



# Syria in ISIS's Strategy

**Can ISIS be defeated without a solution in Syria?**

Research Paper

Abdullah Erfan

Adjunct fellow, Center for International and Strategic Studies, Washington, D.C. & Non-resident fellow, Stimson Center, Europe office, Brussels.

## Introduction

More than three years after the defeat of ISIS, the caliphate remains a serious threat requiring a comprehensive, thorough response. The breakout of ISIS-affiliated prisoners from Ghwiran prison in Hassakeh in January 2022 reminded us that the threat of ISIS remains a grim, salient reality. The death toll amounts to close to 500 fighters between ISIS and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>1</sup> This is the largest human loss for the SDF since the caliphate was defeated in Baghuz in Deir Ezzor, Syria, in 2019 and ISIS was declared officially defeated. It is not yet known how many prisoners escaped. Despite all the efforts of the international coalition against ISIS and the SDF, the number of active ISIS fighters in Syria remains large, with at least 10,000 believed to be in Syria and Iraq. Half of which are likely to be in Syria, and most of ISIS affiliated are in the northeast. Considering 10,000 more former fighters held in captivity in prisons and the approximately 70,000 women and children in camps across northeast Syria, it is possible that the ISIS' largest concentration (fighters and non-fighters) in the world could be in Syria.<sup>2</sup> This reality is compounded by and overlaps with Syria's independent crisis, underscoring the complexity of the issue.

After 11 years of war, Syria continues to produce alarming, horrific news on several fronts. Ongoing military operations by Turkey, Iran, the Syrian government, and Israel are destabilizing military conditions. Internally, an unstable security situation has arisen, resulting from weak police control outside cities and weak borders control with Iraq and Jordan. The majority of the population cannot meet their basic needs, even the most essential ones like water, bread, and medicine.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, inflation is increasing at a rate that is highly difficult to measure given the decimation of the currency, unemployment is above 40%, and poverty rates are higher than 80%.<sup>4</sup> A fragmented, authoritarian, and inefficient state of governance is in place with four different government players (the Syrian government/regime, the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria, the Interim Government in Northwest Syria, and the Salvation Government in Idlib) which do not coordinate with one another and all suffer from a lack of resources and competencies, as well as a deteriorating state of service delivery and security. In addition to this is the protracted political transition that allows the *de facto* powers to continue and prevents any form of elections or an inclusive power sharing.<sup>5</sup> These interdependent, complex issues add to the threats associated with ISIS presence in Syria, begging the question: Can an elimination of ISIS preclude these structural issues?

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1 Conflicting reports point to numbers ranging from 140 to 4000. The actual number is unknown, but it is definitely below 4000. Please see: Muhammad Hassan, Samir Al Ahmad, February 14, 2022, "A Close Look at ISIS Attack on Syria's Al Sinaa Prison," Middle East Institute, <https://tinyurl.com/2p86jhsz>

2 According to the UN's latest estimates, al-Hol camp alone contains 56,000 individuals, so keep in mind there are nine other camps in northeast Syria, June 5, 2022, "A visit to al-Hol camp in northeast Syria." Relief Webb, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8puh4e>

3 Update on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria, Issue I, June 2022, OCHA <https://tinyurl.com/47nnaa7z>

4 Syrian Economic Observatory, Autumn 2022, "The Lost Generation of Syrians," World Bank, <https://tinyurl.com/2dfx9hwm>

5 For more, see a lecture organized by the Arab Center in Washington, DC on August 2, 2022, entitled Governance and Fragmentation in Syria: Assessing Humanitarian and Political Challenges, <https://tinyurl.com/bdeh5bav>

Before addressing this question, it is worth stepping back to highlight the place of Syria in ISIS's global activities. Despite the sharp decline in the security, economic, humanitarian, and all other relevant aspects Syria, the country is still not the most active front for ISIS. On top of this list is Afghanistan, followed by Africa (Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, Democratic Congo and others), followed by Iraq, and only then Syria. After Syria, the list continues with the Sinai in Egypt and Israel's Negev desert, as well as Yemen and Libya.<sup>6</sup> The circumstances of these countries and regions resemble Syria in terms of state collapse or failure in terms of economic, political, and security aspects. The success in reducing ISIS activities in Syria may be attributed to the efforts of the International Coalition as well as the SDF. The security approach to contain ISIS seems to work in Syria, but it is not sustainable. Therefore, efforts to improve the security, economic and political situation in all of Syria should not be overlooked in the fight against ISIS, particularly in the northeast, to minimize the possibility of an ISIS resurgence.

This paper aims to clarify the importance of Syria to ISIS globally; to shed light on the security, economic, and political contexts of the organization activities in Northeast Syria; to address the challenges facing counter ISIS efforts by the Global Coalition, the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES)/SDF. Finally, it will discuss the approaches available to deal with these urgent challenges. To avoid generalization, this paper will focus on Deir Ezzor, a region which reflects all security, economic, and political challenges for Northeast. This spotlight on Deir Ezzor does not denote insignificance to the other regions in the northeast; on the contrary, there are many similarities between Deir Ezzor and other cities in northeast, west, central, and southern Syria. This focus will help clarify the concepts and enable comparison with future research in other regions. The paper begins with the premise that security solutions to deal with terrorism are important, but they do not work without considering and improving the broader economic, governmental, and political contexts. The research relied on a combination of desk research, field interviews with officials from local councils and the Global Coalition against ISIS, and independent experts and activists from the region.<sup>8</sup>

## Part I: context

### Syria's importance to ISIS:

The decrease in the number of operations attributed to ISIS in Syria does not mean that Syria is unimportant for the future of the organization. In fact, Syria is particularly important to ISIS for many symbolic and practical reasons. The symbolism of Syria stems from the fact that it is the former headquarters of the group's caliphate, and its recapture will have a significant moral impact on affiliates and sympathizers around the world. From this perspective, the impression of power and control across different parts of Syria is an achievement, regardless of the real

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6 Global terrorism Index 2022, Institute for Economics And Peace <https://tinyurl.com/v6tb32r9>

7 The Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan vulnerability indices can be reviewed in the 2022 Fragile States Index issued by the Peace Fund Foundation, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

8 Ziad Awad contributed to the initial draft of the research. The author is fully responsible for the final paper in its current form.

power and influence that ISIS is enjoying. In practical terms, the group has a strong social structure in Syria that did not disappear even after its defeat in 2019. This structure provides essential cover operational secrecy, recruitment, funding, as well as special logistics for military operations in Syria and beyond. This social structure supports the organization not necessarily out of belief or loyalty, but also out of political motivations related to the Arab locals' historical grievances since Damascus took control of Northeast Syria in the 1960s, as well as the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration's current control over the Arabs since 2019. Syria is strategically located, bordering Iraq and Jordan, with tribal and family ties essential for financing and executing cross border operations. Syria is also geographically close to Israel and the Sinai, areas candidate for expanded operations in the future.<sup>9</sup>

Syria is also important to ISIS because of the approximately 10,000 former ISIS fighters imprisoned in Northeast Syria under the control of the AANES and the SDF.<sup>1</sup> This large number of fighters with varying degrees of loyalty is ISIS's hope of regaining significant military strength, both in terms of numbers and expertise. These prisoners have extensive experience working in a variety of positions within the organization, from funding to recruitment, to a range of forms of fighting. The recovery of these fighters is also important on a moral and personal level for those fighters who are out of prison. The prisoners are their friends, relatives or former leaders. It is expected that attacks on prisons and attempts to smuggle ISIS fighters will continue in the future and, if successful, would have the worst possible consequences. In addition to the prisons, there are camps holding more than 70,000 Iraqis, Syrians, and foreign children and wives of former fighters. These women and children have both a symbolic and strategic significance for the group. They represent the potential of growth by attracting followers with blood ties to the caliphate, in addition to the ideological ties. The women also have important functions within the organization related to funding and communication. After combining the number of fighters in prisons with the number of women and children in camps, the total number of ISIS and its affiliates across Syria is likely to be over 90,000. This makes Syria the country with the highest ISIS member affiliates globally.

## ISIS in Syria after 2019

ISIS operates in different parts of Northeast Syria for a variety of purposes, without attempting to achieve absolute control over any one specific geographic area. There are areas important to the group's funding, recruitment and training because of the concentration of a large number of ISIS affiliates or their families there. Currently, the group does not present a direct challenge to AANES's rule in Deir Ezzor, but it does diminish its authority through various carrot and stick strategies. For example, ISIS strikes deals with local officials or warns them not to attack

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<sup>9</sup> Several aspects of Syria's importance to the group were mentioned in interviews with experts and officials from the region in March 2022. also review: Patrick Hayne and Arthur Quincy, April 5, 2022, "Infiltrating through the cracks: ISIS Neighborhoods in Syria and Iraq," European University Institute in Florence.

<https://tinyurl.com/yvfkp3ck>

<sup>1</sup> There is no accurate count of the number of ISIS fighters anywhere in the world, including in the prisons of northeast Syria.

the group's members, turn a blind eye to their activities, and integrate ISIS affiliates into the aid distribution system. In some cases, ISIS may impede local institutions by preventing the population from becoming members, officials, or even employees of the AANES. In more than one case, the group succeeded to force dissolve the local councils, as in the case of Swaidan and Abu Hardoub in June and July 2019.

ISIS no longer wields the massive financial capabilities it did prior to its 2019 demise. However, it is still able to generate sufficient income to finance its unsophisticated operations as well as to provide its members with living wages. The sources of funding for ISIS in Syria are concentrated in the levies that the group imposes on oil traders and investors, local merchants, contractors, landowners, corrupt military and civilian officials in the ranks of SDF, the Deir Ezzor Civilian Council, and its affiliate councils. ISIS imposes a fixed share of the well's revenues on its investors in oil wells far from the main oil fields, which are unprotected by SDF. The same applies to traders of transported oil, and to merchants at various levels who are in regions or on routes where they can be threatened without consequences. Further to this, during harvests, ISIS cells in some villages collect Zakat from owners of large and medium-sized properties. At times, under threat of assassination, ISIS security cells force some SDF commanders to pay money through intermediaries.

While ISIS retains the capacity to terrorize the population and to launch near-continuous attacks against SDF and its civilian collaborators, it also faces challenges to its internal cohesion. As a result of the coalition attacks and the constant security pressure, there are signs of chaos, confusion, declining discipline and sometimes conflict among ISIS cells. For example, in the village of Ghariba in the Khabur Basin at least three ISIS members of an active security cell were killed during June and July 2021, following a dispute that arose between them after they were accused of collusion with SDF. Some ISIS leaders have been accused of stealing funds from the organization. Some traders succeed in escaping the payment of their levies or reducing their value by mediating with relatives or friends close to the leaders of active ISIS security cells in their areas. These problems point to disorder in the recruitment process, as well as internal discipline procedures and the weakening of the ethical compass of some ISIS members. Crucially, ISIS's control over its cells and its formerly strong central to periphery coordination has been weakened.

## Systems of governance and security in northeast Syria:

ISIS emerged in Syria in 2014 at a time when northeastern Syria was fragmented between the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and armed Syrian opposition factions. ISIS succeeded

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with an Assayish official in March 2022.

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with a resident from al-Sour town, June 2021.

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with an oil field worker in Deir Ezzor, June 2021.

<sup>1</sup> From an interview in June 2021 with a friend of a leader in the Deir Ezzor Military Council, he had to pay US\$5,000 to one of the ISIS security cells.

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with a local notable from the region, April 2021.

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with a food merchant in the Bussaira area, June 2021.

in defeating the armed opposition factions, driving them out. Under the threat of ISIS, the PYD joined forces with several minority and Arab armed factions to form the SDF under the leadership of the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS along with 30 other countries. A system of governance centered around the PYD was formed in the Kurdish areas (Hassakeh, Jazira, and Afrin) and later in the Arab areas such as Deir Ezzor and Raqqa under the name of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES).<sup>1</sup> Despite its decentralized structure, the AANES remains in control of the outskirts of its territory, eliminating the benefits of decentralization. While the popular bases of the Komen units have strong representation in the legislative and executive councils, the appointment of local council leadership is a top-down process where PYD and Future Party followers dominate decision-making positions in the Northeast. Arabs and Kurds who are not affiliated with the PYD complain of systematic marginalization, which increases public discontent and weakens the legitimacy of the AANES in representing the region's diverse population.

It is important to note that the evolution of the AANES has been experimental and came as a reaction to local developments and events. When it was first formed in 2014, the AANES did not cover Arab regions, but in 2017 with the beginning of military liberation from ISIS, AANES moved to control Arab-dominated areas. During the war on ISIS there was no opportunity for inclusive elections and once the war ended the AANES was occupied with the rewriting of current the Social Contract, a document which is expected to provide the constitutional and legal backdrop for the AANES organizational and political structure. One reason for popular discontent is that there are large discrepancies between the Social Contract presented in the 2015 document by the PYD and the reality of the situation in 2022. The AANES is attempting to appease this anger through a process of redrafting the social contract that began in 2020. Despite the broad powers and multiple tasks granted to the provincial legislative councils by the Social Contract,<sup>1</sup> Deir Ezzor's unit still plays a marginal role, as the actual authority has remained in the hands of the provincial executive council, and the Court of Justice has floundered in terms of structure and role.<sup>1</sup> This has led to local governance entities in Deir Ezzor being less developed structurally compared to other cantons in the Kurdish areas.

Out of necessity dictated by the difficult economic and service conditions in Deir Ezzor, the local population has worked with the emerging post-ISIS civilian governance structures. The Civil Council was established in 2017 and its affiliate councils have since overcome many obstacles, most notably the problem of legitimacy as these councils were not elected and effectively subordinate to a higher authority dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) whose members working in the institutions of AANES are the shadow leaders of these institutions. Yet, despite the party's

<sup>1</sup> Geographically, Deir Ezzor is divided according to local nomenclature into two main areas that are separated by the Euphrates River: Shamiya area, south and southwest of the Euphrates River currently under control of Government of Syria, and the Jazira region, north and northeast of the river (under AANES and SDF control)

<sup>1</sup> For more see clause 53 of the Social Contract Charter for AANES, official website of PYD, in original Arabic, undated content <https://bit.ly/3yCuRry>

<sup>1</sup> AlAlu, Sasha, The Autonomous Administration: A Judicial Approach to Understanding the Model and Experience, Omran Strategic Center, 2021.

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9evsa7>



ideological burdens, which are clearly reflected in the AANES literature, its officials have shown flexibility in their dealings with the local communities in Deir Ezzor, greatly mitigating the cultural disparities between the post-ISIS authority and these communities. For example, the AANES avoided applying laws that contradict Islamic law in Deir Ezzor, such as the law prohibiting polygamy<sup>2</sup> and abolishing the dowry and the law of inheritance.<sup>2</sup>

In the broader context, ISIS does not have the power that it once had in Syria, but it is not a negligible threat. Syria is key to ISIS's existence and operations in the rest of the world. Many concrete, contextual reasons explain ISIS's ongoing presence in Syria including the security, economic, and governmental collapse as well as the utter absence of a political horizon. The lack of a credible and legitimate alternative local system of governance for security and service delivery that reduces ISIS's appeal to potential affiliates and current members is an impediment to the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, as well as the de facto power of AANES and the SDF. The following section focuses on the security, economic, governance, and political challenges in Deir Ezzor, representing the rest of Northeast Syria as a whole.

## Part II: Challenges

### Security Challenges:

Given the lack of statistics on the number of crimes, their nature, the perpetrators, and the response of the Internal Security Forces (Assayish) the security situation in Deir Ezzor is difficult to assess in absolute terms. Looking exclusively at Deir Ezzor, it would appear that the security situation, in particular the threat of ISIS is the largest source of worry for the population, according to a survey conducted by<sup>2</sup>IMPACT in late 2020. On the other hand, there is also some satisfaction with Assayish's performance in providing security against organized and isolated crimes in the major cities of Deir Ezzor. This is in comparison with the remote villages and districts where Assayish presence is scarce and ISIS is tangibly present. In some villages, there is relative safety, reminding people of ISIS rule and the scarcity of crimes because of the severity of punitive measures. During ISIS rule, the harsh punitive sentences reduced crimes to a minimum. It became rare for robberies, murders and armed robberies to take place on the roads during ISIS's control in 2014. Residents compared this situation to the period after the fall of ISIS in 2019 and the AANES taking control, when reports of killings and theft of public and private property became almost daily occurrences in some areas. Thieves and highway bandits ambushed bystanders to a point where drivers were unsafe traveling from one village to another. Exploiting the current security vacuum in the peripheries,

<sup>2</sup> MENA Research and Studies Center "Second Marriage in Self-Administered Areas" 6 April 2018 <https://bit.ly/3iVhLR7>

<sup>2</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "The Autonomous Administration prohibits polygamy and issues other laws concerning women" November 9, 2014.

<https://bit.ly/2SHW1Oa>. In cases where AANES tried to impose some measures that affect the cultural and religious identity of Deir Ezzor society, residents have fierce resistance that has always thwarted such attempts. Families and teachers rejected the curriculum that the Autonomous Administration tried to apply to schools in Deir Ezzor, because some of the content of the curriculum, justifying their rejection of it based on the notion that it "violates our beliefs, customs, and laws and calls for moral decay." In private meetings and meetings between Kurdish civil and military officials from Al-Hassakeh province and tribal leaders from Deir Ezzor, Kurdish leaders say they recognize the impossibility of coercing hard-to-bend tribal communities in Deir Ezzor to submit to decisions that are incompatible with their nature and culture, according to interviews conducted in June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Please review details of the survey in Shoresh Dawish and Jelnar Ahmad, Local Priorities and Trends in Northeast Syria, Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria, IMPACT, 2022. <https://impactres.org/aftershocks-the-legacy-of-isis-in-syria/>

3 ISIS provides security by stopping thieves, which strengthens its legitimacy and challenges that of the Assayish.

At the same time, the emerging justice system lacks a capable law enforcement to assist in investigations and, if necessary, executing sentences.<sup>2</sup> Weak judicial and law<sup>4</sup> enforcement processes do not help provide a sense of security and justice. For their part, the judges have tried to become local mediators who resolve issues "amicably" between the conflicting parties in order to speed up the process and reduce reliance on the frequently unavailable legal authorities. This reliance on informal law enforcement provides ISIS with the opportunity to intervene, demonstrate its influence and contribute to the stability of the areas in which it operates. For example, in the growing dispute between the Kubaisa and Bufrio tribes, ISIS intervened on behalf of the Bufrio tribe, whose demands to punish the Kubaisa killers of its members were not met. An ISIS cell pursued and killed an individual involved in the crime in the Sour area, almost a year after the attack on the Bufrio by people close to a Kubaisa tribe.<sup>2</sup>

Deir Ezzor's massive 33,000 square kilometers of land makes it difficult to provide enough police to<sup>7</sup> fight organized crime. Nor does its expansive desert help the SDF to control its border with Iraq, or with Al Hassakeh and Raqqa inside Syria. Likewise, the regime's control of a portion of the Deir Ezzor west of the Euphrates River is a barrier to sufficient control of the province borders. Many experts and locals have pointed to the concentration of ISIS training centers in the desert region, close to the border between the areas of regime and SDF control. Experts have also confirmed that the informal settlements around towns and villages act as a source of recruitment and sanctuary for ISIS members who carried out the January 2022 attack on Ghwiran prison. Threats of new Turkish operations in northeast and western Syria also constitute a challenge to SDF's mission to defeat ISIS. During Turkish threats, When the SDF's focus is shifted towards the north, leaving the southeast without adequate security coverage to<sup>9</sup> deter and reign in ISIS.

Numerous approaches can be taken to answer these security challenges. Strengthening the police force, supporting its deployment in villages and remote areas, supporting the justice system, strengthening law enforcement through formal channels, supporting the presence of the SDF in the Deir Ezzor desert, and protecting its borders with Iraq and other Syrian regions

<sup>2</sup> This is happening despite the swelling number of personnel in the internal security forces (Assayish) and the considerable material capabilities of this apparatus. Sometimes, and as a reminder of the state of security prevailing during its reign, ISIS cells intervene in cases where thieves go too far. In the city of Bussaira, after a series of robberies of copper cables that feed a lighting network on a main street without the city's police being able to stop them, the Friday preacher at al-Safa Mosque in the city swore "on those who can protect the lighting network and deter thieves from intervening" in an indirect message to ISIS cells operating in Bussaira, the attacks on the copper cables stopped, and the lighting network went back to work. On many occasions when a person seizes or beats another person's property and brings his complaint to the Assayish, they don't intervene. "Of the 50-100 complaints per month received by the Dhiban Center for Internal Security Forces, most of them related to financial transactions and quarrels, the Center intervenes with 10 percent of these complaints." According to interviews conducted in June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth look at the judiciary and legislative branches of the Deir Ezzor Autonomous Administration, see: Sasha Al-Alu: A Judicial Input to Understanding the Model and the Experience", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, p. 87-102, April 2021, ibis.

<sup>2</sup> From an interview, conducted by a member of IMPACT team, with a judge in the Eastern procurator, one of the two procurator districts in Deir Ezzor, May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> From an interview with an individual familiar with the murder investigation, June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to know how many Assayish forces are in Deir Ezzor province due to the lack of published statistics.

<sup>2</sup> From interviews with experts from northeast Syria, March 2022.

<sup>2</sup> From interviews with security officials in the Autonomous Administration, March 2022.



could all make significant progress. However, the question remains, can these security challenges be solved independently from the economic and governance situation? This question will be discussed in the following section.

## Economic and governance challenges:

The rule of ISIS and the war against it have devastated all economic sectors in Northeast, making the task of any ruling entity extremely difficult. Infrastructure was destroyed, the M4 road, essential for internal trade, was cut off, the Rabiya border crossing was closed, and operations at the Peshkhabour crossing were recently disrupted by disagreements between the Kurds of Iraq and Syria. Economic isolation and internal fragmentation were reflected in high prices, unavailability of essential commodities, and collapsed infrastructure with no hope of reform. Both the drought and the reduced quantities of water coming from Turkey have exacerbated the situation, leading to a decline in agricultural and livestock production in Northeast Syria which has impacted food security across the country, as well as putting many farmers out of work. The region has been plunged into a vicious cycle, where electricity production is hampered by water scarcity in the dams. A shortage of basic supplies has become a chronic, prolific issue in these areas. Winter 2021 did not have sufficient fuel for heating, and available electricity ranged from 4-6 hours in cities and just 1-2 hours in villages.

Standards of education and health are unlikely to be different in this context. The region suffers from a shortage of teachers, schools, doctors, and hospital equipment. Students must walk long distances to get to school, and once they do they find themselves in unequipped and unsafe surroundings. Critically ill patients in Deir Ezzor need to travel to Hassakeh and Qamishli or even to Damascus if they are unable to afford supplies, equipment or medicines at the city's hospitals. This weakness in educational and health institutions translates to high levels of illiteracy, a poor labor market supply, high rates of chronic illness and disability that reduce work capacity and high mortality rates. In absolute terms, the educational and health conditions in Northeast Syria may be the worst in all of Syria.

A study was carried out by IMPACT in 2020 and based on a survey conducted in the areas under AANES control Autonomous in Al-Hassakeh, Deir Ezzor and Al-Raqqa, covering 504 people in these areas. Its results showed that the sample in Deir Ezzor had the worst assessment of living conditions under the AANES, with 60% of the respondents considering their living conditions to be bad or very bad. The report also showed that the degree of confidence in the AANEAS is at the lowest level in Deir Ezzor. A report issued by the OCHA country team

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with experts from northeast Syria in 2022.

<sup>3</sup> For more, please see: Blanche, Fabrice, "How to preserve the Autonomy in Northeast Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2022. <https://tinyurl.com/3fwhmm3>

<sup>3</sup> From an interview with an employee of the Education Committee at the Deir Ezzor Civil Council, June 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Shoresh Darwish and Jelnar Ahmad, Local Priorities and Trends in Northeast Syria, Aftershocks: The Legacy of ISIS in Syria, IMPACT, 2022. ibis.

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estimated that as of the end of 2017, more than half a million people were in urgent need of assistance in the Deir Ezzor governorate, and according to the distribution of population between the SDF area and the regime's area of control in the governorate, more than half of those reside in the SDF area. But, despite the poor situation in Deir Ezzor, there is a general perception that it is the best that can be. According to one resident of Deir Ezzor:

*"Everything in Syria is bad, whether Idlib or regime areas. The Northeast is better in comparison. The AANES employs people, most of them are wanted by the Syrian Government and have nowhere else to go. There are great opportunities for many people in the Northeast and the alternatives are not good, or even more dangerous. The lawlessness and looting in Turkey's [controlled] regions are horrifying."*

There is a huge gap in the response to the economic and humanitarian challenge that AANES is trying to address in cooperation with internationally funded civil society organizations. The AANES's capacity appears modest in terms of planning, implementing early recovery and reconstruction projects. The lack of staff and expertise, as well as a lack of information, are reflected in the improvised responses, slow project progress and accusations of corruption among administration officials. The leaders of AANES do not deny these problems, nor do they deny the existence of corruption, but they insist that these are individual cases that do not represent the system as a whole. They also argue that corruption is administrative rather than financial. Experts both close to AANES or independent attribute corruption to the lack of codes of conduct and laws to define the limits of institutions and individuals' authorities and powers. If there were roles and bylaws, as well as a rigorous, comprehensive and well-documented accounting system, huge improvement in fighting corruption and mismanagement could be achieved.<sup>3</sup> AANES does not have notebooks documenting financial transactions to make readily available to auditors. It is important to remember that the very first detailed budget for the Autonomous Administration was in 2021, more than seven years after it was first

<sup>3</sup> OCHA publications "Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019..Syrian Arab Republic", March 2019 available for download in Arabic at <https://bit.ly/3ACBnPR>

<sup>3</sup> From an interview with a local resident of the area, March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> From interviews with several officials and experts from the region, March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> In many cases, the Deir Ezzor Council's inquiries into services, health, education, and agriculture were ad hoc and not pre-planned, and came either within the often limited appeasement of communities angry at the Council's stumbling functions, or in line with the intervention of Syrian and foreign NGOs and international development agencies that have played a key role in the little recovery. For example, some local CSOs such as Furatna Development rehabilitated more than 100 schools in the towns between Abu Hamam and Baghuz, east of Deir Ezzor, and the same organization maintained and operated the irrigation system, which covers hundreds of hectares of farmland in the towns of Abu Hamam and Kashkiyeh. another CSO called Bedaya did rehabilitate 100 schools between Bussaira, Abu hardoub Abd a couple for small towns on the northern bank of Khabur river. After implementation, the organizations usually run their projects for a few months for testing before handing them over to the specialized committees in the civil council and its branches at the town level, which entails continuing operation and conducting emergency maintenance work on the projects they received. In many cases, administrative chaos, corruption, and indifference on the part of some council officials and local sub-councils have caused the productivity of these projects to deteriorate or be interrupted for a long time, sometimes even get completely out of service. for example, an agricultural project was carried out by Insaf Development Organization to irrigate approximately 500 hectares of land in the town of Al-Shafa, east of Deir Ezzor, between September and December 2019. The organization restored the irrigation station, which was rehabilitated for three months and handed over to the local council in the town. The irrigation station ceased to operate after two weeks after the council took over the management and operation of the plant, which had some of its equipment stolen due to the absence of the guards from work due to the council's late payment of their salaries. In another project which included the rehabilitation of the channels connecting Euphrates River to the Khabur River, near the town of Sour, north of Deir Ezzor, which was financed by the United States Development Agency, the operation of the main pumping station was reportedly interrupted repeatedly due to failure in planning for securing electrical supply.

<sup>3</sup> From interviews with experts and officials from AANES, March 2022.

established. Under the current levels of bureaucratic underdevelopment and lack of basics like regular electricity service, modern technologies like automation of operation are unlikely to be implemented. There are already efforts in place to work on this, but they are proceeding at a pace that does not correspond to development expectations.

The financial gap is also large, since domestic financial resources barely cover the AANES's basic expenses of military and security wages, and the expenditure on the SDF and Assayish. There is no budget for investment in infrastructural reconstruction. The inadequacy of resources compared the abundance of oil in Deir Ezzor, which gives a false impression of affluence. The problem may lie in how the administration deals with oil revenues and the way it integrates Deir Ezzor into production and marketing, and subsequently sharing the revenues. Oil revenues go to AANES' headquarters in Raqqa where they are disbursed centrally. This generates a sense of discontent among Deir Ezzor's citizens and its elite due to the disproportionate financial allocations for their population, compared to the size of the oil production in their area. Residents of Deir Ezzor feel that services and infrastructure in the Kurdish areas are better, constituting<sup>3</sup> another aspect of discrimination against them. The residents compare this to ISIS's decentralized management of oil which allowed them to refine oil and benefit directly from the revenues. As a result of the local concentration of revenues, the oil industry created jobs that bolstered ISIS popularity. In contrast, the AANES has banned the polluting of local oil refineries, and has taken over production, marketing and funding to the center, without consulting Deir Ezzor City Council. Unfortunately for the AANES, taking control of the oil sector has not been accompanied by an increase in production due to maintenance issues and a depletion of fields, which has reduced revenue in general, and subsequently Deir Ezzor's share. The lack of data and statistics and the absence of credible specialized investigative bodies on these issues certainly do not help to resolve the knowledge gap. For many, AANES is no different from the Syrian Government in terms of integrity, but "the existence of a governance institution gives a sense of justice under the Syrian government, even if it is false," as one expert put it.<sup>4</sup> ISIS's narrative that AANES is stealing oil and discriminating against Arabs gains traction amid uncertainty, pessimism, and violence, and that contributes to a sense of anger against the SDF and AANES. That frustration is being exploited by ISIS for recruitment and gaining<sup>4</sup> increasing support and sympathy in the region.

<sup>3</sup> Many interviewees and sources acknowledged AANES efforts to combat corruption. But they pointed to structural problems, its relationship to population, the domination of ideology-oriented members, as well as security and political instability as reasons of slow progress.

<sup>4</sup> From an interview with an AANES official, March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> From an interview with an official from the Deir Ezzor Civil Council, March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> From interviews with citizens of Deir Ezzor in March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the productivity of wells in the Azbā oil field dropped from five thousand barrels a day in 2019 to 2500 barrels in spring 2021, due to decisions made by the Cadro supervising the field, which the technical workers had to enforce, with the total production dropping to less than 20 thousand barrels a day in oil fields under AANES control. Based on interviews with technical workers in oil facilities in Deir Ezzor, May 2021.

<sup>4</sup> From an interview with an expert from AANES, March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that the availability of cheap oil during the ISIS years in Deir Ezzor was a key factor that helped the group to provide the minimum necessary services. In addition to job opportunities provided by ISIS's modus operandi of operating and investing in oil facilities, the abundance of oil has enhanced the group's ability to provide some vital services to the population. Depending on a power plant in Al-Omar oil field, and a smaller plant in al-Team field, ISIS was able to supply electricity to thousands of homes between al-Jazeera and al-Shamiya, and to water purification plants in dozens of villages and towns. The group also provided a massive supply of fuel

In the face of economic and development challenges, financial resources must be made available to invest in reconstructing infrastructure and creating a fruitful investment environment to create jobs, support growth, and promote the region as a whole. However, attracting investment to a region ruled by an internationally unrecognized administration with a critical lack of legitimacy in all institutions, in a country embroiled in a multilateral war with no political solution in sight is, at the very least, a highly difficult task. The following section addresses the political and social challenges of Northeast Syria and Deir Ezzor.

## Political and social challenges:

The compromised legitimacy of institutions in Northeast Syria and their alternatives across Syria present enormous political challenges. For example, 44% of respondents in an IMPACT study in Deir Ezzor do not see any of the current political players as their representatives, while only 34% see the AANES as closer to them compared to the Syrian Government or the Syrian opposition coalition. The legitimacy crisis extends far beyond Deir Ezzor. Across Northeast Syria, more than 55% of respondents felt that they were not represented politically at all, and that none of the current players in Northeast Syria represented their political visions and aspirations. Within the Kurdish-majority province of Hassakeh, only a quarter of the respondents named one of the main Kurdish parties such as the Democratic Union or the Kurdish National Council parties. This demonstrates the weakness of the Kurdish political establishments, even in Kurdish majority areas. In the predominantly Arab province of Raqqa, a minority of 30% mentioned the Etilaf (Syrian Coalition for opposition and revolutionary forces) as their political representative, meaning that 70% of Arabs do not support any of the available Arabic political options. In the contest on legitimacy, the Syrian government did not receive more than 9% of the votes of the pollsters throughout Northeast Syria with regards to being the political entity that most represents their aspirations.

The legitimacy of institutions is not only linked to the quality of services, which is deteriorating in across Syria without exception. An important dimension of the political legitimacy of institutions lies in the communities' recognition of the institution's authorities, services, and records. For example, education in Northeast Syria is provided in two ways: AANES-supported schools and Syrian Government schools. Apart from the quality of teaching, which is very important, there is a political dimension to education, which is the curriculum and its content, the language of teaching, as well as the recognition of the certificates issued by these schools. It is understandable that Kurds prefer teaching their kids in a Kurdish curriculum introduced by AANES, and that Arabs prefer Arabic curricula introduced by the Syrian Government or the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). But both Arabs and Kurds will suffer if the certificates

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and flour to bakeries, while imposing a strict control on their operators. In contrast, AANES failed to maintain the same level of services that ISIS provided. Insufficient efforts were made to provide continuous and sufficient electricity, but AANES remained dependent on meager allocations from the Euphrates Dam. Please review: George Fahmy, Manhal Barish and Rashed Othman: "Military Solution Not Enough to Defeat ISIS in Syria" Research Project Report (Florence Italy): The Wartime and Post-Conflict Project in Syria, European University Institute, April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zGUFEO>

of school were not to be recognized within the Kurdish regions and beyond. The issue of the lack of recognition of the AANES's school certificates by the rest of Syria as well as the rest of the world reflects the problem of the AANES' legitimacy on the national as well as the international level, and that in turn<sup>4</sup> affects its local appeal.

One of the social challenges in Northeast Syria is the deep-rooted nature of ISIS's cultural presence, which finds its roots in a tribal structure with a conservative Salafi understanding of Islam. Three years after its defeat, the majority of the population has continued to practice religion in the same Salafi way that was dominant during ISIS years of control in Deir Ezzor. It may be difficult to understand the contradictions inherent in the behavior of a society that has on the one hand brutally suffered from a group with a certain ideology, but at the same time continues to follow its way<sup>5</sup> of life, albeit tacitly. However, this contradiction may be explained by the fact that the highly conservative religious culture preceded ISIS's existence and that these conservative roots are unrelated to the group. On the other hand, this also points to the ability of ISIS to create a common ground to connect with the community where existing powers have not been able to exploit. However, the ideology of the AANES clashes with the beliefs of the people in Deir Ezzor and is oppositional to their lifestyle. This contradiction is reflected in the low levels of political involvement in the administration and its institutions, as well as the possible emergence of negative or effective forms of resistance against its policies. In this special context, the fear of ISIS cannot be underestimated as a strong disincentive for some locals to<sup>5</sup> engage in the AANES' activities, and structures.

Another social challenge for existing institutions is the social fragmentation and instability of populations resulting from repeated displacement since the start of the war in 2011. The effects of displacement and social instability in Deir Ezzor goes beyond the high relief and humanitarian costs. The presence of these displaced people creates long-term security problems in terms of the difficulty of monitoring, the possibility of ISIS members hiding in their camps and the difficulty of establishing their identity. Displacement has fueled pre-existing social fragmentations that resulted from socio-political and tribal divisions. Between one clan and another, or between members of the same family, individuals can take positions which are in direct opposition with others. The fluctuation of allegiance among some individuals according to prevailing power balances complicates the social division further. Social disintegration also weakens the role of traditional social leaders embodied by clan leaders and undermines their

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4 From an interview with an expert in March 2022<sup>7</sup>

4 For example, in terms of religious worship, most imams and worshipers still worship in mosques according to the methods imposed during ISIS reign. For example, most men have stopped reading al-Fatiha at their funeral, and in the streets, women's clothing is still the black robe imposed by ISIS. These effects are even felt by those who opposed the group, refused to follow it, and were imprisoned and punished by it. Although their position against ISIS has been consistent so far, they do not deny its role in "correcting some of the customs, worship and beliefs to return to the origin of sharia", from a June 2021 interview with a man who was persecuted, imprisoned and tortured by ISIS, but who maintained until now changes to the way he prayed and his appearance that was influenced by ISIS.

4 The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) "ISIS Torture and Detention Centers" April 2016, available for download in Arabic at <https://bit.ly/3xJeOrc>

5 Many among local activists and actors, mosque preachers and imams, and educational workers are reluctant to engage with AANES programs because of fear of the ISIS reaction. Teachers avoid to criticize ISIS in front of their students or correct some of the concepts and behaviors the group has propagated, as are mosque preachers fearing ISIS's vengeance. There are an estimated 350 mosques in the AANES controlled areas of Deir Ezzor. Residents in neighborhoods, towns and villages take care of these mosques and appoint imams and preachers to run them. according to an employee at the Office of Religious Affairs of the Deir Ezzor Civil Council.

representative functions, thus reducing their influence both on these communities and on AANES. When arms begin to proliferate, the absence of security, a sense of justice, and political representation mean that violence remains the only way perceived to resolve conflicts.

This fragmented tribal society, exhausted after enduring the war and a long history of accumulated oppression is expected to be grateful to any force that topples ISIS and provides it with material services. But there is no guarantee that this new power will survive if it does not address the grievances and expectations of society. At the political level, the Deir Ezzor Civil Council (CC) represents the Kurdish center for the AANES more than it does for the Arabs of Deir Ezzor. AANES sought to incorporate Arabs within the CC, but as a result of the intense centralization and the lack of an election and accountability mechanism, the Arab component of AANES lost their legitimacy among their constituencies. Contrary to the broad powers of local government institutions embodied in the Civil Councils, the real power to make decisions remained the preserve of the "cadre" members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), operating in the shadows and through a multi-tiered network that appears to be the "center of discussion<sup>5</sup> and strategic decision-making." Current forces did not consider the grievances of the Sunni Arabs, the root of, and the most important historical factor in the origins of extremism and<sup>4</sup> its continued nurturing.

Although ISIS does not distinguish between its enemies and does not, in its ideological essence, give weight to the national and ethnic sentiments, it has used the ethnic sensitivities in conjunction with the religious in mobilizing Sunni Arabs in its battles. During meetings held by the ISIS Public Relations Bureau with tribal leaders in Deir Ezzor in the last year before the fall of its state, the Diwan officials tried to mobilize tribes loyal to ISIS against the SDF on the grounds that SDF was a Kurdish force which wanted to occupy their area. They called Arabs who were involved in the ranks of the SDF as mere "mercenaries and apostates." Despite the rise of some Arab figures from Deir Ezzor within the military and civil power institutions and structures formed after ISIS in the region and the expansion of their influence and impact at the local level, ISIS's media and propaganda still portray the AANES as a strange authority being led by "Kurdish infidels."<sup>5</sup> In light of the worsening crises in the region, it is difficult

<sup>5</sup> The effects of disintegration are not limited to the community, but often extend beyond it to the civilian and military governance structures that emerged after ISIS in Deir Ezzor. At the same time, due to fragmentation and clan rivalry, in some cases, it is avoided to work under the leadership of an official from another clan. For example, it was noted that the new volunteers in the SDF ranks of the Abu Kamil tribe refused to volunteer in the ranks of the Deir Ezzor Military Council, led by a member of the Al-Bakir clan, a rival to Abu-Kamil clan. For similar reasons, hundreds of Al-Shaitat tribe members in the towns of Abu Hamam, Al-Kashkiyeh and Ghranij preferred to form their own brigade within the People's Protection Forces. According to interviews conducted in June 2012 with four local SDF members and leaders.

<sup>5</sup> Both the Deir Ezzor Military Council and the Deir Ezzor Civil Council adopt AANES slogans derived from PYD literature.

<sup>5</sup> Haid Haid, Models of Local Governance in Syria - A Reference Study, ESCWA, July 2020

<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Abu Rumman: Dynamics of the "Virtual Caliphate" and the gap in counterterrorism strategies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq, November 2020.

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned by one interviewee who said "joining AANES makes the person a Kurd and doesn't give legitimacy to the council. Council members lose their local credibility by joining AANES", March 2022.



6 to separate the special impact of this propaganda on the population from the impact of the successive crises.

The immediate consequences of Arab-Kurdish tension within the institutions of AANES or within the ranks of SDF are the weakening of their cohesion and unity, contributing to their isolation from society and limiting their ability to face the diverse challenges they face in Deir Ezzor, in particular the security challenge posed by ISIS. In cases where ISIS-affiliated security cells operate almost openly, local residents are reluctant to report them to the SDF. Apart from the fear of ISIS punishment, residents are not sufficiently motivated to report these cells or become implicated in the ISIS-SDF conflict, especially given the inability of the SDF to protect its collaborators against ISIS punishment.

## Conclusion

The previous sections attempted to answer whether the problem of ISIS can be solved without addressing the dilemmas of Syria. Syria is a unique counterterrorism model, where the security solution is clearly the most effective way in the current circumstances to deal with ISIS and reduce the of its resurgence, but it is not enough in the long term. A comparison of ISIS's modest performance in Syria compared to other regions where it is globally active shows the importance of the US-led Global Coalition's efforts to end the restoration of its lost glory. Syria shares the same features of state collapse as Afghanistan and many African countries - deteriorating services, absent security, long porous borders, and disputed and shaky legitimacy. Yet, ISIS does less well in Syria than these other regions with similar characteristics. But Syria will remain important for ISIS for many reasons, both symbolic and pragmatic. Its attempts to strengthen its influence will continue despite all international and domestic efforts. This means that there can be no room for complacency in the fight against the group across security or military fields. There must also be a greater effort to reduce its appeal to young people and suffocate the financial resources enabling its steady spread. These efforts can be made once the AANES's legitimacy is increased, service provision improves, and persistence to reach a comprehensive political solution to the conflict in Syria does not waver.

There are several scenarios for the political future of the Northeast that will significantly impact the ability to fight ISIS. The first and most likely is the continued presence of the Global Coalition forces, as well as the prolongation of the current state of fragmentation in the whole country. While this scenario certainly provides an ISIS-deterrence force, it does not guarantee the emergence of institutions with legitimate and improved capacity to provide services and security on an equal footing. The second scenario is the departure of the Global Coalition forces, and the Syrian regime's recapture of Northeast Syria and perhaps parts of northwest

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5 There have always been local demands for greater Arab representation within the AANES. Following the assassination of a leader of the Ugaidat tribe, a statement issued by the tribe demanded that the Global Coalition that "established and supervised the de facto authorities" hand over the area to its members "on the condition that the Arab component takes its full role in the administration and leadership of its areas." See the Deir Ezzor Media Center "The statement of the Ugaidat tribe to the US-led Global Coalition" Facebook, April 11, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3gekBPO>

Syria in the event of an agreement with Turkey and its total or partial departure. This scenario may help shape a better political horizon, but it threatens cross-border chaos with the loss of military deterrence and policing of Northeast Syria along its extended borders with Iraq and Jordan.

It is difficult to separate Syria's problems as an ongoing conflict from its problem of ISIS activity at a local and global scale. In the absence of a political solution and the lack of basic security and infrastructure, it will be difficult for international donors to focus on improving the economic situation in Northeast Syria. Many fear the angry reactions that are expected from Turkey, the Syrian Government, Iran and Russia. Nevertheless, donors should continue to support efforts to improve institutional representation of community diversity, strengthen their capacity to deliver services and collect revenue, and support community reconciliation.

If room for choice on anti-ISIS policy is possible, priority should lie with minimizing the risks posed by prisons and camps, representing the epicenter of the group's activities in Syria. Reducing the number of Iraqi and Syrian camp residents - who make up more than half of the camps' population - would be a major accomplishment and would greatly reduce future certain risks. This should be followed by a safe and dignified release for children and young people, who represent more than 70 per cent of the camp population. Leaving these children in the camps without education, health care and the opportunity to explore better alternatives to their future means that ISIS will remain the only option offering a life direction after all other doors have been closed on them.