



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Research Project Report (1)

State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	5
1. Demographic and socio-economic changes	6
1.1 Demographic changes and population displacement	7
1.2. Changes in labour structure	9
1.3 High cost of living	11
2. Service provision’s policy	14
2.1 Devastated healthcare system	14
2.2 Education in ruins	17
3. Service providers: The government’s networks, international humanitarian assistance, and local initiatives	20
3.1. State institutions, weakened but remain the most important service provider	20
3.2. Pro- and non-governmental organisations and the Baath Party	22
3.3. Local initiatives: Businessmen, diaspora support networks and informal collectives..	24
Conclusion	26

Executive Summary

The physical and economic destruction caused by the conflict has significantly affected state institutions and its capacity to deliver services, compared to the years prior to 2011. Currently, the Syrian government lacks the ability to improve the socio-economic situation for large sectors of the population and to provide adequate social services. After the Syrian Pound (SYP) suffered a major depreciation at the end of 2019, the situation deteriorated for the majority of Syrians. The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 could lead Syria into a deeper crisis.

The drain of state resources has pushed the government to concentrate its rehabilitation and early recovery efforts in areas that remained under its rule throughout the war, while deprioritising the recaptured territories with less public investment and service provision. The reconquered areas are still considered as hostile entities by Damascus. The burden of public service provision has fallen on the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) in collaboration with UN agencies and INGOs, which often fund the majority of the programs in recaptured areas. The services provided by these institutions were however limited to basic services, especially medical assistance, while rehabilitation of health, education and energy infrastructures are still lacking.

The Syrian government security forces have also (re)imposed a repressive and securitised atmosphere on the populations that remained or returned to former opposition held areas. The combination of state neglect and repression in Daraa and some areas of rural Damascus has led to increasing discontent.

After years of war, the alternative to the Syrian government is unclear. The destruction of wide sectors of the economy have strengthened the state's institutions as the main provider of services and the main employer. Large segments of the population are dependent on the state for wages or assistance, despite having been weakened in absolute terms compared to before 2011.

From this perspective, the actions of organisations connected to the inner circles of power in Damascus, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and Syria Trust for Development, consolidate the regime by capturing international humanitarian funds and manipulating humanitarian assistance. Businessmen's charity initiatives and the mobilisation of Baath party networks act to ensure regime stability and reinforce its clientelist and power networks. They operate as tools and instruments to control society.

State institutions are marked by contradictory but connected features: a source of authority as an employer and provider in a devastated economy and society with limited alternatives, and a source of frustration and discontent because of its shortcomings, unequal and unjust delivery rooted in authoritarianism and clientelism.

Introduction

Diminishing state services has been a constant pattern in Syria since the 1980s. Following the coming to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, the role of state institutions in providing public services continued to deteriorate in the context of increasing neoliberal policies.¹ The role of local private charities and social actors affiliated with the state, or at least officially registered, was given growing responsibility to address poverty and socio-economic difficulties among the population.²

Physical and economic destruction has impacted the capacity of the state and its institutions to deliver services compared to before 2011. The Syrian government currently lacks the ability to improve the socio-economic situation of large segments of the Syrian population and to provide adequate social services. All macro-economic indicators to signal economic recovery are absent. The capacity of state institutions has been impacted, but security services are still robust within all sectors of society.

As the government recaptured cities in the past years, it has faced increasing socio-economic difficulties. The value of the Syrian Pound (SYP) has continuously depreciated since September 2019, reaching nearly 2,900 SYP for 1 US dollar on 7 June 2020.³ This situation has worsened the living conditions of the majority of Syrians.⁴ COVID-19 has intensified the socio-economic problems in the country, where poverty levels are estimated at over 85 per cent prior to the eruption of the pandemic. Whole sectors of the economy such as tourism, transport, trade or construction have been paralysed by the effects of the pandemic.⁵ In May 2020, the Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection stated that the number of companies established and registered between January and end of April was 102, a decrease of 64 percent, compared to the same period in 2019.⁶

The economic impact of the COVID-19 and the prospect of sanctions could therefore lead to a deeper crisis. Against the backdrop of this socio-economic deterioration, the consequences of the state's inability to meet population's needs becomes urgent. Will the government be able to maintain control and passive support among large segments of the

¹ Healthcare and education spending did not increase in accordance with population growth. Public expenditure on education and healthcare as a percentage of GDP was approximately 4 and 0.4 respectively before 2010 – low in comparison to OECD countries, which on average spent 13.3 and 9 percent respectively in 2010. Joseph Daher, “The Political Economic Context of Syria’s Reconstruction: A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of

Unequal Development”, Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, December 2018), <https://bit.ly/2wQ43Jn>

² Laura Ruiz De Elvira, *Towards the End of the Social Contract in Syria: Charitable Associations and Redeployment of the State (2000-2011)* (in French), KARTHALA Editions, 2019

³ The rate of SYP on the black market has changed since April 2020 from around 1,200-1,300 SYP to around 2,500 SYP for \$1 on June 6, 2020. The conversion into US dollar will be made according to the value of the SYP at the period indicated in the text. If no period indicated the rate ranging from 1,200-1,300 SYP will be used.

⁴ Daher Joseph, “The Deep Roots of the Depreciation of the Syrian Pound”, Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, December 2019), <https://bit.ly/35reYq5>

⁵ Economic losses were estimated at around 1 trillion SYP (around \$830 million) per month from March 2020, by Damascus university professor Ali Kanaan al-Watan, “About a Thousand Billion Pounds the Syrian Economy Losses a Month Because of Corona” (in Arabic), *Business 2 Business*, 12 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2K0PdTz>. The partial reopening of the economy and markets at the end of April 2020, which coincided with the beginning of Ramadan, and nearly a total reopening of economic activities and public sector in June will probably diminish the losses for the following months.

⁶ Ali Mahmoud Suleiman, “64 Percent Decrease in the Creation of Companies as a Result of Corona” (in Arabic), *Al-Watan*, 19 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/36nTXgo>

population? Could state institutions rely on local private charities, NGOs, INGOs and businessmen to outsource the provision of services? These questions are crucial especially in the context of continuous protests not only for more democratic rights, but also for socio-economic redistribution and economic development.

The study will analyse the differences in state services and policies between cities and areas that remained under government control throughout the conflict with ones that were for a time governed by rebel groups before being recaptured by the government. While a weakening of state services occurred throughout the war, the lack of service provision is more significant in areas returning to the sovereignty of the Syrian government after years outside its rule.⁷

The paper will examine demographic changes and socio-economic indicators. It will assess the provision of state services, with a particular focus on two main sectors; health and education. Finally, the paper will analyse the service providers to assess the capacity of the Syrian state.

In addition to a literature review on analysis of the socio-economic situation in Syria, this research relied on data collection through media reports and newspaper articles published in Syria and on twenty interviews conducted in March 2020 with individuals residing in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Daraa and Sweida.⁸ These semi-structured interviews focused on the perceptions that inhabitants have on the provision of public services (especially education and health) and on socio-economic issues (poverty and depreciation of the SYP). They were carried out by a network of researchers, each of whom has privileged access and knowledge of specific areas, on the basis of a written questionnaire. The choice of these cities was made based on two considerations; they host important state institutions and population centres and experienced different situations throughout the uprising.

1. Demographic and socio-economic changes

The conflict has deepened the process of urbanisation, forcing many from rural areas to be displaced. It is estimated that 72.6 percent of the population (13.7 million people) lived in urban areas in 2019, compared to 56 percent of the population in 2010. Latakia, Tartous and some areas of Damascus, witnessed a significant influx of people, while eastern Aleppo and Homs experienced an exodus. Of a total population estimated at around 20.8 million in February 2020, a bit more than 15 million were living in regime-controlled areas.⁹

⁷ Synaps, "War by Other Means, Syria's Economic Struggle", 30 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2IOzOoI>; Haid, Haid, "The Regime Is Shifting the Burden of Early Recovery to Residents", January 2020, *Chatham House*, <https://bit.ly/2vWja45>; Myriam Youssef, "Syrian People Suffer After Pyrrhic victory", *London School of Economics*, 12 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/2vkF6VZ>

⁸ All interviews were conducted in March 2020 and the date will not be in quotations.

⁹ World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis", February 2020, 24, <https://bit.ly/2TO2BjP>

1.1 Demographic changes and population displacement

Population displacement from and within specific regions followed the government's repressive strategy by targeting opposition controlled urban centres and highly populated neighbourhoods, especially those held by non-Islamic State forces. By doing so, the regime forced masses of displaced civilians to travel to government-controlled areas to look for better security and public services. Damascus also sought to prevent the burgeoning attempts of the protest movement's democratic sectors from creating and organising their own viable alternative to the regime provision of essential state functions.¹⁰ In practice, this strategy resulted in the destruction of infrastructure and cut opposition supply lines in opposition-held areas. From 2016, the Assad government also promoted the conclusion of 'local reconciliation agreements' with cities that had been besieged and continuously bombed. These deals led to new waves of forced displacement. As a result, regions that remained under the control of the government welcomed large numbers of IDPs and those outside its control experienced large displacement.

Figure 1 – Population and Total IDPs in Cities and Governorates

City or Governorate	Population 2011	Population 2019	IDPs
Damascus city	1,5 million	1.8-2 million	625,000
Latakia city	400,000	870,000	410,000
Sweida city	90,000	97,000	15,000 (in all governorate of Sweida)
Aleppo city	2,4 -3 million	1.5-1.6 million	190,000
Rural Damascus governorate	2,6-2,8 million	3.2 million	1.2 million
Daraa city	128,000	134,000	28,000

Sources: The author (compilation)¹¹

¹⁰ Khedder Khaddour, "The Assad Regime's Hold on the Syrian State," *Carnegie Endowment* July 2015, <https://bit.ly/2ScvXqP>

¹¹ United Nations, "Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic", March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2vktxOJ>; Urban Analysis Network, April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3c41S4a>; European Asylum Support Office, "Syria Socio-Economic Situation: Damascus City", February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TMD0Yo>; Myriam Ferrier, "Rebuilding the City of Aleppo: Do the Syrian Authorities Have a Plan?", (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 19 March 2020), <https://bit.ly/2Vyh4A0>

Latakia and Damascus welcomed a significant number of IDPs from different areas of the country. In both cities, IDPs increased the pressure on existing availability of housing, infrastructure and services. This situation increased housing prices, especially rentals, preventing many IDPs from finding accommodation. In Latakia, there were attempts to increase the city's capacity to absorb large numbers of IDPs by the construction of new residential units, with an estimated capacity to house approximately 120,000.¹² In Damascus, many IDPs turned to 'collective centres' (public buildings and factories used to house five or more IDP families) or informal settlements where they faced poor access to basic services.¹³ Two informal settlements close to the capital's Old City, Mazzeh 86 and Rukn Eddin, also welcomed many IDPs. These settlements have not expanded in size but have become more densely populated in the past few years.¹⁴ However, a form of 'housing contradiction' appeared in Damascus, as the number of vacant properties increased significantly because of the departure of their owners, while there was a considerable shortage of housing for IDPs. This contradiction was rooted in socio-economic differences. In neighbourhoods with low social status and a high degree of informality where homes were abandoned by their owners, IDPs became squatters, while in high status and more expensive neighbourhoods with planned urban design and official property rights, homes remained vacant when their owners left.¹⁵

The impact of the arrival of the IDPs in the governorate Sweida was less significant than in Latakia and Damascus, putting less pressure on city's services and facilities. Number reached around 70,000 in 2014-2015 before diminishing to around 15,000 at the beginning of 2020, with a small majority residing in the city of Sweida and the rest dispersed across the countryside.¹⁶ The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) was the organisation most involved in providing support and services to the IDPs, while organisations associated with the UNESCO and small local associations participated in relief and support operations.¹⁷

By contrast, regions that suffered intensive destruction saw large segments of their population move to other areas outside and/or within the governorate. Most of rural Damascus experienced internal population exchanges.¹⁸ Cities such as Douma and Darayya experienced massive destruction and significant displacement, while Qudsaya and Muadamiyat were less affected.¹⁹ At the same time, Jaramana remained under the domination of the government

¹²World Bank Group, "Syria Damage Assessment of Selected Cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib", March 2017, XI, <https://bit.ly/39SCygM> ; Urban Analysis Network, "Latakia City Factsheet", May 2019, <https://bit.ly/3d0iNWL>

¹³ United Nations, "Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic", March 2019, 31 and 56, <https://bit.ly/2vktxOJ>

¹⁴ Barend Wind and Batoul Ibrahim, "The War-Time Urban Development of Damascus: How the Geography- and Political Economy of Warfare Affects Housing Patterns", *Habitat International*, Volume 96, February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Voh9pV>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Yasmine Nayef Meri, "The Livelihoods of Internally Displaced Syrians in Suwayda: Job Opportunities, Education and Prospects for Return", *Chatham House*, December 2019, <https://bit.ly/2K0cJ3b> ; Mahmoud al-Lababidi, "The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts", Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 28 August 2019), <https://bit.ly/2xe8JJm>

¹⁷ Interview with a farmer, Sweida; Enab Baladi, "What Does the Political Map Hide? Sweida... an Isolated Island Awaiting its Fate", 4 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2wGZFga>

¹⁸ The governorate is composed of nine districts but is generally divided in four geographical areas: Eastern Ghouta, Southwestern Ghouta, the Barada River Valley, and the mountainous district. Yassar Abdin, "The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs", *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 906, April 2019, p.900-903

¹⁹ The population of Darayya diminished from a population of between 80,000 and 250,000 prior 2011 to an estimated remaining of between 2,500 and 4,000 in 2016 after suffering a terrible siege (Amnesty International, "We Leave or We Die": Forced Displacement under Syria's "reconciliation" Agreements", November 2017, 18, <https://bit.ly/33etSPu>). Muadamiyat was not emptied of its population and around 2500 opposition fighters and draft evaders stayed in the city. Similarly, in Qudsaya situated roughly 10km northwest of the Syrian capital along the Damascus-Beirut highway, more than 200,000 people remained in the city after local armed opposition forces signed an agreement with the

throughout the war and experienced a huge increase in its population, from 185,446 registered prior to the conflict to just under a million as of the end of 2019, half of which are IDPs, mostly from Eastern Ghouta and other areas of rural Damascus. Confronted with this overpopulation, the city suffered from a lack of public services, especially gas, electricity and water in the winter²⁰.

Similarly, in Daraa, IDPs were mostly present in regime-controlled areas. Between 2012 and 2018, the city was divided into neighbourhoods under the control of the regime and others held by opposition armed groups. This division has continued in the post-reconciliation context with areas that remained under the government's authority within the governorate favoured in regard to governance, security, service provision and distribution of humanitarian and development assistance. Lack of basic services and housing as a result of the conflict are also significant obstacles to return.²¹ According to interviewees from Daraa, this situation led to a significant increase in the price of housing.²²

Eastern Aleppo, and more generally Aleppo city, is facing a different situation. The city has been one of the most damaged, mainly its eastern neighbourhoods, which were recaptured by government forces in December 2016. The city's population has remained consistent, at around 1.6 million, including 190,000 IDPs, a smaller population compared to 2.4 million inhabitants in 2011.²³ Long term return of former inhabitants of eastern Aleppo has been obstructed, mostly for security reasons.

1.2 Changes in labour structure

The structure of labour suffered dramatic changes in many regions, but more particularly in former opposition-held areas. Throughout the country, as large sectors of the economy were destroyed, especially the private sector, the national average of state employment increased from 26.9 percent in 2010 to over 55 percent in 2015. This is explained by the decline in total employment,²⁴ as reflected by the massive drop in the number of individuals registered with the Social Security Organisation (SSO), which included workers from the public and private sectors and pensioners. Around 2.2 million people were registered with the SSO in 2019, while an estimated 3.7 million were registered in 2012, a decrease of 40 percent. In 2012, there were 1.39 million state employees, 2.3 million private sector employees and 360,841 pensioners. The number of workers registered in the private sector

regime in October 2016. People however wanted for compulsory or reservist military service in the Syrian army, were not allowed to leave the town.

²⁰ Al-Khabr, "Jaramana Residents Complain About the Small Number of Gas Cylinders Distributed... And the Municipality: the Situation in the City is Dire", 11 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Vn8vIc>

²¹ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries", Research project report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 4 November 2019), <http://bit.ly/38eCzKA>; Urban Analysis Network, "Daraa City Profile", October, 2019, 17, <https://bit.ly/2L75RBP>.

²² Interviews with an informal worker residing in Daraa-city; and with an informal worker residing in Daraa al-Mahatta.

²³ Ferrier, "Rebuilding the City of Aleppo"

²⁴ Syrian Centre for Policy Research, *Alienation and Violence, Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014*, 2015, 34, <https://bit.ly/3ccVIV2>

decreased by 70 percent, while the public sector lost 22 percent of its workforce. The number of pensioners increased by 39 percent.²⁵

This change was especially important in Aleppo. Prior to the conflict, 76 percent of employment was in the private sector, while in 2017, 56 percent were employed by the public sector as the total number of working individuals decreased to 140,000.²⁶ Similarly, in Daraa city, the public sector employed 37 percent of the workforce in 2015, compared to around 15 percent in 2004, while the number of state employees remained almost the same, at around 14,000. This was the result of the destruction of large parts of the economy, especially in agriculture and construction, whose outputs diminished by 57 and 70 percent respectively.²⁷

In the case of Latakia and Damascus, the composition of the labour force is dominated by public sector employment, services and commercial activities and to a lesser extent manufacturing.²⁸ While large segments of the workforce in Latakia have remained dependent on state employment since 2011,²⁹ diversification as a result of the large inflow of IDPs occurred, many of whom brought savings and continued their economic activities in the city. With the relocation of many private companies, especially small and medium enterprises (SME) from Idlib and Aleppo to Latakia city and the coastal region in general, private investments were higher than in other areas of Syria during the conflict, albeit estimated well-below their 2011 level.

Similarly, in the first years of the war, the province of Sweida benefited from a relatively greater share of investment because of its safety and proximity to Damascus. In 2015, for example, the governorate hosted 17 investment projects by the Syrian Investment Agency (SIA), which was the highest number in the country.³⁰ It had also a relatively diversified economy, with 27 percent of the workforce (or nearly 27,000 employees) employed by the state, while the other main sectors of employment were in private services (14 percent), hotels and restaurants (14 percent), building and reconstruction (15 percent), and agriculture (11 percent).³¹

Although employment shortages existed in manufacturing and agricultural sectors, primarily as a result of massive outflow of working-age skilled and less skilled individuals, high levels of unemployment³² and low wages characterised the labour force. In 2018 and 2019,

²⁵ The Syria Report, "New Data Highlights Massive Drop in Syrian Workforce", 27 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/34SdYLT>

²⁶ Urban Analysis Network, "Aleppo City Profile", *ibid.*, 43-45

²⁷ Urban Analysis Network, "Daraa City Profile", October 2019, 7 and 52-53.

²⁸ Humanitarian Needs Overview, "Food Security, Situation in Syria", November 2017, 17, <https://bit.ly/397PcHF>

²⁹ Prior to the war, in the governorate of Latakia, the working population employed in the civilian public sector represented 54.6 percent. (Fabrice Balanche, "Go to Damascus, My Son: Alawi Demographics Shifts Under Ba'th Party Rule," in Kerr M. and Larkin C. (eds.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2015), 91-92.

³⁰ Daher, "The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction."

³¹ Taim Zeida, "Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society", *Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science*, 6 January 2020, 7, <https://bit.ly/2U7mB>

³² The level of unemployment is hard to estimate accurately, but it possibly ranges from 15 percent to 50 percent. According to the latest report of the Syrian Center for Policy Research, unemployment was estimated at 42.3 percent in 2019. (Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), "Justice to Transcend Conflict", 1 June 2020, 9, <https://bit.ly/3dA3iEI>)

according to a FAO survey in 12 governorates, unemployment was the main challenge, followed by high food prices.³³

Unemployment is not only linked to the destruction of large segments of the economy and therefore a lack of work opportunities. It is also the consequence of threats of arrests for failure to conscript, which pushes many young men to either stay at home or seek daily and informal work with low salaries and social insecurity, as explained by several interviewees in Daraa.³⁴ Rural Damascus and Daraa in particular suffered continuous forms of repression and harsh control with constant arrests of young men for their past affiliation with former opposition groups and/or with the aim of forcing them to join the military and go to battle often without training.³⁵ Levels of unemployment in former opposition-controlled areas are therefore generally higher. For example, in Daraa, unemployment reached 41 percent in 2019.³⁶ The cessation of cross-border international aid after recapture by the government in the summer 2018 also played a role in deepening socio-economic problems in the Daraa governorate, as stated by many interviewees.³⁷

To illustrate the high level of demand for job opportunities, an owner of a pharmaceutical company in Aleppo stated that he received many requests, at least 10 to 15 per day, following two jobs opening (pharmacist and chemist) in his industry. He added that one of the conditions for recruitment was to have completed the military service or not be mandated for it.³⁸

The structure of labour in former opposition-held areas is a direct consequence of destruction of wide sectors of the economy, that led to increase the relative importance of state employment. The continuous campaigns of arrests of young men for military conscriptions and extraction ransoms, also played a role in the high level of unemployment or in the increase of precarious employment. In contrast, public employment remains important in Latakia, Damascus and Sweida, but the structure of their economies is more diversified and dominated by commercial and service activities (both private and public), as these cities were spared from destruction and hence attracted new investment.

1.3 High cost of living

The acute deterioration in the value of wages, whether private or public, has pushed workers to seek alternative sources of income. Among state workers, seeking a second source

³³ Food and Agriculture Organizations of United Nations and World Food Programme, “Special Report FAO/WFP Crop And Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic”, 9 September 2019, 61, <https://bit.ly/2w8a6ZE>

³⁴ Interviews with an informal worker residing in Daraa-city; and with an informal worker residing in Daraa al-Mahatta.

³⁵ The Facebook page “Voice of the Capital” published at the beginning 2020 a report documenting about 1,200 cases of arrests in Rural Damascus against former opposition fighters who signed ‘reconciliation’ agreements and individuals wanted for military conscription. See also Ninar al-Ra’i, “Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta”, Research project report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 23 August 2019), <https://bit.ly/3bkVF3Y>

³⁶ Urban Analysis Network, “Daraa City Profile”, October 2019, 7 and 52-53

³⁷ Interviews with an informal worker residing in Daraa-city and an informal worker residing in Daraa al-Mahatta, *ibid.*

³⁸ Interview by telephone with an Aleppo businessman, March 2020

of income became more widespread after 2011 and particularly in the past few years, and provoked an increase in bribes or in the sums that were already being extracted.

The loss of purchasing power caused by inflation and the depreciation of the SYP has dramatically affected the population. According to a report published by the FAO in September 2019, the share of monthly expenses covered by credit increased up to 60 percent in certain governorates such as Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor and rural Damascus.³⁹ Prices of medicines and basic foodstuff has increased since the beginning of 2020, but exploded following the announcement of the first official case of COVID-19 in March 2020. Between February and April, the price of some foodstuff rose by 40 to 60 percent.⁴⁰

The cost of living (food, housing, education, health and clothing) is most expensive in Damascus and has continuously risen with inflation. The monthly requirements for a family of five in Damascus increased from 380,000 SYP in January 2020 to 430,000 SYP (between \$331 and \$358) in April 2020, while the average monthly public wage did not exceed 60,000 SYP (between \$46 and \$50 per month).⁴¹ The erosion of purchasing power in Syria has been dramatic, with estimates reaching a diminution of 93 percent in May 2020 compared to 2010.⁴² The prices of food and beverage increased 32.5 times since 2010, while the prices of all items such as general goods and services have become inflated by 27 times its 2010 level. Nearly half of that increase occurred during the first five months of 2020, but especially in May.⁴³

Low-income groups in the capital have to prioritise and ration their food purchases as a result of the continuous increase in the price of basic food items. The World Food Programme reported in September 2019 that about 14 percent of households in Damascus city had “inadequate food consumption” levels. Many families in the capital, as elsewhere in the country, depend on their extended kin and networks, or financial support from friends or relatives abroad to cover their daily expenses.⁴⁴ The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic also had negative consequences on remittances from March to May, aggravating the situation of many within the country. There were estimates expecting daily remittances to diminish by more than 50 percent, from USD 4.5 million prior the first COVID-19 measures in March 2020 to around USD 2 million for the following months.⁴⁵ At the beginning of Ramadan on 23 April, an increase in remittances to Syria was however announced.⁴⁶

The rising cost of living has pushed people to seek alternatives, such as promoting women’s work or joining pro-government militias. In rural Damascus, interviewees who did

³⁹ FAO and WFP, “Special Report FAO/WFP”, 57 and 65.

⁴⁰ Ramez Mahfouz, “An Academic Estimated the Loss of the Economy by About One Thousand Billion Pounds Per Month” (in Arabic), *al-Watan Online*, 11 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3b107EY>

⁴¹ Kassiou, “430 Thousand Pounds, the Cost of Living for a Family of Five People Increased by 13 Percent in Three Months” (in Arabic), 6 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Vft9y>

⁴² Shaam Times, “Economist: We Suffer From a Shortage of Financial Resources and the Coming Days are More Difficult” (in Arabic), 27 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZJezyG>

⁴³ Zachy Mehchi (2020), “On the Edge of Starvation: New Alarming Consumer Price Index Estimates for Syria”, *London School of Economics*, 26 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Y2rjh7>

⁴⁴ European Asylum Support Office, “Syria Socio-Economic Situation: Damascus City”, 24-25.

⁴⁵ World Bank, “Personal Remittances, Received (Current US\$)”, 4 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dB04AN>; Al-Watan, “About a Thousand Billion Pounds the Syrian Economy Losses a Month Because of Corona” (in Arabic), *Business 2 Business*, 12 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2K0PdTz>

⁴⁶ Watan Online, “Remittances of Expatriates Increased with the Beginning of Ramadan ...” (in Arabic), 27 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2VKYdmt>

not receive remittances stated that they had cut their expenses.⁴⁷ A woman explained that she begun work “because of the lack of income compared to the expenses”, especially as she became financially responsible for her parents and other close family members. Yet, the family lived in difficult conditions, unable to cover basic foodstuffs and goods, despite the woman and her father being employed.⁴⁸ Young men, lacking employment opportunities often see no other alternative but to join pro-government militias. In Eastern Ghouta, the Baath Brigades used Baath party offices in various towns to recruit youth who had joined the party. Conscripts, in addition to receiving a monthly wage of around 50,000 SYP (between \$38,5 and \$41,5), were also exempted from compulsory service and interrogation by law enforcement.⁴⁹

As a result of the destruction of large parts of the economy, unemployment and rising costs of living, an estimated 83 percent of Syrians lived below the poverty line in 2019 according to UNDP. This number could increase due to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

Figure 2 - People in Need by Governorates

Governorates	Numbers of “People in Need” ⁵⁰	Total Population
Damascus	713,000	1,8-2 million
Latakia	640,000	2.56 million
Sweida	210,000	364,000
Aleppo	2,54 million	3.7-3.8 million
Rural Damascus	2,045 million	3.2 million
Daraa	685,000	984,100

Source: United Nations, “Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic”, March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2vktxOJ>

Wide segments of the population have increasingly been dependent on the state for income. Since the beginning of the war, state expenditure has been concentrated on food and fuel subsidies and on wages and pensions, alongside military expenditures.⁵¹ At the same time, no significant investment from the state or through remittances and international aid is made

⁴⁷ Interview with a female teacher, Rural Damascus.

⁴⁸ Interview with a female worker in humanitarian assistance in local and international organisations, rural Damascus.

⁴⁹ Al-Ra’i, “Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta”, 7.

⁵⁰ People in need refers to people whose physical security, basic rights, dignity, living conditions or livelihoods are threatened or have been disrupted, and whose current level of access to basic services, goods and protection is inadequate to re-establish normal living conditions within their accustomed means without assistance.

⁵¹ Salaries and pensions accounted for 58 per cent of the state expenditure in 2019. (Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), “Justice to Transcend Conflict”, 1 June 2020, 59, <https://bit.ly/3dA3iE1>)

into the economy and to productive sectors that could have allowed for the creation of jobs and diversification of the economy.⁵²

2. Service provision's policy

The government has centralised many of its administrative functions, distributing critical services from the capital cities of Syria's governorates where regime affiliated forces were deployed, rather than from outposts in the countryside as it had done prior to March 2011.

This often led to oversubscribed public services in areas that remained under the control of the government while infrastructure is absent in former opposition-held areas, with little effort to restore them. The void left by the state in the provision of public services is partially filled through the implementation of conditional partnerships between the government and UN agencies and INGOs.

2.1 Devastated healthcare system

The Syrian military forces and their Russian allies are responsible for 91 percent of the deaths of at least 923 medical professionals killed in Syria between March 2011 and March 2020, according to Physicians for Human Rights.⁵³ In addition to violent campaigns against medical personnel and facilities in areas formerly controlled by opposition forces, the government also used the reconciliation deals to destroy opposition institutions by forcibly dismantling their political and service bodies in the newly recaptured areas. These institutions enabled the opposition and local communities to self-organise and provide the population with an alternative to state institutions in the provision of key services. This was considered a threat for the government. The health system suffered significantly throughout the war, not only as a result of the destruction of medical facilities and the targeting of medical staff, but it was also affected by the flight of many healthcare workers, a diminishing budget and the consequences of international sanctions.

Government expenditure on health equates to \$20 per person in 2020, approximately \$350-400 million.⁵⁴ In addition, only 64 percent of hospitals and 52 per cent of primary healthcare centres across Syria were fully functional at the end of 2019, and up to 70 percent of the health workforce had left the country.⁵⁵ This led to a significant higher ratio of population per doctor, increasing from 623 individuals for one doctor in 2010 to 769 in 2017.⁵⁶ Again significant differences existed between regions.⁵⁷

⁵² Joseph Daher, "Syria's Manufacturing Sector: the Model of Economic Recovery in Question", Research project report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2019), <https://bit.ly/35aCIEk>

⁵³ Physicians for Human Rights, "Medical Personnel Are Targeted in Syria", 23 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XWymtg>

⁵⁴ The Syrian government allocated for the 2020 budget 266 billion SYP (which amounted to \$380 million at the official exchange rate of the Central Bank of Syria 700 SYP for \$1) for the Ministry of Health.

⁵⁵ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syria Anniversary Press Release", 6 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/394olw03>

⁵⁶ Economy2Day, "In Syria ... One Doctor For 769 Citizens and the Mortality Rate is 8 Per Thousand" (in Arabic), 9 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2J27UFZ>

⁵⁷ Mazen Gharibah and Zaki Mehchy, "COVID-19 Pandemic: Syria's Response and Healthcare Capacity", *London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK*, 25 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2vVj9Nw>

Figure 3 - Human Resources for Health by Governorates (2011-2018)

Governorates	Human Resources for Health (HRH) ⁵⁸ in 2011	Human Resources for Health (HRH) in 2018
Damascus	0.1	0.21
Latakia	0.66-0.68	0.22-0.23
Sweida	0.675	0.296
Aleppo	0.0095	0.0027
Rural Damascus	0.723	0.214
Daraa	0.168	0.025
Syria	0.198	0.095

Source: World Bank, “The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis”, February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TO2BjP>

Public health services are present in government-controlled areas, though they are often overcrowded and inadequate. State services in Damascus are for example generally better than in the rest of the country, although quality is affected by the lack of qualified staff and basic equipment and medicine. Similar trends are evident in Sweida and Latakia.

Figure 4 - Number of Public and Private Hospitals in Cities that Remained Under the Control of the Regime (2020)

Governorates	Public Hospitals	Private hospitals and clinics ⁵⁹ (estimates)
Damascus	15	36
Latakia	3	14-15
Sweida	1	3

Source: Ministry of Health, “Distribution of Private Hospitals according to governorates”, 20 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dmEC35>

⁵⁸ HRH combines the number of physicians per 1,000 persons and the number of nurses and midwives per 1,000 persons.

⁵⁹ They could generally welcome from 10 to 100 persons.

The decrease in the numbers of healthcare workers has also had a negative impact in Daraa. For example, the number of health workers decreased from 4193 in 2011 to 2063 in 2018, including a reduction of the number of doctors from 372 to 62.⁶⁰

These appalling conditions of the healthcare system explains the lack of motivation among the remaining medical staff, who earn low salaries and have difficult working conditions. Growing corruption, clientelism and bribes are also prevalent.⁶¹ This is reflected in an interview conducted in rural Damascus “the private hospital in my area provided very bad services (...), numerous medical errors led to several deaths there, but as the hospital owners are influential individuals, no sanctions fell on them”.⁶² An interviewee from Daraa also explained “the situation was better prior to the return of the regime, because many individuals and I received salaries and income through programs and employment connected to opposition armed groups of the Free Syrian Army and humanitarian and relief organisations”.⁶³

The preference for private healthcare was already growing before the war, especially among higher socio-economic groups,⁶⁴ yet costs are prohibitive for the majority of the population. In areas such as al-Mazzeah, Damar Project, Mazraa, and the White Bridge in the capital Damascus costs ranged from 5,000 to 15,000 SYP (from \$4 to \$12.50) in 2019, while in clinics located on the outskirts of Damascus the cost ranged between 2,000 and 3,500 SYP (from \$1.5 to less than \$3).⁶⁵ Similar trends are observed in Sweida, Latakia, Daraa and Aleppo.

In both rural Damascus and Daraa, the lack of public hospitals has forced many patients to seek private hospitals or travel to the capital. In the city of Daraa, private hospitals are generally too expensive for local populations.⁶⁶ This has forced many individuals to travel to Damascus to seek medical treatments in public institutions. This came however with security complications or fears of arrest. Inhabitants of Eastern Ghouta needed security approval from the security services to travel to Damascus and individuals of Daraa have been arrested on their way to the capital to get medical treatment. In Aleppo city, 60 percent of health facilities were destroyed or partially damaged, with nearly all health facilities in Eastern Aleppo reported damaged or destroyed during the war.⁶⁷ Since 2011, most of the remaining inhabitants in

⁶⁰ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria”, Research project report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2020) <https://bit.ly/2ycE3J1>

⁶¹ Lubna Salem, “Weapon and Corruption in Latakia hospitals” (in Arabic), *al-Araby*, 14 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Untn11> ; Interviews with a journalist, with a farmer and with a carpenter, Sweida.

⁶² Interview with a female worker in humanitarian assistance in local and international organizations, Rural Damascus

⁶³ Interview with a student residing in Daraa-Balad, neighborhood Al-Manshia. This testimony is shared by other interviewees in the governorate: Interviews with an individual from Daraa (Eastern Mlayha), an individual from Daraa (neighborhood Al-Abbasiya) and with a student, Daraa Countryside.

⁶⁴ Interview with an accountant, Damascus; with the president of a NGO, Damascus; Kasturi Sen and Waleed al-Faisal, “Syria Neoliberal Reforms in Health Sector Financing: Embedding Unequal Access?”, *Social Medicine*, April 2012 April 2012, p.174

⁶⁵ Hussam Saleh, “In Damascus: The Medical Examination Fee Reaches 15 Thousand Liras And Overnight In a Private Hospital With 100 Thousand Liras” (in Arabic), *al-Hal*, 1 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UjDZOS>

⁶⁶ Interviews with anonymous person, rural Damascus, Dahiyat Qudsiya; with a female teacher, Rural Damascus; with a female worker in humanitarian assistance in local and international organizations, Rural Damascus; with a financial and administrative coordinator in an international organization, Rural Damascus Province, Dahiyat Qudsiya.

⁶⁷ Before the war, the far majority of private hospitals were situated in western areas of the city, while public services in Eastern Aleppo were generally deficient and insufficient, including in the health sector. World Bank Group, “Syria Damage Assessment of selected cities”, IX.

Aleppo depended on public hospitals situated in and around Aleppo University, which ran over its capacity.⁶⁸

Similarly, the conflict resulted in a shortage of trained medical personnel and equipment in both public and to a lesser extent, private hospitals.⁶⁹ Lack of medical staff, especially qualified ones, has also led to increasing medical errors committed by inexperienced doctors, sometimes resulting in the death of patients. This is a growing problem in public hospitals and to a lesser extent in private ones.⁷⁰

Many hospitals also remain closed as a result of insufficient medical staff and destruction of health infrastructure. Harasta public hospital al-Biruni, the largest specialised centre to treat cancer, remains a major exception. It reopened in mid-2018 after the government regained full control of the city. Some of its services were even expanded in March 2020, through the sponsorship of Basma Association,⁷¹ which has been supporting the hospital since the organisation was established in 2005 by Asma al-Assad, the president's wife, who inaugurated the extension of the hospital.⁷²

2.2 Education in ruins

In the summer of 2019, 40 percent of schools in Syria were not functioning as a result of severe damage caused by the conflict, while some were used as temporary shelters for IDPs. Over 2 million children – one-third of Syria's student population⁷³ - were out-of-school and 1.3 million were at risk of dropping out according to UNICEF's 2019 report.⁷⁴ Overall, between 2010 and 2018 the enrolment rate for the children between 5–17 decreased from 85 percent to 61 percent, with large variance depending on the governorate. Child labour doubled from 10 percent prior to the conflict to 20 percent in 2018, as many children dropped out of school and joined the labour market to assist their families.⁷⁵

In addition, about 150,000 teachers have left the formal education system, more than one-third of pre-war education employees.⁷⁶ The general lack of qualified education staff is the result of immigration and low salaries in public institutions. Teacher's salaries in public schools do not exceed 35,000 SYP (a bit less than \$30), while the salary of a teacher with 15 years' experience is 50,000 SYP (a bit more than \$40). Some teachers have also been dismissed for political reasons or because they avoided conscription. The insufficient number of teachers has

⁶⁸ Al-Thawra, "Thawra Opens the File of Public Hospitals", 20 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/34uOOSY>

⁶⁹ Kassiou, "University Hospital of Aleppo ... A Shortage of Personnel and Poor Service" (in Arabic), 30 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XvwXK4>

⁷⁰ Jelnar al-Ali, "Saqr to «Al-Watan»: Medical Errors in University Hospitals Exceeds Others and Operations are Performed Without the Presence of the Supervisor", *al-Watan*, 8 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2U4leA0>; Kassiou, "Aleppo .. The Health Sector's Problems are not Limited to the "Medical Errors"" (in Arabic), 2 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2V2A0aU>;

⁷¹ Tina Zintl, "The Cooptation of Foreign Educated Syrians, Between Legitimizing Strategy and Domestic Reforms", in Hinnebusch R., and Zintl T. (eds.), *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Volume 1: Political Economy and International Relations* (Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press), 126

⁷² Arabic Russia Today, "Asma Al-Assad Participates in the Opening of the Expansion of al-Biruni Hospital Specialized in Oncology", 7 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XwESGV>

⁷³ There were about 5.8 million school-age children within Syria, or about 28 percent of the overall population currently residing in country in February 2020.

⁷⁴ UNICEF, "Fast Facts Syria Crisis August 2019", August 2019, 2-3, <https://uni.cf/39Q2biq>

⁷⁵ Syrian Economic Sciences Society and UNDP, "Employment and Livelihood Support in Syria", Relief Web, July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Uaf7dm>, p.6

⁷⁶ World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians," 130-13.

partially been compensated by employing university students, often as “contractual” staff who receive lower salaries than formal teachers⁷⁷ and who lack the sufficient qualifications.⁷⁸ Many public school teachers have sought other professional activities or provide private lessons, which allows them to earn higher wages. An interviewee in rural Damascus explained how a former public-school teacher started to offer private math lessons at the cost of 5,000 SYP (around \$4) for an hour to high school students.⁷⁹

Figure 5: Total Number of Schools and Students in Syria by Governorates

Syria/ Governorates	Total number of schools (primary, education and vocational schools)	Total Number of students (primary, education and vocational schools)
Syria	12,791	3,693,778
Damascus	880	361,242
Latakia	1,220	261,221
Sweida	611	106,618
Aleppo	1,430	514,603
Rural Damascus	1,580	650,732
Daraa	620	229,250

Source: Sana, “12700 Schools Open Tomorrow to Welcome students as the New School Year Begins” 1 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2K5SPUw>

As with health services, there are major differences in the provision of education between areas. Education services are generally available throughout Damascus, Sweida and Latakia, but with limitations. As elsewhere, there is a shortage of educational staff in public schools. In addition, school buildings need renovation to cope with overcrowding, especially as a result of the arrival of significant numbers of IDPs and no additional funds from the Ministry. In Latakia, there was an average of 50 to 60 children per class in some primary

⁷⁷ Mona Halaq, “In the Ghouta: Salma Draws Her Sheep ... and She Hopes to Write his Name, Education rubble for the “Nakba Generation”” (in Arabic), *al-Akhabar*, 29 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3a4OkF6>

⁷⁸ Halab Today TV, “A Shortage of Teaching Staff Impedes Education in Damascus and its Countryside”, (in Arabic), 22 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2x64xeG>

⁷⁹ Interview through a questionnaire of a female worker, Dahiyat Qudsiya.

schools in November 2019, compared to 20 students per class before 2011.⁸⁰ In Sweida, the size of classes also expanded, reaching an average of 45 students per class.⁸¹

The main issues of the public education system in former opposition areas are more significant. In both Daraa and rural Damascus, many educational professionals have been displaced during the conflict. Moreover, many schools have been destroyed. According to statistics of the Ministry of Education, at the beginning of the 2019 school year, 500 schools in Damascus countryside needed renovations and 39 were completely destroyed. A certain number of schools have reopened in different localities of Eastern Ghouta but are still far from being suitable for education. The majority lack sanitation and potable water.⁸² In this area, many schools have been rehabilitated by UNICEF and sometimes through the support of businessmen and local communities, but classes generally remain overcrowded, exceeding 50 per class.⁸³ In Daraa, 15 out of 17 neighbourhoods have experienced a lack of education capacity, with approximately 14,000 seats lost as of October 2019.⁸⁴ It was estimated that 400 of the 988 schools in Daraa were either partially or completely destroyed. As a result, UN agencies and some local NGOs have engaged in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of some schools.

The situation in Eastern Aleppo is worse. Estimates indicated that 53 percent of education facilities in Aleppo were either partially damaged or fully destroyed in February 2017. In mid-2019, only 60 percent of schools were operating, negatively impacting over 500,000 children. As elsewhere in the country, schools carry out double or sometimes even three shifts in order to provide education to all students. However, inequalities in education provision that existed prior to the war between eastern and western areas of Aleppo have been exasperated. Only 15 percent of students in eastern Aleppo were served by public facilities in February 2019,⁸⁵ with 80 students per class.

The inequality between governates is primarily based on their status during the war. Former opposition-controlled areas suffered greatly from destruction caused by the government and its allies. Upon recapture by the government, public services, including education, in these areas were often ignored with insufficient investment which sometimes led to a deterioration of essential services and infrastructure.

⁸⁰ Hazem Mustapha, "On Syria's Coast, Children of 'Martyrs' and 'Terrorists' Attend the Same School", *Syria Untold*, 22 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/2J9CVbc>

⁸¹ Taim Zeida, "Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society", 16; Enab Baladi, "As-Suwayda Schools Without Allocations: Associations Contribute in the Replenishment", 14 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2JF9Pkj>

⁸² Mona Halaq, "In the Ghouta."

⁸³ Radio al-Kul, "Eastern Ghouta schools are deliberately neglected by the regime" (in Arabic), 21 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/34z0AM2>

⁸⁴ Urban Analysis Network, "Daraa City Profile", 71-75

⁸⁵ The rest attending 'non-government' schools, homeschooling, or not attending.

3. Service providers: The government's networks, international humanitarian assistance, and local initiatives

Despite being the largest employer and main provider of social services in the country, the state lacks the means to maintain sufficient services for large segments of the population. This situation has weakened the government's capacity to (re)impose a certain form of hegemony, even a passive one, on the society. In order to partially make up the shortcomings of state institutions and fill the void, the regime relies on various international and local actors.

State institutions have been increasingly dependent on UN agencies, INGOs, local NGOs and associations to outsource the provision of basic services, particularly to areas formally outside its control in order to compensate for the state's shortcomings and/or absence. In these regions, the policy of prioritising particular areas over others is also a way for Damascus to direct the international humanitarian assistance to territories considered as less rebellious or more ready to collaborate.

The government also uses its own networks to ensure some basic services are provided in order to strengthen its control on society. Yet, this is insufficient to address the needs of the local population, who endure harsh living conditions. This has forced civilians to seek their own solutions and establish local initiatives to fund basic services or reconstruct some infrastructure to compensate for state's absence and/or deficiencies. However, this has not prevented new forms of dissent to be expressed, especially as socio-economic conditions continued to deteriorate and as a result of strict security measures and repression campaigns from the government.

3.1 State institutions, weakened but remain the most important service provider

State institutions remain the main provider of essential public services, a key factor in the resilience of the government. Despite the loss of territory, the government made it a priority to maintain the functioning of state-owned agencies, keeping large segments of the Syrian population reliant on its services. Syrians, who were already heavily dependent on the state before the uprising, became even more so. Although state subsidies have declined,⁸⁶ state-owned public agencies remained the primary providers of essentials like bread, subsidised fuel, healthcare and education.

The Syrian Trade Establishment (STE), the state institution with branches selling food and other goods at low prices throughout the country, is crucial for segments of the population who are not able to purchase similar products in private stores and shops. Public control over the market of goods is insufficient as 80 percent is controlled by private actors.⁸⁷ At the

⁸⁶ Public subsidies between 2011 and 2019 as a percentage of the current GDP decreased from 20.2 per cent in 2011 to 4.9 per cent of current GDP in 2019. (Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), "Justice to Transcend Conflict", 1 June 2020, 8, <https://bit.ly/3dA3iEI>)

⁸⁷ In his speech on May 4th, Bashar al-Assad stated his willingness to augment the role and market share of the Syrian Trading Establishment (STE), in the objective of eliminating trade intermediaries by buying products directly from farmers and peasants at adequate prices and providing them to consumers at lower costs. The implementation and outcomes of such a plan are still to be observed, particularly as traders and businessmen linked to the Syrian regime have been the ones profiting from the high prices of products through their large control on the market.

beginning of June 2020, the STE announced that more than 400 new halls and outlets would be opened in different governorates before the end of the year. There are currently approximately 1,600 units affiliated with the STE active across Syria.⁸⁸

Municipal service provision in former opposition-controlled areas such as Daraa and Eastern Ghouta are restricted to food distributions led in coordination with SARC. Subsidised bread and cooking gas are provided via Neighbourhood Committees appointed by the municipality. Long queues outside state bakeries are common in nearly all governorates. The number of people depending on these have increased in the past few months, as bread is sold for 50 SYP, instead of 100-150 SYP in private bakeries and shops. This price increased to 300 SYP at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in some areas.⁸⁹ However, the service is unequal. In eastern Aleppo, some parts of rural Damascus, especially Eastern Ghouta⁹⁰ and Daraa, there was a shortage of bread in state bakeries at the end of March 2020.

Moreover, the state remains by far the largest employer in the country, with around 1.5 million public workers and 500,000 pensioners.⁹¹ The importance of state employment in the economy and labour force increased significantly during the war as wide sectors of the private sector economy were destroyed.

Most of the service provision and restoration of public infrastructure is performed by, or in coordination with, SARC and funded by UN agencies and INGOs. SARC and the Syrian Ministry of Health often collaborate with international agencies such as UNICEF and OCHA to provide health services in former opposition-controlled areas. In addition, various international and local NGOs are active in these areas. However, the needs of the local population are not sufficiently addressed by these actors as the provision of healthcare is limited to basic services. Similarly due to the absence and/or lack of state education services in former opposition-controlled areas, a number of INGOs operate through local NGOs and associations in collaboration with the Ministry of Education to make up for the deficiency in basic needs, restore schools, fund school activities and campaigns promoting enrolment in schools. At the same time, within these particular areas, differences also exist. For example, the government seems to impose stricter security against towns which are the most rebellious and limit the provision of certain services.⁹²

In eastern Aleppo, the government has made no effort to improve living conditions or rebuild residential areas, while the provision of state services is minimal. The renovation of war-ravaged buildings has been entirely done and paid for by the inhabitants.⁹³ The area is not prioritised for reconstruction or redevelopment. No organised reconstruction projects have

⁸⁸ Ali Mahmoud Suleiman, "413 New Hall for "Syrian Trade" Before the End of this Year" (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 5 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2MAQEcl>

⁸⁹ Suhail al-Ghazi and Elizabeth Tsurkov, "People Can't Even Afford to Buy Bulgur": Discontent is On the Rise as Syria's Economic Crisis Worsens", *Middle East Institute*, 28 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2wmohe3>

⁹⁰ Al-Watan, "Gatherings of Displaced People Without Bread .. Deputy Governor of Quneitra..." (in Arabic), 30 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2V87qUj>

⁹¹ Mahmoud Ashtar, "Amount of Actual Wage Increase Only 162 billion Pounds!" (in Arabic), *Kassioun*, 25 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/2sCg8zF>

⁹² Al-Ra'i, "Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta", *ibid.*

⁹³ Angus McDowell, "In East Aleppo, Bodies Still under Rubble Show Limits of Syria's Recovery", *Reuters*, 25 April 2019, <https://reut.rs/39KCKid>

been initiated, except some small parts of the old historic centre, which are not residential areas.⁹⁴ In the city of Aleppo, especially the eastern neighbourhoods, many buildings have been destroyed since 2016, and there have been no plans from the government to support reconstruction. Alongside this situation, the threats of looting in these areas is still significant because of the massive presence in the city of different local and foreign militias supported by various actors.

3.2 Pro- and non-governmental organisations and the Baath Party

International humanitarian assistance inside Syria has been crucial since the beginning of the uprising in mid-March 2011. Its significance was reflected by the declaration of the Governor of the Central Bank of Syria, Hazem Qarfoul, in January 2020 asking officials of international organisations operating in government-controlled areas to activate their programs to support the Syrian population.⁹⁵ INGOs and UN agencies also play an important role within the country by providing jobs and subcontracting Syrian companies. Segments of the economy that are not subject to sanctions - transport, agribusiness, hotels and pharmaceuticals – survive by relying on the incomes generated by international humanitarian assistance.⁹⁶

SARC also provides services and assistance to the Syrian population. It provides education and healthcare and runs humanitarian and rehabilitation projects throughout the country. According to their 2019 report, SARC employs 12,200 staff and volunteers, and have over 5.5 million beneficiaries.⁹⁷ The majority of beneficiaries are in rural Damascus (30 percent) followed by Aleppo, Al-Hasakeh, Daraa and Homs with a total of 50 percent of the registrations.⁹⁸ SARC, with the support of international partners, is currently responsible for sanitary and disinfection campaigns throughout the country since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

Another important non-state actor is the Syrian Trust for Development with more than 2,500 volunteers. The organisation's activities include the rehabilitation of schools, health centres and streets, providing loans to small enterprises and individuals, running cultural projects and trainings sessions. They run activities and programmes in ten governorates, with a strong presence in Damascus and Latakia and some areas of rural Damascus.⁹⁹

These two organisations have become the focal points for the majority of foreign humanitarian organisations registered in Damascus. Moreover, the majority of the international assistance is channelled via these two organisations. Approximately 60 per cent of all UN aid operations in Syria are conveyed through SARC, while the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Syria has collaborated with Syria Trust for Development,

⁹⁴ Ferrier, "Rebuilding the City of Aleppo".

⁹⁵ Enab Baladi, "The Central Bank Requests International Organizations to Activate their Projects In Syria" (in Arabic), 20 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/38MAQfP>

⁹⁶ Thomas Abgrall, "International NGOs Rush to Damascus", *Commerce du Levant*, 7 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2XbXMCU>

⁹⁷ Syrian Arab Red Crescent, "Semi Annual Report 2019", July 2019, 2, <https://bit.ly/2UMmXKU>

⁹⁸ Ibid, 3

⁹⁹ Abd al-Muna'am Mas'oud, "Damascus Countryside Bakery Production Is not Enough! As of Saturday, A Bundle of Bread For Each Family", *Al-Watan*, 26 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3aLkplv>

allocating \$7.7 million between 2012 and 2016, while UNOCHA allocated over \$751,000 to it in 2016.¹⁰⁰ This has allowed state authorities to impose control over assistance operations and programs within the country, thereby restricting aid to particular areas, such as to former opposition-held areas.¹⁰¹ Damascus has, for example, prevented and/or restricted international and local aid agencies from transferring supplies to non-government-held parts of the country since the outbreak of the pandemic in mid-March 2020.¹⁰²

These organisations, although officially outside the control of the state, could be considered as part of the government's network, and acting in its interests. After the short-lived protests in January 2020 in the Sweida governorate, the Syria Trust for Development announced plans to provide 368 million SYP (around \$300,000) for an ongoing project in Sweida to support the local population. This was a clear attempt to try to alleviate dissatisfaction among the population.¹⁰³

Another NGO operating within the regime's network is the Syria Youth Imprint (SYI), established officially in 2012. The organisation claims to have more than a dozen branches throughout government held areas, as well as branches in Holland, Venezuela, the UAE, Lebanon, Kuwait and Romania. It has thousands of volunteers involved in humanitarian, rehabilitation, development and relief activities. There is a particular focus on programmes that serve the families of the Syrian army's soldiers who had been killed and injured. It has collaborated with several ministries and Chambers of Commerce and Industry on various national campaigns, as well as with the Syria Trust For Development.¹⁰⁴ The director of the organisation, Anas Mohammed Younes, appears to be particularly close to Asma al-Assad.¹⁰⁵ The NGO has also been very active during the COVID-19 crisis.

The NGOs and charity associations that work in various governorates are also close to the authorities. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East (GOPA) has increased its activities since the beginning of the war. According to its director, the Very Reverend Archimandrite Dr Alexi Chehadeh, GOPA has 44 offices and 38 community centres with a 1600 full-and part-time staff. The organisation provides a range of services, including education, vocational training, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) services, shelter, psycho-social support and healthcare. In 2018, the organisation served 2.5 million beneficiaries, collaborating with 22 international partners, including various UN agencies.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 7

¹⁰¹ Haid Haid, "Principled Aid in Syria: A Framework for International Agencies", *Chatham House*, July 2019, 6, <https://bit.ly/2V6Dnwh>

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Aid Restrictions Hinder Covid-19 Response", 28 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2WAq4Xd>

¹⁰³ Danny Makki, "Damascus Battles Economic Collapse as the Syrian Pound Plummet", 6 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/33fHQk9>

¹⁰⁴ Rahaf Amar, "Mr. Anas Muhammad Yunis, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Syrian Youth Imprint Foundation, in an Interview with Panorama Tartous on the Activities of the Year 2018..." (in Arabic), *Panorama Syria*, 25 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/3axvplI>; SANA, "On the Sixth Anniversary of its Establishment, Syrian Youth Imprint Launches an Employment project for Job Seekers" (in Arabic), 11 January 2017, bit.ly/2S1WB5F

¹⁰⁵ Information retrieved on personnel Facebook page of Anas Mohammed Younes, 23 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3cHDKOW> and of the organization Syria Youth Imprint, 23 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3cFLIDR>

¹⁰⁶ Marianne Ejdersten, "Fr Ale-i - A Peacemaker In Syria", *World Council Churches*, 21 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/39Sef20>; GOPA-DERD, "Home", April 2020, <https://bit.ly/39PAIMW>

The majority of NGOs and charity associations with official state's recognition are small and mid-size organisations that operate in one single province and involved in a variety of different activities. They often collaborate with local authorities and with SARC.

In addition, the government has also increased the visibility of the Baath party¹⁰⁷ as an additional tool to influence society. Baathist networks have been mobilised by the government in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in order “to reinforce the role of the party in society” as officially claimed by its leadership.¹⁰⁸ Local Baathists branches participated in campaigns in coordination with ministries and local authorities. In Damascus, a campaign called “Together We Can” was launched by the Baath Damascus branch at the beginning of April 2020. This operation involved the distribution of bread and basic foodstuff to local populations and assistance in disinfection campaigns.¹⁰⁹

Different pro-government militias have established their own systems and mechanisms of service provisions, including the distribution of clean water, humanitarian assistance, and utilities, in areas they are active and to constituencies connected to them.¹¹⁰

According to the political dynamics and specificities of each region and penetration of state's institutions, Damascus retains the ability to mobilise pro-regime networks including Baath officials, militias, intelligence officers, and prominent members of local society (businessmen, religious networks, tribal members, etc.) to control most segments of the population.

3.3 Local initiatives: Businessmen, diaspora support networks and informal collectives

Businessmen, especially the ones close to the regime, have also established charity organisations and launched humanitarian initiatives. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, initiatives to provide for basic needs, especially food and medicine, increased often with much publicity from pro-government and state media.

The Al-Bustan Charity Foundation was established in 1999 by Rami Makhlof.¹¹¹ He was involved in the coastal areas through his company Syriatel and association ‘fidelity to the martyr’ in the funding of various services, including medical treatment and weddings, for militiamen, SAA soldiers and members of the security services.¹¹² In mid-2018, he established

¹⁰⁷ Agnès Favier and Marie Kostrz, “Local elections: Is Syria Moving to Reassert Central Control?”, Research project report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute-Middle East Directions, 3 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3eJjXH8>)

¹⁰⁸ Al-Watan, “It Has a Good Level of Organization and Experience in Social Work...” (in Arabic), 5 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2xQhQA8>

¹⁰⁹ Al-Watan, “Secretary of the Damascus Branch to ‘Al-Watan’: 500 Volunteers’ Baathists to Enhance the Party’s Social Role and Mobilize Youth Energies in Society”, 6 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2V7ZSB4>

¹¹⁰ Aldassouky, Ayman and Hatahet, Sinan (2020), “The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime-Sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities”, *Research project report*, Florence, Italy: European University Institute-Middle East Directions, to be published

¹¹¹ The rift between Rami Makhlof and the Presidential Palace does not change the fact that Makhlof’s Bustan charity foundation and other charity initiatives still serve pro-government networks, especially in the context of the families of soldiers killed and injured. The only difference is the identity of who heads these networks. There is a transfer from Rami Makhlof to the Presidential Palace (see for more details Joseph Daher, “The Syrian Presidential Palace Strengthens its Concentration of Power: The Rift Makhlof-Assad”, *Research project report*, (Florence, Italy: European University Institute-Middle East Directions, 14 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3d3k4fd>)

¹¹² Abir Mahmoud, “Syriatel Offers the Largest Mass Wedding in Syria” (in Arabic), *Al-Watan Online*, 7 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/39KGDwy>

the Nour Microfinance Foundation, with offices in Damascus and Tartous, whose mission included the provision of financial services to low-income individuals who lack collateral for bank loans. At the beginning of Ramadan in 2020, Makhoulf announced donations amounting to 500 million SYP (between around \$384,500 and \$415,000), which were divided between the youth initiative (“min ba’d wa min ba’id”)¹¹³ and Al-Bustan Charity Foundation. This included the distribution of food baskets to families in need.¹¹⁴ He announced a new transfer for the final days of the holy month of Ramadan at the end of May 2020 of 1.5 billion SYP (approximately 806,000 USD for a rate of 1,860 SYP a US dollar) to the Al-Bustan Charity Foundation and other associations to provide assistance to people in need, including to 7,500 martyr families and 2,500 injured to which al-Bustan Charity Foundation offered services.¹¹⁵

Other businessmen close to the regime followed the same path. Samer Foz established FOZ Charity in Latakia and Damascus. In Latakia, Foz Charity distributed food baskets containing basic goods to people in need through the Directorate of Social Affairs and Labour and local associations and provided sanitary products and liquids to the Directorate of Health.¹¹⁶ Abu Ali Khodr supported and sponsored local social initiatives in the Tartus governorate.¹¹⁷

In Aleppo, Fares Shehabi, MP and Chairman of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry, announced that the Aleppo Chamber of Industry had launched an initiative to distribute free bread to people in need, starting in the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo.¹¹⁸ This initiative also included food baskets for security officers and the distribution of 1,000 waterproof uniforms to cleaning workers.¹¹⁹ However, in Aleppo, the number of businessmen, especially close to the government, has decreased as many have left the country. This has left space for other organisations to expand. In Christian communities, associations linked to the various Churches or to the far-right French organisation “Chrétien d’Orient” have been successful in mobilising funding for humanitarian and rehabilitation projects.¹²⁰

Rural Damascus and eastern Aleppo have been dependent on initiatives from businessmen and NGOs mostly based in Damascus and Western Aleppo. Sweida and Daraa have been reliant on diaspora communities and local forms of assistances based on family and primordial identities (tribal in Daraa and religious -Druze- in Sweida), in addition to SARC.¹²¹

¹¹³ A youth initiative to help families affected by the Corona pandemic, including in distributing food baskets. (Information retrieved on Facebook of the campaign Ma3 ba3d min ba3id, 27 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bK3Y9N>)

¹¹⁴ Information retrieved on Facebook of Ramil Makhoulf, 27 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3eW6lIx>

¹¹⁵ This payment was carried out several days following “The Homeland’s Wounded” program’s announcement, created in 2014 and handled by the Syrian Presidency to deal with the needs of the injured soldiers and pro-regime militiamen, of an emergency allowance ranging from 150,000 and 200,000 SYP (from around \$80 to \$107.50; for a rate of 1,860 SYP a US dollar) to injured individuals registered with it. This demonstrated the attempts of Rami Makhoulf to rival with the Presidential Palace on a popular basis supportive of the regime. (Information retrieved on Facebook of Ramil Makhoulf, 23 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/36qc7hN>; Information retrieved on Facebook of Jarih al-Watan, 19 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2LVBLBt>)

¹¹⁶ Information retrieved on the Facebook of Foz Charity, 22 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2RXZWCV>

¹¹⁷ Ayman alDassouky, “The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict”, Research project report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute-Middle East Directions, 24 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/34bDZFh>)

¹¹⁸ Snack Syria, “Free Bread to Prevent Queues and Crowds in Front of the Social Enterprise Lounge”, 25 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2V3h0bm>

¹¹⁹ The Syria Report, “Pandemic Also Opportunity for Business Elite to Improve its Image”, 1 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3e01Xl7>

¹²⁰ Interview by telephone with an Aleppo businessman, March 2020; Interview by telephone Dr Harout Akdedian, Portland State University, Middle East Studies Centre, March 2020

¹²¹ Interviews with a journalist, a farmer, a carpenter, and a researcher/journalist/ linguist, Sweida.

These areas do not have large groups of businessmen and a pool of local NGOs with the capacities to launch initiatives similar to Damascus, Latakia and, to a lesser extent, Aleppo.

Diaspora communities in the Gulf and local businessmen assisted communities in Daraa governorate and in Eastern Ghouta to restore infrastructure (schools, health centres, buildings) and provide services, including removing rubble and distributing bread and essential products.¹²²

At the outbreak of COVID-19, diaspora communities sent money to villages and towns in Sweida and Daraa to help people with limited or no income to have access to food and medicine, or in some cases, dispatched medical equipment to local health institutions. In addition, groups of youth and volunteers announced through social media, their willingness to secure and deliver food and medicine for many families and individuals unable to purchase them.¹²³

The government has also deployed its various networks to respond to the crisis, while trying to influence or even repress local initiatives. In Latakia, security forces ended local youth initiatives to help families in need in some neighbourhoods.¹²⁴ In some areas of rural Damascus and Daraa, activities have also been influenced by the authorities through the SARC, municipalities or the Baath party.¹²⁵ The government aims to stop any private solidarity initiatives from developing means of autonomy and expanding its own network.¹²⁶

Conclusion

The state's ability to provide services has diminished considerably since 2011. While the socio-economic situation has continued to deteriorate, criticisms of the authorities has increased as well as various forms of dissents, including demonstrations on 7 June 2020 in Sweida with slogans demanding the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad and the departure of Iran and Russia from Syria and in different cities and towns of Daraa governorate.¹²⁷ The weakening and reduction of state services started prior to the uprising in 2011 due to the state's neoliberal and authoritarian policies. Thus, the war only exaggerated this situation.

At the same time, the gradual elimination of any political and social alternative to the Syrian government accompanied by the destruction of wide sectors of the economy have

¹²² Haid, "The Regime Is Shifting the Burden of Early Recovery to Residents"; Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria"; Synaps, "War by Other Means"

¹²³ Baladi News, "Civil Initiatives To Confront Corona In The Palestinian Camps In Aleppo And Homs" (in Arabic), 23 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2yxKiHi>; Al-Baath Media, "Initiatives In Sweida To Confront Corona" (in Arabic), 25 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bXn8Zc>; Information retrieved from Facebook on a personal page, 23 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2V2W3gF>

¹²⁴ Interview with anonymous person, Latakia.

¹²⁵ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria", Research project report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2020)

¹²⁶ Muhamad Rakan al-Mustafa, "The Minister of Affairs for "Al-Watan": Collecting Donations Through Well-Known Associations Only" (in Arabic), *Al-Watan Online*, 25 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/39KHRhI>

¹²⁷ Al-Modon, "The Revolution Regains its Pulse... Daraa and Sweida chanting "Leave Bashar."" (in Arabic), 7 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3h2z7rP>

reinforced state institutions as the main provider of services and the main employer. Large segments of the population are dependent on the state for wages or assistance.

The actions of organisations such as the SARC and Syria Trust for Development consolidate the government's authority by taking international humanitarian funds and manipulating humanitarian assistance. Charity initiatives run by Syrian businessmen and the mobilisation of Syria Youth Imprint, the Baathist party and some militias also act to reinforce the government and its clientelist and power networks. They are also mechanisms that the government uses to control society.

The lack of state resources has meant that the government has focused its reconstruction and early recovery efforts in areas that remained under its control throughout the war, neglecting recaptured areas. These areas are still considered to be hostile. The burden of state public service provision in recaptured areas falls on SARC in collaboration with UN agencies and INGOs, which funds the majority of programs. The services provided by these institutions are limited to basic services, especially basic healthcare.

Local populations, supported by diaspora communities, have established networks, based on primordial identities. However, these initiatives are restricted in scale and reach to those most in need.

The resilience of the Assad government with the assistance of its foreign allies has not signalled the end of problems for Damascus. On the contrary, the government has to address the political and socio-economic challenges in post war Syria, often without sufficient resources. While the government's survival has been somewhat secured, mainly as a result of the support of its foreign allies, maintaining a form of passive hegemony on large segments of the population is not. This has created a situation of continuous instability.

The issue of the state and its institutions are therefore contradictory but connected. The government is both a figure of authority as an employer and provider of public and social services to a population with no or limited alternatives. At the same time, it is a source of frustration and discontent because of its inadequacies rooted in authoritarianism and clientelism.