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Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria

Introduction

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, painting a worrying picture for the future of the NE and its residents. 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 Amidst the resulting heightened tensions, insecurity, and bouts of renewed conflict—communities across the region struggle to secure employment, children are mostly forced to forego proper education, infrastructure projects struggle to progress, and services such as water and electricity remain scarce in many areas.

In essence, every factor that previously allowed for the rise of armed extremist groups and the eventual takeover by the so-called Islamic State remains unaddressed and, in some cases,, more prevalent than before. This begs the following questions:

- What are the prevailing vulnerabilities that contribute to the threat of IS and other extremist groups regaining a foothold in the North East?
- 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?

Such are the questions that this report seeks to answer. The findings and recommendations are based on three months of field research and interviews in the following cities: Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Urfa (Turkey); Beirut (Lebanon); Manbij, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and Kobani (Syria); and Washington, DC and New York City (United States).

About the Authors –

Jasmine M. El-Gamal is a political analyst, writer, and speaker on U.S foreign policy, the Middle East, Islamophobia, and the Syria refugee crisis.

Hanny Megally, is a senior fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and a member of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

¹ State military presences in this region include the Russian Federation, Syria, Turkey and the United States.

Background

Northeast Syria, with a pre-conflict population of around three million people, has long been home to a diverse array of ethnicities, religions, languages, and communities. The two largest communities are the (largely Sunni Muslim) Kurds and Arabs, which coexisted alongside smaller communities of Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, and Circassians.

What started out as peaceful protests for dignity and reforms in the south of Syria during February 2011 soon turned violent when they were met by heavy handed responses. This quickly led to a breakdown of security across the country, providing an opening that extremist groups would exploit and paved the way for the arrival IS from Iraq, and its eventual control of the northeastern city of Raqqa.

Why did IS choose the Northeast? The reasons are rooted in a mix of symbolic, social, financial, ideological, and practical considerations. Once the group had settled on the NE, it began a campaign of influence to recruit fighters to its ranks, coupled with a two-pronged strategy of incentivizing and coercing the local population into submitting to life under the “Caliphate.”

IS was also able to reap considerable wealth from assets native to northeast Syria, such as oil and farmland. Assets also appeared in the form of human capital, including tribal allies, defected fighters from other armed opposition groups, and foreign fighters that poured into Syria from all over the world. Among its top five sources of capital, IS [received](#) “illicit proceeds from the occupation of territory, such as bank looting, extortion, control of oil fields and refineries, robbery of economic assets, and illicit taxation of goods and cash.”

While a significant proclivity for radical beliefs did not appear to predate the arrival of IS on Syrian soil, historical legacies of state repression and conditions of instability contributed to the group’s shocking and unprecedented success. A strong desire to fight the Government of Syria (GoS) through any means necessary, coupled with a socioeconomic breakdown and conditions of chaos, motivated many to switch allegiances and join IS, which boasted both a strong safety net for its members as well as a reputation for ferocity and fearlessness.

Why did IS succeed in expanding in the Northeast? Violence and trauma experienced at the hands of armed parties to the conflict were undoubtedly powerful motivators encouraging membership in extremist groups, including IS, and a resort to armed revenge.

Another force behind IS’s success was the neglect of the Kurdish people prior to IS’s arrival. Beyond rendering thousands of Kurds stateless through various

“Arabization” initiatives, the GoS had also repressed Kurdish linguistic, cultural, and political rights through discriminatory measures.

Sectarian narratives also aided IS’s dominance. Prior to 2011, northeast Syria comprised a mix of communities, sects, and ethnicities, including Turkmen, Armenians, Kurds, Christians, and Muslims, who had largely co-existed peacefully. At the onset of the protests in 2011, however, public discourse was sectarianized to sow division within the communities, a practice that was maintained and exploited by IS.

It is critical to reiterate that while some Syrians may have joined IS as the result of genuine ideological belief, our study suggest that most joined because it presented a well-funded and effective means of achieving their desire for stability and purpose. Before it was targeted by the Global Coalition to Counter Daesh, IS was functioning as a de-facto state and at least some of its “citizens” were satisfied with the level and quality of services. Initially, many saw IS as a “least-worst option” in the midst of the “chaos.”

It is of utmost importance to underscore that acceding to IS rule in the northeast was by no means all-voluntary; IS famously ruled with brutality, fear, and coercion.

What effects did IS have in the Northeast? The organization under Al-Baghdadi’s leadership proved brutal. The tactics deployed to establish a so-called Caliphate were deliberately shocking, ruthless, and intended to achieve total domination of the population it ruled over.

Women and girls were segregated, made to wear sharia-compliant clothing covering their entire body and face. They were also wedded to male IS fighters and expected to bear children for them. Men had to go through what was known as “repentance centers,” where they were subjected to courses related to Islamic scripture and IS interpretations of the faith.

Ethno-religious minorities such as the Yazidis suffered greatly. IS considered them infidels and traded their women and girls as sex slaves. For those within Sunni Muslim communities that chose to fight with IS, their choices fomented tension, resentment, and even rifts between families, who “might have one son fighting with IS and another with the FSA.”

Children were particularly vulnerable to IS’s brutality. Already impressionable due to their age, young boys, known as “cubs of the Caliphate,” were subjected to hours of indoctrination in IS teachings in schools and training centers.

What was the aftermath of IS’s rule in the Northeast? The legacy will take years to be fully understood. Thousands of Syrian men and women remain in

prisons or prison-like camps under the administration of the SDF; and those individuals and their young children are at the risk of becoming radicalized (or further radicalized in some cases) if the international community doesn't move to identify long-term solutions.

At the initiative of tribal leaders and their communities, the SDF have thus far released several hundred Syrian women and children from al-Hol and allowed them to return to their communities. This is a welcome step and could set the stage for further normalization of the al-Hol population.

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

A number of troubling factors have also emerged regarding governance in the Administration/SDF-controlled areas. Governance in such an environment would be a challenge for any state; for the Administration, a non-state actor, the challenges are multiplied. As the COVID-19 pandemic has most recently made clear, there are a myriad of limitations on the international community when it comes to providing assistance through a non-state actor without the consent of the GoS.

While the Administration is, on paper, comprised of both Kurds and Arabs, several interviewees as well as other published accounts described how the “real” policy decisions are “made in Qandil,” referring to the headquarters of the PKK in Iraq's Qandil Mountains.

Eighty-one percent of people interviewed for this report critiqued the level of service provision, complaining about a lack of adequate water and electricity supply and the lack of significant progress on reconstructing schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure projects.

On the security front, our interviews reflected several existing reports of abuses at the hands of the Administration in areas under their control, including “forced displacement, demolition of homes, and the seizure and destruction of property.”

What are the risks of violence reemergence? There are a multitude of actors in the northeast, each with their own particular set of objectives that are often at odds with one another.

In the process of pushing back IS and the YPG from its border, Turkish military action (along with that of its Syrian proxies) has displaced thousands of Syrian Kurds, fueling feelings of anger, resentment, and uncertainty across the northeast, in addition to Kurdish fears of genuine ethnic cleansing. Intense societal fragmentation, along with rising levels of anger, resentment, and uncertainty, has continued to create an environment that, as described above, armed and extremist groups were previously able to use to their advantage.

The SDF, under double pressure from Turkey and having concluded they cannot rely on the international community for safety, have elected to reengage with the GoS. **Should the GoS successfully re-establish a more robust presence in the area, an outward veneer of stability may be established, albeit one that is once again reinforced with a heavy hand.** While in the short-term that may prevent a resurgence of IS and other extremist groups, it also means that the root causes of the conflict will remain.

The lack of equitable access to basic infrastructure, services, and education that existed under the GoS's pre-2011 rule continues today under the Administration and SDF, which adds to the area's vulnerability.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe ravaging communities in the poorest and richest of countries in the past year, northeast Syria, with 700,000 people displaced from their homes, has been hit particularly hard due to a lack of resources, access and attention.

The humanitarian crisis in northeast Syria has worsened since the UN Security Council, acting under pressure from the Russian Federation, shut down a UN-sanctioned humanitarian aid hub on January 10 at al-Yarubiya crossing on the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Finally, while IS has lost its "Caliphate," it is still very much present (albeit in a more decentralized way) in both Iraq and Syria.

What are the report findings in regard to the emergence of violent extremism?

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

These include:

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

What can be done to prevent the reemergence of violent extremism?

Addressing needs in northeast Syria is contingent upon cooperation between local and international actors toward sustainable programming that, above all, values the dignity of the individual. However, present circumstances have made it very challenging for effective humanitarian intervention in the NE. The reasons include, direct assistance by United Nations and state aid organizations (needing approval in Damascus) being limited to a decreasing number of agreed cross-border entry points or through state controlled territory; instability as a result of Turkish and allied forces military interventions in the area or the continued operations of IS and other armed groups; and the limited knowledge about the areas of expertise and capacities of local Syrian partners, in addition to a lack of coordination on the ground. All of this has led to an over reliance on partnerships with international non-governmental groups.

If the current low-intensity conflict persists – or even worsens - these circumstances will continue to hamper assistance unless there is a shift in approach. In the short term, this requires investment in four key areas intended to improve the efficiency and impact of any aid programming in the area.

This should include:

- Making informed decisions based on real-time data gathered from the ground through increased utilization of local actors and resources
- Mapping of the local actors (a local registry) to better understand local capacities and gaps
- Providing emerging institutions, civil society organizations, community-based associations, local councils, and other local actors, with capacity-building, training, and mentoring

- Developing linkages between different local sectors, such as justice, development, humanitarian assistance, and security, to improve coordination of efforts on the ground and increase efficacy

Immediate investment in these four areas, aimed at increasing efficiency and impact of aid programming, should vastly improve the ability of United Nations and aid organizations with their interventions even if the challenges outlined above continue.

With the above steps in mind, the recommendations below are addressed to both international actors (UN agencies, governments, international aid organizations, donors, etc.) and Syrian stakeholders (local and national governmental, non-state, and non-governmental actors). They identify key areas that emerged from the study

1. Improve the day-to-day security situation

This pervasive insecurity is currently impacted by a dearth of well-trained, well-equipped law enforcement personnel, the continued proliferation of armed former fighters (including IS fighters), a foreign military troop presence, and the widespread availability of weapons.

- Introduce culturally appropriate Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and counselling programs for persons engaged in violent extremism or conflict
- Encourage individuals to leave violent extremist groups by developing programs that provide them with accredited educational resources and economic opportunities
- Explore opportunities to introduce or support existing traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, arbitration, and restorative justice
- Provide practical human rights training to SDF security forces and all those involved in the administration of justice

2. Address conflict-induced trauma

- Many of the survey participants identified the urgent need for expertise and resources to be provided in this area
- Provide medical, psycho-social, and legal service support in communities that currently give shelter to victims of violent extremists, including victims of sexual and gender-based crimes

3. Restore trust and confidence in local governance

As local governance structures are vital partners in helping ensure long-term stability in the region, it is imperative to restore trust and build confidence in them.

- Increase transparency by ensuring that local governance structures publicize their working agenda, priorities of action, and openly share their budgets with community members
- Increase inclusive citizen participation and build community-embedded platforms and mechanisms for social accountability, whereby grassroots actors can be engaged in policy deliberation and identification of priority initiatives
- Conduct regular civil society's needs assessments. Improve delivery of essential services like electricity, water, waste management, etc. to alleviate hardship and strengthen the legitimacy of local governing institutions
- Strengthen local institutions, such as village and tribal councils and religious organizations
- Reduce levels of corruption by strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms

4. Deliver justice

Access to justice was identified as a key aspect of tackling grievances and building or restoring confidence and trust.

- Assist efforts to provide access to justice for all by focusing on strengthening the integrity and effectiveness of justice institutions and ensuring independent oversight
- Advance accountability for gross violations of international human rights

5. Strengthen Civil Society

As part of a strategy to work more closely with local partners and to improve coordination among local actors

- Develop joint and participatory locally designed strategies with civil society and local communities, aimed at preventing the reemergence of violent extremism
- Support confidence-building measures at the community level by providing appropriate platforms for dialogue

6. Educate and Employ

- Invest in education and improve upon the current arrangements. Programs should assist in providing education to ensure that all children have access to inclusive, high-quality learning that promote soft skills, critical thinking, and digital literacy. Civic education should be introduced into school curricula, textbooks, and teaching materials
- Improve upon the capacity of teachers and educators

- Incentivize local authorities to create social and economic opportunities in both rural and urban locations

7. Empower Youth

- Support young people's participation in activities aimed at preventing violent extremism through engagement mechanisms as laid out in the 2015 Amman Declaration on Youth, Peace, and Security
- Encourage the integration of young people into decision-making processes at the local level by supporting the establishment of youth councils and similar mechanisms which give young people a platform for participating in mainstream political discourse

8. Empower Women

- Enhance the capacity of women and their civil society groups to engage in prevention and response efforts related to violent extremism
- Support educational and economic initiatives that are specifically targeted at women
- Support programs aimed at community sensitizing on women's leadership roles

9. Align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- For greater impact and synergy, programming and policies should be aligned with SDGs, specifically ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1)
- Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Goal 4)
- Achieve gender equality and empowering all women and girls (Goal 5)
- Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth; full and productive employment; and decent work for all (Goal 8)
- Reduce inequality within and among countries (Goal 10)
- Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal 11)
- Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development (Goal 16)

**Center on International
Cooperation**
726 Broadway, Suite 543
New York, NY 10003

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