
Policy Paper

Making Syrian Local Administration Legible

Towards an Evidence-Based Approach to Reforming Local Governance

Prepared by LUGARIT for SALAR International

Author: Jadd Hallaj

17 February 2026

LUGARIT

LUGARIT is a dynamic think-and-do tank focused on international development in the Middle East and Africa. We provide timely, tailored, and high-quality knowledge to support communities and institutions in leveraging their resources and ingenuity to consolidate “real” development.

Learn more about LUGARIT on its website

<https://www.LUGARIT.com/>

Connect with LUGARIT on social media

Linkedin

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/LUGARIT>

X / Twitter

https://x.com/LUGARIT_impact

BlueSky

<https://bsky.app/profile/LUGARIT.com>

FaceBook

<https://www.facebook.com/LUGARIT>

Instagram

https://www.instagram.com/LUGARIT_impact

Threads

https://www.threads.net/@LUGARIT_impact

SoundCloud

<https://soundcloud.com/LUGARIT>

Medium

<https://medium.com/@LUGARIT>

About This Content

This policy paper was prepared by LUGARIT For SALAR International.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this content are those of the author and do not reflect the views or the official positions of LUGARIT and SALAR International.

LUGARIT and SALAR International do not give any warranties concerning this content.

Copyrights

© 2026 LUGARIT and SALAR International.
All rights reserved.

SALAR International

A part of the Swedish Association
of Local Authorities and Regions

SALAR International is the international cooperation arm of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, supporting local democracy, peacebuilding and recovery in different parts of the world. SALAR International has been active in the Middle East and North Africa since 2010.

Learn more about SALAR International on

<https://salarinternational.se/>

Connect with SALAR International on social media

Linkedin

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/salarinternational/>

Author

Jadd Hallaj

An architect, urban planner, and researcher specializing in spatial data management and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). He serves as a research consultant at LUGARIT, where he works on urban planning, territorial development, and international cooperation. Jadd has collaborated with a range of international institutions - including UNESCO, the EU Delegation to Syria, UN-Women, and UN-Habitat - applying digital tools and participatory approaches to advance impact of development projects. He is also the co-founder of the Living Summer School, an Erasmus+ initiative promoting territorial innovation. In 2023, his work in Rouen, France, was awarded the European Prize in Architecture and Urban Planning.

[Profile >](#)

Acknowledgements

This policy paper was made possible thanks to the insights and contributions of:

Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj
Zedoun Alzoubi
Ryan Knox
Folke Gunnar Andersson
Bashar Moubarak
Obidah Alsayed Ali
Hassan Masri
Ahmed Kannas
Najwa Altaweel
Mustafa Alokoud
Alaa Barmo
Diana Hasan
Hussam Sulaiman

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. From Temporary Fixes to a Sustainable and Accountable Local Administration	6
3. Challenges in Understanding a Complex Legal Landscape	8
3.1. Reinterpreting law 107	8
3.2. Heterogeneous Local Implementation of Decisions	9
4. Towards a National Framework for Local Administration	11
4.1. Defining Territorial Unity - “waḥda makāniyya”	12
4.2. Pillars of Local Administration in Syria: Political, Administrative, Fiscal & Legal	13
4.3. Formal vs Informal Considerations	15
5. Recommendations	16

1. Introduction

The dramatic institutional shift following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 propelled local administration to the center of Syria's political debate. Despite this renewed focus, local actors struggle to be part of the formal governance system on the ground; regional tensions continue to escalate, with notable conflicts erupting in the coastal areas, Sweida, Aleppo and most recently areas previously in the Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria (AANES). Most of the negotiations dealing with the country's fragile territorial integrity are focused on security issues. The lack of a comprehensive approach to local administration, during this critical transitional phase, is hampering the recovery of services and limiting the healing of fractured communities.

Today, decisions on appointments, boundaries, service delivery, fundraising, and public order are no longer merely technical and administrative acts; they are mechanisms through which territorial order is re-produced. In the absence of a shared national framework, these practices are unfolding through improvised arrangements that vary widely across governorates and municipalities. What are often framed as temporary or emergency measures risk solidifying into durable, uneven governance realities, shaping power relations and political economies well beyond the transition.

Despite stated intentions to transfer authority closer to the local level, current practices of the Transitional Syrian Government (TSG) point to renewed forms of centralization. Authority is cascading downward through appointed executive channels, often bypassing or overriding municipal structures. Governors and newly created administrative bodies increasingly intervene directly in local affairs, while municipalities face shrinking autonomy and resources; many have been completely disbanded. These arrangements respond to real governance vacuums, but they also blur mandates, weaken accountability, and generate confusion over who governs what—and on whose behalf. Without clearer mandates and empowered local institutions, the space for effective recovery and reconstruction—whether driven by Syrian communities or supported by international partners—risks remaining fragmented.

The resulting local administration system is difficult to read, track, and assess: legal texts are selectively applied, territorial units are inconsistently defined, and implementation varies widely across space. This hinders the system's legibility, or the ability of the state, citizens and external partners to clearly understand who governs what territory, under which rules, with which resources and through which accountable institutions. Furthermore, without an evidence-based process to document, monitor, and analyze the underlying dynamics of the local administration system, these interim practices risk becoming entrenched without public debate or institutional coherence.

This policy paper argues that the central challenge facing local administration in Syria today is not simply one of capacity or service provision, but one of legibility as a public good. The paper makes the case for establishing an evidence-led national framework for local administration as a prerequisite for effective governance during the transition. Such a framework must clarify territorial unity (*waḥda makāniyya*), reconcile parallel administrative logics, and situate local administration

within a transparent distribution of authority, resources, and accountability. Making Syrian local administration legible is not only a technical exercise but a necessary step toward reconsolidating the governance of a fragmented country, rebuilding legitimacy, and laying the foundations for a more coherent and inclusive future governance system—one capable of enabling credible recovery efforts and creating the institutional conditions for long-term peacebuilding.

2. From Temporary Fixes to a Sustainable and Accountable Local Administration

Local administration has long constituted a central, yet structurally constrained, component of governance in Syria. It represents the primary institutional interface between the state and society, responsible for managing territory, delivering public services, regulating everyday life, and mediating relations between citizens and higher levels of authority. While often treated as a technical or secondary tier of governance, local administration has in practice played a decisive role in shaping political legitimacy, social cohesion, and patterns of development across the country.

Historically, Syrian local administration operated within a highly centralized political and economic system. Local administrative units were assigned extensive responsibilities but exercised limited authority over decision-making, resources, or strategic planning. This imbalance produced systemic inefficiencies and entrenched forms of dependency on the center, often mediated through party structures, security institutions, and patronage networks. As a result, local administration functioned less as an autonomous governance space and more as an implementing arm of central authority, with weak accountability to local constituencies.

Since 2011 this landscape has been fundamentally altered. As centralized control weakened and territorial fragmentation intensified, local administrative arrangements—formal, informal, and hybrid—became indispensable to sustaining basic governance functions. Across diverse contexts, local actors assumed responsibilities for service provision, coordination, dispute resolution, and resource management, often under extreme conditions of scarcity and insecurity. These experiences demonstrated both the indispensability of local administration to societal resilience and the structural limitations imposed by fragmented authority, uneven capacity, and the absence of coherent national frameworks.

The diversity of wartime governance arrangements also demonstrated that local institutions could function under very different political umbrellas when given minimum clarity of mandate and access to local revenues. Comparative studies show that local governance units which retained some discretion over fees, utilities or community contributions were better able to maintain basic services and mediate conflicts than those fully dependent on central transfers.

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, local administration has moved to the center of political and institutional debate in Syria. It is increasingly framed as a key mechanism for redefining relationships between the government in Damascus and other governance areas, including areas previously within the Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria (AANES), as well as regions such as Sweida, and the coastal areas, mainly as a tool to manage minority issues. Far from constituting a purely administrative layer of governance, local administration is viewed by many groups as a potential framework for sharing authority, managing diversity, and mediating governance across Syria's territorially and politically fragmented landscape. Yet little is being

discussed about its role as a framework for managing reconstruction, development and social cohesion beyond ethno-sectarian tensions.

Despite proclaiming intentions to transfer authorities to the local level, legacies of the centralized model persist. The new central authorities in Damascus want to retain access over decision making on financial flows at the local level. They have tried to improvise and test various models of governance focused on advancing de-concentration some administrative functions by bringing the decision-making process closer to the ground, but they are doing this through centrally appointed and controlled offices and new channels of governance that parallel existing local governance structures. The vacuum left at the local level after 14 years of war required quick and responsive emergency approaches. Authority is cascading down from the top executive to local governors, and in turn to governor deputies, bypassing municipal structures or stepping over their jurisdictions to manage essential services. Municipal units have lost a great deal of their autonomy and resources. In some cases, interim mayors and executive bureaus were appointed in a rush; the process is now being expanded to other areas of Syria.

Decree 107/2011, issued at the beginning of the conflict, was challenged during the last year by the Ministry of Local Administration and the Environment (MoLAE) in an attempt to advance a stronger centralized role for the ministry. But it seems that the balance of power is shifting towards the centrally appointed governors, reporting directly to the president. The initial contestation among individuals assigned to managed different layers of local governance (governors, political bureaus, interim mayors, etc.) is still visible in many places. However, the interim local arrangements are gradually returning to their formal nomenclature of Decree 107. The decree is again at the center of the debate, as it seems to provide a reasonable interim stabilization factor and possibly an entry point to negotiate a deal with the Autonomous Self Administration Areas in the Northeast.

The improvised interim arrangements notwithstanding, local administration is likely to play a pivotal role in Syria's future governance for several reasons. Politically, it provides a tangible institutional space through which relationships between state and society can be reconstituted, local interests articulated, and legitimacy rebuilt. Administratively, it is essential to restoring state capacity in a territorially diverse and resource-constrained environment, where centralized systems alone cannot effectively manage service delivery, reconstruction, and planning. Reports from the ground are pointing to a great deal of dependence on local resources and local sources of legitimacy as a critical factor to compensate for limited central resources and access to local communities.¹ Over the longer term, interim solutions will likely give way to more formal local administration models. Current arrangements are gradually crystallizing to provide entry points for recovery, and social cohesion through their proximity to local needs, assets, and social dynamics.

¹ For more information see: Hallaj, Omar Abdulaziz, and Masri, Hassan (2026). Financing Economic Recovery and Reconstruction in Syria: Between Central and Local Authorities. LUGARIT. <https://link.lugarit.com/uCAB>

3. Challenges in Understanding a Complex Legal Landscape

3.1. Reinterpreting law 107

The system of local administration in Syria was already undergoing significant change during the conflict. Early on, the TSG in Damascus introduced adjustments to existing arrangements through a dense and fast-evolving series of decrees, decisions, administrative orders, and circulars, cascading responsibility vertically from the top executive office to the governors, and subsequently to governor appointments of district officials. Tracking these changes has proven particularly challenging: many decisions are not formally published, circulate briefly, or are communicated through informal channels, including official social media pages, messaging applications, and local networks. As a result, the documentary record of local administration during this period remains fragmented, uneven, and difficult to consolidate.

A recurring challenge observed during this period was the fragmented and often selective interpretation of the Local Administration Law (Legislative Decree No. 107 of 2011). Rather than serving as a stable reference framework, Decree 107 was frequently invoked in a partial manner, with specific provisions emphasized while others were sidelined. This dynamic is clearly illustrated by Decision No. 126/ق (Decision establishing the General Directorate of Local Administration and Environment) issued by the Secretariat of the Presidency, which created these directorates at the governorate level as part of the post-2024 reconfiguration of local governance but did not itself define their mandates or competencies, leaving this task to the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment. Subsequent ministerial regulation, notably Decision No. 1000/ق expanded and specified the directorates' authorities, thereby consolidating the role of the centrally managed General Directorate of Local Administration and Environment at the governorate level.

Decision No. 1000/ق assigns the Directorate a wide-ranging portfolio extending well beyond coordination, including strategic planning, oversight of administrative units, budget preparation and monitoring, management of public assets, supervision of local services, environmental regulation, investment promotion, and data collection and analysis. The decision also positions the Director General as a de facto deputy to the governor responsible for local administration and environment, thereby reinforcing a vertically integrated model of governance in which substantial powers are re-centralized through a parallel administrative structure to that defined by Decree 107.

However, contestations by the governors for creating a parallel channel of authority in highly volatile local conditions, in addition to public outcry, seem to have halted the process. Informal directives have been passed on the ground to stop working with the new decree and revert to the framework of Decree 107.² Attempts are underway now in most areas to appoint interim executive councils and mayors to regain the minimal functionality of municipalities and adhere to the nomenclature of the exiting law.

² The issuing of Circular 13/ق by the Minister of Local Affairs and the Environment transferring a wide range of authorities to the governors and canceling any previous circulars, is an indirect acknowledgment of the annulment of his previous Decision 1000/ق.

3.2. Heterogeneous Local Implementation of Decisions

The confusion on the ground was exacerbated by a myriad of other measures documented during this period. Various decisions illustrate both the improvised nature of the transition underway. Several decrees reinforced the centralized appointment of key local governance positions, including Decision No. 35/٧ by the Minister of Local Affairs and the Environment (Decision Appointing the President of Latakia City Council) based on a recommendation of the Director of Local Administration in the governorate, and Decision No. 997/٧ (Decision Appointing the Director of Local Administration and Environment in Daraa Governorate), took place in contradiction to the mandate of the Decree 107 which they proclaim to apply. At the same time, the creation of new bodies and interim arrangements—such as Decision No. 53 (Decision Establishing the General Secretariat for Political Affairs) and Decision No. 1215/٧ (Decision to Form a Temporary Executive Office for Idlib City Council)—signaled ongoing institutional reconfiguration at both central and local levels that carry practices from the time when the Salvation Government was in charge in Idlib.

On the ground, these decisions were implemented in a heterogeneous manner, pointing to a high level of experimentation and improvisation rather than a coherent policy. Many of the initial circulars and decrees were revoked soon after they were issued, pointing to highly contested decision-making processes. The role of the local branches of the Secretariat of Political Affairs, carry different weight in different governorates. Individual governors seem to have different preferences and are testing different models to reach out to local communities using divergent models and nomenclature for their efforts.

Local authorities capitalized on the lack of a coherent legal framework to initiate their own responses to local problems. Directives and decisions issued by governors, and occasionally by mayors, supersede the need to have local council approvals to regulate public order and urban life. Examples include Circular No. 4/ص (Circular Requiring Prior Authorization for Public and Private Events), issued by Hama Governorate, which made the organization of any public or private event within the governorate subject to prior written approval from the Office of Events at the General Secretariat, and prohibited venues from hosting activities beyond their designated function without such authorization. Additional measures include Circular No. 2430/3 (Circular Prohibiting the Posting of Notices Without Prior Approval) issued also by the Governor of Hama, regulating political and religious expression and display in public institutions and public space, and most recently decision 675/10 by the governor of Lattakiya (circular prohibiting female public employees from wearing makeup in the workplace). Such measures illustrate how administrative authority is being mobilized to address security and symbolic concerns through local governance structures.

We have also witnessed significant interventions affecting labor relations and civil society engagement at the local level. Decision No. 2 (Decision Terminating All Fixed-Term Employment Contracts in Aleppo Governorate) and Decision No. 1330 (Decision Ending the Validity of Full-Paid Administrative Leave Decisions in Aleppo Governorate) reshaped the local public workforce, while Circular No. 448/ص (Circular to All Non-Governmental Organizations Regarding Notification of

Vacancies) and Circular No. 484/ص (Circular Suspending Previous NGO-Related Circulars) both in Homs Governorate tightened administrative oversight over non-governmental organizations, causing contentions with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor officially mandated with that task. Together, these measures underscore the extent to which local administration has become a key site for filling in governance voids and managing institutional discipline during the transitional period.

In the absence of a legible legal system—one in which authority, territory, and mandates can be clearly identified—temporary practices risk becoming entrenched without public scrutiny, political debate, or institutional alignment. When decisions are difficult to trace, boundaries are inconsistently defined, and legal references are selectively applied, accountability mechanisms cannot function, local grievances have no clear channels, and corruption and exclusion are more likely to flourish. Making local administration legible and decision making transparent are therefore a prerequisite for governing the transition itself: they enable informed policy choices, support equitable recovery, and prevent the consolidation of fragmented, de facto governance arrangements that could undermine national coherence in the long term.

4. Towards a National Framework for Local Administration

Lessons from recent Syrian history suggest that the debate on decentralization should not be reduced to constitutional design but must address the everyday political economy of local services—who collects resources, who decides priorities, and through which mechanisms citizens can hold providers to account. Applying this multidimensional lens also highlights that decentralization is not a single trajectory but a negotiated settlement between political inclusion, administrative capacity and fiscal autonomy. Evidence from Syrian localities indicates that progress in one dimension—such as deconcentrated service delivery—can coexist with regression in another, particularly political representation, requiring a more granular reading of change.

While laws, decrees, and administrative decisions remain important reference points, they no longer provide a sufficient lens for understanding how authority is actually exercised on the ground. Focusing exclusively on the legal framework thus risks obscuring the territorial, political, and fiscal dynamics through which local governance is being reshaped in practice. This section therefore introduces a set of core dimensions that can be used to understand how local administrative systems are structured, exercised, and constrained in Syria. These dimensions, drawing on internationally recognized frameworks, provide an analytical lens for understanding the relationships between authority, capacity, resources, and law, and for situating local administration within its broader political and institutional context.

This framework conceptualizes territorial unity (*waḥda makāniyya*) as the primary entry point for analyzing local administration, treating locality not as a fixed administrative fact but as an object of governance shaped by both formal design and everyday practice. By posing the question of how territories are administered, the framework distinguishes between arrangements established by law, policy, and institutional design, and the informal practices through which authority is exercised on the ground. This inquiry is developed through four interrelated analytical pillars—administrative, political, fiscal, and legal—which together structure a multidimensional reading.

4.1. Defining Territorial Unity - “waḥda makāniyya”

Local administration in Syria is structured through parallel and partially overlapping territorial systems that define spatial units according to different political and functional logics. These systems coexist without being fully reconciled, producing ambiguity in authority, representation, and service delivery.

On the one hand, a localities-based framework structures territorial units primarily for purposes of representation. It follows a hierarchy from the state to the governorate (Muḥāfaẓa), and then to municipal localities such as madina, beldeh, and baldiyah. This framework is closely associated with elected local councils and mechanisms of political representation, linking territorial definition to questions of legitimacy and popular participation.

On the other hand, an administrative–executive framework organizes territory around the exercise of authority and service delivery. This system follows a hierarchy from the state to the governorate, then to districts (manṭiqa) and subdistricts (nāḥiya). It operates primarily to implement executive power, administrative oversight, and the delivery of public services.

The problem is further intensified by the emergence of divergent governance models during the conflict. Syria was fragmented into overlapping zones of authority, each advancing its own territorial logic and governance framework. The Autonomous Administration in the northeast promoted commune-based governance rooted in “democratic confederalism”; Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib combined sharia-derived legal frameworks with technocratic administrative structures; Turkish-supported councils in the northwest adapted elements of Turkish municipal law; and regime-controlled areas continued to rely on pre-2011 legislation supplemented by wartime decrees despite formally adopting Decree 107 in 2011. In the absence of a systematic mechanism to document and compare how these rules were produced, interpreted, and applied at the local level, territorial governance holds heavy legacies and remain opaque, fragmented, and difficult to analyze.

Moreover, the coexistence of these parallel frameworks raises a fundamental political question: who holds the authority to define spatial units and their boundaries? The definition of local community or society is not a neutral or technical exercise, but an inherently political act that determines how communities are recognized, aggregated, or excluded within the administrative system. Decisions about where boundaries are drawn, which populations are grouped together, and at what scale authority is exercised directly shape patterns of representation, access to resources, and the distribution of power.

The definition of the “local”, therefore, cannot be understood merely as an administrative category or a planning convenience. It is a political construct through which authority is territorialized, identities are institutionalized, and claims to legitimacy are produced. In the Syrian context, where territorial definitions have been repeatedly adjusted, contested, or informally reinterpreted, the power to define the local has functioned as a key instrument of state control as well as a site of resistance and negotiation. Understanding how territorial units are defined—and by whom—is thus central to analyzing local administration, governance dynamics, and the broader relationship between state and society.

4.2. Pillars of Local Administration in Syria: Political, Administrative, Fiscal & Legal

The thematic pillars outlined below reflect the core dimensions through which decentralization is commonly understood and assessed in international practice. Applying this framework to the Syrian context, including the collection and tabulation of the data using this framework, allows for a more systematic assessment of decentralization trajectories over time:

4.2.1. Political Authority

Concerns how local administrative units are positioned within the broader political system. It includes mechanisms of representation, legitimacy, and accountability, as well as the distribution of decision-making power between national and local levels. In Syria, local administration has historically existed within a political environment that limited local agency and constrained the articulation of local priorities. Examining political authority therefore requires attention to how legitimacy is produced, how accountability flows, and how local voices are reflected—or excluded—from higher-level decision-making. For instance, in Syria today, elected local councils were dismantled in most places. They are being replaced by appointed executive bureaus. The naming of executive bureau members is contested between the governors and the ministry creating a new selective process that undermines the prospects of political decentralization in the future. It should be noted that interim arrangements for post consolidation of legitimacy differ greatly from international frameworks dependent on elections as a critical yardstick for political decentralization. Tracking the transition and understanding what is stalling of the process will be critical to understanding how the system is evolving.

4.2.2. Administrative Capacity

Refers to the ability of local administrative units to govern effectively. This encompasses institutional arrangements, legal mandates, organizational structures, human resources, and technical competencies. It also includes the authority to manage public services, shape service-related policies, and set local priorities. Persistent mismatches between responsibilities and authority, compounded by limited staffing and constrained autonomy, have long undermined administrative performance. These weaknesses were magnified during the conflict, as local institutions were required to operate under conditions of fragmentation, insecurity, and resource depletion. Today, it seems that most important administrative functions are usurped by the governors, who are interfering directly into municipal affairs and designating their own assistants to undertake key municipal functions superseding the role of municipal structures. Moreover, the competition between national, regional and local institutions to fill the service delivery gaps will likely hinder the process of transition towards a system of subsidiarity and transparent division of authorities and responsibilities.

4.2.3. Fiscal and Financial Functions

Address the material foundations of local administration. It includes revenue generation, expenditure responsibilities, public investment, borrowing, and oversight of spending, all of which are decisive factors for the actual functionality of local administration. Historically, Syrian local administrations exercised minimal control over financial resources, limiting their capacity to plan, respond to local needs, or pursue development initiatives. Fiscal arrangements thus directly shape both operational effectiveness and accountability relationships between local authorities and local communities. The last period in Syria witnessed a new trend where national funds, governorates, and cities competed for local resources through organizing fundraising events collecting substantive pledges from local donors. Lacking clear mechanisms for implementation and oversight, this process will not likely evolve into a healthy system of fiscal decentralization but may play into locally entrenched political economies that will be hard to bypass in the future. Without transparent frameworks for municipal finance, in the worst-case scenario, local fundraising risks evolving into parallel taxation systems detached from public oversight, undermining equity between territories and distorting incentives for reconstruction assistance.

4.2.4. Legal Grounding

Defines the formal status of local administration within the state. It encompasses the nature of the state structure and the extent to which laws and constitutional frameworks recognize, protect, or constrain local powers. In Syria, legal provisions governing local administration have often been characterized by ambiguity, overlapping mandates, and broad discretionary authority for central institutions. This has allowed local administrative practices to vary widely across time and territory, frequently diverging from formal legal intent. Ongoing negotiations to establish a new territorial order have faltered after the military operations in Sweida and the slow implementation of the 10th of March agreement with the AANES, in an attempt to avoid the specter of another war.

4.3. Formal vs Informal Considerations

Beyond formal dimensions, local administration is shaped by a range of indirect factors that influence how authority and resources are exercised in practice. Political parties have historically affected local administration through centralized leadership, limited autonomy of local branches, and mediation between local elites and national power centers. This process was centralized under the Baath but it retained an important channel to represent local communities and their grievances. Identity diversity—ethnic, sectarian, tribal, or regional—has influenced representation, institutional design, and perceptions of legitimacy, at times reinforcing inclusion and at others deepening fragmentation. Today, it is not clear how the return to a transparent multi-party system will take place and whether the Secretariat for Political Affairs with its local branches in the governorates will evolve into a catalyst to open the political field or as a new centralized political body in its own right.

Clientelism and patronage networks have played a particularly influential role, often substituting for formal accountability mechanisms and shaping access to resources and authority. External interventions—whether political, economic, or humanitarian—have further conditioned local administrative practices, especially in conflict-affected areas where international actors became key stakeholders in governance arrangements. These informal channels will likely contribute to interim solutions but will most likely act as exclusionary mechanisms. Decentralization is not a guarantee of more democratic processes and may risk becoming an entrenched process of political exclusion. The growing role of international actors further underscores the need to treat local administration as a core entry point for recovery governance, not merely as a delivery channel. Where aid programs bypass municipal structures, they may unintentionally reinforce fragmented authority and weaken prospects for a unified state–society relationship.

Local administration also manifests differently depending on socio-economic and security contexts. The relative strength of local economies affects the ability of local institutions to mobilize resources and sustain services. Capacity to attract and retain human resources shapes governance quality and reinforces disparities between urban centers and peripheral areas. Security arrangements—particularly the distribution of security roles and the degree of central oversight—define the operational space available to local authorities. Local culture and cultural assets influence legitimacy, social cohesion, and public engagement, while also shaping how local identities are expressed within administrative structures. These factors must be monitored to understand the evolution of the local administration system. Monitoring legal transformations alone will only render a partial picture.

5. Recommendations

The evolving context of local administration in Syria has underscored a set of interrelated challenges that cannot be addressed through ad hoc documentation or isolated analysis. Together, these challenges point to the urgent need for a dedicated knowledge platform capable of consolidating information, tracking change, and supporting informed engagement. Improvised interim solutions may crystallize into a long-term model of consolidating interim local solutions into permanent de facto models, hindering the prospects of institutionalizing local governance into a coherent, transparent, equitable and sustainable system.

Rebuilding Institutional Memory and Historical Grounding

To track the dynamics of local administration on the ground, there is a clear need, first, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the local administration system and its historical evolution in order to situate ongoing reforms within their longer institutional trajectories. Some of the measures observed—particularly those relating to appointments, interim councils, and administrative hierarchy—draw on provisions embedded in earlier legal frameworks, notably Legislative Decree No. 107 of 2011, while a great many were undertaken in stark contradiction to the letter of the law. Without historical grounding, recent changes risk being interpreted in isolation, detached from the structural precedents that continue to shape local governance.

Despite the presence of knowledge and information on local administration, Syria lacks a mechanism to curate this knowledge. Information remains fragmented across institutions, social media, and informal networks, with no reliable reference that practitioners can rely on. Information, when it exists, is inaccessible. This structural gap means lessons are not transferred, duplication persists, and workable models are rarely adapted across regions. Rebuilding institutional memory should also draw on comparative experiences from Syrian local governance during the conflict. Engagement with municipal practitioners, former council members and local associations is essential to recover tacit knowledge on budgeting, service organization and dispute resolution that was never formally codified yet proved decisive for local resilience.

Without a consolidated platform, governance practice continues to depend on anecdote rather than comparable evidence. The various branches of government proclaim to move towards digitizing governmental functions and expanding e-government models, including MoLAE. However, it is not clear how they will develop their systems and what aspects of the legal legacies they will retain. Having an independent monitor and a source of knowledge for local actors to draw on, can be critical to strengthening these actors and balancing the central-local dynamics.

Creating Tools for Monitoring, Tracking, and Disambiguation

On another level, the pace and scope of recent decrees required continuous monitoring to capture changes occurring at multiple levels of administration, from central ministries to governorates and municipalities. The simultaneous issuance of multiple, and often contradictory, legal instruments addressing overlapping domains highlighted the importance of tracking not only individual texts, but also their sequencing, interaction, and internal coherence.

This need is compounded by spatial ambiguity and fragmentation. Syria lacks a unified and authoritative map of cities, neighborhoods, and localities. Different actors—governors, city council heads, police chiefs, and security branches—often operate using divergent spatial references. As a result, boundaries function as negotiated and contested realities rather than stable legal entities, and even neighborhood-level committees frequently lack clearly defined territorial mandates. The administrative system is thus not uniformly applied nationwide, and spatial units are often socially and politically disputed rather than administratively fixed. This has great implications for citizen based accountability frameworks in the future. When local constituencies cannot address grievances to clear channels it creates gateways for corruption and nepotism.

Monitoring tools should therefore move beyond legal texts to capture how authority, fiscal flows and service responsibilities are actually exercised, including informal coordination mechanisms between local governance units, utilities and community structures. A shared analytical infrastructure linking territorial data with information on mandates, staffing and expenditures would also enable more equitable external assistance to recovery planning through local governance units, rather than creating substitute structures.

Promoting Analytical Insight and Informed Engagement

Furthermore, there is a growing demand for analytical accompaniment of these changes. Beyond documentation, local governance stakeholders require structured, evidence-informed analysis capable of identifying emerging patterns, implementation challenges, and potential unintended consequences. The diversity of legal instruments issued during this period and local fundraising events conducted at the local level demonstrates that local administration has become a central arena through which broader political, security, and institutional adjustments are being enacted, even when the general legal trend is pointing towards more centralized governance.

More broadly, local administration has emerged as a key pillar of Syria's recovery and state reconstitution. Questions of local agency to collect local revenues and public contributions, shifting modalities of political representation, and the distribution of authority between central and subnational levels are not merely technical issues, but core political and social contested fields. The recent legal measures governing appointments, fundraising, public order, labor, and civil society engagement illustrate ongoing efforts to recalibrate relationships between ministries, governorates, and localities through improvising adjustments and negotiating alterations to administrative laws and procedures. How these efforts evolve—and whether they enhance coherence, legitimacy, and responsiveness, or instead reinforce local fragmentation and re-centralization—remains a critical challenge with significant implications for governance, service delivery, and social cohesion.

Piloting Functional Local Governance and Aligning Recovery Support

In parallel to analytical work, targeted efforts should be made to demonstrate how functional and accountable local administrative units can operate within the current transition, following the recently revived dialogue / emphasis on Decree 107. Carefully selected municipalities and districts could serve as practical laboratories for clarifying mandates between governors, executive bureaus, mayors, and municipal councils, testing arrangements for service delivery, budgeting and local accountability. The experience from these pilots should be systematically captured through the proposed knowledge platform, creating an evidence base to inform policy choices and to support a gradual unification of local governance systems that evolved in different parts of Syria during the conflict.

At the same time, the external assistance architecture must integrate a clear local-governance perspective when designing non-humanitarian recovery support, ensuring that investments in infrastructure, livelihoods, public services and peacebuilding reinforce legitimate municipal institutions rather than bypass them. Embedding pilot experiences and platform-based analysis into donor and government planning processes would help bridge the gap between emergency responses and longer-term institutional reform, providing a common reference for aligning national policies with local realities and strengthening the conditions for sustainable recovery.

Leading a Structured National Dialogue

All the above should form a basis for an ongoing, structured, honest and evidence-based horizontal and vertical dialogue among key national and local stakeholders on the current status and future alternatives of local administration and local governance development in Syria. Establishing a “new system” is not a simple administrative or technical affair but a complex societal development that also needs to include a discussion about key principles and guiding norms that should underpin reform.

Over the longer term, Syria will also need to consider the establishment of a nationally recognized interlocutor for local governments, a role that in many countries is played by local government associations, or unions. The absence of such platforms usually limits structured dialogue between local and central authorities and pushes negotiations into informal and personalized channels. There is a precedent for such structures in the MENA region (eg. Turkiye, Palestine, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco) and rebuilding this representative layer will be essential once a more unified system of local governance begins to take shape.