



Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate

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Summary

According to research conducted by Integrity, local governance in opposition-controlled areas of Dara'a Governorate remains in an embryonic stage of development. It is constrained by ongoing state attacks and the targeting of key infrastructure across opposition-controlled territories, a lack of transparency in core governance organisations, funding sources that are limited, unpredictable and which adversely affect service delivery and an ongoing dependence upon Syrian government infrastructure for the delivery of complex services.

These constraints persist despite the apparent 'organisation' and 'formalisation' of many local relief or civil society entities over the past 12 to 18 months into Local Administrative Councils (LACs) and the relatively high levels of funding disbursed by the Dara'a Governorate Council, in comparison with other governorate councils.

Interviewees for this research suggest that in most cases, LACs have been unable to move beyond the relief-orientated 'committee' structure into inclusive and holistic local councils. This situation was attributed largely to the fact that many LACs in Dara'a are unable to secure funding to implement activities at a level that meets local needs. It also reflects the fact that LACs were often created with relief, rather than governance, objectives in mind.

Following the founding of the Dara'a Governorate Council (DGC) in July 2013, some improvements were noted in the amount of funding available for local relief efforts. However, interviewees note that this has not translated into improved effectiveness of relief activities. The formation of many LACs from pre-existing groups with connections to the DGC has limited the reach and impact of relief efforts: beneficiary selection and project development are seen to be based on group-membership or ideology, rather than need. Moreover, although more successful than other governorate councils in Syria, in terms of total amounts of funds distributed, the DGC is in fact a relatively minor funder in Dara'a and therefore has limited ability to influence other local entities such as armed groups.

Respondent perceptions of the DGC's legitimacy are influenced by limitations on participation in the earlier elections, its location outside of Dara'a and the undue influence of one donor with a particular and exclusivist ideology. These challenges may be ameliorated through new elections, and the DGC has developed organisational guidelines to help achieve this.

Finally, the Syrian government maintains ongoing military control of strategically important areas and is targeting local governance and service delivery infrastructure in opposition-held areas. As a result, many areas under opposition control remain dependent on the state's

networks for electricity and water provision, or go without those services at all. This inhibits the development of independent local governance structures that are considered credible and legitimate by local populations and that are able to provide services to these populations.

Objectives of this Report

This research summary report provides a brief overview of the state of local governance in Dara'a Governorate. It draws on material from a longer qualitative research report prepared by Integrity in April 2014. Specifically, it focuses on the functioning of Local Administrative Councils (LACs) and the Dara'a Governorate Council (DGC), so as to assess governance entities at these two levels. The examination of governance entities within opposition-controlled areas reflects the research focus of the original report. Semi-structured interviews were conducted involving 50 key informants with knowledge of local governance entities in Dara'a. Interviewees were identified using a snowball sample.¹ Additional information was drawn from 25 interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders for an earlier research project in September 2013. Integrity notes that the data included in this summary report was current at the time of original publication, but given the fluidity of the conflict in Syria may now have changed. For briefings or more information on this report, please contact Integrity at the following email address: syria@integrityresearch.com.

Dara'a Governorate: Context and Conflict History

Dara'a Governorate had a pre-conflict population of approximately one million and is made up of three districts (Dara'a, Sanamayn and Izra'a), which are further divided into 17 sub-districts. Dara'a City is the biggest city in the governorate with a pre-conflict population of approximately 100,000 people. The governorate has until recently been a highly productive agricultural area, supplying Jordan and some Gulf states with fresh fruit and vegetables. Evidence suggests that even with continuous bombing and an absence of usual farming subsidies, the governorate could export crops to Jordan if the border was open to exports from opposition areas.

¹ Identifying further interviewees from amongst the acquaintances of existing contacts.

The first major protests against the Syrian Government in 2011 took place in Dara'a City. Under the Free Syrian Army umbrella, armed resistance in the governorate became more organised, and in March 2012, rebels seized the Balad district of Dara'a City. This led to heavy government bombardment of the area and an upsurge in violence between government and opposition forces across the governorate. At the time of research, most of the south of the governorate was under opposition control.

Dara'a is a strategically important governorate for the Syrian Government due to its proximity to the borders with both Israel and Jordan. If the two North-South highways connecting the government-controlled border crossing with Damascus were to come fully under opposition control, the capital could be threatened. Because of this strategic importance, the Syrian Government continues to invest troops and services in the governorate.

The political and military landscape of Dara'a also differs considerably from other parts of Syria. While Salafist² groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and others are present in some parts of the governorate, there has not to date been a large-scale consolidation of Salafist brigades in Dara'a as with areas in the north. Respondents increasingly felt, however, that such consolidation would become likely if alternative armed and governance institutions were not strengthened. The Salafist groups that do operate in Dara'a do so under the confines of local Free Syrian Army (FSA) and have until now exercised only limited political influence.

Local Governance in Dara'a

This report looks at two levels of administration and governance structures that exist in Dara'a Governorate: the governorate-level Dara'a Governorate Council and the village or town-level Local Administrative Councils (LACs). Both types of entity were formed and are shaped by a unique set of local influences and face differing challenges relating to the provision of basic relief or governance services.

² The term Salafist is used in this report to refer to those groups or individuals who take a 'literalist' position on religious texts, rejecting some reformist Islamist scholars 'contextualisation' of sources.

Dara'a Governorate Council

Governorate Councils are designed to be municipality or governorate-level organisations that streamline funding to LACs, and support the formalisation of governance mechanisms within them. As with LACs (discussed below), their success in delivery, and in providing an alternative governance mechanism to the Syrian Government, has so far been limited. The Dara'a Governorate Council (DGC) was established in July 2013 in Cairo to provide a streamlined funding mechanism for nascent LACs throughout Dara'a and formalise other groups into more governance-oriented organisations. The location of the founding conference, held outside Syria, underscores a problematic beginning: Jordanian authorities vetoed the convening of the conference on Jordanian soil and prevented all but two of the 80 invited delegates Dara'a from exiting Syria through Jordan to attend. Despite Skype-based voting from two rooms in the Syrian interior, which ameliorated constraints on attendance to some degree, many respondents involved with local governance inside Dara'a criticise the DGC for its lack of representation.

DISTRICTS AND SUB-DISTRICTS OF DARA'A GOVERNORATE



The Association of the People of the Houran: Influence and Funding

The *Rabita Ahl Houran* (the Association of the People of the Houran or APH) has played a leading role in the Dara'a Governorate Council. The APH was founded by individuals from southern Syria who fled during the government crackdown on groups affiliated with, or accused of being members of, the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s and 1990s. As an organisation, the APH was founded at the onset of the current conflict to deal specifically with humanitarian needs. It focuses exclusively on the geographic area of the Houran.³ Respondents suggest that the APH has strong connections with the National Coalition and with Qatar as a result of its ideological and organisational origins. The APH has been known within the governorate for some time, primarily for its impressive reach in aid distribution, which surpasses the abilities of other organisations working throughout the Houran region. In the last year, however, respondents suggest that accusations of nepotism and ideologically-biased beneficiary distribution have increased notably.

Multiple interviewees also cite the influence of the APH upon the DGC as a challenge to the legitimacy and credibility of the Council. This influence was identified in several ways. Respondents note that several key APH members played a role in the Preparatory Committee activities that preceded the DGC's founding, and defined participation in the election that created the DGC. This situation facilitated the strong influence of the APH in the DGC, particularly in the makeup of the powerful decision-making body, the Executive Committee. Evidence suggests that 75 per cent of the Executive Committee is made up of APH members.⁴ This influence led to a brief boycott of the DGC by some LACs, which subsequently resulted in a wave of more representative funds disbursement. The influence of the APH over the DGC in this way appears to have contributed to a lack of trust in the neutrality of the DGC, has weakened buy-in with LACs and spurred a lasting desire among some LACs for a more representative governorate-level structure.

The DGC has provided more funding and assistance throughout Dara'a than any other Council in Syria. Respondents suggest that between USD 1 to 1.5 million in aid has either been spent already or is earmarked for distribution. Yet, despite this level of relief funding, the DGC is not in fact the largest donor in Dara'a. Groups such as the APH mobilise funding amounts from a range of sources, considerably greater than DGC reserves. Interviewees with knowledge of both the DGC and the APH note that at a single donors conference in Istanbul in early 2014 the APH raised between USD 7 to 8 million.

³ The Houran is the historical name for the volcanic plateau in the South-west of Syria, which includes most of Dara'a and Suwayda Governorates, and northern parts of Jordan, including the city of Irbid.

⁴ It should be noted that the General Assembly is more representative.

Furthermore, despite their strong ties to and influence over the DGC, many such groups deliver the bulk of their relief funding outside council structures. Evidence suggests that the APH and other such organisations donate in this way throughout the governorate to improve their public standing and political capital with local stakeholders. The APH seeks out membership and has at times reportedly offered non-transparent incentives such as scholarships (based on APH affiliation of parents, rather than need or revolutionary participation), to encourage joining. In return, they demand loyalty from new members and require all members to be observant Sunni Muslims. Perceptions of the power wielded by the APH appear to have evolved in recent months, and the level of influence has served to alienate local activists and LAC members. For example, in late 2013, many secular media and CSO activists commended the APH for their capacity to fund much-needed aid projects in the governorate and saw the APH's strong presence in the DGC as unproblematic. The same activists interviewed half a year later were far more critical.

Challenges to legitimacy and effectiveness of the DGC

The comparatively small funding reserves of the DGC, when measured against other donors active in the governorate, limit the council's ability to position itself as the legitimate successor to state institutions. Likewise, the inability to streamline funding to LACs through one organisation exacerbates existing splits between local entities and inhibits the development of cohesive and coherent local governance in Dara'a. The functioning of the DGC is also limited by the Syrian Government's targeting of nascent alternative governance systems inside Dara'a. Furthermore, the DGC is constrained by the strict limits placed on cross-border movement by the Jordanian authorities. In addition to inhibiting the delivery of relief goods, this tightly controlled border has reduced the ability of individuals working inside Dara'a's nascent LACs to influence the DGC (which remains based in Jordan), thereby limiting progress toward a more representative organisation.

Yet despite these strong critiques of the DGC, respondents claim that it remains the most viable organisation to support the development of effective local governance in Dara'a. Reflecting the above constraints, interviewees expressed clear priorities for the improvement of the DGC, including:

- New elections, inclusive of voters inside Dara'a excluded in the July 2013 ballot
- Relocation of the DGC from Irbid, Jordan into Dara'a Governorate

Local Administrative Councils

Origins, Key Stakeholders and Funding

The principal local governance entity in opposition-controlled areas of Syria at the village and town-level is the LAC. This structure first emerged in Rif Damascus in 2012 and has become the National Coalition's model for the development of local governance. According to this model, LACs are supposed to be formed by local elections, though elections do not always take place. LACs frequently contain all necessary service delivery 'offices' and are charged with providing complex services such as civil defence, justice, infrastructure and education. However, these offices often exist in name only, with actual work not taking place due to a lack of funding. LACs are also expected to be inclusive of the various opposition entities that emerged earlier in the Syrian conflict, such as medical committees, media offices, relief distribution networks and Revolutionary Councils.⁵ In this sense, LACs are intended to be 'holistic' institutions that integrate previously disparate service providers and lay the groundwork for a new state, even as they are often practically limited by lack of funding for basic functioning.

Local stakeholders, especially armed groups, are particularly significant to governance at this level and to relief and service provision in Dara'a. Interviewees note that local FSA units are the primary political actors on the ground and LACs mirror local socio-political dynamics. Where power is fragmented between competing armed groups, this is reflected in and affects the functioning of LACs. Similarly prominent families in the area play a significant role in the operation of LACs. Evidence demonstrates that many earlier relief entities and subsequent LACs, were created to include a balanced representation of influential families as a way of ensuring at least a degree of representation where security situations did not allow for public elections. This has the effect of reducing transparency and inclusiveness in LACs, although better mechanisms are clearly hard to implement as long as aerial bombardment poses an ongoing threat to the kind of gatherings needed to facilitate more direct representation.

⁵ As previously existent entities, such organisations often represent the bulk of the current tangible work of the LACs.

In the early period of the conflict in Dara'a, before opposition forces took control of substantial areas of the governorate and large population displacements occurred, the limited levels of available financial resources were adequate for the delivery of relief activities. These resources came predominantly from small donations from local sources and from expatriate communities.⁶ However, as the conflict intensified and humanitarian needs increased, the relief networks active inside Dara'a expanded to supply basic aid to communities in need, using the Jordanian border as their primary conduit.

From mid-2013, relief committees throughout the governorate began to transform into the more formalised LACs. Yet respondents note that this was more a change in name than in form or function. LACs continued to carry out the same basic relief functions as before and have not yet made significant increases in local representation. Interviewees attribute the motivation for this cosmetic change to a desire to secure greater levels of funding from the newly formed DGC. Reflecting a desire to strengthen governance within local organisations, the DGC stated that it would only fund entities with the formal structures (for instance, entities with a number of offices, even if currently not active) and basic education levels for the holders of various LAC positions. This accelerated the creation of LACs and positions within them, yet was not accompanied by the significant increase in funding required to allow LACs to function properly. Others noted that some funding to LACs from the DGC appeared to be influenced by the strength of personal connections, either with the Council or the APH. In such cases, the availability of DGC funding appears to have negatively impacted upon responsiveness and accountability.

Changing funding sources and influence of donors

This increase in the volume of relief incentivised a need for greater organisation, both within the networks that facilitated the cross-border movement of goods, as well as for the relief entities distributing aid inside Dara'a. Evidence from respondents suggests that a significant proportion of the funding for this aid continues to come from individual donors sending support to their place of origin. However, larger donors with an interest in distributing aid to the governorate as a whole have emerged, further stimulating the formalisation of distribution networks to accommodate the increasing volumes of aid. These larger donors are increasingly conservative faith-based groups, such as the APH detailed above.

⁶ Respondents note that Dara'a is well known in Syria for the strength of its connection to expatriate groups living in Gulf countries and in Europe.

Salafist groups have maintained a weaker presence in Dara'a in comparison both with other areas in Syria and with the strength of local FSA-linked groups, partially as a result of the much tighter foreign border control with Jordan than in the north of the country. Yet Jabhat al-Nusra and others are increasingly making their presence felt and by drawing upon their larger financial reserves they are beginning to assert greater authority through the use of their own Shari'a Courts, which have even started to rule against powerful local commanders.

Obstacles to Local Governance in Dara'a

The establishment and consolidation of LACs throughout Dara'a was intended to achieve several things. This change process aimed to integrate the patchwork of emergency local relief and civil society entities that had emerged early in the conflict into structures capable of providing broader and better quality aid in the short term and other services eventually. These structures were intended to be able to conduct needs assessments across the governorate, improve the organisation of relief distribution, cut out intermediary actors of various nationalities responsible for the siphoning off of aid and facilitate more effective advocacy for assistance from outside. Additionally, this change was intended to expand the services provided to communities by local governance entities. Finally, the change also aimed to increase the levels of community representation within local councils.

These objectives have not yet been met. The earlier relief and administration entities were formed from a diverse range of (often clandestine) local opposition groups and networks, which were not obvious precursors to representative local organisations. As noted above, the inherent danger that large-scale public gatherings pose to populations has also meant that these entities were rarely formed through the kinds of direct local elections relevant in peacetime.

In short, evidence suggests that local governance in areas of opposition control has not become significantly more representative or better structured in the approximately 12 months since the formation of the Dara'a Governorate Council or since the 'organisation' of relief committees into LACs. This is due in large part to the absence of a parallel increase in funding levels, necessary for LACs to function.

Interviewees also note that while an LAC may be the primary local relief entity, the diversification of activities into areas beyond relief or the improvement of such activities has been limited. Similarly, despite attempts at consolidation and coordination of earlier relief and administration committees, LACs in many areas continue to be only one of several local

bodies in the community. Furthermore, the process of LAC formation in Dara'a was generally lacking in formality and transparency and only rarely involved elections. According to a respondent with knowledge of the formation processes, up to 75 per cent of LACs in Dara'a were 'self-selected' and others stress the ongoing importance of local families or groups because of the extreme dangers involved in conducting elections in the current environment, given the risk of targeting by government forces.

Importantly, respondents suggest that the inability to provide services is generally a much more important obstacle to improved legitimacy than the means of entity formation. Local citizens who found their LAC legitimate tended to do so based on whether it had attempted to provide services (even if hindered by limited funding), rather than if it had been directly elected. The reverse however, was not true: if no services were delivered, even greater representation, such as through direct elections, was not considered itself sufficient to foster legitimacy.

Continuing Dependence on the Syrian Government: A Constraint on Local Governance

Despite active conflict throughout Dara'a since 2011, the Syrian Government continues to occupy a strong strategic position in the governorate. The government has been able to hold crucial areas of Dara'a, such as the M5 highway, which splits the governorate in two, and has been able to maintain control of larger urban centres along this route, including a significant portion of Dara'a City. It has used this strategic and military advantage to prevent the consolidation of local governance in opposition areas, contributing to the slow pace of development, formalisation, and capacity of local governance.

Interviewees note that as part of its strategy to maintain control, the government preserves a monopoly on the provision of core services such as electricity and water to opposition areas. Government military forces also target infrastructure in opposition-controlled areas to counter the potential for opposition groups to deliver services. This approach secures the ongoing dependence of many apparently opposition-controlled areas in Dara'a upon the Syrian Government. Towns that have sought to break from this dependence, as was the case in Nawa or Khirbet Ghazala, have suffered serious attacks and many residents of these towns have become internally displaced persons in other opposition-controlled areas.

The dynamic of service delivery is further complicated in some areas of Dara'a by the relationships between state service providers and civil society groups who are also engaged in serviced delivery. Both civil society organisations (CSOs) and the state have access to limited amounts of service delivery infrastructure (such as electricity networks or goods warehouses) and sometimes must cooperate to ensure services are provided to their respective populations. Respondents characterise this relationship as one of interdependence and evidence suggests that it is unique to Dara'a. Reflecting the precarious political situation, and the need to retain a strong posture of independence, these service-delivering CSOs in opposition-controlled areas reject the suggestion that they are working under the DGC's umbrella and do not identify themselves a governance entity. Such CSOs also reject incorporation into the LAC or DGC governance structures, particularly, evidence suggests, due to the perceptions of APH dominance. Given the central role they play in service delivery, this refusal to incorporate by some CSOs further inhibits the ability of LACs or the DGC to bolster credibility by providing much-needed services to their local populations.

Facilitating Local Governance Development in Dara'a: Challenges to Address

Integrity's analysis suggests that local organisations face three critical challenges if they are to move beyond their current nascent state and become more focused local governance entities.

Firstly, as outlined above, the current context has given rise to significant challenges to the accountability, transparency and representativeness of local organisations, whether LACs or the DGC. The current conflict environment means that local elections have been beyond almost all LACs and there can be little expectation of free and fair direct elections in the near future. Indeed, forcing elections at this point may result in the replication of already-existing and non-representative power structure. Instead, legitimacy of local organisations could be improved through greater inclusiveness of internal processes and further engagement with the diversity of existing local committees, CSOs and NGOs who work in multiple service areas. Similarly, limitations on participation in the election of the DGC and perceptions around the functioning of its relief distribution appear to have contributed to community perceptions about its lack of representativeness or transparency. As noted above, obtaining DGC funding often appears to be based upon the strength of personnel connections, resulting in better-connected rather than better-performing LACs receiving funding.

Addressing these issues through new DGC elections that allow the participation of a more representative range of civilian actors, through structures that prevent monopoly control being exercised by any one group and by working with a wider range of local actors may enable the DGC to consolidate its position as a governance entity at the governorate level.

Secondly, existing levels of funding are clearly insufficient in comparison to current community needs. Existing funding also tends to focus primarily on relief provision, at the expense of other activities that may contribute to the development of improved local governance. Levels of funding need to increase and become more effectively streamlined through formal mechanisms within the DGC.⁷ Furthermore, the DGC, although aspiring to a needed and desired comprehensive governance role, is a notably smaller contributor in relation to other donors, especially Islamic-orientated groups such as the APH. The existence of several funding sources for local actors risks fragmenting activities and can provide incentives for competition rather than collaboration between providers of local governance and relief services.

Finally, the control that the Syrian government exerts over strategically significant areas and infrastructure in Dara'a inhibits the further development of local governance. The government maintains a monopoly on important service delivery infrastructure in key areas of Dara'a, which denies LACs or the DGC from delivering services to local populations themselves. Without the capacity to deliver services to populations, such local governance organisations will continue to be at least partially irrelevant to their communities, and will remain dependent on the Syrian state. Furthermore, the government's control of areas across Dara'a denies nascent governance institutions the ability to coordinate, resulting in an ongoing an-hoc and fragmented approach to governance and service provision outlined by respondents to this research. Without an unlikely change in the balance of power within the governorate, this dependence on government-controlled infrastructure is likely to remain in the short to medium-term.

⁷ Respondents emphasise the need for DGC reforms, such as new elections, before increases in relief funding are channeled through the Council.



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