

The Legislative Council in Deir Ezzor

Current Situation and the Prospects for Reform

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This paper is part of a series of policy papers in which the Justice for Life organization provides procedural recommendations to improve the performance of local institutions.

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JFL's mission is to collaboratively promote human rights, dialogue, and freedoms in Syria through documentation, advocacy, access efforts, and capacity building for communities and organizations. JFL operates on two strategic tracks, which are reviewed and adjusted every three years. These tracks focus on enhancing justice and defending human rights in Syria and advocating for the right of Syrians to participate in political and civil life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Background and aims of the paper.....	6
Data sources.....	8
Findings	9
Roles and Effectiveness	9
Participatory Approach and Community Engagement.....	12
Recommendations	14
Restructuring, Powers, and Bylaws.....	14
Activating the role of intellectuals and competent individuals.....	14
People trust and accountability.....	14
Capacity development and technical and material support	15
Good communication and public relations skills.....	15
Enhancing dialogue spaces	16

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the current state of the Legislative Council in Deir Ezzor following recent restructuring efforts. It specifically assesses the role of the Legislative Council, its effectiveness in fulfilling this role, and the challenges that hinder its success. Additionally, the paper investigates the avenues and mechanisms for community participation in the Council's activities and decision-making processes. Based on this analysis, the paper offers several recommendations for enhancing the Council's work and outlines reform priorities for local governance structures.

The central question this paper seeks to answer is: What is the role of the Legislative Council in Deir Ezzor within the framework of governance and local administration under the Autonomous Administration, particularly in terms of effectiveness and its capacity to facilitate community participation? What are the areas in need of development or reform?

BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF THE PAPER

Over the past year, Deir Ezzor has experienced numerous rapid developments, most notably the intense fighting in August 2023 between armed tribal forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These clashes resulted in the deaths and injuries of dozens of civilians, widespread security tensions, road blockades, and curfews. The clashes ultimately concluded with the SDF regaining control over towns that had temporarily fallen to the tribal forces. Following the restoration of relative stability, the Civil Administration in Deir Ezzor held a conference in October 2023 titled "Strengthening Security and Stability in Deir Ezzor," attended by representatives from various bodies within the Autonomous Administration, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), tribal sheiks, local dignitaries, political parties, and civil society organizations. The conference produced a series of recommendations and decisions aimed at improving security, living conditions, and governance in Deir Ezzor¹, including a key decision to restructure the legislative and executive councils, municipalities, and the military council within six months.

Simultaneously, in October 2023, the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria issued an amended social contract, which serves as the constitution for its governance across various controlled areas.² The revised social contract introduced several changes to the structures of Autonomous administration, including the reorganization of administrative divisions into seven different provinces, one of which is Deir Ezzor. Additionally, the amended contract included the restructuring and renaming of certain governance bodies within the Autonomous Administration, such as changing the Legislative Council to the House of Peoples and the Civil Council to the Executive Council.

Based on the outcomes of the Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability and within the framework of the new social contract, the opening session of the Legislative Council, now renamed the "House of Peoples in Deir Ezzor Province," was held on April 3, 2024,³. During this session, Mr. Fayeز Al-Baik and Ms. Rahaf Hassan Al-Raouj were elected as co-chairs of the Council, along with four deputies.

Despite the six-month deadline set by the Conference on Strengthening Security and Stability for completing the restructuring of local councils, including the Legislative and Executive Councils, these efforts remain in their early stages. So far, progress has been limited to the formation of the

¹ The final list of the outcomes of the conference can be found on the official website of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria via the link: <https://aanesgov.org/?p=7942>

² The amended social contract can be viewed and downloaded from the official website of the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria via the link <https://aanesgov.org/?p=9221>

³ Statement regarding the founding session of the People's Council in Deir Ezzor on the official website of the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria <https://aanesgov.org/?p=11237>.

Legislative Council, the election of its co-chairs, and changes in the leadership of the Executive Council. However, this moment presents a valuable opportunity to analyze the restructuring process and identify areas for development and reform.

In this context, Justice for Life launched a communication project to leverage the ongoing changes and restructuring efforts. The project aims to foster in-depth dialogues with various community stakeholders on a range of topics. These discussions inform policy papers that analyze the current situation, identify obstacles and challenges, and offer practical recommendations to enhance the participatory, impactful, and sustainable nature of institutional restructuring and reform efforts.

This paper focuses on the House of Peoples in Deir Ezzor Province, previously known as the Legislative Council (referred to in this paper as the Legislative Council), and aims to:

1. Examining the current state of the Legislative Council in Deir Ezzor, including the changes brought about by the restructuring process, and identify the shortcomings that this process aims to address.
2. Assessing the role and effectiveness of the Legislative Council, comparing its actual performance with the intended role it is supposed to fulfill.
3. Analyzing the challenges and obstacles that hinder the functioning of the Legislative Council and exploring the reasons for the discrepancies between its theoretical role and its practical implementation.
4. Investigating the existing and potential opportunities and channels for enhancing community participation in the Council's work and exploring possible strategies to activate and improve these avenues.
5. Developing actionable recommendations to increase the efficiency and impact of the restructuring process and to strengthen the role and effectiveness of the Legislative Council.

DATA SOURCES

The paper relies on data and information from primary and secondary sources, as follows:

Primary Data: The study utilized inputs from three focus group discussions conducted in different areas of Deir Ezzor. These sessions, held from July 29 to July 31, 2024, took place in Hajin, Al-Busayrah, and Al-Sa'wa. Each session involved eight participants from various sectors, including representatives from the Legislative Council, local governance bodies, civil society, and the local community. The sessions followed a uniform structure and were led by facilitators from the Justice for Life team, who used a general framework with open-ended questions addressing three main topics: 1) the role and effectiveness of the Legislative Council, 2) participatory mechanisms and community involvement in the Council's work, and 3) development opportunities and reform priorities.

Secondary Data: This data consists of general and contextual information gathered through desk research using open sources such as reports, media statements, and announcements from civil society organizations and official Autonomous Administration channels in northeast Syria. Notably, available information is scarce on the Legislative Council in Deir Ezzor, which is attributed to limited media coverage and the Council's recent restructuring.

FINDINGS

Roles and Effectiveness

Theoretically, the Legislative Council (referred to as the House of Peoples in Deir Ezzor Province, according to the revised social contract) serves as the provincial legislative authority. Its main responsibilities include representing local communities, enacting, and issuing laws, overseeing the Executive Council's activities, and approving decisions from both the Executive Council and the judiciary.

Article 88 and Article 89 of the amended Social Contract for Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria, issued in December 2023, outline the structure and functions of the Council of Peoples at the provincial level. Article 88 defines the House of Peoples as: "The House representing the peoples and social groups in each province, responsible for legislation, control, and policymaking."⁴

According to feedback from the three focus group discussions, the previous Provincial Legislative Council (PLC) was seen as limited in power and "ineffective," with the Executive Council prioritizing decision-making and implementation. Participants also noted issues such as corruption and nepotism within the previous council, which further diminished its effectiveness.

In contrast, participants in the focus group discussions expressed "hope" for a revitalized role of the new council in representing local community interests and overseeing the Executive Council's various committees. They highlighted that the new council includes representatives from all regions and towns of Deir Ezzor and features many individuals with technical expertise and well-known local figures, such as the President of the Farmers Union and the Medical Captain, which they believe strengthens the council's effectiveness.

Despite this broad representation and the presence of competent and respected individuals, concerns were raised about the need for clear selection mechanisms or transparency in the appointment process. One council member reported being informed of his appointment without details on the reasons or selection process, reflecting issues with transparency in the new council's formation.

Conversely, several obstacles appear to hinder the Council's role, efficiency, and ability to fulfill its responsibilities. Chief among these challenges is the overall unstable political and security situation in the region, which affects not only the Legislative Council but also other local governance structures. One focus group discussion participant, a member of the Legislative Council, noted that external political pressures significantly impact the Council's operations. For

⁴The amended social contract can be viewed and downloaded from the official website of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria via the link <https://aanesgov.org/?p=9221>

instance, pressures led to the postponement of municipal elections scheduled for this year,⁵ which in turn affected the ability to hold elections for the Legislative Council members as outlined in the social contract, leading to appointments instead.

Additionally, participants identified several challenges impacting the Council's work and effectiveness, including:

1. There remains **significant ambiguity and lack of clarity regarding the Council's operational mechanisms**. This is partly because the Council's rules of procedure have not yet been approved, and the process of structuring and appointing new members of the Executive Council is incomplete. Given the close relationship between the Legislative Council and the Executive Council—particularly the Legislative Council's role in supervising and approving Executive Council decisions—the delay in structuring the Executive Council creates uncertainty about the detailed mechanisms of the Council's work.

Since the restructuring of the Council in April of this year, only four sessions have been held, including the founding session on April 3, 2024, and the most recent on May 11, which focused on appointing the co-chairmanship of the Executive Council. A Council member noted that the formation of the Executive Council⁶ should have been completed within 45 days of the joint presidency appointment. Still, this process has been repeatedly delayed, with no clear timeline for when the new Executive Council will be established.

Furthermore, there needs to be more clarity about the roles and powers of Legislative Council members. Although the social contract outlines the general roles and responsibilities of the Legislative Council, the practical application and specific roles still need to be clarified both to Council members and to the region's population.

2. Several participants identified the overlap between the Legislative and Executive Councils as a major barrier to the Legislative Council fully executing its legislative and oversight functions. They noted that many heads of committees within the Executive Council are also members of the Legislative Council, creating a conflict of interest that restricts the Legislative Council's ability to supervise and monitor the activities of the Executive Committees. This overlap is seen as a critical issue that needs to be resolved during the restructuring of the Executive Council. Participants in the focus group discussions also highlighted that the Executive Council's dominance in the decision-making and implementation processes during earlier restructuring phases was a key factor in the Legislative Council's lack of effectiveness. Additionally, one participant expressed concern about the ongoing practice of rotating the same individuals between the Legislative and Executive Councils, fearing that this could erode trust and hinder the genuine change that the region's residents are seeking.

⁵ For more on this topic, see: "War on Municipal Elections in the Autonomous Administration Areas of Northern Syria," by Suzdar Mohammed, published on the Syria Direct website on 10/06/2024 <https://tinyurl.com/p3dchemh>

⁶ <https://aanesgov.org/?p=11911>

3. The **influence of certain powerful individuals**, particularly cadres and advisors with significant authority, was frequently mentioned as a barrier to the effective operation of the Legislative Councils. Some participants noted that final decisions are often controlled by these cadres and advisors, who possess the power to intervene, block any decision, or even dissolve the council if necessary. This authority is not limited to the Legislative Council but extends across all levels of local governance structures. One member of the Legislative Council pointed out that the previous Council's weakness, along with the prevalence of corruption and nepotism, has only strengthened this authority. Despite this, he expressed hope that the newly restructured Council would be able to perform its duties without external influence or interference. However, only some participants shared this optimism; a member of a local council voiced concerns that the Legislative Council would only be able to make decisions with the approval of these cadres.
4. The **widespread corruption and nepotism** are major challenges for civil actors and local governance structures in Deir Ezzor, frequently dominating discussions about the region's current state. In relation to the Legislative Council, corruption has been identified as a significant issue that marred the work of the previous Council. During the focus group discussions held for this paper, participants repeatedly pointed to corruption as a key indicator of the previous Council's ineffectiveness. They also noted that the Council's weak supervisory role has further contributed to the spread of corruption within local governance structures, which they attributed to the lack of laws and effective accountability mechanisms. Participants shared several examples and real-life instances of widespread corruption, particularly financial corruption, including notable increases in the wealth and property of some council members. In addition to financial corruption and the abuse of power, discussions during the focus group discussions highlighted nepotism as a major form of administrative corruption. This issue is particularly concerning given the absence of elections and the need for more transparency in the processes used to appoint members to boards and committees. These conditions severely restrict opportunities for holding individuals accountable.
5. The influence of tribal balances plays a significant role in the social and political dynamics of Deir Ezzor. Since the region was integrated into areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration in 2018, **tribal quotas** have been a key factor in selecting members for various councils, bodies, committees, and offices. Participants in the focus group discussions identified reliance on these tribal quotas as one of the primary obstacles to the effectiveness and efficiency of local administrations. This approach has led to the marginalization of qualified individuals, the perpetuation of corruption, and the rise of nepotism. Specifically, participants pointed out several negative consequences of tribal quotas, such as the exclusion of qualified individuals from smaller tribes and the concentration of appointments within larger tribes, regardless of merit.

Additionally, the reliance on tribal quotas has empowered a few tribal elders, who may lack a "broad societal vision," as one participant described. However, many participants acknowledged that the recent restructuring of the Legislative Council, which emphasized broad geographical representation and the selection of qualified individuals, has reduced the influence of tribal

quotas. This shift was viewed as one of the most significant aspects of the restructuring process, aligning with the demands approved at the Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability.

It is important to note that, according to some participants in the sessions, tribal structures, particularly tribal sheiks and dignitaries, are not inherently negative. These figures can serve as influential societal channels and play a crucial role in conflict resolution and the promotion of security and social peace if they are effectively utilized and engaged.

Participatory Approach and Community Engagement

Given the current state of the Legislative Council, particularly the ambiguity surrounding its powers and operational mechanisms, the opportunities and channels for community engagement in the Council's activities also need to be marked by a similar lack of clarity. Some participants in the focus group discussions, especially those who are members of the Council or other local administration structures, highlighted that the Council's role and composition should ideally foster significant community participation due to the broad representation of various regions and communities in Deir Ezzor among the Council's new members.

They noted that these members, being part of the local communities, are directly familiar with the realities and needs of their areas and can convey the voices and aspirations of the residents. Moreover, the residents are generally aware of who represents them in the Council. Personal relationships play a crucial role in facilitating this engagement, with some participants emphasizing the strong family and tribal ties in the region as key avenues for community engagement. They also pointed out that Council members have a responsibility to leverage these relationships to address and follow up on social issues and concerns, ensuring they are communicated to the relevant committees or individuals.

In addition, participants mentioned specific spaces or channels, such as the councils of elders in certain villages and towns, which are utilized to listen to people's problems and concerns. However, the actual impact of these participation forms on decision-making processes and the effectiveness of the Council remains more complex. As one participant noted, "problems are raised without mechanisms to solve them," highlighting the persistent challenges and obstacles that hinder the Council's work and effectiveness.

Participants in the sessions, including Council members and representatives from local and civil society, agreed on the urgent need for more organized and structured channels for communication and community involvement. They proposed several measures to address this, such as implementing a hotline or complaints box to allow residents to share their concerns and suggestions with the Council. Additionally, they suggested conducting regular field visits to engage with other civil actors and local communities and establishing communication channels with local councils and communities to better understand and address the community's issues, needs, and priorities.

The discussion also tackled the importance of community engagement and communication with other actors, particularly civil society and community initiatives. While civil society organizations

and tribal leaders were recognized for their strong presence and effectiveness, it was noted that the former Legislative Council's weaknesses hindered better communication and collaboration between these groups. Some participants highlighted the significant role of civic and youth groups in driving change, providing examples from various regions in Deir Ezzor and beyond. However, they also pointed out that civil society's influence is limited in sensitive areas such as human rights, with many activists fearing harassment or prosecution if they address contentious issues, like the treatment of detainees, due to concerns about potential repercussions from the administration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the in-depth discussions and the proposals put forward by members of the Legislative Council and representatives from the local community and civil society, a set of recommendations can be formulated. These recommendations will focus on reform priorities and strategies for enhancing the Legislative Council's effectiveness and leveraging the ongoing restructuring process to improve participation and community engagement in its activities.

Restructuring, Powers, and Bylaws

The data from the focus group discussions reveal that the process of structuring and establishing the bylaws of the Council, including defining roles and responsibilities, still needs to be completed. This has led to uncertainty and confusion regarding the Council's powers and its practical role compared to the theoretical principles outlined in the social contract. Therefore, it is crucial to expedite the completion of these structuring processes. This includes finalizing the rules of procedure, forming follow-up and supervision committees within the Council, and completing the establishment of the new executive council, ensuring a clear distinction between the powers and responsibilities of the two councils. Additionally, the structuring process, especially the formation of Executive Council committees, should address issues such as name rotation and conflicts of interest to prevent confusion between the two councils' work and avoid repeating the previous Legislative Council's shortcomings.

Activating the role of intellectuals and competent individuals

Given the lack of a suitable environment for conducting local elections to select members of the Legislative or Executive Council, which many participants view as an ideal currently unattainable, it is crucial to prioritize selecting individuals with scientific and technical expertise, a good reputation, and proven integrity. This approach is essential to combat corruption and nepotism, enhance local community trust in the Legislative Council and local administration structures, and increase their effectiveness, efficiency, and capacity to represent the population's interests, address their problems, and meet their needs.

People trust and accountability

The widespread issues of corruption, nepotism, and the lack of a meaningful role for the previous Legislative Council have resulted in very low levels of trust among the population and local communities in the Council and local governance structures. According to the participants in the sessions, several procedures and practices could address this problem and rebuild community confidence. These include enhancing the Council's media and promotional efforts to better inform the public about the Council's role, functions, and achievements. Additionally, developing and implementing mechanisms for accountability and monitoring the Council's work is crucial.

This includes requiring Council members, especially committee heads, to submit regular reports on their activities to the Council's Presidency and Office.

Moreover, the Council should establish and activate effective communication channels with the local community to organize participation mechanisms. This involves arranging regular field visits and meetings with community actors and supporting the creation of popular committees, such as a complaints box and other transparent communication methods.

Capacity development and technical and material support

The scientific, technical, and academic expertise among Council members is considered a key strength that should be leveraged to enhance the Council's effectiveness, according to participants in the focus group sessions. However, there are several areas where Council members need further development, particularly in principles of good governance, the International Bill of Human Rights, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and negotiation skills. Additionally, technical skills such as media, communication, mobilization, and advocacy are also areas for improvement.

Participants also emphasized the need for financial support for the Council, particularly regarding salaries and compensation for committee chairs and specialists. They noted that current salaries are low and non-competitive, which may hinder the attraction of qualified individuals, especially given the higher earning potential in private sectors or civil society organizations. To address this, participants recommended establishing financial support mechanisms to cover administrative expenses and compensate Council members for their work. This type of support would help reduce the risk of corruption and improve the efficiency and quality of the Council's work.

Good communication and public relations skills

Participants in the sessions emphasized the importance of maintaining ongoing coordination and communication with various local administrative structures, including communes and local councils, as well as with central bodies like the General People's Assembly in Northeast Syria.

The participants also recommended enhancing communication and collaboration with both local and international civil society organizations to ensure effective coordination of work, need assessment, resource sharing, and exchange of support and expertise.

Enhancing dialogue spaces

Finally, based on the focus group discussions and participants' inputs, it is recommended to invest in forums for discussion and dialogue involving Council members and other stakeholders, including local councils, social structures, civil society organizations, activists, and community initiatives. These forums should focus on addressing problems, setting priorities, and developing collaborative mechanisms and proposals to improve transparency and community engagement. Emphasis should be placed on revisiting previous resolutions and legislations, particularly those that are problematic, such as the expatriate card.