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Deraa Province: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society

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1. Executive Summary

Deraa is known to be the cradle of the Syrian uprising of 2011. There were many reasons for the province's increased popular resentment against the political regime in Syria, including the regime's hardline security policies; its monopoly of the public sphere in the interest of a tight circle of local middlemen directly linked with the security apparatus; the continued tightening of the margin of basic freedoms; and the uneven development between Deraa's rural and urban areas.

The protest movement in the Deraa province is distinct given the role played by Deraa city in the uprising, which preceded the involvement of the surrounding rural areas.

The peaceful nature of the uprising in Deraa helped to strengthen of the civil aspect of the movement, and rendered it more effective in the province as a whole. The number of organisations in southern Syria was at least 38 in 2015, increasing to around 50 organisations by the middle of 2018. Many local councils were also formed, helping to fill the governance gap in the province resulting from the Syrian regime's gradual withdrawal in 2012.

In general, the local stakeholders, whether local councils or civil society organisations, were not able to develop an effective economic or administrative system. Instead, they mainly relied on the financial and technical support provided by international donor bodies.

In the period between 2012 and 2015, the province witnessed a number of battles between the Syrian military forces and the opposition forces, which by the end of 2015 had taken control of the majority of the two southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra. The situation remained largely unchanged until the De-escalation Agreement of May 2017, which led to a relative decrease in the intensity of violence, and included all southern areas.

However, the situation shifted rapidly once again at the end of June 2018, when the Syrian regime, backed by the Russian forces, began a brutal military campaign against Deraa. This campaign ended in what is known as the Deraa Reconciliation Agreement of June 2018, between the opposition forces and the regime, carried out under the direct oversight of Russia. This agreement stipulated return of the whole southern area to regime control, with the integration of opposition military factions into the Russian-backed Fifth Corps. However, within the first year of this agreement, it became clear that many of these points were not adhered to, putting into question the ostensible state of stability. The Syrian authorities did not abide by its commitments, either on the security or civilian level, and in particular in relation to regularisation of state and service provision.

Furthermore, the central government's refusal to coordinate with the local governance bodies in the opposition-held areas dampened any hopes of reaching real and tangible stability in many governance sectors. These included issues pertaining to civil registries, such as birth, marriage and death certificates, as well as those pertaining to property rights. All such documents issued by the directorates and local councils in opposition-held areas were not officially recognised.

The challenges described above make it difficult to predict how civil society work in the Deraa province will develop in the coming period. However, looking at various indicators from the province, it appears that there will be little space for non-relief-based organisations to operate (this includes legal and rights-based organisations, and those working in violations documentation, advocacy for victims, and those working in governance, administrative and institutional development, and peace building). Most of these organisations will be forced underground, and will have to coordinate with civil society groups present in northern Syria, or non-governmental organisations working in neighbouring countries.

2. Historical Overview

2.1 Prior to the Emergence of the Syrian State

In order to understand the reality and implications of the conflict in southern Syria since the 2011 uprising, it is important to look back at the historical context behind the emergence of identity politics particular to the region. This way, we will be able to build up a clearer picture of the political, cultural and social character of this region, which is typified by complex familial and tribal dynamics. It will also help in explaining some of the social phenomena particular to southern Syria, such as the relatively low sectarian tension in comparison with other Syrian provinces, and the emergence of new familial and tribal powers during the period of armed conflict.

Southern Syria has long had fertile land and a large store of wheat,1 which made the area vulnerable to invasion. This was particularly the case during the period of the Crusades, contributing to an increased Christian population in the area. During Islam's expansion in the Levant region, many Christian families converted to Islam; the Masalimah family, for example, one of the biggest Sunni families currently in the southern Horan region, had been Christian before converting to Islam.2

The Horan region continued to play an important economic role during the Ottoman period; the district of Muzayrib became a key meeting point for pilgrims, and with the Hijaz railroad passing through the province, it came to be one of the key centres for commercial exchange. During that period, the province's centre changed several times, from Muzayrib to al-Shaykh Saad, then to al-Shaykh Maskeen, and finally to the city of Deraa. The conflict between the province's cities and rural areas is thought to have begun with the population expansion that took place during that time, given the move of the province centre from the rural areas to an urban one, sparking conflict over power and trade.

During the French Mandate period, the region played a significant role in the Great Syrian Revolt (1925-1927).3 This was manifested in the battles of Khirbet Ghazaleh and al-Musayfrah, in coordination

[1] Horan Foundation, *tārīkh ḥorān*. 2016. http://ahlhoran.org/ar/?p=15703

[2] Michel Lequien, Oriens Christianus, Paris 1740, Vol.II, Coll. 859

[3] Ali Abdallah, *durūs min ath-thawra as-sūrīyah al-kubrah*. al-Modon. 2015. https://www.almodon.com/opinion/2015/3/17/دروس-من-الثورة-السورية-الكبرى

with anti-Mandate forces in the neighbouring province of Sweida, despite the historical sectarian-linked tension between the Druze-majority Sweida, and the Sunni-majority Deraa.

2.2 Al-Ba'ath Party Rule

For the first four decades of the Ba'athist state, the Al-Ba'ath Party was constitutionally designated 'The leading party in state and society', and enjoyed relatively wide popularity in the south, with many of Deraa province's residents joining the party's ranks. The widespread protest movements against the party's policies and their hegemony over all areas of the state, which began at the start of the 1970s and were suppressed militarily at the start of the 1980s, did not gain significant popular support in Deraa, in comparison to provinces such as Aleppo, Hama and Damascus.

A number of factors contributed to the Ba'ath Party's popularity in Deraa province during that period. The most significant of these are outlined below:

1. The socialist economic policies of the Ba'ath Party, which focused on supporting farmers and the agricultural sector in Syria's rural areas, which made up approximately 80% of the area of Deraa province. The party began by forming farmers' cooperatives, extension units and implementing agricultural reforms. Meanwhile, the country's major commercial and industrial cities, such as those of Damascus and Aleppo, were damaged/disrupted by the implementation of nationalisation policies, extending to private factories and facilities/businesses. Such disruption did not significantly affect Deraa province, whose economy relied on agriculture.
2. Giving a greater political role to the region, which had been hitherto politically marginalised, by raising the share allocated to workers and farmers in Parliament to 50% of all MPs, and giving leading roles in the party and state to a number of individuals from the south. One such individual was Farouq al-Shara', who occupied a number of positions, most prominently foreign minister and vice president. Another was Rustum al-Ghazali, who occupied several positions in the security apparatus in both Syria and Lebanon. Alongside this, the network of clientelist relationships pertaining to the Party was strengthened, pushing many people from the southern provinces to join institutions supporting the Party, such as the Revolutionary Youth Union and other unions, such as the Workers' Union and the General Women's Union.
3. The location of the province, bordering both Occupied Palestine and Jordan, contributed to the increased interest of the Party in the area, particularly against the backdrop of the Syrian-Israeli conflict.

2.3 March 2011 to August 2018

On 18 March 2011, the Syrian uprising began in Deraa. A group of youth from Deraa city left al-Abbas Mosque, and headed for al-Omari Mosque, where the largest protest against the ruling system thus far was held. The trigger for popular protests in Deraa city is attributed to the detention of a number of children by Syria's security forces a month earlier on 27 February 2011.[4] Protests began to spread

[4] SyriaUntold, *Daraa: Land of Grain. The story of the city of Daraa in the Syrian revolution*. 2016. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=405572856233290

in other villages and cities across the province, as a result of the severe security clampdown pursued by the Syrian government, with the continued detention and killing of protestors.

There were many reasons for the increased popular resentment against the ruling system in Syria, including the regime's hardline security policies; its monopoly of the public sphere in the interest of a tight circle of local middlemen directly linked with the security apparatus; the continued tightening of the margin of basic freedoms; and the uneven development between Syria's provinces and cities. These were compounded by the general economic deterioration in the country, unmistakably affecting Deraa, and Syria's devastating drought of 2006-2011, which created an economic crisis among a population which relied primarily on agriculture. The negative economic approach taken by the regime also severely affected Deraa's population, particularly in the suspension of agricultural subsidies by the government.[5] As well as this, the inequitable agricultural and real-estate policies in the province contributed to the stoppage or obstruction of buying and selling agricultural land for Deraa's population; the regime stipulated the obtaining of prior security approval by the security apparatus, with Deraa's border location given as a pretext. This led to the restriction of agricultural and commercial activity in the area.

2.3.1 Peaceful Protests

The protest movement in the Deraa province is distinct given the role played by Deraa city in the uprising, which preceded the involvement of the surrounding rural areas. This is in contrast to the majority of Syrian provinces, where the protests were led from the countryside.

The protests in the Deraa province remained peaceful up until the beginning of November 2011, and armed conflict erupted in the area later than in several other provinces. We can link this delay in militarisation to two main factors, outlined below:

1. The leadership of the movement by university-educated urban youth. Despite the fact that the province is primarily led by family groups, many of these families were committed to neutrality at the start of protest movement, out of fear of the security forces. This left the space open for young people to lead the protests in the area.
2. The emergence of a number of local leaders who were unaffiliated with political authority, who were highly influential in the local community. Such individuals included Ma'an al-'Awdat, who was a leading figure in the peaceful movement, and who was assassinated by the Syrian security forces in August 2011. Another was Ahmad al-Siasina, the sheikh of al-Omari Mosque in Deraa city. These leaders endeavoured to prevent the spread of militarisation, as far as was possible, and to focus on peaceful protest.[6]

The peaceful nature of the uprising in Deraa helped to strengthen of the civil

[5] Shamel Azmeh, The Uprising of the Marginalised: A Socio-Economic Perspective of the Syrian Uprising, LSE Middle East Centre paper series (6), Middle East Centre, London 2014

[6] An interview conducted by the author with M. Abazeed, a local activist from Deraa Province. 2019

aspect of the movement, and rendered it more effective in the province as a whole. The protestors and activists, particularly the young people among them, formed local coordination groups; these became one of the most important sources of information and documentation of violations by the Syrian authorities, alongside their role in civil and relief activity.

Between the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012, many non-governmental organisations and local initiatives emerged, such as Ghosn Zeitoun, Horan Foundation and the Public Authority for Civil Defence. The number of organisations in southern Syria was at least 38 in 2015,[7] increasing to around 50 organisations by the middle of 2018. Many local councils were also formed, helping to fill the governance gap in the province resulting from the Syrian regime's gradual withdrawal in 2012. These councils began to provide a number of basic services, such as water, electricity, education, roads and the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure.

2.3.2 Militarisation

Deraa's popular uprising, which began peacefully, rapidly slid into armed struggle with, firstly, the regime's increasingly brutal military and security response, including intensified campaigns of detention and torture against peaceful protestors, and, secondly, the rise in defections from Syrian army ranks. Walid al-Qash'ami, a conscript from the town of Abta' in Deraa countryside who was carrying out his military service in the Republican Guard, is considered the first defector of the uprising, having refused to open fire on the residents of Harasta in rural Damascus on 23 April 2011. First Lieutenant Abdel Razzaq Tlas, who defected on 27 April 2011 from the 15th Brigade near the city of Ankhal in Deraa's western countryside, is meanwhile considered the first officer to defect, thereafter moving to his hometown, the city of Rastan in Homs. Defections continued from the officer ranks of the Syrian army from then onwards, including Lieutenant Ahmad Khalaf in June 2011, and Lieutenant Khaldoun Zeineddine from Sweida city in July 2011, who started the Sultan Basha al-Atrash Battalion and fought against the regime in Deraa in the area of Lajat.[8]

Against the backdrop of these defections, and the steady growth of the armed movement, the number of armed factions in Deraa began to rise considerably, such as the Talha bin al-Zubeir Battalion, the al-Omari Battalion, the Yarmouk Martyrs Battalion, the 18th Brigade and the Mu'taz Army.[9] The protest movement continued to grow, and the increase in the number of factions originating in Deraa gave rise to an increase in violence employed by the Syrian regime in the province. This exacerbated further with the besiegement of Deraa city on May 4 2011; the siege imposed by the Syrian security forces cut off electricity, water, communications and medicine from the city, while a security clampdown led to the detention of

[7] Citizens for Syria, Syrian Civil society Organisations: Reality and Challenges. 2017. https://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/Syrian_CSOs_Reality_and_challenges_2017-CfS_EN.pdf

[8] SyriaInside, *dar'a ḥakāyat ath-thawrah*. 2017. http://www.syriainside.com/articles/118_درعا-حكاية-ثورة-من-السلمية-إلى-الواقع-الحالي

[9] Ibid

thousands of individuals.[10]

At the end of 2012, jihadist groups began to emerge in Syria, such as the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. While the numbers of fighters in the ranks of these groups saw a considerable increase in the northern parts of Syria, their initial presence in Deraa was limited to a small number of fighters, who were primarily focused in the southern countryside of the province, near the Jordanian border. In the middle of 2013, with the intensification of conflict and armed violence in the area, the numbers of fighters in the ranks of these militant Islamist groups in the Deraa province began to increase. Some came from the southern areas of the Damascus province, others from Jordan, while many joined these groups from southern Syria itself. Their control of the Nassib crossing with Jordan, as well as their control of a number of granaries and olive presses in the province, gave these groups significant economic power.

In the period between 2012 and 2015, the province witnessed a number of battles between the Syrian military forces and the opposition forces, which by the end of 2015 had taken control of the majority of the two southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra.[11] The situation remained largely unchanged until the De-escalation Agreement of May 2017, which led to a relative decrease in the intensity of violence, and included all southern areas.[12]

However, the situation shifted rapidly once again at the end of June 2018, when the Syrian regime, backed by the Russian forces, began a brutal military campaign against Deraa. This campaign ended in a number of local agreements between the opposition and the regime, carried out under the direct oversight of Russia. These agreements stipulated return of the whole southern area to regime control, with the integration of opposition military factions into the Russian-backed Fifth Corps. Despite the state of relative peace that prevailed during this period, especially with the increased direct Russian presence via the Russia military police, there continued to be sporadic protests, and some military action against the Syrian Army's notorious Fourth Division, owing to the continuation of looting, theft, detention, and attacks on civilians by this Division.[13]

3. The 2018 Agreement

In June 2018, as mentioned above, a brutal campaign was launched on southern Syria by government forces and their allies, which ended in the near-total control of the provinces of Deraa and Quneitra by the Syrian government, and caused a number of structural changes to the conflict, both on the civilian and military level.[14] The military campaign conducted by the Syrian regime forced the opposition factions into negotiations with them, particularly regarding the displacement of over

[10] The New Arab, *Dar'a … ḥakāyat muḥāfiẓah ash'al aṭfāluh ath-thawrah as-sūrīyah.* 2017. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2017/3/18/درعا-حكاية-محافظة-أشعل-أطفالها-الثورة-السورية

[11] Al-Jazeera, *Tawzī' manāṭiq as-sayṭarah fī sūriyah*. 2016. https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/2/27/توزيع-مناطق-السيطرة-في-سوريا

[12] Abdullah Almoussa, *De-escalation Agreements at the Brink of Failure.* Atlantic Council. 2018.

[13] Abdullah Al-Jabassin, *From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations,* Working Paper, EUI RSCAS, 2019/06, Middle East Directions (MED), Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria

[14] International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*. 2019. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/196-lessons-syrian-states-return-south

300,000 people in the space of just two weeks at the beginning of June as a direct result of their campaign.[15] These negotiations between the conflicting parties ended in agreements on a number of key areas, known as the 'Deraa Agreement'. The following outlines the most important points of this Agreement:

1. 'Regularisation' of security status for individuals who choose reconciliation (over displacement). This regularisation covers all dissidents and civilians who hand over their weapons, with the guarantee they will not be prosecuted/pursued by the security services, on the condition that they do not conduct any actions against the state or security services.
2. Regularisation of legal status for dissident officers and volunteers, and their discharge from service without compensation.
3. Regularisation of legal status for dissident conscripts; they must re-enlist in military service within six months, and are allowed to leave the country after completing their service.
4. Allowing members of armed groups to join the Syrian Army's ranks, after their status has been regularised, upon presenting requests to volunteer or be contracted by the army.
5. Entry of Russian police forces and Syrian internal security forces to carry out security management of the area.
6. Returning the army to the barracks in the southern areas, as long as they are not stationed near the neighbouring border areas with the Golan, on the Israeli border, which is under the control of UNDOF peacekeeping forces.
7. Departure of civilians and soldiers who refuse reconciliation, and the terms of the agreement, to the areas of Idlib and Aleppo countryside in northern Syria.
8. Securing of crossings by Syrian government forces, under the oversight of the Russian police.
9. Entry of Syrian government institutions to carry out all service provision for citizens: water, electricity, gas, healthcare, education, renovation, and the restoration of roads.
10. Handing over heavy- and medium-grade weapons of those who refuse reconciliation, and their departure to the north, keeping light-grade weapons and four magazines only.
11. Inclusion of those residing outside Syria who wish to return to Deraa in the regularisation process, within a set time limit, with the option for proxies to hand in the request for status regularisation on their behalf.[16]

However, within the first year of this Agreement, it became clear that many of these points were not adhered to, putting into question the ostensible state of stability. The Syrian authorities did not abide by its commitments, either on the security or civilian level, in particular in relation to regularisation of state and service provision. The security-related issues, in the period after the Agreement, can be summarised in five major trends:

1. <u>Detentions:</u> The 2018 Aagreement stipulated that residents of Deraa who wanted to stay would not be pursued by the security branches. Despite this, the Syrian forces conducted extensive campaigns of house raids and arrests. 692 detainees were documented, among whom were 29 women, from the area, and the majority of whom carried the required regularisation cards. Among them too were individuals who had previously worked

[15] UN News, *235 alf nāziḥ fī dar'ā ma' istimrār al-a'māl al-qitālīyah fī 'addat manāṭiq ḥawl sūriyah*. 2018. https://news.un.org/ar/story/2018/07/1012842

[16] Arabi21, *naṣṣ ittifāq la faṣīl mu'āriḍ ma' rūsiyā bi-dar'ā*. 2018. https://arabi21.com/story/1105974/عربي21-تحصل-على-نص-اتفاق-لفصيل-معارض-مع-روسيا-بدرعا

in the local councils and in humanitarian aid,[17] during the first eight months after the start of the Agreement. This crackdown carried on sporadically in the area, and has continued up to the time of writing.

2. Assassinations: Over the course of around one year, 112 assassination attempts were documents, resulting in the deaths of 51 people, the majority of whom were opposition figures directly linked to the negotiations and regularisation dossier with the Syrian authorities. Identifying those responsible for these assassinations is difficult; some believe that members of military factions opposed to the regularisation agreement were behind these attacks, while others blame the Syrian security apparatus and various army divisions, including the Fourth Division. This latter argument attributes the assassinations to the wish of these divisions to maintain chaos in the area, and therefore continue to illegitimately benefit from the war economy.[18]
3. Declaration of popular resistance: At the end of 2018, protests emerged in Deraa calling for popular resistance against the Syrian regime.[19] While this resistance movement was not an organised effort and did not extend further than individual actions, the mere fact of its existence, and the targeting of a number of regime checkpoints, rendered the sustainability of stability a cause for concern, particularly in light of the sensitivity of Deraa's geographic location.[20]
4. Lack of clarity over the form and nature of the *de facto* military authorities: Despite the fact that southern Syria was under the control of Syrian governmental forces, in some areas, such as Deraa city, and villages and towns of the western countryside including the town of Tafas, there remained a clear armed presence of Syrian opposition factions. Moreover, the Syrian regime forces themselves were fragmented, with some loyal to Iran, such as the Fourth Division, one of the most powerful divisions of the Syrian army in the south, and others loyal to Russia, such as the Fifth Legion, which came to comprise individuals and leaders who had previously fought under the banner of the opposition's Free Syrian Army. This had the potential to give rise to an aggravation of these divisions between these different forces, and in turn making a flare up in the south increasingly likely.[21]
5. Mandatory conscription: The government forces imposed mandatory conscription on young men from the area following the end of the regularisation period, set in the 2018 agreement at six months. Many conscripts were sent to fight in the Idlib province, and with the deaths of around 30 fighters from Deraa in the battles of northern Syria, the security situation in the south worsened, with the fury of the families over the issue of mandatory conscription.

[17] An interview conducted by the author with O. Mohammad, Director of the Documentation Office of the free Horan Institution. 2019.

[19] Popular Resistance in Deraa, official Facebook page. https://www.facebook.com/المقاومة-الشعبية-في-درعا-2015821478721778/

[20] Syria TV. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0yxPwdFdmg

[21] Abdullah Al-Jabassini, *From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behavior During Negotiation*, Working Paper, EUI RSCAS, 2019/06, Middle East Directions (MED), Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria

4. Governance Systems in the Deraa Province

Prior to March 2011, the governance system in the south was limited to the government's role, with no tangible role afford to non-governmental bodies such as civil society organisations and trade unions. These were not allowed to function except according to very stringent restrictions, and were only able to perform a charitable role. The role of local families, which make up one of the most significant dynamics and social drivers in the Deraa province, was also weak, and was co-opted by the regime's political and security system, with heads of families incorporated into networks of local intermediaries directly linked to this system.

Following the start of the March 2011 uprising, however, the forms of governance adopted were hugely expanded, given the plethora of political and armed actors in the growing conflict. These included both official governmental bodies and quasi-governmental bodies, the latter represented in the local councils and technical directorates in opposition-controlled parts of Syria, as well as civil society organisations and local initiatives. Such bodies played a fundamental role in filling the governance and service gap which emerged in many areas which were no longer under central government control.

This diversity in the way local governance was administered in Syria led to a state of harmful competition over regional administration, specifically between civil society organisations and local councils in southern Syrian; this competition manifested itself around the form and nature of administration, and the quality of services being provided. Military forces also directly intervened as one of the actors of governance, even extending to some of the armed factions which were granted administration of certain service sectors, and the enforcement of their own governance system.[22]

From the end of 2012, when opposition control extended over large parts of the Deraa province, the majority of governance systems in place were characterised by weak coordination and cooperation mechanisms. This was exacerbated by the official government bodies refusing all communication and coordination mechanisms with their quasi-governmental counterparts, such as the councils and directorates operating in opposition-controlled areas.

For example, before Deraa's 2018 agreement was signed, the health directorate in Syria's opposition-held areas shared all essential medical data with its counterparts in the central government, with the consideration that health operations should remain outside the political sphere.[23] However, the Syrian government did not in turn, for example, recognise the examinations and certificates issued by the educational directorate operating in opposition-held areas.

[22] Graduate Institute Geneva, Syrian Civil Society Cooperation, Challenges and Opportunities In- and Post-Conflict Implications 2016

[23] An interview conducted by the author with Z. Zoabi, a member of a Syrian medical organisation. 2019

The central government's refusal to coordinate with the local governance bodies in the opposition-held areas dampened any hopes of reaching real and tangible stability in many governance sectors. These included issues pertaining to civil registries, such as birth, marriage and death certificates, as well as those pertaining to property rights. All such documents issued by the directorates and local councils in opposition-held areas were not officially recognised, even after the Deraa Agreement was signed in June 2018.

4.1 Stakeholders in Opposition-Held Areas

While local councils and civil society organisations played a key role in opposition-held areas, and made significant attempts to fill the growing governance gap, their management was often disordered and chaotic. There are several reasons for this, and the most significant of these are outlined below:

1. The multitude of stakeholders responsible for the service administration, such as organisations, councils, local initiatives and military forces, as well as such government-run institutions operating in opposition-held areas.
2. The absence of a central leadership, or even a high-level coordination body, keeping together these different stakeholders.
3. The security situation, and the Syrian governmental forces seeking to separate the eastern countryside from the western countryside, preventing them from connecting geographically. This prevented any kind of coordination, while the security situation meant it was a logistical challenge to carry out team capacity building, given the difficulty of individuals entering and leaving the area to attend required trainings.

Overall, there were three main bodies charged with service provision and governance in opposition-held areas: 1) provincial councils and local councils, 2) civil alliances and, 3) military forces.

At the start, military forces did not play a major role in service provision and civil administration in Deraa, in comparison with other provinces. This was primarily because of the availability of competent and capable civil bodies, both economically and administratively; the role of the armed forces being focused on military affairs; and the power of the locally influential families and popular base, which supported civil society organisations and the councils, as opposed to military formations.

Despite this, military bodies did have some administrative role, particularly in the control of the Nassib crossing on the border with Jordan.[24] Their control of wheat granaries and olive presses is also noteworthy, given that these two goods are economically important – particularly in relation to their export to neighbouring areas.

The process of governing provinces in opposition-held areas was primarily in the hands of provincial councils and local councils, with technical support provided by the opposition's various directorates, such as the health and education

[24] Al-Jazeera, *Al-mu'āriḍah as-sūrīyah tusayṭir 'ala ma'bar naṣīb al-ḥudūdī*. 2015. https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/4/2/المعارضة-السورية-تسيطر-على-معبر-نصيب

directorates. According to many of Deraa's residents, the governing of the province by local residents had positive results, since they could more easily communicate with local communities, and had wide knowledge of the area and local needs. Despite these positives, the experience overall was not as successful as was expected. Although the administrative structure of the councils was run according to a clear hierarchy (the highest being the Ministry of Local Administration, followed by the Province Council, ending with the Local Council),[25] this structure did not end up being effective. In spite of this seemingly hierarchical coordination, the reality was that each local council had its own different formation mechanism, with some using elections, and others employing a selection process utilising political, tribal and military forces. The paucity of financial potential and funding opportunities also meant that the extent to which they could carry out interventions and effective service provision was highly limited.[26]

In general, the local stakeholders, whether local councils or civil society organisations, were not able to develop an effective economic or administrative system. Instead, they mainly relied on the financial and technical support provided by international donor bodies. The councils were not able to play a significant role either in terms of organisation or in terms of administration, restricting the role of the local councils to the following:

1. Providing funding proposals and needs assessments to Syrian civil society organisations, affording these organisations positions of power; in certain cases, they came to be the bodies with the greatest influence over the decisions of local councils.
2. A supervisory role over funding policies, which was itself limited because of the lack of financial potential and of internal administrative capacities.[27]

While the provincial councils sought to provide licenses to civil society organisations, with the aim of controlling the presence and working mechanisms of these organisations, these licenses did not have any real benefits. Moreover, the chain of relationships within the non-governmental organisations and local councils grew to resemble those of state institutions, in terms of patronage, hiring relatives, and uneven development between neighbouring towns and villages.

Gender equality, or the lack thereof, is considered among the chief shortcomings within these organisations and local councils, with a clear absence of women in management posts. The majority of women-centred projects focused essentially on women being craftspeople only, this becoming clear from the number of embroidery projects through which the organisations targeted women, without really thinking about creating projects which could empower women politically, economically, and in terms of governance.

[25] Circular No. 22, Ministry of Local Administration, Relief and Refugee Affairs, 31/07/2017.
[26] An interview conducted by the author with J. O. a humanitarian worker in an INGO working in Deraa. 2019.
[27] An interview conducted by the author with Z. Zoabi, a member of a Syrian medical organisation. 2019.

4.2 Governance Recommendations in Deraa Province

1. Decentralisation: The employees of every major sector, such as education, health, agriculture, urban and investment development, should work through a decentralised approach at the province level, within a wide margin of independence from central governance. This relates specifically to the management of local resources (human and material); the management of local revenues; and the distribution of roles and powers between the province and administrative units, as is appropriate for the local community.
2. Advancement of development projects, as well as that of the private and investment sector.
3. Self-governing of the province and its villages: This is with the aim of reducing communal tension, protecting against corruption, and reducing patronage and clientelism as far as possible. With the governance of the province and its administrative units being carried out by members of the local community itself, applying societal pressure on those in charge would become easier. This is particularly true of the southern Syrian communities, which have strong tribal and familial ties, which could thus become a means of societal accountability.
4. Reducing restrictions on civil society organisations: Given the current situation, such restrictions end up being harmful to all, particularly given the fact that these organisations were able to meet the majority of local community needs over the last seven years. It is also crucial to benefit from their experience and impartiality during the state-building process.
5. Recognition of documents issued by quasi-governmental bodies: It is necessary to create a mechanism for recognising certificates and documents issued by quasi-governmental bodies, in order to avoid major problems related to education and family matters, such as the documenting of births and deaths.

5. Civil Society

5.1 Overview of Civil Society in the Deraa Province

The number of civil society organisations has significantly increased since the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, with this being particularly evident in the areas of southern Syria. This is the result of the military power shifts in the south, and the resultant fragility of Syrian governmental control; the significant funding opportunities due to donor focus on supporting areas of southern Syrian; the enormous humanitarian needs resulting from the war; and the inclination/trend of the majority of peaceful activists to civil [society] work, particularly after the proliferation of armed factions in the south.

According to a study carried out by the organisation IMPACT, southern Syria witnessed the emergence of over 50 non-governmental organisations between 2011 and 2018, with the majority founded between 2013 and 2015. These organisations were active in a number of fields, including education, health and relief, alongside organisations specialised in working with youth, women or children.[28]

These organisations came to rank among the biggest players in terms of governance

[28] Citizens for Syria, *Syrian Civil society Organisations: Reality and Challenges*. 2017.

and service provision, even assuming the role of the state in many areas. Organisations such as Ghosn Zeitoun, for example, assumed responsibility for education in large parts of the province; the Public Authority for Civil Defence, meanwhile, oversaw the provision of basic services such as electricity, water and infrastructure. Other organisations, meanwhile, such as Farah Organisation, worked specifically in the field of governance, and conducted capacity building for those working within the local councils.[29]

Such organisations also played a major role in reducing conflict and contributing to the peacebuilding process, through their consensus-building role in many parts of southern Syria. The organisations operating in southern Syria had wide-ranging relationships with other stakeholders, such as governmental and quasi-governmental bodies. They also had strong coordination capacities, and were able to coordinate with various UN agencies operating in southern Syria from Jordan. Finally, they had a distinct role in reducing the economic and social burdens for communities in southern Syria.

However, the Syrian government's recapture of southern Syria in June 2018 led to the closure of the majority of these civil society organisations, either by the direct order of the regime's security apparatus, or by the organisation itself, out of fear of pursuit and detention by the security services.

5.2 The Future of Civil Society Organisations in the Deraa Province

After the breakdown of the 2017 De-escalation Agreement and the Syrian government forces' recapture of southern Syria, the number of operational organisations went down from 50 to 10, specifically during the first six months after the June 2018 Agreement was signed. Most of the organisations which remained were branches of organisations in government-controlled areas which had previously obtained licenses; the Syrian government prohibited the operation of all organisations which had worked in southern Syria that were established after March 2011.

After the June 2018 Agreement, which led to the forced displacement of many residents of southern Syria to the north, some activists displaced from the Deraa province tried to re-activate their work in the areas of Idlib and northern Aleppo. However, this was limited to providing relief services to those displaced from Deraa, and organising IDP camps for them.

Despite this, during the few months following the June 2018 Agreement, there were some exceptions within the province, which cannot be generalised to civil society work in southern Syria as a whole. For example, a few Syrian organisations operating specifically in the field of relief were able to gain licenses from the Syrian authorities, under new names, some of them even run by those known to be on the side of the opposition. One possible reason for this is the Syrian government's need for service providers, given that it does not

[29] Farah Organisation, *Education Governance Programme in Southern of Syria*. 2018.

have the financial and administrative capacities itself to meet the growing needs of the local communities in southern Syria. Moreover, given the precariousness of the security situation in southern Syria, all parties have been obliged to consider working with civil society organisations, which are better placed to communicate with local communities and reduce potential future conflict. Lastly, the relationship between civil society organisations and the private sector helped to sustain civil society work, with many private companies utilising their licenses to facilitate the work of humanitarian organisations.

The challenges described above make it difficult to predict how civil society work in the Deraa province will develop in the coming period. However, looking at various indicators from the province, it appears that there will be little space for non-relief-based organisations to operate (this includes legal and rights-based organisations, and those working in violations documentation, advocacy for victims, and those working in governance, administrative and institutional development, and peace building). Most of these organisations will be forced underground, and will have to coordinate with civil society groups present in northern Syria, or non-governmental organisations working in neighbouring countries.

In terms of charitable relief organisations, it appears that these will be allowed to work in the province, as long as they are branches of other charitable organisations licensed in Damascus prior to March 2011. Otherwise, they will have to apply for new licenses from the Ministry of Social Affairs, with new names and new teams.

5.3 Civil Society Recommendations in Deraa Province

1. Imposing specific conditions on the funding of Syria's reconstruction by the international community: This is with the aim of putting pressure on the Syrian government to widen the margin of civil society work in the areas of its control; offering legal guarantees to protect civil society workers and activists; and working towards mechanisms for monitoring the extent to which civil society in Syria is able to function freely.
2. Reducing political and ideological polarisation of Syrian civil society organisations: It should be necessary for civil society alliances, to begin building relationships with Syrian organisations spanning different political affiliations, in order to enhance the sustainability of civil society work in Syria.
3. Advocating on the protection of humanitarian workers: It is crucial that advocacy organisations apply sustained pressure on international bodies and Syrian governmental bodies to guarantee the protection of humanitarian workers, and the continuation of their work.
4. Self-funding for the Syrian non-governmental organisations and local initiatives: The development of self-funding mechanisms would serve to reduce the excessive dependence on international donors, as would the development of revenue-raising projects.
5. Increasing civil society's role in designing and monitoring the development and reconstruction efforts: It is important to advocate for the inclusion of Syrian civil society as a major player in the reconstruction

process. Since they are the most impartial actors in the Syrian conflict, their direct involvement would guarantee, to a significant extent, that the reconstruction period would not become politicised.

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Photography: Jordan-Syria Border, Nasib Border Crossing (Jaber Nasib area), 4 July 2018. WFP/Abeer Etefa.

Please note that the information provided is accurate at the time of writing but is subject to change.

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