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# Administrative Divisions and the Conundrum of National/Local Identity Formation in Syria

Policy Paper

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Historical Background.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Formation of Administrative Divisions and the Question of Identity .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Formation of National Identity .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Complex Dynamics of Local Identity .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>On the Relationship Between Local and National Identities .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>16</b>

## Executive Summary

For decades the Syrian government has proclaimed that the demarcation of subnational administrative divisions was an apolitical process based on purely administrative and developmental considerations. A constant drive to homogenize the Syrian identity as part of a greater pan Arab identity has meant that local identity was hardly a subject of discourse, formal or otherwise. Beyond superficial references to folklore as a generic form of local identity, the subject was a political taboo.

Yet, the demarcation of administrative divisions was never entirely neutral. The management of the intricate procedures of delineating internal boundaries among governorates, districts, subdistricts, and municipalities, assigning nomenclature and toponymies, and determining the hierarchical status of administrative units was intertwined with manipulating local identities to build patronage networks for the central authorities and national elites at the local level. The haphazard process of creating new administrative boundaries in Syria developed divergent modes of accessing national development resources and fostered heterogeneous interplay between the national and local levels. Rather than consolidating a unified national identity, the rigid, non-transparent and highly centralised process of administrative design led to the creation of divergent identity markers and irreconcilable social solidarity models, which stand as key conflict drivers today.

This policy paper examines the impact of administrative-territorial subdivisions on the formation of local identity in Syria, the relationship between local and national identity, and, hence, the impact of administrative divisions on national identity. Based on extensive interviews with 76 key informants in all of Syria's 71 districts, this policy paper draws on the data and results of a more comprehensive research published recently<sup>(1)</sup>. It aims to track the construction and evolution of local identities as it relates to the process of demarcating administrative divisions from the initial moment of creating the Syrian state in the wake of the Sykes-Picot agreements to the aftermath of the conflict that erupted in 2011. It argues that the emergence of strong local identities is strongly related to the degree of connectivity the localities had to the centre. Contrary to common fears expressed by many in the central government and the opposition, strong local identities were not an antithesis to the emergence of a unifying national identity. Quite the reverse, the evidence points to the fact that the stronger the local identity, the more likely it was intertwined with the national one. What affected national identity negatively was marginalization and a centralized approach to enforcing national identity formation.

## Historical Background

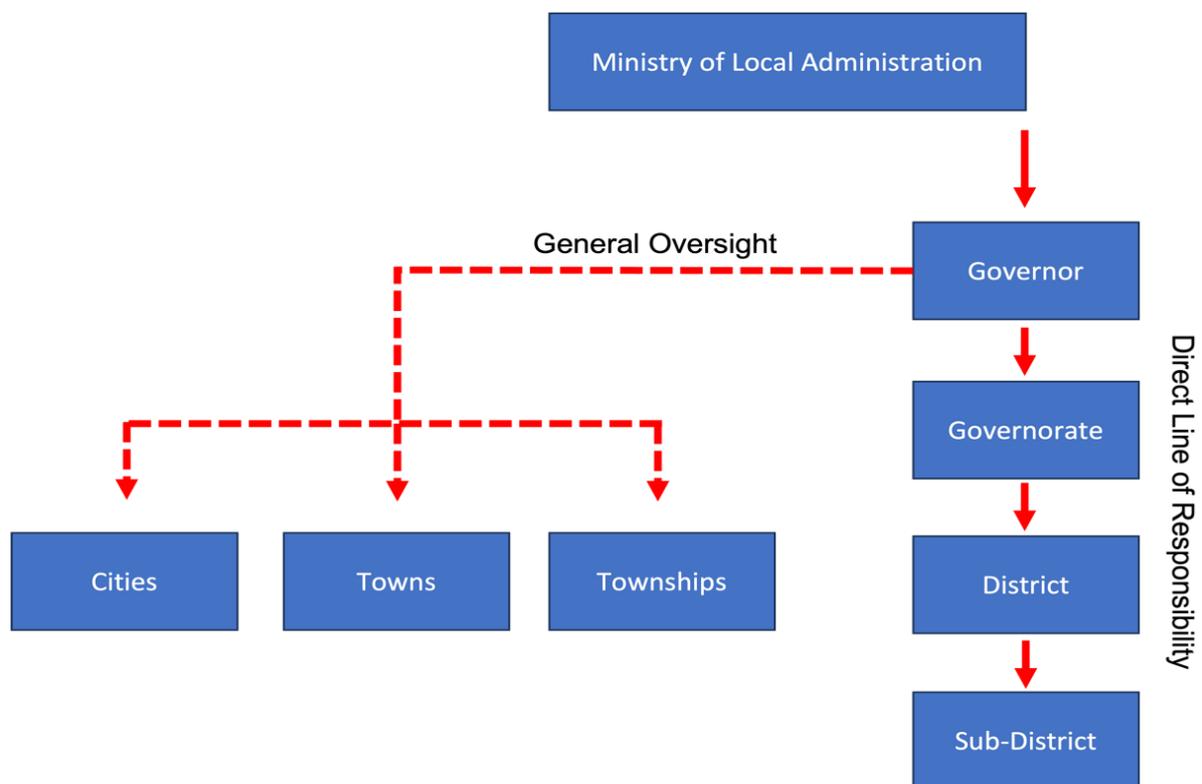
The Syrian administrative subdivision system follows a general tradition witnessed in many countries of the region since the Ottoman period. Two types of administrative hierarchies were deployed. On the one hand, there was the territorial order that divided the country into

<sup>(1)</sup> This policy paper draws on the following research published in Arabic in January 2024:

الزعيبي، زيدون، حميدوش، أمل، مبارك، بشار، المصري، محمد، الزعيبي، صهيب، عنجري، صهيب (2024). الهويات المحلية والتقسيمات الإدارية: المناطقية ليست الخطر. لينيوم وبيتنا <https://bit.ly/49MYngH>.

governorates, districts and subdistricts (mohavaza, mantiqa, nahiyeh). On the other hand, there was a municipal order of cities, towns, and townships (madinah, baldeh, baladiyeh). The jurisdictions given to each category shifted over time; however, the basic nomenclature and structure remained almost the same since independence in 1946.

Since the issuance of law 107, in 2011, the territorial order was scaled back considerably at the sub-governorate level, reducing it to policing and support functions to the governor. Thus, only the governorate (mohavaza) level retains an elected council; the districts and subdistricts have no legal personalities, and the chief administrators are appointed centrally. The municipal order, by contrast, gained significance, and municipalities were imbued with legal personalities and had elected councils and mayors. The point of juncture between the two orders is the office of the centrally appointed governor, who chairs the elected governorate council and directly manages the administrators of the district and sub-district administrations. He also retains considerable oversight over the work of the elected municipal councils.



**Figure 1:** Schematic description of the administrative hierarchies in Syria today.

As it stands today, there are, 14 governorates, 71 districts and 288 sub-districts. On the other hand, the municipal composition as per the last adjustments done before the local elections of 2022 comprises 156 cities, 520 towns, and 754 townships. The evolution of this current administrative architecture was gradual, and emerged in waves. However, changes to the system involved not only the number of units but also the changing of toponymies and the authorities and accountability of each layer. Furthermore, the distribution of these units remained highly heterogenous as some governorates had a much larger number of subdivisions than others even when adjusting to per capita populations of the governorates.

The re-districting process was not part of a formal policy that emerged from free and open public debate. Indeed, until the issuance of the latest version of the National Framework for Regional Planning in 2022, there was not any formal recognition of the unbalanced distribution of cities and towns across the territory<sup>(2)</sup>. Over the years, the dialogic relationship between local and national governance layers emerged in a haphazard manner and created heterogenous identity formations. The fear of opening debate on sectarian, ethnic, regionalist and ideological identities in Syria casted a long shadow over the subject of identity. Discussing local identity was equated with discussing sectarian and ethnic identities, a topic that was seen as an antithesis to a unified national identity. The demarcation of administrative boundaries was supposed to be a purely administrative process. The subsequent laws of 1956-1957-1971-2011 defined clear criteria for the hierarchy of administrative units based on population counts, socio-economic factors (defined primarily in economic and developmental terms) and proximity concerns. However, these laws were ambiguous on how boundaries are to be drawn. The process of demarcation of administrative units remained a prerogative of the executive branch of government without recourse to parliamentary oversight or referendum<sup>(3)</sup>.

The process of consolidating the administrative divisions of Syria operated on different levels:

1. The designation of governorate level provincial units (mouhavaza): these were negotiated gradually during the French mandate on the traces of the old Ottoman Vilayet and Sanjak boundaries. When the French eventually abandoned the prospects of creating a federal state and negotiated the Franco Syrian Treaty in 1936, Decision No. 5 of 1936 was issued on the principle of drawing administrative units on purely administrative concerns. Governorate units (mouhavazat) thus had no political representation of their own. The order was codified in the post-independence era in the law of 1957. The number of mouhavazat increased gradually from 7 to 14; the last one being the designation of the capital city as a mouhavaza in 1972. There were no formal justifications given for ordinances to create new mouhavazat. However, our previous research suggests that the bulk were motivated by highly political interests to manage local identities and secure patronage for the central authorities. The central government was keener to create smaller provincial units with direct links to the capital than to decentralize power to larger governorates to allow them to serve their citizens in a better way<sup>(4)</sup>.
2. The transformation of the nomenclature and toponymies of settlements, and territorial units: Here the drive was clearly ideologically driven to Arabize Kurdish, Syriac, Phoenician and other non-Arabized names starting during the union with Egypt but

<sup>(2)</sup> For more information on how the issue was tackled refer to: هيئة التخطيط الإقليمي (2022). الإطار الوطني للتخطيط الإقليمي: 2035. دمشق: وزارة الأشغال العامة والإسكان. ص. 72 وما بعد.

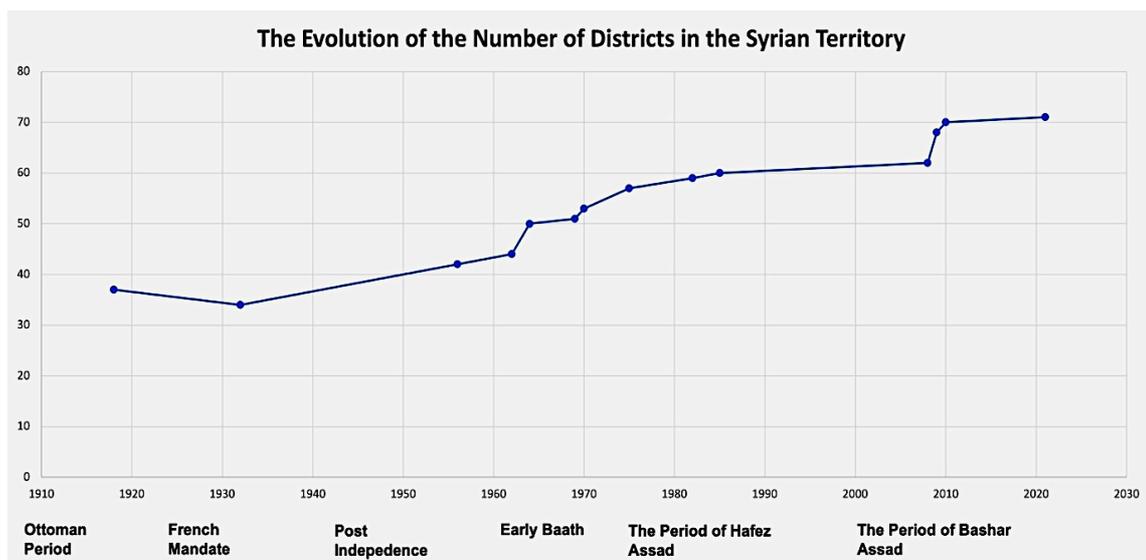
<sup>(3)</sup> Ordinances for the creation of new administrative divisions, changing their names or changing their boundaries came invariably from various levels of the executive branch and often in a manner inconsistent with the letter of the law, for instance most the codes on local governance in Syria stipulated that the creation of the lower levels of administrative units are the prerogative of the minister, but in many cases the creation of sub-districts and towns came tucked into presidential decrees related to governorate level and district level demarcations.

<sup>(4)</sup> For more information on the evolution of the provincial administrative units in Syria see:

Al-Zoubi, Z.; Hallaj, O. A.; Al-Zoubi, S.; Hallaj, J.; 2022. The Making of Syria's Administrative Divisions' Map: One Hundred Years of a Problematic Relationship Between the Centre and the Periphery (Arabic Text). London: London School of Economics <https://bit.ly/3T4LVSt> .

increasing in force from 1961 onward after the session from the union, and then later under the Baath. In addition to changing the names of cities, districts and sub-districts, most governorates lost their traditional names and were named after the major city in the mouhavaza. In border zones, the nomenclature was changed to provide a clear distinction and re-orientation of peripheral areas from their traditional connections to place names across the borders in neighbouring states towards the Syrian interior.

3. The demarcation of sub-governorate districts and sub-districts: The Syrian peripheral districts had to be disentangled from other territories of the Ottoman vilayets that were not incorporated into the Syrian territory in 1918. The French mandate focused on redefining these peripheral zones. A few changes happened in the immediate post-independence era. However, the main changes took place after the session from the union with Egypt and expanded during the early period of the Baath period into the presidency of Hafez Assad. Another, wave of new districts was created between 2007-2010. A few districts were created sporadically in between. The data from the research suggests that the initial waves of demarcating new districts was politically motivated either to segregate communitarian groups, or for nepotism purposes (to strengthen the personal patronage networks of leading Baath party leaders<sup>(5)</sup>) Later districts created during Bashar al-Assad's presidency seem to be more utilitarian in nature and focused on developmental and service objectives and less motivated by clear political or identitarian concerns.

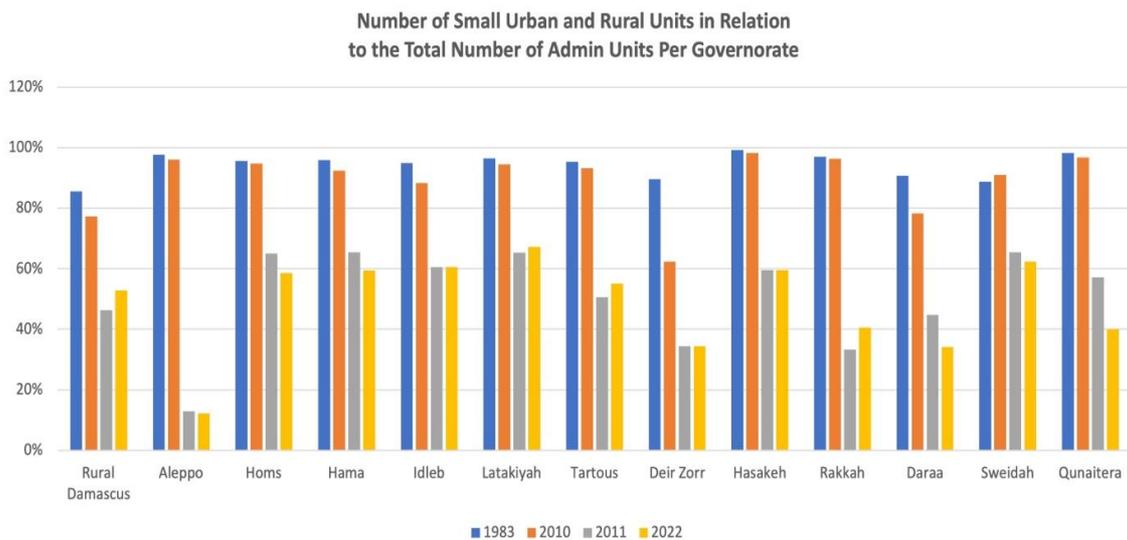


**Figure 2:** The change in the number of districts (mantiqa) from the Ottoman period till today. (Data sources: French era and Syrian government ordinances establishing the new mantiqas in Syria)

4. The demarcation of municipal units: These were more fluid and were often created and changed at will. The orders for their creation came from different levels of authority, not necessarily linked to the letter of the law. The number of municipal units (cities, towns, and townships) remained more or less proportional to the population count in every governorate up till the year 2010. With minor variations, larger municipal units incorporated smaller units into their jurisdictions following the same pattern across all governorates. That

<sup>(5)</sup> Refer to the original research paper where the data for this policy paper was collected: وأخرون (2024). الزعي، زيدون

process, while often reflecting some personal and identitarian biases remained generally administrative in nature till the issuance of law 107 for the year 2011. Subsequently the government seems to have manipulated the aggregation of smaller units into larger cities and towns following political and identitarian purposes. Zones of the country with rural populations that were loyal to the central state were rewarded with an increased number of towns and townships to allow for more chances of linking to national and provincial patronage networks. While rural zones of the country that were more hostile to the central government were annexed to the nearest cities and towns that remained more loyal to the central government.



**Figure 3:** The number of smaller municipal units in proportion to the total number of units in the governorates. Note that before 2010 there was a clear attempt at harmonizing the distribution of municipal units across all the governorates. Starting in 2011 there was a concerted effort to favour certain governorates with more small municipal structures and hence more access to political patronage of the State. (Data sources: the Syrian Statistical Abstracts for the Years 1983 and 2011; the Ordinance Number 1378/2011 and the Ordinance Number 1452/2022 issued by the Ministry of Local Administration and the Environment in Syria).

Political motivations for administrative changes in Syria often revolved around the strategic control of communities. A notable tactic in this regard is gerrymandering, employed to manipulate the political landscape in favour of specific parties, especially the Baath Party after 1963. This was exemplified by the reassignment of towns like Harem in Idlib and Al-Qardaha in Latakia from one district to another despite their relatively small demographic size at the time. Additionally, political motivations can be traced to clientelist relationships maintained by key national elites or influential individuals – such as the transformation of the Al-Qadmus area into a district perhaps to consolidate the role of the influential Khawanda business family and to create a balance between the Ismaili and Alawi communities in the district. Another instance of this logic of redistricting was the establishment of six districts in Tartous to develop strong patronage networks to local communities; by contrast Al-Hasakah, several folds larger in surface area than Tartous and having double its population, has only four districts. In other

instances, administrative subdivision was stalled in order to appease powerful figures, such as the decision not to elevate Manbij to a governorate status, likely to maintain the goodwill of the influential business and military elites of the Al-Shihabi clan who had a strong presence in the nearby city of Al-Bab, and which would have become annexed to its rival town of Manbij. The preference was for the two towns to remain in the sphere of the city of Aleppo as equal satellites rather than subordinating al Bab to Manbij.

Historical inertia also played an important role. In most cases once changes in administrative divisions were implemented, they tended to be irreversible or hard to reverse, even when the conditions for their formation were no longer warranted. Some towns lost their central economic and demographic role within their districts, yet they were maintained despite no longer adhering to the norms of establishing administrative subdivision. For example, Jarabulus was designated as a district during the French Mandate era (as it emerged from subdividing the border districts in northern Aleppo). Yet, it continues to hold this status, notwithstanding its relatively small area and population. This historical inertia in administrative districting underscores the enduring impact of past decisions on contemporary governance and regional identity. It also points to the strength of the patronage networks that are hard to dislodge once formed.

It seems though, that after 2000, the central government has reduced its reliance on the governorate and district levels to control political patronage in favour of municipal politics. Nonetheless, the establishment of new governorates, as well as ongoing modifications at the sub-governorate levels (regions and districts), and the reorganisation and redistribution of administrative units within cities, towns, and municipalities, significantly influenced the formation of local identities across Syrian territories. These changes have considerably impacted the stability of the communities within these units. In the subsequent part of this paper, the focus will be on the impact of these demarcations on the formation of local identity.

## **The Formation of Administrative Divisions and the Question of Identity**

The international scholarly discourse presents numerous instances where administrative divisions have either fostered conditions conducive to stability, as observed in Spain, Britain, and Eastern European countries, or incited unrest and violence, as in the case of Pakistan in 2010 with the creation of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, the division of Papua in Indonesia in 2003, and the partition of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde district in Belgium<sup>(6)</sup>. Consequently, examining such phenomena in the Syrian context is paramount, particularly considering the ongoing conflict since 2011 and the current de facto division of the country. In the future, this importance is underscored by various factors: the sectarian and ethnic dimensions of the conflict, the fragmentation of Syrian governorates among different controlling entities, the imperative of establishing administrative frameworks to reinvigorate development amidst a deteriorating economy, the challenges of rebuilding societal cohesion and peace, the complexities in determining the original domicile of populations displaced by conflict since

<sup>(6)</sup> For a more comprehensive review of the literature concerning the impact of administrative divisions on local identity please review the research that this policy paper is based upon: زيدون، الزعي، (2024). وآخرون

2011 (or urban migration before 2011), and the criticality of considering decentralisation as a strategic approach to resolving the Syrian political stalemate.

The issue of local identity in Syria is particularly problematic. While the law speaks of the socio-economic dimension as the basis of defining administrative divisions and localities, in practice, as has been demonstrated in the first part of the paper, the central government resorted to demarcating local boundaries by manipulating intra-local sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and other forms of identities. Thus, rather than working to strengthen the cohesion of communities by facilitating the intermixing of divergent identity groups at the local level, the State (ever since the formation of the Syrian State and not just under the Baath) constructed new administrative structures in a non-transparent manner to foster these secondary identities while preventing localities from creating their own expressions of solidarity that would have transcended the identitarian divides. Thus, the local identity as a discursive construct is an unspoken contested field. It was supposed to produce a new political economy and social reality that would transcend Syria's sectarian and ethnic divides, but in reality, it ended up subtly manipulating them and deepening the rifts.

Nonetheless, as shall be seen in the following sections, the construction of administrative boundaries did create new forms of identity and solidarity, perhaps not the intended ones, and certainly, as the research has demonstrated, they did not create homogenous results either. The findings of the qualitative survey that assessed the evolution of local identity will require careful verification through a more thorough quantitative analysis. However, the research, that the following findings were based upon, was rich with detailed information on the substance of local identities; and, more importantly, on the factors that lead to strong solidarity at the local level. The qualitative key informant interviews covering all 71 districts in Syria (as well as the sub-divisions of major cities) were based on questions related to the emergence of collective identity markers, standard toponyms and nomenclature, economic interests, managing and negotiating local differences, managing, and negotiating differences with adjacent districts, as well as managing the relationship with the governorate and the national levels with regards to social and identity problems. Qualitative results were translated into a set of criteria to define a basic barometer for the strength of identity markers and the sense of solidarity that communities had at each local, provincial (governorate), and national level. The initial research findings were presented in an Arabic language publication; however, a more thorough coding of the findings and a stronger correlation with quantitative data is in the works for future research.

While the study of local identity and its relationship with national identity could have focused on any of the various local scales, the researchers made an initial assumption based on previous work on the issue. They assumed that the provincial (mouhavaza) level administrative units were not proper vessels of local identity. In search of finer granularity for assessing the spread of local identity, they decided to select the district level as the basis of the study. At this scale, the relationship of cities to their hinterlands is still visible, and the socio-economic solidarity networks were perhaps the most visible. The research results confirmed a positive correlation in most cases with that scale of administrative demarcation on the formation of local identities. The team opted to avoid the municipal level at this research stage. The municipal level does

not reflect the local rural-urban dynamics. It was also a system in constant flux, as shown above. While the governorate and district-level administrative demarcations were also constantly being modified, the rate of change was slower, allowing for more stable dynamics to form. The gradual impact of the administrative subdivisions could be traced more visibly at this level.

## The Formation of National Identity

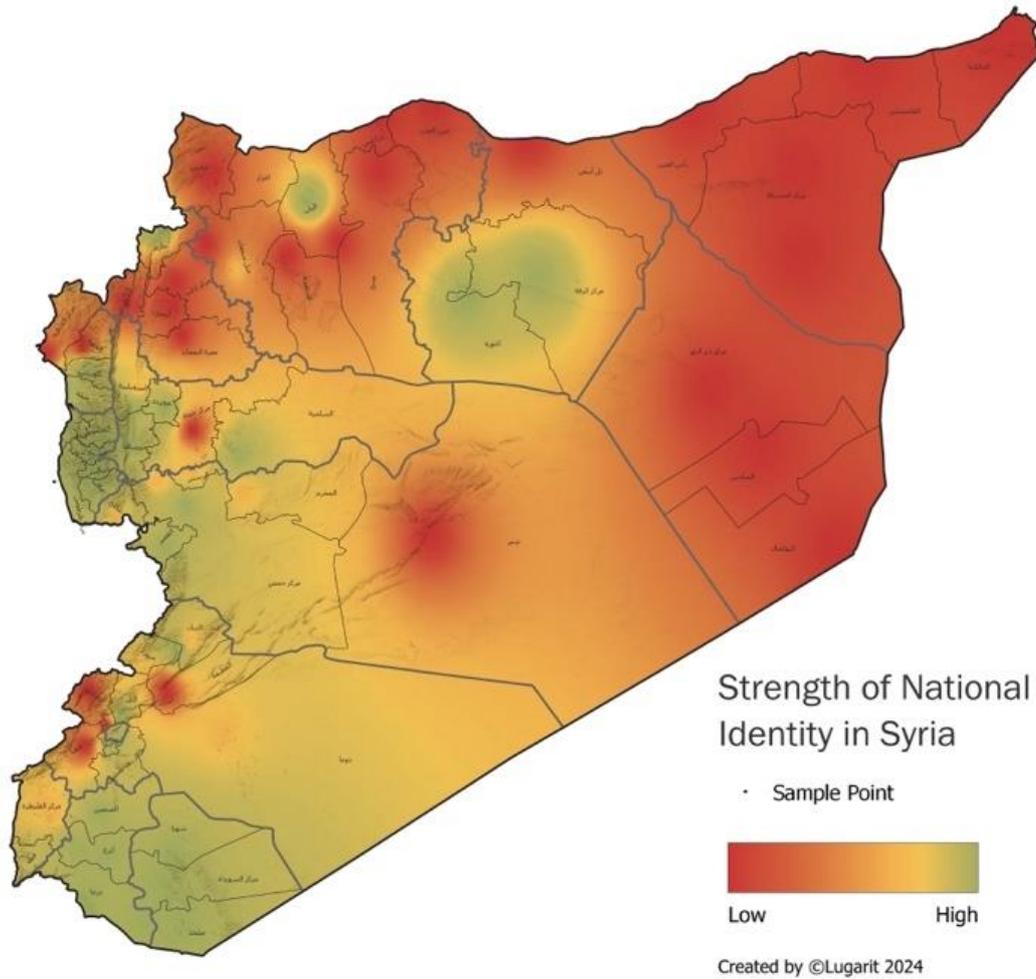
Notwithstanding the proclamations of national pride and the apprehensions of elite groups concerning the peril of fragmentation resulting from sectarian, ethnic and social divides, the discourse surrounding Syrian national identity is multi-layered, enigmatic, and multifaceted. This discourse wavered in the constitutional texts as well as in the official communication of institutional and political leaders over time<sup>(7)</sup> The constant shifting of the identity markers at the national level and the lack of universal adherence of local communities to a national identity framework is attributable to an amalgamation of both objective circumstances and political determinants.

Objective factors can be explained as follows:

- The nascent nature of the Syrian state: coupled with its origins in the post-Sykes-Picot order. This colonial pact is viewed unfavourably by most Syrians as an attempt at subdividing a larger national realm extending to other Levantine and Arab countries. This attitude perpetuates perceptions of Syria as a transient, diminutive entity born from a colonial project. Furthermore, there is a general societal distrust of the idea of administrative subdivision, as another colonial attempt at fragmenting the national realm. The legacy of the French mandate to divide Syria into small statelets plays into that fear.
- Supranational ideologies: Stemming from the point above, supranational political movements, encompassing Pan-Islamic, pan-Arab, and other ideologies advocating for the natural unity of Greater Syria (the Levant), or the Socialist International, have historically overshadowed Syrian political life. These movements have generally not prioritized cultivating a distinct Syrian national identity within its contemporary borders.
- Legacies of past identities: The social interconnectedness of Syrian communities with neighbouring communities in adjacent countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan) has fostered affiliations extending beyond national boundaries, especially for some border communities, further complicating the identity narrative.

<sup>(7)</sup> For more information regarding the evolution of national identity in the Syrian constitution refer to: الزعي، زيدون (2020). الدين والدولة بين التيارات الليبرالية والمحافظلة السورية: قراءة في دساتير سورية. استمبول/ مركز عمران للدراسات الاستراتيجية.

<https://bit.ly/3oSXiNi>



**Figure 4:** Strength of belonging to the national identity and its identity markers. Qualitative responses to the survey were evaluated against a set of indicators and transcribed onto a heat map to show where a sense of strong belonging to a national order was manifest.

Political determinants were intricately linked to the strategies of successive political regimes, and they changed accordingly:

- Efforts by ruling elites to foster a supranational Arab identity to enhance their legitimacy in leading Syrian polity: This inadvertently undermined the significance and visibility of distinct Syrian identity markers (flags, personalities, slogans, etc). National identity was experienced by society through the prism of allegiance to the ideological tenets of the ruling elites, creating a sense of state-defined national identity rather than one grown organically through the cultural innovation and genius of the society. Thus, the general populace's sense of national identity is profoundly impacted by people's interaction with State institutions and policies and was confounded by perceptions of weak governance and corruption. Or conversely it was perceived strongly when local communities had strong direct patronage ties to the national elites or national institutions. Thus, it is not uncommon to see some small islands of adherence to national identity among communities such as Al-Bab and

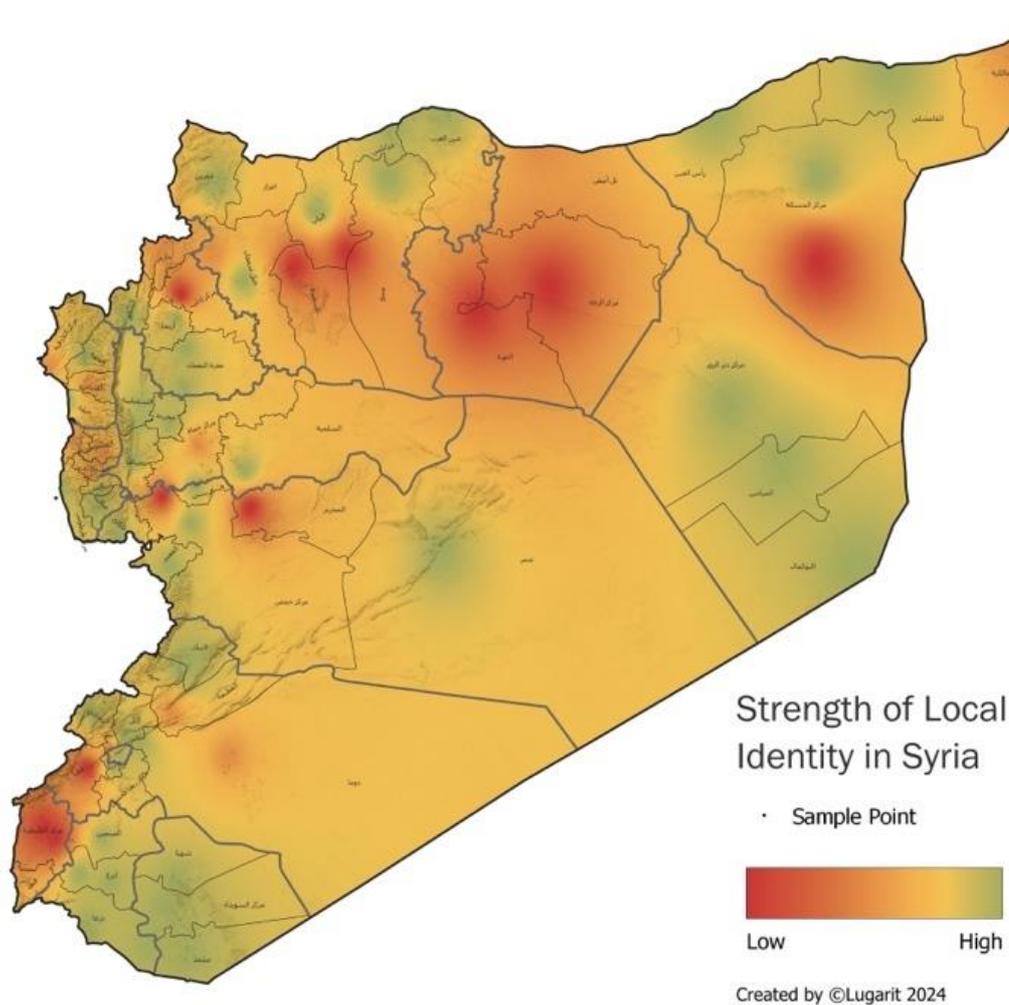
Raqqa city. Both are examples of localities that had strong connections of patronage or business with the centre.

- The constant leveraging of external political projects: including the constant focus on the regional Arab-Israeli conflict de-legitimized local priorities and concerns and led to a systematic weakening of the concept of citizenship to a national order. Dissent was discouraged and at times violently put down, thereby diluting a strong sense of national allegiance, as the central state was seen as synonymous to the repression by national elites. This was clearly the case in the cities of Hama, Jisr al-Shougour, Lattakiyah, and Haffeh for instance.
- The deliberate marginalization of certain regions: notably Northwest and Northeast Syria, left many groups feeling disenfranchised. The same goes for many rural and desert areas that were subservient to the economy and patronage of major cities. Empirical evidence from the research suggests that geographical proximity to the capital was a significant factor in consolidating a sense of national identity. This phenomenon may be attributed to the symbolic role of the capital in national identity construction and the employment of a substantial number of residents from neighbouring governorates in state institutions located in the capital. The town of Harem and many parts of Dara'a and Sweidah fall into that category.
- The centralization of the political system: and a lack of encouragement for forming cross-provincial networks of local councils and civil society left all attention focused on the directives and priorities of the capital. The main exception would be unions that were predominantly controlled by the Baath Party. They provided some chances for networking and interaction between localities but as they were under the ideological control of the Baath, they did not encourage organic expressions of national identity. However, connection to the Baath afforded a higher level of social mobility and allowed for physical contacts and even internal migration to other parts of the country, encouraging a stronger appreciation of the national territory.

## The Complex Dynamics of Local Identity

The research methodology used, and the data collected for the research relied on a clear distinction between social and local identities. The former pertains to identification with a social category, such as ethnicity, religion or sect, class, clan, family, or other social groupings. Conversely, local identity is intrinsically connected to a specific geographical locale, encompassing various social groups interacting in the same space. Further, the research team differentiated between local political identity, which confers specific political rights upon its bearers, and local cultural identity, intimately tied to its adherents' customs, traditions, practices, and adoption of specific identity markers. The researchers' focus was on local cultural identity, conceptualized as the individuals' emotional and conscious connection to a specific geographical area rather than belonging to a specific social or identitarian group. It was deemed essential to correlate the spatial designation of supposedly neutral administrative divisions with the local cultural praxis that ensued in those local units.

The local connection is fostered through economic and social bonds established via unique modes of production, customs, and traditions that differentiated them from other locations with whom they may have shared other common social affinities. However, the research team was clear not to rigidly confine the definition of the “local” when investigating local cultural identity. People interviewed were for the most part not limited in their responses to a fixed spatial boundary when they described their localities. The “local” may be specific to a small city, such as Salamiyah in Hama Governorate, or extend to a geographical region, exemplified by the cities and towns of Qalamoun, including Deir Atiya, Al-Nabak, Jairud, and Yabroud. In some cases, it extended for beyond the governorate level for certain respondents.

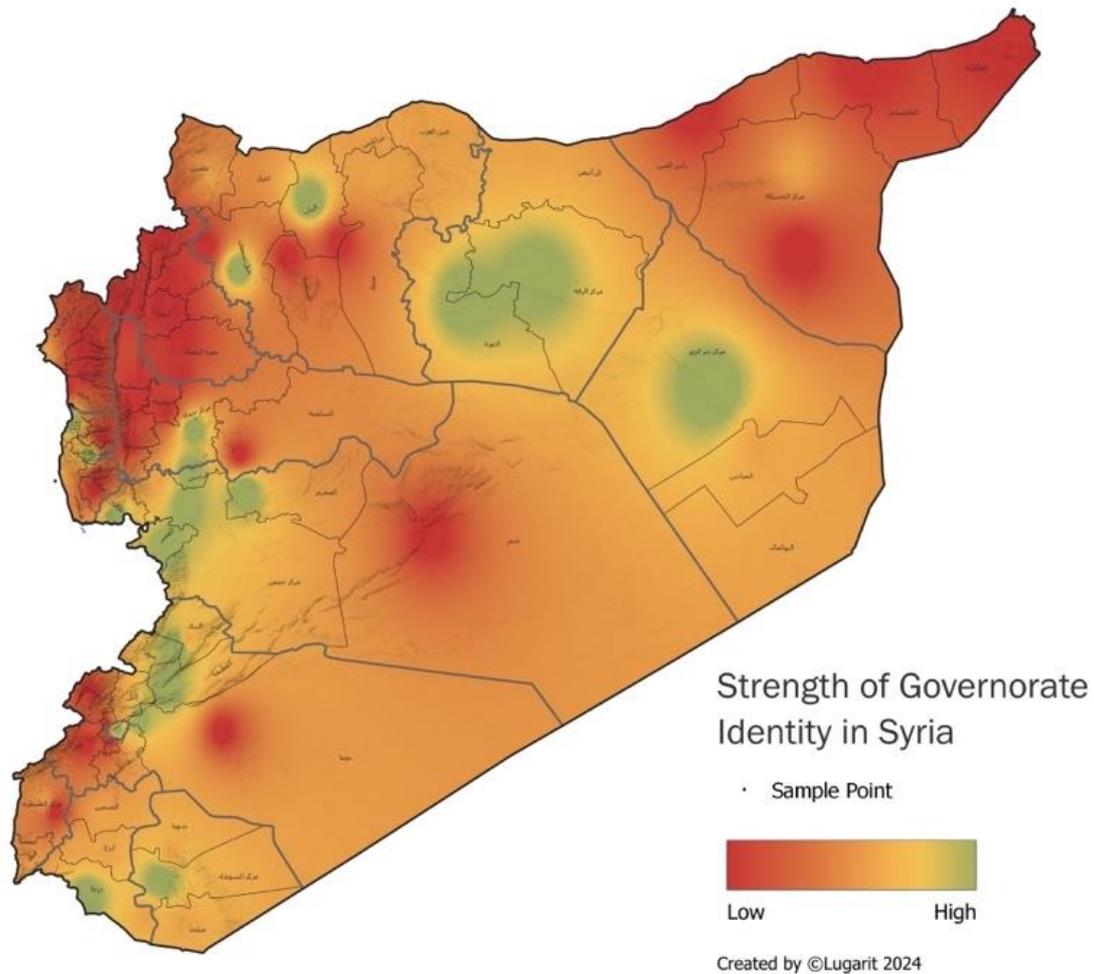


**Figure 5:** Strength of local identity markers. Qualitative responses to the survey were evaluated against a set of indicators and transcribed onto a heat map to show where a sense of strong belonging to a local order was manifest.

The determinants of local identity included the respondents’ cleat to conceptualise the geographical extent of their “local” area, identify local symbols and identity markers (such as prominent figures, landmarks, or significant events), recognize dialects, adhere to certain cultural expressions, as well as the appreciation of the customs, traditions, and rituals practiced within that area.

Several factors were found to contribute to strengthening local identity:

- **Social homogeneity**: The degree of social homogeneity within a society (in terms of clans, sects, classes, etc.) is directly proportional to the strength of its local identity. While some heterogenous localities seemed to have strong local identities resulting from long traditions of managing and negotiating their differences, the general stability of the social order in the locality is key to the emergence of a strong identity.
- **Legacies and renown**: The prominence of a locality and the fame of its identity markers, whether due to historical events such as being the birthplace of the Great Syrian Revolution for Dara'a, archaeological or natural landmarks such as the Aleppo Citadel and the Ugarit alphabet, or distinctive regional traits like the humour in Homs, amplifies their local identities.
- **Institutional thickness**: Regions with a longer history of institutional development tend to have stronger local identities. For instance, the identity of modern Raqqa (one of the late governorates to be created) is less pronounced than that of Aleppo or Latakia. By contrast a place like Raqqa tends to have a stronger national identity as it had stronger connection to the centre directly and resolved its administrative problems via a more direct access to central patronage. Newly created districts were the clearest examples of weak local identity as they were formed by extracting their communities from other previous administrative districts, often creating heterogenous social groupings and confusion of connection to administrative services, such as in the case of Tal Dao.
- **Production and transportation connectivity**: The extent to which the dynamics of economic production and the existence of value chains necessitated interaction with external entities and a loss of economic centrality inversely affects local identity. Similarly, limited transportation connectivity with surrounding areas can at times reinforce local identity in a negative sense. By contrast areas and district that still depended on agriculture as the main stipends for economic wealth tended to have very strong local identity.



**Figure 6:** Strength of identity markers at the governorate level. Qualitative responses to the survey were evaluated against a set of indicators and transcribed onto a heat map to show where a sense of strong belonging to a local order was manifest.

The general hypothesis that the governorate level was not a strong lever for local identity was in evidence at this stage of the research. When asked about the governorate level as a harbinger of local identity, the results were often clearly negative. The governorate level which is the most powerful level in the Syrian hierarchy of local government, seems to have failed to foster a sense of community. While some of the more recent districts have failed to foster a strong sense of locality, most governorates have manifestly failed to do so, Homs being one strong exception, at least for the western parts of the governorate. There are other minor exceptions, like Dara'a, Deir Zorr and Sweidah, who maintain strong governorate level identity, perhaps as a result of their sectarian or tribal structures. Governorate-level identity is generally strong in larger cities, especially the city centres of the governorates. However, in most rural areas, the subjugation of the local level to the hierarchical administration of major cities has created a reverse sense of belonging.

It should be noted however, that the pre-conflict dynamics are quickly changing. Idleb that was once one of the least developed in terms of its governorate level dynamics before 2011 is

showing a strong tendency to develop a strong governorate level identity since. The prospects for how the identity formations have been transformed during the conflict awaits new research and falls outside the scope of this paper.

## On the Relationship Between Local and National Identities

The interplay between national and local identities can be conceptualised along six distinct dimensions: predominance of local over national identity, predominance of national over local identity, parity between national and local identities, concurrent weakness in both national and local identities, exclusivity of national identity, and exclusivity of local identity. Empirical findings from the study suggest that, in most instances, one identity has a pronounced presence coupled with a secondary importance for of the other. Notably, instances of exclusive national or exclusive local identity were not evidenced in the sample. Likewise instances of mutual exclusivity are very limited. The case of Shaddai is the exception that proves the rule, as a substantive part of that local consisted of people that were moved from the areas that were flooded after the construction of the Euphrates dam. Their affinity with the central government that displaced them and the new hard geography where they were displaced created a negative appreciation of both identity levels.

The interview data indicated a strong correlation between strong local and national identities. This implies that individuals often perceive themselves as belonging to their localities and to Syria simultaneously. A robust local identity is indicative of a deep emotional attachment to one's place of origin or settlement, conferring a sense of uniqueness to the inhabitants of that locality. Concurrently, it seems to also signify an emotional bond with the nation, embodying a sense of protection and belonging. Thus, integration of the two levels emerges as a salient characteristic in the nexus between local and national identities. Although this matches the findings of the theoretical literature and evidence from other countries, this cannot be taken as a fact and should be tested quantitatively in more detail in the future.

Another finding is that the conflict between local and national identities arises predominantly when the latter is perceived as undermining or threatening the former. In such scenarios, local identity challenges the national identity when there is a perception that national identity seeks to subsume or replace it (the case of Lattakiyah, of Haffeh and Hama discussed above). In that sense, national identity shifts from being a protective umbrella to be perceived as threat or imposition on local communities, while local identity transitions from a source of pride to a bastion of self-defence. Such situations are also indicative of populist discourses on identity. Identity markers may gain in relevance but mitigating measures to manage difference between social groups and ensure stability and cohesion recede in importance.

In contexts where local identity is weak, adopting national identity becomes transactional. The potential for adopting a national identity in that case is clearly contingent on perceived benefits from the government and its patronage networks, as the case of Raqqa exemplifies. Conversely, both identities may remain underdeveloped without such incentives, as observed in Al-Shaddadi above. Peripheral zones sometimes exhibit such conditions. Some frontier and border districts demonstrated a lack of attachment to the national identity as proximity to State favours and patronage was limited. In some incidences connection to social and economic networks

across the border were more prominent. This worked against both the local and national sense of belonging. The localities along the border with Lebanon are a case in point, where the economy is tied to smuggling networks across the border. The same was observed in other non-peripheral areas; national identity appears to be more diminished in areas with a weaker local identity. The evidence at hand does not allow for drawing strong statements of causality. However, a principle initial finding of the research is that proximity to the political, or geographical centre, bolsters national identity. This is largely due to transactional and pragmatic considerations perhaps more than other factors such ideological ties and cultural affinities.

In that regard, identity formation should not be seen as a natural process; it cannot be taken for granted as it is constantly being re-constructed. The creation of administrative divisions is perhaps one of the most instrumental factors in putting localities on the radar of the capital. While primarily designed to foster political clientelism and patronage networks for the central government and its elites, it has also allowed for trickling of resources from the centre to the local level for developmental purposes creating a leverage for a strong national identity. By contrast, geographically or politically marginalised areas often correlate with a weakened national identity. **The main conclusion for the research is that a forced centralisation of the ideological construction of national identity coupled with marginalization has undermined national identity rather than reinforced it.**

## Recommendations

This paper has reviewed conditions in Syria from before the conflict. Many of its arguments must be revisited after 13 years of hostilities. Yet, the evidence is clear: The reconstruction of a national identity for a post-conflict Syria will have to be considered very carefully from the bottom up, and not just from the top down. Many factors will come to play in re-negotiating the relationship of the local to the national level to ensure stability and non-recurrence of violence in the future. The fine tuning of the design of the administrative divisions will have to be considered as a key factor. The demarcation of administrative boundaries is essential not only to balance the distribution of antagonistic social groups but to effectuate a fair and equitable distribution of resources and access to national polity. The process must be transparent and mutually acceptable to Syrians to avoid the manipulation of central/local relations on the basis of patronage and clientelism. National and local identities are not at odds as many have come to conclude as a result of the war, indeed, their mutuality is the corner stone to sustain peace in the future.

In fostering a cohesive national identity and a balanced co-creation of local and national identities in Syria, this paper proposes the following recommendations to address national identity formation through various constitutional, institutional, and socio-political dimensions.

The Parameters of Syrian National Identity: It is imperative that Syrians should work to consolidate the building of a social compact among them as citizen living in one State that recognizes their full and equal citizenship with all that entails of rights and obligations. Defining the parameters of citizenship as a balance between individual rights and group rights will not be an easy task. Syrians are advised to consider the following:

- Accepting the Syrian state in its current borders as the harbinger of national identity: Syrians will always have aspirations for belonging to a supranational identity. This will not likely change over the short time. But Syrians need to understand that failure to build a mutually acceptable Syrian national identity today will not lead to the formation of their supranational dreams. Quite the reverse, the fragmentation of national identity today will only lead to the permanent and irreversible division of the country based on the su-national de facto division of the country.
- Inclusivity in national identity: While the State needs a unifying national identity, this should not happen at the expense of the diversity of local identities. The two are not mutually exclusive. National identity should recognise and celebrate the diverse tapestry of Syrian communities, their identity markers, and their values.
- Respect for local identities: The focus of the debate concerning the plurality of identitarian groups (religious, sectarian, ethnic, class, clan, etc.) has diverted attention towards irreconcilable differences. By contrast, shifting the focus to the local identity that encompasses and aggregates diverse identitarian groups and works to bridge the gaps between them could provide a workable alternative. Localities have complex dynamics of interaction among different social groups. They have evolved tried and tested mechanisms for the reconciliation of differences. Social cohesion will be fostered through reviving local collective identities rather than the populist portrayal of Syria as a stagnant mixture of distinct and irreconcilable identitarian components or groups.

National and Constitutional Dialogue on National Identity: The current construction of national identity, as defined by the Syrian political and constitutional order, will recreate conditions of exclusion as identity is perceived as an a priori and predefined construct, is heavily controlled and proscribed from the top down, and is limited to a rigid definition of national identity markers. This definition of identity fails to adequately reflect the diverse social and local nuances of Syrian identitarian groups and even the differences inside each group. But more problematically, it also heeds little to the need for balancing the relationship between the centre and the local levels politically, administratively, economically, and socially. Key Issues to consider:

- A national dialogue focused on the national identity is imperative: This needs to be fostered both in the track 1 process but perhaps the debate needs to also be opened to other tracks. The debate should go beyond the pre-determination of national identity markers as envisioned by the Government nominated delegation to the Constitutional Committee, or the creation of a more inclusive construct of national identity that resonates with identitarian groups, as envisioned by the delegation of the Opposition Negotiation Commission. Very rich alternatives are possible when considering the local level as place for resolving identity tensions.
- Unpack the complex relation between the centre and the local: through a comprehensive revision of the issue of decentralization in Syria, the design of the administrative order, the distribution of resources and the creation of transparent relations between the central and

local levels. This should be an essential entry point for the constitutional debate in the Syrian political process.

Institutional Levers for National Identity: National and local identities are not simple by-products of constitutional design. In fact, the most relevant factor for identity construction is the daily praxis of institutions and not their normative design per se. Institutional functions, administrative structures, and the day-to-day work of formal and informal governance bodies are of utmost importance. The reform of institutions to enhance their ability to reflect a transparent process of sustaining national identity and creating the balance with local identities will be of utmost relevance in the post-conflict period. The institutional design should encompass:

- Economic empowerment and decentralization: Strengthen the economic capabilities of localities and launch a process of decentralisation that fosters transparent allocation of authorities and responsibilities on the basis of subsidiarity. Preventing economic marginalization is essential to bridging the divide between the local and national identities.
- Allow for local-to-local interaction: It is posited that extreme centralisation poses a greater threat to social cohesion and the emergence of a unified national identity than a carefully designed process of decentralisation that fosters possibilities for the local administrations to enhance their collective bonds and work closely with each other and with the centre to resolve problems of local identity. The experience demonstrates that these issues, left to the prerogative of the centre alone, did not create a better adherence to national identity. To the contrary it allowed for central elites and their ideology to play with local patronage networks and increase social and identitarian tensions at the local level.
- Administrative division planning: The design of the administrative divisions in Syria is at the core of conflict dynamics. The conflict has fostered new territorial divisions. There is a need to formulate a strategic plan for transparently managing administrative divisions respecting local identities and their sensitivities. A careful balance should be struck between the need for creating new administrative divisions to better manage local identity and the need to avoid administrative divisions as a tool for rentier distribution of resources to foster patronage and clientelist networks for national elites. New governorates may be in order such as Qalamoun, Ghouta, Palmyra, Qamishli, Manbij, and potentially Salamiyah.
- Avoiding the populist definition of identity: The process of administrative demarcation should be entirely distinct from the calls for managing identity issues through negotiations among identitarian groups (or identitarian components) at the national level. Such an approach is only likely to replace national level elites with a new crop of sectarian, ethnic and tribal populist leaders.
- The socio-economic logic of administrative design: The feasibility of new administrative units from an economic point of view should be considered to avoid the creation of redundant layers of governance that can only work to foster corruption and clientelism. Moreover, aggregating local economic resources and social capital in a transparent manner is vital in creating sustainable and stable local identities. Social capital will be one of the most important resources in the reconstruction of the country in the post conflict.

Preservation of local identities: At a first instance this should entail avoiding actions that could erode local identities, such as altering the names of localities or modifying their administrative boundaries without proper consultations and agreement among the local communities. But beyond that, there is a need to designate resources, to support communities to generate positive expressions of their local identity, to protect their identity markers, preserve their heritage assets, and to ensure that identity is constantly being allowed to represent the living spirit of the local communities.

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