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THE ASSAD REGIME'S HOLD ON THE SYRIAN STATE

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DEIR EZZOR

Baath Vanguard Camp

Qalb Al-Maftouh
Military Base

Joura

Brigade 137

Deir Ezzor
Military Airport

Al Jabl Military Base

Regime-Controlled Areas
Regime Security Branches
State Institutions
Relocation of State Institutions
Syrian Military Bases
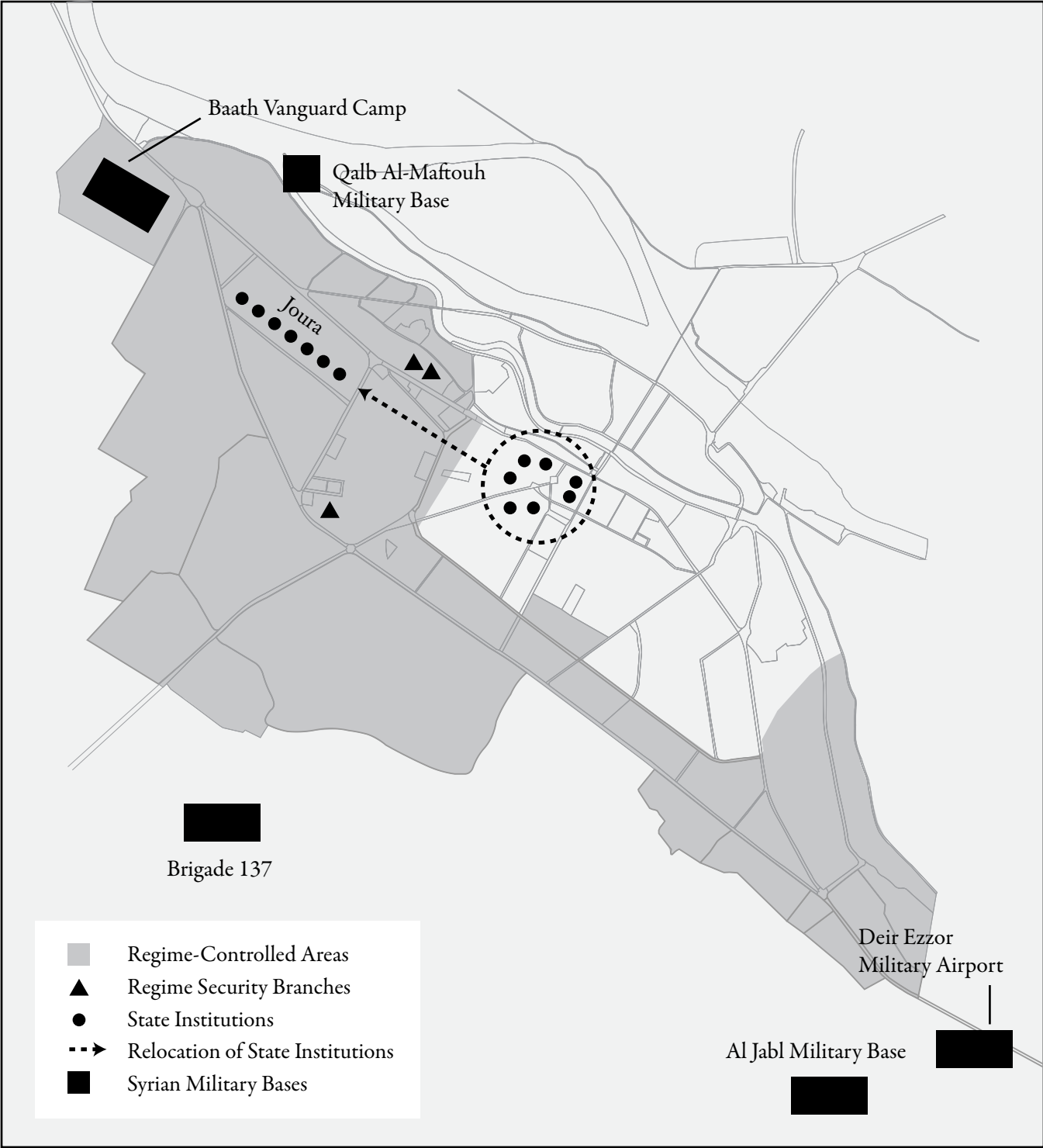
Summary

Since the early days of the Syrian uprising in 2011, President Bashar al-Assad's regime has made it a priority to keep state agencies running, allowing Assad to claim that the regime is the irreplaceable provider of essential services. Breaking the regime's monopoly on these public services and enabling the moderate opposition to become an alternative source of them would weaken the regime and prevent the radical jihadist Islamic State from emerging to fill power vacuums across the country.

How the Regime Tightened Its Grip

- Syrians depend heavily on the state for income, essential goods and services, and administrative documents. Once its survival was at stake, the regime intensified efforts to entwine itself with state institutions that provide these necessities.

- The once-sprawling bureaucratic functions of the Syrian state have been consolidated during the war into highly defensible urban power centers under the regime's control.

- To maintain its monopoly on the provision of essential services, the regime destroyed alternative structures that the opposition created in liberated areas.

- The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State—which has brutally suppressed populations under its control—as the only other entity in Syria able to provide a degree of public administration has reinforced the regime's narrative that it is the sole real option Syrians have if they are to receive essential services.

What International Actors Can Do to Break Assad's Monopoly

Look past a military strategy. The opposition's Western and regional state backers—in particular Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—should move beyond simply providing military assistance to opposition factions and also support the restructuring of armed rebel factions and the political opposition into a more coherent and unified entity that can take on new roles within Syria.

Empower an alternate authority. In areas where the moderate opposition has taken over militarily, opposition groups must be encouraged to carry out the functions of the Syrian state, and they must be supported in those efforts.

Protect state institutions. The regime must be prevented from destroying these institutions—and the opposition's ability to run them—after military forces loyal to Assad withdraw from an area. To accomplish this, the United States and its Western allies should provide air protection from regime attacks after Assad-aligned forces retreat.

Introduction

In late 2011, world leaders and regional analysts confidently predicted that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime would fall within weeks.[1] But in mid-2015, it was still fighting, despite losing control of more than one-half of Syria's territory and struggling to maintain its grip on the remaining areas.

Evidently, military and economic assistance from Iran and Russia has been a critical factor that has helped the regime cling to power. But another key element of the regime's survival has been its ability to claim that the Syrian state, under Assad, has remained the irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that are outside the regime's control. The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State as the only other entity with the capacity to deliver some basic services has helped the regime to highlight the moderate opposition's inability to do so, reinforcing the regime's claim that its survival is integral to the daily lives of Syrians.

A key element of the Assad regime's survival has been its ability to claim that the Syrian state has remained the irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that are outside the regime's control.

As the popular uprising morphed into armed conflict between 2011 and 2012, the Syrian regime made it a priority to keep state-owned agencies running, and in so doing it has kept Syrians dependent on its rule. Syrians relied heavily on the state before the uprising began and many of them had to do so even more during the conflict. The Syrian state was and remains the country's largest employer. State-owned public agencies are the primary providers of essentials like bread, subsidized fuel, healthcare, and education. Only state-run administrative services can provide Syrians with the documents allowing them to marry, register a property, or travel outside of Syria.

To ensure that Syrians continue to receive these much-needed services, once-sprawling state agencies have been consolidated into highly defensible, urban power centers under the control of forces loyal to Assad. Living in these regime-controlled areas has become a necessity for many Syrians.

Most importantly, the Syrian army ruthlessly targeted and destroyed nascent attempts by the regime's moderate political opposition—the groups seeking to topple the regime and keep the Syrian nation-state intact, whether as a secular democracy or a state in which Islam plays a greater role in politics—to establish its own viable alternative to the regime's provision of essential state functions. At the same time, regime forces largely left the radical jihadist Islamic State unmolested as it built and expanded its own systems of public service provision.

This created an apparent "us or the Islamic State" dichotomy, and in this balance of evils the Assad regime has become, for many, the option they feel compelled to support.

But is the Assad regime truly saving the Syrian state? A closer look at the regime's behavior—and its practice of destroying institutions when it loses control of an area, as occurred in Idlib, in northwestern Syria, in April 2015—suggests that the regime's support for the state is limited to the self-interested goal of holding on to the legitimacy and power that it desperately needs to survive.

As long as the regime is seen as the protector of the Syrian state, a political solution to the crisis will remain impossible. To achieve a breakthrough to this stalemate—and implement an effective strategy to curb the Islamic State—international actors who fear a collapse of the state must end the Assad regime's monopoly over public institutions and allow the moderate opposition to take over state functions in some of the areas under its control. Such action, on the part of both backers of the regime and its opponents, will enhance cooperation between the armed and political elements of the opposition, weaken the regime such that it may be obliged to make compromises in peace negotiations, and prevent the Islamic State from emerging to fill power vacuums across the country.

A State of Survival

The Assad regime and the Syrian state are two distinct but constantly interacting entities. When Hafez al-Assad, the former president of Syria and the father of the current president, captured power through a military coup in 1970, state institutions were already well established with a bureaucracy and infrastructure that could serve most of the country. During his three decades in power, the regime thoroughly infiltrated the state apparatus, particularly its highest ranks, through a network of cronyism and corruption and refashioned state institutions with symbols of the Assad ruling family, adorning government offices with photos of the president and erecting statues of him on public property.

Indeed, throughout more than forty years under the ruling Baath Party, the Assads have constantly blurred the lines between the regime (a collection of informal family, community, religious, and other networks that operate within and outside the institutional framework of the state) and the Syrian state (the apparatus that administers the country and provides services).

Government services underpin much of Syrian life. Administrative offices are the only structures that can issue essential documents and allow Syrians to register newborns and real estate property and access pensions. State-owned universities, schools, and hospitals serve irreplaceable functions for most citizens. Following a tremendous public sector enlargement during the 1970s, the state became the principal employer of Syrians—1.4 million were estimated to be on the government payroll in 2010.[2]

The regime intensified its efforts to meld itself with these state institutions when the uprising began in early 2011 and the regime saw that its survival was at stake. President Bashar al-Assad has rhetorically tied the regime's destiny to that of the country as a whole, regularly reiterating that his departure from power would cause the breakdown of Syria, while his perseverance through the conflict would allow the state and its institutions to survive, despite the loss of territories to the opposition. As he stated in an interview with the BBC in February 2015: "It wasn't about me to survive, it was about Syria."[3]

The regime has touted its efforts to keep state institutions running despite the war, frequently implying that the regime is the state. In November 2014, for instance, the minister of higher education praised the accomplishments of the public university system, which had enrolled 650,000 students and graduated more than 50,000 each year, despite the unfolding conflict.[4] Two months later, as the western city of Homs confronted an acute gas shortage, the regime lauded the city for its efforts to ensure that state-owned hospitals, bakeries, water treatment plants, and other facilities continued to function.[5]

How the Regime Consolidated Its Assets

Since the war began, the regime has centralized many of its administrative functions, distributing critical services from the capital cities of Syria's governorates,[6] where its affiliated forces are also deployed, rather than from outposts in the countryside, as it had done prior to the uprising. This has encouraged masses of displaced civilians to move to these areas—and reinforced the regime's overall narrative that its paramount task is not protecting itself but protecting the state. The regime has also kept much of the population of opposition-held areas dependent on these strongholds if they are to access services.

These state institutions are well protected by security forces affiliated with the regime. Syria's administrative offices are all located beside regime-held intelligence checkpoints. Government bureaucracy and public administration buildings—including the administrative heads of universities, hospitals, courts, and facilities for obtaining personal documents—are all within the vicinity of the regime's intelligence agencies, including military intelligence, state security, air force intelligence, and political security branches, and Syrians who visit them must pass under the attentive eye of regime security personnel.

Syrian cities with administrative offices have been steadily militarized through the deployment of army divisions and the establishment of military bases. An illuminating example is the regime-held center of Daraa, in southern Syria, where, in 2012, a major sports stadium was converted into a military base from which helicopter attacks could be launched. Similarly, a campsite used by the Baath youth organization (formally called the Baath Vanguards, Taleaa al-Baath) in Idlib was quickly transformed into a military base.

In addition to the regular military forces, locally recruited militias have been widely deployed.[7] The regime has directly armed locals and organized them

into local popular committees (*lijan shabiya*). While many people involved may be more motivated by a desire to protect their own neighborhoods than by a wish to affiliate themselves ideologically or politically with the regime, they inevitably contribute to the regime's security effort.

At the same time, the regime has effectively left opposition-held areas tethered to the state's institutions. For instance, people living on the outskirts of Daraa must visit the regime's outpost in the city center to collect official papers and state salaries.

This has already fostered an informal microeconomy, with people transporting salaries and documents from regime- to opposition-held areas in return for conspicuous bribes. Both the enterprising middleman and the government employee dispensing the service—in violation of state policy that the recipient must be present—receive a commission, providing them and their communities with new income and a degree of relative affluence.[8]

Many civilians have decided to leave their houses and move into relative safe havens under the regime's control. Even opponents of Assad have family members who have fled areas of active conflict for areas under the regime's control, both for safety reasons and to get access to the services that make regime-controlled areas relatively more livable than the rest of the country.[9]

> **The high concentration of civilians in areas under Assad's control also works to the regime's advantage, as it can create a disincentive for the opposition to attack.**

The high concentration of civilians in areas under Assad's control also works to the regime's advantage, as it can create a disincentive for the opposition to attack. This was exemplified by a 2014 rebel shelling of the Mahatta neighborhood in Daraa.[10] The neighborhood was under regime control, but many of the dozens killed in the attack had fled to Mahatta from opposition areas, meaning the attack was, in effect, an attack on the same families that had been providing support to the opposition—and the shelling had the effect of increasing popular support for the regime among staunch supporters of the opposition. This created tension among groups within the local opposition and, according to one opposition activist, made the groups reluctant to carry out further attacks on regime-controlled Daraa.[11]

Syrians' dependence on the state reaches beyond the country's borders. Until the regime changed its policy in May 2015, Syrian passport holders in neighboring Lebanon, Turkey, or even far away in Europe or the United States were required to mobilize a network inside regime-held cities in order to get their official documents. Some have paid up to $2,000 to renew their passports to be able to travel.[12] This fee was not a newly declared, official administrative charge but a bribe distributed among the state employees authorized to produce official passports.

Indeed, it could be said that the regime is compelling support from many Syrians by holding the Syrian state hostage.

But as the conflict stretches on over time, the regime's stranglehold on the state is exhausting its institutional capacity to properly serve the population. Rather than exerting pressure on the regime to compromise, the war increases cronyism and corruption in government institutions, helping the regime to further infiltrate the civil service apparatus and tighten its grip on the Syrian state. The sale of official documents, for example, creates incentives among public servants to remain loyal to the state (to continue collecting bribes), all while encouraging them to issue documents in a selective manner (only to those who are able to pay).

The conflict has also reduced government budgets and forced sharp cuts in subsidies on strategic goods such as bread and diesel fuel, meaning that, even in regime-held areas, in the near future they risk becoming difficult to find, more expensive, and accessible only to those who are willing to bribe regime personnel in offices charged with distributing these goods.[13] Millions of ordinary families still depend on those subsidies—a cornerstone of the social contract between Syrians and their state—and they are increasingly becoming involved in the regime's corrupt logic.

The regime's use of the state as a weapon has another destructive effect on the state itself. In Wadi Barada, on the outskirts of Damascus, the government continued to pay teachers' salaries and supply educational materials to local communities even after the area had fallen into rebel control. Yet it performed these state functions in a discriminatory manner, firing all teachers active in the opposition and arresting any students who had been active in the opposition as they were leaving Wadi Barada and other towns to take their secondary school exams. Using the state as a weapon in this manner deprives the state of its qualified employees, impairing its long-term functioning.[14]

The Case of Deir Ezzor

Beyond centralizing the organs of the state from the countryside into urban areas, the regime has also moved its institutions within cities, shifting them to neighborhoods that remain firmly under regime control. In Deir Ezzor, a town in eastern Syria populated by Arab tribes that has a history of opposition to Assad, the regime has succeeded in mobilizing residents to defend the portion of the city it holds—the portion of the city where state institutions have also been relocated and services are now provided.

Before the uprising, most state institutions were housed in the central neighborhood of Dawar al-Tamween, and the middle class lived primarily in the neighborhood of Howeika. Between June 2012 and early 2013, when these two neighborhoods fell under rebel control, the regime moved its administrative offices to the middle- and lower-middle-class neighborhood of Joura (see map at front). The demography of the city shifted as well, with many former residents of Howeika and affluent areas in surrounding towns streaming into the district.

At one point, the battle for control of Deir Ezzor threatened to push regime forces out of the city entirely. In what a Syrian army officer said was a sign of how important it was for the regime to maintain an administrative presence in Syria's east, in June 2012 Assad even sent the elite, Damascus-based Republican Guard to help defend the regime-held quarters of Deir Ezzor—this, when many observers had assumed that the regime would be willing to abandon the region wholesale.[15] After fierce clashes with the opposition in late 2012, the regime fully established neighborhood services in Joura to provide for the entire city, and it has kept them secure through its security branches and major military complexes. By the end of 2013, with Joura protected, Assad's forces had regained their footing.

The advances of the so-called Islamic State in Deir Ezzor and the surrounding countryside in December 2014 did not discourage the regime from staunchly defending these areas. The highly protected Joura neighborhood is the regime's center of resistance against the group, offering citizens services despite the unfolding battle. Hundreds of thousands of people have moved to these areas from both within the city and the countryside, as well as from Islamic State–controlled Raqqa, in the north.[16] The regime's counterinsurgency strategy went as far as organizing and training Sunni Arab tribes in Deir Ezzor to defend Joura and prevent Islamic State advances from the countryside into the neighborhood.[17]

By mobilizing locals on behalf of the state, the regime sheltered its strategic hub from attack. The regime has also praised locals in their efforts to defend the city. The minister of justice, originally from Deir Ezzor, visited the city in July 2014, and, in a speech, he lauded the sons of Deir Ezzor for their efforts in protecting the national interest.[18]

In addition, major tribal leaders from the region, along with important figures from the area, such as the local mufti and the heads of the university and local Red Crescent society, attended a conference in Damascus in August 2014 to condemn the Islamic State and proclaim their commitment to fighting it.[19] Regardless of whether they personally oppose or support the regime, these leaders have a vested interest in defeating the Islamic State and buttressing the city and state services upon which they depend. For them, this is the only alternative to the Islamic State—a group whose spectacular brutality in suppressing the populations under its control is well known and widely feared, even by those who have been at war for four years.

Preventing Alternatives

What is widely known as the moderate Syrian opposition is actually an array of different political and military groups that operate with various degrees of independence from, cooperation with, and antagonism toward one another. Many claim an affiliation with the label of the Free Syrian Army, with perhaps the most

defining characteristic of the moderate Syrian opposition being what it is not: neither the regime nor religious extremists bent on waging global holy war.

Even given the elusive definition, fractured nature, and associated weaknesses of the moderate Syrian opposition, it poses the most significant threat to Assad's rule, which may help explain why it is here that the regime has directed its most punishing military campaigns. The regime's intense pressure on the moderate opposition has played a significant role in keeping it divided and unable to implement a unified approach to local administration and service provision across the regions of the country it controls.

Besides the moderate opposition, two groups in Syria have achieved differing degrees of semiautonomy: the Kurds—led by Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD) and offshoots of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)— and the Islamic State. These two groups have been better organized and more powerful in the areas they hold than the more moderate rebel groups, and thus they have had some success in building parallel governance and service systems.

Yet both the Kurds and the Islamic State have a shaky foundation: the populations they govern still rely on many services provided by the state.

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Destroying Aleppo's Experiment

Prior to the uprising, the most affluent neighborhoods in Aleppo—then and still Syria's most populous city—were found in its western sections. As protests morphed into armed conflict and rebel fighters closed in on the city, many of its wealthy residents left. By the end of 2012, opposition forces had secured control over eastern Aleppo, and, thanks to the support of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and foreign donors, this area flourished to such an extent that Aleppines were coming from the regime-controlled part of the city to buy food and supplies.

The opposition set up embryonic governance structures, establishing a council for the Aleppo Governorate (*majlis mohafazat halab*) and a city council (*majlis madinat halab*). These institutions effectively provided water, electricity, and trash removal services, while local groups organized new aid institutions to dispense food and medical supplies and conduct basic rebuilding projects.[20] In spite of continued clashes between the regime and rebels, the eastern region under opposition control became viewed as a safe and desirable place to live, so much so that people from surrounding areas began to flock to it. A common refrain in comparing western and eastern Aleppo at the time was that, in the east, "There is life" (*fee hayat*). By early 2013, the population in the east had reached as many as 1.5 million people.[21]

The regime's subsequent bombing campaign, however, put a decisive end to these developments. In the latter half of 2013, the Syrian regime began raining

"barrels of death" (*baramel al-mawt*)—oil drums filled with explosives and shrapnel that are typically dropped from helicopters—over eastern Aleppo. It is difficult to determine exactly what the attacks were targeting—civilians, infrastructure, or military positions—due to both the notorious inaccuracy of barrel bombing and the limited information available in a war context.

The effects, however, went well beyond the immediate toll of death and destruction: the attacks devastated efforts to reestablish a sense of normal life in eastern Aleppo, with an estimated 600,000 residents fleeing opposition sections of the city over the course of three months.[22] The NGOs and foreign donors quickly shelved their rebuilding and development projects out of fear that their work and personnel would be harmed,[23] while the bombing campaign also chased away many of the skilled bureaucrats who had been employed by the newly established opposition governorate and city council.[24]

In parallel, the regime closed the crossing from the west to the east; since then, going from one side of Aleppo to another has required leaving the city in order to circle part of it, getting on the road to Hama, and entering back through another entrance, passing through a combination of more than 40 government and opposition checkpoints.[25]

The local administrations set up by the opposition were thus hampered, and their ability to provide services and help meet people's daily needs destroyed. The barrel bombing severed the means by which Syrians in Aleppo could receive public services from an alternative political authority, one that could also facilitate reconstruction outside the aegis of the regime.[26] The effects on eastern Aleppo are clear enough today: people who remain in the city say garbage sits piled on the streets and the smell of death permeates the air. Rebel forces continue to operate from the area, but the regime's tactics have effectively prevented the sections of Aleppo that are outside of its control from developing into viable alternatives to its authority.

The Siege of Eastern Ghouta

Douma is another rebel-held city that had some temporary success in providing a credible administrative alternative. The suburb is just 10 kilometers (about 6 miles) from Damascus in the Eastern Ghouta region that forms the outskirts of the capital. Rather than relying on barrel bombing as in Aleppo, in the fall of 2013 Syrian regime forces surrounded Douma, cutting off access and launching attacks from the periphery, effectively enforcing a siege of the area.

Earlier in 2013, Douma leaders and civil servants who defected from the regime created a reasonably efficient local service council providing some services autonomously from the regime, including street cleaning, the regulation of real estate contracts, and the issuance of birth and death certificates. While their administration often employed Islamic phrases and symbols, it was moderate and its services were widely used by local residents.[27] The suburb became an administrative center for opposition-held Eastern Ghouta. This was

possible in large part because Douma had been the capital of the Rif Dimashq Governorate, giving it both the facilities and local civil servants necessary to perform such functions independently of Damascus.

Douma's drive to create a functioning administration was spurred by the fact that it has no open border with a neighboring country. This meant that local groups in the region were forced to negotiate with and rely on each other to achieve any progress. By contrast, in opposition areas in northern Syria along the Turkish border, opposition figures can simply cross into Turkey and seek out financial support to pursue their projects independently, creating a much more chaotic environment.

The siege of Douma, however, slowly drained the city's ability to develop as a thriving center where civilians could live without some of the services supplied by the regime. People from elsewhere were unable to enter Douma, and locals could not reach Damascus to collect salaries and official paperwork.[28]

In spite of this, the city of Douma has remained a nominal base of operations for both opposition fighters and civilian services. The local service council has been functioning since early 2013, while a military council led by Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), the strongest rebel faction in Eastern Ghouta, manages security affairs. Douma is limited, however, in both its military and administrative capabilities. Former civil servants perform some public services that had been provided by the government, but these do not extend beyond minimal tasks.[29]

The impact of the regime's siege and sporadic bombing campaigns has been to make survival—simply avoiding death and finding food and shelter—the primary concern of Doumanis. Douma is nearly unrecognizable after two years of siege. Jaysh al-Islam and allied rebel factions have maintained physical control over much of the area but, because of the siege, they have been unable to provide electricity, bread, medicine, education, communication, or even heating oil for the winter. This has severely eroded support among the local civilian population for the armed opposition, even if it has been the regime's siege that has cut off local access to services.[30]

By forcing Doumanis to focus on survival,[31] the regime has rendered the more bureaucratic functions of the alternative state, like real estate documents and marriage licenses, irrelevant.

The result in Douma has been similar to that in eastern Aleppo—it has not been possible to establish a viable alternative to the Syrian state.

Controlled Autonomy in the Kurdish Areas

Part of the regime's strength in maintaining the functions of a state comes from the flexible approach it takes toward its rivals. While it has taken pains to destroy and deny the moderate opposition's efforts to provide services, with the Kurdish enclaves in Syria's northeast, it has been content to maintain only a strategic military and administrative foothold. This has freed up Assad's military forces to focus on fighting the opposition, while allowing the regime to continue to

provide official documents and other administrative services, reminding residents that it is still an influential presence upon which they depend.

Syria's Kurds have long been marginalized by the Syrian regime; hundreds of thousands of Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and the regime forcefully repressed a Kurdish uprising in 2004. But a slow process of recognizing cultural rights that began in 2010 was quickened with the outbreak of the Syrian crisis the following year, with the regime reversing its citizenship policy.[32] As the war has continued, the regime has made further conciliatory moves toward the Kurds.

In July 2012, the regime withdrew most of its forces from Kurdish-populated areas while maintaining several security and military bases and administrative offices. Since this withdrawal, the PYD, the dominant Kurdish party in Syria, has established independent, self-governing political units in the Kurdish-majority areas in the north of the country. The PYD has undeniably succeeded in becoming the dominant military and security force in the eastern Jazira region near the Iraqi border, as well as in the two Kurdish towns adjacent to greater Aleppo, Afrin and Kobane. The party has also succeeded in becoming the provider of basic needs—it subsidizes crops for farmers and provides water and electricity.

While the Jazira region is the heartland of the PYD, certain areas remain firmly under regime control. The capital of the easternmost province, Hasakah, is completely held by the regime. Though police disappeared from the streets of the second-largest town of Qamishli upon the regime's retreat, regime security forces have retained a presence in a local military complex.[33] This security area also houses the major hospital for the city and surrounding towns and villages.

It is the regime that still issues important paperwork such as passports and school certificates in the Jazira region. It also manages flights from the still-functioning (and regime-controlled) airport in Qamishli. This duality in governance reminds locals that while the PYD may be ruling their area, the party is unable to provide some of the most crucial state functions that would give the Kurdish experiment in semiautonomy lasting legitimacy.

The strange combination of minimal regime military presence and continued administrative service provision reflects a stalemate between the PYD and the regime. Though it is presumably in the PYD's interest to get rid of the security forces and provide all services itself, a fight to displace the regime would cripple state institutions. These bureaucratic and administrative functions of the state are vital to Kurdish inhabitants in the region, on whose support the PYD depends. The Assad regime, perhaps cognizant of this fact, has allowed this odd arrangement to continue. This does not seem to be lost on local residents; a running joke in Qamishli is that the regime could withdraw from Qardaha (Assad's hometown, considered the heart of the regime's popular support) tomorrow, but even then it would not withdraw from Qamishli.

The Islamic State: Cultivating a Distasteful Alternative

There is one group the regime has comparatively left alone to build its own independent administration—the Islamic State. The Islamic State's expansion has benefited the regime by undermining other opposition groups, while also strengthening the idea that only the regime can save Syria and Syrians from this fanatic alternative.

The Islamic State emerged onto the international stage in 2013. It progressively made territorial gains—mostly at the expense of other opposition groups—without encountering regime resistance. Even the Islamic State's spectacular takeover of Raqqa, a governorate capital and an opposition stronghold, in early 2014 did not trigger a military response from the regime. As soon as the Islamic State seized the city from the armed opposition, it promoted Raqqa as a symbol of its power and a demonstration of its project to establish an Islamic caliphate (*dawlat al-khelafeh*). This confirmed many Syrians' worst fears that the group intended to establish its own tyrannical version of a state.

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And, unimpeded by the barrel bombs and sieges that decimated grassroots organizations in Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta, the organization quickly acted on its promises to provide an administrative alternative. Perhaps most significantly to locals early on, it established a court system and imposed laws. For example, morality police (*hesba*) began monitoring price controls to keep the costs of everything from foodstuffs to medical operations at reasonable levels. The group created a real sense of governmental rule for residents. By late 2014, Raqqa was known as the capital of the Islamic State; the moderate opposition never bestowed that label on any of the cities it controlled, nor was it able to create the same sense of a military and administrative stronghold.

But the Islamic State's alternative capital is one where executions are carried out in public and bodies are hung in the street. This unmatched barbarity has played directly into the regime's hands, by highlighting what an alternative to Assad would mean, both to Syrians and the international community.

While there is no definitive proof that the regime had a long-calculated plan to enable the Islamic State's expansion, several incidents suggest that Assad at least capitalized on the opportunity the Islamic State created. The regime never subjected Raqqa to the same level of air raids that devastated other rebel-held areas. Though Raqqa was first held by other groups, there was always an Islamist presence, and the regime has long been suspected of encouraging that presence to undermine the moderate political opposition. This was most clear, perhaps, early in the uprising, when the regime released from prison dozens of prominent Islamist fighters, who then quickly joined and became leaders in the most hard-line ranks of the armed opposition.[34]

The events in Raqqa also illustrate the importance of administrative centers to the regime's strategy of holding state institutions. After losing control of the city in the spring of 2013, the regime withdrew in the summer of 2014 from the nearby Tabqa air base and from the headquarters of the Syrian army's Seventeenth Division. Even though Tabqa had been an important base for launching air strikes in eastern Syria, once the provincial capital was lost and the regime was unable to impose administrative influence over the province, Assad's forces abandoned these facilities.

In contrast, the regime has been holding its ground and fighting desperately to keep the Deir Ezzor air base since 2011, even after the Islamic State gained control of all the territory around the city in 2014. Until February 2015, the regime's control of the city center allowed it to maintain administrative dominance, and it continued to pay the salaries of state employees in areas under Islamic State control. Since then, however, the Islamic State's siege of Deir Ezzor has prevented state employees outside Deir Ezzor from reaching regime-controlled areas to collect their pay.

In Raqqa, Assad's forces may well be allowing the U.S.-led international coalition against the Islamic State to do the regime's work. Similar to the way in which the regime's bombing campaigns weakened the efficacy of rebel rule, the coalition air strikes have caused military and economic strains that have limited the Islamic State's ability to govern. The regime has primed itself to move in, not only militarily but administratively, should the Islamic State be sufficiently weakened. Signs of this are already apparent on the ground. By the end of 2013, the pro-Assad paramilitary National Defense Forces had established a group outside Raqqa in Athria, a small city on the road to Homs, apparently waiting to conduct an offensive against Raqqa should the opportunity arise. In parallel, the regime has also created a kind of provincial administration-in-waiting, hosting Raqqa's most prominent tribal leaders in the capital. These preparations indicate how important it is to the regime not just to assert military control, should the Islamic State be routed from Raqqa, but also to reestablish administrative relevance.[35]

The Assad Regime Clings to Power

The Syrian state is the Assad regime's greatest resource. A monopoly over state institutions has given the regime the ability to claim that it is the only entity serving Syrian citizens and to deprive the moderate opposition of legitimacy. Despite four years of war, the regime's grip on the state has enabled it to force Syrians and the international community alike to deal with it as the country's legitimate political authority and to accept the idea that the Assad regime is actually the Syrian state. In other words, the continued access to state-administered services only in areas held by forces loyal to Assad has strengthened Syrians' perceptions that the state exists only where the regime is present. And

the international community is fearful that a collapse of the Assad regime could entail the breakdown of the state altogether—and even worse, empower the Islamic State's expansion.

At the same time, Syria's political opposition today is a fractured mess located almost entirely outside the country and with almost no legitimacy on the ground in Syria, even in the few areas in which moderate armed opposition groups still operate. The international community and Syrians themselves are increasingly speaking as if the conflict has come down to a choice between two bad options—that as abhorrent as the Assad regime may be, a future Syria under it is still preferable to one in which the Islamic State and its radical jihadist ideology are ruling a functional caliphate in the heart of the Middle East.

But this is a skewed perspective of the situation. The Assad regime will not save the Syrian state. Since the conflict began, the regime has continued to protect public buildings or provide services only as far as this helped to maintain its legitimacy. As soon as the opposition has gained ground, seizing public buildings and attempting to serve in the same role, the regime has responded by bombing the very institutions it worked so hard to protect.

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In eastern Aleppo, for example, the regime bombed schools and hospitals, in addition to agencies established by the opposition to administer and provide services to Syrians living outside the regime's control.[36]

More recently, after rebel forces captured the northern province of Idlib and its capital city in April–May 2015, regime forces used barrel bombing to destroy the national hospital and the governorate building as well as the Red Crescent office, preventing any alternative entity from being able to run these state institutions.[37] A similar scenario could occur in Daraa, whose outskirts are in opposition control, with the regime only maintaining a hold on the center of the city.

In this way, the regime's loss of territory to the opposition will only tighten its monopoly over the state, further tie the population to its rule, and diminish the ability of state institutions to serve their intended functions.

In addition, as the regime falls short of resources, it will increasingly tie access to state services to loyalty to the regime, allowing only those who are involved in its corrupted network to benefit from service provision. This will eventually bind even more Syrian citizens to the regime, while leaving a large portion of the rest essentially stateless or under the control of the Islamic State.

An example of this trend was evident in May 2015, when the regime issued a new decree allowing Syrians living outside the country to renew their passports in foreign consular offices for $400, which will directly feed into the Damascus treasury. In addition to paying the costly fees, which many cannot afford, Syrians

who want to obtain a new passport must undertake endless bureaucratic procedures, which can only be accelerated by bribing the consular staff.[38]

All in all, the regime is poised to increasingly manipulate access to state services, consigning Syrians to comply with its rule if they wish to receive education, health assistance, travel documents, or any other of the most fundamental services.

Saving the Syrian State

To prevent the Assad regime from tightening its grip even further, an alternate entity must be empowered to administer the Syrian state. In areas where the moderate opposition has taken over militarily, opposition groups must be encouraged to carry out those functions and supported in those efforts. At the same time, the regime must be prevented from destroying these institutions—and the opposition's ability to run them once military forces loyal to Assad withdraw from an area. These two steps must be pursued simultaneously.

> **To prevent the Assad regime from tightening its grip even further, an alternate entity must be empowered to administer the Syrian state.**

The first requires that the opposition's Western and regional state backers (in particular Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) pursue a strategy that goes beyond simply providing military assistance to opposition factions and also supports the transition and restructuring of these armed factions and the political opposition into a more coherent and unified entity. Such an approach would include helping the political opposition to reestablish state institutions in territories outside the regime's control. This would help reinforce the political opposition ties' with the armed groups, which both have an interest in reinstating these services to reinvigorate their legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

This can only happen, however, if the second step is taken and these areas are afforded some degree of protection from the ability of the regime's air forces to bomb them out of existence. To accomplish this, the United States and its Western allies should provide air protection from regime attacks in areas held by the opposition.

Taken together, such policies would establish much-needed coordination between Syria's armed and political opposition, enable the opposition to end the regime's monopoly on state service provision, and disassociate the regime from the state—allowing the state to be upheld even as the regime retracts and preventing the emergence of vacuums prone to exploitation by the Islamic State or other extremist groups.

All of this would help set the conditions for a political settlement to the conflict. A viable alternative to the Assad regime as a provider of basic services would weaken the regime's fundamental claim to legitimacy in the eyes of Syrians—both in areas it controls and areas controlled by the opposition—and

the international community. From this weakened bargaining position, the regime would be far more willing to make concessions at the negotiating table that it has, to date, refused to make.

While many Syrians and interested foreign powers would like to see the end of the Assad regime, few—whether supporters of the regime or the opposition—want to see the erosion of the Syrian state. However, this is almost assured if the Assad regime's stranglehold on state institutions is allowed to continue.

Notes

1   See "Barak: Fall of Assad Would Be a 'Blessing' for ME," *Jerusalem Post*, December 11, 2011, www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Barak-Fall-of-Assad-would-be-a-blessing-for-ME.

2   Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010 Census, www.cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter3/TAB-4-3-2011.htm.

3   Bashar al-Assad, interview by Jeremy Bowen, BBC News, February 10, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31327153.

4   Dr. Mohammad Mardini, minister of higher education, interview on "From the End" program on the official Syrian TV station, December 7, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9x6Suf4nLiE.

5   Talal al-Barazi, Homs governor, interview on "From the End" program, on the official Syrian TV station, January 18, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJn5MZN0XEk&feature=em-uploademail.

6   This comprises twelve cities in Syria's fourteen governorates, as well as the city of Qamishli in Hasakah Governorate in the country's northeast. The cities of Raqqa and Douma are administrative centers on paper, but because they are held by actors other than the Syrian government, they are not currently functioning as centers on the ground. Qamishli, though not a governorate capital on paper, is performing all of the functions of one.

7   The regime has both used existing forces and created new local forces to protect its institutions and monitor society. See "Syrians Are Organizing Themselves to Protect the State Institutions and Their Residential Neighborhoods," Syriasteps, September 8, 2013, www.syriasteps.com/index.php?d=110&id=109546.

8   Author interview with Saraqeb resident, Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2014.

9   Author interview with an employee of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, Beirut, Lebanon, July 2014. In an interview with the BBC, Bashar al-Assad stated that "families of those [opposition] fighters, they came to the government in order to have refuge, not vice versa. You can go now and see where they live and who takes care of them. . . . Most of the areas where the rebels take over, the civilians flee and come to our areas. . . . The natural reaction of any person, of the people, of the families, of the population, is to flee from any area where they expect a conflict. . . . And they come to the government." See Bashar al-Assad, interview by Jeremy Bowen.

10   See "At Least 20 Killed in Syria by Mortar Fire at Election Rally in Support of Bashar al-Assad," *Daily Mail Online*, May 23, 2014, http://dailym.ai/1JJjuQs.

11   From an interview with a Daraa resident and activist (via Skype), October 2014.

12   Mohammed al-Khatieb, "For Syrians, Passports Are Solid Gold," *Syria Deeply*, November 11, 2013, www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2013/11/2583/syrians-passports-solid-gold.

13   *Syria: Alienation and Violence: Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014*, Syrian Center for Policy Research, March 2015, http://scpr-syria.org/att/SCPR_Alienation_Violence_Report_2014_EN.pdf.

14   Author telephone interview with Wadi Barada resident and Free Syrian Army member, December 2014.

15   Author telephone interview with Syrian army officer, May 2014.

16   Author interview with Red Crescent staff, January 2015.

17   "Volunteers With the Syrian Army to Fight Against Daesh in Deir al-Zour Province," Almayadeen TV, December 24, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6AlSg9Kzt0.

18   Syrian Official TV, "The Minister of Justice Visited Deir az-Zour and Declared That Syria Continues to Confront Terrorism," July 18, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtpzDCkOgDg.

19   "Tribal Leaders of Deir az-Zour Assert Their Stance Against Terrorism in All of Its Forms," SANA, August 10, 2014, www.sana.sy/شويخ-عشائر-جوجهو-عامهدح-ةظفاحم-ريد-الزور-يؤكـ-2.html.

20   Press conference by the opposition governor of Aleppo. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=makVa05xRDc.

21   Author interview with nongovernmental organization employee working in eastern Aleppo, Beirut, Lebanon, June 2014.

22   See "Potential Death Falling From the Sky," Violation Documentation Center in Syria, March 2014, www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1394885517-Arabic.pdf.

23   Author interview with a former director of an Aleppo-based nongovernmental organization supported by a Western donor, Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2014.

24   Author interview with former government and later local council employee in Aleppo, Gaziantep, Turkey, May 2014.

25   Author interview with former government employee (via Skype), August 2014.

26   Author phone interview with United Nations staff, August 2014.

27   Author interview with Red Crescent employee in Beirut, April 2014.

28   Author telephone interview with an employer in Damascus, October 2014.

29   Author interview with Douma resident (via Skype), April 2014.

30   Ibid.

31   One Doumani recently sold his entire house for $700 in order to buy food for his family. See "Home Is Sold for $700 to Buy Food," All4Syria.com, February 20, 2015, http://all4syria.info/Archive/194854.

32   "Damascus, the First Public Celebration of Nowruz," Al Jazeera Arabic, March 21, 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0WpCuHiq_Q.

33   Several Skype interviews in 2014 with Kurdish employees at Syrian state institutions, who confirmed that the Syrian government still regularly paid salaries for thousands of employees, though these had to be collected in either the city of Hasakah or Qamishli.

34   "President Bashar al-Assad of Syria Issued a Decree Granting a General Amnesty for All Crimes," *Thawra*, June 1, 2011 http://thawra.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=28081056820110601020853.

35   Author phone interview with National Defense Forces fighter, April 2015.

36   On Aleppo see "Aleppo: At Least Nine Dead After Syrian Army Airstrike 'Targeted School,'" Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, April 19, 2015.

37   On Idlib see Al-Araby al-Jadid, "The Syrian Opposition Challenges Administration of Idlib," May 25, 2015, http://bit.ly/1IVdKC6.

38   See "Regime Increases Passport Renewal Fees for Syrians Abroad," *Syrian Observer*, April 23, 2015.

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