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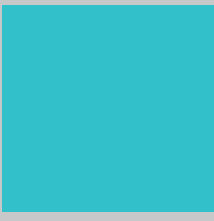
Middle East Directions

Deir Al-Zor after Islamic State: Between Kurdish Self Administration and a Return of the Syrian Regime

Ziad Awad

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Executive Summary

Deir al-Zor was the main entry point for Islamic State of Iraq into Syria, the group that transformed in 2013 into what is known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (IS), because of the governorate's strategic location on the eastern Syrian border with Iraq. IS managed to establish control over large swathes of territory by engaging in battle on multiple fronts. Subsequently, though, the group gradually lost sway over much of this territory, leaving Deir al-Zor as its last bastion of influence in Syria.

Despite its economic and human significance, Deir al-Zor was marginalised by the central government for decades prior to the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. The region only lately came to prominence on a national and international level in light of the fight against IS, with two separate military campaigns against the group being waged in the province. The first of these began in June 2017 and was led by the Syrian regime, with powerful support from its Russian and Iranian allies. The second was spearheaded by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with significant US backing. By the beginning of 2018, the two separate campaigns had divided Deir al-Zor geographically, militarily and politically. One of the two areas is governed by the Kurdish Self Administration[2], while the other is under the control of the Syrian regime. The territory in Deir al-Zor controlled by IS, meanwhile, now comprises just two small areas, in the north east and the far east of the governorate. While international efforts are now concentrated on the governorate of Raqqa, the final stronghold from which IS has lately been pushed out, the local dynamics of the conflict in Deir al-Zor remain critical to the stability of the region as a whole.

Today, the much hoped-for post-conflict stability in Deir al-Zor is being severely challenged. The conflict has caused severe damage to the social and economic fabric of the region, as well as to its infrastructure, which could well cause stabilisation-efforts to falter. This could also result in a resurgence of jihadi Salafism, whether under the banner of IS or of another group.

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[1] Ziad Awad is the editor of Ayn al-Medina, a magazine specialising in issues relating to eastern Syria. Awad has also published numerous articles focusing on the local dynamics of the conflict in Deir al-Zor and Raqqa.
This paper was written in January 2018 as part of Middle East Directions' Syria Initiative, which includes a scheme to mentor Syrian researchers. The paper has been translated from Arabic by Mary Atkinson.
[2] A decentralised model of governance followed by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) since December 2013, with the aim of establishing an autonomous region named the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, in the party's areas of influence in al-Hasakah governorate, as well as in Kobani/Ayn al-Arab and Afrin. The idea then expanded to encompass the city of Manbij, and large areas of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor governorates.

Between 2012 and 2017, displacement and migration in its many forms and directions – one of the direct consequences of the war – exacerbated the divisions among local communities in Deir al-Zor. These pre-existing divisions are based on conflicting stances towards the revolution, the regime, IS and most recently towards the new Self Administration. The state of division and disintegration is most visible within tribes, which are the main social unit of local society in Deir al-Zor. Weakness and competition within the tribal structure left the population extremely vulnerable to exploitation by jihadi Salafism, although IS was ultimately unable to rally lasting support from the tribes.

Under an exclusive mandate from the US, the SDF – whose core is composed of armed Kurdish units loyal to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – have been able to impose their military control over part of Deir Al-Zor province. The Deir al-Zor Military Council, which took part in the battle against IS under the umbrella of the SDF, is mostly made up of locals. However, it did not take on a leadership role, and the Kurdish core retained a monopoly over decision-making within the SDF. While the battle against IS was ongoing, the Self Administration established the Civil Council of Deir al-Zor as a local governance authority. However, the formation of the Civil Council and the selection of its members was controversial, with doubts as to its legitimacy, as many considered it little more than a smokescreen for the PYD – which is seen as an extension of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party –(PKK) and its political ambitions. Likewise, under the governance model followed by the Self Administration in Deir al-Zor, there are significant tensions between, on the one hand, the governance model's ethnic Kurdish identity and commitment to the ideology espoused by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and on the other, the local community's conservative Arab Sunni identity. These tensions could lead to serious conflict in the medium-term.

After re-establishing control over what had been the most densely-populated part of Deir al-Zor before the revolution – and which is now practically empty – the Syrian regime is attempting to return those who had fled the area to their homes. This is referred to as 'reconciliation', but it is only focused on security. Politically, the regime needs to ensure the return displaced people for political, economic and security reasons. On a political level the regime needs to demonstrate its legitimacy, while economically a return of the displaced will stimulate agricultural production in the area. Likewise, from a security standpoint, it would allow for young men from returning families to be recruited into the newly-established Self-Defence Units which, it is hoped, will represent an alternative way of restoring the regime's military control in the area following the army's failure to do so.

The regime is also betting on reviving its local power structures, which had been severely weakened by a loss of military control in the area over recent years. Part of this was the plan to restore the Baath party to its traditional role as a key player in the area, and to rebuild the regime's executive apparatus from the public sector. However, the regime has little chance of success, because the damage to its governance system will be difficult to repair. This is especially true given its inability to fund reconstruction efforts. In addition to official structures, the regime is also relying on a new, ascendant group: militia leaders, warlords and middlemen, some of whom have even made it into the People's Council of Syria. Moreover, the Shia minority, which makes up a very small percentage of the population, has also been able to exert greater power thanks to the growing Iranian influence. This will foster sectarian resentment, which will in turn be exploited by IS, which is keen to reassert its influence. Similarly, IS will take advantage of weaknesses in the systems of governance offered by the regime and the Self Administration. As a result, efforts to establish stability might falter, leading to the potential for new unrest and conflict in the medium-term.

Introduction

Ever since Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1970, Deir al-Zor has been overlooked by the central government. This is despite it being the largest governorate in eastern Syria in terms of population, with 1.6 million inhabitants[3], and physical size, covering 33,000km^2, and despite its considerable oil and agricultural resources.

This did not change when Bashar al-Assad assumed power from his father in 2000, and Deir al-Zor continued to be marginalised, and continued to suffer a low rate of development and high unemployment. Conditions like these, along with the oppression, political disenfranchisement and corruption that characterised the rule of both father and son, eventually led to the revolution in March 2011. The unrest began in the form of peaceful demonstrations calling for reform, but quickly transformed into a widespread popular uprising demanding the overthrow of the regime.

The repressive measures employed by the regime in an attempt to put down the growing calls for change were the principal catalyst for the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which began as a number of small armed groups tasked with protecting demonstrators. As the months wore on, however, the FSA organised itself into larger brigades that began to engage in large-scale military confrontations. By the summer of 2012, it had taken control of all of the rural areas surrounding the city of Deir al-Zor, and most of the neighbourhoods within the city. The regime's territory shrank to just three of the city's neighbourhoods, as well as military outposts on the city's outskirts controlled by the army.

In the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Deir al-Zor had its share of the rising number of jihadi Salafists, since its position on the border with Iraq meant it served as an important crossing point for budding jihadist fighters. Fighters from Deir al-Zor who returned from the battlefield in Iraq formed organised jihadist cells which would go on to play a pivotal role in the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra in the second half of 2011. These cells maintained a key position until the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (IS), which would overrun Deir al-Zor in the summer of 2014 and occupy it for almost three years.

In September 2017, the Syrian regime – backed up by its Russian and Iranian allies – was able to break the siege imposed by IS on regime-held areas of the city of Deir al-Zor. Following this, it re-established control over the city and surrounding rural areas on the right bank[4] of the Euphrates River, as well as over a small strip on its left bank. In the same month, SDF forces launched a separate military campaign against IS, named al-Jazeera Storm, which was carried out with the support of the international coalition. The operation saw the SDF seize control of rural areas in the north of the governorate, as well as of a strip of land skirting the left bank of the Euphrates. Moreover, despite its ability to launch damaging surprise attacks within areas under the SDF's control, IS sustained heavy losses that severely

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[3] The number of inhabitants recorded in the Civil Registry for the governorate in early 2011. Central Statistics Office: http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-1-2-2011.htm.

[4] The eastern bank of the river, referred to as the right bank. The western bank is referred to as the left bank, in line with the Arabic terms used.

damaged its organisational structure, with the result that by early 2018 it was essentially out of the arena of conflict.

The battles against IS saw the US and Russia enter into non-aggression agreements, which prevented the outbreak of large-scale conflict between their allies on the ground, the SDF and the regime. However, there does not appear to have been any agreement between the Americans and the Russians regarding the post-IS period in Deir al-Zor, nor regarding the future of the governorate in general, which is linked to the future of Syria as a whole. With the full military defeat of IS on the horizon, and Deir al-Zor still divided between the regime and SDF, there is increasing risk of fresh conflict between the latter two. This is especially the case in view of the regime's need for oil and gas, the largest fields of which are under the SDF's control. In addition, the growing Iranian influence in the Syrian steppe (*badiya al-Sham*) on both sides of border is a cause for concern for the Americans in particular, and thus a potential source of tension. The political ambitions of the regime – which has been bolstered by its success fighting IS in Deir al-Zor as well as by the dwindling risk posed by the armed opposition in other governorates – will also play a role in increasing the likelihood of conflict.

Despite a slowdown in military operations in Deir al-Zor, which are now confined to small, geographically-isolated areas, the governorate remains in a state of great disarray. The security situation is highly volatile, and is likely to continue to be so, at least in the short term. However, the prospect of the military defeat of IS does create opportunities for stability and peace-building in the region in the medium and long term. In this context, this paper will analyse some of the lasting impacts the war has had on the social fabric of Deir al-Zor, lay out the local communities' likely responses to the Self Administration and the regime. The mechanisms of governance employed by each authority will be examined, as well as the impact that these may have on efforts to re-establish stability within the governorate.

This paper consists of three sections. The first of these looks at the societal breakdown caused by the conflict and by waves of displacement, as well as the conflicting political allegiances that coexist in the area and the divisions they cause. In this respect it appears that the tribe, which is the main social unit in the governorate, will not play a significant role in restoring stability to the region. The second section looks at the mechanisms of local governance employed by the Self Administration, derived from the Kurdish federalist project, and the challenges it is likely to face in governing an Arab-majority population[5]. The third section, finally, looks at the regime's attempts to restore its authority by reviving its pre-2011 mechanisms of governance, and will examine the challenges inherent in that attempt, given the fundamental changes that have occurred in the intervening years.

The paper is based on the author's long experience of following the situation in Deir al-Zor, as well as on several meetings held during the last three months of 2017 and into January 2018 with former leaders of the FSA, current leaders of the SDF and the Self Administration. Interviews were also held with public figures, activists, supporters of the various parties to the conflict and eye-witnesses to

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[5]Ethnic Arabs make up 90% of the population of Deir al-Zor governorate, the vast majority of them Sunnis. A small minority converted to Shiism beginning from the 1980s, a community that does not exceed 5,000 members according to the highest estimates. There is a Christian minority with deeper historical roots, which according to 2010 estimates numbers around 1,000 members.

some of the events. Additionally, the paper makes use of a survey that was carried out in the Turkish city of Urfa with a cohort of Syrian refugees who had fled from regime-held areas of Deir al-Zor.

Map of military control in Deir al-Zor

Source: https://syria.liveuamap.com
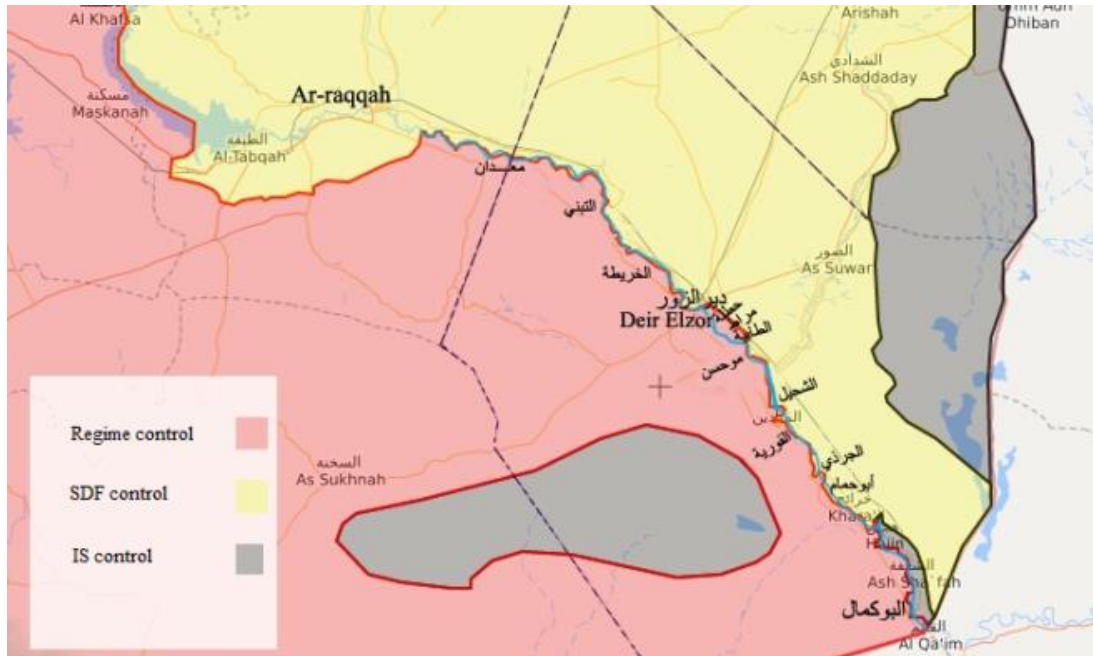
Conflict-driven breakdown of the local society

Mapping displacement and its political implications

Displacement caused by the escalating conflict between the FSA and regime forces starting in summer 2012, has been a major cause of social breakdown in Deir al-Zor, alongside major friction between supporters of the regime and the revolution. The subsequent rise of IS, which seized control of the governorate in summer 2014, exacerbated these divisions. At that time, new waves of displacement began, initially comprising FSA fighters and civil society activists involved in revolutionary organisations[6], and later including ordinary citizens fleeing repression at the hands of IS, and the social rules the group imposed. The largest wave of displacement took place in the summer and early autumn of 2017, comprising the remaining population from the right bank of the Euphrates. They were finally forced to flee due to intense aerial bombardment by the regime and its allies, and their

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[6] In 2013, there were 29 non-governmental and civil society organisations registered in Deir al-Zor governorate, as well as 73 local councils. Karam Alhamad, Deir Al-Zor: A legacy of marginalisation and suffering, Syria notes 24 October 2017.

advancing troops on the ground. Other, smaller waves of displacement were also taking place at the same time as a result of Operation al-Jazeera Storm, the SDF operation on the left bank of the Euphrates.

By the end of 2017, the population of Deir al-Zor was spread out over several regions, each of which is characterised by a distinct political context that differs from the overarching political realities in other areas. Activists and international organisations estimate between 400,000 and 450,000 people have fled Deir al-Zor to Turkey. Meanwhile, it is thought that between 100,000 and 150,000 of those who left the province are now internally displaced in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, areas that, with Turkey, are home to some of the most outspoken opponents of the regime, as well as of IS and the Self Administration. According to the same estimate, the number of people from Deir al-Zor living in areas under regime control is somewhere between 200,000 and 250,000. Of these, fewer than 100,000 are thought to still be living in Deir al-Zor, while the remainder have been internally displaced to Damascus, Homs, Hama or al-Hasakah governorates, or to coastal areas, all of which are areas of strong regime support. In terms of areas under SDF control, it is thought that between 350,000 and 400,000 people from Deir al-Zor are living there, whether in areas of the governorate under SDF control or in IDP camps in al-Hasakah and Raqqa. Between 100,000 and 150,000 people from Deir al-Zor have fled to countries in the EU, the majority of whom are opponents of the regime, and approximately 100,000 people to the Gulf and other Arab countries.

The fragmentation outlined above has, over recent years, led to the creation of distinct communities in each area, each now siding with either the opposition, the regime, IS or the Self Administration. Each of these distinct communities has its own goals, concerns and issues, as well as its own actors. Such fragmentation clearly contributes to the creation of challenges that could thwart efforts by both the regime and the Self Administration in their different strategies to restore stability in the areas under their control.

Large sectors of the IDP and refugee population are not politically engaged as supporters of any of the three parties to today's conflict (the opposition, the Self Administration and the regime). Nevertheless, the potential for return appears slim, unless the security, infrastructure and economic situation improves in both parts of Deir al-Zor. The massacres committed by regime forces[7] also decrease the likelihood of even politically disengaged refugees' return to areas under the control of those same forces.

By the end of January 2018, the regime was in control of an urban area measuring approximately 200km^2, barely populated, with the exception of the area of Deir al-Zor city that was originally densely populated[8]. On the other hand, areas under SDF control represented a destination and a crossing point for people fleeing the regime. Moreover, in general, people fled from areas that had been under SDF only for as long as it took to expel advancing IS fighters from their towns and villages. This is evidence of the different treatment the civilian population experienced at the hands of the SDF and the regime, and reflects the general image of both among locals.

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[7] This is especially true in the case of recent massacres carried out during the regime's anti-IS operation (see http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Some_370,000_displaced_people_in_Deir_al-Zour_and_Raqqa_2017.pdf), and the arrest and extrajudicial execution of Deir al-Zor civilians (see http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/140928/0/شبيح-أسدي-يعدم-مدنيين-حبا-بالقرداحة-صور).

[8] Specifically, the neighbourhoods of al-Jura, al-Qusur and Harabish.

From a tribal way of life to a cycle of conflict

Tribes are considered the most significant social unit in the rural areas of Deir al-Zor, as well as in parts of the governorate's three biggest cities (Deir al-Zor, al-Mayadeen and Abu Kamal). All parties in the conflict have supporters from each tribe, although the ratios vary from one to the other. In the case of the Syrian conflict, the diversity of allegiances found within each tribe – and hence within local communities – is not the result of lively intellectual debate or constructive diversity, but rather of years of political infighting, ongoing war and displacement, as well as conflicting interests both within and between tribes.

Historically, tribes generally had limited, non-political aspirations, making it easier for the authorities to deal with them without having to meddle with the internal tribal structure. However, during the three-decade reign of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000), and subsequently during his son Bashar al-Assad's rule up until the revolution began, the tribal formations underwent a gradual but significant transformation which saw them cede much of their power to the regime, and tribal *sheikhs* lose their position as community leaders to become merely high-profile followers of the regime.

After 2011, in the wake of the outbreak of the revolution and amidst the war and mass displacement that followed, the tribal system found itself tested beyond its capacities. In general, the different clans failed to adopt a unified position. There were, however, some instances of partial unity, such as the involvement of large numbers of young men from the Bu Khabour, Qaraan, Bu Kamal, Shaitat, Bu Rahma and Bu Saraya[9] tribes in anti-government demonstrations, and subsequently in the ranks of the first FSA's units. In these cases, the tribesmen involved had other things in common, the most important being relatively high rates of education (above secondary school level). Moreover, the fact that several members of these tribes had already become activist leaders played a role in widening the revolution's youth base within these individuals' immediate tribal circles. This new movement went against the will of regime supporters within those same tribes, mostly older men who were government employees, Baath Party activists, regular informants, and notables. Some of these elements collaborated with the security apparatus in an attempt to put down the uprising, but to little effect.

During the first year of the uprising, the first wave of revolutionaries was able to move past the tribal structure and forge new links to unite their supporters. However, after FSA units took control of rural areas around Deir al-Zor city and most of the city's neighbourhoods in the summer and autumn of 2012, they failed to build a military structure strong enough to deter attacks on a local level. This is despite the fact that the units belonged to an umbrella military organisation which was ostensibly united. Because of this failure, tribes that were distancing themselves from the conflict began to establish their own armed groups under the name of the Free Syrian Army in hopes of taking over

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[9] These tribes are based in the small towns of Al-Muhasan, Al-Quriyah, Al-Shahil, Abu Hamam, al-Jazri al-Sharqi, and al-Kharita. All belong to the same confederation, the 'Egaidat, which is the major tribal confederation in Deir al-Zor.

state property that had been left unprotected, most significantly oil wells and fields[10]. However, they did not take part in front-line battles against the regime alongside more established FSA factions.

In this chaotic environment, the revolutionary spirit and its influence gradually started to decline, due to internal conflicts between its leaders and increasing tribalism. This led to increasing divisions within the original factions of the FSA, and tribal divisions re-emerged. In this context of collapse and a multiplication of different power centres, first Jabhat al-Nusra and then IS gradually began to gain influence in Deir al-Zor.

The tribe and the jihadi movement

The tribe has shown itself to be fragile structure, easily penetrated by outside influences, most notably in its encounter with jihadi Salafist movements. Jihadi Salafism in Deir al-Zor only really began to grow after the US invasion of Iraq, and up until the outbreak of the revolution in 2011 it remained a marginal movement comprising a few cells of young men returning from Iraq. One of these cells, made up of young men from the Bu Kamal clan in al-Shahil, played a pivotal role in the growth of Salafi jihadism in Syria. During the summer and autumn of 2011, these men offered refuge to the Iraqi jihadists Haji Bakr and Abu Maria al-Qahtani, as well as the Syrian Abu Mohammed al-Jolani[11] and several others. The group had been sent by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then head of the Islamic State of Iraq, to establish a jihadist military faction that would be announced in January 2012 under the name Jabhat al-Nusra Li-Ahl al-Sham (Victory Front for the People of Levant). The team sent by Baghdadi would go on to play a significant role in the growth of the jihadist movement in Syria, first by way of Jabhat al-Nusra – of which Jolani was leader, and of which Qahtani became head "religious scholar" – and then of the IS, of which Haji Bakr was considered the effective leader in Syria until he was killed in January 2014.

With the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in April 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra was left divided, with IS managing to attract the most important bloc of foreign fighters and experts. This created gaps in the leadership structure of Jabhat al-Nusra that were filled by locals, the most prominent of whom were members of the "Shahil Cell." The ascension of these leaders gave the impression that the Bu Kamal tribe had particular influence within Jabhat al-Nusra. Meanwhile, tensions emerged between Jabhat al-Nusra's central leadership and the local branch, with Abu Maria al-Qahtani – who had by then become the effective leader of Jabhat al-Nusra in Deir al-Zor – imposing his own specific style, one that differed from the al-Qaeda approach that Abu Mohammed al-Jolani tried to consolidate[12].

The tribal nature of Jabhat al-Nusra in Deir al-Zor was one of the factors that distanced other tribes from it. Tribal allegiances meant, for example, that it was more tolerant of attempts by members to control a greater share of bulk oil resources under the cover of Jabhat al-Nusra's Central Shariah Committee, the group's backbone[13]. The group was lenient towards the Bu Kamal tribe, with tribal

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[10] See *The Stance of the Tribes*, page 10 of *Oil in Deir al-Zor From Revolution to Islamic State*, Ayn al-Medina, special edition of August 2015, http://ayn-almadina.com/content_images/users/1/contents/2932/1568.pdf.

[11] On developments of the jihadi movement since 2003, see Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman in *The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism,* Friedrich Ebert, Amman [in Arabic].

[12] See: al-Jolani Reveals his True Face by Hossam Juzmani, https://www.aljumhuriya.net/35409.

[13] This body was established in March 2013 under the name of the "Shariah Committee" for the Eastern Region, which then morphed into the Central Shariah Committee, bringing together Jabhat al-Nusra and various FSA factions, and subsequently Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa al-Islam.

allegiances taking precedence over organisational and legislative considerations. This was a key weakness exploited by IS, which secured the support of other tribes against Jabhat al-Nusra[14] during a period of increasing conflict between the two, starting from autumn 2013. IS also took advantage of competition between different tribes and factions over external funding and ammunition, as well as competition for control of oil wells close to their respective strongholds. This strategy meant that, by the summer of 2014, IS was able to seize control of the governorate.

In many instances, the conflict became very complex and multilateral, with increasing numbers of different factions, tribes and jihadi elements. At times of danger, before IS seized full control, tribes would often protect members who were supporters of the organisation under the pretext of maintaining tribal solidarity, which is sometimes invoked and at other times disappears. However, IS elements who had previously received tribal protection were quickly rejected after IS seized control of Deir al-Zor and engaged in oppressive practices targeting the local population. Such expulsions occurred, moreover, after the organisation gradually eliminated the tribal power centers in its own ranks that had grown up around figures from its first local supporters and exhausted the ability of these personalities to bring new members.

During the three years in which it was in control of Deir al-Zor, IS welcomed thousands of locals into its ranks. Small numbers of these were motivated by a true dedication to jihadi ideals, while others wanted to fight the regime, and found that taking up arms under the IS banner was the only way of doing so. However, the vast majority fought alongside IS simply for their various individual ends, since at the time the group effectively represented the most significant authority in the region. But just as IS rapidly swelled its ranks immediately after seizing control, it also quickly diminished in power as a result of numerous military defeats. Up until IS's most significant defeat at the end of 2017, thousands of its local fighters died during battles within Deir al-Zor and in other locations. Hundreds were also taken prisoner by, or surrendered to, the SDF, while many others melted away into the masses of people forced to flee (although some of these were captured while passing through territory controlled by the SDF, the opposition, or within Turkey). Those who have remained are now fighting to defend an ever-decreasing pocket of territory, despite numbering just a few hundred, according to January 2018 estimates[15]. It is likely that, after it finally loses control over its remaining territory, IS will go underground, continuing to operate as a secret organisation. It is also within the realms of possibility that the group, after its probable defeat, will nevertheless remain capable of launching damaging and far-reaching attacks. In any case, however it transformations it will be not be any less radical than previously, and may even become even more fundamental.

In short, the future of IS will depend on the success or failure of today's winners – the SDF and the regime – in building a successful bulwark against a resurgence by the group, an effort that must encompass economic, security and political change. This effort must also pay close attention to the morale of local communities, which will continue to suffer as long as there is an absence of justice.

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[14] And also against FSA factions that were fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra.
[15] According to a military source who requested to remain anonymous.

The Self Administration: a governance model fraught with challenges

The SDF and its Deir al-Zor Military Council

By early 2018, the SDF's military presence on the ground in Deir al-Zor consisted of the Deir al-Zor Military Council, most of whose fighters and leaders are from the local area, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), which are respectively the male and female armed wings of the PYD and mostly composed of Kurdish fighters.

The SDF announced the establishment of the Deir al-Zor Military Council in November 2016. The move provoked considerable controversy and criticism within opposition circles from Deir al-Zor at that time, for at least three reasons. Firstly, the establishment of the Council was considered a grave interference by outside powers in the internal affairs of the governorate as opposition figures expected that the Council would derive its power solely from the PYD[16]. Secondly, the accusations that surrounded the head of the Council, Ahmed al-Khabayn, and those around him, helped to confirm the general sentiment that the PYD promoted marginal Arab figures with little influence in order to be able to control them more easily. Thirdly, the initiative was considered a pre-emptive attempt by Kurdish forces to pull the rug out from under negotiations taking place at the time between leaders of armed opposition groups from Deir al-Zor and the international coalition. The talks were aimed at establishing a single military force composed of local fighters from Deir al-Zor, who at that time were spread out in different factions of the FSA across various regions of the country. The idea was to add to these forces thousands of former FSA fighters[17]. However, the US scrapped the initiative in the summer of 2017, instead telling fighters that the FSA could only take part in the battle of Deir al-Zor under the banner of the SDF. A number of FSA leaders rejected this proposition, declaring "the SDF, the regime and IS" enemies in equal measure[18]. As a result of the failure of these negotiations, FSA factions were excluded from taking part in the battle for Deir al-Zor[19].

A large proportion of the membership of the Military Council[20] comes from tribes based on the left bank of the Euphrates, which unlike the right bank is an area in which the SDF focuses its activities. The Bakkeir, Baggara and Shaitat tribes appear to be the best represented of these. The fact that the head of the Military Council and several other leading figures belong to the Bakkeir has meant that more tribesmen have joined, and much the same can be said of the Baggara. As for the Shaitat tribe, the desire to seek vengeance from IS – which committed grave massacres against them in summer 2014 – helps to explain the presence of large numbers of their tribesmen in the SDF.

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[16] Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Mohammed al-Aboud, former head of the Revolutionary Military Council in Deir al-Zor, and subsequently a member of the High Negotiations Committee.

[17] In the spring of 2017, the FSA counted around 4,000 fighters from Deir al-Zor among its ranks, according to estimates by FSA leaders.

[18] Quote from Lieutenant Colonel Muhanned al-Talaa, head of the Maghawir al Thawra (Revolutionary Commando group), taken from a YouTube broadcast: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hImClcP2GgU.

[19] Among these factions, Ahrar al-Sharqiyya, Abna al-Sharqiyya, and other factions present in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, as well as Usud al-Sharqiyya and Maghawir al Thawra from the Syrian steppe, and Quwwat al-Nukhba (Elite Forces) that were concentrated in pockets of territory under US sponsorship, in areas under SDF control, close to the city of al-Shaddadah.

[20] According to a leader from the Military Council who requested anonymity, the council had 3,000 active fighters as of January 2018.

During the final phase of the battle of Deir al-Zor, opposition to the SDF within revolutionary circles in general remained strong. However, in some quarters it was thought wise to take advantage of any opportunity that presented itself to achieve gains on the ground. Consequently, a number of military leaders ended up joining forces with the SDF or its Military Council, accompanied by hundreds of fighters.

However, the leadership of the SDF remains monopolised by Kurdish military figures. The YPG and YPJ are more cohesive and disciplined than the Deir al-Zor Military Council and most other Arab groups. They also have at their disposal more effective weaponry than the Military Council, whose fighters only have light and medium weapons. In the case of the Military Council, it also appears that the training and military preparation given to new volunteers are somewhat crude[21].

It is difficult to predict what role Arab fighters will play in the process of governance formation in the coming phase. However, based on similar experiences in Raqqa province, where the SDF gradually weakened and ousted Arab elements from power, Arab communities in Deir al-Zor will not be given space to play a significant role. This is likely to include even those leaders of the Military Council who display complete loyalty. Such side-lining is particularly likely if plans to establish a new military structure are successful. The US position on this remains unclear[22], but the idea expounded by some Kurdish leaders is to set up a new force under the banner of the "Army of Northern Syria"[23], tasked with guarding the frontiers of areas under SDF control. If such a force is successfully established, the Deir al-Zor Military Council will be dissolved, and its members redistributed over a wider geographical area further from their homes, with the result that they will lose some of the territorial control they enjoy today.

Controversy over establishing the Civil Council

Just as Operation al-Jazira Storm was being launched on 24 September 2017, the newly-established Civil Council of Deir al-Zor was unveiled, following two weeks of fractious and speedy preparations at the end of which Ghassan Youssef was chosen as co-head of the council alongside a female colleague. Announcing its establishment, the council said that "the dictatorial regime has no future in Syria," adding that the newly-created council would "take charge of administering the governorate once it is liberated[24]." According to the statement, the council is composed of two co-presidents and 5 deputy presidents, in addition to 15 specialised committees.

The Council has not yet published sufficient information about its members, leaving it vulnerable to accusations from opposition activists that is made up of marginal individuals with little influence or legitimacy. Its members are also said to be inexperienced and lacking in technical knowledge. In January 2018, during a general meeting attended by dozens of local tribal representatives, leaders of the Self Administration pledged to restructure the Council to correct the "errors" that beset its formation, with the aim of achieving greater diversity and effectiveness[25].

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[21] *Ibid*

[22] The US Secretary of State has denied Washington's intention to establish a border force: http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-42730812.

[23] Head of the Self-Protection Units Siyaband Walat, http://www.hawarnews.com.

[24] Statement: http://www.hawarnews.com/البيان-الختامي-لمجلس-دير-الزور-المدني/.

[25] During a meeting held in the village of al-Suwar.

However, the existing structure of the Self Administration (or what it is assumed to be) remains tense and in conflict over its powers and functions. It remains difficult for observers to ascertain where decision-making power and responsibility lies, damaging the council's effectiveness in general, and lessening the likelihood of popular participation. Moreover, despite the insistence of the Self Administration's leaders on explaining their governance project by way of recurring public meetings, it appears that much of the local population remains in the dark. In general, the level of participation by the local population in Deir al-Zor will remains weak, and limited to somewhat marginal sectors related to public services and the economy, due to the totalitarian nature of the ruling PYD and its unclear decision-making style.

It is too early to predict the future of these local governance structures, but it is clear that they will be vulnerable to the effects of divisions that have left Deir al-Zor fragmented into distinct communities that are spread across different geographical areas, and which live under different political authorities. In this context, the Civil Council's legitimacy will forever remain in doubt, and consensus will remain out of reach.

Challenges facing the Self Administration in Deir al-Zor

The communities living under SDF control in Deir al-Zor suffer from deep-seated fatigue stemming from what they have experienced in recent years. Long, multi-layered conflicts involving multiple actors and different sectors of society have sapped the population's energy, and have robbed it of its power and its elites. This means that the local communities will not challenge the Self Administration's political, social and cultural project, the aim of which, according to Administration officials, is to establish an autonomous region called the Federation of Northern Syria. However, the project may yet find itself facing numerous challenges in the short and long term in Deir al-Zor governorate.

The first of these is the very concept of Self Administration autonomous administration, which is characterised by its Kurdish identity and its ideological content. While this concept may be by fully supported by Kurdish figures of influence in their communities, it will represent a stumbling-block for efforts to ensure active participation from elites and leading figures within Deir al-Zor, whose population is 99% Arab.

Secondly, the enormous cultural differences between the social model the PYD is looking to implement – through educational and legal initiatives – and the traditional, conservative local community in Deir al-Zor, represent a major challenge to the success of the Self Administration. The model the PYD is following ignores the Arab heritage shared by almost a third of the population within the borders of the proposed Federation, and instead explicitly discusses the "civilisation of Kurdistan"[26]. Likewise, if the Self Administration continues to overlook, in both its written publications and its oral discourse, the importance of the uprising against the regime, it will drive a further wedge between itself and those who led the uprising in Deir al-Zor, one of the revolution's strongholds.

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[26] The Social Contract of the Federal Regime in Rojava – Northern Syria:
http://www.rojnews.biz/ar/haber/1831/.html.

Thirdly, the Self Administration has limited options in its search for capable and influential local partners: its late arrival on the scene means that intellectual and economic elites, as well as influential figures in general, have fixed political positions, or else have settled in countries of asylum.

The strength of the cohesion and belonging felt by Arabs fighting in the ranks of the SDF has not yet been put to the test, and neither fighting side-by-side in a united front against IS, nor support from the US, are necessarily enough to build a true sense of allegiance and belonging. Any failure by the Self Administration to establish a network of influential and locally-accepted partners will likely be a point of severe weakness when it comes to combatting the ongoing influence of IS, which has experience and strong understanding of the dynamics of the local community. The group has also likely achieved great influence over the thousands of children and youths who were subjected to its proselytism and education over the course of its three-year rule.

Finally, the threat posed by loyal networks that the regime created within the SDF and local communities will increase, as through these networks the regime will be able to destabilise the region and provoke further crises.

The regime's strategy to revive the pre-2011 status quo

A militarily weak regime

In September 2017, regime forces and their Russian and Iranian allies succeeded in breaking the siege imposed by IS on the pocket of regime-held territory in Deir al-Zor city. Subsequently, they established control over the entire city, and within two months had taken all the rural areas to the east and west of the city on the left bank of the Euphrates. Entering via a crossing point in the Syrian Steppe, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard led combined forces that managed to take control of the border area with Iraq and the city of Abu Kamal city in October of the same year.

The combined forces that took part in the campaign were notable for the limited presence of regular Syrian army units, evidence of the regime's increasing reliance on militias. This casts doubt on its future capacity to retain the vast swathes of territory currently under its control.

The regime has so far relied on two types of Syrian militia force. The first is made up of local militia forces, the most important of which fight under the name National Defence Forces (NDF)[27], followed in significance by "Liwa al-Shaitat". The second type of militia upon which the regime relies draws its members from different regions all over the country – the biggest of these is the Tiger Forces (Quwwat al-Nimr), led by air force intelligence officer, Suhail al-Hassan. These are joined by the Palestinian group "Liwa al-Quds"[28], the "Jaysh al-Ashai'r" militia[29] and several other militias that participated on and off in the battle.

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[27] The National Defence Forces ranks are estimated to number around 200 individuals, and are headed by Firas al-Jiham from Deir al-Zor.
[28] The majority of its fighters are Palestinian refugees from the al-Nayrab refugee camp close to the city of Aleppo. The group is led by Engineer Mohammad Said.
[29] The militia is made up of members of the Bu Hamad tribe, based in a village of the same name in eastern Raqqa, and is headed by Turki Abu Hamad.

The militias led by Iran can be divided into three kinds. The first type is local groups, like the one made up of Shia fighters from the small town of Hatla[30]. A second militia group of this type is "Liwa al-Baqir" (Baqir Brigade), composed of Shia and Sunni fighters from the small town of Marat (most of whom are from the Baggara tribe). The militia is headed by Nawaf Raghib al-Bashir, the de facto leader of the tribe, who switched sides from the opposition to join the regime. The second type are Syrian Shia militia groups, the most important of which are "Quwwat al-Rida" (al-Rida Forces), made up of Shia fighters from rural areas of Homs, and "Hezbollah Brigades Syria – 5th regiment", which bring together Shia fighters from different areas of Syria. The third type of militia comprises fighters from various foreign countries including Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as groups of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters in leadership roles. There are also Iranian fighters from the Quds Force, part of the Revolutionary Guard. The Russian presence in Syria, meanwhile, includes units of the official army, as well as mercenaries who likely belong to the Wagner Group.

For the foreseeable future, it will be difficult for the regime to redevelop its own forces, due to the continuous losses suffered by its army over recent years, including through defection, death and injury. The regime has been unable to sufficiently replenish its ranks by attracting new volunteers, or through forced recruitment. Facing this impasse, if the regime were to attempt to decrease its dependence on the Iranians, it would have no option but to continue establishing so-called "Self-Defence Units" to serve as the principal military force in regime-held areas of Deir Al-Zor. According to available reports, it appears that the regime is attempting to absorb the militias fighting in its name together into one united force. This new force would also include thousands of young men returning from forced displacement, under the terms of a "reconciliation" deal which will see their names removed from wanted lists, and these individuals serving only in their own villages, towns or cities.

However, the chances for the success of the Self-Defence Units project appear severely limited[31]. It remains doubtful that young men returning from displacement will agree to fight according to the regime's terms – including the guarantee of amnesty, and that they will only have to serve in their local areas – in return for a salary that, according to the highest estimates, will not exceed $100 per month. In general, there are very low levels of trust in the regime among young people in Deir al-Zor, with public opinion holding regime forces responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians in the area, and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of others.

Rebuilding a defunct apparatus

In its approach to civilian administration in Deir Al-Zor, the regime appears to be attempting a return to the pre-2011 status quo. Since then, the regime's sphere of influence has shrunk to a region that encompasses just 1% of the governorate and is home to fewer than 100,000 people. Nevertheless, the regime kept in place the essential structure of its multi-branch civil governance, including

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[30] The force is led by Tareq Bin Yassin al-Maayuf, one of the most important proponents of Shia thought in the town and surrounding areas during the 1980s and 1990s.

[31] In the first and only recruiting session the Self-Defence Units have carried out (as of the end of January 2018), the total attendance was 96 people, all of them government employees from regime-held areas.
Source: https://www.facebook.com/DearEzzorGov/posts/1308264392612547.

government institutions, the security apparatus, Baath Party branches and party-affiliated organisations and syndicates (even though these bodies were present in form only in most cases).

In the wake of its military victory, there are clear indications that the regime is attempting to rebuild its traditional civil governance system within pre-set boundaries, such that it takes into account the fundamental changes brought about by the war, until such time as the effects of the conflict disappear for good. It appears that Damascus will bet on three groups of local mediators to secure social and political control: high-ranking local government officials, party figures and members of the People's Council. Alongside them, the central government will also seek to rely on middlemen from unofficial centres of power, including tribal leaders, government officials, former Baathists, warlords and informants.

In recent years, despite losses sustained during the war, government bodies and institutions have managed to remain in place. Even at times when there was no work that could practically be done, the government continued to pay the salaries of tens of thousands of its employees[32], whether or not they lived in areas under regime control (apart from those government workers who were dismissed for political reasons). The heads of government institutions in Deir al-Zor, both those who remained in Deir al-Zor city and those who fled to Damascus or the nearby city of al-Hasakah, were able to maintain the institution's basic structure, and in particular its higher levels. This was achieved through constant coordination with the ministries of the central government and with the governor, whom the authorities persuaded to remain in Deir al-Zor city as a civilian representative of regime. While the regime maintained a constant physical presence in Deir al-Zor, it is worth mentioning that this was in the form of five different governors since 2011. One of these was from the governorate itself, and three were former police officers, evidence of the regime's attempt to consolidate power by appointing members of the security apparatus even to civilian roles like that of governor.

In the final three months of 2017, there was a constant stream of ministerial delegations visiting from Damascus, to ensure that local government institutions were ready to take on the task of administering all the regime-held areas of Deir al-Zor. As part of this effort, most ministries issued decrees demanding that government employees who had fled return to Deir al-Zor and break links with the alternative governmental institutions where they had been working while displaced to areas under regime control. Employees who did not comply with these demands were threatened with punishment. Government ministries appear determined to implement this decree, despite the very real challenges of doing so in a context like Deir al-Zor city, where at least 90% of areas have been destroyed and are now uninhabited,[33] and where, consequently, there is no appropriate living or working environment.

As well as the governor and government institutions, the regime also managed to retain a branch of the Baath party, even if this was more or less symbolic. Despite having few illusions as to its potential, the regime is currently in the process of attempting to rebuild and reinvigorate the party in Deir al-Zor, in order to restore it to its previous role overseeing the work of government institutions, alongside the local security apparatus. It is also hoped that it will play a key role as a tool in dismantling opposition communities, as well as those that kept their distance from the conflict. Likewise, the Baath

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[32] According to oral reports, in 2010 the number of government employees in Deir al-Zor was estimated at between 30,000 and 35,000.
[33] According to press statements by Deir al-Zor governor Mohammed Ibrahim Samra.

party will be tasked with reinforcing the regime's power, partly by acting as a façade to distract from the deeply-entrenched family-based nature of the regime's security structure.

Prior to 2011, anyone could become a member of the ruling Baath party, and in many cases, membership was a prerequisite for those wanting to obtain government jobs or promotions. However, party affiliation in many cases had nothing to do with true political allegiance to the regime. This is evidenced by the fact that tens of thousands of nominal Baath party members took part in the anti-government demonstrations in Deir al-Zor, with many of them later fighting alongside the FSA or joining forces with the civilian opposition.

Today, urgent efforts are being made to reinvigorate the party by working with individuals most strongly allied to the regime, regardless of their position within the established party hierarchy. During the final three months of 2017, there was a succession of visits to Deir al-Zor by members of the national party leadership, the most powerful part of the Baath Party structure. In this context, the local branch of the Baath Party also became very active in a number of areas, the most important of which was in negotiating local reconciliation agreements, as well as in establishing the Self-Defence Units. A number of party officials in rural areas began to announce the establishment of local branches of the Self-Defence Units to absorb young people returning to their homes from displacement[34]. At the same time, efforts have begun to revive the Baath Vanguard and the Union of Revolutionary Youth, the Baath party's two auxiliary groups for young people, children and adolescents[35]. The regime is also attempting, although to a lesser extent, to revive professional syndicates and grassroots organisations[36]. This is done in constant collaboration with the local security apparatus, represented by local branches of military intelligence, air force intelligence, the political security directorate and the state security directorate. Throughout the chaos of recent years, these entities have remained effective; they are capable of utilising networks of informants and collaborators outside the pocket of territory in the city under regime control, as well as having experience of taking part in military missions alongside regime forces, on the frontlines surrounding regime-held areas in Deir al-Zor.

Finally, the regime has continued to represent Deir al-Zor in the People's Council, despite the fact that over a third of its population is present in areas outside of its control. The number of representatives for Deir al-Zor has in fact increased from 13 – comprising 3 independents, 9 Baathists and 1 member of the Baath-affiliated National Progressive Front – to 14 in the first round of elections held since the beginning of the revolution, with the addition of one independent member. This was an attempt to buy the support of as many tribe-affiliated individuals as possible.

Throughout the reigns of Hafez and then Bashar al-Assad, most members of the People's Council were faithful to the ruling junta, more than they were to the sectors of society they theoretically represented. A place on the People's Council was, in effect, a reward granted by the regime to its most faithful supporters. It was also used as a method to attract the support of tribal leaders, and bring

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[34] For example, Ghazi Hussein al-Sahu, head of the Second Rural Division, from the village of al-Husseiniya north of Deir al-Zor city. See also statements by the head of the Deir al-Zor branch of the party, Sahir al-Sakr, at a general meeting in the local headquarters on 3 December 2017, regarding the role the party will play in establishing the Self-Protection Units: https://www.sana.sy/?p=6736412017.

[35] In November 2017 Maan Aboud, head of the Union of Revolutionary Youth, visited Deir al-Zor as part of efforts to revive the group there: http://tishreenonline.sy/2017/11/09.

[36] These include local branches of syndicates for workers, teachers, engineers and doctors, as well as the General Union of Agricultural Labourers.

them into the regime's sphere of influence. Tribal leaders always won seats as independents during legislative elections, evidence that, despite the challenges faced by the tribal structure, tribal solidarity remained stronger than other types of social ties. This is in the context of a society characterised by ethnic, religious and sectarian homogeneity, in which there are no marked economic or religious elites[37], nor political parties nor independent organisations. At the same time, electoral laws have always led to increased competition between tribal leaders, at times with conspicuous meddling by the regime in favour of a particular candidate.

Between 2011 and 2017, a group of new local actors emerged as a result of the fragmentation caused by the war. These actors took advantage of the regime's urgent need for security, military and economic support of various kinds. Among these actors were individuals from various different social classes. Some individuals from working-class backgrounds experienced a significant rise in social status during the conflict, for example the head of the National Defence Force Firas al-Jiham. Prior to 2011 he had worked in a bakery and sold drugs, subsequently sponsoring a gambling outlet. When the uprising began, he became active among those the regime recruited to put down demonstrations. By the second half of 2012, these groups were known as the National Defence Force.

Other new actors also emerged from the middle classes, such as Mohammed al-Meshaali, a member of the People's Council elected in 2016. A small-time contractor before the revolution, he had made his living thanks to close relations with local intelligence officers, who helped him to win minor public sector contracts. These relations grew stronger and wider after the outbreak of the revolution, and Meshaali began to play a greater variety of roles as a fixer for the security apparatus. His role involved securing the support of high-profile individuals in the villages of Deir al-Zor and its principal city by granting them special privileges.

Many new faces such as these would eventually find their way into the People's Council. Ibrahim al-Dayir, for example, an independent, was finally elected into the council in 2016 after many previous failed attempts. Al-Dayir managed to take advantage of a massacre committed by IS in the summer of 2014 against his own tribe, the Shaitat, part of a wider effort by the regime to capitalise on the tribe's ill feeling towards IS. He spent vast sums of money on his successful campaign, enabled by many years in Kuwait, employed first as a construction worker and then as a contractor for small construction projects.

In a different context, Mohammed Amin Hussein al-Rija[38], a young Shia cleric from Hatla, rose to become Deir Al-Zor's first Shia member of the People's Council in 2016, representing the Baath Party. Unlike many others, al-Rija was not selected as a Baath Party candidate – considered an automatic win –as a reward, but an acknowledgement of the rising influence of local Shias thanks to growing Iranian role in the area.

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[37] Deir al-Zor, unlike the governorates of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, does not have its own religious heritage, or a sector of important businesspeople.
[38] Al-Rija's father, Hussein al-Rija, led attempts to spread Shiism in the small town of Hatla during the 1980s and 1990s. Shia sources estimate the number of people he converted to Shiism at over 1000. Source: http://bintjbeil.org/article/67270.

The regime's vision of reconciliation

By the end of 2017, only an estimated 20% of Deir al-Zor's pre-2011 population was living under regime control. The regime appears to be aware of the issues raised by the fact that a large majority of the population remains outside its control, with the decision by almost a million people to stay in exile casting doubt on the regime's claims to enjoy broad-based support in the region. The regime also needs the local population to help achieve its plan to revive economic production, particularly in the agricultural sector, as well as for its military plan to establish Self-Defence Units. Likewise, on a symbolic level, the regime's sphere of influence in the region – which covers an area of approximately 200 square kilometres – will remain practically meaningless as long as that area is nearly uninhabited.

After losing military influence in 2012, the regime placed its trust in the effectiveness of the National Reconciliation Subcommittee, which was set up in the autumn of 2013. The body was tasked with promoting public calls for a ceasefire and then a reconciliation process. However, this project was in general unsuccessful. Shortly after its military success, the regime redoubled its efforts to promote reconciliation, focusing in the main on one aspect: securing the return of communities internally displaced to regions outside regime control. Owing to the size of this target population, the regime established Small Reconciliation Committees in small towns and villages to strengthen its communication channels with displaced communities. It also employed a network of intermediaries who, working in a range of different roles, answer directly to high-ranking security officials. Under the guidance of the security services, this network focuses its efforts on symbolic members of the opposition whose return to regime-held areas would represent a heavy blow for the opposition[39].

Likewise, in December 2017, the National Reconciliation Subcommittee was reshuffled, and other committees with similar missions were established such as one aimed specifically at army defectors, and another focusing on checkpoints. A third was set up with the aim of coordinating between the sub-committees and the two secret security agencies that were working semi-openly behind the scenes (despite the fact that the four public security agencies were represented on the National Reconciliation Subcommittee).

Through its local proxies, Iran is also playing an increasing role in efforts to return internally-displaced people, with one Iranian delegate taking part in meetings convened by the National Reconciliation Subcommittee. More than this, though, its efforts in this regard are focused on a network of local Shia figures from military and civilian backgrounds, whose calls for return are more convincing than those of the regime. These individuals offer settlements that are processed more rapidly by officials from the security apparatus, as well as higher salaries for those who enlist in the militias. Moreover, the guarantees offered by Iran and its local proxies are considered more trustworthy than those of the regime. In one instance Tariq Yasin al-Maayouf, the prominent leader of a group of local Shia fighters,

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[39] Salim al-Khalid, a prominent military leader within the FSA, reported having received numerous calls about reconciliation, urging him to return. The most high-profile individual involved in this was Ali Mamlouk, head of Syria's National Security Bureau. During this discussion, Khalid reports having been offered incentives for returning, including large sums of money and leadership of the local Self-Defence Units.

appeared on regime television channel calling on the displaced to return, offering his personal guarantee and promising to use every tool at his disposal to help those who did choose to go back[40].

With regard to local reconciliation efforts, Russia is also playing a significant role through its Russian Centre for Reconciliation in Syria, which is based in the Hmeimim air base in Latakia. At the beginning of November 2017, the body announced that it was opening an office in Deir al-Zor. It appears that Russian efforts are now focused on ensuring that conditions on the ground are suitable for returning IDPs, drawing on their experience following their destruction of the Chechen capital, Grozny[41]. Their approach does not involve building local networks or employing proxies, with this task being left to the regime – instead, they are focusing on providing technical plans for getting basic infrastructure back up and running, helping to remove debris from the streets of Deir al-Zor and providing general logistical support.

Despite these efforts, there has been no sign that significant numbers of displaced people are returning to regime-held areas[42], except in a very limited fashion in some villages in the western countryside of Deir al-Zor. In a small survey of 100 people who fled regime-held areas of Deir al-Zor and are now living in the Turkish city of Urfa[43], 87 said they were not planning to return, with 18 of those expressing their intention to remain living as refugees and denying the regime the legitimacy it might gain from their return. 41 others who do not plan to return said they would remain as refugees because they felt incapable of living under the regime again, while 28 said they would remain in exile because of the economic collapse and lack of job opportunities in regime-held areas.

The results of this survey, admittedly carried out on a very limited scale, nevertheless suggest that there is a fundamental opposition to returning to life under regime rule. This may well scupper the regime's reconciliation efforts in the coming phase, since the amnesty offered to those currently outside regime areas is not considered a strong enough incentive to return home. This situation is likely to be exacerbated by the regime's likely failure to achieve its reconstruction goals. Even together with its allies, the regime is currently unable to meet the steep costs of rebuilding Deir al-Zor city, 90% of whose buildings and infrastructure have been destroyed. In the cities of al-Mayadeen and Abu Kamal the level of devastation is unlikely to be much lower, while in rural areas at least 50% of the buildings and infrastructure has been decimated.

Conclusion

Local communities in Deir al-Zor are fragmented, divided and in constant competition with one another. As such, it appears unlikely that they will play a real role in bringing stability to the region. However, their current situation – the result of years of neglect – also means they will be unwilling and unable in the short term to destabilise the rule of the two authorities that are currently establishing themselves in the region, the Self Administration and the regime.

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[40] https://www.facebook.com/groups/382771785160480/permalink/4606425269461756.
[41] According to a source close to the National Reconciliation Subcommittee who asked to remain anonymous.
[42] Between November 2017 and the end of January 2018 just 70 former defectors from the regime army submitted requests for settlement and return through brokers of the National Reconciliation Subcommittee (*ibid*).
[43] Conducted by assistants in December 2017, over the phone with 60 people, and in person with 40.

The Self Administration may, despite the significant challenges it faces, be able to encourage effective public participation in the local rule it seeks to build in Deir al-Zor. However, such participation will likely be superficial and focused solely on meeting the most urgent needs of the population, such as security, basic services and means of subsistence. Similarly, the very real and deep-seated contradictions between the governance model adopted by the Self Administration and the fundamental character of the local population is beginning to make themselves felt through the emergence of new crises.

Likewise, attempts by the regime to restore the local governance frameworks it employed previously look unlikely to succeed, due to obstacles that it will only be able to overcome in a limited way. Even if it does succeed in restoring its earlier structures of power, which have lain dormant throughout the conflict, the regime will not be able to rely on them. The regime's bet on the efficiency of these structures will be unsuccessful, as the regime no longer has a monopoly over power, resources and granting opportunities. This will further damage its structures of power, which before the outbreak of the revolution were already fragile and weak. As such, it would only be able to operate effectively in a closed environment, in which it represented the only available option for the population under its control. The regime's reconciliation programme will falter if it is approached from a purely economic and security point of view, with displaced people – and in particular supporters of the opposition – surrendering in order to obtain amnesty and be allowed to return to their homes.

The growing role played by Iran, which will not be content with a military role but will extend into other areas that confirm its sectarian ambition, will be yet another factor of unrest and will contribute to feelings of hopelessness, repression and disappointment in the general population. This will open the door to a new revival of jihadi Salafism, which has far from disappeared from Deir al-Zor, but whose exponents are rather awaiting an opportune moment to relaunch.

In the face of such grim prospects of division between two separate authorities, the international community – and the US in particular, due to the strength of its influence over the Self Administration – must put pressure on said administration to amend its political, social and cultural strategy, taking into account the political aspirations, identity and social specificities of the local population in Deir al-Zor. The US should also, in partnership with the EU (which has very little presence in Deir al-Zor) push for greater participation by diverse civil society organisations independent of the Self Administration, focusing on areas such as securing job opportunities, reviving the agricultural sector, providing effective services and ensuring adequate healthcare and education for local communities.

In areas under regime control, meanwhile, the US must not turn a blind eye to the growing Iranian influence, and must operate pro-actively to counter it. It must also take steps to prevent the regime securing the return of young IDPs only in order to enlist them in new militia groups that are currently being established. More generally, it must renew its efforts to urge the regime to take part in negotiations with concrete outcomes relating to political transition, and with the ultimate aim of convincing it to cede power. Alongside the EU, it must also support efforts by Syrian and international human rights organisations to hold regime officials to account for war crimes – such a justice-based approach will be the principal, and indeed only, way to achieve any meaningful stability going forward.