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Governance in rebel-held East Ghouta in the Damascus Province, Syria

Ilina Angelova
Sciences Po, Paris

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Publisher: Centre of Governance and Human Rights, University of Cambridge

Contact: cghr@polis.cam.ac.uk, (+44) (0)1223 767 257

Abstract: *This paper will describe the evolution of the civilian administration in East Ghouta in order to explain the development of the resilience mechanisms which have allowed this Damascus suburb and rebel stronghold to withstand chemical attacks in August 2013, a 23-month long siege, repeated aerial bombings and ground invasions by the Syrian regime as well as, most recently, the advance of the Islamic State (IS) in those territories. A detailed discussion of the various administrative bodies, created and run by civilian actors and responsible for the provision of the basic services for a population of 2 million people, will reveal the emergence of a governance model centred on the role of the city council and its constituent medical, relief, services and information offices. This civilian administration model, similar to the one implemented in the “liberated” areas in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates, is considered by many civilians and members of the opposition as an embodiment of the original principles of the Syrian revolution because of its commitment to moderate Islamic values and a transparent electoral process, as demonstrated by the January 2014 elections in East Ghouta. As such, it offers an alternative to the governance models of Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State, implemented in other parts of Syria. However, even though the civilian administration in East Ghouta has repeatedly illustrated its resilience to external attacks and adaptability vis-à-vis the deteriorating humanitarian situation, the obstacles to its survival have multiplied. In addition to the violent attempts of the regime and IS to take over this territory, the encroachment of armed groups on the activities of the civilian actors, the exhaustion of medical and food supplies, and the difficulty in standardising the governance structures on the local and provincial level have proved to be some of the overwhelming challenges to the governance model in East Ghouta that, until today, continue to question the endurance of the “liberated” territories around Damascus.**

1. Introduction

The Ghoutas form an agricultural belt around the Syrian capital, Damascus, that plays the role of its extended suburbs and include about sixty cities and a total of two million people. They have a long history of resistance as the stronghold of the Syrian nationalists fighting the French mandate in the country since the 1930s. In modern time, the Ghoutas have been an important agricultural region, which however underwent economic difficulties in 2010 as much of the land in the region was sequestered by the Assad regime, exacerbating tensions between the residents and the central government.¹

The Ghoutas entered the revolution on 25 March 2011 when the first big protest took place in Douma, which was followed by demonstrations in the eastern part of the suburbs, notably in Harasta, Zamalka, Jobar, Arbin, Ain Terma and Kafr Batna.² What started out as a peaceful protest fuelled by demands for greater political freedom and agricultural subsidies to the suburbs developed into a militarised conflict as soon as the regime’s violent crackdown reached Zamalka and Douma in April 2011. After the militarisation of the conflict and the advances of the rebels in the region around Damascus, the east and north parts of Ghouta were established in November 2011 as the main rebel strongholds in the Damascus province, with less concentrated but still present rebel forces in the south and west Ghouta. Incessant rebel offensives into Damascus in July 2012, February 2013 and July 2013 were carried out by opposition armed groups based in East Ghouta.³ During the last of those offensives, rebel forces penetrated the capital, reaching as far as its east neighbourhood, Jobar, fired mortars at the Presidential Palace, hit Bashar al-Assad’s convoy, and seized important roads which served as the regime’s essential supply routes.⁴

* The author would like to thank her thesis supervisor, Prof. Jean-Pierre Filiu (Sciences Po) for his guidance and advice.

¹ Laith al-Khatib, ‘Syria’s Eastern Ghouta: A Chaotic Conflict of Brigades’, *Al Akhbar*, 20 December 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17975>.

² ‘Statistical Report of the Center for East Ghouta’ [‘التقرير الإحصائي لمركز الغوطة الشرقية وحقائق مذهلة’], *All4Syria*, 6 November 2013, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/109571>.

³ Isabelle Lasserre, ‘Syria: Anti-Assad Operation Began’ [‘Syrie: l’opération anti-Assad a commence’], *Le Figaro*, August 22, 2013, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/08/22/01003-20130822ARTFIG00438-syrie-l-operation-anti-assad-a-commence.php>.

⁴ Valerie Szybala, ‘Assad Strikes Damascus’, *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2014.

The concentration of the armed opposition in East Ghouta and the liberation of other towns in the north and south regions of the Ghoutas was also seen as an unprecedented threat to the capital, which to a large extent motivated the indiscriminate and brutal tactics that the regime has used vis-à-vis the rebel-held territories in East Ghouta. Additionally, while it has repeatedly intensified its military campaign to retake those territories by resorting to air strikes, ground invasions, barrel bombs, local Shia militias, a total siege around those territories and finally a chemical attack, the regime has nevertheless failed to re-take East Ghouta until today. While the regime finally forced some rebel-held towns to yield and sign a truce with it in the west and north part of the Ghoutas, notably with Moaddamia in December 2013 and Barzeh in January 2014,⁵ it has not yet been successful in weakening the resolve of the opposition in East Ghouta even if its tactics have had a catastrophic impact on the population in this area, leading to the deaths of more than 28 000 people.⁶

While the importance of the military component of the persistence and resilience of the rebels in East Ghouta is undeniable and has been the focus of different studies examining the evolution of the armed struggle in the Damascus Province,⁷ the activities of the civilian opposition in those liberated territories necessitate a similar kind of analysis. Based on interviews with local activists, official statements used by governance bodies in East Ghouta and the information extracted from their websites and social media pages, this study outlines the structure of governance in East Ghouta. In doing so, it also underlines the specific humanitarian challenges and military circumstances which have shaped and transformed them between August 2013 and January 2014. The similar foundations, both ideological and structural, of those bodies demonstrate the gradual emergence of a model of governance centred around the role of the local city council in East Ghouta. However, the variations in the organisation of those councils in each city and the creation of unique offices and civil initiatives also demonstrate the more unfamiliar features of this model of governance as well as the obstacles to its standardisation and unification. The last part of this study examines the most recent attempts of the civilian administration in East Ghouta to address this issue, namely creation of unified offices responsible for the provision of administrative and other services on the provincial level and the establishment of the first provincial council of East Ghouta situated in Douma.

2. The evolution of governance in East Ghouta

Due to its status as rebel-held, or “liberated”, territory ever since late 2012, East Ghouta has experienced the complete withdrawal of state services and cessation of the activities of the state institutions. As a result, the provision of basic services such as food, water, electricity, and internet has been denied to the civilians in those territories, in addition to the collapse of the logistical networks provided previously by those institutions. Furthermore, the discrediting of the state apparatus following the violent repression of the revolution and ensuing civil war curtailed the number of available governance models available to a population that had been subjected to a the authoritarian governance of the Ba’ath party since 1966. This necessitated the elaboration of a novel and different model of governance for the “liberated” territories.

⁵ Ruth Sherlock, ‘Starving Syrians told: “Give up the rebels, and you will have food”’, *The Telegraph*, 01 February 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10611738/Starving-Syrians-told-Give-up-the-rebels-and-you-will-have-food.html>.

⁶ Violations Documentation Center (VDC), <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/>.

⁷ Valerie Szybala, ‘Assad Strikes Damascus’, *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2014; Joseph Halliday, ‘The Struggle for Syria in 2011’, *Institute for the Study of War*, December 2011; Elizabeth O’Bagy, ‘The opposition advances in Damascus’, *Institute for the Study of War*, 9 August 2013.

According to the testimony of local actors, various governance initiatives have taken place in East Ghouta ever since the concentration of the opposition in this area. In order of increasing organisational complexity and functionality, examples of such initiatives are the civil defence teams, coordination committees, and city councils, all of which have been shaped according to the particular needs of each city. This has been a process complicated not only by the continual military contestation of the rebel-held cities in East Ghouta by the Assad regime,⁸ but also by the lack of formal cadres and professionals in the field of administration left to work in this area. As already mentioned, another obstacle has been the lack of a governance model whose resilience has been tested and whose nature has been proven to be compatible with the original principles of the revolution such as democracy, freedom and inclusiveness.

As a result, the different governance bodies in East Ghouta have tended to build upon and replace each other, undergoing transformations meant to address their weaknesses and meet more efficiently the evolving needs of the local populations. The highly improvised, changing and often unstable nature of those bodies, the most prominent and widespread of which have been the local city councils, has resulted from the difficult conditions of their creation, but has also been the origin of their flexibility, decentralisation, and resilience to different types of attacks. This ability to function continually according to the logic of crisis management and face repeatedly medical, humanitarian and military emergencies has prompted the gradual evolution of the city councils into permanent and irreplaceable governance structures in the rebel-held territories. They have steadily taken on the role as providers of most basic administrative and other services in the area and have established networks of cooperation and communication between each other. Those networks have demonstrated their relevance particularly in crisis situations, such as the chemical attacks of 21 August 2013. While this attack was devastating for the population in East Ghouta, killing more than 1,400 people, it nevertheless acted as a trigger for the re-activation of institution-building in the area and the strengthening of the links between and within the city councils.⁹

3. The local city council as the main unit of governance in East Ghouta

The internal structure of the city council—the main governance mechanism in East Ghouta—offers insight into the priorities, practices and dynamics of the civilian opposition in that area, exhibiting a high degree of creativity and adaptability. It also highlights the main problems and obstacles, on the humanitarian and administrative levels, that the civilian opposition faces on a day-to-day basis and the governance mechanisms that have gradually developed to address those issues.

The local city councils, especially those that were set up in the aftermath of the chemical attacks, built upon the local coordination committees which had been established at the start of the revolution to organise the demonstrations but did not replace them in all towns. While those coordination committees were at the outset of the revolution mostly a type of information offices, tasked with the dissemination of information and the organisation of activities in the town, the militarisation of the conflict and the multiplication of problems affecting the population as a part of the armed conflict necessitated an expansion of the activities of those bodies to include the provision of other services too.

⁸ Leana Hosea, 'Growing suffering of Syria's besieged civilians', *BBC*, 5 December 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25240296>; Michael Weiss, 'Assad's Terror-Famine', *NOW*, 18 October 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/assads-terror-famine>.

⁹ "Insight: after chemical horror, besieged Syrian suburb defiant", *Reuters*, 4 October 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/04/us-syria-crisis-zamalka-insight-idUSBRE9930E420131004>.

All local councils in East Ghouta thus have at root an information office which is responsible for the constant circulation of information, the contact with foreign and local media, with other city councils and figures from the opposition, and the documentation of all events in the city. The importance of those information offices was clearly demonstrated during the 21 August 2013 chemical attacks. The pre-existing networks between the information offices and coordination committees in the towns in East Ghouta allowed for a very swift information exchange at the time of the attacks. The information offices at the sites of the attack—Zamalka and Ain Tarma—reported the attacks around 15 minutes after the sarin-filled rockets hit those towns. Only ten minutes after that, at 02:35 am, the information office at Kafr Batna—another town situated several kilometres to the east from the impact sites—reported the strike, putting all of East Ghouta on alarm in a remarkably short period of time.¹⁰

This fast information exchange, aided by the activation of the pre-existing networks between those information offices, in turn allowed for the almost immediate sending of first responders to the site of the strikes. Those first responders, many of whom were media officers themselves, helped with the evacuation of residents and the transportation of wounded civilians to safer areas, but for the most part also died as a result of the exposure to sarin.¹¹ All but one of the Zamalka information office members were killed on 21 August by the chemical gases and the subsequent air strikes, which targeted some of the hospitals to which the wounded had been taken.¹² In addition, it was the media officers of the affected towns in East Ghouta that recorded the internationally disseminated videos and photos which corroborated the news of the chemical attacks and which were later used as evidence by foreign intelligence services and by the UN to determine the use of sarin.¹³ In the aftermath of the attacks, the information offices within the city councils became a particularly important outlet, which allowed for those towns, isolated due to the siege imposed by the regime around East Ghouta, to communicate with the rest of the world and raise awareness about their deteriorating humanitarian situation.

The city councils in East Ghouta also consist of medical offices, which control and organise the medical points in this area. The destruction of numerous hospitals and medical points by air strikes as well as the inadequacy of medical resources following the siege around East Ghouta have necessitated the creation of hospitals or medical points in private homes, mostly underground, with very limited access to electricity, water, light and even air due to safety concerns. A report, produced by certain medical offices and the human rights organisation Violations Documentation Center (VDC) based in Douma in East Ghouta, has outlined the deterioration of the medical situation in the region, enumerated the hospitals destroyed by regime raids, identified the kidnapped or killed medical personnel and specified the most needed medical equipment.¹⁴ Another problem that the medical offices face on a daily basis is the lack of medical staff in the rebel-held territories: for example, the Al-Ghouta Islamic Hospital receives about 1,200-1,600 injured people per month, but has a staff of only 5 doctors. In the entire East Ghouta region, there is one doctor per 80, 000 people or a total of 100 doctors for a population of 2 million.¹⁵ The

¹⁰ Kafr Batna Coordination Committee, 21 August 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=504412646299952&set=a.170097259731494.40969.169014683173085>.

¹¹ Oren Dorell, 'Reports: Syria chemical attack responders die', *USA Today*, 23 August 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/08/22/syria-chemical-attack-responders-die/2686971/>.

¹² Special report on the use of chemical weapons in Damascus Suburbs', *Violations Documentation Center in Syria*, 22 August 2013, <https://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports//chemicaldamascussuburbs#.UzM4edzfnxc>.

¹³ Saqba Coordination Committee, 21 August 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=648554415168522&set=a.228986480458653.65498.225790024111632&type=1>; Hamourieh Coordination Committee, 21 August 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=471209819641911&set=a.261831450579750.58706.252158191547076>.

¹⁴ 'A Special report on the medical situation in East Ghouta - Damascus suburbs', *Violations Documentation Center in Syria*, November 2013, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1383565710#.Uzg5-a1dV5A>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

pharmacies in East Ghouta are also facing shortages: medications such as painkillers, antibiotics and asthma inhalers have almost been exhausted, which in turn has forced doctors to only administer very small doses of painkillers to their patients. On a day-to-day basis, the medical offices, therefore, are responsible for the maximisation of the already insufficient resources and the maintaining of the limited number of medical facilities that, without proper management and support, would be incapacitated by the obstacles they face.

The 21 August 2013 chemical attacks demonstrated the role of the medical offices not only on a daily basis, but also at the time of emergency and humanitarian crisis. Their existence within each city council facilitated the communication and cooperation between the numerous medical points in East Ghouta at that time of extreme chaos and confusion.¹⁶ As a result, the medical office in Jobar was able to organise the redistribution of atropine, (essential for the treatment of exposure to sarin), to the medical points in Zamalka and Ain Tarma that needed it most.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the attacks, the medical offices within each city analysed and identified the mistakes made, such as the transportation of residents exposed to sarin directly to the hospital from the site of attacks, which had led to the further contamination of other patients and doctors. They were thus able to create emergency plans and training procedures in preparation for possible further attacks as well as to implement programmes for the standardisation of the use of medical equipment, thereby limiting the waste of resources at a time of crisis.

Relief offices are also present in the city councils established throughout East Ghouta. They have been created to address the lack of resources, including food and water, that has resulted from the siege imposed on East Ghouta. The “Starvation Until Submission Campaign” implemented by the Assad regime since November 2012 has consisted of the limiting of the entry and exit of the area and then, in October 2013, in its total sealing off from the neighbouring regions.¹⁸ The results of the siege have affected every domain of private and social life and have necessitated the establishment of relief offices to address the multiplying problems connected to the exhaustion of resources in the towns. One of those problems—the soaring prices of essential goods such as rice, water, milk and wheat—has acutely affected East Ghouta, causing conflicts between civilians over the selling or withholding of resources. Another, more serious problem – the sheer unavailability of other goods, has gradually become the main responsibility of those relief offices.¹⁹ They are responsible for the communication with external donors, such as Syrian expats, international relief groups and others regarding the delivery of basic goods, their redistribution to the most vulnerable residents and its storage in warehouses for future emergencies. In addition, they often participate in the organisation of the difficult transportation of those goods to their respective towns and put themselves in danger when having to approach the regime checkpoints maintaining the siege around East Ghouta.

The relief offices within the local city councils often execute their activities in cooperation with the services offices, created to address the deterioration of the living conditions in the Ghoutas on the infrastructural level. Due to the intense shelling, ground attacks, barrel bombs and the chemical attacks of 21 August 2013, many buildings, including hospitals, schools and mosques, have been

¹⁶ Rima Marrouch, ‘Syrian Doctors: Desperate Patients Flooded in at 3 am’, *NPR*, 22 August 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/08/22/214544301/syrian-doctors-desperate-patients-flooded-in-at-3-a-m>.

¹⁷ ‘A Statement from Jobar Medical Point regarding the chemical attacks’, 21 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoCT81NcDnc>.

¹⁸ Souad Khibiyeh, ‘Green bread from animal feed is Syrians’ food in besieged areas’, *The Syrian Observer*, 16 January 2014, <http://78.138.104.166/Features/Features/Green+bread+from+animal+feed+is+Syrians+food+in+besieged+areas>; ‘Insight: Starvation in Syria: A war tactic’, *Reuters*, 30 October 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/30/us-syria-crisis-hunger-insight-idUSBRE99T07I20131030>.

¹⁹ Facebook page of the Northern/Douma sector of the Unified Aid Bureau in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/Office.relief.douma>.

destroyed along with many water tanks, power grids, electricity posts, and roads. The services offices have been created with the purpose of fixing or rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure.²⁰ Their work on the fixing of water systems, pipes, the cleansing of water sources and the digging of new wells has been particularly important in view of the lack of water in the besieged, rebel-held territories. Many of the relief offices within the city councils were created as ad-hoc civil defence teams in the aftermath of the 21 August 2013 chemical attacks when streets and buildings had to be cleaned from the debris and the residents had to be instructed on how to clean their own houses from the chemical residue.²¹ Those improvised teams later evolved into the relief offices that had to face not only the aftermath of the chemical attacks, but also the new infrastructural and humanitarian predicaments exacerbated by the tightening of the siege around East Ghouta and the intensification of air strikes.

Another important office in most city councils is the human rights office that documents the human rights violations, the number of wounded or killed civilians, the names and numbers of prisoners, disappeared, people in need of special care and the number of refugees from other cities. The importance of those organisations has become significantly more pronounced in the aftermath of the attacks and particularly after the visit of the UN chemical inspectors to East Ghouta on 28 and 29 August 2013.²² Human rights offices as well as human rights organisations active throughout all of East Ghouta, such as the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) based in Douma, collected blood, tissue, and earth samples, as well as parts of the rockets which carried sarin in an effort which was later praised by the UN inspectors for its usefulness in the investigation of the attacks.²³ The importance of those human rights offices is also related to the belief among the civilian opposition in the possibility of justice and the utility of their work in the event of the setting up of a criminal tribunal to investigate the human rights abuses during the Syrian war. The establishment of such offices demonstrates that, in addition to providing for the physical needs for basic services through the medical, relief and services offices, the population in East Ghouta is also committed to its need for justice and accountability and is ready to work for those principles in its institutional framework.

Even if many of the city councils are organised in a similar fashion and consist of information, medical, relief, services, and human rights offices, this organisational structure is certainly far from being the standard for all councils. The adaptability and responsiveness to the demands of the population have so far overridden the need to standardise the councils' structure throughout the region. As a result, unique offices have appeared in each city council, highlighting some of the additional needs of the residents in that respective town and their ability to offer institutional solutions to their problems. For example, the Office of Revolutionary Action in Arbin is responsible for the organisation of demonstrations and other political activities, demonstrating the desire of the residents in the town to continue the practice of peaceful protesting that for them embodies the original principles of the revolution.²⁴ The Committee for Women and Children of Arbin was also created to train women and children in first aid, preliminary paramedic procedures, nursing,

²⁰ 'The Relief Office in East Ghouta', *Kafr Batna Gate*, <http://kafarbatnagate.com/?p=83>. Youtube video of the activities of the Relief Office: <http://youtu.be/PD5BxxR2P-M>.

²¹ 'Residents of Eastern Ghouta fear another chemical attacks', *The Damascus Bureau*, 21 October 2013, <http://www.damascusbureau.org/?p=5987>.

²² Ian Sample, 'UN Inspectors in Syria: under fire, in record time, sarin is confirmed', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/16/un-inspectors-syria-sarin-gas>.

²³ Zack Baddorf, 'Exclusive: Damascus Doctor has Tissue Samples From Chemical Weapons Attack, Waiting on UN to Inspect', *TRNS*, 25 August 2013, <http://www.talkradionews.com/world-news/2013/08/25/damascus-doctor-has-tissue-samples-from-chemical-weapons-attack-waiting-on-un-to-inspect.html>.

²⁴ Razan Zaitouneh, 'Local Council in Erbeen: A fighter's place is not among civilians', *The Damascus Bureau*, 17 June 2013, <http://www.damascusbureau.org/?p=5391>.

the use of ambulances, drugs as well as sawing, knitting, cooking and reading.²⁵ Another unique office, “the siege and external relations office” of the Saqba city council, was created specifically with the purpose of coordinating the delivery of aid to the town and overcoming the problems posed by the siege around East Ghouta.²⁶ The institutional creativity of the civilian opposition in East Ghouta has accompanied its commitment to building a relatively unified model of governance through the role of the city council and has enhanced the resilience of the rebel-held territories to the multiple regime assaults.

4. The consolidation of the civilian administration in East Ghouta

The multiplication of local city councils around East Ghouta has contributed to strengthening the population’s responsiveness to the continuing regime attacks and the hardship of living under a siege, but has also posed logistical problems and complicated the relations with external donors and the cooperation between the city councils themselves. Therefore, the creation of a larger body—a unified Council for all of East Ghouta—had been high on the priority list of the civilian opposition, especially ever since the chemical attacks which prompted an expansion and more central role of the local city councils. A broad and inclusive civilian movement, called the National Assembly of the Forces of the Revolution in East Ghouta, was established on January 27, 2013 to gather all actors in the region interesting in the formation of a unified council.²⁷ It includes the members of numerous local political parties, civilians and rebels from 58 towns in the area and strives to be a “truly representative model for a united local council for the Eastern Ghouta to serve as an elected government and manage the affairs and public services of the region.”²⁸

The movement has officially expressed its dedication to the establishment of a free, pluralistic and civil state, the rule of law, justice, equality and respect for human rights, and “Islam as the primary carrier of culture and history” in East Ghouta. It has also stated that it wishes to set an example of “administrative decentralisation” for the future government of Syria and has thus assisted many cities in East Ghouta in setting up their own local councils.²⁹ The National Assembly’s Board of Directors has also regularly visited already established local city councils in the East Ghouta in order to assess their capabilities and needs and to compile all information needed for the implementation of projects addressing the towns’ needs.³⁰

The National Assembly’s most important contribution to the development of the governance in East Ghouta has been its initiative to set up the unified Council for East Ghouta by establishing a Supervisory Electoral Commission to oversee the elections for such a council.³¹ Building on the already existing local council in the city of Douma—a stronghold of the opposition in East Ghouta—a Local Council of the Damascus Province, (also known as the Local Council of the Civil Administration and Services, or Douma Council), was established in the city.³² Due to the many Council positions available, such as an agricultural specialist, legal experts, and technical assistants,

²⁵ Facebook page of the Committee for Women and Children in Erbin: <https://www.facebook.com/C.W.C.ERBEEN>.

²⁶ Facebook page of the Saqba Local Council: <https://www.facebook.com/LocalCouncil.Of.SaqbaCity.Ar>.

²⁷ Facebook page of the National Assembly of the Forces of the Revolution in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/N.R.O.F.REG1?fref=ts>.

²⁸ Razan Zaitouneh, ‘Will the National Coalition of Revolutionary Forces in East Ghouta be able to Unite the Revolutionary Forces?’, *The Damascus Bureau*, 19 August 2013, <http://www.damascusbureau.org/?p=5762>.

²⁹ Press conference of the National Assembly of the Forces of the Revolution in East Ghouta, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr29PF9k0mQ#t=121>.

³⁰ Facebook page of the National Assembly of the Forces of the Revolution in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/N.R.O.F.REG1?fref=ts>.

³¹ The Local Councils in East Ghouta’, *Builders of the Future*, <http://bof-sy.com/?p=1364>.

³² ‘Douma, dispute in the first local council elections’, *Zamanlws*, 4 February 2014, <http://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/46234.html>.

the elections took place over a period of three days, with their fairness and transparency monitored by the Supervisory Commission.

The Council is organised in a manner similar to the organisation of the other local city councils with medical, relief and other offices, but it also includes a larger number of members and technicians across a wider spectrum of professions. Due to the Council's expanded functionality, its role has turned Douma into the administrative centre of the civilian opposition in East Ghouta. It has been praised by residents of Douma for its increased independence from foreign agendas, its wider representativeness and greater spectrum of offered services. In addition, its importance stems from its status as the first provincial council of the opposition in the Damascus Province and thus as the "first step in building a state", according to its founders from the National Assembly of the Forces of the Revolution in East Ghouta.³³

In 2013, Douma became not only the location of the Local Council of Civil Administration and Services, (which assumed the role of provincial council), but also the centre of another initiative for the consolidation of governance in East Ghouta: the formation of Unified Medical, Unified Relief and Unified Service Offices. Those bodies were created to consolidate the efforts of the respective offices within the city councils and organise them on a provincial level, in order to enhance their cooperation and access to resources coming from donors. For example, the Unified Relief Office in East Ghouta was designed to unify the activities and objectives of the relief offices in the cities of East Ghouta.³⁴ The establishment of a central Relief office for the region allowed for a direct communication with external donors and international relief organisations and a redistribution of the received resources according to an analysis of the different cities' needs at certain times.³⁵ The Unified Medical Office in East Ghouta is made up of 17 medical offices controlling 35 medical points in all of East Ghouta, to which it regularly redistributes medical equipment.³⁶ It has also elaborated emergency plans and programs for the maximisation of medical resources and the standardisation of medical practice throughout all of East Ghouta, which have then been implemented by the local medical offices resulting in an enhanced use of the available resources.³⁷ Lastly, a Unified Services Office was also established to organise on a provincial level the services offices within each city council. It has been particularly active in the implementation of various projects throughout all of East Ghouta, the analysis of the need of infrastructural rehabilitation in different cities and the provision of expertise. Those bodies have resulted in the consolidation of governance in East Ghouta and have addressed the problem of the multiplication of city councils by bringing them and their offices under a common umbrella and offering them additional support with their projects.

5. Challenges to the governance mechanisms in East Ghouta

While the proliferation of city councils and their consolidation in unified bodies acting on the provincial level has strengthened the resilience of the rebel-held territories, the problems

³³ Facebook page of the Board of Directors of the Local Councils in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/إدارة-إ-المحليةلمجالس-الغوطةفي-الشرقي-210553702449457>.

³⁴ Facebook page of the unified Relief Office in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/CRO.ALGHOTA/>, <https://www.facebook.com/URO.English?ref=profile>.

³⁵ Unified Aid Bureau Faces Major Challenges in Eastern Ghouta', *The Damascus Bureau*, 5 March 2014, <http://www.damascusbureau.org/?p=6499>.

Facebook page of the unified Relief Office in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/CRO.ALGHOTA>, <https://www.facebook.com/URO.English?ref=profile>.

³⁶ Facebook page of the Unified Medical Office in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/Unified.Revolutionary.MedicalBureau.inEastGouta?ref=stream>.

³⁷ Press conference of the Unified Medical Office in East Ghouta, 26 August 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoO42HXLeVQ&feature=youtu.be>.

endangering this progress remain and even multiply with the further development of the administration in East Ghouta. Firstly, the practice of allocation of the resources deemed “necessary” for different cities by the Unified Offices or the Council of Local Administration and Services has already created significant conflicts both between the local councils and the central offices and between the city councils themselves. For example, the warehouse of the United Relief Office was attacked and disputes over some of the resources which had been withheld erupted, causing a rift between the provincial body and the residents of the area. Another problem has appeared as a result of the allocation of resources, executed according to the number of residents under the control of each town’s council. This practice means that some cities that have a smaller number of residents but suffer from greater difficulties in terms of infrastructure or the lack of food or medicine tend to receive less than the towns with more residents that are less affected by the siege and the bombardments. This disparity between needs and funding has exacerbated the tensions between certain city councils.

Another issue that was complicated by the January 2014 elections and the establishment of the Local Council of the Civil Administration and Services in Douma has been the contestation of other similar bodies over the legitimacy and resources which this Council has claimed. Another group called the Local Council for the Damascus Suburb Governorate, claiming to represent the civilian opposition in East Ghouta and the Damascus Province as a whole, has not only rejected the legitimacy of the Local Council of the Civil Administration based in Douma, but also organised separate elections in February 2014 in order to challenge its establishment.³⁸ The mutual boycotting of the elections of both bodies has divided the civilian opposition in East Ghouta and indicated a possible rift, resulting from a competition over legitimacy and resources.

Lastly, while the current study focuses on the civilian elements of the opposition in East Ghouta, the presence of armed rebel forces cannot be ignored as the contestation between military and civilian components over the formation of local governance structures is constant and significant aspect of the political landscape in the Damascus Province. Military councils, such as the Douma Shura council headed by the military commander Zahran Alloush, leader of the Army of Islam, have tried to replace the civilian councils or impose its command on them in often violent ways.³⁹ As a result of one of those conflicts, some donors favourable to the civilian opposition have curtailed their support in order to avoid funding military formations⁴⁰. Another instance of the clash between military and civilian bodies in East Ghouta was the kidnapping in December 2013 of the prominent activist Razan Zaitouneh - the founder of the biggest human rights organisation in the area, the Violations Documentation Centre.⁴¹ Zahran Alloush’s presumed involvement in the kidnapping has further deepened the civilian-military divide in East Ghouta. Nevertheless, the resolve of the East Ghouta residents to preserve the civilian institutions has been particularly strong in the face of military pressure. In addition to their rejection and condemnation of Alloush’s potential participation in the kidnapping of one of the most respected leaders of East Ghouta, the local residents reacted strongly to Alloush’s rejection of the Douma Council which he criticised for “dividing the voice of Muslims” and as being an “inexcusable transgression” for rivalling his army’s own institutional creation, the Shura Council.⁴² A large number of civilians in Douma issued a statement reiterating their duty to “reject any attempt by any party to force the people of Douma

³⁸ ‘Douma, dispute in the first local council elections’, *Zamanlws1*, 4 February 2014, <http://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/46234.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Yazid Sayigh, ‘Unifying Syria’s Rebels: Saudi Arabia joins the fray’, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 28 October 2013, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/10/28/unifying-syria-s-rebels-saudi-arabia-joins-fray/>.

⁴¹ ‘The Razah Zaitouneh Kidnap Affair: Syrian Human Rights Activist Face Danger from Both Regime and Extremist Islamists’, *Oximity*, 17 January 2014, <https://www.oximity.com/article/The-Razan-Zeitouneh-Kidnap-Affair-Syri-1>.

⁴² ‘Statement of the civil movement in Syria’ [بيان من الحراك المدني في سوريا], *Syria Over-Blog*, 14 October 2013, <http://syria.frontline.left.over-blog.com/article-120613504.html>.

under tyranny” and refusing to “obey any institution not elected by the people, no matter how wealthy and powerful it is”, demonstrating their unyielding dedication to the civilian nature of their local institutions.⁴³

6. Conclusion

The current discussion of the governance mechanisms in East Ghouta contributes to three debates centred on the prospects for the rebel-held territories around Damascus and throughout Syria, in light of the opposition’s demonstrated capacity to administer those spaces and the growing ability of the regime and other actors, such as the Islamic (IS), to deny it this authority. The first debate concerns the presumed weakening of the rebel front around Damascus following the surrender of rebel-held towns in North and South Ghouta which signed a truce with the regime in December and January 2014 and the regime’s capture of key towns in East Ghouta in August and September 2014.⁴⁴ The advance of IS in East Ghouta, which became notable in June 2014, is also seen as a growing threat to the opposition’s capacity to maintain control over their stronghold in the Damascus suburbs.⁴⁵ However, the opposition has so far repeatedly both the regime’s incursions from the west and ISIS advances from the east in this area.⁴⁶ Therefore, East Ghouta rebels’ demonstrated resilience to those actors and to the threat of humanitarian collapse due to the imposed siege questions those claims and serves as an example of the crucial importance of flexible governance mechanisms in such settings.

The second debate deals with the evolution of a rebel governance models throughout Syria and the intensifying competition between those. The current paper is a part of the developing body of literature focused on the governance of rebel-held territories around Damascus, which will strive to complement the existing extensive research on the civilian administration in the Aleppo⁴⁷ and Idlib governorates.⁴⁸ Many similarities can be found between the outlines of the governance structures in those three governorates and, even though significant differences exist, a tentative rebel governance model centred on the role of the city council and its constituent offices and dedicated to the original principles of the revolution and moderate Islamic values can be seen emerging. This model - contender for a potential post-war governance of Syria - however, is also continually challenged by competing models of governance, offered by the Assad regime and the Islamic state in other parts of the country, which makes understanding its ability to be resilient and viable, as demonstrated by the case of East Ghouta, important.

Thirdly, highlighting the importance of the governance mechanisms in this area in particular contributes to current policy debates regarding the financial support to the opposition in Syria. Given the recent US pledge to arm moderate rebels in order to fight IS,⁴⁹ financially assisting the civilian administration bodies in East Ghouta and other parts of country is no less significant for the struggle against the extremist forms of governance which IS has already implemented in

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Scott Lucas, ‘Syria Daily, August 16: Regime Captures Key Town East of Damascus’, *EA WorldView*, 16 August 2014, <http://eaworldview.com/2014/08/syria-daily-regime-captures-key-town-east-damascus/>.

⁴⁵ ‘Death of ISIS Emir in Eastern Ghouta’, *The Syrian Observer*, 26 June 2014, <http://syrianobserver.com/News/News/Death-of-ISIS+Emir+in+Eastern+Ghouta>.

⁴⁶ ‘Syria rebels battle ISIS jihadists near Damascus’, *Daily Star*, 21 July 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Jul-21/264592-syria-rebels-battle-isis-jihadists-near-damascus.ashx#axzz3EglorxEM>.

⁴⁷ Bacsko, Dorrnosoro and Quesnay, ‘The Civilian Administration of the Aleppo insurgency’, *NORIA Research*, October 2013, <http://www.noria-research.com/2013/10/24/the-civilian-administration-of-the-insurgency-in-aleppo/>.

⁴⁸ Tristan Salmon, ‘Emerging civil administrations: a way forward in Syria?’, *Open Democracy*, 29 March 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/tristan-salmon/emerging-civil-administrations-way-forward-in-syria>.

⁴⁹ Patrician Zengerle, ‘U.S. Congress approves arming Syrian rebels, funding government’, *Reuters*, 18 September 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/18/us-iraq-crisis-congress-vote-idUSKBN0HD2P820140918>.

northern Syria and which it will undoubtedly try to create in the Damascus suburbs if it gains a firmer footing. Furthermore, as this paper illustrates, the irreplaceable importance of the medical, relief and services offices throughout East Ghouta for the civilian population, it also demonstrates the mechanisms whereby international assistance to those governance bodies is likely to ameliorate the living conditions of around two million people and prevent multiple deaths resulting from the lack of medical resources, food, water and shelter. While questions regarding the likelihood of such funds reaching the civilian beneficiaries and not falling in the hands of armed groups persist and doubts about the ability of those bodies to overcome their structural deficiencies and tendency for in-fighting recur, the ability of those governance institutions to learn and adapt in order to face those and other challenges, as this paper has demonstrated, has so far proved to be superior to the obstacles to their survival.

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Centre of Governance and Human Rights

POLIS · 7 West Road · Cambridge · CB3 9DT · United Kingdom

www.cghr.polis.cam.ac.uk
