

Youth in Power

Rethinking Syria's Future
from the Local Level

Organized by

Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien
European Center for Kurdish Studies



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Disclaimer: The principles in this paper reflect the discussions of the study trip. This does, however, not mean that all participants agree on all points of this document.

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Decentralization at the Municipal Level

Contextualization

1. Armenia has been undergoing a process of decentralization at the local government level for two decades. The process has been top-down, focusing on creating larger, more effective municipalities that provide better services and take on greater budgetary responsibility.
2. The decentralization of Armenia began with a decision by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure and was implemented by it. Armenian municipalities were not directly involved in the design or implementation strategy of the reform. No referendums were held in the municipalities that were to be merged.
3. Armenia's decentralization was not driven by considerations of minority rights or diversity management. Armenia is a very homogeneous country, and the main goal of the decentralization reform was to strengthen the effectiveness and local accountability of municipalities.
4. The main strategy of decentralization therefore focused on merging municipalities. Armenia now has 71 municipalities (compared to 915 at the start of the decentralization process), six of which were not part of the expansion framework (the cities of Yerevan and Gyumri, as well as four municipalities with recognized minority populations).
5. The responsibilities of municipalities include local matters such as waste collection, local infrastructure, local land management, water supply, wastewater disposal, and local economic development.
6. Overall, decentralization was a success. Larger municipalities led to higher budgets (both their own taxes and fees and their share of state funding increased).
7. Another positive development is that there are clear signs of increased competition between local parties during elections. Access for women, young people, and civil society has also been increased. For example, many municipalities offer economic incentives for women and tools for youth participation. Politically, a quota for women has increased their inclusion in elections, although problems remain in this area. Some municipalities have established separate women's and youth councils, which have an advisory function.
8. Finally, there is greater transparency, particularly as part of the budget is open to applications and proposals from the public. The proposals are implemented by the administration.
9. The decentralization process is not yet complete. Current discussions focus on decentralizing additional decision-making powers in the areas of education, health, and social affairs.

10. Financial challenges remain, and the role of the regions (there are ten) has not yet been clarified in the process, meaning that obstacles to the development of more inclusive local (and regional) structures remain.
11. Finally, another challenge lies in the area of representation: smaller municipalities feel excluded because they are no longer represented on local councils. Unlike minority communities, they were unable to escape the decentralization process.

Lessons Learnt for Syria

1. The local level, i.e., the municipal level, is interesting for Syria because it is not usually the focus of high-level politics. What happens at the federal level is often gets more attention than what happens at the local level. This creates scope and, in some cases, freedom for participation and inclusive processes.
2. In Syria, unlike in Armenia, the process would have to be a bottom-up process, i.e., starting from the villages and towns and working its way up. It is unlikely that the government in Damascus would initiate such a process.
3. Syria's ethnic composition at the local, regional, and national levels, requirements for post-war reconstruction, and the potential for economic development at the local and regional levels would need to be taken into account when determining how responsibilities should be distributed and how large the municipalities should be.
4. The aim should also be to increase the efficiency of local (and, where applicable, regional) structures, which includes greater budgetary autonomy for the local (and, where applicable, regional) level.
5. The decentralization of Syria requires a clear institutional and political framework, which must develop over time. It must clearly define the powers and budgets of the local level, the relationship between the local, regional, and national levels, and their interaction in the provision of services and the reconstruction of the country.
6. A key principle in the allocation of responsibilities should be that whoever has responsibility should receive financial support—responsibilities without a budget are meaningless.
7. Decentralization in Syria must focus on strengthening participation—this includes representation of different population groups, but also access for women and young people to political office, decision-making and advisory processes, and budgets that enable specific projects to meet the needs of different social groups.
8. Decentralization can make a significant contribution to strengthening the legitimacy of the Syrian state. Improving local services, recognizing local and regional differences, and ensuring greater participation and the inclusion of many different voices can help restore trust in state structures after years of conflict and decades of dictatorship.

9. The decentralization of Syria must focus on the principle of fiscal equivalence (local and, where applicable, regional budgetary autonomy for those tasks that are decided at the local and regional level, see point 6) and the strengthening of local (and, where applicable, regional) structures. During the transition phase, elections should be held at the local (and, where applicable, regional) level as soon as possible in order to begin rebuilding and democratizing the country from the bottom up. It is important that the representatives in the local councils, who are given certain powers and have certain budgets at their disposal, are elected and thus take responsibility for the population, rather than being appointed by the governor or even from Damascus.

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