

# SYRIAN LOCAL COUNCILS IN THE EYES OF THEIR COMMUNITIES



EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF FIVE COUNCILS  
THROUGH SURVEY METHODOLOGY

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The Day After (TDA) is a Syrian organization that works on supporting democratic transition in Syria. The scope of its work revolves around the following areas: the rule of law, transitional justice, security sector reform, designing electoral systems and electing the constituent assembly, constitutional designing, economic reform and social policies.

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## Introduction

Since the onset of the Syrian revolution, and subsequent armed resistance that evolved to liberate regions of Syria from Assad's control, local councils emerged to immediately fill the governance gap that existed in areas that were liberated by the opposition. As a result of the blockades, sieges, and sudden collapse of services that usually follow the liberation of cities from the regime's control, local councils formed to provide an alternative yet incohesive new form of governance to these communities and assumed responsibility for the delivery of public services to the population in their areas; considering the context of ongoing war, the local councils, face numerous problems and challenges that threaten their existence. Many researchers extensively examined these problems and tried to provide insights and perspectives on ways to improve the performance of councils. However, studies on this topic based on the opinions and attitudes of local residents themselves are scarce, if not entirely absent. Most of the studies published thus far are based on data drawn from members of the councils themselves, or from others parties operating with them<sup>1</sup>. This survey study puts particular focus on the voices of local inhabitants and seeks to identify their opinions and the way they evaluate the performance of their local councils: what do they want from councils? How do they evaluate their performance? What are the difficulties that councils face? How do they manage their villages? What are their needs?

Concentrating on the voices of local residents is an effort to aid in achieving the following:

- Galvanizing democratic participation at the local level and including citizens in decision-making processes regarding the management of their hometowns.
- Improving the relationship between local councils and local residents; strengthening the trust between them, as each are exceptionally aware of the needs and capacity of the council.
- Rationalizing the work of local councils by identifying the needs of the population and their opinions so as to allow councils and their funders to set priorities and formulate more efficient and effective policies and programs.

This research is divided into three chapters:

In the first chapter, titled "Opinions and General Evaluation", we identified the opinions of respondents in general, and the opinions of those who turned to local councils in particular, to glean their perceptions about the performance of the council. The evaluation aimed to assess the manner in which members of the local council treat their constituents and the development of its performance. We tried to identify the percentage of those who turned to each of the local councils, and the reason behind doing so, in order to examine the workload of the councils and better assess their needs. In order to enhance our understanding of these needs, we asked the respondents about the challenges and difficulties faced by the work of their council. In this chapter, we also addressed the issue of foreign funding and how respondents felt about foreign-funded local councils as well as their attitudes towards local elections, and what constitutes the best way, in their opinion, to form their local council in the future.

The second chapter presents the services provided by councils along with the respondents' evaluation of each, from the least to the most favorable evaluation. This chapter consists of five sections, focusing on five different local councils respectively. We also learned the discrepancies between the local council's current performance versus the community's expectations of desired performance. Additionally, we discussed the nature of the relations and communication between the council and the local population: the extent of their knowledge about the way the council is formed, its relations with third parties, the distinction between the council as an institution and its chairmanship, and the engagement in local elections in case they take place.

The third and final chapter is primarily designed to learn more about the civil servants working in local councils. Based on a sample of respondents that are employed in the council, we tried to identify their professional and educational backgrounds, age, ideology, income, marital status and responsibilities (the number of individuals they are responsible to provide for). We have also pinpointed respondents' evaluation of the difficulties and challenges that councils are facing.

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1- Refer to: Analytical Overview (2/2): Survey of Local Councils in the Province of Idlib (Performance and Mechanisms), Omran Center, April 2015 or The Local Administration in Syria, The Research and Management Group, 2014. These studies among others mainly rely on the views of local council members. There is no doubt that this aspect is important and requires more research, but our present research is there to complement the full image by using a different angle: opinions of local residents.

## Brief overview of the councils under study

### The local council in Daraya:

The local council in Daraya governs the city both at the political and services level, and shares its military office with the Shuhada' al-Islam Brigade (Martyrs of Islam), which constitutes the largest faction in Darya and is part of the FSA Southern Front, headed by Major Saeed Nakrash. Shuhada' al-Islam Brigade extends along more than 70% of the fronts in Darya, and the Islamic Union of Ajnad al-Sham (al-Sham soldiers) also takes part in the fighting on some of these fronts. They are the only two military factions in Darya. The estimated number of civilian residents remaining in the city is around twelve thousand, of whom have been suffering from a suffocating siege for more than four years. The council in Daraya was the result of a consensus reached between the armed factions and dignitaries of the city.<sup>2</sup>

### The local council in Al Rastan:

The current council of Al Rastan was formed out of a consensus among relief agencies, armed factions and dignitaries of the town, in addition to a popular acceptance of residents that are dependent on the overall services provided by the council. Several former councils in Al Rastan have not succeeded and underwent grave difficulties, particularly after the previous council was overthrown following popular demonstrations protesting cuts in the provision of bread and basic services. The majority of volunteers working in the council are residents of the town itself, and the financial support primarily comes from charities that built cooperative relations with the council in order to provide services to the people of the city of Al Rastan.

### The local council in Eblin village:

The council was established in early 2013 after the army left the towns of Jabal al-Zawiya around the beginning of 2012. The council consists of five members, in addition to the council President, whom are appointed by consensus by families residing in the village. The council composition includes a representative from each family in the town in addition to one member who represents small families. The president of the council has been appointed by consensus.

### The local council in Idlib city:

The local council of Idlib city was formed prior to the liberation of the city in 2012, in the Turkish city of Rihaniyya. The council has been restructured following an agreement between armed factions and the interim government, after Al Fath army took control of the city of Idlib on April 9, 2015. There is a set of local structures in Idlib, such as the Sharia Board, the Directorate of Health and the Department of Education, that manage existing facilities and provide services to local residents.

### The local council in Maarrat al-Numan:

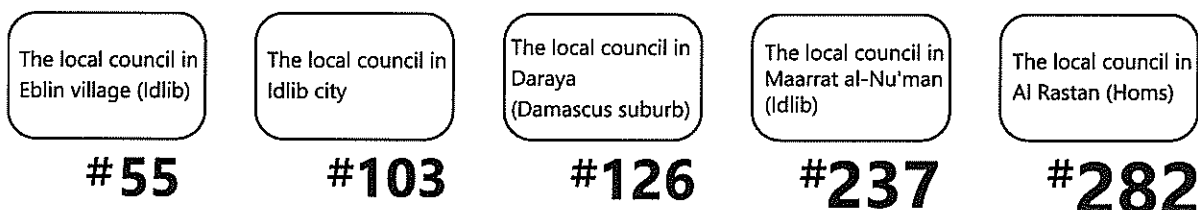
The local council of Maarrat al-Numan was formed following the formation of an electoral college that includes seven consensual candidates. A set of applications were submitted, among which some were rejected and others were approved with the support of existing armed factions and Islamic courts. Following that, the council was created. Unknown assailants burned down the headquarters of the council, and the President of the council and his deputy have subsequently resigned.

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<sup>2</sup>-Dana council, which was the subject of the conducted study, stopped working at the end of August 2016 due to the compulsory signed agreement between the Syrian regime and the opposition fighters to evacuate the city from its residents utterly and to deport the fighters along with their families to Idlib city.

## Research Methodology and Sample

In the period between November 10, 2015 and January 4, 2016, The Day After (TDA) conducted a field survey to gauge local residents' perceptions on the performance of local councils in their respective areas. The survey encompassed 803 respondents: 424 men and 379 women present in the areas governed by five local councils, namely:



Conducting a performance assessment of any party or organization in times of war is extremely difficult; the circumstances of constant shelling, bombardment, and entire sieges makes obtaining a representative sample of Syrians – a partial or even a representative sample in a specific area – an almost impossible task. Therefore, it should be clarified that our goal is not to obtain scientifically random samples representing local residents in each area. Rather, it is to obtain diverse and different samples allowing us to identify respondents' evaluation of local councils' performance as a snapshot of some of the real sentiments on the ground as well as to identify the differences among these councils according to the geographical areas. This research also constitutes an initial contribution to the designing of a questionnaire that can help local councils enhance their capacity by identifying their needs and understanding local assessment of their performance. Moreover, it helps donors ensure that outputs of governance projects they fund are achieved, through the identification of beneficiaries' perceptions and assessments of the local councils performance. Most importantly, we hope that this benefits local residents and contributes to improving their conditions.

Upon selecting local councils to evaluate their performance, we firstly aimed to include different regions within our sample, particularly those under harsh conditions and that have been withstanding a tight blockade for a long time (Daraya as an example). Secondly, we prioritized the areas in which TDA field researchers conducting face-to-face interviews-- that were five in total-- could move around more easily than others. It must be noted that there were limitations in conducting further evaluations of other local councils, due to the comparative approach of our study and the need to disburse a uniform questionnaire for all areas under study, which would not allow us to distribute it in some areas. The Day After welcomes collaboration with local councils interested in identifying how their local residents perceive them, whether in making the necessary modifications to the questionnaire, or in collecting, inserting, and analyzing the data and subsequently writing a final report that would eventually help them work more efficiently and effectively.

# Chapter I

## Opinions and General Evaluation

We first filtered respondents by asking if they were aware that local councils existed in the areas they reside in. The overwhelming majority responded with 'Yes', while a small percentage answered "No" or "I don't know". We then proceeded with the questionnaire only with those respondents who responded with "Yes". The total was 771 respondents answered "Yes", among whom 412 were men and 359 were women<sup>3</sup>.



### Performance and positive interaction

To identify respondents' assessment of the general performance of their local councils, we presented them with a list ranging from 1 to 5, 1 being "very poor" and 5 being "very good". With the exception of the local council in Al Rastan, and to a lesser extent in Maarrat al-Nu'man, the overall assessment of the remaining local councils was average to very good. This indicates that public satisfaction with the performance of the councils could be described as ranging between acceptable and good (Table 1).

Half of the respondents stated that they have visited the council or dealt with one of its departments (Figure 1). Based on the findings, it seems that the percentage of positive evaluation of respondents<sup>4</sup> increases when compared with those who did not interact with the council directly (Table 1 and 2). This demonstrates that communication and interaction between local residents and council members contributes to a greater understanding of both the council's capacity, and challenges, and therefore a more positive evaluation of its overall performance. As shown in Figure 2, most of the reviewers said the interaction was average or good, and only a small percentage of them reported it was poor. Results showed that the main reasons for turning to councils pertained to issues related to relief and health (we will discuss these causes in further details later in the report). Most of these visits took place during the three months preceding this survey (Figure 3). Comparing the percentages of reviewers and the reasons for the visit will help us form a better understanding of the major challenges faced by these councils.

Figure 1. Have you visited the council or dealt with one of its entities?

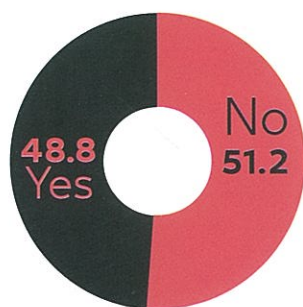


Figure 2. How was the treatment?

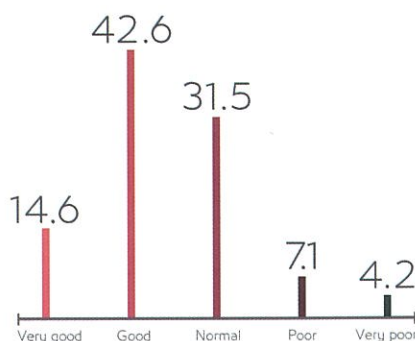


Figure 3. When was this visit?



3- They were distributed as follows: 126 in Daraya, 227 in Al Rastan, 232 in Maarrat al-Nu'man, 55 in Eblin village, and 81 in Idlib. Further details about the data collection process is available in the questionnaire at the end of this report.

4- The total number of reviewers who said they visited the councils or dealt with council staff members is distributed as follows: 126 in Daraya, 111 in Al Rastan, 46 in Idlib, 33 in Eblin village, and 62 in Maarrat al-Nu'man

The total number of respondents who stated that they have visited the councils or interacted with council members, and reported that they were treated poorly or very poorly are 43. The negative responses were mainly reported in Al Rastan, Maarrat al-Nu'man, and Daraya. However, a very small number of respondents in other areas reported poor or very poor treatment from council members. More than a quarter of respondents who said they visited the council in Maarrat al-Nu'man (total number was 62 individuals) described the treatment as poor or very poor (Figure 4).

Figure 4. How would you describe the way they treated you? (As per each council)



Table 1. Local councils operate in excruciating circumstances. Taking into account these challenges, how would you generally rate the performance of local councils in your town?

Overall assessment (all respondents)					
Council	Very good	Good	Normal	Poor	Very poor
Daraya	0.8	27.0	64.3	7.9	0.0
Idleb City	2.5	30.9	38.3	22.2	6.2
Maarrat al-Nu'man	6.9	25.8	30.3	24.9	12.4
Eblin village	0.0	23.6	52.7	20.0	3.6
Al-Rastan	1.8	9.3	36.2	41.9	10.8
Respondents' assessment (only those who recently visited the council or dealt with its entities) %					
Council	Very good	Good	Normal	Poor	Very poor
Daraya	0.8	27.0	64.3	7.9	0.0
Idleb city	4.3	37.0	37.0	17.4	4.3
Maarrat al-Nu'man	11.3	21.0	29.0	27.4	11.3
Eblin village	0.0	33.3	54.5	12.1	0.0
Al-Rastan	3.6	16.2	31.5	38.7	9.9

## The development of councils' performance

In general, respondents say that council services have improved or remained unchanged since the time of their establishment, while Table 2 illustrates that around one-third of respondents in Daraya and Idleb said these services deteriorated. We cannot accurately identify the reasons of the discrepancy between respondents' evaluations through this questionnaire, nor can we pinpoint the reasons for the decline or improvement of services, because doing so requires a separate examination of each council.



However, in order to fully understand the problems and challenges related to the work of each council, we included a question (evaluation in the form of a range from 1 to 5) on each of the services provided by the council. This will enable us to make several useful recommendations that will be presented in the second chapter. We will, however, identify the reviewers' opinions and the reasons for the visits before moving to chapter two.

Table 2. According to you, has the performance of your local council improved or deteriorated in comparison to when it was established?

General assessment (all respondents)				
Council	Improved	Did not change	Deteriorated	No answer
Daraya	21.4	41.3	35.7	1.6
Idleb City	43.2	23.5	30.9	2.5
Maarrat al-Nu'man	50.2	37.3	12.0	0.4
Eblin village	70.9	18.2	10.9	0.0
Al-Rastan	37.6	51.6	10.8	0.0
Assessment of respondents who have recently resorted to their council				
Council	Improved	Did not change	Deteriorated	No answer
Daraya	21.4	41.3	35.7	1.6
Idleb City	52.2	17.4	26.1	4.3
Maarrat al-Nu'man	50.0	35.5	14.5	0.0
Eblin village	81.8	12.1	6.1	0.0
Al-Rastan	45.0	43.2	11.7	0.0

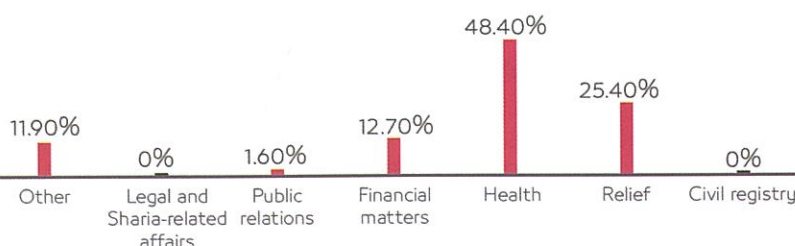
## Reason for turning to the council

Our findings highlight the gravity of the situation in Daraya and the substantial responsibilities that lay with its local council: all the respondents in Daraya either turned to the council or dealt with one of its staff members (Figure 5). About half of them did so for reasons related to health, a quarter for relief, and 12.7% mentioned financial issues (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Have you visited the council? Yes



Figure 6. Reasons for turning to the council (percentage from respondents who turned to the council) – Council of Daraya



In Eblin village 60% of respondents and in Idlib 56.8% said they either turned to the council or dealt with one of its staff members (Figures 7 and 9). In Idlib, 25% mentioned relief as a reason for their council visit, and a similar percentage referred to health-related reasons. About a third of respondents in Eblin village mentioned each of these two reasons (Figures 8 and 10).

Figure 7. Have you visited the council?

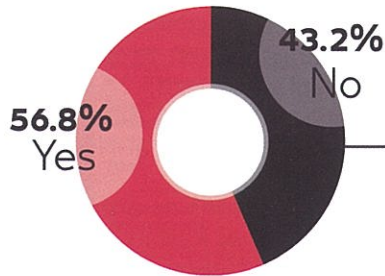


Figure 8. Reasons for turning to the council (percentage from respondents who turned to the council) – Council of Idlib

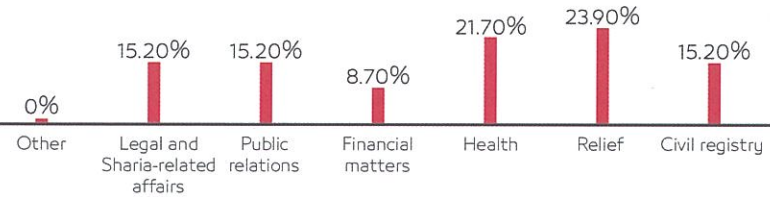


Figure 9. Have you visited the council?

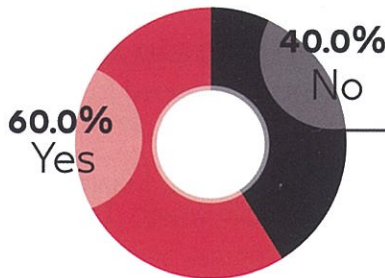
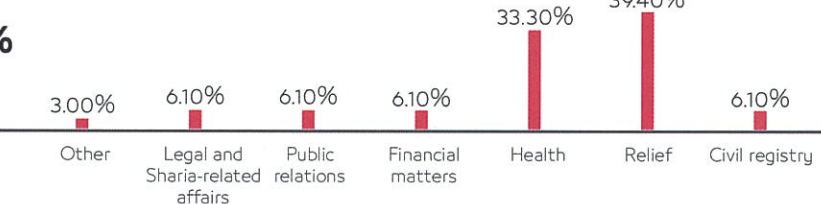


Figure 10. Reasons for turning to the council (percentage from respondents who turned to the council) – Council of Eblin village



The proportion of respondents in Maarrat al-Nu'man who referred to the council dropped to about a quarter (Figure 11), and the main reason was relief, followed by health-related matters (Figure 12). While in Rastan, where the percentage of respondents who referred to the council is 39.8% (Figure 13), more than a third of those who turned to the council said that the primary reason is related to relief, and about a third mentioned health (Figure 14).

Figure 11. Have you visited the council?

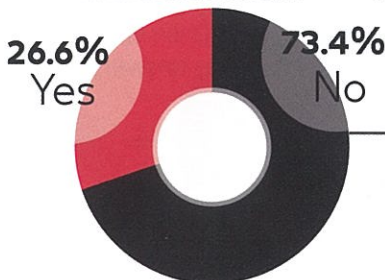


Figure 12. Reasons for turning to the council (percentage from respondents who turned to the council) – Council of Maarrat al-Nu'man

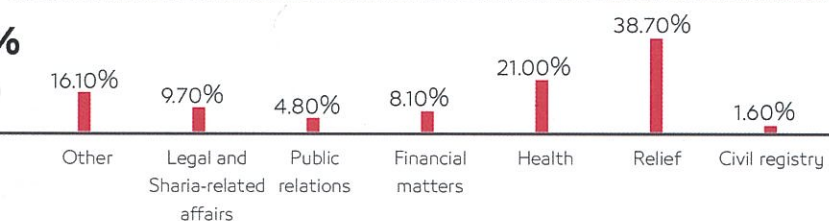


Figure 13. Have you visited the council?

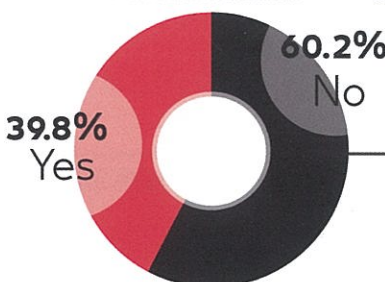
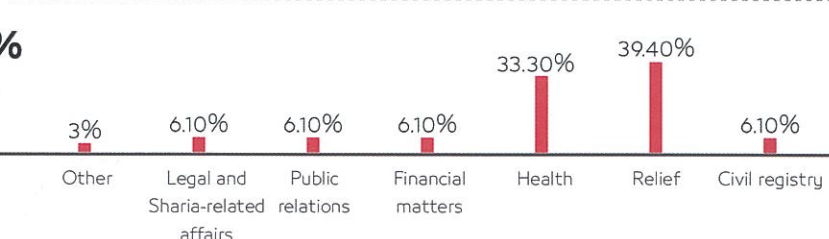


Figure 14. Reasons for turning to the council (percentage from respondents who turned to the council) – Council of Al Rastan



## Difficulties and challenges

Table 3 presents detailed lists of the opinions of respondents who said they had turned to the council or dealt with its staff members<sup>5</sup> in each region, arranged in descending order of importance, i.e. from the most important to the least important problem. The reason for focusing on respondents who turned to councils and not others is because they are often informed and more aware than others of the circumstances and the work conditions of the subject of our evaluation.

- Financial constraints ranked first among four out of the five local councils under study as a primary challenge facing local councils: more than half of respondents in Daraya and Al Rastan cited financial problems, and this percentage dropped to 39.4% in Eblin village, to 30.4% in Idlib, and to 21% in Maarrat al-Nu'man (in which financial restraints ranked second).
- Favoritism and personal relationships as challenges plaguing local councils were most cited Eblin village (33.3%), and dropped to about a quarter in both Al Rastan and Maarrat al-Nu'man, and to 13.0% in Idlib. It was least cited in Daraya (5.6%).
- Respondents in Idlib were most likely to report interference of armed factions as a problem (10.9%), followed by 6.5% of responses in Maarrat al-Nu'man, and 3.6% in Al Rastan. None of the respondents in Daraya and Eblin village cited the interference of armed factions in the work of the council as a challenge.
- Lack of expertise and competence was a highly ranked challenge to local councils in Eblin village, compared with the rest of the areas. This percentage dropped to 11.3% in Maarrat al-Nu'man, to 10.3% in Darya, and to 7.2% in Al Rastan. This issue was least reported in Idlib, whereby only 2.2% of respondents opted for this answer.
- The reference to shelling and armed attacks is most prominent in the answers of respondents in Daraya and Idlib city (about a quarter in each of them), but the percentage dropped to 17.7% in Maarrat al-Nu'man and significantly decreased in other areas. Notably, respondents in Al Rastan did not mention shelling and military attacks at all.
- Percentages referring to disorganization and mismanagement were highest in in Maarrat al-Nu'man (17.7%), followed by 13% in Idlib, 10.8% in Al Rastan, and 6% in Eblin village. The percentage was lowest in Daraya (1.6%).

Difficulties and challenges differ from one area to another, and can be classified into one of the following chief categories: the first pertains to issues beyond the control of council, such as shelling and armed attacks, or lack of financial resources; The second category pertains to the council itself, such as favoritism and mismanagement.

Issues seem to be clear for the residents of Daraya and can be summarized under the first category, both beyond the control of the council: the lack of financial resources ranked first, and the shelling and military attacks ranked second. Responses given in Al Rastan and Eblin village also revolve around issues beyond the control of the council: the lack of financial resources, ranked first. However, the second reason pertained to problems within the council itself and the way it functions, as favoritism and personal relations came second; it must also be noted that 21.2% in Eblin village said the council members are inexperienced. As for Maarrat al-Nu'man and Idlib, the answers came divided among several choices within the two categories (Table 3).

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<sup>5</sup>- It should be noted that our question was about the main challenge facing the council, meaning that respondents in each region had to choose only one answer that best reflects what they believe is the biggest problem facing this council.

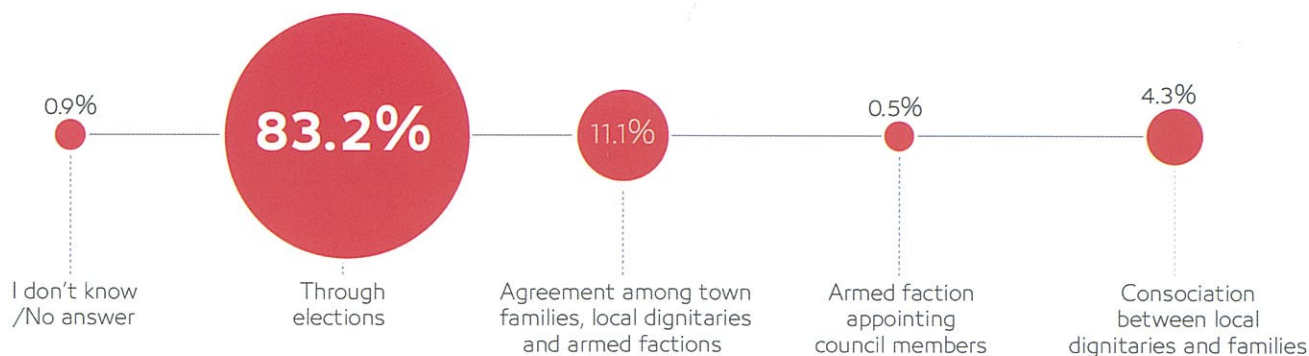
Table 3. Five lists exhibiting the main challenges that councils face (enlisted in a descending order according to their importance) with percentages of respondents in each region<sup>6</sup>

	List of Daraya		List of Al Rastan		List of Maarrat al-Nu'man		List of Eblin village		List of Idleb	
1	Lack of necessary financial resources	52.4%	Lack of necessary financial resources	53.2%	Favoritism and personal relationships	22.6%	Lack of necessary financial resources	39.4%	Lack of necessary financial resources	30.4%
2	Shelling and military attacks	26.2%	Favoritism and personal relationships	22.5%	Lack of necessary financial resources	21.0%	Favoritism and personal relationships	33.3%	Shelling and military attacks	26.1%
3	Council members' lack of expertise and competence	10.3%	Disorganization and mismanagement	10.8%	Disorganization and mismanagement	17.7%	Council members' lack of expertise and competence	21.2%	Disorganization and mismanagement	13.0%
4	Favoritism and personal relationships	5.6%	Council members' lack of expertise and competence	7.2%	Shelling and military attacks	17.7%	Disorganization and mismanagement	6.1%	Favoritism and personal relationships	13.0%
5	Other	4.0%	Interference of armed factions in the work of the council	3.6%	Council members' lack of expertise and competence	11.3%	Interference of armed factions in the work of the council	0.0%	Interference of armed factions in the work of the council	10.9%
6	Disorganization and mismanagement	1.6%	/ I don't know / No answer	1.8%	Interference of armed factions in the work of the council	6.5%	Shelling and military attacks	0.0%	I don't know / No answer	4.3%
7	Interference of armed factions in the work of the council	0.0%	Other	0.9%	I don't know / No answer	3.2%	I don't know / No answer	0.0%	Council members' lack of expertise and competence	2.2%
8	I don't know / No answer	0.0%	Shelling and military attacks	0.0%	Other	0.0%	Other	0.0%	Other	0.0%

## Local elections

Local councils in Syria have been formed in different ways: while armed factions formed local councils in some areas, councils in other areas were formed in consociation between local dignitaries and families on the one hand and often with armed groups on the other. However, some of these councils have also been formed through elections. In this questionnaire, we tried to identify the positions of respondents, not only to study their satisfaction and assessment of the mechanism of forming their current council, but also to learn more about how they want it to be in the future. To reach this end, and after we had asked about the formation of the current council, we included another question about the best way to form a local council in the future. There is a near consensus among respondents that local councils should be formed by elections in the future (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Which of the following do you think is the best way to form a local council in the future?



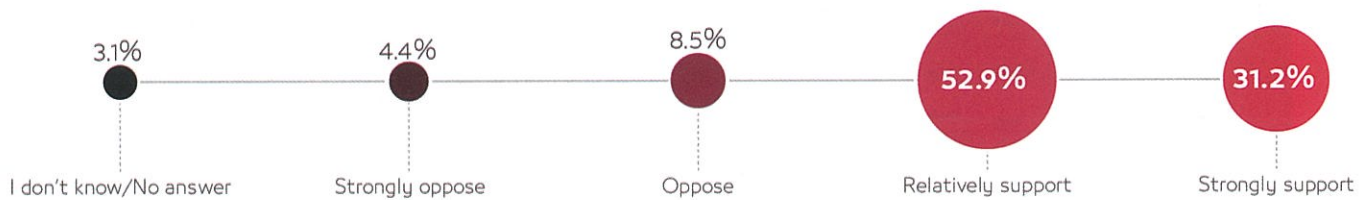
<sup>6</sup> Some respondents, particularly in Daraya, mentioned besiegement in the "Other" answer choice. Some other respondents opted for "All of the above"

## Attitude towards foreign funding

The issue of foreign funding for local councils raises numerous problems and accusations. To try and understand how local residents perceive foreign funding to local councils, we asked them straightforwardly about their stance on the issue.

There seems to be near consensus among Syrians in our sample in support of foreign funding of local councils. Only 4.4% of them said they strongly oppose such funding (Figure 16).

Figure 16. What is your attitude towards foreign funding to local councils?



## Chapter II

# Detailed Evaluation of performance

We asked respondents to evaluate the performance of their respective councils in each of the following service areas: supplying electricity, securing fuel and gas, providing potable water, civil registry services, providing food and clothing for those in need, maintenance of sewerage networks, street cleaning and garbage removal, rubble removal, supervising schools and vital installations.

### We will focus on five main points:

- By conducting a detailed assessment of the services provided by the councils, we identified the rankings from the worst to the best. This will enable councils and funders to focus on the order of priorities so as to improve services, particularly those that have been reported by respondents as bad or very bad.
- The information provided by the council constitutes an important factor for evaluation as it reflects the extent of communication between the council and local residents and helps people identify the services provided by the council. This information also reveals the extent of transparency in the performance of the councils. For this purpose, we asked respondents about the extent of their knowledge of the way the council was formed and its relations with other bodies such as armed factions, the provincial council, and the interim government.
- How do local residents want their local council to be set up in the future? According to them, what is the best way to form it and how is that different from how it has actually been formed?
- The distinction between the council as an institution and the council president's persona. For that purpose, we asked respondents if they would elect the same council president in case free elections are held in the future.
- Participating in, or boycotting of, elections. Does the boycott percentage increase in specific areas more than others? This study may not allow us to identify the main reasons for boycotting elections, as it may be derived from religious convictions rejecting the principle of elections or related to other reasons, but exploring those reasons requires further research.

## The local council in Daraya

Based on our results, the worst service assessment within the Daraya local council pertained to services meant to ensure electricity, fuel, gas and potable water. Services ensuring the work of vital installations, removing rubble, and operating schools received the most favorable assessment (Figure 17). Residents of Daraya tend to be acutely aware of their council's external relations, as a majority of respondents recognized the council's collaborative relationship with armed factions, affiliation with the provincial council, and recognized that it is also reporting to the interim government (Table 4). However, 42.1% of respondents reported not knowing about how the council was formed, while a similar percentage said that it was formed through elections (Figure 18).

There is a general consensus among respondents in Daraya that elections constitute the best way to form a local council (Figure 19). Despite the fair evaluation of their council's performance, a small percentage of Daraya residents said they would vote for the current president of the council in case free elections take place (Figure 20). The highest percentage of respondents, which amounted to more than half, said they would vote for someone else.

Figure 17. Evaluating the performance of the local council in Daraya (arithmetic mean)

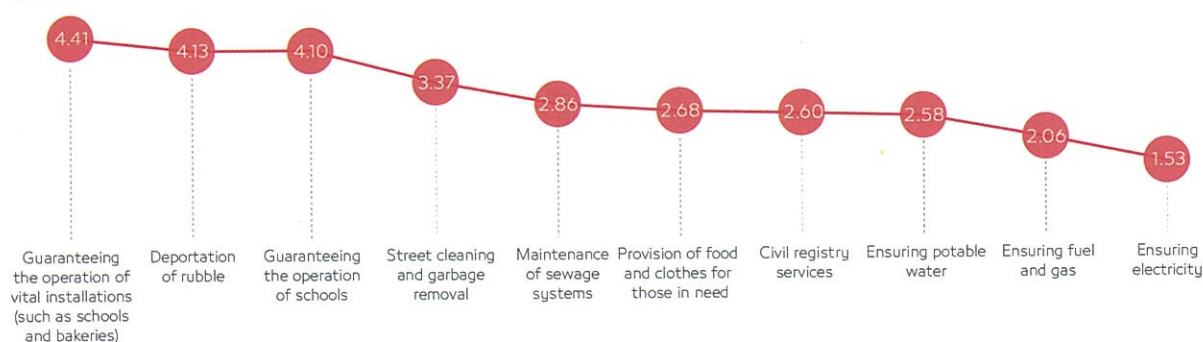


Table 4. External relations of the local council in Daraya

Daraya					
	Affiliation	Collaborative Relation	Negative competition	No relations	I don't know / No answer
Relations with armed factions	0.0	89.7	0.0	10.3	0.0
Relations with the provincial council	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Relations with the interim government	98.4	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0

Figure 18. Based on your knowledge, how was the local council formed? (%)

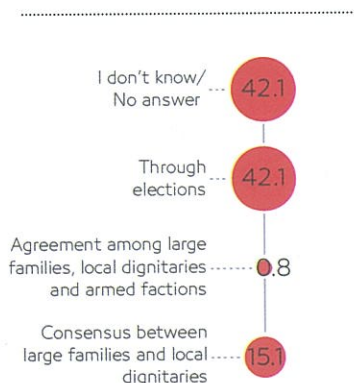


Figure 19. Which of the following ways do you deem is the best to form the local council? (%)

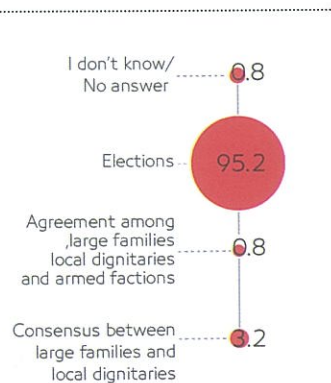
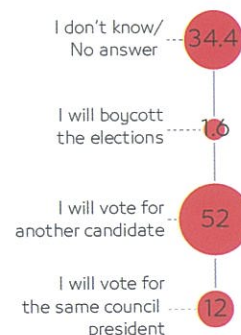


Figure 20. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future? (%)



## The local council in Idlib city

Based on our results, services ensuring the availability of electricity, potable water, and maintenance of sewage systems received the worst service assessment results in Idlib city, while services that received the best assessment results are the removal of rubble, street cleaning, garbage removal and the provision of food and clothes for those in need (Figure 21).

The respondents' knowledge about Idlib city council's relations with armed factions and the interim government was mixed (Table 5). Respondents in Idlib city were also divided among themselves when asked about the way the council was formed, whereby some of them say the council was formed by consensus and others say it was appointed by armed factions (Figure 22).

The highest percentage of respondents in Idlib city said elections are the best way to form the council (56.8%). The other choice in the questionnaire was "consensus among large families, local dignitaries and armed factions", and the response rate to this option amounted to 37% (Figure 23).

When asked about their positions in case free elections were held, the largest portion of respondents stated that they do not know what their positions will be in the future. The percentage of those who said they would boycott the elections in Idlib city, was expressedly large (12.3%) in comparison with responses apropos councils in other cities. 17.3% of respondents said they would vote for the current president of the local council (Figure 24).

Figure 21. Evaluating the performance of the local council in Idlib (arithmetic mean)

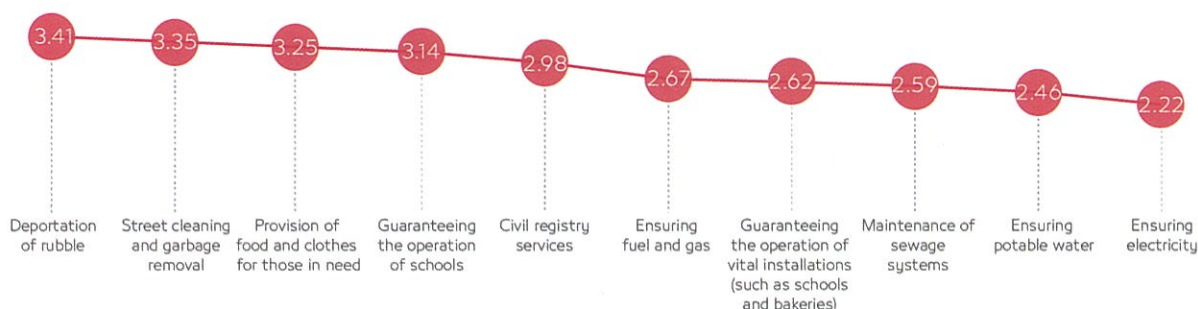


Table 5. External relations of the local council in Idlib city

	Idlib city				
	Affiliation	Collaborative Relation	Negative competition	No relations	I don't know / No answer
Relations with armed factions	46.9	34.6	2.5	3.7	12.3
Relations with the provincial council	72.8	25.9	0.0	0.0	1.2
Relations with the interim government	11.1	43.2	4.9	14.8	25.9

Figure 22. Based on your knowledge, how was the local council formed? (%)

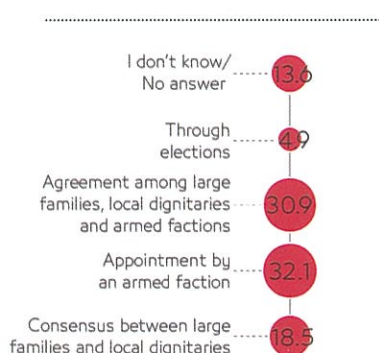


Figure 23. Which of the following ways do you deem is the best to form the local council? (%)

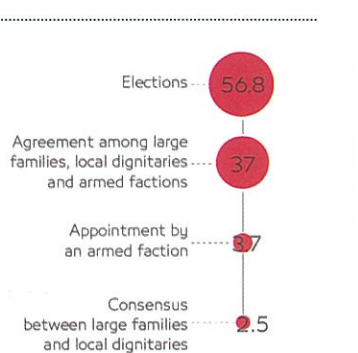
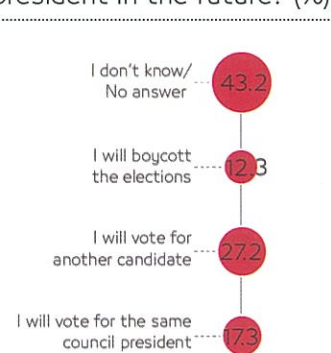


Figure 24. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future? (%)





## The local council in Maarrat al-Nu'man

The provision of fuel, gas, electricity, and potable water received the worst service assessment from respondents in Maarrat al-Nu'man, while the most favorable service reviews included street cleaning, garbage removal, the provision of food and clothes for those in need, as well as the removal of rubble (Figure 25).

Locals of Maarrat al-Nu'man in our sample do not generally seem to be aware of their council's relations with armed factions, the interim government, or the provincial council (Table 6), nor are they informed about the way their council was formed (Figure 26). However, there seems to be a near consensus (77.3%) among them perceiving elections as the best way to form the local council (Figure 27).

In case free elections were held in the future, 13.7% of respondents said they would boycott it, and more than half of respondents said they would elect a new president different from the current one (Figure 28).

Figure 25. Evaluating the performance of the local council in Maarrat al-Nu'man (arithmetic mean)

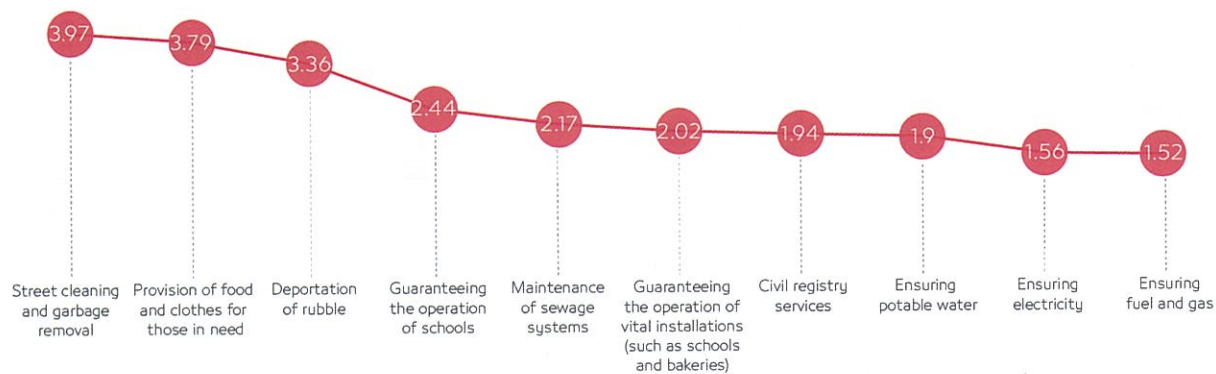


Table 6. External relations of the local council in Maarrat al-Nu'man

Maarrat al-Nu'man					
	Affiliation	Collaborative Relation	Negative competition	No relations	I don't know / No answer
Relations with armed factions	21.0	27.0	4.7	24.0	23.2
Relations with the provincial council	33.0	23.2	0.0	6.9	34.8
Relations with the interim government	48.5	10.3	0.0	6.9	34.3

Figure 26. Based on your knowledge, how was the local council formed? (%)

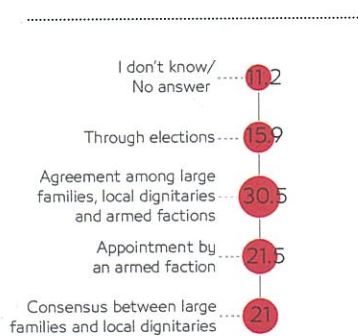


Figure 27. Which of the following ways do you deem is the best to form the local council? (%)

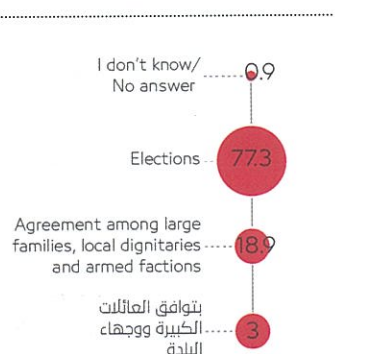
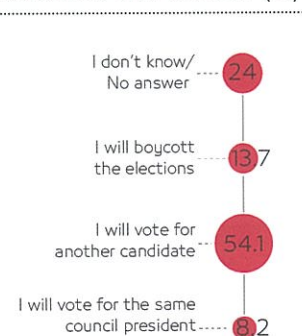


Figure 28. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future? (%)



## The local council in Eblin village – Idlib

Respondents assessed the performance of the local council in providing gas, fuel, electricity, and potable water as being worse than its performance in other services. The most favorable performance evaluation lied in its ability to supervise the operation of schools, street cleaning, garbage removal, as well as the provision of food and clothes for those in need (Figure 29).

Respondents in Eblin village are divided among themselves regarding their council's relations with armed factions, as being either affiliated with these factions or simply having a collaborative relationship with them. More than half of respondents describe the local council's relations with the provincial council as a collaborative one.

Most of respondents in our sample, at a rate of 67.3%, say that large families, local dignitaries and armed factions formed the Eblin local council (Figure 30), while a similar percentage said elections are the best way to form the council (Figure 31). The percentage of those who said they would vote for the current council president was remarkably lower than the other councils (Figure 32).

Figure 29. Evaluating the performance of the local council in Eblin village (arithmetic mean)

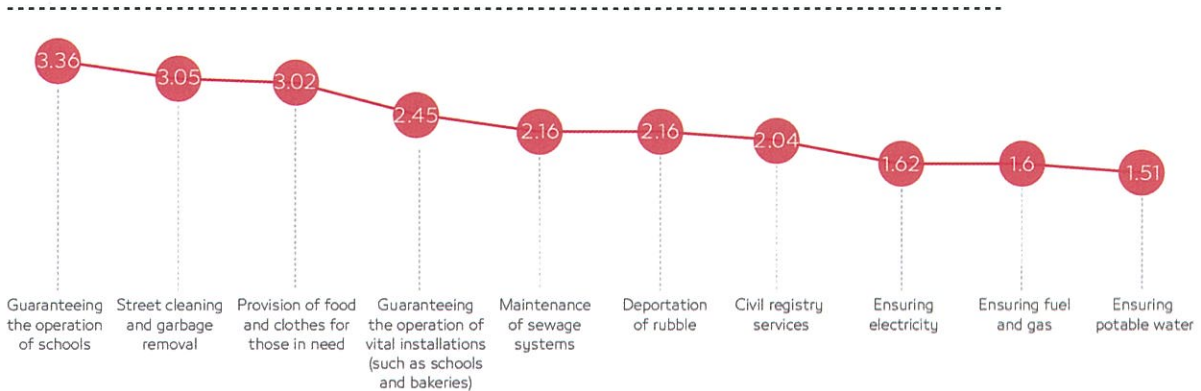


Table 7. External relations of the local council in Eblin village

Eblin village					
	Affiliation	Collaborative Relation	Negative competition	No relations	I don't know / No answer
Relations with armed factions	45.5	52.7	0.0	0.0	1.8
Relations with the provincial council	12.7	54.5	0.0	25.5	7.3
Relations with the interim government	9.1	49.1	0.0	32.7	9.1

Figure 30. Based on your knowledge, how was the local council formed? (%)

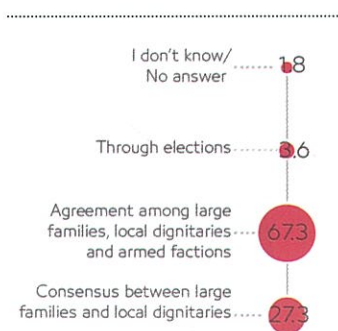


Figure 31. Which of the following ways do you deem is the best to form the local council? (%)

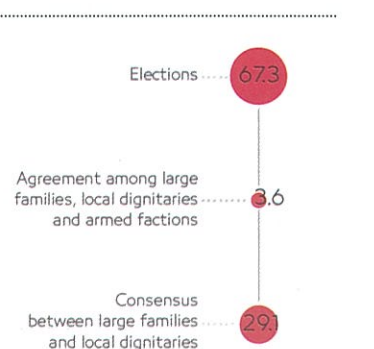
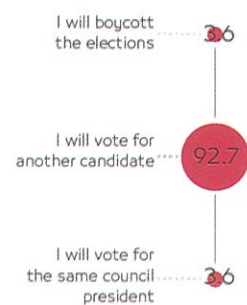


Figure 32. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future? (%)



## The local council in Al Rastan

Based on our results, it appears that the local council in Al Rastan is facing numerous challenges as the performance assessment was generally negative, except for services related to ensuring the work of vital installations and to some extent those ensuring potable water (Figure 33)<sup>7</sup>.

Most respondents in Al Rastan consider the relations with armed factions as a collaborative one, but it does not seem they have solid knowledge about the council's relations with the provincial council or the interim government (Table 8).

The largest proportion of respondents (41.2%) indicated that large families, local dignitaries and armed factions formed the local council (Figure 34), whereas they are in agreement that the best way to form the council is through elections (Figure 35). They also favor electing a new president apart from the current one (Figure 36).

Figure 33. Evaluating the performance of the local council in Al Rastan (arithmetic mean)

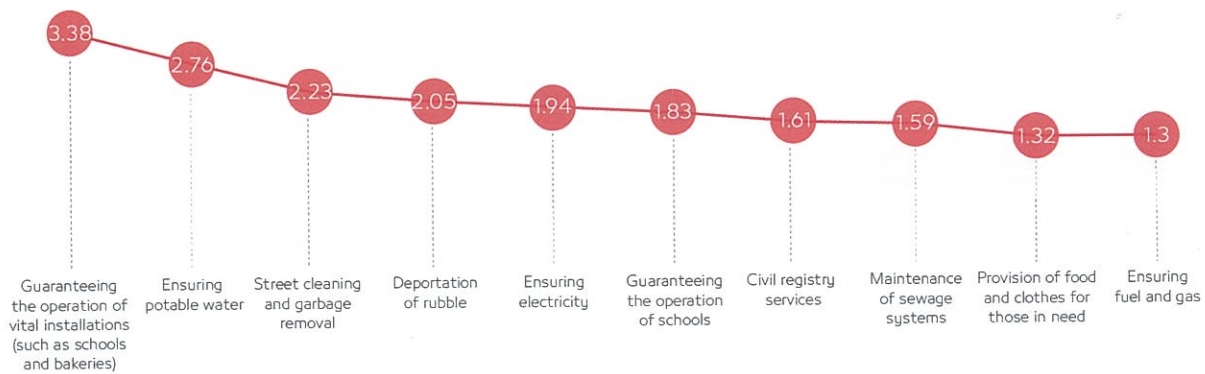


Table 8. External relations of the local council in Al Rastan

Al Rastan					
	Affiliation	Collaborative Relation	Negative competition	No relations	I don't know / No answer
Relations with armed factions	5.4	67.6	5.0	18.6	3.9
Relations with the provincial council	32.3	11.8	29.0	17.6	9.3
Relations with the interim government	45.5	8.2	7.2	20.8	18.3

Figure 34. Based on your knowledge, how was the local council formed? (%)

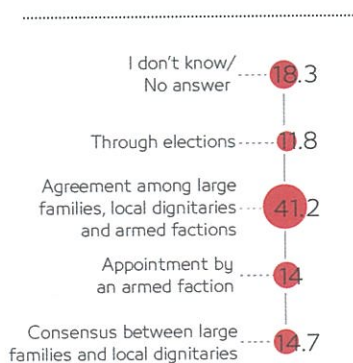


Figure 35. Which of the following ways do you deem is the best to form the local council? (%)

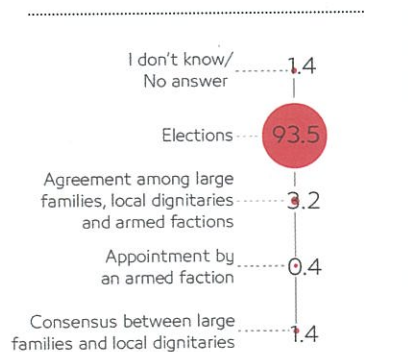
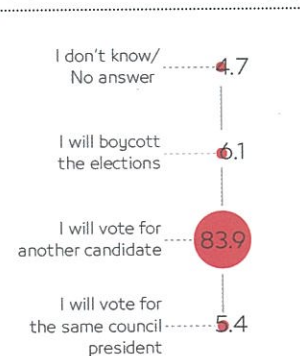


Figure 36. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future? (%)



7- In this context, it is worth tackling the latest statement issued by the local council in Al Rastan (Friday, March 4th 2016), as it appears that even the service of securing the work of facilities is beyond its capacity because of the blockade imposed by regime forces.

# Chapter III

## Workers in Local Councils: Who Are They?

Our sample included 48 local council members : we will try to identify their social and professional backgrounds. As illustrated in figure 37, which presents their previous professions, the largest proportion of them were former civil servants (43.8%) or students (18.8%). As for the levels of education, 60.4% of them hold university degrees and about a quarter of them are high school graduates.

Figure 37. Previous profession (%)

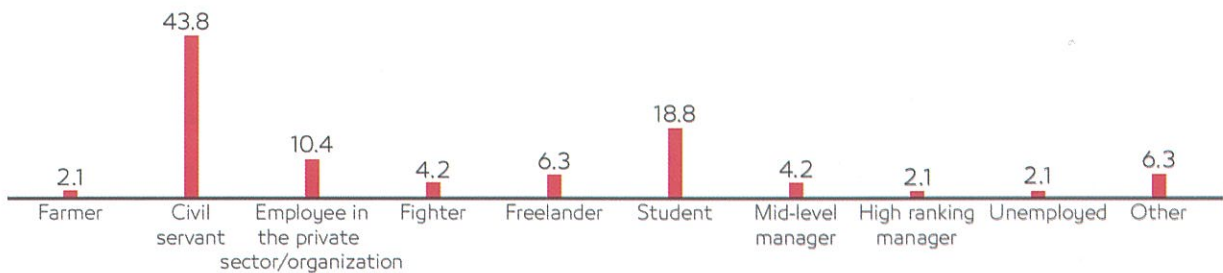
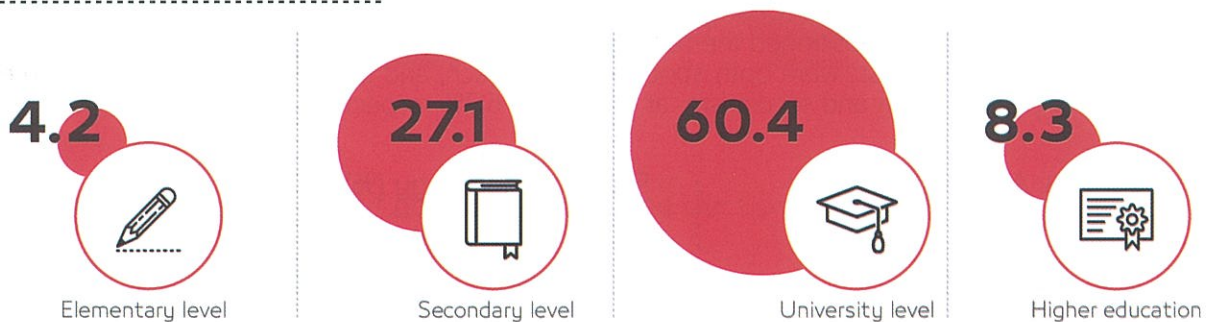


Figure 38. Level of education (%)



The sample of workers in councils included 20 women distributed across the four following local councils: Daraya, Idlib city, Maarrat al-Nu'man, and Al Rastan.

The largest percentage (about a third) of respondents working in councils and who answered our question about income said they earn less than 25,000 Syrian pounds, and a quarter reported an income between 25 and 75 thousand Syrian pounds. About 8.3% said their monthly income exceeds 75 thousand pounds (Figure 40).

Figure 39. Gender (%)

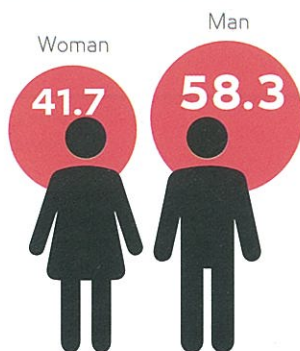
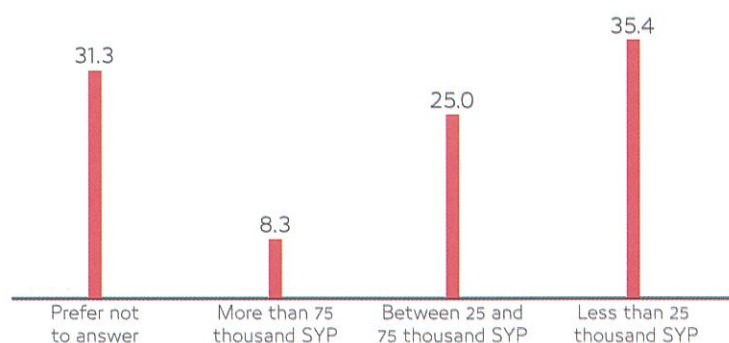


Figure 40. Average of monthly income (%)



Having to support their families proved to be a major challenge faced by council members (Figure 41). The largest percentage reported being responsible for supporting three to five members, although this figure reached much higher in some cases (Figure 42).

Figure 41. Civil status (%)

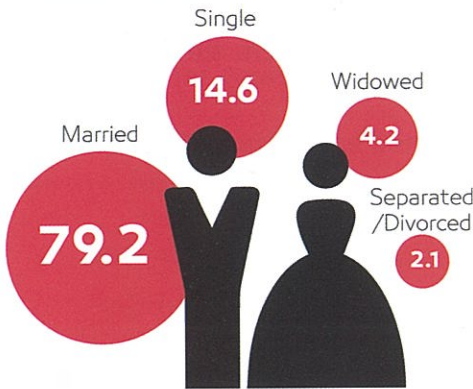
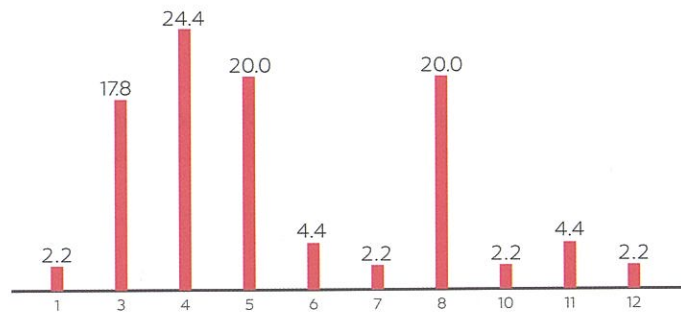


Figure 42. Number of dependents (%)



The ages of council members generally range from thirty-six to forty-five years old (Figure 43). As for their ideologies, and according to the self-assessment that we conducted, the largest proportion of respondents positioned themselves in the center (about a third). However, percentages of Islamists and secularists were both about a quarter each, and the rest was spread between extremes of political Islam and secularism, at 12.5% and 6.3% respectively.

Figure 43. Age (%)

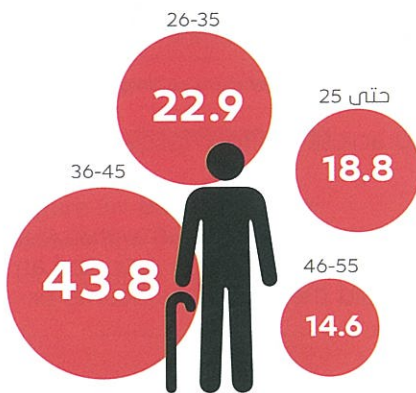
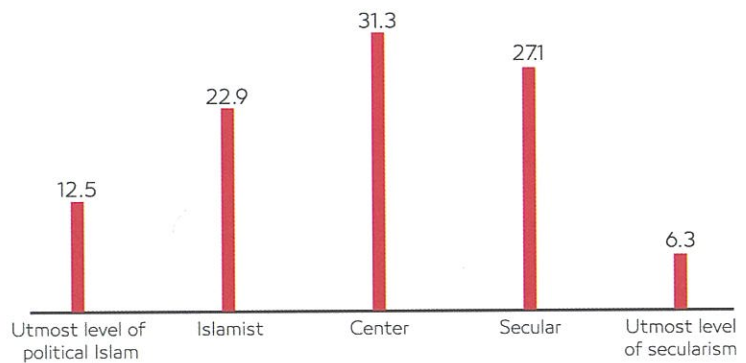


Figure 44. Ideology (%)



Major problems facing councils, largely fall beyond the control of the council and include: the lack of the necessary financial resources (51.2%), and shelling and military attacks (31.7%) (Figure 45). Although most of them say elections constitute the best way to form the council in the future, a quarter of them said the most suitable way is a consensus among large families, dignitaries of the town, and the armed factions (Figure 46). Here, the percentage of those saying they will elect the same council president reflected a steep increase, but despite this the largest proportion of them either said they would elect another president, or opted for "I don't know what my position will be in the future", or abstained from responding (Figure 47).

Figure 45. Main challenges facing councils according to council staff (%)

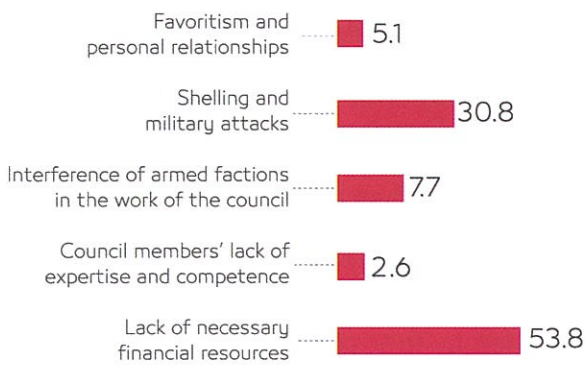


Figure 46. Best way to form the local council (%)

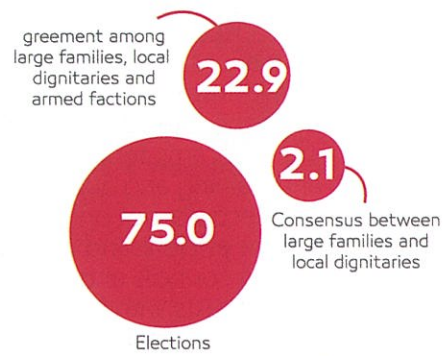
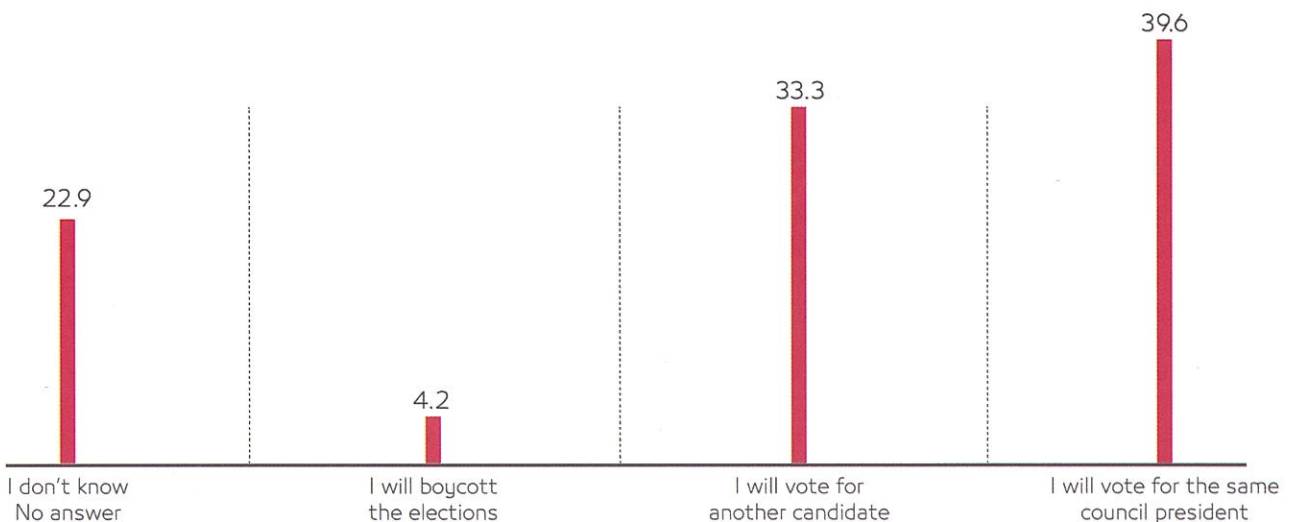


Figure 47. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future? (%)



## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this research, we have identified the way local residents assess the performance of local councils in their areas. We have also been able to present a list of services provided by local councils that were classified from worst to best according to respondents' assessments. Local councils covered in this research would do well if they worked on allocating further resources for those services respondents assessed as worse than others. There is no doubt that some basic services, such as securing electricity, received relatively similar assessment results as other services across most other councils. However, assessment results of other services appeared to be very distinct from one council to the other.

Although local councils constitute a relatively nascent experience in Syria and operate in extremely difficult conditions, we could still claim that respondents are satisfied, to some extent, with the performance of their respective local councils. It seems that a large portion of those working in these councils have previous professional experience in working as former civil servants, and a considerable portion are either students or university degree holders. Therefore, each council contains relatively qualified individuals that would allow them to overcome external crises provided they receive the necessary support. In that context, what we mean by external crises is those crises that local councils do not have the ability to overcome on their own such as financial constraints, which apparently constitutes one of the most severe challenges threatening the existence of councils according to most respondents. What remains, are the problems stemming from within the council, i.e. mismanagement, disorganization, favoritism, personal relationships, or lack of expertise, which all fall primarily under the responsibility of the interim government and civil society. They both are required to develop efficient monitoring programs to regulate the work of local councils and to assist in the organization, management, and training and qualifying personnel. Studies of this sort constitute a valuable method to achieve these objectives, not only as a means of monitoring but also as an approach to help these councils design more efficient and competent social intervention programs, and therefore establishing the trust between councils and residents. However, close attention should be paid to the scale of the responsibility that rests with local councils in besieged areas. It appears that residents of Daraya, to a large extent, are dependent on the services provided by their council particularly in terms of relief and healthcare, since all the respondents we met in Daraya reported having visited the council or dealt with its staff.

Local councils need to improve the communication with the local population. They also need to familiarize them with the services they provide, the problems and challenges they face, and to be transparent about the way they were formed and the relations they have with third parties, even with respect to funding; local residents currently understand the need for this funding and do not oppose it. Many techniques, depending on the region and respective circumstances, could be adopted for this purpose, and ways such as a brief newsletter, a website or a page on social media, can make a difference. Results in Daraya have reflected a special relationship between the council and the local residents in comparison to other areas.

Results indicate that elections are by-and-large the way to go for forming local councils. Respondents clearly differentiate between the council as an institution and its presidency. Even for councils that received a positive assessment, a low percentage of respondents desired electing the same president if free elections were to be held in the future. However, many responded with "I don't know" or opted for electing another candidate. Results indicate a majority of respondents participants will actively take part in future elections with the exception of a small percentage that said it would boycott, which was particularly the case in Idlib compared with other regions, but the majority still said they would take part. After our previous survey study about sectarianism<sup>8</sup> indicated widespread support for a state based on citizenship and equality, and following our study about federalism<sup>9</sup> that reflected the presence of cautious inclinations towards decentralization, this study confirms that even at the local level, there is an insistence that the town be managed by an elected local council.

It is important to note that further studies on other local councils, which were not covered by this sample, are crucial for the reasons outlined above. We hope that this research is the first step towards pursuing a broader project, "Local councils in the eyes of their communities," that conducts performance evaluation of local councils across various areas in Syria. Providing the necessary conditions for the success of these councils rests not only with councils alone, but also with all of us as individuals, civil society organizations, interim government, and funders.

8- Please refer to [Sectarianism in Syria \(Survey Study\)](#), The Day After, February 2016.

9- Reference here is made to the study conducted by The Day After under the title: "[Syria: Opinions and Attitudes on Federalism, Decentralization, and the experience of the Democratic Self-Administration](#)", The Day After, April 2016, which had been conducted in conjunction with the present study.

## Questionnaire

Q1. Based on your knowledge, is there a local council in the area you currently live in?

- Yes
- No (jump to Q.14)
- I don't know (jump to Q.14)

Q2. Local councils operate in difficult circumstances. Taking into account all these difficulties, how would you generally assess the performance of the local council in your area?

1 to 5: 1 is very poor and 5 is very good

1      2      3      4      5

Q.3. Do you think that the council improved or deteriorated compared to when it was established?

- Deteriorated
- Didn't change
- Improved
- I don't know/No answer

Q4. How would you assess its performance in each of the following fields? 1 to 5: 1 is very poor and 5 is very good

1      2      3      4      5

Guaranteeing the operation of vital installations (such as schools and bakeries)  
Ensuring potable water  
Street cleaning and garbage removal  
Maintenance of sewage systems  
Ensuring electricity  
Ensuring fuel and gas  
Provision of food and clothes for those in need  
Guaranteeing the operation of schools  
Civil registry services  
Deportation of rubble

Q5. Have you visited the local council, or visited any of its affiliates, or worked directly with its staff members?

- Yes (jump to Q.A)
- No (jump to Q.6)

Q.A Please cite who this affiliate is

- Civil registry
- Relief
- Health
- Financial affairs
- Public relations
- Legal and Sharia-related affairs
- Other

Q.B. When was this visit?

- Less than three months ago
- Between three months and a year ago
- More than a year ago

Q.C. How would you describe their attitude? 1 to 5: 1 is a very poor attitude and 5 is very good one

1      2      3      4      5

Q.D. What do you think are the main challenges facing them?

- Lack of necessary financial resources
- Council members' lack of expertise and competence
- Disorganization and mismanagement
- Interference of armed factions in the work of the council
- Shelling and military attacks
- I don't know/No answer
- Other

Q.6. Based on your knowledge, what is the relation between the local council and armed factions?

- Affiliation
- Collaborative relation
- Negative competition
- There are no relations
- I don't know/No answer

Q.7. What about the local council's relations with the provincial council?

- Affiliation
- Collaborative relation
- Negative competition
- There are no relations
- I don't know/No answer



## Questionnaire

Q.8. What about the local council's relations with the interim government?

- Affiliation
- Collaborative relation
- Negative competition
- There are no relations
- I don't know/No answer

Q.9. Based on your knowledge, how was the local council formed?

- Consensus between large families and local dignitaries
- Its members were appointed by an arm faction
- Agreement among large families, local dignitaries and armed factions
- Through elections
- I don't know/No answer

Q.10. What is your attitude towards foreign funding to local councils?

- Strongly support
- Support
- Oppose
- Strongly oppose
- I don't know/No answer

Q.11. Which of the following do you think is the best way to form a local council in the future?

- Consociation between local dignitaries and families
- Armed faction appointing council members
- Agreement among town families, local dignitaries and armed factions
- Through elections
- I don't know/No answer

Q.12. What would be your position in case free elections were held to elect a council president in the future?

- I will vote for the same council president
- I will vote for another candidate
- I will boycott the elections
- I don't know/No answer

Q.13. Are you an employee in, or do you work for any of the agencies affiliated with the local council?

- Yes
- No

Q.14. Gender

- Male
- Female

Q.15. Number of dependents

( \_ )

Q.16. Educational level

- Illiterate
- Primary
- Elementary
- Secondary
- University
- Higher studies

Q.17. Civil status

- Single
- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced

Q.18. Monthly income

- Less than 25 thousand SYP
- Between 25 and 75 thousand SYP
- More than 75 thousand SYP
- Prefer not to answer

Q.19. When discussing the politics and the future form of governance in Syria, two main political currents are tackled: the seculars who want to separate religion from the state, and those who lean towards a political Islam that aims at establishing a religious state. Where would you place yourself in the following set of numbers, where 0 is utmost secularism and 10 is utmost political Islam?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I don't know

In the period between November 10, 2015 and January 4, 2016, The Day After (TDA) conducted a field survey to gauge local residents' perceptions on the performance of local councils in their respective areas. The survey encompassed 803 respondents: 424 men and 379 women present in the areas governed by five local councils, namely: Al Rastan, Daraya, Idlib city, Maarrat al-Nu'man, and Eblin village.

This survey study puts particular focus on the voices of local inhabitants and seeks to identify their opinions and the way they evaluate the performance of their local councils: what do they want from councils? How do they evaluate their performance? What are the difficulties that councils face? How do they govern their towns? What are their needs?

The study sheds light on numerous problems that differ in nature from one council to another, it however, also reveals a general satisfaction with the performance of the five councils included in the survey. Through the survey we have been able to present a list of services provided by local councils that were classified from worst to best according to respondents' assessments. This allows the councils to prioritize particular services based on local assessment of their performance. One of the key findings of the survey is that an overwhelming majority of respondents foresee elections to be the best method for council formation.



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