In wartime Syria, local councils and civil institutions fill a gap

Thursday 29 December 2016, by AL-SHAMI Leila, MORITZ-RABSON Daniel, YASSIN-KASSAB Robin (Date first published: 31 July 2016).

Amid the visible destruction of the Syrian war, the country has also witnessed a less-publicized transformation: democratic structures have arisen in places controlled by militant organizations.

Where rebel groups have taken over areas previously held by Bashar al-Assad's government, local residents have begun to organize councils to provide basic functions for their communities, who now enjoy freedoms that were prohibited by Assad. For the first time since the Ba'ath party gained control of Syria in 1963, democratic elections for appointments to local and provincial councils have taken place.

Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, authors of "Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War," met with Syrians who fled to Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan to learn more about the details of the local councils and their structure. They spoke with *NewsHour Weekend* about the roles of these organizations and the challenges they face.

In Syria, what functions do local community councils provide for people who are still in the country?

Al-Shami: The local councils are in liberated areas where the regime has completely withdrawn or has been pushed out. Now basic administrative units are functioning there, so they're responsible for the provision of all social services, and they're responsible for water supplies, electricity supplies. They often work with external donors to distribute humanitarian aid, or aid which they've collected from the local community. They're providing support to the makeshift hospitals, makeshift education facilities. In some areas they've also been responsible for growing and distributing food, specifically in communities which have been under siege, such as Darayya. And in Darayya they've set up a fantastic local library, and they also have legal services. They also sometimes operate security services or community police forces. It depends on their size and capacity. "The democratically elected local councils are a glimmer of that hope surviving in the midst of all of this chaos." — Robin Yassin-Kassab

Yassin-Kassab: They are, of course, in survival mode, and that's that sad thing. They're dealing with the day-to-day, trying to keep life going under bombardment, under siege.

Are they in less of a survival mode in places controlled by more moderate rebels?

Al-Shami: The level of survival sustenance they have is in relation to how much of a target that community is for the regime and for its ally Russia. Some of the communities which have been most under attack by the regime are communities which have had very successful local councils and have had very successful experience in building these grassroot structures, such as Darayya. It seems that these democratic structures are precisely what has been under attack by the regime in a lot of

places.

Who has provided funding for the councils?

Al-Shami: Governments have provided money through the provincial councils, and lots of international aid agencies are sending things through the local councils. Lots of Syrian aid agencies.

Yassin-Kassab: In many places, there's nothing really getting through, and people are trying to grow food on their rooftops, and so on. The real, fundamental point about sustainability is that if you got access to Aleppo, you could take them water purifiers, tons of food, and you build hospitals. And then the next day, these things would be bombed by the regime and Russia. So these things are ultimately not sustainable, of course, and won't be sustainable if the world continues to sit back and watch.

What is their geographic spread?

Yassin-Kassab: They're in the liberated areas [rebel-held areas]. There's a lot of them in the south, in Daraa, where the regime has been pulled out of that southern province, reaching down to the border with Jordan. In the suburbs in Damascus, which are liberated from the regime, and usually besieged, so places like Darayya, places like Douma, Harasta. Idlib province, part of Hama province. A little bit of Homs province. A bit of the north of Latakia province, and large areas of Aleppo province and Aleppo city.

Al-Shami: In areas that are under regime control, there are councils which are still operating in secret.

How inclusive are the councils? Do they breach sectarian and ideological divides and include women?

Al-Shami: I think the council structures themselves have not been inclusive to women at all. There's very few women that are sitting on local councils. What they try to do is include people who are selected to the council for their technical, professional expertise. They've tried to include people from prominent families and tribes. They've always included, in mixed communities, minority groups, so people from different religions or sects.

There's been lots of campaigning by activists to call for greater women's greater representation.

Yassin-Kassab: There are members who are liberals and democrats, and then the more moderate sort of Islamist as well has been involved, and then nationalists and ex-Baathists and so on. But in a way it's not been so important. In general, they're non-ideological bodies, particularly at the local level, which, in a way, looks like a way forward. It doesn't matter if one guy is a leftist and the guy next to him is an Islamist. They're there because one of them knows something about how to get the water system working, and another one knows something about education, and they're working about practical things for the sake of the community.

How do rebel factions interact with the local councils?

Al-Shami: I think it's been very different, the experience of cooperation between these civilians and administrative structures and armed groups. And I think some of the difference often comes down to whether armed groups are the local community itself. Because in many areas, the armed groups that are operating there, they're the sons and brothers and fathers from that neighborhood. The men have picked up arms to defend their community. So then they're also part of the same families or the same networks as the local councils. In those kind of areas, cooperation's been very broad. Some

councils, and Darayya is one example, they've specifically set up structures to improve cooperation. So for example, the military brigade in that area attends some of the meetings of the local council, and they ensure cooperation so that the militia is essentially working as a security force which is subject to popular and local control and to civil control. So that's obviously an ideal model. That's not the case everywhere.

How are these councils important for Syria's future?

Yassin-Kassab: It's difficult to remember that in 2011, 2012 — it was this brief window — it looked like there could be a completely different future in Syria and the wider Middle East. Change was happening at a tremendous rate, and people were really interested in democratic ideas. These weren't seen as something imposed from the West or imported from the West. They were seen as immediate necessities. And people were discussing what that meant: how could people run their own lives, how could they live without dictatorship.

The democratically elected local councils are a glimmer of that hope surviving in the midst of all of this chaos.

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P.S.

* July 31, 2016 at 3:05 PM EST:
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/civil-society-emerges-syria-war/