



Reintegrating ISIS Supporters in Syria: Efforts, Priorities and Challenges

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Executive summary

- Despite the significant degradation of ISIS's military strength, the campaigns against them appear to be driven by a belief that physical victory equates to ISIS's ideological defeat. Consequently, none of the primary actors in the anti-ISIS coalition have emphasised the potential benefits of rehabilitating captured ISIS members.
- Drawing on first-hand interviews with experts and practitioners, all of whom have 'on-the-ground' experience in Syria, this paper seeks to describe the key priorities and challenges for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and rebel groups who are dealing with ISIS members; analyses the community-led initiatives aiming to rehabilitate and reintegrate the members and communities that were exposed to ISIS's ideology; and attempts to assess the impact of such efforts, identifying gaps and missed opportunities. This analysis would be the first of its kind in relation to the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts that are currently occurring in Syria.
- While some of the dynamics that pressure locals to be affiliated with ISIS apply strictly to Syrians, other factors are similar in-part to the ones that drove thousands of foreign fighters to join the group. Such motivations include: 1) Financial benefits; 2) Protection; 3) Military capacity and 4) Ideology. While it is not clear how many people fit each of these profiles, local experts argue that the majority of people joined ISIS for other reasons than ideology. Identifying and understanding such motives are important for both countering ISIS's recruiting tactics and rehabilitating its supporters.
- The SDF's post-ISIS policies are currently stuck between capturing more ISIS supporters, and figuring out what to do with the enormous number that have already been detained. The SDF efforts are ultimately focused on the short-term, such as securing the collective detention camps or releasing them through local reconciliation deals, instead of designing well-defined policies to spend their limited resources efficiently. The fragile state of SDF-run detention camps, and the lack of official efforts to rehabilitate those detained in them, could create fertile breeding ground for potential ISIS recruits.
- The lack of formal efforts to deal with the emerging problems in rebel-held areas, a result of ISIS's territorial loss, has pushed civil society actors to establish ad-hoc and limited community-based initiatives to deal with such issues. For example, the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre has been established in the northern city of Mare' to rehabilitate detained ISIS members. Likewise, the activist-run Sound and Picture Organization focuses on collectively countering ISIS's ideology among civilians who lived under the group's rule and could be susceptible to its influence.

- Although rebel-controlled areas in northwestern Syria appear to have more initiatives to limit ISIS's inspiration, the majority of those efforts are ad-hoc community-based initiatives with limited impact. Apart from their involvement in a few local reconciliation processes, official actors in those areas, whether rebels or governing entities, do not seem to be involved in facilitating or supporting such initiatives, thus negatively limiting their scale, impact and sustainability.
- The international community and the countries fighting ISIS in Syria have a massive stake in ensuring the successful reintegration and rehabilitation of ISIS members. Ignoring such efforts will likely allow ISIS to use its ideology and propaganda to capitalise on the current insecurity, perpetuating instability in both Syria and the region as a whole.

1 Introduction

The anti-ISIS campaigns in Syria have successfully degraded the group's military strength. After announcing itself in Syria in April 2013, ISIS seized control of half the country within a year,¹ an area containing approximately 3.2 million people.² Four years later, apart from a few scattered pockets, ISIS has lost nearly all its territory. The majority of its army – which peaked at more than 50,000, including 20,000 non-Syrians – is either dead, captured or on the run.³ By the end of 2017, the majority of the actors in the fight against ISIS had quickly begun to announce victory over the group, and adapted their Syria policies accordingly.⁴ Yet none of the main actors have done much to consolidate such gains by finding suitable solutions to the problem of how to deal with the thousands of captured ISIS fighters. Likewise, there appears to be no interest in rehabilitating the members of the organisation or the local communities that were exposed to ISIS's propaganda for years.

The various un-coordinated anti-ISIS campaigns – led by the US, Russia and Turkey – seem to have adopted the mistaken view that to eliminate ISIS as an insurgency will automatically erase it as an ideology.⁵ Neglecting to set out a clear post-ISIS strategy that addresses those concerns will risk allowing ISIS to exploit this vacuum of leadership and security. The ramifications of such failures may be that military gains are squandered and ISIS re-emerges with a vengeance, or at least continues to operate as a low-grade insurgency for the foreseeable future. It may also provide ideologically similar groups, notably the former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the opportunity to recruit former ISIS supporters by simply convincing them to switch allegiances.⁶ The consequences of this will not only continue to destabilise Syria and prevent its recovery, but also continue to undermine the security of the region and the world at large.

This paper examines how the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and rebel groups – which were critical in ousting ISIS from its previously held territory in their respective regions – are dealing with former ISIS members, scrutinises the priorities shaping their actions, and the challenges they are facing in doing so. It then analyses the community-led initiatives aiming to rehabilitate and reintegrate the members and communities that were exposed to ISIS's ideology. Finally, the paper attempts to assess the impact of such efforts and identify gaps and missed opportunities.

1 Alarabiya, 'Daesh seizes 50% of Syria and the regime controls 25%', *Alarabiya*, 20 August 2015, <http://ara.tv/bagm> (accessed 3 April 2018).

2 Victoria Crow, 'Global Coalition needs to change tactics in fight against IS after "turning point" in 2017', *News Network*, March 10, 2018, <http://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/global-coalition-needs-to-change-tactics-in-fight-against-is-after-turning-point-in-2017/news-story/0d4176bad0b175770f6cf4d1ef14011d> (accessed 2 April 2018).

3 Al-Jazeera, 'Islamic State 'has 50,000 fighters in Syria'', *Al-Jazeera*, 19 August 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/islamic-state-50000-fighters-syria-2014819184258421392.html> (accessed 5 April 2018).

4 Haid Haid, 'Next in the Fight Against ISIS, Captured Militants Must be Rehabilitated', *Syndication Bureau*, 9 March 2018, <https://syndicationbureau.com/en/next-in-the-fight-against-isis-captured-militants-must-be-rehabilitated/> (accessed 5 April 2018).

5 Ibid.

6 The term supporter is used in this paper to refer to the people who believe in the ISIS's ideology or mission, whether or not they are officially members of the group. Haid Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib', *Chatham House*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/local-community-resistance-extremist-groups-syria-lessons-atarib> (accessed 6 March 2018).

Such gaps include the SDF's inability to create a comprehensive post-ISIS strategy or clear set of priorities about what should be done and when (which will be discussed in detail below). As a result, the SDF appears to be focusing on finding short-term solutions to deal with thousands of ISIS detained members (such as indefinite detention, releasing local ISIS members without rehabilitation efforts), which are proving counterproductive. Likewise, instead of seeking the support of civil society groups to overcome such challenges, the SDF seems to be marginalising those that could be its closest allies. Although rebel-controlled areas appear to have more initiatives to rehabilitate and reintegrate those influenced by ISIS, the majority of those efforts are ad-hoc community-based initiatives with limited impact. This negatively limits their scale, impact and ability to be sustainable. There is no consensus among the various actors operating in those areas for a unified approach to deal with captured ISIS members. Moreover, the countries fighting ISIS in Syria, which have as much stake in ensuring the successful reintegration and rehabilitation of ISIS members, are not involved in funding or supporting such efforts.

The paper proceeds as follows: the first section looks at the main motivations, identified by Syrian analysts and counter-radicalisation practitioners, that drove locals to join ISIS. It highlights the two broad categories that are used to design the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts: the ideologically devoted members and the non-devoted pragmatists. The second section explores the SDF efforts towards captured ISIS members and the locally brokered reconciliation deals to reintegrate them. The third section looks at similar dynamics in rebel-held areas by providing a case study on how the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre is rehabilitating detained ISIS members. It explains how the activist-run Sound and Picture Organization works on collectively countering ISIS's ideology among civilians who lived under the group's rule and could be susceptible to its influence. The paper concludes by identifying some of the gaps and missed opportunities in the ongoing efforts in this regard and what could be done – by the respective local actors and the countries fighting ISIS in Syria – to prevent ISIS from continuing to cause instability in both Syria and the region as a whole.

Despite the importance of this topic, this paper appears to be the first public report to provide a comprehensive account, based on first hand interviews, of how different actors in Syria are dealing with the issue of rehabilitating and reintegrating former ISIS members. Nonetheless, this study does not claim to list all the reintegration and rehabilitation efforts pursued by different Syrian actors, as some of them are not known publicly. Additionally, it is pertinent to acknowledge that this study is a remote assessment, given that the author has been unable to visit the country. It is a primary effort that hopes to pave the way for additional study on this topic. The paper only focuses on two kinds of territory: those is controlled by rebel groups, and those by SDF. Syrian Regime controlled areas were not covered as there is little information known publicly.

2 Methodology

Central to the research for this paper is a set of fifteen semi-structured interviews with activists, local officials, Syrian analysts, local counter-extremism practitioners and former ISIS members. The interviewees were selected based on the profile of their work, as all of them have direct, first-hand experience on the ground in Syria. Because all crossing points into Syria from Turkey have been closed, it was not possible for the author (who frequently visited Syria until 2015) to conduct direct field research on the ground. Instead, most interviews were conducted by the author online, principally via Skype and WhatsApp, between May 2017 and April 2018. Several interviewees were interviewed more than once. The identities of interviewees remain anonymous due to safety concerns. These interviews are supported by secondary sources, including official statements, documents and news coverage, as well as social media commentary confirmed by credible activists.

Key concepts

- Rehabilitation: a purposeful and planned intervention that aims to change characteristics of ISIS supporters or members (attitudes; cognitive skills and processes; personality and/or mental health; and social, educational or vocational skills) that are believed to be the motives that drove the individual to join or support the group, with the intention to reduce the chance that the individual will re-join the group or continue to support it.
- Reintegration: a process that leads to a safe transition back into the community, by which former ISIS members live a law-abiding life and acquire attitudes and behaviours that generally lead them to become productive, functioning members of society.
- Reconciliation: a process that aims to break the cycle of violence, and progress together towards peace through dialogue between the victims, perpetrators, and wider community. It also aims to prevent, once and for all, the use of the past as the seed of renewed conflict, discrimination and/or revenge killings.
- De-radicalisation: a psychological and cognitive process by which the individual experiences a fundamental change in understanding and belief cognisant to their worldview.

3 Motivations for joining ISIS

Syrian experts and counter-radicalisation practitioners have been attempting for years to identify the various recurring factors and dynamics that drove members to join ISIS.⁷ Through their work with former ISIS members, they have been able to identify four main drivers that pushed many Syrians to cooperate with the group.⁸ Such motivations include financial benefits, protection, military capacity, and Ideology.⁹ While many of these motivations are similar to the ones that drove foreign fighters to join ISIS,¹⁰ the civil war created special conditions that pressured many locals to join the group.¹¹ Identifying and understanding such motives are not only important in countering ISIS's recruiting tactics, but also in rehabilitating and reintegrating the thousands of locals who were affiliated with ISIS at some point.

Financial benefits

The Syrian armed conflict has made it more difficult for locals to provide for their families through administrative jobs. ISIS generated an income of nearly \$2 billion in 2014 alone, and was in control of all governance functions and public services provision.¹² This allowed the group to provide works across various functions and capacities, such as ethical police, judges and administrative staff. Moreover, ISIS was giving higher salaries compared to other rebel groups and providing its members with additional incentives to fight for the group. For example, members were receiving welfare allowances for accommodation, utility bills, their spouses, children, parents etc. A local resident who lived in an ISIS controlled area stated,

ISIS was paying its members \$100 per month. The group was also given a monthly accommodation allowance of \$50. Those who are married were receiving an additional \$50 per month for the wife, \$35 for each child, and \$50 for each parent living with them. On average ISIS members were making \$600 to \$700 per month which was way more tempting than the \$50–100 that was paid by other groups. That's why many people were keen to join the group.¹³

ISIS members were also entitled to other services such as free medical treatment and pharmaceuticals. In contrast, non-ISIS members suffered under a barely functioning economy with rapidly increasing prices.¹⁴ In other words, joining ISIS was considered a viable way to accumulate wealth in the areas it controlled.

7 Author interview via Skype with Aghiad, a member of the Sound and Picture Organization, April 2018.

8 The term cooperate is used in this paper to refer to the individuals who work with ISIS without officially joining the group. For example, a local doctor can be working at a hospital run by ISIS without being a member of the group. The same applies to teachers and other administrative employees.

9 Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, Syrian researcher who focuses on radical groups in Syria, March 2018.

10 J. Antunez, and A. Moreno, 'Daesh European Foreign Fighters: Ideology, Motivation and Profiling', *GESI*, January 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318393476_DAESH_EUROPEAN_FOREIGN_FIGHTERS_IDEOLOGY_MOTIVATION_AND_PROFILING_1 (accessed 3 February 2018).

11 Interview with Ahmed.

12 Jose Pagliery, 'Inside the \$2 Billion ISIS War Machine', *CNN*, 11 December 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/12/06/news/isis-funding/index.html> (accessed 3 March 2018).

13 Author interview via WhatsApp with Sarmad, a local resident from Raqqa, March 2018.

14 Natalie Ilesley, 'ISIS is Facing a Cash Crunch in the Caliphate', *News Week*, 23 September 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/isisislamic-stateiraqsyriacaliphateraqaais-599849> (accessed 9 April 2018).

Protection

Fear of ISIS played a significant role in persuading people to join for their own protection. ISIS is known for establishing wide networks of informants to gather intelligence (and thus better understand the local dynamics), identify key players, recruit supporters and eliminate potential threats. The widespread use of informants in ISIS-controlled areas created mistrust between residents, pushing many to publicly show their loyalty to the group.¹⁵ It is also well known that the group asserted its dominance through the use of violence and coercive measures, including detention, abduction, intimidation, assassination and public execution.¹⁶ As such, many people felt that the easiest way to avoid being perceived as a potential enemy was to become a de-facto ISIS member, follow its regulations and attend its activities.¹⁷ Civil servants in the areas captured by ISIS, for example, had no choice but to continue their work under ISIS's flag. Likewise, captured enemy combatants were promised amnesty in exchange for pledging allegiance to ISIS.¹⁸

Military capacity

In times of conflict, being part of an armed group provides a degree of control and agency. As ISIS was, for a long time, better funded, disciplined and equipped, it became the most appealing option for would-be recruits.¹⁹ The rapid ISIS victories in Syria and Iraq in the second half of 2014 portrayed the group as the most powerful armed group in the region. Consequently, some of those who viewed the Bashar al-Assad regime as the ultimate enemy – for killing its fellow citizens to stay in power – considered ISIS the greatest threat to its survival and therefore the only group capable of toppling it.²⁰

One local resident who lived in an ISIS-controlled territory stated,

When you live in a war zone, you need to feel protected by someone or some group. ISIS's victories in Syria and Iraq and the way the media portrayed it made it look unstoppable. Therefore, people started joining the group because it seemed that it was winning. No one wants to join a group that is losing or is expected to.²¹

Ideology

Some recruits were ideologically committed to the ISIS goal of establishing a caliphate that was governed according to their radical interpretation of the Sharia. However, within this category of recruits, Syrian counter-radicalisation practitioners differentiate between two types of ideological supporters: those who already shared a similar ideology before joining the group (in Syria, these tend to be the defected members of other groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (previously called the Nusra Front), who created the primary core of

15 Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria'.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Author interview via Skype with Abdullah, a local activist focusing on resisting radical groups, March 2018.

19 Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a local civil society activist focusing on reconciliation and peace building, January 2018.

20 Author interview via WhatsApp with Omar, former rebel fighter who lives in Turkey, December 2017.

21 Interview with Sarmad.

ISIS in Syria),²² and those who became ideologically motivated after being exposed to ISIS ideology and propaganda. While the group aims to spread its ideology through its Sharia institutions and educational courses, ISIS seems to give a special priority to educating youth. The group specifically tailors its propaganda to appeal to young people and manipulates them into trusting in ISIS ideology above all else.²³ The ‘Cubs of the Caliphate’, as ISIS calls them, are ‘cheaper’ and more ideologically malleable than adults. It was also easier to target them on a large scale at ISIS-sponsored schools, which were the only educational option available to most local residents.²⁴ ISIS was thus able to mobilize a large number of young people for its own causes by providing them with one of the clearest ways to achieve personal fulfilment, often framing actions through personal grievance.²⁵ This category is considered the most dangerous as it potentially lays the groundwork for the group’s resurgence and potential inter-generational problem.²⁶

While it is not clear how many people fit each of these profiles, Syrian practitioners estimate the number of those who joined ISIS for ideological reasons to be less than 20%.²⁷ This view, however, is not limited to just Syrian extremists. In May 2016, International Alert conducted a qualitative study examining the reasons why young Syrians were vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups. Their research concluded that

*Radicalisation is not an explanation for joining a violent extremist group per se. For Syrians, belief in extreme ideologies appears to be – at most – a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group. Religion is providing a moral medium for coping and justification for fighting, rather than a basis for rigid and extreme ideologies.*²⁸

Syrian counter-radicalisation practitioners have generally divided ISIS members into two broad categories in order to identify the reintegration and rehabilitation efforts that are most appropriate.²⁹ These are:

Non-devoted members: This category includes the pragmatists who joined ISIS for non-ideological reasons and has two tiers. First are those members who did not commit crimes against civilians, and who are viewed as low-risk. These members do not usually need extensive rehabilitation efforts, and are therefore easy to reintegrate. Second are those members who committed crimes against civilians, and are considered high-risk. This group needs advanced rehabilitation programs and psychological support to be reintegrated into society, including out-reach and societal reconciliation to help local communities heal. While a few rehabilitation efforts taking place in Syria are targeting non-devoted members, not much is being done to address the risks posed by this group.

22 Interview with Mustafa.

23 Author interview via WhatsApp with Omar, a local teacher from Raqqa, February 2018.

24 Haid, ‘Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria’.

25 Interview with Ahmed.

26 Interview with Abdullah.

27 Interview with Ahmed.

28 M. Aubrey, R. Aubrey, F. Brodrick and C. Brooks, ‘Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight’, *International Alert*, May 2016, http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups_EN_2016.pdf (accessed 11 April 2018).

29 Author interview via WhatsApp with Hussein, the director of the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre, April 2018.

Devoted members: This category includes people who are driven by the ISIS ideology and are fully committed to its mission. Those who belong to this category and have military experience are considered the most dangerous individuals. The danger of such a group continues past detention given their ability, and history, of radicalising other detainees. This group needs extensive and advanced rehabilitation efforts, although such a goal is not always achievable.

The rest of the paper will illustrate how the Syrians who fall into the aforementioned categories participate in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes administered by official actors and community-based initiatives.

4 Areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces – challenges and priorities

ISIS's offensive to capture the northern city of Kobane (officially known as Ayn al-Arab) in September 2014 triggered the ongoing Kurdish-led counter-offensive.³⁰ To stop the city's imminent capture and prevent a similar fate for the Iraqi city of Sinjar,³¹ where ISIS killed and enslaved thousands of civilians just a month before, the US-led anti-ISIS coalition provided air support and ammunition to the People's Protection Units (YPG) – the strongest Kurdish armed group affiliated with the political Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – who were defending the city.³² The positive outcome of that cooperation, which successfully protected the city, quickly made the Kurdish forces the main partner of the US-led coalition inside Syria.³³ Consequently, the scope of the operation expanded beyond the Kurdish majority areas and led to the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic coalition led by the YPG to fight ISIS.³⁴ Since then, the SDF has been successful in recapturing the vast majority of ISIS-held territories in north-eastern Syria. But this military victory resulted in a high level of destruction in the seized areas and the displacement of thousands of civilians due to the intense fighting and high number of coalition airstrikes.³⁵

ISIS's territorial losses at the hands of the SDF have also been perceived locally as de-facto Kurdish gains, given the installation of a governance style that mirrors traditional Kurdish-led self-administration. Arabs, who make up the majority of the population in these territories, largely oppose the SDF-led governance model given that it was imposed on them, and because it does not foster meaningful local participation.³⁶ This has increased tension between Arabs and Kurds, fuelling a cycle of mistrust and fear of the SDF alliance.³⁷ Additionally, the fighting has led to the capturing of thousands of ISIS members who are displaced.³⁸ Furthermore, SDF's key priorities seem to be developing governance structures in the former ISIS-held territories, restoring essential services and allowing displaced people to return home.

30 Martin Chulov, 'Kurds Flee into Turkey in their Thousands to Escape Isis Offensive', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/21/isis-kurds-escape-into-turkey-from-syria-kobani> (accessed 21 February 2018).

31 Lin Taylor, 'Nearly 10,000 Yazidis Killed, Kidnapped by Islamic State in 2014, Study Finds', *Reuters*, 9 May 2017, <http://reut.rs/2pgROBb> (accessed 24 March 2018).

32 BBC, 'US-led air strikes hit IS on Syria's border with Turkey', *BBC*, 28 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29390781> (accessed 6 April 2018).

33 Haid Haid, 'The New Kurdish-Arab Alliance', *Now Media*, 20 October 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/566087-the-new-kurdish-arab-alliance> (accessed 12 March 2018).

34 Ibid.

35 Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria'.

36 Haid Haid, 'The Ramifications of the SDF Governance Plan for Raqqa Post-ISIS', *Atlantic Council*, 11 May 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-ramifications-of-the-sdf-governance-plan-for-raqqa-post-isis> (accessed 12 April 2018).

37 Haid Haid, 'The Emerging Conflict Between Arabs and Kurds in Syria', *Now Media*, 12 October 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/566344-the-emerging-conflict-between-arabs-and-kurds-in-syria> (accessed 13 March 2018).

38 Eric Schmitt, 'Pentagon Wades Deeper Into Detainee Operations in Syria', *The New York Times*, 5 April 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2ElnYyO> (accessed 19 April 2018).

While the following sub-sections will not discuss the challenges facing the SDF's governance efforts, this paper studies how those challenges have shaped the post-ISIS policies for both the SDF and the local governance entities affiliated with them. It looks closely at the SDF's policies of eliminating the ISIS threat by capturing the group's supporters, who are suspected of carrying out attacks in an effort to destabilise the region, and figuring out what to do with the enormous number of captured ISIS members.³⁹ The section also looks at how the SDF uses a community vetting process to overcome the swelling number of detainees by identifying those who should be offered reconciliation deals to be released without prosecution.

Detention and legal prosecution

The number of captured ISIS members continues to grow, given the ongoing operations to capture the rest of ISIS's territory and hunt down ISIS sleeper cells. This has further increased the challenges facing the SDF in securing and processing prisoners.⁴⁰ The significant number of prisoners and the lack of official detention facilities has resulted in a dependence on temporary collective detention centres, namely camps and schools. Such facilities, however, not only hold ISIS fighters, but also many of their families,⁴¹ as well as other people who are suspected of being affiliated with ISIS.⁴² More secure facilities are used to imprison ISIS leaders and other figures who are considered high-profile and potentially dangerous.⁴³ SDF officials highlighted that the half-dozen detention sites in and around Raqqa, some of which contain thousands of prisoners, are at practically full capacity, with limited budgets.

The large number of detainees has also slowed the vetting and interrogation process, which could lead to a number of serious ramifications.⁴⁴ The SDF-established makeshift detention facilities lack sufficient security to prevent jailbreaks of battle-hardened militants, who could reinvigorate the remaining ISIS pockets.⁴⁵ To overcome such gaps, the SDF is receiving American funds to secure schools and other buildings being used as temporary jails by erecting fencing, putting bars on windows, and providing extra guards.⁴⁶ Despite such efforts, a small group of ISIS detainees managed to escape from an SDF detention facility last February.⁴⁷ The security concerns caused by this incident are not only linked to the profile of the escapees or how they broke out, which remains largely unclear, but rather to the fact that escape is possible in the first place. Consequently, there have been growing concerns that future detention breakouts could occur at even larger scales, particularly given that ISIS in Iraq (previously known as 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq') had previously carried out a major prison breakout operation named 'Breaking the Walls'. The operation, which took place between July 2012 and July 2013, resulted in a series of eight breakouts from the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib. As a result, hundreds of hardened militants who escaped are now among the leaders and foot

39 Author interview via WhatsApp with an SDF official who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic and the information shared, February 2018.

40 Haid Haid, 'Next in the Fight Against ISIS, Captured Militants Must be Rehabilitated', *Syndication Bureau*, 9 March 2018, <https://syndicationbureau.com/en/next-in-the-fight-against-isis-captured-militants-must-be-rehabilitated/> (accessed 5 April 2018).

41 Interview with Aghiad.

42 Haid Haid, 'Concerns Grow for Civilians Caught up in Anti-ISIS Hunts', *Chatham House*, December 2017, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/concerns-grow-for-civilians-caught-up-in-anti-isis-hunts> (accessed 6 March 2018).

43 Interview with an anonymous SDF official.

44 Ibid.

45 Haid, 'Next in the Fight Against ISIS, Captured Militants Must be Rehabilitated'.

46 Schmitt, 'Pentagon Wades Deeper Into Detainee Operations in Syria'.

47 Barbara Starr, 'ISIS Fighters Escape from US-Backed Detention in Syria'.

soldiers of ISIS and other like-minded groups operating in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁸ One local journalist who has been researching this topic stated,

It seems that neither the US nor the SDF are paying attention to the mistakes that were committed in Iraq which led directly to where we are today. These collective detention camps provide ISIS members and leaders the time and place to brainstorm their next moves. The previous breakouts and the fragile security measures indicate that they can break free as soon as they are done planning.⁴⁹

Analysts also fear that the detention facilities could become breeding grounds for ISIS, a 'radicalisation academy'.⁵⁰ The detainees captured by the SDF are not all devoted believers in ISIS's ideology and mission. Some are only suspected of being affiliated with ISIS, and might prove innocent, while others are internally displaced people who are not permitted to leave the displacement camp because they do not have sponsors in the SDF-controlled areas.⁵¹ Most of the men, women and children stuck in such detention camps have little to occupy them (such as attractive education and training), which leaves them vulnerable to recruitment. Many of the former Syrian prisoners who joined ISIS and like-minded groups were radicalised by other violent extremist detainees in the prisons run by the Syrian regime.⁵² Additionally, many experts have traced the beginning of ISIS in Iraq to similar circumstances in 2004 where ISIS leaders were detained at the time. The years they spent at Camp Bucca, a sprawling American detention centre in southern Iraq, only made them more radicalized and gave them the opportunity to regroup and develop new networks and strategies.⁵³ The enormous number of detainees in the overcrowded cells and camps make the SDF's efforts to monitor the activities of the prisoners even more difficult. A local teacher who lived in a displacement camp near Raqqa stated,

The living conditions in the detention camps – or the death camps as locals call it – are extremely difficult. Despite the lack of education, basic services, medical services etc., people are not allowed to leave. Those people are angry, tired, desperate, and with all the time in the world on their hands. More than that, instead of locking ISIS's brochures away from such potential recruits, you do the opposite. What better opportunity can ISIS hope for?⁵⁴

Additionally, the inability of the SDF-affiliated legal system to prosecute ISIS detainees has turned this challenge from a temporary failure into a long-term crisis. Prosecution is left to newly established local courts that seem to have well-intentioned judges and lawyers but suffer from sparse resources, limited legitimacy, concerns related to due process, and a lack of local or international recognition.⁵⁵ Terrorism cases, in particular, are handled by the Defense of the People Court (also known as the terrorism court), which applies a special counterterrorism law written and adopted by the Kurdish-led self-administration in 2014.⁵⁶

48 Jessica Lewis, 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent', *Understanding War*, September 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-iraq-resurgent> (accessed 2 April 2018).

49 Author interview via WhatsApp with Haitham, a local journalist from Raqqa who focuses on radical groups, February 2018.

50 Haid, 'Next in the Fight Against ISIS, Captured Militants Must be Rehabilitated'.

51 Haid, 'Concerns Grow for Civilians Caught up in Anti-ISIS Hunts'.

52 Rania Abouzeid, 'The Ex-Jihadi in Plain Sight', *The New York Times*, 10 March 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2Gg9F0k> (accessed 22 April 2018).

53 Schmitt, 'Pentagon Wades Deeper Into Detainee Operations in Syria'.

54 Interview with Omar.

55 Nadim Houry, 'Difficult Justice Questions', *Human Rights Watch*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/06/difficult-justice-questions> (accessed 15 April 2018).

56 Sarah el-Deeb, 'Syria's Kurds Put IS on Trial with Focus on Reconciliation', *The Associated Press*, 7 March 2018, <https://apnews.com/d672105754434b738c8e5823233572c9> (accessed 7 May 2018).

While there has been no comprehensive assessment of these courts' operations, the few relevant studies suggest that they suffer from lack of professionalism, including a paucity of trained prosecutors and judges.⁵⁷ In other words, the existing legal and judicial apparatus lacks the needed manpower to take up such a task. 674 people were tried and convicted by terrorism court in 2017, while 225 have been tried so far this year.⁵⁸ At this pace, it will take the court at least a decade to prosecute the captured ISIS members.

Human rights organisations have highlighted major concerns about the due process present in special courts, with suspects denied the right to a lawyer, to challenge the evidence against them, or to appeal their sentences. Detainees have complained about lengthy pre-trial detention and not being able to challenge the evidence against them.⁵⁹ Additionally, there is no strategy to deal with the families of ISIS's Syrian members, many of whom are living in displacement or special detention camps. While many of those family members, especially women and children, are not officially under arrest, they are de facto held in their respective camps and have no idea about their future or control over it.⁶⁰

Concerns are also growing for civilians caught up in anti-ISIS hunts. Locals feel that the SDF is dealing with those who lived in ISIS-controlled areas under the assumption that they are affiliated with the group until proven otherwise.⁶¹ This is largely due to the fact that ISIS thoroughly embedded itself in the local social structure, requiring residents to attend mosques and small businesses to pay taxes. As such, it is difficult today to distinguish between ISIS sympathizers and civilians who were forced to collaborate against their will, or were merely trying to survive.⁶² But the guilty-until-proven-innocent approach is deeply problematic. Local residents have expressed alarming concerns about the waves of arbitrary arrests based on people's appearance and without any prior information about them.⁶³ Some arbitrary detainees might be released after a few days or weeks, based on the ability for people to vouch for them, while others remain imprisoned for longer periods until proven innocent.⁶⁴ One local resident, who was detained by the SDF due to his appearance, stated,

When we were fleeing al-Raqqa [due to the ongoing fighting against ISIS], my brother and I were detained at one the SDF checkpoints. We had long beards and were wearing robes similar to the ones used by ISIS, which we intentionally used not to raise suspicion while fleeing. We were detained for weeks until enough people vouched for us. But others were not as lucky.⁶⁵

It is important to remember that it is extremely difficult to get a clear picture of the exact scale of this phenomenon, due to the absence of any systematic data collection and the fear that prevents the detainees' family members from talking about it publicly.

57 Mikael Ekman, 'ILAC Rule of Law Assessment Report: Syria 2017', ILAC, 2017, <http://www.ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Syria2017.pdf> (accessed 12 March 2018).

58 el-Deeb, 'Syria's Kurds Put IS on Trial with Focus on Reconciliation'.

59 Houry, 'Difficult Justice Questions'.

60 Interview with Aghiad.

61 Interview with Sarmad.

62 Interview with an anonymous SDF official.

63 Haid, 'Concerns Grow for Civilians Caught up in Anti-ISIS Hunts'.

64 Author interview via WhatsApp with Hamed, a local resident from Raqqa who was detained by the SDF, December 2017.

65 Ibid.

Reconciliation deals and community vetting

To overcome the swelling number of detainees, the SDF seems to be focusing on local reconciliation deals to release local fighters.⁶⁶ An SDF official highlighted that most of the captured ISIS affiliates are locals who did not join ISIS for ideological reasons, i.e. non-devoted members.⁶⁷ Additionally, local authorities do not have the capacity to prosecute all of them or detain them for an indefinite period. As a result, the SDF is trying to find the best option to mitigate the risks posed by fighters, while attempting to improve its relations with local Arab-majority communities who are largely suspicious of its intentions. One SDF official stated,

*We are sifting out combatants from local civilians who were pressed by ISIS into administrative or medical jobs. We also differentiate between those who committed crimes against civilians and those who did not. These different processes help us identify who is a threat and who can be reintegrated into their communities.*⁶⁸

Consequently, those who are considered suitable to be reintegrated are then released following discussions with public figures from their communities to facilitate that process. This provides the reformed prisoners with local support, while delegating to their community leaders the responsibility of preventing them from re-joining ISIS in the future.⁶⁹ Such deals officially started during the campaign to re-capture Raqqa, where the SDF began releasing former ISIS fighters who did not commit crimes and held no senior posts.⁷⁰ Local authorities reported that the fighters were released at the request of local tribal leaders as a goodwill gesture designed to promote stability.⁷¹ It is not clear, however, how many people have been released, as there are no official numbers and not all the reconciliation deals are publicly announced.

While there has been no comprehensive assessment of these reconciliation deals, the involvement of local community leaders in the reintegration of former ISIS supporters is not enough to ensure positive results. Such local processes to reintegrate former ISIS members, which are needed, should not be done on ad-hoc basis but rather be part of a larger holistic policy to avoid negative ramifications. According to local sources in Raqqa, the deals have allowed dozens of well-known ISIS members and commanders who committed atrocities to walk free. A local resident in Raqqa stated,

*Those criminals, who are known to locals, were released only a few weeks after they had been captured. Even if the SDF did not know about the crimes that they had committed, which I doubt, this means that their vetting process is flawed.*⁷²

In an unusual statement, one of the SDF officials confirmed that they gave amnesty to some ISIS members who switched allegiances while

66 Michael Georgy, 'Syrian group releases 83 former ISIS militants to promote stability at the end of Ramadan', *Reuters*, 24 June 2017, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/r-amnesty-for-militants-in-syrias-raqqa-aims-to-promote-stability-2017-6?r=US&IR=T> (accessed 1 March 2018).

67 Interview with an anonymous SDF official.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Georgy, 'Syrian group releases 83 former ISIS militants'.

71 Ibid.

72 Interview with Hamed.

they were still with ISIS. As a result of their cooperation with the SDF to defeat ISIS, those members were released immediately, without being questioned about the crimes they committed.⁷³

Local sources have also pointed out that instead of holding former ISIS members accountable, dozens of released ISIS fighters were accepted into the SDF ranks, which added to the growth of tensions among locals. Some of those individuals have become part of the SDF's tribal forces, while the majority are working in the intelligence sector, either as informants or handlers.⁷⁴ But such efforts could be counterproductive and may lead to revenge killing among locals. In an interview, a local resident stated: 'It does not feel right to see a criminal walking free without a fair trial. But such actions do not come with no consequences. The families of the victims might take the law into their own hands when they feel that justice is not served'.⁷⁵ For example, the person who was assassinated in Tabqa (Ussama al-Qawi) last February was named as being a security officer with ISIS before he joined the security apparatus affiliated with the SDF.⁷⁶ Although it is not clear who was behind the incident, revenge might be a possible motive.⁷⁷

The involvement of local communities in such amnesty deals is not only limited to reintegration, but also includes the vetting process that determines who is and is not guilty. Since the SDF and its affiliated security agencies are not familiar with the Arab-majority areas, such as Raqqa, they depend mainly on locals to vet the local population and identify potential threats.⁷⁸ This vetting process is done on two different levels. The first is on the community-level through security committees [*lijan amnia*], which include different security agencies, local notables, and other officials. The role of local notables inside such security committees is limited to vouching that their fellow community members are not affiliated with ISIS. This process of social surveillance usually takes place when a new area is captured by the SDF or before internally displaced people are allowed to go back to their areas. Similarly, local notables are sometimes able to free some detained locals who are suspected of having ties with ISIS.⁷⁹

The second is on the individual level through a network of local informants who share intelligence on whether individuals had worked with ISIS, and to what extent. Depending on the credibility of sources to verify the extent of people's affiliation with ISIS, the process is sped up so the chance of having innocent people caught in anti-ISIS efforts is limited. This process can also help lift some of the burden off local authorities to allow them to focus on dealing with confirmed ISIS members.⁸⁰ However, the relatively unstructured and random nature of this vetting process—which often relies on anyone who is willing to cooperate, without paying much attention to the intentions behind such a decision—is extremely prone to abuse. People could easily use such structures to pursue grudges and vendettas, which may

73 Khalil Hamlo, 'The Mystery of How ISIS Members Disappeared', *Salon Syria*, 25 January 2018, <https://salonsyria.com/%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%88-%D8%AE%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AA/#.WvN7GtMvxN> (accessed 12 February 2018).

74 Interview with Sarmad.

75 Interview with Hamed.

76 Zaman al-Wasl, 'Unidentified people kill an SDF intelligence member in Tabqa', *Zaman al-Wasl*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/84681/> (accessed 13 March 2018).

77 Interview with Sarmad.

78 Ibid.

79 Interview with Haitham.

80 Ibid.

dissuade refugees from returning to former ISIS areas and triggering revenge attacks, given the high level of personal grievances among locals.⁸¹ The seeming ease with which the vetting process facilitates personal acts of retribution could also undermine the legitimacy of any local authority attempting to exert control and enforce stability.⁸²

81 Interview with Ahmed.

82 Interview with Mustafa.

5 Rebel-controlled areas

Unlike the areas controlled by the unified alliance of Syrian Democratic Forces discussed above, rebel-held areas are ruled by different groups, not all of which are allies. Consequently, fighting ISIS in these territories was carried out by various actors at different times. The first large-scale anti-ISIS campaign was led by local insurgent groups, namely Jaish al-Mujahdeen, in January 2014 across most of northern Syria, leading to the re-capture of approximately half of its territories. This anti-ISIS campaign only lasted for a few weeks and did not lead to much destruction as ISIS members withdrew from many areas without much resistance due to the largescale popular uprising against them.⁸³ Apart from dozens of ISIS fighters who decided to fight until the end and were therefore captured, the majority of the group's combatants relocated to ISIS's strongholds in eastern Syria.⁸⁴ Countering ISIS's ideology was not considered a priority for those in charge at the time since the group had been defeated nearly six months after it was established, and its propaganda machine was not fully operational.⁸⁵ Similarly, the small number of captured ISIS members meant that the actors in charge only had to deal with former ISIS members who had defected, deciding to stay in their communities instead. Civil society groups and community leaders, who have a strong presence in northern Syria, were heavily involved in the local reconciliation processes that allowed former ISIS members, who decided to stay, to continue to live in their areas.⁸⁶

The second large-scale battle was announced in August 2016 by the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield Operation. This was backed by a number of Syrian rebel groups, with the goal of pushing ISIS away from the Turkish border in north-eastern Syria. The operation achieved its objective after nearly six months of fighting when ISIS fighters withdrew from the city of al-Bab in February 2017.⁸⁷ As a result, most ISIS fighters fled Raqqa, while only dozens of them were captured during the whole campaign.⁸⁸ The Euphrates Shield Operation was Turkey's first direct foreign military intervention in Syria; as such, its priority has been to focus on reconstruction and governance to present the areas under its control as a successful example. Countering ISIS ideology was not considered a priority despite the fact that the group had been able to impose its beliefs on people living there for years.⁸⁹

This section shows how the lack of formal efforts to deal with post-ISIS problems has pushed civil society actors to establish ad-hoc and limited community-based initiatives to overcome that gap. It provides a case study of how a local reconciliation process with former ISIS members was implemented in Aleppo's countryside, and the successes and challenges it faced. It then describes how the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre has been established in the northern city

83 Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria'.

84 Interview with Ahmed.

85 Interview with Mustafa.

86 Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria'.

87 Haid Haid, 'Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy', *Chatham House*, 26 September 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/post-isis-governance-jarablus-turkish-led-strategy> (accessed 6 March 2018).

88 Interview with Hussien.

89 Ibid.

of Mare to rehabilitate detained ISIS members. Finally, it describes the work of the activist-run Sound and Picture Organization, which focuses on collectively countering ISIS's ideology among civilians who lived under the group's rule and could be susceptible to its influence.

Local reconciliation processes

There are currently no publicly-known, successful reconciliation examples in these territories; the following case – which is neither common nor widely coordinated – stands as a clear example of the rare attempts to address the issue of reintegrating ISIS members within rebel-controlled communities. The experience took place in Atarib in early 2014, where the local resistance to ISIS was followed by a community-led reconciliation process that, notwithstanding clear shortcomings, allowed the majority of local ISIS members to leave the group and reintegrate within the community.⁹⁰ The process had two phases; prior to the confrontation that saw ISIS defeated in the city, Atarib's residents offered protection to ISIS members if they abstained from fighting.⁹¹ The advice was clearly relayed, via public communication channels, walkie-talkies and the mosques, that those who opted not to fight on behalf of ISIS would be safe. Most local ISIS members subsequently conveyed, via their families, that they were unwilling to fight. Such individuals received protection guarantees from the city's local military leaders and public elders on the condition that they did not leave their homes during the fight. Indeed, all those who chose not to fight remained at home. Those who decided otherwise went to their designated assembly point at the group's centre. A former rebel fighter who participated in the fighting stated,

We decided to give people a way out in case they wanted one. We all make mistakes, and people should always have a second chance. Moreover, killing locals, even if they are members of ISIS, will badly impact the relationship between the residents of the city. Luckily, almost all of the locals decided not to fight, which weakened ISIS and preserved the unity of our community.⁹²

The second phase followed the defeat of ISIS in Atarib, where its local members were issued with clear instructions to surrender their weapons to the nearest armed faction, and to declare their dissociation from the group. There were no collective punishments or prosecutions, although all former ISIS members were temporarily banned from carrying weapons in public. Prosecutions were, however, pursued in the case of some individuals against whom charges were already pending, or against those in which sufficient evidence existed to warrant criminal prosecution. The same fighter stated,

Many of those who joined ISIS in Atarib and in other places only did it for financial reasons, influence or protection. Some, if not the majority, of former members are likely to join whichever extremist group replaces ISIS if they are treated as enemies. We tried to win them over instead of pushing them away, only for them to join ISIS elsewhere.⁹³

⁹⁰ Interview with Abdullah.

⁹¹ Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria'.

⁹² Author interview via WhatsApp with Omar, former rebel fighter who lives in Turkey, December 2017.

⁹³ Ibid.

While this process was partially successful in allowing former ISIS members to continue to live peacefully in the city, it undoubtedly had many failings.⁹⁴ There were no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that former ISIS members did not join other radical groups. While most local armed groups refused to allow ex-ISIS fighters to join their ranks, one consequence was that many joined the Nusra Front, which took control of ISIS military bases and weapons in many of the areas from which ISIS had withdrawn. The group's ability to do so apparently reflected local rebel groups' fears of any confrontation with the Nusra Front. Equally, there were no clear follow-through mechanisms on the process to protect former ISIS members. Consequently, some of those previously associated with ISIS were subject to discriminatory behaviour and social stigma. Some ex-fighters were reported to have subsequently re-joined ISIS elsewhere, although it is not clear whether they were motivated to do so as active supporters of the group or because the local reprisals caused them to turn back to ISIS.⁹⁵

With regard to captured ISIS fighters, there was no clear plan to determine how they would be handled after the group's defeat. Initially, the local rebel group *Liwa al-Islam* was put in charge of all ISIS prisoners. However, *Liwa* soon handed responsibility for ISIS detainees to the more established Ahrar al-Sham movement, which already controlled a large prison at the Bab al-Hawa crossing and was thus understood to have both the will and the necessary resources to hold the captives. According to local accounts, the detainees were then handed over to the Nusra Front and later released; some then joined the Nusra Front, while others re-joined ISIS in Raqqa.⁹⁶ In the absence of any formal follow-up, it remains unclear as to precisely what happened to the ISIS prisoners, or who was responsible for setting them free. Finally, no systematic efforts were invested in countering ISIS's ideology on either the individual or community level.

Rehabilitation centre – the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre

While there does not seem to be a local reconciliation process in the town of Mare' in Aleppo's countryside, a more advanced rehabilitation process to deal with former ISIS members has been established through the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre (SCEC). This is the only centre of its kind in Syria. The centre is located in Mare and controlled by the Turkish-led forces.⁹⁷ The local civil society actors and religious scholars involved in this initiative founded the centre in October 2017 to address, among other things, the emerging problem resulting from ISIS's territorial losses in north-eastern Syria. These losses caused hundreds of ISIS-affiliated militants and defectors to flee to rebel-controlled areas in northern Syria.⁹⁸ While other actors are focusing on fighting the group militarily, the centre focuses on countering violent extremism and establishing de-radicalization programs to erase ISIS's entrenched ideology. The director of the centre stated,

⁹⁴ Haid, 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria'.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Author interview with local police member under condition of anonymity, September 2017.

⁹⁷ Anas al-Raqi, 'The Syrian Centre for countering radicalisation in Marea', *Ayn Al-Madina*, 23 November 2017, <http://www.ayn-almadina.com/details/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%20%D9%84%D9%85%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AD%8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%83%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%81%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9/4289/ar%20%20%20%20> (accessed 13 March 2018).

⁹⁸ Author interview via WhatsApp with Mohannad, a local civil society activist familiar with the organisation's work, April 2018.

Despite the urgent need to rehabilitate ISIS members, everyone was only focusing on defeating the group militarily. But ISIS's ideology cannot be defeated with weapons. Thus, I decided – with other local figures – to start what needs to be done with whatever expertise and means available. The aim is to prevent the re-emergence of the group by providing a more comprehensive approach to erase its remains.⁹⁹

Established in a former school, the centre includes thirty-five staff, five of which deal directly with ISIS members while the rest are guards and administrators. All the people involved are working on a voluntary basis, as the centre does not receive foreign funds. The running costs of the project are covered by small donations raised locally.¹⁰⁰ The centre hosts twenty-five ISIS members who were captured or defected, the majority of whom are Syrians while the rest are from the Caucasus, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Tunisia, Iraq and other countries. The centre has so far only been admitting ISIS members who have been referred by local courts, and whose sentences include residing at the centre for rehabilitation.¹⁰¹ The centre was able to reach such an arrangement – with some of the local courts and the affiliated rebel groups – due to the prominence of some of the people involved in this initiative, as well as the importance of the work it is doing. Consequently, the respective courts started referring captured ISIS members to the centre until the latter reached its maximum capacity.¹⁰²

The centre's residents are divided into three categories. The first is the low-risk group, which includes Syrian members who were not fighters or have not been accused of violations against civilians. The second category are those considered medium-risk and includes Syrian combatants involved in violence or criminal activities. The third and high-risk category includes all non-Syrian members. While the profile of the second and third categories are similar, in terms of committing crimes against civilians, the centre differentiates between them for two reasons. First, it is due to the assumption that most of the Syrians joined ISIS for pragmatic reasons such as fame, power, money etc. In contrast, foreign ISIS members are considered more ideologically motivated. Second, the language barrier makes it more difficult to communicate with those in the third category, thus making it more difficult to rehabilitate them.¹⁰³

For each of these categories, there are workshops and seminars in religious doctrine to familiarize them with a more moderate form of Islam than the version imposed by ISIS. Other sessions aim at countering ISIS propaganda and narratives by explaining the damages caused by ISIS attacks and who the real targets of such assaults were. Videos, photos, reports, and newspapers are usually used as evidence to support the argument. The residents also attend courses in civic education, law, communication, human security, human rights and other relevant topics that can help reintegrate them into their

99 Interview with Hussien.

100 Interview with Hussien.

101 Mohammed al-Khatib, 'Three Former ISIS Members: This is why we joined the group', *al-Jumhuriya*, 1 February 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/ar/content/%D8%AB%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AB%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%87%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B6%D9%85%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%80-%C2%AB%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%91%D8%A9%C2%BB> (accessed 13 April 2018).

102 Interview with Mohannad.

103 Interview with Hussien.

communities.¹⁰⁴ While group psychosocial support sessions are mandatory for everyone, many have to attend individual sessions to help wean them off ISIS ideology. The residents attend three such sessions every day, while spending the rest of the time watching movies, playing chess and backgammon etc.¹⁰⁵

The residents stay at the centre between one and six months. During this period, the progress of the residents is measured and shared with local authorities who base their release decisions on the centre's recommendations. Those who make quick progress can be released from the centre after the first month, while others may require an extended stay. During that time, the families of the residents are allowed to visit them for one hour once a week.¹⁰⁶ The stay at the centre is deducted from their prison sentence; as such, the centre operates both as a detention and a rehabilitation facility. Four former ISIS members, who belong to low and medium risk groups, have been released based on the centre's recommendation. The centre has established mechanisms to follow up on released individuals (such as home visits, establishing communication channels with their communities etc.) to monitor their reintegration into society.¹⁰⁷

Though the centre has demonstrated some success, it also faces numerous challenges, notably a lack of funding. The limited financial resources thus only allows the centre to accept a small number of ISIS members. This has also led to the centre's inability to hire translators, making it difficult to communicate with some of the foreign residents who cannot communicate in Arabic.¹⁰⁸ The centre's sole dependence on small donations raised by locals may also risk the continuity of its operation if, and when, locals can no longer cover the centre's expenses, which may be very soon.¹⁰⁹

Additionally, the people in charge of the centre have no previous experience in the field of rehabilitation or countering violent extremism. Despite various attempts, they have not been able to make contact with any other experts or centres who work in the field. This is due to the lack of knowledge about who to contact, the limited attempts to reach out, and the lack of willingness among those that were contacted. Therefore, most of the centre's staff lack the knowledge and experience that allow them to work with former ISIS supporters without risking being counterproductive, particularly given that they have designed their programs alone. This issue was partially raised by the centre's director who expressed the need for more experienced specialists, especially when dealing with hardened ISIS loyalists.¹¹⁰ Besides, the centre – which deals with underage ISIS members – does not have specialised youth counsellors or staff familiar with child/youth rehabilitation. This raises concerns about treating children similarly to adult ISIS members and detaining them in the same place as those who have committed serious crimes. Furthermore, the centre does not address the wider impact of ISIS on the thousands of local residents living there who joined Islamic State in different capacities, or who were influenced by it.

104 al-Khatib, 'Three Former ISIS Members: This is why we joined the group' .

105 Interview with Hussien.

106 al-Raqi, 'The Syrian Centre for countering radicalisation in Marea'.

107 Interview with Mohannad.

108 Ibid.

109 Sarmad al-Jilane, 'Unlearning ISIS: The Battle to Reclaim Hearts and Minds', *News Deeply*, 17 November 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/peacebuilding/articles/2017/11/17/unlearning-isis-the-battle-to-reclaim-hearts-and-minds> (accessed 13 April 2018).

110 Interview with Hussien.

Case study

Sami is a 14 year-old boy from the northern countryside of Aleppo.¹¹¹ His school was closed after ISIS captured his town in late 2014, and so he started going to the ISIS-run education centre at one of the local mosques. He attended the daily Sharia courses, which, among other subjects, encouraged the children to join ISIS. Watching ISIS propaganda videos was an essential component of his new education. His decision to join ISIS was also influenced by the death of his two older brothers (20 and 23 years old) who were fighting with ISIS.¹¹² As a result, he decided to join the group, which at the time seemed like the only logical choice. Despite the objection of his parents, who did not want him to join ISIS, he went to the recruitment centre and became a member of ISIS at the age of 12. After a short period of training, he started fighting for the group in different locations in eastern Syria. Although he believed in ISIS and its goal to the extent that he was considering becoming a suicide bomber, he defected after two years due to pressure from his family. He smuggled himself back to his village where he surrendered to the rebel group in charge of the area.¹¹³ After investigating his involvement with ISIS, Sami was transferred to the centre by a local court. He stayed in the centre for four months and was recommended to be released due to his positive response to the rehabilitation courses. Sami has returned to his village where he lives with his family. He is planning to go back to school to continue his studies. After his release, the centre continued to follow up on Sami and his reintegration process.¹¹⁴ The director of the centre mentioned Sami in particular, in different occasions, as a successful example of how former ISIS members can be supported during their reintegration back into their community, especially when such members are victims of the group in the first place.¹¹⁵

111 His name was changed to protect his identity.

112 al-Khatib, 'Three Former ISIS Members: This is why we joined the group'.

113 Interview with Mohannad.

114 The Syrian Counter Extremism Centre, 'Graduation of one of the guests of our centre', The Syrian Counter Extremism Centre, 6 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJEfadiHlvo&feature=youtu.be> (accessed 23 April 2018).

115 Interview with Hussien.

Initiatives on the community level: The Sound and Picture Organization

While the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre focuses on known ISIS members, the activist-run Sound and Picture Organization focuses on civilians who lived under its rule and could be susceptible to the ideology.¹¹⁶ The organisation – which seems to be among very few initiatives, if any, that do this type of work – is focusing on people who are internally displaced from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in areas under the control of the SDF or other rebel groups. The special focus on this target group is due to the fact that people involved in the organisation are also internally displaced from these areas. Internally displaced people are usually targeted by violent radical groups who try to take advantage of their vulnerable conditions, which makes working with them a priority.¹¹⁷ The organisation believes that the impact of ISIS ideology will not automatically disappear just because the group was militarily defeated. The director of the initiative stated,

The pro-ISIS nashid, the strict dress-code, the beheadings, becoming an ISIS fighter, all these things have become familiar especially to children who do not know anything else. This time bomb needs to be defused as soon as possible to prevent it from being detonated again. Despite that, the lack of formal efforts to address this issue has pushed others to take on such a task.¹¹⁸

The organisation's activities take place in different locations based on where the target group lives. For those who live in camps, the group gathers people inside tents or makeshift facilities such as schools, or outdoors. As for those who live in urban areas, the activities usually take place either in public venues, such as schools or cafes, or in private houses.¹¹⁹ Over a period of two months, the organisation conducts a series of sessions to help people discuss the difficulties facing them due to their displacement; and help them come up with solutions to their problems. The sessions are also indirectly used to engage in discussions about ISIS ideology to highlight its flaws and reduce its appeal to those who were exposed to it. Furthermore, these sessions aim to identify those at risk of being influenced by it and work with them individually to counter that. All sessions are facilitated by members of the group who try to keep the discussion as informal as possible, without losing sight of its objectives.¹²⁰ The sessions are tailored to fit the organisation's three main categories: women, children and men.

Women

These sessions, which are facilitated by two women, take place once or twice a week and are usually attended by twenty to forty participants, depending on the space available. To encourage attendance, the sessions are presented as a networking opportunity to help those that are displaced connect with others from their areas of origin, as many of them feel lonely.

¹¹⁶ The Sound and Picture Organization is an opposition-run media network that covers developments in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor and is spearheading de-radicalisation efforts both in former ISIS areas and in rebel-held areas.

¹¹⁷ Author interview via WhatsApp with Raed, a local civil society activist familiar with the organisation's work, April 2018.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Aghiad.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Raed.

¹²⁰ Interview with Aghiad.

The first two sessions typically involve icebreakers in which participants are encouraged to get to know each other, while sharing information about the humanitarian services provided and how to access them. The following sessions encourage the participants to talk about what they are interested in doing, such as attending vocational training or other courses. The facilitators then start discussing the difficulties and restrictions under ISIS rule and how people coped with them. To kick off this sensitive discussion, the moderators start by asking general questions such as how cooking changed under ISIS, as some ingredients were not always available, and what people did to overcome that. The discussion then moves to focus on the restrictions imposed on the community by ISIS, especially on women, and how the participants coped with them.

During the discussion, the facilitators direct the conversation to focus on how women have suffered because of ISIS and why ISIS should not be allowed to rule again. The sessions also provide psychosocial support for the participants. The moderators aim to assist the attendees in erasing the remains of ISIS ideology that their children have been exposed to. Notably, the director of the organisation pointed out that the vast majority of the female attendees are not generally in favour of ISIS because they were the ones who suffered the most from it. For example, many of the beneficiaries were not able to leave their houses for months due to ISIS's strict rules that impose a severe dress code, and the presence of a male guardian on any female who leaves her house.¹²¹

Children

The organisation tailors its courses to target two age groups of children. The activities targeting the first group, under the age of ten, are done through the parents who attend the adult sessions, with an emphasis placed on the female attendees. The parents are quickly briefed on the signs of alarming behaviour (such as trying to impose a strict dress code on his female family members, watching or listening to ISIS's nashid, imitating war games where the child always plays ISIS or pretends to behead other people etc.) and how to deal with such behaviour when necessary. Following the session, the parents who still struggle to deal with their children can contact their respective facilitators to provide them with one-to-one advice. If the cases are too complicated, the facilitator can connect the families with a group of Syrian specialists who are volunteering from abroad and can give more advanced support remotely. Although the organisation does not have a clear idea about the percentage of children who are showing alarming behaviour – and therefore need urgent support – they expect the number to be high.

The second group of children are between ten and fourteen years old and attend around two or three sessions a week in the schools that the beneficiaries go to or in the camps they live in. Those sessions, which are presented as entertainment activities, are facilitated by one male and one female and include between twenty and forty children. The facilitators usually distribute children's magazines and story books, and show cartoon movies as an icebreaker activity. When the children are more comfortable, the facilitators engage in

¹²¹ Ibid.

group discussions with the children about their life now and before. Based on the discussion and the general observations, the facilitators tailor psychosocial support, either individually or collectively, for the children involved.

Lack of friends is one of the common problems among displaced children. To mitigate such a problem, the facilitators try to engage the children in group activities such as sports, with the aim of helping them create new friendships. Such activities also aim to distract from the violent games that they play, which imitates the ongoing war in Syria. The facilitators also engage with those children who tend to wear military camouflage outfits or have an-ISIS like appearance (such as shaved heads and short thobes) or listen to ISIS's nashids. Those identified are encouraged to change their behaviour through positive incentives such as providing them with different types of clothes as gifts, or via discussions with them about trendy hair or trendy music, which can be publicly accessible. The children with problems that need private sessions, such as those who tend to be violent or have issues with their families, are dealt with separately. Such efforts may include arranging home visits, working with the children and their parents, or transferring them to the specialists who can provide remote support.¹²²

Men

These sessions, which target adult men without any age restrictions, are run by two male facilitators and include between ten and twenty participants. To make such activities appealing, the group attempts to help the participants find jobs in the areas they live in by connecting them with local job providers. The sessions usually start by discussing the job market, what people are interested in doing and how they might be able to find jobs. The following sessions initiate group discussions on the differences between the new community and the old one, and the difficulties they now face. Such discussions are then followed by group debates on the different practices imposed by ISIS. Those debates tend to be more direct and focus largely on what people liked and did not like about ISIS. Based on what people say and the facilitators' general observations, the latter guide the discussion to highlight the negative impact of ISIS actions and ideology in an attempt to counter ISIS propaganda. The sessions also aim to prevent future inter-community revenge attacks against former ISIS members, by highlighting the negative impact of such and the different ways those individuals can be brought to justice.

To measure the outcome of the courses, the facilitators organise a follow-up session around four to eight weeks after. The organisation's activities are largely ad-hoc and sporadic, which makes it difficult to determine their impact. However, the facilitators have been able to conclude that the sessions have limited impact on male participants in comparison to the other categories, especially among those who fail to find work and therefore struggle to provide for their families. Although the group has been working on similar activities under the control of ISIS and have been doing such activities for years, the group lacks the required experience to deal with advanced cases.

¹²² Ibid.

The remote specialists who are offering to support the group are not able to overcome that gap due to technical issues (such as good Internet) and the limited availability of the specialists who have full-time jobs.¹²³

The private donations from the organisation's members who live abroad are used to cover the expenses of the workshops (flyers, refreshments, transportation, games etc.).¹²⁴ However, the dependence on individual contributions risks the sustainability of the group's work. It also limits the availability of the volunteers in Syria, some of whom have full-time jobs. The lack of full-time staff and the overwhelming workload has meant the organisation has only been able to follow up on a small number of individual cases. The lack of funds is also making it difficult for the organisation to find venues for its activities.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Interview with Raed.

6 Conclusion

The key actors fighting ISIS do not seem to be differentiating between defeating the group militarily and erasing its ideology and propaganda from the minds of the individuals and groups that were ruled by it. Apart from a few limited reconciliation deals, the actors in charge of captured ISIS territories have not been investing much effort in the rehabilitation and reintegration of those who were influenced by the group's ideology. Despite the lack of such official actions, there have been a number of community-based initiatives to address such needs, such as creating a rehabilitation centre for ISIS members, and conducting group activities to help communities overcome ISIS influence. But the broad influence of ISIS has made extremism a rampant problem that cannot be addressed by such ad-hoc attempts.

The challenges facing the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including a lack of resources, expertise and popular legitimacy, are limiting their ability to have a comprehensive post-ISIS strategy or clear set of priorities. As a result, the SDF seems to be mainly focusing on finding short-term solutions (such as indefinite detention, or release into local communities without rehabilitation efforts) to deal with thousands of detained ISIS members. Despite the lack of ability to prosecute those prisoners, the SDF does not appear to be engaging in any formal efforts to rehabilitate them. Similarly, the SDF does not have the resources to imprison ISIS members for an indefinite period of time. As such, detaining them for years, even if accountability measures are taken which is not always the case, without engaging them in any rehabilitation programs may not be enough to ensure that they will not re-join ISIS or like-minded groups once released. To consolidate its gains against ISIS in the long-term, the SDF should start rehabilitating prisoners as soon as possible.

To overcome the swelling numbers of detainees, the SDF seems to be focusing on local reconciliation deals to release some of the local fighters. Such deals can only have a positive impact if the released fighters do not commit crimes or pose any risk, but these conditions do not appear to apply to all the beneficiaries of the amnesty deals. These deals should be coupled with subsequent mechanisms to ensure their successful integration, and allow displaced civilians, some of whom are detained with the imprisoned ISIS members, to move back to their areas where safe or to other locations where living conditions are better, including Kurdish-held areas. This would help reduce the cost of keeping them in the detention camps and thus allow the SDF to focus on the detained ISIS members. Furthermore, the segregation of captured ISIS suspects can also help mitigate the risks of breakouts and in-prison radicalisation on the one hand, while tailoring action plans for each category on the other.

Countering ISIS ideology in the communities where they ruled is equally important, but does not appear to be part of the SDF's agenda. While such a complicated task cannot be fulfilled by the official structures that have been recently established in former ISIS territories, the SDF seems to be marginalising civil society groups,

instead of seeking their support. The SDF, and the various governance structures affiliated with it, only permit the civil society groups that are registered (i.e. approved by the SDF) to operate in its areas of influence.¹²⁵ As such, most of those who oppose SDF's ideology are not allowed to operate in its territories, despite the much-needed efforts they can provide in this aspect.¹²⁶

Although rebel-controlled areas appear to have more initiatives to rehabilitate and reintegrate those influenced by ISIS, the majority of those efforts are ad-hoc community-based initiatives with limited impact. Official actors and structures do not seem to be involved in facilitating or supporting such initiatives, which negatively limit their scale, impact and ability to be sustainable. Similarly, there is no consensus among the various actors operating in those areas on a unified approach to deal with captured ISIS members. Most of the rebel groups have local courts affiliated with them, so the fate of the detained ISIS members depends on which group captures them, and consequently, which court is prosecuting them. The differences between the various local courts is not limited to ideology of the group they are affiliated with but all other aspects of the legal process, namely investigation, laws, sentencing. Consequently, while some might be sentenced for years, others might walk free if they agree to switch alliances and join the group detaining them.¹²⁷

There are no official efforts to address the special needs of the wives and children of ISIS members who have either died or fled.¹²⁸ Although the numbers are not clear, many of the women who originally lived in rebel controlled areas before moving with their husbands to ISIS territories have been returning to their homes, whenever possible.¹²⁹ The challenges facing such a group varies based on who the father is (and the level of resultant support received from the family) and what opportunities are available. Syrian women who are married to non-Syrians usually do not have any official marriage contract. Some of them only know the nickname of their husbands (for example, Abu Ahmed al-Fransi or Ahmed's father from France), which does not only mean that the children's father will be unknown but they might even be stateless given that Syrian women cannot pass on their nationality to their children.¹³⁰ If the family of the children or the wife does not want them back, then they will most likely end up in camps where living conditions are harsh and access to education and other services is very limited.¹³¹ In addition, the lack of any effort to rehabilitate or reintegrate them into their communities makes them vulnerable targets for ISIS and like-minded groups who are looking for recruits.¹³² The situation for wives and children of ISIS members is equally neglected in SDF controlled areas. While most of the families of ISIS members are detained with them in the collective detention centres, the ones who are not detained face the same aforementioned challenges.¹³³

The international community and the countries fighting ISIS in Syria have much at stake in ensuring the successful reintegration and rehabilitation of ISIS members. Ignoring such efforts will likely allow

¹²⁵ Interview with an anonymous SDF official.

¹²⁶ Interview with Raed.

¹²⁷ Interview with Ahmed.

¹²⁸ Interview with Omar, former rebel fighter.

¹²⁹ Interview with Abdullah.

¹³⁰ Interview with Mustafa.

¹³¹ Interview with Ahmed.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Interview with Aghiad.

ISIS to continue to capitalise on its ideology and propaganda, which were imposed for years on the individuals and communities that it controlled; and to continue to destabilise Syria, prevent its recovery, and undermine the security of the region and the world at large. Therefore, international aid to fund and support both official and community-based efforts is crucial. This paper provides both policy makers and de-radicalisation practitioners a long list of issues that need to be urgently addressed, such as segregating ISIS members, providing better security and monitoring measures, assisting the local legal processes, and improving the conditions of internally displaced camps. While different levels of funding are required, other issues such as increasing capacity on the ground, supporting local actors to create comprehensive action plans with clear objectives, milestones and priorities, and separating ISIS fighters from displaced people, only require sharing expertise and lessons learned. The most important step to benefit from such a broad range of opportunities is for supporters to contact local actors who are working on such projects to offer help. International actors should always remember that the rise of ISIS in Syria was a symptom of the Syrian conflict. Thus, until the root causes of the conflict have been addressed, ISIS and like-minded groups will continue to benefit from the grievances and chaos caused by it.

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