

# Civil Society

## And Confronting the Effects of Extremism in North and East Syria



The impact of extremist groups and ideologies on the communities of northeastern Syria and the role of influential groups in confronting such impact

A research paper issued by Justice for Life (JFL) with support by the European Union



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The Justice for Life organization (JFL) is an independent, non-governmental and nonprofit Syrian organization, concerned with strengthening and promoting the culture of human rights in Syria.

JFL was founded in 2015. Since then, it became a platform and a space for human rights defenders and victims to advocate and defend their cases in accordance with legal and professional norms. JFL promotes human rights across Syrian society at the cultural, social, and political levels to ensure that victims and their families have access to their rights. To achieve this, the organization's work has expanded to become an active part of the national and international human rights alliances that document the violations in Syria and prepares the documentation of violations and crimes that have occurred against Syrian people since 2011 in compliance with legal standards.

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## Executive Summary

Between 2014 and 2017, the northeastern Syrian regions (mainly the governorates of Al-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, and Deir Ezzor) were controlled by the extremist group of ISIS (the Islamic State). This period has marked the longest of all ISIS control over any other areas in Syria. Moreover, extremists committed numerous violations under the rule of ISIS, including detentions, kidnaps, child recruitment, displacement of civil populations, and enforcing unprecedented brutal punishments. Consequently, the northeastern governorates became the main battlefield of the decisive anti-ISIS military campaign. As a result, hundreds of thousands of civilians escaped the region particularly fled Al-Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and some parts of Al-Hasakah governorate. After the defeat of ISIS, the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) gained control over almost the entire region. At the same time, main cities such as Al-Hasakah and Al-Qamishli received thousands of IDPs in mass displacement waves<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, other IDPs from the government-controlled Al-Raqqa and Aleppo countryside relocated to the SDF-controlled Al-Raqqa governorate.

After the defeat of ISIS, local communities witnessed a considerable improvement in several civic fields, such as freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of civil society activity, basic services, and women's participation. However, the security status has not recovered, which led to deteriorating living conditions, besides institutional corruption of the Autonomous Administration bodies and the lack of job opportunities.

The main causes of extremism's existence and spreading remain unchanged: poverty, inequality, insecurity, political exclusion, marginalization, racial/ethnic discrimination, and substantial damage to damage to education sector. Furthermore, this state of tension could escalate into even more social unrest and exposure to military threats such as the Syrian government forces and their allied militias or the Turkish-backed rebels, which control areas of northeast Syria.

Within the framework of the Social Reintegration and Resilience to Combat Radicalization in Northeast Syria project, which is funded by the EU and implemented by JFL, which has been active in the Social Structure Research field. JFL has worked an analytical report the impact of extremist

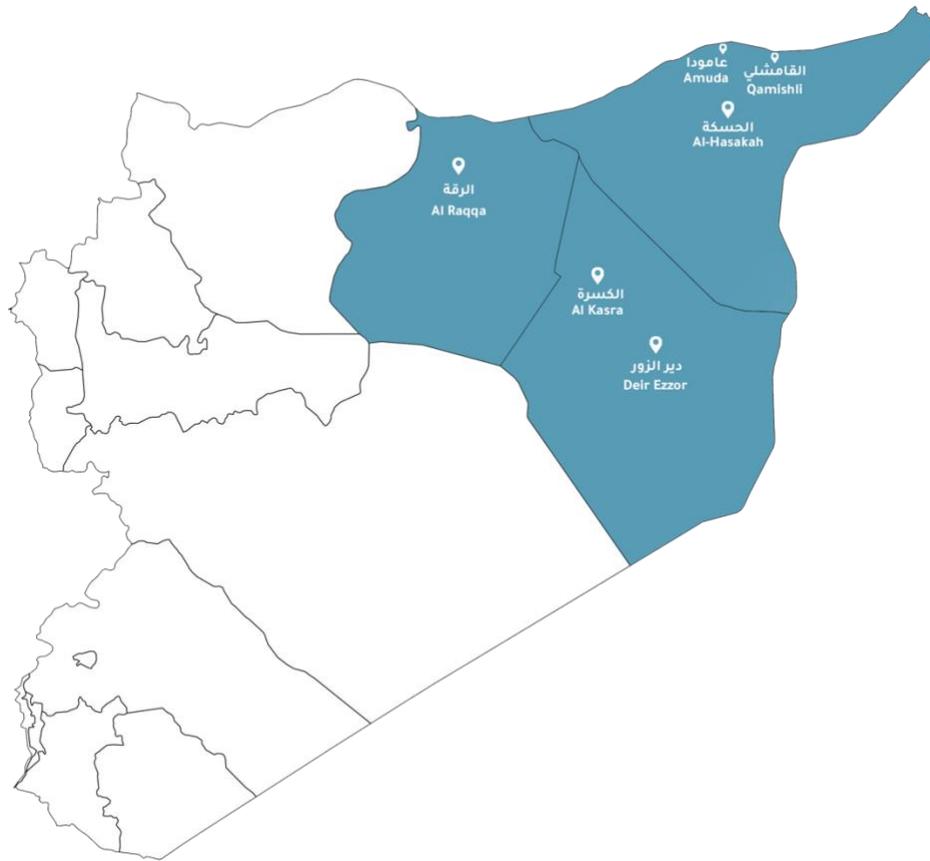
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<sup>1</sup> Four mass displacement waves happened in 2012, 2013, 2017, and 2019 due to anti-ISIS military campaigns launched by the SDF and the Syrian government or due to clashes with Turkish-backed rebels in Al-Raqqa and Al-Hasakah countryside.

groups and their ideology on local communities, particularly vulnerable groups. Acknowledging the socio-economic, insecurity, and associated violence elements as the main causes of extremism, the analytical report recommended promoting coordination between civil society and local communities and authorities to slow down the extremist impact and to protect the region from falling to extremist groups. The analytical report's findings are based on interviews with key informants. Additionally, JFL has designed its own research tools such as focus group discussions and close-ended questions to figure out the social tendencies, which enlighten a road map to change and reinforce the region from any possible return of extremist ideology.

There is a common agreement that developing economic and security plans is the first step towards sustainable defeat and immunity against extremism. Furthermore, it opens the road to reconstruction and return refugees back home. Ultimately, people will then have the stamina to rebuild what they lost in the past years.

# Overview of Implementation Areas



## Al-Raqqa Governorate

It is located on the north bank of the Euphrates River, 200 km<sup>2</sup> east of Aleppo city in the northeast of Syrian. Al-Raqqa covers an area of 19 thousand km<sup>2</sup>. The current<sup>2</sup> population<sup>3</sup> is over 500 thousand, in addition to 300 thousand IDPs. Al-Raqqa has a tribal community structure with a Muslim majority; the Al-Bushaban tribe is the largest in Al-Raqqa. The Christian minority fled the governorate after ISIS control. To the northern outskirts of Al-Raqqa, there is a Kurdish population and some Circassian and Turkmen families.

The Syrian armed opposition and Islamic factions managed to control Al-Raqqa in 2013 before ISIS managed to impose full land control between January-August 2014. Three years later, ISIS retreated from Al-Raqqa and was defeated by the international coalition-backed SDF. However, military operations maneuver never stopped after ISIS; Turkish-backed Syrian rebels (known as the Syrian National Army) launched attacks in 2019 from Turkish borders and managed to reach the city of Tal Abyad, which made the SDF seeking military help from the Syrian government military and its allied militias to stop the Turkish expansion. Therefore, the control map is divided between those parties.

## Al-Hasakah Governorate

It lays to the northeast of Syria with and area of 23 thousand km<sup>2</sup> and currently over 2 million population and over 200 thousand IDPs. Al-Hasakah is inhabited by various religions and ethnicities; Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Syriacs, and Armenians. Arabs and Kurds are majority Muslims while the Assyrians, Syriacs, and Armenians are Christians. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Al-Hasakah witnessed peaceful demonstrations against the Assad regime. Many local coordination groups were found to lead the uprising. Shortly after, the Syrian government gradual retreat from the region, the security gap was filled almost immediately by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party PYD, which formed the military units of: YPG (People's Protection Units), and YPJ (Women's Protection Units).

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Central Bureau of Statistics for the year 2014: Deir Ezzor Governorate: (1,234,000), Al-Hasakah Governorate (1,277,000), and Al-Raqqa Governorate (867,000).  
<http://cbssvr.sy>

<sup>3</sup> The numbers of residents and IDPs in Al-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah and Deir Ezzor are based on estimates by local organizations and local activists closely connected to the Autonomous Administration.

In July 2012, the opposition armed forces entered the city of Ras al-Ain after confrontations with government forces. After the intervention of the YPG as a third party in the conflict, the city was divided in terms of control between the YPG and Jabhat Al-Nusra. With the continued withdrawal of government forces from the region except for Qamishli and Al-Hasaka, the YPD extended its control over the border areas with Turkey. In 2014 the YPD announced the Autonomous Administration<sup>4</sup> project<sup>5</sup>.

The opposition armed forces withdrew from Al-Hasakah Governorate, and ISIS managed to control their positions. In 2015, the SDF<sup>6</sup> (the Syrian Democratic Forces), accompanied by the US-led international coalition support, announced starting a military operation to combat terrorism and restore ISIS's areas.

The autonomous administration renamed the administrative region of Al-Hasakah to Jazira Canton, which consists of two districts: District of Qamishli and Derik and the district of Al-Hasakah district, which itself contain 4 zones; Al-Hasakah, Darbasiyah, Serekaniye, and Tal Tamr.

## Deir Ezzor Governorate

Located in the far east of Syria and divided into northern bank, locally known as Jazira, and southern bank, locally known as Shamiya, by the Euphrates River. Deir Ezzor is the second largest Syrian governorate of 33 thousand km<sup>2</sup> with a relatively small population of 600 thousand residents and 140 thousand IDPs. The vast majority of people live in cities and towns on the banks of River Euphrates,

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<sup>4</sup> "The Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria: Problems of Identity and Legitimacy" By Omran Center for Strategic Studies in 2018. <https://bit.ly/2SivRVX>

<sup>5</sup> In 2014, some parties in the northeastern of Syria declared the "Democratic Autonomous Administration" in Afrin, Ayn Al-Arab/ Kobani, and Jazira. In 2015, the "Federation of Rojava - Northern Syria" was announced and followed by another announcement in 2016 of the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria." Finally, in 2018, the "Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" was declared, which included the governorates of Al-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, in addition to all previously mentioned areas.

<sup>6</sup> A military organization consists of several armed factions representing the different components of the Syrian society in the northeast region. The YPG and YPJ are considered the main power of this organization.

such as Deir Ezzor city, Mayadin, Al-Bukamal. The community is tribal with an Arab Muslim majority<sup>7</sup>.

A series of different forces managed to control Deir Ezzor in the last decade. In 2011, as a result of the massive popular uprisings against the Assad regime in the governorate, the government military forces raided the city for the first time in August 2011 to prevent peaceful protests. After few months the protests resumed and escalated after murdering several children from the Deir Ezzor. Then, the Syrian military brutally<sup>8</sup> raided Deir Ezzor in June 2012 using heavy arms and air-coverage by choppers and warcrafts. As a result, hundreds of thousands escaped the military confrontations and Deir Ezzor cities suffered massive destruction.

Then, the Syrian armed opposition forces along with extremist groups controlled a few neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city and the countryside. In 2014, ISIS took over the opposition areas<sup>9</sup> in the governorate and defeated the Syrian government military in 2015 and 2016.

Later in mid-2017, as a result of the anti-ISIS international coalition, the SDF forces expelled<sup>10</sup> ISIS from the north Euphrates bank such as Al Kasra, Hajin, Su'ar, and Al Bsaira. On the other hand, the southern Euphrates bank fell to the Syrian government including Deir Ezzor city, Mayadin, Bukamal. And as a consequence of large-scale military activities, large waves of IDPs mobilized to SDF controlled Al-Hasakah and towards government-controlled Damascus. The last stronghold of ISIS in Baghuz town was finally taken under control in 2019 by the SDF.

## Methodology

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<sup>7</sup> Tribespeople in Deir Ezzor from stability to revolution, conflict dynamics and factors of civil peace - JFL - July 2017. <https://bit.ly/3pZA0q5>

<sup>8</sup> Al Joura and Al Qusour The Forgotten Crime, JFL, 2017.

<https://jfl.ngo/en/al-joura-and-al-qusour-the-forgotten-crime/>

<sup>9</sup> They Killed Them to Make Them an Example, JFL, 2018.

<https://jfl.ngo/en/they-killed-them-to-make-them-an-example/>

<sup>10</sup> A Position Paper about Deir Ezzor by JFL, October 2017

<https://bit.ly/3wvKY9n>

## Objective

Within the framework of the **Social Reintegration and Resilience to Combat Radicalization in Northeast Syria** project, which is funded by the EU and implemented by JFL, which has been active in the Social Structure Research field. JFL has worked an analytical report the impact of extremist groups and their ideology on local communities, particularly vulnerable groups. Acknowledging the socio-economic, insecurity, and associated violence elements as the main causes of extremism, the analytical report recommended promoting coordination between civil society and local communities and authorities to slow down the extremist impact and to protect the region from falling to extremist groups. The analytical report's findings are based on interviews with key informants. Additionally, JFL has designed its own research tools such as focus group discussions and close-ended questions to figure out the social tendencies which enlighten a road map to change and reinforce the region from any possible return of extremist ideology.

## Spatial and Temporal Framework

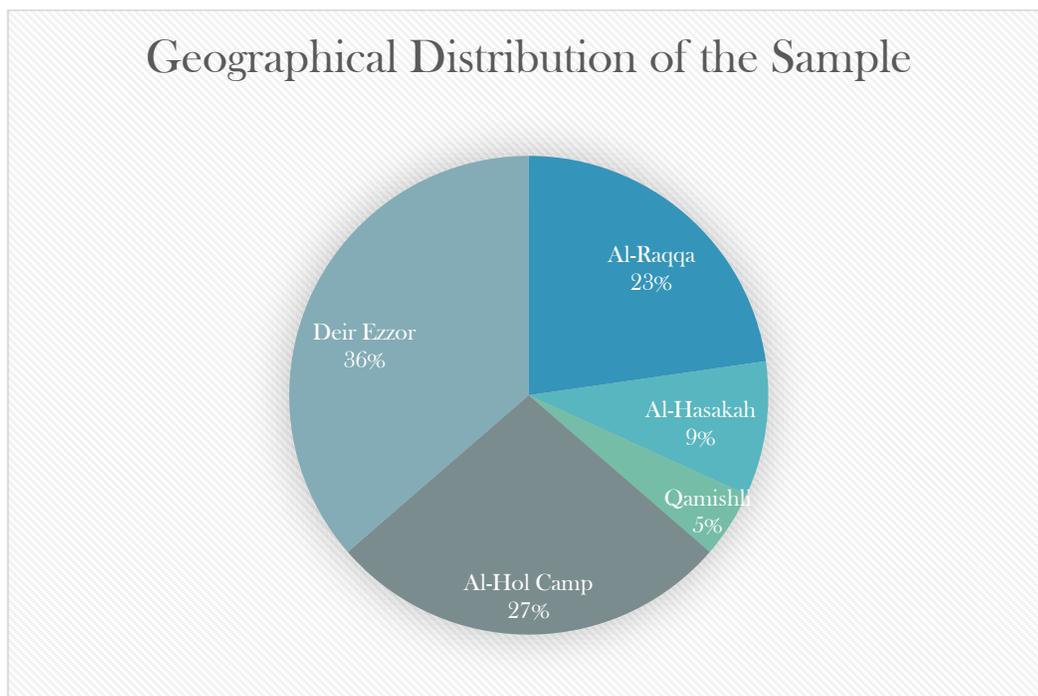
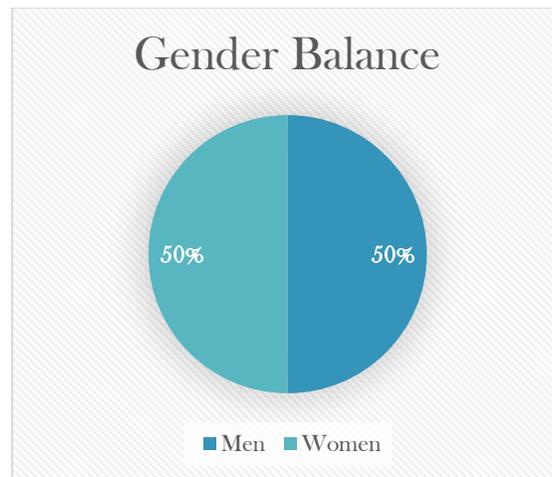
The research process took effective six months (Jan-June 2021). During which plans and tools were set, data analysis and questionnaires were developed. The implementation took place in the following areas: SDF-controlled Deir Ezzor, Al-Raqqa city, Al-Hasakah city, and Al-Hol Camp.

## The Research Tools

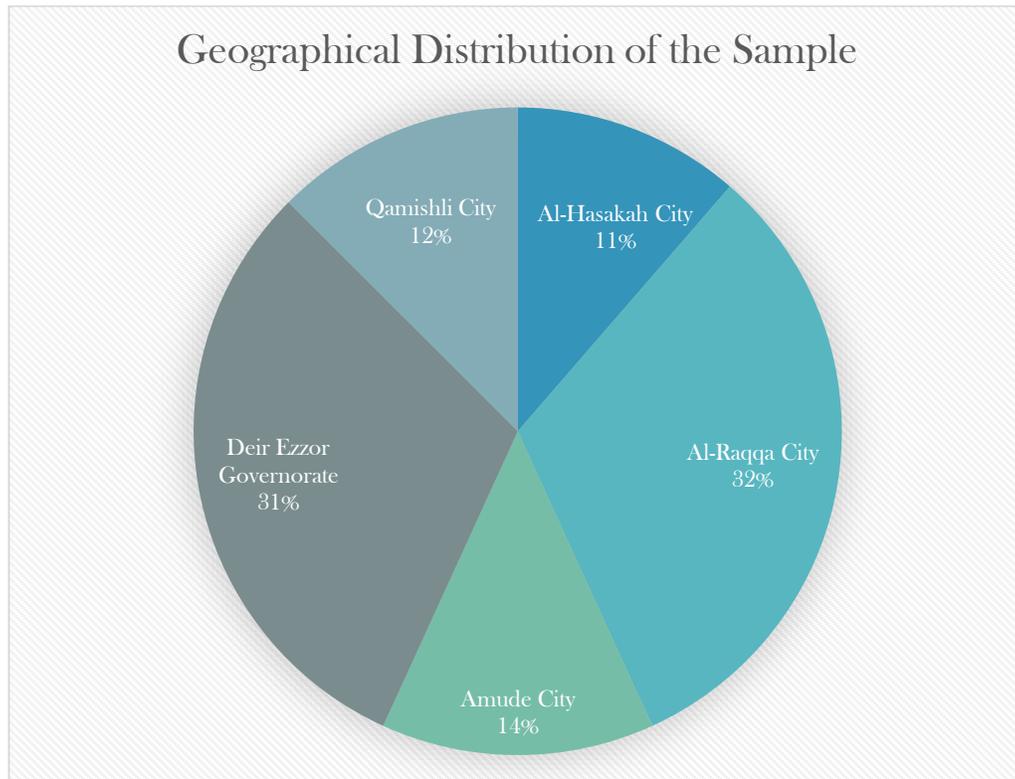
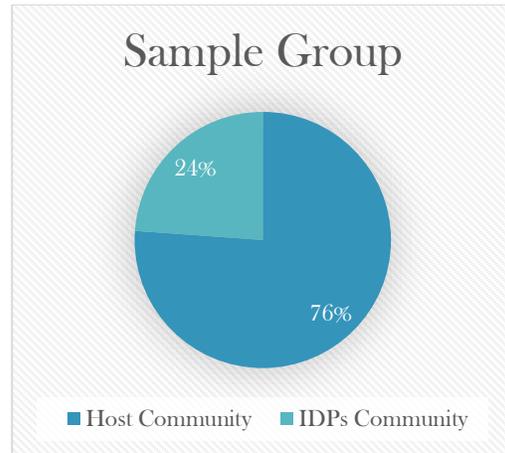
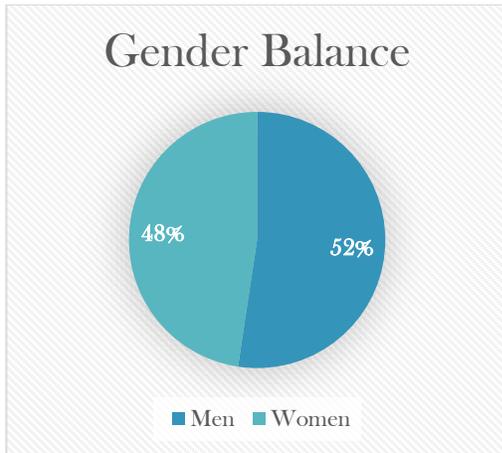
The paper adopted qualitative research tools, including KIIs, focus groups, and surveys. The research team could access information from different levels in terms of type and source to include all possible opinions of all different targeted community segments. To have a clear survey questionnaire, JFL chose a specific answer module. Therefore, opinions were transcribed into a clear database, easy to analyze. Surveys took place after the focus group sessions, to be crossmatched with the previous results.

## The Research Sample

The interviews involved key informants of local authorities' officials, civil activists, NGO workers, community actors, residents from Al-Hol Camp, and intellectuals. Additionally, the sample has balance representations from the host community and IDPs community. A total of 22 people were interviewed according to the following criteria:



On the other hand, the focus group’s sampling has included civil society activists from both genders, members of education staff, officials from the Autonomous Administration, religious leaders, prominent citizens, and intellectuals.



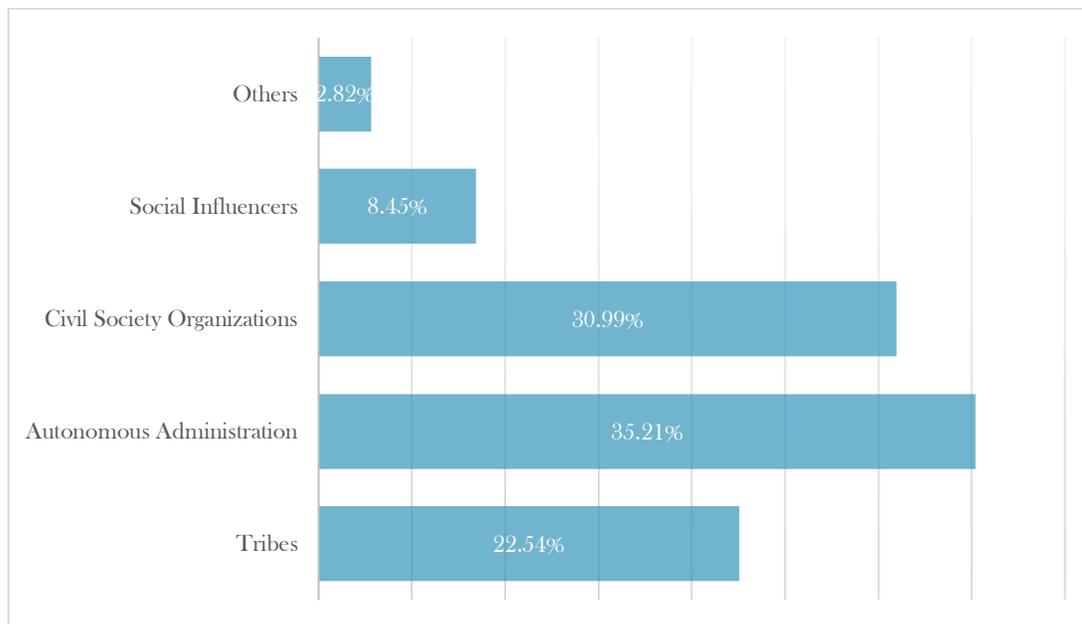
## The Research Team

JFL contracted with facilitators to hold the focus groups in Al-Raqqa and Al-Hasakah governorates. In Deir Ezzor, facilitators were trained by JFL and had experience in focus group activities. All teams underwent a training series and extensive supervision by the project's technical advisor. The team learned the sessions' objectives, the facilitation tools, and how to fill in session reports using participants' inputs and analytical reports.

After the data entry process, JFL's research team analyzed qualitative data. It elicited societal sentiments and tendencies to draw realistic conclusions, objective scenarios for various forms of applicable interventions that could lay the groundwork for addressing the effects of extremism and immunizing communities to hate speech and the roots of violent extremism.

# Communal Impressions and Results Analysis

## The Most Influential Actors on Local Decision-Making, Work, and Coordination Mechanism Among Them



The Autonomous Administration is the most influential party in all the areas under its control. The administration governs politics, economy, security, and legislation. In comparison, the tribal leaders take a more limited and specific role in other kind of issues such as revenge, tribal reconciliations, some criminal cases, or detainees' issues. Civil leaders/community influencers have a similar role in local conflicts, but it is not possible to extend their roles. On the other hand, civil society organizations are highly effective because they provide community services. They use all potentials to raise community awareness, social reintegration, psychological support and improve living standards.

In Al-Hol Camp, many observations reported some people are influenced by ISIS ideology through some previous pro-ISIS. In contrast, others are influenced by the Autonomous Administration or civil society organizations. In addition, some interviewees in the camp confirmed ISIS activity.

There is a kind of coordination between the influencers. However, despite all differences between them, there is no clear or regular coordination mechanism. The Autonomous Administration coordinates with some tribal leaders and local dignitaries on local issues, usually through dialogues and meetings that bring together influential parties.

Any cooperation between local authorities and civil society organizations should focus on developing coordination mechanisms: to improve the services, rebuild infrastructure, exchange resources, and provide projects (agricultural, humanitarian, support people with disabilities, war wounded, and women support). The cooperation between organizations, authorities, and dignitaries accelerates the reintegration of ex-combatants and their families. This requires the local authority to facilitate the project implementation process for civil society organizations.

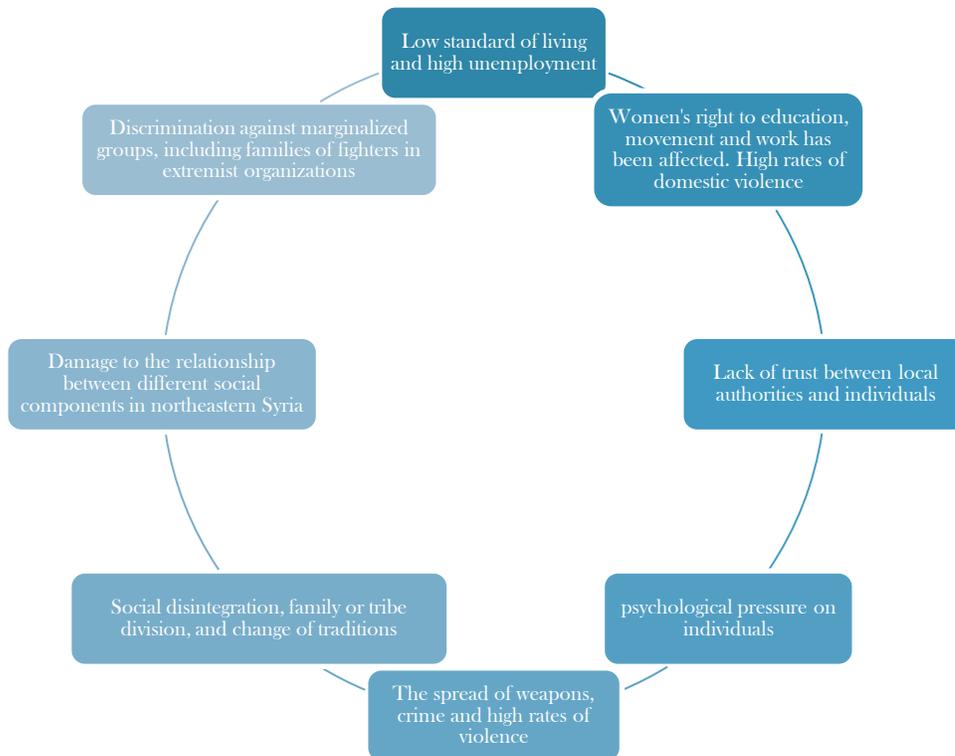
In Al-Hasakah governorate, almost fully under the Autonomous Administration control, some tribal leaders have relations with the Syrian government agencies. At the same time, other leaders coordinate with the Autonomous Administration. Yet coordination with either side remains limited and ineffective on local decisions, besides security coordination between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government.

## Social Conflicts Affecting Everyday-Life and Their Causes

The most divisive prominent conflicts in the northeastern region are based on religion and ethnicity. In addition, security concerns are increasing over extremists' crimes, gang robbery or kidnaps, disputes between IDPs and host community, corruption-power conflicts, disputes over lack of services, or threats of war either by the Syrian government or Turkish-backed opposition.

As for the causes of conflicts, people mentioned the exclusion and marginalization by the local authorities of Arabs, mutual stereotype among different components, political and livelihood instability, extremism, natural resources, and local traditions prolong conflicts.

## The Impact of Conflicts on Individuals, Society and Social Integration



- Low living standards and unemployment forced some individuals to join militants in northeastern Syria (SDF, Syrian military or allied militias, or ISIS).
- Women are among the most negatively affected, as they lost so many education opportunities, mobility rights, and inheritance. As rates of divorce and domestic violence skyrocketed.
- Lack of trust between local authorities and individuals caused the mass departure of thousands of highly educated and skilled youths outside of Syria searching for jobs and safety.
- Psychological pressured individuals suffer such as fear and anxiety. This is very common between married people, and drugs are widespread.
- The violence rates have skyrocketed. Crimes increased, and so do the spread of weapons. This fragile state of security affected the delivery of services and local development programs. The number of schools decreased, teachers emigrated, and curricula changed. What's of the education system is no longer sufficient to absorb many students.

- Conflicts and instability imposed by the successive dominant powers demolished community traditions, and the cracks grew to divide families and tribes.
- The violations committed by the dominant forces in the last decade and the SDF's discriminatory policies scarred the social relations.
- Kurdish-Arabic relationships in northeastern Syria were damaged by political and ideological differences. Sometimes conflicts turned into armed ones. Yet, there is no long-term vision of community mutual coexistence among the various components.
- The social stigma and discrimination against the former ISIS women and children in health care and education hinder reintegration into their communities, which may also explain extremist ideology's growth.

## The Consequences of Conflicts on the Social Reintegration and Mitigating Them

Many local conflicts have escalated and became armed. Usually, those kinds of social conflicts last for years and sometimes decades, making it even more difficult to step forward into community dialogue, not to mention direct future impacts on community development and services, which is one reason for divisions. On a tribal level, local conflicts negatively impacted relationships between tribes. The desire to revenge and reviving old conflicts is always in the air. Two key informants commented on how the war effects and social division made it impossible to achieve any meaningful peace between the various groups, despite significant efforts. While one of the participants, a resident in Al-Hol Camp, believes that social reintegration can only be achieved by applying Islamic Sharia as a ruling system.

Someone shot his brother dead over property dispute, despite the efforts of dignitaries for peaceful settlement. The shooter's family moved away and the whole family burdens fell on the wife who was unable to support the family without her husband.

The conflict's significant consequences on society or individuals could be mitigated by taking measures or implementing activities, considering differences in needs and security state anywhere:

1. Dialogue is a key to communicate various issues of community concern across the different northeastern components, promote tolerance of one another, and engagement in decision-making.
2. Supporting civil society organizations interested in spreading the values of tolerance and peace, providing psychological support services, and supporting war-affected families.
3. Reintegrate the war-affected groups into their societies and repeal laws against which the local community expressed objections.
4. Equal distribution of resources, stopping monopoly, and transparency between the Autonomous Administration and the local community.
5. Find solutions to social divisions and raise awareness of long-term threats of divisions.
6. Establishing a new social contract that guarantees different components and individual rights.
7. Accountability of all those who committed violations and solidifying the non-impunity principle.



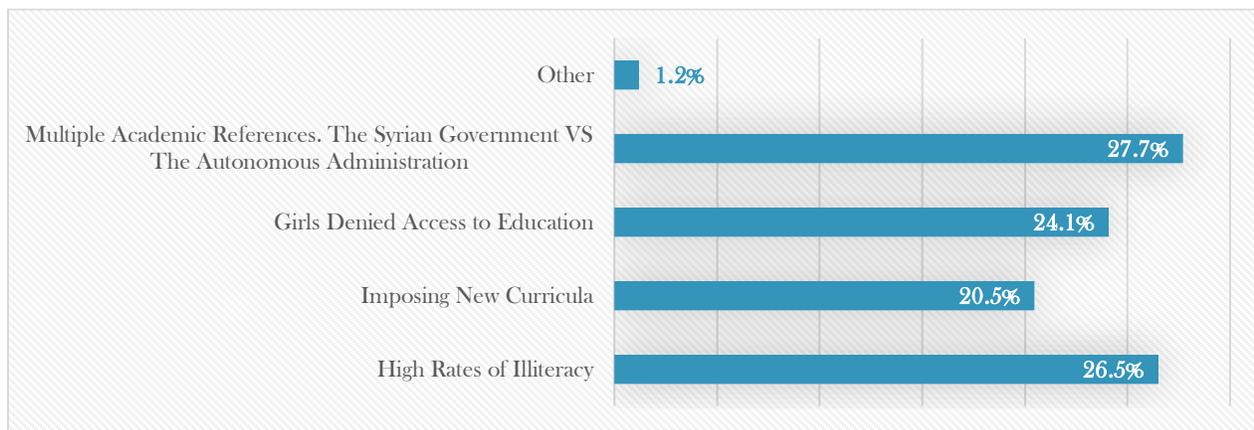
## The Impact of Violence on the Segments of Society and the Service Sector

### On Women, Children, Youth, People with Disability, and Elderly

- Women are the main group affected by violence. Women are still subject to widespread growing violence and discrimination against mobility rights or education. Besides, the war has burdened women with enormous duties in supporting a whole family alone due to losing their spouse.
- Some younger girls and boys are subjected to sexual exploitation, harassment, and domestic violence. Their financial needs are being exploited to promote drugs. Usually, armed groups recruit those children, breaching international laws to protect children. All of this contributed to increasing underage marriage rates.
- The new security and economic conditions prevented thousands of students from continuing their education as high schools and universities have been suspended. In addition to the lack of jobs, thousands of young people were pushed to emigrate.
- On the other hand, the elderly suffers a lack of healthcare, the spread of epidemics, loneliness without children to support them. At the same time, the disabled individual reported a lack of medical and technical supplies to live normally.

### On Education

The war and continuous violence severely impacted the education facilities. Many schools were completely or partially destroyed, while others were used as military headquarters by the conflict parties. The educational process was disrupted for a while. Yet after the resumption, it suffered inadequacy of schools and alternating curricula, which threatened the whole process of education. Moreover, violence forced instructors to leave and seek safety. Girls were denied education during the years of ISIS control. Nowadays, families don't want to risk sending their daughters to schools.



A participant has assured that the disruption of governmental educational operations in Northeast Syria is the primary reason why reviving education has failed.

## On the Relationship Between the Various Syrian Components

Conflicts have constrained the relationship between the different components, as it's in decline and mistrust prevails. Conflict parties plunged people from different components into the war. Each of those parties claimed to defend the future and rights of their own component, which reinforced sectarianism, ethnic, and religious rifts. Furthermore, when different powers in the northeast managed to control the region, they have marginalized and discriminated against different components, such as ISIS discriminating against non-Muslims or the Autonomous Administration discriminating against other components.

Three participants confirmed that there are no conflicts between the Syrian components as they normally interact in general. Limited conflicts between spiritual and social leaders may sometimes reflect on those exposed to their influence from the components.

A female participant commented during one of the focus group sessions: "I left Al-Raqqa in 2013 after I lived there for 16 years. When ISIS departed the city, I came back to visit my close neighbors with whom I had a long friendship. When I met them, they were cold to me and used many sectarianist terms during the conversation. Clearly, they are still influenced by the time ISIS" Another participant from the same session shared: "During my recent visit to Homs city, once I met

a lot of people, but I didn't know everyone. I had to avoid disclosing my religious affiliation because the conversation had a strong sectarian tone."

## Integrating the Most Affected Groups by the War (women, children, etc.) Who were Targeted by Violence

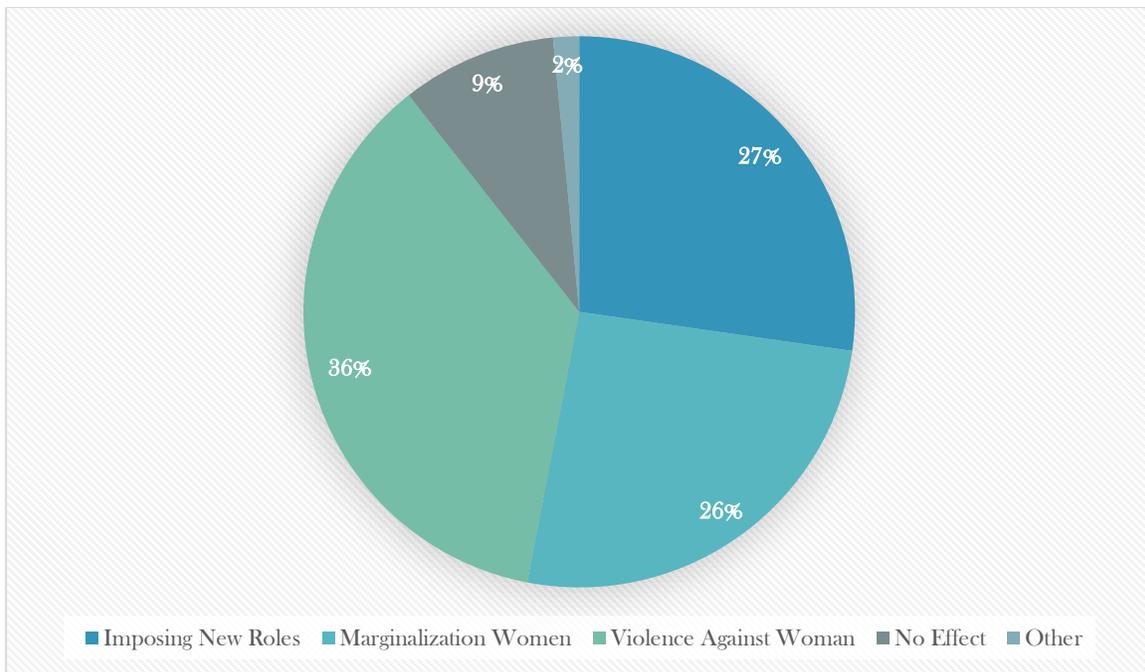
Reintegration of war-affected groups is a priority for the local community, and this can be done through implementing several initiatives:

- Provide basic services and support education, livelihood programs, and vocational training.
- Reinforce women empowerment programs, counter exploitation of women and children, and prosecuting and punishing the exploiters.
- Enact strict laws to preserve the rights and dignity of vulnerable groups, including banning child recruitment and counter-violence against children. Instead, laws have to enable protection services and psychosocial support to children.
- Support the civil society in peacebuilding and social reintegration programs to build safe dialogue spaces that restore the self-trust of vulnerable people.

## The Influence of Extremist Groups on the Local Concept of Gender

Extremists damaged the natural relationship between men and women by framing women's roles and seizing their rights, according to most interviewees. As a result, women lost any right to engage in decision-making at various levels, including the family level sometimes. The extremists' actions have entrenched the superiority of men over women by completely splitting them and promoting child marriage and non-accountability of violence against women. The treatment of women changed from one faction to another: ISIS punished women, while the Autonomous Administration enabled them to engage in all political, social, and civil fields. Besides, enabling the Women's Affairs Institutions to help women subject to violence or being discriminated against by men. Some participants viewed the

Autonomous Administration's pro-women policies as a transgression of local customs and traditions, and it's a negative gesture on some families.



Despite all violations against women, the extremists did not change social concepts. According to many interviewees, extremists have nothing to do with that change. The local society's view on women's role is inherently discriminatory and unfair, and it is based on social norms and religion.

## Current and Potential Threats to Social Reintegration

### Current Threats

- Insecurity includes kidnaps, assassination, extortion, armed robbery, and drug trafficking.
- They impose threats to all society components, and they threaten the relationships among them. It also contributes to the huge rift caused by the war, tribal conflicts, and community division, especially the Kurdish-Arab division. This drives away the authorities' efforts to handle security threats seriously and adds to this poverty and hard living conditions.
- The other threat is security operations carried out by the Syrian government agencies in Al-Hasakah governorate, where the presence of these agencies continues in some areas of the governorate, unlike the governorates of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa.

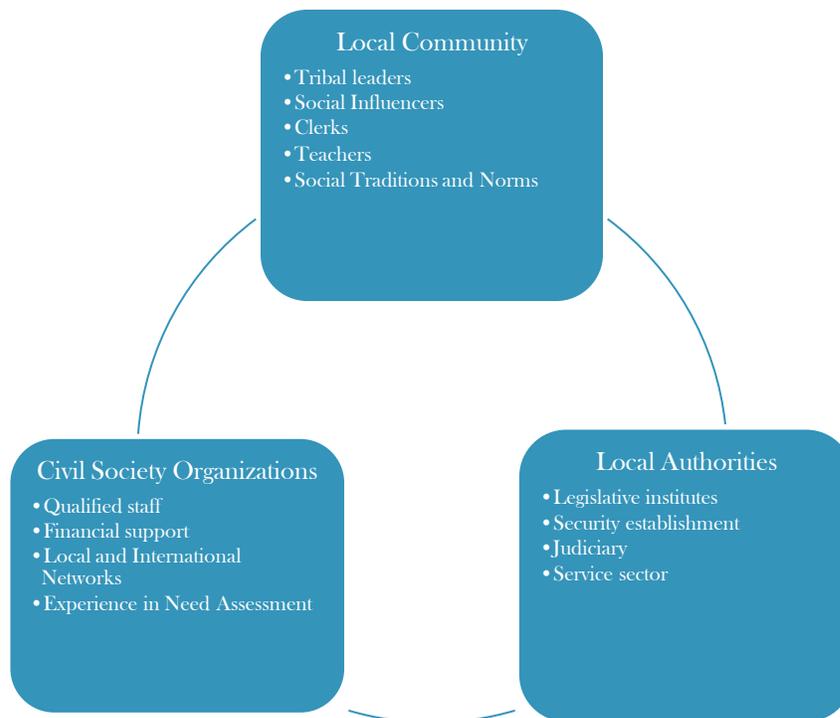
## Future Threats

After the absence of any prospect for a political solution at the national level and a complete cessation of military operations by all local and international parties involved in the Syrian conflict, there are many potential threats:

- Several factions threatening to enter northeastern Syria, such as the Syrian government and their allied militias. A large-scale military operation may cause massive destruction.
- Several local parties seeking separation which would trigger a Turkish intervention in more areas of northeastern Syria.

## Confronting the Violence by Extremist Groups and the Resources Available to Achieve this

The northeastern Syrian communities have gained knowledge after extremism penetration into society. The local community is capable of identifying, allocate resources and proceed to confront extremist ideologies. According to interviews, military and security forces bears a major responsibility for security affairs. Additionally, local parties bear the social responsibility to contain the causes of extremist ideology. Available resources can be developed to survive a longer-term and effective response on to the following levels:



## Local Community

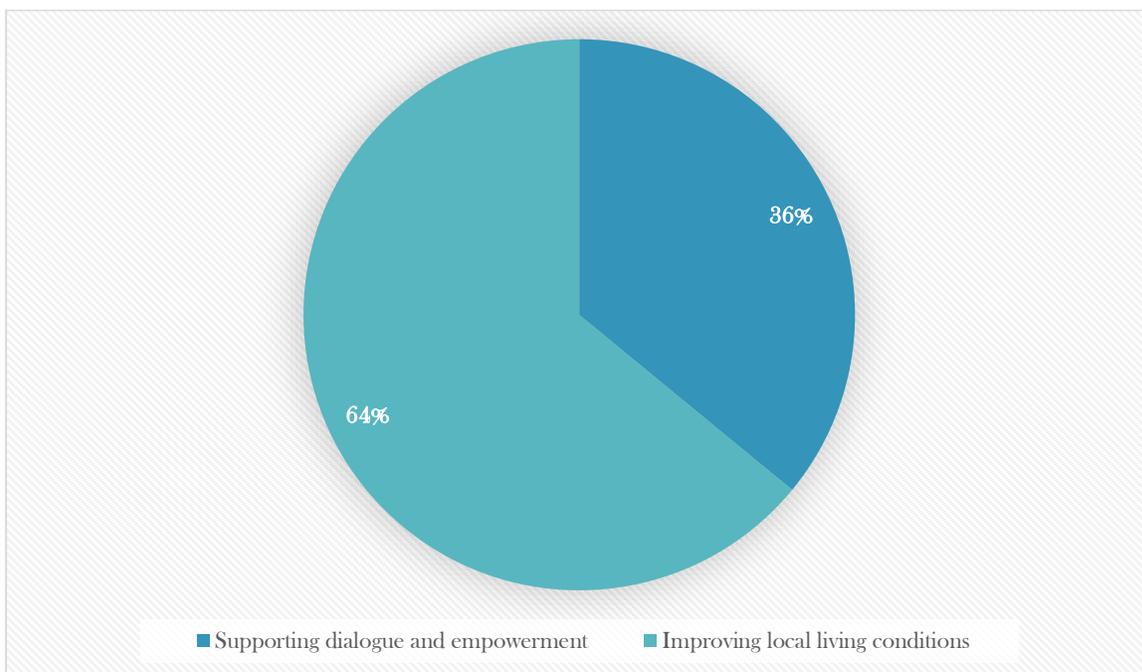
- Community's notables, tribal leaders, clerks, teachers, psychologists, and intellectuals.
- Values of tolerance in local traditions.

## Local Authorities

Local authorities have formed legislative, judicial, service, and security institutions. These institutes are authorized to pass laws and apply the rules. They preserve the values of justice, equality, freedom, and non-discrimination. They are responsible for improving people's living conditions, serving the interest of people, keeping peace and security, providing job opportunities, encouraging commercial activities, preventing monopoly, and equal distribution of natural and human resources. Nevertheless, the mentioned institutions do not meet people's expectations because they don't perform their duties. Therefore, the public can't benefit from local authorities' resources without a clear mechanism to activate these institutions. If the authorities have the will, the public participation in decision-making will add up to their resources.

## Civil Society Organizations

The civil society has qualified staff and expertise and has the financial capacity to hold dialogue sessions and workshops. The civil society has various local, regional, and international networks that support its role in communicating the needs of the local population. Civil society organizations can assess needs and reallocate resources towards affected vital sectors, such as education and health, or towards marginalized groups such as women and war-wounded.



## The role of civil society Organizations in empowering marginalized groups (minorities, women, girls)

Raising awareness of community participation and peaceful dialogue to counter violence and extremism. In this context, civil society organizations can start advocacy campaigns to urge decision-makers to incorporate community groups in the process of decision-making. Community platforms are important to spread the message of the community so the rest of the world can hear them loud and clear. Different groups in the community have different needs, and it is basically needed to have the stage to speak out. Furthermore, community groups need training, and they will always seek improvement regarding livelihood programs or finding a job. Establishing cultural centers for the

community besides psychological support facilities helps develop and benefit from human resources in all fields. Civil society should monitor and enrich the representation of the society by assisting more vulnerable groups.

## Local Community Collaboration in Reintegrating the Former Combatants of Extremist Groups and their Families

Community leaders have a role in reintegrating former combatants and their families back into their local communities. The leaders must promote kindness to those families and act against hate speech and discrimination.

Differentiating former combatants from those who committed crimes, or were involved in violence or held managerial posts enables community leaders from reintegrating those people. Local norms should help the community overcome violence caused by some former combatants.

## Needs that Must be Addressed to Mitigate the Effects of Violence

The participants agreed on several needs that must be served to mitigate the consequences of violence, as they stressed the following:

- Deteriorating security situation, difficult living conditions, and poor services.
- Deteriorating healthcare, and lack of schools and job opportunities, especially for youth.
- Security forces' violations including arrests, lack of free trials, and physical abuse.
- Discriminating against some former combatants and their families regarding civil rights besides lack of a safe environment and hate speech against them.
- Conditions in camps as they became gathering spots for extremists. Syrian ex-combatants in those camps should be assisted to grant a safe passage back to home and providing them with necessary humanitarian aid and legal resettlement.

It is clear from interviews that improving security and living conditions and support education are considered key steps to stability and reintegrate marginalized groups like the families of extremists. Participants from Al-Raqqa in specific acknowledged services like water/electricity and the reconstruction resulted from massive destruction in the city during anti-ISIS operations.

According to participants, when a political solution and acceptable social contract are met, the political stability era kicks in. Theoretically, it could lead to even more socioeconomic stability.

## The Role of Civil Society in Mitigating the Impact of the Extremism Tendency and the Divisions on Society

In the past three years, NGOs' intervention was generally positive and absorbed significant war impacts on the local host community and IDPs. These NGOs carried out activities in peacebuilding and raising awareness of extremism. They showed incredible flexibility with marginalized groups, including women related to extremists. Although these gestures resulted in simple positive feelings of safety represented by civil bodies interested in people's daily lives. Yet, the intervention impact was limited according to what most participants said because the need is way greater and exceeds the NGO capacity. Besides, the lack of security stability, insufficient funding, and lack of authority's provision. Furthermore, from an implementation perspective, the NGOs require collaboration from all concerned parties to fully recover from extremism and its effects.

NGOs play a major role in mitigating social divisions through peacebuilding, raising awareness programs, supporting community mediation, communicating with community leaders from all components, and forming local peace committees. These programs contribute to promoting dialogue between the host community, the displaced, and the local authorities. Local and international organizations must plan their programs according to local needs, and it's worth mentioning the necessity of the non-interference principle. Authorities should be supportive, not a burden, and preserve the civil work's independence, integrity, and transparency. Three participants indicated that resisting divisions is challenging and that NGOs can do nothing about it.

In the first session held in Deir Ezzor governorate, the participants mentioned a dispute between two neighborhoods in villages in the Deir Ezzor countryside over a generator. A civil society organization studied the needs of each neighborhood and provided the area with an additional generator. This act led to the fulfillment of the need and the resolution of the conflict.

A participant commented on the different roles of local community and organizations in influencing ex-combatants: “The village teacher rescued an extremist guy from Deir Ezzor countryside. The teacher called a local organization to provide the guy with psychological support. After some time the guy made progress, and he managed to improve his communication with family and friends and he even went back to school to continue education.”

## The Participation in Social Reintegration Activities and the Most Contributing Groups

The local community suffered from the extremist phenomenon. Therefore, individuals want to participate in activities aimed at limiting the spread of this ideology. Youth are the most contributors to civil activities. Additionally, all the following contribute to activities: opinionists and intellectuals, civil society, independent activists, and people affected by extremist ideas and groups. Some interviewed reported that even local authorities and tribal leaders could contribute.

Several steps accompany participation:

- The language must be encouraging and convincing to join activities. Furthermore, the language should emphasize a set of basics: the public interest in social reintegration to build peace and reduce divisions and preserve human rights and means for reconstruction and economic development.
- Incorporating beneficiaries in activities' planning and implementation. Activities must accommodate all social groups and genders without discrimination.
- Participants should be able to move freely. Safety and security needs should be considered in participation, such as restrictions, arrests, or security pursuits.

- Few interviewees ruled out a broad desire to participate in activities for either security reasons or out of frustration and despair over a fundamental change.

## Conclusion

Extremists affected the local community, especially the most marginalized groups. Even four years after the departure of ISIS, the consequences of what they committed are still present in society and individuals. Social relations and communities' relations reflect it. Unfortunately, the current authorities are not helping to overcome this period. In addition to national disability and the absence of any political solution, tribal, ethnic, and religious conflicts delay recovery. Other disputes break out among the host community and IDPs, power-corruption conflicts, and deteriorating economic conditions. Furthermore, the lack of services increases and intensifies these conflicts. Bad conditions will prolong the conflict, escalate it, and result in heavy casualties. As a result, relationships will be severely damaged on all levels; tribal, ethnic, and religious.

The causes for extremism ideology are still present, including exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, unequal distribution of resources, security chaos, poverty, and damage to education, which threatens high illiteracy rates in the upcoming years. Moreover, women's rights and the huge rift between religions and ethnicities prolong instability, imposes threats to return the Syrian government forces and allied militias to the region, or possible attacks from the Turkish-backed Syrian rebels. Reintegrating the families of ex-combatants is one of the most crucial issues that need just solutions that consider both rights and fears of the local community, without deprivation anybody of their basic rights.

The Autonomous Administration is the most influential party. It retains the system via judicial, legislative, and security institutions that can play significant roles in helping the local community recover. Tribal leaders and social influencers play important roles in local conflicts. After the remarkable rise of civil society organizations and their services and social reintegration programs, they are considered important players with a limited but positive impact. Nevertheless, the local community still sees the local authority's military and security forces and tribal leaders as the two most reliable parties. Therefore, the remaining organizations have a supporting role for the parties.

There is a gap in coordination between the influential parties in northeastern Syria, and it is limited to local conflicts or issues of detainees. Therefore, it cannot be extended to participation in local decision-making or accountability.

## Recommendations

Finding a permanent solution at the national level is a prerequisite for achieving a sustainable security and economic stability, which clears the path to reconstruction and to return the displaced and refugees. Besides, it eliminates any hopes of extremists to return because of united community efforts. The promotion of human rights and freedom lays the foundation to adhere to peace. In theory, this presumes everyone will adhere to denouncing violence, including the local authorities and communities, which indicates an anticipated end of extremism and violence. Furthermore, holding every perpetrator of violations accountable, a zero-immunity policy, is the common sense to achieve justice, reintegrating marginalized groups, and reducing conflicts.

Reinforcing the local community's resilience to extremist ideology requires handling several reasons that facilitated and contributed to extremism. However, should steps can be taken right away, the Northeastern community would quickly solidify immunity and speeds the recovery from the consequences of extremism; thereby, Justice for Life recommends:

## The Autonomous Administration and The Syrian Democratic Forces

- 1- Influential parties on the local decision (i.e., the Autonomous Administration, civil society organizations, tribal leaders, and social influencers) should take the initiative to develop coordination among them. Coordination can be translated into the self-development of the Autonomous Administration and conflict resolution or at the level of discussing the future of northeastern Syria. This can only be achieved through holding extended discussion sessions for consultation. Of course, this is the responsibility of the Autonomous Administration to encourage local participation in decision-making.
- 2- Activating the role of the state institutions, particularly the judicial and legislative authorities, through empowering the staff officials and ensuring their independency.

- 3- Enact laws that protect marginalized groups and prevent discrimination against them, especially children, disabled, war-wounded, and elderly.
- 4- Work to restore security stability and enhance local participation. This process must not be limited to military approaches that led to violations before.
- 5- End violations committed by the SDF's security forces against community groups in northeastern Syria, including arrests, enforced disappearances, restrictions on civil work, and corruption.
- 6- Preserving the right of the northeastern Syrian people to express their opinion, form assemblies, parties, associations, and professional unions.
- 7- Countering hate speech and discrimination.
- 8- Imposing restrictions on weapons and make them limited to the state security institution.

## Civil Society Organizations

- 1- Encourage dialogue such as dialogue sessions, forums, and supporting civil peace programs. Furthermore, program planning should consider local needs with direct participation of the local community on both planning and implementing levels.
- 2- Support women's rights and women empowerment programs. Women must be directly engaged in planning such programs.
- 3- Establishing social media platforms for marginalized groups and permanently allocating programs on media channels operating in northeastern Syria to advocate for their cause.
- 4- Support education and standardizing the curricula.
- 5- Maintain the health sector, basic services, and livelihood programs.
- 6- Reinforce the role of community leaders to find answers and sustainable solutions to reintegrate extremists' families and differentiating between the perpetrators and reintegrative elements.
- 7- Focus on combating extremism and violence. Integrating people who adopted the extremist ideology without isolating them. Clerks have a major role in this regard.
- 8- That civil society organizations invite more participants and beneficiaries into larger activities. Invites must not be limited to the category of the intellectual.
- 9- Forming platforms for civil society organizations to coordinate with each other, enhance their work and make optimal use of their resources.

## Suggested Models of Intervention

Based on the report outputs and the recommendations, and learned lessons during the previous years in identifying social needs and appropriate forms of intervention in different contexts of societies considering specificity, we suggest the following interventions that contribute to counter the reasons of extremism:

- Establishing a dialogue space that includes community actors, local authorities, and civil society in a way that allows everyone to speak about their problems and propose solutions. It also offers a transparent and timely problem-solving tool. This space can take forms such as local coordinating group/working group or civil advisory. Similarly, it is advised to form dialogue forums that guarantee a wider representation of local communities to convey their views to be used for discussion or consultation.
- Forming civil society coordination platforms. Better coordination would result in better use of resources in an orderly manner and prevents conflicting interventions and gaps. For example, possible platforms could rely on competence or geographical locations.
- Strengthen the roles of dignitaries and clerks who have the community trust and belief. Dignitaries and clerks can use this card to reintegrate ex-combatants and their families into local communities. These efforts are associated with the remedial activities carried out by civil society organizations.

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