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Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria

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The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) has launched the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) since 2012 to serve as an inclusive platform for technical dialogue between Syrians from all walks of life, regardless of their political affiliation; to engage in discussions on the post-conflict development needs and trajectories of the country; to prevent and overcome a conflict trap; and to strengthen the resilience of local structures over the medium and long-term.

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List of acronyms

AQI	Al-Qaida in Iraq
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
GoS	Government of Syria
HTS	Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
NE	Northeast
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Syrian National Army
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
YPG	People's Protection Unit

1. Introduction

Objectives and Relevance

Nearly two years after the last remnants of the Islamic State's (IS) fighting forces were dislodged from their final hideout in Baghouz, Syria, the northeast (NE) region remains highly insecure. Renewed conflict in the northeast spurred by Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 and its consequences—massive displacement, the resurgence of non-state armed opposition groups, the reduction of United States (US) forces and most international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) along with their funding and programming, tensions between the Kurdish-led governing bodies[1] and Arab communities—paint a worrying picture for the future of the northeast and its residents. The continued possibility of negotiations between the Kurdish Administration and the government of Syria (GoS) has similarly foreboding implications ranging from government reprisals against former oppositionists to re-exerting control over IS prisoners. The latter would be particularly troublesome if the GoS were to release the prisoners, as it did in the early days of the conflict, for the purpose of fomenting unrest. This would once again have multiple spillover effects in bordering countries, from the flow of fighters and weapons to a renewed surge of refugees.

Meanwhile, numerous actors with a stake in the future of Syria now maintain a troop presence in the northeast or provide financial and logistical assistance to proxies. Amid this heightened insecurity and renewed conflict, communities across the northeast struggle to secure employment; children are by and large forced to forego proper education;[2] infrastructure projects move at a snail's pace; and services such as water and electricity remain scarce in many areas. In January 2020, the closure of the al-Yarubiyah border crossing from Iraq into Syria severely hindered the transportation of much-needed aid into the northeast. This has been particularly debilitating following the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria,[3] as the need for urgent medical supplies has redoubled.[4]

In short, every factor that previously allowed for the rise of armed extremist groups and the eventual takeover by the so-called Islamic State (IS) in northeast Syria remains unaddressed and, in some cases, more prevalent than before. Which begs the following questions: What are the risks that IS and other extremist groups may regain a foothold in the northeast? Is a return to violence the default for seeking to bring about change or improvement? If so, what can be done by actors at the local, national, and international level to prevent such a resurgence of violence or violent extremism in northeast Syria? This paper aims to address those questions.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first section, we take a historical look at the northeast region and examine the reasons IS targeted it as the basis for their self-described "Caliphate." In the second section, we look at the "post-IS" landscape in the northeast and highlight the current vulnerabilities that exist on the ground—social, economic, military, and political—that may lead to violent extremism or a

reemergence of IS. In the final section, we lay out several key policy recommendations and propose a way forward for local and international actors seeking to preventing the reemergence of violent extremism in the northeast.

The publication of this paper comes at a critical juncture for the northeast, where IS continues to capitalize on the region's instability and has begun to reassert itself in both Syria and Iraq, exploiting the fragile security environment of both countries.[5] A failure to address the core issues that gave rise to violent extremism will undermine the enduring defeat of IS and other extremist groups and lead to the continued suffering of the people of northeast Syria.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The findings and recommendations in this paper are based on three months of field research and interviews[6] in the following cities: Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Urfa (Turkey); Beirut (Lebanon); Manbij, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and Kobani (Syria); and Washington, DC and New York City (United States). The report combined both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in order to triangulate findings as much as possible under the challenging circumstances of violence and limited access to participants inside Syria. In total, the team conducted approximately twenty one-on-one in-depth interviews with practitioners, activists, and researchers on Syria, which complemented scarce desk-top research on the rapidly changing conflict dynamics in the northeast.[7]

Over the course of the research period, our team also relied on focus group discussions to sharpen the design of the study, comparatively contextualize the research, and verify findings through dialogue among stakeholders and technical experts. We conducted two consultation workshops in Beirut and four virtual workshops.[8] At an initial workshop in Beirut with Syrian stakeholders and non-Syrian experts, we introduced the aim of the project and solicited insights, views, and comparative experiences from the Arab region and beyond in order to inform our research. At the second Beirut workshop, the team presented our methodology and initial findings. Over the course of two days, participants (again, both Syrian and non-Syrian) provided their feedback, pointed out gaps, and added their own insights to the research questions. Finally, during the third, virtual workshops with practitioners and policymakers, we presented our policy recommendations and solicited participants' feedback. Workshop participants were provided the opportunity to review a final draft of this paper before publication and their feedback was incorporated into the final draft.

On the quantitative side, the research incorporates findings from a comprehensive anonymous questionnaire comprised of 31 close-ended questions and another 55 semi-structured questions that allowed for more open-ended answers. Questionnaires were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and the total sample size was one hundred individuals. Participants were purposefully selected to capture important spatial as well as demographic characteristics representatives of the population at large as indicated below in Table 1. Due to security challenges associated with Operation Peace Spring, as well as costs and time constraints, random sampling was not feasible. The team relied on trusted intermediaries in cities affected by Daesh, who were trained in the administration of the surveys and instructed to purposefully reach a wide variety of people (age, sex, income level, social group, etc.) for the surveys to ensure as representative a sample as possible.

Given the nature of purposeful sampling, data collection is prone to a margin of error as surveyors can face limitations on who they are able to access during the time of data collection. As such, we acknowledge the under-representation of the Syrian population in the present study. Given the limitation in our sample size, the survey results reported here should not be viewed as broadly generalizable of the perceptions of the population at large. Rather, they are meant to serve as a diagnostic tool to shed lights on important dynamics that should be addressed by policymakers in order to prevent the resurgence of violence in the northeast. Our findings are intended to pave the way for future studies to employ a systematic analysis through larger scale surveys and qualitative data.

Table 1: Statistics of respondent characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
	Place of Origin	
Raqqa	27	27.0
Deir Ezzor	44	44.0
Al Hasakeh	6	6.0
Manbij (Aleppo)	12	12.0
Qamishli	7	7.0
Al Qahtaniyah	4	4.0
Total	100	100.0
	Ethnicity	
Muslim Arab Sunni	81	81.0
Muslim Kurdish Sunni	14	14.0
Christian Armenian	5	5.0
Total	100	100.0
	Age	
No answer	3	3.0
16-25	26	26.0
26-35	42	42.0
36-55	20	20.0
56<	9	9.0
Total	100	100.0

Summary of Key Arguments and Findings

Our research and interviews highlighted several factors which contributed to an environment in which IS and other armed and extremist groups were able to thrive, and which policymakers should pay close attention to when addressing the needs in NE Syria. These include:

- Restrictive state policies that did not allow Syrian citizens in the NE to live a life of dignity and freedom;
- Long-standing Syrian state policies that led to inequalities and a lower standard of living—compared with other parts of Syria—despite the region's natural resources;
- The lack of any meaningful public space for peaceful assembly, participation, or debate;
- The GoS's military response to the (initially peaceful) protests, setting the stage for the rise of armed opposition groups and internal violent conflict on which IS successfully capitalized;

- Divide and rule tactics designed to sow discord among communities in the NE that had, up until 2011, generally peacefully coexisted;
- A natural extension of communities and tribal links between NE Syria and Iraq that allowed for ease of movement, the flow of ideas, weapons, individuals, and eventually IS itself as a group, across the border (this was aggravated by the after-effects of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and ensuing chaos in the country);
- A gaping security vacuum in the NE as a result of the GoS's decision to pull back from this region[9] as the protests snowballed, in order to focus its main efforts on the south and on key central cities such as Damascus and Aleppo;
- A lack of unity of purpose and ability to govern by the armed opposition once they had taken control of parts of the NE;[10] and
- IS's organizational structure, resources, and (initial) perceived success in maintaining order and providing services such as water and electricity.[11]

Family waiting to pick up fuel near al Naim roundabout. Raqqa City, Syria. 2021. Photo credit: Mohamad Othman

2. Context

Northeast Syria, with a pre-conflict population of around 3 million people,[12] has long been home to a diverse array of ethnicities, religions, languages, and communities. The two largest communities are the (largely Sunni Muslim) Kurds and Arabs, which coexisted alongside smaller communities of Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, and Circassians across three governorates: Raqqa, al-Hasakeh, and Deir Ezzor. The area is heavily tribal, with tribes constituting around 90 percent of the population in each of Deir Ezzor, al-Hasakeh, and Raqqa.[13] The diversity of the region[14] is evident not only from the array of communities but also within its largest group, Arab Sunni Muslims, ranging from socially conservative tribes to secularists, atheists, Sufis, and those more religiously conservative who believe in the imposition of Sharia law.[15] Historically, the area has been the heartland for Sufism,[16] and particularly the Naqshabandi order, an ideology that is anathema to that of IS.

Well before the Arab Socialist Baath party came to power in 1963,[17] successive governments undertook "Arabization" initiatives across the country,[18] in which non-Arab religious and ethnic minorities saw their villages and cities renamed to Arabic names[19] and others were forcibly displaced. This Arabization campaign, which reached its peak under the Baath party from 1963-70,[20] hit Syria's Kurdish population across the country particularly hard. The Baath party further developed these efforts with a plan, dubbed the "Arab Belt Plan," to build a 350 km-wide "Arabic belt" along the Syria-Turkey border.

In 1970, then-Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad took power in the last of a string of coups that had rocked the country since its independence.[21] Under al-Assad (himself an Alawite), the minority Alawite population of Syria by-and-large became the dominant beneficiaries of the government's patronage system at the expense of the majority Sunni population and, to a lesser extent, other minority groups.[22] Al-Assad stacked his government and military with Alawite loyalists, which in turn strengthened their adherence to the system and set a sectarian tone throughout the country, frustrating large portions of the population who saw themselves as unfairly marginalized because of their sect. These policies hit the majority Sunni northeastern region of Syria especially hard.

Three years after becoming president, al-Assad began to implement the Arab Belt plan, forcing thousands of Kurds from their homes in favor of Arab families. At the heart of plan was an effort to separate the Kurds living in Syria from those residing in Iraq and Turkey, thereby stopping any attempts to create a Kurdish state that would combine the populations living in those three countries. The project's name was later officially changed to the "Plan for the Establishment of State Model Farms in the Jazira Region."[23] These policies further alienated the Kurdish population living in the northeast.

The region remained consistently sidelined and neglected in comparison to development standards throughout other areas of the country; in 2003, extreme poverty in the northeast was more than quadruple that of the coastal region,[24] and a 2005 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Poverty Assessment Report revealed that the northeast region had the greatest incidence, depth, and severity of poverty in the country.[25]

When President Bashar al-Assad ascended to power after the death of his father, he promised political and economic liberalization reforms that would reorient the country's development model[26] from a socialist state-led economy to a "social market" economy. Al-Assad's plan included measures to encourage outside investment, enhance free trade, undergo regional development, and promote social justice.[27] However, few of these promises materialized in a way that dramatically improved the lives of average Syrians in the northeast. Economic growth was concentrated in the hands of the Syrian elite, namely Alawites and select Sunni families.[28] The state's attention continued to be more focused on large urban centers and less on the northeast.

A 2005 UNDP[29] report noted: "The regional distribution of poverty is more conspicuous, as 58.1 percent of the poor in Syria … live in one region; the North-Eastern region, which has 44.8 percent of the total population … This region also exhibits the highest amount of inequality for the poor, as it has the highest poverty gap and severity indices." This was particularly egregious given the natural resources present in the northeast, including agricultural lands, irrigation structures, livestock and fisheries, and the oil fields in al Hasakeh and Deir Ezzor.[30] [31] [32] Additionally, at the turn of the century, after Bashar al-Assad had come to power, a process was embarked upon to establish a "social market economy" that promised social gains by increasing privatization of economic activity. This opened up opportunities for the elites to accumulate wealth and to expand their social and economic base. However, "while the first decade of the twenty-first century was in part defined by the increased accumulation of wealth by new (and old) economic actors, it was also defined by the negative social impacts ….such as decreased living standards, increased unemployment and labor precarity, stagnating wages, and the like."[33] Coupled with the inherent vulnerabilities of the system he had inherited from his predecessor, Bashar al-Assad's strategy for reform would sow the seeds for an uprising decades later.

The gap between early expectations for reforms and the lack of meaningful change had heightened the sense of grievance in the north-east as al-Assad's rule passed its one-decade mark in 2010. "Growing up in the nineties in that area, even though our village administratively was described by the Syrian state as 'urban,' we didn't have a single police station. In the entire area between al-Bukamal and Hajine, there was only one police station. The GoS presence in those areas was shallow and superficial… people in those areas did not have cozy relations with the state. If there was a traffic accident that hurt or killed someone, the locals would deal with it mostly, relying on the state was a last resort."[34] Fuel became expensive, the agricultural sector became less effective,[35] and people began moving to cities in search of opportunities. "[The region] had challenges that were beyond the capacity of the GoS to fix, they focused on urban centers instead. Some of the areas worst hit by this policy were al-Hasakeh (more so than others), Raqqa and Deir Ezzor."[36]

It is within this context—discontent, underdevelopment, and a general lack of ability to lead a dignified life—that the Syrian uprising reached northeast Syria. What started out as peaceful protests for economic reforms in the south of Syria in February 2011 soon turned violent when the GoS chose to deploy a heavy-handed response. In March, Syrian police arrested several children in the southern city of Daraa for writing anti-government graffiti on a wall.[37] In April, 13-year old Hamza al Khateeb was detained, also in Daraa, during a protest and was tortured and killed by Syrian state forces. His mutilated body was returned to his parents days later.[38] Hamza's brutal treatment and subsequent death sent shockwaves throughout the country and spurred further demonstrations throughout May, his name becoming a rallying cry for protesters throughout the country.[39] Over the next several months, a destructive pattern emerged where protestors would take to the streets and the state would respond with ever-increasing violence,[40] resulting in numerous deaths and spurring another round of protests in response. This cycle

continued to escalate throughout the rest of 2011 and into 2012, with the state increasingly losing control over vast parts of the country.

In June, President al-Assad's call for a national dialogue was dismissed by the opposition as he continued to blame the protests on foreign conspiracies. As the schism between the government and protestors widened, a group of defectors from the Syrian military announced in July the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA),[41] signaling a new, more ominous phase of the conflict and paving the way for the formation of subsequent armed opposition groups. In a diplomatic show of force, the leaders of the US, Germany, France, and the UK issued statements calling for President al-Assad to step down,[42] as had happened with the rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, and eventually Yemen.

Money and weaponry began to flow into Syria from a variety of sources in support of the various armed opposition groups, including from foreign governments, illicit armed markets, Syrian national stockpiles, and battlefield captures.[43] Wealthy individuals in Gulf countries became an ever-increasing source of funding.[44] By August 2011, UN human rights officials put the death toll of Syrians at the hands of the state at over 2,200 in just five months, and the UN Human Rights Council voted to open an investigation into possible crimes against humanity. In September, following a multi-day conference of Syrian opposition activists in Istanbul, 140 people were selected to form the Syrian National Council to represent the opposition. September also saw the first large-scale battle between the government and the armed opposition in the city of al-Rastan.[45] Over the next several months, the conflict spiraled out of control to become a full-fledged internal armed conflict between the state and numerous armed opposition groups.

The fighting quickly led to a breakdown of security across the country, providing an opening that extremist groups would exploit to their advantage.[46] It paved the way for the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and its eventual control of the northeastern city of Raqqa. The creation of the so-called "Caliphate" based in Raqqa spurred the creation of the multinational Global Coalition Against Daesh.[47] The coalition, working with its local partners on the ground including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces,[48] eventually defeated IS militarily, recapturing Raqqa in October 2017 and handing over governance of the northeast to the civilian component of the SDF, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. To date, almost nine years after the first protests took place, the Syrian conflict has resulted in the death of over half a million Syrians and the displacement (both internal and external) of over 12 million others.[49]

3. Background of the Islamic State (IS)

The story of IS stretches back not into Syria's long and complex history with Islamist organizations, but rather into Iraq's history with American occupation. IS's roots begin with a Jordanian jihadist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had trained with the fedayeen (armed fighters, many of whom were of Arab origin) in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and then later became the commander of Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).[50] After the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and toppled Saddam Hussein, Zarqawi launched a radical movement throughout Iraq aimed both at resisting and attacking American occupation and fomenting sectarian war between Sunnis and Shia. He quickly became a feared figure throughout Iraq, in large part due to AQI's sophisticated and coordinated use of terror attacks against such high-profile targets as the Jordanian embassy and the UN headquarters in Baghdad.

Zarqawi aimed to demonstrate that Iraq was a no-go zone for peacebuilding organizations and international diplomacy, having rejected any foreign presence and influence from the start, and also saw Iraq as the place where the roots of a "Caliphate" could emerge. Zarqawi was later killed[51] in a targeted airstrike by US forces in 2006 while attending a meeting in a safe house. His successor, Abu Ayub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir), announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and declared Abu Omar al Baghdadi as its leader. The latter two were also killed[52] in a US airstrike in 2010, after which Abu Bakr al Baghdadi took the helm of ISI.

In 2006, US forces allied with Sunni tribes, including former insurgents who switched sides, in a partnership known afterward as the "Sunni Awakening," or al sahwa. By 2009, overwhelming joint military force from the US and the Iraqi army brought ISI to a weakened standstill.[53] However, its embers lived on among enraged Sunnis who still harbored resentment against what they perceived as the Shia's usurped political dominance and the American occupiers. Over the following five years, ISI maintained a brutal shadow presence in the form of an assassination campaign against Sunnis associated with the Awakening.

Notably, AQI, and later ISI, had long maintained a competitive and sometimes downright antagonistic relationship with Al-Qaida's leadership. Higher-ranking members, including Al-Qaida's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had warned what they perceived as a hotheaded Zarqawi during the years of the occupation not to be too brutal, lest his overzealous methods jeopardize public support among Sunnis. The differing visions over tactics between the parent organization and Zarqawi's offshoot foreshadowed the future separation of the two, and also contributed to ISI's sense of independence as a radical actor with no need for international oversight.

Across the border, Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front), a group founded by operatives dispatched by al-Baghdadi in 2011, was fighting an ever-larger battle for independent territory amid the growing Syrian uprising. In 2011, ISI fighters were sent by al-Baghdadi across the border into Syria to take advantage of the expanding security vacuum resulting from the al-Assad Government's response to the growing protest movement across the country, as well as the development of the insurgency. As Iraq's political and social conditions broke down again in 2013, particularly in the north, ISI made an unexpected political move

and declared dominion over both Iraq and Syria, announcing that Jabhat al-Nusra was a mere extension of ISI and should be subsumed to create a larger organization. Nusra leader Mohammed al-Jowlani rejected the argument and for the first time declared publicly his allegiance to Al-Qaida.[54]

As ISI grew in prestige and power on both sides of the border, it drew in Syrian recruits as well as Iraqis, prompting al-Baghdadi to rebrand the organization as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013, and then simply the Islamic State (IS) on June 29, 2014.[55] Before that, Al-Qaida's international leadership had already decided (in early 2014) that it could no longer tolerate al-Baghdadi's belligerence and supposed disobedience, and opted to exile him officially from Al-Qaida's global network.

In Iraq, IS expanded rapidly. The Iraqi military fell back swiftly and IS forces were able to capture the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in a rapid blanket takeover and—in a huge boost to the organization's capabilities—seize US-provided heavy weaponry and tanks. Some of this weaponry was eventually transferred across the border to the Syria conflict and played a role in shifting the tide in IS' favor in the northeast. The eventual takeover by IS of northeastern Syria would, at its peak in 2014 and 2015, form part of a transnational, independent territory larger than the United Kingdom. Within its borders were seven million taxable residents, control over oil fields and refineries, grain stores, smuggling routes, an impressive array of weaponry, and hundreds of millions of dollars in estimated capital.[56]

Al Morour district in Raqqa city, Syria. 2021 .
Photo credit: Mohamad Othman

4. Root Causes for the Emergence of IS in Northeast Syria

Why Did the Islamic State Target Northeast Syria?

The reasons why IS focused on the NE as a suitable base for the group's self-proclaimed "Caliphate" are rooted in a mix of symbolic, social, financial, ideological, and practical considerations. Once the group had settled on the NE, it began a campaign of influence to recruit fighters to its ranks, coupled with a two-pronged strategy of incentivizing and coercing the local population into submitting to life under the "Caliphate."

IS's expansion into northeastern Syria from Iraq was deliberate and calculated. The region contained a number of specific assets which aided and incentivized IS to cross the porous Iraq-Syria border and establish its de facto capital in Raqqa.[57] The organization benefitted in particular from three characteristics unique to the northeast:

1. It is clear from IS propaganda that northeast Syria carried a special importance to the organization's ideology.[58] For example, the region is home to the small Syrian town of Dabiq, an otherwise nondescript and unassuming community near the Turkish border. The town is prophesied in Islamic hadith to be the site of an impending battle between infidels and believers at the end of the world wherein true followers of God will destroy the forces of evil.[59] In the year 796, Raqqa was also chosen by then-Caliph Harun al-Rashid as his imperial residence, and for thirteen years Raqqa was the capital of the *Abbasid* Caliphate,[60] which stretched from Northern Africa to Central Asia. This may not have been the only motivator for establishing Raqqa as the Islamic State's de facto capital, but it certainly constitutes a nod to the organization's self-perceived image as the guardians of a "pure" Islam. IS promoted the area's religious importance in their propaganda, going so far as to name their primary magazine after the town of Dabiq, as well as featuring it prominently in their online presence.
2. Northeast Syria also constituted a major economic breadbasket for IS.[61] At its height, the organization maintained a massive funding portfolio which included a wide array of financial sources and assets. While much funding derived from Iraq and abroad, IS was also able to reap considerable wealth from assets native to northeast Syria, including geographical sources of wealth such as oil and farmland. Assets also appeared in the form of human capital, including tribal allies, defected fighters from other armed opposition groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the FSA, and foreign fighters that poured into Syria from all over the world.[62] Among its top five sources of capital, IS received "illicit proceeds from the occupation of territory, such as bank looting, extortion, control of oil fields and refineries, robbery of economic assets and illicit taxation of goods and cash that transited territory where ISI[S] operates."[63]
3. Control of the northeast allowed IS unimpeded access across two countries: Iraq and Syria. This sent a powerful message around the world that IS was in the state-building business and that their state was being built on religion, not bounded by imperialist borders. The territory was easily accessible

from Iraq, and the long-standing smuggling routes and tribal links across the border made it easy for the group to move across the border.[64] Logistically, moving heavy weapons and fighters from Iraq across the border to the northeast was quite viable, and long-standing links between tribes on either side of the border were particularly helpful when it came to fostering relations and providing a safe passage for fighters who were traveling between Iraq and Syria.

Why Did IS Expand in Northeastern Syria?

Authoritarian Legacies

The IS takeover was predicated on several factors in northeast Syria, according to participants in the study. None was more fateful than the GoS's heavy-handed response to the 2011 protest movement, which set the stage for the ensuing chaos that IS and other extremist groups were able to take advantage of. The history of the GoS' authoritarianism, as well as the disunity of both the political and armed opposition, the chaos unleashed by the conflict, and other social and economic factors in the end proved critical to the ability of IS to present itself as an alternative system of governance[65] after its forceful takeover of Raqqa.[66] At the time, Syrians seeking to protest or fight against the GoS had a number of different groups to which they could pledge allegiance, ranging from the FSA to the secular civilian opposition, and more religious radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. While a significant proclivity for radical beliefs and violent extremism does not appear to predate the arrival of IS on Syrian soil, historical legacies of state repression and conditions of instability leading to a security vacuum at the time of IS's incursion into the northeast contributed to the group's shocking and unprecedented success. A strong desire to fight the GoS through any means necessary, coupled with a socioeconomic breakdown and conditions of chaos, motivated many to switch allegiances and join IS, which boasted both a strong safety net for its members as well as a reputation for ferocity and fearlessness.[67] Boosted by these two motivating factors, IS underwent rapid expansion and succeeded in gaining control over much of northeast Syria, which it then ruled through fear and brutalist tactics until its final territorial defeat by coalition-backed forces in Baghouz in 2019.[68]

Aggravating the fury and shock that people felt at the GoS's response—for example, when the body of 13-year old Hamza al-Khateeb was returned to his mother, burnt and severed, after his arrest at a protest[69]—was a long-standing sense of a general lack of dignity described amongst those surveyed and interviewed. One of the questions in the survey, for example, asked participants whether they ever felt humiliation living under the GoS (pre-Daesh), to which 38 percent answered, "Yes." In addition to the lack of dignity, survey respondents and workshop participants complained of the lack of space for civic participation; when asked what limits their political freedom, 67 percent of our survey respondents (particularly from Raqqa) reported fear of, and retaliation from, the GoS. This general frustration, coupled with what participants viewed as the GoS's excessive use of force, likely set the stage for first the FSA and other armed opposition groups, and then IS, to capitalize on the opportunity and gain a foothold in the region.

Relative Deprivation and Exclusion

Paramount to IS's success in the region is a long history of intentional neglect and active repression in the northeast on the part of the Damascus-based rulers. Our survey findings show that 37 percent of respondents weren't able to support themselves and their families under pre-2011 GoS rule, and 76 percent of respondents belonging to the low-income category expressed a very negative perception of the GoS. Legacies of violence extend well before Bashar al-Assad's presidency, back into the time of his father, Hafez al Assad, and include tens of thousands of arbitrary arrests, torture, forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and prolonged detention after sham trials.[70]

Beyond rendering thousands of Kurds stateless through various "Arabization" initiatives over the years, the GoS has also repressed Kurdish linguistic, cultural, and political rights through discriminatory education policies (such as banning Kurdish language education) and arresting prominent Kurdish political leaders (57 percent of Kurds in our survey reported a negative perception towards the GoS). Kurds attempted a civil uprising in 2004 following a bloody shooting by Syrian security forces at a soccer match, but the uprising failed to promote change and instead resulted in ever-greater repression throughout the northeast.[71] Repression of Syrian Kurds began far earlier than 2004, but the 2004-2011 era saw some of the region's strictest and most severe crackdowns, which contributed significantly to the widespread discontent expressed by Kurds at the onset of the uprisings in 2011. Few Kurds would ultimately go on to join IS, yet the repression of the Kurds, among other reasons, ensured that the northeast was a bastion of long-term anti-GoS sentiment and compounded the grievances experienced in the region at the hands of Assad's government.

A Desire for Revenge

Violence and trauma experienced at the hands of the GoS or other armed parties to the conflict were undoubtedly powerful motivators encouraging membership in extremist groups, including IS, to resort to armed revenge for the death of loved ones.[72] According to research published in 2016 by the peacebuilding organization International Alert, the breakdown of "normal" social structures as a result of the conflict "leads to the desire to be part of some sort of cohesive and purposeful social group," and that "in the absence of non-violent alternatives to meet these needs, these violent extremist groups provided one of the clearest ways to avenge personal grievances and achieve their political and social desires."[73] This tracks with the themes that came up repeatedly in our research. One individual from Deir Ezzor described it as an opportunistic jump to join whichever group could provide the means to avenge a loved one, or simply inflict harm on a government that had done the same to so many Syrians. This desire for revenge and, relatedly, a sense of dignity and agency that came from being part of a group or militia, meant that the armed opposition group with the most advanced weapons, training, and resources would often have the best chance of luring would-be fighters to its ranks. This, we learned from our research, is something that IS took full advantage of.

Sectarianization of Public Discourse

In addition to the GoS' heavy-handed response to the protests, it also began injecting sectarian narratives into public discourse to sow division within the communities in the northeast, a practice that was maintained (and indeed escalated) by IS.[74] This happened within a context of a long-standing government policy, dating back to the Hafez al-Assad era, of creating patronage networks structured by sect, region, ethnicity and tribe,[75] which facilitated systematic discrimination and limited access to labor opportunities if one was not affiliated with the "right" group (i.e., Alawites or Sunni government loyalists).

Prior to 2011, north-east Syria comprised a mix of communities, sects, and ethnicities, including Turkmen, Armenians, Kurds, Christians, and Muslims, who, according to our interviews, had largely co-existed peacefully. More than one interviewee pointed out the nature of people in the area as non-sectarian, simple, and used to co-existing with minorities (Kurds, Turkmen, Sunni, and Christians, all living together). One interviewee from Tal Abyad described his community as infused with Sufism and tribalism (vs. the jihadi, takfiri nature of IS and similar groups who eventually would take hold in Deir Ezzor). He also talked about state policies before the turn of the century promoting divisions within the community. This description is supported by existing literature on the GoS's instrumentalization

of sectarianism as a "mechanism of power and strategy for survival."[76] This in turn created cleavages throughout society that eventually were capitalized on by various armed opposition groups and the IS.

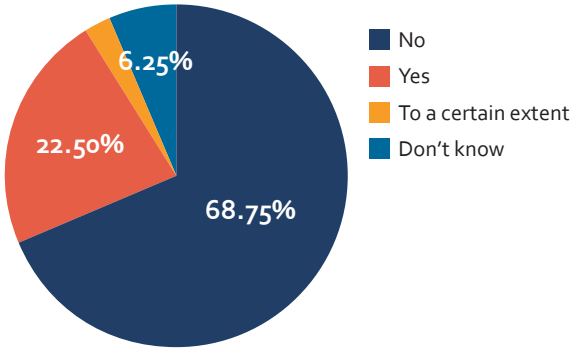
A Tal Abyad resident highlighted that even in areas where Islamism was evident, it was mostly influenced by Muslim Brotherhood ideology rather than by the takfiri jihadist groups we would later see in Syria at the height of the conflict. He pointed out that Raqqa, the eventual capital of the so-called "Caliphate," had dining establishments which served alcohol, as well as a long-standing "collective identity" as Raqqawis above a particular sect or religion. According to him, this co-existence threatened the GoS's policies of "divide and conquer" against a population united by a national identity and represented by an opposition chanting "the Syrian people are one." The GoS's actions and narrative from the beginning of the uprising and then later on in the conflict undermined the spirit of that slogan. For instance, using units that comprised mostly Alawite to commit acts of indiscriminate terror against non-Alawites, or releasing[77] hardened Sunni jihadists from prison, served to undermine the secular leadership and stoke violence amongst the protestors.

Perceived Effective Governance and Wealth of the IS

Although the actual level and quality of IS governance and the impact it had on those living under its rule is a subject that is widely debated, it is clear that before it was targeted by the Global Coalition to Counter Daesh, it was functioning as a de-facto state and at least some of its "citizens" benefitted from and were satisfied with the level and quality of services.[78] [79] Additionally, following years of living under corrupt and repressive GoS rule and later witnessing infighting and corruption amongst armed opposition groups comprising the FSA, there was a perception amongst some people living under IS rule that the organization was less corrupt and more pious than those previously in charge.[80] In short, at least in the beginning, IS rule provided improved services and a reprieve from chaos and the lack of overall security that the population had been suffering from.

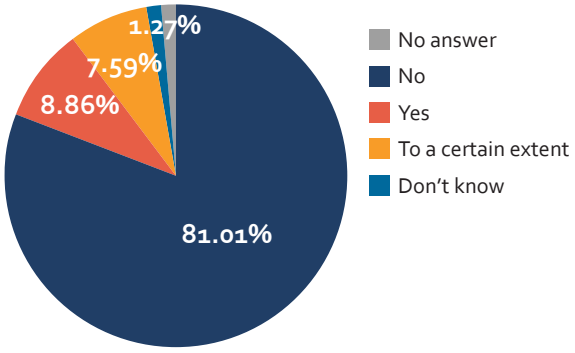
Several interviewees highlighted the failure of the FSA to provide a strong, clear structure and a unified chain of command as one of the reasons men defected from the FSA and joined IS. Some indicated that, at

FIgure 1: Life under Daesh control: Do you believe the state was providing an adequate level of services (water, electricity, etc)



Satisfaction with services under Daesh rule

Figure 2: Life post-Daesh: Do you believe the state was providing an adequate level of services (water, electricity, etc)



Satisfaction with services in post-Daesh rule

least initially, the provision of services by IS and perceived structure did provide a "least-worst option" in the midst of the "chaos" (which was a word used by several interviewees, "fawda"). One interviewee from Deir Ezzor described how men from the area became quickly disillusioned with the FSA's infighting and failure to follow through on promises of positions and influence, so they defected to IS. One example of this is a Syrian man who was a part of the FSA's leadership and who later switched ranks and joined IS for personal gain and greater influence.[81] An additional factor was that his brothers had been killed in Deir Ezzor by Jabhat al-Nusra, so he found common cause with the IS, for whom Jabhat al-Nusra was a mortal enemy. In short, opportunism played a large part in why people were defecting from the FSA to IS. As one interviewee pointed out, "the fact that people were shifting loyalties means that it was not ideological." This mirrors our survey findings, whereby "ideology of IS" was not significantly reported as a strength of IS nor as a driver to join their ranks. In fact, 70 percent of respondents reported that they abstained from joining IS because they were not convinced with their ideology, and 64 percent considered the IS actions as lies or void of hope.

IS also proved remarkably adept at using its wealth to attract members and to support its fighters, which likely ensured that few were willing to defect for fear of losing the financial safety net which they received through IS membership. Indeed, survey findings reveal that out of the total "Yes" responses, around 42 percent of our survey respondents believe that youth ,unaccompanied minors, and school drop-outs were an easy target for IS, followed by the poor (16 percent) and the unemployed (15 percent). The socioeconomic value which radical groups like IS provided to individuals proved very telling in recruitment, and in a wider sense, the comparative wealth of extremist groups shifted the broader structure of the Syrian uprising in a far more radical direction.[82]

Discipline and Sense of Purpose

Structure, purpose, and organization were recurrent themes among those interviewed about how the IS was seen. IS appeared to be a disciplined and organized group with grand aspirations, a vision, and a plan to realize it. Following their successes in Iraq, they were also seen as winners. Months before the now-deceased IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared the "Caliphate," IS members were moving freely within north-east Syria, recruiting members and foreshadowing the creation of the "Caliphate"—something Al-Qaida and rival extremist organizations never aspired to as a tangible goal for "this" world. After the fall of Mosul to IS in 2014, IS fighters triumphantly drove across the border into Syria on US-provided vehicles, brandishing heavy weaponry. One participant from Deir Ezzor stated, "We saw them with [American-made] weapons that we had never seen before." While the sight and scope of IS militants with this type of gear has now been normalized after years of media coverage, it is important to remember how unprecedented this was at the time, and how shocking that the Iraqis had surrendered control to the IS so quickly, despite years of training by US forces.

As a result of the conflict, there was a general sense of chaos and uncertainty amongst communities; as such, IS was able to infiltrate with claims of an organized "dawla" (state), with rules, systems, and justice mechanisms.[83] In comparison with the disorganized nature of the FSA, for example, the IS seemed like it had a clear sense of purpose and a hierarchy in which one could envision rising over time. "Even before al-Baghdadi declared the dawla, fighters were going around recruiting people, telling them that they were going to build a state. That was unheard of before," one young man said. Another interviewee felt that the IS's superior power and implied resources would be an end to the chaos and a "known" steady state. "We just wanted an end to the war and a life of dignity," he said.

A Crumbling Economy

Another important factor which contributed to the rise of IS was a breakdown in the economic and civil structures in the northeast. By 2013 alone, quality-of-life conditions in Syria had plummeted. According to a report by UN-ESCWA, the total economic loss is estimated at USD 442.2 billion by the end of the eighth year of conflict.[84] The country has fallen from the 'medium' cluster of nations to the 'low human development' group, largely the result of weakening performance in education, health and income, as measured by the Human Development Index."[85] More precisely, the human development index dropped from 0.631 in 2010 to 0.445 in 2019, making Syria one of the worst states in terms of HDI performance.[86] This was in no small part put into motion after the severe drought of 2006-2007, during which the agricultural system in the NE region, typically a provider of over two-thirds of Syria's total crop yields, collapsed.[87] Such deprivations bred a sense of need and desperation that IS was able to capitalize on in order to gain the acquiescence of parts of the population.

As conditions worsened and Syria's social fabric was crumbling, countless people were losing their economic safety nets, many families were losing their breadwinners to conflict, and the value of the Syrian pound was collapsing.[88] While conditions in the northeast were already marred by significant poverty before the conflict, living in the northeast became even more difficult as the prices of basic goods increased and ongoing conflict forced millions into Internally Displaced People (IDP) and refugee status within and outside the country. To demonstrate the power of money at the time, in Raqqa, tribal leaders accepted USD 60,000- 100,000 (depending on the size of the tribe) from the GoS in the early days of the protests in exchange for their loyalty;[89] however, that was not enough to motivate the tribes to fight for the GoS against the armed opposition. When the IS came into Raqqa, the tribes once again accepted money in exchange for their deference.[90] This "opportunistic radicalization" was a running theme throughout the interviews and indicated that for many people in the northeast joining or acquiescing to radical groups, opportunism was often a primary factor in their decision.

Ideology

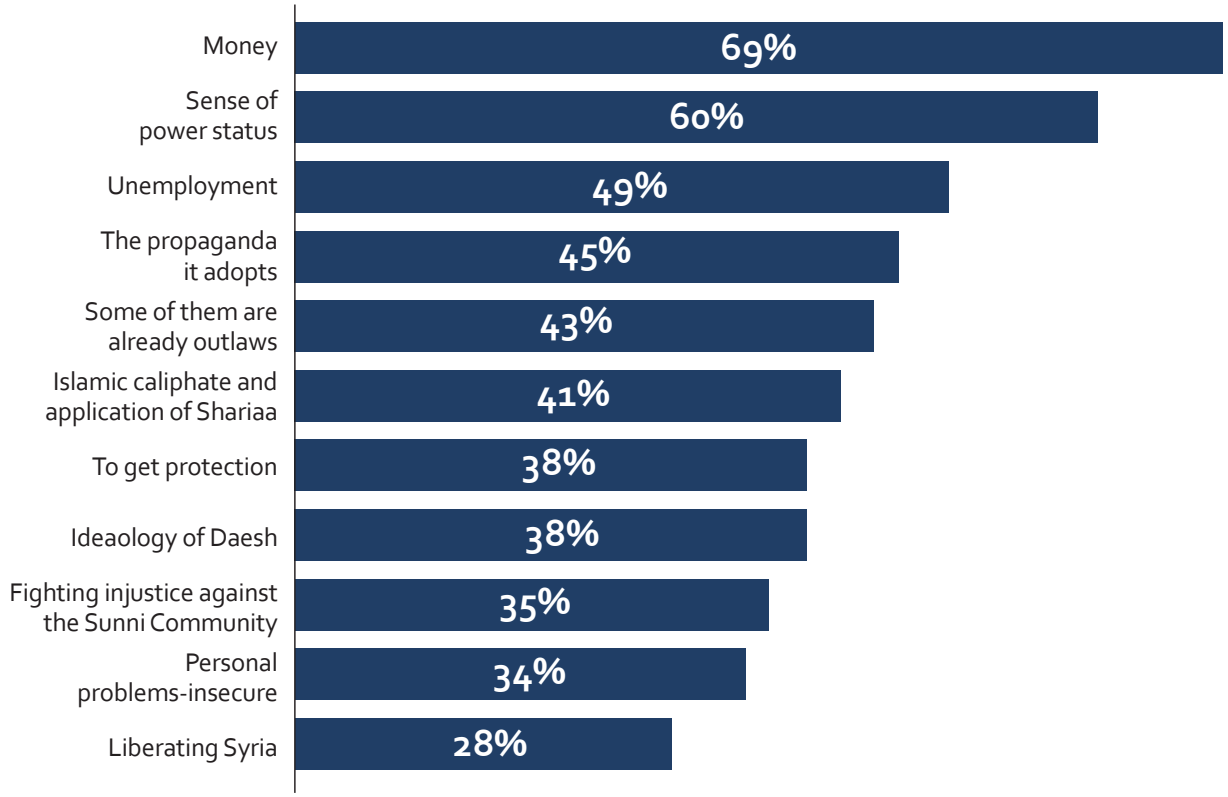
It is critical to reiterate that while some Syrians may have joined IS as the result of genuine belief, a perceived religious obligation, or indoctrination, our study suggests that the security vacuum due to the conflict, economic and social[91] vulnerability amid chaos, a desire for revenge (whether against GoS forces or other armed opposition groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra) and, in some cases, the need for protection, played more of a role in the radicalization to violence in the northeast.[92] Our research indicated that many of those living under the IS considered it to be a non-native organization which was imposed upon Syria from Iraq and which incorporated too much influence from foreign fighters, and thus did not represent their community (38 percent of respondents said they abstained from joining the IS due to the presence of other Islamic movements that represented Syrians better than IS). Rather, they may have joined—or at least did not actively resist its arrival—because it presented a well-funded and effective means of achieving their desire for stability and purpose amidst an increasingly uncertain and unstable environment.

Based on our interviews and surveys, it is difficult to state with any certainty what percentage of people who ended up adopting IS language and ideology were doing so voluntarily and what percentage were forced to do so or became convinced because of indoctrination. One interviewee from Deir Ezzor described in great detail the time he spent (52 days) in an IS "repentance center," where he was sent by IS fighters and where men were subjected to forced prayers five times a day and constant sermons and tests, to the point where many succumbed and bought into the ideology.[93] Furthermore, at the time, moderate

opposition forces such as the FSA, as well as IS's primary radical competitor, Jabhat al-Nusra, were losing ground and popularity, meaning that many may have joined IS simply because it was the only functional and successful paramilitary group left in their area. This concurs with our survey findings, whereby answers such as "getting justice for the Sunni community" and "the influence of religious figures" were not as commonly listed as drivers to join IS as were "money," "status and power," "unemployment," and "the propaganda it adopts."

Moreover, around 65 percent of respondents reported to prefer a federal system that allows religious and political privacy by region (agree and strongly agree), whereas only 26 percent reported to prefer a political system in which only Islamic parties compete in parliamentary elections.

Figure 3: Drivers to join Daesh



Responses of multiple drivers to join Daesh (% of Yes responses)

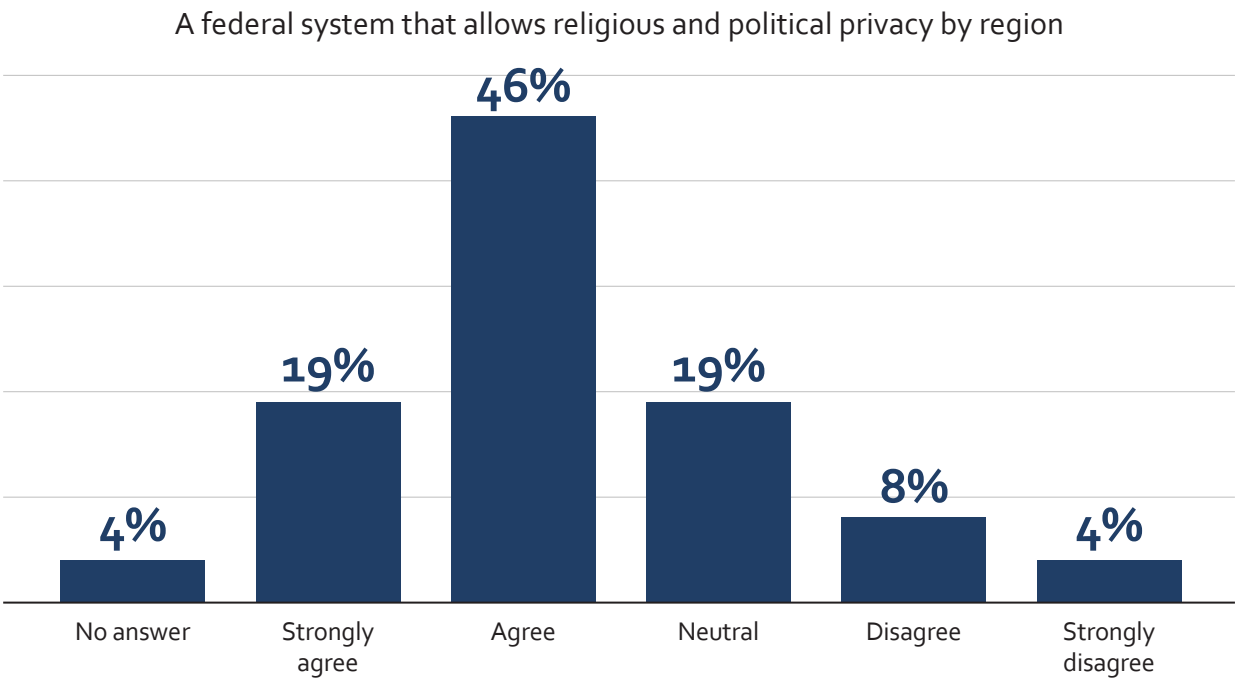


Figure 5: Federal political system preference

5. Effects of IS on North-East Syria

The organization under Al-Baghdadi's leadership proved brutal and ambitious: IS's self-proclaimed "Caliphate" was based on an idea of complete religious "purity," the annihilation of ethno-religious minorities such as the Yazidis, who they considered infidels and whose women and girls they traded as sex slaves, and the establishment of a utopian Islamic empire. The tactics employed by IS to achieve this dream were deliberately shocking, ruthless, and intended to achieve both total domination of the population it ruled over as well as provide deterrence against potential enemies.[94]

It is of utmost importance to underscore that acceding to IS rule in the northeast was by no means all-voluntary; it would be false to generally describe residents of northeast Syria as having "accepted" IS rule for all these years. IS famously ruled with brutality, fear, and coercion. The list of barbaric acts is long, including throwing those accused of homosexuality off buildings, public hangings in Raqqa's main square where the bodies would be left on display for days, and virtue police that would punish anyone not seen as following strict social rules set by IS.[95] Various groups living under IS fared differently, with minorities being the clear targets and Sunnis benefiting—so long as they did not break the Caliphate's strict rules (100 percent of Kurdish and Armenian respondents believe that those who joined IS are criminals, versus 78 percent of Arab Sunni respondents). IS used religious texts and decrees to allow the use of Yazidi women and girls as sex slaves; thousands of women and young girls well below the age of puberty were bought and sold between fighters, and several thousand remain missing to this day.[96]

On an individual level, men and women fared differently based on their gender and what the IS deemed to be proper Islamic Sharia law. Women and girls were segregated, made to wear sharia-compliant dress covering their entire body and face, wedded to male IS fighters, and expected to bear children. Men and boys were expected to bear arms, to train and to fight. Men were provided with a stipend, a home, and could choose wives (or buy women slaves). This is not to say that women were simply relegated to the kitchen under IS rule. Women also played a role in IS recruitment efforts, served as members of the female religious police, and generally contributed to the expansion and administration of IS.

Rules regarding the dress code were particularly stringent for women, as they were sometimes stopped in the streets and told their clothing was not compliant. "My wife and her friend were stopped [by a female al-Hisbah[97] member] and told to wear different clothes," said one interviewee. "Of course, it was a business as well, the proper clothes were the ones IS told you were proper and that you had to buy, which would then benefit IS."[98] Men were also subject to stringent but different rules. All men had to go through what was known as "repentance centers," where they were subjected to weeks—sometimes months—of courses related to Islamic scripture and IS interpretations of the faith. At the end of his stay, a man would be asked to pledge bay'ah (allegiance) to the IS and get a paper stating they were "forgiven" and had "repented."[99] Some were able to leave the center by promising they would eventually give bay'ah but then fled Syria; others gave bay'ah as a way to avoid further trouble or scrutiny from the group; and others still became convinced and would go on to fight with them.[100]

When it came to the community level, even tribal communities that were already socially conservative but not necessarily religious were hijacked by IS and its restrictive interpretation of Islamic texts. In tribal communities in the northeast, for example, a man and woman would not go out together as they would in more liberal urban centers around the country, and men would take their sons to the mosque every Friday for prayers. However, these traditions were a result of social norms rather than religious fundamentalism of the kind that IS would eventually impose on communities. "People went along with the new rules because they were afraid; IS's punishments were harsh … but also because they thought their presence was just another phase [of the conflict] that would pass."[101] This change happened gradually. "They didn't come right in within a night and day and start to kill and detain … IS initially simply stated they were there to enforce Sharia law and the teaching of the religion, and that those who did not comply would be punished.[102] People began to feel afraid because of IS's previous brutality when dealing with armed opposition fighters;[103] they knew by then what the group was capable of, and did not want to risk their wrath.

One workshop participant from al-Hasakeh described how IS created a language that was distinctly sectarian amongst the existing armed opposition groups at the time. "They started attacking Kurds through the mosque minarets once they came into town." Nine years of such actions by the Syrian state, IS, and to some extent now the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (see section 6 below) have fomented and exacerbated tensions within communities and increased sectarian divisions.

For those within Sunni Muslim communities that did choose to fight with or support IS, their choices fomented tension, resentment, and even rifts between families, who "might have one son fighting with IS and another with the FSA".[104] For those living under IS rule, expressing an alternative opinion or voicing a concern with their policies was not an option; neither was speaking one's mind. In some cases, fathers ceased to feel comfortable talking in their own homes, lest their child, who may have been brainwashed into supporting IS, betray their views.[105]

Children were particularly vulnerable victims of IS's propaganda. Already impressionable due to their age, young boys, known as "cubs of the Caliphate," were subjected to hours of indoctrination in IS teachings in schools and training centers.[106] Many children were thus affected in one way or another by the ideology and actions of IS, whether by aspiring to the group's "achievements", fighting for the "cause" or becoming completely traumatized by their new environment and its impact on their families (loss of life, detention, etc.).

Minority communities in the north-east suffered a different, and sometimes deadly, fate. IS's desired "purification" of the "Caliphate's" inhabitants meant that minorities were often summarily executed, forced to leave, or taken as sex slaves. The trauma and collective displacement of minority communities has weighed heavily on its members and threatens to multiply throughout generations if not addressed and mitigated by any future Syrian government.

The legacy of years of IS rule (preceded by years of unjust GoS policies) over individuals and communities in northeast Syria is yet to be fully understood. Resources to address trauma or to undo indoctrination are scarce, all the more so following Turkey's incursion into the northeast. Thousands of Syrian men and women remain in prisons or prison-like camps under the administration of the SDF; those individuals, and their young children, are at the risk of becoming radicalized, or *further* radicalized in some cases, without initiatives from the international community to identify long-term solutions. In al-Hol camp, tens

of thousands of women and children continue to languish in inhumane conditions, posing a serious risk to the long-term stability of the northeast.

While the foreign population of the camp poses the largest logistical challenge, since the SDF is forced to maintain them inside the camp pending repatriation to their home countries, the Syrian population of around 25,000[107] may be more easily transferred. At the initiative of tribal leaders and their communities, the SDF have thus far released several hundred Syrian women and children from *al-Hol* and allowed them to return to their communities in exchange for assurances from community leaders (in most cases so far, that means tribal leaders). This is a welcome step in the sense that these individuals will no longer be in proximity to the more radicalized individuals in that camp, and it could set the stage for further normalization of the *al Hol* population. It remains to be seen, however, how their return will be perceived within their communities. Additionally, for the Syrians still inside the camp, life continues to be difficult and many of them (and their families outside) accuse the SDF of "imprisoning" them without justification.[108] In October 2020, Ilham Ahmed, president of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council's Executive Committee announced[109] a pending order to "empty the Syrians from the camp completely," although she did not clarify whether this represented an entirely new plan for the camp's Syrian residents or merely an acceleration of the existing initiative involving assurances from families and tribal leaders.

In addition to the families in the camps, the SDF is detaining approximately 10,000 suspected IS fighters, including boys over the age of 12, pending decisions about how they will be brought to justice. Access to the outside world is limited and their conditions under detention remain unknown beyond overcrowding and lack of resources to run such detention facilities. The mixing of radicalized, hardened IS fighters and ideologues with others who may not have been radicalized—including children as young as twelve—increases the likelihood of the spread of extremist ideas, making it harder for eventual repatriation or reintegration into host communities.

Besides the factors mentioned above, there is a strong and prevalent sense of resentment on the part of many Syrians in the northeast toward the international community for the way in which the campaign to defeat IS was conducted, and the ruins it has left behind. This feeling is particularly strong among residents of Raqqa, as the former capital of the so-called "Caliphate," which was completely levelled by coalition airstrikes in the battle to evict IS. Many Kurds also perceive the international community, and in particular the Americans, as having abandoned them after the military defeat of IS. The lack of international programming or adequate funding for civil society initiatives or reconstruction projects means that progress towards normalization is moving at a snail's pace, making it difficult for communities to rebuild their lives in a way that allows them to thrive and live with dignity.

6. The Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria

Centralized Control, Arab Exclusion, and a Lack of Good Governance

A number of troubling factors have emerged following the military defeat of IS by the SDF and the US-led Coalition forces, which will need to be addressed when considering a potential return of violent extremism to this region.

The Autonomous Administration inherited a traumatized population whose cities and towns had been devastated by the years-long conflict, on top of catastrophic damage done by the Coalition bombing campaign in the last days of the fight against IS. Governance in such an environment would be a challenge for any state; for the Administration, a non-state actor, the challenges are multiplied. As the COVID-19 pandemic has most recently made clear, there are myriad limitations on the international community when it comes to providing assistance through a non-state actor without the consent of the GoS. Following the withdrawal of US forces to make way for the Turkish incursion into northeast Syria, the Administration has moreover struggled with what they complain is a lack of resources and international support to govern. This includes struggling to maintain control and security of the camps and prisons holding thousands of IS fighters and their families, while simultaneously defending against what the Administration/SDF viewed as an illegal Turkish invasion.

Building a bottom-up participatory decision-making process is one of the main founding principles of the Administration. Officially the governance model celebrates grassroots empowerment and the right of citizens to participate in local decision-making processes. Elected councils at the commune level have been considered active spaces for local participation. However, the democratic credentials of these entities have been called into question as members often seem to have been appointed, rather than elected.[110]

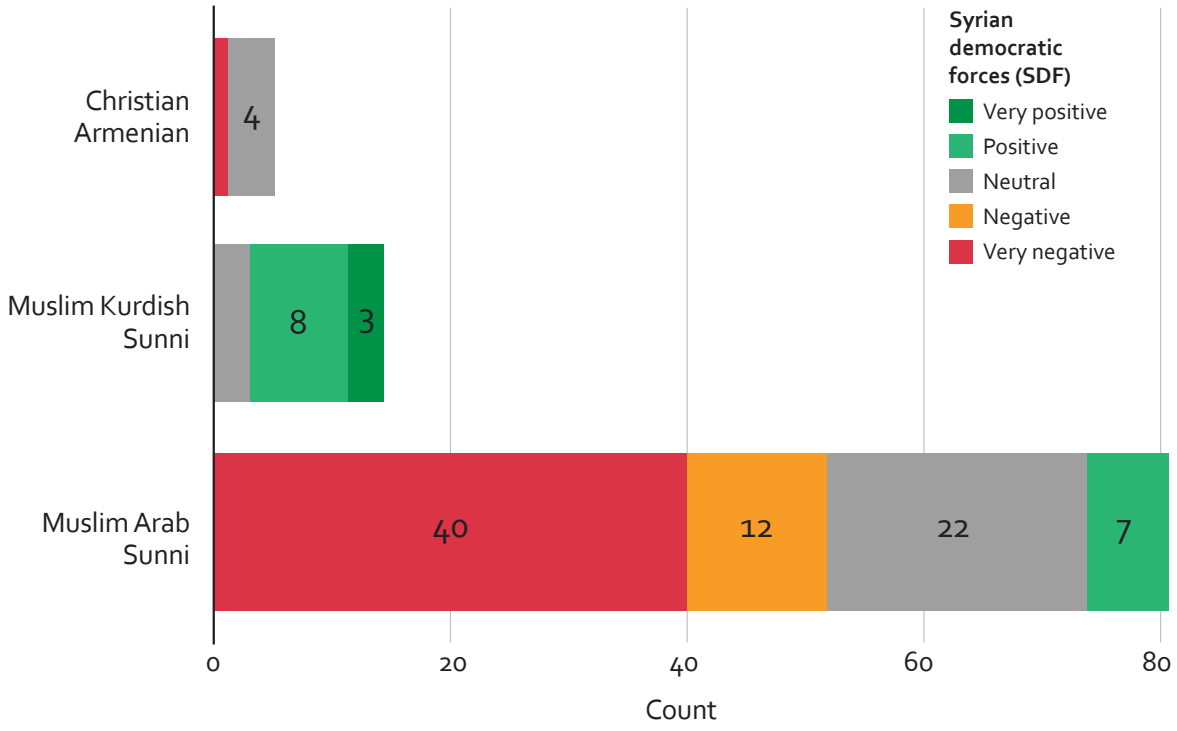
While the Administration is, on paper, comprised of both Kurds and Arabs, it is important to recognize the difference between who is "technically" in charge of decision-making in the northeast and the reality on the ground. This is one of the main grievances that came out in interviews, particularly with Arab residents. One asked, "why is a Kurdish military leader [referring to SDF Commander General Mazloum Abdi] negotiating on our behalf with the United States, or making the decision whether to negotiate with the regime?" The Arab resident added that political negotiations should be made by political leaders, not military commanders. Another similarly complained that "the SDF only thought about negotiating with the regime when Kurds were under attack by Turkey. They are only looking out for their own interests and trying to get their own autonomous area."[111]

Adding to the feelings of resentment and exclusion, several interviewees as well as other published accounts[112] described how the "real" policy decisions are "made in Qandil," referring to the headquarters of the PKK in Iraq's Qandil Mountains. Arabs in the SDF or Administration who are given leadership positions in Arab-majority areas are, in reality, subservient to the PKK-trained cadres "advising" them. Others have described a situation where "five to ten higher-ups in the PYD make all the strategic decisions

for the region", whereas local councils in Arab-majority areas have "little to no say in regional political or legislative affairs."

The overall disproportionately low Arab participation in Kurdish-led governance and military structures repeatedly came up as a theme during interviews (around 50 percent of the sampled Arab Sunni community shared a **very negative** perception towards the SDF, and the sectarian tension was evident. For instance, when asked whether they feel like being equally treated with Kurds, 89 percent of Muslim Arab Sunni answered "no").

Figure 5: Perception of SDF per ethnicity*crosstabulation

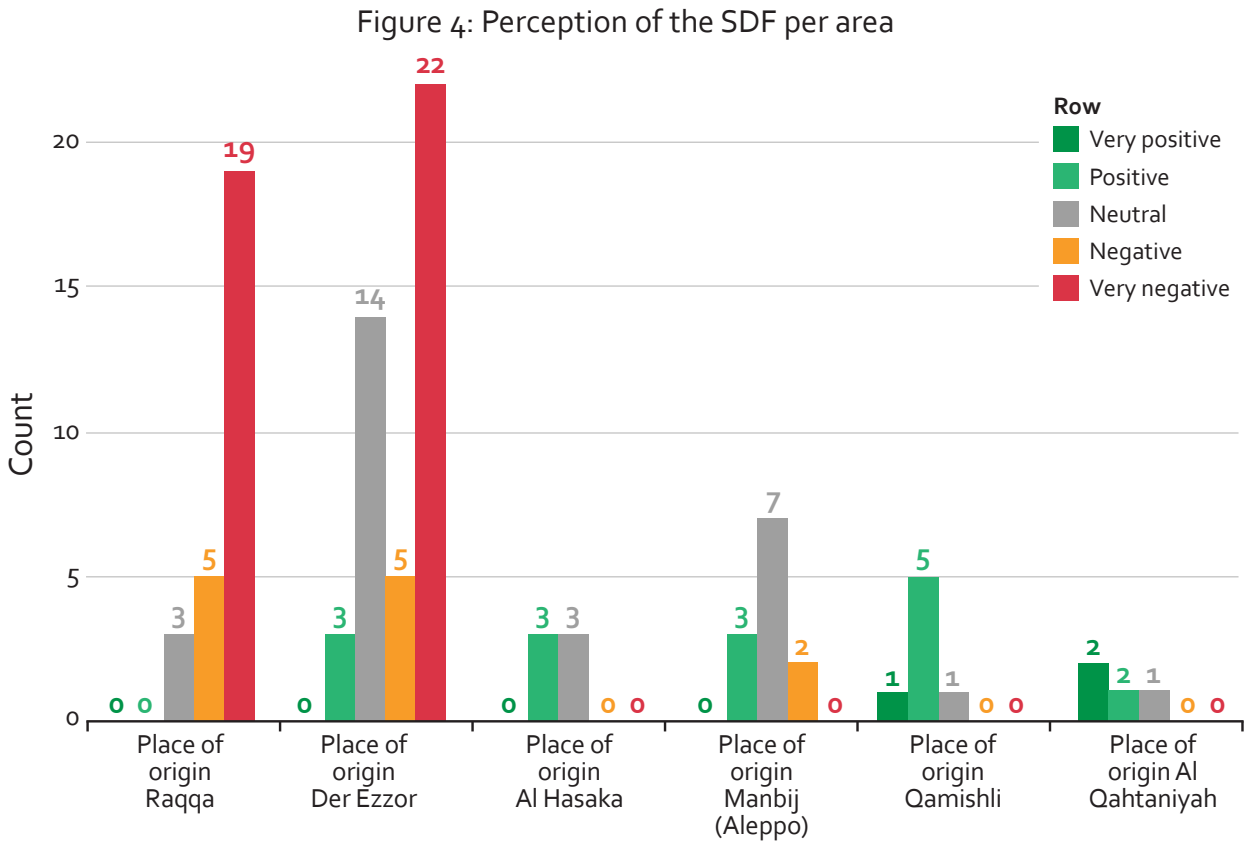


Perception of SDF per Ethnicity (Count)

The current dissatisfaction with political and military representation was coupled with a deep sense of resentment on the part of several participants who had previously fought the GoS and IS with the FSA and complained how the Arab fighters of the region continue to be portrayed in the media as incompetent, disorganized, and untrustworthy, or somehow always one step away from joining an extremist organization. A common complaint on the part of Arabs interviewed for this paper was that "to the Kurds [SDF and Administration leadership] every Arab is IS." The lack of significant Arab participation in the Administration has also been attributed to disinterest: they saw their participation as "largely symbolic, since the PYD runs everything anyway," or because Arabs who otherwise might have joined are aware that IS sleeper cells in the northeast are increasingly targeting Arabs affiliated with the SDF. In short, the Kurdish-led governance system in the northeast appears designed to give the appearance of popular participation[113] without actually allowing for the inclusion of voices from the regions various communities.

Another point of contention between the Kurdish-led Administration and local Arab residents is the heavy influence of PKK ideology on school curricula. "Why am I looking at a picture of Ocalan?"[114] complained a man originally from Deir Ezzor. The sentiment was echoed by a

half-Kurdish, half-Arab man from Manbij: "The people of Deir Ezzor have no interest in learning about or accepting a Communist ideology," the man from Deir Ezzor told me. "They [the Administration and SDF] are making the same mistake IS did, they are coming in with a foreign ideology and trying to impose it on the locals. It won't work." This comment was enlightening insofar as it made clear the animosity is not between "Kurd" and "Sunni," but between Syrians and foreign influence. This also concurs with our findings, whereby respondents from Raqqa and Der Ezzor were among the groups with the highest negative perception of the SDF as per the below chart.



Perception of SDF per place of origin (Count)

Eighty-one percent of people interviewed for this report critiqued the level of service provision in Administration/SDF-controlled areas, complaining about a lack of adequate water and electricity supply and the lack of significant progress in their communities on reconstructing schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure projects. Some residents in Deir Ezzor have openly lamented the current situation, stating "the dawla was at least providing electricity!"[115]

On the security front, our interviews reflected several existing reports of abuses at the hands of the Administration in areas under their control, to include "forced displacement, demolition of homes, and the seizure and destruction of property."[116] The Manbij-born man told us of the SDF: "They are using the same tactics as IS … starving people, burning their food sources so they [the people] are hungry and depend on them." These tactics have fueled already existing discontent borne out years of neglect and abuse under successive "governments" and threaten to act as a driver of radicalization to violence.

Short Cycles of Programming and Neglect on the Part of the International Community:

Following the defeat of the IS, international programming began to flow into northeast Syria with the aim of stabilizing the region and allowing for a return to a semblance of normalcy. However, there was a constant mismatch[117] between the long-term needs of the local population and the short-term emergency humanitarian assistance-related goals of the international community in Syria.[118] In addition, any progress made on the ground proved to be fragile, with most international actors and INGOs forced to withdraw from the area following Turkey's Operation Peace Spring.

The US had long led the international response in the northeast, and the presence of US troops in the area allowed other Western countries to implement their own programming on the ground, mostly through the UN, USAID, or international NGOs. Between 2012 and 2017, the German government, one of the largest bilateral donors, provided funding worth about EUR 5.4 billion in response to the crisis. With the defeat of IS, priority was given by the international community to stabilization efforts, which essentially meant service provision and humanitarian assistance, with limited funding going to medium- or longer-term projects. The bulk of humanitarian assistance often went to helping displaced Syrians in neighboring countries and in supporting host communities. Within Syria, and in the northeast, the focus was on improving living conditions for the population. International Donor Conferences held in Brussels "identified education and employment, as well as food security and the meeting of basic needs, as the areas of most need of addressing."[119] Additionally, Syrians would receive aid targeted at health and hygiene, water supplies, and shelter. As an example of immediate support, US programming largely comprised clearing rubble and paving roads, IED clearance (in public buildings only), and "light rehab" of schools and hospitals. On the ground, "people were frustrated because they felt like it was a drop in the bucket and not addressing things that people cared about."[120]

But under the Trump administration it became clear that the US was seeking to reduce its military presence in the region, starting with Syria, and any change in US policy necessarily impacted the overall status of international programming in the northeast. Repercussions from the change in policy brought a sense of betrayal within the Administration/SDF and confusion among the population in the northeast. In addition, the US-SDF/YPG partnership was drawing the ire of authorities in Ankara, who had real concerns about the US partnering with the Kurds in the northeast.[121]

In December 2018, following President Trump's announcement that US forces would withdraw from the northeast, much programming was halted and US personnel were evacuated. Many other international NGOs followed suit and while some returned briefly, the onset of Turkish operations in the area led to a mass exodus of internationals from this region. Aid programs where further disrupted when the UN Security Council failed to agree on a resolution that would have kept open the al-Yarubiyah border crossing with Iraq.

7. Fragility and Risks of Violence

There are a multitude of actors in the northeast, each with their own particular set of objectives and often at odds with one another (88 percent of respondents believe that the action/inaction of the international community aggravated the conflict). Operation Peace Spring, the US repositioning, and the overall strategic ambiguity on the part of the international community make it nearly impossible for residents of the region to normalize their daily lives, resulting in a lack of ability for outside humanitarian actors to decide whether to spend money on programming in the area, who to work with, and how to do so in a way that is safe, sustainable, and built on the actual needs of the community. This sense of insecurity was clear in our survey findings. Seventy-one percent of respondents expressed fear of the unknown, with ambiguity as their biggest fear. They expressed worries pertaining to chaos, the division of Syria, the international community abandoning Syria, the continuation of the conflict, and further mass displacement. Moreover, when asked whether they felt safe about their future, 88 percent answered "no." This constant fear and instability spilled over into their psychological health, where it is worth noting that 41 percent reported experiencing flashbacks and nightmares and 48 percent were affected by a fight-or-flight syndrome.

The advent of a large-scale Turkish incursion into the northeast of Syria, and the impact on the local population, has brought to the forefront new sources of grievances that either did not exist, or were dormant, before the operations. According to the Turkish Government, Operation Peace Spring has two major objectives: 1) dealing a crushing blow to the YPG and pushing them away from the Turkish border, and 2) creating a resultant buffer zone to which Syrian refugees currently located in Turkey can relocate. On October 9, 2018, Turkey began moving forces across the border. In subsequent weeks Turkish forces bolstered by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) descended on the region, uprooting tens of thousands of civilians alongside the YPG. Human rights organizations and journalists reported scenes of mass displacement as (mostly) Kurds fled the scene of combat operations to other places in the northeast or across the border to Iraq.

In the process of pushing back IS and the YPG from its border, Turkish military action (along with that of its Syrian proxies) has displaced thousands of Syrian Kurds in the process, fueling feelings of anger, resentment, and uncertainty across the northeast, in addition to Kurdish fears of genuine ethnic cleansing of the area.[122] Intense societal fragmentation, along with rising levels of anger, resentment, and uncertainty, does not bode well for future peace in the area and is recreating an environment that may well be suited to future return to violence.

Besides providing an opening to IS, the current chaos in the northeast has continued to propagate a level of uncertainty and frustration that, as described above, armed and extremist groups were previously able to use to their advantage. The SDF, under double pressure from the Turks and having concluded they cannot rely on the international community for an open-ended commitment to their safety, have elected to reengage with the GoS on a potential arrangement but are doing so now from a position of weakness.[123] Should the GoS successfully establish a more robust presence throughout the northeast, an outward veneer of stability

may be established, albeit one that is once again reinforced with a heavy hand. While in the short-term that may prevent a resurgence of IS and other extremist groups, it also means that the root causes of the conflict will continue to exist, amongst them being the GoS's very presence.

In the end, efforts to discourage future violent extremism in the northeast would do well to account for immediate structural vulnerabilities such as the lack of basic infrastructure, services, and education that existed under the GoS's pre-2011 rule and continues today under the Administration and SDF. Any efforts would additionally need to address long-term grievances relating to marginalization, enjoyment of basic rights, and unfair wealth distribution, rather than the question of ideology which appears to be only one of the drivers—and a weak one at that—in northeast Syria.

Finally, while IS has lost its "Caliphate" and may never be able to reconstitute in its exact previous form, it is still very much present (albeit in a more decentralized way) in both Iraq and Syria. Similar to Syria's northeast, Iraq's economic, societal, and security challenges are myriad and still constitute a threat to long-term regional stability efforts. Iraqi government officials warn that IS militants are exercising free movement in mountainous areas that are hard to control or monitor. Also similar to Iraq, the eventual fates of tens of thousands of foreign fighters, women, and children who were once linked to IS are unknown. Iraq's judicial system is demonstrably overwhelmed with the number of cases that may face trial. Meanwhile, those accused of ties to a United Nations-designated terrorist group are subjected to horrific conditions or treated as pariahs by their community if they are allowed to return. The combination of ongoing societal grievances, structural weaknesses, and a lack of control over border areas increases the risk of future spillover into Syria should there be another opportunity for IS to regroup. Given the role that events in Iraq played in the creation of IS in the first place, and the flow of fighters and weapons across the border into Syria which contributed to the group's eventual control over the area, any efforts by external actors to prevent the resurgence of violent extremism in northeast Syria must be coordinated with similar politics in neighboring Iraq.

Firdous District in Raqqa City, Syria. 2021.
Photo credit: Mohamad Othman

8. COVID-19: Implications for North-Eastern Syria

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe ravaging communities in the poorest and richest of countries alike, northeast Syria, with 700,000 people displaced from their homes, has been hit particularly hard due to a lack of resources, access and attention.[124] Given the massive challenges highlighted above, as well as the fact that the northeast is being governed by a non-state actor, the pandemic has had a devastating effect on the region. As of August 24, 2020, there were 394 confirmed cases, almost one-fifth among health workers.[125] Kurdish and US officials have accused the GoS of hindering shipments of testing materials and medical supplies to the northeast. The World Health Organization (WHO) admitted there had been delays in getting samples from the northeast to laboratories in Damascus for testing, although they have since said the issues have been resolved.[126]

The humanitarian crisis in northeast Syria has worsened since the UN Security Council, acting under pressure from the Russian Federation, shut down a UN-sanctioned humanitarian aid hub on January 10 at al-Yarubiya crossing on the Iraqi-Syrian border. The border crossing served as a key pipeline for WHO and private relief groups delivering medical assistance into north-eastern Syria. Efforts by the U.N. to identify alternate routes to fill the gap have so far proved unsuccessful.[127]

An added concern are vulnerable populations held in overcrowded cramped conditions, such as the approximately 65,000 people still in al-Hol and the nearly 10,000 captured IS-suspected fighters and supporters scattered across makeshift prisons in the region.

Suspension bridge road, Huweiqa District, Deir Ezzor, Syria. February 2021. Photo credit: Sada AlSharqieh

9. Findings

Overall, our research indicates that the rise of violent extremism and the resort to violence in northeast Syria was largely opportunistic, driven more by structural weaknesses and "push and pull" factors rather than wide-scale ideological affinity with extremist groups such as the Islamic State. As previously mentioned, many of these underlying factors still exist, aggravated by the Turkish operation in the northeast, widespread grievances against the Kurdish-led Administration and SDF, the dearth of international assistance, and now the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for the population.

The reasons for radicalization to violence are complex and local, and research has found they often converge around a combination of ideology (including religion), grievance, identity, economic factors, and the propaganda that feeds on them. While research has shown that violent extremism is the outcome of identifiable interrelated factors, it still cannot be predicted by focusing on one variable alone, and we still do not know why only certain individuals within a society or community become radicalized and turn to violence or join extremist violent groups. With the understanding that there is no simple route to violent extremism or radicalization to violence, our research has identified a number of drivers among the communities in northeast Syria that previously led to violent extremism or a radicalization to violence and that, if unaddressed, may do so again in the future. These include:

- The lack of justice and accountability coupled with ongoing violations of human rights and rule of law;
- A security vacuum resulting from prolonged and unresolved conflict in Syria and the spillover from Iraq;
- Real or perceived marginalization and discrimination;
- Corruption and impunity on the part of the ruling elite (the state/IS/SDF);
- The lack of economic opportunities despite the richness of the area's natural resources
- Poor governance by a variety of different actors (the state/IS/SDF);
- Opportunities for radicalization in detention or in displacement camps; and
- A risk that beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences have been and will be misused and mobilized in the future to create social tensions and potential violence.

10. Short to Medium-Term Policy Recommendations for Resilience-Building

It is abundantly clear, based on our research and multiple workshop discussions, that addressing needs in northeast Syria is contingent upon cooperation between local and international actors toward sustainable programming that, above all, values the dignity of the individual. To that end, the recommendations below are addressed to both international actors (UN agencies, governments, international aid organizations, donors, etc.) and Syrian stakeholders (local and national governmental, non-state, and non-governmental actors).

Actors intending to intervene in this region to help ameliorate the risks of radicalization or return to violence should consider the following key areas for early assistance, ensuring that effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are built into their programming. We have refrained from spelling out in detail how and when each actor should undertake these recommendations; rather, we intend for this to serve as guidance for stakeholders to understand what needs to be done. Furthermore, it is imperative that any support be based on several preliminary steps/principles so as to include and empower local voices and their communities:

Knowledge Gathering: For programing to be effective, informed decisions need to be based on data gathered on the ground about drivers to extremism and violence; in other words, understanding the source of grievances, and evidence about successful and effective programs. While there is a currently a dearth of such data due to access and security issues, the capacity exists on the ground and should be sustained and improved. Local actors should be enlisted and, where needed, provided the skills to carry out this work.

Mapping of Local Actors: An investment in mapping out local actors on the ground and sharing this information more broadly is badly needed. Local interlocutors should be supported in efforts to gather, identify, and share relevant data (perhaps through an electronic register) with potential donors. Where possible, local actors can be encouraged to self-register if they have access to the Internet. Confidentiality issues would have to be treated sensitively, protecting the privacy of individuals as needed.

Building Local Capacities and Institutions: Emerging institutions, civil society organizations, community-based associations, local councils, and other local actors, all of whom are potential partners for programming, might benefit from capacity-building, training, and mentoring to maximize their efficacy. This is not simply a process of having international technical experts, who often also bring the added value of comparative experience, impart their knowledge to local actors. It also requires linking up local actors with similar local actors from different countries or regions—particularly if they have worked on similar challenges or under comparable conditions.

Coordination: Local actors working in different sectors—for example, in justice, development, humanitarian assistance, and security—often have little or no connection with each other. Investment in developing those linkages and supporting cross-sector programs and activities would go a long way

in strengthening their efficacy. Assistance in developing a gendered analysis in these approaches and ensuring the inclusion of women, youth, and children, will strengthen individual programs and their coordination.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): For greater impact and synergy, programming and policies should be aligned with SDGs, specifically ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1); ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Goal 4); achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (Goal 5); promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (Goal 8); reducing inequality within and among countries (Goal 10); making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal 11); and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development (Goal 16). Such alignment will aid in the provision of access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

1. Improve Security and Respect for Rule of Law

In the short term, it is imperative to focus on improving the day-to-day security situation to the extent possible given the overall state of the conflict. This pervasive insecurity is currently impacted by a dearth of well-trained, well-equipped law enforcement personnel, tensions within local communities resulting from the SDF's practices, the continued proliferation of armed former fighters (including IS fighters), a foreign military troop presence, and the widespread availability of weapons. Steps to consider include:

- Introduce culturally appropriate Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and counselling programs for persons engaged in or associated with violent extremism or the larger internal conflict. Ensure these are gender-sensitive and include programs for youths,
- Encourage individuals to leave violent extremist groups by developing programs that place an emphasis on providing them with accredited educational resources and economic opportunities. Also, ensure that victims of violations at the hands of such individuals are similarly given opportunities to obtain justice, including reparations (see section 4 below).
- Explore opportunities to introduce or support existing traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, arbitration, and restorative justice, to resolve local conflict and achieve sustainable peace. Cooperation between tribal leaders, local community leaders, and SDF authorities must be included as part of the program in order to succeed.
- Provide practical human rights training to SDF security forces where they need it, as well as law enforcement agents and all those involved in the administration of justice while ensuring independent oversight. This should be done in a way to pave the way towards long-term institutional reform in a post-settlement environment.

2. Trauma Relief and Psycho-Social Support

- Addressing the effects of conflict-induced trauma raised by many of the survey participants should be a priority for organizations who have the resources and expertise to do so. An urgent psycho-social program should be established for the purpose of providing physical and mental health care to those with physical injuries, impaired mobility, mental trauma, and other needs requiring immediate specialized or sustained medical attention. Particular emphasis and prioritization should be given to victims of rape, torture, and other aggravated bodily harm at the hands of parties to the conflict, in addition to children.
- Provide medical, psycho-social, and legal service support in communities that currently give shelter to victims of violent extremists, including victims of sexual and gender-based crimes.

3. Strengthen Good Governance

To ensure long-term stability in the region, it is imperative to restore trust and build confidence in local governance. This could be aided by programs that work towards:

- Increased transparency: ensure that local governance structures publicize their working agenda, priorities of action and openly share with community members their budgets.
- Building civil society's capacity in evidence-based monitoring of local authorities' performance and budgets in an effort to reduce corruption
- More broadly representative local governance structures that include minority groups, traditionally marginalized groups, and women, rather than reproducing preexisting social hierarchies
- Increasing inclusive citizen participation: building community-embedded platforms and mechanisms for social accountability, whereby grassroots actors are engaged in policy deliberation and identification of priority initiatives, in addition to being involved in policy implementation and monitoring of results.
- Conducting regular civil society's needs assessments and capacity-building in collective deliberation, collaborative implementation of local initiatives, and effective evidence-based monitoring of performance and budgets.
- Increasing access to justice (see section 4 below).
- Improving delivery of essential services like electricity, water, waste management, etc. to alleviate hardship and strengthen the legitimacy of local governing institutions.
- Creating strong responsive local governance institutions : municipal authorities' management capacities could be strengthened through locally-adapted training programs that emphasize areas such as financial administration, strategic planning, and community participation.
- Fostering participation through viable social accountability mechanisms that strengthen links between citizens and local authorities.
- Strengthening local institutions, such as village and tribal councils and religious organizations.
- Reducing levels of corruption by strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms and initiating independent oversight, with a focus on key sectors like justice, health, and education.
- Establishing legal frameworks that protect freedom of opinion and expression, pluralism, and diversity of the media, as well as the right to organize.

4. Ensure Access to Justice

- Assist efforts to provide access to justice for all by focusing on strengthening the integrity and effectiveness of justice institutions and ensuring independent oversight and accountability of such bodies.
- Advance accountability for gross violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Particular focus should also be given to assisting families looking for missing relatives who may be buried in mass graves left behind by IS, and civilian deaths as a result of international coalition bombardments.
- Provide comparative expertise and experiences from other countries/regions to assist in finding practical and fair pathways to adjudicating the challenging issues around land, housing, and property rights.

5. Strengthen Civil Society and Engage Local Communities

- Develop joint and participatory locally-designed strategies with civil society and local communities, aimed at preventing the reemergence of violent extremism and protecting communities from recruitment by addressing the push and pull factors described earlier in this report.
- Support confidence-building measures at the community level by providing appropriate platforms for dialogue and the articulation of grievances. This includes helping to create or promote fora that address the drivers of violent extremism, including ongoing human rights violations. Ensure that women have the ability to voice their unique grievances and to have a seat at the table.
- Adopt community-oriented policing models and programs that are representative of the local population to solve local issues in partnership with community representatives.
- Support activities that enable civil society actors, youth, women's organizations, and religious leaders from other countries in the region or globally to share good practices and experience so as to strengthen local efforts. This should include advancing values of tolerance and pluralism.

6. Education; Skill Development; Employment

- Education in the northeast is an area that needs the most immediate investment, as the current arrangements (unaccredited SDF or UNICEF curricula) are mere stop-gap measures and do not set up the students for long-term success or development. Students in the northeast should have access to non-sectarian educational materials that are in line with international standards at their respective levels, are accredited, teach critical thinking skills, and are sensitive to the cultural and social fabrics of Syrian society.
- Programs should assist in providing early childhood education (ages 3 to 8) to ensure that all children have access to inclusive, high-quality learning; programs that promote soft skills, critical thinking, and digital literacy; and explore means of introducing civic education into school curricula, textbooks, and teaching materials. The capacity of teachers and educators should be built to support this agenda.
- Incentivize local authorities to create social and economic opportunities in both rural and urban locations and invest in equipping people with the skills needed to meet local labor market demands through relevant education opportunities.

7. Empowering Youth

- Address at-risk youth: special attention in programming should be paid to youth in the at-risk category, i.e. young men and women who may be targeted by extremists looking to make a comeback in the northeast by taking advantage of continued grievances and the lack of employment opportunities. This could include vocational training, community-based projects, and programs based on principles of self-worth, respect for others, and critical thinking.
- Support young women's and young men's participation in activities aimed at preventing violent extremism, through engagement mechanisms as laid out in the 2015 Amman Declaration on Youth, Peace, and Security.[128]
- Encourage the integration of young women and men into decision-making processes at the local level, including by supporting the establishment of youth councils and similar mechanisms which give young women and men a platform for participating in mainstream political discourse.
- Involve hard-to-reach young women and men, such as those from underrepresented, special needs, or minority groups, in efforts to prevent violent extremism or radicalization to violence.
- More effort should be aimed at encouraging international financial institutions, foundations, and other donors to provide small grant-funding mechanisms to women and young social entrepreneurs with the aim of enabling them to develop their own ideas on strengthening community resilience against violent extremism and radicalization to violence.

8. Empowering Women

- Ensure all the above recommendations include gender analysis and contribute to the eradication of real or perceived exclusion and marginalization of women, so that they can participate fully and equally in political life and public affairs.
- Enhance the capacity of women and their civil society groups to engage in prevention and response efforts related to violent extremism.
- Ensure that a portion of all funds dedicated to addressing violent extremism and radicalization to violence are committed to projects that address women's specific needs or empower women.
- Support educational and economic initiatives that are specifically targeted at women to enable them to participate in decision-making in their own communities, in particular to female heads of households whose husbands may have been killed or missing as a result of the conflict.
- Support programs aimed at community sensitizing on women's leadership roles.

9. Strategic Communications and Social Media

- Assist in the development and implementation of communications strategies, including through radio broadcasts and social media, to challenge the narratives associated with violent extremism and radicalization to violence. These should be tailored to local contexts, crafted in a way that takes into account the power and reach of social media and be gender sensitive.
- Support efforts to provide victims a platform to transform their experiences into a constructive force for preventing violent extremism and radicalization to violence.

- Help develop or support local efforts to develop media training and industry codes of conduct for journalists in the northeast. Ensure that any programming includes female journalists to give voice to the female Syrian perspective and provide adequate gender balance to reporting from and about the northeast.

10. Effective Monitoring and Evaluation

- Ensure effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are in place for these interventions to provide assurance that programs are having the desired impact.

The Great Mosque north of Raqqa Museum, Raqqa City, Syria. March 2021. Photo credit: Sada AlSharqieh

Appendix One: Frequencies of quality of life under different ruling parties

Table 1: Ability to support yourself responses under different ruling parties

Safety	Frequency	Percentage
	Pre-*Daesh*	
No	37	46.25
Yes	38	47.5
To a certain extent	4	5
Don't know	1	1.25
Total	80	100
	Under *Daesh*	
No	61	76.25
Yes	13	16.25
To a certain extent	1	1.25
Don't know	5	6.25
Total	80	100
	Post-*Daesh*	
No answer	1	1.25
No	62	77.5
Yes	16	20
Don't know	1	1.25
Total	80	100

Table 2: Living with dignity Reponses under different ruling parties

Living with dignity	Frequency	Percentage
	Pre-*Daesh*	
No	50	62.5
Yes	30	37.5
Total	80	100
	Under *Daesh*	
No	62	77.5
Yes	12	15
To a certain extent	3	3.75
Don't Know	3	3.75
Total	80	100
	Post-*Daesh*	
No answer	1	1.25
No	64	80
Yes	14	17.5
To a certain extent	1	1.25
Total	80	100

Appendix Two: Frequencies of safety and psychological health

Table 3: Feeling safe responses under different ruling parties

Safety	Frequency	Percentage
	Pre-*Daesh*	
No	50	62.5
Yes	29	36.25
Don't know	1	1.25
Total	80	100
	Under *Daesh*	
No	64	80
Yes	11	13.75
To a certain extent	2	2.5
Don't know	3	3.75
Total	80	100
	Post-*Daesh*	
No answer	1	1.25
No	68	85
Yes	9	11.25
To a certain extent	1	1.25
Don't know	1	1.25
Total	80	100

Table 4: Psychological health responses in post-*Daesh* rule

Psychological health Frequencies

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Psychological_ health[a]	Fight-or-flight-syndrome	48	34.3%	76.2%
	Trouble concentrating	28	20.0%	44.4%
	Reckless or self-destructive behavior	5	3.6%	7.9%
	Bursts of anger	29	20.7%	46.0%
	Trouble sleeping	30	21.4%	47.6%
Total		140	100.0%	222.2%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 2 (Yes)

Appendix Three: Strengths of Daesh and drivers to join its ranks

Table 5: Strengths of Daesh responses

Strengths *Daesh* Frequencies

		Responses (Yes)		Percent of Cases
		N (Count)	Percent	
Strengths_*Daesh*[a]	Islamic Caliphate and Application of Sharia	41	10.4%	41.4%
	Money	76	19.3%	76.8%
	Power	48	12.2%	48.5%
	External Support	57	14.5%	57.6%
	Ideology of *Daesh*	42	10.7%	42.4%
	Gives me protection	13	3.3%	13.1%
	Practices of the GoS and its allies in Syria	27	6.9%	27.3%
	Fighting injustice against the Sunni Community	27	6.9%	27.3%
	Social Media and Propaganda	62	15.8%	62.6%
Total		393	100.0%	397.0%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 2 (Yes)

Table 6: Drivers to join Daesh responses

Reasons_join_*Daesh* Frequencies

		Responses (Yes)		
		N (Count)	Percent	Percent of Cases
Reasons to join *Daesh*[a]	Money	69	12.4%	70.4%
	Sense of Power or Status	60	10.8%	61.2%
	Ideology of *Daesh*	38	6.8%	38.8%
	The propaganda it adopts/ communication	45	8.1%	45.9%
	Fighting injustice against the Sunni community	35	6.3%	35.7%
	To get protection	38	6.8%	38.8%
	Personal Problems-Insecure	34	6.1%	34.7%
	The influence of some friends/ relatives	30	5.4%	30.6%
	The influence of Sheikh/Religious figure	34	6.1%	34.7%
	Unemployment	49	8.8%	50.0%
	School drop-out	26	4.7%	26.5%
	Chance to leave Syria	6	1.1%	6.1%
	Some of them are already outlaws	43	7.7%	43.9%
	Liberating Syria	28	5.0%	28.6%
	Other political/Sunni movements not doing enough to fight for Syria	21	3.8%	21.4%
Total		556	100.0%	567.3%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 2 (Yes)

Appendix Four: Easy target categories for IS

Table 7: Easy target categories for IS

Easy Target Frequencies

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Easy Target[a]	Youth from 16-25	67	16.6%	67.7%
	The poor	65	16.1%	65.7%
	The Unemployed	61	15.1%	61.6%
	Rich/ Capitalists	16	4.0%	16.2%
	Unaccompanied Minors (Under 16)	59	14.6%	59.6%
	People with personal problems-Insecure	46	11.4%	46.5%
	The Religious	44	10.9%	44.4%
	School Drop-Outs	44	10.9%	44.4%
	Others	1	0.2%	1.0%
Total		403	100.0%	407.1%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 2 (Yes)

Appendix Five: Ordinal regressions of perception of the GoS by age and income level

Table 8: Regression of perception of the GoS by age

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[Q17_GoS = 1.0]	-2.018	.815	6.134	1	.013	-3.615	-.421
	[Q17_GoS = 2.0]	-1.648	.745	4.897	1	.027	-3.108	-.188
	[Q17_GoS = 3.0]	.090	.622	.021	1	.885	-1.128	1.308
	[Q17_GoS = 4.0]	1.139	.647	3.097	1	.078	-.129	2.408
Location	[Age=1.0]	2.830	.838	11.421	1	.001	1.189	4.472
	[Age=2.0]	2.944	.779	14.280	1	.000	1.417	4.470
	[Age=3.0]	1.821	.782	5.417	1	.020	.288	3.354
	[Age=4.0]	0[a]	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit. **Tabulated at value 5 (Very negative)**

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Goodness-of-Fit

	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Pearson	7.154	12	.847
Deviance	8.073	12	.779

Link function: Logit.

Table 10: Regression of perception of the GoS by income level

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[Q17_GoS = 1.0]	-21.983	1.020	464.851	1	.000	-23.981	-19.985
	[Q17_GoS = 3.0]	-19.571	.377	2698.118	1	.000	-20.309	-18.832
	[Q17_GoS = 4.0]	-18.613	.301	3828.696	1	.000	-19.202	-18.023
Location	[Income_level=1.0]	-17.453	.519	1131.977	1	.000	-18.469	-16.436
	[Income_level=2.0]	-17.567	.000	.	1	.	-17.567	-17.567
	[Income_level=3.0]	0[a]	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit. **Tabulated at value (very negative)**

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Goodness-of-Fit

	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Pearson	1.420	4	.841
Deviance	1.705	4	.790

Link function: Logit.

Appendix Six: Ordinal Regression of perception of the SDF by place of origin

Table 9: Regression of perception of the SDF per area.

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[SDF = 1.0]	-.497	.993	.251	1	.617	-2.443	1.449
	[SDF = 2.0]	2.671	1.224	4.758	1	.029	.271	5.070
	[SDF = 3.0]	5.265	1.316	16.009	1	.000	2.686	7.844
	[SDF = 4.0]	6.000	1.327	20.453	1	.000	3.400	8.601
Location	[Place_of_origin=1]	6.948	1.387	25.095	1	.000	4.229	9.666
	[Place_of_origin=2]	5.849	1.340	19.066	1	.000	3.224	8.475
	[Place_of_origin=3]	2.622	1.421	3.405	1	.065	-.163	5.408
	[Place_of_origin=4]	3.682	1.350	7.433	1	.006	1.035	6.329
	[Place_of_origin=5]	1.078	1.292	.697	1	.404	-1.454	3.609
	[Place_of_origin=6]	0[a]	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit. **Tabulated at Value 5 (Very negative)**

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Goodness-of-Fit

	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Pearson	10.325	15	.799
Deviance	11.476	15	.718

Link function: Logit.

Test of Parallel Lines[a]

Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Null Hypothesis	42.296			
General	28.788[b]	13.508[c]	15	.563

The null hypothesis states that the location parameters (slope coefficients) are the same across response categories.

a. Link function: Logit.

b. The log-likelihood value cannot be further increased after maximum number of step-halving.

Endnotes

1 The entity currently controlling Northeast Syria is called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, commonly referred to as "the Administration." While the SDF is a fighting force, the Administration is a civilian body that is technically led by a coalition of Kurds and Arabs but in practice dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The SDF (which includes the PYD's military arm, the People's Protection Units, or YPG), along with the SDF's police force, the Asayish, maintain security in areas under its administration. See Ruby Mellen, "A Brief History of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led Alliance That Helped the US Defeat the Islamic State," Washington Post, October 7, 2019. Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/07/brief-history-syrian-democratic-forces-kurdish-led-alliance-that-helped-us-defeat-islamic-state/.

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