The Civilian Administration of the Aleppo Insurgency

An Islamist rebel group in Aleppo called "the Authority for the Promotion of Virtue and Supporting the Oppressed" reviews applications for aid on Feb. 25. In addition to handing out aid, the Islamist group says it is carrying out civilian administration in parts of Aleppo. (© Hamid Khatib/Reuters/Landov)

Analysis – October 2013

Text by Adam BACZKO, Gilles DORRONSORO and Arthur QUESNAY

Map by Xavier HOUDOY

To cite this article:

ALEPPO DIVIDED: AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION IN SEPTEMBER 2013

Legend

- Orange: Area under government control
- Yellow: Area under opposition control
- Military Base
- Syrian armed forces HQ
- State Institution

Salaheddin Neighborhood
Aleppo municipality
Road
Insurrection’s Institution

Base maps: Google Earth, d-maps
While the human and financial means were limited, civilian institutions have nevertheless emerged in a few months in the zones conquered by the insurrection movement in Northern Syria. This experience of reconstructing an administrative system through the bottom-up has enabled the public service system to restart and constitutes the basis for an alternative to the Damascus regime. The management of Eastern Aleppo by the armed opposition thus constitutes both a strategic and a political challenge.

The areas controlled by the insurgency in the country’s second city account for probably – the figure is uncertain – over a million inhabitants, and their management represents a test for the sustainability of the opposition in the long run. Despite daily bombings and limited external aid ($400 000 since its creation in March, to which can be added one-off aid donations which generally add up to a few tens of thousands of dollars), Aleppo’s new municipality has managed to reestablish the vital public services. City agents pick up the trash, electricity and water are available several hours a day and shops, schools and hospitals have reopened. The police force is progressively re-forming throughout the city, although numbers remain in the few hundreds. In the short term, the city’s access to food seems more or less secure, and a limited return of refugees from Turkey could even be observed this summer.

Yet, this nascent administration lacks the essential resources and qualified personnel required by a city of this size. Indeed, while it is de facto providing for most of the city’s public services, the municipality is regularly confronted by competition from certain armed groups attempting to create alternative authorities, and is now working under the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL – ad-dawla al-islâmîyya fî-‘Iraq wa-sh-shâm), affiliated with Al Qaeda.

**The two-fold process of administrative reconstruction**

The development of an autonomous administration began with the seizing of the Eastern part of the city after the departure of the regime forces in August 2012. The civilian activists that had participated in the organization of daily protests started then to take part in the city’s management. Already in 2011, numerous informal networks of solidarity had formed to support the peaceful protests. These groups, while lacking clear structure, tried to coordinate the demonstrations and to provide some services forbidden by the repression, such as medical care. Also, while fighting erupted in other cities, especially in Homs or Hama, some of these networks took charge of, fed and housed the displaced refugees in Aleppo. However the efficiency of these first initiatives was limited by the violence of the security forces which were arresting activists and forcing them to go underground.

With the fall of Eastern Aleppo, these local initiatives had to face a particularly precarious context. Part of the population fled the combats, but a number of inhabitants stayed or returned several weeks later once their neighborhoods were liberated. The city’s access to water and electricity had been cut by the fighting, while the schools and hospitals – systematically targeted by the regime’s bombings – were forced to close. Winter 2012-2013 was
particularly harsh for the city’s inhabitants who lacked food and heating. The absence of running water as well as the accumulation of trash, explain the frequency of skin diseases and infections to which children are particularly vulnerable. At this time, the activist networks were the only groups available to coordinate aid and try to maintain minimal public services. In each neighborhood, a structure, sometimes two or three, under the title of neighborhood council or local council (majlis al-hay or majlis mahâli), emerged from the initiative of local activists.

Side by side with this bottom-up reconstruction, the Syrian National Coalition (al-ıtilâf al-watani as-sûrî) regrouping the different components of the Syrian opposition, was trying to rebuild a civil coordination structure at the governorate and municipalities level. In particular, a Governorate Revolutionary Transitory Council (al-majlis an-intiqâli ath-thawrî lil-muhâfaza) was charged with organizing an administration at the governorate and city levels. Its headquarters, based in the industrial neighborhood of Sheikh Najjar, became an administrative centre around which other institutions, such as the Military Council of Aleppo, latched on. The latter coordinates the different armed groups in the governorate, the new civilian police force, as well as a radio and a television channel. However, during the winter 2013, the Transition Council met with strong resistance by the Local Councils, which were questioning its legitimacy, thus reflecting greater tensions at the heart of the opposition between the activists inside and outside of Syria.

In March 2013, the integration of the two processes – the bottom-up reconstruction of local institutions and the attempt to coordinate them from the top-down – led to the organization of elections in the city of Gaziantep in Turkey. Taking inspiration from the experience of the neighboring province of Idlib, consensual personalities were charged by the Coalition to select hundreds of delegates in the parts of the governorate controlled by the insurrection. This electoral body was then assembled from March 1 to March 5 2013, and elected the Governorate Council (majlis al-muhâfaza) and the Municipal Council (majlis al-madâna). Mohammed Yaha Nana, a former public servant of the city, and Ahmed Azuz, a first hour activist, were elected respectively Governor of the province and Mayor of the city. Each one leads a team of over a hundred workers, selected both for their professional abilities and for their roles in activist groups. Since the spring of 2013, this effort to form a hierarchical and centralized administration has been pursued through the progressive holding of local elections in the 65 neighborhoods controlled by the insurrection.

The reconstruction of this administrative apparatus results in the rise of individuals from the middle classes, rather young men from these residential neighborhoods of the periphery (Salaheddin, Sakhur, Hanano). Several women from the same background have also accessed functions that they would never have been entitled to considering their social origin: hospital coordinator, district mayor, members of the Education Department. As a result of their early engagement in the opposition and their precious technical abilities (degrees, experience in administrations) – in a context of exile of the more educated part of the population – these men and women have become the engine of the institutionalization process taking place in the territories controlled by the insurgency, with Aleppo representing the most advanced example. As a result of their social background, the members of the Aleppo municipality are rather close to a part of the Free Syrian Army brigades, also composed of urban middle class. The similarity of trajectories between those two groups in the Syrian revolution explains their proximity in daily sociability and the presence of city employees in combating units outside of working hours.
A certain gap nevertheless exists with the insurrection brigades who hold members from the rural areas and which are accused of lacking discipline and of imposing conservative social norms.

This social gap is more obvious when it comes to Syrian activists acting from the outside, notably in Turkey or Europe. The latter often belong to richer families, or even to those big families that dominated Aleppo’s social life, as in the other Syrian cities. Their social networks have enabled them to leave the country more easily, with means such as the ownership of a Syrian passport, a rarity that the Mayor of the rebel part of Aleppo does not possess. Also, degrees and good abilities for Western languages have enabled these Syrians already connected to the Western world to integrate the institutions of the Syrian National Coalition and numerous Western governmental and non-governmental organizations. These external activists often demonstrate a certain social disdain for the members of the Governorate and Municipal Councils, accusing them of incompetence and conservatism. Definitively, a large gap has appeared between those on the inside, who benefit from the social change to occupy positions of authority, and those on the outside, who scarcely interact with institutions held by activists with whom they share little from a social perspective. A clear consequence is the strong hostility between institutions from the inside and from the outside, which in turn partly explains why the aid only rarely reaches the local councils. Another consequence is the often false perception of the situation in Syria by Westerners who are in contact almost exclusively with these Syrians living abroad.

The reestablishment of public services

In a few months, the incumbent city administration has reorganized the public services despite the constant bombings and the lack of qualified employees. Garbage pick-up and rubble clearing are taken care of by former regime employees in rented private trucks. The waste, after being collected and assembled in one area of each street by the inhabitants themselves, is then sent outside of the city to a former marble carriage work now used as a dump. A sanitary team also passes through each neighborhood to spray the streets with insecticide, thus preventing the malaria epidemic that was threatening the city last summer.

The municipality also intervenes at the infrastructure level. It organizes technical teams to maintain electrical and hydraulic networks. As the engineers are outside of the Eastern part of the city, the municipality has not been able to repair the transformers that had been damaged by bombings. The electricity thus runs irregularly only a few hours a day. As the network is integrated in both sides of the city, the two municipal services are forced to negotiate in order to insure the provision of electricity in their respective zones. Another example of an indivisible good is the hydraulic network. It poses the same problem, but with a different solution. Certain water towers are located on the front line, and their access is essential to insure running water in both sides of the city. However the army, unlike the regime’s municipal services, generally refuses to negotiate with the insurgents. As a consequence, the water debit is weak and fluctuating, even though the repaired pipes and water towers of the East side have allowed...
access to running water a few hours a day. On the other hand, as funds are low, the municipality is not maintaining the road network which is deteriorating because of regime strikes.

The Aleppo municipality has aimed at reestablishing the medical and educational services. Hospitals and schools are organized in locations held secret to avoid bombings. Specialized services, notably pediatrics and dermatology, have been reestablished. On the school side, the regime’s books, or photocopied versions, are used as pedagogic support and enabled the baccalaureate exam to take place during the summer.

Despite the absence of stable resources, the municipality is able to provide for these services thanks to a largely unpaid engagement of thousands of employees. Indeed, the salaries of teachers are fixed at 25 dollars a month but are rarely paid. The aid given by the Coalition is irregular, despite the funds allocated by Western and Gulf countries. Since its creation in March, the municipality has had to regularly call upon donations from Syrians abroad. For the months of September and October, the Aleppo municipality no longer disposes of funds to run the city’s public services.

An administration in search of a monopole

Since it is lacking funds, the municipality cannot cover the entire needs of the city. This left a void for militarized groups to try to impose their own administration. The determining question of the reconstruction of a judiciary system set the problem. When the city was taken, in September 2012, the Free Syrian Army brigades on the one hand, and the religious and juridical personnel on the other, agreed to put together a tribunal, the United Court of the Judiciary Council (al-mahkama al-muwâhada lil-majlis al-qadâhî). The later judge according to the Unified Arab Code (al-qânûn al-’arabî al-muwahhad), a penal and civilian body of law based on the Sharia, and established by the jurists of the Arab League in Cairo in 1996. In addition, a police force, made of former police officers having deserted and volunteers, has been created under the control of the Governorate Council. The police’s mandate is to apply the Council’s court decisions. However, in the absence of proper resources and, until recently, of any external aid, the civilian police force has been incapable of imposing their mandate to armed groups and of applying the decisions of the United Court, who in turn lost a large part of its legitimacy.

While facing this judiciary system, armed groups – Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham and al-Tawhid – have established their own court in the early months of 2012, the Legal Committee (ha’fat ash-shari’a), thus avoiding submitting to the authority of a third instance. A difference with the United Court is that the Legal Committee has its own police force, limited to 200 men sent by the armed groups, and sets up check points in the city. Until the summer of 2013, the tribunal refused the application of a written code, as it considered that religious competence would insure a more precise application of Islamic jurisprudence. It also imposes a religious control, such as the headscarf for women and the strict following of fasting during the Ramadan month. The Legal Committee is also implied in the city’s management by creating competing services for electricity provision, education and medical care. Finally, by taking over
first the administration of Aleppo’s mosques, which had been neglected by the municipality, the Legal Committee was able to control most of the city’s mosques.

The competition between both institutions did not lead to armed confrontation, but the tensions are obvious. The Legal Committee is accusing the members of the civilian administration of being bad Muslims, a strong argument in a time of Jihad, while the institutions attached to the Coalition consider their rivals incompetent. Last August, the men from the Legal Committee thus encircled the United Court for one day, until they were forced to retreat by the Free Syrian Army combatants closely related to the civil institutions. Even though, the members from both administrations have to communicate regularly to manage the city and face the armed groups. An agreement between the two competing projects would not be impossible if the Legal Committee was to align its procedures on those of the United Court, and if the municipality was to Islamize its discourse.

In the meantime, the civilian administration is facing the ISIL, which is refusing this institutional game and is directly threatening its existence. This group, affiliated to Al Qaeda, was formed in April 2013 from the fusion of the Islamic State of Iraq (ad-dawla al-islāmiyya fī-l-‘irāq), the Iraqi branch of the movement, and a section of Jabhat al-Nusra, notably the foreign fighters engaged in Syria. In Syria, Al Qaeda is engaging in a process of controlling directly territories. This is a relatively new strategy for the movement, the premises of which were visible in its Yemeni branch – when it occupied the South of the country – and Sahel branch in Northern Mali. Like in most of Northern Syria, the ISIL is progressively taking over the control of strategic places around Aleppo, and is more and more involved in the management of populations. A part of the administrative services of the Legal Committee joined the ISIL in April – at the same time as certain fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra – under the title of Islamic Administration (idāra islāmiyya), but this phenomenon remains rather embryonic.

The rocketing increase in power of the ISIL these last months has profoundly transformed the political dynamics in Northern Syria. The pragmatic collaboration between groups with sometimes opposed ideologies, but united against the regime, has led to a direct confrontation that could hinder the vulnerable and fragile civilian institutions. The way that, in Raqqa, Azaz, Manbij or Tall Abiad, the ISIL eliminated the members of local administrations and now rule over the cities of Al-Dana or Saluq, demonstrates the risk weighing over Aleppo’s administration. Since last summer, the United States and the European Union started providing support for Aleppo’s police force, but many more resources are necessary to the survival of the functioning civilian institutions in the rebel-held territories.
Adam BACZKO is a Phd candidate at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris), Adam Baczko researches comparatively the exercise of justice by armed movements and its political implications.

Gilles DORRONSORO is a professor of International relations at Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University in Paris. A specialist of contemporary Afghanistan and Turkey, he co-founded the European Journal of Turkish Studies and the South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal. He is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Arthur QUESNAY is a PhD candidate in Political science at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University (Paris-1). He is working on the processes of power redistribution in Iraq and sectarian dynamics that are taking place in the contested northern areas of the country.

Xavier HOUDOY is a PhD candidate at the French Institute of Geopolitics (Institut Français de Géopolitique, IFG, Paris). His research deals with the making of India’s foreign policy towards China and the role federated states have in this process.

Noria is a network of researchers and analysts which promotes the work of a new generation of specialists in international politics.