

POLICY BRIEF

The Remnants of Islamic State in Syria: Military Action Alone Cannot Defeat It

Abstract

After five years of fierce battles, in March 2019 a military campaign succeeded in bringing down the Caliphate that Islamic State (IS) declared in 2014 with the liberation of the group's last stronghold in eastern Syria by US-backed Kurdish forces. However, while IS lost its territory, the group with its fighters and ideology remain robust in Syria. As IS attacks are increasing in the areas controlled by Kurdish forces, Syrian opposition factions and the Syrian regime, these different actors and their foreign allies follow a military approach as the only strategy to defeat the group. However, military action will be insufficient to defeat IS unless it is accompanied by other political, economic and religious measures. This paper analyses the size and scope of IS activities over the past two years and the factors that strengthen the group's presence, and it offers policy recommendations on the measures needed to defeat IS in Syria.

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Introduction

In March 2019, so-called Islamic State (IS) was forced out of its last Syrian stronghold in the small town of Baghouz near Deir ez-Zor in the southeast of the country. Military action succeeded in toppling the pseudo-state, or 'caliphate,' declared by the group in 2014 but the organisation continues to exist as a military and ideological force in Syria. As of March 2021, it has carried out more than 1,500 attacks in various parts of Syria since leaving Baghouz, a toll that continues to mount daily.

In consequence, all parties, including the Syrian regime, opposition factions and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – the military arm of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) – along with their respective international allies continue to adopt a military approach as their sole means of confronting IS. This approach, however, cannot by itself prevent the resurgence of IS unless it is complemented with additional parallel political, economic and even religious approaches. As long as the political, economic and social climate that first facilitated the emergence of IS in Syria remains unchanged, the organisation will continue to be able to re-organise, conduct operations and recruit new members. In the medium-to-long-term future, it may even try to retake towns and villages once again.

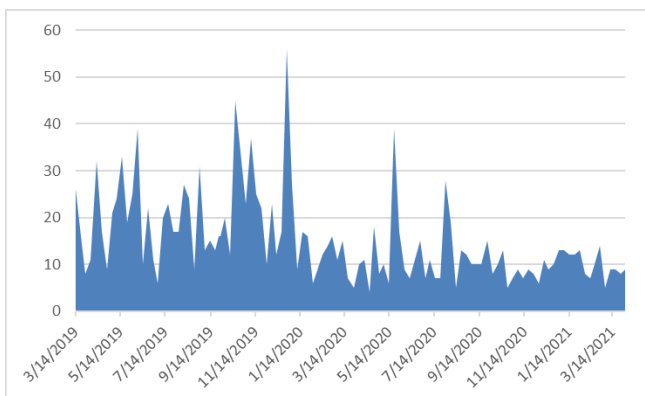
This policy brief details the scale and scope of IS's activities over the past two years, analyses the factors contributing to its survival and proposes policies to confront it in Syria.

1. Objectives and Geographical Scope of IS Activity

The loss of Baghouz in March 2019 did not stop IS carrying out operations. As Figure 1 shows, the frequency of these operations has fluctuated over time. Since it lost its 'caliphate' the organisation's strategy has been to exhaust both its Syrian and foreign opponents through

continual guerrilla warfare and to appear steadfast against these forces in the eyes of the local population wherever possible.

**Figure 1: IS Operations
(March 2019 – March 2021)**



Source: Al-Naba, an official weekly newspaper issued by IS's Central Media Office¹

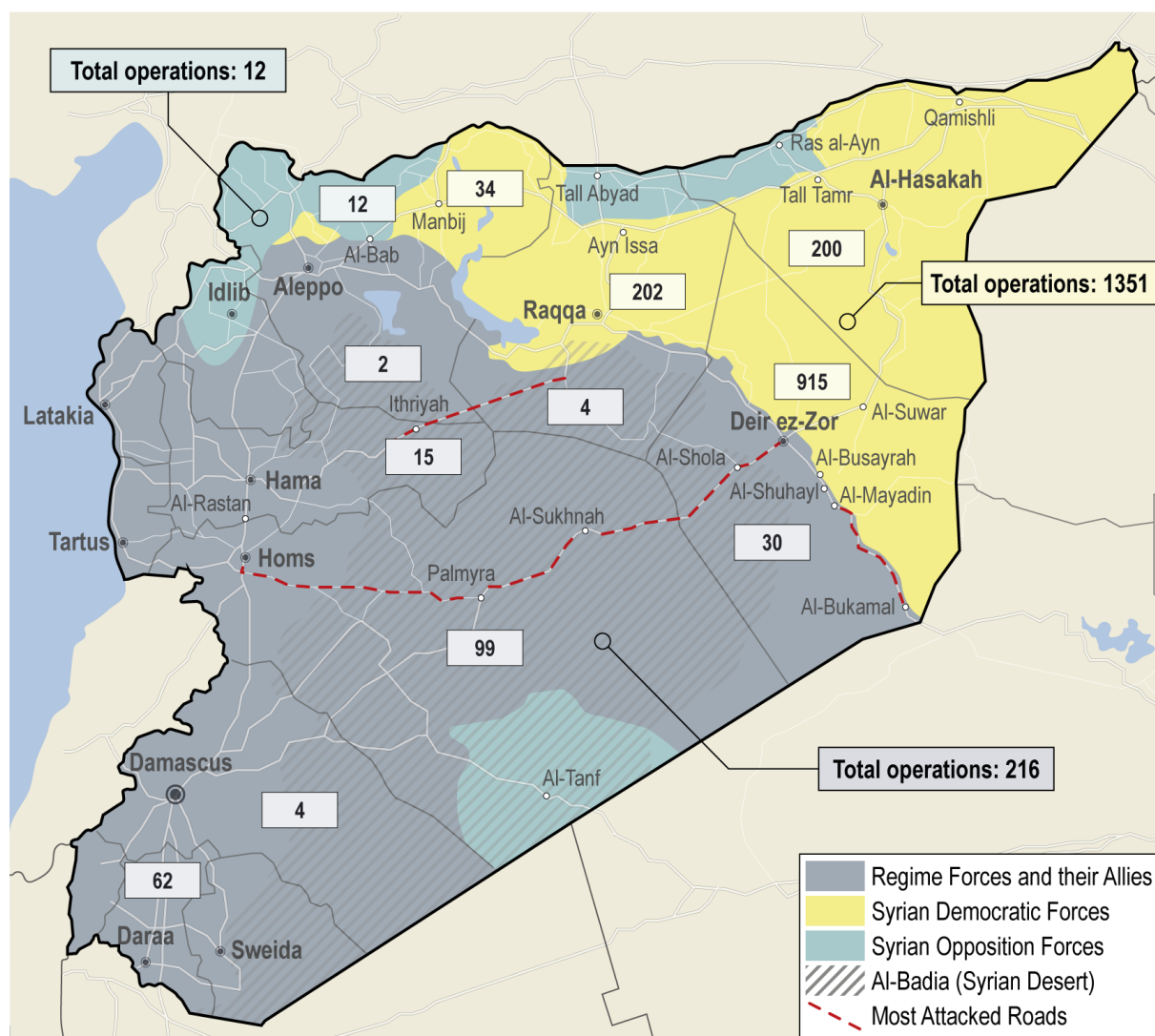
The organisation is active in numerous areas. However, the vast majority of its targeted attacks (around 86%) between March 2019 and March 2021 took place in territory controlled by the SDF. 13% occurred in regime-controlled areas and the remaining 1% on opposition-controlled terrain.

The number of operations in SDF-controlled areas totalled around 1,350. The parts of Deir ez-Zor governorate - previously referred to by IS as its Wilayat al-Khayr - saw the largest share of these operations, with more than 915 documented. Next came Raqqa, with about 200 operations, which were matched by parts of al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor governorates, collectively designated by IS as its Wilayat al-Baraka, which also saw 200 operations. Finally, parts of Aleppo governorate under SDF control witnessed some 34 operations (Map 1).

In regime-controlled areas, the organisation carried out around 215 operations, 152 of which were in the al-Badia (desert) region and 62 in Daraa governorate (which is not fully under regime control). One was in Damascus city.

¹ For all its statistics on IS operations, this paper relies on data published by al-Naba, an official weekly newspaper issued by Islamic State's Central Media Office. Al-Naba considers every attack or clash, regardless of how small, as an operation. While it does not publish details of all operations but only of ones considered important, it does show the statistics of all operations together with their geographical location. Figure 1 is drawn based on the weekly data published by al-Naba from Issue No. 172 of March 2019 to Issue No. 280 of April 2021.

**Map 1: IS operations by governorate and controlling entity
(March 2019 –March 2021)**



Source: Al-Naba

Three different categories of operations are carried out by IS, according to the target. The first are attacks against military targets, which are the most numerous. The second are punitive operations targeting collaborators with local military authorities together with those who refuse to pay *zakat* (literally alms but in practice a mandatory tax) and royalties to the organisation. Finally, operations to implement *hudud*² number the fewest in the post-2019 period. Over the past two years, the organisation has ceased carrying out indiscriminate car bomb killings, which had previously caused high civilian death tolls. Instead, it has appeared to focus on targeting military forces hostile to it and their collaborators, while making sure at the same time not to alienate local Sunni communities.³

1.1 Operations Against Military Targets

All the dominant local military forces – the SDF, Assad regime units and opposition factions – in each area and their foreign allies are targeted. IS generally prefers to ambush the mobile patrols of these forces. These operations follow the standard IS approach, which is to make an example of its enemies and wear them down, even if they do not bring particular political gains. The aim is to establish the presence of IS militants and carry out their ‘jihadist’ duty to target the enemy whenever they can. The results are “decided by God and subject to His will,” according to the organisation’s doctrine.

² Punishments fixed in the Quran and hadith for crimes considered to be against the rights of God.

³ Feras Kilani, “A Caliph Without a Caliphate: The Biography of ISIS’s New Leader,” *Newlines*, 15 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3guOs6W>

Numerous attacks have targeted regime forces and their Iranian allies in al-Badia, a semi-desert region with several major highways running through it. These attacks have been concentrated in the remote eastern fringes of Homs governorate, particularly the areas surrounding the towns of al-Sukhnah and Palmyra. Parts of Deir ez-Zor governorate bordering the desert, especially the region south of the town of al-Mayadin, have also been targeted. Since the end of 2020, the organisation has been able to carry out repeated attacks on the strategic road between Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. The most prominent of these was the ambush of a Fourth Division bus in the al-Shola region on 30 December 2020 killing nearly 40 members of a militia affiliated with the Division. The ambush marked a significant escalation after a series of smaller operations in less significant areas, such as the outskirts of al-Badia near the Euphrates Valley between the towns of al-Mayadin and al-Bukamal in Deir ez-Zor governorate. Meanwhile, IS has continued its attacks on wells, stations and gas and oil pipelines in the desert regions of Homs and Deir ez-Zor governorates. It has also conducted dozens of further ambushes against Iranian-backed militia fighters and the Russian-backed al-Quds Brigade in the desert between Raqqa, Hama and Homs governorates.

In the SDF-controlled areas east of the Euphrates, IS cells have carried out attacks in Deir ez-Zor governorate and regions further north, such as the desert in al-Jazirah and the Khabur Basin in al-Hasakah governorate. These attacks target the SDF as a military force, striking individuals and groups alike. IS's operations in these areas have evolved and become more daring, targeting SDF headquarters in significant towns. In March 2021, for instance, the SDF headquarters in al-Busayrah and al-Shuhayl were targeted with rocket-propelled grenades.

Elsewhere, IS cells have carried out a number of operations in opposition-held territory in Aleppo governorate. In November 2020, a Free Syrian Police (FSP) officer was assassinated in al-Bab.

A leader of the Turkish-backed Sham Legion brigade, Hamdo al-Hammadi, was killed by an explosive device that blew up his car in the same city, while in December 2020 a car belonging to a Levant Front leader in Afrin was also targeted.

1.2 Punitive Operations

Operations west of the Euphrates have targeted tanker convoys coming from SDF-controlled areas *en route* to the Homs refinery. Such attacks aim to punish oil traders and smugglers who are late in paying the royalties imposed by IS in exchange for ensuring the safe passage of oil tankers.⁴ IS operatives have repeatedly attacked crude oil tankers belonging to the Qaterji Company, the most recent operation having burned 10 tankers between Ithriyah and Salamiyah in al-Badia in January 2021.

As for the SDF-controlled areas east of the Euphrates, operations have targeted local civilians who work with the AANES and its councils and communes.⁵ These operations aim at isolating the AANES representatives in local communities and deterring the population from associating with the AANES or developing common interests with it.

IS also targets people it accuses of spying for the SDF or international coalition forces and its own former members whom it accuses of treason. These operations also occur in opposition-controlled areas. In November 2020, IS kidnapped a person from his home in the village of Zamaka north of al-Bab before killing him on charges of spying for the Turkish-backed Hamza Division.

Punitive operations also involve attacks on merchants or wealthy persons who refuse to pay *zakat* to IS in the SDF-controlled parts of Deir ez-Zor. These include local oil dealers and contractors who fail to pay the royalties imposed by IS in exchange for the safe passage or import of oil.

4 Al-Araby al-Jadeed, "This is How Assad Gets Oil Despite Sanctions and SDF Control" (in Arabic), 12 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/3suKsW4>

5 Mike Thomson, "IS Brutality Returning to Syrian Towns," BBC, 7 February 2021, <https://bbc.in/3v8kYQd>

1.3 Operations to Implement *Hudud*

These operations target people accused of ‘apostasy’ or “corruption on Earth.” They include attacks on Sufis portrayed as warlocks and sorcerers. Despite the organisation’s ability to target a greater number of such people, the numbers of this type of operation have actually gone down, indicating that IS’s present priorities concern security and finance to maintain the organisation more than religion and *sharia* law punishments.

2. Factors Enabling IS’s Survival

The factors enabling the organisation’s survival and continuing military capabilities differ from one area to another, and from one place within each area to another. Nonetheless, two key common factors may be identified. The first is an absence of governance, as in al-Badia, where the population is sparse and regime forces exercise only weak military control. The second is societal tension resulting from a deterioration of services and an absence of political legitimacy, as is the case in SDF-controlled areas.⁶

2.1 The Ungovernable Territory of al-Badia

The principal reason for IS’s ability to survive in al-Badia appears to be its deliberate and well-planned dispersal across the vast desert, full control of which would require immense military capabilities which are possessed neither by the Assad regime nor its Iranian and Russian allies.

The al-Badia desert is a large territory not ruled effectively by any single entity. Its approximately 80,000 square kilometres are split administratively among seven governorates: Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Raqqa, Homs, Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Sweida. It contains no large urban centres apart

from Palmyra, al-Sukhnah and al-Qaryatayn, all three of which saw waves of displacement between 2012 and 2017 due to the war, almost entirely emptying them of residents.

It was to al-Badia that most foreign IS fighters in Syria relocated after the overthrow of the ‘caliphate.’ The leadership of the group has been assumed by non-Syrians, such as Abu Ayyub al-Iraqi, until he was killed at an unknown time after 2018, at which point he was replaced by the Saudi Arabian national Alqama al-Tamimi, himself killed in February 2020.⁷ Compared with IS fighters in SDF-controlled Deir ez-Zor, the al-Badia fighters appear more representative of IS’s typical ideological toughness, combat capabilities and organisational cohesion.

In al-Badia, IS has found a suitable environment in which to re-organise, taking advantage of its experience in the similar terrain of the western Iraqi desert. After the defeat of the former Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) at the hands of the US-backed Sunni clans collectively known as the Sunni Awakening movement (or *Sahawat*), the desert continued to provide ISI with safe haven between 2007 and 2013. From the military perspective, IS fighters enjoy a competitive advantage in the desert environment as they have greater experience of desert warfare than the Syrian regime and its allied militias. This gives the organisation the upper hand in confrontations with regime forces.⁸ Furthermore, smuggling networks on the Syrian-Iraqi border and the network of merchants with whom corrupt regime officers cooperate play an additional role in providing IS with the weapons and supplies it requires.

6 In the special case of Daraa, the fragile Russian-sponsored settlement between regime forces and their Iranian allies on the one hand and armed opposition factions on the other has done much to enable the survival of IS in the governorate.

7 Al-Naba, “Alqama al-Tamimi ... A Lion Between the Dens of Syria and Iraq” (in Arabic), Issue No. 265, January 2020.

8 Mohammed Hassan, “ISIS and the Assad Regime: Strategy and Counter-Strategy in Syria’s Badia,” *Middle East Institute*, 16 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3asFvXR>

2.2 Political Corruption and Societal Tensions in SDF-Controlled Areas

In the territory east of the Euphrates, which has an estimated population of three million, the AANES has failed to establish fair and competent governance for all residents. It has failed to face mounting economic, political and cultural challenges, not least of which are the high unemployment rate and AANES's lack of support and legitimacy among Arab tribes, which make up the majority of the population and yet play almost no role in governance and decision-making.

In Deir ez-Zor, a large proportion of men of working age are unemployed. Agricultural and related work no longer suffices to employ the growing numbers of young men entering the labour market for the first time. Meanwhile, the process by which people are employed in AANES institutions and in its affiliated Deir ez-Zor Civil Council is seen by residents as questionable. For example, in October 2020, although more than 1,200 people applied for basic jobs such as school building guards, not one has been appointed as of the time of writing. Residents feel that the AANES discriminates against them, responding only to requests for employment from outside Deir ez-Zor.⁹ Corruption is also widespread in most AANES-affiliated institutions. The SDF arrested Zakaria al-Maani, the former head of the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council's Finance Committee, on charges of theft.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, Ahmed al-Khabil, nicknamed Abu Khawla, remains the subject of controversy and allegations of corruption.¹¹

In addition, the SDF insists on forcibly conscripting young local men, especially in Raqqa and al-Hasakah governorates, while also imposing severe restrictions that have pushed many others to flee the area to avoid arrest by the SDF military police. This mandatory conscription has faced popular resistance, especially among Arab

tribes, which fear becoming involved in a conflict between the SDF and IS which they would prefer to stay out of.

To a large extent, the cultural differences between the AANES and the local communities in the areas under its control further aggravate such crises. For example, the AANES attempts to impose its own education curricula in the schools it sponsors in Deir ez-Zor, which has led to much tension since these curricula are at odds with the prevailing conservative values and traditions of the local communities.

Finally, the political order in Deir ez-Zor led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) enjoys little to no support from the local communities. As such, the absence of legitimate governance structures provides opportunities for IS to resume its activities. In addition, tribal conflicts in eastern Deir ez-Zor offer a favourable environment for IS to exploit divisions. As a result of the political and security vacuum, the organisation has been able to continue demanding *zakat* payments from these communities, enabling it to re-organise and provide its fighters with the necessary resources.

2.3 Deteriorating Living Conditions in SDF-Controlled Areas

The AANES has failed to provide the population with a reasonable level of public services and to develop the local economy, especially with regard to agriculture, which constitutes the main source of work for most of the population. The AANES has also failed to carry out a fair and substantive distribution of oil and gas wealth, especially from its main fields in Deir ez-Zor.

Locals complain that their post-IS rulers have neglected their needs and are incapable of meeting them due to their incompetence. For at least two years, dozens of cities, towns and villages in Deir ez-Zor have suffered from a

9 Manhal Baresh, "Syria: Discriminatory Policies Continued by the Autonomous Administration Against the People of Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 13 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3tJkslk>

10 Syria TV, "SDF Arrests the Deir ez-Zor Council's Head of the Finance Committee" (in Arabic), 11 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3dttluf>

11 Barack Barfi, "Managing Washington's Corrupt Partners in Eastern Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 17 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/3uVdQGE>

deterioration in the public electricity service, with only a meagre capacity of 29 megawatts allocated to Deir ez-Zor from the Euphrates Dam.¹² This has led to power cuts lasting up to 22 hours a day in some areas, while power is entirely absent in others, particularly east of Deir ez-Zor, where the population relies on private locally-sourced generators. These power cuts have caused certain water purification stations to stop working, leading to shortages of drinking water that force residents to pay for water from mobile tankers – at a price of SYP 500 per barrel – despite living close to the Euphrates River.

Moreover, fuel prices in Deir ez-Zor have risen dramatically since last summer, reaching five or six times the previous prices in al-Hasakah governorate, even though Syria's largest oil fields such as Tanak and al-Omar are located in Deir ez-Zor. The price of a litre of diesel in Deir ez-Zor is SYP 400, compared to SYP 75 in al-Hasakah, while a litre of gasoline costs SYP 750 in Deir ez-Zor versus SYP 150 in al-Hasakah, according to March 2021 prices.¹³ High fuel prices have led to severe price hikes for transportation, agriculture, foodstuffs, vegetables and bread. There is also an acute shortage of flour supplied to bakeries in Deir ez-Zor. Local residents demand more flour and new bakeries, as the quantities of bread available cover no more than 40% of the needs of the western countryside's population. Delays have also occurred in the restoration of infrastructure which was severely damaged during the military operations conducted by coalition and SDF forces against IS two years ago.

IS is well aware of the favourable impact, from its perspective, of discriminatory policies and deteriorating living conditions in AANES-controlled areas. As such, it takes care to avoid attacking public infrastructure in a manner that could harm the local population, refraining from targeting drinking water stations and electricity networks, for example. It also avoids such soft targets as aid workers in relief and development NGOs for the same reasons. IS publications make a point of highlighting the deterioration

of living and security conditions in these areas, comparing them to how they were under its rule. In an interview with the *al-Naba* publication, Abu Mansur al-Ansari, the 'Emir of security units for Wilayat al-Khayr,' said the situation in the area had become "extremely bad" since the organisation left. "No good services, no jobs, no new projects [...] and the general population lacks security for themselves and for their money [at risk] from criminals, with widespread kidnappings and roadblocks day and night."¹⁴

3. How to Prevent an IS Resurgence in Syria

Various local and international political actors operating in Syria have adopted the same strategy in confronting IS based on the same military solution applied in the past. However, the approach that succeeded in defeating the 'caliphate' does not work when it comes to the remnants of the organisation. The battle to expel IS from the territory previously occupied by its pseudo-state is a quite different matter to the containment of its ideas and activities in the post-caliphate period.

The factors that led to the emergence of IS in the first place remain in place today, some perhaps even more so than previously. Syrian state institutions remain absent from large swathes of territory under its nominal control, as in the case of al-Badia. The SDF lacks popular support in Arab areas, especially in Deir ez-Zor. While the country as a whole suffers from deteriorating living conditions, neither the regime nor the opposition, nor even the SDF, appear capable of countering IS's rhetoric at the political and religious levels. Confronting IS and preventing its attempted comeback therefore requires transforming the environment conducive to its activity. Decision-makers, whether inside Syria (particularly the AANES) or outside, must undertake four key steps to combat the organisation.

12 Interview with an electrician working in Deir ez-Zor on 15 April 2021.

13 Manhal Baresh, op. cit.

14 Al-Naba, Issue No. 261, Year 12, 20 November 2020.

3.1 Military Action Is Important to Halt IS's Advance in the Short Term, but Will Not Defeat It Altogether

Syrian regime forces supported by their Russian and Iranian allies in al-Badia and the SDF supported by the international coalition east of the Euphrates may be able to stop the advance of IS for a certain period of time, but they will not be able to inflict permanent defeat on the organisation. This has been demonstrated by the trajectory of IS attacks over the past two years, as is illustrated in Figure 1. The upward and downward shifts point to IS's ability to adapt to changing conditions. Military confrontations can inflict losses on the organisation but cannot alone stop its advance in the medium and long terms if the organisation continues to rebuild its ranks with new members and enjoy the support of local communities. Importantly, excessive use of force and an expansion of the circle of suspects and targets may have negative repercussions, prompting some victims or their families to sympathise with IS or provide it with assistance in response.

At the same time, security and military measures should not be limited to confronting IS's armed members but must be extended to cutting off its military and financial supply lines straddling the Iraqi-Syrian border by tackling the smuggling networks cooperating with it.

3.2 Religious and Cultural Initiatives Are Needed to Counter IS Ideology

IS cannot be decisively defeated without a holistic project to counter its religious rhetoric. Although the factors that drive many to join IS are political and socio-economic rather than ideological, it is IS's religious discourse that imbues these factors with the religious aura with which its fighters justify their acts of violence, which would be unjustifiable without such an aura. Accordingly, confronting IS's ideology is no less important than confronting its armed forces. The organisation spreads its ideas freely, exploiting the absence of effective alternative religious movements and promoting what it deems the true interpretation of Islam. Countering this propaganda requires building a religious discourse capable of refuting

the interpretation of Islamic *Sharia* used by IS to justify its political and military activities.

This should not be reduced to mere religious discourse. The religious and cultural project envisioned here must also involve religious actors with local support who can effectively promote an anti-IS discourse within their communities. The regime's religious institutions, which have lost respect and legitimacy due to their political stances, are of no use in this regard. Instead, it is necessary to work with other religious figures who continue to enjoy such respect and legitimacy among Syrians.

3.3 Legitimate Political and Security Structures Should Be Built in SDF-Controlled Areas

The Kurdish-led AANES must seek to build a real political partnership with Arab communities in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and al-Hasakah, establishing sustainable political structures with local legitimacy. These should include a local security and police apparatus independent of the Internal Security Forces – also known as the Asayish – to defend these areas against IS attacks. In this regard, the SDF-affiliated Deir ez-Zor Military Council, the majority of the leadership and membership of which are Arab, must be supported with the aim of building a local military force to encourage defected soldiers and members of armed opposition factions to return to their areas and join it.

As long as local support for the dominant political and security project is absent, whether in SDF-controlled areas or more broadly in Syria as a whole, IS will continue to enjoy leverage it can exploit. As things stand, the discontent simmering beneath the surface in numerous parts of the country gives the organisation a golden opportunity to regain control in the medium and longer terms.

3.4. More Action Is Needed to Improve Living Conditions in SDF-Controlled Areas

The AANES must also work to improve living conditions in the areas under its control, especially in Deir ez-Zor, and to provide the services urgently needed there. The international community must assist in these efforts. This includes, for example, combating unemployment, providing jobs, creating major development projects in Arab towns and villages, securing decent living conditions and compensation for those who were displaced and/or had their homes destroyed, providing basic services such as water, electricity, healthcare and education to a decent standard and providing bread, fuel and other foodstuffs at prices commensurate with the purchasing power of the population.

International actors with an interest in resolving the crises in AANES areas must intensify support for civil society organisations (CSOs), which have played important roles in alleviating the suffering of the local population. Projects implemented by relief organisations have helped provide tens of thousands of families in need with minimum food and shelter. Active development organisations include the Early Intervention Team in Raqqa,¹⁵ Better Hope for Tabqa in the western Raqqa countryside¹⁶ and Our Euphrates for Development, which operates in Abu Hamam east of Deir ez-Zor. These organisations have helped maintain electricity networks, restore a number of roads and hundreds of schools, repair small and medium-sized irrigation systems and support farmers, enabling them to cultivate their land once again. Increasing the funding allocated to CSOs in north-eastern Syria and making such funding sustainable may be highly feasible options for developing the local economy, given the great benefits these CSOs provide the population with and the various job opportunities they create for the young men and women involved in them.

In the medium and longer terms, the civil society emerging there may turn into an effective mediating social force to help solve the complex crises afflicting the region.¹⁷

15 Mutasim al-Tawil, "Great Services Provided by the Early Intervention Team in the City of Raqqa" (in Arabic), *7al.net*, 1 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3x65xda>

16 The organisation's Facebook page "A Better Hope for Class" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3x88Wlz>

17 Hadeel al-Saidawi, "Preparing for the Aftermath," *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*, 11 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/3vboSYC>

Middle East Directions

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