About the Authors –

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Executive Summary

Nearly two years after the Islamic State's (IS) fighting forces were dislodged from their final hideout in Baghouz, Syria, the northeast (NE) region remains highly insecure. Numerous state actors with a stake in the future of Syria either maintain a troop presence in the NE or are providing financial and logistical support to proxies or other non-state actors.[1] The resulting conflicts paint a worrying picture for the future of the NE and its residents.

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

To further exacerbate the situation, all the factors that previously allowed for the rise of armed extremist groups and the eventual takeover by the so-called Islamic State (IS) in NE Syria–lack of accountability, marginalization, corruption among and impunity for the ruling elites, lack of economic opportunities, poor governance, and opportunities for radicalization in detention–remain unaddressed and, in some cases, more prevalent than before. Indeed, this report comes at a critical juncture for the northeast, where IS continues to capitalize on the region's instability and has begun to reassert itself in both Syria and Iraq, exploiting the fragile security environment of both countries.

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[1] State military presences in this region include the Russian Federation, Syria, Turkey and the United States.
[2] Interviews reveal discontent with the scarcity of opportunities for children to receive an education that is also free from what they described as "propaganda," whether under the rule of the Syrian government, IS, or the SDF.

A failure to address the core issues that gave rise to violent extremism will undermine the enduring defeat of IS and other extremist groups and lead to the continued suffering of the people of NE Syria, which begs the following questions:

- What are the existing vulnerabilities that contribute to the threat of IS and other extremist groups regaining a foothold in the NE?
- Is a return to violence the default for seeking to bring about change or improvement?
- If so, what can be done by actors at the local, national, and international level to prevent such a resurgence of violence or violent extremism in NE Syria?

The research conducted for this study suggests that, while some Syrians may have joined IS as the result of genuine belief, a perceived religious obligation, or indoctrination–radical ideological beliefs are not the main drivers of violent extremism in the region. Rather, the main reasons were more opportunistic, driven by the security vacuum created by the conflict, economic and social[3] vulnerability amid chaos, a desire for revenge against armed groups and, in some cases, the need for protection. Additionally, many of these underlying socio-economic, security, and governance drivers were aggravated by recent military operations in the NE. As result, the area suffers from widespread grievances against the Kurdish-led Administration and SDF, the dearth of international assistance, in addition to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for the population.

Given this bleak outlook, addressing urgent needs in NE Syria is contingent upon cooperation between local and international actors. However, present circumstances have made it very challenging for effective humanitarian intervention in the NE. The reasons relate to access limitations imposed on direct UN and state aid, which are made even more difficult by the decreasing number of cross-border entry points; instability as a result of continuing conflict; the very limited knowledge that exists about capacities and expertise of local Syrian actors; and the lack of coordination on the ground.

Our findings indicate that in the short term, these circumstances will continue to hamper international aid programming unless there is immediate investment in areas that may improve the efficiency and impact of any programming in the area. Such enhancement should be built on using local actors to conduct mappings (for example a local registry) of local capacities; the strengthening of such capacities through trainings and mentorships; and improving local information sharing and coordination across key sectors, such as justice,

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[3] Author interviews, October-December 2020. Social vulnerability here means a desire for protection, as described in interviews.

development, humanitarian assistance, and security Immediate investment in these areas, should vastly improve the reach and impact of the United Nations and aid organizations even if the challenges posed by the continuing conflict remain.

This study's long-term recommendations are addressed to both international actors (UN agencies, governments, international aid organizations, donors, etc.) and Syrian stakeholders (local and national governmental, non-state, and non-governmental actors). They refrain from spelling out in detail how assistance should be carried out, recognizing that much will depend on the types of local partnerships that can be developed at local governmental or civil society level. Rather, they seek to provide guidance by identifying key priority areas that emerged from numerous consultations with stakeholders, and our fieldwork. These include improving day-to-day security; addressing conflict-induced trauma; restoring trust in local governance including by improving access to justice; prioritizing investment in education and employment; and enhancing the capacities and voices of youth and women. The study recognizes that for greater impact and synergy programming and policies should be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.