

Perceptions of Governance - The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition-held Syria

January 2017

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The Local Administration Councils' Unit (LACU) is a Syrian civil society organization specialized in promoting the concept of local administration in Syria through providing local councils in Syria with all needed services, monitoring and developing their activities, building their capacity, and contributing to the enhancement of active civil participation in local governance.

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Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to Ayman Sabbouh (صبيوح أيمن), an Electric engineer and LACU's field researcher and area coordinator for South Idlib. He was severely injured on 7/12/2016 when Ma'aret al Numan was targeted by an airstrike and passed away on 23/12/2016 in Antakya, Turkey.

The research team of this report, Martina Santschi, Corinne von Burg, Leila Hilal, Bahjat Hajjar, Mazhar Sharbaji and Mazen Gharibah, are grateful to the interviewees and the participants of the focus group discussions for having shared their views. The team would also like to thank the interviewers who have done a tremendous job under highly challenging circumstances and the translators for their helpful work. In addition, the team highly appreciated the support of Ahmed Eleiba, Karen Michels, Luca Gschwind and Lukas Oester, and extends a special thanks to Sara Hellmüller for her incredible support throughout the project.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development programme has generously supported this project. It funds and monitors innovative research on global issues with a focus on sustainable development and poverty reduction.

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Executive Summary

This report provides new insights into Local Administrative Councils (LACs) in five case study areas in opposition-held Syria. It explores their evolution, practices and influence and the way that they are perceived amongst citizens in the communities in which they exist. LACs constitute key institutions in service delivery in opposition-held areas in Syria. In some locations they also fulfil, to a certain degree, other governing functions such as collecting revenues and running the civilian registry. The majority of LACs grew out of popular mobilization efforts following the 2011 uprising, with the first known LAC starting in 2012. Initially they began as relief agents and evolved over time, attempting to fill the vacuum left when the Syrian government retreated from certain areas of the country.

This research utilized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to study the experience of the LACs in the opposition-held cities of Daret Ezzeh, Ma'aret al Numan, Zamalka, Kafr Takharim and Nawa. The report highlights the LACs and their governance patterns and trends, revealing the following insights:

- Without a centralized body to apply unified strategies, guidelines, rules and regulations, the LACs have emerged and operated in a highly ad hoc and independent fashion. Nevertheless, as shown in the report, common approaches have emerged regarding the structuring of the municipal LACs with increasing levels of formalization of governance methods.
- The LACs have, at the beginning, prioritized short-term responses to humanitarian needs over longer-term development and governance goals, leading to an administrative focus on alleviating immediate deprivations by improving access to water and electricity, repairing roads and utility infrastructure and addressing waste management. This immediate-term focus has also been driven by a revolutionary ethos, local security and international political context and funding policies that have disallowed longer-term planning and enhancement of subnational governance capacities. Yet, gradually the LACs' focus shifted to include also more longer-term activities.
- The LACs have utilized various methods for public participation and transparency. However, they were often influenced by available means and local dynamics. The security and contextual challenges have limited the LACs external visibility and engagement with all segments of society. With regards to inclusion, (s)election processes have changed over time, but are still limited to a small pool of influential families and individuals. Women, in particular, have been overwhelmingly excluded from participation in LAC leadership positions.
- The availability and agenda of external funding have been a major influence on the direction of the LACs. Donor priorities, rather than community needs, have often driven the direction of the LACs' work. This has had two main consequences. First, there is some evidence that LACs have also limited transparency because they avoid publicizing challenges that might impact donor support. Second, dependency on often short-term foreign funds has led the LACs to work project-to-project rather than according to longer-term or integrated community-wide plans.
- In most case study areas, the LACs have very limited or no enforcement power. Armed groups and the police mostly wield such power. In cases where coordination with armed groups is strong, the LACs have been able to exercise more decision-making power, including being able to arbitrate local disputes or represent communities externally.
- Citizens' perceptions of the LACs have been influenced by their historical experience living under an authoritarian government, leaving average citizens suspicious of biases and inequities in how governance systems may serve communities. Persons who have had direct contact with the LACs presented more awareness of and contentment with the changes the LACs underwent.
- Flight, death and brain drain due to low pay have also undermined the human resource capacities within the LACs' executive leadership and staff. This clashes with the strong public desire for enhancing employment in the LACs based on meritocracy and experience.
- After the withdrawal of the Syrian government, a multitude of actors started to engage and compete over service delivery and the power and resources associated with it. The LACs were, in the case study areas, able to establish themselves as the leading agency in service delivery and are strongly associated with it in public perception.

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1 Background

The Syrian uprising that began in 2011 can be seen in the tradition of the Arab Spring and was characterized by mass street demonstrations opposing the continued reign of authoritarian governments. Unlike in Tunisia or Egypt where the sitting leaders were forced out within a few months of sustained mass mobilizations, or Libya, where Western powers used force to bring down Muammar al-Gaddafi, Syrian protestors were met with brutal force and no external powers militarily intervened to support their struggle or protect civilians. The initial uprising quickly turned into an armed opposition movement.

Between 2012 and 2013, many Local Administrative Councils (LACs) were formed in opposition-held territories, rather ad hoc and independent from each others. In most cases, youth activists organized in Local Coordination Committees (LCC) initiated the formation of the LACs following the withdrawal of government forces and services. The emergent LACs were primarily civilian-led¹ and meant to create alternative governance structures from those of the Syrian government, as well as meeting needs by providing basic services. They are mainly perceived as key institutions in service delivery, but they also engage in administrative tasks such as running the civilian registry and coordinating other actors involved in service delivery.

The LACs took on varied characteristics influenced by local realities and power dynamics. LACs' roles and functions were never singular or centrally guided. Without a central governing or political oversight body, the LACs often functioned according to ad hoc rules and regulations. The numerous Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that sprang up in the wake of the uprising were also working on the ground in areas where LACs were founded, often responding to similar public needs and competing for similar resources. Gradually, the LACs were able to establish themselves in the service area and to take a leading role in coordinating and cooperating with other local and international organizations.

Because armed groups and civilian activists, in the areas being taken over by opposition groups, shared the goal of ending control of the Syrian government, they initially worked in tandem. While civilians generally led in basic service delivery, the armed groups dedicated themselves to security. Additional actors such as the Shoura Councils, courts and traditional authorities serve different political and judicial roles in many communities. The Shoura Councils encompass different actors, including LAC representatives, military factions, notables and unions, and work, in some cases, as external oversight of the LAC.

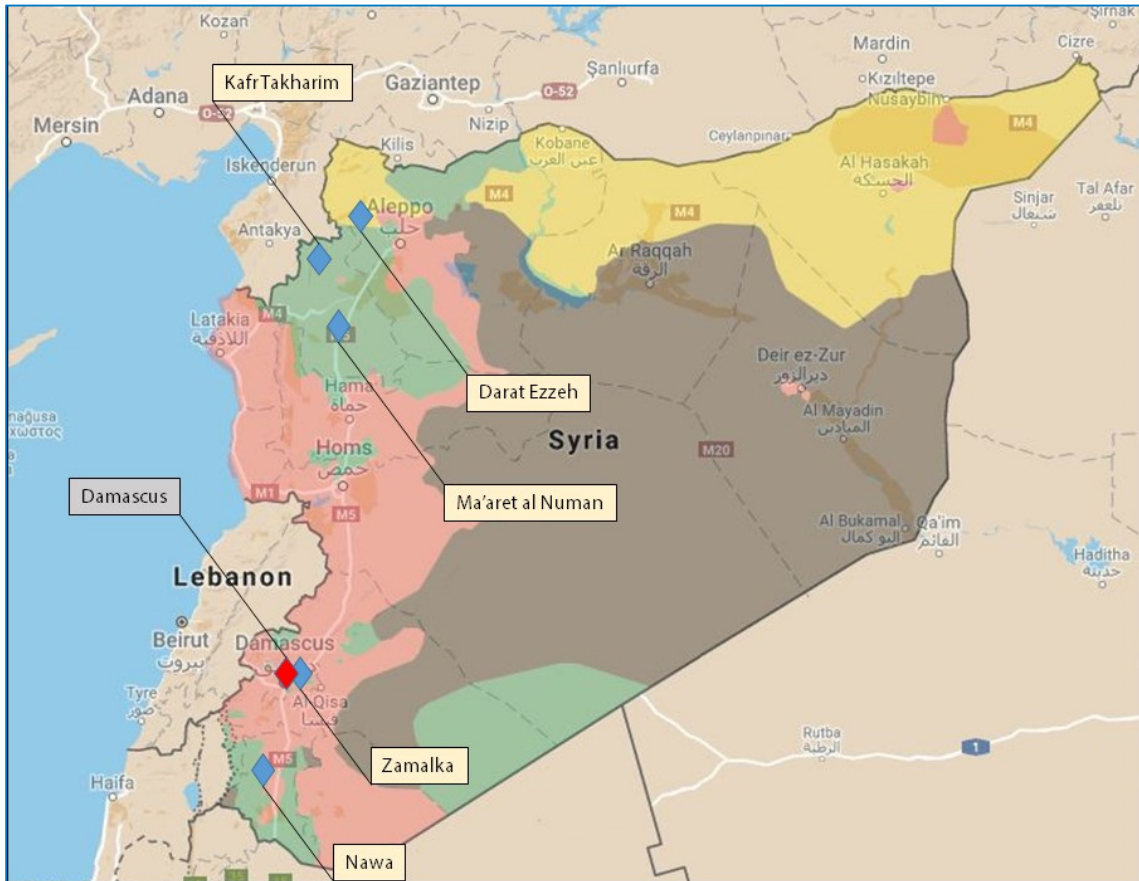
Overall, the effects of the armed conflict, including in many cases repeated aerial bombardments on public infrastructure and civilian homes and markets, meant that the LACs were operating in a highly distressed environment. Areas on the frontlines were particularly susceptible to internal volatility, often times because this led to the influx of local or foreign fighters in the community to aid the battles or consolidate opposition control. There was also a large disconnect between the external political opposition and the LACs, with the latter mostly being concerned with managing local demands and weathering emergency conditions. Over time, the growing militarization of society and social fissures have further challenged the development of the LACs and perceptions of legitimacy.

This report provides new insights into LACs in opposition-held Syria. The particular focus of the report is on the structures that opposition actors have created and the ways in which they have changed over time. The report examines five case studies of opposition local governance experiences, capturing expectations and perceptions of the communities under LACs' influence.

¹ In some locations, particularly where armed forces were behind the opposition-led drive against the government or where they exploited resulting power vacuums, armed groups led the formation of the councils.

1.1 Research Methodology

The study is not representative but draws on impressions and perceptions collected through fifty semi-structured interviews and five focus group discussions held in five case study areas, namely Darat Ezzeh, Ma'aret al Numan, Zamalka, Kafr Takharim and Nawa.



Map: Case Study Areas, Source: TutoMap, 15 January 2017²

The data was collected from August to October 2016, and complemented by expert interviews. The case studies were selected among established city and municipality councils which have been running at least for three to four terms.³ Based on a number of criteria that aim at capturing the diversity of LACs that exist, the specific case study areas were selected. The criteria were as follows:

- different modalities of formation
- different composition with regards to their members and staff
- availability of external funding (yes/no)
- generation of local revenues (yes/no)
- different levels of active conflict
- presence of extremist forces (yes/no)
- existence of formal mechanisms for coordination with civil society (yes/no)

The Local Administrative Council Unit (LACU) led the data collection process with a team of Syrian researchers. For security reasons, the respondents were treated anonymously. The purpose and procedure for the interviews and focus group discussions were clearly explained to all respondents before

² Red: Syrian Arab Army; green: Armed Groups, including Al-Qaeda, Jabhat Fath Sham, Free Syrian Army and Jaish Al-Islam; yellow: Syrian Democratic Forces; black: Islamic State.

³ Terms last between four to twelve months.

the conversation started. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Arabic and subsequently translated to English for processing and analysing the data.

The interview respondents included LAC executive members, LAC staff, community leaders, NGO staff, individuals affiliated with civil society organizations as well as armed group and community members.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Instead of viewing armed conflicts as simply destroying political orders, this research looks precisely at the contrary - their contribution to shaping and (re-)producing them. In most civil wars, armed groups and opposition movements exert considerable control over certain parts of the country's territory. They often represent the de facto public authorities in areas under their control and they perform, to a certain degree, acts of governance in the new structure that they have established (Péclard and Mechoulan 2015). According to Mampilly (2011), the main conditions for effective 'rebel governance' are: 1) a force capable of policing the population, 2) dispute resolution mechanisms, 3) the capacity to provide public goods beyond security, and 4) feedback mechanisms to foster civilian participation in governmental issues.

In areas where state actors have been defeated or where control is highly contested and fluid with ascendant non-state actors, new socio-political dynamics emerge that shape the current and future order. In such contexts, different actors and groups including armed groups, local elites, youth groups, civil society and influential families commonly jostle for authority in the public sphere. Competition also emerges over the authority to administer and govern, including the authority to provide services, approve and facilitate service projects and coordinate non-state actors (Hagmann and Péclard 2010).

Legitimacy is a crucial aspect of all power relations and can be understood as an acceptance of authority by both elite and non-elite groups. While power is often exerted through coercion in cases where there is a lack of legitimacy, it is exerted through voluntary or quasi-voluntary compliance in cases where the authority possesses legitimacy (McCullough 2015). In the absence of coercive means, compliance can be mainly achieved through the use of two other tools: a) service provision and b) shared ideologies between the governed and the governors (Keister and Slantchev 2014).

Non-state groups around the world have gained legitimacy through a range of strategies, including filling perceived gaps in state performance, drawing on nationalist and religious ideological narratives to build a shared identity, redistributing wealth through taxation and challenging existing states that are perceived as illegitimate by significant parts of the population (McCullough 2015).

Robert Lamb (2014) suggests that it is not so much the source of legitimacy that matters, but rather how much an authority conforms to the following features:

- predictable (a necessary, but not sufficient condition that includes transparency and credibility)
- justifiable (judgements about important values: what is right, good, proper, admirable)
- equitable (ideas about fairness, that is, inequalities are justified)
- accessible (having a say in processes for making decisions that affect one's life, a weak version of consent)
- respectful (treatment consistent with human dignity and pride)

Yet assessing legitimacy is challenging. First, its multidimensional and shifting nature makes it difficult to pin down and capture legitimacy. Second, one cannot understand legitimacy only by assessing the performance⁴ of the respective structures because legitimacy is heavily influenced by popular perceptions and expectations, as well as the consent of the people. If, for example, communities do not expect an authority to deliver services, then its failure to do so will not necessarily result in a perception of illegitimacy (Ibid.). Third, perceptions of legitimacy differ from person to person and from group to group (Lund 2006). Legitimacy highly depends on who is asked and what is looked at, and is subject to personal opinions, preferences and biases. This research, therefore, does not aim at making concluding remarks on the legitimacy of the LACs under study, but rather analyses the variety of perceptions and expectations that exist at this moment in time.

⁴ Service delivery, election mechanism, inclusion of citizens and communication in the case of the LACs in Syria.

1.3 [Report Outline](#)

Several publications on local governance and the LACs have been published and were part of the literature review preceding the field research.⁵ This report aims to add to this body of work by focusing on the evolution of the LACs over time and the perceptions of a broad range of actors concerned. The report first gives an introductory overview of the selected case study areas. Second, it elaborates on the design and evolution of the five selected LACs, including the process and criteria for the (s)election of members. Special attention is paid to the participation of women. Third, the study examines one of the main functions of the LACs in Syria, namely the delivery of services. Expectations and perceptions are portrayed with concrete examples, and challenges with regard to services are highlighted. Fourth, the inclusion of citizens into the LACs as well as their practice with regards to information sharing is scrutinized. Last, the relation of the LACs with other important actors, such as external donors, local actors and official Syrian institutions is analysed.

⁵ See for example: Angelova, I. (2014). Governance in rebel-held East Ghouta in the Damascus Province, Syria. / Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2014). Local Administration Structures in opposition-held areas in Syria. / Heller, S. (2016). Keeping the Lights on in Rebel Idlib: Local Governance, Services and Legitimacy among Islamist Armed Group. / Institute for War & Peace Reporting (2014). Local Governance inside Syria: Challenges, opportunities and recommendation. / Local Administration Councils Union (LACU) and Conflict Dynamics (2015). Options for Decentralization in Syria. / Local Administration Councils Union (LACU) and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) (2015). The Indicator of Needs for the Local Councils of Syria. / Lund, A. (2016). Into the Tunnels: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in Eastern Ghouta. / Omran Centre (2013). The Political Role of Local Councils in Syria. / Turkmani, R. et al. (2015). Countering the Logic of the War Economy in Syria: Evidence from Three Local Areas.

2 Case Study Areas

In the following section, the case study areas and the respective LACs are described.

2.1 Daret Ezze

Daret Ezzah is a town in the Western countryside of Aleppo province with a pre-war population of 34,000. About 15 kilometers from the Turkish border, the city became an early opposition stronghold in June 2012. Thus, the town's local council is relatively mature, better resourced and more "administratively centralized" than many other councils. It has also benefited from the fact that it was the administrative center of the sub-district under the Syrian government. Given its relative strength, and its history as an administrative center, the council has effectively incorporated at least two other village areas where there is no recognized community leadership structure. It is also coordinating with the provincial council at the executive level.

Following the evacuation of Aleppo, Daret Ezzah has remained under opposition control. A large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) live in the area, which has been the frequent target of government and Russian aerial attacks. The council's focus has been on service delivery as well as road and utility infrastructure with involvement in aid distribution and, more limitedly, education.

2.2 Ma'aret al Numan

Ma'aret al Numan is a town in rural Idlib with around 80,000 residents in 2016. Given its strategic location on the Aleppo-Damascus highway, it was the scene of intense bombardment by the Syrian government following the ouster of government forces in the fall of 2012. Ma'aret al Numan also gained prominence in 2016 when residents took to the street during a ceasefire to protest against the presence of the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra. Since 2012, Free Syrian Army forces, many of whom originated from Ma'aret al Numan, have competed with other armed forces for control over civilian affairs.

The council has pursued particular mechanisms to ensure accountability such as: 1) developing and enforcing criteria for election to the General Assembly; 2) setting a requirement of three signatures for verification for financial expenditures made by different offices; and 3) dividing the city into districts and appointing a focal point from each to the local council. Coordination is done with the provincial council and with neighboring villages' councils and CSOs. It appears that the council claims superior administrative and political authority, but the Shoura Council participates in its organizational efforts.

2.3 Zamalka

Zamalka is located 3.5 kilometers from the Old City of Damascus. It is administratively part of the Rif Damascus province and falls within the Eastern Ghouta neighborhood. Bordering the main Damascus-Aleppo highway, Zamalka is a strategically important location and as a result has been subjected to heavy bombardment by government and Russian air forces in 2013. It is currently designated as besieged by the UN, with an estimated population of 13,000 as of mid-2016.⁶

The council's growth has been stymied by a lack of financial resources due to besiegement, a particularly acute military presence, a high level of factional infighting and a rampant war economy. Relief CSOs initially outmatched the local council, but over time it has gained in prominence within the community, although its authority is still relatively weak in comparison to armed groups. While citizens often approach the council to implement projects and resolve community conflicts, the factions' influence and infighting typically overwhelm its ability to act as an arbiter. In addition, due to the lack of regular service delivery support in the area - for instance there is no TAMKEEN⁷ program in Zamlaka - the council often functions on a project-by-project basis when funding is obtained.

⁶ The population was 45,000 before 2011.

⁷ TAMKEEN Committees were organized in areas supported by the UK in order to promote better coordination between civil society and the LACs, and to increase participation of the communities in decision-making.

2.4 [Kafr Takharim](#)

Kafr Takharim is located in the northwest of Idlib province. Its original population was 30,000, but it has grown to around 45,000 due to incoming IDPs. It was previously an agricultural area with some industrial production. Kafr Takharim has been a target of the Syrian government and Russian air strikes, including on civilian areas.

The first LAC was organized in the city in mid-2011, and is now in its sixth term. It works in close cooperation with neighboring councils. A primary defining feature of it is the fact that it does not receive external funds. Another defining feature is its close relationship with military factions. Coordination is effected mostly through the Shoura Council, which is the accepted supreme authority in the community and also includes three representatives of the LAC.

Without external support, and the high degree of coordination between military factions and the LAC, it is able to exercise considerable authority within the community, including enforcement power. Yet, it has been affected by mismanagement and a prioritization of services not necessarily following citizens interests.

2.5 [Nawa](#)

Nawa is located in the south of Syria in the Rif of Dara'a province. It is part of the southern Houran. Nawa had a pre-2011 population of over 58,000. It lies in a strategic military area and front line due to its proximity to southern Damascus, the Israeli border, and key access routes to Jordan and other locations.

The first LAC was formed in late 2013, but due to military battles between armed opposition forces and the government, and within armed groups, control over the town shifted back-and-forth until the end of 2014. Between 2013 and the end of 2016, the LAC was disbanded and reconstituted at least nine times. Its current incarnation links back to an earlier initiative by the vetted Southern Front's military command, which sought to consolidate control over the area by capitalizing on popular support and servicing citizens needs. The command did this also in order to limit the influence of extremist forces in the area, an attempt which has been largely successful.

While the Syrian government and Russia conducted air attacks against the southern Houran in early 2016, the area has largely stalemated militarily, giving citizens and military forces the space to strengthen governance structures. This has benefited Nawa. On the other hand, Jordanian authorities keep a strict control over the border, which has constrained Syrian humanitarian, diaspora civil society and donor access to the area. Nevertheless, Nawa has received external funds for projects and has a TAMKEEN committee.

There are several main distinguishing features linked to its military and social circumstances. First, it is not a technocratic council. Second, it is a centralized authority providing services beyond its municipal borders to other areas within its district. And third, it is subordinate to the Shoura Councils and the Provincial Councils, with the latter issuing the regulatory rules for the council.

3 Development and Functioning of the LACs

“In the beginning, there was just a group of people who care about the country”.⁸

Within all LACs under study for this report, a gradual evolution has taken place. Respondents generally considered them a service institution with the main goal of securing basic services for the residents to alleviate the suffering caused by the armed conflict. Starting small, with only a few revolutionary activists and supporters, the initial aim was to provide temporary relief until a complete overthrow of the government would be achieved. As one interviewee mentioned: “during the formation of the LAC, it was simply a group of about ten leaders who organized those supporting the revolution. When the government and its security forces withdrew from the town, they met and formed what they called the Revolutionary Local Council”.⁹ Today, many LACs have structures that include specialized offices, influenced by the shifting needs and priorities of the inhabitants.

The gradual expansion became necessary due to the increased demands on the ground, emerging from a shift in priorities of the inhabitants due to the realization that the state of armed conflict will not end any time soon and that they thus need more sustainable and effective mechanisms. In addition, in places where fighting decreased, former inhabitants and IDPs from other regions (re-)settled. This led to a considerable growth in population and in needs that could not be met with the structures in place. It became increasingly “important that people are aware of the existence of a formal institution that assumes its role to be the responsible and legitimate institution, that is the reference to go back to, and it was important to avoid any vacuum in the city that could have been exploited by any party or individual [...]. With time, awareness increased and helped to promote the authority of the LAC [...]”.¹⁰

The gradual evolution of the LACs in the areas studied, while neither uniform nor consistent, is evident through a number of factors that will be further explored below: (1) reformation and expansion of the LAC structures, including thematically specialized offices; (2) changing mechanisms and criteria for member (s)election; (3) development of legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms. Many of the LACs have turned into a “unique place between revolutionary and public institutions”.¹¹ The developments are also observable in the changes in service delivery activities (see chapter four). It was also noticed that gradually, the LACs attempted to become more inclusive and transparent by consulting the communities and by better informing the wider public about the specific work and projects that are being carried out (see chapter five). The lack of transparency can partly also be explained by the fact that many LACs started their work when the respective areas were still controlled by the government. At that time, most activities had to be carried out in secrecy and thus, public information could have endangered any opposition-led activity. After the government withdrew and cooperation with various other internal and external actors started, the need for transparency and regulative mechanism grew. LACs also started to increasingly coordinate with local and international organisations that are active in the field of service delivery (see chapter six).

As the security situation fluctuated, including periods of de-escalation, and structures evolved and became more formalized, the expectations of the inhabitants also changed. The perceptions of the interviewees with regards to the improvement of the performance of the LACs varied significantly. Most interviews emphasized that the expectations are high and manifold, and that the newly established governance structures can hardly be compared with the ones in place before the outbreak of the armed conflict. The lack of security, financial stability as well as of qualified personnel places serious obstacles in the way of all LACs.

⁸ Focus Group Discussion

⁹ Focus Group Discussion

¹⁰ Interview 5, LAC member

¹¹ Interview 5, LAC member

3.1 Reformation and Expansion of the LAC Structures

The structure of many LACs has expanded, with new specialized offices having come into existence since 2012 when the first councils were established. Currently, an average LAC features six to eleven specialized offices which perform specific tasks and coordinate with other actors in their respective fields. In addition to this, in some cases, there is an oversight committee aiming at monitoring and evaluating the performance of the LACs.

Almost all LACs consist, at this point, of a presidency and an executive level, supported by several specialized offices. Generally, the executive offices meet once a week to discuss updates and brainstorm on new ideas while the overall council meets once a month. Decisions in these meetings are usually taken by a two-third majority. According to some citizens, this change in structure has led to a considerably more professional and well organized work.¹²

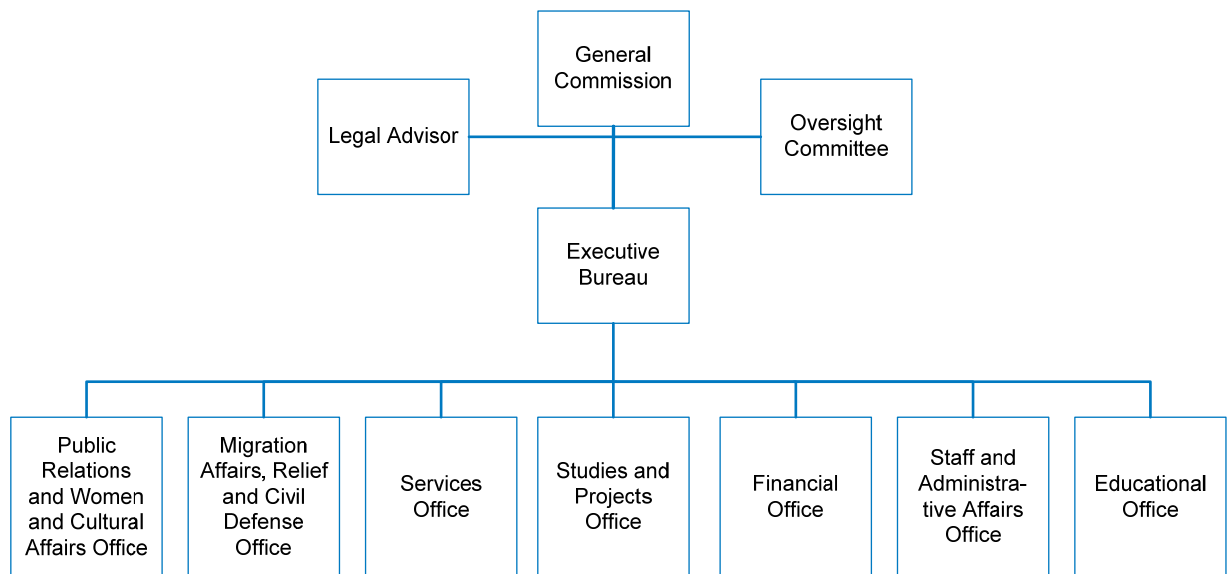


Figure: Example of LAC Structure (Zamalka)

3.2 Mechanisms and Criteria for Member (S)election

Another aspect highlighting the evolution of the LAC structure are the (s)election procedures and criteria which have changed over time. On the one hand, because of the experience gained and lessons learned in the previous terms, on the other, because there were popular requests for more formalized procedures. At times, security considerations have influenced the procedures. In some areas, such as Ma'aret al Numan, the security situation did, at times, not allow for public election as the danger of bombing and shelling was too high. In Zamalka, a raid on the day of the election for the second term of the LAC has resulted in a very small number of people going to public places to cast their ballots. In the following term, no public election at all was possible due to the security situation.

In general, a trend towards broader based (s)election procedures and a greater emphasis on the technical abilities of the candidates can be noted. While the first two terms were rather based on an ad-hoc renewal of the LAC members and were almost exclusively decided and constituted by revolutionary actors, the terms that followed had more elaborated mechanisms and a more specific request for LAC members with a certain technical expertise. At this stage, the pattern that can be observed mostly is that influential individuals from the communities nominate persons to the General Assembly who then (s)elect the Executive Bureau in a gathering.

¹² Interview 36, LAC and armed group member

However, not all LAC members are newly elected after each term. In cases where they did not experience any problems during the earlier term and there are no objections, the Executive Bureau members, the president and the vice-president might stay in office for the following term. In some places, the co-founders of the LACs or others who have served for several terms are still part of the current LACs. This, on the one hand, helps to balance between those who have a revolutionary record and those who are part of the LAC due to their technical competence¹³ and, on the other hand, promotes some continuity. In practical terms, it might also reflect the lack of qualified persons that would be eligible for certain posts. The increasing lack of well-qualified individuals poses a challenge to all LACs. Over the years, many trained and experienced individuals have left the country or decided to work for implementing organization where they receive a higher salary.¹⁴ This has led to the (s)election of less qualified people in several locations.

Box 1: (S)election Mechanisms

In Daret Ezzah, the LAC has been organized six times, each time under a new leadership. The first council was organized in mid-2012 following the withdrawal of government forces. The most recent was formed in August 2016. Like most other LACs, different modalities have been used to form the council over time. While consultative methods were originally employed, the most recent council was elected by a pool of General Assembly members nominated by families in four designated districts. The elections were public, but informal, held at the local mosque.

In Ma'aret al Numan, the LAC has gone through four reorganizations. The latest reorganization is defined by the involvement of youth activists and the participation of women in its Executive Bureau. The LAC members are hired through a competitive recruitment process conducted by a General Assembly. The General Assembly was (s)elected in a meeting that was held with the participation of CSOs, police, notables of the city, relief organizations, Shoura Council and media persons.

In Zamalka, the LAC was reformed four times since its formation in March 2013. Initially founded by agreement amongst revolutionary activists, elections were held for the following terms - once by direct local elections and, then, through a General Assembly election. In the latter process, it appears that participation was limited to area notables of "good reputation".

In Kafr Takharim, the first council or service delivery effort was organized in the city in mid-2011, for a total of six iterations. The current LAC was established through a mixed process of consultation and a limited election process which was controlled by the Shoura Council and the youth LCC.

In Nawa, the first LAC was formed in late 2013. But because of military battles between opposition and the government, and within opposition forces, the LAC was disbanded and reconstituted at least nine times between 2013 and the end of 2016. Due to its military and social circumstances, it is not a technocratic council, and was composed through a process of direct election monitored by the Shoura Council and the revolutionary committees. For the election process, the city was divided into five electoral districts.

It was evident in the interviews and focus group discussions that the (s)election processes were executed in different ways, but mostly through self-selection mechanisms. Opinion about these processes differed considerably. In general, people welcomed the improvements made in the (s)election process in recent years¹⁵ as the following quote exemplifies: "for the people, you can't satisfy all of them, but there is a high degree of satisfaction because the current experience is the best one that has been implemented. The community cares more about the quality of provided services rather than the style of elections".¹⁶ This underscores the notion of legitimacy as based on performance rather than on popular sovereignty (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2014). In some instances it might also be linked to the fact that some

¹³ It is important to note that there are also LAC members that fall inbetween those two categories.

¹⁴ Focus Group Discussion

¹⁵ There is of course a difference between the part of the population within a given area that supports the revolution and those that do not. Parts of the revolutionaries also feel side-lined by the non-revolutionary elites that have slowly increased their presence within the LACs.

¹⁶ Interview 32, LAC member

communities are rather homogenous and thus, representation is not challenged very much.¹⁷ Some respondents expressed that they felt represented by the selected members through the fact that they were from their communities and thus seen as bearing responsibilities vis-à-vis them. As one interviewee mentioned, “the council is a reflection of the local community”.¹⁸

Although most LACs did not feature direct election processes, a majority of respondents viewed them as partly consultative. With regard to the perception of the LACs, it was highlighted that the (s)election processes did not, regardless of their flaws, allow for pure favouritism which made the process and the outcome acceptable to many respondents. Thus, some respondents did not condemn the (s)election processes as long as there was some sort of consultative process where opinions of a broader range of actors were taken into consideration.

While many respondents portrayed a general feeling of being represented, there were also several voices that criticized the often applied “elitist self-selection mechanism”. Amongst those concerned, it was raised that there is a wish for free elections encompassing all segments of the society, and not just consultation and agreement among those that are already powerful. Above all, the lack of transparency was mentioned. Particularly in LACs where the (s)election occurs in different electoral districts, respondents expressed concerns that this helps certain actors to win tactically. The formation of alliances and coalitions during the (s)election processes led to the suspicion that unqualified individuals were elected who did not possess the required level of responsibility and expertise.

Although the procedures currently in place in all areas studied were generally perceived as an improvement towards widening the political space, they were also seen as allowing for interference by powerful parties that steer the public interest in a particular way, thus heavily influencing and determining the (s)election process. Besides influential families, the interference of other stakeholders was mentioned several times. In Kafr Takharim, the influence of military factions on the selection process was underscored, being perceived as contradictory to the notion of the people that the LACs are civilian-owned and -led structures. In Nawa, the strong role of the Shoura Council in selecting the president and in pushing, based on self-interest, for members to be included in the LAC was viewed critically.

3.2.1 [Criteria for \(S\)election](#)

In (s)election processes, the criteria that a new member has to comply with play a crucial role but are most often not written down or codified. They also changed over time: “in the beginning, before counting on the educational degrees, we used to count on the revolutionary history [...]”.¹⁹ While other factors have certainly influenced this shift too, the highly specialized executive offices that developed over the past years have called for a higher degree of technical qualification.

As highlighted in the case of Zamalka, to strengthen the legitimacy of the LAC, it was, at the beginning, important to (s)elect from among revolutionary activists. But after a while, perceptions of legitimacy shifted, and thus the LAC focused on different (s)election criteria, with more emphasis on the technical abilities of its members.

In all areas under study, it is a precondition for the (s)election to be a citizen of the town or city from at least the beginning of the uprising, which excludes IDPs from running for office. Over the years, they introduced further minimum requirements. For most posts in the Executive Bureaus, a high school degree is required, while the president must have a university degree.

Interviews revealed that competency and experience are seen as key criteria: “I wish there was neutrality and objectivity, and that the members of the LAC were qualified, competent and experienced, without acting based on a political ideology”.²⁰ In addition to these criteria, the following were mentioned frequently when being asked about legitimate representatives: good interaction with people, identification with the uprising, honest intention and work ethics, trustworthy, wise and transparent. There are also a

¹⁷ Expert interview

¹⁸ Focus Group Discussion

¹⁹ Interview 33, community member

²⁰ Focus Group Discussion

few exclusionary criteria such as a having a criminal record, being accused of corruption and being affiliated with the Syrian government as only dissidents were allowed to work within the LACs.

In some interviews, respondents raised doubts with regard to the criteria the Preparatory Committee or General Assembly put forward and how they relate to the current demands of the LAC. Some also reported that even if criteria such as competency, knowledge and experience were in place, the (s)election were not based on them, but rather made according to nepotism and affiliations. As one respondent stated:

“As we have mentioned, there are large alliances in town due to the prevalent discriminatory mentalities (sons of well-known families). This leads to alliances between them which often produce educationally and technically incompetent council members. For instance, seven members represent the northern sector of the city, none of whom have a university degree or relevant work experience for the LAC. Although there were many candidates who had college degrees, experience and professional and technical competences, none became a member because they did not get enough votes.”²¹

3.2.2 [Women Representation](#)

Women are almost inexistent in the ranks of the LACs: “[...] there is no women participation in the local council membership or work. [...] the current council did not accept the candidacy of any women for its Executive Bureau or council membership”.²² Even though in some areas an openness to the election of women was promised, it almost never materialized. The LAC in Ma’aret al Numan seems to be an exception, as it allows for women in its Executive Bureau. A few LACs have created specific offices for women, but even if they exist, they are not necessarily functional. In Zamalka, a discussion on the participation of women took place in the forefront of the previous council (s)election among different figures and institutions. Interestingly, the discussion did not revolve around the academic qualification or the work experience of women (or the lack thereof), but rather about whether they have “the necessary level of civilized behaviour and awareness”.²³

It was mentioned several times that it is not the LACs that do not allow for the (s)election of women but rather the society that does not support the involvement of women “because of the common habits and tradition”.²⁴ As the society is still very much segregated²⁵, women are often marginalized in the public sphere. Above all, most military factions are usually very restrictive with regards to the movement and clothing of women, which often results in even more barriers for their active participation.

While there are almost no women represented in decision-making functions, they are present as LAC employees in some of the offices, mostly in the field of education and health. In recent years, they have also gained a certain visibility in society as they have been active during protests and some are worshiped as “martyrs”. Several times, it was also pointed out that there is no gender discrimination in the services that are offered by the LAC to the society. Some LACs work with and support women’s groups and provide services specifically for women such as private sections for women in hospitals and livelihood support that is adapted to the needs of women. A female respondent also stressed that “the council takes our opinion on issues and projects that are directed to women”.²⁶ In Daret Ezzeih, it was emphasized that sometimes women are recruited as LAC staff member because the CSOs make this a condition to fund a project of the LAC.

²¹ Interview 25, teacher

²² Interview 25, teacher

²³ Focus Group Discussion

²⁴ Interview 45, member of a CSO

²⁵ For example separate schools for boys and girls

²⁶ Interview 45, civil society activist

3.3 Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Mechanisms

The Syrian National Coalition established a Syrian Interim Government that was intended to serve as a central authority with legal and regulatory authority over the LACs. The Syrian Interim Government was never fully funded and has languished in exile but it operates on a nominal basis, including having adopted an amended version of the Government's Local Administrative Law 107²⁷ and supplementary sub-national regulatory laws, meant to create a basis of institutional and legal legitimacy and maintain consistency with the government-held areas out of the national interest. The Ministry of Local Affairs has led the adoption of these provisions, and in turn works most closely with provincial level councils to disseminate the norms and rules. Local leaderships sometimes drew on these frameworks, but not consistently and the present research revealed little awareness of these provisions amongst respondents.

While the Shoura Council exercises a certain oversight function, the set-up and activities of the LACs are also regulated by some bylaws. The bylaws typically stipulate the power of the LAC and the responsibilities and jurisdiction for the Executive Bureaus. Among others, they regulate (s)election procedures, awarding of projects, administrative aspects of the daily work, penalties as well as the approval and dismissal of employees and other human resource-related issues.

At the outset, in the absence of an overall regulation, the LACs mainly relied on established practices. In a next step, they then started following the rules and regulations set out by the provincial councils. After a while, specialists, for example, from the legal offices, and lawyers from the Lawyers Association started working on specific bylaws, which were then discussed and ratified in the meetings of the LACs. In the case of Zamalka, the bylaws were even approved by the citizens during one of the (s)election processes.

Thus, most LACs have over the years adapted some rules and regulations as well as developed internal by-laws in order to regulate their internal affairs. While neither mentioning explicitly nor giving credit, most LACs also make use of the existing regulations and procedures followed by the Syrian government. As one LAC member mentioned: "it does not mean that we are not also using some bylaws that existed under the Syrian government because they worked and were useful and have no political implication. They don't belong to the Syrian government, but are owned by the Syrian people".²⁸ Especially with regards to financial and organizational issues, many LACs follow the regulations that were put in place by the Syrian government.

Interviewees repeatedly underlined that such bylaws exist, but that the LACs do not have an enforcement mechanism, and thus cannot enforce compliance with these by-laws. While it used to be the police that exercised this role, in the current context, this is hardly the case. The LACs can therefore only resort to persuasion and have little power to hold anyone accountable or execute its decrees and decisions. Critical voices also mentioned that many of the activities the LACs undertake are still based on improvisation.

²⁷ The law 107 was passed by the Central Government in 2011. It contained a number of provisions regarding the delegation of administrative power to regional, local and sub-local levels.

²⁸ Interview 50, LAC member

4 Service Delivery

LACs, through their offices, provide diverse services including education, health, water, electricity, garbage collection, communication, civil and real estate registry, sanitation, protecting public property and relief distribution. NGOs, local CSOs, relief associations and humanitarian agencies engage in some of these fields too. Some, but not all of these actors, cooperate with and support the LACs. Other services, such as justice and security, are led by other actors including the police, armed factions and courts. The LACs hardly play a role in judicial institutions, including the prominent Shoura Councils. However, in the case of Zamalka, for example, the LAC engages with the committee for internal reconciliation, which was established to end internal conflicts and also includes some LAC members. Pointing at the multitude of public authorities, a respondent noted: “there are many parties in the city that represent the government. The notion is prevalent that the LAC is the civil authority and handles the relief, services and infrastructure needs, whilst the Shoura Council is the judiciary providing justice and the executive authority is the local police which provides security services”.²⁹

LACs, NGOs, CSOs and armed factions sometimes engage in the same field and thus compete over certain service delivery functions. They thereby jostle for authority to coordinate, allocate and deliver services, for the control of resources and positions related to service delivery and for legitimacy that is associated with it. Some armed groups try to extend their influence by imposing an agenda for aid and services. In one case, armed groups and the LAC contested the control of the electricity supply of the town as supposedly it is also associated with legitimacy. In another case, members of an armed faction tried to weaken the LAC by disrupting water delivery. The purposely destroyed water pipes to “stir up anger towards the LAC or put pressure on it to fix it”.³⁰

Competition also emerges between LACs, directorates and NGOs. In a focus group discussion, a participant noted that organisations supporting and funding education compete with the education directorate over the authority to hire teachers and edit curricula.³¹ Despite competition between different actors, the LACs have - more or less successfully - asserted their authority and the leading role to approve, facilitate and coordinate activities of NGOs, CSOs and other actors engaging in service delivery in the case study areas: “[...] the ruling body in the city is the local council, it provides most of the services for the city, directly or through supervising and coordinating with other working parties in the city”.³²

In different case study areas, for instance in Ma’aret al Numan and Daret Ezzeh, CSOs and NGOs engaging in service delivery sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the LACs. Thus, the LACs in those areas are recognized as official authorities responsible for service delivery.

4.1 Changing Activities and Roles of LACs

Since the establishment of the LACs, their role in service delivery has generally changed and expanded. But as highlighted in other chapters too, it differs from context to context as the LACs are dictated and shaped by the realities on the ground including the changing security situation and needs. The LAC structures have become - as discussed in chapter three - more professional and specialised and have thereby also transformed the LACs’ engagement in service delivery. While at the beginning, tasks were not clearly distributed, with the introduction of the different offices of the LACs, council operations and their specialization increased. For example, in Ma’aret al Numan, the key sectors for the LAC were, after its establishment, exclusively relief and health, as those were addressing the most urgent needs. When the government forces left the area, the field of activities of the LAC expanded and was directed towards more longer-term activities, such as reconstruction and infrastructure projects. The Council has successfully implemented several initiatives including cleaning up the city, repairing destroyed infrastructure and improving bakery production facilities. These positive efforts have bolstered the

²⁹ Interview 40, community leader

³⁰ Expert interview

³¹ Focus Group Discussion

³² Interview 41, individual working in the education sector

legitimacy of the council, but concerns suggested that it has been unable to equally service all parts of the city.

Over time, and in the areas that became more secure, external support and the number of projects conducted have increased and the quality of projects improved. In Nawa, the LAC was, at the beginning, working under difficult circumstances as the armed forces of the Syrian government were based close by, the infrastructure was severely damaged and exchange with external actors difficult. Since then, the situation has improved and the Nawa LAC receives support from external donors for its service delivery function.

LACs, through their specialized offices, are implementing service projects as well as engaging in service delivery by planning, mobilizing, authorizing, facilitating, overseeing and coordinating. As in other countries, services that are not provided directly by LACs are often still associated with them due to their role in authorizing, advising and coordinating service delivery.³³

Besides being the key player in service delivery, the LACs are also seen as central civil, governing and administrative authority. Some refer to the LAC as (quasi) government body, a “mini-government”³⁴ or an “alternative to the Syrian government”.³⁵ A LAC member noted: “Only the local council is the body that represents what a government is”.³⁶ Yet, the influence of the LACs is often limited, for instance in relation to military factions.

Most respondents acknowledged the importance of service delivery and the important role of the LACs in delivering those. They generally have high expectations of the LACs and other institutions engaged in service delivery. Notwithstanding the fact that this study is not a needs assessment, respondents stipulated many demands. A young interviewee noted: “people put enormous pressure on the council, and their needs always exceed the available services”.³⁷ Yet, respondents, including LAC members, referred to and acknowledged also weaknesses and substantial challenges that impact on the success of the engagement of the LACs in service delivery.

Service delivery or the capacity to deliver services impacts on the way people perceive the LACs and their legitimacy. One respondent - a civil society activist - noted that external support and the resulting services lead to “an increase in citizens’ confidence and trust in the local council”.³⁸ Another respondent added: “on a positive note, the council was able to build legitimacy, and provide services, and construct some of the infrastructure”.³⁹

4.2 [Challenges Affecting Service Delivery](#)

Despite the fact that the LACs, in cooperation with other actors, engage in service delivery, the services in many cases do not correspond to the needs. The LACs face a number of key challenges. One of the major challenges is the lack of financial resources to provide services, repair and expand infrastructure, run the LACs and pay its staff (adequately). The LACs are operating in a context affected by armed conflict, constricted by high unemployment and a livelihood crisis, thus local revenues are an unreliable and a contested financial source. As a result, the LACs depend on external sources. In Zamalka for instance, funding comes from external sources distributed by the Provincial Council, from taxes levied on NGO activities in the area and from collaborative projects with NGOs. As such, the council does not have a general budget but functions on a project-by-project basis.

In some areas, the LACs tried to generate more revenue, but they face a difficult dilemma: Is it opportune to levy fees and taxes to secure service delivery in a conflict-affected context in which many face livelihood crises? What are the implications of levying fees and taxes for the LACs in terms of legitimacy, but also accountability? In some cases, LACs already collect revenues to fund services and other activities, but in most case studies they are only planning to do so in the future. The LAC in Nawa, for

³³ Research of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium in South Sudan, for example, illustrated that local authorities engaging in coordinating service delivery are often associated with these services even if they do not provide them (Maxwell et al. 2016).

³⁴ Interview 44, community leader

³⁵ Interview 7, former LAC member

³⁶ Interview 50, senior LAC member

³⁷ Interview 2, youth

³⁸ Interview 30, civil society activist

³⁹ Interview 20, lawyer

instance, has imposed taxes, by obliging every family to pay 100 Syrian Lira monthly. In addition, it also plans to impose taxes on commercial shops, pharmacies and physicians and to take legal action if they do not pay. The LAC in Daret Ezzeah has collected revenues by levying Value Added Tax (VAT) on water and food, using funds to subsidize those services, and to a lesser extent council salaries and fuel purchases. It also leases properties. In Ma'aret al Numan, the LAC receives some money from the court and has ambitions to charge fees for services and collect taxes but has not yet been able to implement it. In Zamalka, the LAC already collects fees for certain services and plans to collect further fees based on usage. It has also attempted to raise revenue through property rentals (e.g., former municipal buildings are leased out for commercial enterprises). However, respondents had conflicting views on this. While some called for the levying of taxes and fees to ensure the continuity in service delivery, others demanded free or less expensive services.

Another major challenge of the LACs, strongly linked to the limited resources, is to enable the continuity and sustainability of operations and activities. Once a project and its funding ends, the LACs' engagement in that field often also stops, severely disrupting longer-term service delivery. Other obstacles affecting the LACs' capacity to deliver services are a lack of qualified staff, equipment and the supply of fuel and other essential goods.

The armed conflict, and the resulting insecurity and bombing, seriously impact on service delivery. In Zamalka, Ma'aret al Numan, Nawa, Kafr Takharim and also in Daret Ezzeah, infrastructure such as public buildings, roads, the sewage and water system and phone land lines as well as private houses were destroyed or damaged. Limited supply and - in some areas - siege conditions, hamper service delivery. Equipment and material to repair infrastructure or to deliver services are not (regularly) available or too expensive.

Another challenge are waves of displacement and the resulting rapid increase of population. In Ma'aret al Numan and Daret Ezzeah, for instance, many IDPs arrived. In other cases, such as Nawa, many former residents returned after the end of the siege. The limited services can thus often not cover the needs of newly arriving or returning people. Respondents from Ma'aret al Numan noted that while the amount of relief services remained the same, the number of persons in need has heavily increased.

Critical voices also explain some shortcomings in service delivery with institutional weaknesses of LACs or singular entities within LACs including "slow and weak performance and the lack of expertise and clear strategy to set the rhythm of the local council's work, and the foggy relationship between the different offices".⁴⁰ The different LACs often suffer from mismanagement and a prioritization of services not necessarily in accordance with citizens' interests.

Box 2: Specific Examples of Service Delivery

This box provides specific examples of service delivery and describes the role of the LACs, major concerns and people's expectations in the specific case study areas. The concerns refer to some of the key challenges respondents identified with the current system.

Education

Different organisations engage and cooperate with LACs in the field of education. The education offices in Kafar Takhareem, Zamalka, Ma'aret al Numan and Daret Ezzeah, for instance, shape and follow the education system, supervise the schools and assess the needs of the schools. The LACs, together with international organisations, support schools with material such as books, but also in terms of logistics. The LACs furthermore provide salaries for some of the teachers.

Nevertheless, education services are limited due to a lack of resources. Material and goods to secure operations, such as fuel, are lacking, and school buildings destroyed due to the ongoing war. Respondents from Zamalka, Nawa and Kafr Takharim underlined that schools lack trained teachers. In Kafr Takharim, for example, many teachers were dismissed from work after the uprising and some

⁴⁰ Interview 39, activist engaged at the beginning of the uprising

trained teachers went to work in other fields as teachers' salaries are very low. The education sector, as well as the health sector, are most heavily affected by this brain drain.

Support in the education sector is, according to a number of respondents, not well coordinated and thus poses major challenges. Support to schools and teachers' payment is not unified,⁴¹ and each region has its own curriculum. As one respondent said: "support is intermittent and limited, which has a negative impact on the educational process. All organizations support different schools and hence each school is being operated in another way. In other words, there is an increasing gap among schools in terms of teachers' salaries, syllabuses, etc".⁴²

Relief, Food Aid and Livelihood Support

The ongoing armed conflict severely impacts livelihoods, making relief an important aspect of food security. The LAC relief offices are involved in registering displaced families, identifying people in need, securing housing, supervising the distribution of food aid and distributing food items themselves. However, a leader of the LAC of Kafar Takhareem underlined that other associations and organizations play the leading role in relief and food allocation.⁴³ Several respondents, including LAC members, stressed the lack of fairness and justice in the assessment of needs, food distribution, allocation of funding and service delivery more generally.

A considerable number of respondents prefer livelihood support which focuses on income generating activities and the creation of employment rather than food aid. Projects supporting income generating activities exist in the different case study areas. Some projects support urban livelihoods by facilitating access to equipment and financial resources while other projects support cultivation and livestock keeping. Yet, these projects face different obstacles, such as the high number of people in need and the lack of livelihood assets. For instance, access to electricity and fuel is difficult, and in some urban areas such as Zamalka, arable land and pasture are hardly available. It seems that livelihood projects and livelihood support do not necessarily reach the people in need and beneficiaries were not always carefully selected.

Due to the lack of sources of income and high commodity prices, many face challenges buying food at the market. In locations under siege, such as Zamalka, access to food is even more challenging. Respondents expect the LACs to monitor, control and influence the markets and prices for food and to create outlets where people can access less expensive food. In Daret Ezzeh, Zamalka and Nawa, the LACs produce and/or subsidise bread if they can access the necessary ingredients.

Water and Electricity

Access to water as well as access to electricity are limited in most areas. Both sectors are interlinked as in many areas, water has to be pumped with fuel or electricity. Therefore, due to a lack of electricity, access to water is often curtailed. The private sector provides services in both areas which are, however, perceived as unreliable and too expensive. The LACs attempt to facilitate access to water and electricity - the latter often produced with large generators - and to provide alternatives, for instance by negotiating a more accessible price with the private sector. Yet, in both sectors, particularly in the electricity sector, the impact of the LACs seems to be limited.

The LACs water offices provide staff and equipment, build new sources, support and monitor the water pumping process as well as try to repair, maintain and expand the infrastructure. Thereby the LAC coordinates with organisations that work in the water sector including the maintenance of the water system. However, the costs for repairing broken systems and the lack of equipment and spare parts in both sectors make it difficult to meet the needs of citizens.

⁴¹ Focus Group Discussion

⁴² Interview 6, NGO staff

⁴³ Interview 24, senior LAC member

5 Inclusion of Citizens and Information Sharing

Inclusion of citizens in decision-making modalities and information sharing are two sides of the same coin. While the first is a two-way communication and confers some responsibilities on the citizens too, the latter one is a one-way communication, but nevertheless contributes significantly to the legitimacy and acceptance of the LACs.

Inclusion of Citizens

In three of the five LACs researched, inclusion of citizens into decision-making and priority setting has almost not taken place to date. In Nawa, Kafr Takharim and Daret Ezzeah, public consultation meetings with citizens in general have not been reported, while consultations with powerful elites or specialists have taken place. In Zamalka, the LAC opened its quarterly General Assembly meetings held in mosques or communal buildings to the public, but it is unclear how extensive this opportunity was used by the wider public. Powerful elites or specialists are more often consulted in order to receive their opinions and considerations on a specific activity or in order to choose between different projects that are to be implemented. Specialists have also been invited frequently to propose new initiatives and projects. Direct beneficiaries were only occasionally consulted before the projects began. One reason that was mentioned for this is the need to manage expectations. The LACs avoid broad consultations before funding is secured, as this could cause severe disappointment in cases where the project is not able to attract financial support.

In Ma'aret al Numan, the situation differs, and active inclusion of citizens has recently significantly improved. Several times, public outreach and consultation meetings took place. Thereby, citizens were able to voice their needs and concerns and were asked about the type of projects that are most needed in their communities. In such meetings the citizens thus had a stake in determining the service focus of the LAC. In other public gatherings, the citizens were informed about all activities of the LAC, but not consulted. Many interviewees in the Ma'aret al Numan area have mentioned this participatory approach as a very positive feature of the LAC. They perceive the meetings as a much needed possibility for them to express their views and for the LAC to arrange their priorities upon those views. The assessment of people's priorities has also improved through surveys that are being conducted.

Some cities and towns have also instituted other mechanisms to transfer information and get feedback from the community. In Zamalka, the neighbourhood committees and leaders work as intermediaries, conveying citizens' messages to the LAC and distributing information from the council to the communities. The city is divided into 14 neighbourhood committees and every committee is responsible for approximately 150-200 families. There are regular meetings in which the head of the committee is responsible for the dissemination of news and for exploring people's needs, and then in turn, voicing them to the LAC. For example, at an occasion where food baskets were distributed by the Red Crescent, the heads provided information on the type of support, the allocation formula and the procedure, in order for families to understand the process and the calculations underlying the different sizes of food baskets. A similar mechanism was also reported from the LAC in Nawa, where the town is divided into 15 suburbs, with an average of 300 to 400 families per suburb. Each has a suburb committee and a suburb head, who is responsible for meeting with the respective families, exploring their needs and feeding them back to the LAC.

But there are also certain limitations to public consultation meetings. On the one hand, the LACs sometimes face difficulties in reaching out due to the security situation. Large town hall meetings or gatherings in the mosque are often not possible due to the danger of bombing and shelling. On the other hand, citizens are not always responsive to invitations. In some interviews, it was reported that, even if the LAC convenes meetings and holds public gatherings in order to get a sense of the demands of the city's residents and to take them into account when planning for the future, the turnout is generally low. Most citizens are either not interested or busy earning a living.

In some LACs, a formalized complaint mechanism to gain feedback from citizens has been created. A public office dedicated to receiving complaints and complaint boxes have been recently installed in the

Zamalka area, in addition to the responsibility that the neighbourhood committees have in this regard.⁴⁴ But given the environment and the limited communication, it has been difficult to activate these official mechanisms. While Nawa also seems to have a complaint mechanism in place, several interviewees reported that there was no reaction after complaints were made. In other locations such as Daret Ezze, complaints can be filed with the Shoura Council, but most people do not seem to be aware of this possibility.

While many interviewees raised the issue of a lack of outreach and consultation, some voices also mentioned that, as the LAC is selected by the citizens, it does not need to get back to them but is mandated to take decisions on their behalf. A member of TAMKEEN added: “of course there is a radical difference. Humanitarian organizations, especially the one I work for, have a completely different mechanism. It gives the community the opportunity to set priorities. This is different for the LAC as a representative authority that sets the priorities itself [...]”.⁴⁵ Another interviewee has also questioned the necessity to consult ‘ordinary’ citizens, as they would only complain about the missing services and do not possess the necessary knowledge and experience to add something constructive to the discussion. Yet another respondent highlighted the fact that before the uprising, nobody even dared to speak or participate, and therefore the current situation must be seen as an important improvement. Based on past experiences, at least a section of the citizens supposedly has limited expectations in terms of access to information and participation. At the same time, individuals working for the LACs are not necessarily used to participatory approaches.

It can be observed that, while current or former LAC members emphasize the possibility for participation, for example through invitations to the meetings of the General Assembly in Zamalka in which participants receive information and discuss about the projects and actions of the LAC, most civilian respondents do not seem to perceive this the same way.

Information Sharing

The LACs in the areas under study rely heavily on facebook to publicise their work. In addition, some LACs also print newsletters and magazines, and place brochures on billboards within and outside of LAC facilities for the dissemination of relevant information. This includes news and detailed information on project activities, advertisements of project tenders and bids, decisions of external actors that have an impact on the LACs work, job advertisements and appointments of new staff members and invitations for public meetings. Sometimes, the LACs also inform the public of imminent air strikes, recommending them to stay away from public places such as the mosque. Through these platforms, the LACs also disseminate information such as the dates for relief distributions or a listing of the pharmacies that have night shifts. At times, the LACs also inform the Imam of the local mosque to disseminate important information during the Friday prayer.

Some LACs have gone a step further in informing the public. Intermittently, the Daret Ezze LAC issues a gazette called ‘Al-Narges’, which is widely distributed in the area. This, according to several respondents, has largely increased the perception of transparency as the magazine informs the public about all LAC activities and also includes a financial report. Some respondents from Zamalka expressed the wish to have such a magazine/newsletter too, as this would provide credibility, enhance people’s trust in the LAC and avoid false rumours on spending. But it also seems true that much of the published reporting is intended for external consumption, with significant input coming from donors and expat activists in Turkey and beyond. In Kafr Takharim, the LAC has its own radio station where it broadcasts important announcements and news. In Ma’aret al Numan, the LAC distributed walkie-talkies to facilitate and improve communication with important households in its vicinity. The Daret Ezze council also utilizes social media such as whatsapp to communicate with select activists and notables.

Some of the LACs also feature a media bureau, but its function was not clear to many of the interviewees. In Zamalka, respondents indicated a common tactic of pitching projects directly to the president of the council; in other locations, people indicated a higher degree of information after visiting

⁴⁴ There is a procedure in place where those that have complaints first approach their neighbourhood committee head and only if there is no response on this level, they file their complaints directly with the LAC (Focus Group Discussion).

⁴⁵ Interview 49, member of TAMKEEN

the LAC's office, suggesting an ad hoc nature of communication. Overall, and not surprisingly, the persons involved in activities where the LACs are also engaged were most familiar with its functioning.

In almost all interviews and focus group discussions held, the need for an improved information strategy was mentioned. While the communication could be more frequent and active, the use of appropriate tools to reach the targeted audience was also questioned. Facebook, as the primary information sharing platform, is not able to reach all segments of society. Those without regular access to internet or elderly people often do not receive the announcements.

6 Relations with Other Actors

The LACs are part of local (political) arenas that are made up of different actors, including armed groups, CSOs, politicians, unions, different clans, women's and youth groups and influential families. At the same time, the LACs are part of a hierarchy of opposition structures and work with and are supported by international and national donors.

Overall, relations with other actors are partly supportive but also shaped by competition over influence. The following sections explore how the relations of the LACs with these different actors changed and how they are perceived and described by respondents.

6.1 Donors

Different institutions fund and support the LACs in their key function as service delivery entity. Those include multilateral donors, bilateral donors from the region or other parts of the world, international or local NGOs and relief agencies, as well as private institutions and individuals. Various respondents stressed that services can only be provided due to grants from these actors. Especially large endeavours, such as infrastructure projects, are only implementable with external support. The LAC in Kafr Takharim, however, seems to be an exception as it does not obtain direct external funding.

Many respondents had the impression that external support and donor policies have enhanced the performance and professionalism of the LACs, for example by offering trainings and capacity building workshops on administrative techniques as well as project design and management. Their positive impact on transparency and monitoring was also highlighted. Yet, some respondents believed that the changes are only superficial and mainly aimed at securing funding. In addition, some respondents perceived donors' conditions as challenging, complicating and, in the worst case, interrupting the work of the LACs: "sometimes documents are requested that the council simply doesn't have; this creates additional burdens on the council staff and thus causes shortcomings in the work of the council".⁴⁶

Donors often support specific sectors and activities. The major concern mentioned by many respondents is the influence of donors on the priorities and implementation activities of the LACs. Critics stress that conditions and preferences of donors, for instance for partners and with regard to the selection of beneficiaries, are not well adapted to the local context and needs. Some donors are said not to adequately consider the LACs in decision-making processes. As a result, LACs have only limited room to influence the planning and execution of their own projects. In addition, donors do not always adequately share information about their foreseen projects, such as its financial and administrative size. Yet, some of the donors seem to be flexible and cooperative and consider the LACs priorities in their planning. A respondent who had worked as a coordinator of a donor noted: "we worked through the administration of the former LAC. The LAC was responsible for the project, and through the relief office within the LAC, the LAC chose the names [of the beneficiaries], and the LAC was informed about everything that happened. No one dictated any decision [...]".⁴⁷

As discussed in chapter four, the support by donors is seen by many as too limited, which is said to affect the quality of services. In addition, the transitory nature and unreliability of external support is also seen as problematic. Some respondents expressed the fear that international support fosters dependency.⁴⁸ A civil society activist stated: "Aid has a negative effect on local councils because it allows them to rely on this financial assistance rather than securing other sources of income".⁴⁹

Respondents particularly scrutinized what they perceive as politicized attempts of influencing the LACs. Some donors were accused of intervening in the formation of the LACs and the governorate councils: "I will not name any, but some of these organizations intervened in local councils and other bodies

⁴⁶ Interview 15, LAC member

⁴⁷ Interview 37, former LAC member

⁴⁸ Relief dependency is a complex phenomenon and according to research, relief is often not reliable enough for people to become truly dependent (Harvey and Lind 2005).

⁴⁹ Interview 31, civil society activist

indirectly, which negatively affects the work of the councils and bodies and also reduces their importance and hinders them from undertaking their roles properly”.⁵⁰

6.2 Local Non-Armed Actors

The LACs emerged in a context affected by armed conflict where other authorities and socio-political actors have already existed. Former and current LAC members, but also other respondents stressed that the LACs consult and cooperate with (almost) everybody, particularly with those actors who engage in service delivery. Yet, other respondents have a more critical view of these relationships and refer to competing interests. According to them, exchange is limited and consultations with other actors are not grounded in any standards or in an institutionalized mechanism but are, as in the case of Nawa and Daret Ezzah, mostly unofficial and based on personal relations.

One important group of actors are community leaders and public figures who have considerable influence on their community members. They consist of elders, traditional community leaders, clan and family leaders and religious leaders. More recently “revolutionary activists”, being individuals who played an important role in the uprising against the Syrian government, emerged as a sub-group of influential people. Public figures are often represented in the Shoura Councils which are expected to have an oversight function over the LACs. In Kafar Takhareem, some public figures are members of the LAC, while others are consulted. In the case of Ma’aret al Numan, they are invited to attend meetings, periodically visit the LAC and some even work for the LAC. Other than this, exchanges with them are most often not institutionalized, highly dependent on personal relations and thus volatile and subject to change.⁵¹

The LACs and their specialized offices also cooperate and coordinate with different CSOs, including community-based organizations (CBO), local NGOs, youth and women’s groups, unions, associations, activists and TAMKEEN committees. LAC members, but also civil society respondents, stressed the LACs’ role in the coordination, support, facilitation and supervision of CSOs and other groups in service delivery: “after the council agrees with the CSOs on the general outlines, the council’s committees follow up on the work with the CSOs and provide it with the necessary database to ensure sound operation”.⁵²

However, the relations between the LACs and other local organisations that work in service delivery and relief are at times also competitive. Particularly where the LACs were established only recently, their role was subject to discussions. It was evident from the interviews that the cooperation and coordination between LACs and civil society increased and improved over time. Civil society also wields influence on the composition of the LACs, either as members or for example in preparatory committees that accompany emerging LACs. Nevertheless, competition over competencies, authority, projects and support inevitably continues as LACs and other organizations often engage in the same fields of activities.

6.3 Armed Factions

The areas in which the LACs operate are under the control of different armed factions that subscribe to different ideologies and objectives and are at times in conflict with one another. The relations between the LACs and the armed factions differ from one area to the other and change over time. In some cases, they are cooperative, in others more competitive or even destructive. Respondents also stressed that the sphere of the LACs as civilian entities is clearly separated from the armed groups. But the lines are sometimes blurred, as for example in the case of Nawa, where the armed factions are part of the preparatory committee that oversees the selection of the LAC members and even part of the LAC itself. Critical voices explained shortcomings of the LAC in Nawa with the dominating role of some military factions that does not allow the rise of any effective civilian entities in Nawa.

Yet, the LACs are also partly dependent on the armed factions and their enforcement power, for example in providing security and policing in the cities. The LAC in Zamalka is in touch with armed factions with regards to complaints about misconduct of members of armed factions. At times, it also provides facilities

⁵⁰ Interview 49, civil society activist

⁵¹ Interview 11, former LAC member; Interview 19, NGO staff

⁵² Interview 14, LAC member

for frontline camps and offices. In exchange, the armed forces inform the LAC and other local institutions about military decisions and actions and provide, from time to time, logistical support to them.

6.4 The Syrian Opposition Coalition, the Interim Government and Provincial Councils

The LACs are part of a hierarchy headed by the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the Interim Government of the Syrian opposition which claim to politically represent and govern the areas controlled by several armed opposition groups.

The Syrian Opposition Coalition is not (yet) present inside Syria. Interactions, relations and cooperation between the LACs and the Coalition are seen as non-existing or minimal. The LACs and the hierarchically superior institutions, the Coalition and the Interim Government, are in theory connected through the ministries (Ministry of Local Administration (MoLA)) and governate or provincial councils. However, in reality these relations are almost not existent. The Coalition is seen as disconnected from the LACs and the people and as weak in credibility. A prominent person from Zamalka critically noted: “the outside opposition in general does not care about us, and we do not feel represented by them. As activists we do not have a desire to communicate with it, they are outside and they didn’t help the besieged people”.⁵³ The Coalition is also perceived as ineffective and as not providing any tangible support to the LACs. A NGO staff from Zamalka said:

“[...] the local council of Zamalka and several other councils have lost faith in them, because we do not see anything from them but the declarations and some talking, and we see some people from the opposition are living from the blood of the Syrian people, and they get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in the name of the opposition and eventually they escape with this money. People do not count on these persons”.⁵⁴

While the previous Interim Government was based outside Syria, the recent Interim Government tries to establish itself inside Syria. Some of its senior members recently met LAC members and community leaders “to kick off coordination between both sides”.⁵⁵ The Interim Government - consisting of a head of cabinet and different ministries - is expected to provide support and to cooperate and coordinate with the LACs through the provincial councils and the ministries and directorates. It is also expected to directly implement activities and projects. In practice, the Interim Government is, however, hardly able to provide any support. A former LAC member critically stated: “[...] no one recognizes the Interim Government and it has not done anything so far”.⁵⁶ A respondent from Zamalka said: “[...] nowadays they are trying to prove their presence in Gouta but until now, there is no credibility in dealing with them and they did not provide anything to show good faith”.⁵⁷

More recently, provincial councils emerged in the case study areas. They were introduced to act as intermediaries to bridge the gap between the LACs and the Interim Government and the Syrian Opposition Coalition and also include representatives of the different LACs. The provincial councils are expected to have the oversight, to decide, give directions, approve budgets and projects and provide regulations and support. In practice, the influence of provincial councils seems to be limited, partly because most provincial councils only emerged recently and are thus not as well established and institutionalized as some LACs. In addition, provincial councils are often affected by lack of resources and can only provide limited support and supervision to the LACs. By working with the LACs, the provincial councils seemingly try to enhance their influence and credibility as they “attempt to gain legitimacy by having cooperative relations with the LACs”.⁵⁸ As a result of the limited influence and resources of the provincial councils, LACs seem to have considerable room for planning, deciding and implementing. This is further exacerbated by the fact that resources and grants, to a large extent, continue to go directly to the LACs.

⁵³ Interview 33, community leader

⁵⁴ Interview 47, NGO staff

⁵⁵ Interview 32, LAC member

⁵⁶ Interview 3, civil society activist

⁵⁷ Interview 47, NGO staff

⁵⁸ Interview 3, former LAC member

7 Conclusion

This report provides novel insights into LACs that have been formed in opposition-held areas in Syria as part of a new political order. Based on five case study areas, it not only explores the development of LACs and the changes over time, but also their current practices, their relation to other actors as well as the way they are perceived in the eyes of those they seek to govern.

Most LACs were established after 2012, in areas from which the Syrian Government withdrew. Their development was, in the absence of a centralized governing body or an overarching strategy, primarily ad hoc and independent from each other. LACs have successfully established themselves, in the areas under study, as the key institutions for service delivery, and to a certain degree, they also fulfil other governing functions such as collecting revenues and running the civilian registry. While some LACs have been active in reconciliation work, in the perception of most interviewees, they were primarily service delivery institutions.

Local political arenas - of which the LACs are part - are always contested by different actors, but particularly in contexts where the established state structures have receded and where a variety of actors are jostling for influence, power and resources. As theory suggests and the situation in the case study areas exemplifies, the position of coordinating, allocating aid and implementing services is highly contested because it is crucial in terms of power and control over resources, as well as in terms of mobilizing political support and legitimacy (see for instance Hagmann and Péclard 2010). Competition also exists among different societal segments over filling positions within the LACs and over dominating the direction they take. This political dimension of service delivery is not necessarily recognized and taken into consideration by external actors who have the tendency to approach service delivery from a purely technical perspective.

Because of the complex and volatile Syrian context, the LACs are subject to a range of changing dynamics. In order to better understand the evolution of the LACs, the report presented four different thematic areas in which these changes can be observed.

First, this can be seen in the more elaborated structures that have been created. Increasingly, specialized offices, often staffed with experts, emerged and established formalized procedures to acquire and implement projects. In addition, they have established legal frameworks that guide their work as well as their interaction with the broader public. More recently, the LACs also started to develop common approaches and by-laws to better coordinate the still rather independently acting LACs.

Second, their participation, inclusion and information approaches have been professionalized. At the onset of the LACs' establishment, a small group of revolutionary activists selected the members of the LAC from amongst themselves. After each term, the procedures were amended, resulting in a more open and participatory process, albeit, more often than not, limited to influential families and notables from the region. At the same time, the LACs have also professionalized their information and feedback system, ranging from Facebook pages to magazines and complaint boxes. As Mampilly (2011) illustrates, feedback mechanisms to foster citizen participation is one of the four main conditions for effective 'rebel governance'.⁵⁹ In terms of citizen participation, some LACs have increasingly used local town hall meetings or similar gatherings to better understand and incorporate the needs of the population.

Third, the LACs have expanded their field of activity with regard to service delivery. While, at the beginning, they mostly focused on relief, they expanded and are currently more engaged in longer-term endeavors such as infrastructure and service delivery projects. Some LACs also expanded the reach of service delivery to neighbouring towns and other started to collect fees and revenues to allow for more sustainable service delivery. But most LACs are still heavily dependent on external funding. This makes them, on the one hand, more vulnerable and less independent in shaping the direction of their activities. On the other hand, it also conveys a certain degree of recognition and legitimacy to them by being the legitimate counterpart for external actors (McCullough 2015).

⁵⁹ Even though in Syria, the term 'rebel' is not used, Mampilly's theory can be applied to governance in opposition-held areas in Syria.

Fourth, they also changed in terms of their relation with other actors. There are a number of other actors that fulfil complementary functions, for example in the field of security (armed factions, police) and justice (Shoura Councils). While the LACs cover two of the four main conditions of effective 'rebel governance', namely providing public goods and featuring feedback mechanisms to foster citizen participation (Mampilly 2011), armed factions, the police and the Shoura Councils are in charge of the two others, namely policing and dispute resolution. Although there are additional actors in the field of service delivery, the LACs have, in most cases under study for this report, managed to perpetuate their leading position. The fact that they, by now, have been widely accepted by other actors implies an increased recognition by local actors.

As one cannot understand legitimacy only by assessing the performance of the structure (McCullough 2015), examining popular perceptions and expectations were equally important for this report. Numerous respondents stressed the importance of LACs in service delivery and acknowledge that without the LACs, service delivery would be far more limited. At the same time, respondents were quite critical of the LACs, for instance in terms of institutional capacity, nepotism and the lack of or inconsistent and unreliable funding. Moreover, citizens in most case study areas did not feel that they are adequately consulted, and women and other groups are, for most parts, not included in the LACs. Respondents also complained about unfair distribution of services and relief, and they feel that aid and services are more shaped by donor priorities than actual needs and realities on the ground. An additional challenge was also seen in the fact that LACs have little or no enforcement power, with the exception of those that work closely with the armed factions. Yet, at the same time, the fact that LACs are able to exert considerable compliance without the use of force seems to indicate that they are recognized as legitimate (McCullough 2015).

Despite criticism, many respondents acknowledged that the LACs have indeed transformed, and also significantly improved in different fields, particularly in service delivery. While the LACs are widely appreciated for their role in service delivery, the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the Interim Government have less credibility. Both of the latter institutions are seen as disconnected from the realities on the ground, and not perceived as representing and reflecting the interests of the people.

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