‘Return to the Homeland’s Bosom’

The case of Erbeen and Zamalka in the countryside of Damascus

العودة الى حضن الوطن

عربين و زملكا في ريف دمشق

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Abstract

This thesis examines the state return to 'liberated areas' in one district in Syria in the context of a victor's peace, an economy in strain and an ongoing civil war. Using state in society approach and the literature on authoritarian resilience, it focuses on state institutions as well as national and local elites, as links between state and society and as important actors in the process of authoritarian resilience. Reflecting on the recent state history, state-building efforts, the nature of the state's institutions, and the pre-conflict state-society relations, the thesis pays attention to the historical settings and state workings at the national and local level and zooms in on a city and town in Eastern Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus to analyse the first phase of state return after 2018. The thesis is one of the first studies to look at local level research and examines the return of the state at the level of towns and cities.

The research benefited from, among others, literature on *the state, state-formation, state-(re)building, authoritarian resilience, authoritarian upgrading, network of privileges, relationship of power, network polities, recombinant capacity,* and *authoritarian practices.*

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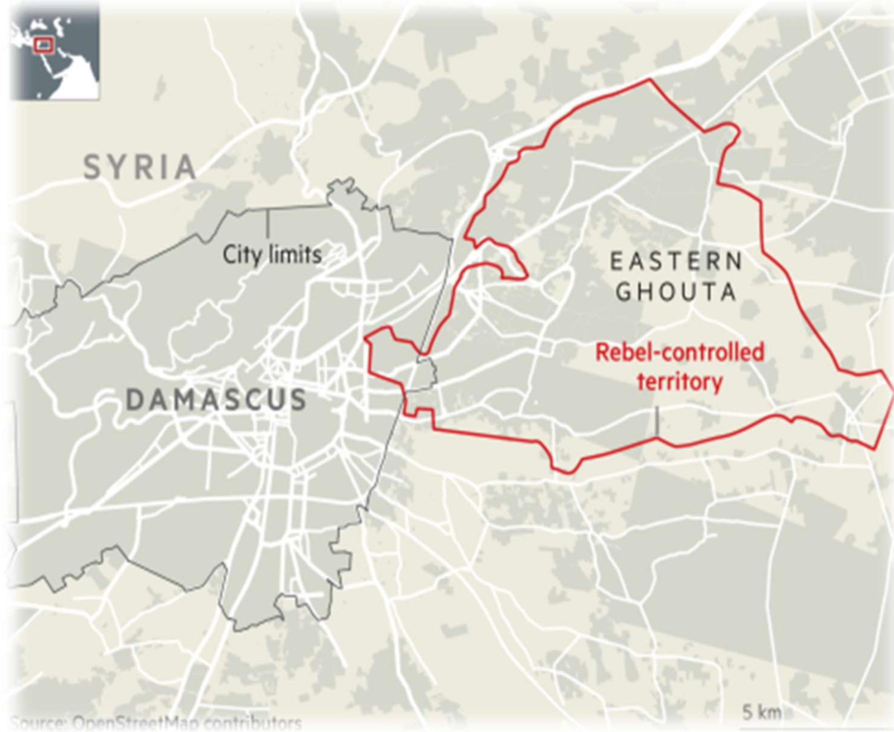
Map of Eastern Ghouta



Source: OpenStreetMap contributors

Acronyms and Abbreviations

FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LAC	Local Administrative Council
NDF	National Defense Form
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NPF	National Progressive Front
YPD	Democratic Union Party

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1 Chapter one: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

As of 2016, the Syrian government turned the tide in the war against the rebels and Islamists and regained control over vast sways of the Syrian territories either militarily or the so called "reconciliation agreements". The change in the realities on the ground was accompanied by the return of the Syrian state institutions and representatives to these areas, which at times were (partly) depopulated or had sustained years of military conflict leading to enormous loses in social and economic capital. One example of territory that came under the control of the Syrian government during this period is Eastern-Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus. Between 2013 and 2018, the area was ruled by a conglomerate of rebel groups, revolutionary councils, civil society and non-government organizations 'NGOs' as well as representatives of the internationally recognised interim government, which was based in Turkey.[1]

After a fierce military campaign starting in late 2017, the Free Syrian Army affiliated al-Rahman corps and Salafist al-Islam army capitulated in March and April 2018 respectively. Under the banner of 'reconciliation agreements', the fighters and affiliates of the opposition accepted a deal in which they could remain and reconcile with the Syrian state or be transferred to northern Syria. Approximately 60,000 rebels and associates of the opposition fled the enclave to Idlib and northern Aleppo for fear of reprisals and on 12 April 2018, the Syrian armed forces raised the Syrian flag in the area declaring its 'liberation'.[2] While approximately 150,000 civilians left the enclave to accommodation centres in Damascus – which were under the control of the Syrian government – tens of thousands remained in the enclave, which had approximately 400,000 residents before the last onslaught. The conflict resulted in massive destruction and it was estimated that between 50 % and 90% of infrastructure were destroyed.[3]

In the earlier stages of the final onslaught and while fighting was still ongoing in some parts of Eastern-Ghouta, on 26 March 2018, the Minster of the Local Administration, Deputy Head of the Higher Council for Local Administration, announced the blueprint for the state return to the region stating that Eastern Ghouta had 'returned to the bosom of the homeland'. The plan would entail the entry of the army and security forces only to be followed by the competent civilian authorities when the physical environment was secured. On 3 April 2018, the Prime Minister at the time, Imad Khamis, established a high-level ministerial committee to oversee the return of services. Parallel to the hasty return of the state institutions, social actors

such as religious figures and representatives of official religious institutions as well as prominent businessmen, who had left the area before it fell under the control of the rebels, also gradually returned.

While the official narrative on the state return after the various military victories and 'liberations' in different areas, such as Dara'a, was unified, the actual process of the state return in Eastern-Ghouta followed a different trajectory from other areas and was characterized by a total military and security control and domination. This thesis aims to understand how the Syrian state re-established itself in the region, Erbeen city and the town of Zamalka, to be more specific. To achieve this, I use two theoretical frameworks: the state-in-society framework of Joel Migdal and authoritarian resilience of Steven Heydemann. While the former stresses the linkages between the state and society and the constitutive nature of this relation, the latter focuses on the transformation and reconfigurations of practices and relations that guarantee authoritarian resilience. I focus on the return of institutions as well as on the role of local elites and power networks and how they shape and impact the process of the state return in the context of post-war authoritarian rule.

This thesis seeks to answer the following research question:

How did the Syrian state, conceptualized as a field of power, re-establish itself in the city of Erbeen and the town of Zamalka in Eastern-Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus in the period between March 2018 and March 2020 after five years of rebel governance?

In answering this central question, the thesis will additionally rely on the following sub-questions:

a) What was the role of the state institutions?
    1) What state institutions returned and who returned with them? The pace of return?
    2) Which state institutions (coercive or civilian) were prioritized?
    3) How the returning state officials / agencies deal with services – e.g. water, electricity – that were in place, some of them created by rebels and the impact of the state return on the existence of rebel-institutions?
b) What was the role of local elites and the impact of their interactions with the state institutions?
    1) How and when did pre-conflict power networks and local elite return to the areas under study?

2) How did local elites and pre-conflict power networks engage in social, economic and political reconstruction? And how did this impact the process of the state return?
3) What was the role of former rebels under the current governance structures?

While the return of the state in the context of a victor's peace is not a new phenomenon, the case of Eastern-Ghouta is worthy of further study, especially in the Syrian context, due to a confluence of factors and characteristics. Consistent with the initial state-building process, which was shaped by different social, religious and ethnic considerations, as will be shown in chapter three, the state return process has not been uniform across the country. There are two aspects in which state return in Eastern-Ghouta is distinctive compared to other areas and provinces. Firstly, the tribal considerations which moulded the process in the province of Dara'a in the south of the country, where tribes are at the centre of society, were marginal in Eastern-Ghouta. Secondly, the class divides, and the rural versus urban dynamics which play an important role in Aleppo, had little salience here.

Furthermore, this is a case of a relatively stable state return, as the Syrian state is not challenged by (former) rebels, unlike Dara'a,[4] where the rebels maintain their arms, or Aleppo, where the majority of the rebels were from the countryside and their departure did not result in a similar wave of population displacement.[5] Eastern-Ghouta is politically important due to its proximity to the capital and hence its stability is presumably of high priority. Yet, despite the unique characteristics of Eastern-Ghouta, there have not been many comparative and in-depth studies dedicated particularly to it, and especially for the process at the local level (town and city). Therefore, by focusing precisely on that level in its analysis, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on the state return in Syria and to bridge the gap in our understanding of this process at the local level.

The available studies on Eastern-Ghouta are focused on the practices of the state (coercive) institutions and their representatives.[6] Produced primarily by non-academic and partisan think tanks,[7] the majority of the available studies do not address the role of local actors in the region. The roles of the local business community as well as the religious institutions, including the Church, are particularly absent and have not received attention, despite their important contribution in the process of social, economic and political reconstruction, as will be shown in chapter five. All of these considerations contributed and informed the choice of Erbeen and Zamalka in the region of Eastern-Ghouta as a subject for this thesis.

This thesis will contribute to our understanding of the Syrian state post conflict and how the conflict has changed it, if at all, especially since the state at the national level did undergo massive changes and became reliant on international actors such as foreign militias, Iran and Russia. As will be discussed in the theoretical chapter, the thesis will also contribute to our understanding of the authoritarian state at the local level and the role of local elites in the resilience of the state at this level, a topic that remains undertheorized and understudied. Last but by no means least, in light of the current discussion on reconstruction in Syria and the questions this raise for policy makers, this study is practically relevant as it sheds light on aspects that are relatively absent from the discussion on reconstruction and political engagement such as the role of local elites.

1.2 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two will introduce the literature on which this research was based and the research methodology. The literature on authoritarian resilience and the state will be discussed. Thereafter, the thesis will elaborate on the analytical approach that will be employed in the research.

Chapter three provides a concise history of the Syrian state as of 1963, the year when the current incumbent political system assumed power. The chapter begins with a brief section on the initial years of the Ba'ath Party in power. It then proceeds to the era of Hafez al-Assad, 1971 – 2000. An overview is offered of the political system, state institution, system power structures and a glimpse into the organization of the state society relations.

Chapter four discusses the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's reign between 2000 and 2011. The chapter explains the changes in the structure of the political system and the organization of social order as well as the social, economic and political conditions that prevailed before the outbreak of the conflict. The chapter then proceeds to an overview of the conflict at the national level and then zooms in on the region of Eastern-Ghouta. The main characteristics of this region and the general situation under the rebel governance will be detailed.

Chapter five introduces the case study of how the state re-established itself in the city of Erbeen and town of Zamalka. Here, the focus is placed on two aspects; a) state institutions and b) local elites and their contributions to the political, economic and social reconstruction and how this shaped the new state.

Chapter six concludes with reflections on the findings of the research with regards to Syria and authoritarianism in general.

2 Chapter two: Conceptualizing the State and Authoritarianism: challenges and debates

2.1 Introduction

In the following sections, I will present a concise discussion of the main literature used for the purpose of this thesis. The chapter starts with a discussion of the empirical literature on Syria, and then proceeds to introduce the literature on authoritarian resilience in the Middle East and the gap in the literature on the authoritarian resilience at the local level. It then discusses the literature on the 'state' and the main schools of thought within the literature. The chapter concludes with an explanation of what frameworks this thesis will employ.

Prior and during to the Syrian conflict, many prominent scholars studied the nature of the Syrian state and the process of its formation and building. The available literature addresses the institutional arrangement as well as the complexities of the state-society relations and micro-level interactions at the level of state and citizens. The use of co-optation, clientelism and (neo)patrimonialism and how they are employed are all discussed extensively. Literature on the post-conflict state, however, is not as developed. Only little has been written on the state in Syria and the efforts to re-establish, restore or rebuild the state in newly captured areas, especially at the local level.

The focus in the existing literature has been mainly on the reconfiguration of the state. Wennmann, for example, argues that the Syrian state did prove to be resilient, but despite its that it has changed and what is left beyond the security sector or the immediate interest of the regime appears to be a shell state with little functional ability to deliver services. Syria's political and economic spaces are reconfiguring and in the process are consolidating into a new order. He further argues that the fracturing of Syria's political and economic spaces has shaped the rise of a new elite that acts at grassroots level as gatekeepers for access to local sources of wealth and to local populations (Wennmann 2019: 28 -30). Beyond this contribution and other similar in nature, the majority of studies focus on the practices of institutions and their representatives, especially the coercive ones.

2.2 Authoritarian resilience in the Middle East

Authoritarianism as a political system is not exceptional to the Middle East, however, its endurance and the failure of the states of the region to democratize has attracted extensive interest (Hinnebusch 2006: 373) and generated a new wave of studies focusing on the source

of authoritarian persistence and resilience (Heydemann and Leenders 2013:4). While the framework of authoritarian persistence in the Middle East tends to carry connotation of anachronistic, one-person dictatorships clinging to power while falling increasingly out of touch with their societies and rapidly changing environment, authoritarian resilience, in contrast, as argued by Heydemann and Leenders (ibid), refers to the attribute, relational qualities and institutional arrangements that have given regimes in the Middle East the capacity to adapt governance strategies to changing domestic and international conditions.

The focus on relational qualities in the authoritarian resilience framework broadens the analytic focus beyond the regime-level and encompass the state-society relations and the microlevel adaptation among social actors. These social or nonstate actors are seen to operate across various spheres and not only independent from or (only) in opposition to the state (Heydemann and Leenders 2013:6). Furthermore, authoritarian resilience, as a mode of governance, is further seen not only as a defensive reaction to threats and challenges posed to authoritarian states but also a characteristic of everyday governance (ibid) represented by the 'recombinant' quality of these authoritarian political system, which enable them to reorder and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance, to reshape and recombine institutional, discursive and regulatory arrangements to create recognizable solutions to shifting challenges (Stark 1996 in Heydemann and Leenders 2013:6).

While the resilience of authoritarian states at a national level is widely researched, as shown in the previous sections by Wennmann (2019) as well as the study of Hedemann and Leenders (2011), the resilience of authoritarian states in the Middle East and their ability to reconfigure and adapt at the local level is underexplored, undertheorized and has received little attention, especially in the context of the ongoing conflicts and victor's peace. So are the interaction among and adaptation of social actors and their role in the resilience of the authoritarian state at the local level. This unaddressed gap in the literature, especially the role of local actors and local power networks, blinds our understanding of the relational aspect of the authoritarian state at the local level and this thesis aims to address this gap.

2.3 The State: challenges and debates

There is no consensus over what the state is, despite the booming literature and wealth of studies on the topic. The debate on the state and its nature has not only divided social scientists, but it also has direct consequences on our understanding of state-(re)building and how to understand state's legitimacy. Within the literature on the state, two main school of

thoughts dominate. The neo-Weberian or institutional approach and the post Weberian rational approach, which largely encompasses the distinct work of Foucault on governmentality and the non-state-centric approaches.

2.3.1 Neo-Weberian or Institutional Approach

Weber offered what has become a now-classic definition of the state (Migdal 2001). He argued that a state is a "compulsory political organization" whose "administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical forces in the enforcement of its order [. . .] within a given territory" (Weber 1978: 54, emphasis original, in Saouli 2019: 40). In Weber's imagination, this definition does not reflect real states. Rather, it is an "ideal-type," which we can use as a standard conceptual device to compare actual states with (ibid). The ideal-typical notions of the state as a monopolist of legitimate physical violence, as an autonomous bureaucratic apparatus, as the embodiment of popular sovereignty, and as a spatially and territorially coherent entity enjoy global prominence (Schlichte, 2005: 6, in Hagmann and Péclard 2010) and they constitute the analytical lenses through which scholars interpret state politics around the world (Hagmann and Péclard 2010).

The aforementioned interpretation of Weber's definition of the state stressed its conceptualization as an autonomous organization with extraordinary means to dominate and came later to be known as neo-Weberian or institutional approach, which is focused almost exclusively on state capacity and institutions (Lottholz and Lemay-Hébert 2016). The state, according to an institutional understanding, is seen as an entity that can be understood through its apparatus (government, institutions). In the institutional approach, where the state apparatus is understood as a separate entity clearly distinguishable from society, state-building, or re-establishing the state in our case, is aimed at building state institutions and their capacity (ibid).

Critics argue that the fixation of the institutionalist approach to state-building on state institutions and capabilities, more or less explicitly based on the European experience, naturally leads scholars to analytically marginalize, if not disregard, the political, cultural and historical contexts of other countries in question (Lemay-Hébert 2009, 2014, 10–11; Nay 2013; Hameiri 2010, in Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert 2016). For those involved in international projects of state-building, a more fundamental criticism is that this approach differentiates between state- and nation-building, arguing that it is possible to conduct state building operations from the outside without entering into the contested sphere of nation-building (Lemay-Hébert 2009). Furthermore, and in addition to the more fundamental critique discussed in the next section,

critics argue that this approach tends to confuse legitimacy and power and thus ends up denying that the governed have any form of agency (Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert 2016).

2.3.2 Post-Weberian Approach

In response to the institutional approach to the understanding of state, a new school of thought developed a relational or post-Weberian concept of the state in which the state is seen as a set of relations that enact arrangements of political authority (Lottholz and Lemay-Hébert 2016). According to this stream of thought, it is imperative to understand how the state as a phenomenon is constituted by the relations among human beings, first and foremost. The focus of inquiry should be on how and why people, or other actors, 'do', or enact, the state by practicing behaviour and making arrangements which lead scholars to talk about a 'state' (see Migdal and Schlichte 2005, 14–15, in Lottholz and Lemay-Hébert 2016). In this approach, the state represents more than the mere expression of its institutions, and hence state building is more than capacitating such institutions. Thus, while accepting the institutional approach's focus on the security apparatus and state institutions, especially as a critical first step in state building processes, the post-Weberian approach draws attention to the importance of non-state actors and their relations with the state and its institutions.

2.3.2.1 State in society approach

Within the post-Weberian approach, there exist several schools of thought too. A leading voice is Migdal (2001), who in his state-in-society approach, emphasis the ongoing struggles among shifting coalitions over the rules for daily behaviour or '*processes*.' These processes determine how societies and states create and maintain distinct ways of structuring day-to-day life – the nature of the rules that govern people's behaviour, whom they benefit and whom they disadvantage, which sorts of elements unite people and which divide them, what shared meaning people hold about their relations with others and about their place in the world. And these processes also ordain the ways that rules and patterns of domination and subordination are challenged and change. In his state-in-society approach, Migdal proposes a new definition of the state as a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by a) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory, and b) the actual practices of its multiple parts (ibid). In this approach, it is crucial to understand state and society in their mutually constitutive relationship (Lemay-Hébert 2009).

Another leading voice within the post-Weberian approach is Foucault, whose concept of governmentality is seen as an attempt to understand the state away from its theories. Foucault remarked that he had refrained from pursuing a theory of the state 'in the sense that one abstains from an indigestible meal' (2004: 78, in Lemke 2017: 42). Albeit not identical with Migdal's state-in-society approach, Foucault also concentrates on the multiple and diverse relations between the institutionalization of a state apparatus and historical forms of subjectivation. He endeavours to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence (Lemke 2017: 44). Other authors, (Boege et al 2009), have further called for a non-state-centric approach with a focus on 'hybrid' political order, where less attention is paid to the state and its official institutions, as opposed to an elevated emphasis on the role of informal institutions.

2.4 The way forward: Analysing the 'State' in an authoritarian context

This paper analyses how the Syrian state, authoritarian in nature, re-established itself as well as the role of local actors in the process of political and social reconstruction. Based on Migdal's definition of the state (2001:15), this paper conceptualizes the state as a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by a)the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, represented by institutions, and b) the actual *practices* of its multiple parts. These processes, as defined by Migdal (2001:11), determine how societies and states create and maintain distinct ways of structuring day-to-day life. They further ordain the ways that patterns of domination and subordination are challenged and change. The paper, therefore, considers that the state represents more than the mere expression of its institutions, and acknowledges the role of other (social and non-) state actors.

In addition to the main state institutions, the study identifies and analysis the role four distinct local elite groups that are involved in the establishment of the new political order and who contribute financially and socially into the process of social and political reconstruction. The study focusses on the 'interaction of these (local actors) groupings with one another and those whose actual behaviour they are vying to control or influence' (Migdal 2001:23) as well as the outcome of these interactions.

In order to understand how the state adapts to the new challenges upon its return and how it deal with societal actors, this study employs the concept of recombinant authoritarian defined as a system of rule that possess the capacity to reorder and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive and

regulatory arrangements to create recognizable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configurations and challenges (Stark 1996 in Heydemann and Leenders 2013: 6).

2.5 Research Design and Methodology

This thesis is based on the study of the literature on the state in Syria and a case-study on a focused area; the city of Erbeen and town of Zamalka. It focuses on the period between March 2018 and March 2020. The research took place between March and July 2020. It was conducted from distance due to reasons that would be discussed below. Epistemologically, this research takes a combination of critical theory and realist / critical realist approach. Critical theory is important in this context since the analysis of this research takes into consideration the social and historical processes as well as the power relations that shaped the Syrian state pre-conflict and consider them a starting point for understanding how the 'returning' state re-established itself. Looking to understand the mechanism that shaped the return of the state, I further employ the critical realist approach.

The research for this thesis had three dimensions focusing on the state pre-conflict, the conflict period and finally the state return. To answer the questions about each one of these periods, I followed different data generations methods. As far as the state pre-conflict is concerned, the research was literature-based and focused on the history of the Syrian state, while the conflict period, in addition to literature review, the research benefited from interviews with individuals that were involved in the process of local governances, including members of local councils and humanitarian organizations. The focus on these two periods was beneficial as it equipped me with a thorough understanding of the state system, state history, and the main actors as well as the general dynamics and characteristics of the state and society relations. The third dimension of my research, which focused on the city of Erbeen and town of Zamalka, benefited from 'field work' represented by interviews conducted from distance and other data generation methods. In my discussion with the interviewees, I focused on two distinct aspects: a) state institutions, and b) role of elites. While there remain many other factors and actors worthy of research with regards to the return of the state, I chose these two aspects due to their importance in the process. The last phase of my research was dedicated to synthesizing the generated data with the finding of the theoretical literature and composing argumentation that are presented in this thesis.

For the purpose of this thesis, I used a mix of data generation methods and relied on information and data generated from different and diverse sources. These sources included: a) semi-structured interviews and short open conversations conducted via internet calls with (former) residents, former rebels, members of the religious institutions, businessmen and representatives of the local governance bodies; b) reports of international organizations and think tanks or researcher centres; c) social media analysis (regime and opposition) and media outlets (official, semi-official and private); d) Academic literature on the Syrian state and state return.

I will succinctly describe my data generation techniques that I used to answer the different questions. The codification and analysis of the data will be explained later in the last section of this chapter. My collection of evidence targeted three different periods in time, which were essential to understand and the Syrian state. The first period or dimension of my study focused on preliminary literature research on the pre-conflict State. The aim was to investigate the prominent and salient characteristics of the Syrian state, the main political and social actors, and dynamics of the state-society relations. Since the aim of the thesis is to understand how the state re-established itself, it was paramount to understand the recent history of Syrian state. The literature used for this purpose predates the conflict and hence escapes the current polarization caused by it. It studies the state at a macro- and micro-level and address the complex nature of the state-society relations, in addition to institutions. Notwithstanding the importance of the period after WWII when Syria in its current borders was created, the focus of this thesis is on the state as of 1963, the year when the Ba'ath Party assumed power.

The second dimension of this research focused on the conflict period. I studied the conflict in general and then zoomed in on Eastern-Ghouta. I sought to understand the changes under the rebels and how this impacted the state. While this did not directly tie in into the core of my research, it was important to understand these changes since they could impact the process of the state return and alter the expectations of local actors toward the returning state. For this purpose, I conduced literature review and several short interviews with individuals that were part of the governance structure under the rebels. All interviewees had left the region and were residing in Idlib or Turkey. During interviews, I constantly kept myself reminded of the potential bias of the testimony of my interviewees given their political position as well as other factors such as the passage of time, which may affect the accuracy of the provided information.

The third dimension of this research focused on Erbeen and Zamalka and was the most comprehensive and consisted of a) interviews conducted via internet calls with (ex) residents, former rebels, members of the religious institutions, businessmen and government officials; b) reports of international organizations and think tanks or researcher centres; and c) social media analysis (regime and opposition) and media outlets (official, semi-official and private). In total, I conducted 20 interviews for the purpose of this research, of which five were semi-structured. I opted for a semi-structured style to create a space for my interviewees and to be more alert to what they may wish to bring into the discussion. These interviews were comprehensive and addressed both the return of the state institutions and the role of the elites. These semi-structured interviews were supplemented by 15 shorter interviews or as per Burgess's term 'conversations with a purpose' (1984:102 in Mason 2018:110) (ranging between 15 and 30 minutes) with a greater focus on a particular aspect of the research. While the majority of the interviewees originate form Erbeen, four of them including the NGO workers and former rebels, were active in both areas.

As far as the interviews are concerned, and given the security situation on the ground, they were all confidential. To protect the privacy and security of interviewees, I relied on online platforms that guarantee a good level of encryption such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Furthermore, in two cases, I arranged contact through a third person, as the interviewees feared that their phones might be under surveillance. I chose my interviewees due to a) their knowledge of both areas, b) their engagement in public life of both areas, and c) because I previously worked with some of them and had experienced their integrity and impartiality. In addition to this, I employed snowball sampling and interviewed local governance representatives on the basis of recommendations from knowledgeable individuals. I was not previously acquainted with these persons. To ensure avoiding a confirmation of my analytical ideas or biases, I interviewed individuals that did not share similar political position. For my interviews, I used a mix of literal and interpretive approaches. Interviewees were of different academic, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds. I conducted all my interviews in Arabic at times and platform chosen by the interviewees with the aim of fostering trust. I informed them of the manner and the specific purpose for which I would use their information. I further assured them that I would vigorously protect their personal information and their identities.

As far as other date sources are concerned, I employed content analysis. I analysed interviews with officials, local elites and members of the religious institutions, which were

broadcasted via different TV channels. These interviews were conducted as a part of the national coverage of the state return to the area. I selectively choose the interviews and paid attention to the ones that addressed issues related to my research. I also generated information from the official social media pages of the local councils and various ministries. I further a variety of media outlets including official, such as the Syrian News Agency and government newspapers, semi-official, such as al-Watan and several theme-focused websites on economy and industry, and opposition media outlets such as the voice of the capital and the Ghouta Media Center, the last two focus primarily on Eastern-Ghouta. Personally, as an active actor in the area under study through an organization that I set up before and since I experienced the period under discussion vicariously in diaspora and through daily contact with people in both areas under study, the data that I generated and the knowledge that I constructed during the third phase seemed plausible. My intimate knowledge of the areas under study helped me reflect on the date that I generated, and to avoid any common-sense biases, I continually triangulated information that I received from my interviewees with date from various and at times opposing sources.

2.6 Personal involvement and limitation of the research

Before the conflict, I was a frequent visitor to these two areas, and I had family members and friends who lived there. I further had many friends, who are native to both areas and I knew many individuals within the business community in Erbeen. In late 2010, I bought a property in the area and was planning to settle in Erbeen too. After 2011 and as Eastern-Ghouta became the center of political activism in the vicinity of Damascus, my presence in the area became more frequent. Along some of my best friends, I participated in a range of humanitarian and political activities. Early on, I was involved in the reception of internally displaced from other governorates, and after the siege, I operated as a facilitator of humanitarian supplies to the area. In of 2015, with the assistance of other colleagues, I co-founded an organization, Damaan Humanitarian Organization, which was based in Erbeen and was active across several towns and cities, including in Zamalka. It was during this time, that I maintained daily, at times hourly, contact with people across Erbeen and Zamalka.

Having established my relationship with the area, charges of bias are inescapable in my case. However, during the research period, and to the best of my knowledge and ability, I followed the ethical rules of conducting research and kept myself reminded of my potential ‘common sense’ biases. In retrospect, however, it was this intimate relationship and knowledge

that made this research possible. My intimate linkages played a crucial role and facilitated access and data collection. This opens the door to discussing two more possible shortcomings in my methodology that are a) the limited interaction with officials or representatives of the official institutions as I only interview four officials, while a part of the research is on official institutions and their representatives; and b) the fact that my research was conducted without field work in the two designated areas, which may render some aspects impossible observe and blind my analysis. I am fully aware of these shortcomings and their impact on the quality of my research. I explain below why I could not overcome these shortcomings and how I dealt with them.

Throughout the conflict, I unapologetically and proudly was opposed to the oppression that was practiced against all people of Syria, not only by the Syrian government, but by all actors, including the rebels as well as international actors.[8] Although, I never considered myself an opponent of the state nor did I consider the state to be a synonym of the ruling elite, my activism and direct engagement; be in political[9] or humanitarian,[10] during the conflict attracted the attention of the Syrian government[a] and there is nothing that I could do to escape the imputed political opinion ascribed to people like myself. We are considered by the current incumbents of power to be enemies of the state and hence untrustworthy or simply constituting a hazard against the state. This is made obvious by how persons that are considered to be against the 'state' or the regime are portrayed in the official media. This in turn makes field work impossible, if not physically dangerous for persons with my profile.

As for the limited contact with representatives of the authorities, the inclination to reject any form of contact is not only related to their suspicion of the potential motives behind the research but are also directly related to the tight security scrutiny practiced by the security apparatuses on the state officials. Representatives of local authorities, similar to civilians, refrain from maintaining contact with dissidents or persons that are considered to be politically

[a] Disclaimer: The author uses the terms regime and government interchangeably. So is the case when referring to the state or government as Syrian or Assad's. To remain faithful to the literature, the author uses the phrase 'the Assad's regime' or 'Assad's government' throughout the first and second core chapters. The author, however, notes that the use of these phrases personalises the state and reduces it to its head(s). These terms obscure the nuance about the state, which academia is entrusted to bring. It praises the heads of the state for achievements, to which they have not contributed, and faults them for crimes that they have not committed. While the author has no issue with the use of the concept of regimes, as conceptualized by Saouli (2020: 44), he notes that, beyond academia, these phrases and terms are heavily employed by partisan (western) interests and have shaped the narrative on Syria unfavourably for decades, especially with regards to its foreign policy with regard to the wider Arab region.

active against the government or the state for fear of retribution by the security forces. It is for these reasons that the number of interviews with representatives of state institutions is small. Furthermore, and even if this research was to hypothetically take place in the open and with the approval of the state, it is highly likely that in the current context of heightened security scrutiny, state representatives would not be forthcoming and might practice self-censorship for fear of retribution. Alternatively, and in order to remedy this shortcoming, I analysed TV interviews, and official press releases, which at times did discuss in detail some important aspect of my research.

2.7 Data Codification and Analysis

My data collection methods in phrases two and three involved the continued analysis of news and social media content, as well as TV interviews and press releases. However, my main data collection involved 'semi-structured' in-depth and short conversational interviews. After my fieldwork research, all interviews (listed in Annex 1) were analysed comparatively with regards to Erbeen and Zamalka. I then codified this data by highlighting common patterns, and commonalities as well as differences.

3 Chapter three: The State in Syria | Historical Overview 1963 - 2000

This chapter will introduce an overview of the Syrian state history as of 1963. The first section succinctly addresses the initial years of the Ba'ath Party between 1963 and 1971. The chapter then proceeds to elaborate on the state development under President Hafez al-Assad. It provides an overview of the power structure of the political system and the efforts of the ruling elites to incorporate and co-opt a variety of social actors into the ruling coalition and how this shaped the state-society relations. The chapter concludes with a concise summary of the main pillars of legitimacy of the Syrian political system during this period.

3.1 The rule of the Ba'ath Party 1963 – 1971

After approximately two years of its inception, the union between Syria and Egypt failed in 1961. As a consequence, the relative political stability that prevailed during the union years gave way to a volatile period with political instability dominating the scene. This, however, came to end when Ba'athist army officers took power in a bloodless coup in 1963. Prior to its takeover, the Ba'ath Party was among the main political parties in the Syrian scene (Hinnebusch 2008:263-265). After the break-up of the union, the party reconstituted its political base, which was divided among the lines of unionists, who called for the unity between the two countries to be re-instated, and non-unionists, who were against the union with Egypt due to the undemocratic political conditions that prevailed during the union (Abboud 2015:29-31). The party promogulated an anti-colonial, pan-Arab ideology with a socialist leaning and called for unity among all Arab countries (Saouli 2015:318). In power, the party introduced and pursued radical agendas for political, economic and social transformation under the banner of 'socialist transformation' (Van Dam 2017:41), which have shaped the evolution of the Syrian state ever since.

During these early years, the party members were ideologically motivated, and the party was neither large in membership nor a vehicle for political organization (Stacher 2012:56). It was further facing fierce opposition across the whole spectrum of political scene (Hinnebusch 2012a: 96). The party promulgated its ideology through its official mouthpieces; al-Thawra (the revolution) and al-Ba'ath (the Ba'ath). During its reign, and despite its progressive agenda and pan-Arab promises, the party stifled the political life in the country with the introduction of the 'emergency law or state of emergency', which suspended most constitutional protections and led to the exclusion and suppression of political opponents and curtailed freedom of speech

and assembly, among others (Salama 2012). Furthermore, the secular ideology of the party, and while appealing to members of minorities and a segment of the Muslim community, alienated a considerable political mass, whose resistance was soon felt and was represented in political and security instability (Lefevre 2013:43-61).

Economically, the party declared a war on the 'bourgeoisie' and pursued a radical economic agenda, which was represented in its nationalization drive, especially in the industrial and financial sectors, as well as land reforms, which targeted landed urban merchants and benefited small farmers (Abboud 2018:33). Hinnebusch (2012a: 96) called these policies a 'revolution from above', which although won support for the new regime among the rural constituency, it led to the alienation of those in control of private wealth and businesses. The statist and centrally planned economy as well as dependence on the public sector as a driver of economic growth would become the main characteristics of the Syrian state for many decades to come.

As far as the security and military apparatuses, the size of these institutions grew exponentially, since along the party, they became a means of social mobility. Simultaneously, there were waves of purges and redundancies among officers as well as ranks and files whose loyalty to the party was not guaranteed (Van Dam 2011: 32-33). Furthermore, and due to factionalism along the lines of unionists, who tended to originate from big cities and adhere to the Sunni faith, and non-unionists, mostly from rural and minoritarian background, many Ba'athist officers were laid off as the latter group sought uncontested control over the state and the party (Abboud 2018:29-31). These purges gradually led to the consolidation of power in the hands of rural and minoritarian officers, in particular the Alawites (Van Dam 2011:34-61). In the words of Batatu (1999: 144), this led to the ruralisation of the army, the party and bureaucracy.

Albeit an improved stability in comparison to previous years, the initial years of the Ba'ath Party reign were coloured by factional in-fighting, an armed rebellion in Hama province, the bastion of conservative Islam at the time and power center of many disadvantaged landed bourgeoisies, and the 1967 defeat in the six days war (Van Dam 2017:25-43). Furthermore, gradually, and in addition to divisions with regards to the utility of union with Egypt, internal disagreements and infighting within the party leadership developed. These disagreements were over the course of national governance and the ideology of the party, which led to a 'duality of Power' between a Marxist-leaning socialist wing under the leadership of

Salah Jadid and a more pragmatic Arab nationalist wing represented by Hafez al-Assad and his supporters (Van Dam 2011:64).

3.2 The Assad senior era 1971 – 2000

In February 1971, following a period of power struggle (Van Daam 2011: 62) among the two main factions within the Ba'ath party, Hafez al-Assad, the Minister of Defence at the time and a lead member of the pragmatic faction, seized power from his party comrades in what was called the 'corrective movement', a bloodless coup that saw Hafez al-Assad; hereunder Assad senior, become the undisputed leader of the country. In the words of Patrick Seale (1988: 173), the semi-official biographer of Assad senior, when in power, the latter intended to 'rule without serious curbs of any sorts' on his authority. Assad senior, according to Seale (ibid 174), was keen to give his state 'formal institutions if of a somehow ceremonial nature'. He concentrated power in the presidency and built his own regime, which monopolized the spheres of coercion, economy and ideology (Saouli 2020: 44). This coup ushered in the consolidation of the Ba'ath's state.

Two years into his presidency, a new constitution was endorsed in Syria, which guaranteed wide constitutional and legal prerogatives to the president, who was by the virtue of his position also the Secretary-General of the Ba'ath party, the Supreme Commander of the armed forces as well as the High Commander of the Central Leadership of the National Progressive Front (NPF). Assad senior further appointed the cabinet, which according to the constitution, was the highest executive and administrative authority in the country. The cabinet answered to the president, but reported to the people's assembly, which is equivalent to a parliament (Zisser 1998:38). Haddad (2012: 58) argues that Assad senior headed a presidential monarchy above the party and leveraged different actors to maintain control over the levers of state power; military, security and government. The regime of Assad senior aimed to achieve autonomy from social forces, which it disempowered, and to balance various social actors against each other. These social forces, including those affiliated with the regime, were involved in a competition in a decentralized political order (Stacher 2012:22), in which Assad senior was the sole arbitrator. On the top of a 'Bonapartist regime', Assad senior used the bureaucracy and distributary command of the state to balance and arbitrate between levelled-old and rising-new social forces (Hinnebusch 2009:8)

To stabilize the regime, Assad senior depended on his Alawite co-religionists in a 'Ba'athized army' (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015: 03), which secured his position and enabled

him to link his regime to society through bureaucratic and party-corporatist institutions that cut across sectarian and urban-rural divides and spanned the middle class and the peasantry, which represented a sizeable regime coalition (Hinnebusch 2012b: 06). A few years into the reign of Assad senior, the coalition expanded to include some members of the Syrian business elites and state-depended bourgeoisie. The end result, according to Saouli, was a broad-based diverse ruling coalition, which nonetheless did not mean that the regime was democratic or representative of the whole society as it excluded a wide range of political and social actors within the Syrian society (Saouli 2018: 22- 23). Despite its overt dependence on kin (sectarian and tribal) relations, the regime maintained a secular façade and clear sectarianism was considered a sin (Van Dam 2011: 39-40).

Assad senior and his regime employed neo-patrimonial strategies and the regime was infested with corruption, clientelism, and favouritism (Van Dam 2017: 47). The regime maintained flexible modes of governance, including a statist and market-oriented ones, which enabled it to accommodate various constituencies (Heydemann and Leenders 2013: 10). Popular Institutions such as the people's assembly and various unions occupied an important role under the regime, as they became valuable mechanism for managing mass politics since they allowed various segments within the society to be represented and incorporated into the regime. However, to limit their independence, the regime employed the use of patronage and cliental networks to exploit and manipulate formal institutional frameworks, and to alter organization rules and functions among state agencies (ibid).

The regime had four pillars of power including the party, state bureaucracy, which expanded vastly under the regime, the army and security apparatus as well as corporatism, a process by which different social forces were subordinated and incorporated (Hinnebusch 2001: 80-87). Aoyama argues that these pillars of power were divided in a two-tire structure including 'visible power' and 'hidden power'. The former was exercised legally through the political system including bureaucracy and 'popular institutions', while the latter was the sole and true power, which quietly penetrated into every corner of all social and political situation. This power was exercised by 'real' power apparatus represented by the intelligence services, the armed forces and the Ba'ath party (Aoyama 2019: 83). Schmidt (2018:33) further argues that under Assad senior there was no differentiation between the rule-setting organizations, represented by the regime, and the executing organizations or state institutions. The latter only had autonomy at the lower levels, which almost completely disappeared on the central and decisive levels.

While Michel Seurat (1984) referred to Syria under Assad senior as a state of terror, Nazih Ayubi (1996) described the Syrian state as 'fierce' and Galioun (2004: 127) as a feudalized modern state marked by a stagnation of power leading to lack of any turnover or renewal of elites. Political repression under Assad senior led to absence of accountability, which eliminated any restraints on the practices and power of the regime (Saouli 2018: 23). The strength of the state under Assad senior resided in hard talk and in heavy-handed repression rather than in economic performance and social, or rather societal cohesion (Kienle 2019:60). A country that is socially divided, Syria under Assad senior was a territorial rather than a national state (ibid 63), which could be attributed to the pan-Arab ideology promogulated by the regime.

According to Aoyama (2019: 74), there were five prominent cleavages along religion, ethnicity, cities, urban vs rural and social classes, which the state under Assad could not bridge. These cleavages were manifested in identity expression which varied between sub-state (religious, sectarian, and geographical), national (Ba'athist or other forms of Arab nationalism) and supra-state identities such as Islamism (Saouli 2018: 13). Support for the regime ebbed and flowed along these cleavages and was not always clear. Weden (1998:505) argues that Syrians, in such an environment, had to act 'as if they do' believe in the Ba'ath ideology and that the policies of the regime had a disciplinary effect on the Syrian public, who according to Sottimano (2015: 87) lived within in a set of social expectations, which constituted the Ba'athist political order, and were internalized by members of the public. Cynicism, depoliticization and compliance with authoritarian power practices cut across all sections of Syria.

3.3 Regime Power Structure

The four pillars of power will be discussed separately:

3.3.1 The Ba'ath Party

The pan-Arab ideology of the Ba'ath Party was seen as a potentially unifying and stabilizing credo given the religious and sectarian heterogeneity in Syria (Stacher 2012:). In 1973, article eight of the new Syrian constitution defined the Ba'ath Party as the leading party of the state and society, which consolidated the party's position as the ruling party in Syria (Ziadeh 2013:15). Under the rule of Assad senior, the party developed an elaborate institutionalized apparatus based on Leninist practices of selective recruitment and indoctrination, which

penetrated schools, factories and villages and was linked to society by an array of corporatist 'popular organizations' (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015: 03). Given its position in the regime and constitution, the party played a crucial role in the articulation of a dominant narrative and in suppressing alternative ideologies (Saouli 2018: 22) and became enmeshed in the state (Stacher 2012:57). Funding of the party was channelled from the national budget and in the early 1980s, it had a budget equivalent to that of the Ministry of Finance (Ziadeh 2013: 23). Throughout the reign of Assad senior, Ba'athism remained the official religion of the state, but policies were marked by pragmatism and realism (Saouli 2018: 21). As of mid-1980s, the party lost its influence, albeit retaining its nominal position as it remained the only large-scale political organization with a viable infrastructure and branches all over the country (Stacher 2012: 58-59).

The party operated within a hierarchical and sophisticated structure, which pervaded the society and the state. Officially, the National leadership (al-Qiyadah al-Qawmiyah القيادة - القومية), presided over all regional leaderships (al-Qiyadah al-Qutriah - القيادة القطرية) representing the various countries in which the Ba'ath Party was active. However, the reality was different given the ideological and organizational split within the party (Ziadeh 2013:22). The regional command, representing the highest authority in Syria, oversaw a web of branches, which operated at a provisional level, and subbranches, which operated at the level of big cities. Sub-branches were made of sections, divisions and cells. These smaller political units penetrated schools, towns and city quarters. All three highest levels had bureaus such as those of farmers, workers, and education as well as others that encompassed all aspects of societal life and constituted a vertical line of command throughout Syria and enabled the party to supervise the bureaucracy and popular syndicates (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015: 25). The party's regional command operated as a middle level policy making and implementation organ under the presidency. It was politically superior to the governments and coordinated the work of ministerial officials (Hinnebusch 2005:341). Although frozen after mid-1980s, the party did witness regular internal elections every four years (Ziadeh 2013:20-23).

The party was further a ladder of upward political mobility through which plebeian elements continued to be recruited into the elite (Hinnebusch 2005:341). A policy of Ba'athization was adopted in which members of the party were prioritized for public employment and an advanced rank was a prerequisite for progress or promotions within the armed forces and security forces. Unlike other parties that were allowed to operate in Syria, the Ba'ath Party had a monopoly over political activism, advocacy and recruitment within the

educational and military / security sectors (Ziadeh 2013:27). Joining the Ba'ath's Pioneers (or vanguards) and Revolutionary Youth Union was semi-compulsory for elementary and secondary school pupils and both organizations played a key role in inculcating the strict slogans and rules of a Ba'ath upbringing' (ibid 31). Students were requested to attend weekly meetings and to pay monthly fees. Notwithstanding this, in power, the party did not maintain its political coherence for long. Hinnebusch (2015:41) argues that the party turned from an ostensibly ideological party into a more all-inclusive party, whose member were not necessarily committed to its ideology. This was partially caused by the drive to increase recruitment among professionals and bureaucratic classes, which Hinnebusch (ibid) considers as a 'signal of the urbanisation and erosion of the traditional rural-centredness and plebeian character of the party'.

3.3.2 Corporate organizations

The regime of Assad senior created a broad network of popular organizations in top-down initiatives that, at least initially, were a part of a strategy of inclusion and mobilization, which worked to the benefit of the state and its constituency. The regime employed these popular organizations to mobilize against the old political elites or the classes that it overthrew (Hinnebusch 2005:349). Peasants, women and workers, among others, were unionized. These unions were gradually transformed into corporatist transmission belts of the Ba'ath regime and were meant to harness these societal actors to the benefit of the party and the state (Luebbert 1991:2 in Heydemann 2007a:32).

Populist in nature, these corporatist institutions were accorded a privileged access to power, which enabled this highly controlled form of corporatism to create its own agency and engage in bargaining and negotiation with the political elites (Bianchi 1989; Golberg 1992; Posusney 1997 in ibid). However, and notwithstanding their official positions within the regime, these unions lacked autonomy and never challenged the state or the control of the Ba'ath party (Hinnebusch 1993). Progressively, members of these corporatist institutions became state-bourgeoisie or class of state functionaries (Perthes 1995 in Hinnebusch 2008: 271).

3.3.3 Army and Security Forces (intelligence services)

Assad senior built a national security state (Hinnebusch 2012a: 97), which was fierce in nature and tolerated no opposition (Ayubi 1996). The army and security agencies formed the

backbone of the regime (Saouli 2018:22) and were the key apparatuses for the concentration and defence of the regime (Hinnebusch 2009:07). Assad senior consolidated his authority through his control of reliable instruments of coercion, including the intelligence services, but above all, the transformation of the military into a reliable regime pillar (ibid). The factional struggle within the armed forces had already hallowed it out by the time Assad senior assumed power, which he further concentrated in the hands of a tight circle of trusted associates including his family and next of kin as he aimed to establish a coup-proof military (Van Dam 2017: 32-46).

Under Assad senior, the armed forces assumed two missions: regional Pan-Arabist and national. The former was incorporated into the army's ideological doctrine as the defender of all-Arab interests and Palestinian land, while the latter was twofold and included the protection of people against all internal and external threats as well as the participation in social and economic development by building up the socio-economic infrastructure (Al-Haj Ali 2012 in Said 2018:58). Given its latter mission, the military developed a vast economic establishment dealing with projects at the national level such as road infrastructure and housing. Like the party, the military became an integral instrument of penetrating and integrating society (Stacher 2012: 65). In addition to the army, Assad senior established elite forces that were tasked with the protection of the regime such as the republican guards and at times of political instability such as that of the early 1980s when members of the Muslim Brotherhood waged an insurgency against the regime, the latter resorted to the use of paramilitary groups such as the 'Ba'ath Party Militias' (Van Dam 2011:105).

Meanwhile, and in addition to the armed forces, Assad senior built an extensive security system based on four security bodies or intelligence agencies: The General Intelligence Administration, Political Security, Military and Air Force intelligence. The first two were officially attached to the Ministry of interior, while the latter two were nominally subordinated to the Ministry of Defence. They all came under the supervision of the National Security Bureau, which was attached to the regional leadership of the Ba'ath Party (Ziadeh 2013:23). In addition to their role in the provision of physical security, these agencies were tasked with surveillance and had branches in all governorates. Recruitment in these agencies grew exponentially under Assad senior with numbers indicating that there was a member of the Syrian intelligence service for every 153 citizens – one of the highest ratios in the world (ibid 24). Not only were these agencies independent of each other to avoid any collusion between

some of them against the regime, there was scarcely any cooperation and the relationship was purposely bad (Valter 2018:46).

Recruits of both the armed forces and intelligence agencies 'did not develop a corporate identity' and the Syrian regime under Assad senior carefully balanced officers from different ethnic, sectarian and religious background in leadership position to maintain control (Bellin 2004). Patrimonialism was prevalent and personalism pervaded staffing decisions. Sectarian and tribal tries were used to guarantee loyalty especially after late 1970s, when entire branches of the military forces became dominated by Alawites (members of the Assad's religious sect) (ibid) whose main task was to protect the regime (Hinnebusch 2012a: 97). Trusted members of the military, and security agencies established their own network of social (tribal, sectarian, religious) clients and competed with the Ba'ath party as a bridge between the regime and society as they contributed to an informal co-optation of social forces (Saouli 2018: 23). To maintain their loyalty, corruption and illicit economic activities were tolerated (Haddad 2012: 99-100).

Repression and coercion were defining features of the Assad senior era. In this authoritarian environment, coercion was not directed against those who simply made demands on the state, but those who challenged it (Heydemann 2007a:28). Political unrest and insecurity in the late 1970s and early 1980s ended in all political opposition being violently crushed and culminated in the 1982 Hama massacre. Political dissent and activism were violently repressed and 'criticism of the ruling establishment and the leading party was made tantamount to sabotage of the state and undermining the foundation of the nation' (Sottimano 2015:70). Members of the opposition were oppressed (Daher 2019:09). The regime further created a distinct set of courts to handle security and political related matter and deployed state regulatory authorities to give a legalistic appearance to the arbitrary exercise of political power (Heydemann and Leenders 2013:10). It further, and especially at times of political or security threat by the opposition, employed extrajudicial tactics, including assassinations and forcible disappearance, against its opponents (Leenders 2013:172).

3.3.4 Bureaucracy

The initial years of the reign of Assad senior coincided with an increase in rents in Syria due to the increase in oil prices, technical and financial support from Soviet Union "USSR" due to superpower competition, and the flow of aid from Gulf states given Syria's role in the fight against Israel as one of the confrontation or 'front lint' state in the region (Hinnebusch 2009:

08). Next to expanding its armed forces and co-opting the middle-class, the regime used this rent to create a large state bureaucracy (Hinnebusch 2020:34) leading to what Ayubi (1996) called an 'overstating' of the state or as Hinnebusch (2012a: 97) describes as the overdevelopment of the state relative to its economic base. The increase in the size of bureaucracy was in line with the regime's 'statist development' model (Haddad 2012:27) for which it maintained a large public sector, as it aimed to create employment (Hinnebusch 2009:17).

These bureaucratic institutions penetrated society and became instruments in social mobility; however, they were subverted by 'traditional practices' such as clientelism and nepotism. These practices prevented these institutions from becoming an engine of development and capital accumulation (Hinnebusch 2012b: 6). According to Valter (2018:57), under Assad senior, the state administrative apparatus always functioned on loyalty rather than competence. He further argues that there was never a recruitment process based on expertise, but rather on co-optation of clients. The party, through its specialized offices, supervised the working of the government, and hence the bureaucracy, to ensure its conformity with the ideology and policies of the party (Hinnebusch 2015:32). Under Assad senior, public sector employed major segments of the middle and working classes (Hinnebusch 2012a:96). At some point during the 1980s, 25 percent of Syrians were employed by the state bureaucracy (Abboud 2018: 35).

3.4 State and society relations during the rule of Assad senior

Seale (1988:178) notes that the state, which Assad senior had created, was imposed on society and not derived from it; however, and notwithstanding that the aforementioned pillars were key to the stability and continuity of the regime, Assad senior did try to widen the base of political and popular support for his regime (Ziadeh 2013:19) and the regime had other links to society (Hinnebusch 2012b:5). In order to strengthen the regime, and prop up its legitimacy, Assad senior, according to Kienle (2019:60), employed co-optation.

Politically, the regime created the People's assembly and the National Progressive Front (NPF) in 1971 and 1972 respectively (Seale 1988:178-179). A façade of democracy, as per Schmidt (2018:36), these institutions, Heydemann (2007a:27-31) argues, constituted valuable mechanisms for managing mass politics and were instruments for 'macropolitical management' in a political arena that was designed as an expression of organic unity of the nation rather than a site of political contestation. The national progressive front consisted of a

group of leftist parties that acknowledge the leadership of the Ba'ath Party and agreed to operate under its umbrella without any political competition. These parties were 'several varieties of communists and Pan-Arabists and were no more than the mere remnants of earlier political groupings that had their roots in the politics of the 1950s and the 1960s' (Zisser 1998:38).

The creation of this front made 'the opposition parties subservient to the ruling party in exchange for parliamentary and ministerial representation' (Stacher 2012:126). Corporatist institutions such as the peasants' and workers' unions were also represented in the national progressive front. Hinnebusch (1980:171) argues that the aim behind the creation of NPF was 'to give the members of the other small progressive nationalist parties in Syria a chance to hold regime roles'. It was endowed with cosmetic powers such as deciding matters of peace and war; approving five years plans that ruled the statist economy; determining the general political orientation of the state and consolidating the basis of the popular democratic system (Ziadeh 2013:27).

In a fixed ratio-system of 60 and 40 percent, the progressive national front as well as independent figures were respectively represented in the people's assembly, which was elected once every four years. The Ba'ath Party maintained a majority in the assembly. The constitution gave the Assembly the prerogative of naming a presidential candidate, whose name must first be approved and recommended by the Regional Command. The Assembly was further endowed with the power to enact laws, approve the budget, pronounce on development plans, and ratifies international agreements (Zisser 1998:37). The people's assembly, however, was very weak since constitutionally, the president could dissolve it, as well as the fact that the Syrian government derived no legitimacy from it (Ziadeh 2013:57).

Socially, the regime gradually and progressively penetrated civil society including trade unions, non-government organizations and syndicates. These entities were appended to the state and used for maintaining political control over the societal sectors that they represented (ibid 2013:32). Along other institutions, the aim of these bodies, according to Sottimano and Kjetil (2008:9), was to discipline people into 'nationhood'. In addition to professional and non-government organizations, the regime also assiduously worked to co-opt the religious establishment. Notwithstanding its secular ideology, the regime of Assad senior sought an alliance with moderate Sufi Islam to counter the Islamist opposition to the regime. Islamists were not, however, politically incorporated and accommodation of Islam was paralleled by

regime efforts to control it (Hinnebusch 2012a: 104-105). The regime tried to develop indirect ways to influence the religious debate by giving certain key figures easy access to media or simply by tolerating their public religious activism (Pinto 2015:160).

3.5 Political system legitimacy and social pact

Under the regime of Assad senior, the prevailing social pact between the state and society was of a national-populist (Heydemann 2007a:24) and populist social (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015:4) nature, in which the regime's constituency traded loyalty for jobs and social entitlement. The constituencies of the regime, which initially possessed of little property, developed an interest in statist policies including a big public sector, cooperative agriculture, and populist regulation of the market, which all became part of the social contract (Hinnebusch 2015: 23). However, this social pact, according to Heydemann (2007a:26), was elastic and fluid, which allowed for the continues adjustments and accommodation of new actors.

As far as its legitimacy is concerned, in addition to its distributive policies, the regime's legitimacy depended on its foreign policy towards the wider Arab causes, the Palestinian cause, and defiance to Israel and its western backers including the United States of America (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015:4). Three years after its accession to power, in 1973, Syria under Assad senior led Syria to war against Israel, which consolidated his nationalist credentials as a defender of lands and rights.

4 Chapter four: The Storm: waves of change and anchors of authoritarianism

This chapter will provide an overview of the Syrian state and its transformation in the period between 2000 and 2018. The first section will succinctly elaborate on the first decade under the current Syrian leadership. It will address the main changes in the political system as well as the state-society relations in the lead up to the Syrian conflict. The chapter will then proceed to provide an overview of the Syrian conflict and its impact on the nature of the Syrian state. The chapter concludes with an overview of the conflict in the region of Eastern-Ghouta.

4.1 The rule of Assad junior 2000 – 2011

In July 2000, approximately one month after the death of Assad senior, his son, Bashar al-Assad, hereunder Assad junior, was elected as a president (Ziadeh 2013: 45). The succession was collectively engineered by the regime elites who arranged the nomination of Assad junior by the ruling Ba'ath Party and amended the constitution to allow his ascendance to power. The new president, unlike his father, had no previous history in party politics and depended on the incumbent elites to rule initially (Hinnebusch 2015:26-27). He had to share power with the 'old guards' (Hinnebusch 2012a: 98), which resulted, as Hinnebusch argues (Hinnebusch 2015:26-27), in a revival of the Ba'ath Party and of a balance of power between the presidency and the party, something that had been absent under Assad senior.

In the eve of his ascendance to power, the survival of the regime required many reforms (Hinnebusch 2012a:98) as there was a widespread discontent in the party bases at the corruption of the leadership (Hinnebusch 2015:26-27) as well as many socio-economic grievances and problems such as rapid population growth, rural-urban migration, and dwindling oil resources, which had aggravated existing problems (Zintl 2015:13). The new president promised a wave of modernization as well as economic and political reforms. This materialized in the release of hundreds of political prisoners, and tolerance towards human rights organizations and political forums, which multiplied at the beginning of his rule (Daher 2019:12). The parties of the national progressive front were granted wider freedom and were authorized to publish their weekly newspapers and to open provincial offices (Perthes 2004:20). Nonetheless, Assad junior held into many of the features of the regime he had inherited from his father, especially the hierarchal structure that guaranteed his dominance (Ziadeh 2013:50) and the short period of political freedom ended shortly and abruptly in 2001.

According to Hinnebusch (2012a & 2015), Assad junior lacked the power his father held and hence had to engage in an extended struggle to consolidate his reign. Hostility and resistance to Assad junior's reforms were not limited to an institution or the party per se, but rather to the members of the 'old guards', who had constituted the rule of his father. The origin of their resistance was partly ideological and in part due to the benefits they had accumulated and continued to enjoy under the then-prevailing system. While the old guards were aided by a wide network built on neo-patrimonialism and their control over the various aspects of bureaucratic and administrative decision and implementation, Assad junior had enormous constitutional powers, which he used to make the presidency an instrument of major internal reform, a process which Heydemann refers to as 'authoritarian upgrading' (Heydemann 2007b). This drive to consolidate power, Hinnebusch (2012a:99), would unwittingly weaken the capacity of the new president to sustain power over society as in the course of this process he weakened the regime's links to various societal constituencies.

Assad junior used these powers to retire and dismiss the old guards and the battle between them played out at different levels and had its impact on the regime's pillar of power as well as the state-society relations.

4.1.1 Transformation under Assad junior

4.1.1.1 The Ba'ath Party and corporate organizations

Shortly prior to his inheritance of his father's rule, Assad junior, under the tutelage of his father, started a campaign of dismissal against his potential opponents, who were members of the Regional Command in the party (Hinnebusch 2015:27). The widespread discontent in the party bases at the corruption of the leadership benefited his drive against those figures. Notwithstanding that, the remnants of his father's reign, who did manage to maintain their positions, did mount resistance to his policies and reforms upon his ascendance to the presidency. The struggle over control lasted until the 10th Ba'ath Party congress, which was held in 2005, when Assad senior brushed the old elites and replaced them with his own confidants (Hinnebusch 2012a: 99) and introduced his blueprint for economic forms under the banner of 'Social Market Economy'. This model of development aimed to increase the role of the private sector, while maintaining the position of public sector (Abboud 2015:48). Unlike the role of the state under the Ba'athist state of his father, the state under Assad junior was to '(re)position as the guardian of social stability and welfare' and not to provide them (ibid 49). The market was accepted as the primary means of distributing resources and wealth, while the

private sector became a full partner with the state in furthering economic development (Abboud and Lawson 2013:333). These reforms entailed, as per (Fadilah 2010), ‘silent privatization’ of the Syrian economy, in which services were privatized and not the public assets.

Assad junior saw that the party apparatus as well as the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reforms’ and thus engineered a set of policies that ‘starved them of funds and attacked their powers of patronage’ (Hinnebusch 2012a:99). The system was seen as lacking efficiency and innovative capacity and so he introduced policies that gradually rolled back the policies, institutions, and distributional patters of decades of central planning or state-led economy (Abboud and Lawson 2013: 334-340), which led to the gradual deinstitutionalization of Ba’athism as both a political and an economic model, and belief system supportive of its institutions (Hsu 2007 in Abboud 2015:46). To limit the patronage network of the party, Assad junior changed the rules governing appointment to government offices, which henceforth would be based on merit rather than party affiliation. Economy and day-to-day administration of the government were further insulated from the intervention of the party. There was further an end to obligatory ideological education in universities and secondary schools together with the reduction in privileges for party members in access to university places (Hinnebusch 2015: 32-42). These changes debilitated the power base of the party and reduced its influence and power.

In addition to its elimination of the power of the party, Assad junior further undermined the position of corporatist interests and his policies contributed to the Ba’athist corporatism losing its populist character. Corporatist interests represented by, among others, workers’ and peasants’ unions as well as trade unions lost their privileged power position (Hinnebusch 2015:43), which was progressively assumed by representatives of the business class (Abboud 2015: 52-53). Agriculture was neglected, which negatively impacted agricultural communities, while a new law was passed to end the ‘overprotection’ that was granted to workers (ibid 61). Furthermore, members of these unions and corporatist organizations were blamed as the culprits responsible for the economic stagnation and were labelled “the new reactionaries” (Sottimano 2015:81). As opposed to the Ba’ath historiography, where the state was the patron of the struggling masses including workers and farmers, the new reform process gradually stripped them of this position, while praising and welcoming the business classes (ibid 83). The stress on merit recruitment to government offices spelled a shift of power from the party to the government, and hence from the rural areas to the educated urban classes.

Members began falling away, hallowing out the party's local organizations (Hinnebusch 2015:42).

Although the ideology of the party was abandoned in practice (Hinnebusch 2012s: 98), the regime under Assad junior remained dependent on it to control the society, albeit its declining capacity (Hinnebusch 2015:44). In 2005, Assad junior, during the 10th Party congress, defended Ba'athism and its ideology of Arabism insisting that the former was valid although its implementation had fallen short, while renewing commitment to the latter, albeit with an acknowledgement that Syrian interests should be prioritized (Hinnebusch 2011a: 120). Until the breakout of the conflict in 2011, the party remained the 'leader of the state and society'. Abboud (2015:54) argues that the new policies under Assad junior were introduced as 'adjustments to previous polices to serve contemporary demands' and not as replacement to Ba'athism.

4.1.1.2 The military and security forces

Hinnebusch (2011a: 115) argues that Assad junior key to power was to secure his control of the security forces and the military, which he did early on after he assumed office. In his endeavour to do so, Assad junior exercised his power to retire the older generation and promote officers that were mostly Alawites and beholden to him including his brother Maher, cousin Hafez and brother-in-law Asef Shawqat. Meanwhile, and although he was not willing to challenge the system, Assad junior did try to put a more modern and civilized stamp on both the army and security apparatus (Valter 2018:46). The new president, whom Ghadbian (2015:94) describes as 'having a mentality of in-house regime reforms bred in the womb of authoritarian structures' proposed a project to professionalize the army by concentrating on special units (Said 2018:66) and did manage to 'limit some of the privileges' of the security establishment' (Hinnebusch 2012:99). Moreover, he pushed for the establishment of the "National Institute for Security", which aimed to reform the security system (Valter 2018:46).

Although Assad junior did not challenge the armed forces, they were affected by the reforms that were introduced. According to Said (2018:65-67), the regime was not able to continue financing the sweeping and generous privileges of the military. Not only that, but the reforms that were introduced did further affect the economic activities of the military-owned enterprise and stripped many of the public companies that were operated by the armed forces from their benefits.

As far as the security agencies and their practices were concerned, the regime's modus operandi did not radically change with the accession to power of Assad junior (Valter 2018:46). Continuity with the old Assad regime was apparent in the regime's steady programme of arrests, prolonged detention, recurrent torture and long prison sentence. Yet, repression became different under Assad junior. No longer did prisoners languish for decades without trial or even acknowledgement that they were imprisoned (Ghadbian 2015:104). The new-Assad regime used the legal system for show trials of activist-dissidents in what Leenders (2013:179-185) describes as the judicialization of repression. Opponents were harassed and dismissed from their government posts (SHRC 2008:4-6 in Ghadbian 2015:97), while tens of online websites were censored or closed down (Maktabi 2015:196).

4.1.1.3 Bureaucracy

Assad junior was able to bypass the remaining party resistance by shifting power to state institutions, notably the cabinet and its technocrats at the expense of the Ba'ath Party apparatchiks (Hinnebusch 2015:39). The power decline of the main opposing centres of power did not, however, eliminate the inertia and hostility of the underqualified, poorly motivated bureaucracy charged with carrying out reform. Early in his presidency, Assad junior sought to bring in younger, technocratic, less corrupt or ideological, and more liberal ministers, either non-Ba'athists or Ba'athist reformers; however, this was slow and not always successful given the control that the party maintained until 2005 (Hinnebusch 2011a:122). Progressively, this drive to depend on privileged technocrats that were close to the president would further strengthen his position (King 2009).

To circumvent the hostility of the Ba'ath-minded bureaucracy and in attempt to modernize his administration and introduce a new blood, Assad junior issued a decree mandating retirement at the age of 60 (Hinnebusch 2011a:122). He further mounted a campaign promoting foreign-trained technocrats (Zintl 2015:114) and recruiting many to influential posts within the administration and the cabinet. These figures, however, were not always successful given that they lacked the stature and networks to operate within the system (Hinnebusch 2012a:99). Zintl (ibid 124) further argues that the criterion of international education and training that was employed by Assad junior was often a disguise to the old clientelist relationship and left the same people in charge of reform decisions since children of the old guards, who had benefited from international education, were recruited to help the drive of reforms in the country.

4.1.2 Political system Legitimacy and Social Pact

The popularity of Assar junior originated from his image as a young approachable reformer (Lesch 2005). His ascension to power created great expectations of structural reforms in Syria (Pinto 2015:154) and his marriage to a Sunni woman, activist stance and commitment to social projects won her many admirers, was another factor that contributed to his popularity (Zintl 2015:120). Meanwhile, similar to his father's regime, Syrian foreign policy remained one of the main sources of the regime's legitimacy (Sottimano 2015:70). Early in his presidency, especially after the attacks in the US and the occupation of Iraq, Assad junior recalibrated the rhetoric of the regime to adopt 'resistance' against Israel and the US instead of 'steadfastness' (ibid 72-78), which reinforced the nationalist credentials and legitimacy of the regime.

At the time, and since Assad junior lacked a political movement to energize reform due to the debilitation of the Ba'ath Party (Hinnebusch 2015: 39) and because the tilt towards 'resistance' necessitated the creation of a regional alliance with Iran and non-state actors of Islamic backgrounds such as Hamas and Hezbollah, there was an increase in the use of Islamic rhetoric by the regime. In what Salwa Ismael (2009:26-27) describes as an "Islamized" transformation in the foundation of Syrian authoritarianism, the regime under Assad junior increased its use of Islamic symbols and vocabulary in an attempt to gain legitimacy and popularity among pious Sunni Muslims (Pinto 2015:156).

Co-optation of new societal actors and economic reforms were also part and parcel of the regime's attempt to increase its legitimacy; however, as Abboud (2015:46) argues the strategy of Assad junior was not merely a 'set of policies and reforms that would have objective economic outcomes' as intended by their designers; rather they had wide-ranging social, political and ideological implications. Assad junior focused on the need for economic reform but seemed unaware of the destabilising effects such reform may bring to the regime. The new policies exacerbated social problems and perpetuated, rather than renovated, and enduring economic and political order that was corrupt, inefficient and despotic (Seifan 2010 in Sottimano 2015:68).

One main victim of these new reforms and set of policies that were introduced by Assad junior was the social contract between the state and societal actors. In his quest to consolidate his power, Assad junior uprooted the old guards or barons of the party, which weakened powerful interests with clientelist networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime (Hinnebusch 2012a: 99). He destroyed the old patronage networks that had linked many

constituents, especially Sunnis, to the regime, and his replacements, having no comparable stature or resources, could not substitute for them and were of no use to control the regime and society (Hinnebusch 2015: 39). The failure to materially appease the former corporatized actors led to dissatisfaction among large actors of society and a subsequent, gradual delegitimization of the Ba'ath Party (Abboud 2015: 63).

4.2 Conflict

4.2.1 The calm before the storm

During the first decade of the reign of Assad junior, the ongoing transformation of the Syrian society, economy and politics were accelerated, and the country witnessed an unprecedented economic opening towards the regional and international arenas. While some of these transformations were intended and planned, their outcomes were not always favourable to the regime. Assad junior was set to navigate the new decade with, as Hinnebusch argues (2012a:99), a weakened capacity to sustain power over society. His rhetoric and occasional implementation of reform led social actors in various realms to believe the dismantling of dictatorship was at hand and the new prospects for change temporarily revitalized Syrian activists (Salamandra and Stenberg 2015:19).

Culturally, the cultural field gradually but constantly shed away the ideological conformity that persisted under Assad senior and became more pluralistic, while topics that were deemed 'sensitive' under the father were no longer taboo topics in everyday Syrian discourse and a wide range of writers and intellectuals engaged with the 'problematique' of politics from multiple perspectives (Weiss 2015). The beneficiaries, according to Salamandra (2015), of this limited openness and pluralism, including artists, dramatists and writers, had developed a dark aesthetic, which later came to equip the anti-regime protests.

Meanwhile, and while the ideology of the Ba'ath Party was slowly abandoned and its control gradually eroded, there was a growing prominence of religion in the public sphere (Stenberg 2015:147) which the regime tried to capitalize on through, for example, the proliferation of images of Assad junior portraying him as a pious Muslim (Pinto 2015:158-160). At the same time, because of the ongoing civil war in Iraq, sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites were brewing in the background and came to life in a few instances of heated debates due to the increased visibility of Shiite presence and the growing role of Shiite clerks,

whose numbers increased as the country received approximately two million Iraqi refugees and cemented its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah (Al-Haj 2017).

Socially, the first decade of Assad junior was marked by an increased impoverishment and rural poverty due to, among others, the dismantlement of Syria's socialist agricultural system and subsequent rounds of draughts that hit the country as of 2006 onwards. Towards the end of 2000s, the country became an aid recipient and tens of thousands of peasants fled to main city suburbs in search of informal work (Ababsa 2011:83). Some 300,000 families were driven to major cities, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs "OCHA 2010", which referred to this migration of peasant families as the "largest internal displacement in the Middle East in recent years" (Ababsa 2015:199-207).

Economically, although the country was registering annual economic growth, inequality increased leading to class antagonism. The structural economic changes introduced by the regime negatively impacted the lower classes of the society, while opening new opportunities for the 'state bourgeoisie' or 'integrated elites' (Khatib 2018:97). Free trade agreements with Turkey and the wider Arab region did contribute to an increase in the variety of products in the local markets, but it came at the expense of local industry leading to the closure of a sizeable number of small-scale factories. The Global Crisis of 2008, which impacted the level of Foreign Direct Investment, as well as the simultaneous global food prices compounded the economic woes of a great segment of Syrians (Lawson 2018).

Politically, the revolt in 2011 was not the first act of political dissent during the reign of Assad junior. Although Syrian civil society was largely subdued, the 2000s witnessed unprecedented political activism by the secular and liberal opposition, which materialized in the 'Damascus Spring', a period of political freedom in which intellectuals formed open forums or 'salons' to discuss public matters, and the 'Damascus Declaration', a declaration of prominent intellectuals and representatives of banned political parties / groups (Al-Om 2018:159-160), as well as the 'Kurdish uprising' in 2004, which saw the outbreak of big protests against the regime, including in the capital.

Hinnebusch (2012:103) argues that Assad junior failed to initiate a 'pacted-transition' through the co-optation of the secular liberal and largely loyal opposition, which could have led to a more pluralistic and resilient hybrid regime. The regime's main argument was that democratization had to follow economic modernization and only small steps were made towards transparency and pluralism. Meanwhile, and unlike the period during his father's reign,

opposition under Assad junior managed to create a united front irrespective of their divides across ideological and sectarian lines, which was unprecedented in the country (Ghadbian 2015:99), although not for a long time or to affect change.

In addition to the internal political challenges, the initial years of Assad junior were further marked by regional and western hostility. Due to its opposition to the war on Iraq, the regime came under continues US pressure and sanctions, which further intensified after the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister and led to the forced evacuation of the Syrian army from Lebanon, a historical sphere of Syrian influence. The regime was also estranged from its regional environment after the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 and the subsequent takeover of the Lebanese capital by the ally of the regime, Hezbollah, in 2008 (Wieland 2015). These pressures encouraged some members of the opposition to think that the regime was vulnerable to pressure for reform or even regime change (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015:16).

On the eve of the uprising, Assad junior, according to Lesch (2018:136) did enjoy a level of popularity in his country and an increased recognition internationally (Wieland 2015). However, there was an increasing societal frustration and antagonism against the regime and its head due to the structural economic changes that affected the social base of the regime. Although he was warned of the festering hostility of the public attitude towards his ‘economic reforms’ (Hinnebusch 2012a:101-102), Assad junior seemed to have been living in denial, which he articulated in a media interview in early 2011. [11] In the interview, Assad junior made comparisons to other countries in the region and reached a conclusion that his regime was insulated from social protests.

Whether real or manufactured, the confidence shown by Assad junior was accompanied by practical actions. Abbas (2011) and (Lesch 2018) claim that a ‘special committee’ was established and security studies were conducted. While the latter, dismissed the potentials for any popular uprising, the former recommended harsh response should there be any wide spread of protests. Meanwhile, as small gatherings in support of the people of Libya and Egypt were held and numerous Facebook calls were mounted by expatriate (or exiled) Syrians for a ‘Day of Rage’ against the regime (Al-Om 2018:163), police authorities were given orders to be more lenient to minimize any potential incidents that could incite the public and, regime officials published several articles warning against any challenge to the status quo reminding Syrians that the regime was the only guarantee for social cohesion (Lesch 2018:132-134).

4.2.2 Children of Dara'a and the fall of the wall of fear

In February 2011, the security forces arrested a group of children that had painted anti-regime slogans on the walls of their school in Dara'a province in the south of the country. The security forces tortured one of the children to death, which provoked wide communal response and was the trigger of the Syrian uprising (Dagher 2019:161-178). On March 18, 2011, people marched out of one of the mosques in Dara'a calling for dignity and freedom in what later came to be marked as the start of the 'Syrian Revolution'. Security agencies, which had received news of the plans to protests, responded violently leading to new casualties, which promoted renewed protests in the province and around Syria.[12] As the death toll grew bigger and more victims fell across the country, and in an attempt to stave off popular resentment and anger, the regime tried to reach out to local representatives, elders and notables (Dagher 2019: 191-224). It further offered some economic reforms and reasserted the role of the state as an agent of redistribution and provider of economic security, while distancing itself from the economic reforms of 2000s which were believed to have contributed to social discontent (Heydemann 2013:62). On 24 March 2011, the regime announced a broad set of reforms, only to be followed later by another set.[13]

The protests did not abate in spite of reform promises. Lesch (2018:133) argues that Syrians had no trust in such promises since the regimes of both Assads had previously given empty promises. Initially, and as the protests became a weekly reality, the protesters consciously avoided any sectarian or ethnic slogans that might alienate Syria's minorities and that the regime could use to delegitimize the opposition. The peaceful protesters called for 'reform' and advanced a democratic and pluralistic vision, which according to Saouli (2015:326) challenged the monopoly of the regime over the national narrative and attempted to engage and mobilize the latent public. However, and notwithstanding their secular political slogans, which were borrowed from the successful revolutions that had toppled other dictators in the Arab World, the regime accused the protesters of being members of the outlawed Muslim brotherhood movement or militant Salafis (Pinto 2015:159).

Although some observers have noted early instances of violence against the regime forces, the uprising remained largely non-violent and peaceful in nature until late July 2011, when defectors from the Syrian army announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which vowed to protect the protesters.[14] Various rebel groups sprang up and were nominally associated with the FSA. Soon afterwards, these groups managed to capture (small) cities from

the regime, whose forces were either overwhelmed or voluntarily retreated from these areas (Abouzeid 2018).[15] These groups became soon the recipient of political, financial and military support from regional and international actors including the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and UAE. The multiplicity of sponsors and their diverging agendas led, among other factors, to the fragmentation of the armed Syrian opposition (Phillips 2016).[16]

Notwithstanding the militarization of uprising, the protest movement did not vanish. The uprising opened up new opportunities for civil society. People came together to act within a space that did not exist before, a realm of civil society as a means of expression, development, co-ordination and community, but mostly as resistance (Al-Om 2018:169). However, the nascent social movement as well as the official opposition to the regime resembled the self-proclaimed armed wing of the uprising in their fragmentation. In addition to the plethora of Islamic-leaning and Islamist groups, five main secular opposition groups emerged with the uprising. The differences between the political opposition ran along the lines of issues such as the need for foreign intervention, militarization, nature of the future political system, and the possibility of negotiations with the regime. These groups mutilated, reproduced, aligned and discredited each other throughout the remainder of the conflict (Khatib 2018:101-104).

On the other side of the conflict, in its attempt to adapt to the challenges posed by the renewal of mass politics and with the change of nature of the early protest into a militarized conflict, the regime reconfigured and underwent a process of authoritarian restructuring which increased its ability to survive. The regime tightened its dependency on global authoritarian networks and exploited its strategic relationships with like-minded authoritarian counterparts including Iran, China and most importantly Russia (Heydemann 2013:60-68). These adaptations were accompanied by ‘political reforms’, which arguably were meant to undermine the unity of the opposition and included an end to the state of emergency, allowing the establishment of parties and amendment of the certain articles in the constitution, in particular number eight, which recognized that Ba’ath Party as the leader of the society and state. The regime further initiated a ‘national dialogue’ led by the vice president that aimed to engage members of the opposition and which later failed due to the maximalist position of the opposition and the unwillingness of the regime to concede (any) real power.

Militarily, and given the regime’s lack of trust in the regular army, whose members were increasingly defecting, as well as the inability of the security forces, to confront the increasingly sophisticated guerrilla tactics of armed insurgents, the regime underwent a series

of reconfigurations and adaptations to solidify support and prevent the further fracturing of its inner circle including in the army and the security sector. The regime increased the cohesion of its military and security institutions and abandoned the 'Trinity of Leadership' approach, which was employed as a sectarian balancing act in these institutions at the time of Assad senior, and populated senior positions with Alawi loyalists. Al Mustafa (2020) shows how the 40 most powerful and senior positions of the armed and security forces were populated by Alawite officers.[17]

In addition to its dependence on the republican guards and other units of almost completely Alwite composition such as the fourth division that operated under the command of Assad junior's brother, the regime deployed paramilitary units against the protesters and rebels. Üngör (2020:1-3) argues that paramilitarism became a prominent feature of the Syrian conflict and that its use was a key aspect of the Assad regime's repression. These paramilitary forces or the so-called "Shabbiha," a catch-all category for irregular, pro-government militias dressed in (semi-) civilian gear and linked organically to the regime, became gradually formalized as of 2012, onward, first in the Popular Committees, and then in the National Defense Forces (NDF).

During the conflict, a number of opposition media outlets appeared, including numerous newspapers and radio stations (Al-Om 2018:165), which reflected opposition-learning traits, but not necessarily revolutionary, as some of these outlets gave a religious spin to the conflict. In its discourse, and through its media outlets, the regime continued to promote a national narrative, aiming to demobilize sectarian divisions and framing the conflict as one between the 'State', which represents plurality, stability and sovereignty and the 'terrorists', who are agents of external powers wanting the disintegration of the Syrian state (Saouli 2015:327). As the conflict progressed, the official media of the regime routinely highlighted the prominent role of militant Islamists associated with al-Qaida (Heydemann 2013:64) and promoted sectarianism as broad frame for interpreting the violence, positing the enemy as marauding jihadist gangs motivated by hatred towards religious minorities. The interpretive frame was also adapted by segments of the political and armed opposition as well as ordinary citizen (Ismail 2018:199)

The conflict, which was declared a civil war in July 2012,[18] was the subject of various Arab and international initiatives and resolutions, which attempted to find a solution, but to no avail (Zartman 2020). At the national level, the regime established the Ministry of National

Reconciliation in 2012, which aimed to facilitate national dialogue (Hinnebusch and Imady 2017:2). Due to reasons not entirely attributed to the regime and the various opposition groups, but are a testimony of how regionalized and internationalized the uprising became, the original conflict metastasized and the scene witnessed the emergence of extremist groups such as the Al-Qaida-affiliated group currently known Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which declared the establishment of a Caliphate in 2014 (Lister 2017),[19] as well as the Democratic Union Party (YPD), a sister organization of the Turkish 'Kurdistan Worker's Party' terrorist organization, which declared a self-administration in the Northeast of the country (Federici 2015).

During the years of the conflict, control over territory ebbed and flowed with the regime controlling the main cities, including the capital, and the Kurdish-led militias aided by the US occupying vast sways of North East Syria. The US and other international forces were part of the international coalition to combat ISIS, which occupied big parts of the Syrian desert and Raqqa. Meanwhile, various opposition factions, including rebel and Islamist groups controlled various patches of territory including strategic areas such as border crossings with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan as well as areas in the periphery or proximity of the capital such as, among others, Eastern Ghoutas in the countryside of Damascus. This trend reversed as of late 2016 when the regime regained controlled over Aleppo,[20] Dara'a,[21] and Eastern-Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus.[22] The regime employed various strategies to regain control combining the use of force, negotiation, reconciliation agreements and forced surrender.

4.2.3 Eastern Ghouta

Ghouta (غوطة دمشق/ Ghūṭat Dimashq) was once Damascus's fertile beltway and the green zone of Ghouta constituted Damascus' final frontier before the Great Syrian Desert (Karen Pinto 2018:1). Ghouta is divided into Eastern and Western wings, both of which consists of an agglomeration of cities, towns and villages surrounding Damascus. Eastern Ghouta is a part of Rif-Damascus Governorate (Rural Damascus) and is approximately 140 KM2. As a part of Rif-Damascus governorate, Eastern-Ghouta is further divided into districts and sub-districts, which further consists of cities and towns. The administrative categorization plays an important role since it defines the level of the central state's presence and representation as well as the type of central state institutions. As far as local administration structures are concerned, while Eastern-Ghouta is represented in the provincial council of the Rif-Damascus governorate, local councils for cities, towns and municipalities are popularly elected. These local councils

cooperate with the representatives of the central state in the governance of their areas. Geographically, Eastern-Ghouta is divided into four sectors the biggest of which is Douma, in addition to the Central, Southern and al-Marj, a vast area of farmland.

Prior to the conflict, the total population of Eastern-Ghouta was estimated to be approximately 1.5 million. The population growth was estimated at approximately 3.9 percent in 2010; representing one of the highest figures in comparison to other cities in Syria and the region. Eastern-Ghouta was further a preferred destination for internal migration due to its proximity to Damascus. According to Al-Azmah (2013), 40 % of the Eastern Ghouta's population were migrants from other parts of the country, particularly Damascus, as well as Iraqi refugees. With a small Christian concentration in Erbeen and Harasta and a small Druze Community in Ain-Tarma, Eastern Ghouta's residents were predominantly Muslim Sunnis with varying traditional and conservative religious and social leanings. Dominant religious schools differ between the various cities, towns and municipalities. While Douma is considered a bastion of the Hanbali doctrine, which arguably explains the emergence of the Salafist groups during the conflict, other towns and cities follow the Shafie doctrine.[23]

Politically, and although the inhabitants of Eastern-Ghouta benefited from the land reforms under the regime, Lund (2016)[24] argues that many were bitterly opposed to the authoritarian secularism of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. This trend was strengthened due to influence from the Gulf countries that was facilitated by labour migration and new information technologies especially in the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century (ibid). Nonetheless, the presence of the Ba'ath Party was strong given the role of its agricultural bureau as well as the semi-obligatory membership for public sector employees and students. The party had various offices across the region and affiliation to its higher rank was not unusual. Notwithstanding that other traditional opposition parties such as Pan-Arabists Nasserist and different wings of the communist party were popular and had a foothold in Eastern-Ghouta, especially in Douma (Bishara 2013:123).

As for its local economy, in addition to agriculture, which was declining as a source of employment due to cuts in subsidies for the sector and harsh weather conditions, and trade, Eastern-Ghouta hosted a sizeable small- and medium-size industry sector revolving around furniture production, food-processing, clothes, as well as small hand-craft items. In the al-Marj area, the dominant economic activity was agriculture, while the district of Douma was home to one of the biggest industrial Zones in Syria, Adra city.[25] Erbeen, meanwhile, was a trade hub

and hosted several food-processing plants. Areas with closer proximity to Damascus, such as Zamalka and Ain-Tarma, were mainly residential. In general, the industrial sector in the area, especially furniture production, was hit hard after the implementation of free trade agreement in the mid-2000s rendering many people redundant. In the mid-2000s, due to new laws and regulations, Eastern Ghouta witnessed a housing and construction boom, which was to cater for the newcomers and as a part of the official urban planning for the area. Despite the variety of economic activities in the area, unemployment and poverty were on the rise, however. As many as third of the labour worked in the informal economy and the area was predominantly inhabited by the lower-middle class. The area further suffered from lack of development and grappled with overrun public services (Al-Azmah 2013).

4.2.4 Conflict in Eastern Ghouta

The first protest against the regime in Eastern Ghouta was organized soon after the unfolding of the events in Dara'a. Security forces responded with severe repression injuring and killing several protesters, which set the scene up for more protests. The regime, through high-ranking officers in the republican guards, did reach to the notables of Eastern-Ghouta to negotiate and offer compensation for the dead as well as to affirm the regime's intent on reforms; however, these attempts were sabotaged by regime hardliners as well as the fact that notables did not have control over the protesting youth and hence could not effectively stop them. Soon afterwards, protests spread across the cities of Eastern-Ghouta. Initially, the protesters called for reforms; however, this shifted soon to regime change due to the increase of repression. In response, security forces responded with fire, intensified their presence in the area and resorted to arrest campaigns, during which activists and non-activists were arrested (Dagher 2019: 191-224).

Although armed elements operating under the banner of opposition surfaced early on, the uprising was practically militarized in September 2011 when the first armed battalion was formed in Douma, only to be followed by a plethora of armed groups that became active in the region and launched an urban insurgency against the regime. These groups were formed by army defectors as well as civilians who took up arms to defend the protesters (Lund 2016). In response, the military and security forces' pursuit of counter-insurgency tactics produced an outright state of war. The regime instituted 'clearance' and 'cordon and search' operations. The setting up of checkpoints and the closure of towns and villages was accompanied by the cutting off service as electricity (Ismail 2018:170). Notwithstanding that control over the area

remained contested until late 2012, when the regime forces withdrew due to the increase in attacks against its posts.

Upon its withdrawal from the area, and to subdue the region to submission, the regime encircled the enclave with checkpoints and gradually imposed limitations on the movement of goods and persons only to close the whole area off in April 2013. Regime institutions withdrew from the area and its forces inscribed ‘Surrender or die’ on the walls surrounding their checkpoints. Furthermore, the national media referred to Eastern-Ghouta as an incubator of terrorism. Gradually, a siege developed, which was policed by troops and militias, including foreign ones, combined with air raids and indiscriminate artillery bombardment as well as the (suspected) use of chemical weapons. The regime further deprived the area from basic services including water and electricity supplies as well as garbage collection. Although not strictly enforced in the first year, the regime forces imposed total blockade and restricted access to and from these areas, including to aid consignments as well as food and humanitarian supplies. The siege warfare was further accompanied by both indiscriminate and deliberate targeting of public infrastructure and private projects such as hospitals, bakeries, agricultural projects, and livestock farms, among others (Kanfash and Aljasem 2019).[26]

After trimming vast agricultural lands from areas under the rebels’ control, the regime allowed one access route to the enclave, which now constituted Douma, the central and southern sectors as well as a small part of the al-Marj. The al-Wafideen crossing, which bordered Douma, was supplemented by a network of tunnels that were dug by the rebels to connect the enclave to some neighbourhoods in Damascus. These strategic access points played a role in the survival of the enclave as they were used for smuggling of food, medicine and ammunition. These tunnels became essential to the war economy in the enclave which was dependent on taxation and smuggling and hence control over the tunnels was highly contested and led to several rounds of rebel infightings. Smuggling constituted a lifeline and the main source of income for armed groups, next to foreign funding.[b] Crossline smuggling of goods and individuals from and to the enclave flourished with the blessing of the regime’s army and security forces, whose officered were involved in corruption and facilitated such transactions.[c]

[b] Author’s interview with interviewee # 2, a former member of the local council in Erbeen, on 13 April 2020.

[c] Author’s interview with interviewee # 3, a middleman between the government forces and rebels, on 18 April 2020.

Within the enclave, real power and control was in the hands of armed factions, albeit the presence of several local councils and later representatives of the 'Interim Syrian Government', which sprung to fill the void that was left by the departure of the state apparatus and its services. Next to defectors and rebel groups that identified with a nationalist rhetoric, there were a variety of armed groups that identified with various interpretations of Salafi and traditional Islam. Throughout the initial years of the siege, there were several episodes of infighting and mergers, which contributed to the gradual disappearance of small groups and the consolidation of power within two blocs; 'Islam Army', which had its stronghold in Douma and adapted a Salafist discourse and a strict interpretation of Islam and 'al-Rahman Corps', which was in charge of the al-Awsat Central and Southern sectors. Al-Rahman Corps propagated a nationalist Islamist ideology and identified with the Free Syrian Army (Lund 2016). An exception to the infighting was Harasta, an administrative part of Douma, which came under the control of the Ahrar al-Sham armed faction, a Salafist group that concluded a ceasefire with the regime. Additionally, approximately 200 affiliates of Al-Nursa, Syrian wing of al-Qaida, were also present in Eastern-Ghouta, although not active. [d] The presence of these al-Qaida affiliates would later be used as a pretext to attack the region due to the presence of terrorists.

Although there were several attempts to unite the main factions through military operation rooms and revolutionary military councils and Unified Military Command, the two main armed groups maintained their independence and ran competing institutions in areas under their control. The unified military command had a nominal hierarchy represented by the head of the two main armed factions, but it did not last long. Notwithstanding that the main factions set up police forces and religious courts, temporarily operating under the Unified Judicial Council, which did contribute to an increased societal order and managed to check the spread of criminality in the area. As far as their coercive practices are concerned, the rebel groups mirrored the tactics and some of the institutions of the Assad regime. For example, both the Islam army and the al-Rahman corps had their own security apparatus and prison systems, where violations were reported (Lund 2016).

Meanwhile, civilian activists represented in local administrative councils (LACs) as well as a plethora of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charities multiplied in the region. Unlike Douma, where all work was centralized through the Islam army, including

[d] Author's interview with interviewee #12, a former rebel associated with the al-Rahman Corps, on 15 April 2020.

charity work, the Central and Southern Sectors under the control of the al-Rahman Corps offered the space for such initiatives to co-administer and to focus on non-military aspects of life. The role of such entities grew in importance as the poverty increased in the enclave due to unemployment and lack of resources as well as near-total dependence on humanitarian aid (Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Turkmani 2018). For example, Lund (2016) explains that in November 2017, one kilogram of bread in eastern Ghouta cost 1150 percent more than in nearby Damascus and from January 2017, bread and wheat flour prices increased by more than 174 percent and 390 percent, respectively. Fuel shortages increased and prices skyrocketed leading to coking becoming obsolete. These conditions rendered the importance of charities and NGOs paramount for the approximately 400,000 remaining inhabitants, who could not flee the region for fear of retribution from the regime forces or due to their financial inability to live in the capital. Furthermore, the rebels imposed high tariffs for existing the region reaching 1500 dollars, which the majority of people under siege could not afford.

According PAX organization (2018),[27] which monitored sieges in Syria, the siege in Eastern Ghouta was a part of a wider strategy of Assad regime that had used similar techniques across the country entrapping approximately 2.5 million throughout the conflict. The siege of Eastern-Ghouta attracted a lot of international attention and several resolutions from the UN Security Council as well as regional and international actors. These resolutions and initiatives were aimed to end or ease the siege and facilitate a ceasefire. The four de-escalation zones agreement, which was signed in May 2017 by the government backers Iran and Russia as well as the rebels ally, Turkey was one of these initiatives. Eastern-Ghouta was designated as one of these four zones, which only managed to maintain peace for a short period (Hinnebusch and Imady 2017). Other initiatives had no impact on the situation.

Meanwhile, and despite the military hostilities, the regime and the rebels engaged in several rounds of negotiations aiming to find a settlement or a ceasefire. These negotiations were led by local businessmen, who had left the area before the armed groups took control of the region, as well as religious figures, who had connections to the region, but were residing under the regime control. Next to local notables, prominent retired military officers attempted to negotiate a truce, but in vain (ibid). In addition to the regime, and through their external bureaus, the rebels engaged in several rounds of negotiations with representatives of the Russian government. These negotiations took place in Switzerland, Turkey and Egypt and were a part of the Russian efforts to negotiate a ceasefire in the area. A ceasefire was signed with

the Russian Federation in mid-Aug 2017; however, it did not hold as the regime did not abide by it.[e]

In late 2017, after targeting the tunnels connecting the rebels' areas to Damascus, the regime further tightened its blockade and fewer goods were smuggled or allowed through the only access point in al-Wafideen. UN aid convoys, whose access to the area was already intermittent and only allowed certain goods, were not permitted to reach the enclave. Shortly afterwards, the regime with the help of the Russian air force launched a military campaign that was marked by unprecedented use of precision airstrikes and indiscriminate artillery bombardment in what Ismail (2018:59) called 'pacification by eradication' in which mass killing was not only targeted against the rebels but the entire area. The regime deployed overwhelming power accompanied by calls for surrender under the guise of local reconciliation agreements. In early March 2018, several towns fell to the control of the regime forces, which demoralized the rebels in the rest of the enclave and broke their will to resist. In mid-March 2018, the central and southern sectors of Eastern-Ghouta agreed to the surrender terms of the regime leaving Douma as the last resisting town in the area, only for the Islam army to surrender in April 2018 after a chemical weapon attack on the city (Lund 2016).

[e] Author's interview with interviewee #1, a member of al-Rahman Corps negotiation team, on 15 April 2020.

5 Chapter four: Return of the State: Erbeen and Zamalka

5.1 Introduction

On 02 April 2018, the Syrian Arab Army raised the Syrian flag in Eastern-Ghouta declaring it the official day of 'liberation'.[28] The symbolic and sparsely attended ceremony was proceeded by a statement by the Minster of the Local Administration, Deputy Head of the Higher Council for Local Administration, on 26 March 2018, in which he declared the blueprint for the state return. The plan would entail the entry of the army and security forces only to be followed by the competent civilian authorities when the physical environment was secured. On 03 April 2018, the Prime Minister, Imad Khamis, established a high-level ministerial committee to oversee the return of services.[29]

However, and notwithstanding the unitary response introduced by the central authorities, the return of the state was gradual, uneven and more complex than the initial plans of the government. The return process was shaped by administrative, economic and social considerations, which differed across cities and towns. It is these different factors that make a detailed examination of the state return across the whole region of Eastern-Ghouta, which was discussed in the previous chapter, beyond the scope of this study due to time and size limitation. Instead, this chapter will examine the question of state return in two administrative units; the city of Erbeen and town of Zamalka focusing on two aspects; a) the return of state institutions, and b) state-society relations with a focus on the role of local elites.

5.2 The Fraternal twins: Erbeen and Zamalka

Erbeen and Zamalka are both in Eastern-Ghouta, whose general characteristics were discussed in the previous chapter. They are geographically adjacent and are located seven and three KM away from Damascus, respectively. They are part of the same administrative sub-district meaning that they fall under the same representative of the central state. The dominant religious doctrine in both areas is the Muslim Shafie and between 2013 and 2018, they were under similar and at times identical governance arrangements, which saw a conglomerate of FSA-groups as well as representatives of the local council oversee the daily life in the city.

In 2011, the city of Erbeen had 100,000 residents,[30] while Zamalka, albeit administratively a town and hence demographically smaller in theory, was home to 180,000 residents.[31] After the military campaign in March 2018, approximately 29,000 people were still residing in Erbeen,[32] while Zamalka had approximately five thousand left.[33] The number of

residents is currently at approximately 60,000[34] and 13,000[35], respectively. The higher number of residents in Zamalka pre-2011 is attributed to internal migration from Damascus, as well as other governorates after a change in construction regulations, which led to a boom in the construction market. Additionally, the town became a destination for Iraqi refugees due to its proximity to Damascus and its relatively open culture, as opposed to other towns and cities in Eastern-Ghouta.[f] As a predominantly residential area, Zamalka had no industry and only shortly before the outbreak of the conflict did it start to attract businesses.[g]

Erbeen, on the other hand, was known as Syria's third 'haven', in reference to its economic importance and the sheer size of economic activities. It hosted the biggest market for almonds in the Syria and was home to several big food-processing plants and companies, such as al-Durra, al-Ghouta and al-Ahlam, which became regional and international brands. The city also hosted several trade warehouses that were among the biggest in Eastern-Ghouta.[h] Similar to Zamalka, Erbeen did benefit from the construction boom in the years before the conflict; however, the sale of property to 'outsiders' remained much more contained and limited. Although not collectively observed, sale of property to outsiders was discouraged as a form of social control in the face of what had been considered a gradual invasion of foreign customs.[i] By the time of the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, and being the center of the sub-district, Erbeen hosted the courtroom and the office of the sub-district director, police Major Ghiath Marie, who officially oversaw all government institutions, except the judiciary.

Although it had a bigger population, no high ranking officials of the national government resided or originated from Zamalka, while several residents or decedents of the city of Erbeen occupied prominent position in several national institutions including the Army Chief of Staff and later Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, Dawoud Rajha; the Head of Rif-Damascus Endowment Directorate, Kheder Shahrour, as well as several highly reputable and prominent religious figures such as Ihsan al-Sayed Hassan and Abdul-Satar al-Ghabra. In addition to high ranking officials, Erbeen was home to several affluent families such as Sukar, Kwaider, Rajha and Durra, among others. These families invested in the improvement

[f] Author's interview with interviewee # 21, a former mayor in Zamalka (Mayors are in charge of neighbourhood and are junior to the local council members), on May 29, 2020.
[g] Author's interview with interviewee # 22, a member of one of the local governance structures (specification in the list of interviewees) in the town of Zamalka, on 01 June 2020.
[h] Author's interview with interviewee # 11, a businessman from Erbeen, on 30 May 2020.
[i] Author's interview with interviewee # 10, a businessman focused on construction works in Erbeen, on 29 May 2020.

and beautification of their direct surrounding and had a prominent social role through their philanthropic projects.[j]

In the conflict, which resulted in an estimated that between 50 % and 90% destruction in the infrastructure of Eastern-Ghouta[36] and saw 34136 buildings being partly or totally destroyed, according to a report by the United Nation Institute for Training and Research,[37] both areas had their share of the damage. In Erbeen, it was estimated that half of the city was uninhabitable due to destruction in the infrastructures and residential areas.[38] The percentage was estimated at 40 percent in Zamalka.[39]

5.3 Return of the State Institutions

This section will examine the return of the state institutions to Erbeen and Zamalka. It will answer four questions: a) what institutions have returned; b) the pace of return; c) which institutions were prioritized; and d) the impact of state return on the rebel institutions. Engaging these questions, I make a distinction between the coercive apparatuses represented by the armed forces, the security apparatuses and police forces as well as the civic and service institutions such as schools, state bakeries, electric grid and civil registry, among others. The reason behind this is the fairly common beliefs and views in various reports that the regime always prioritizes its coercive apparatuses, to which I previously attached a degree of credibility, and because making this distinction enable us to draw conclusions and to understand the approach of the central state and its main focus in newly captured areas.

During April 2018 and March 2020, hereunder the research period, all state institutions that had existed before 2011; be it coercive or civilian, returned to Erbeen and Zamalka. On 26 March 2018, six days before raising the flag over Ain-Tarma, in Eastern-Ghouta,[40] the Minster of the Local Administration announced that the first institutions to return to Eastern-Ghouta were the armed forces and security apparatuses. The armed forces had already been in the region since their successful attack in Mid-March. Erbeen and Zamalka came under the control of Republican Guards units, which established several checkpoints in and around both areas cutting them off from their surroundings.[k] A military base in the outskirts of Erbeen was rehabilitated and put in use. Unlike other areas in Eastern Ghouta, the military presence in

[j] Author's interview with interviewees # 6 and 7, residents of Erbeen, on 30 May 2020.
[k] Author's interview with interviewee # 13, a former rebel associated with the al-Rahman Corps, on 29 May 2020.

Zamalka and Erbeen was limited to Syrian units. This presence, represented by checkpoints inside cities, was gradually reduced and was totally abolished in early-2019.[l]

As far as the security apparatuses are concerned, Erbeen and Zamalka fell under the control of the political security apparatus, which reports to the Ministry of Interior, and the military intelligence, which reports to the Ministry of Defence, respectively.[m] The division of control is attributed to operational and capacity factors as well as political consideration. Zamalka was the headquarter of the FSA leadership during the rebel control and had turned into a military terrain with an extended network of tunnels, which necessitated the involvement of the armed forces and its intelligence to secure and clear the area, as opposed to Erbeen which remained largely a civilian territory, albeit with several rebel bases. Furthermore, in line with other areas across the country, no single apparatus was trusted to control the whole region for fear of information concealment or complicity.[n] In addition to checkpoints, these apparatuses established fixed posts across the two areas.

The police also made an early return announcing the return of the corps on 31 March 2018. The police force in Erbeen and Zamalka was headed by major Ghiath Marie, Director of Erbeen Sub-district. The officer in question occupied the same position pre-2011 and in the interim period was relocated with the member of his police force to Dahyat al-Assad (translate as Assad's district), a nearby city that remained under the control of the Syrian government.[41] Upon its return, the force was initially located in the old building of the sub-district and police station; however, it later relocated to a nearby building as building had sustained massive damage during the military campaign. During the research period, the police forces was not reported to have engaged in security or military operations and the focus of the returning force was limited to civilian and policing duties such as crime investigation and overseeing the process of civic registry registration.[o]

The armed forces, security apparatuses and police oversaw the execution and implementation of the reconciliation process in Erbeen and Zamalka. The deal granted pardon for crimes committed against the state and public order and did not include crimes against civilians or penal crimes. Thus, no mass incarceration took place. The process, which

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[l] ibid

[m] ibid.

[n] Author's interview with interviewee # 14, a member of the security forces (Damascus-based), on 30 May 2020.

[o] Author's interview with interviewee # 4, a resident of Erbeen, on 25 May 2020.

guaranteed a six-months grace period for defectors and military service evaders, required all rebels as well as civilians, who were affiliated with the anti-regime activities or groups such as NGOs or civil society associations, to undergo a security check, during which information on their activities, connections, and source of funding, among others, were collected. Subsequently, those individuals were issued security clearance documents that enabled them to move freely and in theory to avoid arrest.[p] After the six months grace period, defectors and evaders were required to report to the armed forces for military service.

Although both Erbeen and Zamalka were part of the same reconciliation agreement, which absolved individuals from public prosecution only, priority was given to Erbeen, where the process started in April 2018,[q] while it took until September 2018 in Zamalka.[42] One of the consequences is that male residents of Zamalka were deprived from free movement for fear of (arbitrary) arrest. Reportedly, security forces arrested several individuals in both areas despite having undergone the security clearance.[r] These arrests were justified under the banner of penal arrests or charges of crimes committed against individuals, although it was contested by some former affiliates of the opposition as politically motivated.[43] When inquiring about the reasons for the delay, residents of Zamalka and representative of the local council did not receive any answers; however, arguably was is that the decision was to prioritize Erbeen was chiefly related to its administrative categorization as a city and the fact that is the center of the sub-district as well as the number of its residents.

Local councils were activated soon afterwards. In mid-April 2018, former local councils' members, whose mandate had expired in during the years of the rebel control, were re-appointed with a temporary mandate to oversee the work of local councils.[44] These members were considered to be close to the regime and a part of the regime and their appointment was decreed by the Minister of Local Administration and was based on Law 107 of local administration. Although, local governance was not new in the area, the appointed councils, and the ones that would be elected later, would have to deal with a new regulatory environment, in which the role of local councils had been enhanced. In 2011, as a part of the reform package that was introduced by the state to appease the protesters, law 107/2011 was introduced to replace the old local administration law of 1971. In the new law, and in order to enhance

[p] Author's interview with interviewee # 15, a former NGO worker, on 20 May 2020.
[q] Author's interview with interviewee # 23, a member of the local governance structure in Erbeen (specification in the interviews list), on 27 May 2020.
[r] Author's interviews with interviewees # 4, 5 and 18, residents of Erbeen and Zamalka, on 25 and 26 May 25 as well as June 04.

democracy through decentralization, local councils were to assume greater responsibility with regards to the provision of local services. The role of the central authorities would be limited to planning, legislation and regulation.[45]

Simultaneously, civic and services institutions such as the water and electricity establishments as well as the communication office returned in April 2018. Under the rebel control, these services were provided by local councils, and NGOs. Administrative institutions such as the court followed in June 2018.[46] The return of institutions did not translate into a return of services though. The latter was gradual and differed in the pace between Erbeen and Zamalka. In the former, the electricity grid was re-established, albeit surgically and minimally, in August 2018, and residents received six hours of free electricity on daily basis. Meanwhile, it took until late 2018 for the electric grid to be maintained in Zamalka and by the end of the October 2019, the town was still suffering from unreliable power provision at approximately 3 to 6 hours per day.[47] According to the local municipal office, this is due to lack of resources to fix the damages in the main power stations.

Similarly, running water provision was resumed one-month earlier in Erbeen and was resumed in August 2019, while it took until September 2019 for the service to resume in Zamalka. The head of the local council blamed the delay on the contracting company, which was to finish both areas simultaneously.[48] One aspect where the level of services varied significantly is debris clearance. In Erbeen, debris clearance commenced in May 2018 and it progressed much faster than Zamalka, where work began in October 2018, and progressed slowly. The return of other services, such as public transportation to Damascus and bakeries, were announced simultaneously in both cities; however, in both cases, services in Zamalka were not stable and were discontinued on several occasions. For example, while the central state bakery in Erbeen resumed its work in January 2019,[49] the residents of Zamalka were still suffering from the closure of the only bakery in town in October 2019.[50]

As far as the institutions that were introduced under the rebels to fill the vacuum of the state institutions that departed in 2013 are concerned, they all collapsed as representatives of the local councils, NGOs and rebels either fled the area or remained while maintaining a low profile. Under the rebels, some of the services were provided for free or for minimal fees. Meanwhile, the official approach towards the infrastructure and projects left by the rebels and local councils such as water wells, electric generators and schools was inconsistent and varied according to time, location and the military or security units in charge of the area. Makeshift

schools were discontinued and so was the use of electric generators, initially. Later, however, the use of electric generators was allowed in exchange of bribes paid to regime officers and levied by former rebels.[s] Based on recommendations by specialists associated with various ministries, projects such as water wells were initially ordered to be disassembled for fear of negatively impacting the underground water reserves. This, however, changed as the level of damage in the national water network infrastructure including pipes and generators was deemed significant and hence dependence on these wells was necessary. Notwithstanding that, plaques with names of NGOs or referring to rebel institutions were removed. [t]

The return of the state institution was accompanied by a shift in the narrative about Eastern Ghouta, including Zamalka and Erbeen, and its people. The latter, the subject of years of securitizing narrative, were no longer considered an incubating environment for terrorism and armed rebellion but were rather portrayed as victims and hostages of the rebels and terrorist groups.[51] During the research period, representatives of the central state institutions such as the sub-district director, and visiting ministers maintained that the destruction in the area was to blame on 'terrorist groups' and the people of the 'liberated areas', including Erbeen and Zamalka, were described as good citizens. For example, in an interview on the national TV, the director of Erbeen sub-district praised the cooperation between the police and the people as well as the latter's role in eradicating terrorism.[52] Celebrating the release of prisoners, the Secretary of the Ba'ath Party heading a delegation of parliamentarians, members of the Rif-Damascus governorate council and religious figures declared publicly that the 'mistakes' of the past were the responsibility of 'all of us', referring to the people and the state.[53]

Examining the return of the state institutions so far lead to three observations. The first observation is related to the different pace of the state institution return into Erbeen and Zamalka. Erbeen was prioritized over Zamalka and institutions as well as services were faster to return to Erbeen. While this is partly explained by logistical differences such as the level of destruction in local infrastructure, it could also be attributed to the difference in the administrative categorization of both areas and hence the difference in resources allocation; the presence of the central state institutions in Erbeen and the attention this generate from the representatives of the central state; the number of residents (and returnees); allocation of aid

[s] Author's interview with interviewee # 13, a former rebel associated with the al-Rahman Corps, on 29 May 2020.

[t] Author's interview with interviewee # 16, a former NGO worker, whose work was focused on water provision, on 27 May 2020.

from (international) donors, which is also directly linked to the number of residents; and the role of local actors, which will be explained in the next section.

Secondly, apart from the initial onslaught, which resulted in massive damages and loss of lives, the return of the state was reconciliatory and it was accompanied by a change in the narrative on the culpability of the people in Eastern-Ghouta, who remained under the control of rebels and were previously accused of forming an incubating environment for terrorism. The return was further marked by the gradual enforcement of laws and regulations. Only in October 2019 did the local police take actions against unregistered motorcycle.[54] It was in the same month that the local council of Erbeen threatened to close unregistered shops and later closed several shops for non-compliance.[55] This soft approach was accompanied by a path to normalization through the 'reconciliation agreements', which despite being highly motivated by security concerns, it contributed to the 'normalization' of life since they enabled rebels and former associates of the opposition in the region to 'enjoy' all their rights under the state, but also fulfil their obligations, including military service.

Thirdly, it dispels a misconception about the prioritization of coercive institutions vis-à-vis civic and service institutions. It is to be noted here that although the physical presence of the affiliates of the coercive apparatuses was prioritized in Erbeen and Zamalka, this was not paralleled in terms of resources allocation for reconstruction and rehabilitation. While schools, electricity and telecommunication offices and the court all underwent maintenance, albeit in cases minimal, in the very early stages of the state return, offices such as the conscription office in Erbeen and the office of the sub-district director did not. The latter was only renovated towards the end of 2019,[56] while no work had started on the former by the end of the research period.[u]

During the research period, the process governing the allocation of funds as well as financial means available for the process remained elusive to me. There exist no open records of the process, and even some of the interviewees within the local governance structures had no access to the information. It is, however, highly plausible that the prioritization of civilian institutions is caused by the limited financial capacity of the government as well as the interest of its representatives to build legitimacy. The prioritization of services institutions could also be aimed to encourage the return of internally displaced and to generate revenues from services. Furthermore, a crucial factor in the process is the availability of funds from local and

[u] Author's interview with interviewee # 04, a resident of Erbeen on 25 May 2020.

international donors, which did partly shape the response since these actors invested only in civilian institutions; further details in the below section.

5.4 State return and the role of local elites

This section addresses the role of local elites and how their contributions facilitated political and social reconstruction and shaped the return of the state. It examines the role of four distinct groups; businessmen, members of the religious institutions, former rebels and the local Ba'ath Party representatives. Before discussing their current role, however, it is essential to establish that local elites did play a prominent role before the outbreak of the conflict. Before 2011, in Erbeen, a coalition of businessmen, and religious figures organized and financed several government-sanctioned or -tolerated initiatives such as the 'Charitable Health Fund', and 'Charity Association'. On occasions, businessmen financed the local council to implement projects, which otherwise would have had to wait for funds from the central state.[57] The involvement of these actors did not stop at the level of social services. They engaged in the local and national politics too. Businessmen and religious figures played a prominent role in the election of local councils and some members were elevated to higher positions within the rank of the Ba'ath Party, ministries and various associations such as the (Rif-)Damascus Trade and Industry Chambers.

Acknowledging the role local actors, approximately 8 years later, on 26 March 2018, the Minster of the Local Administration, Deputy Head of the Higher Council for Local Administration, issued a call for local communities and notables to actively engage in the reconstruction of their areas. Local councils' members echoed the call on several occasions during the research period. While such calls were not rare prior to the conflict, when the central state rhetorically called on citizens and local elites to engage in the organization of their (political) lives, the new calls were aimed at physical 'reconstruction', which highlighted the limited financial resources of the returning state and the need for the engagement of local actors. Unlike in the past, however, this would be heavily governed by the new local administration law of 2011, which regulates details as minuscule as the involvement of 'citizens' in voluntary work, and the creation of 'neighbourhood committees', as well as financial aspects such as the receipt of 'gifts' and 'donations' from donors and locals.[58] Members of the local elites did engage in reconstruction activities throughout the research period prompting an increased media coverage locally and nationally.

5.4.1 Businessmen

The role of businessmen differed between Erbeen and Zamalka. Businessmen native to the city of Erbeen played a major role in the return of services to the city. The contribution of these individuals, who had fled the enclave during the rebel control, were twofold. Firstly, and of a great importance was their financial support for the renovations of institutions, such as schools, and public space, such as main roundabouts,[59] as well as the provision of services. Three food-processing companies financed the rehabilitation of three schools. Al-Ahlam Co. rehabilitated Sayed Quraish School,[60] Al-Durra Co. renovated the Abdulmoneem Riyad High School,[61] and Sukar Co. rehabilitated the Abdul-Rahman Al-Dakhek School. To understand the significance of this support, it is important to know that the central state allocated 50 million Syrian pound in April 2018 as a part of its 'emergency response' to the whole city, while the cost of renovation for Abdulmoneem Riyad school was approximately 60 million Syrian pound.[62] Towards the end of the research period, the head of the local council announced that five new schools would be rehabilitated by the local business community. Furthermore, businessmen native to the city covered the maintenance costs of big machineries used in garbage collection and debris clearance. They further financed local initiatives for debris clearance as well as roads maintenance,[63] which helped accelerate the opening of small business in the main market.

Secondly, by extension of their engagement and due to their high-ranking connections, local businessmen generated increased interest by the central authorities' officials. On 6 different occasions, representatives of the parliament, the governor of Rif-Damascus who is the highest authority in Eastern-Ghouta, and five ministers as well as high-ranking Ba'athists were among the guests of honours in events organized by local businessmen in the city of Erbeen. The active engagement and contributions of these businessmen was covered extensively by the national media. The central authorities portrayed the return of businessmen and big companies to Erbeen as a national victory and a sign of local resilience in the face of terrorism. It further vowed to provide financial and administrative facilities to vitalize production.[64] In addition to these financial and administrative pledges, these visits bestowed prestige on these businessmen, as in the Syrian contexts, such visits are a sign of political strength and connections. Unlike smaller businessmen and shop-owners, these businessmen benefited from security facilitations to reopen their factories as they could easily circumvent the bureaucratic hurdles that hindered others such as security clearance and technical

assessments carried out by the local councils.[v] Al-Ahlam Co., for example, which had relocated to another suburb of Damascus, returned to Erbeen in July 2018.[65]

The picture was different in the town of Zamalka. The local business community did not engage in any reconstruction initiatives despite the repetitive calls by the head of the local council, who later blamed the slow return of services in the town, as opposed to neighbouring areas, on the lack of response from the local business community. Correspondingly, the absence of initiatives and projects impacted the level of attention from the central authorities' officials. With the exception of one visit by the governor of Rif-Damascus, as a part of the visit to Erbeen, and one visit by the Secretary of the Ba'ath Party in Rif-Damascus governorate as well as parliamentarians with the aim of celebrate the occasion of a 'presidential pardon', the town was the recipient of mid-level officials such as the Education Director for Elementary Schools, Director of telecommunication in Rif-Damascus,[66] and Deputy Education Director for High Schools. The overall return of businesses in Zamalka, including small ones, remained limited throughout the research period.[w] The is due, among others, to the fact that the business community, which was active in the town before the conflict, was mostly non-native and hence did not have deep connections with the area. The business community was further small and fragmented. Unlike Erbeen where there is an industrial sector, Zamalka was dependent on trade, a sector that is not very active in the town yet due to its small population and level of destruction.

5.4.2 Religious figures

The role of prominent religious figures; including those holding official positions, was very prominent after March 2018. Several high-profile religious figures, such as the Head of the Rif-Damascus Endowment Directorate, Kheder Shahrour,[67] as well as the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, John X,[68] paid visits to the enclave after its fall, during which they denounced terrorism and voiced their support for the state's efforts to rebuild the region. Their role was not limited to rhetorical support only. During the research period, representatives of the religious institutions and associated organizations supported and organized several local initiatives that were focused on reconstruction and the provision of services. Unlike the business community, whose members had fled the enclave during the rebel control era, some of these figures, such as Abdul Satar al-Ghabrah, the Imam of the Grand

[v] Author's interview with interviewee # 11, a businessman from Erbeen, on 03 June 2020.
[w] Author's interview with interviewee # 18, a (former) resident of Zamalka, on 04 June 2020.

Mosque of Erbeen, remained in the enclave, albeit maintaining an independent position from the rebels.

Similar to the businessmen community, the role of the religious figures differed between Erbeen and Zamalka. As far as Erbeen is concerned, and in order to understand the role of the religious institution and religious figures, it is crucial to note that the city was home to several renowned figures, including Dr. Kheder Shahror, Head of the Rif-Damascus Directorate, Abdul Satar al-Ghabrah, Imam of the Grand Mosque of Erbeen, and Ihasn al-Sayed Hassan, a leading Islamic scholar, a Sheikh al-Qura (top reciter) of Syria, and a member of the Supreme Quranic Affairs Council. These figures, among others, did play an active social role prior to the outbreak of the conflict. Their activities focused on the provision of charity.[69] Furthermore, assuming the role of notables, these figures further played a role in mediating communal problem and disputes.[x] Erbeen is home to one of the oldest mosques in the Eastern-Ghouta region; Erbeen Grand mosque, which dates back to the 11th century.[70] It is further the Saint George Church, which was built in 1873.[71] Both the grand mosque and the Saint George church were destroyed during the conflict.

As early as May 2018, Khedr Shahrour hosted the first religious celebration in the city of Erbeen. During the event, representatives of the various state institutions, including the army and security forces, were present to celebrate the "liberation of the city from the terrorists''. In June 2018, Shahrour hosted the governor of Rif-Damascus and high-ranking officers and personally submitted a list of requests on behalf of residents and businessmen, which were aimed at facilitating reconstruction and provision of services.[72] Furthermore, he and Hassan sponsored the rehabilitation of several mosques in the city. Imam al-Ghabrah organized several debris clearance activities, which were funded by his disciples and the business community.[y] Additionally, all three figures sponsored initiatives that aimed to support orphans and widows in the city. In early 2019, the nephew of Shahrour established the al-Seraj charity association,[73] which is said to have benefited from the sponsorship of Shahrour.[z] During the research period, the association played an active role in the collection of Zakat (donations), and the provision of humanitarian aid. It received aid from national and international donors and benefited from the bureaucratic facilitations of the state institutions. High profile officials such as the governor

[x] Author's interview with interviewee # 08, a resident of Erbeen, on 01 June 2020.
[y] Author's interview with interviewee # 08, a resident of Erbeen, on 01 June 2020.
[z] Author's interview with interviewee # 05, a resident of Erbeen, on 26 May 2020.

of Rif-Damascus, as well as security officers were frequent visitors of the associations.[74] Other active associations did not benefit from a comparable level of facilitation.[aa]

Simultaneously, during the research period, the church was active in the provision of social services through the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee. Early after controlling the area, the authorities allowed the committee to operate in the region, along very few organizations.[75] Although the committee operates across Syria and provides services in several areas in Eastern-Ghouta, the main focus of its activities was the city of Erbeen. In December 2018, the committee opened the 'First Step' training center, which offers free vocational and foreign language trainings.[76] It further established the 'Child-friendly Space' center, which offers free psycho-social support for children as well their family members.[77] In early 2019, the committee opened a medical center, where services were provided for free.[78] In addition to the St. Ephrem committee, other Christian organizations such as the 'Middle East Council of Churches' offered occasional aid in the city as well as educational training in 2019.[79] Marking the commencement date for the start of renovation, on 13 December 2019, the church of Saint George held its first mass in the city of Erbeen.[80] The Orthodox church in Russia is funding the renovation.[81]

In contrast to Erbeen, the city of Zamalka received less attention from religious institutions and figures. Shahour visited Zamalka on one occasion to examine the damages of mosques in the town, one of which was rehabilitated with funds from the Directorate of Religious Endowment. He sponsored no public initiatives other than that. Meanwhile, renovation work did start in other mosques; however, the main source of funding was public charity and hence the delay in the execution of renovation projects.[bb] During the research period, no local NGOs was active in Zamalka and the Syrian Red Cross remained the main source of aid. On one occasion, a Chechen Islamic charity organization distributed aid to children during the opening of one of the local schools in Zamalka;[82] however, this was not organized through the religious institution in the town and was a part of a larger campaign carried out by the organization in several areas. As far as the church is concerned, and while residents of Zamalka did benefit from the services provided in the various centres in Erbeen, the church did not support or adopt any public initiative in the city.[cc]

[aa] Ibid

[bb] Author's interview with interviewee # 17, a (former) resident of Zamalka, on 25 May 2020.

[cc] Author's interview with interviewee # 22, a member of the local governance structures in Zamalka (specification in the list of interviewees), on 01 June 2020.

Representatives of the local council in Zamalka criticized the lack of support and attention from religious figures. Comparing Zamalka to Erbeen and other cities in the region, a representative of the local council attributed the improvement in other areas, including Erbeen, to the direct involvement of religious figures unlike Zamalka, which had been left to depend on governmental funds.[dd] The gap in attention and hence resources is directly linked to the absence of networks. While in Erbeen local networks, represented by the religious figures, and an international network, represented by the church and its international connection, including with the Orthodox Church of Russia, Zamalka has no prominent figures or local networks to represent the city or mobilize efforts on its behalf.

5.4.3 Ba'ath Party

Before the conflict, the party had a stronger presence in Erbeen in comparison to Zamalka. While the population of Zamalka was almost twice the size of that in Erbeen, the party had two divisions in the latter as opposed to one in Zamalka. Furthermore, several decedents and residents of Erbeen held higher position within the party at the level of Eastern Ghouta such as Jamal al-Qalish, who is a member of the Eastern-Ghouta section, a seven-member body representing the whole region, and Nazir Erbeeniah, Head of the National Volleyball Association. Furthermore, Erbeen hosted a 'Farmer or Agricultural Association', which was dominated by members of the Ba'ath Party.[ee] As far as Zamalka is concerned, the town had only one high-ranking member of the Ba'ath Party, Majed Nouman. He rose to prominence when he was elected as a member of Eastern-Ghouta section in late December 2019 and consequently to the Rif-Damascus sub-branch in February 2020.[83]

Early in the conflicts, rebels and associates of the Free Syrian Army targeted the members and offices of the Ba'ath Party in Eastern-Ghouta. Consequently, Ba'athists were among the first to flee the enclave when it fell under the total control of the rebels. While in Damascus, Ba'athist individuals maintained their party membership and positions. They held regular meetings in Dahyat Harasta city.[ff] In April 2018, members of the Ba'ath Party returned, especially those holding positions in the central and local institutions. However, this was not paralleled by the reopening of offices in the region, which took until December 2018, when the party offices were rehabilitated. The party offices across Eastern-Ghouta, including Erbeen and

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[dd] Author's interview with interviewee # 22, a member of the local governance structures in Zamalka (specification in the list of interviewees), on 01 June 2020.
[ee] Author's interview with interviewee # 20, a member of the Ba'ath party in Erbeen, on 10 June 2020.
[ff] Author's interview with interviewee # 20, a member of the Ba'ath party in Erbeen, on 10 June 2020.

Zamalka held their first official meetings in January 2019.[84] In September of the same year, party elections were held.[85]

In both areas, the Ba'ath Party revived its control over local politics through the local administration election, which was held in September 2018.[86] The party issued a 'National Unity' list, where the majority were Ba'athist. In both Erbeen[87] and Zamalka,[88] eight of the 10 candidates on the list were Ba'athists. Subsequently, the party captured the main positions within the local councils. In Erbeen, the head of the temporary council, Abdul-Karim Kishkeh, who is a member of the party, was replaced with Ratib Shahrour, also a member of the Ba'ath Party. Ratib Shahrour is a relative of both Ghazi Sharour, a high-ranking Ba'athist and Kheder Shahrour, the Head of Rif-Damascus Directorate. In Zamalka, Badie Tayfour, the head of the temporary local council, was re-elected for the same position. Badie is a Ba'athist and had occupied several positions in Damascus University and Ministry of Education. In both areas, the majority of the local councils' positions were occupied by Ba'athists.[gg]

Socially, and despite the change in the constitution that stipulated that the Party was the leader of the society, the Ba'ath Party re-imposed its grip on schools via the vanguard and youth organizations. Students and pupils were required to swear the oath of the party daily.[hh] The party organized several events to celebrate 'national holidays' including the 'March Revolution' and 'Corrective Movement'.[89] In September 2018, and subsequent to local administration elections in Zamalka, the Ba'ath Party formed the Ba'ath Battalion. This military formation absorbed former rebels and was based in the town of Zamalka.[90] In April 2019, a group of Ba'athist youth formed the 'Ba'ath Volunteers Team'.[ii] During the research period, Erbeen neither had a military formation attached to the Ba'ath party nor a 'Volunteer team'.[jj] This, however, does not rule out the fact that some individuals from Erbeen may have joined the Battalion.

Notwithstanding the successful revival of the Ba'ath Party to Eastern-Ghouta, its role remained limited in the process of reconstruction and return of services. In Erbeen, the party practiced a symbolic role through the presence of its members in official and social ceremonies. The head of the first division in the city and his deputy paid two highly publicized visits to the

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[gg] Author's interviews with interviewees # 19 and 20, members of the Ba'ath Party in Zamalka and Erbeen, on June 07 and 10, respectively.
[hh] Ibid.
[ii] Author's interview with interviewee #19, a member of the Ba'ath party in Zamalka, on 07 June 2020.
[jj] Author's interview with interviewee # 20, a member of the Ba'ath party in Erbeen, on 10 June 2020.

small returning Christian community during Christmas 2018 and 2019.[91] They were further among the honorary guests during the official opening of the electricity and telecommunication offices in the city. Higher ranking Ba'athists, such as Jamal al-Qalish and Nazir Erbeeniah, among others, were present during visits of ministers and governors or ceremonies such as the reopening of schools.[92] The party neither organized nor sponsored any social initiatives at reconstruction in the city.[kk]

Unlike Erbeen, the Ba'ath Party was relatively more active in Zamalka. Members of the local division were present during official ceremonies such as the opening of the telecommunication office. The division further sponsored a team of Ba'athist volunteers, which was formed in April 2019. The team organized initiatives such as clearance of debris, distribution of bread and holding up 'national ceremonies' to celebrate national holidays related to the party. While initially not very active, the team increased its activities when Majed Nouman, who became the team patron,[ll] was elected as a member of the Eastern-Ghouta section and later to the sub-branch. Although beyond the period of this research, in April 2020, the team created a Facebook page to publicize its social work and increased the volume of its activities.[93] Meanwhile, the party battalion were not engaged in any social initiatives in the city.[mm]

The difference in the local role of the Ba'ath Party activities in both areas may be attributed to the hierarchy of its members in Erbeen and Zamalka. Members of the party in Erbeen could contribute and show their political participation and engagement through their positions within the state since they occupied high-ranking position within the central state institutions and the local councils. Meanwhile, in Zamalka, lower-rankings members had very limited alternative to showing their commitment beyond their volunteerism or direct association with the local Ba'ath battalions.

5.4.4 Former rebels

Notwithstanding the offer for reconciliation and fearing retribution, the majority of the rebels left the region when the government forces returned in March 2018. During the research period,

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[kk] Author's interview with interviewee #19, a member of the Ba'ath party in Zamalka, on 07 June 2020.
[ll] Ibid.
[mm] Author's interview with interviewee #19, a member of the Ba'ath party in Zamalka, on 07 June 2020.

the role of former rebels in Erbeen and Zamalka was limited to collaboration with the security and armed forces and they had inconsequential role in the process of reconstruction or return of services. In Erbeen, Abu Jamal Shanabo, who was a member of the security office of the al-Rahman corps, continued to play a role in everyday life with a small number of his former associates.[nn] His name soon rose to infamy due to his cooperation with the security apparatuses and his involvement in extortion of (small) businesses, especially operators of electricity generators, who were are only allowed to operate for a fixed fee / bribe.[oo] While he was not the only former rebel to collaborate with the authorities, he did have a favourite position because of his direct contact with the security forces and willingness to participate in illegal activities. Reportedly, on several occasions, he informed on weapons caches and former associates of the rebels.[pp] Similarly, the role of former rebels in Zamalka was limited to cooperation and working with the security apparatuses through the Ba'ath battalion or direct enlistment.[qq]

In contrast to other areas in Syria, the role of the rebels in Erbeen and Zamalka remained very limited. Unlike other areas, former rebels could not hold to keep their weapons. Furthermore, none of the remaining rebels had high-profile position or the charisma of some of the leaders that had left. They were further small in numbers and without the support of the local community or returnees. Finally, the involvement of individuals such as Abu Jamal Shanabo in ill-practices antagonized the local community against them and hence weakened their position as compared to other elites in the region.

Examining the role of local elites in the process of social and political reconstruction leads to several observations. First, the revival of old networks within the 'liberated area' was instant and depended on the familiar figures, whose loyalty and allegiance were tried and trusted. As far as the Ba'ath Party is concerned, the revival was on the basis of a 'election', which enabled persons with older ties to assume positions within the local governance institutions. Second, the role of the conflict-era 'elites' is limited with regards to social and political reconstruction as opposed to the security sphere. Notwithstanding their new association to the security apparatuses, which legalizes their status, they engaged in illegal actions such as embezzlement and solicitation of bribes on behalf of security officers, which

[nn] Author's interview with interviewee # 12, a former rebel associated with the al-Rahman Corps, on 26 May 2020.
[oo] Ibid.
[pp] Author's interview with interviewee # 08, a resident of Erbeen, on 01 June 2020.
[qq] Author's interview with interviewee # 12, a former rebel associated with the al-Rahman Corps, on 26 May 2020.

further undermined any potential role within the local communities. Thirdly, although the business community was very active in the city of Erbeen, for example, this did not translate into political capital through the local administration elections as none of their associates assumed any official positions. In contrast, associates of the religious figures, and equally the Ba'ath Party, did translate their active engagement into political gains through these elections. The head of the local council in Erbeen is a nephew of the head of religious endowment and a Ba'athist and so is the head of the only local charitable association.

Fourth, the role of elites was deterministic with regards to the social and political reconstruction in both areas under study. Erbeen, the city where elites were active and engaged in the process of the state return, made a faster recovery as opposed to Zamalka, where elites were almost absent during the research period. The presence of a strong network of businessmen, religious figures and members of the Ba'ath Party in the city of Erbeen helped with the mobilization of resources, activation of society and steering the resources of the state into the city. The activities and direct engagement of these networks further attracted the attention and interest of the representative of the central state, which resulted in pledges of administrative facilitations and financial support. Correspondingly, the absence of such networks or their weak presence resulted in a reduced mobilization of resources, less active engagement from the society and less attention from the central state.

5.5 Conclusion

The chapter has sought to examine how the state re-established itself in Erbeen and Zamalka in the countryside of Damascus after 5 years of rebels' rule. The state return was examined through the prism of institutions return and the role of local elites in the process of social and political reconstruction. Although a part of the same official response, the analysis of the return dynamics shows that the state at the local level is shaped by the interactions of local actors and dependent on the local context. Supported by local elites, the state institutions were reactivated earlier in Erbeen, while the process was slower and less reliable in Zamalka, where the local elite are absent, weak and played a very limited role. In this process, and while the destruction of people's livelihood and economic infrastructure rendered them more dependent on the state as it became the main provider, the role of local actors was further strengthened, although it remained subordinate to the state. These actors aimed to complement and support the state, represented by its institutions, and not to replace or challenge it. Although situating itself above

the various local actors and claiming representation of all interests, the state and local actors were mutually constitutive and enforcing of each other position.

This chapter shows that in the areas under study, the return of coercive apparatuses was prioritized; however, this was not paralleled by a strict implementation of rules and regulations in different aspects of every-day live, apart from the reconciliation agreement requirements. The role of non-coercive apparatuses, and not withstanding their limited capacity, grew more salient gradually as the process of physical and economic reconstruction started. In addition to support from the central state, the non-coercive institutions received financial and technical help from various non-governmental organizations and benefited from the support of local elites, which increased their role and capacity to shape the process of the state return.

The chapter further shows that although the government regained control over the area militarily and maintained its control through the deployment of security forces, it did not entirely disregard bureaucratic and political mechanism such as the administrative re-appointment of local councils' members and elections to consolidate control. It further demonstrates the importance of the old cliental networks in the state return. Employing administrative and political mechanisms to reinstate its cliental networks, the state maintained a veneer of legality and enhanced the claim of its representatives' legitimacy. The mechanisms further enabled the full capture of local administration institutions. Incorporation into the cliental network seems to remain trust-based and hence former rebels were excluded from reaping the benefits of the state return. The role of this group's member remains trivial in comparison to affiliates of the Ba'ath Party, for example.

Lastly, while in the case of Eastern-Ghouta the return of the state was only possible through a military victory, the process was only to be complete through a change of narrative on the side of the government, at least publicly, which was concomitant with its early return. While the scenario will remain a hypothesis, the return of the state would have probably been much different had its representatives maintained a hostile narrative against the region and its people as this might have altered the calculations of local actors and swayed them from investing in the return of institutions and services. The change of narrative was woven into a quest to normalize life through the 'reconciliation processes', which although motivated by security concerns, it provided a path to normal life, wherein rebels and citizens 'enjoy their rights' and respect their obligations.

6 Chapter six: Conclusion

The aim of this research has been to explain how the state, conceptualized as a field of power, re-established itself in the city of Erbeen and town of Zamalka in Eastern-Ghouta, in the countryside of Damascus. Through the prism of the post-Weberian state-in-society approach as well as the authoritarian resilience framework, the focus of this research was on the state's institutions and local elites and how they shaped the return of the state.

The first core chapter elaborated on the state-building strategies of the Ba'athist political system and President Hafez al-Assad. In addition to the central role of (coercive) institutions, the chapter showed that the political system, authoritarian in nature, attached great importance to the state-society relations and was mindful of the need to penetrate the society and to build a cross-sectarian and cross-class coalition. Under the rule of an ideological party, the political system was pragmatic and built an elastic social pact which allowed for the continues adjustments and accommodation of new actors and interest, which secured its stabilization and guaranteed its resilience.

The second core chapter showed how authoritarian political systems reconfigure and readjust in the face of economic and security challenges. It elaborated on the process of 'authoritarian upgrading' during the first decade under President Bashar al-Assad and showed that while authoritarian political system do have the capacity to transform, the process is not risk free, especially if it does not take into consideration the impact on the state-society relations and how such transformations may impact the social pact. The chapter further presented an analysis of the mechanisms of resilience of authoritarian systems, the Syrian one in particular, in the face of security challenges and how they adapt to such challenges.

The third core chapter analysed the state return in the area under study. The chapter showed that, in addition to institutions, the process relied on the old power networks in the context of authoritarian reconfiguration characterized by limited state resources. The chapter showed that the state employed a mix of soft and repressive strategies to establish its authority, including the use of administrative and electoral mechanisms. It further demonstrated the importance that authoritarian systems attach to local support and 'normalization' of relations with local communities either through the reconciliation agreement or change of narrative.

The chapter further demonstrated the constitutive relationship between the state institutions and officials on the one hand and local actors and power networks on the other. Complementing the role of institutions and officials, old power networks played an important role in the process of social, political and economic reconstruction. The intervention of these actors moulded the process in their respective areas and impacted the shape and capacity of the returning state.

Theorizing the return of authoritarianism

Beyond the empirical discussion on the state return in Syria, the evidence from the case study shows that authoritarianism does transform throughout conflicts, while maintaining its recognizable characteristics and approaches in order to create solutions to the challenges that it faces. In the case of Syria, the findings show that authoritarianism persist and continue after the end of conflict, although in different ways that correspond to the social and political context. As has been shown, the conflict did not result in the destruction of pre-war institutions and networks. Neither did it create a space to build a more inclusive and representative governance. To the contrary, the case at hand shows a high level of continuity with pre-conflict institutions, practices and pre-conflict power networks. This continuity shaped the process of the state return. At the local level, this particular case of authoritarianism return followed the old rules and was characterized by the return of the ‘old system’, which resorted to new mechanisms including an increased reliance on local actors given its limited financial resources.

Drawing on the aforementioned conclusion, and in line with the state at the national level, it may well be argued that authoritarian states at the local level persists and transforms, while maintaining the main features of the old system. Nonetheless, this argument falls short of theorizing on the return of authoritarianism at the local level and is not generalizable since the case of Eastern-Ghouta is characterized by a total military and security domination, unlike other areas. This calls for further investigation of how the authoritarian state return at the local level in different contexts taking into consideration variables such as the presence of rebels or the strength of local actors and local economy, among others. This would also invite further research into the legitimacy of the new order as well as its durability and sustainability in these different contexts.

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Annex 1: List of interviewees

#	Date	Reference	Affiliation	Area
1	15 April	Interviewee 01	Member of al-Rahman Corpse negotiation team of the Al-Rahman Corps	Turkey
2	13 April	Interviewee 02	Former member of the Local Council of Erbeen during the rebel control	Idlib
3	18 April	Interviewee 03	Middleman between the rebels and government forces	Idlib
4	May 25	Interviewee 04	Resident	Erbeen
5	May 26	Interviewee 05	Resident	Erbeen
6	May 30	Interviewee 06	Resident	Erbeen
7	May 30	Interviewee 07	Resident	Erbeen
8	June 01	Interviewee 08	Resident	Erbeen
9	June 03	Interviewee 09	Resident	Erbeen
10	May 29	Interviewee 10	Construction businessman	Erbeen
11	May 30	Interviewee 11	Businessman	Erbeen
12	15 April and May 26	Interviewee 12	Former rebel / al-Rahman corps	Erbeen
13	May 29	Interviewee 13	Former rebel / al-Rahman corps	Erbeen
14	May 30	Interviewee 14	Security officer	Damascus
15	May 20	Interviewee 15	NGO worker	Erbeen
16	May 27	Interviewee 16	NGO worker	Erbeen
17	May 25	Interviewee 17	Former resident	Zamalka
18	June 04	Interviewee 18	Resident	Zamalka
19	June 07	Interviewee 19	Ba'athist	Zamalka
20	June 10	Interviewee 20	Ba'athist	Erbeen
21	May 29	Interviewee 21	(Redacted for security related issues – contact the author for further info)	Zamalka
22	June 01	Interviewee 22	(Redacted for security related issues – contact the author for further info)	Zamalka
23	May 27	Interviewee 23	(Redacted for security related issues – contact the author for further info)	Erbeen

Annex two: Syria: Plagiarism declaration

Declaration of Originality/Plagiarism Declaration
MA Thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights
Utrecht University

(course module GKMV 16028)

I hereby declare:

- that the content of this submission is entirely my own work, except for quotations from published and unpublished sources. These are clearly indicated and acknowledged as such, with a reference to their sources provided in the thesis text, and a full reference provided in the bibliography;
- that the sources of all paraphrased texts, pictures, maps, or other illustrations not resulting from my own experimentation, observation, or data collection have been correctly referenced in the thesis, and in the bibliography;
- that this Master of Arts thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights does not contain material from unreferenced external sources (including the work of other students, academic personnel, or professional agencies);
- that this thesis, in whole or in part, has never been submitted elsewhere for academic credit;
- that I have read and understood Utrecht University's definition of plagiarism, as stated on the University's information website on "Fraud and Plagiarism":

"Plagiarism is the appropriation of another author's works, thoughts, or ideas and the representation of such as one's own work." (Emphasis added.)[rr]

Similarly, the University of Cambridge defines "plagiarism" as *" ... submitting as one's own work, irrespective of intent to deceive, that which derives in part or in its entirety from the work of others without due acknowledgement. It is both poor scholarship and a breach of academic integrity."* (Emphasis added.)[ss]

- that I am aware of the sanction applied by the Examination Committee when instances of plagiarism have been detected;
- that I am aware that every effort will be made to detect plagiarism in my thesis, including the standard use of plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin.

Name and Surname of Student: Mohammad Kanfash

Title of MA thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights:

'Return to the Homland's Bosom': The case of Erbeen and Zamalka in the countryside of Damascus

عربين و زملكا في ريف دمشق العودة الى حصن الوطن

Signature	Date of Submission
MK	02 August 2020

[rr] https://students.uu.nl/en/practical-information/policies-and-procedures/fraud-and-plagiarism

[ss] http://www.plagiarism.admin.cam.ac.uk/what-plagiarism/universitys-definition-plagiarism

Annex Three: Syria: History and early state trajectory

1 History

Syria, in its current map, is a relatively new country despite the fact that two of its biggest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, top the list of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. Historically, the country was a part of the Levant or 'Bilad al-Sham – بلاد الشام', which incorporate the historic lands of Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon. The geographic location of the country made it a crossroad for trade between Asia and Europe. Religiously, the area was of a great importance for both Muslims and Christians as it was located on the pilgrimage route to Palestine and Mecca as well as due to the presence of many holy sites. This importance resulted in constant competition over the control and governance of this land, which has seen the rise and fall of many dynasties and empires including the Roman, Byzantine and a succession of Islamic Caliphates including, among others, the Umayyads, Abbasid, and the Ottomans.

2 Syrian State before 1963: late Ottoman era and early national trajectory

2.1 Ottomans and the State in Syria

Syria as a part of the Levant was under the control of the Ottoman empire for approximately four hundred years starting from 1517. The Caliphs' rule was based on Islam, from which laws were derived for Muslims, while non-Muslims had the *millet* system, in which minorities were allowed a form of self-governance to regulate their social spaces and personal affairs including taxation, education and religious affairs. Laws in the empire were personal rather than territorial (Chatty 2017: 24). In a bid to modernize in line with European powers, different Caliphas, under pressure from external forces and due to national decay, introduced three waves of political, social and economic reforms; in 1839, 1856 and 1876. These reforms or *Tanzimat* cumulated with the promulgation of a short-lived constitution in 1876, which introduced a form or constitutional Caliphate and formalized equality among the various ethnic and religious components of the empire. A body of representatives ensued from these reforms too; however, not for long. Unlike in Europe, where national states had been either established or being crafted, the Ottomans promulgated an Ottoman identity, which at the core of its ideology does not differentiates between all subjects of the Caliph (Chatty 2017).

As a result of the new administrative reorganization in light of the *Tanzimat,* modern Syria became a province '*Vilayet* or *Wilayah'.* Officials from Istanbul were dispatched by the

central government to administer Syria and they usually made use of local *notables* to consolidate their reign and reach out to local constituencies. For fear of independence, such rulers were not militarily empowered and hence their dependence on the local elements was not merely for social purposes, but also a form of political and military empowerment. Local councils were established in which the main ethnic and religious components of the province were represented. In the late nineteenth century, and as a result of wide displacement due to wars with Russia and Greece, the Syrian province received hundreds of thousands of migrants and internally displaced from across the empire adding to its rich ethnic and religious texture.

These new waves of migrants, coming from as far as Crimea, Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria, were encouraged to establish new settlements and provided with land to settle. Due to the exposure to missionary work of the Europeans and Americans as well as the opening of various educational centres, which promulgated western ideas of nationalism, a new ideology of Arabism competed against the recently pronounced Ottoman identity. It was under the guise of this new ideology and in the chaos of the First World War that the Syrian province revolted against the Ottoman empire in 1916 and secured its independence on 1 October 1918 (Khoury 1983 and Antonius 1939, Hourani et al 1993).

2.2 Arab State and the French Mandate

The fall of the Ottoman Empire ushered in the creation of modern Syria as a part of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and United Kingdom, which divided the Levant into two spheres of influence for the two powers. Greater Syria, which included Lebanon at the time, came under the French Mandate. This was contrary to the promises of the British Government which had proclaimed its support for the establishment of an Arab state should the people of the Levant raise up against the Ottoman empire. Upon the British invasion of Syria, Faysal ibn al-Husayn, the son of the ruler of Hijaz in modern day Saudi Arabia and one of the leaders of the Arab revolt of 1916, proclaimed the independence of Syria and his own right to govern it. The Arab state was born dead as it was starved for financial assistance and did not have the necessary requirement for statehood. At the time, the state apparatus maintained its Ottoman characteristics albeit with a diminished role for social prominent actors or notables. (Khoury 1989).

Under the universally sanctioned mandate system, Syria became the suzerainty of France in spite of the wishes and protestation of the Syrians, who faced off the invading forces in the battle of Maysaloun in 1920, during which the Minister of Defence was killed. In line

with their experience in Africa, the French rulers, once controlling the country, sought to divide it into even smaller pieces hence the atomization of the territory along regional and ethnic lines and the creation of Lebanon as well as a Druze and Alawite states. The aim of this policy was to counter the nascent Arab nationalist movement (Khoury 1989).

Similar to the Ottoman ear, France ruled through colonial representatives that were dispatched from France. The High Commissioners, who came from military and civilian backgrounds alike with a majority from the former, presided over a bureaucracy consisting of French civilian and military personnel, whose governance experience was mostly gained in the French colonies in Africa and who aspired to transfer the same experiences to Syria. The French administration worked with a Syrian cabinet, which was boycotted nationally and was constituted by representatives of the local communities and remnants of the old regime. Gradually, the state bureaucracy increased, due to the introduction of new institutions under local and international pressure. Elections were held in the 1928, which produced a national assembly.

As per the Mandate requirement, which was to assist the new countries towards their full independence and the creation of a sound political system, a draft constitution was promulgated, which was inspired by European democratic systems. The French did not work towards a national identity, as this would have run against their presence in the country; however, the various ideologies were fostered at the period including Arab nationalism, Islamism and socialism. As far as social actors are concerned, the French authorities reinforced the landed elites and co-opted tribal leaders through the distribution of formerly collectively held lands in exchange for political subservience and commitment to the French project (Abboud 2018: 21). In a bid to increase its support among minorities, various laws and regulations were introduced by the French authorities (Neep 2012).

As far as the coercive apparatus of the colonizing state is concerned, and by the French design, the army developed a strong rural and minority complexion, under the leadership of French officers. This was partly a response against the Arab nationalist movement, whose affiliates were mostly of Muslim backgrounds. The French focused in their recruitments on historic Levantine minorities such as the Druze and Alawites as well as members of the (relatively) newly displaced groups such as Armenians and Circassians, as the latter were considered to lack connections to or affinity with the Arab nationalist movement. Regardless of the gradual and incremental political achievements of the nationalist movement in the mid-

and late- thirties, very little changed with regards to governance and the composition of the bureaucracy and the coercive apparatus, which led, among other factors, to a national mobilization against the French mandate. The struggle against the French was crowned with national independence in 1946 (Mizrahi 2003).

2.3 Independence and subsequent era

The nationalist bloc that was leading the struggle against the French presence in Syria produced the main politicians and parties that continued to rule Syria after its independence. The continuation of the old political order was soon racked by instability due to national and regional events. Politically, and especially after the occupation of Palestine, the ruling elites were accused of malmanagement and hence were forced to leave power. A variety of political parties morphed, and various ideologies were in competition to dominate the political and social landscape. Beyond the elite-controlled institutions, the army and bureaucracy emerged as two important sites for political competition. The plural landscape led to the factionalization of politics and state institutions (Abboud 2018: 26).

It was in this environment that the armed forces moved in to seize power on four occasions to 'rid' the country of the competing factions and to restore stability and build the 'state'. Many initiatives were undertaken to professionalize the armed forces and local police forces as well as the bureaucracy and state institutions; however, such initiatives were short-lived as hand changed after each coup leading to rounds of dismissals and purges against officers and their associates in the bureaucracy. Next to national realities, both regional and international meddling played a role in the political instability of this era, which came to an end with the union between Egypt and Syria in 1958 (Seale 1965).

2.4 United Arab Republic: Syria and Egypt

The new United Arab Republic (UAR) was declared in February 1958 in an attempt to consolidate Syria's political institutions and end instability. It was the work of military figures, who pushed for it without any political consultations. For the merger to happen, the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, stipulated the dissolution of all political parties and the concentration of all constitutional powers in his presidency. Socially, the new state was not successful in attracting or consolidating a social constituency within the Syrian political scene. To the contrary, some affiliates of the older parties were persecuted and had to flee leading to the exclusion of critical masses from the new system.

Economically, under the new leadership, a plan of radical nationalization, which made the state directly responsible for capital accumulation, was implemented at the cost of private commercial and industrial sectors (Heydemann 1999: 106 in Abboud 2018). These plans and initiatives, next to their ramification for the political economy model, antagonized and excluded the landed elites. In order to secure its domination and maintain its control, the new system expanded its coercive apparatus and supplemented it with new institutions including in the intelligence sector. A main trait of these institutions at the time was their authoritarianism (Heydemann 1999 in Abboud 2018).

Meanwhile, military officers, whose political allegiance were not trusted, were either discharged, assigned to civilian occupations or relocated to Egypt. These changes impacted further the cohesion of the already-fragile armed forces and antagonized many of its members. The union came to end in 1961 by a putsch that was led by an army officer and encouraged regionally. A period of political instability ensued after the UAR and was only ended when the Ba'ath Party assumed power after a coupe in 1963. The state transformation that occurred during the UAR period was not reversed afterward, but rather reinforced (Abboud 2018 and Seale 1995).

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