K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Governance in Syria

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Question

What are the key issues with regard to governance in Syria that need to be addressed?

Contents

1. Overview

Over the past six years the civil war in Syria has evolved into a multifaceted conflict with numerous actors both internally and externally. As a result a complicated framework of governance has emerged with fragmented arrangements operating across the country. Therefore, although there are policies that can be implemented across the board and centralised institutions can be developed, an understanding of local needs also has to be formed in order to better enhance local governance capacity. There are a number of elements – such as security, aid, reconstruction, return dynamics, reconciliation and external actors – that also impact on governance and thus have to be taken into account when addressing issues of governance. This review highlights what analysts see as the key areas that need to be addressed or supported in relation to governance in Syria both now and once the conflict has ended.

Key findings are as follows:

- Due to numerous incompatible forms of governance a multidimensional system of governance needs to be developed for Syria as a whole.
- The presence and participation of women in governance needs to be supported and encouraged.
- Participation beyond influential individuals and families also needs to be encouraged.
- Capacity of local governance units need to be built, particularly with regard to delivering on local needs.
- Local government units need to be formed for areas under the Islamic State's control so there is not a power vacuum when it is defeated.
- Local governance units control of security needs to be improved.
- Inclusive debates on the horizontal distribution of power are needed so that an understanding of a viable decentralisation arrangement can be formed.
- However, a vertical system of coordination and oversight also has to be formed and for this purpose links between internal and external opposition groups need to be enhanced.
- Systems need to be put in place to better understand how to maintain the operation of the current civil service following the potential fall of the Assad regime.
- The different levels of security across Syria need to be understood and addressed in any governance solutions.
- The local war economies, linked to organised crime need to be understood and prevented from dominating governance units post-conflict.
- The distribution of aid needs to be carefully administered as it impacts on the ability of local actors to govern now and after the war.
- Aid needs to be delivered across the country, as it impacts the post-war reconstruction and development phase by building the foundation for future services and livelihoods.
- The return of the population will impact future governance, as people with skills are more likely to return to safe zones, privileging some communities over others.
- The demographic manipulation through returns by the Iranian and Syrian governments needs to be prevented as this will exacerbate ethnosectarian tensions in the country.
- Reconciliation processes help communities work alongside one another and therefore need to be pursued in parallel to governance initiatives.

- External interfering has undermined local governance and limited the ability to deliver services, thus negotiations between external actors towards compromises on their maximalist ambitions are needed.

2. Local Governance
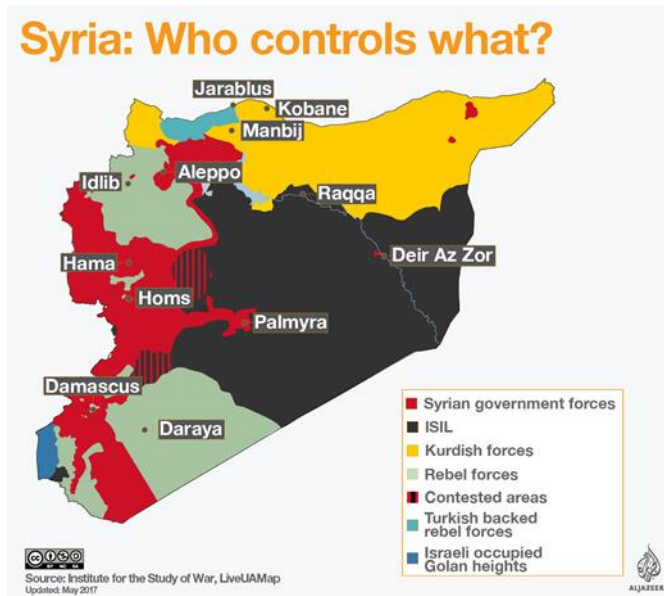
Source: Al Jazeera, 2017

There are no ungoverned spaces in Syria, but rather there are spaces governed at different levels by different groups (Ali, 2015). In the Islamic State controlled areas the laws of the leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, are enforced on the ground by Islamic State fighters. The Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria including Afrin, Kobane and the Jazeera, known as Rojava (West in Kurdish) have developed their own particular brand of governance known as democratic autonomy, optimised by bottom-up local governance and a co-leader system (one male, one female). Whereas in the rebel-held territories numerous Local Administrative Councils (LACs) operate, however coordination is extremely limited and different levels of governance and control of security exist. As a result there are numerous, not necessarily compatible, forms of governance happening across Syria with no central oversight. Thus, multidimensional systems of governance need to be developed for Syria as a whole (Ali, 2015).

Apart from Rojava, the local governance systems that have emerged since the onset of the war lack the presence and participation of women and this needs to be supported and encouraged. The LACs also lack trained staff and administrators, as well as the capacity to follow democratic procedures (Aljundi, 2014). Participation also needs to be more inclusionary and move beyond being dominated by influential individuals and families. The LACs tend to follow short-term policies due to the nature of their existence and the lack of central oversight. There needs to be a move towards broader longer-term interlinked policies and the necessary capacities need to be developed. LACs are dependent on funding from international donors and they thus tend to follow donor priorities rather than local needs. Their capacity to govern for the benefit of the local population needs to be enhanced, which would most likely involve funding tied to local needs. LACs are said to lack enforcement powers where they are not in control of the armed groups and

therefore their control of power needs to be developed, as security should come from official governance not be loosely affiliated to it (Hajjar et al., 2015).

At the same time, the identity politics and divisions that have emerged in Syria should not be further cemented. This sectarian trend should not define the post-conflict reality (Parasiliti et al., 2017). In areas where radical entities such as the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front are in control, there needs to be preparations for governance so that there is not a power vacuum that is taken advantage of by other radical entities or criminal networks. A better understanding of local governance initiatives needs to be formed in order to empower them, rather than solely concentrating on top-down initiatives that undermine local governance and enable radical entities to fill the void that is left by weakened local governance (Khalaf, 2015).

3. Decentralisation and Federalism

Due to the dynamics of the conflict, its longevity, and the widening of the gap between the aims of the multiple actors, decentralisation in Syria has become entrenched in the future of the country. The focus needs to move away from irreconcilable differences over the vertical distribution of power within a central government to inclusive debates on the horizontal distribution of power. Decentralisation lowers the stakes of the conflict by giving all a measure of autonomy and security, which in turn can help overcome the serious lack of trust that exists between parties. Decentralisation can be implemented at a range of levels and these levels do not necessarily have to be the same across the country (Dobbins et al, 2016).

Nonetheless, local capacity needs to be developed, coordination at a central level and between localities needs to be enhanced, and systems need to be in place to ensure democracy is delivered across the country and individual fiefdoms are not created or entrenched. At the same time, radical Islamist organisations need to be prevented from forcing their way into the decentralised system and using the provision of services for legitimisation (Dobbins et al, 2016).

The multiple systems that have been formed across Syria are not necessarily compatible and some sort of centralised system for their interaction and administration will have to eventually be formed. The micro governance units need to be connected to some macro oversight. Previous attempts at this failed, as have attempts to forge vertical integration and horizontal links. Lack of funding and legitimate macro entities have been blamed for this failure, which has further been blamed on the lack of interaction between internal and external opposition groups and the failure of the external opposition groups to support the provision of basic services at local level. Failure to do so leads to, and has already led to, negative competition which impacts on good governance. Forging better links between internal and external opposition units with a wider programme that helps to deliver services can help better create the necessary horizontal and vertical governance interactions/links (Abboud, 2016).

The Assad regime and the Syrian state are not one and the same and there are multiple functioning governance institutions that need to be harnessed if he loses power. Therefore, systems need to be put in place to better understand how to maintain these areas of governance, whilst prosecuting those that have done wrong. Lessons need to be learnt from the failures of the de-Ba'athification in Iraq where the process crippled governance post-Saddam (Parasiliti et al., 2017).

4. Closely Connected Issues

Security

Security plays an important role in the ability of powerbrokers to effectively govern the territory they operate within. Thus, the most secure areas in Syria, such as the Kurdish cantons, are often credited/praised for their governance initiatives. However, security and safety are strongly influenced by authority formation and the nature of deals and relationships involved in the formation of these nascent authorities. For example, the most secure areas are influenced by the Syrian government in one way or another. The Assad regime disrupts entities that threaten its own collective security whilst supporting those that serve its agenda of retaining power (Ali, 2015). The rebel held Local Administrative Councils (LACs) have less security and less ability to provide services due to not having formed deals with Assad. The necessary focus on providing security has often come at the cost of delivering governance (Khaddour, 2017). In short, there are very different levels of security across Syria, impacting governance abilities in multiple ways and this needs to be understood and addressed in any governance solutions. At the same time, a war economy has been formed in Syria which is closely linked to organised crime and this needs to be prevented from dominating governance units post-conflict (Abboud, 2016).

Aid and Reconstruction

Aid and reconstruction are delivered by multiple actors in Syria with some communities receiving priority, whilst others are ignored. Aid is an inherently political process and it impacts on the ability of local actors to govern now and after the war. Aid is also being used to form alliances, and areas of influence are being forged by external actors. Aid and reconstruction are utilised in local governance processes by political and military actors on all sides in order to gain acceptance and political support. Aid thus shapes the everyday realities and power relations on the ground for the local population at large. Moreover, it influences the direction in which people move, changing the geopolitical landscape. The distribution of aid therefore needs to be carefully administered (Abboud, 2016).

Aid during the conflict impacts the post-war reconstruction and development phase, as it builds the foundation for future services and livelihoods, both structurally and in terms of human capacity (Meininghaus, 2016). Inclusive reconstruction processes are important to prevent rebuilding old fault lines. Excluding groups undermines political stability, as it disadvantages and weakens populations both now and after the war (Abboud, 2016). Consequently, involving local communities and the broader Syrian population is important. Failure to do so will empower those who already possess key political levers and social capital, at the expense of others and of stable governance (Karasapan, 2017).

Return dynamics

More than 6,300,000 people have been internally displaced,[1] whilst, as of May 2017, there are 5,055,150 registered Syrian refugees.[2] The return of the population and how they are returned

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[1] http://www.unocha.org/syria

[2] http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php

will impact future governance, as people with skills are more likely to return to safe zones, privileging some communities over others (Hajjar et al., 2015). Additionally, the Iranian and Syrian governments have made efforts to repopulate key areas with mostly Shia populations, replacing Sunnis. For instance, Iran negotiated directly with rebel groups to swap populations in areas around Damascus and further north for Lebanese and Iraqi Shia families. Not only does this exacerbate ethno-sectarian tensions in Syria, which will have a negative impact on future governance, it also enhances the Assad regime's control over key areas (Karasapan, 2017).

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a broad term encompassing many different levels of interpretation. In a country like Syria, which is undergoing a long and brutal civil war its notions of forgiveness may be difficult to forge. However, the ability to live side by side and interact on both a political and local level is vital for effective governance and to prevent the conflict reigniting. Hence the development of governance is closely connected to the progress being made with reconciliation and these processes need to be pursued in parallel (Ali, 2015).

External Actors

Russia, Iran, and Turkey recently agreed to form four large "de-escalation" zones over opposition-held regions of Western Syria and they will deploy forces along the borders of these zones. This will give them significant influence over future governance deals and enable the Assad regime to refocus its efforts. At the same time Donald Trump signed an order on 8 May authorising the US Department of Defence to directly provide weapons, ammunition, and other equipment to the Kurdish forces, which is likely to increase the Kurds' influence and territory.[3] Multiple external actors engage in supporting proxies and undermining rival groups, which undermines local governance and often limits the ability to deliver services (Ali, 2015).

There is a need for negotiations between external actors towards potential compromises on the maximalist ambitions of their respective agendas (Khaddour, 2017). It has been suggested by Parasiliti et al. (2017) that this may need to involve coordination with Russia as, a) one of the external actors, and b) as a bridge to actors like Iran and the Assad regime. It needs to be taken into account that this conflict has moved beyond the borders of Syria and involves multiple regional actors with different agendas (Parasiliti et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that even the support of so-called 'moderate' groups has to be carefully administered, as the West's favoured ally, the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) has been accused of using its support to monopolise power and increase its territory (Ali, 2015).

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[3] http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-situation-report-april-20-may-10-2017

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