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Aggregating Power: The Territorial Orders of Syria



Research paper

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Executive Summary

In the wake of the Assad Regime's collapse on the 8th of December 2024, Syria stands at a critical crossroads, as it presents both opportunities for reform and risks of further fragmentation. Previously, management of the territorial system of Syria was heterogenous despite the State's hegemonic outlook. The central state applied diverse formulas for managing the territory focused mainly on building loyalty to the Baath regime rather than focusing on the efficiency and effectiveness of administration to serve local communities. During the upheaval of the Syrian revolution and the ensuing conflict, authorities in Damascus transformed the territorial system in Syria. Many of the areas that fell outside the control of the central regime adopted their own territorial orders. Today, amid the uncertainty surrounding the country's future, there is an urgent need to revisit and understand the territorial structures of Syria—examining their historical trajectories and evolving geography leading up to November 2024. This understanding is crucial for guiding future efforts in restructuring the territorial order in an effective manner; this will be essential for reorganizing the country's territorial hierarchies, administrative borders, and political economy in a manner that supports sustainable reconstruction and fair representation of Syria's diverse communities.

As such, this paper proposes an analytical framework to approach the complex spatial dynamics of Syria's territorial orders, examining how they were shaped by historical legacies, centralization efforts, and the impact of 14 years of conflict, influencing governance practices and everyday life across the country. Aggregation in this context refers to the consolidation and concentration of authority at various levels of territorial administrations within set boundaries, shaping the interactions between central and local authorities. Whereas other papers in this series will focus on governmental and formal and informal political dimensions of territories, this paper will focus on spatial manifestations looking into distribution of administrative units, internal borders, and population densities.

The paper begins with an overview of the historical roots of territorial governance in Syria, summarizing its evolution from Ottoman administrative reforms seeking balanced centralisation, through the strong asymmetries imposed by the French Mandate and into post-independence highly centralized governance models. Most importantly, we discuss how territorial systems were divided in two separate overlapping frameworks that were never reconciled, mainly the territorial units (governorates, districts and sub-districts) and the municipal units (cities, towns, and townships). Dynamically changing administrative divisions were persistently used as mechanisms to consolidate central authority and exert control over diverse and often fragmented territories. Societal and regional divisions were often exacerbated by introducing and reinforcing strong spatial asymmetries, which served as tools for managing or manipulating local populations and resources in return.

The paper places a critical focus on the Decree 107 of 2011 as the existing legal framework for managing the local governance. This law will be the point of departure to reform the system of territorial governance in Syria. Understanding how the law was implemented to demarcate the local administration units will be critical for any reform process in the future. The said decree aimed to promote decentralization by granting greater autonomy to Local Administrative Units

(LAUs). In theory, it offered a pathway to increased local agency in managing local affairs, transparency, and civic participation. However, in practice, central control remained entrenched, as the central government retained the power to dissolve councils, manipulate their formation, and reconfigure territorial boundaries to serve its political interests. This led to imbalances and disparities in the distribution of councils, limiting genuine local autonomy and fostering dependency on central authority as the ultimate arbiter in local affairs. Rather than achieving meaningful decentralization, the implementation of Decree 107 often reinforced existing hierarchies and patronage networks, undermining the law's intended reforms.

Conflict further fragmented Syria's territorial governance, giving rise to distinct models of local governance under various de facto authorities. Each governance model tried to adapt to unique political, social, and regional considerations, resulting in disparate approaches to administration, resource allocation, and public service provision. Today, despite the fall of the Assad regime, the legacy of fragmented spatial geometries highlight the challenges of reunifying the territory, adjusting regional disparities and achieving a viable cohesive governance model. In this context, Decree 107 serves as the starting point in understanding the territorial framework and setting a baseline for comparison between the divided areas, as a first step in developing a new unified framework.

By interrogating the spatial dynamics of territorial orders, this paper illuminates the dual role of territorial governance structures as instruments of control and as reflections of socio-political realities. The study underscores the importance of re-designing territorial orders using new spatial demarcations that could balance political authority, administrative efficiency, and local identity. Such designs must prioritize inclusivity, equitable service delivery, and meaningful local autonomy to foster stability, cohesion, and sustainable development. Ultimately, the success of territorial governance in Syria will depend on its ability to adapt to shifting socio-political realities while addressing historical asymmetries, finding commonalities in the various territorial models and harmonizing differences to promote a more equitable distribution of power and resources. We conclude with a series of recommendations for the future of territorial orders in Syria:

1. **Tackling Systemic and Historical Imbalances:** Addressing entrenched disparities to ensure equitable distribution of resources, authority, and representation across all regions.
2. **Leveraging Cities as Localized Cross-Geography Constants:** Utilizing urban centres as anchors of stability and development, fostering connectivity and cohesion across fragmented territories.
3. **Balancing Peripheral Orders:** Harmonizing the relationships between central and local authorities to promote inclusivity, efficiency, and local empowerment in governance.

Introduction

A territorial order refers to the way territories are conceived and organised through the demarcation of geographic spaces into manageable units for governance. Orders emerge from “aspirational ideas” that act as ideological glue for the social-political-spatial nexus of states⁽¹⁾, allowing for the establishment of spatial frameworks that organise political and administrative systems through structured authority. In return, by ensuring effective governance, these orders aim at maintaining the very political economy from which they originated.

In Syria, these arrangements reflect a complex blend of historical legacies, centralized governance traditions, and the impact of conflict. Decree 107, introduced in 2011, aimed to decentralize governance by redefining the relationship between local administrative units and their councils with the central state but often ended up reinforcing central control. The realities on the ground frequently diverged from declared governance frameworks, shaped instead by competing power dynamics, fragmented control, and societal tensions. During the last 14 years, these fragmented orders fueled conflict, weakened economies, and hindered stability.⁽²⁾ This paper examines the spatial dynamics of Syrian territorial orders, with a focus on Decree 107, the offshoot models of territorial governance, and subsequent trajectories over the past decade.

More generally, the design of territorial orders varies significantly across countries, shaped by diverse political systems that historically served the interests of central authorities. Their establishment is typically codified through varying forms of policy, which define distinct rights and responsibilities, delineate jurisdictions, outline mechanisms for elections and appointments of officials, define their mandates, and manage financial governance models. However, legal definitions are often not sufficient in determining territorial orders, as their interpretations often vary according to political imperatives as well as personal patronage networks. In fact, the spatial distribution and the corresponding political weight of the different layers of territorial units are mostly left to the discretion of the executive branch of government who manipulates spatial systems to match top political elites’ aspirations and is as much driven by personal prerogatives as it is by reason of State.

The resulting power is aggregated to allow central authorities to exert control over larger territories that fall out of their immediate reach. As such, territorial orders define the degree of decentralization within the territorial framework. In some cases, they can even possess their own legal identity to perform their diverse functions. For example, in France, territorial units (or “collectivités territoriales”) are recognized as legal entities functionally independent from central institutions.⁽³⁾ Decentralization reforms initiated in the late 20th century have granted these units legal autonomy to manage local affairs. However, in more centralized systems such as in England,⁽⁴⁾ local authorities function primarily as administrative extensions of the central state. These administrative divisions do not possess legal personalities, and their powers are limited to the functions delegated by the central government. They implement national policies

⁽¹⁾ Kadercan, B. (2023). *Shifting grounds: The social origins of territorial conflict*. Oxford University Press.

⁽²⁾ Hallaj, O. A. (2017). Geographies of absence: Radicalization and the shaping of the new Syrian territoriality. *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 29(1), Article 10. <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol29/iss1/10>

⁽³⁾ Qu’est-ce qu’une collectivité territoriale ou collectivité locale ? | vie-publique.fr. (2024, August 22). <https://www.vie-publique.fr/fiches/19604-quest-ce-quune-collectivite-territoriale-ou-collectivite-locale>

⁽⁴⁾ Sandford, M. (2024). Local government in England: Structures. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07104/>

rather than independently manage their own affairs and resources, reflecting a much tighter control by the central state compared to more decentralized systems.

Just as importantly, territorial orders play a critical role in structuring citizens' engagement with political institutions, determining how they access public services, and defining their roles and identities within the political system. The spatial demarcation of governance units affects how individuals perceive their relationship to each other, aggregate their political agency, and shape regional and national identities.⁽⁵⁾ Representation through electoral systems and participation mechanisms at different levels ensures that territorial orders are not merely abstract constructions but concrete expressions of governance that interact directly with people's lives.

While the foundational concepts of territorial orders revolve around governance structures and the demarcation of their administrative boundaries, their practical implications extend far beyond. Territorial orders encapsulate the ways states negotiate power dynamics, engage with citizens, and address regional disparities. This negotiation is particularly evident in how these orders evolve, adapt, or fracture in response to shifting political, economic, and social pressures. By examining the interplay between centralized authority and localised governance, we can better understand the mechanisms through which territorial orders shape—and are shaped by—the historical and contemporary realities of state control, identity formation, and public engagement.

A History of Centralization and Asymmetry

Syria's territorial orders are deeply rooted in a complex historical trajectory shaped by regional power struggles, external interventions, and shifting governance frameworks. For millennia, the geographic area now recognized as Syria was integrated into larger territorial structures, whether as part of imperial territories or fragmented city-states and principalities. The Levant's historical reality, lacking clear and defensible geographic boundaries, exposed the territory to repeated conquest, incorporation, and fragmentation by successive regional powers.

Balancing Central Governance and Local Autonomy: Ottoman Reforms of the 1870s

The Ottoman territorial landscape was dynamically and constantly changing throughout the empire's history at every level, reflecting the complex task of consolidating an empire as vast and diverse as the Ottoman Empire. The current national territory of the modern state of Syria was mainly divided into the two key vilayets of Aleppo and Damascus.⁽⁶⁾ The latter only received the name of Syria (Sûriye) in the late 19th century amid increasing external European pressures and internal ethnic struggles⁽⁷⁾. Also, at various points, smaller administrative units, such as the vilayets of Raqqa and Zor in the East, and Tripoli and Beirut, in the West, emerged and operated with varying degrees of independence. The hierarchies, powers, leadership and

⁽⁵⁾ Moore, M. (2017). *A political theory of territory*. Oxford University Press.

⁽⁶⁾ Named Arap earlier on, Dimaşkû, Şam and Sûriye. To track the Ottoman toponyms see: Sezen, T. (2006). *Osmanlı Yer Adları (Alfabetik Sırayla)*. Ankara: Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü. ISBN: 975-19-3945-3.

⁽⁷⁾ Al Zoubi, S., Alzoubi, Z., Hallaj, O., & Hallaj, J. (2022). The making of Syria's administrative divisions' map: One hundred years of a problematic relationship between the centre and the periphery. *London School of Economics and Political Science*. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/116961/3/The_making_of_Syria_administrative_divisions_map.pdf

toponyms of the Ottoman territories were changing as constantly as the internal borders of the empire.

At no point was the delineation of Ottoman vilayets strictly aligned with present-day Syrian borders; territories often extended beyond these borders, while regions considered integral to the current modern Syrian state were often governed from exterior administrative centres such as Beirut, Saida, Tripoli, Mosul or Diarbekir among others. Tracking the evolution of these borders is complex, and is often reduced to a selection of maps that cater to simplified and targeted historiographies which do not rightfully represent the constant changes of the Ottoman territorial orders. The boundaries and dependencies of these vilayets remained in flux. Aleppo was only ever part of the same vilayet as Damascus during a brief period following their initial conquest by the Ottomans, and the vilayets of Syria (Sûriye) and Aleppo gaining approximately similar sizes by the mid-19th century in terms of coverage (Fig 1) and population.

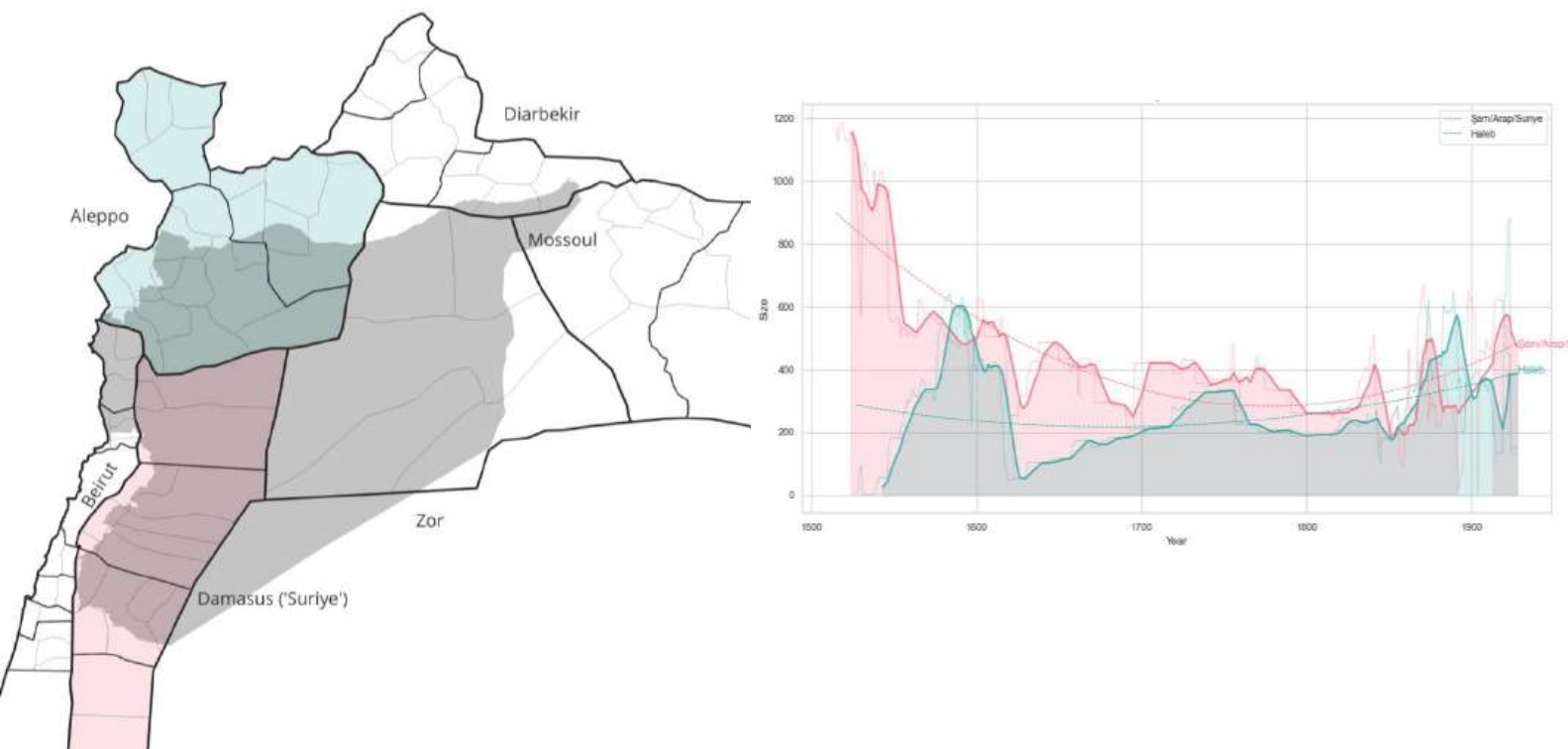


FIG 1: Left: The Vilayets of Aleppo (In Blue) and Damascus (in Red) in 1899.⁽⁸⁾ Right: The estimated evolution of historical references to the “Halep” and “Arap/Şam/Suriye” Vilayets from 1516 to 1940. Based on HGIS data extracted from historical records.⁽⁹⁾

During the mid-19th century, in response to challenges posed by local power centres and mounting ethnic and religious tensions, which were exploited by external powers wanting to set a foot in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman authorities instigated the Tanzimat reforms. The Vilayet Law of 1864 sought to modernise and harmonise administration through a hierarchical system that subdivided vilayets into sanjaks, qadas and nahiyes each

⁽⁸⁾ Drawn from: Huber, R. (1899). Empire ottoman. Division administrative 1/1 500 000 dressé d'après le Salnamé de 1899/1317 [Map]. F. Loeffler. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53060269b>

⁽⁹⁾ This document is part of a larger research into the history of the evolution of administrative borders in the Ottoman Empire. More than 200,000 data points were extracted from historical records and compiled into a year-by-year HGIS system covering all areas within the Ottoman empire. The analysis was able to define a “size axis” which refers to a spatial grid with a spacing of 12.5 KM, and the probability of its points belonging to a certain vilayet: $Size = 12.5 * Probability$. Size is seen here as a combination of surface coverage and historical accuracy.

governed by a Local Council (majlis) comprising Muslim and non-Muslim officials.⁽¹⁰⁾ This structure aimed to strengthen central authority over the vilayet governors (Vali) who transferred administrative powers to other bureaucratic structures reporting directly to the central state. Civil members of the councils were selected through second degree consultative elections to bolster local representation, but the Vali often had the final say by influencing the selection of the grand electors.

Despite this aim to standardize administration throughout the empire, different aspirations for the design of territorial orders emerged. In 1899 the vilayet of Halep was divided into 3 sanjaks, 24 qadas and 45 nahias with a total population of 829,332 inhabitants. The vilayet of Damascus was divided into 4 sanjaks, 19 qadas and 13 nahias with a total population of 921,149 inhabitants.⁽¹¹⁾ Despite being of similar size, the Damascus vilayet was divided into roughly a third of the nahias of Aleppo, illustrating different approaches to regional governance; more decentralized in the latter and more centralized in the first. The dynamically evolving Tanzimat era laid the groundwork for contemporary territorial governance in the Ottoman from which modern Syria emerged after 1918, reflecting both the ambitions and limitations of centralized rule in a diverse and expansive empire.

In parallel to the territorial governance system, the Tanzimat envisioned a municipal governance order. Larger cities in the Ottoman empire were growing and their elites were asserting their presence by involving themselves in local service provision and building their patronage networks outside the confines of formal governance. The Ottoman authorities sought to regulate these networks and instituted the municipal code of 1877. Although several Levantine municipalities were already incorporated before that.⁽¹²⁾ Not all cities were endowed with municipalities, and the law did not define a clear criterion for establishing ones. It was set as a mechanism to control local elites and regulate their work if they opted to form municipal structures. Thus, the distribution and demarcation of municipalities was not fully developed by the end of the Ottoman period. Nonetheless, the principle of dual local governance management (territorial governance and municipal governance) was already well established towards the end of the Ottoman period.

From the Vilayet System to the Governorate System: The French Asymmetrical Manipulations of Territorial Order

The Vilayet system was maintained for the first part of the mandate period (1922-1946) despite moving from a federation of four states (1922-1925) to three states with the union of Aleppo and Damascus (1925-1930) and finally the unified Syrian Republic (1930-1946). However, the French interpreted the vilayet system to the benefit of fulfilling their political contradictory ambitions, leading to strong asymmetries in the territorial orders.⁽¹³⁾ For example, even after

⁽¹⁰⁾ For a French version of the law: Young, G. (1905). *Corps de droit ottoman: Recueil des codes, lois, règlements, ordonnances et actes les plus importants du droit intérieur, et d'études sur le droit coutumier de l'Empire ottoman* (Vol. 1, pp. 36-45). Clarendon Press.

⁽¹¹⁾ This data is also extracted from Huber's administrative map cited previously.

⁽¹²⁾ For more information, refer to:

Sharif, M. (2014). *Imperial Norms and Local Realities: The Ottoman Municipal Laws and the Municipality of Beirut (1860-1908)*. Beirut: Orient Institute of Beirut.

⁽¹³⁾ French internal communications show a great diversion of policies related to the management of the Syrian territorial order. Some parties were more inclined to keep the Ottoman vilayet boundaries under the pretext of upholding the terms of the mandate to respect the political borders of the entities that were put under their protection; they considered vilayet boundaries as political borders and not administrative

the 1925 unification, Aleppo remained a well-defined vilayet with clear centrality, whereas Damascus was one of 6 other Sanjaks, many of them having been relinquished to Lebanon and Palestine.

In 1936, the implementation of the Decree No. 5 of 10 January 1936 on the Administration of Mohafazat marked a modernization of the vilayet system.⁽¹⁴⁾ The French mandate authorities were mostly focused on changing local municipal boundaries during the first part of the Mandate, avoiding overt attempts of manipulating the more political boundaries of territorial units such as the sanjak and the nahia.⁽¹⁵⁾ The 1936 decree initiated a new wave of territorial changes that was brought about by the advancement of the negotiations with the nationalist forces which was culminated in the Franco-Syrian treaty to grant Syria its independence and sovereignty,⁽¹⁶⁾ ultimately allowing the incorporation of the territories of the Druze and Alawouites progressively by 1942. According to the 1936 decree, sanjaks were replaced by new "administrative regions" (mohafaza, or governorate), each headed by an appointed administrator (mohafez). The denomination of lower administrative units was maintained with 9 mohafazas divided into 29 qada and 75 nahiye.

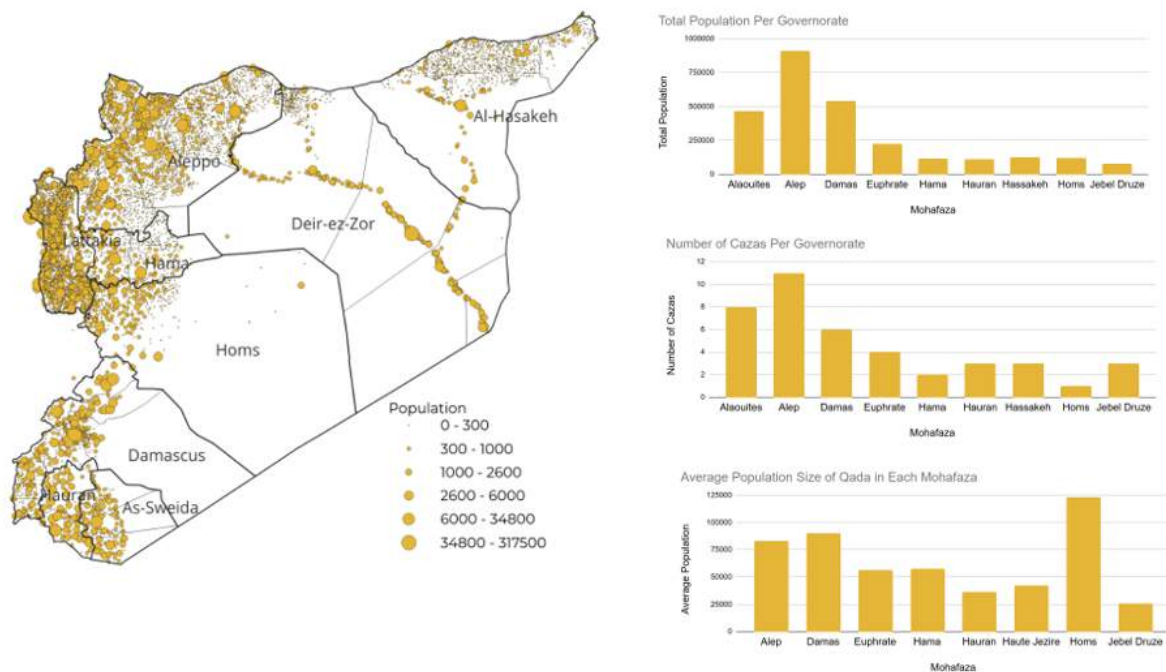


Fig 2: The demographic distribution in Syria in 1945. Left: Map of Syria in 1945 showing the vilayets, qadas, and around 10,000 localities scaled to population size. To the right, the data is presented in diagrammatic form to demonstrate the asymmetry in demarcating the territorial units.¹⁷ The utilization of heterogenous norms of demarcating administrative boundaries independently of objective population figures, was clearly at play in the French mandate era.

ones. Others were inclined to divide the Syrian lands into smaller entities following ethno-sectarian lines, irrespective of the terms of the mandate. Ultimately the French authorities wavered between the two positions. The questions would finally be resolved only as a result of the increasing pressure of the nationalist movement, and its gaining momentum especially after the economic crisis of 1929 and the collapse of the French economy. This led to sever economic crisis in Syria and gave local bourgeois nationalist forces the upper hand to subdue the resistance of regionalist forces that struggled to keep their local privileges. For more information, refer to: Hallaj, Omar A. (2017). "Geographies of Absence: Radicalization and the Shaping of the Syrian Territoriality." *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 29. Iss. 1, Article 10.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Haut-commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban. (1936, January 15). Bulletin officiel des actes administratifs du Haut-commissariat. [s.n.], Beyrouth. Retrieved from <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32730505k>

⁽¹⁵⁾ Maestracci, N. (1930). *La Syrie contemporaine: Tout ce qu'il faut savoir sur les Territoires places sous mnadat Français*. Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle & C^{ie}.

⁽¹⁶⁾ One of the main results of the 1936 Franco-Syrian agreement was the acceptance of the Syrian parties of the Status of Alexandretta. The Liwa or Sanjak of Alexandretta was already offered a special status administratively, although nominally it continued to report to the vilayet of Aleppo after 1921. After 1936, the road was opened for the session of the Hatay region as an independent State in 1937 and subsequently in joined the Turkish Republic after 1939.

During ⁽¹⁷⁾ the ten years from 1936 to the end of the French Mandate in 1946, the administrative divisions in Syria continued to change. The number of qadas increased from 29 in 1936 to 41 in 1945 and 44 in 1952, while the number of nahias grew from 75 in 1936 to 129 by 1952.⁽¹⁸⁾ By the end of the Mandate, the administrative divisions varied significantly in terms of area, population, their urban or rural makeup as well as the number of smaller administrative units they would incorporate in each territorial unit (Fig. 2). For instance, in 1945 the Alouites governorate had about half the population of the Aleppo governorate, a similar average population per urban settlement, and a total area approximately 3.6 times smaller. Despite this, the Alouites governorate was divided into eight qadas compared to Aleppo's eleven. Rather than receiving a proportionately smaller number of qadas in line with its size and population, the Alouites governorate was assigned more than two-thirds as many qadas as Aleppo.

The French mandate has already started a trend of asymmetrical handling of local patronage beyond the normative prerogatives of the territorial system. This reorganisation extended beyond simple administrative restructuring; it was a calculated strategy by the French to exploit and deepen sectarian divisions.⁽¹⁹⁾ By redrawing administrative boundaries, the colonial authorities sought to manipulate local identities, foster dependency on French control, and consolidate their influence. This approach left a lasting imprint on Syrian governance, embedding patterns of division and external interference that would shape political dynamics and local identities for decades to come. For example, the trend of overrepresentation in the Lattakia and Tartous mohafazas, which emerged out of the Alouites mohafaza is noticeable until today.

Centralized Statecraft: Local Governance in Post-Independence Syria

Following its independence in 1946, Syria grappled with the challenge of forging a unified state out of a diverse and historically fragmented territory. In the post-independence period, the Syrian government aimed to establish a centralized governance model, solidified by the enactment of the Law No.496 of 21 December 1957 on Administrative Organization.⁽²⁰⁾ This law sought to streamline administrative divisions by replacing the Ottoman-era qadas with *maniqas* (districts), while also reducing the significance of nahias. The once-powerful *mutassarifs* and *qaimaqams* who headed the *sanjaks* and qadas councils and who had wielded substantial authority under the Ottoman system, were replaced by *mudirs* (district directors). These *mudirs* functioned as extensions of the governor's office, tasked primarily with executing state policies and maintaining public order, thereby reinforcing the central government's dominance over local affairs.

¹⁷ The data was extracted by Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and geo referenced from: Service géographique des forces françaises libres au Levant. (1945). *Syrie: Répertoire alphabétique des noms de lieux habités (3e éd.)*, Beyrouth. Retrieved from <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb45396522p>

⁽¹⁸⁾ The accurate number of Nahias in 1945 is hard to find, however, a detailed account of the 1952 administrative units can be found here: Directorate of Statistics. (1952). Administrative divisions in the Syrian Republic (in Arabic). Ministry of National Economy.

⁽¹⁹⁾ See for instance:

Rabbat, E. (1937). *Unité syrienne et devenir arabe*. Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et C^{ie}.

⁽²⁰⁾ Majlis al-Nuwab (مجلس النواب). (1957). Qānūn raqm 496: al-Tanzīmāt al-Idāriyyah (التنظيمات الإدارية): ٤٩٦ رقم قانون. Issued on 21 December 1957.

However, the centralization of authority exacerbated the asymmetries introduced during the French Mandate across Syria's regions. Peripheral areas were often neglected, receiving limited resources and representation, which hindered their integration into the national territorial framework. Between 1936 and 2011, the number of mohafazas (governorates) increased from nine to fourteen, while the number of qadas (or mantiqa) doubled and the number of nahias tripled. The populations within each administrative unit continued to vary significantly; for instance, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in 2011, the mohafaza of Aleppo was home to approximately 5.9 million people, roughly 12 times the population of the mohafaza of Sweida, estimated at 486,000 (see Fig. 3).

The creation of administrative units at the mohafaza level was clearly motivated by attempts from the centre to forge political loyalties, linking more remote areas directly to the capital rather than creating more decentralized governance arrangements to lessen the need to connect to the central organs of the state.⁽²¹⁾ There is also evidence that the demarcations of mantiqas were used to manage sectarian divides.⁽²²⁾ One thing is clear, is that, despite the letter of the law that provided some level of equality in representation for the different communities in Syria, the distribution of districts and subdistricts in Syria did not follow a unified norm. Variances of the number of districts per capita in the governorate could exceed three to four folds. While this is understandable for remote districts with small populations, the evidence suggests that variances were not related to better outreach to remote areas. Indeed, the largest variances are between densely populated areas. Given that many of the electoral districts for governorate level councils and (and for Parliament up till the coming to power of Hafez al-Assad), more districts meant more direct link to local elites and more favouritism for their local patronage networks.

The size and distribution of districts are also linked to the political economies played by the cities in the territory. The larger the district compared to the main urban centres, the more likely that the urban centres of very densely populated districts are usurping the political economy of the surrounding territories. By comparing maps in Fig 2 and Fig 3, it becomes obvious that, progressively throughout the 20th century, the demographic weight of rural areas has decreased considerably, with mid-sized towns being particularly affected.⁽²³⁾ Small and mid-size towns lacked the economic and political centrality of the larger urban areas. They grew as a result of making centres of new districts, but were not allocated with sufficient resources to manage their territories. These newly created districts were clearly created to appease certain types of rural population and bring them to the fold of the central State's patronage sphere, but ended up creating unbalanced micro-centrality, encouraging rural populations to move the nearest small towns, and keeping the rural base of the district merely to enforce political allegiance of local elites to the centre.

⁽²¹⁾ Al Zoubi, S., Alzoubi, Z., Hallaj, O., & Hallaj, J. (2022). The making of Syria's administrative divisions' map: One hundred years of a problematic relationship between the centre and the periphery. London School of Economics and Political Science. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/116961/3/The_making_of_Syria_administrative_divisions_map.pdf

⁽²²⁾ al-Zoubi, Z., & Hallaj, O. A. (Eds.). (2024). Administrative divisions and the conundrum of national/local identity formation in Syria. Omran for Strategic Studies. <https://omranstudies.org/index.php/publications/papers/administrative-divisions-and-the-conundrum-of-national-local-identity-formation-in-syria.html>

⁽²³⁾ Both maps are clustered in 8 size groups that best reflect the distribution of the data, using Jenks clustering algorithm and identical circle sizes. Distribution may be compared between the maps, but not absolute values.

As a consequence, small and medium cities grew rapidly (especially after the 1980s) but were not endowed with proper urban governance resources. Today, these cities are likely to absorb the largest proportion of returning refugees and IDPs, as many of the major cities witnessed major destruction; however, administratively and economically they have little absorption capacity to undertake such a task. Balancing the size of districts, their intended populations and their allocated resources, will be critical to reshaping the future territory of Syria and to ensure proper and stable political representation.

This centralization trend started well before Hafez al-Assad rose to power in 1970, but it intensified considerably afterwards. In 1971, Law 15 formalized this approach, granting limited administrative powers to local councils while ensuring that governors—appointed by the president—retained ultimate authority. ⁽²⁴⁾ Hafez al-Assad solidified control by reweaving a network of local patronage, binding local leaders to the central government and guaranteeing their loyalty. This strategy reinforced central authority but also widened the gulf between the centre and the periphery. Administrative boundaries and identities were manipulated and renamed to suppress ethnic identities and maintain control, leading to heightened feelings of alienation and marginalization among these communities. ⁽²⁵⁾

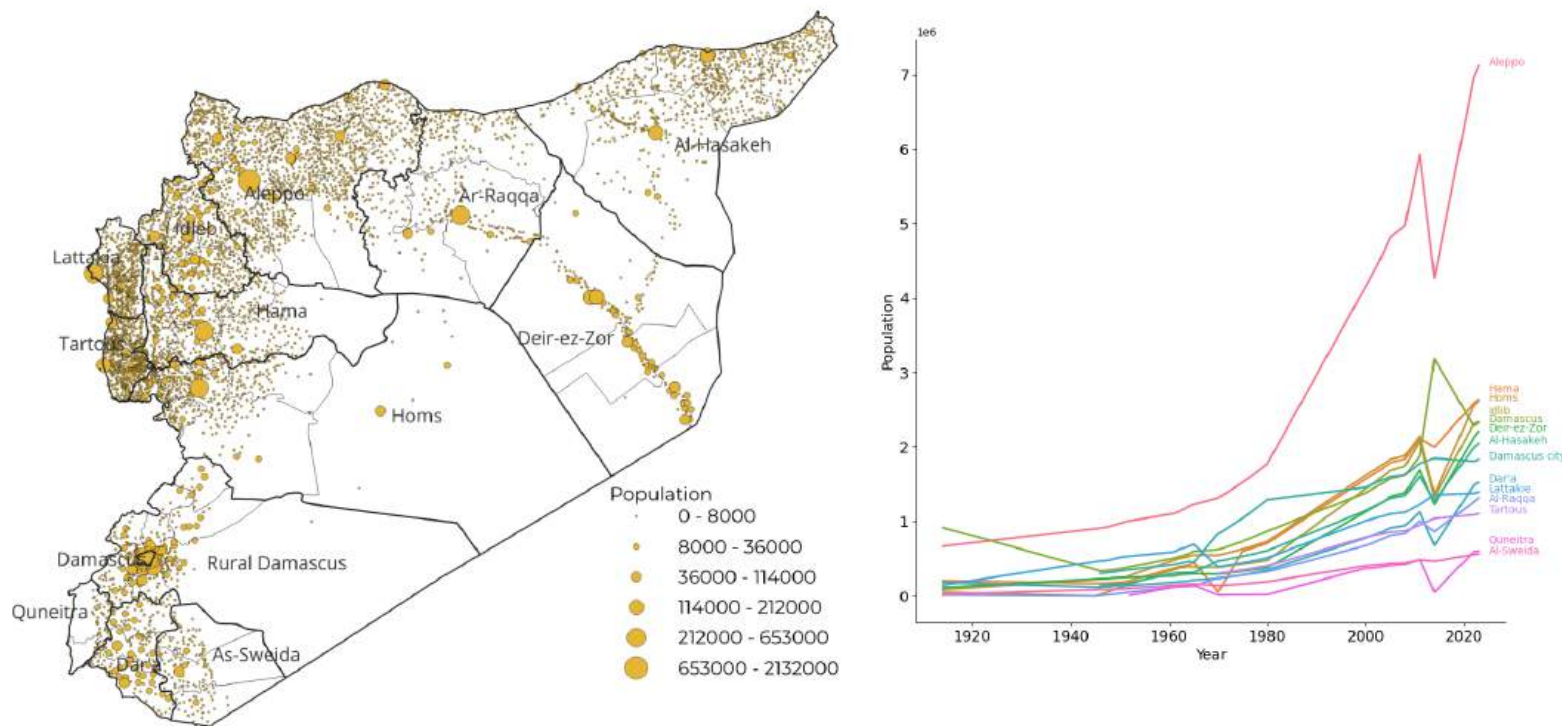


Fig 3: Left: The distribution of the population in Syria according to the 2004 census. ⁽²⁶⁾ Right: The evolution of the population by Mohafaza between 1914 and 2022. ⁽²⁷⁾

⁽²⁴⁾ Local Administration Law, Legislative Decree No. 15 of May 11, 1971, amended by Law No. 12 of June 20, 1971, and supplemented by Executive Regulations (Decree No. 2297 of September 28, 1971).

⁽²⁵⁾ al-Zoubi, Z., & Hallaj, O. A. (Eds.). (2024).

⁽²⁶⁾ The 2004 data is accessible here: Syrian Arab Republic - Population Statistics. OCHA, Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX). <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/syrian-arab-republic-other-0-0-0-0-0-0-0>.

⁽²⁷⁾ The data in this graph was compiled from the official state statistics of the Ottoman Nefus, French Mandate Reports and Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of Syria.

The Missing Link: The Evolution of Municipal Governance in Syria Between Territorial and Urban Frameworks

The post-independence municipal history of Syria reflects a persistent dichotomy between centralised authority and local autonomy, with the municipal governance system frequently intertwined with the broader dynamics of political power. In fact, until 1971 provincial and urban administration was separated into two different policy and legal frameworks. Rather than serving as a genuine mechanism for local empowerment, the municipal system has often functioned as a means of patronage, reinforcing the control of central authorities over local governance. For much of Syrian territorial history, municipal governance focused on localities as a parallel system rather than an integral continuation of broader territorial orders.

During the Tanzimat reforms, municipal councils were introduced as a means to foster local development, particularly in entrepreneurial cities. These councils, however, operated under separate legislation and formed a disparate category of governance, with ultimate power residing in the hands of centrally appointed governors and administrators. Semi-formal municipal councils emerged in major cities, providing a platform for local elites to enhance their influence. These elites leveraged their roles in conducting urban services and implementing development projects, often capitalising on their capacity to raise funds through trade and tax-farming enterprises.⁽²⁸⁾ This enabled elite networks to compete for control over local representation both in territorial and municipal governance systems and provided the centrally appointed governors with the power to act as arbiters, thus reinforcing the centrality of the local governance institutions. According to the Vilayet law of 1864, and its subsequent amendments, the Vali had tremendous arbitration powers among local councils and local institutions. However, the power of appointed governors was also controlled from the bottom up for fear of the governors gaining too much power as in previous generations of territorial management. Thus, the governors had no direct say in running budgets or local affairs as much as oversight over sub-Vilayet territorial units (Sanjaks) where the bulk of executive powers were concentrated.

During the French mandate, the duality of the system was maintained. The French mandate issued a large body of decrees to manage municipalities, change their mandates and demarcation, and readjust their technical bureaus. Many of the infrastructural projects that were developed under the French mandate were paid for by the municipalities and not the central State and its appointed governors. The bulk of the Syrian budget under the mandate was meant to cover essential security, national administration, governorate level administrations and national infrastructure (health, telegraph and transportation). The French maintained a relatively lean government system in Syria to reduce costs.⁽²⁹⁾ Municipalities were expected to entice private investments to establish local infrastructure, by hiring French and European companies and creating shareholding companies. Should basic groundwork be needed to support such projects (such as developing cadastres and planning ordinances), then the

⁽²⁸⁾ Sharif (2014).

⁽²⁹⁾ Barakat, A. (1948). *Le probleme budgetaire en Syrie (1920-1939)*. Beirut: Imprimerie Nasser.

municipalities were supposed to pay for them from their own resources. The municipal layer was an almost independent layer of governance under the French mandate.

In the initial post-independence era, the duality of the system was continued. In 1956, a law was issued to organize municipalities.⁽³⁰⁾ The law provided for the incorporation of four types of municipalities 1) major cities (Damascus and Aleppo), 2) governorate centres, 3) centres of districts, and 4) centres of sub-districts and some smaller towns. However, there was no mandate for establishing municipalities in all populated areas. Large swathes of the rural areas were left without legal personalities and were managed through the territorial order of the mohafaza, mantiqa and nahiye. In essence over two thirds of the Syrian population was excluded from political representation at the municipal level. The municipal order was effectively acknowledged by the law as a place for political representation for the urban elites. The subsequent law of 1957 (discussed above) regulating the territorial order, was an administrative law. The discussions in parliament clearly recognized the difference. Administrative territorial units consulted local elites but were managed by the centre. Municipal electoral laws applied only to incorporated cities.⁽³¹⁾ Only cities were imbued with legal and political personality.

A significant shift occurred with the enactment of Decree 15 in 1971, which sought to merge municipal and administrative laws into a unified framework. This law conceptualised local authorities wherein local communities were tasked with electing councils to manage state assets within the confines of their local administrations, rather than independently governing community resources. Despite these reforms, practical application remained limited, and genuine local autonomy was constrained by central oversight. Later, Decree 107/2011 reinforced the formal integration of municipalities into the broader territorial governance system. Three categories of municipalities were positioned as equal legal personalities to the mohafaza, mainly: Cities, towns and townships. This represented a move toward greater local engagement and a more balanced relationship between local and regional governance structures. However, as shall be seen later, the law was only partially implemented. And the ensuing spatial demarcation of municipal units was further manipulated to ensure the political hegemony of the Center over local administration units.

Negotiating Decentralization in the Middle of a Conflict: Decree 107 and its Legacies

The Arab Spring and the subsequent eruption of conflict in Syria in 2011 represented a pivotal juncture in the evolution of Syrian territorial governance. In an attempt to address widespread dissent, the Syrian government introduced reforms aimed at decentralization. At the cote of these reforms was the issuing of Decree 107 in 2011⁽³²⁾, which granted local councils increased autonomy and legal recognition. The new decree claimed to enhance transparency within Syria's governance structures, allowing local councils greater autonomy in managing their affairs while reducing the role of central institutions to policy coordination and technical

⁽³⁰⁾ Decree 177/1956: the Law of Syrian Municipalities.

⁽³¹⁾ Refer to deliberations of parliament on the 4th and 9th of December 1957.

⁽³²⁾ Local Administration Law, Legislative Decree No. 107, 1971.

backstopping. However, as we will see further on, the application of the decree was limited and heterogenous.

Redefining Local Administrative Units (LAUs)

Decree 107 purportedly aimed at transferring significant authority from the central government to Local Administration Units (LAUs) covering the whole Syrian territory, leaving no population centre unincorporated into a municipal LAU. The three categories of municipalities defined (cities, towns and townships) were granted legal personalities representing all their inhabitants; previously the legal personality of the municipality was limited to its local council that acted as a delegated authority to oversee State resources in their jurisdictions. Governorates and municipalities were categorised into four types of LAUs, each with defined roles and population-based representation⁽³³⁾:

- **Governorate:** Composed of one representative per 10,000 residents, with a minimum of 50 and a maximum of 100 representatives.
- **City (madina):** Established in governorates, districts, or major population centres exceeding 50,000 people, with one representative per 4,000 residents, ranging from 25 to 50 representatives.
- **Town (baldeh):** Created for district centres or population groups with 10,001 to 50,000 residents, with one representative per 2,000 residents and a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 25 representatives.
- **Township (baladiya):** Covering population centres or groups of 5,001 to 10,000 residents, with a fixed number of 10 representatives.

This system relegated nahias and mantiqas to policing and basic administrative tasks while removing intermediary governance layers between governorate and municipal LAUs. Decree 107 also established a Supreme Local Council (SLC), chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising key ministers, governors, and heads of governorate level LAUs. The purpose of the SLC was to create a structured interface between central, regional, and local governance, fostering a more cohesive approach to governance throughout Syria.

The SLC was also charged with developing a five-year decentralization plan to guide national policy in divulging ownership and control of service line ministries to the direct ownership and oversight by LAUs. At the end of the designated period, the LAUs were supposed to manage their own development processes and instigate their spatial and economic development plans. The goal was to create a more responsive and integrated approach to regional governance, addressing the specific needs of communities while aligning with national objectives.

Each designated LAU under Decree 107 received a budget allocation from the central government, earmarked for local infrastructure projects, service provision, and community development initiatives. It also received funding to sustain its administrative functions. Central financial support was particularly critical in underdeveloped rural areas, where local

⁽³³⁾ See article 1 of the Law 107.

administration often represents the primary vehicle for economic development and employment opportunities. The establishment of municipal offices also led to the creation of local bureaucracies, serving as key sources of employment and embedding government clients within these structures, reinforcing patronage networks central to political control in Syria. Attaining LAU status offered settlements increased political autonomy and influence, enabling local leaders—often aligned with powerful political figures or families—to shape the administration and development of their communities.

Despite the decree’s emphasis on decentralization, it retained several mechanisms to ensure continued central oversight. The President maintained the authority to dissolve any Local Administration Council at any time without justification, underscoring the central government’s ultimate control over local governance structures. This provision illustrated the balance struck by Decree 107: while granting more power and autonomy to local bodies, it carefully preserved central authority and control.

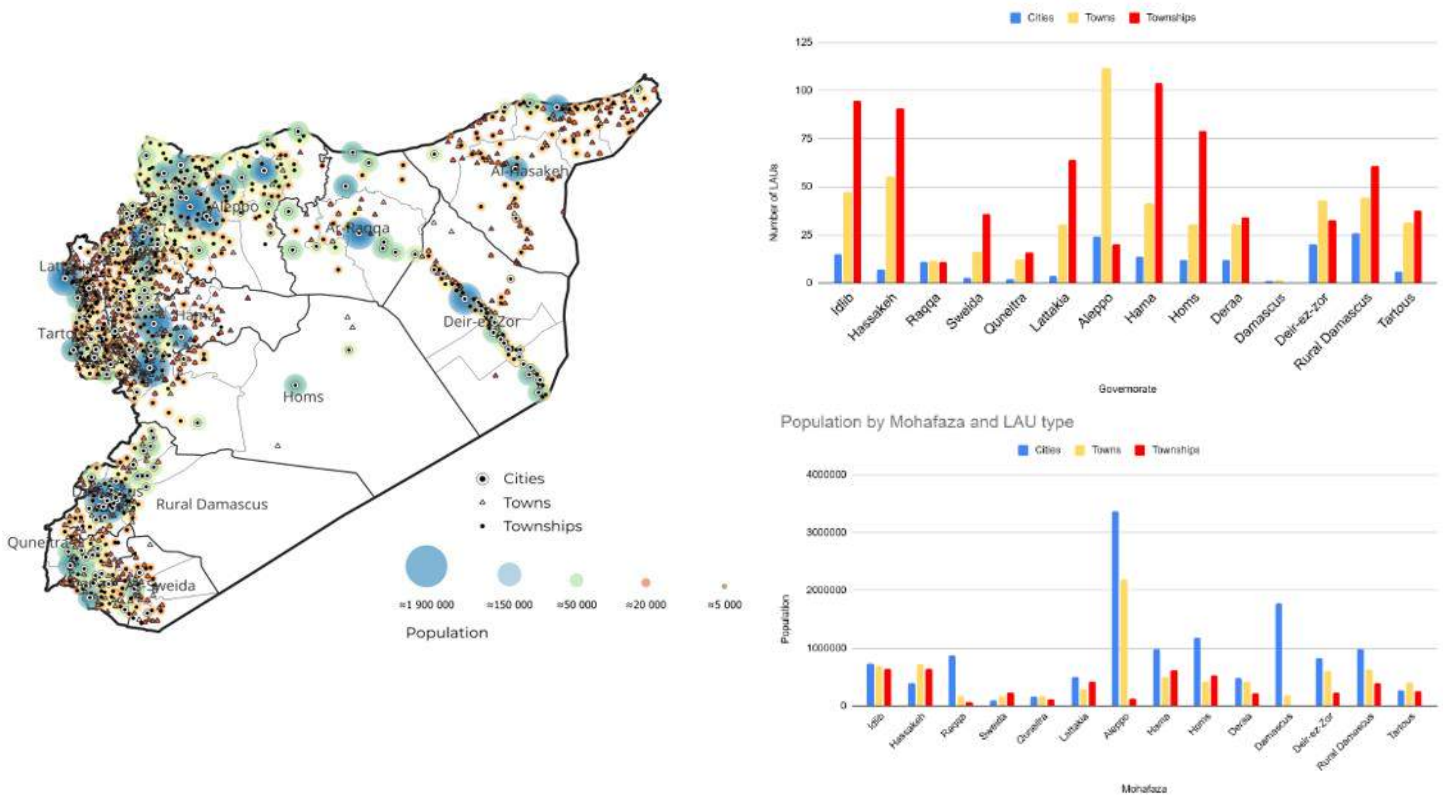


FIG 4: The distribution of Local Administrative Units throughout Syria as prescribed by the Decision 1378 of 2011.⁽³⁴⁾

Representation Imbalances in Local Governance

Under Decree 107/2011, the Assad-dominated central State maintained significant control over the creation, modification, and structuring of local administrative units. While ostensibly aimed at decentralization, this power allowed the regime to shape the local governance framework to align with the regime’s strategic and political priorities. By retaining authority to adjust administrative boundaries and units, the central authorities preserved considerable leverage

⁽³⁴⁾ Decision 1378 of 23 August 2011 on the identification of Local Administrative Units and their relative population.

over local governance, limiting the extent of genuine autonomy experienced by LAUs, and forcing the territorial order in ways to preserve and enhance the regime's political networks.

One of the most prominent issues arising from this arrangement is the imbalanced distribution of LAUs across Syria, which appears to follow political considerations rather than equitable principles (FIG 4). For example, Aleppo and Raqqa received roughly half as many LAUs per capita as other governorates. The city of Damascus, due to its unique status as both a governorate and a city, received 2 LAUs. In Aleppo, there were approximately four times as many towns as townships, an exceptional disparity within the administrative divisions of other governorates. Governorates with strong urban loyalist networks as in the case of Aleppo witnessed incorporation of small rural areas into the nearest towns and cities. Whereas governorates with strong rural loyalist bases like Lattakia and Tartous saw the expansion of towns and townships to enable their populations to better access State favouritism and jobs.

Furthermore, the type of LAUs — whether designated as a city, town, or township — was theoretically determined by their population size and impacts their council representation and funding. In practice, however, this was not consistently applied.⁽³⁵⁾ For instance, Yarmouk, with a population of 188,968 inhabitants, was classified as a town rather than a city, reducing its council seats to 25 instead of the 47 it would have received as a city.⁽³⁶⁾ In 2011, Yarmouk was uniquely downgraded, while 145 other areas across Syria were upgraded. Qudseya and New Qudseya for example were both designated as two distinct cities despite having a population of only 7,854 and 11,468 respectively. According to decision 1378/2011 many refinements were made to the incorporation of municipalities were made to either allow for the segregation of minority towns from larger urban areas, or separating different ethno-sectarian groups, or providing urban suburbs housing loyalists groups with a certain level of autonomy from towns with less loyalist bases. This indicates that the central government was careful to upgrade rather than downgrade the status of LAUs strategically, particularly in Rural Damascus and Hama. This policy shifted during the conflict when many LAUs in opposition-controlled areas, especially in Hasakah and Idlib, were downgraded especially as the demarcation of LAUs was modified again in preparation of the local elections of 2022.

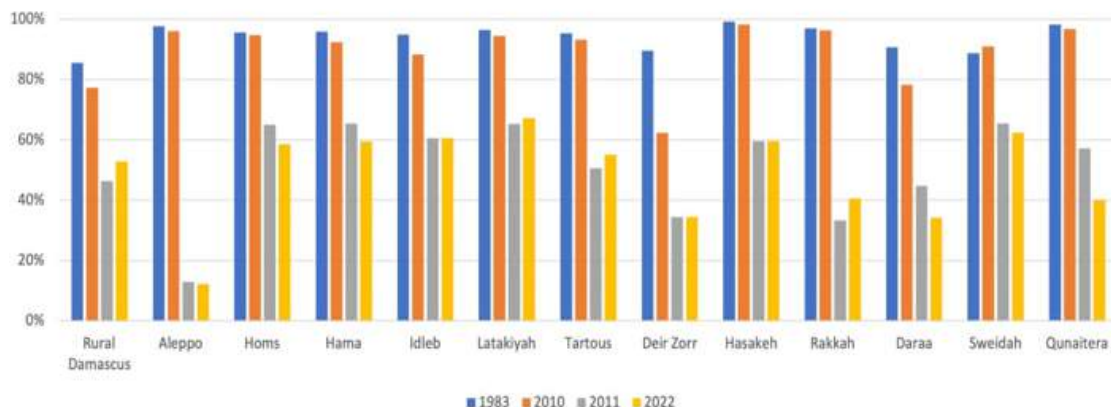


Fig 5: The number of smaller municipal units in proportion to the total number of units in the governorates.⁽³⁷⁾

⁽³⁵⁾ Article 6 of the Decree No. 15 of 1971 did however explicitly reserve the right for the Central State to not abide by population thresholds unlike the Decree No. 107 of 2011.

⁽³⁶⁾ Yarmouk was one of the two LAUs of the Damascus mohafaza. It disappears altogether as an LAU during the conflict.

⁽³⁷⁾ Data sources: the Syrian Statistical Abstracts for the Years 1983 and 2010; Decision 1378 of 2011 and Decision 1452 of 2022 issued by the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment in Syria.

Before 2010 there was a clear attempt at harmonising the distribution of municipal units across all the governorates, ensuring that rural municipal structures maintained a relatively heterogeneous level across all governorates (in proportion to their populations). However, starting in 2011 there was a concerted effort to favour certain governorates with more small municipal structures and hence more access to political patronage of the State. This uneven distribution reflects a deliberate effort to control local governance by fragmenting it in some areas while consolidating it in others. Evidently this had no correlation with the optimal size for managing services as purported in the Decree 107. This approach weakened regional cohesion and limited the collective administrative power of the population to oversee their service delivery. By dividing authority among numerous smaller units, the regime effectively diluted the service provision power of individual administrative entities but enhanced their access to central state patronage. This allowed the maintaining of a strong grip on local governance and minimising potential challenges to its authority, while deepening the penetration of the regime into loyalist communities. Conversely, in areas where consolidation was beneficial to the central state's interests, the government strategically strengthened large urban LAUs to solidify its influence and ensure greater presence, reducing the agency of rural areas.

Urban-Rural Disparities in Governance and Development

Despite the increasing concentration of the Syrian population in urban areas, provinces such as Latakia, Tartous, Homs, Hama, Hasakah, Sweida, and Qunaitra maintained a relatively high number of townships in comparison to their cities and towns. These governorates are characterised by substantial percentages of ethnic and religious minorities residing in their rural areas. Receiving the designation of a LAU brought budgets, capacity to collect fees, subsidies, employment opportunities, and avenues for expanding patronage networks.

According to Decision 1378/2011, there were an estimated 4187 seats in city councils, 5857 seats in town councils and 6090 seats in township councils. However, the distribution of the township seats is highly uneven across mohafazas. In the Latakia mohafaza for example, there are 4 cities with a total population of 501,471 represented by around 125 council seats, as compared to 64 townships with a total population of 423,084 represented by around 610 council seats. Overall, populations in cities have around 1 seat per 4000 inhabitants, whereas rural areas have around 1 seat for 700 inhabitants. The council representation is thus about 6 times higher in rural areas than in urban areas. This is not the case in Deir-ez-Zor, where there are only 2 times more township seats as compared to city seats. The situation is even more dramatic in the governorate of Aleppo. This implies that rural areas were not equally represented across Syria.⁽³⁸⁾

The establishment of an LAU strengthened a municipality's influence in local affairs, increased subsidiarity, and ensured the presence of a municipal bureaucracy and a baseline budget for local investments. By favouring certain provinces with a higher number of townships, the Syrian government deepened state patronage within these rural communities, extending its

⁽³⁸⁾ The figures cited in this paragraph were calculated by the authors based on the population count cited by the administrative laws.

influence more comprehensively than in other regions. The result of these urban-rural imbalances is a fragmented governance landscape, and the inability of forging efficient urban-rural service and economic networks. The intended benefits of decentralisation were evidently realised unevenly to favour certain constituencies and disfavour others. While some areas have gained new levels of autonomy and development, others remain marginalised, highlighting the persistent challenge of achieving equitable governance in a nation marked by deep divisions and complex socio-political dynamics.

Fragmented Territorial Order

The last 14 years in Syria have profoundly reshaped the country's territorial and governance structures, resulting in a fragmented landscape divided into several Areas of Control (AoC) before the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. These included areas controlled by the Assad Regime (AR), the Syrian interim Government (SIG), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Autonomous-Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES) — each governed by various de facto authorities. This fragmentation has led to the emergence of seven different governance models or frameworks that reflect the socio-political realities and power dynamics of different regions. In areas beyond the regime’s reach, many former Baathist structures were dismantled and replaced by alternative governance systems designed to accommodate new political, social, and security needs.

	AR	HTS	SIG	AAENS
Number of LAUs in 2011	901	115	54	263
Number of LAUs in 2024	1015 ⁽³⁹⁾	8	17	148

FIG 6: A comparison of the number of LAUs prescribed in 2011 and the estimated current situation in 2024 across the main AOCs.

Over the past decade, the Assad Regime sought to maintain and recalibrate its implementation of Decree No. 107, focusing its application on territories it still controlled while preserving nominal claims over regions like Idlib, Northern and Eastern Syria—areas where its practical influence has waned or altogether disappeared (Fig 7). In the regions it continued to administer, the AR leveraged Decree 107 to bolster its control, using local governance structures as tools to assert its authority and distribute state resources selectively. This approach reinforced networks of patronage and attempted to legitimise its rule.

⁽³⁹⁾ According to Decision 1452 of 2022.

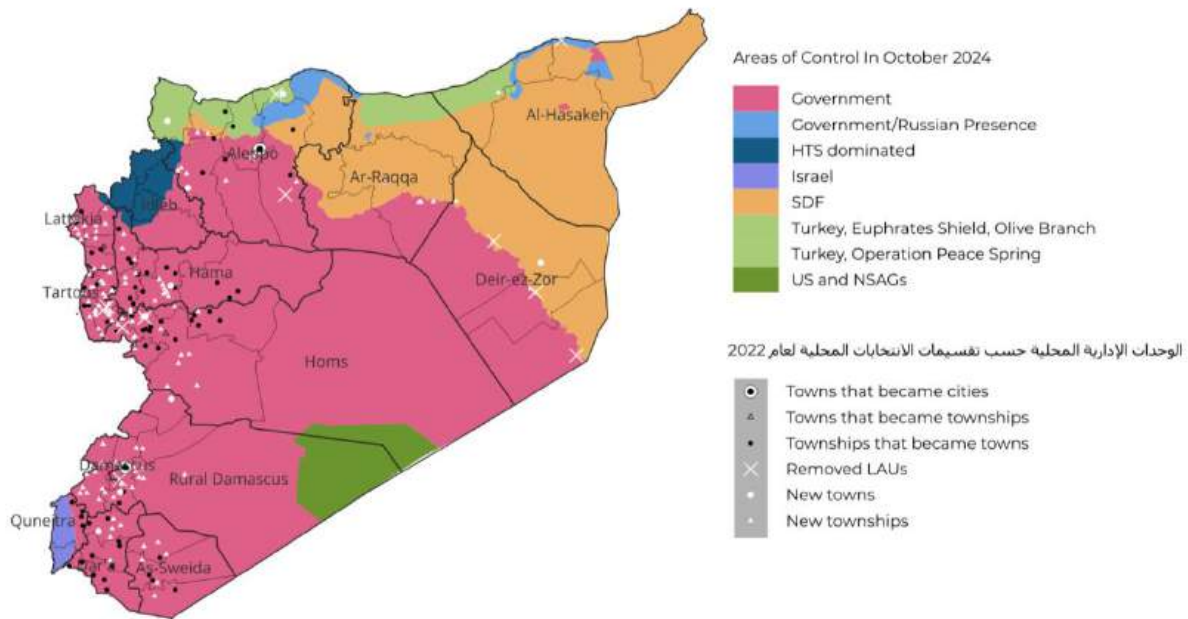


Fig 8: The modified LAUs of 2022 compared to 2011 according to the framework of law 107 (2024).⁽⁴⁰⁾

Meanwhile, in areas controlled by other actors, de facto authorities created their own legal frameworks adapted to their unique contexts, aligning legal provisions with their specific political, social, and cultural needs. Each region's framework was shaped by its distinct realities, with governance models that served to legitimize local authority and address the needs of communities within their respective area of control. While this could reflect a degree of local empowerment and responsiveness, it mainly highlights the challenges of creating a cohesive and unified governance structure across a fractured nation after the fall of the Assad Regime.

The Territorial Federation in the Autonomous-Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES)

The Autonomous-Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES) emerged through the efforts of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in their fight against ISIS and is politically represented by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). AANES's territorial structure is rooted in its Social Contract, serving as a de facto constitution, and establishing a quasi-federal governance model. In early 2024, the AANES claimed to be divided in seven main administrative areas, or moqata'a (division): Al-Jazeera, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Euphrates, Manbij, Afrin/Shahaba (which the Self-Administration regards as occupied by the Syrian Interim Government), and Tabqa.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ AOC basemap is courtesy of the Syria Conflict Mapping team at The Carter Center's "Exploring Historical Control in Syria". Here "Government" implies areas under the control of the Assad Regime. The 2011 LAUs were compared to the 2022 LAUs (Decision 1452 of 2 August 2022). The 2024 AOC borders of Syria were used to isolate the 2011 LAUs into each AOC.

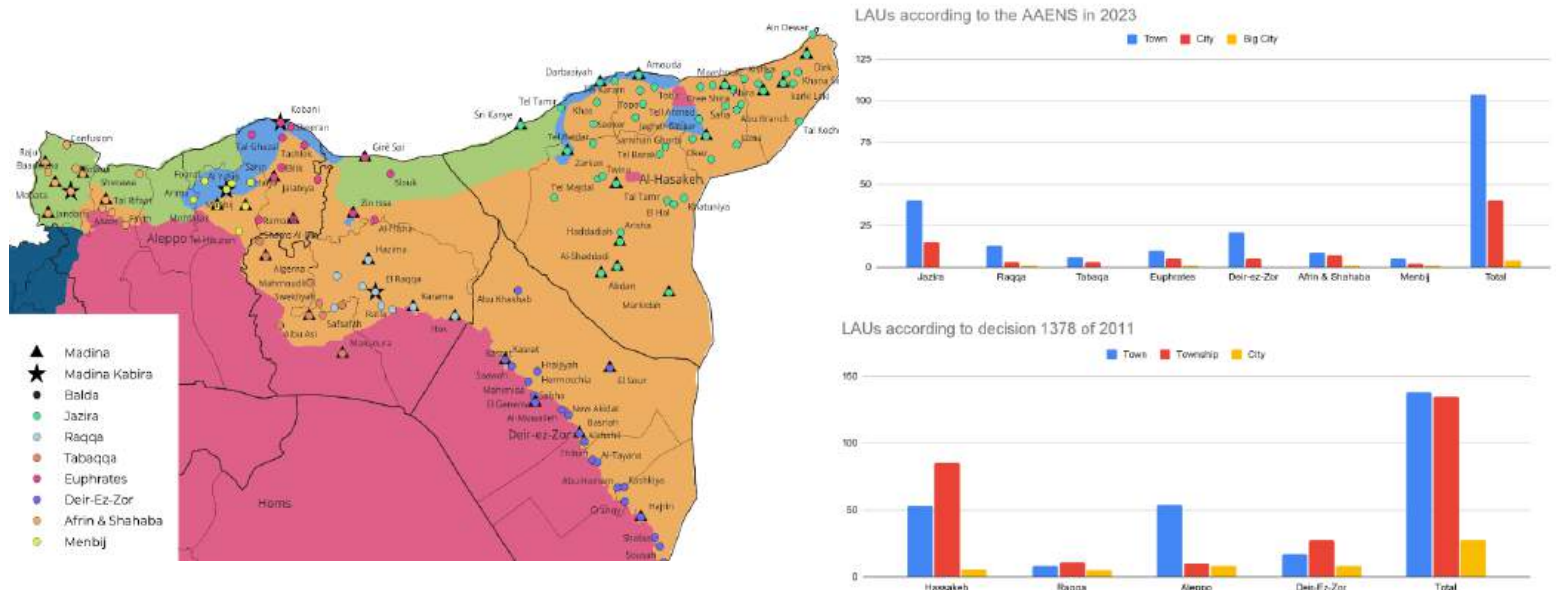


FIG 8 (Left and top Right): The 149 LAUs in the AAENS area in 2024 as defined by the AANES.⁽⁴¹⁾ Bottom Right: LAUs according to decision 1378 of 2011.⁽⁴²⁾

Some regions closely correspond to previous Syrian governorates, such as Hassakeh and Deir-ez-Zor, while others, like Raqqa, Tabaqa, and Manbij, are more aligned with the demarcation of pre-2011 districts (see Fig 8). Afrin/Shahaba and Euphrates m²oqata’as represent mergers of Afrin and the parts of Azaz that were still controlled by the SDF, and Ain Arab (Kobani) and Tel Abyad, respectively. In many cases, original Kurdish place names have been instigated, reflecting AANES's efforts to assert a distinct Kurdish identity and heritage within some parts of its territorial jurisdiction, even when the Kurdish constituencies did not constitute a majority of the population.

Governance within these administrative areas was insured and managed by 148 LAUs, responsible for overseeing neighbourhoods, towns, and cities. However, 130 townships (Baladiya) established under Decree 107 within AANES-controlled territories were excluded from the broader territorial framework of the Self-Administration, highlighting shifting orders and the reduction of status of some towns in favour of other ones. While AANES claims a decentralised structure, significant control often remains concentrated under the influence of the SDF. Moreover, the blending of civilian and military governance frameworks can blur lines of accountability, complicating efforts at true self-governance and limiting genuine community empowerment. This dual civilian-military approach centralises power within a security-dominated structure, presenting challenges to fully autonomous local governance and creating tensions in balancing civilian needs with security priorities.⁽⁴³⁾

⁽⁴¹⁾ Democratic Autonomous Administration of the Autonomous Region of North and East Syria. (2024). Law No. 6 of 2024: Administrative Divisions Law of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

⁽⁴²⁾ The 2011 data only takes into account areas within the claimed AOC of AAENS excluding the Euphrates shield area, whereas the 2023 data takes that area into account as well.

⁽⁴³⁾ Allsopp, H., van Wilgenburg, W. (2019). *The Kurds of Northwestern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. London: I. B. Tauris.

City-Regions of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

In the areas governed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, the territorial order was characterised by a blend of militarised control and civilian administrative oversight under the authority of the Salvation Government. HTS has consolidated its governance structure by absorbing or sidelining pre-existing local councils and establishing a centralised administration that aligns with its objectives.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Initially, HTS's primary focus was on asserting military dominance, leveraging governance structures as tools to consolidate its authority. The "Civil Services Administration" initially functioned as a loose network providing services but gradually evolved into the "Civil Administration for Services" and eventually became the current framework of the Salvation Government. This governance system featured centralised control through a series of ministries, departments, and councils, enabling HTS to maintain significant influence over public services, local administration, and economic resources in the territory it controls, albeit it was not the direct provider of many services. Key service provision in the health and education sector were delivered by internationally funded NGOs.

At the local level, the Salvation Government systematically brought existing municipal councils under its control or replaced them entirely, often marginalising traditional governance systems that operated under earlier opposition frameworks. It is noteworthy that the regime allocated to Idlib to mostly smaller townships, as per Decision 1378/2011 (Fig 4). However, HTS repurposed the term "baladiyah" to designate its 8 regions, which are more comparable to pre-2011 nahiyas. In any case, the area saw the number of LAUs reduced from the 115 municipal councils prescribed in (13 cities, 31 towns and 71 townships) to just 8 covering parts of the Idlib governorate and a small part of the Aleppo governorate that were under the control of HTS. Therefore, the Salvation Government was able to exercise more direct interference in municipal affairs by reducing many of the intermediary layers of governance at the local level.

This process was framed as necessary for improving administrative efficiency, managing costs, and streamlining oversight. However, it has led to diminished local autonomy, as centralised structures under HTS leadership now exert significant direct control. Local council members were generally appointed rather than elected, with limited local input. Their functions were tightly regulated, often confined to basic services such as sanitation, while more substantial responsibilities, including permits and broader service provisions, were managed centrally. This governance model was marked both by more effective provision of resources as well as by extensive security influence, and an overarching focus on reinforcing HTS's power. The model that was effective in aggregating the better than average service provision in the area worked well for a community that was aligned ideologically to the authorities, small enough to remove many intermediary layers of governance and sufficiently confined to control its economy and currency. Today after the fall of the regime in Damascus, this model is being scaled by HTS to become the model for the rest of Syria. Many question marks remain as to whether the local conditions in Idlib could be replicated elsewhere.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Information in this section is drawn from forthcoming research by the Omran Center for Strategic Research.

Revised 107 Framework of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)

In areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), an amended Law No. 107 served as the foundational framework for structuring territorial governance. In the Euphrates Shield Area under the control of the SIG, three Turkish Vilayets (Hatay, Kilis and Gaziantep) oversaw 17 LAUs, referred to as municipalities (see Fig 9). This was a sharp reduction from the 10 cities, 36 towns and 8 townships that were originally proscribed by Decision 1378/2011. The original Decree 107/2011 has been adapted and modified to establish LAUs for cities and towns, reflecting a hybrid governance model that integrates local Syrian administrative traditions with oversight and support from regional Turkish authorities.

Traditional roles historically assigned to Syrian governorates were assumed by adjacent Turkish Valis (Fig 8), acting as intermediaries between local councils and higher administrative structures. These Turkish bodies oversaw critical functions such as security, infrastructure development, trade, education, and other regional services. By managing and integrating these sectors, the Turkish authorities ensured policy coherence and service delivery across SIG-controlled areas. Under this arrangement, LAUs took on many of the functions envisioned for local administrative units under Law 107, including the delivery of public services, resource management, and the enforcement of municipal regulations. While these councils retained a degree of autonomy, their powers and responsibilities were shaped to fit the realities of governance in opposition-held territories, often requiring coordination with Turkish administrative structures.

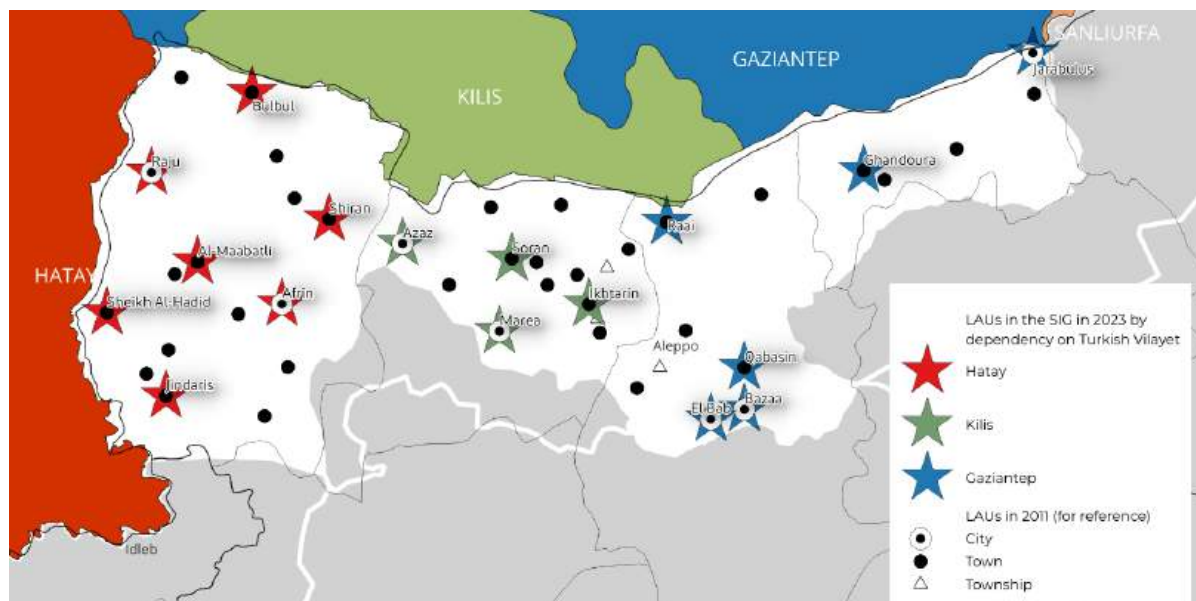


Fig 9: LAUs in the SIG's Euphrates Shield Area in 2023 (marked with a star) overlaying the administrative divisions of Decision 1378 of 2011 LAUs and coloured by the Turkish governorate they were overseen by.

Conclusion

The spatial structure of administrative divisions within a state plays a critical role in shaping its political economy, with profound implications for governance and resource distribution. Hierarchies and aggregated centralities within territorial orders influence how power is concentrated, represented, and exercised. Factors such as population size, geographic surface area, and representation weight—defined through allocated seats in local councils and in Parliament as well as other means such as local budgets and resources—determine the degree of influence and agency afforded to different administrative units. Effective balancing of these factors can help stabilise local economies, promote equitable resource allocation, and foster inclusive governance. Conversely, imbalances within these structures can deepen socio-political disparities, undermine state stability and effectiveness in delivering services, and often sow long-term grievances within marginalised communities, particularly when administrative divisions favour certain regions or groups at the expense of others.

In the context of Syria, administrative divisions have not only served as instruments of governance but have also reflected and exacerbated the country's fragmentation during the conflict. Competing powers have adapted and redefined territorial orders to suit their interests, further entrenching divisions and complicating efforts for reunification. The adaptation of governance structures has been influenced by local conditions and geopolitical strategies, with various actors using administrative divisions as tools to consolidate power, secure resources, and establish political legitimacy. This has underscored the dual-edged nature of territorial orders in conflict settings, as such divisions can simultaneously act as a means of governance and a mechanism for aggregating control and or dispersing it.

Designing effective administrative divisions requires a nuanced approach that balances political authority, administrative efficiency, and social identity. Well-constructed territorial orders should reflect local realities while respecting diverse community identities and needs. Successful territorial arrangements can facilitate equitable service delivery, fair representation, and social cohesion, ensuring that political and administrative systems function efficiently. Conversely, poorly designed territorial orders can exacerbate conflicts, destabilise political economies, and deepen social divisions. Imbalances in power distribution can disrupt essential systems, weaken local economies, and fuel grievances, as evidenced by rural-urban competition over resources, services, and political influence.

Ultimately, the success of any territorial order lies in its ability to respond to shifting political, social, and economic dynamics while remaining flexible and adaptive. By acknowledging historical legacies, local identities, and socio-political realities, states can craft administrative systems that promote stability, inclusivity, and equitable development, paving the way for lasting peace and cohesion. This paper has explored the spatial dynamics of territorial order in Syria and its trajectories after 2011, emphasising their historical roots and socio-political legacies as foundations of contemporary arrangements. Building upon this foundation, the next paper in this series will delve into the multi-level governance models that underpin and operationalize these territorial structures, examining how they function to adapt and balance competing priorities across diverse levels of society.

Recommendations: Towards a Unified Territorial Order

Tackling Systemic and Historical Imbalances

As Syria reconsiders its territorial orders to address the deep fragmentation of the past 14 years, a critical priority is tackling the systemic imbalances that have shaped governance, representation, and resource distribution. The conflict has revealed stark contrasts in how Local Administrative Units (LAUs) are defined, distributed, and weighted, reflecting a patchwork of competing frameworks influenced by local, regional, and geopolitical considerations. These discrepancies, rooted in Syria's historical centralization and exacerbated by wartime dynamics, have deepened urban-periphery divides, fostering inequitable development and perpetuating marginalization in rural and peripheral regions. Effective territorial reorganization must therefore confront these disparities while addressing historical legacies of exclusion and inefficiency.

Lessons learned from the diverse territorial orders also point out that the way Decree 107/2011 was implemented was inefficient and created a number of redundant municipalities. In the future, aggregating some municipalities may be necessary, and some variation between governorates may be essential, but the variance should not be so stark as to create diverse governance systems; it should be based on clear criteria based on population sizes, the nature of the terrain and the structure of the local economy. Ultimately, the Syrian territory can be effectively managed by reducing the number of municipalities to about a third to a half (400-750 municipalities).

Leveraging Cities as Localised Cross-Geography Constants

Syria should focus on strengthening local systems rather than adopting a rigid territorial framework, which risks further alienating diverse community identities and needs. Syria's cities have proven to be the most stable and constant units within this fragmented territorial landscape, maintaining their central role as hubs of governance, economic activity, and social cohesion. This contrasts sharply with the more fluid and politically contested definitions of towns, townships, and rural areas, which have been shaped and reshaped to serve specific political or strategic objectives. However, focusing on cities as the main organizing spatial factor should not undermine the political representation of rural communities and their economic interests. These factors can be adjusted by fine tuning electoral districts and devolution of decision making closer to the local level, not by creating more municipalities that have no agency and their sole function is to enable the centre to forge deeper patronage networks at the expense of better service provision and local representation.

Balancing Peripheral Orders

In order to address the rural-urban disparities, future priorities must also include examining the number and roles of peripheral administrative units surrounding cities, ensuring their capacities align with the populations and services they are tasked with managing. Further studies need to be led to better understand the historical, economic and socio-cultural relations between these localities in order to rebalance asymmetries. Improvising solutions to adjust administrative divisions will likely disrupt complex social and economic networks and will most likely not be

sustainable. The process requires extensive societal consultations, as well as specialized legal and administrative expertise; it cannot be left to haphazard experimentation in the transitional phase. Restoring normalcy in service provision depends on crafting local administrative systems with sustainable carrying capacities—units capable of efficiently delivering essential services, addressing local demands, and fostering socio-economic integration. By establishing cities as central hubs and equipping local systems with the tools to function effectively at a regional scale, Syria could lay the groundwork for cohesive and enduring governance.



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