OMRAN
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Political Role of Local Councils in Syria

Survey Results

Omran for Strategic Studies

An independent think tank and policy center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region.

Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria.

Omran's work support decision making mechanisms, provide practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision makers, identify challenges within the Syrian context, and foresee scenarios and alternative solutions.

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Executive Summary

Omran for Strategic Studies conducted a survey of the local councils operating in areas under opposition forces that include 105 local councils from the following provinces: Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Idleb, Dara'a, Al Quneitra, Homs, Hama, and Lattakia. The scope of the questionnaire focuses on the nature of the role that local councils play in areas under control of nationalistic opposition forces specifically. The questionnaire also asks responders to take into consideration the international diplomatic and political efforts to find a solution to the Syrian crisis based on the assumption that local councils are a key factor for stability during the current crisis and in a future transitional phase.

The results of the survey are as follows:

- Local councils mainly fulfill a service role built upon the legitimacy they receive from the populace but at the same time hold great potential for political effectiveness.
- The main mechanisms for forming local councils are general agreement and elections and there is a lesser dependence on appointments and individual activists' efforts.
- In general, local councils have good relationships amongst themselves as well as with nationalistic opposition groups.
- Despite a general acceptance among local councils about the idea of negotiations, this does not translate into their acceptance of local truces.
- A majority of the sample insisted on limiting the concept of negotiation to studying ways of establishing a transitional governing council.
- A majority of the sample supports the Higher Negotiations Committee with the remainder of the sample taking an opposition position.
- The local councils sample confirmed that the issue of Bashar Al Assad is the main issue preventing the success of any negotiations.
- More than 2/3 of the sample prefers a decentralized administrative nationalistic governing structure for Syria in accordance with the local populace's desire.
- The services and civil peace are on the priority list for the local councils during the transitional phase.

Introduction

Local councils are one of the main products of the Syrian revolution since it expresses the change in the relationship with the capitol on one hand and a tool for managing the transitional phase on the other. Four years have passed since the creation of the local councils during which they achieved notable successes and passed through difficult obstacles. At the same time, international efforts are ongoing to push forward a political process through negotiations while investing in the local councils in this regard, taking into consideration the importance of local councils and their current roles giving them significant legitimacy from the ground. As such, it is of great importance to study local councils in their service and political roles with the objective of analyzing the nature of those roles and significant factors effecting each. In the end, there are recommendations on how to strengthen local councils as an engine for political momentum.

This analytical paper sheds light on the political role of local councils and its manifestations in the various local partial truces. The paper also attempts to analyze the relationship between local councils and both military and political opposition groups. In addition, the paper looks at local council positions on the negotiation process, specific criteria that local councils view as part of a political vision, their relationship with the Higher Negotiations Committee that represents the Syrian opposition and finally the obstacles facing local councils during the transitional phase.

Local Councils: Existing Service Role and Characteristics of an Emerging Political Role

Mechanism for forming local councils are limited to elections, general agreement, appointments, and individual activist efforts. The survey revealed that a majority, 57%, of surveyed local councils formed through a general agreement on a local level. 38% of the sample identified elections as the chosen mechanism. The results revealed the least dependence on appointments (3%) and individual activist efforts (2%) as mechanisms for forming local councils, both of which combined account for 5% of the respondents' answers.
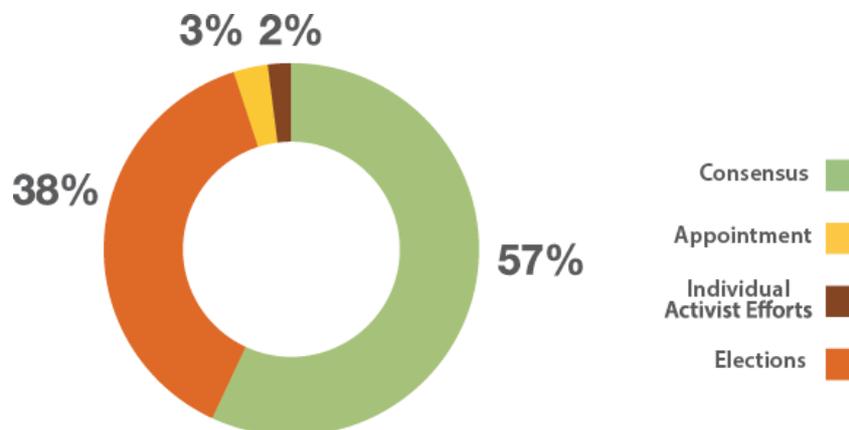

Figure (1) Mechanisms for Forming Local Councils

**The fact that general agreements were the most used mechanism to form local councils is best understood as a result of the lack of security and stability in Syria, as well as the demographic changes in local communities which made it impossible for all the native residents of a locality to participate in elections. In addition, the general agreement mechanism allows local council members to avoid technical issues related to the election process (lists of candidates, election laws, voting centers, and vote counting). These technical processes require legal and technical expertise not widely available among the local councils. When comparing these results with the results of a past study about local council needs conducted by Omran's Local Council's Unit we found that there was a slight increase in the preference for elections with 35.75% in the previous survey and 38% in this recent survey. This slight increase is as result of better organized local elections, higher participation, and better nomination processes – this is especially the case in Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus.

The roles played by local councils in areas controlled by nationalistic opposition groups depend upon the resources available to the councils, local support for the council, and a support network for fulfilling the council's assumed role. The survey results showed that 57% of the respondents identified the councils' roles as service oriented and focused on offering relief, infrastructure, health, and education services. The second largest group of respondents, 42%, identified the councils' role as both service and politically oriented. These respondents identified the political activities of local councils as follows: public and political statements, attending political events, organizing protests, conducting community reconciliations, and conducting negotiations with the regime or other groups related to the regime. The remaining 1% of the respondents identified the local councils' roles as purely political.
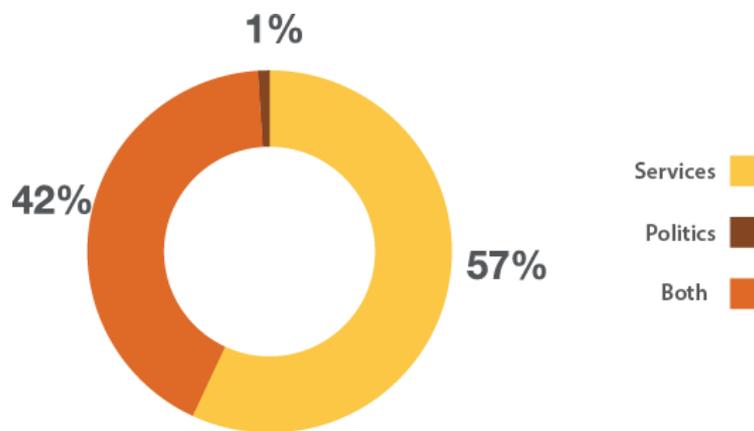
Figure (2) Role of the Local Councils

**The service role of local council's takes precedence over the political role despite the local council's possessing great potential and strong political capital, as seen here:

1. *Local legitimacy stemming from their representation of the local population through elections or general agreement;*
2. *The notable success that local councils have displayed in filling the roles of state institutions in areas outside of Assad regime control and their ability to completely represent the political and ideological positions of local populations. Also, local*

> councils are able to attract local talent and local leadership to participate in administrative affairs.
> 3. *Local councils have political legitimacy that extends from the regime's acceptance of local councils as a legitimate party to negotiate with, as was the case in Zabadani, and in other cases international organizations and some nations depend directly on local councils to implement relief projects on the ground. Furthermore, local councils maintain working relationships with the political Syrian opposition and other local opposition actors who coordinate directly with the local councils on revolutionary and political matters.*

The most significant challenges impeding a greater political role for local councils are:
1. *Local council members who believe that local councils should focus only on the service sector;*
2. *Ongoing conflicts of interest between local councils and nationalistic armed opposition groups and political opposition groups.*
3. *The lack of a stable political process in which the local councils can play an active and productive role other than providing service.*

Local Councils and Opposition Powers: A Positive View on Intertwined Relations

In general, the survey results show that the sample has positive relationships with both the Syrian Opposition's National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces and the Interim Government. The percentage of respondents who chose to describe their relationship with the NCORF as "Good" is 37%, while 25% described the relationship as "Bad" and another 38% as "Acceptable". In regards to the Interim Government, 45% of the respondents described their relationship as "Good" while 21% described the relationship as "Bad" and another 34% described the relationship as "Acceptable".
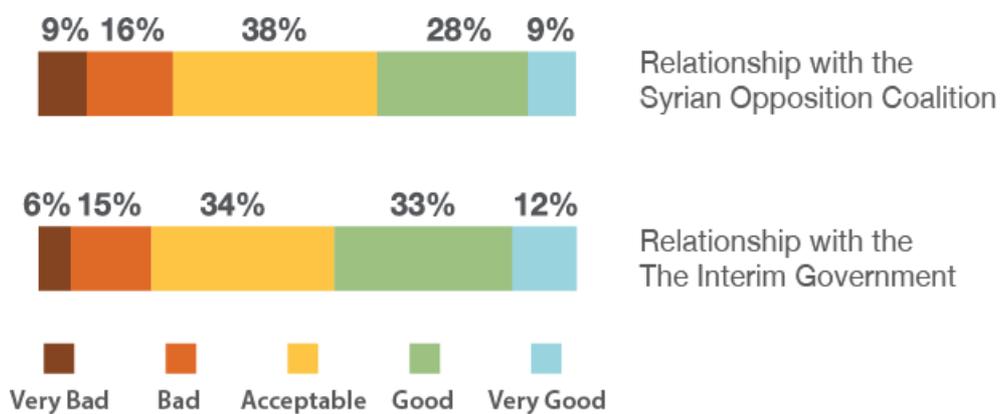

Figure (3) - Local Council Relations with Official Opposition
Political and Service Organisations

The local councils also maintain positive relations with the armed nationalistic opposition groups with 89% of the respondents describing their relationship with such groups as "Very Good" or "Good" while another 10% described the relationship as "Acceptable" and only 1% as "Bad".
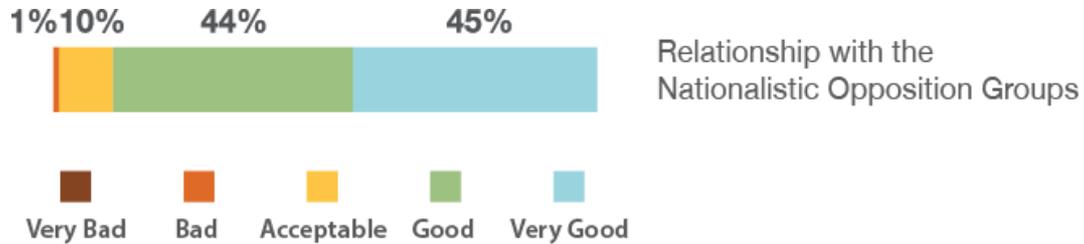

Figure (4) Local Council Relations with Nationalistic Opposition Groups

**The relationship between official opposition institutions and local councils are shaped by the following factors:
1. *Financial Support*
2. *Political and international legitimacy*
3. *Specific jobs and tasks*
4. *Personal relations*

Based on these factors, the positive relationship between the local councils and opposition institutions is explained as follows:
1. *Recognition by the local councils that any weakness in the role of the opposition institutions is due to outstanding factors, such as, regional and international state pressures more than shortcomings in the opposition itself.*
2. *The local councils recognize the critical need for a central entity to organize the local councils and set their priorities. In addition, local councils need a political entity to provide a national platform to lead the political workings allowing the local councils to focus more on providing services and local administration.*
3. *There are existing personal relationships between local council members and political opposition members as well as some of the local council members who are members of the official political opposition.*
4. *Local councils depend partially on opposition institutions to communicate with supporters.*

On another note, the relationship between local councils and the armed nationalistic opposition groups developed from a relationship of tension and conflicts of interest to a positive relationship with continued conflicts of interest but in varied forms. This change is best explained as follows:
1. *Armed nationalistic opposition groups recognizing the importance of the local council project in respect to administering civilian affairs and the need for the armed groups to assist local councils, which in turn increases the armed groups' legitimacy.*
2. *New councils and committees were formed to manage intervention by the armed groups into local council affairs giving the local councils increased independence and transparency when forming the council, choosing members, and setting priorities.*

Local Councils and the Negotiation Process: Conditional Acceptance of a Political Solution Surrounded by Obstacles

The idea of a political solution gained wide spread political support, both regionally and internationally, especially following the increased security threats and exacerbating humanitarian crisis that were both spilling over the Syrian border. In the spirit of pushing the negotiation process forward the international community passed several UN resolutions and the Higher Negotiations Committee formed in Riyadh as a party to negotiate directly with the Assad regime instead of the Syrian National Coalition. The round of negotiations that followed these events did not produce any results in favor of moving towards a political solution. Since the local councils are the legitimate representatives of their localities and they have previous experiences negotiating directly with the regime, it was critical that we ask the local councils about their thoughts on the internationally sanctioned peace talks. 57% of the respondents accept on principle the idea of negotiating with the regime to reach a final solution while 38% rejected the idea and 5% did not give their opinion on the matter.
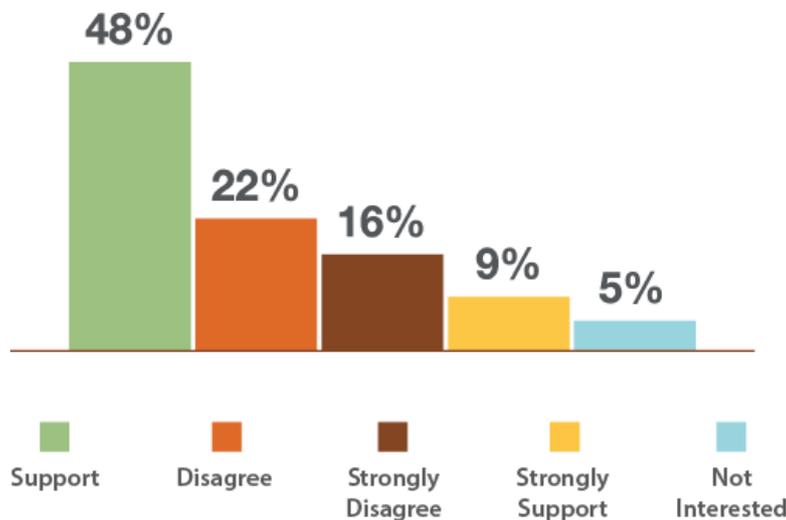
Figure (5) Position on Negotiations With the Regime

It is notable that for local councils, accepting to negotiating with the regime for a final solution does not extend to the local councils accepting local truces with the regime. Two-thirds of the respondents rejected local truces with the regime because they believe those agreements fall in favor of the Assad regime while a little less than a quarter of the respondents expressed their support for local truces since the truces would revive the economies of besieged communities. Lastly, 15% of the respondents chose not to give their opinion on this matter.

Figure (6) Position on Local Truces

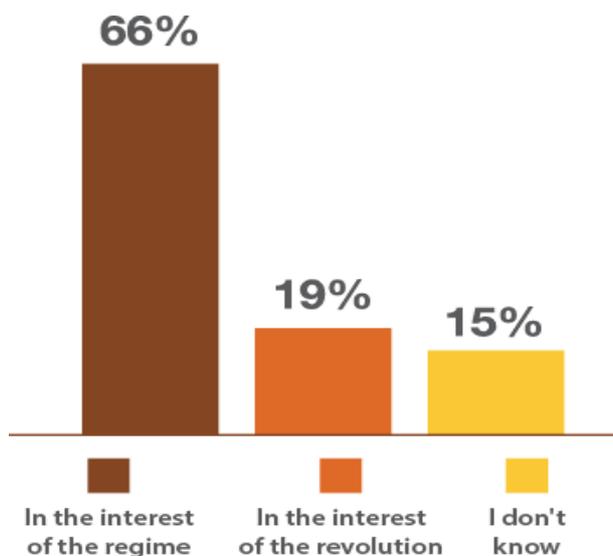***Since 2013, the Assad regime and its allies have engaged in a number of truces with local actors in areas outside of Assad regime control. These areas are strategically important for the regime, due to either geographic reasons or demographics, and this is clear since the truces are concentrated in the areas around the capitol, Homs, Dara'a and Hama. The number of truces are approximately – regardless if they are ongoing or ended – 27 and several more that are currently under negotiation in Quneitra, Rural Damascus, and Dara'a.*

The regime resorted to limited truces as a temporary solution due to two basic factors:
1. *Military – Security: The regime found that it is unable to follow through on a complete military victory due to its lack of human resources and multiple active battlefronts in a number of distant geographic locations thus forcing the regime to seek out temporary truces in strategic areas while giving up control in others.*
2. *Politics: The regime pushed forward a vision for an all-encompassing political solution built upon meeting demands including redistributing power roles and including representatives from various communities in governance. On a local level, the regime sought to meet mainly humanitarian demands. As such, the regime forced the hands of the local councils to accept truces so that they could secure marginal benefits, at the forefront of which was easing the human suffering caused by the ongoing conflict and a lack of international efforts to help in this regard. Local councils secured a number of things from the truces including lifting sieges, releasing of prisoners, stopping shelling, and reviving basic services.*

As for those who refused the truces, two thirds of the sample, their position is best understood as follows:
1. *The negative impact from truces on local living conditions.*
2. *The regime fails to abide by the terms of the truces, especially those that call for releasing prisoners, allowing humanitarian aid from entering the city, and free movement for residents of the locations agreed to the truce.*
3. *There are no strong guarantees for implementing the truces and weak oversight mechanisms.*
4. *There is a fear that the truces will have a negative impact on the revolutionary movement through infiltration and drowning the truce areas in various crises.*

Despite the local councils' acceptance of truces with the regime, they did have a list of prioritized conditions that the regime should abide by in order for the councils to enter into agreement with the regime:

1. A complete ceasefire and end to all aerial bombardment
2. Pulling out all foreign militias.
3. Releasing prisoners.
4. Lifting the siege of besieged locations.
5. Allowing humanitarian aid to enter targeted locations.
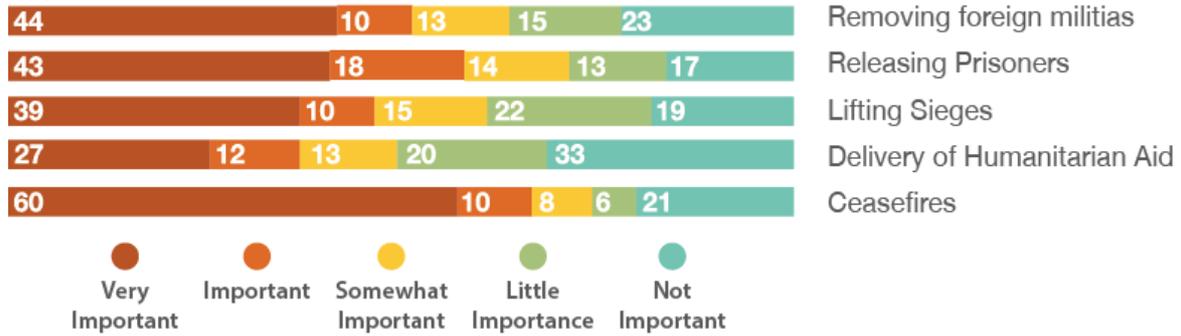
Figure (7) Measures Before Starting Negotiations

At the same time, the regime continued to place the fight against terrorism as the single priority and the only path towards a political solution. The opposition and the opposition forces insisted on their original demands including forming a transitional body with full executive powers to manage the transitional phase. In regards to the negotiable priorities, a majority of the local councils, 89%, believed that the entire negotiation process should focus on the issue of forming a transitional body with full executive powers while only 9% of the respondents felt that the negotiation process should focus on both the formation of a transitional body and the fight against terrorism.

Figure (8) Local Council Positions on the Priorities During Negotiations

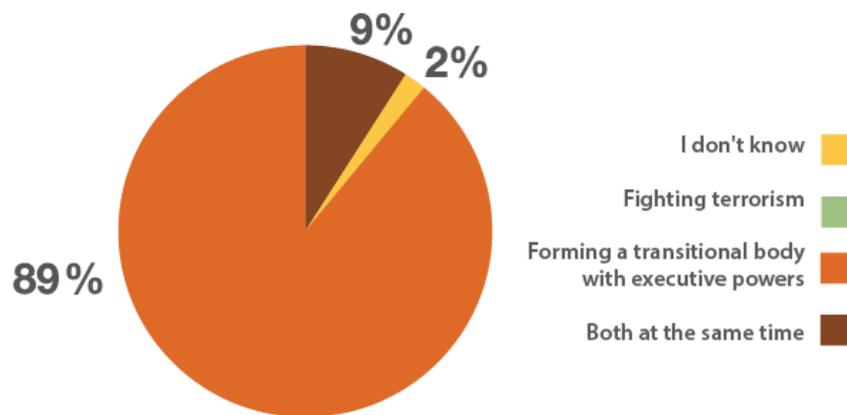In regards to the relationship between local councils and the Higher Negotiations Committee 55% of the respondents believe that the Higher Negotiations Committee represents the local councils while the remaining percentage of respondents took an opposite position.
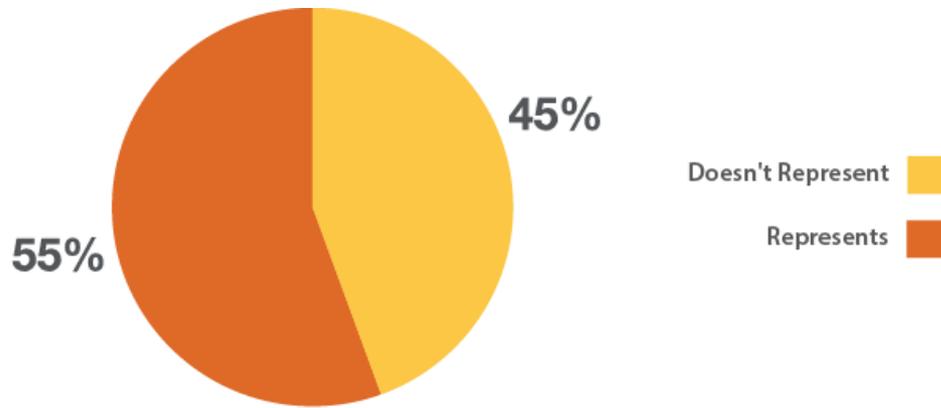

45%

55%

Doesn't Represent

Represents

Figure (9) Local Council Position on the Higher Negotiations Committee

As for the negotiation process and procedures, a majority of the councils expressed their support for negotiations but do not look positively at the processes and procedures on which the negotiations arestarted including a number of issues preventing the success of the negotiation process:

1. The issue of Bashar Al Assad's future.
2. A lack of international pressure on the Assad regime to move seriously towards a political solution.
3. The lack of a party that completely represents local residents in the negotiations.
4. The lack of unity among nationalistic opposition forces.
5. A weak performance by the political opposition.

	Not Significant	Limited Significance	Somewhat Significant	Significant	Very Significant	
Absence of a party that represents the residents	29	21	23	10	22	
Absence of International Consensus	27	13	6	19	40	
Military Groups	33	25	26	7	14	
Political Opposition	26	24	30	14	11	
The Issue of Bashar Al Assad's Future	21	12	6 16	50		
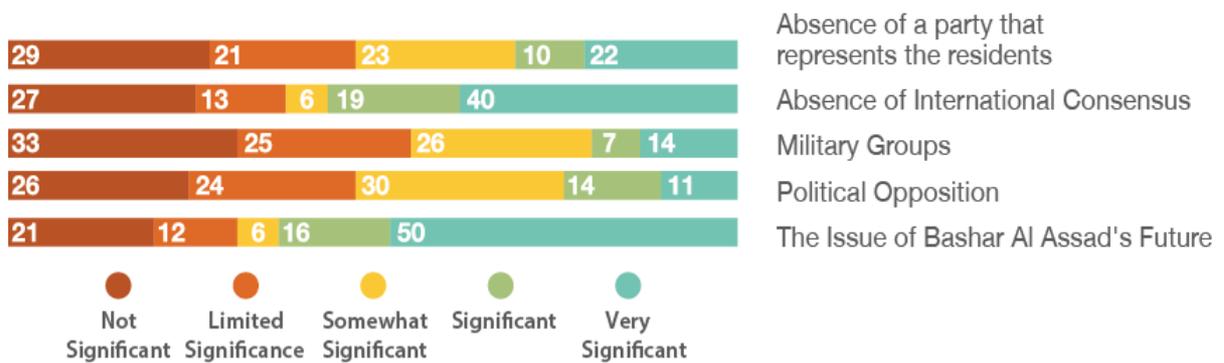
Figure (10) Obstacles to Reaching a Political Solution

**The acceptance of local councils to engage in negotiations with the Assad regime is based upon several factors:*
1. Local councils are convinced that it is too difficult for any side to achieve an outright military victory given the current political conditions after the Russian intervention with ongoing international pressure to seek out a political solution to the crisis.

2. *The local councils use the negotiations to gain some marginal benefits like humanitarian access and other conditions mentioned previously.*
3. *The negotiations put the regime in a sensitive position and test the regime's seriousness in reaching a political solution.*

Local councils accept negotiations on a conditional basis and these conditions form a political breaking point for the local councils:
1. *A complete ceasefire and end to all military operations.*
2. *Pulling out all foreign militias.*
3. *Implementation of all the humanitarian demands made in UN resolutions including the release of political prisoners, lifting the sieges on besieged areas, and allowing the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid.*
4. *Lifting the siege of besieged locations.*
5. *Allowing humanitarian aid to enter targeted locations.*
6. *Maintaining the unity of Syrian territory and administering the country through a transitional body with no role for Bashar Al Assad.*
7. *Restructuring the military and security institutions on nationalistic principles. Holding accountable all those responsible for committing crimes against the Syrian people.*

The local councils tend to focus their demands during negotiations on security and military related requests instead of humanitarian requests. This is best understood as a compounding of the humanitarian crises resulting from the worsening security situation and thus stopping the escalating violence and military operations will give the local councils more opportunities to focus on providing services and address the growing humanitarian crises. Furthermore, despite almost half of the sample supporting the Higher Negotiations Council the remainder of the sample, a significant percentage at 45%, which we cannot disregard, do not consider the Higher Negotiations Council as their representative. This is explained by two main factors:
1. *The way the Higher Negotiations Committee formed some councils felt marginalized.*
2. *Weak communication between the Higher Negotiations Committee and the local councils, and the committee's failure to update the local councils on the latest political developments since the local councils are the closest too and the legitimate representatives of local residents.*

In the proposals for a political solution, the issue of the structure of the state and its administrative a structure vary between a decentralized political state and a decentralized administrative structure. The survey results revealed that a little more than two thirds of the sample favored a decentralized administrative structure while approximately one third of the sample preferred a decentralized political state.
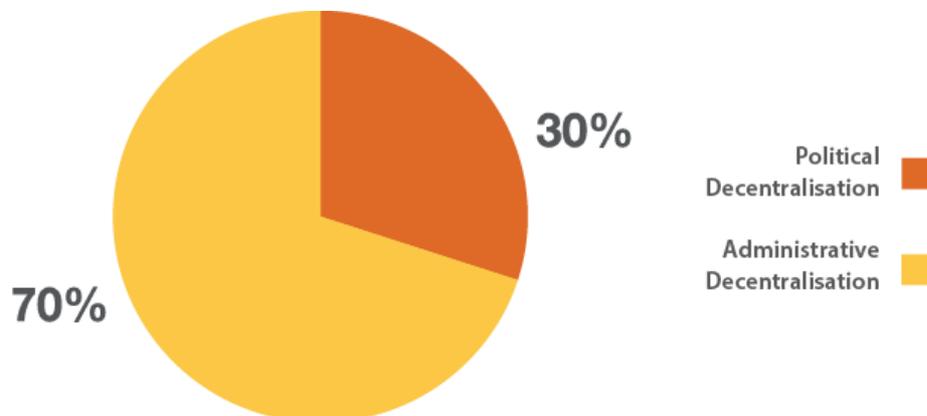

Figure (11) Local Council Views on the Type of Decentralised Governance for Syria

The majority of respondents, 98%, also expressed the need for a nationalized regulatory framework while only 2% rejected this idea.
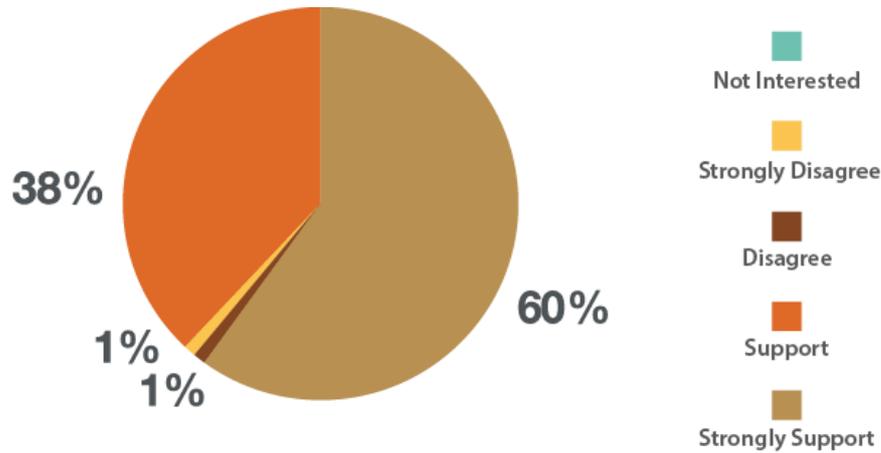

Figure (12) Local Council Opinion on Having a National Framework for Council Operations

**The local councils' preference for a decentralized administrative structure as a concept for administrating the Syrian state stems from the local councils' desire to maintain the state's current borders and giving local communities greater powers in a decentralized administration that ensure their service, development and cultural needs. On the other hand, a decentralized political state will result in the creation of a weak political system comprised of several competing political blocs ending up in constant political turmoil. Also, local councils support the creation of a nationalized framework for organizing their work and are committed to participate on a national level with other councils; and councils are also convinced that they need an established and agreed upon nationalized framework in which to coordinate their priorities and to use a reference when distributing roles.

A Hopeful Role and Challenges in the Transitional Phase

The transitional administrative phase will depend on the local councils due to their legitimacy and their built up experience in managing various issues during the crisis. As for their priorities during the transitional phase, we can list them as follows:

1. Providing basic services
2. Strengthening civil peace
3. Providing local security and economic development
4. Promoting the political process

24	23	21	14	23	Supporting the Political Process
19	22	21	19	24	Economic Development
19	12	4 7	63		Providing Basic Services
15	22	21	23	24	Providing Local Security
20	21	21	12	31	Strengthening Civil Peace

Not Important · Little Importance · Somewhat Important · Important · Very Important
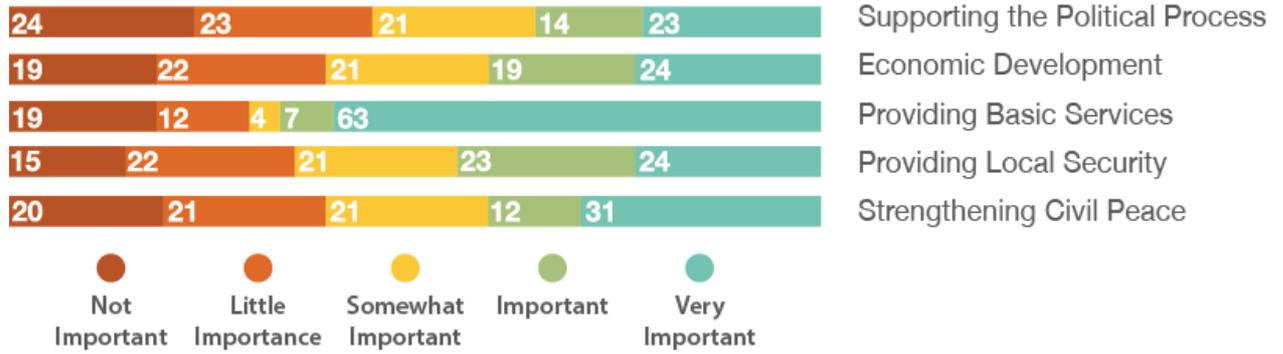
Figure (13) Local Council Role in the Transitional Phase

The survey results also reveal that the local councils recognize that their role during the transitional phase depends on their ability to effectively deal with various challenges, including:

1. Lack of resources
2. Political polarization and social division
3. Gaining legitimacy
4. Security challenges

58	6	2 11	28		Weak Resources
10	22	22	29	22	Political Polarisation
12	11	29	31	22	Social Division
16	29	20	26	14	Security Risks
33	23	21	10	18	Gaining Legitimacy

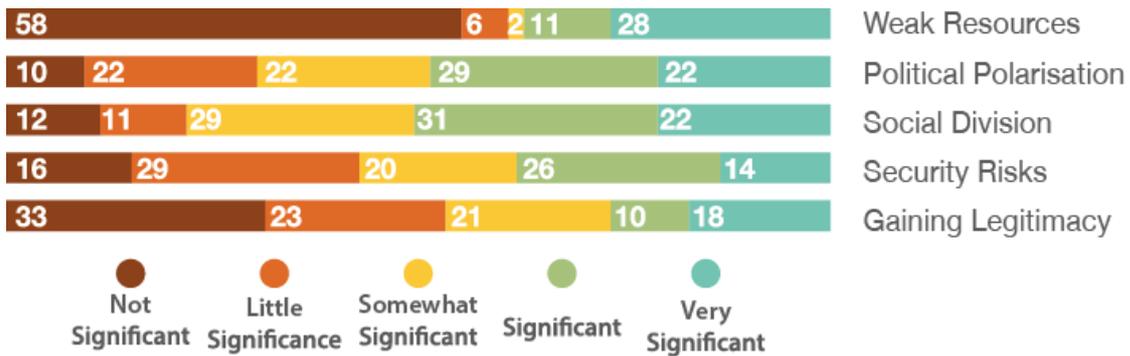Not Significant · Little Significance · Somewhat Significant · Significant · Very Significant

Figure (14) Obstacles Facing Local Councils in the Transitional Phase

**The local councils' prioritizing provision of services during the transitional phase is understood as a manifestation of the local councils' considering their main role as a service provision role, just as we have seen in previous results. Also, recognize that services are the main need of local residents and the local councils' successful delivery of services gives them more strengthen their legitimacy with the local population and then on a national level. Local councils also try to reestablish safety and security in their communities since a lack of which is the main obstacle preventing councils from fulfilling their service roles. In addition, local councils recognize that a major challenge during the transitional phase is a lack of resources, which explains the great demand for services that would bring stability for local residents.

Conclusion

Local councils assume three main roles:

1. Service role
2. Political role
3. Development role

Despite the survey showing that the local councils operating in areas under control of nationalistic opposition groups preferred to focus on service provision, there are instances where local councils did assume political roles. In some cases, local councils published statements in which they took political positions reflecting those of the local population who gave the councils their legitimacy; they attended political activities; organized protests; conducted community reconciliations; conducting localized negotiations with the regime or its allies; and offering their opinions on the national political negotiations.

In light of the political movement to push for negotiations that reach a final political solution for the ongoing crisis it is of great importance to increase the role of local councils and invest in them to strengthen the negotiating strength of the opposition. This will in turn give the political process momentum and protect the results of the political process from a counter revolutionary movement attempting to stop the revolution. It is easy for any observer to notice that local councils have a great potential to establish political groups with significant grass roots support exceeding that of any existing political groupings.

To achieve what we just described there must be an immediate and strong show of support to increase the resources and enhance the capabilities of local councils enabling them to withstand various challenges by:

1. offering financial and institutional advice on human resources capacity building and training;
2. And improving the local councils' relationships with revolutionary institutions, both political and military, based upon properly identified roles and the proper distribution of responsibilities.

Additional part of Survey Sample

Survey Sample								
Administrative Level of Surveyed Council	Town : **60%**		City : **28%**		Province : **7%**		Neighborhood : **5%**	
Province	Damascus	Rural Damascus	Aleppo	Idleb	Dara'a	Quneitra	Homs	Hama	Lattakia
	6%	**9%**	**27%**	**23%**	**24%**	**1%**	**2%**	**6%**	**2%**
Position	Council President: **58%**			Executive Office Member: **31%**			Council Member: **11%**		
Educatiom	Graduate Studies: **6%**		University Graduate: **55%**		Some University **19%**		High school and less **20%**		
Gender	male: **98%**				Female: **2%**				
Marital Status	Single: **16%**				Married: **84%**				

Methodology

1. Sample Pool

We took our sample from amongst the various provincial and related councils located in areas outside Assad regime, Islamic State, Syrian or Kurdish (PYD) control. And especially taking into consideration the councils' abilities to conduct administrative tasks in their areas.

2. Sample Size and Distribution

The sample size is a total of 105 out of 427 local councils including 62 council presidents, 32 executive council members, 11 local council members, and covers Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Idleb, Dara'a, Quneitra, Homs, Hama, and Lattakia. We chose the number of sub-council members in proportion to the number of sub-councils from province to province.

3. Sample Reliability

We took great care to formulate the right questions and present them in an objective way to all the respondents regardless of their personal opinions or their expectations about the survey's results.

4. Survey Time Frame

Collecting the entire sample took one month. We contacted local councils between 1-1-2016 and 2016-2-3 and then reviewed the questionnaires, entered the data, and evaluated the results.

5. Analytical Methodology

The analytical process is split into two sections accordingly with the stated goal of better understanding local council opinions and their knowledge of their service and political roles. In the first part of the analysis, we take into consideration the specific issues presented in the survey, such as the local councils' influence on the political process, their opinions about political and revolutionary performance, and local councils' political leanings. In the second part of the analysis, we focus on the administrative roles of local councils and the level of their commitment to the most important principles and responsibilities.

Local Administration
and Promotion of Democratic Practices