

## Summary

Following the retreat of government authorities in various villages and towns, local administrative councils (LAC) have strived to provide essential public services such as water, electricity, and price stabilization for basic commodities, and in some instances humanitarian relief and military coordination.

The organizational model has faced considerable challenges, both internally and externally. Internal power struggles around issues of representation is the chief internal limiting factor to the ability of the LACs to becoming a truly functioning, service-providing body.

In an effort to synchronize the LACs' initiatives the LAC Support Unit, now known as the LACU, was created in March 2013, with links to the Syrian Opposition Council (SOC)

However, the inability of the SOC to centralize and institutionalize service provision in liberated areas has led to a proliferation of competing service-providing entities, including Islamists and armed groups.

Therefore, SOC's priorities must be the systematic institutionalization of both local governance structures and civilian security apparatuses. The SOC and relevant Syrian institutions should create a unified framework for LAC structures, including by-laws, forms of representation, and electoral processes thus institutionalizing the process.

And the international donor community currently regards LACs as having the same capacity and status as civil society organizations (CSOs). The donor community should begin engaging with the LACs as representative local government institutions, in order to build expectations of accountability between LACs and donors and LACs and citizens.

# Local Councils in Syria

## A Sovereignty Crisis in Liberated Areas

### Executive Summary

This report analyzes and evaluates local administrative councils (LACs), the nascent revolutionary governing structures that began forming across Syria as cities and towns asserted autonomy from the Assad regime. Since 2012 following the retreat of government authorities in various villages and towns, LACs have strived to provide essential public services such as water, electricity, and price stabilization for basic commodities, and in some instances humanitarian relief and military coordination. Although precise numbers are not available, it is estimated that there are hundreds of LACs throughout Syria, at varying degrees of development and effectiveness.

In an effort to synchronize the LACs' initiatives, improve their efficacy, and tie their work more directly to external political opposition structures, the LAC Support Unit, now known as the LACU, was created in March 2013, with links to the Syrian Opposition Council (SOC). However, the LACU has been struggling since its founding in its attempts to solidify connections to the local councils and demonstrate its efficacy as a capacity and resource intermediary. These shortfalls in coordination caused by the inability of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) to assert its sovereignty in the liberated areas leave notable programmatic gaps in terms of the continued development of the LACs as legitimate local governance structures.

In order to understand the development of the LACs, the challenges they face, and identify opportunities for increasing their effectiveness, Menapolis interviewed LAC members from the liberated cities of Kafr Nabel and Manbej, as well as key activists from across Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, and other governorates. The paper offers an overview on the history and evolution of LACs in the liberated areas, factors in their relative effectiveness, their composition and membership selection process, civil military relations, and ties to national level institutions. This background is accompanied by two case studies, and a set of conclusions and recommendations for the SOC and policymakers.

Based on these interviews, desk research, and Menapolis' ongoing engagement with Syrian opposition leadership from across the country, the paper presents the following findings:

- Local Administrative Councils (LACs) are well positioned to take the place of government municipalities, especially in the areas of the north devoid of government services. Seeing that the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) is the political representative of the liberated areas, it must assert its national

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sovereignty through these nascent government structures by developing a clear national strategy and roadmap to create a successful example of governance in the liberated areas. The SOC has failed to support the grassroots LAC development and has allowed for a donor-driven ad hoc approach to funding LACs, through direct funding and selective capacity development projects, fragmenting the national coordination efforts rather than consolidating it. Syrian national bodies working on LAC development, such as the SOC, ACU, and LACU should consolidate ongoing efforts to establish standards for recognizing LACs in order to streamline LAC development. LACs meeting such standards should be recognized as government institutions, in order to further establish their credibility and role as transitional institutions. Donors, on the other hand, must refocus efforts to provision support through recognized Syrian institutions, such as the LACU or ACU, rather than independent discrete funding lines and reporting structures.

- Local security needs remain unmet: local policing forces are understaffed and under-resourced, suffer from legitimacy questions due to ties with the former regime, and compete with militarized battalions. Due to the SOC's lack of strong leadership on the all-important topic of security, it has not succeeded in bringing armed groups under its control. The SOC needs to develop a unified policy for security sector reform, including support, training, funding, and resources. Continued fragmentation of the security sector and its funding exacerbates instability and civil insecurity. Any reform plan must address the incorporation of existing local battalions into a future security system, and/or their disarmament.
- Even the most successful LACs are characterized by ongoing internal power struggles around issues of representation. This is accompanied by fluctuating degrees of capacity and opacity in their operations. The SOC should provision funding and resources to the identification, development, and training of civil society groups in watchdog functions so that they can monitor the LACs for transparency and accountability where appropriate.

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## Purpose of the Paper

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More and more territory in the north of Syria continues to come under the control of the Syrian opposition, often accompanied by dismal living conditions. The dominant local governance structures known as ‘local administrative councils’ (LACs), are thus increasingly under pressure to develop into functioning institutions with the capacity to address prevailing resource shortages. However, the success of these efforts is contingent on the outcome of engagements among a diverse set of stakeholders: the councils themselves, as well as the external opposition -- particularly the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) -- and the international community at large. This brief aims to analyze the developments of LACs in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces, utilizing detailed case studies of the LACs in Kafr Nabel in Idlib province and Manbej in Aleppo province, in the hope of providing context and recommendations as to how best assist these emerging governing structures.

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## Methodology Overview

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The research presented in this paper is based on data gathered in interviews, desk research and through Menapolis’ interaction with LAC members.

Two LAC members and one civil society member were selected from each of the respective sample areas, Manbej and Kafr Nabel. In total, six in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, drawing from an hour long questionnaire that was developed in consultation with Syrian partners and activists. Due to security concerns, the interviews were conducted remotely via Skype.

The information collected from the aforementioned interviews was verified and supplemented by additional interviews with key activists from Sweida, Al-Raqqa, and Rif Dimishq as well as representatives from LACU and the ACU. These interviews revolved around the needs and challenges of civil society and the LACs in their respective governorates and across liberated areas.

In addition to interviews conducted specifically for this paper, Menapolis draws on its in-depth knowledge of LACs whose developments it has been following closely for the past eight months members through cooperation on technical and humanitarian assistance projects across liberated areas.

Finally, the recommendation section of this paper is based on recommendations made directly by interviewees, both those inside and outside Syria.



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## The Evolution of Local Area Councils

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Beginning in early 2012, small administrative structures known as ‘local administrative councils’ (LACs) or ‘civil administrative councils’ (CACs) began to form organically in villages and towns throughout Syria. As resistance to the Assad regime spread across the country, it precipitated a corresponding withdrawal of state and local governance institutions. In response, local leadership in cities across Syria came together in ‘councils’ as a means of administering public services -- and when appropriate, distributing humanitarian assistance to local populations. The maturity, capacity, and efficacy of these LACs, as well as their mandate, differs greatly depending on the local context and how long they have been in existence.

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## History, Typology, and National Proliferation

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The first place to have witnessed a trial run in local administration was Zabadani, a comfortably middle-class, mixed-demographic 30,000 person suburb of Damascus that is often the first to be considered ‘liberated’. Over the course of January and February 2012 the armed opposition in Zabadani clashed with regular forces from the Syrian Army and succeeded in loosening the regime’s grip on the area city.

This newfound independence was accompanied by a suspension of public services, such as electricity and communications, accompanied by spiraling prices for basic commodities and severe heating oil shortages, all to the backdrop of sustained shelling attacks by the regime. These conditions catalyzed the creation of a civilian-led structure for the city that could administer public services, distribute humanitarian assistance, and potentially become a building block of post-Assad local municipal administrative institutions.

The circumstances of Zabadani are not unique: most frequently, it is the withdrawal of regular regime functions involved in municipal service delivery that prompts the creation of a LAC in a given city or town. However, the number and geographical distribution of the LACs, and the function they serve, are determined by a variety of factors. Broadly speaking, three primary conditions exist: regions with governing LACs, regions with humanitarian LACs, and regions where LACs have not been successfully established.

In instances of greater autonomy, such as the northern areas, these LACs often additionally assume broad governing responsibilities, while in areas with limited autonomy, LACs may provide limited humanitarian coordination or assistance. In areas where the regime still provides public services LACs are infrequent, and where they do exist, tend to have highly differentiated and varied mandates.

In the capital of Damascus, a city that remains very much under regime control, LACs are almost entirely absent. Similarly, the southern province of Sweida retains under the oversight of functioning regime institutions, and thus LACs with governing functions have not emerged in the area. In contrast, the southern province of Dera’a and the Damascus suburbs have had considerable parts of their

territories either liberated or come under contestation, resulting in the cessation of government services; the LACs in these areas generally serve the function of distributing humanitarian assistance to their beleaguered communities. Meanwhile, the large liberated swathes of the north are often home to LACs providing public services or governing capacity.

## **LACs in the Northern Provinces**

The largely liberated provinces in the north in particular have seen a proliferation of LACs over the past year, but the number and functionality of these provincial LACs is highly dependent on local context. In Idlib, a province of roughly 1.5 million people (pre-conflict estimate), there are an estimated 50 functional LACs, operating in various towns and cities across the governorate. Similarly, the majority of Aleppo province's towns and cities also are LACs, albeit at varying levels of operational capacity. In contrast, the newly liberated province of Raqqa counts very few operational LACs – five at the most.

The province of Raqqa has not been a key strategic location for either the regime or the opposition throughout the conflict; as such, it has been relatively immune to the direct clashes, shelling, and breakdown of basic services common elsewhere. In the city of Raqqa, most public services -- including electricity and clean water -- were still available in the time period directly before and after regime withdrawal. The province is home to both an electricity-generating dam and the country's largest water reservoir, staffed by government employees that continued to carry out their duties despite the encroaching conflict. In months following the liberation, these services have deteriorated, increasing pressure on local leadership and encouraging the creation of a functioning LAC in the city.

In contrast, the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo have fully developed LACs, borne out of a year's worth of necessity. Across the provinces, the liberation of cities or towns from regime forces was met with a subsequent withdrawal of public goods, leading to severe fuel, electricity, and bread shortages, as well as other basic services. In response, the cities and towns witnessed collaboration among activists, representatives of influential families, and technocrats for the creation of councils that could assume municipal governance functions. The LACs of these provinces are among the most sophisticated in the country: democratically elected province-wide councils in Aleppo aspire to go beyond service delivery and function as representative structures able to attract and distribute humanitarian funds or in-kind relief goods (such as communications equipment) equitably throughout the province.



## Issues of Sovereignty of the Syrian Opposition Coalition in Liberated Areas

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As the north grows increasingly autonomous -- and increasingly isolated from southern infrastructure, trade, and communities -- the pressure on the region's LACs to provide governing services will increase, in hopes of begin an example of successfully run opposition areas. However, their success will be determined by circumstances beyond local control. The external opposition, particularly the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), will play crucial roles in bolstering the capacity and legitimacy of the councils. To date, the SOC has proven unable to take the lead in the creation and development of a framework to unify and organize spontaneous LAC formation, or to successfully bring an “opposition army” under its civilian oversight. Rather, their actions on these fronts have been driven by the international community's demands and not by an independent national strategy envisioned to establish and strengthen these important state institutions. The clear lack of leadership and decision-making power, which has characterized the SOC since its inception has led to an overwhelmingly delegitimized leadership among Syrians inside, including LAC members. The inability to centralize and institutionalize service provision has led to a proliferation of competing service-providing entities, including Islamists and armed groups, leading to the increasing insignificance and decreasing influence of the SOC in the liberated areas. The lack of political will within the SOC to deal with both internal and external threats to its sovereignty and monopoly over the political process and service provision will ultimately contribute to the failure of the SOC and the LAC project.

Instead of addressing its lack of sovereignty over the liberated areas, the SOC undertook a number of limited cosmetic measures to attempt to bridge the gap between the organic, grassroots LACs, the provincial councils, and the external political opposition structures. When the SOC was created in November 2012, it appointed 14 people -- one for each governorate -- to represent the interests of LACs at the SOC, along with the responsibility of delivering funds earmarked for their respective governorate LACs. However well intentioned this governance structure was, it has not proven successful: many of the SOC governorate representatives were unknown to local residents they represented, had no ties to the LACs in their governorate, or were seen as offering preferential to certain groups or localities. Although the positions continue to exist and infrequently assign resources, they have not been able to formalize distribution, and compete with newer assistance distribution institutions.

In response to the ongoing coordination deficits between the external, national-level opposition and local governance support structures, the SOC created the Local Administrative Council Support Unit in March 2013. The LACU (formerly known as the LAC SU) acts as the SOC's specialized division in all matters related to LACs, and is tasked with institutionalizing the process of LAC formation and development. This mandate includes assisting those on the ground at every step of their council formation process, with the long-term intention of ensuring these LACs transition into effective local governance structures. The LACU has continued to suffer from a lack of coordination with other external mechanisms, and has had very little success to date in carving out its role and attracting funds for its work.

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## The Best Available Form of Representation

Since the first LAC formation in early 2012, the organizational model has faced considerable challenges, both internally and externally. Internal power struggles around issues of representation is the chief internal limiting factor to the ability of the LACs to becoming a truly functioning, service-providing body. Within the LACs, power is generally distributed over three major stakeholders, each with competing interests and aspirations, in competition for control: activists and revolutionary groups, technocrats, and local tribal or family leaders. Activists in this context should be understood to mean ‘al-hirak al-thowri,’ used to refer to the opposition’s peaceful, non-armed civic leaders, of both secular and religious identification, while the technocrats include former regime administrators, engineers, teachers, and lawyers.

Among the self-identified unarmed ‘revolutionaries,’ there is a general sense that it is of utmost importance to have technocrats running offices of local councils during this critical phase due to the professional and technical expertise they bring to the table. As such, there has been a concerted effort by those revolutionaries to bring members of the professional and administrative class, such as engineers, lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, and teachers, into the councils. However, many of these new council members have not been involved in the revolution as defectors, organizers, or regime critics, and thus cannot command equivalent levels of legitimacy: to have only been ‘passively’ pro-revolution carries in itself a stigma in many communities. Furthermore, the majority of individuals with appropriate specialized skills are habituated to working in regime institutions, predisposing them to bureaucratic mannerisms not easily adaptable to the revolutionary context.

At the same time, many of those popular activists and revolutionaries with greater legitimacy and public recognition are youths with great enthusiasm but limited practical qualifications. These include outspoken media activists that have been involved in the revolution since its onset -- usually participating in organizing protests and providing media coverage -- and many students who can no longer attend schools and universities, either due to the dangers of traveling or simply because they have been shut down. Although some of these popular activists have great legitimacy and are extremely well known among revolutionaries, they may not command the same degree of respect among average inhabitants of the cities and towns they would seek to represent.

The third common compositional element to the LACs is usually that of familial and tribal networks and city elders. Although some of these traditional leaders have complex relationships with the Assad regime as a function of decades of accommodation and deference, they generally enjoy considerable legitimacy among people of these cities. However, clashes between traditional leaders and the younger revolutionaries are not uncommon: the youthful activists who have attempted to challenge traditional patriarchal structures in favor of democracy and self-governance have run up against resistance, and even ambivalence, with a general public more accustomed to a legacy of power structures.

Although not connected to the LACs themselves, many cities with LACs are also home to ‘tansiqiyat,’ informal groups of media activists. These tansiqiyat were

among the first forms of non-violent ‘pro-revolution civil society’ that emerged in the early days of the uprising, acting as local protest organizers, documentarians, and journalists. Practically every city and town has its own tansiqiyya, and many have evolved into more sophisticated civil society groups. Their members are almost exclusively youth, from both secular and religious backgrounds. Their work often has a symbiotic relationship with the LACs, furthering council efforts and outreach, or highlighting weaknesses and legitimacy deficits where they may exist.

## Civil-Military Relationship

The Syrian uprising differed from other regional revolutionary movements from an early phase, when predominantly peaceful protests evolved into an armed uprising against the ruling regime. The militarization of the conflict began in late 2011 when a mix of military defectors and armed civilians in various governorates came together to protect protesters against regime violence, later forming defensive forces appended to neighborhoods and towns. As regime hostilities against rebel areas intensified, these armed forces quickly adopted offensive tactics and engaged in operations to oust the regime.

Numerous efforts have been made to unify opposition fighting groups under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), however these efforts have been markedly unsuccessful, raising questions about whether an FSA exists in anything other than concept. Lack of unified funding sources, ongoing competition for resources and influence, the absence of a unified military goal, and local clientelism have left these armed groups uncoordinated, fractured, and at worst, factional. The most recent unification efforts took place in December 2012, when Brigadier General Selim Idris, a former regular Syrian Army general, was named leader of the Supreme Military Council of the FSA. However, Idris has been seemingly unable to unify the disparate coalitions and fighting groups into a unified, coordinated structure with clear chain of command.

With no strong mechanism of organization or coordination and no unifying national leader, armed groups -- composed predominantly of civilians -- continued to proliferate. As the rural areas of the countryside, or rif, came under rebel control, these opposition forces moved into more populous townships, and eventually cities. With large swaths of territory in the northern governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa in the hands of the opposition, the need for a transition from de-facto military rule to civilian-led local governance has led to complicated, at times strained, civil-military relationships. The armed actors responsible for ridding the towns of the regime are sensitive to perceived marginalization, forcing civilians to constantly try to balance their needs for fully civilian governing institutions with the interests of the armed actors in the towns they’ve liberated.

Because of the differing composition of the liberated areas and their associated fighting forces, it is difficult to generalize the relationship between the armed opposition and the civilian opposition. The dynamics tend to be highly specific to the local provincial or city context, and may differ widely from one city and town to the next. However, a broad survey of LACs across the country offers three main patterns of interaction between security and governance bodies:

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1. Completely liberated areas: the withdrawal of FSA-aligned groups to the outskirts of the city, leaving defected members of the police force and/or a “security battalion” -- composed of members of the main armed battalions -- in charge of local security;
2. Partially liberated areas: the presence of both armed opposition groups and a relatively weak defected policing force in the city; or
3. Active conflict areas: the monopoly of non-regime armed groups over civil security and civilian affairs as a whole, including aid distribution, service provision, and policing and adjudication functions.

In the liberated and partially liberated areas, it is common to find civilian groups striving to regain control of the city and clearly delineate a civil governance role distinct from that of the armed groups. However, inferior financial resources, and contestations over legitimacy with battle-tested armed groups have often frustrated efforts to reclaim civil functions. In many places this ongoing struggle has resulted in outright conflict over power and resources, with numerous instances of citizens taking to the street to protest the behavior of certain armed groups.

Although similar tensions may exist in areas still partially controlled by the regime, outright criticism of the armed groups is muted, as action against these groups could be construed as anti-revolutionary. In areas of active conflict, civilians rely almost exclusively on armed groups to safeguard all their activities, including distributing humanitarian aid along key roads and areas on the front lines. Without armed protection, movement in areas of active conflict is nearly impossible, throttling all forms of civilian activities.

In Aleppo province, there has been some effort to reconstitute a policing force in the towns and cities, but unlike the armed groups, they remain relatively weak and ineffective. They lack communications equipment, weaponry, and financial resources, but most critically they lack legitimacy: many defected late in the revolution, and are viewed with distrust or disapproval by the people of the areas in which they operate. Despite this, police forces have been created throughout the Aleppo governorate, which attempt to exercise control over civilian security despite the obvious monopoly of armed groups in this sector.

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## Province-wide Councils and Connection to the SOC

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There have been various attempts made at creating democratically elected province-wide councils with the capacity to successfully coordinate fund distribution to the local LACs in their respective provinces, assisting these LACs in reinstating public services and laying down building blocks for post-Assad governance structures. At the same time, efforts have been made at the level of the international community to connect exile opposition support structures to domestic organizing and administrative capacity. These initiatives have had varying levels of success to date.

In early March 2013 the province of Aleppo held governorate-wide elections for seats on the Council of the Province of Aleppo. The elections, organized by a group of youth activists independent of any organizational affiliation, made a concerted effort to attract as many groups, towns and cities to the initiative as possible so as to bolster the legitimacy of the process and the success of elections. Despite some minor setbacks (further described in the case study on Manbej), the outcome allowed the governorate to create a relatively representative structure with legitimately chosen representatives.

In contrast, the efforts for provincial council formation in the province of Raqqa have proven generally unsuccessful. The council was created ‘pre-liberation’ in Urfa, Turkey in January 2013, but has since relocated to operate in Raqqa city. However, its Turkish origins have proved problematic: the externally formed council has minimal legitimacy among revolutionary forces of the governorate. Its access to external resources allowed it to subsume another council that had been formed inside the city, leading to it being differentiated as the ‘SOC council’. This issue of legitimacy has frustrated the council’s ability to cooperate with civil society groups, with significant negative impacts on its ability to deliver the services for which it was ostensibly created.

Idlib’s governorate council was created in January 2012, and falls somewhere in between the examples of Aleppo and Raqqa: although its electoral process was not highly publicized or comprehensively inclusive, its members do enjoy some legitimacy among LACs. The council is the result of elections that took place in Reyhanli, Turkey, and its members continue to reside there, but claim to be constantly ‘going inside.’ The council has made efforts to build connections with the local Idlib councils but the strength of these relationships vary widely: some local councils report minimal contact, while others confirm open lines of communication. However, the Idlib council suffers from a shortage of resources that would bolster their role as coordinators, and a lack of contiguous ‘liberated’ territory, along with a heavy regime presence in key population centers and thoroughfares has frustrated provincial coordination and communication.

### Case study 1: Kafr Nabel, Idlib

Kafr Nabel is a city of 30,000 inhabitants located in the north-western province of Idlib in the district of Maarat Al-Nu’man. The city has been actively participating in anti-government protests since the onset of the revolution; it has since become famous for its witty revolutionary posters and is seen as a bastion for civil

resistance. The Syrian army entered Kafr Nabel on July 4, 2011 and remained there until August 2012, when a five-day battle with local armed battalions ultimately liberated the city of regime forces. With the withdrawal of regime forces came the withdrawal of all government services, leading to a drastic deterioration of living conditions.

## **Emergence of the LAC and the Issue of Representation**

Kafr Nabel has gone through a series of trial runs with LACs. During the regime occupation of the city, the city's tansiqiyya ran four main functions: the media office, statistics office, humanitarian aid office, and financial office for managing external funding support. This group drew its legitimacy from the services it provided the people of Kafr Nabel, especially with respects to the work of the statistics office in mapping public needs, and the distribution of aid and donations via the humanitarian function. However in January 2013, following regime withdrawal and changing popular needs, the heads of these offices along with the city's revolutionaries made the decision to formalize the composition of a full-fledged LAC to administer the city during this transitional period.

The new LAC was to be composed of a team of 15 technocrats and 10 revolutionary figures, so as to combine technical skills with revolutionary credentials. However, disagreements among the 10 revolutionary figures ensued, leading to their withdrawal from the council. This decision proved highly detrimental: the remaining 15 technocrats enjoyed little to no popular legitimacy, and the workings of the council quickly acquired many of the bureaucratic characteristics associated with legacy Syrian government institutions. The inability of the technocrats to adapt to revolutionary conditions led to the council's dissolution only three months after its formation.

A second attempt at forming an LAC took place on April 13, 2013.[2] This time, local leaders supported the creation of a constituent body based on familial representation, which chose members of the LAC. However, the city's key revolutionary figures, frustrated with the ongoing deliberations, chose not to participate in this latest initiative. From the outset, the resulting 30-member LAC has been characterized by its fragility, with constituents and stakeholders expressing little faith in the ability of the council to live up to its new role. Meanwhile, the four offices established by the tansiqiyya have continued to function, and the LAC has been tasked with establishing capacity in other areas: public service provision, public security, and the courts.



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## Civil-Military Relationship

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As of early summer 2013, Kafr Nabel was home to three main groups providing “security.” The first group, the battalions that were involved in the liberation of the city, are now on the outskirts of the city, and do not enter the municipality or intervene in city affairs without explicit invitation. The second group is the city’s own police force, made up of defected police officers and some civilian volunteers; however this police force only covers about 15% of the city’s security needs. Many on the force are poorly equipped and tarnished by a lack of credibility, having defected late in the process and often out of necessity rather than revolutionary conviction.

The third and most powerful security apparatus in the Kafr Nabel is the katiba amniya, or “security battalion,” composed of a mix of fighters from the city’s five armed battalions that had led the city’s liberation battle. Each of the five fighting battalions were asked to nominate names for the leader of the katiba, from which the security battalion leader was chosen. This battalion was meant to support the efforts of the police force, but due to their superior funding they soon became the more influential security force, eclipsing the the ‘regular’ police force. Funding for this battalion came from an expatriate Syrian with origins in Kafr Nabel.

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## Relationship with the Idlib Provincial Council and The SOC

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As is the case with every governorate, Idlib has a LAC representative to the SOC, however there tends to be lack of transparency in the way the representatives operate and how they deliver funds. The Idlib representative, Adnan Rahmoun, is said to deliver funds to a personal contact in the governorate, who then disperses as he sees fit. This approach has sown unease among the provincial LACs, who have reported a distinct discomfort with what they see as the arbitrary distribution of hundreds of thousands of dollars in the hands via a lone individual without any clear accountability.

Although an Idlib provincial council does exist, the election process was not well communicated, and did not systematically include representatives from all revolutionary forces in the province. Furthermore, although Idlib is a much smaller province than Aleppo, it has significantly more residual regime presence scattered throughout its territory, exacerbating difficulties with movement and coordination. The Kafr Nabel LAC is aware of the council and has some direct communications, but the provincial council’s lack of resources have limited its ability to be an effective resource beyond communications and loose coordination with external opportunities, such as out-of-country training.

According to those interviewed, Kafr Nabel has had little contact with the SOC, and little support or interference from the SOC or the provincial council. The city claims to have received money from the SOC at one point, however the vast majority of the little public funding available to the LAC has come from expatriates overseas with origins in Kafr Nabel. Residents of the city generally

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recognize that the Idlib-wide council has limited resources, and cannot offer much more than what it has done to date: coordinate infrequent communications for nominations for activists that wish to attend training courses.

### **Case Study 2: Manbej, Aleppo**

Manbej is a city of roughly 250,000 located in the northern suburbs of Aleppo province; when it was cleared of regime forces on July 19, 2012, it became the largest city in the country to become liberated. Unlike other parts of Aleppo provinces, the regime in Manbej was not defeated in a military battle: rather, the opposition engaged in a mix of civil disobedience and negotiations with security forces in order to clear the regime presence from their territory.

Manbej's revolutionaries had negotiated a deal with the security forces whereby protests in the city would be limited to 15 minutes a day, and in return regime forces would not fire on protestors. In the summer of 2012, as the surrounding countryside fell to opposition battalions, the situation of the regime security presence in Manbej grew precarious. The cities of Jarablous to the north and Al-Bab in south-east had seen armed opposition groups rout regime forces in conflict. By mid-July, Manbej was beset by rumors of the eminent arrival of opposition armed groups. The clearly disadvantaged position of the regime, surrounded by opposition-held territory, led to mass defections from the regime security apparatus and the regime's eventual withdrawal from the city.

The regime withdrew on Thursday, July 19, 2012 and by the following Friday, the sheikhs of the local mosques were enlisted by opposition leadership to instruct government workers to return to work on Sunday in order to keep all services running and to prevent the collapse of local institutions. As a result, Manbej was able keep many functions of the municipality operational, with government workers still receiving their salaries from the state -- including certain departments which continued to work directly with counterparts in Damascus. The state court dealing with personal status laws and land registry remained in place, while a parallel revolutionary court was created for other matters, such as criminality and sentencing. In comparison to other liberated cities of the north, Manbej was largely able to preserve government institutions and safeguard people's living conditions, as well as provide for the large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the neighboring provinces and cities.

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*The special circumstances that gave rise to Manbej’s liberation has led to ongoing discourse about the true commitment of its residents to the revolution. Revolutionary activists have expressed concern that many have been ‘opportunists,’ siding with the revolution only when it became convenient.*  
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## Emergence of a LAC

As is the case in nearly all cities, the early revolutionary movement in Manbej was led by its tansiqiyyats. Two main tansiqiyyats were active in the city, publishing news on city affairs and the surroundings, and organizing protests. In early 2012, these tansiqiyyats came together under the umbrella of a tansiqiyya “revolutionary council” that coordinated ‘revolutionary activities,’ including aid distribution, civil resistance, campaigns, and military activities. This revolutionary council hosted a political office, humanitarian office, medical office, civil resistance office, public services office, media office, legal office, sharia law office, military office, and civilian security office. This revolutionary council has been continuously restructured in order to accommodate new additions to various bureaux, including elections for council and bureau presidents.

The special circumstances that gave rise to Manbej’s liberation has led to ongoing discourse about the true commitment of its residents to the revolution. Revolutionary activists have expressed concern that many have been ‘opportunists,’ siding with the revolution only when it became convenient. One opposition activist estimated that not more than 20 to 30 percent of the population of Manbej is actually actively pro-revolution, describing the rest of the residents as ‘fence sitters.’ Youth activists, concerned about the potential infiltration of such ‘opportunists’ in the revolutionary movement, created a 50-person council called the majlis umana al-thowra (Trustees of the Revolution Council), which is regarded as the legitimate representative of Manbej’s ‘real’ revolutionaries. At a later date, a majlis taoun (Appeals Council) was created, in order to screen the revolutionary sympathies of candidates for positions in the local administrative council.

Manbej is often held up as an example of successful independent civilian administration. However, despite the seeming longevity of the “revolutionary council,” there have been serious objections to its legitimacy and efficiency. The disagreement over who is best placed to represent the city continues and competing councils are regularly formed and subsequently dissolved.

## Civil-Military Relationship

Despite the limited role the armed battalions played in the city’s liberation of the city, they continue to have a significant presence in the city to this day. In order to prevent the ad hoc proliferation of armed groups in the city, and encourage the institutionalization of civil-military relationships, Manbej worked to incorporate oversight for its military council into the city’s revolutionary council structure. However, chain of command for many of the battalions remains unclear, and those battalions affiliated to Manbej’s tribes have been known to take justice in their own hands.

The city does have a revolutionary police force, oversight for which falls under the revolutionary council. However, the force has limited resources, and is composed primarily of defectors, many of whom joined the opposition late in the process or through the default power transition as the city was liberated. As elsewhere in the

liberated areas, the force is under-resourced and struggles for legitimacy, and has experienced difficulties in carrying out their work or enforcing justice in the face of better funded armed groups.

Although Manbej was not liberated by armed battle it is home to many armed battalions, some of which participated in the liberation of neighboring cities, including Jarablous and Al-Bab. Some of these battalions have strong tribal affiliations, some of which have reportedly been problematic for the stability of the security environment. With little regime presence remaining in the surrounding areas, these battalions struggle to justify their ongoing armed and organized presence within Manbej; some have traveled further afield to provide reinforcement for other battalions fighting the regime elsewhere.

## **Relationship with the Provincial Council and the SOC**

The Aleppo province in which Manbej is located is unique insofar as it underwent a successful process for democratic elections for province-wide council. The elections, which were held in Gaziantep, Turkey at the beginning of March, enlisted delegations of ‘electors,’ representatives from different parts of the province that cast votes on behalf of their communities. The end result, a 29-member provincial council, was intended to represent the province as a whole. Although the election process was otherwise relatively uneventful, issues emerged among Manbej’s representatives in the delegation.

The preparatory committee for the Aleppo provincial election had asked Manbej to send eight representatives to Gaziantep, Turkey, to participate in the elections. These representatives were a mix of people from Manbej’s first, or “old,” council, independent revolutionaries and one from the majlis umana al-thowra. When these representatives arrived in Gaziantep, they encountered four additional candidates from Manbej, representing the “new” committees that were formed after the regime withdrew. These newly-formed committees are not seen as legitimate to the “original” revolutionaries, many of whom regard their members as opportunists.

The original delegation entered into negotiations with the “new” committee members without success, ultimately resorting to external arbitration from the election’s “judicial committee.” The original eight Manbej representatives were admitted to the delegation of voters, while the four “new” representatives demonstrated outside; despite the disagreement, Manbej was successful in winning a seat on the Aleppo provincial council.

Unlike in other provinces, LACs report that they communicate with the Aleppo provincial council, and that the revolutionary activists are familiar with the provincial council’s work and members. The revolutionary council in Manbej has received SOC funding from the provincial council for their work, and the president of the council, Mohammad Yahya Nana has visited the city in the past. Similarly, Moaz Al-Khatib, the former president of the SOC visited Manbej in early March directly following the council elections, a symbolic gesture of commitment from the exiled government to the emergent local governance structures within Syria.



Although the Aleppo provincial council is still limited in its ability to deliver to the province due to a lack of funding, its relatively well-organized, transparent and representative elections have led to the creation of a council that enjoys a high level of legitimacy and subsequently a greater ability to actually execute projects on the ground. In addition, this working relationship developed between Manbej and the provincial council is a crucial first step in establishing the provincial council as a functioning institution and credible link between external funding and internal program deployment.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### To the Syrian Opposition Coalition

In this critical stage in political development, the SOC's priorities must be the systematic institutionalization of both local governance structures and civilian security apparatuses. This includes the provision of municipal services, including water, sanitation, and electricity, as well as humanitarian aid in needy areas, and policing and security services. Without these critical functions, the current state of disorder will prevail or degrade as conflict continues. Should the regime fall, the situation should be expected to deteriorate rapidly and unevenly, elevating the importance of trusted local transitional institutions.

The SOC must take the lead in strengthening these capacities in order to ensure a clear chain of command and strengthen the relationship between the external opposition and those inside the country. To do so the SOC must, first and foremost, reestablish its independent decision-making power and sovereignty over the nascent institutions by doing the following:

1. The SOC and relevant Syrian institutions should create a unified framework for LAC structures, including by-laws, forms of representation, and electoral processes thus institutionalizing the process.
2. The SOC and relevant Syrian institutions must supervise and assist the formation and development of the LACs, especially in the early stages.

### Security

1. Local "security projects" run by independent battalions or other armed groups have been detrimental to the re-development of policing capacity in liberated cities, and have contributed to competition over resources. Existing opposition police forces should be independently evaluated for capacity and efficacy, and contingent on potential, receive training and funding support in order to transition civil security functions from militarized to civilian oversight.
2. Current fragmented funding policies have exacerbated power balances between armed battalions and civil institutions. Funding for security needs must be centralized and subject to a national consolidated policy, developed by the SOC and appropriate experts in security sector reform. Individual donors must commit to this consolidation process and outcomes and cease opaque and selective funding processes.

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## About Menapolis

Menapolis is a research and programmatic consultancy based in Istanbul, Turkey. We have our roots in the region, and we understand its unique needs and challenges. We believe that profound and lasting change stems from original, empathetic understanding of the countries in which we work.

This belief underpins our commitment to delivering innovative research, analysis, and actionable programming in each of our core issue areas. We are committed to an integrated approach that links direct action with public policy research and grassroots experience with international experience. Together, we are more than a consultancy we are a transformation laboratory for one of the world's most dynamic and difficult region.

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## To the International Community

The ad hoc support of LACs by the international community, and competition over financial and other resources has had undesirable consequences, creating competing LACs in some cities and towns. The international community must have a unified policy when it comes to support for these nascent governing institutions.

1. The international donor community currently regards LACs as having the same capacity and status as civil society organizations (CSOs). The donor community should begin engaging with the LACs as representative local government institutions, in order to build expectations of accountability between LACs and donors and LACs and citizens. The donor community should consolidate support for the LACs through appropriate Syrian institutions, in order to clarify funding chain of command develop clear standards for funding disbursement and accountability, and ensure transparency among donors and recipients regarding the nature, extent, and frequency of support.
2. Existing civil society organizations, such as humanitarian, media, and non-violent advocacy groups, should be supported and trained independently from the LACs. The current approach of consolidating the two types of organizations decreases independence and accountability of each, and limits the ability of the various organizations to develop a defined unique specialization. Civil society groups should be encouraged to develop LAC monitoring and assessment capacity, and act as an independent conduit for accountability and transparency reporting on the LACs to the broader population.