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MUNICIPALITIES UNDER FIRE: LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ISRAEL'S "SECURITY ZONES" IN SOUTHERN LEBANON AND SYRIA

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Cover photo: 10 December 2024: Ali, a beekeeper from the village of Maaraba in Daraa's western countryside, south of the Golan, can no longer reach his land since Israeli forces took control of a nearby hill after advancing into the area and surrounding villages such as al-Shajara the day after the fall of the Assad regime – Maaraba, Syria.

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Introduction

The phone rang just after dawn.¹ It was early April, and the Israeli offensive in southern Lebanon was in full swing. The mayor of Abbassiyeh, a town north of the Israeli advance, was told by an Israeli officer that two families remained inside an apartment building despite evacuation orders that Israel had circulated on social media the previous day. He immediately dispatched municipal workers to bring them out. Less than two hours later, an airstrike destroyed the building.

For the mayor, the episode captured a new reality where an Israeli officer phones a Lebanese mayor directly, treating the town hall as its interlocutor over the state's head. Israeli forces had not entered his town. Yet they could determine which buildings would remain standing and compel the municipality to manage the consequences. The same institution that repaired water pipes and collected garbage now had to help residents escape impending strikes.

The episode illustrates a broader shift in Israel's approach to its northern frontier, which it is seeking to reshape through overwhelming military superiority and the establishment of de facto "security zones", extending beyond its internationally recognized borders. Its objective extends beyond defeating armed opponents to remotely controlling the conditions of civilian life. The Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and Syria is not limited to the areas where the Israeli army is actually deployed but extends over a large territory beyond the Litani River in Lebanon and the UN-patrolled buffer zone in Syria. Across these areas, airstrikes, raids, evacuation warnings, drone surveillance, social media messaging, and coordination requirements imposed on NGOs shape civilian movement, access to assistance, and everyday life.

In the name of the war against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, the emerging "yellow line" marks a military geography shaped by destroyed villages, displacement, and restrictions on return.² Municipal

officials interpret the destruction of homes, water networks, clinics, and markets as an attempt to make the borderlands unable to sustain the communities in which Hezbollah is embedded.³ In southern Syria, Israeli forces exercise control through a less destructive but persistent combination of military outposts, incursions, arrests, and restrictions on access to agricultural land and on the deployment of Syrian security forces. Israeli officials say that this is ostensibly to contain fighters or informants for Hezbollah, Hamas and other armed groups that they say are operating in this part of Syria.⁴ The two approaches differ in intensity and method, but both constrain the ability of local authorities to sustain inhabited, functioning communities.

The consequences depend, however, on how local government responds. Lebanese municipalities have become emergency administrations sustained by resources collected and allocated through Hezbollah and Amal, alongside diaspora contributions and

Naqoura to Wazzani, with about 55 villages inside and roughly 650 km². The army published a map of its "security zone" on 18 June. Justin Salhani, "How Israel's 'Yellow Line' is reshaping southern Lebanon," *Al Jazeera*, 14 October 2026, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/14/how-israels-yellow-line-is-reshaping-southern-lebanon>

- 3 Interviews with approximately 15 mayors and municipal officials from Shia villages south of the Litani River between April and June 2026.
- 4 Numerous sources report the justification offered by the Israeli military without independently establishing whether those targeted belong to the groups mentioned. See Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Under US pressure, Syria and Israel inch toward security deal," *Reuters*, 16 September 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/under-us-pressure-syria-israel-inch-toward-security-deal-2025-09-16/>; Amr Mostafa, "Israeli military 'captures terrorist cell operated by Iran' in southern Syria," *The National*, 2 July 2025, available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/07/02/israeli-military-captures-terrorist-cell-operated-by-iran-in-southern-syria/>; Emanuel Fabian, "Six soldiers hurt in gun battle as IDF detains terror suspects in southern Syria," *The Times of Israel*, 28 November 2025, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/six-soldiers-hurt-in-gun-battle-as-idf-detains-terror-suspects-in-southern-syria/>

1 Interview with the mayor of Abbassiyeh, in person, 24 April 2026.

2 Israel announced the Yellow Line on 18 April 2026 (the term is borrowed from Gaza). It runs roughly 6–10 km deep from

humanitarian assistance.⁵ As existing research already shows, mayors affiliated with both organizations navigate partisan, legal, and territorial responsibilities, while their movement's social provision helps sustain a "society of resistance."⁶ Syrian councils operate within a different effort: rebuilding public authority while local officials and the Interior Ministry seek to prevent grievances from escalating into armed confrontation. Comparing these municipal responses reveals the political limits of military dominance. Destruction can deepen dependence on established partisan networks, while recurrent coercion can discredit the institutions attempting to preserve calm.

For Beirut and Damascus, what happens in these town halls is central to rebuilding state authority. Both governments are trying to restore an authority hollowed out over many years: Lebanon by asserting a monopoly over the use of force and taking charge of reconstruction, Syria by extending the new authorities' reach into a periphery long governed through neglect and repression. In the borderlands, residents judge these efforts less by ministerial announcements than by whether their municipality can restore water, register displaced families, locate a detained son, or reopen access to their fields. Municipalities are where the state becomes tangible and its legitimacy is tested most directly. Israel's "security zones" place these institutions under extreme strain. In Lebanon, recently elected councils remain in place, but the resources sustaining them flow largely through Hezbollah and Amal. Beirut thus asserts its sovereignty while residents depend on partisan networks for survival. In Syria, councils appointed by Damascus represent the state locally, yet they cannot reliably protect residents or obtain answers from Israel. Each incursion makes the government's strategy of restraint harder to defend. In both settings, rebuilding authority depends on

whether public institutions can provide the services and protection through which legitimacy is earned.

About the Research

This article draws on several weeks of field research conducted across southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria between April and October 2026, including dozens of interviews with mayors, municipal council members, municipal employees, local security officers, and residents. Interviews focused on local governance and mobilization: how authorities maintain services, allocate resources, respond to displacement, and manage relations with political organizations and national institutions under military pressure. Combined with observations of everyday municipal practices, these accounts illuminate how local institutions sustain civilian life and how their responses shape political authority. Some interlocutors requested anonymity, either because they were not authorized to speak publicly or feared being targeted by Israel.

Governing Through Destruction

The offensive that began on 2 March 2026, following the US-Israeli assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah's decision to fire back at Israel, intensified a conflict whose consequences had never ceased to shape southern Lebanon. The November 2024 ceasefire reduced the scale of fighting but did not end Israeli attacks. By 24 November 2025, the UN human rights office had verified the killing of at least 127 civilians by Israeli strikes since the ceasefire took effect.⁷ Municipalities in southern Lebanon experienced the 2026 offensive still grappling with damaged infrastructure, displaced residents, and uncertain prospects for reconstruction after the previous round of fighting. Their finances had already been severely weakened by the economic and financial crisis that began in 2019, which reduced municipal revenues and eroded

5 All six Lebanese cases discussed here – Abbassiyeh, Jouaiyya, Qlaileh, Mansouri, Srifa, and Qana – are Shia-majority towns in the Tyre district, several with strong ties to the Amal movement.

6 Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, "Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah, 'Terrorism' and the Politics of Perception," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 173–197, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000322973>; Mona Harb, *Le Hezbollah à Beyrouth (1985–2005): De la banlieue à la ville* (Paris–Beirut: Karthala–Presses de l'Ifpo, 2010); Aurélie Daher, *Le Hezbollah: Mobilisation et pouvoir* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2014), available at <https://doi.org/10.3917/puf.daher.2014.01>

7 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "UN Human Rights Spokesperson Thameen Al Kheetan on Increasing Attacks by Israel in Lebanon," press briefing, Geneva, 25 November 2025, UN Geneva Multimedia Newsroom, available at <https://www.unognewsroom.org/story/en/2921/un-human-rights-spokesperson-thameen-al-kheetan-on-increasing-attacks-by-israel-in-lebanon>

their purchasing power.⁸ For the municipal councils elected in May 2025, governing has meant managing the consequences of war and overlapping crises from the outset of their terms.

By September 2026, Lebanon's Health Ministry had recorded 4,386 people killed and 12,413 wounded since 2 March.⁹ The destruction of the built environment was equally extensive. A UN Development Programme assessment identified 11,095 completely destroyed buildings in southern Lebanon, affecting 17,891 housing units. Based on satellite imagery comparing 23 October 2025 with 29 April 2026, the assessment estimated direct building damage at \$1.38 billion.¹⁰ This excluded damage to roads, bridges, electricity, water, and telecommunications, leaving much of the destruction faced by municipal authorities outside its scope.

In Abbassiyeh, municipal officials describe the destruction of homes, as well as the town's clinic and pharmacies. In Jouaiyya, the old market has been flattened. In Qlaileh, the municipal building has been destroyed and essential water and electricity networks damaged. In Mansouri, officials report the destruction of the water tower. Such losses affect entire communities: without water, medical care, markets, and accessible farmland, even families whose homes remain standing struggle to remain or return.

Municipal councils have consequently become crisis governments. Their responsibilities now extend far beyond waste collection and local taxation to organizing shelters, identifying vulnerable

households, distributing assistance, repairing infrastructure, and maintaining contact with displaced residents. In Abbassiyeh, a crisis committee brought together municipal employees, local police, civil defense volunteers, and the Amal-associated Risala emergency organization. Workers registered families, arranged support, cleared roads, and repaired water networks under bombardment.

Other municipalities have reorganized around a dispersed population. Qlaileh's officials assembled a database of households requiring financial, medical, and food assistance. Srifa drew on diaspora contributions for emergency repairs. Jouaiyya's municipal staff continued operating after the mayor was killed by an Israeli airstrike.¹¹ Qana relocated administrative activity to Beirut and Tripoli, following residents who could no longer remain in their town. The municipality's territorial responsibilities persisted even when its administration and population were physically elsewhere.

Party Networks in the Town Hall

Hezbollah and Amal's municipal influence long predates the current war. Across Lebanon, sectarian parties and local political families have long shaped municipal elections, appointments, and access to resources; in the predominantly Shia towns of the south, the two movements are deeply embedded in local government.¹² The May 2025 elections renewed that dominance: their joint lists won numerous contested councils and were elected unopposed in 102 of the 272 municipalities across the South Lebanon and Nabatieh governorates.¹³

8 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project (MERP)," joint initiative with UN-Habitat, available at <https://www.undp.org/lebanon/projects/municipal-empowerment-and-resilience-project-merp-0>

9 Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, Public Health Emergency Operations Center, "Update Toll of the Aggression—25/9/2026," 25 September 2026 available at <https://moph.gov.lb/en/Media/view/87142/4/update-toll-of-the-aggression-25-9-2026>. The statement reports cumulative casualties from 2 March to 25 September 2026, without distinguishing between civilians and combatants.

10 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Building Damage Assessment Estimates Over USD 1.38 Billion Across South Lebanon—Until April 2026," 19 June 2026, available at <https://www.undp.org/lebanon/press-releases/building-damage-assessment-estimates-over-usd-138-billion-across-south-lebanon-until-april-2026>

11 National News Agency (NNA), "NNA: Jouaiyya Mayor Fawzi Fawaz and Municipal Council Member Abbas Al-Baalbaki Have Been Killed in the Latest Airstrike on the Town," *MTV Lebanon*, 10 March 2026, available at <https://www.mtv.com.lb/en/news/Local/1664172/nna-jouaiyya-mayor-fawzi-fawaz-and-municipal-council-member-abbas-al-baalbaki-have-been-killed-in-the-latest-airstrike-on-the-town>

12 Khalil Gebara, "Empowering Lebanon's Municipalities Amid Crisis," *Arab Reform Initiative*, 11 September 2025, available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/empowering-lebanons-municipalities-amid-crisis/>, especially "Background: Decentralization with Limited Powers."

13 "Hezbollah victory in several villages in southern Lebanon," *L'Orient Today*, 25 May 2025, available at <https://today>.

The financial collapse that began in 2019 intensified these institutions' dependence on outside support. Delayed transfers from the Independent Municipal Fund lost much of their real value through currency depreciation, while locally collected taxes and fees failed to keep pace with operating costs.¹⁴ Municipal interviews indicate that, when the new offensive began, Hezbollah and Amal were therefore both established political authorities and central providers of the money, personnel, equipment, and logistical support needed to sustain municipal services. War has made these longstanding relationships more consequential.

This continuity is politically important for Hezbollah and Amal. Municipalities help preserve the connection between residents, their villages, and the organizations that dominate local political life. They identify needs, maintain records, coordinate assistance, and sustain relationships through which resources are distributed. Their work allows both movements to retain influence over communities and a foothold in local governance despite Israel's overwhelming military superiority.

Keeping these municipalities running requires money, personnel, equipment, and logistical support. Hezbollah and Amal collect and allocate much of the assistance on which councils depend, alongside contributions from diaspora donors, charities, and humanitarian organizations. Municipal officials identify vulnerable households and organize services with support from volunteers and party-affiliated institutions, including experts from the Hezbollah-affiliated Jihad al-Bina. The two movements mobilize resources that allow them to act. These relationships sustain the communities and preserve the parties' influence even where Israeli military superiority has sharply constrained their freedom of movement.

The endurance of an armed movement depends partly on this wider territorial anchorage. Its fighters may be unable to hold ground against a superior military, but its political organization remains embedded in communities through institutions that sustain everyday life. Municipalities preserve local relationships, organize access to services, and keep displaced residents connected to their villages. These functions help explain why battlefield losses do not necessarily dissolve political authority. But the political importance of municipalities for the popularity or endurance of a political movement, including an armed one, does not remove their legal protection: municipal officials cannot lawfully be targeted solely because of their administrative or political functions, and civilian buildings remain protected unless they meet the criteria for military objectives. Deliberately directing attacks against protected civilians or civilian objects is a war crime. The role municipalities play in preserving a community cannot justify attacking them.¹⁵

The relationship also involves negotiation and disagreement. Some municipal officials, in Amal-dominated municipalities, criticize Hezbollah's military practices and seek to keep fighters away from populated areas.¹⁶ Others describe residents' frustration at suffering the consequences of decisions they did not control. Such criticism can coexist with dependence on assistance distributed through networks linked to Hezbollah and Amal. A family may oppose a military decision while continuing to rely on those networks for emergency support. Indeed, service provision creates varying relationships with beneficiaries. Neither party affiliation nor assistance received fully defines an elected official's obligations or a household's political preferences.

lorientlejour.com/article/1461724/hezbollah-victory-in-several-villages-in-southern-lebanon.html

14 UNDP and UN-Habitat also confirm, drawing on 11 municipal finance assessments conducted in 2021-2022, that the crisis hampers the collection of local taxes and fees and the delivery of essential services. UN-Habitat, *Municipal Resource Mobilization Manual: Building the Capacity of Municipalities and Unions of Municipalities* (2025), available at <https://unhabitat.org/municipal-resource-mobilization-manual>; UNDP and UN-Habitat, "UN Inaugurates Municipal Finance Solutions to Tackle Financial Challenges amidst the Current Lebanese Crisis," 10 August 2023, available at <https://lebanon.un.org/en/241278-un-inaugurates-municipal-finance-solutions-tackle-financial-challenges-amidst-current>

15 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 (Protocol I), 8 June 1977, art. 52(2), available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-52>; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Customary International Humanitarian Law Database*, Rule 1 (distinction between civilians and combatants, available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule1>), Rule 7 (distinction between civilian objects and military objectives, available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule7>), and Rule 156 (definition of war crimes, available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule156>).

16 Interviews with mayors and municipal council members in three towns in southern Lebanon, April and May 2026.

Sovereignty Without Provision

In Lebanon, the government's effort to rebuild state authority – through a monopoly over arms, army deployment south of the Litani, institutional reform, and donor-financed reconstruction – has yet to translate into reliable support for municipal governance. Continuing Israeli operations and access restrictions obstruct that effort, while financial shortages limit the state's capacity to restore services. Municipalities remain responsible for residents even when national institutions cannot reliably meet their needs. They must manage the consequences of military operations while negotiating access to funds, equipment, and assistance through overlapping public, partisan, and humanitarian channels.

The distinction between state and party provision is itself blurred: the Council of the South, a public institution closely associated with Amal's patronage networks, illustrates how government assistance can also sustain partisan influence. Beirut therefore asks residents to recognize its authority while municipalities often depend on established political intermediaries to repair water systems, support displaced families, and keep services running. The state's challenge extends beyond assuming security responsibilities. Unless it can make services, assistance, and reconstruction reliably accessible, its assertion of sovereignty will coexist with – and may continue to rely on – the partisan relationships through which communities survive. Those dependencies will shape local authority long after the immediate humanitarian emergency.

The experience of southern municipalities beyond Hezbollah and Amal's strongholds reveals another dimension of the crisis. Christian, Sunni, and Druze towns have different political affiliations and support networks, and some have remained inhabited despite their proximity to Israeli positions. Their survival raises a question that the Shia-majority cases alone cannot answer: can Beirut provide effective support and protection where municipal government depends less on Hezbollah and Amal?

In Rmeish, a Christian village along the Israeli border, remaining in place has required local officials to manage demands imposed directly by Israeli forces. In March, an Israeli soldier warned a mukhtar that the village would be held responsible if displaced people

sheltering there communicated with Hezbollah. Around 240 displaced residents subsequently left, in a relocation coordinated with the Lebanese army and national authorities.¹⁷ State institutions intervened, but they organized departure under military pressure rather than guaranteeing the community's ability to shelter its neighbors. In Sunni-majority Kfarchouba, the same vulnerability extended to water provision. On 10 June, Israeli forces detained two men operating the village's only water source, including a municipal council member, despite the municipality having supplied identification documents for workers accessing the facilities.¹⁸ In the same way, Kfarchouba's mayor was also detained by Israel.¹⁹

Humanitarian assessments show how these restrictions constrain councils that continue to serve resident populations. In June, Médecins Sans Frontières documented damaged or inaccessible water infrastructure in Rmeish, Debel, and Ain Ebel, alongside delays of up to 72 hours, and sometime more, for urgent medical referrals.²⁰ Assistance reaches these communities through overlapping institutional channels. A June convoy organized under the auspices of the papal nuncio, with Caritas and L'Œuvre d'Orient, brought supplies to the three villages; UNIFIL also coordinates humanitarian access and escorts.²¹ These interventions help sustain

17 Nada Homsy and Nada Maucourant Atallah, "More than 200 displaced people expelled from Lebanese Christian village after Israeli threats," *The National*, 10 March 2026, updated 11 March 2026, available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/03/10/more-than-200-displaced-people-expelled-from-lebanese-christian-village-after-israeli-threats/>

18 "Israeli army kidnaps southern Lebanese villagers seeking to collect water," *The National*, 10 June 2026, available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/06/10/israeli-army-kidnaps-southern-lebanese-villagers-seeking-to-collect-water/>

19 Justin Salhani, "How Israel's 'Yellow Line' is reshaping southern Lebanon," *Al Jazeera*, 14 October 2026, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/14/how-israels-yellow-line-is-reshaping-southern-lebanon>

20 Médecins Sans Frontières, "Inhabited Border Villages in Southern Lebanon Remain Isolated as Residents Struggle to Access Water and Essential Services," 24 June 2026, available at <https://prezly.msf.org.uk/inhabited-border-villages-in-southern-lebanon-remain-isolated-as-residents-struggle-to-access-water-and-essential-services>

21 "Humanitarian convoy reaches Rmeish, Ain Ibl, Dibil despite obstacles," *L'Orient Today*, 11 June 2026, available at <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1537980/a-humanitarian-convoy-under-the-aegis-of-the-apostolic-nuncio-to-lebanon->

civilian life, but they cannot ensure predictable access to the infrastructure and services for which municipalities remain responsible.

The comparison therefore qualifies the argument about partisan dependence. In municipalities embedded in Hezbollah and Amal's networks, destruction can increase the importance of those movements as providers and intermediaries. Elsewhere, councils mobilize different connections while confronting a similar gap between their responsibilities and their ability to protect residents. Beirut's weakness is consequently more than an inability to displace partisan authority. It is also an inability to guarantee that municipal workers can reach a well, patients can reach a hospital, or local officials can shelter displaced families. Rebuilding state authority requires making those guarantees credible.

Syria: Restraint Without Protection

In Khan Arnabeh, adjacent to the Syrian-Israeli border and the UN-patrolled Area of Separation, streets remain busy, Syrian government institutions operate, and security personnel have a reduced but regular presence. Since December 2024, Israel has occupied the approximately 235-square-kilometer Area of Separation established in 1974, constructing new military bases inside the buffer zone and occupying the heights of Mount Hermon.²² Its incursions and access restrictions extend its reach across a wider territory, encompassing areas closed to civilians and locations regularly entered by Israeli forces. Indeed, residents describe recurrent daytime incursions where Israeli troops set up checkpoints, and nighttime raids where troops enter homes and take people away for questioning. Nevertheless, everyday administration

continues under Israeli military pressure that local authorities can neither predict nor prevent.

The distinction between permanent military positions and the wider reach of incursions is essential. Israeli bases and checkpoints are concentrated in the Area of Separation, where residents describe the exclusion of Syrian security forces. Beyond those positions, Israeli patrols enter towns and villages under Syrian government administration, sometimes reaching locations roughly 20 kilometers from the frontier.²³ There is no clear evidence of an Israeli plan for annexation or settlement, but the infrastructure under construction points to an open-ended military presence, accompanied by increasingly frequent and larger-scale incursions. Syrian security personnel continue to operate in these areas, but local accounts include incidents in which Israeli forces disarmed them. The Syrian state maintains institutions and personnel without being able to secure their freedom of action.

Residents also describe signs that the fixed Israeli presence is becoming more durable. Bases are being reinforced with concrete structures and prefabricated units. A new wall restricts farmers' access to their land, while construction of 11 concrete military positions raises concerns about a longer-term military foothold.²⁴ These developments do not establish an

[reaches-rmeich-ain-ebel-and-debel-with-difficulty.html](#) ; UNIFIL, "UNIFIL stays the course despite violence in south Lebanon," 22 June 2026, available at <https://unifil.unmissions.org/en/news/unifil-stays-the-course-despite-violence-in-south-lebanon>

22 United Nations Secretary-General, *United Nations Disengagement Observer Force: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2026/756, 23 September 2026, covering the period 15 May-12 August 2026, available at <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2026/756>

23 Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Israeli Ground Incursions Continue in Southern Syria amid Escalating Violations against Civilians," 8 July 2025, available at <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/07/08/israeli-ground-incursions-continue-in-southern-syria-amid-escalating-violations-against-civilians/> ; Sijil Center, "September Records the Highest Monthly Rate of Incursions and Shelling Incidents in Southern Syria Since the Beginning of the Year" [Arabic], 1 October 2026, available at <https://sijil-sy.org/16905> ; Critical Threats Project, "Iran Update, March 4, 2025," 4 March 2025, available at <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-4-2025>

24 The fixed Israeli presence is also becoming more entrenched. According to the UN Secretary-General's latest report on UNDOF, Israeli forces had maintained and reinforced 11 positions by 12 August 2026, while engineering and construction work continued. United Nations Secretary-General, *United Nations Disengagement Observer Force: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2026/756, 23 September 2026, available at <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2026/756>; see also *Security Council Report*, "UNDOF (Golan), October 2026 Monthly Forecast," available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-10/undof-golan-14.php>. Near Jubata al-Khashab in northern Quneitra, reporting documents trenches, earth berms, and a military road that have damaged farmland and restricted access to fields. AFP, "Villagers in southern Syria

inevitable trajectory toward settlement or territorial expansion. They do, however, influence whether residents believe that ordinary life can resume.

The frequency of operations compounds that uncertainty. Sijil, a Syrian monitoring center, documented 36 civilian deaths and 257 people detained since 8 December 2024.²⁵ In October, 51 of those arrested were still in custody.²⁶ Between January and September 2026, 678 ground incursions and 168 raids and searches have been recorded. The trend is toward escalation with, for September alone, 113 incursions, 27 raids, 24 artillery-shelling incidents, 28 temporary checkpoints, 58 military overflights and 21 other incidents, including gunfire toward agricultural and residential areas and the firing of flares. These categories can overlap within an operation. For municipal authorities, repeated interventions mean that access to roads, fields, and public services can be disrupted even where the council itself continues working.

Israel has not established a parallel civilian administration in the communities described here, but it has made attempts at providing aid and some services. This is viewed by both residents and local authorities as coercive. In Hammidiyeh in late 2025, locals refused Israeli aid. An official said Israeli troops then cut the electricity supply to the village and damaged the water infrastructure, leaving people without water or electricity in the winter. There were serious delays in allowing Syrian repair teams

safe access to fix the damage. An Israeli-backed NGO has taken over the health center in the village, but residents are reluctant to use it. Local Syrian authorities have countered by providing mobile health clinics in the area. Israel has also set up health centers in occupied Druze villages which additionally serve as distribution points for food packages.

Damascus continues to finance local councils staffed by government-appointed personnel. Municipalities remain responsible for services, while an external military force can restrict the activities on which those services and local livelihoods depend. Residents turn to their councils for help, but many of the decisions shaping their lives lie beyond those councils' reach.

Agriculture makes this separation between responsibility and power particularly visible. Access restrictions, which are increasingly under Israeli influence, affect fields and pastures that provide much of the region's income. Farmers cannot confidently invest in a season's work if they do not know whether they will be able to reach their land. Municipal officials consequently confront an economic deterioration that repairs to public infrastructure alone cannot resolve.

One councilor estimated that his village's population had fallen by half.²⁷ Another reported that annual requests for building permits had dropped from around 60 under Assad to about 20, despite the removal of earlier restrictions on obtaining approval. These local accounts cannot establish the scale of departure for an approximate population of 300,000 residents living in a region already destroyed by 13 years of civil war.²⁸ They nevertheless suggest how displacement can develop gradually, through declining investment and the departure of households that no longer see a viable livelihood.

fearful as Israel builds military fortifications in occupied Golan Heights," *L'Orient Today*, 8 October 2026, available at <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1550145/villagers-in-southern-syria-fearful-as-israel-builds-military-fortifications-in-occupied-golan-heights.html>; Abdulsalam Fayeze and Tarek Chouiref, "Explainer—What is Israel's 'Sufa 53' military project in southern Syria?," *Anadolu Agency*, 5 October 2026, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/explainer-what-is-israel-s-sufa-53-military-project-in-southern-syria/4078041>. These works suggest preparations for a prolonged military presence, with consequences extending beyond the bases themselves.

25 Sijil is a Syrian monitoring center that draws on a network of local monitors and collaborating activists. Sijil Center, June 2026 monthly report, and "September Records the Highest Monthly Rate of Incursions and Shelling Incidents in Southern Syria Since the Beginning of the Year" [Arabic; title translated], 1 October 2026.

26 Reporting by Al Jazeera English collating lists kept by the Quneitra governorate, UN, and families, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/10/17/israeli-raids-and-arrests-in-southern-syria-push-population-to-the-brink>

27 Interviews with municipal officials and local security personnel, conducted on condition of anonymity, October 2026.

28 The figure of 300,000 is cited by local authorities but cannot be independently verified. However, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUA), *Syria: Country Focus*, July 2025, section 5.8.14, "Quneitra Governorate," available at <https://www.eua.europa.eu/coi/syria/2025/country-focus/58-security-situation-and-conflict-impact-civilians-governorate/5814-quneitra-governorate>, cites IOM's March 2025 estimate of 111,706 inhabitants – including residents, internally displaced persons, and returnees – for Quneitra governorate alone. The broader area discussed here also includes affected districts in southwestern Rural Damascus and Daraa, whose populations are not included in that estimate.

The erosion of administration is also physical. Local officials describe the Quneitra governorate building as unusable after Israeli intervention, forcing its institutions to disperse and operate with reduced capacity. For municipal councils, weakened governorate services make it harder to obtain support and coordinate responses. Even when a council retains its staff, the institutions to which it must refer problems may themselves be struggling to function.

Detentions expose these limits especially sharply. Families seek information about relatives taken by Israeli forces, while local representatives lack reliable means to obtain answers. Municipalities are close enough to residents to receive their complaints but do not possess the authority to resolve them. Their credibility therefore depends partly on whether they can secure an effective response from the governorate, national authorities, or international institutions. On the issue of detentions, this response is lacking.

The question is how long residents will continue to express support for Damascus's diplomatic restraint. Frustration at Israel's unrestrained actions has not yet translated into wholesale rejection of the new authorities, or endorsement of armed confrontation. Residents recognize that the Assad regime's rhetoric of resistance produced no concrete steps toward recovering the occupied Golan Heights, but they increasingly express impatience at the perceived impotence of the new authorities, and say that patience has its limits. Residents describe Israeli military activity and incursions into homes as pressures that could eventually provoke a spontaneous local response. Such warnings do not make an uprising inevitable. They show the difficulty facing local authorities and the Interior Ministry as they seek to contain distrust and prevent another conflict. Appeals for restraint must remain connected to efforts that residents recognize as defending their interests.

A checkpoint near Hammidiyeh illustrates what those efforts can involve. In April 2026, local interlocutors described a recent request transmitted to Israel through UNDOF to remove or relocate the checkpoint or at least establish daytime periods of unrestricted passage. According to their account, Israel rejected the proposal on security grounds. The request concerned a seemingly modest adjustment, but its consequences for movement and livelihoods were substantial.

For municipal authorities, such negotiations present a dilemma. Practical concessions could help residents remain and demonstrate that civilian channels can produce results. Yet repeated bargaining over basic access also risks making restrictions appear permanent, leaving local government to manage their consequences indefinitely. The challenge is to obtain immediate improvements without allowing emergency accommodation to become the only political horizon.

External assistance has offered limited relief. Residents lament the scarcity of humanitarian engagement, while UN interlocutors describe both the province's low priority and the difficult coordination requirements associated with operating through UNDOF. Municipalities thus face increasing responsibilities with little outside support. Greater assistance would help maintain services, but its political significance would also lie in showing residents that their circumstances are being addressed.²⁹

Quneitra's councils depend on a state still rebuilding its institutions and attempting to prevent escalation. Their continued operation is important, but continuity alone cannot sustain confidence. If they cannot help residents reach their fields, obtain answers about detainees, or envisage rebuilding their homes, the distance between municipal responsibility and effective authority will continue to grow.

The Limits of Municipal Resilience

Municipalities are where state legitimacy is tested – and where sovereignty can be eroded in everyday practice. From direct calls to Lebanese mayors to offers of aid in Syrian villages, Israeli forces engage local

²⁹ A \$5 million allocation launched on 31 July sought to address these gaps through six partners across seven priority subdistricts, with assistance intended to reach approximately 65,000 people. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Syria Humanitarian Fund: Q3 2026 Newsletter*, "Reserve Allocation 2," reproduced by IGAM, 15 October 2026, available at <https://igamder.org/TR/syria-humanitarian-fund-q3-2026-newsletter>; see also OCHA, "Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF): 2026 Second Reserve Allocation Strategy."

authorities while bypassing national governments. Councils remain responsible for their communities, yet decisions about access, assistance, and security increasingly depend on a foreign military. For Beirut and Damascus, rebuilding authority therefore means enabling municipalities to serve and protect residents without having to negotiate the terms of civilian life over the state's head.

At the same time, in southern Lebanon, municipalities struggle to preserve communities whose territory has been devastated. In southern Syria, they struggle to preserve civilian authority in places repeatedly subjected to military intervention. Their ability to keep functioning matters in both settings, but sustaining everyday life and preventing military escalation are different achievements. A council can distribute assistance without making return possible. It can repair infrastructure without protecting residents from the next incursion.

In Lebanon, municipal action limits the humanitarian crisis while preserving the relationships through which Hezbollah and Amal remain anchored in the south. As destruction increases needs and exhausts municipal resources, councils and households become more dependent on the networks that mobilize assistance. Israel's military superiority therefore coexists with the endurance of a local political order it seeks to weaken. Hezbollah forces can lose military positions while retaining influence through the institutions that help residents survive.

In Syria, the danger lies in the erosion of the authority that municipal institutions are trying to rebuild. The Syrian government's severe resource constraints leave municipalities and local institutions with limited capacity to respond to the consequences of Israeli military pressure. This is reinforcing a sense of abandonment among local communities. Over time, deteriorating living conditions combined with repeated Israeli incursions are generating growing tensions both toward Syrian authorities and toward Israeli forces. The issue is politically sensitive. Damascus seeks to mobilize international pressure over Israeli actions while maintaining its commitment to diplomatic restraint. At the UN Security Council, Syrian representatives have condemned incursions and detentions while presenting international law and negotiated arrangements as the path to security.³⁰

This approach coexists with domestic demands for a stronger response while Syrian authorities try to avoid an excessive politicization of the issue or domestic mobilization that could further increase tensions.³¹

While many decisions affecting access to land, movement, and personal security remain beyond their control, councils remain responsible for services and receive residents' complaints. Each unresolved grievance makes it harder for local representatives to demonstrate that working through civilian institutions can produce results.

Israeli coercion is also damaging the relationships on which local government depends. Arrests, interrogations, and efforts to recruit informants can introduce suspicion into communities already marked by years of repression and war. Officials need residents' confidence to identify problems, mediate disputes, and communicate with the governorate and security services. When residents fear that information may expose them or their relatives to further pressure, those relationships become harder to sustain.

Damascus's restraint consequently creates a problem of local legitimacy. Residents who support avoiding another war still expect their government to defend their interests. Local authorities and the Interior Ministry seek to prevent armed mobilization, but their appeals lose credibility when they cannot obtain information about detainees, secure access to farmland, or limit humiliating encounters at checkpoints. Restraint must offer a prospect beyond enduring the next intervention.

This does not make an armed backlash inevitable. Nor does every Israeli operation necessarily express a coherent plan for the political future of these territories. Strategic decisions can coexist with shifting threat perceptions, routine military practices, and the conduct of individual units. Municipal authorities nevertheless have to manage their cumulative consequences, regardless of how consistently those operations were conceived.

30 Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "Olabi: Syria is a partner in regional security and stability," 13 October 2026, available at <https://sana.sy/en/syria/2350267>

31 In October, Syrian activists and civil society organizations called for peaceful demonstrations in solidarity with Quneitra and southern Syria, Al Jazeera Arabic, "Israeli forces shell Tell al-Ahmar in Quneitra amid calls for protests against Israeli attacks" [Arabic], 21 October 2026, available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2026/10/21/>

Conclusion

Israel's security zones are undermining the Lebanese and Syrian states' efforts to rebuild authority where residents encounter it most directly: the municipality. In Lebanon, councils remain responsible for communities whose survival depends heavily on resources mobilized through Hezbollah and Amal. In Syria, local authorities must defend a strategy of restraint while struggling to secure protection or redress for residents. These pressures also risk frustrating Israel's stated security objectives. Destruction can deepen dependence on the political networks it seeks to weaken, while recurrent incursions can discredit the Syrian authorities working to prevent another armed front.

For Beirut, asserting a monopoly over arms must therefore be accompanied by a credible offer of government. Clearing Independent Municipal Fund arrears and channeling Council of the South and Higher Relief Commission assistance through councils, according to published criteria, would make municipalities a visible channel of state relief and reconstruction. Support should respond to needs across Shia and non-Shia communities alike. Mayors should also have a formal role, through governors and the Lebanese Armed Forces, in negotiating return and access arrangements in the pilot zones. Israeli officers should not become the decisive interlocutors for councils seeking to restore civilian life.

Damascus faces a different task: making diplomatic restraint produce results that local communities can recognize. Quneitra's councils need reliable channels through the governorate and Interior Ministry to raise detention cases and restrictions on land access, obtain responses, and communicate them to residents. Restoring the governorate's administrative capacity would strengthen those channels. Explaining the government's diplomatic strategy, while creating opportunities for residents to influence local decisions, would also help councils build representative legitimacy beyond their appointment by the central authorities.

Donors should treat municipal capacity as an investment in rebuilding public authority as well as meeting humanitarian needs. Funding should strengthen accountable municipal institutions and make state contributions visible, rather than routinely bypassing them. In the Shia parts of southern Lebanon, this entails an unavoidable dilemma: supporting

councils can also sustain institutions dominated by Hezbollah and Amal. Transparent allocations, public reporting, and access based on need can limit partisan discretion; excluding those municipalities would leave their residents more dependent on the same networks.

Municipal resilience cannot substitute for Israeli withdrawal or a political settlement. It can, however, prevent prolonged military coercion from further dismantling the institutions on which any settlement will depend. A stable frontier requires governments capable of turning their claims to sovereignty into services, protection, and a credible future for the people who live there.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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