



Aftershocks:

The legacy of ISIS in Syria

Context, remnants, and the way forward

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IMPACT Research is a wing of IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development that is specifically dedicated to in-depth, targeted research.

IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development e.V., founded in Berlin in 2013, is a non-profit civil society organization. With a team based across Europe, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, IMPACT aims for a globally active and well-connected civil society as the cornerstone for social and political change. To this end, IMPACT focuses on long-term, balanced support to individuals and organizations in both conflict and developed countries through its fields of development, dialogue, and social engagement.

Preface

Building resilience of local communities in North East Syria to prevent re-emergence of ISIS

Author: Samuel D. Henkin, Ph.D.

Terrorism and violent extremism are extremely complex phenomena, encompassing a multiplicity of groups with different origins, ideologies, and causes. As a rising tide of extremist movements proliferate destabilizing civil societies throughout the world, radicalization and recruitment to extremist violence are widely acknowledged as a defining societal challenge. Failure to meet the challenge of violent extremism has significant real-world consequences.

Defining “violent extremism” is an issue that confounds policymakers and researchers alike. Similar to the difficulties of defining “terrorism”, violent extremism is often conceptually tied to subjective and pejorative uses of the term. While a lack of definitional consensus exists, broadly speaking, researchers and practitioners recognize that terrorism is a tactic whereas violent extremism is a belief system inseparable from acts of violence exercised to sustain an in-group’s success and survival (ideologically driven violence). Violent extremist ideologies characterize violence against out-groups as necessary for defensive, offensive, and/or preemptive purposes. Regardless of how violence is characterized, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) rely on violence as a primary mode of expression within their extremist paradigm. Major paradigms of violent extremism include racial/ethnic, religious, nationalist, anti-government, and single-issue movements. These paradigms are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, interact, and at times reinforce each other. Overall, violent extremism manifests in diverse ways with varied outcomes.

The collection of reports that follow by IMPACT-Civil Society Research and Development (IMPACT) and their partners adopt a working definition of violent extremism as, “being willing to use or support the use of violence to impose and implement certain beliefs and ideologies with political, economic, and social dimensions”. As such, violent extremism is exercised to exert control and dominate power relations enhancing in-group favoritism and eliminating out-group differences through the use of violence against individuals, groups, institutions, and property. Extremist violence—often in the form of terrorism—serves to impact, alter or inhibit out-group behaviors, mobilize supporters and sympathizers, and contribute to recruitment and radicalization.

Three broad but interrelated questions drive research on radicalization and violent extremism: (1) How and (2) why do individuals join violent extremist organizations, and (3) what causes individuals to support violent extremist organizations? Accordingly, there is a robust literature that interrogates causes and drivers of, and pathways to, violent extremism to identify potential causal radicalization factors. Inevitably, there is variance in determining which factors, roles, phenomena, and experiences engender radicalization to violent extremism. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that radicalization and joining VEOs, is a continual process with no set single pathway, but multiple complex pathways shaped by dynamic causes and levels of causation.

The drivers and causal structures of violent extremism are complex and multidimensional, and thus, approaches to deal with them need to be as well. Efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE) require understanding the psychological, behavioral, political, and socio-economic roots of violent extremism. This complex understanding is vital to the development of programs aimed to mitigate and prevent such actions and foster individual and community resilience. While counter-terrorism (CT) often relies on security-related strategies, CVE programming includes a wide range of intervening initiatives and activities designed for facilitating disengagement, de-radicalization, and rehabilitation at the individual and societal levels. Additionally, CVE programs increasingly include efforts to prevent in-group favoritism and radicalization from metastasizing in the first place, referred to as preventing violent extremism (PVE). In other words, as intervention approa-

ches, preventing and countering (P/CVE) programs aim at developing resilience among communities that may be prone to violent extremism.

P/CVE programs can be narrow or broad in scope. Narrowly conceptualized, P/CVE focuses on disrupting extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence efforts at the individual level. Broadly conceptualized, P/CVE advances community coalition building, social cohesion, and resilience. Over time, research and practice have revealed several important factors to consider as well as questions to ask when developing the conceptual scope of programming, policies, and strategies employed to prevent and counter violent extremism:

1. What are best practices in scoping P/CVE programming for a given context and how are P/CVE goals measurable, and thus, achievable?
2. What (or who) will be targeted (which drivers of violent extremism), and how will they be targeted (intervention practices) to accomplish what (objectives and outcomes), that may be influenced by a range of contextual factors?
3. How will P/CVE programming be evaluated in a given context?

When developing P/CVE programs, it is vital to consider the scope of the intervention, the means of transmission for programming, and how it will generate the greatest impact. In other words, an underlying theory of change must be developed to ensure success.

Though there is no “one-size-fits-all” model, an emergent consensus in P/CVE practice recognizes that an underlying theory of change that draws upon approaches aimed to increase local community capacity to resist and mitigate extremist violence (local-sensitive models) demonstrate the potential for greater impact and sustainability. Local-sensitive and community-based models understand that if diverse representatives of stakeholders are better equipped to develop community-oriented plans for building local partnerships and coalitions to address P/CVE and promote community resilience, their programs are more likely to be accepted by their communities. Greater acceptance can lead to success in preventing and countering radicalization and promoting disengagement and de-radicalization. More successful P/CVE programs will result in fewer vulnerable individuals radicalizing to violent extremism. Additionally, at the community level, investing in local partners facilitating a stronger coalition of diverse stakeholders will increase resilience in the event of extremist violence, helping prevent or mitigate cycles of escalatory violence.

While community-oriented P/CVE programs continue to proliferate around the world, holistic, local-sensitive models are especially important in the Middle East, specifically Iraq and Syria, to prevent a potential re-emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It should be noted that the types, actors, and underlying reasons for violent extremism and terrorism across the Middle East vary widely and violent extremism is by no means a new phenomenon in the region. However, in the collection of reports that follow, countering the impact of ISIS and advancing the resilience of local communities to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS in North-East Syria (NES) rightfully sustains significant attention.

The rapid rise of ISIS and its capacity to establish and control territory perceptibly shifted the global terrorism landscape provoking significant security anxieties. In the Middle East, these security concerns materialized

in numerous ways. First, ISIS territorial control in both Iraq and Syria was substantial, and both states are still reeling from war and conflict. At its height, the Islamic State (ISIS' declared "Caliphate") spread across a third of Syria (mostly in the northeast; NES) and forty percent of Iraq, a territory inhabited by nearly eight million people.¹ Second, ISIS' recruitment successes brought a significant number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to the region; more than 30,000 FTFs from 100 different countries came to Syria alone by 2015.² Third, ISIS established and preserved an extremely violent political and socioeconomic order, which aimed to homogenize its population eliminating perceived differences. Even though ISIS has subsequently lost its territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria its impact still continues to shape societal relations today. The multi-dimensional violent extremism landscape in Iraq and Syria continues to be highly complex, as drivers and causes of radicalization to violent extremism still exist, engendering fears of an ISIS resurgence.

In order to provide a holistic picture of the current state of violent extremism in NES, and the region more broadly, IMPACT's research takes a regionalist and local approach that examines regional violent extremism movements, not as mere products of transnational jihadist activity as often argued, but rather as products of regional history and local political, ethno-religious, cultural, and socioeconomic dynamics. Correspondingly, IMPACT's P/CVE framework and programming account for the dynamics of local context that address local narratives and socioeconomic root causes of violent extremism in NES. The following collection of research papers offers insight into the research objectives, listed below, and actionable recommendations for P/CVE programming in NES: 1) identifying local narratives and positionalities about drivers to join extremist groups; 2) identifying local socioeconomic root causes of the emergence of extremist groups in the target locations; 3) identifying gaps in response to the root causes, and provide recommendations for interventions to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS.

1 BURAK, K. 2021. Territorial logic of the Islamic State: an interdisciplinary approach. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 9(1), 94-111.

2 SCHMID, A., & TINNES, J. 2015. Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Report*, 8(6).

Paper I:
Local Priorities and Trends in North East Syria

Authors: Shoresh Darwich and Jelnar Ahmad

Executive Summary

During the last decade, Northeast Syria has undergone a series of radical transformations in the local context at the security, political, social, and economic levels, which has led to the emergence of a special case, different than that of the remaining Syrian geographical areas. Demographic diversity in the region and the special composition of local governance structures that have emerged and developed during conflict years have played a central role in setting the general tone and in analyzing the reality of the various local communities and groups living in the region.

This report builds on the findings of an exploratory study conducted by the IMPACT team between October and December 2020 with the aim of exploring the current state of service delivery, political currents, and social structures in Northeast Syria (NES) and their connection with local communities. The study built on the findings of a survey conducted on a sample of more than 500 people from different ethnic, demographic, social and economic backgrounds in addition to a set of interviews with key figures in the region.

While NES's population gives beneath the pressures and suffering related to the reality imposed by the ongoing conflict. This is similar to the overall situation in many Syrian regions whose infrastructure was destroyed, living conditions have deteriorated and income sources have declined or have been lost. The security concern, however, remains a top priority for the region's population, at an estimated 28% according to the survey's findings, followed by housing and livelihoods (20% and 19%, respectively). Furthermore, more than half of the respondents who took part in the survey (57%) consider security a top priority. Nevertheless, it should be noted that local-context differences across Northeast Syria's different geographical regions are also reflected in the residents' security concerns and potential sources of threat. In fact, in Hasakeh governorate, the 2019 Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring still casts a shadow over the region as 23% of survey participants from Hasakeh consider that Turkey represents the most serious threat, followed by the Islamic State (ISIS) (18%) while in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, ISIS emerges as a main source of threat with 23% and 20% according to respondents in both governorates, respectively.

As for services and livelihood-related priorities, this study's findings show that as a result of the destruction of infrastructure and the generalized weakness in the regional administration, and despite different response efforts made by various actors, basic services are still a primary need for residents, ranking four on the scale of priorities at an estimated 18%. The survey's findings show that around half of the targeted sample considers the availability of water and electricity services as ranging from poor to really poor.

On a different level, qualitative services like healthcare, education and justice are more complicated as multiple actors are involved in providing them and as they are linked to political or social trends. While the survey findings show that 68% of respondents included in the targeted sample have chosen education centers managed by the Autonomous Administration as one of the main sources of education, in parallel, around 43% of respondents prefer to choose schools and education centers affiliated to the Syrian government. While the proximity and availability of educational institutions rank first on the scale of priorities related to the education sector at an estimated 23% of respondents included in the survey sample, other education-related matters like the curricula, the teaching personnel's qualifications, the language of instruction, the diplomas and their recognition rank close one to another on the scale of priorities with values ranging from 16 to 19%. It should be noted that the degree of significance and the role of these factors in the population's decision to choose one source of education over the other also vary across regions and depending on

the population's demographic features. For example, the language of instruction ranks second on the scale of priorities for respondents from the Hasakeh governorate where resides the largest number of non-Arab ethnicities, especially Kurds, while it ranks fourth or fifth on the scale of priorities in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa where the majority of the population is Arab.

The study findings also reveal disparities in rates of satisfaction about the local administration's performance in the region and levels of confidence in its capacity to respond to the population's needs and aspirations across regions and depending on the extent of the administration's experience. While the Hasakeh governorate, in which the Autonomous administration's experience in Northeast Syria began in 2014, presents higher levels of trust in and satisfaction about the local administrations' performance, the lowest trust and satisfaction rates are, in parallel, those of the survey sample in Deir Ezzor which was one of the last regions to be added to the Autonomous administration after ISIS was driven out in 2019. However, the study findings show as well that a high percentage of the population (34% of respondents included in the survey sample) considers the Autonomous administration in Northeast Syria the closest to its views compared to the other available options, like the Syrian government or the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces or other opposition groups while the largest proportion (44%) considers that no specific player represents it.

Similarly, at the level of political views, the study indicates that the largest proportion of respondents included in the survey sample (55%) does not feel politically represented and considers that no specific player represents its political views and aspirations. Here as well, the demographical factor, mainly ethnic affiliation, plays a central role in shaping views and determining representation. In fact, around a quarter of the respondents included in the sample surveyed in the Hasakeh governorate has mentioned one of the Kurdish parties as the closest to their political views. In parallel, in the Raqqa governorate, around 30% of respondents included in the sample have stated that the Syrian opposition represents the political choice closest to their views while 15% of them chose the Future Syria Party, an opposition party cradled in the Autonomous administration in Raqqa in 2018. As for the Syrian government, according to the survey's findings, it is considered by around 9% of respondents included in the sample across Northeast Syria as the option closest to their views.

In the absence of a genuine political movement and given the weak representation and legitimacy of political players in general, notabilities and social structures emerge as an alternative representative of the region's population and include traditional structures like clans, religious figures and institutions or recent structures that have emerged from the Administration's experience in the region such as the local committees (Communes) or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). While 35% of respondents included in the sample consider that no specific player represents their interests at the social level, the opinions of respondents included in the sample also vary from one region to another. In fact, in the Hasakeh region, social trends that are closer to recent structures, such as local councils, committees (Kumens) and local organizations trump clans or religious leaders who are prominently present in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.

Introduction

The designation “Northeast Syria” (NES) has emerged as a geographical designation to refer to the regions bordered by the Euphrates to the west, by Turkey to the north and by Iraq to the east, and also known as the “Eastern Euphrates region”, thereby replacing “the Syrian Jazira” designation which referred to the three Syrian governorates, Hasakeh, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor and parts of the Aleppo governorate. The Northeast Syria designation has become in vogue when speaking of regions under the control of the Autonomous administration after ISIS was defeated in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and the Hasakeh Southern countryside.

Different actors, forces and armed factions took control of the regions in Northeast Syria. The period during which ISIS controlled Raqqa and Deir Ezzor and limited areas in the Al-Hasakeh governorate was the most terrifying and destructive for the region’s ethnic and social nature. After ISIS was defeated by the Global Coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the region became almost completely affiliated to the Autonomous administration which previously mainly included Kurdish and predominantly Kurdish areas on Syria’s northern borders, drawing attention to regions with no or waning Kurdish presence. Consequently, the Autonomous administration started changing its name, settling down three years ago on Autonomous administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

This region is ethnically and religiously diverse as it is home to Arabs, Kurds, Assyrian Syrians, Turkmens, Armenians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians and Yezidis. It is also politically diverse with multiple Kurdish, Arab and Syriac political parties and overarching national trends. Most political parties and currents fall under or are affiliated to opposition alliances (the coalition and the coordination authority) or are associated with the Syrian government (the Arab Socialist Baath Party and the National Progressive Front). In addition, the region is home to various tribes and clans, with a remarkable presence of the Arab tribe, and is divided into rural and urban areas.

In the first part, the study focuses on exploring the state of services and qualitative services, the population’s degree of satisfaction with them and differences among them in the three governorates. It shed the light on living conditions and the population’s security, housing, livelihoods and basic services (water, electricity and communication) priorities and assesses the quality of these services, leaving some space to tackle qualitative services (education and health) and assess their quality, availability and appropriateness. In the second part, the study attempts to take stock of political trends and the population’s social structure in the three governorates. It tries to have a broader understanding of social and political dynamics influencing the region’s overall situation and its future by examining current local administrations. In the first chapter, it sheds the light on political representation, particularly on players representing the population’s views, one governorate at a time, while it focuses in the second chapter on monitoring social trends representing the population’s views and their role in the overall situation.

Developments since 2011

Northeast Syria has been witnessing conflicts and instability since 2011 as the Government of Syria's (GoS) authority, imposed since the 1960s, waned. The GoS's actual control started to end with the government forces' retreat in summer 2012 and the region was exposed to changes in terms of armed forces. It all started with the opposition's armed factions and the Al-Nusra front (the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria) taking control of Raqqa and large swathes of Deir Ezzor while the People's protection units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units extended control over predominantly Kurdish areas and their role grew after they defeated the Free Army factions and the Al-Nusra Front in Ras al-Ayn at the end of 2012. The GoS then became present only in security squares in the cities of Hasakeh and Qamishli and later took control of most of the destroyed city of Deir Ezzor.

With the rise of ISIS at the end of 2013 and its getting rid of its local competitors, the Free Army and Al Nusra ushered in a terrifying phase in the region's history. The regional organization spread across large territories inside Iraq and Syria became a threat to international security. It had thousands of dangerous fighters and took hold of substantial financial resources. Its military campaign on Kobani in 2014 started the Islamic State's countdown as the Global coalition intervened to combat ISIS under the leadership of the United States and with the support of the SDF on the ground. The war on ISIS led to successive defeats for IS and battles against it were won in the town of Al-Baghuz in 2019. The Islamic State's strategy then veered toward the use of methods that consisted of mobilizing cells in the region, especially in the Eastern Deir Ezzor countryside, by conducting liquidation operations and imposing taxes on the population under different designations to emphasize the fact that ISIS remains despite the collapse of "the Caliphate". ISIS's defeat led to the imprisonment of around 10 000 of its fighters³, which required placing them under constant surveillance, especially after repeated insubordination cases in prisons. In addition, the region is home to six camps for the displaced, including the Al-Hawl Camp which shelters around 70 000 people, including families of ISIS fighters⁴.

3 Kheder Khaddour: Peace challenges in Syria without the integration of the Eastern Euphrates IMPACT-2020

4 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/camp-and-informal-site-profiles-northeast-syria-october-2019>

Methodology

The study's methodology consisted of cross-referencing quantitative and qualitative data from two main data sources.

- I- Secondary sources which include available reports, research and statistics about the region in addition to news reports, official documents and others.
- II- Primary sources which include the data specifically collected for this purpose from two main sources:
 - 1- the questionnaire of the survey conducted on a sample of the Northeast Syria population.
 - 2- in-depth interviews with key figures from the region.

The research team at IMPACT designed the questionnaire as a survey consisting of three main sections. The first section covers several questions about the respondents' demographic data and includes gender, age, ethnicity, religion, place and type of residence, sources of income, and educational attainment, which are all the main variables in analyzing the other sections of the questionnaire. The second section covers the service sector and livelihood priorities and focuses on basic services sectors (water, electricity, communication) and qualitative services, like education, health and justice and respondent priorities, sources, quality and availability of services. In addition, it asks respondents about what they think of the most important service providers in the region. The third section of the questionnaire covers local administration and political representation as respondents were surveyed about political and social priorities, concerns and representation. The questionnaire is anonymous to increase trust and to give respondents freedom in answering the questions. Each question in the survey includes the option of refusing to answer, and the "other" or "I don't know" option to give respondents the freedom to refrain from answering any question and to avoid bias in the questionnaire's values, which would result from the absence of a suitable choice.

A field team of eight female and male researchers with prior experience in the field conducted the survey. They were distributed across different geographical areas covered by the survey and used a virtual data collection application. The research team at IMPACT trained this team before going on the field. The training was divided into two main parts: the first part was related to the skills necessary to conduct a survey, including introducing and presenting the purpose behind the questions, the way in which the question is asked and the answer is recorded and informing the respondent about them. The second part of the training focused on the questionnaire content and on reviewing and discussing each question. In addition, each member of the survey team conducted a trial survey before starting to work to make sure the questions are clear and appropriate, and that the questionnaire and the data collection platform are free from technical problems. While the survey was being conducted, each team was constantly in contact with the IMPACT team that answered any question and responded to any challenges that arose from the working environment itself. Given the difficulty of travel and movement because of the COVID-19 pandemic and in compliance with measures followed in the region and taken by local authorities, most questionnaires were filled over the phone/ internet (78%) while 22% were filled in-person by male and female researchers. The sample of respondents was selected using a randomized segment-based sampling method to ensure that the sample covers different demographic segments and categories in the region although it is not an accurate statistical representation of the population's distribution in the region as specified in the study determinants section below.

As for in-depth qualitative interviews with key figures, 15 interviews were conducted with Kurdish, Arab and Syriac clan notables and sheikhs, politicians and party cadres and administrative officials from different parts of Northeast Syria (Hasakeh - Raqqa - Deir Ezzor) by three researchers distributed across these areas after having received training related to the research main purpose.

Study determinants

- Representation and sampling: the sample chosen for the survey was selected using the randomized segment-based sampling method. However, due to challenges related to difficulty of travel and movement, the project short timeline and the unavailability of accurate statistics about the number of residents and the population demographic distribution in the region, the sample cannot be considered as statistically representative. It should be noted that the sample was chosen to approximately reflect population and demographic distribution in the region.
- The multiplicity of actors controlling the Northeast region and related security concerns have pushed the research team to focus most of their work in areas under the control of the Autonomous administration in Northeast Syria in addition to targeting a small sample from areas under the control of the Syrian government in the remote survey.

Survey sample characteristics

The survey sample consisted of 504 residents of Northeast Syria from different cities and towns in the three governorates of Raqqa, Hasakeh and Deir Ezzor, 33% of whom are women. Respondents' age groups varied as the sample consisted of 25% of youth (18-29 years old), 26% of respondents aged between 30 and 39 and 25% aged between 40 and 59 while 18% were above 60 and 6% under 18.

The sample was also diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion and mother tongue following a pattern similar to these categories' distribution across the region in general. In fact, it included up to 67% of Arabs, 28% of Kurds and 3% of other ethnicities while 2% of respondents preferred not to reveal their ethnicity. Similarly, respondents had diverse mother tongues as 68% chose Arabic as their primary language and 28% chose Kurdish. As for religion, 95% of respondents stated that they were Muslims compared to just 1% Christians while 3% of respondents preferred not to reveal their religion. Regarding clan affiliation, 35% of respondents stated that they did not belong to any clan compared to 17% who declared being affiliated to Al-Bakara clan while the remaining part of the sample was distributed across several tribes and clans, including Shamer, Tayy, al Akidat, Al Buchabaan and others.

On a different level and in view of high displacement rates in the region as a result of the conflict of the last few years, the sample included an equal percentage of displaced and residents. However, more than half of the respondents included in the sample (53%) preferred not to reveal the nature and type of their residency. The remaining 47% type of residency varied as 63% of respondents stated that they resided in

rented houses compared to just 5% who lived in houses they owned and 19% in temporary shelters. In addition, the survey also included educational background and sources of income as two main economic and social factors. In fact, 29% of the respondents included in the survey sample hold university degrees or have received vocational training compared to 19% who hold a high school diploma (12 years of study), 20% who hold a certificate of preparatory education (9 years of study) and 14% who have completed primary education (6 years of study) while 16% of the respondents included in the survey sample are uneducated.

As for sources of income, the unemployed account for 34% of the chosen sample while self-employment ranks first among sources of income at 19% of the sample, followed by permanent employment (14%) and temporary employment (13%). In parallel, 7% of the respondents declared that they relied on assistance as their main source of income.

Part one:

Livelihood priorities and services

First: Living conditions

The war has highly impacted the living conditions of the northern and eastern Syria population, especially in the areas that have witnessed battles that led to the destruction of the infrastructure, in particular in Raqq, Deir Ezzor and the Hasakeh Southern countryside. In some cities for example, water and sanitation networks and roads were completely destroyed. In parallel, in areas where no battles took place, the infrastructure is still useable to varying degrees. The Northeast Syrian region was known to be the least developed in Syria as its unemployment rates reached 40% until 2011 although it represents "Syria's bread basket" and the main source of wheat, barley, cotton and livestock in addition to producing 80% of Syria's oil and natural gas. However, despite Northeast Syria growing out of the Syrian government's control, the reality of war, poor administrative and political performance, the absence of an economic strategy, the lifting of subsidies on basic commodities (bread and gas), weak public services (water, electricity and roads), and the faltering process for the optimal investment of oil revenues as a result of a severe lack of equipment and means of production and marketing have contributed to deteriorating living conditions for the population.

The fact that a significant part of the population lost their main livelihoods, offices, shops, agricultural activities, small industrial facilities, and livestock, and because of smuggling activities coupled with high inflation rates and the Syrian pound losing its purchasing power have led to the deterioration of living conditions. In fact, 44% of respondents included in the sample have revealed that their living conditions are poor and very poor while 14% indicated that their living conditions are good and very good. Naturally, 42% have rated their living conditions as average (Figure 1). When looking at the disparities revealed in this assessment and based on geographical distribution, it becomes clear that the survey sample in Deir Ezzor provides a generally worse assessment of living conditions as around 60% of respondents included in the sample rated the conditions as poor or really poor (Figure 2).

Figure 1 How would you rate current living conditions for you and your family?

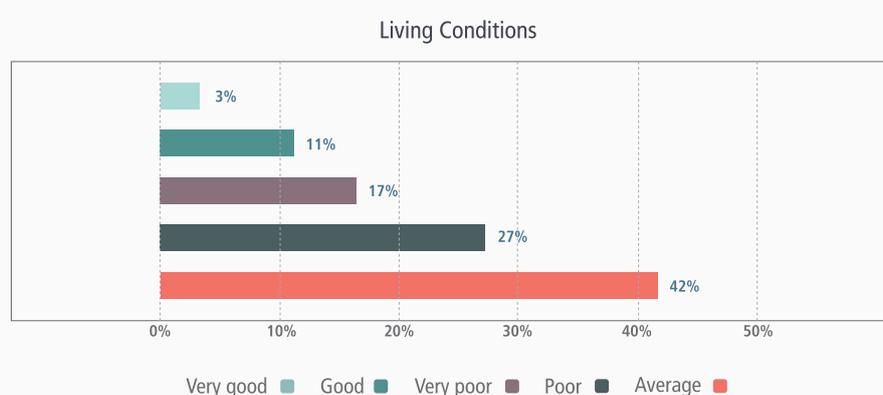
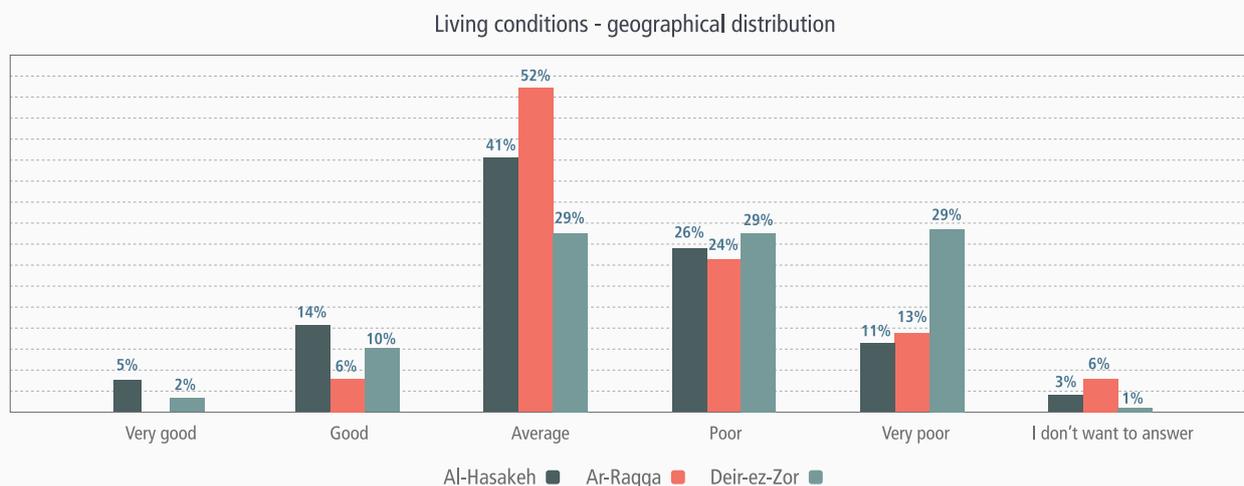
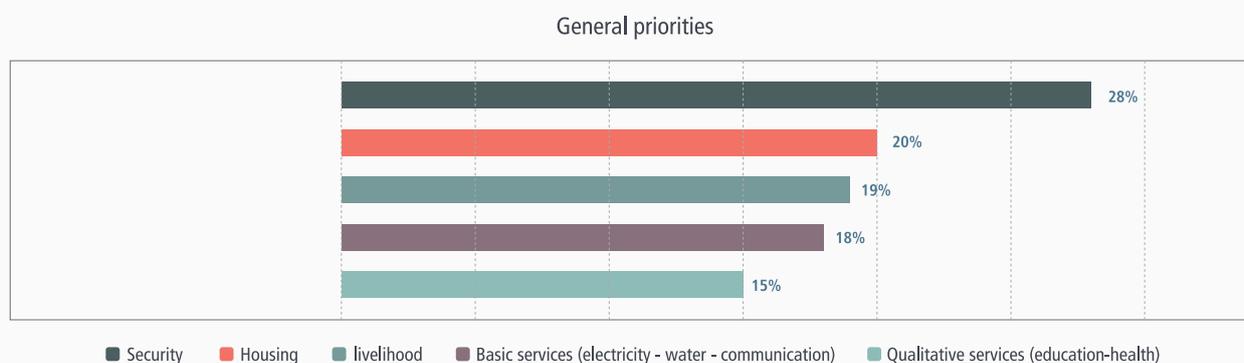


Figure 2 How would you rate your current living conditions and that of your family – distribution by governorate?



Second- General priorities

Figure 3 General priorities sorted in order of importance

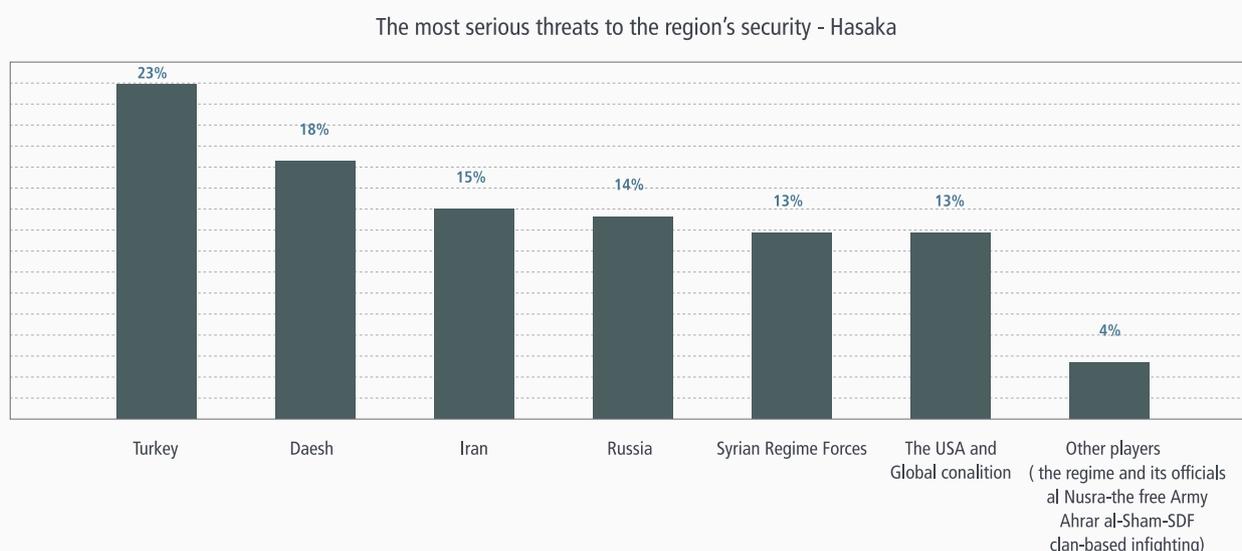


a-Security

Security ranks first among priorities on which the population of Northeast Syria focuses as it scored 28% on the scale of priorities in the survey (Figure 3). In this context, security is a general concept reflecting the general sense of safety felt by the targeted areas' population. The population's security concerns stem from several considerations. In the North/ Hasakeh, 23% of respondents said that Turkey represents the biggest threat to security in the region followed by ISIS (18%), as it is feared that the Turkish Operation Peace Spring which targeted the regions of Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abiad and lead to large waves of displacement, with numbers of IDPs exceeding 300 000 from both regions and from other neighboring regions such as Ad-Darbasiyah and Kobane (Ayn Al Arab)⁵. When asked about their sense of safety, it appeared that 57%

of respondents agreed on safety in the region, a high percentage in the Hasakeh governorate compared to other governorates (Figure 7). In fact, the Hasakeh governorate was not actually threatened by ISIS during the past three years. In addition, border areas did not witness confrontations with Turkish forces and armed opposition factions except for the countryside of both Abu Rasin and Tall Tamr which are adjacent to Ras al-Ayn.

Figure 4 What is the most serious threat to the region's security? Sort in order of importance – Al Hasakeh



In regions furthest along the border, i.e., in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, the respondents' concerns revolved around ISIS retaking control. In fact, 23% of respondents from Raqqa and 20% from Deir Ezzor said that ISIS represents the most serious security threat (Figure 6, Figure 7). ISIS has modified its strategy after the military defeat it suffered in Al-Baghur on March 24, 2019 where ISIS fighters are still regularly launching assaults in Northeast Syrian regions. According to the International NGO Safety organization (INSO), 636 ISIS-related security incidents were reported between October 2020 and July 2021, 416 out of which in Deir Ezzor alone (Figure 5). Around 135 out of all reported incidents occurred in the Al-Basira region in the Deir Ezzor governorate eastern countryside, one of the most affected areas by the poor economic situation in the entire study area. In addition, members of the SDF or of the Autonomous administration or their local interlocutors were the main targets of attacks all over the Northeast part of the country. This reflects IS intent to undermine local governance and increase the cost of collaborating with the Autonomous administration and security forces affiliated to it. In response to such pressure, eight members of the recently-establish civil council in Al-Basira, at the heart of Deir Ezzor, resigned on March 11 due to security concerns.

Figure 5 ISIS attacks in north eastern Syria between October 2020 and July 2021. Source: INSO

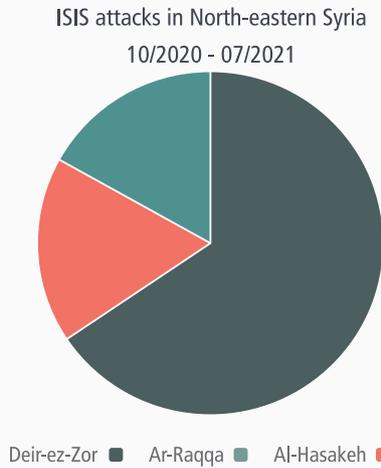


Figure 6 What is the most serious threat to the region's security? - Sort in order of importance - Deir-ez-Zor



Figure 7 What is the most serious threat to the region's security? - Sort in order of importance - Raqqa

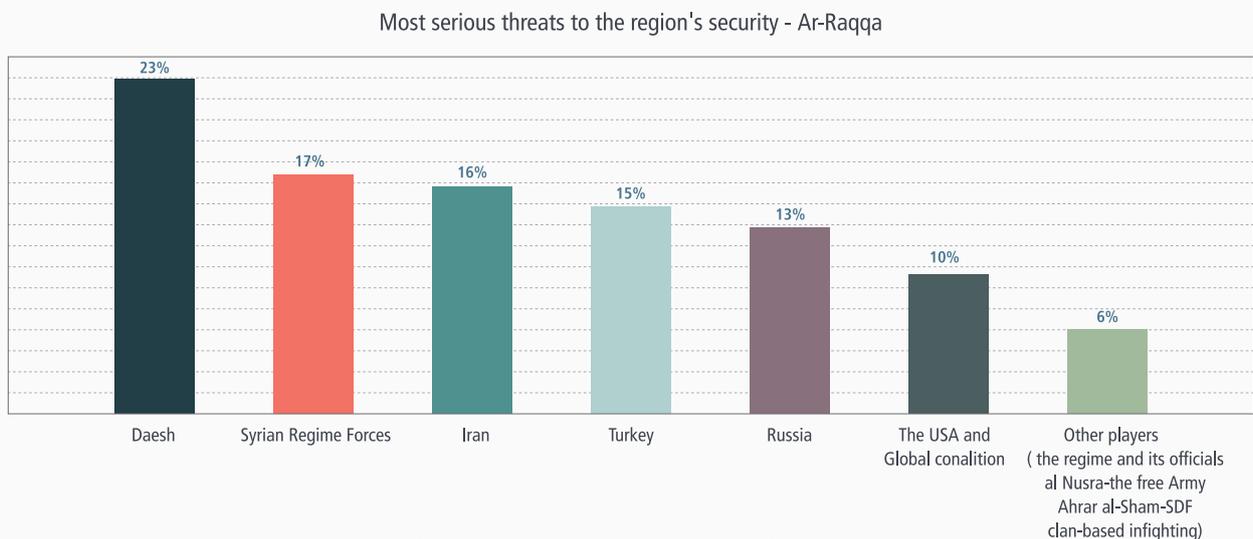
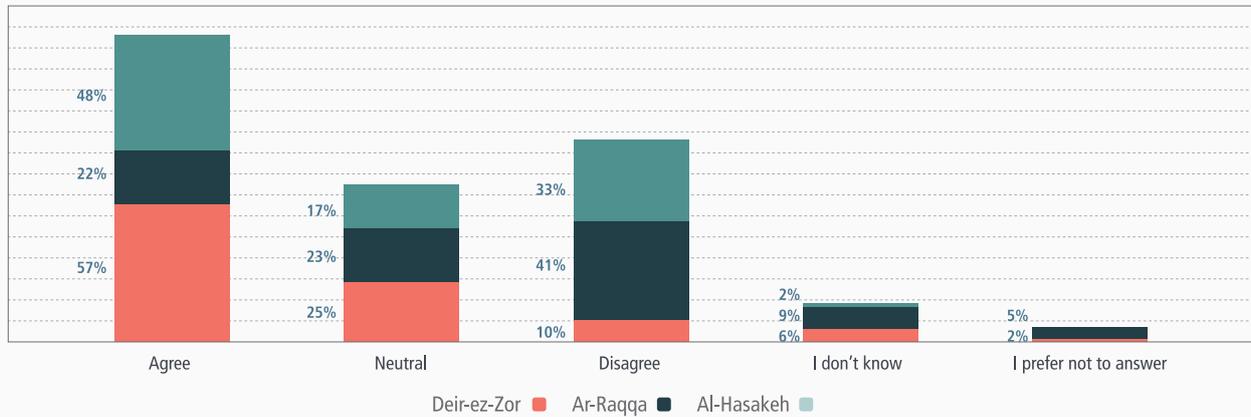


Figure 8 To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I generally feel safe in my area

In general, I feel safe in my area



b- Housing

The war on ISIS and multiple waves of internal displacement have led to a housing-related problem. The issue of housing ranks second among the priorities of respondents included in the survey sample as 20% of respondents mentioned housing as a priority. (Figure 3) This aligns with the sample as 63% of respondents lived in independent rental houses while the rest of the sample consisted of house owners and people living in temporary shelter centers.

For example, 80% of Raqqa was destroyed which means that reconstruction is absolutely not commensurate with the meagre amounts announced by the states which are supposed to be sponsoring the process. This has limited the purpose behind these amounts only to demining and to the implementation of projects in the fields of food assistance, water, health and refugee assistance.⁶

The housing problem is closely related to two issues: the war stopping and the refugees returning to the areas they originally lived in as is the case for the displaced from the regions of Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abiad who lost their homes due to the Turkish Operation Peace Spring at the end of 2019. The second issue is linked to the implementation of the reconstruction program, which is essentially linked to the political solution in Syria.

C- Livelihoods

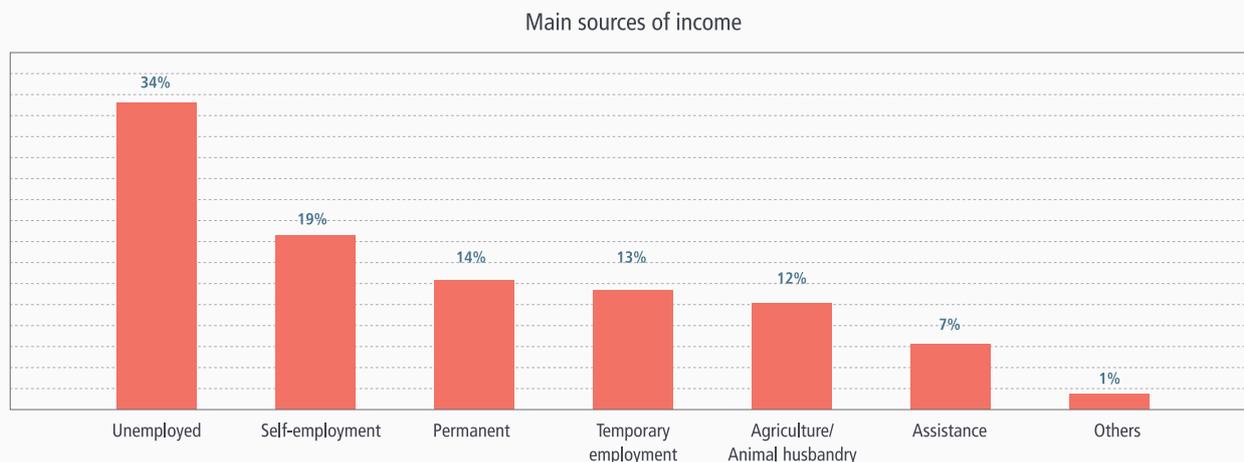
Livelihoods, which refer to main sources of income and the ability to provide for basic life necessities, rank third in the respondents' answers as 19% of them have considered that livelihood are the highest priority. (Figure 3) Indeed, the gap between the Syrians' needs and the resources available to support them is strongly widening, knowing that 80% of Syrians live under the poverty line according to UN estimates, with

6 shorturl.at/vAHRy

increasing rates of unemployment and destruction inside Syria.⁷

The mass of staff of the Autonomous administration in Northeast Syria is close to 200 000 employees distributed across the military, security, service and administrative sectors. The presence of CSOs and the job opportunities (full-time and contractual employees) they create are also considered among the most important economic opportunities. In fact, the percentage of those who declared in their income declarations that their income results from permanent and temporary employment is 27% in addition to a high percentage of self-employment which represents 19% of respondents, a source of income alongside bank transfers sent by those residing in Europe, Lebanon, the Gulf, and Iraqi Kurdistan to their families. Thirty-four percent of respondents said they were unemployed. (Figure 9)

Figure 9 What is your main source of income and that of your family?



Agriculture has declined during years of war given weak oil production, difficulties in exporting production sold at a low cost and the general impact that inflation and price hikes have exacerbated the generally deteriorating economic situation in the region. Therefore, it seems there's a need for the region to promote livelihoods through development programs and governance structures that meet the citizens' basic needs and subsidies for basic commodities and to support small facilities and projects as jobs available in the public sector are not enough to provide livelihoods to the entire population.

d- Basic services (electricity - water - communication)

The region suffers from a general weakness in basic services, especially in the water, electricity, communication and road sectors, mainly due to years of war and the destruction of the infrastructure. The Autonomous Administration blames the war that these regions witness for the poor infrastructure as bridges, roads and water and sanitation networks were destroyed. In some cities and towns for example, water and sanitation networks were completely destroyed.⁸

7 <https://news.un.org/ar/audio/2019/03/1028831>

8 Interview with Sleiman Arab, joint presidency of the municipalities and local administration committee in the al-Jazira district.

The issue of services is important for the population, particularly when battles or wars cease, or when the situation is relatively stable, and to a greater extent, in areas that have security concerns. This in turn pushes 18% of respondents to consider primary basic services as the most important. (Figure 3)

Furthermore, 34% of respondents included in the sample from across the northeast region consider the availability of water services as ranging from good to very good while 18% consider it average and 48% have described it as ranging from poor to very poor (Figure 10). As for water quality, 35% have rated it as ranging from good to very good and 27% as average while 38% have considered it poor or very poor. (Figure 11)

The same goes for electricity which is, in turn, divided into electricity provided by the GoS and the service popularly known as the "Amperes" electricity and provided by private generator owners whose generators are constantly down as a result of the constant pressure they undergo. Thirty percent of survey respondents in Northeast Syria consider electricity services as ranging from good to very good while other respondents representing 22% of the sample rated the service as average and 48% considered it as ranging from poor to really poor. (Figure 10) As for the quality of electricity services, 39% consider it as ranging from good to really good and 19% as average while 42% consider it as poor or really poor. (Figure 11)

The same applies to the communication sector and internet services as 41% have considered them as ranging from good to really good and 23% have ranked them as average while 36% considered them poor or really poor (Figure 10). As for the quality of services, 36% have considered it as ranging from good to really good, 26% as average and 38% as poor or really poor (Figure 11).

Roads deteriorated and the transport network weakened as a result of the absence of maintenance in the city and the war in addition to the fact that the Syrian government did not give the state of roads the necessary importance while the Autonomous administration's reforms lacked quality. The government does not provide the administration with raw materials necessary to pave the roads and the fact that there are no refineries for oil by-products affects the maintenance, rehabilitation and state of the roads. As for the sample, 35% of respondents have rated roads as ranging from good to very good and 28% as average while 37% have considered them as in bad or very bad condition. (Figure 10) As for this service's quality, 35% have considered it good or really good and 33% as average while 32% rated it as ranging from poor to very poor. (Figure 11)

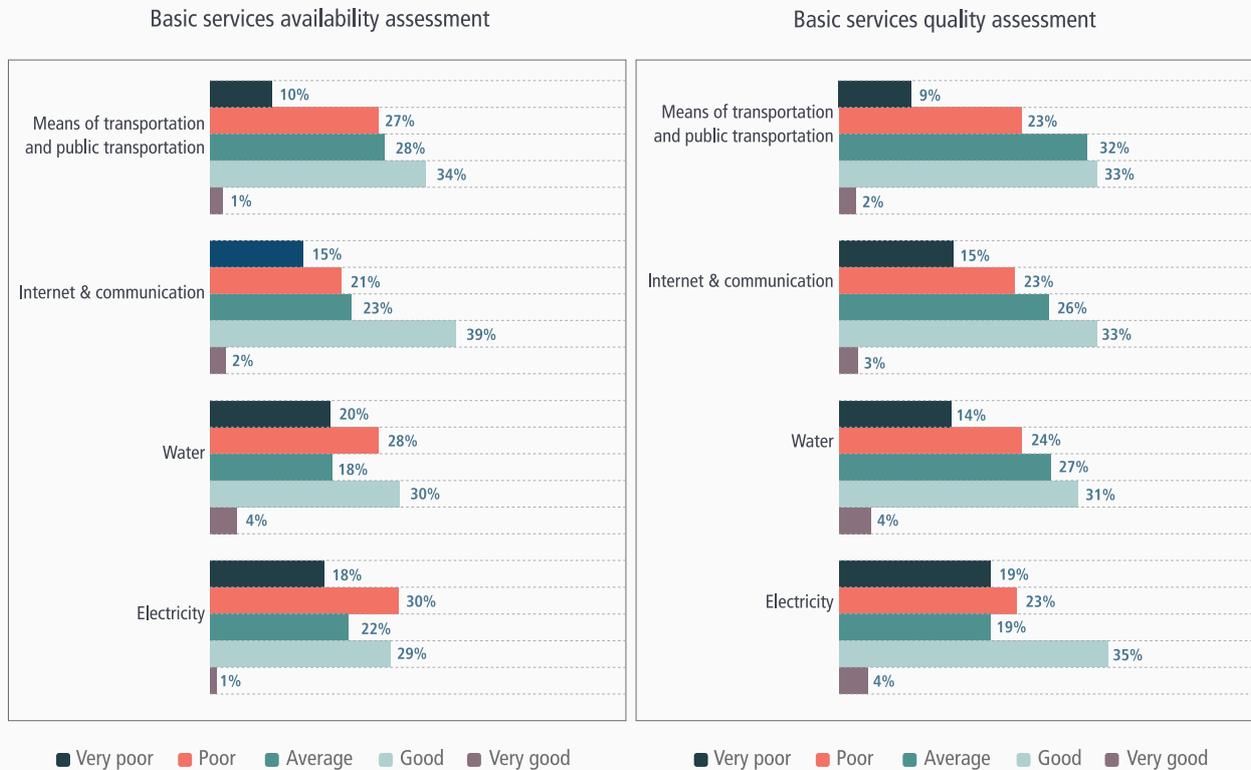


Figure 11 How would you rate the level of quality of the following basic services

Figure 10 How would you rate the level of availability of the following basic services

e- Qualitative services (education - health)

Education

The educational process in Northeast Syria is directly linked with politics, which made it a complex problem. This began with the teaching of the Kurdish language and developing special curricula for the Autonomous Administration's schools and other Arabic curricula in predominantly Arab regions amid a weak presence of Syrian government schools crowded with students. Protests against the curricula, as was the case in Deir Ezzor in mid-2020, have led to the adoption of the UNICEF curricula, somehow revealing rejection of the curricula. In addition, the issue of the government's recognition of diplomas issued by the Autonomous Administration is a major obstacle to the educational process.

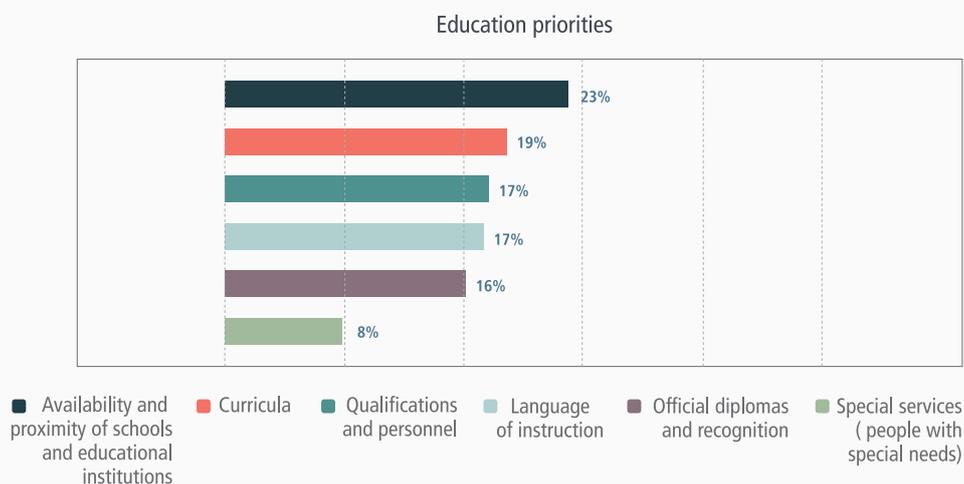
The issue of the schools' and educational institutions' availability and proximity is the top education priority for students and their parents as the opinion of 23% of respondents. (Figure 12) The largest proportion points out the remoteness of Syrian government schools and institutions. Furthermore, the issue of the Syrian government not recognizing diplomas issued by the Autonomous administration departments worries both parents and students as 16% of respondents consider that diploma recognition is a priority, a problem that needs to be solved, especially since it is, above all, a political problem between the Syrian government

and the Autonomous Administration. In fact, the government refuses to lose control over the educational process and to negotiate it, despite the Autonomous administration's efforts to obtain recognition for its schools and diplomas.

Curricula rank second on the scale of priorities, according to 19% of respondents. They are the most divisive issue in society as there is no Kurdish consensus on the curricula content and there is no Arab acceptance of curricula in their current form for ideological considerations.

For considerations related to accelerating the educational process overseen by the Autonomous administration, another problem emerged: the qualifications of the teaching personnel, considered by 17% of respondents as one of the educational priorities to which attention should be paid. On another level, linguistic diversity and the adopted medium of instruction are also an important factor in the assessment of the education sector in the region as a result of its ethnic diversity, especially in predominantly Kurdish and ethnically-diverse areas. In fact, 17% of respondents consider the medium of instruction a priority. For example, students enrolled at the Autonomous Administration's schools in Qamishli are mostly Kurds who take courses in Kurdish which keeps them from properly learning the Arabic language to pursue studies in universities that have opted for Arabic as a medium of instruction. As for students enrolled in schools affiliated to the Syrian government, they don't know how to read and write in Kurdish, as the language is not in the State curricula, at least. However, it is possible for them to take extracurricular Kurdish language lessons.

Figure 12 Sort educational services' priorities in order of importance



Health

The healthcare sector in Syria was greatly damaged during the war. As a result, the healthcare sector's infrastructure was damaged and destroyed in Northeast Syria, especially in Deir Ezzor and Raqqqa. This put several hospitals and dispensaries out of service. According to the Syrian Ministry of Health, the distribution of public and private hospitals in 2017 was as follows: 31 in Hasakeh, 28 in Deir Ezzor, and 11 in Raqqqa. ⁹ There were

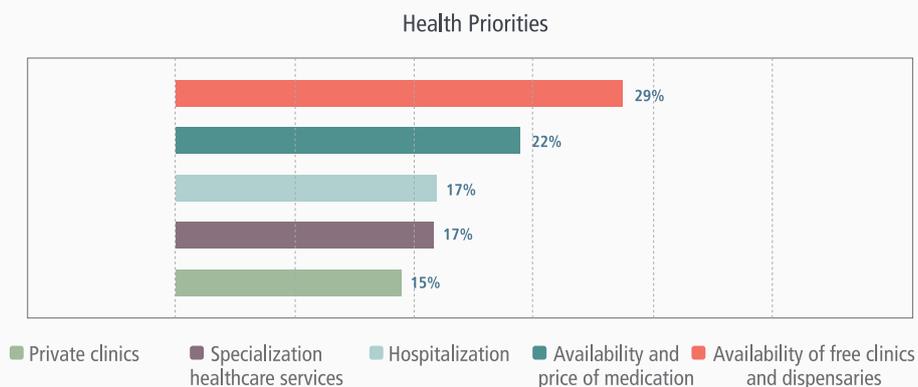
9 <http://www.moh.gov.sy/Default.aspx?tabid=177&language=ar-YE>

5 public hospitals in the Hasakeh governorate; the “National Qamishli” hospital was the only one under the Syrian government’s control, while the “National Ra’s Al-Ayn” hospital was under the control of the National Syrian Army factions (opposition) after they gained control of the city in late 2019. Other hospitals remained in the autonomous administration. In Raqqa, which counts four government hospitals, the autonomous administration remains the norm. The same applies to Deir Ezzor, where there are six government hospitals, most of which are under the Syrian government’s control since they are located inside the city. The larger share of survey responders considers the existence of free clinics and dispensaries a priority, reaching a total of 29%. (Figure 13)

The healthcare sector is supervised by Autonomous Administration health organisms and the Kurdish Red Crescent, which oversaw the renovation and management of hospitals, or the establishment and renovation of medical dispensaries, as well as the renovation of the Hajeen and Abou Hamam hospitals in Deir Ezzor recently. The Autonomous Administration’s body also established private hospitals to contain the Covid-19 pandemic through founding a series of private hospitals, as was the case in Hasakeh and Qamishli, or opening departments in existing hospitals meant to treat Covid-19 patients.

Among the healthcare sector’s problems is the considerable lack of medical staff. The destruction of the healthcare system in Syria due to years of war pushes many medical workers to flee, especially the more experienced ones. This is an issue from which Northeast Syrian regions suffer, according to official statements from that autonomous administration medical organism.¹⁰ This has affected residents’ reliance on private clinic, as 15% saw that private clinic availability is a priority to them, based on survey responses. Medicine is available to 95%, whilst their prices are tied to the dollar exchange rate at the Central Bank, which means they are not stable. In addition to that, the prices of medication are 28% higher in comparison to inner regions under government control. This is due to longer, costly trips and the passage tolls imposed by checkpoints.¹¹ Medication availability and price are one of the most prominent health priorities in the region for 22% of responders.

Figure 13 Health priority ranked by importance



10 shorturl.at/iERW9

11 According to meetings with pharmacists living in the region

Part Two

Local Administration and Political Representation

One: Local Administrations

The self-administration of regions Al-Jazira, Kobane, and Afrin was formed in 2014. In Northeast Syria, the administration in its current form was established in 2019 as a result of developments witnessed by the entire region. The beginning was the declaration of Autonomous Administration in the three cantons of Al-Jazira, Kobane, and Afrin. However, after Operation Olive Tree, led by Turkey and armed opposition factions, which ended with their control over the city of Afrin in 2018, the administration's area was reduced when the second-largest canton slipped out of the administration's grasp.

Meanwhile, attacks against the Islamic State resulted in the widening of the autonomous administration south of the Al-Jazira canton in northern and eastern Syria until its control reached Raqqa, ending the rule of the Islamic State and establishing a local civil administration in Deir Ezzor in 2019. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES/AA) was thus founded in 2019.

The Autonomous Administration set itself up as an alternative to the central government, giving civil administration and local government structures more financial and legal freedom. The core charter of the AA states that "each administration respects the laws, official records, and judicial proceedings of other administrations" and "the residents of each autonomous and civil administration have the right to enjoy all the rights received by citizens in all administrations".

Decision-making goes through public councils. There is a general council at the level of Northeast Syria, and there are regional councils as well. Each council debates matters in accordance with laws in effect within the autonomous administration. The general council debates decisions and suggestions submitted by regional councils. The executive body of Northeast Syria implements the decisions issued. For example, the regional council of Al-Jazira is entitled to issue decisions in the region of Al-Jazira after the suggestion was made to the general council. The legislative council debates decisions, and the executive council draws the plans to implement and carry out decisions. The decision mechanism is based on the council principle starting from Kumens and ending with the regional general councils.¹²

Local councils lack legality if there are no elections to select its members. They are therefore a "de-facto authority", as members are appointed. The administration justifies the absence of electoral procedures save for one operation in Northeast Syria - which are supposed to take place every other year - by claiming it is due to Turkish attacks, which delayed them. Therefore, the scene was not set to hold cyclical democratic elections, at a time in which the Syrian Democratic Council (MSD) pledged to hold elections within one year of making that declaration at its general conference in late 2020.^{13,14}

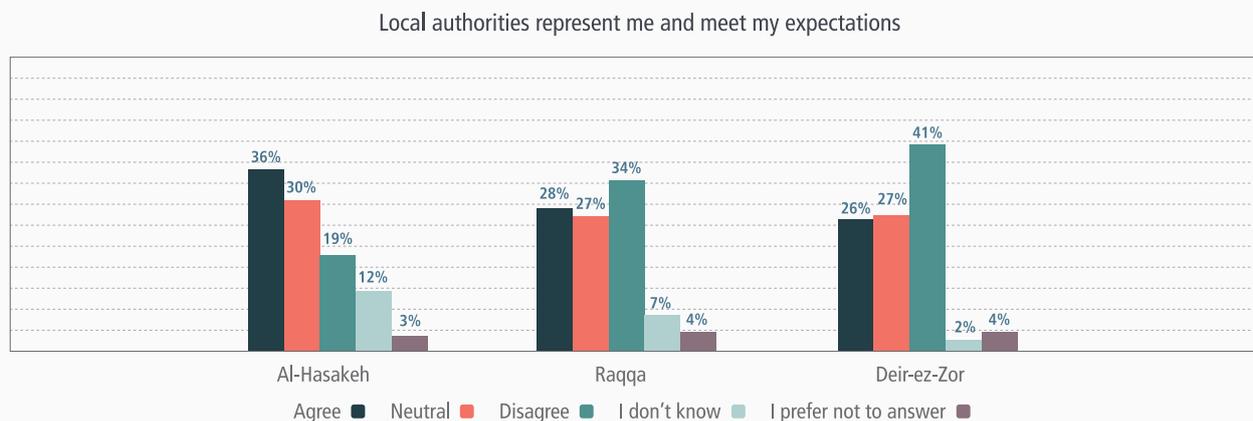
12 Interview with Fawza Al Yousef, a member of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)

13 Interview with Suleiman Arab, joint presidency of the municipality and local administration committee in Al-Jazira

14 The Democratic Syrian Council (MSD): the council's founding conference was held in the city of Dirik in Northeast Syria on 9 December 2015. It is the main political reference and context for the autonomous administration of north and east Syria and the Democratic Syrian Forces. For more: https://m-syria-d.com/?page_id=8821

Local administrations represent local authorities, which are often in direct contact with residents. This puts it squarely in the face of service and security requests. The budget of civil autonomous administration cannot satisfy the requests of all residents given the scope of the destruction and damages to infrastructure and private properties. According to the autonomous administration, some regions require large budgets that the administration cannot supply because of the embargo imposed on it. With its own capacities, the administration is trying to repair destroyed infrastructure and expand it in areas that did not witness wars¹⁵. The limited capacities reflect the popular satisfaction with local authorities' performance and its position in terms of representation and meeting people's expectations. This varies between the three governorates; the satisfaction levels in mixed Kurdish and Arab areas, such as Hasakeh, is greater than it is in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Thirty-six percent (36%) of Hasakeh residents agree that local authorities represent them (Figure 14). The same figures appear in expressing satisfaction about local authorities (Figure 15) while the rate of confidence that the local administration is capable of satisfying needs and meeting expectations rose to 41% (Figure 16). While Raqqa witnessed better services and security than Deir Ezzor, its general satisfaction reached 27% in the survey. In Deir Ezzor, it appeared that those who do not approve of local authority representation had the largest share of responders, with 41%. The rate of overall satisfaction dropped to 13%, and the trust in local authorities did not exceed 22%. The neutral opinions in the survey appear to be in sync about local authorities representing them and meeting their expectations, ranging between 26 and 30% in the three governorates.

Figure 14 How much do you agree with the following sentence: I feel that the local authorities represent me and meet my expectations.



15 Interview with Suleiman Arab, joint presidency of the municipality and local administration committee in Al-Jazira

Figure 15: How much do you agree with the following sentence: I am overall satisfied with the current local authorities' performance

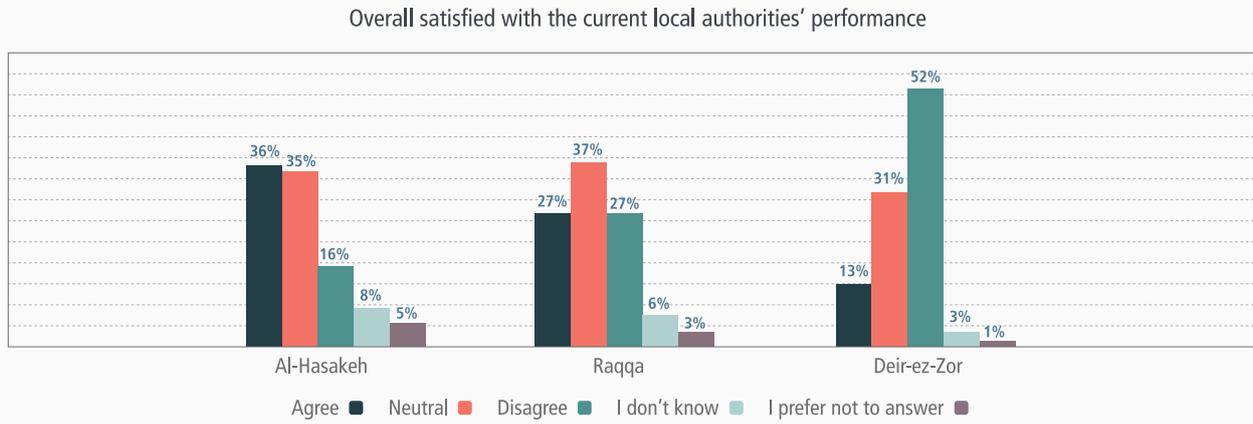
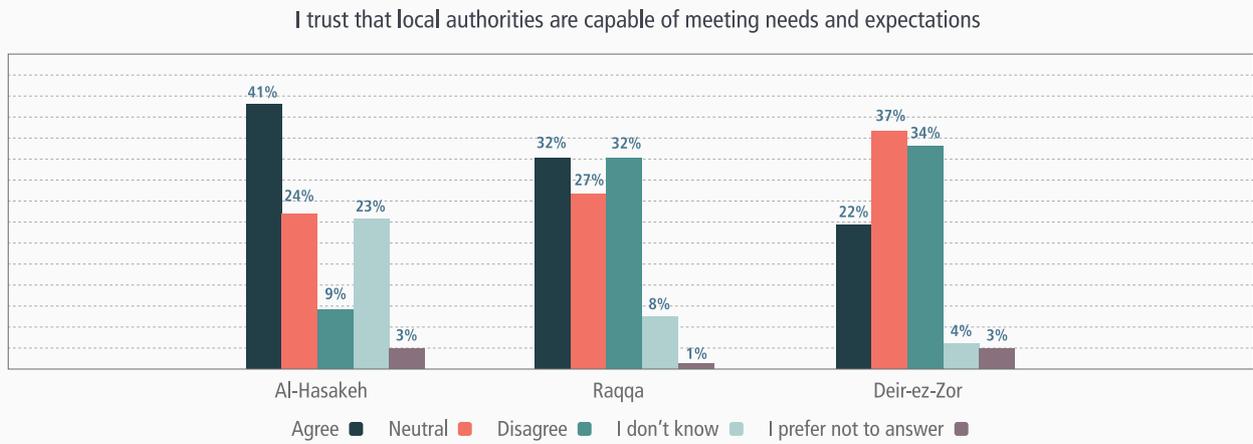


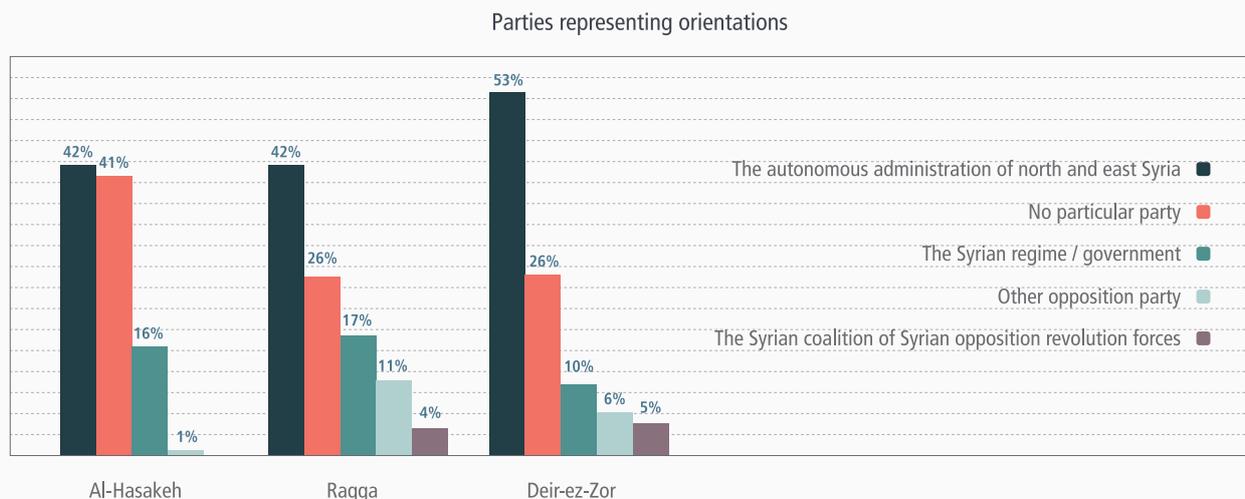
Figure 16: How much do you agree with the following sentence: I trust that local authorities are capable of meeting needs and expectations.



Two: Political Representation

Having to choose a side that represents political orientations pushes residents into a tradeoff of multiple options, represented by the Autonomous Administration, the Syrian government (GoS), and the opposition in all their forms. Even though there are a lot of objections to the performance of local administration and authorities and they are not considered representative of a large part of responders, as is the case of Deir Ezzor, the choice between the previously available options pushed the majority of responders in the three governorates to consider the autonomous authority the representative party of public orientations, with a 53% rating in Deir Ezzor and 42% in Hasakeh and Raqqa. Meanwhile, the choice of the Syrian government did not exceed 17% at its peak (in Raqqa). The next highest-ranked answer after the administration was not naming any specific party, at a remarkable rate in the three governorates. In Hasakeh, around 41% did not name any specific party, versus 26% in the other two governorates. (Figure 17)

Figure 17: Overall, which party most represents your orientation?



Hasakeh

Ethnic diversity plays a major role in determining political orientations in the Hasakeh governorate. The governorate is one of the most prominent places of Kurdish presence in Syria, also counting Assyrian Syrians. For the Kurds, Kurdish parties represent the most adequate political choice to reflect their political orientations, given the sentiment of nationalism coupled with the deprivation of cultural identity and widespread discriminatory policies, which are the biggest factors pushing the Kurds to hold on to nationalist parties. Any transnationalism, i.e. national, party presence is extremely weak. What applies to Kurds also applies to other ethnicities, Arabs and Syrians, in the Hasakeh governorate.

The first Kurdish party was established in the name of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria in 1957. This party birthed all other Kurdish parties, which kept up the process of breaking away from the GoS. Party names multiplied, and all parties are considered historically linked to the mother party.

The Kurdish party map is split into three main axes: The Democratic Union Party is the main player in the area, given its hold on the authority in Northeast Syria, and since it is the party that founded the Autonomous Administration in the area; it also reestablished relations with political and social bodies in the region, and founded the Syrian Democratic Council (MSD) as well as a Kurdish political group under the name "Kurdish National Movement Parties". This was meant to support its allies among Kurdish Syrian parties that did not belong to the National Kurdish Council. The Democratic Union followed a policy of alliances and used whatever power it had to establish relations within both the Arab and Syriac milieus. The Democratic Syrian Council, for example, considers that the political coverage of the autonomous administration is the political decision-maker for the administration's regions, and the one responsible for relations with Syrian opposition parties and for dialog with the Syrian government. Arab participation is unclear and happens through social and tribal formations in the political frameworks that connect Arabs to the Democratic Union. Syriac participation is different; the "Syriac Union" party participates in political decisions and "many matters pertaining to the autonomous administration", according to the leadership of the Syriac Union party¹⁶. Through responders' selection, the rate of Kurdish National Unity parties, led by the Democratic Union, reached 13% of total surveyed people -the highest rate received by a political structure in the governorate.

The second party on the Kurdish political map is constituted of Kurdish National Council parties, supported by the Kurdistan Democratic leadership (Irbil). The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria is considered to be the largest one, alongside the Yekiti party and other parties with less power than these two. The council was founded in autumn of 2011 in order to form a platform for Kurdish Syrian parties and several revolutionary organizations and groups. The goal was to unify the demands of the Kurds in Syria and to form a unified Kurdish political pole. In 2014, the council joined the national Syrian coalition when both sides signed a protocol guaranteeing a form of acknowledgment and participation for the Kurds. However, the council's presence in Arab milieus in the region seems shaky, since it particularly focuses on the demands of the Kurds in Syria and aims at establishing a democratic, pluralist, and federalist Syria and at having the constitution acknowledge Kurdish Syrians' existence. In 2020, it worked on establishing the "Peace and Freedom Front" with the Assyrian Democratic Organization, Syria's Tomorrow Movement led by Ahmad Al-Jarba, and the Arab Council in Euphrates and Al-Jazira. This was meant to reinforce its positions before local constituents, at the same level as the Democratic Union Party. Ten percent (10%) of responders consider that the National Kurdish Council is the closest to them politically.

As for the third Kurdish party, it seems to have less of a presence. This orientation is clearly representative of the Democratic Progressive Kurdish Party in Syria, and the Kurdish Democratic Union party in Syria, both of which were overlooked in dialogues between the other two Kurdish parties.

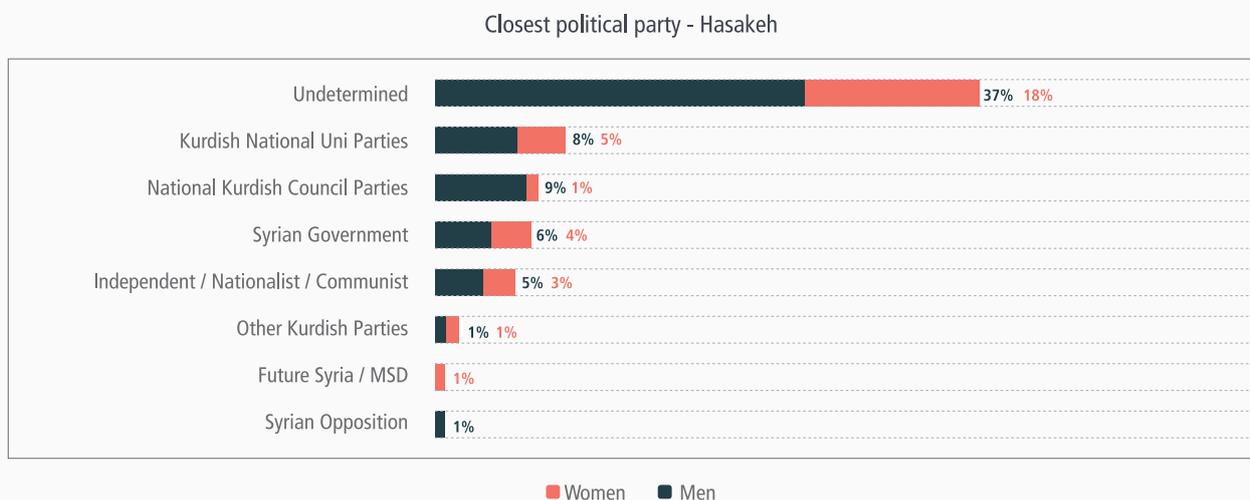
In parallel to this Kurdish presence, there is an Arab presence that is more clan-based than political. Political presence is limited to the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, meaning the Syrian government. Ba'ath still controls a share of Arab presence in Hasakeh, especially when it comes to governorate employees and officials, who, naturally, have nearly no political freedom to stray from the decisions of the central authority and party leadership. In addition to that, there are opposition parties and frameworks, but they are poorly efficient on the general scale. To that, we can add National Progressive Front parties allied with Ba'ath, such as communist parties. When the administration was established, parties appeared to try and gather Arabs

16 Interview with Mohammad Zaki Al-Huwaidi, a political figure from Raqqa

and Kurds under one organization. However, the very idea seems strange in an area witnessing nationalist polarization and closed-off nationalist party, such as the establishment of the Future of Syria Party, which can be described as a transnationalist party.

Nevertheless, the high number of parties in the governorate of Hasakeh does not mean that society is all-egiant to or enrolls in these parties. Survey results show that the greatest number of responders stated that the political party they feel closest to is “undetermined”, with 55% of the sample surveyed. The lowest presence was that of various opposition party, as only 1% of responders felt closest to them. This reflects the poor situation and discourse of these opposition parties in the governorate.

Figure 18: Which party do you feel is closest to your political positions? Hasakeh



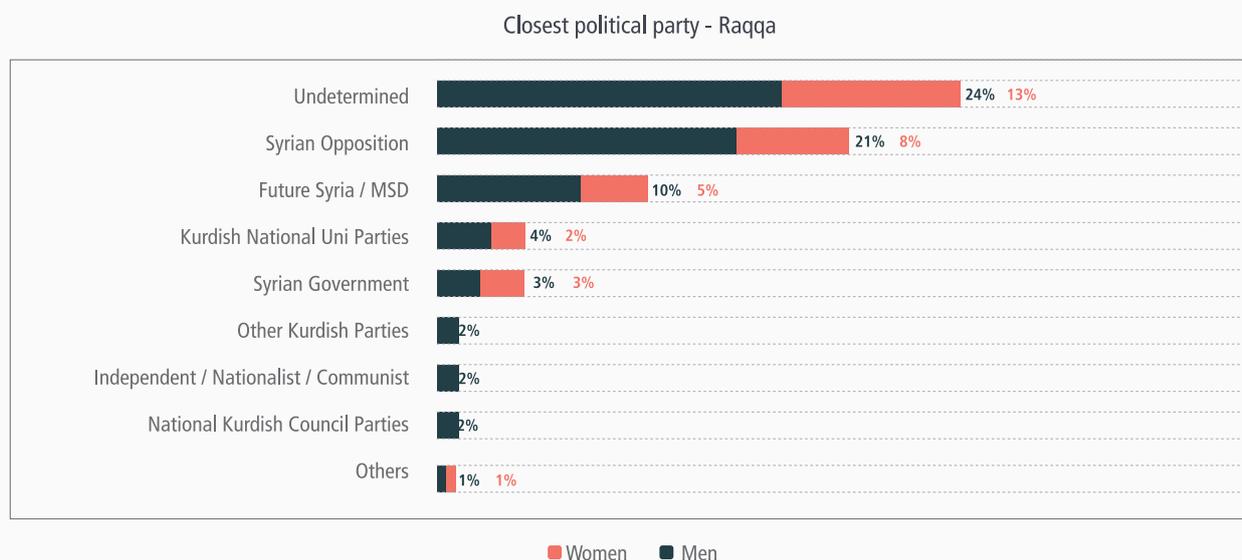
Raqqa

Since it came into power in 1963, the Ba’ath party prohibited the presence of opposing parties across Syria. As a result of the excessive harshness towards opposition party, opposition activity was scaled down and limited to a few figures and small political entities. Unlike the policy of “looking the other way” about the presence of some Kurdish parties’ activity, which were also subjected to security scrutiny and sanctions, Arab or national parties from beyond the government’s umbrella suffered from prohibition policies. In Raqqa, similarly to other Syrian governorates, Ba’ath and the Progressive National Front controlled political life. Years of war did not help in the establishment of a political status in Northeast Syria. Most responders, 37%, did not select a particular party to consider closest to them politically. (Figure 19) Although 29% of responders stated that the opposition is the closest to them politically, the reality of the region does not see any serious opposition movement. Furthermore, the meaning of opposition extends over a large spectrum of opposing parties and entities, such as the National Coalition of Revolution and Opposition Forces, the National Coordination Entity, and other groups such as the Moscow and Cairo platforms. Some opposition members consider that the political operation in Northeast Syria is doomed to fail because the main party does not allow any political process and is a de-facto authority. Therefore, there is no space for participation under military monopoly and in the absence of political margins because of the security situation and the tightening noose.¹⁷

17 Interview with Mohammad Zaki Al-Huwaidi, a political figure from Raqqa

On March 27, 2018, a new party was established within the Autonomous Administration, bearing the name "Future Syria". It was announced in the city of Raqqa, brandishing the slogan "Decentralized Pluralist Democratic Syria". The party had remarkable presence in Arab regions, reflected in the fact that 15% of responders consider the Future party closest to them, which is a record high for a newly established party. There are not many Kurds living in Raqqa. Some of them lived in Tal Abiad before the Turkish Operation Peace Spring, and had to move to Raqqa. Many families moved from Kobane to work in Raqqa. This explains the Kurdish presence in the city and governorates, as 6% of responders considered that they were closest to the Kurdish National Unity parties, and 2% said that the National Kurdish Council was the closest to them. These figures match the overall rates of Kurdish presence in the governorate.

Figure 19: Which party do you feel is closest to your political positions? Raqqa



Deir Ezzor

Political orientations in Deir Ezzor do not differ greatly from those in Raqqa. Over the past four decades before protests erupted in Syria, the presence of Ba'ath was overwhelming, followed by, at a much-reduced scope, Progressive National Front parties allied with Ba'ath, as well as a modest presence of the prohibited Muslim Brotherhood group and the Ba'ath Party "allegiant to Iraqi leadership", and leftist and nationalist opposition parties. However, the presence of parties in the prohibitive state imposed by the ruling party had no effect on public life.

Given the recent reality of Deir Ezzor's liberation from the Islamic State's control and the political stagnation and party prohibition since the Ba'ath party first came to power in Syria, the region and many other regions in Syria remained closer to a region with no political life. Furthermore, there were no parties currently active to represent the people of the area. In that context, the responder's answers overwhelmingly stated (72%) that no particular party represented them politically. (Figure 20) This rate closely reflects the political situation lacking any orientation that may represent residents. Ten percent (10%) stated that the opposition represented them. The region was the scene of polarization between allegiants to the Syrian government

and to the opposition before and after the Islamic State controlled it, but it never attracted large masses. When the region became under the control of the autonomous administration, no political powers capable of political representation appeared, whilst social/tribal representation remained and increased on the governorate’s public scene.

Figure 20: Which party do you feel is closest to your political positions? Deir Ezzor



Three: Social Representation

Across from political representation lies the matter of these powers’ social presence, from clan sheikhs and local notables to new social entities that appeared after the implementation of the new ruling system set by the autonomous administration, such as Communes (Error! Reference source not found.), in addition to the increased role of civil organizations whose presence in the area has been growing since 2011.

Hasakeh

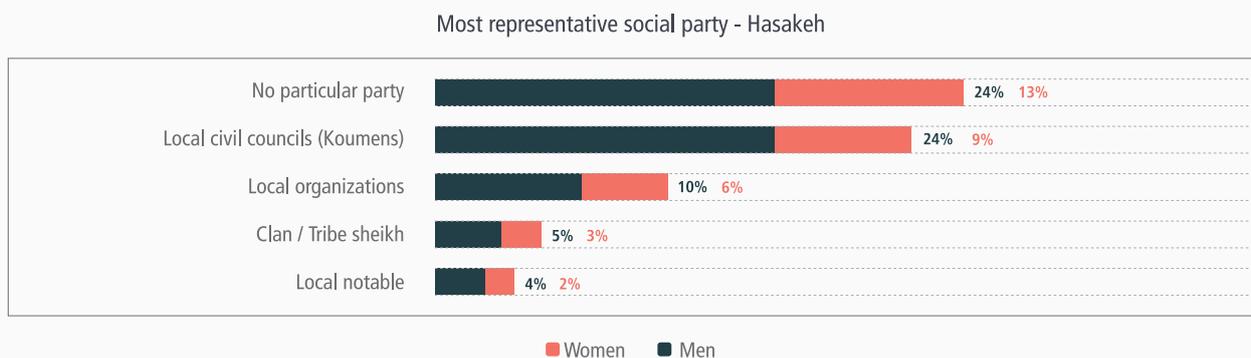
Naturally, social orientations in the governorate of Hasakeh, over its surface area of around 33 thousand square kilometers (33 000 km²), are quite different than those in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, as Hasakeh sees wider social orientations closer to political structures, such as local councils and Communes, at a more important level than the role of clans which is more prominent in other areas of Northeast Syria.

Even though most sample responders, or 37% of them did not determine the party that represents them socially, most of them, or 33%, saw that the Communes were a social party that represented them in areas of the Hasakeh governorate. Local organizations also appear as a party that represents social categories, such as unions, organization, women and youth associations, art, literature, media, development, research, relief, and health associations. The role of civil organizations grew twofold during the crisis years and with the autonomous administration’s acceptance of their existence, role, and diversity. The survey also showcases the limited role of clans or local notables at around 8% and 6% of the sample, respectively. (Figure 21).

Commune System

This is the smallest social cell, made up of several families (15 to 50) living in a specific place, such as neighborhoods, quarters, or small villages. Its membership counts several families and dozens of individuals of all genders who are above 16 years of age. Elections of the Commune council are held at the behest of residents in the Commune’s area in neighborhoods or villages through name cards. Voting is a secret process and winners are announced immediately. The council must be presided by a woman and a man who received votes. Commune roles are based on two goals: 1) “organizing society so it can manage itself and process its affairs”, 2) “provide a mechanism to offer services to people in the most efficient and effective manner.”

Figure 21: On a social level, which party do you feel best represents your interests? – Hasakeh



Raqqa

Unlike the relatively modest role of clans in regions of the Hasakeh governorate, the role of clans shines in the governorate of Raqqa and somewhat mixing into political loyalty to individuals according to the extent to which they belong to the clan or are distant from it. In the governorate of Raqqa, which covers around 19 thousand square kilometers, there are almost 36 clans. Clans can include several sub-clans and even houses. The largest is probably the Al-Afadilah clan, and the Al-Welda clan. In the absence of a state, the clans are an umbrella of protection to its children when harmony reigns within the clan. Most clans play that role away from authorities’ protection, while authorities may have a negative role and could be the reason one party strong-arms another, leading to conflicts and disputes within clans¹⁸. Most clans play that role away from authorities’ protection, while authorities may have a negative role and could be the reason one party strong-arms another, leading to conflicts and disputes within clans. The protective role is inseparable from the role of head of clan, an influential, active, and responsible chief capable of protecting the members of the clan. This role also depends on a numeral factor, or the large number of clan members he contributes to protecting¹⁹.

18 Interview with Hamed Abdul Rahman Al-Faraj, Al-Welda clan sheikh, joint presidency of the legislative council

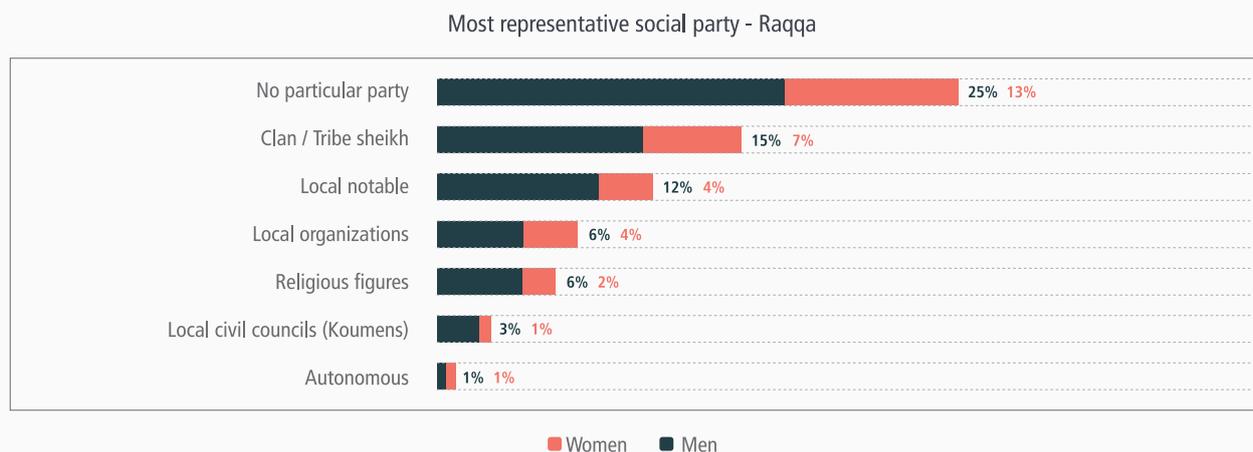
19 Interview with Jamal Al-Othman Al-Mhawesh, social notable from the Al-Hassoun clan

There is trust put in the role of the clan, despite the fierce decrease in its traditional roles. 22% of responders in Raqqa considered that the clan sheikh and the clan are the party that represents them the most. 16% considered that the local notable played that role (Error! Reference source not found.). This interest towards clan sheikhs and local notables shows the power of these two representative poles within society despite the changes that these societies went through and despite the existence of a political, military, and administrative authority.

In contrast, there are voices that declare that clans can no longer play their historical roles, as clans cannot provide any form of protection due to the armed presence on the ground. Clans have no plans to form an armed group, especially the clans of Raqqa, which are “pacifists” and are now more of an urban state, and despite local blocs and alliances (clan-based), they are not directed against the state or the de-facto authorities.²⁰

Social notables, or social figures that come from different cultural, tribal, and professional backgrounds, are representatives of the society. This category can be considered as the closest one to the tribal environment. 16% of sample responders considered that the social notable represented them, whilst 10% considered that they are most represented by local organizations. In Raqqa, 8% of responders chose “religious personalities”, giving religious figures a role, albeit a limited one; they are mosque preachers and imams, or representatives of religious and sufist orientations, selected by 8% of the sample. While the role of Communes was high in Hasakeh, it was rated much lower in Raqqa, not exceeding 4%. The greatest rate of responders, 38%, did not determine the most socially representative party. This is the answer that was chosen by the highest percentage of people in the three governorates. (Error! Reference source no found.)

Figure 22: On a social level, which party do you feel best represents your interests? - Raqqa



Deir Ezzor

Society in the Deir Ezzor countryside is built similarly to the one in Raqqa in terms of clan presence, unlike the city of Deir Ezzor, in which family, social, and urban ties are the strongest elements of society, with clan-based relations still existing, but to a lesser extent. The Al-Ekedat and Al-Bakeera clans are probably the largest clans in the Deir Ezzor governorate, which is the second-largest governorate in Syria in terms of

20 Interview with Thamer Melhem Al-Darwish, sheikh of the Al-Shebel clan

surface after the governorate of Homs. It covers around 33 thousand square kilometers. Large clans such as these two are split into several smaller branched-out clans and sub-clans.

The division of clans over several political orientations led to them losing their central dimension embodied by the clan sheikh. This division affected public perception of clans' current roles, as clans are the sole entity able to find solutions and ensure stability for its members; clans impose their presence and do not allow any outsiders to lay a hand on their members²¹. However, in most cases, and given the social dismantling that followed the uprising, clans have become too weak to express their members' ambitions²².

Clans realize their members' needs, and through the pragmatic approach they have adopted, clans can adapt to all groups in power that have taken turns ruling this area. This approach has led to clans entering into government employment and taking up positions in the autonomous administration. As clans integrate and participate in the autonomous administration in all military and civil institutions, they ensure the safety of its members and grants them power, as they become decision-makers who can, in turn, protect and help other clan members²³. Clans offer an umbrella of protection to their members by being part of operations to maintain security, by respecting laws, and by cooperating and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the autonomous administration to protect the area. Furthermore, clans know that there is a weight and balance to offering safety to their constituents when they belong to the clan, and as clans are stronger and stand together, the security offered is more solid²⁴.

The highest percentage, or 31% of the responding sample did not determine the party that socially represents them. 28%, more than in the other governorates, said that the clans were the socially representative party. 10% picked the local notable to represent them (Figure 23). This rate can be added to the clan role, in a manner, considering that local notables are closer to a social position similar to clan sheikhs, albeit less influential. Notables are also, naturally, clan members, land owners, and legal persons with the power to influence resident groups and can gather social groups around them, coming from various clans and classes. The role of religious men is quite prominent within this tribal and conservative society, with mosque preachers and imams, or persons with a spiritual dimension in Sufi groups. 17% of responders said that these figures represent them. This shift towards religion does not include any aspects related to the Islamic State and its years of rule, but rather is connected to the nature of this society which places religion filters on local identity and trans-clan identity.

The role of Communes takes a backseat in Deir Ezzor, just like in Raqqa. This can be attributed to the reigning clan presence and how recent the Commune system is in a governorate that only shook off the Islamic State's rule in 2019. This pushes the rate of responders that considered Communes to be their representative party down to 9%. This rate might be higher here than in Raqqa, but it remains quite far from the rate in Hasakeh.

21 Interview with Ibrahim Al-Hafal, a sheikh from the Al-Ekedat clan

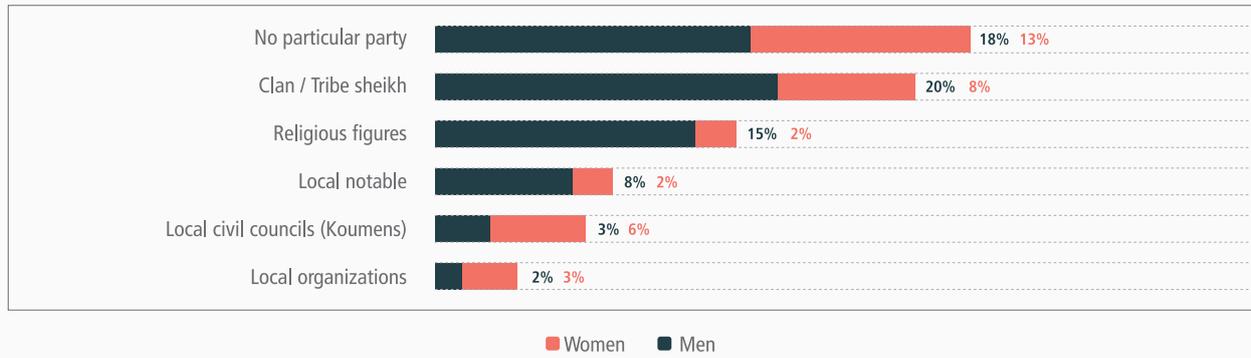
22 Interview with Ziab Sheikh Al-Jelat, head of the Deir Ezzor legislative council

23 Interview with Ibrahim Al-Hafal, a sheikh from the Al-Ekedat clan

24 Interview with Ziab Sheikh Al-Jelat, head of the Deir Ezzor legislative council

Figure 23 : On a social level, which party do you feel best represents your interests? Deir Ezzor

Most representative social party - Deir Ezzor



Conclusion

This study investigates the most important trends in Northeast Syria today. However, given the rapid political and social changes in the region and the modifications of local ruling structures, social constructs, and the reality of services and livelihoods in the area, this study is an introduction of wider and deeper approaches to these factors and dynamics.

The issue of political representation and governance are the main priority matters that require research and in-depth studies of their details and consequences, in terms of residents' relation to local authorities, the level of representation and confidence in these authorities and their ability to respond to needs, as well as their connection to political orientation.

Similarly, the results of this study offer an entry to delve deeper into contextual concepts and determinants pertaining to general security in the region, and the influence that local and regional powers have on the people's security and livelihood realities. The study comes to conclusion that the security situation and the general sense of security are the stark priority of people in the area. Furthermore, providing security and stability depends on a list of expectations about the role that local ruling authorities and local administration structures must play. This requires more research and investigation of the minutiae of this aspect, and the different roles of stakeholders and various actors in the region, as well as the mechanisms needed to design the adequate response and intervention plans.

On another level, this study has shed the light on the schisms between different geographic areas of Northeast Syria in terms of general context or particular details pertaining to the relation people have with local ruling authorities and social representation structures. The results of this study point to an array of factors that influence these discrepancies. Developing mechanisms and programs to facilitate dialogues and the exchange of ideas between these different categories is necessary to bridge gaps between NES residents and improve living standards.

Paper II:
Historical context of armed factions in Deir Ezzor
Before the Syrian uprising and until the end of
2017

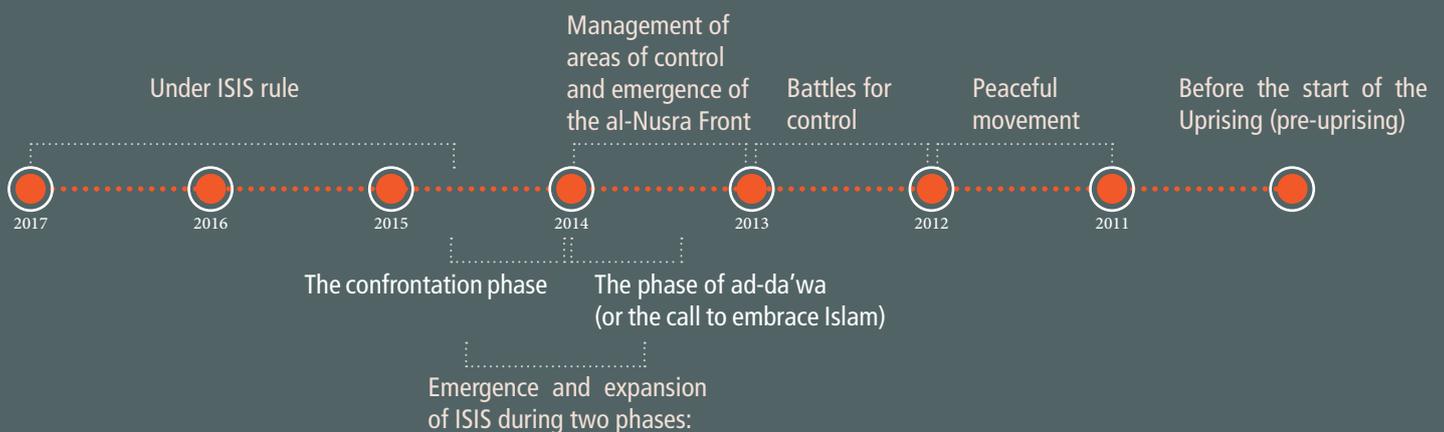
Author: Ward Al Furati

Introduction

This paper attempts to make a detailed historical presentation of the events linked to the violent extremism phenomenon that has impacted the Deir Ezzor Governorate during the period preceding the beginning of the Syrian uprising and until the region was occupied by ISIS, which then declined as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the Global Coalition, on one side, and GoS forces backed by Russia and Iran's militias, on the other side, took control.

To begin with, the paper highlights the social and religious structure of the Deir Ezzor governorate population. It then examines in detail the first signs of the emergence of violent extremism in the region during the Iraq war as a key phenomenon whose impact on the events the governorate witnessed during the past decade will be monitored, in a somehow detailed chapter on the impact of the interlinkages between Deir Ezzor and the Anbar Governorate in Iraq, the involvement of a large number of its youth in the Iraqi resistance and its impact on the uprising in Eastern Syria as the region that spans from Deir Ezzor to Baghdad makes up a harmonious tribal, cultural and religious continuum.

The paper focuses on the most important stages that the Deir Ezzor governorate witnessed since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2013 and until the SDF, backed by the Global Coalition, took control of the part of the governorate located on the left banks (Jazeera) of the Euphrates River and the GoS forces, backed by the Russian army and Iran's militias, took control of the governorate's second part located on the right bank of the Euphrates (Shamia). What followed this phase can be divided as follows:



The Paper Sample

The paper examines the first manifestations of violent extremism in the Deir Ezzor Governorate through a general narration of the most significant events that Deir Ezzor witnessed during the past decade, focusing on in-context details related to the study subject matter.

Sources

The research is largely based on testimonies made by key figures from the Deir Ezzor Governorate to the researcher, and their answers to questions prepared beforehand and that are linked to the paper's rationale. These testimonies and answers that have either been written down or recorded orally are considered as the research primary sources.

In addition to the timeline of the region's major events that can be followed through the news archives of several international and Arab media outlets, there are the official archives of a number of the governorate's military groups and civil institutions that still exist on social media (Twitter – Facebook – YouTube).

As for secondary sources, they encompass previous research about the region published by different centers.



One: Overview of the Deir Ezzor Governorate

The Deir Ezzor Governorate is located in Eastern Syria, 450 km North-East of the capital Damascus. It spans across over 33 000 km², thereby ranking second largest among the Syrian governorates²⁵. The governorate is bordered by the Syrian Hasaka governorate to the North, by the Raqqa governorate to the North-West, and Homs to the South-West. To the East, it is bordered by the State of Iraq as the governorate includes the Qa'im - Bukamal border crossing, the most important crossing between Syria and Iraq, close to the city of Al-Bukamal.

The Euphrates divides the governorate into two regions: the first, North-East of the river, called "Al Jazira" by the locals, and the second, South-West of the river, called "Al Shamia" and in which are located the governorate's main cities (Deir Ezzor - Mayadeen - Al Bukamal)^{26 27}.

Each of these cities is the center of one of the three districts that make up the governorate, as the governorate's cities, towns, and villages are concentrated on the banks of the Euphrates and the Khabur River, which meet at the town of Al Busayrah within the Mayadeen district.

The governorate is home to 40% of Syria's oil²⁸. The Al Omar oil field, one of the countries' largest and most productive, is located in it alongside other fields, oil installations, and gas plants^{i 29}.

Before the start of the Syrian uprising, Deir Ezzor had a population of 1.6 million people, most of which were of civilized rural tribes, including some of the major tribes such as Al Kaadiyat and Al Bakkara in addition to other tribes, mainly Al Bousraya, Al Khabur, Al Muchahada, Al Buleil, and Al Jahish^{30 31 32}. Arabs made up the majority of the governorate's population, while a few Kurdish families lived in the governorate's main cities. Most of the governorate's residents were Sunni Muslims, and there was a small Shiite community in the Marrat and Hatlah townsⁱⁱ, in addition to several Christians and Armenians in the city of Deir Ezzorⁱⁱⁱ. Those living in the governorate's countryside work in farming and animal husbandry. As for city dwellers, most of them work in commerce and small- and medium-sized artisanal and industrial businesses.

25 "Get to know Deir Ezzor", BBC Arabic, 4/9/2017, viewed on 21/12/2020, <https://cutt.us/3GBqH>

26 The Al-Mayadeen district spans across 3954 km² and has a population of 247171 people according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) 2004 data

27 The Al Bukamal districts spans across 6807 km² and has a population of 265142 people according to the CBS's 2004 data

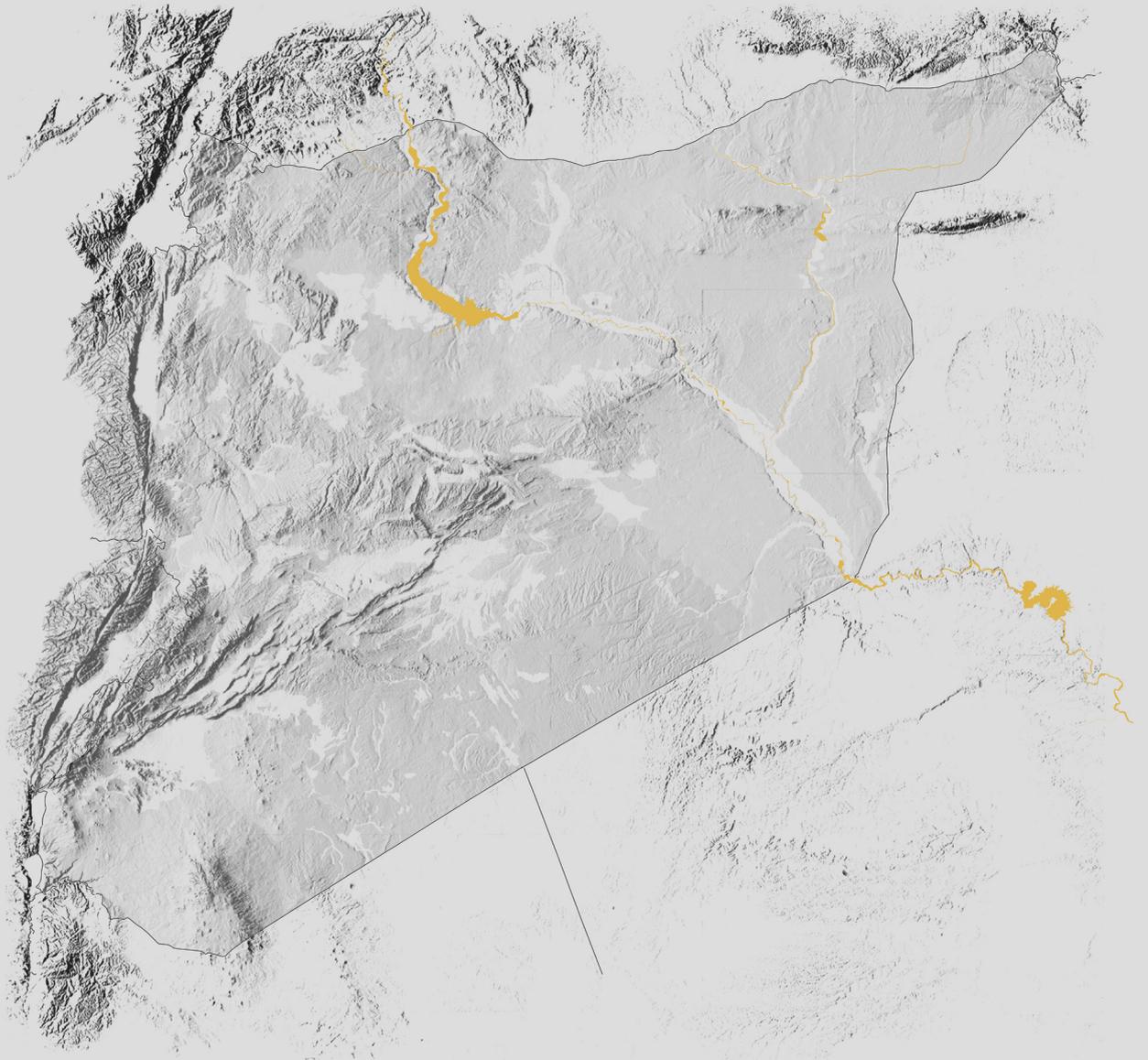
28 «Why are states fighting for Deir Ezzor?», Enab Baladi, 10/9/2017, view on 21/12/2020, <https://cutt.us/nWelf>

29 "The field is located within the Mayadeen district on the right bank of the Euphrates "Al Jazeera". It had a production of 30 000 barrels before the start of the Syrian uprising.

30 The governorate had a population of 1623000 according to the CBS's 2009 data whereas the governorate had a population of 1004747 according to the CBS's 2004 data, a 61.5% increase in 5 years.

31 The Al Akidat tribe is divided into three main tribes related to each other by blood and kinship, namely the Al Bukamel, Al Bukamal and Al Shaitat tribes. Each of these tribes is divided into different, independently- headed groups.

32 The Al Bakkara tribe is divided into three tribes: Al Abed, Al Abid and Dana Sultan. Faysal Dahmouh, page 5 (ibid).



Before the Syrian Uprising (Salafi Ideology - Iraq War)

The emergence of Islamism in Deir Ezzor dates to the 1940s, following the establishment in Deir Ezzor in 1941 of the Dar al-Ansar Association presided over by Cheikh Abed Al Razzaq Ramadan as the Association was among the associations that founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria in 1942. The al-Ansar's responsibility trumped that of the remaining association centers in Syria as it oversaw a vast region that included Deir Ezzor and the Syrian Al Jazeera district, contributing to the formation of active groups in a number of the governorate's cities and towns, most notably the Mayadeen group headed by its mufti Cheikh Mahmoud Mshouh³³.

The Brotherhood was active throughout the 1940s and 1950s. It then declined after the union with Egypt was announced in response to the condition imposed by Gamal Abdel Nasser to disband all political parties and movements. It then resumed its activities, although it did not regain its legal status after the separation was announced, and although a number of the Brotherhood leaders were arrested in 1966 during the campaign that targeted most political currents in Syria back then³⁴.

The Brotherhood remained active in Deir Ezzor and its presence and influence increased until the 1980s, during which armed opposition was led by the Brotherhood against the GoS in Syria. These confrontations were severely repressed by the GoS during bloody events that peaked in the Syrian city of Hama. The Government of Syria also launched a campaign of mass arrests against the Brotherhood's cadres and people who had close ties with them in all Syrian governorates, including Deir Ezzor. Ever since, the Brotherhood's presence in Syria has become secret. It became inefficient as security services kept chasing the cadres of the Brotherhood that waited until the start of the Syrian uprising to try to make a comeback on the Syrian scene³⁵.

In general, it can be said religiosity in the governorate is one of general (popular) nature. In addition, a few Sufi practices that the GoS didn't mind as they were far from interfering in public affairs are widespread in the governorate. Nonetheless, this has changed since the 1990s with the return of several young people who were originally from the governorate but who worked in the Gulf and were influenced by Salafism, whereby individual cases of followers of the Salafi ideology spread across the region. They later created small Salafist groups but did not turn into open Da'wat that had their own strongholds and mosques as it was the case in other regions outside the governorate³⁶. The American invasion of Iraq during which the governorate turned into a gateway for the entry of hordes of volunteers from Syria and Arab and Muslim countries to fight against the International coalition, was facilitated by the Syrian government that turned a blind eye to their flow. Most of them joined the so-called Fedayeen Saddam, creating a paramilitary force of the Iraqi Army against the International coalition. Nonetheless, the Iraqi regime's rapid collapse, the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the emergence of the "Iraqi Popular Resistance" against the International coalition forces allowed thousands of these volunteers, many of whom were from Deir Ezzor, to stay there

33 "Deir Ezzor by memory...the emergence of the Islamist current in Deir Ezzor and the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood... 1 out of 7", Ain Al Madina, published on 24/2/2020, viewed on 24/12/2012, <https://cutt.us/bBYJr>

34 "Deir Ezzor by memory...the emergence of the Islamist current in Deir Ezzor and the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood... 1 out of 7" (ibid).

35 "Deir Ezzor by memory...the emergence of the Islamist current in Deir Ezzor and the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood... 1 out of 7" (ibid).

36 Based on several interviews that the researcher made with some people in the region.

and to contribute to the resistance's efforts^{iv}. Some of them joined the different resistance factions, from the Islamist Army to the Mujahideen Army (MA) and even Al-Qaeda³⁷. Most of them successively returned to Syria between 2003 and 2006, some of them with an organizational sense of belonging to Al-Qaeda or with ideas close to that of the group without actually belonging to the organization, and created Al-Qaeda-affiliated sleeper cells in Syria or groups trying to work on creating organizations with a different vision³⁸. Those got into security confrontations with the GoS's services in a number of Syrian governorates³⁹. It can be said that it is during this phase that the first Qaeda-affiliated groups were formed in Deir Ezzor^v. However, these groups were a rare case among the returnees. One thing is for sure: many of the returnees were inspired by Harakism, be it through its Salafi-jihadi ideology or through other ideologies or had at least become acceptant of the idea as a result of belonging to Iraqi factions and organizations that had the same ideas. As of the beginning of the war on Iraq, groups and individuals who voiced their Salafi-jihadi ideas, keeping away from any organizational activity and committing to timid Da'wa activities^{vi}, spread across the region.

Uprising and Control

The Deir Ezzor governorate saw its first demonstration on March 18, 2011⁴⁰. It was not however a typical demonstration. It was more similar to riots that followed a game in the city stadium, during which the local Al Futuwa club chanted slogans against the GoS. Then, successive demonstrations were held in the governorate cities, towns and villages with increased participation despite the security solution adopted by the GoS in dealing with the revolutionary movement which peaked mid-2011 with the governorate's first casualties^{vii}⁴¹. This pushed a large number of the governorate's residents to join the revolutionary movement, until the governorate managed, alongside the Hama governorate, to break the one million demonstrator record in July 2011⁴². Assad's government then responded with its largest official army move since the beginning of the protests in March 2011, as army troops headed to the Hama governorate in Central Syria and further east towards Deir Ezzor.

The Army forces barged into the city of Deir Ezzor on August 7th, 2011 in the middle of the month of Ramadan. They then started to expand the scope of their incursion in the revolting governorate, ent-

37 Throughout the Iraq war and the following period until the start of the Syrian uprising, the Islamic State in Iraq was considered as part of Al-Qaeda.

38 The Syrian regime arrested a large number of returnees from the Iraq war. Some of them had remained in detention centers until the start of the Syrian uprising.

39 The researcher had previously met former members of organizations founded during that period in Latakia, Aleppo and Idlib, who talked about them creating groups that had a Salafi-jihadi approach and that were active in confronting the regime that launched security campaigns to chase cells that were affiliated to them and some of which sponsored armed confrontation.

40 Videos on YouTube documenting the demonstration, <https://cutt.us/qQPzh> <https://cutt.us/GX0hG>

41 The first demonstration with articulated demands in the city of Deir Ezzor started at the Othman Ben Affan Mosque in the Old Airport neighborhood. As for the city of Mayadeen, the first demonstration took place on 24/3/2011 in the city's Al Muqbi Souk. In Al Bukamal, it started in the Abu Al Baker Al Siddiq Mosque close to the Al Nakhil Square on Friday 8/4/2011.

42 According to several activists, the number of demonstrators in the Deir Ezzor governorate exceeded 550 000 demonstrators and in the Hama governorate 650 000 demonstrators on Friday July 22nd, 2011 called by the activists Khaled's grandsons' Friday. "Explosions at the Military academy in Homs after demonstrations of millions", DW, 23/7/2011, viewed on 24/12/2020 <https://cutt.us/egliT>

ering the city of Mayadeen and several towns in the countryside such as Al Quriyah on August 24⁴³. They also barged into the city of Al Bukamal during the same month. However, GoS forces remained stationed in the governorate's main cities (Deir Ezzor, Mayadeen, and Al Bukamal), making them launching points for security swoops against rural towns and villages from which they later withdrew⁴⁴. This left them without a direct authority and therefore allowed them to keep their revolutionary movement going as if they were liberated areas and to turn into a refuge for the cities' residents and their coordination committees and into areas in which the first Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups in the governorate emerged⁴⁵.

The proliferation of weapons in the Deir Ezzor governorate countryside before the Syrian uprising started made it possible for armed groups to be formed early on within the Syrian uprising's ranks in mid-2011 although not in an organized way. It can be said that the first real battle that the governorate witnessed among these groups and the GoS forces was the Bloody Saturday events in the city of Al Bukamal mid- July 2011⁴⁶.

Then came the GoS army's invasion of the governorate and its stationing in the main cities in August of the same year, pushing these groups, whose membership increased under the umbrella of the FSA that was formed late July, to organize themselves, taking advantage of the GoS's waning security and military authority in the Deir Ezzor governorate countryside.

Confrontations between FSA groups and GoS forces remained swift and did not take the shape of "liberalization" battles until mid-2012, as the city of Mayadeen became the first among the governorate's three centers to be seized on August 24, 2012^{viii}. The first region in the governorate to be completely liberated was the Bukamal district on November 17^{ix}, followed by the Mayadeen district on November 22nd which was completely liberated after taking control of the Artillery Battalion, the Syrian government's last stronghold there^x.

As for the Deir Ezzor district, it was not completely brought under control, as FSA groups started spreading across the city in mid-2012 and managed to seize several neighborhoods and to resist the GoS forces' campaign in September 2012, during which the most atrocious massacres in Eastern Syrian were perpetrated, namely the Al Jura and Al Qusur neighborhoods massacres.^{xi} Following the campaign, FSA groups remained in control of most of the city's neighborhoods but were trapped in them, until groups from the countryside managed to take control of the Al Siyasa bridge in January 2013, therefore linking the city's neighborhoods to the countryside. GoS's forces remained in control of the Al Jura and Al Qusur neighborhoods and of the Deir Ezzor military airport and the Ayash area.

The last GoS military forces barracks to be seized by FSA groups in the governorate were the 113 Missile Brigade, east of Deir Ezzor, during the first half of March 2013⁴⁷.

43 "The large fields of the Euphrates (2 of 2)", Aljumhuriya.net, 26/9/2016, viewed on 24/12/2020, <https://cutt.us/SFaoE>

44 The Regime Forces did not settle down in the vast Deir Ezzor rural areas and villages because arms were widespread among the residents of the rural areas of tribe-based nature.

45 "The large fields of the Euphrates (2 of 2)", (ibid).

46 The Bloody Saturday events have been already mentioned in end note 14.

47 The Al-Nusra Front took part in the battles to liberate the governorate since they started. However, at the beginning, it had a limited membership and influence but the fact that many local factions such as Junud Al Haqq in Al Bukamal, Usud al-Tawheed in Mayadeen and other groups that were part of the FSA joined its ranks added to its increasing membership in the village of Al Shahil that became its stronghold, turned it later into a powerful force in the governorate.

Deir Ezzor Military Groups and their Ideological and Regional Backgrounds

Since the end of 2011 and until July 2014, a number of military groups that were key players in battles to control and defend the governorate were formed in Deir Ezzor. The main groups are highlighted below:

	Faction	Active period	Ideology
	The Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades	From late 2012, till beginnings 2014	Islamist character, without specific ideology
	Front for Authenticity and Development	Established November 2012	Islamist of Salafi Harakist nature
	The Jafar al-Tayar Brigade	January 2012 to November 2013 (joined Al Islam Brigade)	scientific Salafi ideology
	The Islamic Ahrar Al Sham movement	Since early 2013	Salafi-jihadi ideology of reformist nature
	Al-Nusra Front	Since late 2011	Al-Qaeda's Salafi-jihadi ideology

The Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades

The group is considered as one of the cross-national FSA groups in Syria, with branches in several Syrian governorates. Nonetheless, its branch in the Eastern region (Deir Ezzor - Raqqa - Hasaka) is considered as the largest, particularly its branch in the Deir Ezzor governorate led by Saddam Jamal, a native of the city of Bukamal. The group was a sort of alliance more than a cohesive group affiliated to a central authority. The group was created late 2012.

The group in Deir Ezzor, which became known as Ahfad Army⁴⁸, included a number of the governorate's main factions, including:

- The Allahu Akbar Brigade led by Saddam Jamal and considered as the city of Al Bukamal's largest group^{xii}.
- The Al-Ka'Ka' faction led by Mahmud Al Matar and considered as the main group in the city of Al Quriyah^{xiii}, populated by the Al-Qara'an tribe of the Al Akdiyat tribe, Al Bukamal branch.
- The Al-Aasra army led by Abu Seif Al Shaity and established in the area populated by the Al Shatiyat tribe.^{xiv}
- The al-Ahfad group in the city of Deir Ezzor which included a number of the cities' battalions led by Firas Kharabeh.^{xv}

The group is considered among the FSA groups that have not adopted a specific member-characterizing ideology. However, just like most FSA factions in the governorate, it has an Islamist character⁴⁹. The group fell apart at the beginning of 2014 as a result of issues with both the al-Nusra Front and ISIS.

Front for Authenticity and Development (*Jabhat al-Asala wa Tanmia*)

It is one of the cross-national revolutionary groups in Syria. It was created with the funding and support of several Kuwaiti figures in November 2012 as part of a system of fronts divided among the regions throughout the Syrian territory^{xvi}. The eastern front's leader was Second lieutenant Abed Al Rahman Al Turkey native of the city of Maydeen. The Eastern front included several of the governorate's groups, most importantly:

- The Lions of Sunna Brigade led by Abed Al Rahman Turkey and considered as the largest group in the city of Maydeen,^{xvii}
- The Basha'ir al-Nasr Brigade led by Talas Al Salameh and considered as the main group in the city of Al Asharah affiliated to Maydeen^{xviii}

48 Video documenting the meeting of the Ahfad Army Brigades' leaders in the city of Deir Ezzor in preparation of the battle to liberate it <https://cutt.us/AXSKs>

49 Despite the fact that the FSA did not adopt a specific member-characterizing ideology within its camps, most of its groups in Syria – including in Deir Ezzor – had a clear Islamic identity in their nomenclatures and the wording they used in their discourse and slogans as well as in their organizational structure that often included a "sharia-related" position in charge of moral guidance and the internal judicial system within the military groups' organizational structures. In addition, the military training camps it used to establish gave sharia-related lessons about doctrine and Fiqh Al Jihad. However, the FSA remained different from Salafi-jihadi groups (known in the media as Islamist) as it raised the flag of the Syrian uprising and generally embraced the idea that in the future the form of government in Syria should be democratic.

- Ahl al-Athar Brigade made up of FSA groups in the Al B kamal countryside on the right bank of the Euphrates.^{xix}

It can be argued that the official orientation of Front for Authenticity and Development is Islamist of Salafi Harakist nature⁵⁰.

The Jafar al-Tayar Brigade

The Brigade is considered as one of the FSA groups in Deir Ezzor created early on in January 2012. Upon its formation, the Brigade included several battalions from the Al Bukamal and Mayadeen countryside, most of which were from Al Jazeera, on the right bank of the Euphrates, and was led by Hajj Salim Al Khaled who hailed from the town of Al Shahil^{xx}. The Brigade took part in most of the governorate's battles independently until it joined in mid-November 2013 - alongside other groups from the Deir Ezzor governorate - the ranks of the Al Islam Brigade formed in the Eastern Ghouta of Damascus. The Jaafar al-Tayar Brigade formed the nucleus of the Al Islam Brigade in the Eastern region⁵¹. The Al Islam Brigade is considered as an entity with a scientific Salafi ideology in Syria⁵². However, it did not have sufficient time to create Shariah camps that would inoculate the cadres in the Eastern region with their ideas. Its branch remained there like the other FSA groups in the governorate.

The Islamic Ahrar Al Sham movement

The Islamic Ahrar Al Sham movement (or, "the Free Men of Syria") is one of the cross-national groups in Syria as it had branches in several governorates, including a branch in the Deir Ezzor. It emerged early 2013 as the city of Raqqa was seized. Its branch included several groups in the cities of Mayadeen and Deir Ezzor and a number of towns and villages in the governorate countryside without having a central area of deployment in a specific village, town or city⁵³. Ahrar Al Sham intellectually belong to the Salafi-jihadi ideology of reformist nature⁵⁴.

50 The Front for Authenticity and Development was initially created with funding from the Gulf through some figures of the State of Kuwait. It included several students and defectors. Its leadership's intellectual orientation was Reformist Salafism, a current widespread in the State of Kuwait and several Gulf states and inspired from the Muslim Brotherhood's Harakist ideas with a Salafi doctrinal orientation.

51 Statement on the creation of the Jafar al-Tayar Brigade <https://cutt.us/6Hknk>
Statement on the Brigade joining, alongside other groups, the ranks of the Al Islam Brigade <https://cutt.us/aoZB>

52 Salafism is divided into several ideologies including the scientific Salafi ideology that is officially widespread in the Persian Gulf, especially in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Zahran Allush, leader and founder of the Al Islam Brigade, and before him, his father, are considered as followers and advocates of this ideology in Syria. The followers of this ideology are hostile towards followers of the Salafi-jihadi ideology.

53 The Ahrar al-Sham movement's headquarters in Deir Ezzor moved, after first being in the city of Al Maydeen, to Al Baghouz on the Euphrates' right riverbank facing Al Bukamal and also included liberated Deir Ezzor neighborhoods to the movement's headquarters. Maaz, (former fighter in the ranks of Ahrar al-Sham in Deir Ezzor), phone interview with the researcher, Istanbul, 29/12/2020

54 Salafi-jihadi approach was the ideology that the Ahrar al-Sham movement taught to its cadres in its camps since its establishment and until the end of 2013. Then, after a disagreement arose between Daesh and it and evolved into clashes towards the end of 2013, the movement adopted a reformist approach following intellectual reviews among its leaders that lead to some of them to publicly apologize for the Salafi-jihadi ideology.

Al-Nusra Front

The al-Nusra Front is considered a branch of the international Al-Qaeda organization in Syria. It did not however announce it was affiliated to Al-Qaeda until April 2013. It is not precisely known when the front became active in the country. Nonetheless, it announced that it was officially established at the end of 2011 as footage of battalions from Mayadeen and Al Bukamal were broadcast during its official launch ceremony⁵⁵. In record time, its branch in Deir Ezzor expanded, turning into one of the governorate's main groups in addition to being one of the Front's main branches, whose headquarters were located at the Al Basira-attached Al Shahil village in Mayadeen.

It was headed by the Chief of Sharia Abu Maria Al Qahtani. The al-Nusra Front's main groups in the governorate were formed from the FSA battalions that had joined them. For example, in Al Bukamal, several members of the Junud Al Haqq Battalion were among the first who pledged allegiance to al-Nusra.

In Mayadeen, the Usud al-Tawheed Brigade was its cornerstone⁵⁶. This was also the case in each of the regions while the groups of the Al Shheell town were numerically the organization's largest nucleus in the governorate when it was present there. The al-Nusra Front follows Al-Qaeda's Salafi-jihadi ideology⁵⁷.

Mujahidi Al Sharqiya Shurah Council

The Mujahidi Al Sharqiya Shurah Councils' creation was announced on May 25, 2014 as a result of the fusion of 12 groups from the Deir Ezzor governorate, five months after clashes broke out between the governorate's groups and ISIS-affiliated groups⁵⁸. The announcement of [the council's] establishment provided a united front against ISIS despite intellectual, ideological and even regional disparities between its components. Hence, the group remained more of a coalition and did not truly merge. Therefore, the council components could not stop ISIS progress. Soon enough, it fell apart as the areas it had under control in Deir Ezzor fell into the hands of ISIS in July 2014.

55 The al-Nusra Front formation statement published in December 2011 <https://cutt.us/vyo99>

56 The Usud al-Tawheed group was part of the FSA-affiliated Lions of Sunna Brigade in the city of Al Maydeen before it split up with it and joined the al-Nusra Front.

57 Al-Qaeda is considered as the practical application of the Salafi-jihadi ideology created by Sheikhs who embraced the idea of fighting to implement Sharia against those that they consider as the Nation's enemies, be it governments in Muslim countries whose leaders they considered as tyrants hindering the Sharia or governments of Western states that they considered as enemies of Muslims, mainly the United States of America or even factions and groups with which they shared battlefields but which did not adopt their strict approach in the implementation of Sharia and which Al Qaeda considered as apostates or secularists. Despite the fact that the al-Nusra Front is a branch of Al-Qaeda that adopts and echoes the language used in its discourse, it acted on the field in Syria with a less strict approach in dealing with the other groups upon its establishment. This is perhaps what made it more popular to the extent that members of the political opposition defended it against the decision to place it at the end of 2012 on the American terrorism lists. This was before the Front officially announced its affiliation to Al-Qaeda in April 2013 after the creation of ISIS was declared and defections occurred within its ranks. The Front later announced that it has split from Al-Qaeda in July 2016, creating Jabhat Fateh al Sham.

58 The groups that have signed the declaration on the creation of the Mujahidi Al Sharqiya Shurah Council are: the branches of the al-Nusra Front, Jaysh Al Islam, the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham movement, the Front for Authenticity and Development in the Deir Ezzor governorate in addition to Jaysh Ahel Al Sunna, al-Jama'a, Al Kaakaa regiment, Jabhat Al Jihad wal Binaa, Bayariq Al Shaitat, Al Qadisiya Brigade, Jaysh al Mu'ta al Islamiy, Jaysh al Khalas, Al Muhajirin wal Ansar battalion.

The acronym given to the formation for concision and irony purposes by ISIS supporters was "Meshmesh".
"Meshmesh to lead the fight against Daesh in the Eastern Region", Qasiyoun website, 28/5/2014, viewed on 28/12/2020, <https://cutt.us/37hSO>

The Emergence of ISIS, comparison with other groups, and the confrontation war

The founding of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) known in Arabic as “Daesh” was announced in 2013 in an audio recording of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who declared that the al-Nusra Front is part of ISIS and is returning to it.^{xxi} His statement was followed a day later by a recording of Abu Mohammed al Julani, al-Nusra Front’s senior leader, announcing that the al-Nusra Front follows and takes orders from Al-Qaeda, therefore refusing the above-mentioned affiliation⁵⁹. Consequently, the al-Nusra Front followers split into two groups: respondents to the Al Baghdadi and respondents to the Al Julani. Regional disparities in the response’s extent emerged as most al- Nusra Front fighters in Northern Syria sided with Al Baghdadi, extending their influence on its headquarters and wealth while Eastern Syria remained the largest bloc within the ranks of the al-Nusra Front thanks to the efforts of its Chief of Sharia Abu Maria Al Qahtani⁶⁰. The al-Nusra Front groups in Deir Ezzor and its countryside did not follow Baghdadi, except for the Amer al Rafdan group in the Jadeed Ekedat district on the right bank of the Euphrates facing the city of Bu Muhsen within the Deir Ezzor district, which became ISIS’s Deir Ezzor Wali⁶¹. The members of his group did not exceed 50 combatants back then⁶². In addition, a small number of members of the al-Nusra Front and other factions in the city of Mayadeen pledged allegiance to ISIS, establishing themselves in the Mayadeen sports club⁶³. Then ISIS created two small headquarters in the Al Ummal and Al Hawika neighborhoods for those who had pledged allegiance to it in the city of Deir Ezzor. These were ISIS only declared headquarters in the governorate since its establishment and until it took control of the governorate. Furthermore, ISIS did not have checkpoints, nor tribunals in the region.

It was clear that between April and the end of 2013 it was difficult for ISIS to recruit new members in the Deir Ezzor governorate compared to the scale of its activities and its increasing membership in other governorates, despite the absence of threat to ISIS elements in the region back then⁶⁴. In fact, ISIS was generally considered as just another new group among many in the liberated areas, making it possible for those who recently pledged allegiance to ISIS to move freely across the region and sometimes to even live in other battalions’ and groups’ headquarters, relying on kinship and friendships⁶⁵⁶⁶.

59 “Al Julani’s surprise brings al-Nusra’s disputes to light”, Al Jazeera.net 11/4/2013, viewed on 27/2/2021 <https://cutt.us/JES4>

60 According to several interviews conducted by the researcher with former al-Nusra fighters in the Eastern region, the al-Nusra Front Chief of Shariah Abu Maria Al Qahtani’s refusal to join ISIS and his considerable activity within the region and among the al-Nusra Front followers there is considered as one of the main reasons for the majority of al-Nusra-affiliated locals’ refusal to side with ISIS, making Abu Maria’s statement “I swear I would have killed them had I been alone” before the clashes with ISIS started famous. Despite the fact that Abu Maria is Iraqi, he managed within a short period of time to build good relationships with the local community in the Deir Ezzor governorate’s liberated areas.

61 Amer Al Rafdan is a member of the al Ekedat tribe, the largest tribe in Deir Ezzor. He belongs to the tribe’s Al Bakir branch. Despite the fact that he lived in the city of Deir Ezzor before the start of the Syrian uprising, after the uprising started, he left for his hometown, Jadeed Ekedat, in which he established a group that pledged allegiance to the al-Nusra Front and remained within its ranks until Al Baghdadi announced the establishment of ISIS. Al Rafdan then chose to side with ISIS which benefited a lot from the fact that Al Rafdan belonged to a tribe. “Daesh princes...3 qualifications to pledge allegiance”, Al Arabi Al Jadid, 15/10/2014, viewed on 28/12/2020, <https://cutt.us/Sydyd>

62 Abu Al Hasan, (former fighter within the al-Nusra Front ranks in Deir Ezzor), *ibid*.

63 ISIS’s elements in the city of Mayadeen did not exceed 15 according to Abu I Hasan (*ibid*).

64 In the Aleppo and Idlib governorates for example, ISIS managed to spread in record time until it became rare in the third quarter of 2013 to find a big village or town in Northern Syria that doesn’t have an ISIS headquarters. In addition, it adopted a policy according to which it accepted having groups join it, unlike the al-Nusra Front which refused to take in new members in groups and made it a condition for them to join [the Front] individually after attending Shariah camps. This is how ISIS managed to greatly increase its membership compared to al-Nusra’s formerly increasing membership.

65 All those interviewed by the researcher unanimously agreed that at that time, ISIS was considered as just another group and said that they would have never thought that at some point it might come to a decisive confrontation between it and the remaining groups.

66 “Abdallah”, a former FSA fighter in the Lions of Sunna brigade in the city of Al Maydeen, recalls that several of those who had pledged allegiance to ISIS in the city’s countryside lived in the FSA’s headquarters, counting on the fact that they knew them. A group made of 7 ISIS elements had even established itself on the second floor of one of the schools in the city’s countryside while their cousins who had joined one of the FSA-affiliated factions lived on the first floor.

It is somewhat difficult to estimate the number of the governorate's residents who pledged allegiance to ISIS back then. Nonetheless, local estimates contend that there were no more than 150 people who publicly pledged allegiance to ISIS back then⁶⁷. This can be attributed to many reasons, most importantly the region's tribe-based structure that limited each of the groups' ability to enlist recruits in their central forces to the geographical spread of the tribe. As each faction was considered as affiliated to one of the tribe's branches. Its hard core and most of its members belong to the tribe branch from which it initially emerged. The group then mostly becomes geographically limited to areas of presence of this tribe's members. In fact, each group had a nucleus made up of the members of one of the tribes residing in one of the villages or towns. Most of these tribe members were indeed affiliated to some group which made it difficult for the new group to breach the existing faction/tribe-based structure, especially after failing to rally those who had pledged allegiance to al-Nusra as it did in other governorates. Early 2014, confrontations erupted between several groups from Northern and Eastern Syria and ISIS-affiliated groups and ended in ISIS gaining control of the Raqqa governorate and Eastern rural Aleppo while FSA forces managed to drive ISIS out of the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib. Northern rural Aleppo then became the line of confrontation between the FSA and ISIS⁶⁸. As for Deir Ezzor, ISIS evacuated its headquarters in the cities of Deir Ezzor and Mayadeen to avoid clashes following local mediation efforts⁶⁹. However, it kept its main headquarters in Jadeed Ekedat but soon clashes broke out first in the area of Manjam al-Meleh between the Raqqa and Deir Ezzor governorates. Clashes even expanded to Jadeed Ekedat taking a tribe-based turn as ISIS managed, thanks to its Wali Al Rafdan's affiliation to the Al Bakir tribe ^{xxii}, to mobilize some tribe members in Jadeed Ekedat against their cousins from the Bukamal branch (Al Zaher) who lived in the town of Al Shheell ^{xxiii} which is considered as al-Nusra Front's main stronghold in the governorate.

Shortly after the start of clashes, the Al-Nusra Front became the spearhead against the Islamic State in the governorate of Deir Ezzor, even though clashes against the Islamic States were originally started by groups belonging to the Ahrar Al-Sham movement. Soon, several groups were formed in the governorate and joined the fights against the Islamic State which, in turn, mobilized forces it had brought in from Raqqa, north of the governorate in Al-Hasaka. This became its attack launching point. The town of Markadah in

67 The figure is the highest estimate of their number based on several interviews made by the researcher with some local residents and former fighters in several of its groups.

68 Tension between ISIS and several groups in Northern and Eastern Syria had arose in the final quarter of 2013 as ISIS launched a campaign in the Raqqa governorate against some FSA groups, mainly the Farouq and the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades as well as an offensive in Aleppo against several FSA factions in Al Bab and the Northern Storm Brigade in Azaz, thereby taking control, although not completely, of the Raqqa governorate and Eastern rural Aleppo. Indeed, other groups remained present in these areas, including Islamic Front factions (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant – al Tawheed Brigade). ISIS was also in full force in the liberated areas of the Aleppo and Idlib governorates until early 2014 when it detained Dr. Hussein Sleiman "Abu Rayyan", director of the Tell Abyad border crossing in Northern Raqqa and member of the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant and later handed over his dead body which revealed signs of torture. It then moved its troops to take control of Battalion 46 in Western rural Aleppo that was under the control of FSA factions, sparking clashes between the Movement and several groups that had backed it on one side and ISIS in Raqqa and Eastern Aleppo on the other side. Meanwhile, in Aleppo and Idlib, several FSA factions merged under the name "the Mujahideen Army", spearheading the confrontation against ISIS in the governorate. Furthermore, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front spearheaded the same confrontation in Idlib. FSA groups managed to drive ISIS out of the Aleppo and Idlib governorates to Eastern rural Aleppo while ISIS managed to seize the Raqqa governorate and Eastern rural Aleppo. A dividing line that runs along Northern rural Aleppo and separates it from Eastern rural Aleppo emerged between ISIS-controlled areas and Northern Syria's liberated areas.

69 Local and tribe-based mediations played a key role throughout the clashes between ISIS on one side and the Deir Ezzor factions on the other side. Most factions' dominant or central tribe-based nature contributed to that phenomenon and prevented clashes from turning into a war of tribes in the region. Therefore, at a time where battles were at their fiercest in Markadah, north of the Deir Ezzor governorate, Jadeed Ekedat – ISIS' main stronghold in the region – was spared the confrontation after al-Nusra Front groups invaded it and destroyed ISIS' headquarters there, keeping the region away from confrontations after a tribe-based agreement that banished those who had pledged allegiance to ISIS outside of the town of Jadeed Ekedat.

the governorate of Al Hasaka became the main confrontation line between the Islamic State and governorate groups. Tribe mediation in the village of Jadeet Ekedat facilitated the establishment of a truce that prohibited any member of the Islamic State from being present in it, following the closure of the Islamic State headquarters in the village. Even though the area saw a rebuttal of the truce more than once, it nevertheless never became the site of intense clashes.

The clashes in the town of Markadah lasted for approximately three months, during which the Islamic State waged one of its fiercest battles in Syria, which saw it lose a large share of its immigrant fighting elite. This pushed it to change strategies; it tried to gain control of the city of Al-Bukamal in April of 2014 through a maneuver in which it detoured through the Iraqi Badia towards Syria, south of the Euphrates. Its control did not last more than a day. The city groups expelled it after a bloody battle that felled around 50 fighters from the FSA factions in the city and around 100 ISIS fighters⁷⁰.

The Islamic State also exploited the adversity between the leaders of the FSA in the area and the Al-Nusra Front, some of whom had retired from fighting whilst others traded in it. This created fractures within the ranks of military groups in the area. Those who joined the Islamic State were headed by several prominent leaders from the Ahfad Al-Rasul Brigades, such as Saddam Al-Jamal, leader of the Ahfad Al-Rasul Brigades in the Eastern area, and leader of the Allahu Akbar Brigade^{xxiv}

- Abu Seif Al-Shaiti from the Al-Aasra Army^{xxv}

- Mahmoud Al-Matar, leader of the Al-Ka'Ka' Faction⁷¹, in addition to several FSA commanders in Deir Ezzor, most prominently Hussam Al-Shalouf, the leader of the Saddam Hussein battalion in the city of Al-Mayadin^{xxvi}, and several Deir Ezzor military council leaders such as the defecting first lieutenant Abdel Malak Khodr also known as "Abu Haroun"⁷². Additionally, several Al-Nusra Front in Al-Bukamal also defected and announced its allegiance to the Islamic State⁷³. They all contributed in breaking the region's faction structure and facilitated the Islamic State's quest to control the governorate, especially once it had

70 "Their Names: 50 revolutionary martyrs fallen to defeat the Islamic State in Al-Bukamal" <https://cutt.us/S17E1>

71 Mahmoud Al-Matar is the brother of "Ali Al-Matar", the leader of the Al Ka'Ka faction that was formed in the town of Al-Quria on the left bank of the Euphrates. He led a part of the faction that split into several groups when "Ali" was martyred. He joined the ranks of the Ahfad Al-Rasul Brigades. The Islamic State put him on the list of wanted people at the end of 2013. That pushed Matar to officially pledge allegiance to the Al-Nusra Front, which the Islamic State exploited in the media campaign it waged against the Front, claiming it included "corrupted" members, according to their media.

Matar resigned from fighting with the Islamic State during its battles to control the Governorate of Deir Ezzor, despite several claims made by activists in the governorate about his secret allegiance to the Islamic State and supplying transport to its members during the battle. After the Islamic State gained control of the governorate, he officially pledged allegiance and took on a number of tasks within the Islamic State, before the Islamic State transmuted him into a regular fighter within its ranks.

Former interviews held by the researcher with a number of activists from the town of Al-Quria and former fighters from the Al-Ka'Ka faction.

72 In June of 2014, several military council officers in the Deir Ezzor governorate declared allegiance to the Islamic State during the intense fighting between the Deir Ezzor factions and the Islamic State. The declaration came as a shock as these officers were concentrated in the city of Muhasan on the right bank of the Euphrates, within the area of Deir Ezzor, far from the areas in which clashes with the Islamic State were occurring. One of the most prominent allegiants was "Abdel Malak Khodr Al Kareem" also known as Abu Haroun, an officer who defected from the ranks of the regime army at the beginning of the armed movement. He joined the Syrian Uprising armed movement. A group from the Al-Nusra front stormed the city of Muhasan and executed him. However, this did not change the city's trajectory into the ranks of the Islamic State, especially since it had resigned from fighting against the Islamic State since its early days, with its groups busy with the Deir Ezzor military airport in which regime forces had fortified themselves.

"Behind the Muhasan ambush... the mujahidin council decapitates Abu Haroun," Zaman Al Mosul website, 24/6/2014, seen on 27/2/2021 <https://cutt.us/EFeLI>

73 After the Islamic State gained control of the areas outside the influence of the regime within the governorate of Deir Ezzor, many incidents occurred in which Islamic State fighters were targeted. The former local leaders within the ranks of the Free Army in the area therefore had a considerable influence in mitigating these incidences, in exchange for being the mediator between the local community and the Islamic State leaders from outside the region.

controlled the Governorate of Mosul in Iraq, where government bases supplied it with arms, ammunitions, and vehicles; this bolstered its forces with supplies on the Deir Ezzor front, pushing the governorate groups to retreat from there in July of 2014 and head South-East.⁷⁴ There, the Islamic State managed to completely control the Deir Ezzor countryside that was outside the GoS's influence. The Islamic State managed to exert its control on the liberated countryside of the city of Deir Ezzor after negotiating with its battalions which were trapped between the GoS's forces in the neighborhoods of Al-Jura and Al-Qusoor and the industrial area, and the Islamic State forces that had control over the only supply route into the neighborhoods that were not under GoS's control. The battalions entered into a "combat pledge" agreement with the Islamic State, before the Islamic State restructured the city entirely to fall under its rule.

The Islamic State had barely imposed its control over the region when the Al-Shaitat tribe revolted in the aftermath of an Islamic State patrol raiding the town of Abu Hamam, which ended with the execution of the wanted person. The residents chased the Islamic State out of their region. The Islamic State then brought in reinforcements and waged a true war on the regions in which it was present in Abu Hamam, Al-Kishkiyah, and Gharanij on the left bank of the Euphrates. It ended with the Islamic State exerting control over these areas on August 9th, 2014⁷⁵. This marked the start of a horrific massacre of the people of Al-Shaitat, with over 1,000 people killed⁷⁶.

Since then, the governorate came completely under the control of the Islamic State, a year and a half after the Islamic State launched its battle to control it.

74 The groups that fought the Islamic State retreated to two areas. The Al-Nusra Front groups headed to the Daraa governorate, where it joined the Al-Nusra branch before later moving through smuggling routes to the North of Syria. There, it formed the "Desert Crosser" under the Al-Nusra banner, followed by Fatah Al-Sham and the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS). Today, these groups are considered the spine of the HTS's security apparatus in its wars against Islamic State cells present in Idlib. The Free Army groups – including Ahrar Al-Sham – went to Eastern Qalamoun in the Rif Dimashq governorate, where they formed the Lions of the East Army. It, along with the Forces of Martyr Ahmad Al-Abdo, waged fierce battles against the Islamic State. They managed to control the region of Al-Hamad in the Badia/Desert, all the way to the Deir Ezzor governorate. Their strength grew in their facing-off with the Islamic State. These groups were expected to be able to enter Deir Ezzor. However, Syrian Regime Forces, with the support of the Russian army, launched an intense campaign against these groups in May of 2017, which ended with their dissolution. Its remaining members went to Eastern and Northern countryside of Aleppo within the National Army in April of 2018.

Several Free Army groups that had retreated from the governorate coordinated with American troops, forming the New Free Syria Army, then the Revolutionary Commandos Army that are still present today in the region of Al-Tanf, at the Jordan-Syria border. They participated in several clashes with the Islamic State and Iranian militias. However, their activity today is limited to protecting the area of Al-Tanf with the support of the United States of America.

75 "The Al-Shaitat massacre... a memory that will not die", Al-Modon newspaper, 25/8/2020, seen on 8/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/FjjOi>

76 Figures according to the association "Al-Shaitat Martyrs' Families"
"Protests against the negligence of families of the Al-Shaitat massacre victims", Zaman Al-Wasl, 28/8/2020, seen on 8/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/XIOXf>

ISIS State and Collapse

In August of 2014, the Islamic State managed to tighten its hold on the lands outside the GoS's control in the governorate of Deir Ezzor. It carried out a policy of temporary displacement in several villages and towns, in which it combed the area in the search for wanted persons and weapons before allowing the residents to return. They had to go through the Islamic State's checkpoints, where they were searched and added to a census. The Islamic State thus strengthened its hold on these locations, implementing this policy in the towns of Al-Shheel, Khsham, and Al Tabiyyah Jazeerah as a condition to accept these towns' surrender to it.⁷⁷

However, this temporary displacement policy turned into retaliatory displacement in the area of Al-Shaitat, whose residents revolted against the Islamic State after it gained control of the governorate. The Islamic State displaced the entire population of towns and villages (Gharanij, Abu Hamam, Al-Kishkiyah) for periods that ran between 3 months for the village of Gharanij, followed by the people of Al-Kishkiyah, who were allowed to return after about 4 months, in mid-December of 2014.⁷⁸ The people of the largest Al-Shaitat tribal groups, Abu Hamam, gradually returned starting in January of 2015. They registered their return documents with the Islamic State's security centers.⁷⁹ The first group of them returned in June of 2015, but the villagers' return was not completed until early 2016, around a year and a half after they were displaced.⁸⁰ The residents of every town returned after having completed a list of conditions, such as handing over individual weapons, repenting, and denouncing all those who had fought the Islamic State.

The Islamic State did not limit this retaliatory policy to the region of Al-Shaitat. Across the governorate, relatives of those who had led groups to face the Islamic State during the battle to control the governorate were punished. It became common for the Islamic State to destroy houses belonging to relatives of one such group leader or to arrest their relatives^{xxvii}. The Islamic State imposed this systematic policy on the governorate of Deir Ezzor in Syria. It became clear that the Islamic State had a very specific, highly sensitive manner of dealing with the governorate. Indeed, it responded to a number of Al-Shaitat youths revolting against it by banishing the entire tribe from its region; it responded to the appearance of a group resisting the Islamic State by putting relatives of its leaders in a stranglehold and demolishing their houses. This policy made it possible for the Islamic State to tighten its military control of the governorate.

The Islamic State separated the area of Al-Bukamal from the governorate of Deir Ezzor, which was renamed to the Wilayat al-Kheir (or State of Good) within the Islamic State's administrative structure. It was annexed to the "State of the Euphrates," which included the cities of Al-Qa'im and Hasibah in the Iraqi governorate of Al-Anbar. This administrative separation helped isolate the area from the governorate of Deir Ezzor, especially after the Islamic State's August 2016 decision to prevent movement between the two states without an official authorization obtained from the Islamic State centers in one of the two.⁸¹

In addition to that, the governorate suffered, as other regions under the Islamic State's control, from the entire system imposed on people and their markets, clothes, and social lives, as well as from scenes of

77 The number of people displaced by the Islamic State in the three towns reached around 60 thousand civilians in early July 2014. The towns are considered strongholds for groups that resisted the Islamic State for half a year during its battle to control the governorate. "The Islamic State displaces thousands from a town in Deir Ezzor". Al Jazeera net, 6/7/2014, seen on 12/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/yrxkH>

78 "The Shaitat of Al-Kashkiya return to their town with the authorization of the Islamic State", Orient net, 17/12/2014, seen on 12/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/qLbPc>

79 "The Islamic State registers documents for the return of residents of the town of Abu Hamam", the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 20/1/2015, seen on 12/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/qLbPc>

80 Video documenting the return of the residents of the town of Abu Hamam to their homes in January 2016 <https://cutt.us/XrmXJ>

81 "The Islamic State imposes conditions on movement in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor", Enab Baladi, 10/8/2016, seen on 12/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/D8QeP>

execution and public punishments that the Islamic State doled out excessively. Not a week went by without an execution or torture in its town squares and busy intersections, meant to be seen by as many people as possible, and to strike terror into their hearts.

Even though the Islamic State had wide-open doors for joining its ranks, granting joiners exceptional living advantages in comparison to others, it nevertheless suffered from low numbers of new recruits.⁸²

It even had to resort to those who were captured by the Hesba (Islamic police) for infractions such as smoking, non-compliance with the correct dress code, or not handing over their satellite devices, and sent them to front lines around the Deir Ezzor airport to undertake tasks in excavation, construction, bunker building, and other forms of service work and military engineering to support its war efforts. It ended up imposing conscription in August of 2017 when it faced off against two military campaigns aiming to annihilate it.⁸³

This pushed large numbers of youths from the governorate and other Syrian areas under the Islamic State's control to leave towards the North of Syria, going from there to Turkey or Europe.

At the end of 2017, the international coalition launched its campaign, with the Democratic Syrian Forces making up its ground troops, to take control of the governorate of Al-Raqqa and the area of Jazeerah on the left bank of the Euphrates, in the governorate of Deir Ezzor.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Russian forces, alongside Iranian militias and GoS's army forces, waged their campaign to take control of the Deir Ezzor Badia (Desert area) and the region of Al-Shamiya on the right bank of the Euphrates from the governorate of Deir Ezzor. After that, they managed to carry out violent shelling, especially in the region of Al-Shamiya, whose residents, in areas controlled by the Islamic State, were all displaced. The Islamic State kept small pockets of members in the Badia (Desert area), working in secret, as well as pockets in the easternmost parts of the country, in the area of Baghuz, in which it had hunkered down against the campaign by the international coalition and the SDF. Its hold on the region came to an end in March of 2019. Thus fell the last declared Islamic State stronghold. ISIS went back to secretive work, whilst Deir Ezzor remained split into two areas of influence, separated by the Euphrates, after the destruction of the bridges linking the two banks together. The region and its inhabitants ushered in a new reality.

82 The houses of those allegiant to the Islamic State would receive electricity at symbolic prices. They were spared some fee collections and laws imposed by the Islamic State in regions they controlled. It would split people in its regions into allegiants and commoners.

83 "Daesh imposes mandatory enlistment on civilians in Deir Ezzor", Akhbar Al-Aan, 27/8/2017, seen on 12/1/2021 <https://cutt.us/zasCP>

84 The Democratic Syrian Forces' spearhead facing the Islamic State in the attack on Deir Ezzor were forces that previously belonged to Free Army factions, made up of people from the Deir Ezzor governorate. These groups moved to Eastern Syria and joined the SDF that came from Northern Syria after having left individually and secretly after the Islamic State imposed its control over it in mid-2014. They went to Northern Syria and joined various factions, forming small groups within them. They returned to participate in liberating their regions from the Islamic State after the Syrian Democratic Forces announced the start of the battle.

Paper III:
**Socioeconomic factors of violent extremism in
North East Syria**

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Review: Samuel D. Henkin, Ph.D.

Introduction

Since 2011, Syria has been gripped by a politically, economically and socially complex conflict that has led to the loss of millions of its citizens - dead and displaced - and material, cultural and social capital that Syrian society has been building for years. This conflict is accompanied by the GoS's despotism and the emergence of several other authoritarian powers, some of which were based on religious extremist militancy, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These extremist groups seized control of large areas of Syria, imposed their extremist views on all segments of society and violently eliminated anyone who opposes their rule or laws. Currently, the military capability of these forces in Syria has diminished significantly, but this does not mean that the dynamics and factors that led to their emergence and expansion have stopped, meaning that these forces can regain control at any moment when the balance of power is changing. It is therefore essential to understand the factors that contribute to the spread of extremist ideology in the region in order to disrupt them so as to achieve a sustainable end to violent extremist ideology and practices.

This report aims to analyze the socioeconomic factors that directly or indirectly contribute to the spread of extremist ideology and, accordingly, to develop policy recommendations that seek to limit the effectiveness and ability of these factors in spreading violent extremism. The study focuses on the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor Governorate, which is currently under the authority of the Autonomous Administration in North East Syria. The research which identifies the socioeconomic factors studied here relies on extant literature and studies of violent extremism and its causes, especially economic and social causes, at the regional and global levels. Each of the socioeconomic factors identified in this study area is analyzed based on available secondary data, as well as information obtained from local experts through informal and structured interviews. Informal interviews were conducted to clarify and explain some secondary data and information. Structured interviews were based on a rapid questionnaire on the importance of a number of positive and negative incentives for individuals to join violent extremist groups. The report examines the direct and indirect impacts of the socioeconomic factors studied in the prevalence of violent radicalization among individuals in the study area.

The study is divided into four sections. Section I contains an overview of the literature on the socioeconomic factors of violent extremism. Section II frames the methodology for the study and analysis. Section III analyzes the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the spread of violent extremism in the studied areas. The final section outlines the negative aspects of each factor that contributes to the spread of violent extremism in the region, and concludes with policy recommendations based on analysis and results.

Literature review

Violent extremism can be defined as promoting, supporting, or engaging with an ideology that justifies the use of violence to achieve economic, social, or political goals (USAID, 2011). However, much of the literature points to the difficulty of forming an accurate and specific definition of violent extremism and related concepts, such as radicalization and terrorism. Schmid (2012) notes that in recent years these concepts are widely used to serve the interests of politicians in blaming opponents from targeted parties and states, and that the definitions adopted were generally inaccurate, so there is little academic or international agreement on specific and clear definitions of terrorism and violent extremism. However, the lack of consensus around the concept has not prevented agreement that violent extremism is the product of a wide range of factors affecting individuals, communities, and governments.

The spectrum of factors includes those based in economic and social grievances, which some researchers see as the primary driver of armed conflict, violence, and civil wars (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Many economists associate poverty and terrorism when examining the economic dynamics of conflict, arguing that widespread poverty and deteriorating economic conditions increase the likelihood of violence and political instability (China and AI, 1996). Many politicians use this link between violent extremism and poverty to explain the reason behind terrorist attacks, especially after the events of September 11th in the United States. However, many researchers emphasize, through various studies, that there is no direct and significant link between poverty and terrorism (Abadie, 2004). For example, individuals belonging to or seeking to join radical Islamist groups in Western countries are generally not poor and suffer no form of severe economic deprivation (Veldeuis and Staun, 2009). Accordingly, research based on numerous field studies indicate that economic grievances of individuals are considered less influential in the spread of violent extremism than institutional and political factors, such as the presence of organized religious and ideological entities capable of reaching the target communities (Gropi, 2017). Gupta (2005) also points to the weak link between economic deprivation of persons and terrorism compared to the significant impact on violent extremism caused by other factors, such as political repression and the spread of a culture of frustration. Therefore, the primary focus of the international community must be to contain despotism and address societal grievance of repression.

Although the direct relationship between individual poverty and violent extremism is weak, several studies have shown that increased economic deprivation at the macro level, i.e. lower production and economic growth and higher poverty rates in a region, increases the likelihood of violent extremism spreading among individuals regardless of their individual economic status (Blomberg et al., 2004). In other words, countries and regions with poor economic status may create a fertile environment for the production of extremist ideas and groups that attract people from different economic and social classes. Similarly, a study of terrorist prisoners revealed that at the individual level they belonged to various socioeconomic backgrounds, but for some the poor economic conditions in their country created a suitable environment for the spread of violent extremism (Stern, 2017). Another study showed that the average economic level of individuals belonging to extremist groups was more likely to be better than that of members of their respective societies, while poor countries and regions, i.e., poverty at the macro level, constitute the incubator for individuals and groups of terrorism and violent extremism (Keefer and Loiza, 2008).

In Iraq, for example, after the decision to completely and abruptly dissolve the military, security, and Ba'athist apparatuses, nearly half a million Iraqis fell into unemployment (Burke and Matsek, 2020). This resulted in increased need for work, and a growing sense of grievance among Iraqis. Extremist groups benefited

from this situation to attract more people to their sphere of influence (Burke and Matsek, 2020). In Syria, a combination of high unemployment and sharp declines in income levels, has led many young people of fighting age to join extremist groups to secure a minimum income and material benefits for themselves and their families extremists groups can provide them (Turkmani, 2015).

Much research has been done to understand the impact of the availability and quality of public services in the surrounding environment on the spread of violent extremism. Public services include the provision of drinking water, electricity, sewage systems and adequate housing conditions, with local authority institutions capable of implementing the rule of law and protecting the community from the spread of crime and other negative social behaviors. Poor public services in a particular region push some of the members of this region to adopt and practice violent extremism (Mercy Corps, 2018). These individuals consider that poor services are a reflection of the negligence of the authorities in charge of their area. This could be accompanied with favoritism of another area supporting these authorities. They also feel that their human dignity is being abused and thus they seek means and channels to express anger and revenge against the authorities and the submissive society (USAID, 2009). Extremist groups can potentially fill the absence of a minimum level of public services by providing a social support network for the people of the region, which earns them popular legitimacy at the expense of the State's legitimacy and present themselves as a "fair" alternative to the current authorities and are entitled to dispose of the resources of the region since it is working for them (Grinkwich, 2008).

Level of education is a contentious factor in relation to its role in violent extremism, as many extremists have high levels of education and it is not possible to assume an inverse relationship of statistical significance between the educational level of individuals and the degree of violent extremism among them (Dalgard-Nielsen, 2010). On the other hand, many researchers believe that education increases an individuals' ability to discuss facts scientifically and objectively and thus their ability resist ideas and ideologies imposed on them by leaders of violent extremism. Quality education is also an effective means in preventing the spread of extremist ideology, with a focus on the topics of justice, non-discrimination and citizenship rights (Silva, 2017). These educational topics should target all members of society without being directed only at a specific group or region, as the educational courses devoted to raising awareness against violent extremism directed at a specific group of society have proved to be useless and unsustainable (Silva, 2017).

The social structure and networks of a region could influence the degree of the spread of violent extremism among its members (Davis and Cragin, 2009). The tribal structures in some regions may be a positive factor in young peoples' disinterest in belonging to extremist groups, as the tribe gives them a sense of belonging and protection (Winter and Al., 2017). At the same time, however, tribal structures can be a catalyst for the promotion of extremist ideology, as the affiliation of one of the tribe's notables to an extremist group drives many of its members to follow this group as a result of strong family relations and hierarchical authority in tribal structures (Winter and Al., 2017).

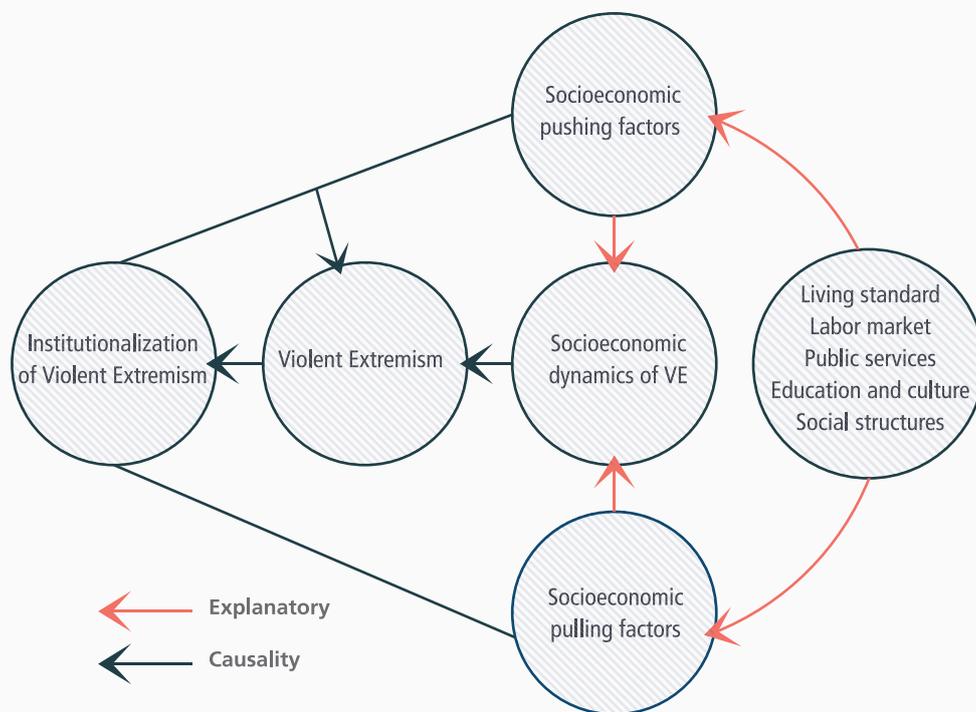
Economic and social exclusion remains one of the most common factors that can increase the spread of extremist violence(USAID, 2009). Economic and social exclusion practices by central state agencies in particular regions or communities, or by local authorities on a particular sect or ethnic group, characterized by the deprivation or discrimination of or against a group related to public services, employment, education and the right to participate in local government, may drive the members of this group to join extremist groups as a form of objection and rejection of the exclusion exercised against them (Allan et al., 2015).

Methodological and analytical framework

The literature on the role of economic and social factors affecting violent extremism shows that analyzing the impact of these factors on the spread of extremism in the studied region requires a comprehensive approach that includes, in addition to the economic and social dimensions, attention paid to institutional, governmental, psychological and religious factors. However, the scope of this study focuses on the socio-economic dimensions. This paper is part of a research group that works to cover all the dimensions of this comprehensive approach in time.

For analytical purposes, the study adopts an operational definition of violent extremism as being willing to use or support the use of violence to impose and implement certain beliefs and ideologies with political, economic and social dimensions. Such extremism seeks to control power and eliminate difference by force through the use of violence against individuals, groups or local authorities and their property. Religious extremism in the region is the main (at least ostensibly) driver of violence and terrorism in the region. The practice of social and economic exclusion of certain ethnic groups by some local authorities in the region is not defined as violent extremism, as it is not accompanied by physical violence including killing, but is certainly considered a key factor driving some community members to join violent religious extremist groups. While many factors fall under the broad categories of economic and social status, this paper focuses specifically on those factors that have a social dimension and directly affect the economic level of the individual. These factors include, standard of living, labor market, education and culture, social networks and public services that reflect the infrastructure necessary to provide adequate living conditions for the population. Of course, socioeconomic factors can be expanded to include, for example, health-related indicators, but this study relies on the selection of factors based on extant literature, in addition to the informal and structured interviews conducted with local experts and key informants. This research addresses exclusion and discrimination as cross-cutting themes of the five factors adopted. For example, understanding the standard of living and the role of material poverty in the spread of extremism in the region requires analysis of the general economic realities, in addition to focusing on the fair distribution of income and the material gap between members of society.

The following analysis of factors aims to understand socioeconomic realities at the macro level without dwelling on their impact at the individual level yet, based on the results of previous studies that clearly show the impact of these factors in creating push-pull environments for the spread of violent extremism ideologically and collectively. In other words, the study does not aim to understand the socioeconomic situation of individuals belonging to extremist groups. Rather, it seeks to analyze the socioeconomic reality and losses of the region, which may lead individuals to join to violent extremist groups, i.e. the factors that drive individuals out of the prevailing social and institutional context in the region. Correspondingly, this study also seeks to understand the pulling factors that extremist groups offer in terms of socioeconomic returns to their members.



The above figure displays the analytical framework of the study. It identifies the important role of five socioeconomic factors in creating dynamics in which a pushing environment of individuals out of their current contexts interact with the opportunities that attract them to the ideology and groups of violent extremism. It also indicates the capacity of violent extremism at the individual and group level to establish itself as a continual climate for such extremism to exist. This process creates a vicious cycle of violent extremism, leading to an environment driven by extremism and an increasing opportunity for extremism, as well as a more rigorous regulation of extremist-thinking groups and individuals, who in turn support their production dynamics.

The analytical framework explores data and secondary information available on each of the five factors (standard of living, labor market, public services, education and culture, and social networks) in the Deir Ezzor. The data analyzed includes both current data on the five factors as well as pre-conflict data, which affords an opportunity to understand of the impact of the crisis and whether grievances are cumulative or just emerging. The data sources, especially for the pre-crisis period, include statistics available from the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics at the administrative level of Deir Ezzor province and the countryside, in addition to the outputs of research centers and international organizations around the region such as the Syrian Center for Policy Research and different UN agencies. Secondary data and information are based on different surveys, such as the 2009 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, the 2014 Population Survey. These surveys were conducted research centers and UN agencies in coordination with the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics. They covered all sub-districts in Syrian including the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor.



The research also relies on the results of a quick field survey with civil activists and key informants in the Deir Ezzor. The questionnaire was fielded to 13 local experts to gauge their views and objective assessment on the socioeconomic dividends and losses that drive individuals to violent extremist behavior and affiliation with extremist groups, specifically in the rural eastern area of Deir Ezzor. The selection criteria of the local experts are: very good knowledge of study area, objective thinking, age and gender, educational level, and willingness to participate in the survey. Due to social and accessibility constraints, only 4 females participated in the survey. Seven of the participants have university degree, and the remaining six reached the secondary educational level. The age of experts ranges between 20 and 62 with an average of 38 years. The questionnaire consists of two sets of questions. The first set of questions contains 9 factors that may attract individuals to extremist groups. The factor's role in driving an individual to violent extremisms was assessed by experts on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 has no impact, and 10 means that the factor plays a very important role. On the same scale, the second set of questions contains 8 pushing factors that may lead individuals to leave and confront their local communities. It should be noted that the results of the questionnaire are indicative only to support the analysis and are not based on a sample representing the studied community.

Socioeconomic factors affecting violent extremism

1. Living standards

Poverty and economic deprivation play an indirect role in the spread of violent extremism by creating an environment that generates a desire to improve their standard of living in various ways, including the adoption of violent extremism and the development of a harsh environment for their communities. Deir Ezzor is considered a Syrian province that is rich in agricultural production, especially wheat, in addition to having oil and gas resources. However, its residents suffer from accumulated economic deprivation, which worsened during the 10-year Syrian conflict. Before 2011, the proportion of the population living below the upper poverty line in Deir Ezzor Province, as part of Syria's northeast, was about 36%, and up to 42% in rural areas (Abu-Ismaïl et al., 2011). Deir Ezzor was ranked last among the Syrian provinces in terms of the multidimensional poverty index, which relied on family income and expenditure data in 2009 (CBS, 2014). Thus, it can be said that the region of study suffered severe economic deprivation as a result of the neglect of state institutions and the absence of an effective development strategy during the period before the crisis.

The crisis has dramatically exacerbated poverty rates across the country, especially in areas that have suffered from extensive military operations and remain unstable in terms of security, such as the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor. Many families lost their properties and incomes as a result of the significant decline in economic activity at the national and local levels and the closure of a large number of businesses in the region. The proportion of the population in Deir Ezzor living below the upper poverty line rose to 92% in 2019, which is higher than the average of all Syrian regions, which was about 86% (SCPR, 2020). The proportion of people living below the food poverty line in the governorate was more than 60%, the highest in Syria (SCPR, 2020). It is worth noting that poverty rates increased significantly during 2020 as a result of the significant decline in the value of the Syrian pound, which negatively affected the purchasing power of the population, especially in already disadvantaged areas such as rural Deir Ezzor. During the first half of 2020 alone, prices of all commodities, including food commodities, doubled without any significant rise in income (Mehchy, 2020).

According to local experts, all agricultural, industrial and service sectors witnessed a sharp collapse in production due to poor physical infrastructure, absence of the rule of law, instability of exchange rates, spread of favoritism and corruption and the weakness of the institutions regulating economic work. This is reflective of the economic deprivation of most people in the region, but a few people were able to benefit from the new economic dynamics created by the crisis and made huge profits. These beneficiaries are divided into three groups: First, large families who controlled one or more oil wells as a result of their tribal weight and their strong ties with local authorities. The second group includes families who controlled smuggling crossings between self-administration areas and Syrian government control areas. The third group is those who receive high-ranking positions with local authorities and exploit their positions for personal benefits. With the increasing economic deprivation of the majority of the population, the gap between the general population and the beneficiary minority in the region is widening. The lack of justice in the distribution of

resources is evident, which increases the state of frustration and anger experienced by many of the disadvantaged people.

The results of the survey showed that all experts, without exception, consider poor living standards and economic deprivation as among the most important reasons for the desire of many people, especially young people, to belong to extremist groups. In contrast to the current economic frustration, extremist groups inspire hope in their members that substantial economic benefits for them and their relatives will come. The results of the survey also confirmed that most local experts considered that profits from robberies, seizures and royalties, such as zakat, are an incentive for many young people to belong to violent extremist groups. In some areas, such as Shuhail, respondents considered that economic incentives provided by extremist groups play a role, but are not that important in attracting young people. The ability of these groups to carry out their activities of looting and pillaging is relatively weak as a direct result of security tightening against these organizations by local authorities and the global coalition to defeat ISIS in Syria. However, relying primarily on increased security is not a long term sustainable solution to limit the ability of these groups that are still able to take advantage of any opportunity to regain their activities in looting and imposing levies.

In general, the persistence of low living standards and the absence of economic justice drive many of the region's inhabitants into despair, frustration and anger, and creates an enabling environment for the spread of violent extremism. In some cases, low living standards supports radicalized peoples' expectations of greater economic opportunities offered by extremist groups.

2. Labor market

High unemployment and low labor-market participation in many countries, including Syria, has been linked to a rising tendency for many young people to engage in violent extremism, particularly if the practice has a periodic pay-off and other economic incentives mentioned in the previous section. Since before the crisis, the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor has suffered from weak employment indicators compared to other regions of Syria; in 2010, the region's unemployment rate was about 17 percent, compared to 8.6 percent in Syria. The region had the lowest labor force participation rate in Syria, especially for women, that year, with an overall participation rate of 35%, down to less than 9% among women, compared to an average of 43% and 13% among women (CBS, 2011).

Prior to the crisis, most labor market participants were engaged in agricultural activity and to a lesser extent in simple service activities with a limited number of small industrial workshop. Much of the youth depended on seasonal work in Lebanon and were employed mainly in the construction and agriculture sectors, especially after the drought that hit the northeast region in 2008 and 2009.⁸⁵ It can be said that even in the pre-crisis period, the region was suffering from clear distortions in the labor market, manifested in low participation rates, relatively high unemployment rates, weak labor productivity, and the fact that the majority of young people sought to emigrate for work.

85 Deutsche Welle Arabic (2010): "Drought forces thousands to migrate from the Syrian Jazeera and live in miserable conditions." Available at: <http://bit.ly/3rLhB0i>

The crisis has greatly affected the region's labor market. A number of experts have pointed out that demographic changes affect the region as a result of male labor-intensive migration or their involvement in hostilities, where injury or death forced many women into the labor market to support their families. Women are forced to engage in low-productivity and low-profitability activities due to lack of decent work opportunities and lack of qualifications that provide them with broader employment opportunities. Local experts estimate the unemployment rate in the region currently under consideration is likely more than 50%, and it is expected that these rates will increase with the economic crisis in Lebanon and the return of many of the region's youth after losing their job opportunities there.⁸⁶

During the crisis, the region experienced a dramatic decline in work-related income, which was already low before the crisis. In the agricultural sector, experts believe, profits of work may not exceed 10% of the total costs paid due to the destruction of infrastructure, the rise in the prices of inputs (seeds, fertilizers, agricultural medicines), the inability to market products effectively, the absence of agricultural subsidy and the significant deterioration in the exchange rate. For those engaged in small-scale service or industrial activities, the average monthly income is about \$130, and few young people have jobs in local or international organizations with relatively high monthly salaries of \$400, for local organization workers, and up to \$2,000 for international organizations.⁸⁷

However, the most important aspect of the labor market in study area is participation in conflict-related activities, which can be classified in two groups. The first are activities that have an official nature, such as volunteering for the Syrian Democratic Forces. Some young people join as an alternative to the lack of decent work opportunities and receive a financial reward (amounting to about \$70), regardless of their degree of conviction and agreement with the objectives of these forces. Such activities, while exercised within the legal framework set by local authorities, contribute to the militarization of society, especially of the youth sector. Making the practice of combat the core experience these young people have can be invested in by extremist groups capable of attracting fighters by paying higher salaries than they currently receive.⁸⁸ The second set of activities associated with the conflict are illegal acts such as smuggling, extortion practices and irregular refining of oil. In general, those involved in these practices for money can easily be members in terrorist groups if they are offered good financial incentives.

The results of the expert survey on the prevalence of violent extremism indicated that the attractive salaries extremist groups can pay are an important factor in attracting individuals, especially with the current labor market environment. A labor market that suffers from lack of decent work, low productivity, high unemployment, exploitation of workers, the absence of control over employers, and the spread of illegal and criminal activities. The average significance of the labor market factor was 8.6 on a scale from 10, where 10 is considered to be a critical factor. It should be noted that this result is based on the assumption that the

86 As mentioned in the methodological and analytical framework, the study used the opinion of local experts to estimate some of the indicators at the present time, while emphasizing that these figures are indicative and not accurate or based on sample surveys representing the studied community.

87 Using the average exchange rate from February 2021 of about 3300 Syrian pounds per dollar.

88 It is difficult to get an accurate number of the salaries that terrorist organizations currently pay in Syria, but at the time of ISIS' control of the area, the average monthly salary of local fighters was about \$200

physical capacity of extremist groups is available, as well as the availability of logistics to maintain communication and recruit local members. Some local experts noted that it is difficult to know the exact level of salaries offered by these groups because members cannot say so, but the main source of funding for these groups and, as a result, the payment of salaries to their members is often based on zakat, funds levied on the people of the area, and theft and seizure, in addition to external support.

3. Public services

Poor public services play an indirect role in creating an environment that expels individuals, businesses and investments, and increases the cost of any service or goods and thus contributes to an increase in the sale price for the final consumer. The literature suggests that poor public services such as water, electricity, sanitation, communications and transportation create a sense of neglect and discrimination experienced by local communities, creating discontent with authorities. Before the crisis, the countryside of Deir Ezzor was one of the most deprived areas in Syria of some public services such as potable water and sanitation (CBS, 2014). However, the Syrian government at that time was trying to provide public services in a fair and acceptable manner to all regions. This government effort reflected a form of bargaining which GoS imposed on society, in part through the provision of public goods and services in a good and free manner in exchange for the society's acceptance of the complete absence of life and political practice. This type of bargaining is practiced by most authoritarian regimes.

Most areas of Deir Ezzor experienced violent fighting during the past 10 years, and security instability still prevails over most areas of the province, including the eastern countryside. This has resulted in significant damage to infrastructure, which has negatively impacted public services for the population. A quarter of the province's buildings have been partially or totally destroyed, including public buildings. The massive destruction of drinking water networks has led some 30% of families in the area to buy water from tanks (EASO, 2020). This increases the financial burden on these families, who already likely suffer from the loss of their income, as the cost of a water tank is about 5,000 Syrian pounds. The destruction and looting of power plants, cables and other electrical equipment has led to long-term power outages, with some rural areas receiving only two hours of electricity a day, which is not sufficient to meet all the basic needs. This has led many residents to rely on private generators, which impose additional costs on families. During the crisis, telephone land line infrastructure was destroyed and looted, precipitating a near complete absence of such service and the region's main reliance on the mobile networks of the Syrian government (Syriatel and MTN). The fighting also led to the destruction of a large part of the road network and the theft of a large number of public and private means of transport, which increased the cost and difficulty of transportation in the area, and between it and other areas.

Many families in the region consider the continued weakness of public services is linked not only to the lack of material resources, but also, to the failure of local authorities due to corruption, nepotism, weak administrative competence and the absence of qualified staff, in addition to their neglect and discrimination. For example, in 2020 the US alone is estimated to have spent about \$835 million in the northeast and much of it went toward infrastructure rehabilitation, yet the residents of the area in question felt little improvement

in terms of public services. This reality creates anger and discontent among the region's population, which many extremist groups can invest in to attract a greater number of members.

The results of the survey, which included 13 local experts from the region studied on the factors behind the spread of violent extremism, showed that poor public services such as electricity, water and transportation is an important factor in deepening the frustration among the population, which is accompanied by anger as a result of local authorities being held responsible for this failure. The average importance of this factor was 9.2 on a scale of 10, where 10 is considered critical. According to experts, the absence of effective public services is one of the most important negative incentives that push individuals towards violent extremism in response to the poor service reality and prejudice against their regions. In addition, the weakness of public services and the lack of signs of improvement make it more difficult for individuals to adapt to their environment and increase their desire to leave or fight against this situation.

4. Education and culture

The level of education and information received by individuals greatly influences their decisions to participate in CVEs activities. Firstly, the role of qualitative education assists in increasing the capacity for logical arguments and their tendency to help dismiss ideas and ideologies promoted by extremists quickly without evidence-based analysis. A second dimension in which education's relationship with violent extremism emerges is the nature and type of education and information that individuals receive. Curricula often used to invest in and promote political, ethnic, and sectarian identities serves the interests of extremists of all backgrounds, often in consort with the region's dominant culture. For example, in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor, a tribal culture based on masculinity is highly dominant and therefore any formal or informal education that is radicalized against women and their participation in economic and political life is supported by the people of this region.

Prior to the beginning of the crisis, rural Deir Ezzor was one of the weakest in terms of educational attainment. The percentage of illiterate people in the region in 2010 was about 38%, compared to 15.6% in Syria (CBS, 2011). The percentage of people with a university degree or a middle school certificate was only 3%, while in Syria this percentage was more than 10% (CBS, 2011). In 2010, women in the region were severely deprived of education, as illiteracy rate among them was about 55% and the rate of women with post-secondary education approached 0% (CBS, 2011). Also, prior to the crisis, the governorate of Deir Ezzor, especially in its rural areas, ranked last among the Syrian governorates in terms of school enrollment and years of schooling (i.e., average number of years spent in school). This indicates the great difficulties experienced by the population of rural Deir Ezzor in terms of education attainment, including material poverty, prevailing culture and difficulty in accessing educational facilities (CBS, 2014). These indicators reflect the region's pre-crisis educational and cultural vulnerability, making it more vulnerable to the acceptance of unsubstantiated ideas, including extremist ideas, and to prevailing cultural contexts based primarily on tribal intolerance and the patriarchal system.

The crisis continues to greatly affect education in and general culture of the region. During ISIS control, about 95% of Deir Ezzor public schools were closed, used for military operations or occupied by displaced

persons, and partially or fully destroyed (EASO, 2020). In addition, the education sector lost many of its staff due to immigration, displacement, detention, and forced disappearance. This affected student enrolment rates, which were already originally low. Local experts estimate that more than 60% of children of school age are not enrolled in schools. With official institutions disrupted throughout the years of the crisis, the culture of informal institutions, mainly the tribal culture, which does not lend any interest to female education and encourages them to drop out of school, has become normalized. The relative distribution of students by sex in first primary school indicates that females constitute about 40% of the total children Phase (Chemonics, 2019). Yet, this percentage dropped to less than 20% in secondary schools, according to local experts.

One of the most important problems related to education in the area studied is the nature of the curricula and its several changes during the crisis. Schools in the area are currently dependent on the curriculum developed by UNICEF and for a period of time adopted the Syrian government's curriculum, with the exception of some subjects. Before and during ISIS's control, girls were deprived of schooling and the curriculum was driven by religious doctrine. Curriculum pluralism and syllabification have adversely affected children's continued learning and dispersed their cultural identity, as all forces in the region have in one way or another sought to impose their ideas and ideology.

All the experts surveyed agreed that the poor educational and intellectual levels is one of the most important factors that influence the spread of violent extremism in the region. Poor educational levels negatively affect collective awareness, especially the awareness of young people and their ability to reason based on evidence, thus potentially increasing their acceptance of extremist ideas and practices. The use of education by some de facto forces, especially ISIS, to establish and normalize their ideology within the new generation and build on the negative influences of the dominant tribal culture of toxic masculinity and domination continues to have a significant impact on the possibility of violent extremist thinking. This can rebuild extremist institutions and entities at any moment when conditions allow it to. Therefore, military victory and the elimination of the material presence of extremist groups is not enough unless it is accompanied by the modernization of the educational process for all ages in partnership with the people of the region. This process should be based on the positive aspects of local culture such as generosity and altruism and refute, in scientific terms, their negative aspects such as strong and authoritarian male masculinity.

5. Social structures and networks

Most people in the region are part of complex social structures and networks based on intertribal and intertribal relationships. Al-Akidat is one of the largest tribes in the studied areas. Its various clans live in the eastern and Northeast countryside of Deir Ezzor. Among the prominent clans are al-Bukamil in Shuhail and Dhiban; al-Bukair in Khasham, al-Sawar, and al-Busaira; and al-Shuaitat clan in Abu Hamam, Kishkieh, and Gharanij. During the conflict, it became clear that the relationship of clans with the different ruling authorities is changing and affected by individual interests and the influence that they can obtain through this relationship. The crisis has also shown that members of a single clan can have different, and even competitive, affiliations and relationships with the de facto powers.

In principle, tribal networks can protect the region from violent extremist ideology and can play a major role in fighting this ideology militarily and ideologically (Khan, 2007). On the other hand, tribal social formations can contribute to the spread of violent extremism by extremist groups exploiting differences among the sons and leaders of the same tribe and buying allegiances to positions and material benefits. In other words, support for an extremist group by an elder, whether it results from a threat, desire for material benefits or ideological conviction, probably means that the extremist group has the support of a large portion of the family, the tribal sub-fraction, or the clan that the sheik leads.

The clan and tribe represent social capital at the local level in many areas of Syria, particularly in the Jazira, including rural Deir Ezzor. Although the regime in Syria wanted to emerge as a supporter of state institutions that transcended tribal clans, it actually invested in tribal structures and provided material advantages and influence to many tribal sheiks in exchange for their continued loyalty to the Government of Syria. Thus, the clan continued to play a pivotal role in the lives of individuals in rural Deir Ezzor even during the period of the highly centralized security state imposed by Assad's rule until 2011 (Dukhan, 2014). Tribal affiliation provides individuals with reassurance and homogeneity and has sometimes ensured access to decision-making positions and access to material benefits and gains. The results of the 2014 Population Survey showed that social capital in rural Deir Ezzor, represented by the trust between individuals, cooperation, support and participation, was high in the pre-crisis period compared to other regions of Syria (SCPR, 2017). This situation reflected the rise of so-called "Bonding Social Capital", which refers to strong relationships between homogeneous groups of individuals that reflect positively on their economic reality (PUTNAM, 2000). Clans are an example of the Bonding Social Capital which is more visible in rural Deir Ezzor than many other regions in Syria.

During the crisis, social structures in the study area were upset and the Social Capital Index collapsed to about half of what it was before the crisis, reflecting a major deterioration in cooperation, community participation, trust among individuals, a sense of security and agreement on common values and visions (SCPR, 2017). Syria's various warring powers, including external ones, continue to invest in disagreements within tribes and clans to obtain tribal support and use this support as a means of warfare against other powers. Although al-Shuaitat was united in the battle against ISIS, especially after a horrific slaughter of tribal members in 2014, the group was able to attract many tribesmen to its ranks by providing financial benefits or offers of stronger positions and influence, drawing on differences and disputes within the same tribe. One of the key people in the area cited al-Bukair as an example of the exploitation of the warring factions and their benefit from internal conflicts in the tribe. al-Bukair tribe's elite are at odds with each other as a

result of old disputes over the ownership of land and the limits of influence of each tribal sub-fraction and family within the tribe. At present, the rifts continue, as a part of the al-Bukair clan, supported by the GoS accuses the tribal emir Ahmed al-Khabeil (Abu Khawla) of treason because of his position as a leader in the Deir Ezzor Military Council of the Democratic Forces of Syria. This example illustrates how tribal structures can shift from being protectors and defenders of their members from violent extremism to an instrument used by all warring forces, including extremist groups.

The continuing crisis and the increasing fractures within tribal structures as a result of conflict of interests weaken the traditional capacity of these structures to protect their members and help them solve their problems, thus weakening individual clan loyalty. This can facilitate the process of affiliation with various warring parties, including violent extremism forces, without returning to their traditional references. Also, the crisis has witnessed manifestations of the exploitation of strong relations between members of the family or the same clan through the establishment of large, numerically homogeneous armed groups, specialized in illegal acts, especially smuggling of materials (specifically oil) between the areas of the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Government. These groups are not subject to the orders or decisions of the local authorities, which in turn avoids any confrontation that may lead to the outbreak of a large-scale conflict with all members of the clan to which these groups belong.

Tribal structures are the cornerstone of social relations within the studied region, and the crisis has fractured these structures and been exploited by all warring parties, including violent extremist groups such as ISIS. These groups have also been able to use social networks to penetrate tribal structures and directly influence individuals, especially young people. However, the results of the expert questionnaire showed that the "desire to fulfill the individual need to belong to a group and a certain ideology" plays a weak role in the spread of the practice of violent extremism, as clan and family loyalty continues to "satisfy" the need for the people of the region to be part of a homogeneous group pursuing a specific goal. Building on and developing the advantages and disadvantages of traditional social structures is therefore an important factor in addressing violent extremism in thought and practice.

Summary and policy recommendations

Understanding and addressing underlying drivers in the spread of violent extremism requires a comprehensive approach that includes, addressing the socioeconomic, security, political, psychological, and religious dimensions in a region. This paper focused on the socioeconomic dimension, and therefore the policy and program recommendations that are presented are linked to this dimension and are based on the findings of the analysis on each of the five factors in terms of: 1) the degree to which they provide an environment that pushes individuals out of their institutional and societal context (push and pull factors), and 2) the extent to which extremist groups exploit socioeconomic factors to recruit individuals and integrate them into the ideology of violent extremism (pull factors of extremism). Short- and long-term recommendations are put forward with an aim of reducing the impact of the negative aspects of these factors and disrupting their dynamics to work towards a radical change in the socioeconomic environment that breeds violent extremism and advancing a transition from fragile stability based security and military solutions to a more sustainable peace based on inclusive development.

Living standards:

The overlapping negative axes that drive individuals to join extremist groups associated with this factor are:

- Loss of individual and family property for a number of reasons, including war actions, theft and robbery, and the need to sell property to buy basic family needs.
- A sharp rise in general physical poverty, which deprives families of adequate and quality access to basic goods and services, such as health and education.
- Loss of food security for a large population resulting from the lack of food commodities and/or the financial inability of families to purchase necessary foodstuffs.
- Control of the rentier economy, such as the dependence of some large families on oil, as well as the expansion of the criminal economy, including smuggling, robbery and extortion practices.
- The lack of economic justice and equality among families of the study area and those of other regions.

Extremist groups are working to benefit from deteriorating standard of living. They are attracting individuals to them through offered economic benefits, as a result of robbery and the imposition of royalties, thus raising the living standards of the families of those affiliated with them. Extremists groups invest in the state of frustration and despair related to the living conditions of individuals, in addition to their anger at the lack of justice and economic equality.

Recommendations:

- Promotion of security activities based on participatory activities between authorities and the community, such as joint patrols by local youth and police and/or training volunteers to guard their neighborhoods. This practice helps protect the remaining family property in the area, and also, limits the opportunity of crime, robbery and theft, which are an important financial source for extremist groups and one of the tools for attracting individuals.

- Request international organizations, in coordination with local authorities, initiatives and civil organizations, to provide the necessary direct support to secure basic goods and services, especially for the poorest families, after identifying needs and priorities.
- Ensure the flow of food commodities to the region in coordination with authorities and the private sector, to provide greater support for the prices of basic food commodities, to tighten market controls and to encourage civilian initiatives to carry out such controls.
- Coordination with international organizations to provide direct support for productive economic activities to gradually replace the rentier and criminal economies. For example, international organizations could be encouraged to provide financial and technical assistance to the region in terms of drip irrigation, combatting soil salinization and agricultural pests, as well as supporting small industries and workshops in the region. In this context, local organizations can play a role in technical support and the prioritization of production work based on their relationships and studies on community needs.
- In the long term, the Autonomous Administration must work to build an economic strategy in partnership with the local community from all regions, achieving economic integration between regions and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within the framework of the rule of law and effective community control.

Labor market:

The overlapping negative axes driving the spread of violent extremism associated with the labor market are:

- Structural imbalances in the labor market since the pre-crisis period in terms of low labor force participation, especially among women, and the weak productivity of workers in various sectors.
- A sharp rise in unemployment rates during the crisis, coupled with a sharp decline in labor returns, especially in the agricultural and industrial productive sectors.
- The lack of equity in accessing decent job opportunities, with a majority unemployed or working in difficult conditions and a minority with good salaries and working conditions.
- The transition of young people from working in productive sectors to working in conflict-related activities, including smuggling, informal oil refining and robbery gangs, as well as belonging to extremist groups.
- The enlistment of military personnel into the labor market as an activity that generates relatively good income, regardless of their convictions about the party for which they are fighting.

Extremist groups benefit from the sharp deterioration of the productive labor market, the militarization and the almost total absence of decent work opportunities by exploiting frustration and despair, thus increasing their ability to attract young people after offering them a material pay-for-work allowance for their activities and goals.

Recommendations:

- International organizations, in coordination with local authorities, should support productive economic activities by providing loans to small, high-profits projects, in addition to providing technical support for the rehabilitation of their staff. The provision of loans can be linked to social conditions, such as the need for the children of the applicant to attend school or to prioritize projects led by women. Local organizations can play a key role in assisting international actors in identifying social conditions and priority projects in the region based on their experiences and relationships with the community.
- Provide tax incentives and administrative to facilitate and regulate small enterprises and thereby guarantee the rights of workers and promoting civil initiatives that monitor and protect the rights of workers in the region.
- Coordinate with international organizations to establish vocational training courses that are primarily related to labor market needs and are based on studies of the local economy and possible activities.
- Study the decrease of membership and volunteering for official military groups, and reconsider the topic of mandatory conscription to reduce the phenomenon of the militarization of the labor market. Focus on building the professional non-combat related expertise of young people.
- Review the high salaries offered by international organizations to alleviate income disparities among the people of the region.
- Tighten security to restrict conflict-related activities in cooperation with the people of the region, as well as dry up the financial resources of extremist groups resulting from their criminal activities.
- In the long term, a participatory strategy must be adopted that seeks to develop local cadres and integrate them into productive economic activities in an organized economy that provides decent work for all without discrimination.

Public services:

The overlapping negatives that drive the spread of violent extremism indirectly tied to public services are:

- The massive destruction of infrastructure has had a significant negative impact on the public services provided in the region, such as electricity, water, communications, sanitation and transportation.
- Accessing basic services is an additional financial burden on the community, which already suffers from severe economic hardship. For example, people in the region have to pay relatively high amounts to obtain water from tanks and electricity from generators.
- A large part of the local community in the region believes that the current weakness of public services is due mainly to corruption, nepotism and incompetence, as well as discrimination against the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor for the benefit of other areas in north-eastern Syria.

While extremist groups may not directly offer positive incentives in terms of public services, the current public service situation is an indirect magnet for extremist groups, especially young people, who are frustrated with the poor service situation, angered over corruption, nepotism, and discrimination. Extremist groups present themselves as an alternative through which to express anger and overcome frustration.

Recommendations:

- Cooperation between local authorities and the community by identifying the priorities that the region needs in terms of public services in the short term and developing a joint action plan that takes into account available financial and technical resources.
- Coordinate with international organizations to contribute to the rehabilitation of infrastructure in a participatory manner involving the local private sector in the region. It should be noted that the private sector's contribution to this helps create many job opportunities, which is considered a key factor in curbing the spread of violent extremism.
- Request equitable distribution of resources and rehabilitation projects between the regions of north-eastern Syria, and in this context, participatory partnerships with local communities play a key role in ensuring justice and transparency in the distribution of these projects.
- Expand the space for civil and human rights initiatives in the region to establish an effective monitoring and evaluation system aimed at reducing corruption, nepotism and neglect related to public service projects.
- In the long term, public services in the region must be part of a comprehensive development plan based on integration between the various regions of Syria based on the right of everyone, without exception, to have access to quality and sustainable public services.

Education and culture:

The negative aspects of education and culture in the region that directly affect the spread of violent extremism are:

- Low levels of education in the region in terms of enrollment and the proportion of people with secondary and higher education since the pre-crisis period, especially among women.
- The major negative impact of the crisis on education infrastructure is the massive destruction of schools and their use for non-educational purposes, in addition to the sharp decline in the quantity and quality of teaching staff.
- More than half of school-age children have dropped out of school and are financially helping their parents by entering the labor market, including in conflict-related activities.
- Long interruptions in the educational process and continuous change in curricula in line with competing visions and objectives of the various authorities that have taken control of the region, including ISIS.

- An increase in the negative aspects associated with clan affiliation and cultural practices, including the polarization and radicalization of the clan and the promotion of misogynic thought, which excludes women from any cultural, social or economic activity.

Extremist individuals and groups can exploit poorly educational peoples, school dropouts, and patriarchal culture among the region's population to spread violent extremist ideas and practices relatively easily due to the absence or poor cognitive flexibility to counter these ideas and build on the radical teachings that were taught to children and young people during ISIS' takeover of the region.

Recommendations:

- Continue to rehabilitate schools in cooperation and coordination with international organizations and local authorities, taking into account the needs and requirements of modernized education (computer and Internet security, etc.), thereby making the educational process attractive to the sons and daughters of the region.
- Work to develop educational curricula on an ongoing basis in cooperation with relevant international institutions, thereby promoting the values of openness, dialog, participation and acceptance of others.
- Secure the provision of financial and technical support by UN organizations and the international community for intensive training and qualification programs for teaching staff, and study of the provision of incentives by the authorities to teachers (soft loans, subsidized goods and services, additional salaries) in order to better attract and retain qualified staff.
- Implement free out-of-school training and education programs for children who have dropped out of school in order to compensate them for the lessons they have lost and attract them to re-enroll in school.
- Provide positive incentives and punitive factors for families in the region to enroll their children in school. Positive incentives include the provision of soft loans for small projects on the condition that all children enroll in school and cover the costs of stationery for children. Punitive factors may include financial penalties for families that do not fulfill the obligation to enroll their children in school.
- Facilitate the work of civil society organizations and cultural and educational initiatives in order to provide a space for dialog among the various inhabitants of the region, with emphasis on women-led initiatives aimed at empowering women, thus reducing the negative impacts of patriarchal culture.

Social structures and networks:

The negative aspects associated with this factor that affect the spread of violent extremism are:

- In the pre-crisis period, tribal customs, traditions and power prevailed over societal relations based on citizenship and the rule of law, giving the sheiks and influential powers wide authority in the region, regardless of the justness of this power.

- Significant deterioration in the levels of trust, cooperation and participation among members of the same clan during the crisis period, as well as the dissension among their leaders. One reason for this is that each warring parties seeks to control the clans through coordination with clan leaders.
- Loss of the clan's large role in social and economic protection networks for its members. This loss has occurred for several reasons, including the deterioration of the economic situation and the dispersal of loyalties of the members of the clan and its leaders among competing forces.
- The use of the clan's position and human resources by some to protect illegal activities, such as smuggling, on the pretext of gaining material benefits for one segment of the clan.

Violent extremism invests in the deterioration of the positive role of tribal structures, their diminishing ability to provide protection and assistance to their members, and the increase of discord between clan leaders. Militant groups exploit these imbalances to reach the largest segment of the tribe, presenting themselves as an alternative to traditional structures and as a body capable of providing some form of economic and social protection to members of the region while strengthening and "correcting" their religious affiliation.

Recommendations:

- Give sufficient freedom to establish civil initiatives that can obtain technical and material support from international organizations aimed at opening channels of evidence-based community dialog on issues of concern to the region, regardless of the backgrounds of tribal participants, which enhances cross-tribal and inter-tribal social relations.
- Encourage cooperation between the community and the private sector to form associations of individuals belonging to different tribes and families with the aim of creating a revolving financial fund whose revenues (on symbolic charges) are used by participating families when needed, thus helping to renovate social structures and networks in a way that can support and protect their members.
- In the long term, a development strategy should be pursued aimed at moving from social relations based on territorial affiliation and tribal loyalty to relationships based on citizenship and respect for the rule of law, as well as establishing formal and sustainable social protection networks (such as unemployment compensation, pensions, health insurance) capable of protecting individuals and ensuring their future.

The recommendations proposed for each of the five socioeconomic factors studied are highly interrelated and integrated, which requires the adoption of a comprehensive plan that takes all these factors into consideration in order to confront violent extremism. This plan should be built in a participatory manner with the community, experts and interested actors in the region and should be part of a strategy that also includes political, security, governmental and psychological aspects as well.

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Paper IV:
Extremist Groups Approach Toward Social Structures

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Review: Haian Dukhan

Introduction:

Jihadist movements usually become active in rural areas, far from the state's reach. These areas often have tribal natures, which leads to a form of interaction between jihadist movements and clans. Jihadist movements sometimes benefit from the resentment borne by clan communities against central authorities due to the poor distribution of wealth, as the economic situation in rural areas where clans live is usually inferior to larger cities. Some clan members might feel sympathy towards jihadist movements as a result of this inequality.

The rise of Al-Qaeda in tribal regions in Pakistan is a prime example in this context. Al-Qaeda members were under the protection of the Wazir and Mahsud tribes in the tribal region of Waziristan, in Pakistan. Following the American invasion of Iraq, Al-Qaeda became active in the regions of Al-Anbar, in western Iraq, which is considered to be a governorate with a tribal structure. The organization of Al-Qaeda, which later became the Islamic State of Iraq, tried to establish relations with several tribes and clans of Al-Anbar and use them to lead armed mutiny against the American presence in Iraq.⁸⁹

The aim of this research is to study jihadist cross-border immigration from Iraq to Syria following the latter's uprising, which started in 2011, from the Al-Nusra front to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). More precisely, this means the eastern countryside of the Deir Ezzor governorate, which was an incubator of jihadist movements, trying to determine the role of civilian structures -the tribes, clans, and the relations between them – in supporting or withholding support from ISIS, in this region in particular, from its nascence to this day.

Similar to other regions, the clan structure of Deir Ezzor witnessed uneven periods of dismantlement due to emigration, education, urbanism, and the policies of the ruling regimes which took turns governing Syria. This disruption been starkly apparent since the uprising, only becoming deeper as local and regional powers competed in a tug-of-war over the governorate of Deir Ezzor. Divisions deepened further because of their attempts to use clan bonds to reach their goals. ISIS exploited these clan divisions to carve a space for itself in Deir Ezzor. Now, after ISIS has been defeated and control exerted over large swathes of the governorate by the Democratic Syrian Forces, clan divisions and the competition between players there will not stabilize the governorate anytime soon. Furthermore, ISIS sleeper cells and the remnants of the organization rely on parental or tribal networks to spread resentment towards the Syrian Democratic Forces because they feel marginalized from the current authority, aiming to create a state of tension and unrest in the Deir Ezzor governorate and further deepen the schism between governing mechanisms and residents.

89 Haian Dukhan and Sinan Hawat, The Islamic State and the Arab Tribes in Eastern Syria, E-International Relations, Dec 31 2014: <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/31/the-islamic-state-and-the-arab-tribes-in-eastern-syria/>

The history of clans in Deir Ezzor

Sociologists have yet to agree on a single definition of “clan”, but this paper will not delve into that debate, choosing instead a simplified definition of a clan as a group that can be traced back to a single ancestor. A tribe is a gathering of clans with a single origin or different roots.⁹⁰ Tribal sub-factions (phratry) is a kinship structure below the rank of clan but above that of family.

In his books “The Clans of Al-Sham”, Ahmad Wasfi Zakaria states that the Ekedat (Al-Uqaydat) came from Najd to the Euphrates valley. It is said that the original Ekedat are the descendants of three brothers; it is also said that they are clans that come from different places and were all named Ekedat because of an oath they took to stand in solidarity and support to one another.⁹¹

The Ekedat leadership is in Beit El-Hifil but the tribe has been characterized for quite some time by the lack of unified leadership, the refusal of its eminent figures to allow the El-Hefl to represent them all, even though they are honored by their kinship with its first founder. There is no doubt that the tribe resides on both banks of the Euphrates, the Al-Sham island as it is locally known, and that the region they live in is wide enough for both parties. This plays a role in the absence of unified leadership and the fact that each group has “its own plan that is harmonious with its interests, then independent leaders emerged, their behavior fully autonomous from the first presidential family.”⁹²

The Ekedat tribe is one of the principle tribes in Deir Ezzor. Others include the Al-Bou Jamal, Al-Chouwait, Al-Cheaitat, Al-Bakkir, Al-Bou Jamal, Al-Mashahda, Al-Bou Khabour, Al-Karaan (Al-Qarean), and Al-Bou Hassan. Some of these tribes branch out from the Ekedat tribe into important sub-clans, working as independent clans to reach their goals and objectives and controlling their villages inside the governorate. This includes the clans of Al-Hassoun, Al-Bou Mourih, and Al-Damim from Al-Bou Jamal, Al-Bou Ezz from Al-Boujamal, Al-Khanfur from Al-Cheaitat, and Al-Mushref from Al-Bakkir.⁹³

There are other clans in Deir Ezzor in addition to the Ekedat clan. The most prominent ones are the tribes of Al-Bakkara (Al-Baqqara), Al-Obeid, Al-Kalain (Al-Qalaein), and Al-Bou Saraya. Among these other tribes, the Al-Bakkara tribe is considered the most largest.⁹⁴ In theory, it is more cohesive than the Ekedat clan, but it seems that the influence of its Sheikh, Nawaf Ragheb Al-Bachir, who abandoned the ranks of the opposition to fight with the GoS, is limited to whatever resources he can provide.

Other big tribes in different regions of Syria, such as the Al-Hasaka governorate, or in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, especially Shammar, Tai, Al-Zubeid, Al-Rifai, and Al-Dulaym, are also present in Deir Ezzor and reside in some of the governorate’s villages. In Deir Ezzor, Al-Bouleil is a clan that comes under the Shammar tribe. The clan falling under the Tai tribe in Deir Ezzor is Al-Bou Issa, with Al-Jaghafiya coming under the Al-Jabour tribe. In Deir Ezzor is, the clan falling under the Al-Zubeid tribe in Deir Ezzor is Al-Jheish, and the clan falling under the Al-Rifai tribe in Deir Ezzor is Al-Sheikh Issa. There are other, smaller tribes generally mixed in with the bigger ones.⁹⁵

Clans worked as cohesive social structures throughout most of modern history. The weakening of the clan structure may be attributed to the famous Ottoman reformer, Midhat Pasha and his mandate over Iraq starting in 1869.

90 Abdel Nasser Al-Aeid, *Jihadists and Syrian Tribes: the passing domination and chronic dilemma, the Arab reform initiative*, November 2014, p. 2

91 Ahmad Wasfi Zakaria, *the Clans of Al-Sham*, two tomes with one number, Damascus: Dar Al-Fekr, T2, 1983, p.s 568-569.

92 *Ibid.* p. 569.

93 *Deir Ezzor: Tribal Mapping Project*, Nicholas A. Heras, Bassam Barabandi, Nidal Bitar, translated by Marwan Zakaria, Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 30 January 2018, p. 8.

94 *Ibid.* p. 8.

95 *Ibid.* p. 9.

He went against his predecessors, whose strategy to deal with clans vacillated between exaggerated pleasing and extreme oppression. Pasha drew up a new policy that aimed at modifying the traditional foundation of the Sheikh's authority through three axes: resettlement, Ottomanization, and discipline. The first two, resettlement and Ottomanization were intended to weaken the bonds between the Sheikh and his clan and increase his dependence on central authority, while harsh disciplinary measures were enforced against him in the third axis, should he stray from his required role. Pasha realized that owning property and having permanent interests in one location pushed clansmen to give up their way of life. As such he pushed to have as many clans as possible live in their homeland. He then controlled settled clans, imposing taxes on them, and conscripting them into the military. With time, land-owning Sheikhs would start to feel a close bond with the government.⁹⁶

Whilst the last few decades of the Ottoman empire's life were marked by government efforts aiming at grooming tribal leaders and their children or bribing them into performing military and security missions for the government, the French mandate forces between the two world wars considered clans "regressive". They compounded romantic, orientalist narratives with this dogma to further and justify their colonial objectives.⁹⁷

During the first few years of the French Mandate, starting in 1920, French politics granted Bedouins special status. It needed to cooperate with them, because it could not, firstly, leave two-thirds of Mandate territory that they had recently acquired (the Badia) out of their range of control. As well as this, the French needed to guarantee permanent and safe passage through the region for trade and travel.⁹⁸

The French divided the Syrian clans into nomadic Bedouins and semi-nomadic Bedouins. Up until 1934, this distinction meant that nomadic clansmen were allowed to bear weapons but not bring them into the "colonial areas", whereas semi-nomads, or shepherds, had to obtain a government permit to bear arms and could be tried in accordance with state laws. Many clansmen refused to obey and left the country. Those who were satisfied enough to stay were granted automatic parliamentary representation. Nine seats were reserved for the strongest clans, in an attempt to face the national bloc in the Syrian parliament.⁹⁹ The French registered large portions of land under the names of clan leaders to try and gain their friendship and use them against nationalists within the Syrian parliament. These registrations created clan divisions between the Sheikhs of clans who turned into land owners on one side, and the clansmen who found themselves working as farmers for clan Sheikhs in a relationship that strongly resembled feudalism. This process created a deep gouge in the clan structure, especially in terms of the relationship between Sheikhs and their clansmen.

Following the independence in 1946, the new Syrian government tried to eliminate the Sheikh's hold over clans, considering them to be tools in the hands of the colonizing forces that had left the country. In 1953, the clan law, which had been promulgated by the French Mandate authorities, was replaced by a new law, which granted the Minister of Interior the power to scratch clans off the list of nomadic Bedouins and classify them as settled clans if the Minister deemed it fit, without allowing them to return to a Bedouin life. The clans' share of parliament representation was shrunk down to six seats. In 1958, Gamal Abdel Nasser, as president of the United Republic, abolished the clan law and announced that they would not have independent legal identities anymore.¹⁰⁰

Once the Ba'ath party took power in Syria in 1963, its leadership considered the clan system to be a part of the old

96 John Frederic Williamson, *the Arab Tribe Shammar: its political position and history, 1800-1958*. Translation: Meer Basri, London: Dar Al-Hikma, 1999, p.s 161-164.

97 Dawn Chatty, "Tribes, Tribalism, and Political Identity in Contemporary Syria", research published in the magazine "Omran", Beirut, tome four, issue 15, winter 2016, p. 82.

98 Ibid. p. 87.

99 Ibid. p. 88.

100 Ibid. p. 90.

system and started booting clan leaders off their wide territories through nationalization and distributed them to landless farmers or Bedouin families in order to nationalize them. This process led to a considerable spread of the state's power in rural areas, as many tribes settled there and worked in farming, and this marked the start of the end of the Bedouin lifestyle based on nomadic movement.

When Hafez Al-Assad took over through an inside Ba'athist coup in 1970, he worked on widening his support base. The relationship with the clans became more flexible, and they were allowed to solve their own conflicts practically based on customary laws. In an alternative to the previous system of power and strength, clans were seen as state allies. Al-Assad feared that clan leaders would slip his control, so he established relationships with several secondary clan Sheikhs to pave the way for him to use them as alternatives if needed. This further dismantled the clan structure. The work relations between main and secondary Sheikhs developed on one hand, and with the presidential, governmental, political, and security apparatuses on the other.¹⁰¹ Many of them were granted membership in the "People's Assembly", which replaced the parliament. From that position, they managed to make personal gains and reinforced clientelism networks within their clans in the face of potential competition for the positions of Sheikh and for clout. This was constant threat from the authorities hanging over their heads to ensure the continuous allegiance. Over the subsequent forty years, clans witnessed gradual, considerable transformations through which a large share of their strength factors in the face of the state were stolen from them. Their Sheikhs went from social leaders to followers with some social status.¹⁰²

101 Ibid. p.s 90-93.

102 Ziad Awad, Deir Ezzor after ISIS: between the Kurdish autonomous authority and the Syrian regime, the Middle East Multidisciplinary Research Program, 22 March 2018, p. 8.

From the Uprising to ISIS

The social and political situation that followed the start of protests in Syria back in 2011 caused difficulties that prevented many clan leaders in Deir Ezzor from exerting their authorities on youths from their clans. The dissention of officers from the army who became leaders of the armed opposition in the governorate and the later mobilization of young men from local clans worsened the destabilization of the clan leaders' authority. While clan identity remained important and governorate residents admit that belonging to their clans still plays a large role in their identity, the power of clan leaders in Deir Ezzor was deeply destabilized.¹⁰³

Since 2011, the clans have been in turmoil and were tested to beyond their capacities. In general, it failed to take a unified position. Despite that general failure, some cases did appear to hint at a partial unity at the beginning, as clan principles of solidarity, pride, and the bonds of kinship played a part in unifying the protestors. However, when the uprising turned to armed action, divisions made their appearance.

After wresting control of the countryside and most of the quarters of the city of Deir Ezzor in summer and fall 2012, the Free Army Factions failed to establish a military institution with effective local deterrence power, even though they fell under a universal nominal military umbrella.¹⁰⁴

The armed movement was initially characterized by the absence of clan slogans, despite the fact that some formations and movements had taken tribal names at first. That soon changed to geographical, religious, or historical appellations. Tribalism remained behind the geographical appellations in most cases, as they were called things like the formation of free men from a certain village or the battalion of revolutionaries from that town, but that referred to a specific belonging, as each clan lives in their own region or village.¹⁰⁵ Some factions became clan or family militias to protect their borders and interests. These factions with a clan aspect started searching for their own interests.¹⁰⁶ Family or clan groups detonated the oil pipelines that crossed their lands to pressure the GoS and force it to pay them monthly benefits under the title of "protection contracts", or to allow electricity to go through and facilitate the delivery of fuel, or to release detainees from these clans.¹⁰⁷

During the last trimester of 2012, as primitive oil-refining burners started to appear, a new type of attacks on pipelines emerged: families pierced the pipelines to extract quantities of oil flowing through them and store them in large pits dug near the holes, to be used as open-air reservoirs until the crude oil could be sold to traders. In 2013, oil was no longer taken out of the governorate through pipelines when purely clan-based groups, or mixed groups of nominal or real Free Army Formations, achieved total control of all the governorate's oil facilities, wells, and fields.¹⁰⁸

Most clans worked according to their own interests when dealing with oil resources and in accordance with the limitations of their geographical regions. Each clan or phratry attempted to control the oil wells close to where they lived in the Deir Ezzor countryside, claiming that these wells were on their lands or the extension of these lands towards open prairies. Clans managed to become the first beneficiary of oil, be it through the Free Army Battalion, overwhelmingly composed of people from these clans, or more directly as phratries and parts of phratries taking turns in exploiting the wells on a basis of quotas amongst themselves. Most of these clan quota arrangements were vulnerable to greed, competition, and confrontations for control and power. This led to conflicts that in some cases, wounded and killed people.¹⁰⁹

103 Deir Ezzor: Deir Ezzor: Tribal Mapping Project, *Ibid.* p. 10.

104 The Free Army is a general appellation for non-Islamic battalions that resisted the authorities in Syria after 2011; they were often insufficiently organized and unclearly structured.

105 Abdel Nasser Al-Aeid, *Ibid.* p. 4.

106 The Oil of Deir Ezzor: from Revolution to the Islamic State, special edition of *Ain Al-Madina*, August 2015, margin 2.

107 *Ibid.* p. 6.

108 *Ibid.* p. 7.

109 *ibid.*, p. 10.

Against the backdrop of fragmentation and local militarization, these conflicts set the stage for ISIS. ISIS began as a firm central authority that was also able to single out regional factions. Clans were a relatively easy structure to infiltrate by external, powerful currents. Their vulnerability was particularly highlighted in the face of Salafist Jihadist movements. One cell, made up of a few young people from the Al-Boujamal clan in Al-Shheel, played a special role in 2011, when it offered safe haven to the team sent by the Emir of the "Islamic State in Iraq", Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, to establish a jihadist military faction announced in 2012 under the name of the "Al-Nusra front for the people of Syria".

After the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" was announced in April 2013, the Al-Nusra front refused the declaration, which led to the appearance of two jihadist organizations in Deir Ezzor: The Al-Nusra front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS attracted the larger share of immigrants and experts from other movements, which left leadership gaps filled by local allegiants, most prominent of whom were young men from Al-Shheel. This would make quite the impression that Al-Bujamal had special influence in the Al-Nusra front. This was one of the factors that drove away other clans. Complacency before that would mean complacency before Al-Bujamal, and not towards law and order, as the ideological discourse of the Al-Nusra Front claimed. This was also one of the main vulnerability factors that ISIS exploited when it pitted clans against Al-Nusra.¹¹⁰ This is starkly apparent in the Ekedat clan, which is comprised of around 500,000 people, and which heavily participated in armed action in its home, in the countryside of eastern Deir Ezzor.¹¹¹

As a result of the division between the Al-Nusra Front and the recently born ISIS, which settled in Deir Ezzor, most local elements remained in the Front. Amer Al-Rafdán, a prominent local leader, moved to ISIS and took with him a hefty number of immigrants and dozens of people from the governorate, as well as the household gas station managed by Al-Rafdán, which became a "property" of the nascent entity.¹¹²

In September 2013, the legislative body established by the Al-Nusra Front with other factions grew as new factions joined and took on the name of "Central Legislative Body". It launched a new covenant through which it encouraged "Arab Muslim clans in the Euphrates basin to play their historic role". This flirtatiousness would bear measly fruit in its attempt to take control of the governorate's oil, which was one of the main motivations behind its new formation.¹¹³

The Central Legislative Body showed an early interest in oil affairs and repeatedly attempted to convince the groups that controlled wells to hand them over to the body or cut it a share of a profit. In spite of this, it did not use force to take over the oil wells until the competition between the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS in Deir Ezzor reached new heights and fears grew that ISIS would control the oil.

The legislative body used the indiscretions committed by armed clan groups that controlled the Conoco gas factory and its petroleum facilities in the Ksham region as a bolstering motive to control the factory. It released a statement in mid-November 2013, declaring that it intended to take over the factory and kick out "thieves and those who stole public funds" from it. Its bid for control was completed in a single day.¹¹⁴ Then, ISIS used clan sensitivities within the Al-Nusra front to fortify its influence in Deir Ezzor.

Most expelled groups belonged to the Al-Anabiza phratry, a branch of the Al-Bakkir clan which had branched out into

110 Ziad Awad, *ibid.*, p. 9.

111 Abdel Naser al-Ayed, *ibid.*, p. 4.

112 *ibid.*, p. 12.

113 *ibid.*, p. 12.

114 *Ibid.* p. 13.

a largely independent and competitive branch from the Al-Bujamal clan, one of the three main branches of the Ekedat clan. Whilst the main bulk of the Al-Bujamal kept acting as one block from its main stronghold in the countryside city of Al-Shhel, which held the Al-Nusra front, and to which many of its leaders and fighters belonged. Though the legislative body tried to take into account the clan sensitivities by assuring that the Al-Anabiza were not the ones targeted, rather “a minority of Ksham clans” that accounts for the factory. However, that did not lessen the sting of offense that enveloped the town of Khsham and the Al-Anabiza, who interpreted what had happened from a purely clan-based standpoint. This is where Amer Al-Rafdan, the ISIS Emir in Deir Ezzor, played a part. He belongs to the Al-Mushref phratry, which also comes from Al-Bakkir, and is related to Al-Anabiza. He and his phratry live in Jadeed Ekedat, near Khsam. He exploited the tension and kinship to appear as the defender of his clan against Al-Bakkir, in the face of the legislative body which was under the control of the Al-Nusra Front, led by Al-Bujamal sons of Al-Shheel. That is how the conflict between the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS was built upon the schism between these two clans from the Ekedat tribe.¹¹⁵

During the conflict between the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS, the Front managed to advance to Amer Al-Rafdan’s stronghold, a village called Jdeed Ekedat. They raided his house and the houses of some of his fellow clansmen. ISIS had many victories in Iraq in 2014. Al-Rafdan recuperated his strength and soon returned, his mind set on revenge.¹¹⁶ ISIS surrounded the city of Al-Shheel from three sides and battles intensified. Fighters in the city were forced to surrender. ISIS imposed three conditions on the city: 1) that its people repent. 2) that all weapons be surrendered, 3) that all residents be expelled to the countryside until ISIS felt safe enough to allow them to return (approximately 10 days). The conditions were implemented on July 3, 2014 and thirty residents were displaced, set up tents in the Badia in hostile conditions. Temperatures soared above 33 degrees Celsius with food and water scarce.¹¹⁷ This attack put an end to the Al-Nusra Front’s influence in Deir Ezzor, as it completely withdrew from the governorate of Deir Ezzor. This allowed ISIS to fully control most of the governorate, except for the city of Deir Ezzor and the Deir Ezzor military airport, which remained under GoS’s control.

When this came back to ISIS, it tried to avoid growing sensitivities between Ekedat clans, replacing former clan figureheads and moving Amer Al-Rafdan, for example, to the organization’s leadership center in Iraq, and granting local leadership to foreign fighters.¹¹⁸ Abu Dujana Al-Zor’s influence and that of his cousins in the area shrank.

ISIS strove to integrate clans into its own organization, and to distinguish the younger leaders who fought alongside or supported the organization against the prominent Sheikhs representing the clan authority’s base.¹¹⁹ ISIS tried to erase clan identity in the governorate, but kept alive the possibility of benefiting from the network of relations it offered.¹²⁰ Clans protected their members who were allegiant to the organization several times in dangerous circumstances, spurred by clan loyalty. However, these branches soon abandoned their ISIS-allegiant members once ISIS gained control of Deir Ezzor and its cruelty was let run unbridled. Persecuting everyone, ISIS gradually dissipated clan power positions within its that were its first local allegiants after it had taken advantage of these personalities’ ability to attract more members.¹²¹

This crackdown was in part driven by the deep trauma of Sahawat, meaning “awakening” in Arabic, in ISIS’s cultural memory. Sahawat was a group paramilitary forces made up of Sunni clan members were formed under the supervi-

115 Ibid. p. 14.

116 Abdel Nasser Al-Aied, *ibid.*, p. 5.

117 The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria expels people from the cities and towns of the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, July 8, 2014.

118 Abdel Nasser Al-Aeid, *ibid.* p. 5.

119 Deir Ezzor: Tribal Mapping Project, *ibid.* p. 12.

120 Abdel Nasser Al-Aied, *ibid.*

121 Ziad Awad, *ibid.* p. 10.

sion of U.S. forces and the Iraqi government to fight Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq.¹²² The group had barely started regaining its cohesiveness before issuing a core document in 2010, entitled "The Strategic Plan to Reinforce the Political Situation of the Islamic State in Iraq".

The document considered that ISIS was late in fighting the Sahawat under the pretext of social incubators. It accused Iraqi national resistance factions of becoming fertile land for the "popping up of Sahawat".¹²³ As for Syria, ISIS arrived haunted by the ghost of those Sahawat. That was one of the reasons for its preemptive fighting against the Free Army and its assassination of its leaderships before they got stronger, and, later, its fight against the Al-Nusra Front. Maybe that was one of the reasons why the mere idea of establishing Syrian awakenings, similarly to what happened in Iraq, was buried.

In addition to its use of violence against the clans, it is notable that ISIS worked on establishing its own strength base in Syria through offering financial incentives to the poorest villages, providing municipal services in cities, and establishing a system for law and order that replaced the conflicts between clans and factions that were widespread before the summer of 2014.¹²⁴ In this way, ISIS used a carrot and stick approach to prevent Syrian awakenings among clan members. It is also noteworthy that western powers held several meetings with some Syrian clan leaders in Turkey and Switzerland in 2014, aiming to mobilize the clans and create forces similar to the awakenings. Nonetheless, the clans' fragmentation and the clan Sheikhs' loss of authority over their clan members prevented that from ever happening. This led the American and western forces to rely on the Kurdistan Workers' Party to spearhead their war against ISIS in Syria, granting it the task of mobilizing Arab clansmen under its training and supervision, in something that was later known as the Democratic Syrian Forces.

122 Hassan Abu Hania and Mohammad Abu Ruman, the Islamic State Organization: The Sunni crisis and the conflict on world jihadism, Amman: Friedrich Ebert foundation, 2015, p. 47, margin 50.

123 Ibid. p. 114.

124 Deir Ezzor: Clan Mapping Project, Ibid. p. 11.

Under the Autonomous Administration

In September 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched the military campaign “Al-Jazeera Storm” against ISIS on the left bank of the Euphrates, with the support of the international coalition. This campaign ended around April 2019. The Syrian government forces, with the support of their allies Russia and Iran, advanced on the right side of the river. After their withdrawal from Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq, Deir Ezzor became ISIS’s last major front.

In December 2016, the SDF formed the Deir Ezzor military council. The members did not exceed 300 fighters back then, led by Ahmad Hamed Al-Khubail, known as Abu Khawla.¹²⁵ In September 2017, the Deir Ezzor civilian council was formed as a result of a conference, attended by eminent local figures such as tribal chiefs, local society leaders, businessmen, technocrats such as doctors and lawyers, and others. Since that time, the council has undergone many changes, from moving and expanding to restructuring. As ISIS withdrew, new towns and villages came under its jurisdiction.¹²⁶

Despite the fact that the names at the front of the stage did not have wide popular and tribal support, and accusations of corruption rose against them, their power expanded as their military operations progressed and triumphed.¹²⁷ The military council included a large share of clan members of the left bank of the Euphrates, which falls within the geographical scope of SDF’s operations in comparison with the right one. And so, the number of people from the Al-Bakkir, Al-Bakara, and Al-Cheaitat clans seems higher than others from the left bank. The fact that council leaders belonged to the Al-Bakkir, including Al-Khubail, who belongs to the Al-Kabisa phratry, played a role in increasing the number of people from this clan joining the ranks of the council. The same applies for Al-Bakkara. The desire for vengeance against ISIS of the Al-Cheaita clan played a role in mobilizing them into the ranks of SDF.¹²⁸

The autonomous authority in Deir Ezzor ruled over the Al-Omar oil field that produces light crude oil and is considered to be the most important oil field in the region. The Al-Tanak field is second most important, alongside the Al-Jafra and the Conoco fields.¹²⁹ Currently, none of these fields are operating at maximum capacity with some not being used whatsoever. Oil profits go to the federal budget and are the subject of great local interest. There is a general belief that more profit is being produced than is being declared. The new situation meant that clan parties lost their control over the oil, which fell under the control of SDF, the international coalition, and ISIS. Therefore, some influential clan figures lost an important source of funding.¹³⁰ This created tension, as some of Deir Ezzor’s clans believe that the SDF have taken hold of Deir Ezzor’s oil resources without granting enough attention to residents’ basic needs.

From a civilian side, the local directorate is able to design its projects and programs based on requests to discuss them with lower representatives. However, its ability to execute them remains dependent on

125 Mohammad Shaman, “Who did SDF rely on locally? two samples from Deir Ezzor, “Ain Al-Madina” magazine, 31 October 2017. <https://2u.pw/aPh0g>

126 Examples of Local Governance in Syria: reference study, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2020, p. 35.

127 Barak Barfi, managing Washington’s corrupt allies in eastern Syria, the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, 17 October 2017.

128 Ziad Awad, *ibid.* p. 11.

129 Sinan Hatahet, the political economy of the autonomous administration of northern and eastern Syria, “wartime and post-conflict time in Syria”, 31 January 2020, p. 10.

130 Tension in the Deir Ezzor countryside, IMPACT, p. 2.

higher players and funding. The democratic civil administration of Deir Ezzor relies on funding allowances it receives from the Autonomous Administration, for salaries and projects suggested by the former and approved by the latter.¹³¹ Public meetings have granted a share of social debates between local clan personalities and local community notables, which contributed to facilitating the reporting of needs to the concerned authorities. However, these meetings seem to be primarily efforts aimed at responding to limited issues; they do not offer a proper place for global debates or discussions about policies, as notables focus on discussing service-related matters.¹³²¹³³ They consider that the more important matters are in the hands of the unofficial cadre network (influential Kurdish advisors). A local employee of the Autonomous Administration has stated: during my time heading one of the service institutions, we held periodic meetings, and it was constantly underlined that we should not make any decisions without consulting the cadres. Another said, "I made a decision within my power, but one of the cadres opposed the decision. What the cadre decided was later implemented."¹³⁴

Most residents are unsatisfied with services in the region. A study conducted in November 2020 showed that twenty percent (20%) of responders in the eastern countryside complained of a lack of electricity in their areas. Of those that had electricity, the majority stated that they received it through a subscription to generators, at high cost.¹³⁵ Forty-one percent (41%) of them said that their areas did not receive water supply. Those who had access to water received it from the state network, while displaced persons rely on this network and cistern waters, which is faulty.¹³⁶

Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the eastern countryside said that they did not have lighting on streets and road, and when it does exist, it is limited to main streets and required maintenance, which is not continuously provided. Their installation relies on nepotism and clientelism.¹³⁷ They speak of fuel being available in general, but at high prices due to the smuggling of oil and its derivatives to GoS regions. They also said that schools existed, but there was a lack of training for teachers and a lack of books. The survey showed that there are hospitals and medical centers in the eastern countryside according to 81% of the survey respondents, but with varying rates from one village to another.¹³⁸ However, some specializations and medications are nonexistent, and medical services are expensive.¹³⁹

One individual attributed this dissatisfaction to "widespread administrative corruption, the negligence of the humanitarian field, the theft of displaced persons' allowances and the displaced people and residents' dues of fuel meant for heating, as well as decisions being limited to the hands of a specific number of people."¹⁴⁰ Local pages on social media are filled with news about protests, in which regions often adopt

131 Examples of Governance in Syria, Ibid. p. 39.

132 Ibid. p. 38.

133 Ibid. p. 39.

134 Defective participation: the societal participation in the Autonomous Authority of northern and eastern Syria – Deir Ez-Zor, sample, Justice for Life organization, 17 February 2020, p. 18.

135 The reality of services in Deir Ezzor, northern and eastern Syria, Mari Development, November 2020, p. 7.

136 Ibid. p. 7.

137 Ibid. p. 8.

138 Ibid. p. 8.

139 Ibid. p.s 23-24.

140 Defective participation, Ibid. p. 12.

behavior based on their geographical unity and shout slogans of demands for services.¹⁴¹ A few exceptions do exist, such as the strike held by teachers against their inclusion in mandatory conscription, and to demand a hike in employee salaries and support to the education sector. The strike was coordinated between all regions.¹⁴² In general, the conscription of clan members is met with refusal, whilst some notables ask for an adequate monthly salary for the mobilized of at least US\$100. Administration representatives offered 50 thousand Syrian pounds for the mandatory service period of 6 months, equivalent to US\$ 20.¹⁴³¹⁴⁴

In dealing with SDF, tribes do not act like one unified entity. On a few rare occasions, tribes such as the Ekedat tribe attempted to move as one unit. That one time points to reasons that created tension between SDF and clans in Deir Ezzor, such as accusing SDF of not ensuring the safety and security of clan sheikhs from ISIS sleeper cells. For example, an assassination attempt was made on Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil Al-Hifil, its true leader appointed by his brother, Mosaab, the clan's official emir who lives in Qatar. Ibrahim was injured and Sheikh Mutasher Al-Hifil, one of his cousins, was killed on August 2nd, 2020.

There was some tension against SDF, who was accused of the lack of security in the governorate. Following that, a meeting was held at the home of Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Hifil, in the town of Dhiban, attended by a number of notables, and tribal and clan sheikhs of Deir Ezzor. They aimed at creating a council to represent the area that fell under the control of the international coalition, tasked with following up on the matters of assassination which had recently affected people from the region in general, and Sheikhs of the Ekedat and Al-Bakara. It demanded security, general public services, and use of the region's wealth to improve the quality of life of Deir Ezzor's population.¹⁴⁵ Sheukh Ibrahim had issued a statement prior to that, in which he considered the international coalition to be responsible for what was happening, because it represented the true power on the ground. He also asked that a specialist investigation committee be formed to investigate the assassination, including investigators from the tribe, and that "the administration of our regions be granted to its people for the Arab component to take on its role fully", pushing towards a political solution that ensure the rights of all Syrians.¹⁴⁶

The United States issued a statement to condemn the attack on the Ekedat notables, expressing its condolences to the clan and family of Sheikh Mutasher, wishing Sheikh Ibrahim a speedy recovery, and wishing the perpetrators will be brought to justice.¹⁴⁷ Mazloum Abdi, the general leader of the SDF forces, met with clan notables from the region, which prevented the development of clan protests.¹⁴⁸

141 A post on the p. "Akhbar Al-Shheel" or news from Al-Sheel on Facebook, 31 August 2020.

142 A post on the Facebook p. "Markaz Al-Tayyana Al-Ihlami" or the Al-Tayyana media center, 21 February 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/atayyana990/posts/642331333185948>

143 A post on the Facebook p. "Markaz Al-Tayyana Al-Ihlami" or the Al-Tayyana media center, 21 February 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/atayyana990/posts/642331333185948>

144 A post on the Facebook p. "Markaz Al-Tayyana Al-Ihlami" or the Al-Tayyana media center, 21 February 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/atayyana990/posts/642331333185948>

145 A post on the Facebook p. "Ekedat Tribe – Official Website", 29 August 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/Alaqidat/posts/1983164901826170>

146 Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Hifil: clans in eastern Euphrates are ready for any scenario, Syria Television website, 11 September 2020 <https://cutt.ly/qvHENRt>

147 A post on the Facebook p. of the American Embassy in Damascus, 3 August 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/syria.usembassy/posts/10158457283237649>

148 Tension in the Deir Ezzor countryside, Ibid. p. 3.

The common belief about the expected withdrawal of the international coalition and American troops, and consequently the withdrawal of SDF from the areas of Deir Ezzor, further complicates the issues and creates a state of unrest, tension, and distrust. Therefore, there is no proper interest in investing to work with them. Rather, some clan parties are trying to set up early alliances with the GoS and Russia, based on the idea of the expected American withdrawal, especially since tribes are politically divided.¹⁴⁹

Some clan notables have made calls upon the international coalition to allow them to replace the SDF.¹⁵⁰ Researchers have noticed that most administrative and executive institutions and apparatuses in the Eastern Euphrates Administration act as though they are caretaker entities instead of a permanent authority that has the ability to develop and grow its structure, work mechanism, elites, and institutions. They believe that administrative apparatuses consider on some level that their power is temporary and will eventually be overthrown.¹⁵¹ This may be clearer in the rural areas of Deir Ezzor. Here, the administration stumbles because of the newness of its mandate, the lack of experience of many of its people, and the security turmoil due to ISIS's operations. In comparison with the western countryside and Raqqa, it lacks control of the eastern countryside.

ISIS's continued activity in Deir Ezzor

Despite ISIS's defeat in Al-Baghuz, sleeper cells are still active within clan communities. Attempting to provoke unrest and turbulence, they aim to widen the rift between clans and the SDF. ISIS urges people to refrain from working with the institutions of the Autonomous Administration or from volunteering with the SDF forces to broaden the gap that divides them from the current ruling authority.

The concept of religious repentance is used as an ideological and political mobilization tool to carve out local allegiances to ISIS. Until early summer 2019, repentance practices were undertaken carefully. Targeted people were called upon individually, often to meet with one of ISIS's activists, or would repent in local mosques during group prayer. In July 2019, the repentance practice widened its scope into a group activity. In the village of Abu Hardoub, in eastern Deir Ezzor, a list was disseminated, bearing the names of village employees and a call for them to publicly repent and refrain from working in local institutions. This led to the collapse of the Autonomous Administration's institution as only a few schoolteachers remained to work. But this case did not repeat itself.

ISIS appears to favor a policy of infiltrating institutions and intervening in their work. This has been starkly clear since September 2019 with the increase in arrests of people in prominent positions in the administration who still maintain ties with ISIS. For example, the head of the local council of Swidan Jazira was arrested on charges of collecting money for the organization. Similarly, ISIS threatened many AA officials and targeted several of them. Those who were not stung by ISIS's hand were suspected of colluding with it. The circle of suspicion grew to the point that former informants refused to work with security services out of fear that the person they were cooperating with were, in fact, in contact with ISIS.¹⁵²

149 Tension in the Deir Ezzor countryside, *Ibid.* p. 1.

150 Tension in Deir Ezzor, *Ibid.* p. 1.

151 Introduction to the governance journey in Eastern Euphrates, IMPACT, East West Institute, February 2020, p. 7.

152 Patrick Haenni and Arthur Quesnay, *Surviving the aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish movement's resilience strategy, "War-time and post conflict time in Syria,"* 17 February 2020, p. 15.

In addition to reaching undeclared compromises with local notables and leaders, the main goal behind ISIS's policies is taking over resources by imposing royalties. Oil sector operators in the eastern desert part of Deir Ezzor are particularly targeted. Some of them pays ISIS dozens of thousands of dollars every month. The royalty system is imposed on smugglers and ferries on the Euphrates and Autonomous Administration officials. Those who fall behind on their payments receive threats and are punished through raids and sound grenades in their homes. In addition to that, ISIS's efforts aim to weaken the Autonomous Administration's security apparatus, which pushes it to act like an invading force that conduct raids and repeated security operations. In other words, ISIS isn't trying to make institutions collapse or take back lands as much as it is trying to create an environment conducive to collecting financial resources.¹⁵³

Despite the secrecy of ISIS's work, it is still possible to outline its current plans through four levels of sources: the first one is a discussion in its official publication, *Al-Naba'*, with the man they named "Sheikh Abu Mansur Al-Ansari", describing him as "the Emir of Security Detachments in Al-Khair, in the State of Syria", or the region in Deir Ezzor that our research focuses on in accordance with ISIS's appellations. The second one is unique, previously unpublished interviews conducted by a researcher with people close to and with knowledge of ISIS in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor. The third one is an analysis of the admissions from a network of people implicated in assassinations and explosions, disseminated by the security apparatus in Deir Ezzor. The fourth one is a survey of various types of its repeat operations against similar targets.

These sources concur that ISIS invests in the population's frustration with the Autonomous Administration, benefiting from the widespread unemployment and lack of resources. Its cells may be relying on kinship, clan relations, or regional networks in which complaints are more intensified than in others, either because they feel marginalized by groups close to SDF or where involvement rates are high,

153 Ibid. p. 16.

How does ISIS see the relationship between the Deir Ezzor clans and the Autonomous Administration?

In its issue dated 19 November 2020, the Al-Naba' newspaper, which is published by ISIS's Central Media Office, published an important discussion with a man it called "Sheikh Abu Mansur Al-Ansari" -a Syrian, according to ISIS's appellation system – and described as "the Emir of Security Detachments in Al-Khair", in which the central questions revolved around the region that this research focuses on. Comparing responses with the set of other data and local stories, its precise expressions can draw ISIS's vision for and work in area in steady strokes.

In the first question about the state of the region under the control of "the PKK apostates", per the publication's words, Al-Ansari responds that the situation "is terrible from all sides, there is no power but from God. The religion has been lost when the apostates imposed their ignorant laws, and their diligent efforts to corrupt people's beliefs and drag them into the atheism they have adopted, through media, education, and other means... Those who compare its state to what it was when the Islamic State soldiers controlled it are surprised at such a quick change".¹⁵⁴ Consequently, it is safe to say that ISIS is still trying to use its media tools to harm the SDF's image and benefit from a state of tension and stress in the local community to make the current situation appear worse than what it was under ISIS's rule.

Concerning the nature of the relationship between residents and the SDF authorities, he said: "The relationship between the two parties is not marked by friendliness, made clear by the people's recent protests in the region". Concerning ISIS's consideration of people, he says there are two categories: "Some of them are Muslims who worship God almighty despite the crusaders and apostates and despite their blasphemous thinking," and others are "apostates who have sold their religion for the earthly plane, and when they found that the earthly plane of atheists and crusaders would not bring them anything, they became resentful," because profits were only made by "those very few high-placed agents and spies who atheists set as the face of their rule". Concerning the SDF volunteers of employees of the Autonomous Administration, "they are nothing but low slaves who will only get crumbs". Thus, ISIS considers that most of the residents resent the current authorities over principles or because they are hoarding money. His role is to strive "to increase this enmity against crusaders and atheists through any means possible, through terrorizing those loyal to atheism and killing those whom they appoint to local councils in order to swindle people and to alleviate the enmity towards them."¹⁵⁵

Concerning the upwards and downwards changes in the frequency of ISIS's operations and their location changes, contrary to common belief, Al-Ansari says that "mujahideen" are working "in incredibly difficult circumstances, as apostates control the earth and have spread large numbers of their elements in the region... they were helped by many apostates that became their eyes and their spies... the crusaders control the airs through their reconnaissance flights that monitor the area, and helicopters and fighter jets that offer air support to their ground movements, and there is no power but through God almighty".¹⁵⁶

154 A talk with Sheikh Abu Mansur Al-Ansari, may God protect him, Emir of the Al-Khair Security Detachment in Syria, Al-Naba' newspaper, Issue 261, 4 Rabih Al-Thani 1442 Hijri, p. 10.

155 Ibid. p. 10.

156 Ibid. pp. 10-11.

For that reason, campaigns in the region rarely stop, aiming at “monitoring mujahideen and tracking them to kill or imprison them to stop their jihad,” or, at the very least, “trap them in a chase that impedes their time devoted to plan offensive operations”. They “decide to ramp up activities in some location, or against a specific type of targets for reasons that they know, and sometimes decide to freeze activities in a certain area for a while”. However, they quickly “recover their activities after each campaign and go back to targeting apostates and force them into a defensive mode for a period of time”, so that “the apostate leadership has to mobilize numerous forces from various regions to campaign against the “mujahideen” alongside the crusading American army and its heavy air force. The brothers avoid clashing with them, then, a little while later, things go back to how they were”.¹⁵⁷ Despite this, Al-Ansari claims that the results of these campaigns did not affect the organization’s strength nor harm its elements. Those who were arrested as a result of said campaigns are, according to him, innocent residents or even AA intelligence workers loyal to it. That’s because “mujahideen” retreat from the area and avoid clashes because “they do not benefit us”, especially as ISIS feels that the reins of initiative are in its hands. It is the one that decides “when we light a fire under their feet in a specific region, when we move the fire to another region, as they hold their breath in hiding, thinking they are safe, so we haunt their dreams. We are the ones to decide when the best time is for our operation and what is the best way to fight against them”. This is all subject to “estimations from the mujahideen emir brothers”, underlining the decentralization.¹⁵⁸

Overall, the interview shows that ISIS’s activity within local communities is done secretly or in hiding but continues to this day and aims at creating a general state of instability and an attempt to rile local communities against the Autonomous Administration and its rule.

157 Ibid. p. 11.

158 Ibid. p. 11.

ISIS's local activity within the local community

The information below, taken from testimonies given by local sources close to ISIS, shows that ISIS's financial activity is still tightly bound to local community. Its main financial sources are collection operations from community members and imposing royalties on oil traders. This financial activity is considered one of the factors allowing the continuation of ISIS's destabilization activities within the Deir Ezzor clans.

ISIS started preparing for this stage ever since it noticed that its state was about to collapse. Several of its emirs went out to areas under the control of SDF and to the Badiya to prepare for the upcoming security work. Most labor leaders in the countryside in eastern Deir Ezzor are Iraqis, with the majority living in Al-Shamiyah. There is frequent movement between Al-Shamiya and Al-Jazira, despite the fact that the Al-Shamiyah bank's work against ISIS is separate from the Al-Jazira bank's work against SDF. Here, there is less passage than over the border with Iraq.

ISIS's biggest fear is the arrest of leaders. Members and cells are far less important. Therefore, there are many sleeper leaders or leaders who simply offer advice and counsel. Most of today's working elements are new, mobilized through older ISIS members. It is not necessary that the older member be living in a region. Sometimes they are up north, networking between two people in the region. There is no work strategy for ISIS apart from fighting until "judgment day", but the priority today is to fight those who harm them, especially "the watchmen" (intelligence and informants). A well-spread saying goes "killing a watchman working for SDF is more important than killing Mazloun Abdi".

Today, ISIS is limited to the following, from its previous administrative structure: oil, security, the Shar'is¹⁵⁹, and zakat. There is considerable fear of infiltration, especially from newly recruited members, so internal investigations are intense, leading sometimes to death penalties or assassinations against suspected emirs. This fear of infiltration also impedes work. There is mutual infiltration, but double agents are few and short-lived.

SDF experts are under enormous security pressure, but are scattering ISIS as it cuts off contact between central emirs and second rank leaders. ISIS's financial situation is dire. It collects funds to respond to its massive needs as it cares for its members made prisoners and their families; it also spends fortunes trying to liberate its captives. Furthermore, it exploits this region of Deir Ezzor to fund other regions, such as Al-Shamiyah. Most of the funding ISIS collects comes from oil traders, but oil revenues are on a steady decline. Some income is generated through "economic security" which has cells that are independent from military cells.

ISIS still relies on paper communication and seals. It deals with transfer offices to move money. Some cells collect zakat for their own benefit, and there are many instances of theft in which the person responsible for a sum of money sometimes disappears. Those who believe that people who tried to collect money from them are not from ISIS communicate with ISIS members and inform them of the situation. The information and figures are then in ISIS's hands, and the false ISIS members are put to death as punishment.

This excessive decentralization has created chaos. A group kills a person who had received an agreement from another group to be able to keep working with SDF, or a group works in a region without the knowl-

159 Shar'i is a religious male figure who is responsible for the theological aspects of Islamist factions. He is in charge of teaching religion, issuing Fatwa, and encouraging fighters before battles.

edge of the region's emir. However, they consider it a natural consequence of each emir's powers as well as working conditions and security pressure. The main reason behind the continuity of ISIS's operations to this day, despite the massive internal turmoil, is people's fear of ISIS and their lack of sympathy towards existing authorities. ISIS members know that people's fear is a crucial factor, so if they ever notice an inkling of courage in a particular region, they rush to execute an operation there to restore the fear and respect they want.¹⁶⁰

Analyzing ISIS's Network

Unfortunately, the results of investigations run by security forces tied to the Autonomous Administration with ISIS cell captives are lacking, similar to results from the same operations run by the international coalition. This creates a gap in visualizing the situation which is difficult to fill. To partially compensate for that, we analyzed data from a 15-minute confession tape released by the Deir Ezzor General Security, in which three young men are featured.

The first observation in the context of our research is that the three men belong to different clans, which are not known for ISIS ties. The first one, Bachar Ahmad Abdel Wahab, comes from the Al-Bou Awad clan in the city of Al-Quriya. The second one, Chadi Salem Al-Hussein, comes from the Al-Hijjaj clan in Dhiban. Many members of these two clans were allegiant to ISIS during its rule. The third young man, Yasser Mohammad Al-Rakad is from the Al-Karaan clan, also in Al-Quriya. Going through the names they mention in their confessions, there are well over twenty people whose positions in ISIS range from regional emir to cell leader to regular member. The testimony was limited by the narrow scope of information available in the recording. Cousin relations played its part in recruitment once, as well as undetermined kinship, and belonging to the same geographical area once at least.

Two of the three men confessed that they became loyal to ISIS once it controlled the governorate of Deir Ezzor, and they ran away once it collapsed, moving through various towns and villages as normal displaced people without a background, until old relations rekindled their connection to the cells. They then undertook secret operations, which ranged from targeting a car belonging to SDF forces or one its checkpoints, to assassinating soldiers in their ranks, members of their intelligence apparatus or Asayish forces, to planting a bomb within a civilian council. This is in addition to killing two GoS force soldiers who were on leave visiting their families in the region and killing a woman because she was "practicing magic", which falls under mysticism and witchcraft, blasphemy in the eyes of ISIS.

Of even further significance, however, is that, on the orders for a higher leader, one group killed two ISIS members because they were collecting money for themselves under the pretext of collecting zakat, which is supposed to be paid "to the State". The emir of the group that carried out the assassination received

¹⁶⁰ Unpublished personal interviews by researcher Ahmad Mhedi with three people close to ISIS in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor between April and June 2021.

threats from a more ferocious leader, who accused him of also collecting money on behalf of ISIS, pledging to kill him. Because of the reputation garnered by the threat giver, it was clear that the threat was not empty. One of the people he had previously killed was the emir of a past ISIS group, the person under threat had to flee.

On a material level, it does not seem that ISIS is financially secure enough to equip its cells with more than motorbikes, rifles, and grenades in small quantities, whatever they can loot from killing some SDF members and taking their weapons. Going through the almost twenty operations mentioned in the confessions, it is clear that some happen after the target is determined, studied, and watched. However, others happen through something a lot like chance, when executors notice the possibility to target a lone military vehicle or a member in the market. Since security was tightened in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor, it appears that their operations have been more focused on the west.

ISIS's repetition of operations in one area does not necessarily mean it is a ISIS incubator, or that perpetrators live in that region at all. Rather, it may mean that it is easy to carry out operations there and then flee. From the number of residential moves mentioned in the confessions, it is difficult to determine an incubating area apart from the Badiya, which allows cells to go out into it, hold meetings to plan, then return to their houses or go execute the operations. Finally, it seems that the cell emirs are all in their early twenties, as are the three young men in the confessions. We can expect that the age of its newly recruited members is a bit lower, and that the age of the higher ranks of emirs is higher.

ISIS's continuing operations against those who collaborate and work with the Autonomous Administration

Some thought that ISIS had lost its ability to execute attacks against SDF after the end of military operations in Al-Baghuz. Figures and statistics mentioned in this part show that ISIS is still undertaking what could be called hidden insurgency against SDF, to try to terrorize locals and prevent them from working for the Autonomous Administration.

Issue 175 of the Al-Naba' newspaper, published on March 28, 2019, relates the story of one of the typical operations favored by ISIS: kidnapping and slaughtering Uqab Hamed Al-Ali (20 years old from Sabikhan), formerly a fighter for ISIS, currently a member of SDF. Illustrated with a blood-drenched image, the newspaper states that Al-Ali lived "in the caliphate's shadow during the years of empowerment", that he underwent Sharia sessions, and that he enrolled in ISIS's ranks for six months, then left it when "hardships increased" against it to join the ranks of "PKK apostates". He boasted several times about standing on

the corpses of its “martyrs”, with pictures to prove it, and he assaulted those of them he arrested. When “the hour of punishment” came upon him, he was kidnapped by a brigade of ISIS soldiers. They could have assassinated him, but they preferred to capture him, film him, and slaughter him “as a lesson to others”. The source of the newspaper’s information warned members of SDF of receiving a similar fate, stating that “the caliphate’s armies are watching the apostates and are writing lists of those of them it will target”¹⁶¹.

In another repeat operation, issue 203 of the Al-Naba’ newspaper, published on October 10, 2019, reported the previous week’s targeting of mayor Rachid Al-Hussein’s house in the town of Al-Soussa, in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor. Hand grenades and live ammunition were used, which led to his car burning and caused material damages to the house. A few days later, mayor Mahmoud Al-Mazyuz was attacked with automatic rifles as he exited an internet lounge in Al-Busayrah, killing him.¹⁶²

In issue 185, published on July 6, 2019, ISIS state operations were documented under the title “battle of attrition,” later alluded to by an article titled “stressful alertness is the mujahideen’s goal as well.”¹⁶³ Issue 226 of Al-Naba’ (March 19, 2020), talks about killing those that ISIS accuses of being “spies for the PKK”, stating that “caliphate soldiers” in “Al-Khair” (Deir Ezzor) have captured “a spy” called Suleiman Nasser in the town of Al-Tuhaiki. They questioned him and then shot him dead after they got proof that he was “previously involved in handing Muslims over to the PKK”. A few days later, they arrested another “spy” in the town of Al-Hawaij called Mohammad Ulyawi Al-Dgheim. They killed him in the same manner. The day after that, they captured a third one in the town of Darnaj called Mahmoud Al-Huwaija. They killed him and burned his vehicle under the same charge as the previous ones¹⁶⁵.

In the context of the “economic war”, Al-Naba’ also said that on June 27, 2020, “mujahideen” detonated “an explosive device onto a cistern belonging to the apostate “Al-Katerji”, transporting oil for the crusader organization through the Al-Omar oilfield road in Al-Busayrah, injuring him”.¹⁶⁶ Issue 247, published on August 13, 2020, stated that the previous week had seen a tangible uptick in operations as “mujahideen killed and injured around 36 PKK members, including an apostasy head, an investigator, and a jailer.” They may have been referring to Shaaban Al-Maat, who was the SDF “regiment commander” in Hajin, who was killed with a silenced weapon.¹⁶⁷ Issue 250 published on September 3, 2020, states that “caliphate soldiers” had raided the towns of Darnaj and Souaidan, entered the houses of a number of wanted people, shot one of them dead, and then gathered “all the Muslims in the area to remind them of God Almighty and their duty towards the triumph of their religion and brothers”.¹⁶⁸

161 They captured and slaughtered him... in punishment for his apostasy and his war against Muslims, for him to serve as a lesson to his fellow apostates. Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 175, 21 Rajab 1440 Hijri, p. 4.

162 They killed the mayor of one town and targeted another mayor’s house with rifles and hand grenades: Caliphate soldiers destroy two 4x4 military vehicles belonging to the crusader army and a third PKK one, and kill and injure all those on board. Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 203, 11 Safar 1440 Hijri, p. 12.

163 Battle of Attrition, Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 185, 3 Shawal 1440 Hijri, p. 12.

164 Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 213, 22 Rabih Al-Thani 1441 Hijri, p. 10.

165 3 spies were captured, a PKK member killed, two vehicles burned, and the house of a (leader) burned in security operations in Al-Khair, Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 226, 24 Rajab 1441 Hijri, p. 7.

166 9 PKK members killed and injured, one of their vehicles damaged, an Al-Katerji cistern exploded, and armed attacks in Al-Khair, Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 241, 11 Dhu Al-Qaada 1441 Hijri, p. 7.

167 Assassination of the PKK regiment commander and the destruction of two of their vehicles in operations in Al-Khair, Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 250, 14 Muharram 1442 Hijri, p. 10.

168 Among them was a mayor... 6 PKK members killed and injured, and two vehicles destroyed in new attacks on Al-Khair, Al-Naba’ newspaper, issue 250, 15 Muharram 1442 Hijri, p. 10.

The Jusoor center for studies issued three reports monitoring extremist movements' operations. According to the first report, among the 65 operations carried out by ISIS in Syria in January 2020, 49 of them were in the Deir Ezzor governorate, particularly in its eastern countryside.¹⁶⁹¹⁷⁰ The most common method is explosive devices, then attacks and direct targeting, and finally assassinations.¹⁷¹ It is noted that targeting SDF forces is at the top of the list of ISIS operations in Syria. In this context, it is noteworthy that they focused on members that had dissented from ISIS and joined SDF.¹⁷²

In February of the same year, ISIS executed 66 operations on Syrian territories, 51 of which were in Deir Ezzor, mostly in the governorate's eastern countryside, more specifically in Dhiban, Al-Busayrah, and then Khsham.¹⁷³ Once again, SDF forces were the main target of these operations with 75%, followed by GoS forces.¹⁷⁴ In March, ISIS executed 44 operations in Syria, with 37 of them in Deir Ezzor, 40 of them targeted SDF, killing 40 people at least, who made up 86% of those who were killed by ISIS that month alone.¹⁷⁵ They include five civilians who were executed on charges of collaborating with SDF, as well as the assassination of local council officials in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor.¹⁷⁶ Explosive devices topped the list of methods used, followed by assassinations and the execution of prisoners.¹⁷⁷ An ISIS cell burst into a football match in the town of Al-Hawaij and arrested a young man, killed him, and burned his body in front of 200 audience members, on the charges that he was "handing over brothers" to the coalition and SDF.¹⁷⁸

169 The jihadist scene in January 2020, Jusoor center for studies: religious movement unit, 2020, p. 7.

170 Ibid. p. 16.

171 Ibid. p. 8

172 Ibid. p. 16.

173 The jihadist scene in February 2020, Jusoor center for studies, religious movement units, 2020, p. 9.

174 Ibid. p. 10.

175 Ibid. p. 11

176 Ibid. p. 12.

177 Ibid. p. 11.

178 Ibid. p. 12.

Assessment of the situation of clans, ISIS, and people's needs in eastern Deir Ezzor

Successive waves of modernization contributed to weakening once-solid clan bonds. The nationalization of clans and their owning of agricultural property has increased the number of influence hubs within a single clan whose effective and symbolic capital is distributed across centers of power, meaning a number of secondary notables and sheikhs. Concerning the region studied in this research, in Al-Jazira, in eastern Deir Ezzor, the largest contractual tribe is the Ekedat, which contributed to its clans, phratries, and families holding growing special importance, especially with its large number of tribe members and its wide geographical spread.

Due to the reasons mentioned above, it is noted that the effectiveness of kinship bonds now most often stops at the fourth or fifth generation of descent. Under that family unit, bonds appear strong. True loyalty rarely arises above at that level except in a few cases that require higher solidarity, which are phratries or even clans.

The tribal loyalty system is complicated, warranting a delicate inspection of at public positions taken by tribe or clan sheikhs. The general orientation is that traditional tribal authority automatically tends to lean towards standing with the strongest party, publicly at least. This is done to avoid violence or repression against the tribe.¹⁷⁹

Successive authorities, from the Ottoman empires through ISIS, have had double standards when dealing with clans. It aims at weakening them by claiming they are competitive to its authority, but also to benefit from them by describing them as a ready social organization that facilitates dealing with parishes through the Sheikhs who have longstanding experience in representing their clans and communities.

Each party of the conflict in this governorate has supporters from all clans, with varying numbers. In the case of Syria, the diversity of allegiances within clans and with local communities does not reflect intellectual wealth or constructive diversity, but rather reveals division due to political rivalries, continuous war, and displacement, as well as contradicting benefits within and between clans.¹⁸⁰ For that reason, clan notables do not necessarily represent clans. Overall, this is considered to be the legacy of the GoS's time of influence when changes Damascus wrought within clans and the government led to the appearance of multiple leaderships for specific clans. ISIS later tried to use clans, and the Syrian Democratic Forces relied on clans as well. This all led to a situation in which there were several heads of specific clans, none of whom was truly a representative of their respective clan.¹⁸¹

Given its Iraqi history, ISIS managed to easily understand the residence of Syrian clan lands and offered a simple model of a "state" to a minority that was historically unfamiliar with central authority. When ISIS was defeated in Deir Ezzor, not many mourned its loss, despite the fact that rural areas (Al-Hazira) did not suffer what bigger urban areas in Al-Shamiyah did in terms of authoritarianism, abuse, and cruelty.

179 Felix Legrand, ISIS's colonial strategy in Syria, Arab reform initiative, July 2014, p. 6.

180 Ziad Awad, *Ibid.* p. 8.

181 Khodor Khodour, challenges to peace in Syria without integrating Eastern Euphrates, IMPACT, September 2020, p. 8.

Despite Arab-Kurdish sensitivities, the people of Deir Ezzor have realized they have only two practical options after the dismantlement of ISIS's authority: The Autonomous Administration and the Democratic Syrian Forces (SDF) in partnership with the international coalition, and the forces of the Syrian government and their friends from Russia and Iran. They chose the SDF, considering that ruling themselves under the patronage of the international coalition is their better option but was not available due to their weak and scattered state. However, the Autonomous Administration offered a model that greatly, almost fully contradicts the region's customs, especially women's issues as the administration insists on women's full participation, whilst ISIS limited itself to using them as "women's hesba" or religious police as a role in public life. In addition to that, school curricula that were suggested aroused the ire of the Deir Ezzor society and were later removed. These are some of the reasons behind this gap between the current authorities and the people, compounded with weak public services, widespread unemployment, and the mandatory conscription campaigns.

Due to its continued fracturing, it appears unlikely that local communities in Deir Ezzor will contribute to any stability. However, given their current deficit and following years-long exhaustion, these communities will not be able or even want to destabilize the local authority that was imposed to them.¹⁸² Not many would like to experience displacement anew after years of war that forced hundreds of thousands of people out of the governorate. While one of the studies done on the region shows that some people consider resorting to violence a viable option, 80% of people saw that peaceful demonstrations were the best means to protest.¹⁸³ The majority said that local notables or clansmen were the best placed to express that, especially if they are gathered in local councils. Independent civil activists have the trust of around 23% of those surveyed. Civil society organization garnered a measly 12% of trust.¹⁸⁴

For ISIS, who still has around ten thousand fighters in the border region who move relatively easily between Syria and Iraq, according to the estimates of the United Nations Secretary General, organizing its ranks and starting to target SDF forces and others is possible and "natural", and it must not be overestimated in the context of the dissolution of a stubborn organization.¹⁸⁵ ISIS's strategy now is survival first, exhaust its enemies second, and recover its "empowerment" in the appropriate time if possible third. Against all expectations, ISIS's coffers appear to be empty; it needs the levies it imposes. ISIS also conscripts new members without strong ideological conditions, especially in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor, in which it is busy forming armed cells more than bolstering religiousness and implementing Sharia.

For several reasons, including financial weakness, weak capacity, and a lack of interest, SDF's authority in the area has been characterized by corruption and failure, and has created a general atmosphere of anger. Meanwhile, ISIS was trying to make people believe it was cohesive and its organization remained intact, resorting to military operations meant to break the bridges built between the Autonomous Administration and residents. It relied on fermenting terror in the hearts of those who turned against it and fought it, prioritizing these people in their targeting. The plan to terrorize people was a resounding success. Many

182 Ziad Awad, *Ibid.* p. 18.

183 Defective participation, *Ibid.* p. 21.

184 Defective participation, *Ibid.* p. 21.

185 The eleventh report of the Secretary General about the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or ISIS); United Nations, Security Council, 3 August 2020, p. 4.

withdrew from Autonomous Administration institutions and SDF forces, gradually weakening them further. People are afraid to report ISIS members' movements to security forces. Though the people in the region who believe in ISIS's project are few, the majority overlook its operations out of fear or resentment towards the authority of the Autonomous Administration. In order to remedy this apathy, or perhaps the desire to conspire with ISIS, serious and comprehensive reforms of the Autonomous Administration are required. Any solution that does not account for this is a waste of time.

One cannot emit a blanket judgment about the relationship between clan sheikhs in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor and the Autonomous Administration; this differs depending on the extent to which the members of each clan are enrolled in SDF, or how much a Sheikh benefits from his ties to the current authorities to strengthen his representation in the face of competitors or acquire some form of official representation, allowing him to mediate with those who can guarantee extraction from the Al-Hawl refugee camp safe passage home to families from the region. On the other hand, the social map does not point to the appearance of civilian or educated players that could replace clan chiefs and notables. Despite these people's gradual decrease in authority, they remain the best portal into their communities. It is necessary that efforts and resources are spent on improving these communities' living conditions, not on reinforcing Sheikhs' status and influence in particular. That is the only way we can mitigate this environment of vulnerability that ISIS exploits.

Annex: Endnotes

i. The main oil fields and gas plants in the governorate of Deir Ezzor

- 1- The Al-Omar oil field (Al-Furat Petroleum Company), 15km east of the town of Al-Basira
- 2- The Al-Tanak oil field in the Al-Shaitat badia, in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor
- 3- The Al-Ward oil field, near the town of Al-Doueir in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor
- 4- The Al-Taym oil field, 10km away from the city of Muhasan south of the city of Deir Ezzor
- 5- The Al-Jafra field, 25km east of the city of Deir Ezzor
- 6- The Koniko gas plant, 20km east of the city of Deir Ezzor
- 7- The Al-Kharata oil refinery, 20km south of the city of Deir Ezzor
- 8- The Dero oil refinery, 40km north of the city of Deir Ezzor
- 9- The T2 refinery, a refinery on the Syrian-Iraqi oil line

"The oil arm in Syria": the Syrian Human Rights Network, 17/9/2014, seen on 21/12/2020 <https://cutt.us/WQup5>

ii. The village of Hatla is located in the area of Deir Ezzor, in the governorate, on the left bank of the Euphrates (area of Al-Jazeera), facing Hwaijet Saker. Fakhz Al-Bubadran, of the Al-Bakara tribe, lives in the village. The conversion to Shiism in the village came via "Omar Al-Hamadi", who was a staff sergeant in the Syrian Army. He became a Shiite in 1979 during his service in the governorate of Daraa through the efforts of the Al-Mortada group. He then convinced his paternal first cousin and brother-in-law, "Yassine Maiouf", to convert to Shiism. They were the only Shiites in the village until 1982, when the Al-Mortada group brought sheikhs and dignitaries from Syrian tribes and tribes to its branch in Al-Qardaha, where "Maiouf" was appointed head of its branch in the village of Hatla. This allowed Maiouf to convert several of its inhabitants to Shiism, with the generous support of the group. Through the group's connections, Maiouf managed to obtain an academic grant from Iran. He returned from Iran to his village in the early nineties, where the number of Shiite converts had grown, and the Azan sounding from their mosque was the Shiite Azan.

Maiouf persevered in his efforts to call people to Shiism in the village, investing the money he received from rich Gulf Shiites and the Sayida Zeinab Hawza in Damascus, as well as from the Iranian chancellery in Damascus. Witnesses recall that converts to Shiism would receive a monthly stipend of 5,000 Syrian pounds, then equivalent to a government employee's salary.

As the Syrian uprising began, 10% of Hatla, whose inhabitants numbered around 30 thousand, had converted to Shiism.

Hussam Al-Saad and Talal Mustafa, "a map of conversion to Shiism in Syrian cities", the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, page 33-34-35, June 2018 <https://cutt.us/i9mpc>

iii. The city of Deir Ezzor includes 5 churches for Armenians and Syriacs in both their Eastern and Western denominations, as well as dozens of Christian families belonging to different sects (over half of them are Syriac Orthodox). There is no official census of the city's Christians, which counts dozens of Christian families.

"The new migrations of the Deir Ezzor Christians, the darkness of migration envelops the city", Enab Baladi, 3/8/2014, seen on 15/2/2021 <https://cutt.us/GkFQE>

iv. The governorate of Deir Ezzor is culturally affiliated with Iraq, perhaps more than with Syria. The area

spreading from the Syrian Badia to Baghdad is socially homogeneous with Arab Sunni tribes, connected by shared blood, accent, heritage, customs, and traditions. The fact that former Iraqi president (Saddam Hussein) was from that same area caused a form of glorification of him as president, contrary to the Assad family who come from the Alawite sect in Syria, especially given how the state marginalized the eastern governorates of Syria. For these reasons and more, the attack on Iraq in the region was considered an attack on it itself. This pushed large numbers of its people to enter Iraq during the American invasion to face it. A starker proof of this idea is the number of mourning locations on the day the execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was announced, in late 2006.

v. Several groups loyal to Al Qaeda were formed in the governorate of Deir Ezzor. Their tasks were limited to ensuring the movement of some of its members and their families, along with other logistic tasks, stressing the avoidance of any confrontation with the Syrian regime. These groups were one active group in the countryside of Al-Mayadin, on the left bank of the Euphrates, and another one in the city of Al-Bukamal. Abu Al-Hassan (a former Al-Nusra Front fighter in Deir Ezzor), phone interview with the researcher, Istanbul, 25/12/2020.

vi. For example, in the city of Al-Mayadin, there was a group of 15-20 youths wearing Afghan garb, growing their hair and beards long, and preached to their close entourages jihadist Salafist doctrines. They adopted the idea of worldwide jihad, but had no jihadist activity area. These and others were helped by the tribal nature of the area, as they belonged to different tribes, as well as how their speech matched the regime's in standing against America and others. However, this did not spare them from security surveillance and arrest. This group was headed by Qassem Al-Saaran, who later joined the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front in Al-Mayadin. He worked on the central legal committee, which was formed there after its liberation during the Syrian uprising.

vii. In the city of Deir Ezzor, Moaz Al-Rokad was the first martyr, on 16/7/2011, felled by military security bullets in what was later known as the events of bloody Saturday. His martyrdom led to the first real battle in the city. Some of its residents joined the fray with their light arms, facing off against the security forces and the military reinforcements it received from the regime army. Rebels were able to force entry into several military and police stations in the city. Three tanks defected from the ranks of military reinforcement sent by the regimes, and the rebels managed to capture their crews when their leader, a first lieutenant, refused to shoot citizens. The battle saw 5 city inhabitants martyred. The regime forces encircled the city and sent delegations to negotiate with dignitaries to return the tanks and arms that the rebels controlled from the stations so that they would not have to invade. Even though the rebels handed over the troops and arms, the army nonetheless entered the city in August.

viii. The battle for the liberation of Al-Mayadin started after the death of martyr Louai Al-Batah, who was from the city, on 26/7/2021, after members of the regime military security opened fire onto a protest on Al-Jaysh street in the city. City groups, which had been concentrated in its countryside and, secretly, in its neighborhoods, started a battle to liberate it. They attacked regime checkpoints and stations in the city. They took control of the state security headquarters on 1/8/2012, then the political security headquarters on 4/8/2021, followed by the military security headquarters on 7/8/2012. Control of the city was wrested

from the regime forces on 24/8/2012 after Free Army groups took over its last stronghold, the Al-Hajana battalion.

"The welcoming Euphrates's Al-Mayadin (2 of 2)," former source.

ix. Free Army groups managed to gain control of the Al-Qa'im border passage near Al-Bukamal on 19/7/2012. This coincided with the start of artillery mortar shelling on the city of Al-Bukamal by regime forces set up at the Al-Hamdan airport. A series of battles to control a number of border outposts started after that, most importantly those in Al-Kharash, Baajaat, Al-Mahatta Al-Thania, and Al-Waer. The Al-Hajana barracks were then liberated, followed by the aerial defense battalion in early September. The city of Al-Bukamal was split into two parts imposed by its security situation since 20/8/2012. That is the date on which regime forces started using the air force to target the city.

The fight for liberation started on 9/11/2012 when Free Army groups broke into the Security Box and the Al-Jisr checkpoint in the city of Al-Bukamal on two axes: the Automatic Bakery axis and the Al-Jamiyat neighborhood axis. They managed to wrest control of them a week later, on 15/11/2012, after destroying several vehicle and gaining control of others. Meanwhile, the regime forces that remained in the Al-Hamdan military location hunkered down. Groups of rebels attacked it fiercely and were able to gain control of it, forcing the regime forces to retreat to the Al-Bukamal Badia, where rebels chased them and managed to liberate the region of Al-Thulathath on 17/11/2012, thus fully liberating the area of Al-Bukamal.

A group from the Al-Nusra Front participated in the battle alongside the Free Army groups.

Interview previously held with historian A. Ragheb Al-Hamad from the city of Al-Bukamal while working on a book about five cities of the Syrian Uprising, published by Dar Hoz Research and Publishing in the city of Al-Bab, March 2020.

x. After the liberation of the city of Al-Mayadin, the only military barracks remaining in the hands of the regime forces in the region of Al-Mayadin was the artillery battalion near the Al-Rahba citadel. It was made up of large warehouses for feed and electricity companies. Regime forces hunkered down in them with heavy artillery that rained shells onto the city and countryside of Al-Mayadin.

Free Army groups composed of youths from the city of Al-Mayadin, with wide participation from its countryside people, launched the battle to liberate the battalion in early November. The battle lasted around 20 days, after which the groups managed to liberate it on 22/11/2012. Al-Mayadin thus became entirely free.

"The welcoming Euphrates's Al-Mayadin (2 of 2)," former source.

xi. The events of the massacre started on 25 July September and lasted for three days. Groups from the "Republican Guard", led by Colonel Ali Khazam and under the direct supervision of the then head of military security, Major General Jameh Jameh, entered the Al-Joura neighborhood. These groups then started arresting civilians and torturing them. On the first morning of the massacre, the leader of the Special Forces battalion, Ali Khazam, entered the Al-Joura neighborhood from three points, surrounded it completely, and raided homes, arresting a large number of civilians.

At that time, media activists posted videos on social media showing the execution of over 100 men in the middle of Al-Joura neighborhood. There was also news about the execution and liquidation of entire families, including women and children in the neighboring Al-Qusur quarter.

News of the massacre perpetrated by the Syrian regime forces over three days in the Al-Joura and Al-Qu-

sur neighborhoods were muted and shrouded in mystery, until residents discovered dozens of bodies in a basement of one house in the Al-Qusur neighborhood, as well as dozens of charred corpses in the region of Al-Nawamir.

The Syrian regime forces retained control over the neighborhoods of Al-Joura and Al-Qusur since the “Republican Guard” campaign, though some opposition factions wrested control of most of the neighborhoods of the city of Deir Ezzor as well as the governorate countryside.

“Black Tuesday... the painful history remembered by the people of Deir Ezzor”, Enab Baladi newspaper, 25/9/2019, seen on 24/12/2020 <https://cutt.us/x8zmP>

xii. The Allahu Akbar Brigade was formed on 28/4/2012 in the area of Al-Bukamal and under the leadership of “Saddam Al-Jamal”. The Brigade actively participated in battles to liberate Al-Bukamal. It later became the most prominent formation in that context, as in late 2012, it joined the ranks of the Ahaf Al-Rasul Brigades, with “Saddam Al-Jamal” as its general leader in the eastern area. <https://cutt.us/cv6iE>

xiii. The Al-Ka’Ka brigade was formed on 20/3/2012 in the town of Al-Quria in the area of Al-Mayadin. The brigade included the most prominent groups in the regions of Al-Mayadin and Al-Bukamal. However, the brigade was later limited to the people of the town of Al-Quria, under the leadership of “Ali Al-Matar”, transforming into the Al-Ka’Ka division. After Ali Al-Matar’s martyrdom in April of 2013, his brother, “Mahmoud Al-Matar” took over leadership. The brigade was split into two divisions, each of which included a branch of the Al-Qaraan tribe members. They were locally known as Al-Ka’Ka Al-Thawri (revolutionary) and Al-Ka’Ka Al-Islami (Islamist). Al-Ka’Ka’ Al-Thawri, led by Mahmoud Al-Matar, remained within the ranks of the Ahfad Al-Rasul group, which it had joined in early 2013. <https://cutt.us/Mnp4k> <https://cutt.us/KOpYF>

xiv. The Al-Aasra Army was formed through a local popular campaign in the liberated Deir Ezzor countryside to help the town of Al-Qusayr in the governorate of Homs, on the Syrian-Lebanese border, after Lebanese Hezbollah groups entered the fray against Free Army groups there, alongside regime forces in May of 2013. The army was made up of volunteers for various battalions, but its main bulk came from groups in which the Al-Shaitat tribe was present in the governorate, namely the towns and villages of Al-Kashkiya, Gharanij, and Abou-Hamam within the Al-Jazeera region, especially from the Al-Umma Brigade under the leadership of Abu Seif Al-Shaiti. Army groups were able to reach the town of Al-Qusayr and entered it alongside groups from the Al-Tawhid Al-Halabi Brigade (Aleppo Unification), but the town fell anyway. When the Al-Aasra Army returned from Al-Qusayr, its groups from outside the Al-Shaitat regions fell apart. Meanwhile, a number of the Al-Shaitat groups upheld their commitments within its ranks. “Mohammad Hussein Khodor Al-Ghadir”, known as “Abu Seif Al-Shaiti”, remained the leader of the army, which joined the ranks of Ahfad Al-Rasul. <https://cutt.us/WAtob>

xv. The Ahfad Al-Rasul group was formed in the city of Deir Ezzor in August of 2013, by blending a number of the city’s groups, most notably the Al-Qasas Brigade, the Dareh Al-Furat Brigade, The Abu Zur Al-Ghafari Brigade, the Al-Aarfi Martyrs Brigade, and the Martyr Leader Saddam Hussein Brigade, led by Firas Khrabeh from the city of Deir Ezzor, also leader of the Al-Qasas Brigade within it. <https://cutt.us/5VWbg>

xvi. Upon its establishment, the Front for Authenticity and development (Jabhat Al-Asalah wal Tanmia)

included five fronts: The Northern front, led by Major Ibrahim Majbour, the Eastern front, led by Lieutenant Abdul Rahman Turki, the Middle front, led by Major Abdul Halim Ghanoum, the Southern front, led by Lieutenant Abdul Razzak Talas, and the Western front led by Colonel Omar Al-Khatib. <https://cutt.us/In8HU>

xvii. The Lions of Sunna (Usud Al-Sunna) Brigade was formed when a number of battalions from the city of Al-Mayadin, east of Deir Ezzor, merged in early July 2012. On September 14, it was announced that most of the city's battalions would be merged into the Brigade. They were: The Lions of Unification (Usud Al-Tawhid) battalion, the Usama Bin Zeid battalion, the Abu Al-Hassanayn battalion, the Special Missions battalion, the Junood Al-Haqq battalion, the Rijal Al-Aaqida battalion. The merge was announced by First Lieutenant Paratrooper Abdul Rahman Turki, "so that the Brigade became the main group of the city of Al-Mayadin. Then, on November 11, 2012, after the Authenticity and Development Front was established in Syria, First Lieutenant Abdul Rahman Turki took on the post of Eastern Front leader. Not all the Lions of Sunna factions had joined it due to an internal conflict. The formation of the Brigade later collapsed and was limited to a number of the battalions that made it up, notably the Usama Bin Zeid Brigade. New battalions joined it, such as the Abdul Rahman battalion. Since early December 2012, the Brigade joined the ranks of the Authenticity and Development Front.

On October 3, 2013, the Brigade merged with a number of the governorate's brigades, this forming the Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamaa Army. <https://cutt.us/8xvk1>

xviii. The Basha'ir Al-Nasr battalion was formed in March of 2012 in the town of Al-Ashara. The battalion later developed into the Basha'ir Al-Nasr brigade, led by Talas Al-Salameh from the town of Al-Ashara. When the Authenticity and Development Front was formed in November of 2012, the brigade joined its rank within the Eastern Front. The brigade then became a pillar of the Authenticity and Development Front, but it left its ranks along with other groups that made up the Front in October of 2013; they formed the Al-Sunna Army (Jaysh Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamaa) in what is considered a defection from the Authenticity and Development Front in Deir Ezzor. <https://cutt.us/8KGnM>

xix. The Ahl Al-Athar brigade was established in early August 2012 when several battalions of the Al-Bu-kamal countryside merged. When the Authenticity and Development Front was established in November 2012, the brigade joined its ranks within the Eastern front. The brigade became a pillar of the Authenticity and Development Front, but it left its ranks along with other groups that made up the Front in October of 2013; they formed the Al-Sunna Army (Jaysh Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamaa) in what is considered a defection from the Authenticity and Development Front in Deir Ezzor. <https://cutt.us/tKhxT>

xx. Later, in May of 2012, the brigade included several battalions from the Al-Shaitat region. They left its ranks in September of the same year, led by Abu Seif Al-Shaiti, who formed the Al-Umma Brigade. The latter ended up within the ranks of the Al-Aasra army, which joined the Ahfad Al-Rasul grouping the eastern area. "Who is Abu Seif Al-Shaiti who was arrested by Iraqi intelligence," investigation by Mohammad Hassan, Daraj website, 23/5/2018, seen on 26/12/2020. <https://cutt.us/Q3oOt>

xxi. The recording was published under the title of "preach to the believers" on April 9, 2014, as a speech by the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, in which he stated that "The Al-Nusra Front is an

extension and a part of the Islamic State in Iraq". The recording went on to say that starting on that date, all appellations of "the Islamic State in Iraq" and "Al-Nusra Front" would be removed, and would be known together as "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant".

"Preach to the believers" speech. <https://cutt.us/pa0dh>

xxii. The Al-Bakeera tribe is considered an exceptional one within the Al-Bujamel branch in the Al-Ekedat tribe. This branch is the traditional Al-Ekedat chiefdom branch. The Al-Bakeer tribe is spread throughout the towns of Khsham, Al-Busaira, and Roueished, as well as the villages of Braiha, Tib Al-Fal, Kassar, Hulwa, Mashekh, Jadeed Ekedat, Jasmi, and Moaijel. Some of its members are present alongside other tribes in the towns of Al-Harijiya, Al-Hariji, Se'alow, Dablan, and Al-Soor. Most of these regions fall within the regions of Al-Mayadin and Deir Ezzor, on the left bank of the Euphrates (the region of Al-Jazeera).

Faysal Dahmouh, P 16 (ibid) <https://cutt.us/VFKVA>

xxiii. The Al-Bukamal branch (Al-Zaher) is the branch that includes the traditional chiefdom house of the Ekedat tribe. Within the tribe, this branch falls under the Al-Bujamel branch, which is bigger. The Al-Zaher members are spread across the towns and villages of Zebian, Al-Shheel, and Moueileh. They all belong to the regions of Al-Mayadin and Deir Ezzor, on the left bank of the Euphrates (the region of Al-Jazeera).

Faysal Dahmouh, P 16 (ibid.) <https://cutt.us/VFKVA>

xxiv. Saddam Al-Jamal from Al-Bukamal established and led the Allahu Akbar Brigade in the eastern area, then became the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Free Army for the eastern region (Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Al-Hasaka). He was also leader of the Al-Ahfad army in the eastern region. He is considered one of the most prominent leaders of the Free Army in the eastern region, perhaps the strongest leader in terms of retaining the groups of the Allahu Akbar Brigade and leading the Al-Nusra Front in the eastern region. There, they all swore that they were not behind these explosions and pointed fingers at members of the Islamic State, which was spreading out in Al-Shadadi, south of the Al-Hasaka governorate and north of Deir Ezzor. This pushed "Saddam" to communicate with the Islamic State and agree to meet with them to inquire about incidents targeting him. They arrested him and featured him in a video clip in which he spoke about the conspiracy and corruption of the opposition and the Free Army. He was released after this was published, and resigned from armed work. He left the governorate of Deir Ezzor and settled away from it. The Islamic State summoned him after he took control of the governorate so he could be the connection between them and the people of Al-Bukamal following several incidents in which Islamic State fighters were targeted.

"The Maker: the life of Saddam Al-Jamal from tobacco smuggler to Daesh leader", Deir Ezzor between 2012 and 2013, in which Saddam pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in late 2013 and led its attack on Al-Bukamal where he is from, according to some activists.

However, other activists share a different story that exculpates him from the participation in the attack; this is the story Saddam himself tells in an interview with Daraj during his arrest in Iraq after he was arrested following the fall of the Islamic State. In it, he tells the tale of his joining the ranks of the Islamic State after his siblings were assassinated and his house was blown up, after an assassination attempt on his life. Rumors started blaming Al-Qaeda (the Al-Nusra Front). A meeting was held after uproar. Daraj website, 12/5/2019, seen on 27/2/2021 <https://cutt.us/Oo0Hq>

xxv. Abu Seif was the leader of the Al-Shaitat rebel battalion, then the Al-Umma Brigade which was made up of members of the Al-Shaitat tribe. The Brigade later became the Ahfad Al-Rasul group in the eastern area. Once the Al-Aasra Army was formed to liberate Al-Qaseer in July of 2013, the Al-Umma Brigade was one of the main army groups that fell apart upon its return from Al-Qaseer. Abu Seif accounted for the Al-Aasra army, which was limited to a number of groups from the Al-Shaitat area.

In the final quarter of 2013, the Islamic State launched a campaign against the Ahfad Al-Rasul group and leaders and started threatening to assassinate them. Even though the Islamic State did not have any real force in the governorate of Deir Ezzor, it had great capacity for security work and assassinations, which pushed Abu Seif to surrender arms to the Islamic State and hand himself over to them as well. He was subjected to a religious repentance session along with a group of his followers at an Islamic State camp in the Al-Bukamal Badia. Once the session ended, he returned to the area of Al-Shaitat (the village of Al-Kashkiya) as a secret ally to the Islamic State. After clashes erupted between governorate factions on one side and the Islamic State on the other, Abu Seif officially joined the Islamic State alongside the leader of the Al-Aasra Army, then-media personality Abou Ali Al-Shaiti. The Islamic State participated in the battle and wrested control of the governorate. He remained within the ranks of the Islamic State until the Al-Shaitat tribe rebelled against it, after the massacre perpetrated by the Islamic State against that tribe. He became one of the most prominent local leaders of the Islamic State.

"Who is Abu Seif Al-Shaiti who was arrested by the Iraqi intelligence?" Daraj Website, 23/5/2018, seen on 27/2/2021 <https://cutt.us/CRHjm>

xxvi. Hussam Al-Shalouf was born in the town of Hawajj Zubian in the city of Al-Mayadin, and was a resident of the city. He founded and led the Saddam Hussein battalion in the city after turning to armed movements. It was later known as the Saddam Hussein Brigade. The battalion was active in regional battles, especially in the liberation of the Al-Mayadin artillery. At the start of conflicts between Daesh and the Al-Nusra Front in Deir Ezzor, the Saddam Hussein Brigade was dissolved under the leadership of Al-Shalouf, and his weapons confiscated, after he was accused of sympathizing with the Islamic State and facilitating its actions in towns in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor and of being behind some of the operations that took place there. Hussam retired from armed work and stayed in his house in Al-Mayadin. He then moved to his place of origin, the village of Hawajj Zubian, where he announced he was not a member nor a supporter of the Islamic State.

In mid-2014, someone blew themselves up inside Shalouf's house in the town of Hawajj Zubian, killing Hussam Al-Shalouf's father, brother-in-law, paternal cousin, and a relative. There were rumors that the Al-Nusra Front was responsible for the incident.

Right after the attack, Daesh took control of large swathes of the Deir Ezzor governorate and countryside. Al-Shalouf then publically came out as a member of the Islamic State and then took on a position within the Islamic State. He went from an "Emir" of the Northeast Deir Ezzor countryside to the "Emir" of the Islamic State's public relations in the area.

"The Syrian Democratic Forces arrest local Daesh leader Hussam Al-Shalouf". Jisr online newspaper, 12/3/2019, seen on 27/2/2021 <https://cutt.us/9IcLE>

xxvii. For example, in the city of Al-Mayadin, the Islamic State destroyed the house of people related to Nasser Al-Salah Abu Yazan, leader of a special forces team within the Free Army, one of the most prominent

city groups that fought it during the battle to control the governorate. It did the same thing in the village of Al-Dahla in Khsham when it destroyed the house of Yasser Al-Fayad, also known as Yasser Al-Dahla, and houses belonging to people connected to him. The same thing happened in the town of Braiha in the township of Al-Busaira when it destroyed the house of defector First Lieutenant Ismael Aesh Al-Abdallah, known as Abu Ishak Al-Ahwaz, and the houses of group leaders in several villages, towns, and cities that it controlled in the governorate.

