

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



Great Mosque of Damascus © seier+seier, creative commons

---

### >> 4 KEY FINDINGS

- 1 LACs have created more elaborated structures, formalized procedures, internal by-laws, as well as common approaches. Nevertheless, many LACs lack enforcement power and internal coordination and are constrained by nepotism.
- 2 LACs are, within opposition-held Syria, widely acknowledged by citizens as leading entities for service delivery. Yet, their decision-making and priority-setting processes are perceived as being driven by donor interests.
- 3 LACs have enhanced their participation, inclusion and information-sharing mechanisms. However, a lack of resources, qualified experts and enforcement power, combined with instability and insecurity are creating serious challenges to their further development.
- 4 LACs are perceived as legitimate counterparts by internal and external actors. But they are working in highly competitive environments in which other local actors compete for authority, revenue, aid and the competence to govern.

---

This Synthesis Paper<sup>i</sup> summarizes the main findings of the full report<sup>ii</sup> [Perceptions of Governance – The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition-held Syria](#). Between May 2016 and January 2017, research was conducted on local governance structures and perceptions of legitimacy in opposition-held Syria. The research focused on the role of Local Administrative Councils (LACs) in five locations, namely Daret Ezzeh, Ma'aret al Numan, Zamalka, Kafr Takharim and Nawa.

The first LACs emerged in 2012, following the withdrawal of government forces and services from opposition-held areas. They grew out of committees (Local Coordination Committees) set up by local activists in order to meet immediate humanitarian needs, fill the service vacuum, and ultimately try to build alternative governance institutions. They emerged in a highly ad-hoc and independent fashion. Over the years, the LACs have become key service delivery entities with increasing levels of formalization and recognized leadership roles within the communities they serve. The LAC experience has, however, significantly varied due to localised social and conflict dynamics, strained access to resources, and the overall fluidity of continuing armed conflict. A lack of a clear, credible, and adequately financed central authority has exacerbated this ad-hoc and uncoordinated nature of the development of the LACs. Nonetheless, the research revealed the following four main trends.



## **LACs have evolved into more formalized, bureaucratic structures**

The LAC structures have evolved from self-organized relief initiatives into formalized and more professional governance entities with executive bodies and specialized offices. Often staffed with experts, the LACs established formalized procedures to acquire and implement projects. In addition, they introduced by-laws that aim at guiding their work as well as their interaction with the broader public. Nevertheless, public perception reveals that some LACs are seen as working on an ad-hoc and improvised basis, with little internal coordination, decision-making procedures that are driven by individual interest, and structures that still favor nepotism in the distribution of posts and projects. Moreover, most LACs are perceived as having little or no enforcement power, with the exception of those that work closely with armed factions.

The political opposition body, the Syrian National Coalition, founded the “Syrian Interim Government” that has tried to enforce common legal and regulatory frameworks for the LACs. The LACs themselves also began to develop common approaches to better coordinate their work. Many of the LACs are following an amended government law, the Local Administration Law 107. The degree to which these regulations and the law 107 have been consistently followed in a context affected by armed conflict is difficult to verify, but seems to have limited effect to date.



## **LACs have evolved into key service providers**

The LACs have expanded their key field of activity, service delivery. Initially, the LACs focused mainly on humanitarian relief. Over time, as the conflict protracted, the LACs expanded their activities to cover longer-term service provision and more development-oriented functions to citizens. While LACs’ focuses vary depending on local needs and conditions, most LACs are engaged in the provision of water, education, sanitation, health, in building and repairing infrastructure from roads to schools and hospitals, and in the allocation of food aid. Some LACs have started to collect fees and taxes to allow for more sustainable service delivery. The LACs are, however, heavily under-resourced with no central budgetary sources and limited ability to collect revenues as the livelihood of many is under severe stress due to the armed conflict. Dependence on external funding has resulted in a situation where the LACs are often functioning in a project-to-project mode, rather than according to medium term plans. Likewise, they are often driven by donor interests rather than local priorities. But the fact that LACs have been delivering services in concert with the communities they serve without the use of force indicates that they are recognized as legitimate actors in their key function as service deliverers.



## **LACs have evolved into more inclusive, transparent, and participatory entities**

Overtime, the LACs reformed their modalities for inclusion, transparency, participation, as well as access to information. For instance, upon completion of a term, the LACs update their (s)election procedures in order to promote more inclusive processes, albeit, more often than not, inclusion tends to be limited to influential families and notables from the area as well as youth activists. In addition, the criteria for the selection of members has changed over time, from focusing on activists to focusing more on technocrats. All LACs under study for this research have gone through at least three cycles of election or appointment of the executive bodies. Due to a lack of resources, these positions are rarely paid. This counteracts the trend toward formalization, challenging the ability to attract experienced and well-trained staff. Notably, women are, with some exceptions, almost completely absent from the executive structures, yet may serve as staff in specialized offices.

Over the years, the LACs have also attempted to professionalize their information and feedback systems, ranging from utilizing social media, such as Facebook pages, to publishing magazines and maintaining complaint boxes. To invite community participation, some LACs have increasingly used neighborhood committees and leaders to work as intermediaries, conveying citizens' messages to the LACs and distributing information to the citizens, while others refer to local gatherings to better understand and incorporate the needs of the population. Yet, these methods are dependent on security conditions, citizens' ability to access Facebook and other technical tools, as well as their willingness to attend meetings and to participate in a meaningful way.



## LACs have evolved into more legitimate actors

The LACs work in sometimes highly competitive environments. Despite contextual and resource challenges, the LACs are increasingly viewed as legitimate bodies, although with limited governance functions and authority. The fields of security and justice, which are important sectors often attributed to governing actors, tend to be dominated by armed factions and Shoura Courts. The research has shown that while there has been some representation of LACs in political talks, for the most part, the LACs are not in active coordination or communication with the opposition political bodies, and there is inconsistent and relatively limited coordination with provincial-level councils. A severe lack of resources and armed conflict conditions have also hampered the reach of the LACs. Finally, competition with NGOs operating in similar relief and service delivery areas as the LACs often occurs, albeit with a trend towards improved coordination in some areas. Donor support and funding provide a certain degree of legitimacy to LACs by being the recognized bodies for external actors and also empower the LACs in relation to other actors present on the ground. While the LACs have been widely appreciated for their role in service delivery, the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the Interim Government have less credibility. Both of the latter institutions were seen as disconnected from the realities on the ground.

A synthesis report published by:



<sup>i</sup> This synthesis paper and the full report have been financially supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research: [download the full report](#).

<sup>ii</sup> Authored by Bahjat Hajjar, Corinne von Burg, Leila Hilal, Martina Santschi, Mazen Gharibah, and Mazhar Sharbaji.