

LOCAL WARS AND THE CHANCE FOR DECENTRALIZED PEACE IN SYRIA

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For decades, the Assad regime rallied support and crushed dissent in Syrian society through mobilizing networks of local intermediaries. Since 2011, the varying relationships between the central authorities in Syria, these local intermediaries, and the country's different localities have played a fundamental role in shaping the outbreak of protests and descent into armed conflict. While six years of war have left the state's administrative structures in tatters, Bashar al-Assad's regime has focused on maintaining, reviving, or renewing its network of local intermediaries to keep control in its areas and retake lost territory. However, the conflict has crucially and irreparably changed local politics in Syria, and a return to the pre-2011 status quo is impossible. For any negotiated settlement to be sustainable, these changes will need to be incorporated into a new, decentralized power-sharing bargain, which will shape Syria's economic and physical reconstruction and postconflict recovery.

Syria's Localities Amid Conflict

- The Assad regime has long relied on networks of local agents and intermediaries to enforce its authority, and it is currently seeking to reassert control over each opposition area either by luring local elites back into its networks or by crushing the area with military force.
- The Syrian uprising and subsequent insurgency have never been a unified national movement; from the beginning, the opposition has been defined and divided by local identities. The brutality of the war and the chaotic nature of foreign aid have entrenched local divisions and undermined efforts to create a unified leadership.
- While most groups opposing Assad have sought to replace the regime's administrative structures in the areas they control, Kurdish forces in Syria have instead focused on a less centralized and more geographically based vision of power sharing, controlling their territory without attempting to replace the central authorities.

A New Bargain for Decentralization

- Six years of conflict have irreparably altered the Syrian state's administrative structures of governorates and districts, making the country's politics more localised than ever. This often empowers new local elites and provides them with new areas of decisionmaking and policy implementation.
- For there to be an effective decentralization framework in any negotiated peace settlement, the areas of decisionmaking and policy implementation under the purview of new local intermediaries should be incorporated and formalized.
- Local communities with greater influence over local politics would likely help mitigate the corruption emanating from Damascus. This is necessary to avoid the possibility of reconstruction funds re-empowering a cadre of regime-affiliated, kleptocratic elites, similar to those against whom much of the population rose up in 2011.

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