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Dialogue Platform For a New Syrian Reality

Local Governance and Democratic Decentralization

Amjad Ismail al-Agha



Local governance and democratic decentralization constitute vital pillars in discussions surrounding the reconstruction of the Syrian state after more than a decade of conflict. Local governance reflects the capacity to manage resources and services effectively at the lower levels of government, while democratic decentralization serves as a mechanism for distributing authority in a manner that ensures representation and community participation, and enhances the accountability of local governing bodies.

In the Syrian context, these two concepts carry particular importance due to the deep challenges that have affected the political and administrative structures as a result of the conflict, the multiplicity of actors, and the absence of effective central institutions. Therefore, rebuilding a democratic and decentralized system of local governance remains an essential component for achieving stability and sustainable development, especially amid Syria's rich ethnic, sectarian, and social diversity, and the prevailing desire to move beyond the rigid centralization that has characterized the Syrian experience for decades.

Core of the Study

In addressing local governance and democratic decentralization in Syria, it is essential to understand the process of transitioning from a highly centralized system—one that dominates all levels of power and administration—toward a democratic decentralized model that guarantees broad societal participation and fair representation for all components of the Syrian people, within a framework that safeguards the unity and sovereignty of the state.

Research Problem

The main challenge of this study lies in the tension between the urgent need for political and administrative reform to achieve effective democratic local governance, and the complex political and social reality that has become a major obstacle to implementing democratic decentralization. This requires integrated approaches that take into account the particularities of the Syrian context by analyzing the legal and administrative realities, practical experiences, ongoing political debates, and the operational challenges and potential reform pathways.

Main Research Points

- I.The legal and administrative status of local governance in Syria under the current system.
- II.The experiences of local councils across different Syrian regions and the impact of the conflict on them.
- III.The concept of democratic decentralization in the Syrian context and the surrounding political debate.
- IV.The challenges facing the implementation of decentralization and local governance.
- V.Proposals and reform pathways to establish democratic decentralization and improve governance.

The Legal and Administrative Status of Local Governance in Syria under the Current System

The legal and administrative landscape of local governance in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime reflects a complex situation characterized by overlapping efforts toward legal reform and a practical crisis that risks reproducing centralization and weakening local councils.

Law No. 107 of 2011 on Local Administration, although serving as the primary legal framework, suffers from loopholes that have been exploited to reinforce centralized decision-making and enable corruption.

To date, no new legislation has been issued that aligns with the recent political and administrative transformations in the country, leading to persistent ambiguity in the relationship between governorates and local councils, as well as a lack of a clear legal framework defining the distribution of powers.

In practice, the relationship between governorates and local councils remains poorly structured due to the absence of an updated legal reference. Governorates are administratively linked to the Prime Minister's Office and organizationally to the Ministry of Local Administration, while actual authority is divided among several ministries, including the Interior and Foreign Affairs. This dispersion of power complicates the functioning of local councils, fosters overlapping jurisdictions, and blurs lines of legal accountability. Consequently, this dual administrative structure reinforces decision-making centralization and reduces local councils to mere executive branches under central control, limiting their independence and undermining mechanisms of representation and accountability essential for democratic local governance.

The current phase is marked by institutional fragmentation and legal ambiguity. Heads of municipal councils are often appointed or dismissed through opaque procedures or politically influenced appointments. Both elected and appointed councils lack clearly defined roles and continue to operate under the deeply entrenched centralized administrative model that preceded the fall of the regime. This situation perpetuates the concept of "administrative guardianship" rooted in Law No. 15 of 1971, meaning that local administration has yet to evolve into an independent entity capable of managing its own affairs and fostering democratic, responsible community development. Instead, it remains a bureaucratic, security-oriented structure whose primary function is to control communities rather than represent or empower them in the decision-making process.

In this context, the issuance of a new Local Administration Law has become an urgent necessity to introduce a qualitative shift that reorganizes the relationship between the government and local councils through a fair and clear distribution of powers that limits centralization and administrative overlap. Officials have indicated that the upcoming law, expected to be issued soon, will focus on consolidating the principle of decentralization and granting local councils clearly defined competencies. However, the real challenge lies in the practical enforcement of this law and the extent to which governmental institutions will commit to its implementation after decades of entrenched central dominance and political contention at the local administrative level.

Sameral-Gailani, an expert in administrative law and local governance, examines the legal and administrative reality of local governance in Syria under the current system, noting that the present situation represents a dual crisis—combining a fragile legal framework with severe implementation deficiencies.

According to al-Gailani, although Law No. 107 of 2011 remains the main reference for local governance, it has become incompatible with the evolving political and administrative realities following the regime's fall. He adds that the absence of a new law demonstrates the institutions' failure to respond adequately to the challenges of political transformation, resulting in unclear relations between governorates and local councils and perpetuating conflicts and overlaps among executive and legal authorities.

Al-Gailani emphasizes that the persistence of administrative and security centralization has overshadowed the objectives of democratic local governance. The traditional notion of "administrative guardianship" still prevails, restricting the autonomy of local councils and reducing them to executive tools lacking legal protection and effective accountability before local communities. This reflects a failure to achieve the principle of decentralization, which is fundamental to building effective and democratic local governance.

He further notes that the upcoming legislative step represented by the draft of the new law is a critical opportunity, provided it is accompanied by strong political will and genuine implementation that breaks away from the legacy of centralization and political domination. He argues that developing institutional and cultural capacities within local councils—such as establishing transparency systems and ensuring genuine community participation—is an essential foundation for the success of this law and for transitioning local administration from the stage of “guardianship” to one of mature democratic governance. In conclusion, al-Gailani stresses that the issue is not purely legal but rather a complex one requiring gradual and profound transformations in the administrative and political structure. Rebuilding trust between local government and civil society is essential to ensuring Syria’s future stability and development.

Based on the above, the legal and administrative status of local governance in post-regime Syria remains fragile, marked by the absence of a modern institutional legal framework that guarantees genuine autonomy for local councils, and by overlapping authorities among multiple actors. Despite some positive signs in the draft of the new law, the success of local governance also depends on institutional and cultural strategies that promote transparency, community participation, and accountability. This must occur within a broader effort to rebuild the administrative system and move local governance beyond the security-centered centralization toward a genuinely democratic model that supports development and stability.

The Experience of Local Councils in Different Syrian Regions and the Impact of the Conflict

Local councils in Syria have represented one of the most significant experiments in local governance during the protracted conflict that began in 2011. These councils emerged as a social and political response to the power vacuum created in areas that slipped out of central government control.

Although they varied widely in form and function, most were characterized by irregularity and operated under severe constraints imposed by the conditions of war and overlapping military and political forces. The majority of councils were established through voluntary community initiatives and local will, with differing modes of formation—ranging from appointments and local consensus to limited experimental elections. This grassroots legitimacy provided some councils with a degree of community recognition as challenges mounted, yet it remained fragile in the absence of clear legal frameworks or institutional protection within the complex environment of armed conflict.

These councils faced serious administrative challenges that affected their organizational capacity and human resources. The loss of an entire generation of skilled personnel through displacement, death, or migration significantly weakened their performance. Additionally, the continuous interference of military and political actors deepened external control over these bodies and eroded their autonomy, resulting in difficulties in service delivery, transparency, and accountability—particularly amid financial uncertainty and the lack of coordination with either central institutions or armed factions.

Despite these challenges, many councils succeeded in providing essential services in opposition-held areas, including water, electricity, education, and local organization. These efforts strengthened their local presence and tied them closely to the needs of residents, leading to a relatively improved public perception compared to earlier stages when no alternative to the centralized state existed. However, experiences varied greatly—some councils in high-intensity conflict zones saw their effectiveness diminish, while others in more stable areas maintained a minimum level of administrative stability.

The conflict had a deep and lasting impact on the councils' capacity and sustainability. The partial withdrawal of state authority created opportunities for multiple competing actors to manage resources and services, resulting in legitimacy crises and power struggles within local communities,

and shifting attention away from development toward political and sectarian conflicts. Rehabilitating these councils in the coming phase will require overcoming conflict dynamics, fostering political and social dialogue, reforming legal frameworks, and establishing formal mechanisms that guarantee their autonomy and ensure fair representation and accountability at the local level.

Overall, the experience of local councils throughout the years of conflict provides important lessons about the need to build independent, democratic, and effective local institutions through legal and organizational reform, capacity-building, and enhanced civil society participation—free from military or political domination. Such efforts can lay the groundwork for a comprehensive and sustainable state reconstruction process built from the bottom up. Yet despite the difficulties, local council experiences reveal significant potential if properly supported. Experts recommend undertaking legal and administrative reforms to provide councils with clear institutional frameworks and real authority, strengthening technical and human capacities, and promoting inclusive participation—especially among youth, women, and displaced persons. Building partnerships with civil society and regional councils is equally crucial to unify efforts, avoid political or sectarian exclusion, and foster a culture of accountability and transparency. Previous experiences, particularly in northern Syria, offer valuable insights into the importance of gradual decentralization and its role in rebuilding trust between citizens and institutions.

Laila al-Ali, a researcher specializing in local governance and conflict studies, provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of local councils across Syrian regions and the impact of the conflict on them. She argues that these councils represent a unique model that reflects the complex interplay between conflict dynamics, accountability demands, and social transformation.

Al-Ali notes that the councils emerged from the heart of the crisis as a vital response to the administrative and security vacuum left by the retreat of the central state—making them examples of informal

governance structures that sought to fill the void of authority. However, despite their popular origins, she emphasizes that their legitimacy remains fragile due to the absence of clear legislative frameworks that institutionalize their autonomy and shield them from political or military subordination.

She further explains that the councils' administrative and technical challenges were an inevitable consequence of displacement and the migration of skilled professionals, compounded by the pressure exerted by armed factions that sought to control them through threats or political coercion. This, she argues, has undermined local autonomy and hindered the emergence of genuinely democratic institutions capable of providing services effectively and impartially. She places particular focus on the councils' practical role in providing essential services. She highlights that some councils succeeded in creating social cohesion and supporting local infrastructure despite limited resources—partial successes that point to genuine growth potential if coupled with institutional reforms and stronger transparency standards. Nonetheless, she warns that the vast disparities in security and geography subject these experiments to fluctuating conditions that could hinder their stability and continuity. Regarding sustainability and legitimacy, al-Ali stresses that disputes over resources and political or ethnic control have reshaped local power structures into broader arenas of conflict. This reality calls for comprehensive political and social solutions that reconcile competing interests and pave the way for the return of democratic governance. Looking ahead, al-Ali underscores the importance of adopting an integrated strategy that combines the development of a clear legal framework supporting council autonomy, the enhancement of technical and human capacities, and the promotion of broad community participation—including youth, women, and displaced persons. She also emphasizes the need for cooperative alliances between local councils, civil society, and regional councils as mechanisms to overcome divisions and achieve integrated efforts in support of stability and development.

Al-Ali concludes that the experience of local councils in Syria, despite formidable challenges, offers a rich source of lessons on how local authorities can play a central role in rebuilding the state—if guided and reformed within a comprehensive, democratic institutional framework.

In essence, the experience of local councils—despite adversity—reveals significant constructive potential when nurtured with the right approach. Experts advocate for legal and administrative reforms that provide councils with clear institutional authority, strengthen technical and human capacities, and enhance popular participation, particularly of youth, women, and displaced populations. Building partnerships with civil society and regional councils is vital to unify efforts, transcend political and sectarian divides, and promote a culture of accountability and transparency. Previous experiences, especially in northern Syria, underscore the importance of a gradual transition toward decentralization as a means of rebuilding trust between citizens and institutions.

Ultimately, the experience of Syria's local councils demonstrates that they emerged as necessary responses to the power vacuum and the need for essential services in an unstable environment. While their initial legitimacy derived from voluntary grassroots initiatives rather than a formal legal basis, they faced significant administrative challenges and pressure from armed and political actors, which weakened their independence and performance.

Nevertheless, some councils achieved notable successes in service provision and community engagement, pointing to real prospects for progress if supported through comprehensive legal and administrative reforms, capacity development, and civil society engagement. Partnerships with regional councils and civil society remain essential to unify efforts, overcome political and sectarian fragmentation, and institutionalize transparency and accountability.

Amid ongoing conflict and overlapping actors, ensuring the sustainability and legitimacy of local governance remains a complex challenge requiring an integrated political

and social vision to establish effective, independent local governance. Thus, rebuilding local governance in Syria depends on a balanced mix of legislative reform, institutional development, and restored public trust—so that local councils may become a cornerstone of democratic transition and sustainable development.

The Concept of Democratic Decentralization in the Syrian Context and the Surrounding Political Debate

In Syria, the significance of democratic decentralization stems from the complex, multidimensional reality that followed years of prolonged conflict, which led to the disintegration of central authority and heightened demands from diverse social and political groups for a reorganization of power on more representative and participatory foundations. Today, democratic decentralization is viewed as a potential roadmap for rebuilding the Syrian state, providing an opportunity to restore balance between the center and the regions through equitable distribution of powers and responsibilities, while fostering broader and more effective participation of local communities across ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines.

The idea of democratic decentralization in Syria is rooted in a long history of a highly centralized state system, which was politically and administratively closed. As a result, decentralization represents a strategic option for reforming a political system built on rigid centralism that systematically excluded diverse components from meaningful participation in governance. The goal of decentralization is to bridge the gap between decision-making centers and local communities by transforming the state-society relationship, thereby enhancing justice, coexistence, and political and social stability through empowering communities to manage their own affairs based on democratic and transparent principles.

The political debate surrounding decentralization in Syria ranges between proponents, who view it as the most suitable solution to the challenges arising from conflict and cultural and sectarian diversity,

and opponents, who fear that it may open the door to the fragmentation and division of the country along ethnic and sectarian lines. Supporters advocate for embedding decentralization in the new constitution through inclusive national dialogue, establishing principles for equitable distribution of power and resources, and ensuring participation of all components—contrasting with the centralist system, which repeatedly marginalized large segments of the population. At the same time, concerns persist regarding potential geographic and political fragmentation, which could deepen divisions and threaten the integrity of state units, especially in regions with existing autonomous governance models, such as northern and eastern Syria, where the interests of the center may conflict with local demands for greater authority and independence.

The experience of the Democratic Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (DAANES) provides a living example of the practical application of democratic decentralization, despite some shortcomings. This model relies on participatory, multi-stakeholder administration, ensuring fair representation for all components and enabling the management of security, economic, and social service affairs according to decentralization principles. The experiment has demonstrated important opportunities for building an inclusive, diverse governance model, although it has faced criticisms and questions regarding its legitimacy and alignment with national policies. It reinforces the concept of self-administration within a decentralized governance framework, moving beyond the traditional centralized state while attempting to link it to a unified Syrian national identity.

Despite the historical centralization of the Syrian state, the constitutional structure has included some references to decentralization, and the country's ethnic and sectarian diversity serves as a necessary support for this model, given the varying needs of different communities. Implementing democratic decentralization requires clear constitutional guarantees and the establishment of genuine participatory mechanisms that accommodate

diversity and strengthen national integration. This can be achieved through the formulation of a new social contract that recognizes rights and sets rules for shared coexistence within a democratic state where all citizens are equal partners.

Alongside the significant opportunities that democratic decentralization offers for peace and development, this vision faces substantial challenges. These include fears of increased political and geographic fragmentation, the need for strong central institutions to maintain national unity, and the equitable distribution of resources. Additionally, there is a need to build local administrative and technical capacities to ensure the effectiveness of local councils, promote a culture of political participation and accountability, and guarantee community autonomy to prevent domination by external or local actors that could restrict freedoms and rights. The success of decentralization depends on broad and inclusive national dialogue, achieving consensus on its inputs and objectives, and ensuring that it serves as a transitional stage toward building a sustainable, pluralistic democratic state.

Yazan al-Khatib, an expert in political governance and constitutional law, provides an in-depth analysis of the concept of democratic decentralization in the Syrian context and the surrounding political debate. He considers this issue one of the most complex challenges in rebuilding the Syrian political system after years of conflict.

Al-Khatib emphasizes that democratic decentralization in Syria is not merely an organizational choice but a strategic necessity stemming from decades of strict centralization, which produced widespread exclusion and marginalization, particularly of the country's diverse ethnic and sectarian communities. Adjusting the relationship between the central government and local communities through equitable distribution of powers and democratic representation mechanisms presents a genuine opportunity to promote justice, political stability, and social cohesion, while enabling broader and more inclusive participation in decision-making.

Despite its importance, al-Khatib notes that the political debate around decentralization is deeply entwined with fears of fragmenting the state or turning it into a disjointed entity. This concern is particularly pronounced regarding the Democratic Autonomous Administration in northern and eastern Syria, which represents a contemporary model of decentralization but has drawn criticism over questions of legitimacy and its relationship to a unifying national identity. This tension reflects a broader struggle between preserving national unity and responding to local communities' demands for greater autonomy in managing their affairs.

Al-Khatib asserts that the successful implementation of decentralization requires the drafting of a new constitution with clear constitutional guarantees to entrench democratic and participatory principles, alongside the establishment of effective mechanisms for interaction among Syria's diverse communities within a new social contract. This framework should strengthen a unified national identity and ensure equal rights for all. He stresses the need for strong central institutions to uphold national unity, ensure equitable resource distribution, and concurrently support the development of local capacities while fostering a culture of political participation and accountability.

He highlights that building a successful democratic decentralized system involves several critical stages. The first stage involves drafting a robust constitutional and legal framework that guarantees political rights and equitable representation for all groups, integrating these principles through comprehensive national consensus that respects ethnic, sectarian, and cultural diversity without marginalization. The second stage focuses on strengthening local institutions by providing them with genuine authority, financial resources, and administrative capacity to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. The third stage emphasizes cultivating a culture of civic engagement, transparency, and accountability, which are essential to establishing public trust in local councils and elected institutions.

Al-Khatib cautions that this process cannot succeed without support from national decision-making centers. Decentralization cannot function in the absence of a central state that respects the roles of local councils and balances national unity with local diversity. Successful decentralization relies on interaction and integration between central and local authorities, not absolute autonomy or separation.

In the Syrian context, where debates over fragmentation persist, al-Khatib stresses the need for a new national discourse that articulates a democratic social contract, builds trust among all parties, and transforms diversity into a source of strength rather than conflict. He notes that the experience of the DAANES, despite criticisms, offers valuable lessons as a model for managing diversity within a unified national framework.

In conclusion, al-Khatib underscores that implementing democratic decentralization in Syria is not merely a legal or administrative challenge but a project of profound systemic change. It requires strong political will, continuous dialogue, and genuine responsiveness to the diverse demands of Syrian society. He affirms that this project can become a pivotal factor in building lasting peace and a pluralistic democratic state capable of resilience and development amid future complexities. Moreover, the next phase of Syria's political transition can only succeed through inclusive national dialogue that involves all stakeholders, reaching consensus on the principles and objectives of decentralization, thereby establishing a crucial step toward a sustainable, pluralistic, and democratic state that reflects the diversity and aspirations of Syrian society.

The Challenges Facing the Implementation of Decentralization and Local Governance

Implementing decentralization and local governance in Syria represents a strategic objective to overcome the entrenched administrative and political centralization that has long obstructed state development.

However, it faces multidimensional challenges rooted in the nature of the social and political conflict, the current legal and administrative environment, and organizational structures. These challenges, accumulated over years of conflict, make the application of decentralization a complex struggle on multiple fronts—from the fragility of a unifying national identity, through institutional weaknesses, to sectarian and ethnic tensions that could intensify if decentralization is approached without careful planning.

The absence of a cohesive national identity, exacerbated by geographic, ethnic, and sectarian divisions resulting from the Syrian war, constitutes one of the primary obstacles to implementing decentralization. Without a unified socio-political environment, the distribution of authority could become a battleground for competing local powers at the expense of national unity, potentially leading to de facto separation of certain areas or domination by independent local actors, reproducing instability and chaos. Moreover, the absence of a strong central state leaves local levels with limited capacities, providing opportunities for lawless actors or armed groups to expand and assert control.

A fundamental challenge lies in the lack of robust legal and administrative frameworks capable of effectively implementing a decentralized model. Historically, Syria has been governed by deep-rooted centralization, and its institutions continue to suffer from structural weakness and inefficiency. Currently, the relationship between the center and localities remains unclear, with insufficient legislation to ensure a balanced distribution of powers among government levels and enforce accountability and transparency. Additionally, local institutions suffer from inadequate funding, which impedes their ability to provide effective services and undermines the development of independent, capable local administrative capacities. Concerns over potential fragmentation resulting from decentralization that is not founded on solid national and legal principles are among the most pressing issues.

Unequal power distribution or administrative separation from the center could create politically and militarily independent entities, exacerbating sectarian and ethnic tensions and threatening national unity. Potential disputes over resources and authority among competing local centers, particularly in areas affected by chaos, pose a significant risk that could impede political and social reconstruction. Some councils and local institutions in conflict zones lack transparency and good governance, often dominated by militias or influential families in the absence of strong central oversight. This situation perpetuates patterns of local corruption, undermines citizen trust in subnational institutions, restricts meaningful community participation in decision-making and local development, and complicates efforts to build democratic local institutions capable of delivering social justice and sustainable development.

The war has also led to the displacement of thousands of administrative and technical personnel, particularly in heavily affected areas, negatively impacting local governments' capacity to manage affairs effectively. This has resulted in weak planning, poor execution, and inadequate monitoring of development projects, as well as difficulties in cultivating local human resources capable of assuming governance and administrative responsibilities, representing a major barrier to establishing a sustainable decentralized system that grants legitimate local governance authority.

Coordination failures and overlapping powers between central and local authorities remain one of the most critical obstacles. These issues lead to disputes over jurisdiction, delays in decision-making, and confusion in funding and oversight mechanisms, with no clear frameworks for compliance and transparency. Such challenges increase the likelihood of administrative conflicts and hinder targeted local development, emphasizing the need for clear organizational frameworks that mandate discipline and continuous coordination between all parties.

The successful implementation of decentralization requires building a comprehensive national political consensus that includes all Syrian actors and ensures respect for state unity and the rights of all components. In the absence of such consensus, the risk of state fragmentation rises, limiting decentralization's effectiveness in achieving development and stability. Therefore, it is essential to establish negotiated and regulatory pathways that account for diversity and respect national integration as a prerequisite for building a sustainable democratic decentralized governance system.

Aref Jammal, professor of political science and public administration, provides an in-depth commentary on the challenges facing the implementation of decentralization and local governance in Syria. He emphasizes that applying decentralization represents a complex strategic challenge, stemming from the accumulated effects of political and social conflict and a historically centralized state structure that was never prepared to effectively organize authority at the local level.

Jammal notes that the absence of a cohesive national identity constitutes a fundamental obstacle to the success of decentralization. Ethnic, sectarian, and geographic tensions in Syria raise legitimate concerns that decentralization could lead to the effective fragmentation of the country or local entities operating independently of the state. These concerns are compounded by the lack of clear constitutional and legal frameworks that define the relationship between the central government and local authorities, which could exacerbate political and social divisions instead of bridging them.

He also emphasizes that the fragility of the current legal and administrative framework, combined with weak funding and the absence of clear accountability mechanisms, undermines local institutions and reduces their capacity for independence and effectiveness. Jammal recalls that Syria's administrative history is built on strict centralization, making the construction of strong and sustainable local institutions today a complex, long-term task that requires deep reforms.

Jammal highlights the critical issue of overlapping powers and poor coordination among different governmental bodies, which leads to jurisdictional disputes and reduces the effectiveness of local structures. This underscores the need for clear and flexible regulatory frameworks to ensure continuous interaction and transparency between the center and localities.

He further points out the impact of the conflict on the loss of most human and technical resources across large areas, a decisive factor that limits the ability of local councils to act, plan, and operate effectively and sustainably.

According to Jammal, implementing decentralization and local governance in Syria constitutes a highly complex transformative project. It goes beyond mere administrative change to fundamentally reframe the relationship between the state and society within a context marked by political, social, and historical divisions. The absence of a cohesive national identity remains the greatest obstacle, as no national consensus has yet been reached to affirm unity and overcome the deep divisions left by years of prolonged conflict. This heightens the risk that decentralization could evolve into separatism or geographic fragmentation. He warns that this imbalance could not only divide the nation but also lead to the emergence of local “self-governing zones” effectively separated from the state politically and legally, in the context of weak central control and limited official state presence.

Jammal explains that the cumulative nature of Syrian centralization over decades has left weak public institutions lacking financial, human, and organizational capacities. Therefore, transitioning from a highly centralized system to a decentralized one can only occur through deep reforms that reassure all parties that the transfer of powers will not compromise state unity or the rule of law. He stresses the necessity of clear legal frameworks that define the competencies, funding, accountability, and transparency mechanisms for each governing body—elements currently missing in the Syrian administrative landscape.

In this context, Jammal notes that administrative overlap and unclear authorities between government levels exacerbate bureaucratic conflicts, create decision-making paralysis, hinder service delivery, and increase perceptions of injustice. He argues that establishing clear and robust coordination and cooperation mechanisms between central and local authorities is essential for any successful decentralization project.

Another factor weakening local governance is mass displacement and the migration of technical and administrative personnel, resulting in a severe shortage of capable managers for independent local governance and effective planning and implementation. Jamal emphasizes that building new sustainable local capacities requires comprehensive strategies in education, training, and provision of technical and institutional support over the medium and long term. Regarding concerns about state fragmentation, Jammal warns that any poorly planned implementation of decentralization could deepen political and ethnic divisions. This necessitates an inclusive national dialogue involving all parties to agree on a decentralization model that respects diversity while safeguarding national unity. He stresses that successful decentralization depends on a careful balance between expanding local councils' powers and maintaining a strong central state to prevent exploitation by external actors or local forces with separate agendas that threaten national stability.

In conclusion, Jammal asserts that building a democratic decentralized system in Syria, despite its immense challenges, represents the most viable path to achieving development, transparency, and social justice—provided it is accompanied by genuine national political consensus, deep institutional reform, and the promotion of a participatory political culture. He considers it a historic opportunity for Syria to transition from a centralized political system to a pluralistic state capable of embracing its diversity and achieving lasting stability.

Based on the above, the implementation of decentralization in Syria represents a strategic challenge requiring a delicate balance between enhancing the independence of local councils and preserving the unity of the central state. The success of this project depends on establishing a comprehensive national political consensus, institutional reform, and local capacity development, alongside clear legal frameworks that ensure transparency and accountability. Only through this integrated approach can decentralization become an effective tool for post-conflict development and stability in Syria.

Proposals and Reform Pathways to Establish Democratic Decentralization and Improve Governance

The post-Assad period represents a critical and decisive phase for rebuilding state institutions and governance systems. The project of local governance and democratic decentralization faces deep challenges, necessitating the adoption of specific recommendations to ensure a safe and organized transition toward a more democratic and effective political-administrative system capable of managing social diversity, promoting participation, and achieving sustainable development.

•Enhancing the independence of local councils and community participation

Focus should be placed on granting local councils genuine independence from any security or partisan pressures to strengthen their credibility with the communities they serve. This should be accompanied by efforts to promote citizen engagement, encouraging both women and men to participate in decision-making processes, policy planning, and the implementation of local services. Supporting the inclusion of women, displaced persons, and diverse social groups enhances the legitimacy of local governance and reflects Syria's true social diversity.

•Developing legal frameworks and regulating the center-local relationship

Legal frameworks must be reformed to regulate the distribution of powers between the state and local councils. A comprehensive local administration law should grant councils clearly defined authorities, ensure accountability, and clarify the allocation of financial and human resources. Additionally, the relationship between the central government and local councils should be structured through cooperation and partnership mechanisms aimed at balancing decentralization with national oversight, avoiding exclusionary centralization or forced territorial separations.

•Improving financing, technical and human capacities, and infrastructure

Sustainable funding should be provided to local councils to develop the necessary administrative and human capacities and implement practical measures to improve local infrastructure in line with residents' needs. Partnerships with civil society organizations and international donors are essential. Implementing training programs for administrative and technical personnel and leveraging Syrian expertise both domestically and abroad are critical for knowledge transfer and establishing an efficient, well-functioning governance system.

•Supporting national consensus and community dialogue

National consensus on governance and decentralization is vital for the success of the process. The pathway should include agreements on a decentralized governance model that preserves national unity while respecting social diversity. Continuous community and parliamentary dialogues involving all political and social actors are essential to understand citizens' aspirations and unify political perspectives on the subject.

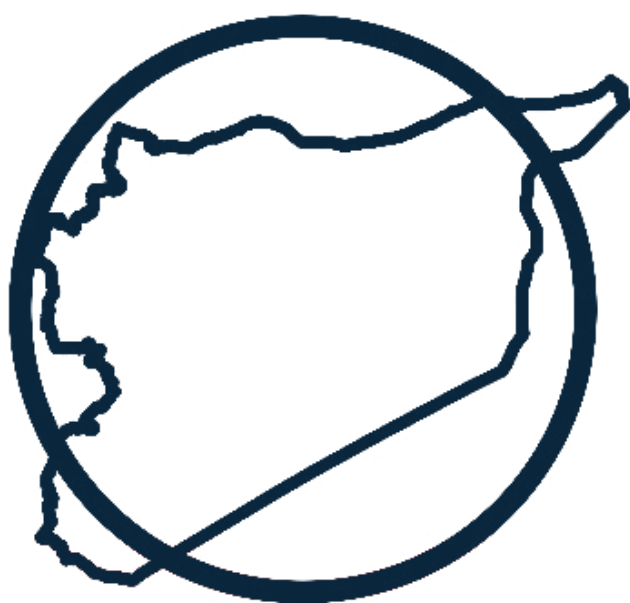
•Promoting transparency, accountability, and community engagement

Transparency and accountability in the administrative and financial performance of local councils are fundamental pillars of good governance. Civil society should be empowered to monitor performance, and mechanisms for public oversight should be activated by clearly disseminating information and providing accountability platforms. Supporting independent and free media coverage of local governance issues is also essential to raise public awareness and encourage active participation.

•Integrating local governance within a cohesive national framework

The study recommends integrating local governance systems into a coherent national framework that balances administrative efficiency with respect for cultural and ethnic identities. Integration should be gradual, considering priorities and capacities, to avoid undermining state unity or exacerbating local tensions. This requires developing multi-level planning methodologies and policies aligned with democratic principles to regulate the relationship between central and local levels effectively.

This approach ensures that democratic decentralization is not only a structural reform but also a comprehensive system capable of fostering stable, inclusive, and participatory governance across Syria.



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