوائم الوحدة الوطنية بالانتخابات المحلية في الحسكة وحمص al-Watan website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/166759, date of publication September 19, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[102] انتهت عملية إعادة الانتخابات لمجالس الإدارة المحلية في حديقة الفرسان باللاذقية, Local Administration and Environment Ministry website:

http://www.mola.gov.sy/mola/index.php/2018-04-19-13-25-39/item/6928-212, date of publication September 20, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

Syria al-Hadath News حدث في ريف دمشق، مرشح يخسر الانتخابات بعد إعلان فوزه Network website: http://event.sy/news-29509.html, date of publication September 20, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

Shamra News مخالفة في طرطوس تؤخر إعلان نتائج انتخابات الإدارة المحلية website:
https://shamra.sy/news/article/ad9b82a125fe506b5bef7a46e625e3e1, date of publication September 18, 2018, last accessed October 18, 2018

[103] الرئيس يصدر المرسومين 304 و305 لعام 2018 Sana website: https://www.sana.sy/?p=823310, date of publication October 3, 2018, last accessed October 24, 2018

The matter of the local council elections did not end with the announcement of the results and publishing of the winners. The violations which were observed, and which we have discussed in this paper, drove one of the candidates from Tartus to file a lawsuit to prove the invalidity of the elections in his province. He argued his case on the basis of various violations committed, including the casting of votes by those who were either not present, ineligible to vote or deceased, in more than one polling station. More than a month after the election results announcements, local news outlets reported that the Supreme Administrative Court had ruled that the vote in 18 constituencies in Tartus was void and that re-elections should be held there, based on the complaint of the aforementioned candidate. This was considered "a precedent which underscores the supremacy of the law and the independence of the judiciary."[104]

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has presented a summary of all details pertaining to the process of local elections that were carried out in Syria in September 2018. It looked at the legal context of these elections, the way in which this process was carried out, both in the nomination process and the candidates from different backgrounds and sectors, and in the voting process itself. The paper also presented people's perception of these elections and analysed the reasons behind their disinterest in it.

The paper offers an opportunity for understanding how is power practised in Syria, and the level of trust in the election process, the impact of this low level of trust on participation and on results, in addition to understanding the gap between law and implementation in Syria and its potential consequences.

5.1 Conclusions

We present here some of the conclusions of this paper;

1.   Elections as a political message

It is important to look into the reasons behind the insistence of the Syrian government to hold the local elections at this particular period. These reasons, as posited by this paper, included economic and political

gains that the government wished to acquire on the long term and the short term.

On the one hand, these elections can be seen as a political gain which in turn allows for the consolidation of field-level gains secured by the Syrian regime in the battles of Eastern Ghouta, in Rural Damascus and Daraa in the south of the country. Through these elections, the Syrian government has tried to show that it is striving to pursue an agenda of democracy in its political affairs. This became very evident in a speech by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during his meeting with the elected local councillors in February 2019. He pointed out that these elections "culminate in an important stage of the mission of restoring security and defeating terrorism and confirms the strength of the people and the state and proves once again the failure of the enemies' Transforming the Syrian state into a failed state that is unable to carry out its constitutional duties[105].

In another sense, the Syrian government has been in a rush to give the impression of stability both on a political and economic level, and of its ability to begin the process of reconstruction. The only thing that would stop or delay the elections according to its narrative would be "the war on terrorism," and the holding of elections would ostensibly be a declaration of the end of the war and of the readiness to start the process of reconstruction.

2.   The political economy of the local elections and the era of reconstructions

There has been a very heavy focus during the recent election period on decentralisation, both in the media and in the national rhetoric, and the link made between the elections and reconstruction of a new Syria. This is through media reports,[106] and through the holding of seminars on the Local Administration Law and its effect on the reconstruction process in Syria. One of these was held in August, one month before the elections, with one of the regional leadership members of the Ba'ath Party stating: "the reconstruction period requires the presence of local councils capable of moving this forward," adding that "the local councils are the outlet through which developmental plans decided on by the government can be carried out. These plans need real support structures able to reflect developmental plans, programs and projects in real terms, to improve the economic situation

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104 في سابقة قد تكون الأولى من نوعها القضاء يبطل نتائج الانتخابات المحلية في 18 مركزاً بمنطقة الشيخ بدر في طرطوس al-Watan website: http://alwatan.sy/archives/172495, date of publication November 4, 2018, last accessed November 8, 2018

105 The text of the full speech is available at SANA website via https://www.sana.sy/?p=896762
106 حشد جماهيري وسط مدينة الحسكة تأكيداً على أهمية المشاركة في انتخابات مجالس الإدارة المحلية, Sana website: https://www.sana.sy/?p=815600, date of publication September 16, 2018, last accessed October 11, 2018

and services. Therefore, we require strong local councils whose members have the experience, capacity and a positive reputation as well as a high profile and the ability to meet people's needs, those who put their trust in them. It is this which we are working to achieve, and which we portray outwardly to articulate our democracy, through which others can view us."[107]

Law 107 gave the local councils – on the level of province, city or township – local authority over some aspect of the economy and construction investments, and thus the elected councils will have a strong role in the upcoming reconstruction phase, with regard to both planning and implementation. It is important therefore for the regime to ensure to ensure that members of these councils are strong supporters. It is important, too, to note the formation in 2014 of the Reconstruction Committee and the appointment of the Minister of Local Administration as its president[108]. Among the committee's tasks is the implementation of projects regarding the return of essential services and the rehabilitation of infrastructure in the destroyed areas.[109] It is this which explains the interest of Holding companies and businessmen in funding those close to them in order to gain access to the local councils.

Similarly, Law 10 issued in April 2018 allows for the introduction of new regulatory areas based on the suggestion of the Minister of Local Administration and Environment[110]. It also gives the executive office within the administrative unit wide-reaching powers in planning and implementation for the new regulatory areas. And it is here that the importance of electing new local councils to start to apply this law becomes important since it would not be legal to apply the new law with council members whose term has already ended. It is also advantageous to apply the law with the implication that it is part of Syria's decentralisation, giving a more positive outward image of the country in the hope of convincing regional and western governments to invest in a Syria whose climate is one of democracy, openness and decentralisation.

3.   The implementation gap

The current local administration law, and despite all its shortcomings, increases the powers of the local authorities and opens the door for Syrians to participate in local councils. But despite the fact that the elections

took place in areas that host Syrians with diverse political backgrounds, including those loyal to the regime and those who do express openly their opposition views, yet, Syrians did not seem to be very keen on taking this opportunity. This reflects the gap between the text of the law and its implementation. This gap does not only come from the way the Syrian government applies the law, but also because of the citizens' impressions of the law and of the overall system of governance. These impressions can be summed up based on the interviews made in this paper as follows:

a)   The big loss of confidence in the overall system of governance including the regime and its laws. This is reflected even among the ranks of those who are not classified politically as opponents of the regime.

b)   A significant spread of a sense of futility. This has been reflected in the low number of candidates and the numbers of elected candidates and through some their statements, which reflect the loss of hope for real change, even when the law provides a legislative opportunity for this change, and a state of recognition by voters that the results are predetermined even before the official announcement.

c)   High awareness that the electoral process in Syria is merely mockery elections.

d)   The significant deterioration in the standard of living of most Syrians and their preoccupation with survival priorities. This contributed to their indifference to the elections and to the inability of many of them to run and compete.

The gap between legislation, implementation and practice is also evident by the fact that the Baath Party continues to dominate the elections, although the 2012 constitutional change theoretically ended the Baath Party's single control of the state and society.

4.   Women's Participation

Neither the Local Administration law nor the General Elections law does contain any provisions concerning the allocation of quotas to women. Women's representation in the elected councils of 2011 accounted for no more than 3%. As for the 2018 elections, there were no official figures on women's participation, but what we observed,

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107 For more about the seminar see Baath Media website: https://goo.gl/LWEhpc
108 Full text of the decision signed by the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment: https://goo.gl/zPN9PL

109 لجنة إعادة الإعمار تكشف عن المشاريع والمناطق التي سيتم تأهيلها في سوريا Sham Times website: https://goo.gl/H4Xp3b, date of publication October 14, 2018, last accessed October 19, 2018
110 The full text of the law is found on the Syrian Arab Republic Prime Ministry website: https://goo.gl/P6miGv

is that the percentage of women on the lists of candidates and on the successful lists did not exceed 10% in most areas. This contrasts with the image the Syrian government is trying to suggest, which claims that there is active participation by women in the political process in areas under its security control compared to the opposition control areas, where the participation rates of women on local councils are also very low. We also noted the reluctance of leading women figures in the country to participate in the elections and that they mobilised their parties to boycott the elections because they do not believe in their usefulness.

The war in Syria has increased the proportion of women to men, many of whom have died or been arrested or left the country to escape conscription. This was reflected in the situation of women, many of whom became the main provider for their families, which increased their participation in the labour market[111]. This should be matched with an increase in the representation of women and their interests in local councils. Access to these councils, as we have observed, requires involvement in networks of cronies, corruption and favouritism, which are usually dominated by men.

5.2 Policy Implications

This paper shows that constitutional and legal changes are a necessary but insufficient condition for the process of democratic transition in Syria. Any meaningful political transition process will indeed require substantial changes in constitutional and legal frameworks and should be based on electoral processes at several levels. But these amendments and procedures alone will remain futile and could end up a façade for the authoritarian regime, if not accompanied by other conditions and measures.

In addition to legal changes, real change requires actions that restore confidence in the overall system of governance and at all levels.

Several insurance policies are needed in order for the Syrians to believe in any legal change and to be more likely to complying with it and thus giving it meaning or legitimacy. What is needed is first; wide consultation and participation in the construction of these laws; second for them to have confidence that these laws and procedures, such as elections are designed to serve their public

interest, and third, that the process should be as inclusive as possible.

A genuine democratic process of change in Syria also requires a structural change in the political economy that allows the dismantling of the relationship between power and money, that opens up for all the possibility of equal and fair participation and benefiting from the process of development and reconstruction, and that allows citizens to exercise their supervisory and monitory role in a manner protected by law.

The increase in the proportion of female breadwinners in Syria and their increased participation in the labour market in Syria present another reason for the calling for quotas for women in elections to ensure their fair representation. Increasing their representation is also an important entry point for changing the political economy structure of the local councils, thus weakening the networks of private interests and reducing corruption, because of the weak participation of women in these networks. It is not enough to allocate a quota for women alone to encourage them to participate in the elections and to run for them. What is also required is a number of procedures and programs of political empowerment and capacity building for women.

The process of change in Syria will not be easy and will take a long time, but not putting the process of change on the right track from the outset will only ensure progress in the wrong direction.

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[111] Syria's 'era of women': War leaves streets empty of men. Middle East Eye Website: https://goo.gl/sfhPcA, date of publication 23 July 2018, last accessed October 19, 2018.