



REPORT WORLD

Governance from Below

Comparing Local Experiments in Egypt and Syria after the Uprisings

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In the wake of the uprisings in Egypt and Syria, two modes of grassroots governing bodies emerged. In Egypt, it was the Local Popular Committees (LPCs), and in Syria, the Local Administrative Councils (LACs). In both countries, bodies arose to perform a range of services that were formally fulfilled by central governments, or by local institutions that were organized in a top-down fashion. The LPCs and LACs both held promise as examples of bottom-up governance with democratic ambitions, in countries where such efforts had been in extremely short supply. With original empirical research, the author investigates the success of the LPCs and LACs in fulfilling their aims of building inclusive, democratic, locally led governance. She finds that by several metrics, and for different reasons that depend much on the contrasting contexts of Egypt and Syria, the bodies have so far fallen short of empowered participatory governance principles. Still, they represent a watershed moment for governance practices in the two countries, and indicate that locally driven organizing will be enduringly relevant in the years ahead.

The Arab uprisings that began in 2011 opened space for the emergence of new modes of governance-from-below in the region.¹ As regimes fell or became embroiled in civil wars, activists improvised nascent grassroots structures in spaces where state institutions no longer functioned. These structures ambitiously aimed to self-manage their communities, coordinate provision of collective goods, settle disputes and act as the representatives of residents. In Egypt, “lijan sha’abiyah” (Local Popular Committees, or LPCs) evolved from neighborhood watch brigades aimed at protecting property to autonomous forums for debating and devising collective solutions to long-neglected local development problems. Between 2011 and mid-2013, the committees proved notably successful at extracting concrete gains from successive transitional governments. Along parallel lines, as Syria’s civil war unfolded, activists turned their focus to responding to the needs of the population in opposition-held areas, where the central government no longer exercised control. Revolutionary local councils were established as bottom-up institutions aimed at stabilizing society.² While many councils were short-lived, or proved incapable of administering local public policies, some—like those in Idlib and Aleppo—emerged as successful experiments in local governance.

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In both Egypt and Syria, the establishment of these local structures stemmed from practical needs, like restoring or improving access to public services, as well as a normative commitment among activists to inclusive democratic governance. They represented unique developments against the Arab region’s backdrop of long-centralized states with hegemonic control over civil society. Their emergence carried implications for the de facto exercise of power on the

ground, as well as future dynamics between localities and the central government. Thus, Egypt's LPCs were viewed as enabling citizens not just to assert their rights, but even to contest the ways that the state governed—and the ways they engaged with the state as it did so. Advocates hypothesized that such localized mobilization could potentially evolve beyond community-centered needs to build broader coalitions for decentralization of state institutions³ and transforming “local government into capable, responsive, transparent and accountable entities.”⁴ Similarly, observers praised the Local Administrative Councils (LACs) in Syria as a “laboratory par excellence” for new experiments in decentralized governance, and the cornerstone of any state-building efforts in postwar Syria.⁵ Yet little comparative empirical work has been done on the actual mobilization patterns, internal organization, or the evolution of these unique forms of activism. What are the characteristics of these recently emergent modes of local governance? To what extent do they plant the seeds for empowering citizens? I argue that governance-from-below experiments in Egypt and Syria share similar traits as far as their autonomous voluntary nature, lack of access to sustainable sources of financing, and the dual roles of democratic citizenship ideas and practical needs in driving their activities. The profile of their participants, decision-making, and links to the communities where they operate reveal important democratic deficiencies. In both contexts, local governance efforts actually fall short of empowered participatory governance principles. Given the larger contexts of instability in Egypt and civil war in Syria these experiments should, nonetheless, be seen as promising signs of grassroots organizing in the region.

The presence of “alternative” governance structures is not exactly a new phenomenon in the Arab region.⁶ Global shrinking of economic space, since the late 1980s, has translated into the proliferation of dynamics of expulsion from core social and economic orders, a process that coincided in the region with the shift from statist models of development to market-led growth.⁷ As states withdrew from their developmental responsibilities, informality grew and the process of socioeconomic expulsion increasingly affected the middle classes that traditionally constituted the state's social bases of power, resulting in a rising sense of relative deprivation among them.⁸ In many cases, governments did not keep pace with rapid urbanization failing to press state authority into unregulated areas. As a result, even in the “geographic heart of the nominal state itself” the region witnessed “territories becoming effectively stateless,” lacking access to state services or rule of law.⁹ Far from being ungoverned or anarchic, however, these spaces saw new actors—such as gangs, militias, thugs, local men of influence and religious political parties—assuming functions previously considered strictly the preserve of the state.¹⁰ Often, these actors effectively exercised local authority by providing public services and common goods, arbitrating disputes, and mediating relations between citizens and the state. The emergence of Hezbollah as a contending authority in Lebanon crystallized the power of nonstate actors and the diminishing of territorial state sovereignty.

But though historical parallels exist, the new modes of governance from below that emerged after the uprisings are distinct in important ways. Not only did they emerge in the context of state vacuums and go on to exercise revolutionary

authority, but they also often adopted democratic reform goals. Furthermore, these initiatives were not spearheaded by conventional civil society actors, such as Islamist activists. Rather, they were initially established by newly politicized youth, who strived to ensure that they were not captured by political forces or armed militias. In other words, the modes of governance under study need to be understood in the revolutionary context of the Arab uprisings. They resulted from significant ruptures in the historical trajectories of states and societies in the region, rather than merely representing continuations of earlier forms of mobilization, survival tactics and self-organization among the marginalized.

This chapter comparatively explores two local modes of governance—the Egyptian LPCs and the Syrian LACs—that emerged after the uprisings. The trajectories of the two uprisings differed significantly as the incumbent regimes responded to early waves of protests in contrasting ways. Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt for thirty years, stepped down fairly quickly, which brought the army to the forefront of the transition. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad was more resilient and moved the country into civil war. This divergence reflects differences in state-building processes, the institutionalization of the coercive apparatus, and international dynamics.¹¹ Indeed, difference in trajectories created space for the emergence of more elaborate modes of governance from below in Syria, under the LACs, compared to forms of grassroots contestations and self-governance by the LPCs in Egypt. Nonetheless, I will argue that, after the uprisings, both the Egyptian and Syrian forms of local activism share largely similar traits. In both contexts, local efforts at governance resulted from power vacuums, and excluded certain social groups—sometimes inadvertently, and other times deliberately. They often lacked embeddedness in their local communities. These local experiments varied widely in their effectiveness, and for the most part proved unsustainable. Collectively, despite their shortcomings, they represent unprecedented forms of political empowerment in the region's postcolonial era. Rooted in autonomous local voluntary initiatives, the establishment of these nascent structures was uniquely driven by both practical needs and secular democratic ideas. Their emergence constituted a systematic grassroots challenge to the centralized authority of fragile Arab regimes—regimes that had failed to uphold the social rights of citizenship in spaces beyond their reach.

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My analysis is based on fieldwork conducted with Egyptian and Syrian activists. I conducted in-depth interviews with core members of six local committees in Egypt during the period 2011–14. Additionally, I conducted focus groups and semistructured interviews to explore the views of residents across three neighborhoods in Cairo in April 2013. Findings

on Syria came from a focus group of local activists held in March 2013. I complemented and updated findings through semistructured interviews with activists as well as members of the Syrian opposition. It should be kept in mind that lack of access to Syria hindered my ability to observe the working of local councils or to assess residents' attitudes toward them. Still, my research yielded enough data to identify trends and draw the limited conclusions presented here.

Origins

Police withdrawal and the resultant security vacuum in the wake of Egypt's January 25, 2011 uprising triggered unprecedented growth of civic activism in the form of neighborhood-based citizen watch brigades, called popular committees. Young men typically led the formation of popular committees by first organizing at street level, and then capitalizing on social media (particularly Facebook) to coordinate new networks at the neighborhood level during the eighteen days preceding Mubarak's resignation, on February 11. According to early analyses, most committees spontaneously emerged in urban areas, with around 34 percent operating in Greater Cairo.¹² Outside these areas, in rural contexts, there were signs that patronage networks of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) played a vital role in the top-down establishment of committees that were dominated by larger families and concerned with maintaining local stability.¹³

Many local committees disbanded after public order was gradually restored. But some reinvented themselves to engage in self-governance initiatives, particularly those in informal settlements—communities with high population density that typically had been developed on private agricultural land in contravention of building regulations. The peak of the committee movement's activity was between February 2011 and June 30, 2013. In response to the effective freezing of government institutions, the dissolution of local popular councils and the ex-ruling NDP, as well as worsening economic conditions, they extended their activities beyond self-policing and basic security. Access to medical clinics, main roads, public spaces as well as services—particularly butane cylinders for households, waste collection, and street lighting—emerged as the most prominent rallying cries for committee activists in informal settlements. Across Cairo, there were numerous examples of committees taking matters in their hands. Ard al-Lewa's committee successfully self-financed a railway crossing to minimize accidents among residents. It also mobilized around the establishment of a park, school and a hospital on fourteen feddans¹⁴ of vacant land owned by the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) in the neighborhood. Next door, the committee in Imbaba organized effective nonpayment campaigns for public services the state failed to provide, such as garbage collection, while Nahia's committee constructed an on/off ramp to connect the neighborhood to the ring road.¹⁵ My research shows that in these instances, activists were often not just motivated by

fulfilling practical needs of their communities. Many also saw themselves bringing the revolution to the grassroots level by becoming local watchdogs of the government, while others saw themselves as engaged in redefining popular understandings of citizenship, emphasizing empowerment and implanting democratic values.



RESIDENTS OF MIT OKBA, GIZA IN EGYPT, MEET WITH VOLUNTEER ENGINEERS FROM MADD PLATFORM FOR A COMMUNITY DIALOGUE ON REDESIGNING SYLVANA SQUARE, ORGANIZED BY THE LOCAL POPULAR COMMITTEE (LPC). SOURCE: FACEBOOK/MIT OKBA LOCAL POPULAR COMMITTEE

As a secular revolutionary impulse, Egypt's local committees faced deep-seated suspicion among power-holders. The end of Mubarak's autocratic rule brought about greater tightening of government controls over civil society organizations, coinciding with the monopolistic presence of Islamist parties in formal political institutions. Successive transitional authorities have attempted to capitalize on the committees as a revolutionary force, in order to bestow legitimacy on their policies at the local level. Under the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), local committee activists were harassed as thugs, while simultaneously encouraged to join a "national council," which was created top-down to represent them. Joining would make them formally organized state-sanctioned groups bearing government-issued identifications. The majority of committees, however, declined to cooperate with these SCAF measures. A few committees collaborated with the state by signing a protocol with the Ministry of Supply by which local activists would be recruited to deliver butane cylinders to households, but the protocol was cut short by the Muslim Brotherhood's ascendance to power.¹⁶ Indeed, the election of Mohamed Morsi as president was marked by heightened competition at the local level, as Brotherhood activists sought to claim the work of LPCs. Cooperation between the LPCs and Muslim Brothers was rare, and relations were marked by mutual suspicion. The military coup on July 3, 2013 ushered in a popular neo-authoritarian regime, and a new low for the LPCs. The new regime has attempted to recentralize authority under the army's patronage and heavily cracked down on civil society activism, particularly in informal areas, including the local committees. To a large extent, the committees' movement has waned, as the state has criticized their activity as illegal.

Similar horizontal forms of committee-centered grassroots activism initially emerged in Syria as young people began to organize meetings in neighborhoods and towns across the country. Known as *tanseeyat*, ad hoc local coordination committees were established to empower the revolutionary movement by coordinating nonviolent protests, and documenting them through citizen journalism. They also extended support for families of prisoners, provided emergency relief to internally displaced persons, and committed local armed groups to sign up to an ethical code of conduct for observing human rights.¹⁷ As armed conflict escalated, however, and the regime withdrew from territories, activists gradually broadened their focus to meeting the needs of local populations and established local councils, which are relatively more formalized hierarchical structures. As a focus group respondent explained “Local coordination committees were the nuclei of the councils, for they brought the financial and logistical support. But, unlike the coordination committees, the local councils were trying to monopolize the violence... Of course there are political agendas connected to them and they provide services under the umbrella of these agendas.”¹⁸ As a matter of fact, the establishment of local councils was not just aimed to “support the people in managing their own lives independent of institutions and state agencies,”¹⁹ or preserving the social fabric of communities at risk of disintegration.²⁰ Rather, they were also conceived by early advocates of their creation as potentially progressive “spaces for collective expression” that served to embed democratic revolutionary initiatives at the local level.²¹

Following government forces’ withdrawal from areas of resistance in 2012, public services were completely or partially halted by the regime.²² In response, the first local councils were founded that year in Aleppo and al-Zabadani. They quickly spread such that by 2014, there were more than nine hundred councils in Syria operating in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Dera’a and al-Hasakeh.²³ Unlike the case of Egypt’s LPCs, which centered on neighborhoods, the largest shares of Syria’s LACs seem to operate at the levels of municipalities (43 percent) and villages (28 percent).²⁴ By 2016, the number of active LACs had fallen sharply to around 395 with the majority located in opposition areas closest to the Turkish border.²⁵

As civilian-led structures opposed to the regime, the councils operate like “small governments” in managing the affairs of their regions.²⁶ Facing arbitrary violence by armed militias, increasing lawlessness and spikes in criminality, activists have generally strived to maintain councils’ autonomy from rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army, whose priorities sometimes clashed with those of LACs’ leaders. Indeed, the trajectory of the councils’ development has been influenced, overall, not just by the intensity of confrontations, or the degree of accommodation with the regime, or by fluctuations in donor priorities, but also by competition from militias.²⁷

Councils have predominantly assumed coordination of civil defense, education, health, and development projects, in addition to the extension of resource-intensive services like water, electricity and waste collection. To a lesser extent, they have also been directly involved in restoring infrastructure, as well as extending relief to the local communities, which

are areas where nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and charity organizations became dominant players. According to participants in the study, LACs made themselves particularly felt in the education sector as they operated schools and amended curricula by removing Ba’athist ideology and references to the Assad regime. They struggled to protect civic and secular values in the curricula, however. In the face of pressures from militias and some donors, they also incorporated Islamist ideology.²⁸

LACs faced stiff competition from armed militias that sought consent from civilians, which they attempted to achieve by devising their own governance structures and fashioning service-delivery mechanisms in territories under their control. For instance, at issue is control of the justice system, which militias affiliated with Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front) have attempted to run as “hay’aat shari’iya,” or legal commissions consisting of religious courts applying Salafi interpretation of sharia. Similarly, the councils’ control over bakeries has been fiercely contested due to attempts by militias to control food supply and legitimize their political authority.²⁹ In some cases, like parts of rural Aleppo, members of the councils are exclusively drawn from the Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki brigade, which controls the day-to-day administration of the territories under its control. However, there are exceptions to this pattern. For instance, in Darayya the militants seem to operate under the control of the local council. Also, midway, there are cases like Douma, where the militants and local councils segregate their activities, and do not actually seek to dominate each other’s work. In these contexts, the local council, as an activist put it, “carries a lot of moral weight, they hold meetings in mosques, have immunity from militias and civil society groups have collaborated with them.”³⁰



RESIDENTS IN THE REBEL-HELD TOWN OF DOUMA HOLD A PROTEST AFTER A MEMBER OF THE LOCAL COUNCIL IS KIDNAPPED AND TORTURED. SOURCE: FACEBOOK/LOCAL COUNCIL OF DOUMA

The councils' dynamic with the regime and its allies is another important factor that has shaped their evolution. At the beginning of the uprising, there were instances of accommodation with the regime. Activists from Douma, for instance, recalled striking an agreement with the governor of rural Damascus in 2013, whereby the local council would be responsible for local administration and not be met with regime interference, in exchange for ending the presence of militias, the rehabilitation of Hamdan hospital and provision of medical supplies.³¹ More recently however, the regime has sought to undermine emerging alternatives to state institutions in opposition areas. This is particularly the case since Syria's opposition in exile has tried to capitalize on the legitimacy of the councils as locally embedded grassroots structures. And the councils were indeed represented within the Syrian Opposition Coalition.³² Later, with the establishment of the Syrian Interim Government in Gaziantep, Turkey, a Local Administration Ministry designated to coordinate donor funding to LACs was formed. The Ministry has also been instrumental in attempting to standardize the internal structures and operation procedures of LACs based on Assad's 2011 local administration law.

Comparing Local Bottom-Up Governance in Egypt and Syria

To what extent do Egypt's LPCs and Syria's LACs constitute channels of participatory empowerment? Such local mobilization is often celebrated as a sign of healthy civil societies and even regarded as the embodiment of democracy, of its promises of citizenship, and self-government. In light of growing dissatisfaction with the way democratic institutions function, since the late 1980s citizens in the West and developing countries alike have experimented with participating in decision-making through a variety of innovative locally rooted mechanisms.³³ Globally, local governance reforms have been promoted by international organizations such as the World Bank on the grounds of expanding participation, deepening accountability, and improving provision of services by bringing them more in line with local demands. The following section analyzes the democratic credentials of the two modes of alternative governance in question along three dimensions: Inclusion, decision-making, and embeddedness.

Inclusion

In Egypt the LPCs were often founded on the bases of preexisting friendships, peer networks, and previous waves of activism. Committee members often belonged to the same graduating class and shared a privileged middle-class background. Further, in many cases they had previous experiences in voluntary social service or charity work, or were relatively more politicized as members of the April 6 Youth Movement,³⁴ student unions, or affiliates of Kefaya (the Egyptian Movement for Change). Their involvement in the committees represented a form of voluntary activism. In Syria, however, membership of LACs, is often drawn from the local social elite and affluent families. Their selection or election is made by informal so-called "Iijan al-sharaf" (honor committees) consisting of local notables and dominant

families. One activist succinctly explained the rationale for these committees in these terms: “Those wealthy businessmen and figures with social status who financed the councils wanted to know where the money is being spent and wanted to have some influence over who holds office.”³⁵ Officials at the interim government’s Local Administrative Councils Unit³⁶ attempted to bestow democratic legitimacy on these entities by referring to them as “electoral commissions” that make nominations for public office. “We formed electoral commissions consisting of eighty people drawn from civil society, civil defense, and notables. They make twenty-five to thirty nominations. Half of these become LAC executive office holders and the other half serves as watchdogs.”³⁷ Opinions varied on the extent to which this mechanism ensured adequate representation. Some argued that it allowed competent individuals to hold office, regardless of their political weight, while others argued that it particularly served to marginalize youths. A recent survey confirms findings revealing that only a third of LACs were formed through some form of “elections” while more than half were formed by consensus.



THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL IN KAFARBATNA, SYRIA, HOLDS ELECTIONS IN MARCH 2016. SOURCE: FACEBOOK/KAFARBATNA LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL

As a result of their recruitment dynamics, bottom-up local governance remained, to a large extent, exclusionary. There are signs that the poor were not significantly included. Women, too, were poorly represented in both the Syrian and Egyptian structures. That said, variations across Egypt and Syria translated into some differences in degree of major social groups’ accessibility to participation. For instance, membership profiles show that youths and minorities were included less in the Syrian bodies as compared to those in Egypt. Further, the distinction between members and nonmembers is sharper in the Syrian case.

As a result of their recruitment dynamics, bottom-up local governance remained, to a large extent, exclusionary.

In Egypt, activists reported that young citizens in the eighteen-to-thirty-five age group represented 80 percent of LPCs' membership base. However, my in-depth research on the committees shows that those in leading positions have tended to be in their forties and fifties. Syria's local councils, on the other hand, are less accessible to youths. Those in the eighteen-to-thirty-five age bracket represented only 30 percent of all members. Indeed, participants explained that even though youths often pioneered the establishment of LACs, they were actually more likely to be involved in relief initiatives than hold office in the councils.

With Christian membership an estimated 30 percent of the total, Egypt's LPCs broadly incorporated religious minorities—even over-representing them as compared to their proportion of the general population.³⁸ Activists have attributed their success at inclusion of minorities to a “deliberate effort to create and maintain trust,” rather than interest among Copts for greater participation.³⁹ In contrast, given deepening ethnic cleavages in the context of Syria's civil war, the country's LACs tend to have more homogenous membership. My interviewees, however, stressed initial inclusion of Alawites and Christians in Douma's and Hama's LACs. They blamed the increased militarization of the uprising for their current exclusion.⁴⁰

As for women's participation, it is significantly low in both cases, ranging in Egypt from 2 percent in rural areas to 20 percent in cities, and averaging just 2 percent in Syria. Participants in my research recognized that the low representation of women was problematic but often blamed cultural values for women's choice not to participate. In the case of Syria, they also highlighted poor security, as well as the opposition of powerful actors and militias in the areas. Activists stressed that they were aiming to increase women's representation through the establishment of specialized women's offices in the LACs.

Finally, the informal character of Egypt's committees and the density of networks they are embedded in translated into the absence of a clear distinction between members and nonmembers. Thus, it is not uncommon to find individuals from one neighborhood being actively involved in the founding and activities of popular committees in another neighborhood. This contrasts sharply with the situation in Syria, where LACs did not include individuals from outside the local community, a situation that has led to the exclusion of sizable internally displaced populations.⁴¹

Decision-Making

Given the participatory nature of Egypt's committees, they face dilemmas when it comes to decision-making. The decision-making process that activists described is often ambiguous and opaque. The majority of the committees rejected voting as a way of reaching decisions, which they associated with formal entities. Instead, activists described forms of collective deliberation involving consultations among core members in a decentralized fashion. They were also careful to reject any form of hierarchy guiding the internal workings of the committee. As one committee member from Imbaba explained, "The system is decentralized . . . we do not believe in hierarchy, we collectively decide."⁴²

Syria's local councils were more likely to reach decisions based on majority voting. In fact, a recent study found that 69 percent of the councils relied on voting by members to reach decisions. Only 28 percent assigned decision-making to specialists within the council or relied on experts, while just 3 percent reported that decisions were taken by heads of local councils.⁴³ This arguably reflects activists' deliberate efforts to develop more formalized local structures, as well as the fact that the councils heavily depend on financing from donors, who emphasize transparency.

Social Embeddedness

Activists in the two cases were keenly aware of the importance of socially embedding their work by establishing effective communication channels with residents. Yet my findings show that in line with top-down governance practices of the centralized old regimes, activists' awareness did not necessarily translate into systematic efforts to broadly consult with citizens in order to identify their needs or respond to evolving demands. In Egypt, LPCs typically attempted to embed their activities in the community during the initial stages of their operation. Shortly after the establishment of the committee, meetings were held in the neighborhoods and residents were invited to identify local needs and priorities. This practice, however, was short-lived. Committee leaders did not continue to broadly consult with residents on their needs by holding such meetings. And in the course of my interviews they often dismissed the importance of local needs assessments, arguing that since they were from the areas in which they worked, they already knew the community's needs. Indeed, simple updates to Facebook pages were the focus of local committees' communication with residents. The one exception to this trend was a committee in Umraneya that formed its own news network on Facebook, as a form of citizen journalism facilitating interactive communication with residents. With more than thirty-two thousand followers, the news network allowed activists to embed their work in the community by documenting problems in the neighborhood and using professional-quality videos and interviews with residents.⁴⁴

Respondents from Syria explained that due to war conditions they couldn't always hold large-scale meetings with the locals. "Our preference is to not communicate in secret in liberated areas," an activist said. "This is easier to do when enlightened militiamen reject theft and violence. They provide security for the local council to operate."⁴⁵ Often LACs relied on mosques to communicate with residents. "LACs' primary means of communication for anything important is

through mosques,” a focus group participant said. “Every Friday relief assistance is redistributed and the medical committee which monitors infectious diseases activity conducts tests.”⁴⁶ With parallels to the case in Egypt, 85 percent of activists in Syria reported that they selected projects based on local needs, yet just 9 percent identified these needs through some form of public consultation.⁴⁷ Similarly, councils maintain Facebook pages, but it is not clear if these are geared toward residents or outside donors.

Sustainability

Egypt’s local committees operated as loosely structured entities lacking access to sustainable sources of financing. While virtually all of the research participants identified lack of funding as the number-one weakness of the committees, they expressed concern regarding the charging of membership fees on egalitarian grounds. Instead, committees to a large extent relied on a combination of seasonal contributions by members, according to their financial means, as well as in-kind contributions from outside actors. My interviewees unanimously dismissed the option of fund-raising from the community, which they said would stigmatize their committees.

Egyptian activists I interviewed recognized that the ability of the LPCs to access sustainable sources of financing hinged on formalizing their status. Many dismissed the prospects of becoming officially registered NGOs, however, even though it would open the door to legal fundraising. Activists viewed NGOs as elitist entities disconnected from their neighborhoods. They also feared heightened state surveillance of their work, and expressed skepticism about the feasibility of receiving official licensing. Lastly, the risks of being accused of following “foreign agendas”—in the midst of widely publicized lawsuits targeting NGO workers—were among the reasons cited for avoiding formalization. As a result, only two out of the six committees actually formalized as NGOs.

Similarly, LACs in Syria were in general poorly equipped to perform their functions due to severe shortages of resources. The councils lacked the capacity to levy taxes. In some cases, they nominally charged for services, such as electricity, by introducing flat rates, but activists noted that this was not always feasible given civilians’ deteriorating living standards. Only in a few cases were the councils successful in launching profit-generating projects. One was Douma’s recycling initiative, which converted waste into organic fertilizers to be sold on markets in the Eastern Ghouta, the rebel-controlled enclave on the outskirts of Damascus in which Douma is located.⁴⁸ The lack of resources has rendered the LACs heavily dependent on external support to implement projects, particularly from the American, British, and German governments. Indeed, it is estimated that as many as 75 percent of the councils received donor support, which in total financed one fifth of their projects. The remaining 25 percent of LACs depended on foreign funding to finance a bigger portion of their activities, according to a survey published in 2015.⁴⁹

Following an international meeting in Paris in October 2012, Western governments pledged to directly support local councils in opposition-held areas in Syria, thus making donor assistance available. However, many councils could not actually access this funding, which was soon channeled through the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Instead, councils relied on erratic donations from affluent residents or Syrian expatriates from the area. Direct support to the local councils seems to have been poorly coordinated, at times placing them in competition with the better-financed NGOs.⁵⁰ This has in turn affected the evolution of LACs' activities. For instance, as local NGOs became the preferred implementing partners for UN and international agencies, local councils became less involved in humanitarian assistance and field hospital management. Instead, local councils started to assume monitoring and evaluation functions for these activities. For the most part, activists viewed NGOs not as mutually empowering partners in local governance but as competitors. Lastly, activists also stressed that shifts in donor priorities toward fighting terrorism undermined their work in supporting civilians. (Though even before the rise of the Islamic State, militarization of the uprising posed risks to their autonomy vis-à-vis the increasingly much better-financed Free Syrian Army and Islamist militias.)

Conclusion

The emergence of new modes of local governance from below occurred against the backdrop of voids created by lapses in the functions of state institutions, or withdrawal by the state from spaces and territories over which it could no longer exercise control. I have argued that the drivers for the establishment of both the LPCs in Egypt and the LACs in Syria were both practical, as well as ideological. A new generation of activists attempted to plant the seeds of democratic change at the grassroots level. My close analysis of the two modes of local governance, however, reveals that these nascent structures do not meet democratic criteria.

Even though the record of Egypt's popular committees is better, both modes of governance are by and large exclusionary. This is particularly the case when it comes to the poor and women, who are not represented in their activities. Egypt's LPCs were particularly successful in incorporating Copts among their ranks. This success in inclusion was not achieved by Syria's LACs, however, where deepening ethnic and territorial cleavages impeded the incorporation of minorities and the internally displaced. Similarly, the committees in Egypt seem to have been relatively more accessible to youths. Notwithstanding these nuances, looking closely at the two modes of governance reveals that they both did not develop inclusionary recruitment processes. Membership in Egypt's local committees largely depends on activist connections through prior networks, and Syria's councils seem mostly accessible only to prominent families and social elites who constitute the honor committees (*lijan al-sharaf*).

As far as decision-making, Syria's councils seem for the most part to adopt majority voting, making them relatively more transparent than Egypt's committees. Nonetheless, whether or not they used voting, both modes of local governance failed to embed the voices of local communities in their decision-making processes. Egyptian and Syrian activists often did not develop mechanisms for back-and-forth consultations with the citizenry. They also shared skepticism about the work of NGOs, which were regarded as elitist or competing with their own efforts, rather than complementary or mutually empowering. Finally, the records of both the LPCs and LACs demonstrate their lack of sustainability. LPCs could not generate sustainable sources of financing, and rejected the prospects of becoming official NGOs, which contributed to the demise of the movement. The local councils in Syria are heavily dependent on external support and donors to cover the growing local needs of civilians. This has limited their autonomy, and often put them in a precarious position in relation to armed militias.

Finally, while the local governance efforts I have examined fall short of participatory empowerment ideals and may prove to be short-lived, their emergence is still a promising sign of grassroots, local organizing. These experiments demonstrate the capacity of activists to establish locally rooted autonomous structures and to effectively meet the needs of citizens, often despite the opposition of central authorities. Notwithstanding the shortcomings of these local efforts, they pioneered alternative ideas for bottom-up governance that are framed in democratic secular terms of citizenship, a development that is likely to alter the exercise of power by centralized authorities in the long run.

Banner Image: Residents in the rebel-held town of Douma, in Syria, protest the presence of foreign troops in October 2015 after Russia joins the war. Source: Facebook/Local Council of Douma

About This Project

This policy report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

Notes

1. I use the term governance in reference to the various institutionalized modes of social coordination to provide collective goods, as well as to produce and implement collectively binding rules. See Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse,

- "Governance Without A State: Can It Work?," *Regulation and Governance* 4 (2010): 114.
2. Other studies in the project explore revolutionary governance in Manbij, Idlib and the Eastern Ghouta in Syria and popular committees in several districts of Cairo.
 3. Ibrahim Kareem and Diane Singerman, "Urban Egypt: On the Road from Revolution to the State? Governance, the Built Environment, and Social Justice," *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 11 (2014).
 4. Yazid Sayigh, "Above the State: The Officer's Republic in Egypt," *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2012.
 5. Agnes Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition-Controlled Areas in Syria," in *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, eds. Luigi Narbone et al. (Florence: EUI, 2016), 6-15.
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 7. Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).
 8. See discussion in Asya El Meehy, "It's the Economy, Stupid! Analyzing the Uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia," *Critique Internationale* 61, no. 4 (2014): 55-59.
 9. Baylouny, "Authority Outside the State."
 10. Ibid.
 11. Nadine Sika, "Arab States, Regime Change, and Social Contestation Compared: the Cases of Egypt and Syria" in *The Arab Uprisings: Transforming and Challenging State Power*, eds. Eberhard Kienle and Nadine Sika (London, I.B.Tauris, 2015), 158-76.
 12. Jennifer Ann Bremer, "Leadership and Collective Action in Egypt's Popular Committees: Emergence of Authentic Civic Activism in the Absence of the State," *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 13, no. 4 (December 2011): 90.
 13. Asya El-Meehy, "Egypt's Popular Committees'," *Middle East Report* 42 (2012).
 14. A unit of land measurement that is a little more than an acre.
 15. See Ibrahim Kareem and Diane Singerman, "Urban Egypt."
 16. For more on this see Meehy, "Egypt's Popular Committees."
 17. Kawa Hassan and Hussein Yaakoub, "Syria's Local Coordination Committees: The Dynamo of a Hijacked Revolution," *Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia*, 2014.
 18. Syrian Activist, focus group conducted by the author, March 2013. Throughout this chapter, I have withheld some details on the identities, locations, and precise dates of focus groups and interviewees, to protect their anonymity.
 19. The architect of the LACs is Omar Al Azizi, a Syrian intellectual and activist who pioneered the idea and was arrested in October 2012, and died under torture in jail in February 2013. See Omar Al Azizi, "A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria," 2013.
 20. Doreen Khoury, "Losing the Syrian Grassroots," *SWP Comments*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (2013): 5.

21. Ibid.
22. The central government maintained its presence in opposition-controlled areas by selectively paying salaries to teachers, public employees, and civil servants, depending on their alleged political loyalties.
23. Syrian activist, interview with the author, October 1, 2016.
24. According to a survey of 405 local councils (which were formed or reformed during the Syrian revolution and were almost all active in the first quarter of 2015). The survey was held in all Syrian districts except for Raqqa and al-Suwayda. Local Administration Councils Unit, Local Councils of Syria Indicator Needs, July 2015.
25. The expansion of the Army of Conquest (Jaysh al-Fateh) into Idlib in April 2016 seems to have severely lowered the number of active local councils on the ground.
26. Sabr Darwish, "Syrians Under Siege: The Role of Local Councils," ARI Policy Alternatives (Paris: Arab Reform Initiative, 2016), 1.
27. Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics."
28. Ibid.
29. Syrian activist, interview with the author, October 1, 2016.
30. Syrian activist, interview with the author, October 3, 2016.
31. Syrian Activist, focus group conducted by the author, March 15, 2013.
32. The question of LACs' representation is controversial because the fourteen LAC members of the Syrian Opposition Coalition have not been changed, despite the fact that LACs inside Syria hold elections every six months. This has led some councils to form an alternative body to represent them, known as the Higher Council for the Local Councils.
33. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003); Dantella della Porta and Massimiliano Andretta, "Social Movements and Public Administration: Spontaneous Citizens' Committees in Florence," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26, no. 2 (June 2002): 244-65.
34. The April 6 Youth Movement is a worker-focused Egyptian activist group that was established in 2008.
35. Syrian activist, focus group conducted by the author, March 15, 2013.
36. The unit functions under the umbrella of the interim government's Ministry of Local Development.
37. Official at Local Administration Council Unit, interview with the author, October 2, 2016.
38. Meehy, "Egypt's Popular Committees."
39. Abu Tarek (nickname), interview by the author, April 2, 2013.
40. Syrian activist, focus group, March 15, 2013.
41. Syrian activist, interview with the author, October 3, 2016.
42. Marwan Youssef, interview with the author, Cairo, April 20, 2013.
43. Local Administration Councils Unit, Indicator Needs.
44. Mahmoud Allam, interview with the author, May 28, 2013.
45. Syrian activist, focus group conducted by the author, March 15, 2013.
46. Ibid.

47. Local Administration Councils Unit, *Indicator Needs*.

48. Darwish, "Syrians Under Siege," 3.

49. Local Administration Councils Unit, *Indicator Needs*.

50. Favier, "Local Governance Dynamics," 8.



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