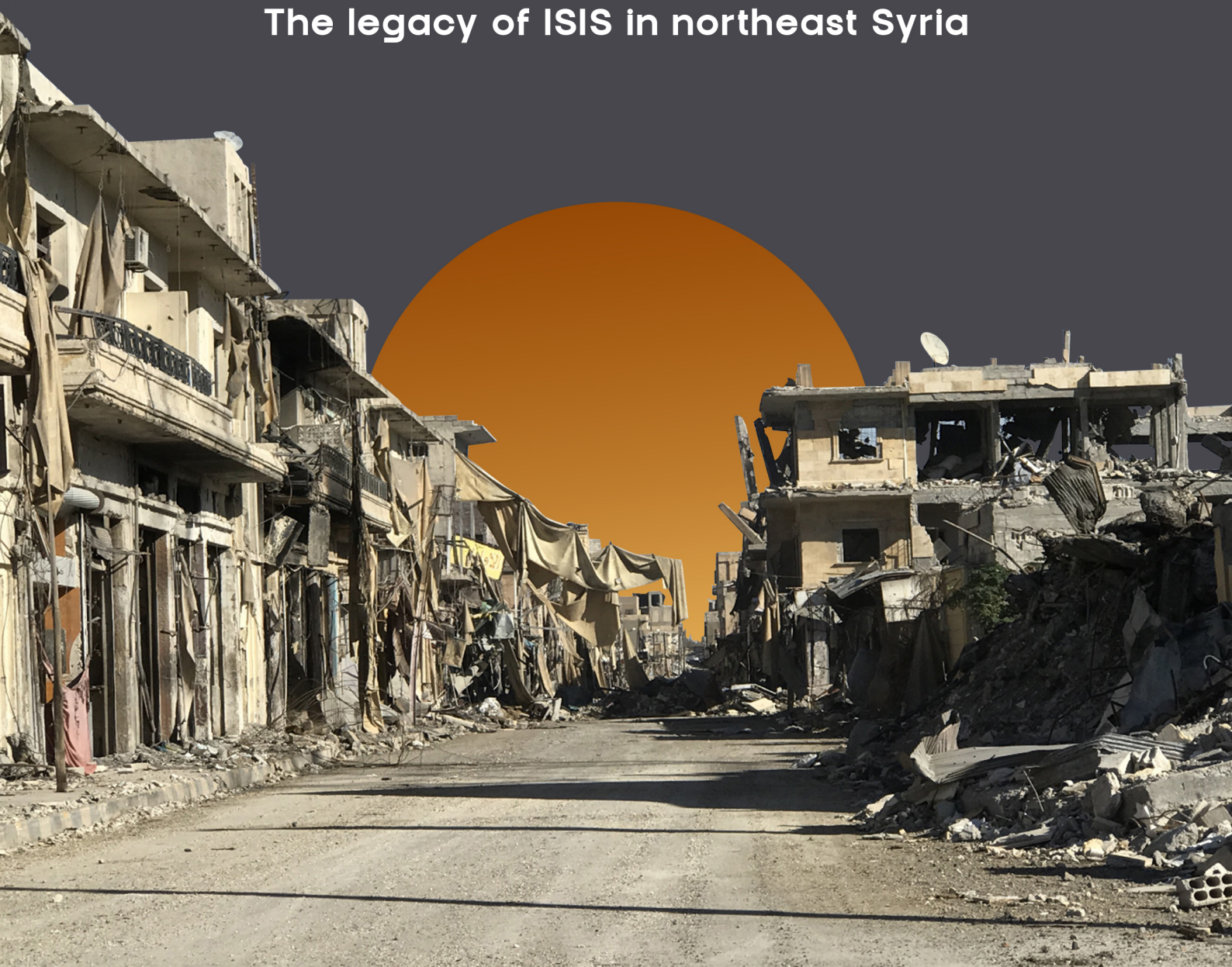
EUROPEAN INSTITUTE OF PEACE

R.D.I
مبادرة دفاع الحقوقية
Rights Defense Initiative

Tyranny of Evil

The legacy of ISIS in northeast Syria



This report is a collaborative effort between the European Institute of Peace (the Institute) and Rights Defense Initiative (RDI).

About the European Institute of Peace

The European Institute of Peace is an independent body that works with a broad range of local and international actors, including the EU, UN, national governments, regional bodies, and civil society to design and deliver sustainable peace processes. It provides practical experience, technical expertise, and policy advice on conflict resolution. The Institute is active in over a dozen countries across various regions of the world, including the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

About the Rights Defense Initiative

Rights Defense Initiative is an independent non-profit organisation founded in 2019. It works on monitoring and documenting human rights atrocities in northeast Syria, sharing them with international and regional accountability mechanism, and preparing studies and reports on the impact of the conflict on communities affected by it. RDI aims to support victims of atrocities to raise their voice in the international community to achieve justice for all victims. It seeks to spread a culture of human rights and the protection of civilians during conflicts in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions. This commitment extends to compliance with international human rights law.

Contents

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Autonomous Administration)
AQI	Al-Qaida in Iraq
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HTS	Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KII	Key Informant Interview
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
KSC	Kurdish Supreme Committee
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NCC	National Coordination Committee
NDF	National Defence Forces
NES	Northeast Syria
NWS	Northwest Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SGM	Sexual and Gendered Minorities
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (or *Etilaf*)
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNITAD	United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
YPG	People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

ARABIC TERMS

Ahl al-Kitab	"People of the Book"
Ajanib	Foreigners (may refer to *ajanib* Kurds, one of two categories of stateless Kurds in northeast Syria)
Da'wa	Islamic outreach
Hisba	Religious morality police that ISIS used to police and surveil public spaces to ensure adherence to ISIS' strict interpretation of Islam and *Shari'a*
Hudud	Severe punishments administered by ISIS such as stoning or flogging
Jizya	A form of taxation, historically levied per capita among non-Muslim subjects of a state governed by Islamic law, revied by ISIS in territories under its control
Kafr	Disbelief
Kafir, kuffar	Unbeliever(s)
Maktoum	Unregistered (may refer to *maktoum* Kurds, one of two categories of stateless Kurds in northeast Syria)
Mamlouk	Servants, subordinates
Madrasa, mudaris	School
Mahram	Guardian
Mukhabarat	Intelligence services
Mukhtar	Local community leader
Murtad, Murtadin	Heretic
Mushrikin	Polytheists
Qasas	Retribution
Sabaya	Spoils of war
Shabiba	Ba'athist youth cadres
Shabiha	Government-backed irregular militias instrumental in early repression, after which the singular of the word (*shabeeh*) became a more pejorative term for regime loyalists and supporters and/or militia fighters
Shirk	Idolatry, polytheism

Tala'a	Ba'athist Vanguards (youth movement)
Tawhid	Spiritual unity
Umma	Islamic community
Wali	Governor
Wilaya, Wilayat	Province
Zakat	A form of Islamic almsgiving, although in ISIS-held territories the word was used to refer to taxes levied by ISIS' institutions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over five years, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caused death and destruction throughout northeast Syria. Between 2014 and 2019, in a region that had already seen several consecutive layers of unrest, repression and violence, a new and almost inconceivable depth of cruelty was visited upon the civilian population.

Much has been written about the years of ISIS rule and the anti-ISIS conflict that followed. But as far as northeast Syria is concerned, a great deal of the popular knowledge about this period concerns ISIS' immense brutality and the fact that forces from the region—including the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—fought successfully to oust the group from its territorial foothold in Syria.

By comparison, relatively little has been heard from the ordinary women, men, and children who suffered directly at the hands of ISIS. There have been countless reports, documentaries, and books about the shocking violence of ISIS' regime. Minorities, such as the Yazidi, have often been the focus of attention. But to date, there has been no concerted effort to collect and analyse the stories of communities across the northeast, let alone consider what can be done to address the many scars inflicted by years of ISIS rule. In some ways, it is remarkable that so little has been heard from ISIS' victims in northeast Syria.

We live in an age where there is, at least from western states, almost a reflex reaction to call for accountability for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. This may be followed by demands for some kind of inquiry, maybe a truth commission, and then reparations.

And yet such calls for accountability, memorialisation or reparations have been muted when it comes to northeast Syria. The reasons for this are not hard to understand. Syria had already been engulfed by three years of uprising and civil war prior to the arrival of ISIS—a conflict that, for much of the northeast, was rooted in decades of ethnic discrimination and repression. Nowadays, though in control of the region, the Autonomous Administration remains stuck in the midst of a frozen conflict in which many relevant powers appear reluctant or uncertain about how to proceed with meaningful accountability or recovery measures—largely because of the political sensitivities that these efforts might imply.

This report does not seek to emulate or substitute itself for accountability measures. It is not an evidence-gathering effort to support criminal prosecutions. Rather, it seeks to offer the beginning of an answer to the question of how societies, confronted by sustained 'radical evil,' can try to recover.[1]

Experience indicates several steps are necessary. At the very root of meaningful recovery is the need to acknowledge and respond to the experiences that have taken place, both in psychosocial and political terms. The relative silence on accountability issues simply serves to highlight the feeling that northeast Syria has been asked to exist in a kind of void since the defeat of ISIS, with the international community almost confused about what to do there or how to do it.

The report is therefore an attempt to take a conscious step toward facilitating recovery. That effort is not motivated simply by a moral or humanitarian impulse; facilitating a genuine recovery is essential from a pragmatic point of view to develop resilience, and to contribute to security and the prevention of future violence.

Of the hundreds of victims and survivors interviewed for this report, it was striking how many indicated the moral significance of being asked to speak in this way about their experiences and to have some kind of

[1] See: Carlos Santiago Nino, *Radical Evil On Trial* (Yale University Press, 1998). Nino, one of the architects of Argentina's justice and accountability policies after the demise of the military juntas in 1983, described the country's seven years of crimes against humanity by state forces as "radical evil."

organised setting in which to present those experiences. The process this report documents is an exercise in acknowledging the dignity and humanity of those who suffered so grievously under ISIS. The telling of the story of the conflict so far has in large part focused on military issues, foreign victims, and high-profile, egregious atrocities. This account seeks to reclaim some of that narrative and explain what happened to ordinary civilians who were subjected to the brutal ordeal of five years of ISIS rule.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Part One of this report details the history of ISIS, its ideological roots, and its route to power in the context of the Syrian conflict.

Afterwards, the report is divided into two principal components. Part Two has a geographical focus, featuring detailed chapters on the experience of the conflict and occupation in six areas: Kobane, Hasakeh, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Part Three is thematic, with four chapters considering the impact of ISIS rule and the anti-ISIS conflict through the lens of the economy, education, gender, and mental health and psychosocial harm.

THE IMPACT ON SIX COMMUNITIES IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

The chapters detailing impacts in six areas—Kobane, Hasakeh, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor—deliberately begin by situating the arrival of ISIS historically and geographically. They describe the towns and areas in question with a view to reminding the reader that these were places where ordinary life took place, and that it was this ordinariness that was shattered. The chapters likewise explain the context in political and historical terms.

There were many similarities between the targeted areas, from the brutal way that ISIS sought to establish its control to the stifling social and ideological programme imposed across them. The six areas all saw horrific violations and human rights abuses, including public executions, massacres, suicide attacks, torture, kidnapping, arbitrary detentions and violations against women and girls, among others. ISIS also subjected the region's many minorities to horrific treatment. Many of these have been classified by various entities, including the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Unsurprisingly, there were also significant differences between the areas. ISIS never established full control over some, such as Kobane and Hasakeh, whereas it was in control of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor for many years. Politics mattered: not all the areas had the same experiences under the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad; some had been early centres of the anti-Assad protest movement, whereas others did not join the initial wave of demonstrations. How the early years of the Syrian war played out in each of the areas would later influence ISIS' impact there. Their ethnic composition, socio-economic factors and geography did, too. Guided by the testimony of people from across the six localities, these chapters seek to tell these unique stories.

The first chapter focuses on **Kobane**. The Kurdish-majority city was besieged by ISIS for months during the autumn of 2014. ISIS had recently won important victories in Iraq and Syria, most notably in Mosul, and had declared itself a "caliphate" with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader. Its full-scale assault on the city caused widespread displacement as residents moved to the Turkish border; many of those who remained in the countryside around Kobane were killed as ISIS advanced. Despite the use of car bombs, suicide bombings, and heavy shelling, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and affiliated Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) repelled the offensive and, with aerial support from the United States (US), broke the siege of Kobane. By the start of 2015, residents slowly began to return to a city that had been largely destroyed, left without electricity and basic services, and rife with poverty and hunger. Their ordeal was not over: in June 2015, ISIS infiltrated Kobane once again and launched a 24-hour killing spree across the

city, killing over two hundred civilians in what residents saw as a deliberate act of revenge. Although it would take several years, Kobane set ISIS on a path towards defeat across northeast Syria.

The second chapter details the impact of ISIS across **Hasakeh** governorate. Rich in resources, ISIS made significant efforts to take control of the area, which also formed the base of operations for the Kurdish anti-ISIS resistance. The chapter begins by detailing the political and economic context of relations between Hasakeh and Damascus in the lead-up to the outbreak of the Syrian war and the historic marginalisation faced by the Kurdish-majority population of the area as a result of the 1962 "special census" and so-called "Arab Belt" project. Although many of Hasakeh's residents joined anti-Assad protests in 2011, most hoped their region would remain unaffected once the uprising turned violent. In 2014, ISIS launched a large-scale attack on Hasakeh, which, would have allowed it to establish control over the Syrian-Turkish border. It quickly captured parts of the governorate bordering Iraq, from which it conducted attacks on Yazidi areas in northwestern Iraq. By 2015, ISIS controlled large parts of Hasakeh, from which it conducted car bombings and suicide attacks behind the lines of the YPG. The chapter includes accounts of these attacks. The parts of Hasakeh that were under ISIS control, meanwhile, saw widespread forced displacement of Kurds—in some ways, a brutal, extreme continuation of the anti-Kurdish policies long pursued by Syria's Arab rulers—and targeted campaigns against Christian and Assyrian communities. From April 2015, after the liberation of Kobane, the tide turned against ISIS in Hasakeh. Militias pushed ISIS back to the provincial border between Hasakeh and Raqqa, slowly preparing for their offensive on ISIS' self-proclaimed capital. Even then, it would take until 2016 before the entire governorate was recovered. Hasakeh would end up hosting various camps for suspected ISIS fighters and their families, ensuring the legacy of ISIS' violence would live on in the area for years to come.

Manbij, covered in the third chapter, occupied a strategic location close to the Syrian-Turkish border and served as a gateway to Aleppo. Predominantly Arab, it had enjoyed a relatively stable relationship with Damascus before the uprising, but not everyone had benefitted and many Manbij residents joined early anti-government protests as a result. This quickly descended into infighting between dozens of armed factions. ISIS, then still allied with Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, quietly expanded into the city until early 2014, when it expelled all other groups from the city, establishing sole control over the area. It would be several years before the group relinquished control over the city, during which time ISIS implemented a repressive social programme in what had once been a more liberal city in the region. The chapter details abuses committed by ISIS during this time: public executions, which intensified after ISIS' defeats in Kobane and Hasakeh; and serious violations against women and girls, including forced marriages, sexual slavery, and the presence of Yazidi slave markets in the city. Kurds, a minority in the area, were systematically targeted, arrested and expelled from the area. Following gains in Kobane and Hasakeh, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the US-led Coalition focused their efforts on liberating Manbij. The offensive got underway in the summer of 2016, and after two months of intense battles with many civilian casualties, ISIS was expelled from the city.

The fourth chapter covers **Tabqa**. Although it was historically considered more loyal to the Syrian regime, Tabqa and the strategic dam outside the city came under the control of opposition forces in 2013. After falling out with Jabhat al-Nusra and other opposition forces, ISIS became the dominant force in Tabqa. In August 2014, it captured Tabqa's military airport, killing more than two hundred Syrian army soldiers, many of whom were publicly executed. Once it had full control of the region, ISIS killed large numbers of prisoners; bodies were regularly crucified or strung up and executions were often filmed and distributed across town. Several women were stoned to death in Tabqa on charges of prostitution. ISIS ended up controlling Tabqa for nearly four years. In 2017, having recaptured Manbij, the SDF and the US-led Coalition forces launched a campaign for Tabqa. Following heavy battles, during which the Tabqa Dam was nearly destroyed by aerial bombardment, ISIS fighters agreed to a negotiated withdrawal to Raqqa. By May 2017, Tabqa was liberated.

Raqqa is the focus of the fifth chapter. Raqqa, a majority-Arab city with a long and storied history, was proclaimed ISIS' "capital" by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in June 2014. Raqqa had been spared the initial fighting of the Syrian conflict, but it was the first governorate to fall entirely outside the control of Assad's forces in March

2013. Infighting between Ahrar al-Sham and other armed opposition groups eventually paved the way for ISIS to seize the city, which it did in November 2013. As its chosen capital, there was an incentive for ISIS to invest in public services and the group set up "ministries" in the city, although services later withered. ISIS imposed a sense of order, albeit one underpinned by brutal repression of any dissent. Mass executions, including on the city's al-Naim Roundabout, were commonly carried out against captured enemy soldiers as well as those accused of apostasy, blasphemy, or spying. Raqqa became littered with mass graves, some of which contained several hundred bodies. Perhaps more than any other Syrian city, Raqqa saw arbitrary arrests and torture; the city held several dozen ISIS prisons, including the notorious Point 11 facility. There were slave markets where Yazidi women and girls were sold. Although most Christians had already left before ISIS took control of Raqqa, after ISIS, no Christians remained. Raqqa's Kurds were also forcibly displaced. By June 2017, Raqqa was besieged by the SDF and US-led Coalition forces. Fought concurrently with the battle for Mosul, it was a strategically important battle for the last major city in Syria fully under ISIS control. An intense four-month fight ensued that ultimately killed more than 1,600 civilians and rendered Raqqa "the most destroyed city in modern times."

Deir Ezzor, the topic of the final chapter of this part of the report, suffered longer than any area in the northeast—living under ISIS rule for around six years. The chapter details the historic influence of tribes in the area, the socio-economic difficulties faced by the population, and the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood around Deir Ezzor. It describes how the city was early to join the Syrian uprising in 2011. ISIS had fought alongside armed rebel groups until April 2013; thereafter, it sought dominance and successfully played tribal politics against Nusra, culminating in a destructive battle between the two groups in al-Shuhayl. ISIS emerged victorious, which left it in control of nearly all of Deir Ezzor, apart from the parts of Deir Ezzor city still held by pro-Assad forces. Tribes that had stood with Nusra, and particularly the al-Shaitat clan, faced severe consequences: hundreds of al-Shaitat tribesmen were killed in August 2014 in one of the large single massacres committed by ISIS. Across Deir Ezzor, communities witnessed horrific abuses, including the stoning of women and men, corporal punishment, and the systematic use of torture. Some 100,000 people in government-held Deir Ezzor city lived under siege for years, dependent on World Food Programme air drops for their survival. In the summer of 2017, the Syrian army, supported by Russian airstrikes, finally managed to break the siege. It would still be two more years before ISIS was defeated on the eastern bank of the Euphrates: after the fall of Raqqa, the remaining ISIS fighters were pushed into its final pocket of territory, stretching around 40 kilometres from Hajin to Baghouz. Although ISIS looked like a spent force, it took until 2019 for the last fighters to be defeated. Many fighters and families were captured and transferred to prisons or camps in Hasakeh; some fought to the bitter end, while others disappeared to fight a low-level insurgency that continues until today.

ANALYSING ISIS RULE & ITS IMPACTS

Economy

The chapter on economic impacts focuses significantly on how ISIS controlled and instrumentalised northeast Syria's economy to finance itself and expand. To the extent possible, it also considers the economic impact of the war on the region's prospects for recovery. The destruction of much of the basic economic and governance infrastructure both by ISIS and the campaign to defeat the group has left the Autonomous Administration working from an extremely low base. Such efforts take place in the context of ongoing political and military tensions, both with the Assad government in Damascus and with pressures from Turkey on the northern border.

Northeast Syria was historically underdeveloped for decades before the post-2011 conflict broke out. For more than 40 years, Syria's northeast was significantly poorer than other parts of Syria, despite its productive and resource-rich agricultural and oil sectors. Economic policies directly and indirectly discriminated against the Kurdish population. While many parts of Syria saw progress in the 1990s and early 2000s, poverty increased in the northeast, contributing to the highest rates of urban and rural poverty anywhere in the country.

At one point after 2014, ISIS was by far the best-financed non-state armed actor in the world, with its finances outstripping those of several small nation states. By far the biggest contribution to its coffers was the oil industry

in both Iraq and northeast Syria. All of Syria's oil reserves are in the northeast, and while modest in global terms, they played a significant part in the country's economy. ISIS had control of all the main oilfields in northeast Syria before the end of 2014, with the limited exception of fields in Hasakeh that remained under Kurdish control. Exactly how much ISIS was making from its oil assets from 2014 through at least 2016 is hard to say, but estimates suggest as much as $3 million per day during 2014 and $1.5 million per day into 2016.

While oil was the principal source of finance, ISIS raised significant income throughout its occupation through the taxation of every facet of daily life. This included agricultural and customs taxes as well as levies on electricity, gas and drinking water. Additional sources of income came through fines and punishments, ransoms for kidnappings, and the payment of the *jiyza tax,* which targeted non-Muslim residents who fell under ISIS' rule.

ISIS had a devastating impact on the local economy. Many families lost their primary breadwinner; many more were incapacitated physically and/or mentally, unable to work to the same levels as before the conflict. In addition, the large number of those with physical and mental illnesses has added a significant burden to a welfare budget that depends almost entirely on humanitarian assistance. The cost of surgery for physical disabilities after the conflict means operations are beyond the means of the vast majority of those injured. The destruction of infrastructure and housing, in addition to areas still affected by unexploded ordnance, also limits the capacity for practical recovery.

Oil remains a key source of revenue for the Autonomous Administration, contributing up to 60% of its current funds. The agricultural sector has not been able to recover from the devastation of ISIS, hampered further by the effects of drought. Some 90% of the population in the northeast is now considered to be living in poverty.

Education

The chapter on education highlights the deep and long-term damage that ISIS' reign of terror wreaked on local communities and specifically on children.

ISIS' rule radically upturned the lives of both teachers and students. Education under ISIS was instrumentalised with a clear ideological bent, meaning teachers were required to demonstrate allegiance and enthusiasm for doctrinal positions. They were seen as the frontline in creating a new generation of believers and soldiers. Teachers who did not demonstrate the necessary enthusiasm often paid with their lives; others were subjected to torture. Some instructors sought to live a double life, organising clandestine schooling in many communities, at enormous risk to themselves. Others, of course, succumbed to the threats and terror, and taught what they were asked to teach.

The deliberate and swift creation of an ISIS curriculum both in Arabic and English indicated both how well ISIS understood the importance of education for disseminating its ideology and consolidating its control over local communities. Besides indoctrination, one of the most disturbing aspects of the accounts in this chapter relates to the militarisation of the curriculum that sought to normalise death, brutality and violence.

The impact of ISIS' hold on the educational system was profound. Many families took enormous risks by refusing to send their children to schools where the new methods and curriculum were in place. ISIS' recognition of the plasticity of young minds was not without results: many accounts tell of how children threatened to report their elders, including teachers, if they saw them indulge in forbidden talk or conduct such as smoking. Teaching experts comment on how northeast Syria's education system has not just been destroyed, but that a whole generation of young people in the region have effectively lost the opportunity of a meaningful education.

Years later, one of the most pressing issues for northeast Syria's education sector is the level of destruction of educational infrastructure. Many schools were destroyed. Not all destruction was done by ISIS; as part of their anti-ISIS campaign, the SDF and US-led Coalition were also responsible for damage to and destruction of school buildings.

The recovery of the education system has been severely stalled, despite the efforts of those working in the area. The necessary resources, not only to rebuild the physical infrastructure but also to help address the trauma suffered by many teachers and pupils, have so far been inadequate. While this will likely require the work of a generation, at least, the need for well-planned, direct recovery and reconstruction is an urgent priority.

Gender

It is well known that ISIS' extreme ideological positions had dire implications for women and girls.

The treatment of women captured in conflict or under occupation was especially alarming. A good deal has been written about the treatment of Yazidi women and how many of them were subjected to sexual slavery as "spoils of war." Captive women were subjected to unspeakable levels of sexual violence, rape, gang rape and torture. While the Yazidi women were a particular focus of such egregious abuse, many others captured in the northeast itself were also subjected to similar treatment.

The chapter on gender also notes that while the systematic and widespread abuse of women through sexual slavery, rape and torture characterised the conduct of ISIS in all the areas it occupied, it is also true that a significant number of women appear to have voluntarily decided to join the group—including from many countries abroad. The chapter reflects on the possible reasons for this, despite the apparent incongruity of allegiance to a deeply misogynistic group. Notwithstanding the number of women who did voluntarily join ISIS, many of these women's testimonies speak about the abusive treatment they received from ISIS husbands.

The chapter also reflects on the extreme violence perpetrated against women and girls, but also the underlying rationale of ISIS' extreme views that sought to identify it as distinct not only from western societies but also from what it regarded as flawed, corrupt Muslim societies.

The data on sexual violence among men and boys is much more limited, largely due to the stigmatization involved. Even so, the available evidence points to high levels of rape of men and boys captured or detained by ISIS.

The misogyny and extreme ideology of gender relations instilled by ISIS were not only profoundly damaging to the women in the region but had a longer lasting and traumatic impact on social relations. In some parts of the region, there was already a conservative approach to gender relations, notably in more rural communities. The teachings and demands of ISIS were not universally rejected in such areas. The conception of "masculinity" developed under ISIS was also premised on a kind of heroic violence accompanied by proprietary entitlements. The impact on children and adolescents more susceptible to indoctrination has also created a large number of problems in a generation with dystopian attitudes toward women and girls.

Mental health & psycho-social distress

The capacity for dealing with the physical and mental consequences of years of ISIS rule was severely hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic, which itself laid bare the paltry state of the region's healthcare system. The massively depleted system was hit with another challenge in 2022 due to a cholera outbreak.

In some ways, it is easiest to measure the impact of ISIS on the mental and psychosocial health of the region by looking at the destruction of healthcare infrastructure. As with the education sector and the destruction of schools, many hospital and clinic buildings were destroyed or repurposed during the conflict. Once on the backfoot, ISIS booby-trapped countless health facilities, causing even greater damage years after the frontlines calmed. Despite efforts to recover, the damage to basic infrastructure and critical services impedes service provision to this day.

ISIS took an ideological view of "western medicine" that had a catastrophic clinical impact on the lives and welfare of many ordinary civilians. It had direct effects on diagnoses for cancer and cardiac conditions, on drug

availability, and on immunisation coverage for preventable diseases throughout the region—all with consequences for the longer term.

The ISIS rule also radically altered healthcare roles and the "culture" of the service. This was perhaps most obvious in how the group only allowed female practitioners to deal with female patients, restricting expert female doctors from applying their skills to men, for example, in cardiology and orthopaedics. Similarly, male gynaecologists were prevented from treating women.

The chapter also goes into significant detail on the nature and extent of mental health and post-traumatic stress disorders in northeast Syria. Interviews with victims and survivors point to high rates of serious PTSD in many of those who survived or witnessed ISIS' brutality. It also highlights the impacts on physical health for those in the region, along with ongoing disabilities resulting from the conflict. A large number of those suffering from physical disabilities are at greater risk of mental health problems. Attention is also given to the impact of displacement on the mental and physical wellbeing of the hundreds of thousands forced to seek safety elsewhere under ISIS, and to a variety of specific traumas related to different kinds of atrocities.

The capacity of the area to recover from the damage inflicted on it by ISIS is extremely limited. While there are indications of attempts to develop a more strategic approach to mental and psychosocial needs in the region, there are doubts about the depth of these approaches and the basic availability of the necessary resources to go beyond short-term care. As a result, the chapter explores and explains in detail the real costs and damage to mental and physical health, the—broadly inadequate—steps taken so far to address them, and the possible ways forward. This begins with an awareness of the depth of the crisis and the challenges, an effort to address stigmatisation and aversion to discussion, better integrated planning, and a move away from humanitarian initiatives to resilience and victim-oriented initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the war against ISIS has ended, the local economy has yet to recover beyond running repairs and hand-to-mouth humanitarian assistance. Support for the recovery of the educational system, the public and mental health systems, and repair of gender relations, which suffered so deeply during ISIS' rule, has remained substantially absent. This is not to denigrate the efforts of those seeking to provide aid in these areas, but the analysis indicates that in all relevant areas, the nature of that assistance cannot be said to be structural, systematic, or sustainable.

The result is that, four years after the fall of Baghouz, the communities most directly affected by the scourge of ISIS remain largely in an abyss of economic crisis but also without the means to address the legacy of their oppressors. It has left families to their own devices, struggling with the legacy of psychological and physical trauma. A generation of children has been left scarred. While the Autonomous Authority is seriously committed to gender equality, the disastrous regression in the treatment of women and girls under ISIS, accompanied by the cult of violently abusive masculinity, will take years of concentrated effort to undo. Added to this is the reality that ISIS has not entirely disappeared. Sleeper cells carrying out continued attacks through northeast Syria indicate at least the possibility of a limited re-emergence.

A comprehensive solution to these issues would require international political agreement. Recognising that the expectations of a political breakthrough in the conflict in Syria remain low, the report seeks to offer some modest, practical suggestions to support the meaningful recovery of the region in the short to medium term:

1. A renewed strategic approach should be adopted to focus on recovery and resilience in light of the information recounted in this report. A multi-disciplinary task force should be convened by the Autonomous Administration to focus on three areas: mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS); education; and gender-related issues. The task force should be composed primarily of local experts and leaders but also include the contributions of international experts and donors.

2. The task force should include and consult with the local agencies that have developed information on victims, martyrs, survivors, death, loss, and damage. The concerns and interests of the victims and survivors of ISIS violence should figure prominently in the development of a renewed strategy in the three areas indicated below:

    a. **Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support:** The persisting crisis of mental health, including indications of extremely high levels of PTSD, is not surprising but needs to be addressed. The particular phenomena of ISIS' cruelty and violence from mutilations and torture, public executions and crucifixion, the all-consuming brutality of the attempts to control not only behaviour but thought, have left the deepest of scars. The response to it needs to be specific and strategic if the children and adults affected are to have a reasonable chance of building a healthy life in the coming years. Efforts need to focus on restoring a functional core in terms of health infrastructure, counselling and training of health care professionals, and systematic care provision focused especially on best practices for PTSD to adults and children.

    b. **Education**: The targeting of the education system was a strategic priority for ISIS and one in which they were successful. The consequences for the communities affected will be generational unless a specific recovery programme is developed to address the challenges of the ISIS legacy. Again, this means ensuring a core infrastructure as well as the provision of educational resources. Equally, so many teachers were terrorised or and traumatized that a specific programme that seeks to counsel and restore their capacity may be advisable. Closely connected to the issue of MHPSS, ensuring that schools are restored as fundamental safe havens for learning and development is crucial for the potential recovery of the region, for building resilience, and indeed for restoring values of tolerance and reconciliation.

    c. **Women and girls**: The impact of ISIS on women and girls needs to be assessed and addressed. Reports, testimonies, and collective meetings indicated that, especially in rural areas, the role of women and girls remains in need of attention. Likewise, while all parts of society—women, men, girls and boys—were terrorised and traumatised by ISIS as well as impacted by ISIS' oppressive approach to gender expression and roles, the particular focus on dehumanising women and girls requires a focused and strategic response to those practices and phenomena. At the same time, a detailed approach to detoxifying the cult of violently abusive masculinity is also necessary.

3. The **missing**: there remain large numbers of people unaccounted for as a result of the ISIS occupation throughout the region. Likewise, there are many unidentified graves. The authorities should develop a supported strategy to account for as many of the missing as possible, locate their whereabouts where possible, and provide the appropriate support to survivors.

4. **Justice**: This report is not conceived as a substitute for accountability efforts. In the aftermath of mass atrocities, it has been widely accepted, especially by western states, that justice and accountability are core values necessary to vindicate the rights and dignity of victims, and to confirm the social values that have been so profoundly attacked. Political circumstances in northeast Syria and in the countries of origin of ISIS fighters have so far made it impossible for a credible and concerted effort to see those most responsible for crimes in northeast Syria brought to justice. While the Autonomous Administration has indicated its willingness to prosecute some of those under its jurisdiction, it lacks the infrastructure and, more importantly, the probable recognition of any convictions in foreign countries. The large number of male detainees represents a drain and a threat. To demonstrate that

the values of justice and accountability are considered universal, especially in the light of particularly egregious acts, the governments of those detained should engage with Autonomous Administration to resolve this impasse, facilitate at least a limited number of trials for those most responsible for serious crimes, and come to an agreement on the recognition of convictions and locations for imprisonment.

5. **Al-Hol camp**: The legacy of ISIS is most vivid in the camps in northeast Syria, in particular al-Hol camp, where tens of thousands of people, primarily women, girls, and boys, have been held since the fall of the 'caliphate.' With regular acts of violence and exploitation occurring there, as well as continued agitation by remaining ISIS supporters, the camps remain both a humanitarian catastrophe and a profound security threat. Efforts should be continued and expedited to support the returns of those in the camps wherever possible.

FOREWORD

The prospects for peace and stability in northeast Syria are, to say the least, complex. While the region remains caught in the sclerosis of the Syrian civil war, it is also subject to several regional and geopolitical tensions as well.

The most directly damaging aspect of this situation for the people of northeast Syria has been the terrifying impacts of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rule after 2014 and the violent conflict to oust the group. Most people know something about ISIS; many will also know about what ISIS did in northeast Syria during its war of aggression between 2014 and 2019. And yet, there has been almost no effort to listen directly to the victims of ISIS' atrocities there. Unfortunately, eleven years of conflict in Syria have diminished interest in people's plight, while the multi-layered political tensions that persist make genuine discussions about conditions inside the country difficult. And while there is a general appreciation that forces from the region fought bravely and effectively against ISIS, providing essential contributions to the defeat of ISIS after it swept across the region, there has been little done so far to speak of the tremendous cost paid by ordinary people in the region.

This report is intended as one step toward redressing that imbalance. It is a victim-centred report in the sense that it tries to understand how the war was experienced by people living in northeast Syria and the impact it has had on them. It is about the human cost—the effects on families and their children, education, and life chances; the impact on women's daily lives; the disastrous consequences the conflict had on the local economy and the ability to simply make ends meet in already constrained conditions; and the deep psychological wounds that ISIS terror inflicted within these communities. It is true to say that all wars have these kinds of impacts, to a degree. But two things are notable in northeast Syria's case: the brutality of ISIS terror and the relative failure to describe and address its human cost.

Why does this matter? There are several reasons.

The first is that there is value, even a duty, to humanise the realities and the costs of the war, including the long-term impact of atrocities suffered by civilians in the region. If we do not take the human cost seriously, our motivations to prevent their recurrence and restore stability are likely to be dulled. Telling the story as well as possible, and understanding the impact ISIS had, are important elements in this effort. For this reason, over half of this report is based on personal accounts and testimonies provided by ordinary people across northeast Syria through both individual and collective focus group interview processes.

Secondly, understanding the impact of the conflict is a necessary step in identifying both short- and long-term measures that, even within the political and economic constraints of the region, can help to address some of the fissures created by the conflict. While many of the headlines ISIS generated related to their gruesome executions and other brutal practices, their military campaigns and rule over communities in Syria and Iraq left behind much deeper scars. Thematic chapters by subject experts on the economic, educational, gender and psycho-social impacts represent one of the most detailed efforts to date to explain the nature of ISIS' impacts on the area.

It may be tempting to think that northeast Syria found peace after ISIS' military defeat in 2019. However, this would be to misunderstand the nature and impact of the conflict.

The ISIS threat has not been entirely extinguished. This much was clear during the research process that contributed to this report: many interviewees were fearful of violence at the hands of underground ISIS cells that embedded themselves into local communities during and after the group's territorial collapse. The group's use of sleeper cells and active local-level terror cells is well-documented. Some suggest that their continued

presence in northeast Syria indicates that ISIS could re-emerge as a significant threat once again in the future. That threat casts a pall over society.

Even then, the war introduced toxicities that continue to affect communities across the northeast. Particularly in more rural areas, attitudes in relation to women and openness to different religious beliefs have become noticeably more closed and less tolerant.

In addition, a great deal of focus and effort, both economically and politically, remain tied up in the aftermath of the ISIS conflict. Al-Hol camp went from a refugee population of 12,000 people to a staggering 76,000 in a matter of months after the fall of Baghouz in 2019; the camp represents a humanitarian catastrophe as well as a persistent security threat. Prisons in the region still house some 20,000 former ISIS fighters, including around two thousand non-Syrians.

The effort to recognise and take seriously the human costs of ISIS rule in northeast Syria does three things: 1. it acknowledges people's suffering; 2. it identifies the physical, mental, tangible and intangible wounds that need tending; and 3. it provides a timely caution about the need to take smarter, quicker steps to resolve the underlying causes of the conflict that prevent genuine recovery from taking place.

As such, this report represents one of the first opportunities for the people of northeast Syria themselves to formally discuss the incidents and impacts of the conflict, serving as a reminder that they are not merely statistics, disempowered victims, or collateral damage. They are real people with real lives who have suffered grievously.

At the same time, this report does not pretend to be an instrument of accountability. It does not seek to identify those responsible or offer evidence in their pursuit. That those responsible for atrocities should be brought to justice is axiomatic. The mechanisms for doing so, however, are not yet quite so obvious. Jails in the region hold tens of thousands of male suspects, and the political situation does not lend it itself to locally-held trials being recognised or the countries where suspects came from agreeing to host convicted individuals. These are matters that need addressing but are not within the scope of this report.

In recent decades, there has been much interest in the idea of truth commissions. The logic behind establishing those kinds of commissions was, at least partly, to help restore trust in authorities who may have been engaged in violations. The post-ISIS context confounds this aim in that the violations addressed here were carried out by ISIS, not by those who oversaw the territory then or who oversee it now. Indeed, many of those individuals themselves suffered directly at the hands of ISIS.

That the report is like some kinds of commissions of inquiry is true, but it takes place in a context where much of what might be asked is already known—we know who ISIS were, where they came from, what they appeared to want, and how they sought to obtain it. As such, the report addresses these issues in its introductory chapter, using already well-established research and analysis. In the same way that we know who carried out the atrocities, we also know why this was done.

The many people who have participated in this effort have done so in the knowledge that it will not change their lives in any direct fashion. They have experienced the harshest realities that life has to offer and have seen that the political capacity to react to these atrocities is extremely limited. Expectations are low as far as material change is concerned. On the other hand, those who worked on this project have noted the positive impact that the simple act of acknowledgment has had for many of those who suffered at the hands of ISIS.

This report is not exhaustive. Limitations of time and resources, as well as security constraints, limited the scope of the project. The challenging work of compiling the report has not gone unnoticed by ISIS, who have made their feelings and intentions known directly to several people who worked on it.

Surely, many tens of thousands of people affected by ISIS crimes could have participated in a much longer process if this were possible. But the report speaks for them as well. It tells a compelling and powerful story of the human and social costs of the ISIS war in northeast Syria. It acknowledges that suffering was caused to real people with real lives and hopes, people with jobs, families, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends; people with worries and dreams. Their lives were torn apart and brutalised. At a minimum, the report seeks to acknowledge and explain the real impact of what happened in northeast Syria. If possible, it also hopes to play a role in catalysing the necessary efforts to help address the aftermath of the barbarous tragedy that ISIS unleashed in the region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The European Institute of Peace is grateful to all the people who contributed to this report. First and foremost, we express our deep gratitude and tribute to all those in northeast Syria who, in individual interviews or during community meetings, shared their stories and testimonies, as well as material on the abuses committed by ISIS. We hope that it contributes, even if in a small way, to a recognition of both your suffering and your dignity.

Thanks also go to those who collected and recorded the data that informed the drafting of this report, in particular the team at the Rights Defense Initiative (RDI) in northeast Syria, including the Chief of Staff, enumerators, team leaders, thematic researchers, data entry officers, secretariat staff, security and logistics officers, and finance and administrative officers.

We also recognize the contributions of those who transformed the material into this report by providing their expertise in translation, analysis, research, writing, editing, design, and communications. Special thanks go out to the thematic experts, Marzio Babille, Dana Swanson, Sahar el-Asad, Soha Shami, Susan Kippels, and Siad Darwish, who dedicated their time and expertise to the production of the thematic chapters of this report. Equal thanks go out to their Syrian counterparts in northeast Syria, whom we refrain from naming for security reasons.

PART 1.1 - INTRODUCTION

At the height of the summer of 2014, the then-leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared a "caliphate" extending from Diyala in eastern Iraq to Aleppo in northwestern Syria.[2] ISIS' self-proclaimed statelet was the product long-term conflict and instability in the region. Its origins could be traced to Iraq, a country severely destabilised by the 2003 US-led invasion, as well as Syria, which had already been ravaged by civil war by the time Baghdadi made his declaration.

At its height, ISIS represented a threat to Damascus, Baghdad, and the wider Middle East. The brutality of its military campaigns and draconian rule in territories under its control would shock the world. And yet, within the space of five years, ISIS lost its capacity to exploit weak regional states. The group's numerous enemies, in spite of their diametrically opposed political interests, fought against ISIS with the same goal—the all-out destruction of ISIS' territorial foothold in the region. By 2019, ISIS had lost control over all the vast swathes of territory that it once controlled in Iraq and Syria, and the so-called "caliphate" was reduced to a covert insurgency once more.

ISIS committed horrific abuses during its rise and its fall—abuses that have inflicted deep trauma. Some of the people most affected were those residing in northeast Syria, where ISIS established its *de facto* capital in Raqqa and where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fought a five-year campaign against the group.

[2] The group has also been referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State (IS) or by its Arabic acronym, *Daesh*. The term ISIS will be used throughout this study.

Origins

ISIS first originated in Iraq. One individual inextricably linked with ISIS was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian born as Ahmad Fadil al-Khalayleh.[3] Just before the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989, Zarqawi had joined the Afghan *mujahideen*, who had enjoyed Saudi, Pakistani and US support throughout the Eighties as anti-communist fighters combatting the Soviet invasion of the country.[4]

After military training in Afghanistan, Zarqawi later returned to Jordan, where, in March 1994, he was arrested. Zarqawi was further radicalised in prison and following his release in 1999, he obtained funding from al-Qaida to set up a training camp in Herat, in western Afghanistan. The Salafi-jihadist militant group, headed by Osama bin Laden, had already bombed US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and would soon gain global infamy for their role in the attacks in the United States of America on 11 September 2001.

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, Zarqawi relocated his operations to northeast Iraq.[5] By the summer of 2004, Zarqawi was thought to be behind a series of terrorist attacks in Iraq, including car bombings targeting the Jordanian embassy, the UN's Baghdad headquarters, as well as various Shi'a shrines.[6]

Zarqawi did not apply for official membership of al-Qaida until October 2004. In a letter to al-Qaida's leadership, the Jordanian outlined his eschatological interpretation of Islam and strategic objectives for al-Qaida in Iraq.[7] Zarqawi's narrow definition of who constituted a Muslim and his concern with excommunication, or *takfir,* would later underpin ISIS' ideology and extreme political violence. Mainstream *takfir* is the declaration that a Muslim has become an apostate or heretic (*murtad*) by practicing idolatry or polytheism (*shirk*), engaging in an act or belief that is either seen as disbelief (*kafr*) in Islam or that brands a person an infidel (*kafir*) who has only pretended to be a Muslim.[8] *Takfir* is punishable by death in Islam and results in further punishment in the afterlife; however, traditionally, *takfir* has rarely been applied in Islamic history, as the practice can have grave consequences for both the accuser and the accused.[9]

Zarqawi—and later ISIS—applied the term *kufar* broadly to include Muslims who committed sin, rulers who did not rule according to Islamic *Shari'a*, Muslims belonging to groups other than theirs, or Muslims who did not migrate from non-Muslim lands into the group's self-proclaimed "caliphate." This hardline interpretation, zealously pursued since the days of Zarqawi, sees Islam as plagued by disbelief, polytheism and heresy, and claims that Islam must be "cleansed" by recreating the world and customs of the earliest Muslims—the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and his companions—in the 7th century AD. Zarqawi saw Shi'a Muslims as Islam's "enemy within," referring to them as "traitorous apostates" (*al-murtadin al-kha'inin*) who made up a so-called "community of renegade deviation" (*ahl al-zigh al-mariqiin*) and embraced idolatry and polytheism.[10]

Although al-Qaida's leaders were wary of this radically sectarian approach, they accepted Zarqawi's pledge of allegiance and decided that he would lead a new affiliate, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).[11] AQI emerged as an important

[3] Toby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, (Kindle edition, 2015) ch.2.
[4] Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Kindle edition, 2015), ch.1.
[5] Warrick, *Black Flags*, ch.4.
[6] NBC, 'Terror strikes blamed on al-Zarqawi in Iraq' (14 July 2004) <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna5437742> accessed 7 June 2023.
[7] US Department of State, 'Zarqawi letter' (February 2004) <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm> accessed 7 June 2023.
[8] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, 'The Danger of *Takfir* (Excommunication): Exposing IS Takfiri Ideology' (2017) Vol.9 *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses,* p.3.
[9] Joas Wagemakers, *Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.226.
[10] Primarily, Zarqawi draws on Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (died 1323)—a favourite of all Salafi-Jihadi movements—for both legalistic and historical justification of this exclusion. Ibn Taymiyyah, like Zarqawi, saw the Shi'a as an 'enemy within'; he blamed them for the downfall of the Abbasid Caliphate during the Mongol invasion and justified violence against the Shi'a through *takfir*. Ibn Taymiyyah has been described as the intellectual father of casual *takfir*, the main legal and ideological mechanism for ISIS' violent persecution of other sects. See: Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (Norton, New York, 2006), p.71.
[11] Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (Kindle edition, 2006), ch.1.

actor in the ensuing civil war in Iraq, conducting terror attacks during the 2005 elections and explicitly targeting Shi'a civilians and religious sites across the country that caused severe civilian casualties.[12] It did not take long for this to cause a serious disagreement between al-Qaida's leadership and AQI. Al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, questioned AQI's attacks on "ordinary Shi'a" and stressed the need to expel US forces from Iraq and secure the support of the Sunni community before establishing an Islamic emirate.[13] Zarqawi defied al-Qaida's central leadership and, in April 2006, announced that an Islamic state would be established in three months.[14]

From AQI to the Islamic State in Iraq

Killed in a raid by US special forces in June 2006, Zarqawi did not live to see the creation of his Islamic state. Months later, Zarqawi's successors, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi (not to be confused with ISIS' future leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) and Abu Ayoub al-Masri, declared the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) on 15 October 2006.[15] Iraq remained highly unstable; the insurgency had flared up following Zarqawi's death, with the subsequent year among the deadliest in terms of both Iraqi civilian casualties and US military losses.[16] The violence and ideological conservatism of the newly created ISI, however, alienated the Sunni population. During the so-called "Sunni Awakening," Sunni tribes from western Iraq's Anbar province allied with the US while it implemented a troop surge that brought around 30,000 new forces into Iraq to quell spiralling sectarian violence.[17] The alliance proved successful: by 2008, the rate of civilian casualties had dropped significantly, and over the next years, ISI's leadership was gradually depleted.[18] In April 2010, both Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Masri were killed by American and Iraqi soldiers, and in the following months, 34 other ISI leaders would be eliminated.[19]

Their deaths opened the door for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to become the ISIS's leader. Born Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri to a lower middle-class family in Samarra, Iraq, he had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s and a doctoral student in Qur'anic recitation. By the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq, Badri had embraced Salafi-jihadism, the extreme form of Sunni Islamism committed to establishing an Islamic state that derives from a literalist interpretation of the Quran.[20] After the invasion, he led a militant group in Diyala province, where he had worked as a preacher, until he was captured in late 2004 while visiting an acquaintance

[12] While the US military blamed Zarqawi and AQI as the primary movers in the growing Iraqi insurgency, it conducted psychological operations to highlight the role of the Jordanian terrorist and downplay the role of domestic support for the insurgency. In reality, however, there were several factors fanning the flames of the insurgency: the growing alienation of Iraq's Sunni population (previously the dominant political force under Saddam Hussein); Shi'a resistance to the US occupation; abuses by the US-led coalition such as the destruction of Fallujah (which would later be one of the first Iraqi cities conquered by ISIS) and torture at Abu Ghraib prison; widespread corruption throughout Iraq; and ill-fated decisions by the Coalition Provisional Authority to disband the Iraqi army and "de-Baathify" the government, thereby ensuring there were between 65,000 and 95,000 well-armed Iraqis that militant groups opposed to the coalition could feasibly work with.
See: Tim Dickinson, 'Hyping Zarqawi' (*Rolling Stone*, 12 April 2006) <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/hyping-zarqawi-244415/> accessed 7 June 2023; Patrick Cockburn, *The Occupation: War And Resistance In Iraq* (2007); Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival & the Struggle for Iraq* (2008); Antony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (2006); Seymour Hersh, 'Torture at Abu Ghraib' *The New Yorker* (New York, 30 April 2004) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib> accessed 7 June 2023; James P. Pfifner 'US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army' (2010) Vol.25 *Intelligence & National Security,* pp.76-85.
[13] Document available here: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023.
[14] McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.1.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Sam Gollob & Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Iraq Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq* (Brookings Institute, August 2020) <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/fp_20200825_iraq_index.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023, pp.8-12.
[17] Jon Lee Anderson, 'Inside the Surge' *New Yorker* (New York, 11 November 2007) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/11/19/inside-the-surge> accessed 7 June 2023.
[18] Gollob & O'Hanlon, *Iraq Index.*
[19] Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.5.
[20] Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016); Mohamed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington DC, USIP Press, 2007), p.36; McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse*, ch.4.

in Fallujah.[21] He was transferred to Camp Bucca, the American detention camp where various leaders of Iraq's jihadist movement would be imprisoned—including at least nine of the top future leaders of ISIS.[22]

After his release, Badri joined AQI. When ISI was declared, he became head of the *Shari'a* committees in the Iraqi provinces. [23] Soon, he was promoted to the third-highest rank in ISI, and following the deaths of Abu Umar and Masri, Badri became leader. His youth, previous position on the Shura Council, and claimed descent from the prophet made him an obvious choice. [24]

Upon becoming leader of ISI, Badri took the name Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He immediately set about cleansing ISI's forces of people whose loyalty was in question and subsequently brought former Iraqi military and intelligence officers into leadership positions.[25] Around the same time, the failure to bring about a transformation of the Iraqi body politic following the Sunni Awakening, growing Sunni resentment with what were viewed as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian pro-Shi'a politics, and the impending withdrawal of US troops created the conditions in which ISI could regroup and regain its strength.[26]

But the real opportunity for expansion came in 2011, when the Syrian uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime turned into a violent conflict.

Syria's uprising

On 18 March 2011, against the backdrop of rising anti-authoritarian protest movements in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, protestors in the southern Syrian city of Dera'a gathered to demand the release of a dozen teenagers who had been arrested and tortured for drawing graffiti criticising the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The crackdown was swift: security forces killed protestors with live fire, which, rather than quelling protests, caused them to spread across the country. Damascus, Homs and Idlib erupted in large demonstrations. Spurred on by decades of socio-economic marginalisation and a repressive political environment, protests were made up of a mix of Syrians, including those who had been economically marginalised (especially in the countryside), youth with democratic aspirations, and conservative Sunnis who opposed the rule and privileges of Assad's Alawi minority.

Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, had come to power in 1970 following two decades of *coup d'états*, and, from his early days, focused on immunising his government against rebellions. Coup-proofing was done primarily through the construction of a pervasive security apparatus built on the surveillance, arrest, and torture of suspected dissidents, but also through intermittent bouts of brutal, large-scale violence. When a Muslim Brotherhood insurgency attempted to assassinate Hafez al-Assad before launching an armed insurgency in the early 1980s,[27] the regime responded with brutal violence that killed tens of thousands and saw many more arrested or disappeared into the regime's detention archipelago. In the early days of the 2011 protests, the younger Assad deployed many of the same techniques, overseeing harsh crackdowns on protests that involved the use of sniper-fire, tanks, and massacres against demonstrators, while promising symbolic and insufficient

[21] Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London, Verso Books, 2015), ch.4; McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.4..
[22] While inside Bucca, al-Badri formed a couple of important alliances, including with Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who would become his ISIS deputy and spokesperson.
See: Terrence McCoy, 'Camp Bucca: The US prison that became the birthplace of Isis' *The Independent* (London, 4 November 2014) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/camp-bucca-the-us-prison-that-became-the-birthplace-of-isis-9838905.html> accessed 7 June 2023.
[23] Aaron Y. Zelin, 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Islamic State's driving force' *BBC* (London, 31 July 2014) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28560449> accessed 7 June 2023.
[24] McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.4.
[25] Isabel Coles & Ned Parker, 'How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule' *Reuters* (London, 11 December 2015) <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/> accessed 7 June 2023.
[26] Cockburn, *Rise of Islamic State*, ch.4.
[27] The US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed 2,500 died, but Amnesty International later concluded there were 25,000 casualties. See Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London, Verso Books, 2016) ch.4.

political reforms.[28] The response by the Syrian government was widely condemned internationally, and by the end of 2011, the European Union, US, and Arab League had all imposed sanctions.

In less than a year, Syria's popular uprising became militarised. Many protestors continued their peaceful demonstrations, often at great personal risk, while others believed that only armed resistance would bring about change. Military defectors created the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the opposition started organising politically. President Assad's strategy was to explicitly target civilians and medical facilities in burgeoning opposition-held areas, calculating that this would deprive the armed opposition of popular support.[29] Many of the opposition groups obtained support from external players such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey; western states meanwhile fretted over how to support 'moderate rebels,' although they too provided 'non-lethal' and 'lethal' support to opposition armed groups.[30] Furthermore, the opposition calculated on a western military intervention like the one that helped overthrow Muammar Qaddafi in Libya in 2011, in which rebel factions operated under a NATO no-fly zone following authorisation by the UN Security Council to take 'all necessary measures [..] to protect civilians.'[31] Despite the push for his removal from western countries and the Gulf, Assad retained diplomatic backing from Russia and battlefield support from Iran and Hezbollah.[32] As a result, the civil uprising turned into a civil war, with extensive international intervention on both sides.

Over the course of 2012 and 2013, western countries came to recognise the opposition's Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as Syria's legitimate representative. Nevertheless, as the intensity of fighting increased, the most ideologically committed rebel groups—often Islamists or jihadists— became the dominant anti-Assad forces on the battlefield. One of these groups, Jabhat al-Nusra ("Nusra"), emerged as an ascendant actor in early 2012, claiming responsibility for a series of car bombings in Damascus in December 2011 that targeted the Syrian security services.[33]

It later became apparent that Nusra had been formed on the orders of al-Qaida leader Zawahiri to Baghdadi.[34] In 2011, Baghdadi sent Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, another former Camp Bucca inmate, as his representative to Syria, together with several dozen hardened al-Qaida operatives.[35] Nusra sought to keep its affiliation with al-Qaida secret and collaborated closely with other Islamist opposition factions, participating in *Shari'a* committees in areas captured from government forces while actively recruiting within Sunni communities.[36] It also attracted many of the incoming foreign fighters, and enjoyed strong financial support from the Gulf.[37] Nusra's degree of integration in the Syrian rebellion was such that, when the US designated Nusra as a terrorist organisation in late 2012, accusing it of being part of ISI, a protest of 29 Sunni rebel factions featured the slogan, "We are all al-Nusra."[38]

The designation of Nusra underlined that while the US (and other western countries) wanted Assad to be overthrown, they were deeply concerned about the current and possible future role of Nusra. A US Defense Intelligence Agency assessment from August 2012 had foreseen that 'ISI could [...] declare an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organisations in Iraq and Syria,' adding that 'if the situation unravels, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria.'[39] The same assessment noted that this was what some foreign states supporting the opposition intended, as it would isolate

[28] Ibid, ch. 1.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*: *International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (Yale University Press, 2020) pp.125-146.
[31] UN Security Council Resolution 1973, adopted 17 March 2011 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/699777?ln=en> accessed 7 June 2023.
[32] Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, pp.92-99, 147-167.
[33] Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.9.
[34] McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.4.
[35] Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.9.
[36] Jennifer Cafarella, 'Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria' (Institute for the Study of War, 2014) <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023; McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.4.
[37] Cafarella, 'Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria'.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Document available here: <https://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DOD-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023.

the Assad government.[40] The fear that Islamists would hijack the uprising meant that although the US and other western states would cooperate with—and even train and arm—opposition groups, they would apply more scrutiny to these groups than other states, who appeared more willing to work with the growing number of overtly Islamist groups on the ground.[41]

The ever-increasing strength of the Islamists within the anti-Assad ranks played into the hands of Assad, too. The Syrian president had always had a mercurial relationship with international jihadi militancy. Until the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, Assad had co-operated with the US on the extraordinary rendition of terrorism suspects to Syria.[42] But Syria had also been a conduit for arms and cash to Lebanese Hezbollah and following the US invasion of Iraq, it had provided channels of Islamist militants to AQI—with the US government estimating that as many as 85 to 90% of all foreign fighters in Iraq at the time had come via Syria.[43] This meant that when ISI decided to establish itself in Syria, networks were already in place.

To make matters worse, in the early days of the uprising, Assad released from detention a large number of known Islamist militants, such as Zahran Alloush and Hassan Abboud, calculating that they would join and radicalise opposition forces already on the ground.[44] Many of these detainees ended up becoming leaders in ISIS, or Nusra, or new, powerful Islamist groups such as Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham.[45] This served to strengthen Assad's narrative that he was facing a rebellion of Islamist extremists rather than a popular uprising.

The ISIS-Nusra schism

Nusra's affiliation to both al-Qaida and ISIS became public in 2013. Baghdadi argued the ties between Nusra and ISIS should be made public; Jolani demurred and said that he was in Syria on the authority of al-Qaida leader Zawahiri, who had forbidden him from announcing their official presence in Syria. Despite Jolani's objections, on 9 April 2013, Baghdadi announced that Nusra was an Islamic State affiliate and that it would now form part of a newly created Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.[46] Jolani publicly rejected the move, instead pledging his allegiance to Zawahiri and al-Qaida central. Eventually, the dispute led Zawahiri to expel ISIS from al-Qaida altogether.[47] ISIS and Nusra also disagreed on priorities, with Nusra intending to concentrate on Assad's forces and ISIS pursuing a broader regional agenda.[48]

The dispute with Nusra and ISIS' unwillingness to compromise with anyone that did not share its ultra-conservative Salafi-jihadist ideology put ISIS at odds with other Syrian opposition groups. It did not take long for those differences to turn violent.[49] In August 2013, ISIS pushed out Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham from northeast Syria's Raqqa—the first provincial capital seized by the opposition from government forces—before ISIS laid siege to opposition forces around al-Bab and clashed with rebels elsewhere around Deir Ezzor and Albu Kamal.[50] In early 2014, Nusra, the FSA, and the Islamic Front (a coalition including Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham) fought

[40] Ibid.
[41] Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, pp.134-146.
[42] Murtaza Hussain, 'Canada Charges Syrian Officer with Torture in Rendition Case — Despite U.S. Silence' *The Intercept* (New York, 1 September 2015) <https://theintercept.com/2015/09/01/charges-filed-case-rendition-torture-maher-arar/> accessed 7 June 2023; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, p.14.
[43] Peter Neumann, 'Suspects into Collaborators' *London Review of Books* (London, 3 April 2014), pp.19-21.
[44] Phil Sands and others, 'Assad regime abetted extremists to subvert peaceful uprising, says former intelligence official' *The National* (UAE, 21 January 2014) <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/assad-regime-abetted-extremists-to-subvert-peaceful-uprising-says-former-intelligence-official-1.319620> accessed 7 June 2023.
[45] Richard Spencer, 'Four jihadists, one prison: All released by Assad and all now dead" *The Telegraph* (London, 11 May 2016) <http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/isis-jihad-syria-assad-islamic/index.html> accessed 7 June 2023.
[46] See footnote n.2. ISIS is used throughout this study rather than any of the group's other names.
[47] McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.4; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.12.
[48] UN Security Council, 'The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the Al Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant: Report and recommendations submitted pursuant to resolution 2170 (2014)' (2014) S/2014/815, para.7.
[49] *Al Jazeera English*, 'Fighting rages between Syrian rebels and ISIL' (Qatar, 9 January 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/1/9/fighting-rages-between-syrian-rebels-and-isil> accessed 7 June 2023.
[50] Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.14.

a violent, month-long campaign against ISIS that left thousands dead, according to conflict monitors.[51] It ended with ISIS being pushed out of Idlib and Aleppo, but in control of positions around Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and rural areas in Syria's east.[52] When ISIS allegedly killed Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Khaled al-Souri, a Zawahiri "delegate" in Syria, the al-Qaida leader finally cut off all remaining ties with ISIS.[53]

Territorial expansion

As it expanded the territory under its control, ISIS benefitted from an impasse in the Syrian conflict. With Iranian support, Assad had survived an initial opposition onslaught in 2012 and 2013. After the failure of the Geneva II talks in January 2014, it was clear both sides still believed in a military solution to the conflict. An investigation in 2014 found that Assad's army had conducted 90% of its raids on opposition targets, largely abstaining from targeting ISIS.[54] ISIS' presence served the government's narrative well, but at that point, the Syrian opposition rebels were also a more immediate threat than ISIS to the power centres controlled by Assad.[55] As a result, ISIS was largely left alone—until much later, when it had grown too great a threat to ignore.

Meanwhile, ISIS forces increased attacks across the border in Iraq. This included a prison attack in Tikrit, which helped swell its ranks, followed by attacks on Iraqi security forces and Shi'a civilians.[56] The combination of ISIS' terror attacks and a heavy-handed security response by Prime Minister Maliki's Shi'a-dominated security forces opened Iraq's deep sectarian wounds. Once again, ISIS was able to capitalise on Sunni discontent and it allied itself with Sunni militant groups it had previously been fighting.[57] In early 2014, ISIS took control of the city of Fallujah, which had been the epicentre of the insurgency against US forces a decade earlier.[58] ISIS then announced it had become an "Islamic emirate."[59]

The late spring and summer of 2014 saw substantial ISIS gains on both sides of the border. In Syria, ISIS clashed with the People's Protection Units (YPG) and other Kurdish militia groups, taking control of Tal Abyad, and laying siege to Kobane; by late August, the group squeezed the Syrian army out of the Tabqa airbase, later executing at least 200 soldiers, which left it in complete control of Raqqa province.[60] Arguably more significant gains, though, were made in Iraq, where the group captured Samarra and Tikrit. Then, in late June, 1,300 ISIS fighters overran Iraqi security forces to capture Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities.[61] With Mosul under its control, ISIS now dominated territory between northern Iraq and the outskirts of Aleppo. On the back of their recent victory, ISIS declared that the "caliphate has returned."[62] Baghdadi ascended the pulpit of the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul and embraced his role as the "caliph", whom all Muslims were to follow.[63]

---

[51] 'Thousands were killed and were killed during clashes with the Islamic State' (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2014) <https://web.archive.org/web/20140916120006/http://www.syriahr.com/index.php?option=com_news&nid=20553&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.VBgmVKXP1aQ > accessed 7 June 2023.

[52] *Al Jazeera English*, 'ISIL retreats from parts of north Syria" (Qatar, 28 February 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/2/28/isil-retreats-from-parts-of-north-syria> accessed 7 June 2023.

[53] Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.12; McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse*, ch. 4.

[54] 'Syria: Countrywide Conflict Report #4' (Carter Center, 11 September 2014) <https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Sept-18-2014.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023.

[55] Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, p.200.

[56] Jessica D. Lewis, 'ISIS Battle Plan for Baghdad' (Institute for the Study of War, 27 June 2014) <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS-not-culminated.pdf> consulted 7 June 2023, p.2.

[57] Cockburn, *Rise of Islamic State*, ch.4.

[58] *Al Jazeera English*, 'Iraq government loses control of Fallujah' (Qatar, 4 January 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/1/4/iraq-government-loses-control-of-fallujah> accessed 7 June 2023); see also: Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, ch.6.

[59] Liz Sly (2014) "Al-Qaeda force captures Fallujah amid rise in violence in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 3 January, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/al-qaeda-force-captures-fallujah-amid-rise-in-violence-in-iraq/2014/01/03/8abaeb2a-74aa-11e3-8def-a33011492df2_story.html.

[60] Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, pp.197-198; *Al Jazeera English*, 'Islamic State captures key Syrian air base' (Qatar, 25 August 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/8/25/islamic-state-captures-key-syrian-air-base> accessed 7 June 2023.

[61] Cockburn, *Rise of Islamic State*, ch.2.

[62] Quoted in McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse,* ch.6.

[63] Ibid.

Just as ISIS capitalised on domestic conditions in Syria and Iraq, it also benefitted from favourable geopolitical developments. US support for Iraqi security forces had resulted in copious amounts of heavy weaponry, including tanks and Humvees, being captured by ISIS in Mosul. There were similar instances in which Syrian opposition forces were forced out and overrun; others simply sold their weapons to ISIS.[64] ISIS allegedly also benefitted from the wider financial resources available to radical groups from private donors in the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, which were not restricted until well into 2013.[65]

Once ISIS had declared its caliphate, and in light of its extreme interpretation of *takfir*, it had a growing list of enemies in the Middle East and beyond. Many states saw ISIS as an immediate threat to their interests and security in a way that Syria, led by Assad, was not. Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but also Western states and Russia, feared the success of Islamist extremists that could threaten their regional interests but also feed the aspirations of domestic terrorists. ISIS' brutality also played a large part in ensuring it would soon face a large coalition of international states and regional actors assembled to fight it. Its treatment of the Yazidi minority, which included mass killings, sexual slavery, torture, and forcible transfers, among other abuses, received widespread international attention. Many atrocities occurred across northeast Syria, some of which will be discussed in Part 2 of this report.

The US-led Global Coalition Against Da'esh began bombing ISIS positions in Iraq in August 2014. On 23 September that year, the campaign was extended to Syria, where Kurdish forces were struggling to face off an ISIS siege in Kobane along the Syrian-Turkish border.[66] The move brought US airpower into the Syrian war—not in the way that the armed opposition had long hoped for, against Assad, but instead to deal with the threat of an Islamist extremist group with more territorial control than any al-Qaida franchise ever had.

Governance in the 'caliphate'

By declaring its caliphate, ISIS assigned itself responsibility for the governance of territories under its control. Its proclaimed goal was to "cleanse" Islam by recreating the world and customs of the earliest Muslims living in the 7th century Middle East.[67] In July 2014, the very first issue of ISIS' propaganda magazine *Dabiq*— titled 'The Return of the Khalifah'—stated that the group's calling was to purge the world of apostasy and disbelief in order to bring political, geographical and spiritual unity (*tawhid*) to the Muslim community (*ummah*). ISIS saw pious Sunni communities as subdued and believed it would bring about a "true" Islamic society, led by a caliph and governed under *Shari'a* law. Only then would Muslims be able to live under the true rules of God (as interpreted by ISIS).

Intrinsic to its worldview was the belief that other communities (whether Shi'a, Yazidi, Alawi, Druze, Shabak, or Christian) and anyone else proclaimed to be a sinner were a hindrance to the fulfilment of the Muslim community's full potential. With an interpretation of Islam like that of Zarqawi, ISIS believed that such groups could justifiably be eradicated. Extreme forms of violence, if committed against other sects, ethnicities, or so-called sinners thereby became an act of purification of a religion that had supposedly lost its way and become heretical.[68] ISIS promoted an uncompromising understanding of the Salafi creed, and Muslims who held the wrong beliefs could and *must* be killed. Experts noted that even amongst Salafi-jihadi groups, ISIS' exclusionary

[64] Conflict Armament Research, *Weapons of the Islamic State* (December 2017) <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-islamic-state/< accessed 7 June 2023.
[65] European Parliament, 'The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Weapons to Rebel Groups Around the World' (European Parliament, June 2013) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137_EN.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, pp.140-141, 202-206.
[66] Cockburn, *Rise of Islamic State*, preface.
[67] Cole Bunzel, 'From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State' (Brookings Institute, 2015).
[68] Pieter Nanninga, '"Cleansing the Earth of the Stench of *Shirk*": The Islamic State's Violence as Acts of Purification' (2019) Vol.7 *Journal of Religion and Violence* pp. 128–57.

stance was unprecedented.[69] Exclusion through violence served to create an in-group identity between Muslims of different nationalities and ethnicities who had joined the so-called "caliphate."[70]

The need to provide territorial governance affected the structure of the organisation. In general terms, ISIS' governing structures consisted of three separate internal groups.[71] The core leadership, headed by Baghdadi, presided over the military, administrative and religious arms of the organisation. Many of the leadership were former Ba'athist military officers who had been alienated by Maliki's politics in post-Saddam Iraq.[72] The second group were ordinary Syrians and Iraqis, mostly Sunnis, who had pledged loyalty for military, financial, or ideological reasons and held administrative and military positions. The third group were foreign fighters, economically and socially alienated youth drawn by a supposedly revolutionary and romantic cause. By 2014, the US estimated that ISIS had between 20,000 and 31,500 members; by late 2015, at least 30,000 foreign fighters from 86 countries had joined its ranks.[73] As opposed to Nusra, whose leadership was almost exclusively Syrian, ISIS often appointed foreign fighters to senior positions and rewarded them with benefits unavailable to ordinary Syrian or Iraqi fighters.[74]

Following a thorough review of documents and letters drafted by ISIS leaders, the UN team investigating ISIS crimes (UNITAD) found that ISIS employed a 'very centralized, top-down approach to the administration of territory that it held.'[75] Below Baghdadi, ISIS operated a division between two deputies for its respective Syrian and Iraqi operations, with former Iraqi military commander Abu Ali al-Anbari in charge of operations in Syria while Abu Muslim al-Turkmani oversaw Iraq.[76] Administrative control was exercised by ISIS' "delegated committee," which reported directly to Baghdadi and enjoyed broad administrative powers, such as overseeing the provinces or *wilayat*.[77] With Raqqa and Mosul as the respective centres of gravity in Syria and Iraq, responsibilities were further delegated among governors for the management of certain towns or villages.[78]

ISIS' governance model in territories under its control could be broadly divided into two categories: administrative measures and the delivery of "Islamic" services. Administration included: *da'wa*, or religious outreach, which was one of the first services ISIS provided upon entering a territory; the establishment of *Shari'a* institutions; the creation of *hisba* (religious morality police) who patrolled the cities to promote virtue and prevent vice; and education services using a curriculum focused on Islamic sciences and study of the Quran. ISIS also established Islamic courts to resolve disputes (based on its ultra-conservative interpretation of *Shari'a*) and administer *hudud*, severe punishments such as stoning or flogging. Local police forces worked as executive forces for the courts tasked with maintaining internal security in towns and detention centres.[79] Further tasks included military recruitment, including training for children as the "Cubs of Zarqawi," and public relations and tribal affairs.[80]

---

[69] Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (New York, Random House, 2016).

[70] N. Lovrics, 'The Spectacles of Experience: Toward a New Understanding of ISIS's Performative Violence' (2015) Vol.2 *New Sociological Perspectives*; S.T. Zech & Z. Kelly, 'Off with their Heads: The Islamic State and Civilian Beheadings' (2015) Vol.6 *Journal of Terrorism Research* pp.83-93.

[71] UN Security Council, S/2014/815, para.13.

[72] Coles & Parker, "How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule'.

[73] *Al Jazeera English*, 'CIA says IS numbers underestimated' (Qatar, 12 September 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/9/12/cia-says-is-numbers-underestimated> accessed 7 June 2023); European Parliament, *Foreign Fighters – Member State responses and EU Action* (Brussels, 2016) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-579080-Foreign-fighters-rev-FINAL.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023.

[74] UN Security Council, S/2014/815, paras. 16 & 19; Charles C. Caris & Samuel Reynolds, 'ISIS Governance in Syria' in *Middle East Security Report 22* (ISW, 2014), p.23-23, <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf> accessed 7 June 2023.

[75] UNITAD, 9th report, S/2022/836, para.48.

[76] UN Security Council, S/2014/815, para.16.

[77] Thomas Jocelyn, 'State Department adds chair of Islamic State's delegated committee to terror list' (*Long War Journal*, 21 November 2018) <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/11/state-department-adds-chair-of-islamic-states-delegated-committee-to-terror-list.php> accessed 7 June 2023.

[78] UN Security Council, S/2014/815, para.15.

[79] Caris & Reynolds, 'ISIS Governance in Syria' p.15-19.

[80] Ibid, p.2.

Islamic services, on the other hand, were mostly related to the provision of aid and basic services to the population under its control. This included infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, the maintenance of bakeries to provide subsidised bread to local populations, and the supply of water and electricity.[81] ISIS also operated bus services, postal services, healthcare and vaccination programmes for children, and soup kitchens.[82] Many of these services were free but subject to severe shortages.

Military tactics

A significant amount of ISIS' substantial income—with a budget of $2 billion, it was considered the richest terrorist organisation the world had ever seen—was channelled to the *Diwan al-Jund*, ISIS' war ministry.[83] For most of the period covered in this report, the ministry was headed by Abu Muhannad al-Suwaydawi, who succeeded Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi (killed in 2014) and maintained his role until his own death in 2019. Both had been former officers in the Iraqi army. Data recovered from Bilawi's safe house revealed that around 2014, ISIS maintained around a thousand 'medium and top-level field commanders, who all have technical, military, and security experience.[84] Among commanders, military professionalism was emphasised, and extreme discipline was enforced among its foot soldiers, who had no say over the rigid rules imposed on them.[85]

Until 2014, these commanders had been loosely connected and ISIS operated a decentralised system of military command and control, allowing local commanders a high degree of autonomy to conduct semi-conventional, highly mobile warfare. At times, ISIS would deploy terrorist attacks such as mass-casualty car bombings in civilian areas; at other times, it would use guerrilla tactics such as small-scale attacks, subversion, infiltration, and targeted assassinations with forces that were able to disperse quickly after the operations to avoid opponents' overwhelming firepower capabilities. While small but extremely brutal attacks would weaken defences and undermine the morale of ISIS' opponents, they were combined with highly mobile, large-scale attacks conducted with concentrated forces operating along multiple axes to overwhelm the capacity their opponents' capacity to defend. [86]

ISIS' high-mobility attacks were deployed effectively in Mosul and Deir Ezzor, for example, and facilitated the group's rapid military gains in Iraq and Syria in the late spring and summer of 2014. They were made possible by the significant military assets seized from the armed forces of Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syrian government forces and the armed opposition. The group also benefitted from arms trafficking, primarily through Turkey.[87] In late 2014, the UN Security Council Monitoring Team reported that the weaponry in ISIS' arsenal included:

> Light weapons, assault rifles, machine guns, heavy weapons, including possible man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) (SA 7), field and anti-aircraft guns, missiles, rockets, rocket launchers, artillery, aircraft, tanks (including T 55s and T 72s) and vehicles, including high-mobility multipurpose military vehicles.[88]

The origins of its arsenal were diverse. A three-year investigation showed that around 90% of weapons and ammunition deployed by ISIS forces originated in China, Russia, and Eastern European countries.[89] The report also showed that 'supplies of material into the Syrian conflict from foreign parties—notably the United States

[81] Ibid, p.20-23.
[82] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State* (Brooking Doha Center, 2014) <https://www.brookings.edu/research/profiling-the-islamic-state/> accessed 7 June 2023, p.28.
[83] Martin Chulov, 'How an arrest in Iraq revealed ISIS's $2bn jihadist network' *The Guardian* (London 15 June 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power> accessed 7 June 2023.
[84] Ruth Sherlock, 'Inside the leadership of Islamic State: How the new 'caliphate' is run' *The Telegraph* (London, 9 July 2014) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956280/Inside-the-leadership-of-Islamic-State-how-the-new-caliphate-is-run.html> accessed 7 June 2023.
[85] Antonio Gustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan & the New Central Asian Jihad* (London, Hurst, 2018).
[86] Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, pp.17-19.
[87] UN Security Council, S/2014/815, para.37.
[88] Ibid., para 41.
[89] CAR, *Weapons of the Islamic State*, p.5.

and Saudi Arabia—have indirectly allowed [ISIS] to obtain substantial quantities of anti-armour ammunition' such as advanced anti-tank guided weapons.[90]

Following the declaration of its statelet, ISIS had competing military priorities. On the one hand, it needed more conventional armed forces to defend the territories under its control; on the other hand, conventional weapons and materiel such as heavy artillery and tanks would be more vulnerable than mobile forces to the mounting aerial attacks that had already commenced by mid-2014. In response to this challenge, ISIS set about restructuring its military apparatus into three distinct armies, to formalise the management of its armies that were fighting on different fronts.[91] ISIS' primary conventional force was the "Caliphate Army," operating with at least twelve divisions on different fronts across Syria and Iraq that were estimated to have several hundred to several thousand soldiers at ISIS' peak.[92] This was supplemented by the "Dabiq Army," made up of a loose collection of battalions of foreign fighters who served as highly mobile shock troops defending against immediate threats; and the "Al-Usra Army," a small and specialised commando force tasked with defending Mosul.[93] Governors of ISIS-administered provinces could also draw on their personal "Army of the Wilayat" special forces.[94] ISIS' war ministry supported the coordination of its different armies as well as logistics and administration and the procurement and development of arms and ammunition and ensured the regulation of activities according to *Shari'a*.[95]

ISIS' "delegated" central committee 'closely oversaw the organisation's finances and had authority over the military disbursements, including battlefield bonuses for military achievements and for procurement of arms and supplies.'[96] Estimates for payments to ISIS soldiers differed, but were generally thought to be between $50 per month for unskilled volunteers and up to $1,500 per month for skilled fighters.[97] There were additional stipends for fighters with families.[98] By early 2016, however, ISIS' finances were gradually depleted due to territorial losses and resulting declines in oil revenues. The group was forced to cut fighters' salaries in half.[99]

Over time, the contradictions in ISIS' model of governance and control contributed to its downfall. While ISIS had been successful in conquering territory and attracting foreign fighters to its cause, its methods left it without international allies at the same time that it faced multiple, simultaneous military campaigns that were able to deploy substantial air power in support of ground offensives. Lacking aerial capabilities itself, and without the capacity to defend against aerial attacks, ISIS' need to control and govern territory made it increasingly vulnerable.

In addition, rather than working with other Islamist or jihadist factions in Syria to make common cause against Syrian government forces, ISIS had actively fought against other groups. Although it had benefitted from a groundswell of fighters early on, it was unable to obtain the sustained support of local populations due to its rigid implementation of Salafism, which had been more uncompromising than that of any al-Qaida branch—including Jabhat al-Nusra.

[90] Ibid, p 6.
[91] Haroro Ingram et al., *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.235-248.
[92] Craig Whiteside et al., *The ISIS Files: The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers*, George Washington University,p.25, https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/q237hr95t
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid, p.27.
[95] Ibid, p.9.
[96] UNITAD, 9th report, S/2022/836, para.48.
[97] UN Security Council, S/2014/815, para.80.
[98] Ibid.
[99] The Guardian, 'Islamic State to halve fighters' salaries as cost of waging terror starts to bite' (London, 20 January 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/20/islamic-state-to-halve-fighters-salaries-as-cost-of-waging-terror-starts-to-bite> accessed 7 June 2023.

The first defeat: Kobane

Some signs of ISIS' limitations showed early. In September 2014, five thousand ISIS fighters used tanks and artillery captured in Mosul to besiege half a million people in the Kurdish-majority city of Kobane, on northern Syria's border with Turkey. The Kurdish YPG had only liberated the city from Nusra in 2013 after which the PYD had established its headquarters in the city. In October 2014, Turkey, which was initially accused by some of passivity as ISIS advanced on Kobane, opened its borders to let refugees into Turkey while allowing Iraqi Kurdish forces to cross into Syria to join the fight.[100] After four months of intense street fighting and artillery barrages, Kurdish forces—with increased US air support—inflicted heavy losses on ISIS and ultimately broke the siege.[101]

ISIS' failure to take Kobane represented the group's first major military defeat since its rapid expanse in the summer of 2014. With American air support, Kurdish forces pushed back against ISIS east of the Euphrates, recapturing Hasakeh in April 2015 and Tal Abyad in July that same year, before slowly moving towards ISIS' self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa.[102]

Nevertheless, the international military campaign took time to gather steam, during which time ISIS continued to expand. In April 2015, it seized Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp in the southern suburbs of Damascus, and took control of the ancient city of Palmyra as well as gas fields in the surrounding area.[103] At that point, ISIS controlled roughly half of Syria's territory, even if most of Syria's extant population remained in areas controlled by Assad's forces.[104] ISIS also captured Ramadi in Iraq.[105]

ISIS derived some benefits from the international attention. The military campaign made for good propaganda: through its sophisticated (social) media operation, the group claimed that this was further evidence of Sunni Muslim persecution; civilian casualties that occurred while the US-led coalition's aerial campaign were portrayed through this lens as well.

Internationally, too, ISIS enjoyed success, with affiliates pledging loyalty in Nigeria and Libya; others, such as in Afghanistan, the Philippines and Somalia would soon follow. And between 2015 and 2016, it was able to organise high-profile terror attacks in Paris, Brussels, St. Petersburg, and Manchester, demonstrating a capacity to strike back. Even so, this only further strengthened the international resolve that ISIS had to be destroyed.

Mounting anti-ISIS offensives

ISIS' gains and the US intervention in support of Kurdish forces further complicated the mosaic of the Syrian conflict. Assad had lost swathes of territory to ISIS; more importantly, Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a forces left Syria to prop up Baghdad, which exacerbated Assad's manpower shortages and helped shift the momentum back towards the armed opposition.[106] Facilitated by a Turkish-Saudi agreement, an Islamist armed coalition, Jaish al-

[100] *Al Jazeera English*, 'Turkey to let Iraqi Kurds join Kobane battle' (Qatar, 21 October 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/10/21/turkey-to-let-iraqi-kurds-join-kobane-battle> accessed 7 June 2023.
[101] *Al Jazeera English*, 'Syria Kurds return to "destroyed" Kobane" (Qatar, 28 January 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/1/28/syria-kurds-return-to-destroyed-kobane> accessed 7 June 2023.
[102] *Al Jazeera English*, 'ISIL launches offensive on Syria's Hasakah' (Qatar, 31 May 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/31/isil-launches-offensive-on-syrias-hasakah> accessed 7 June 2023; Ben Hubbard & Maher Samaan, 'Kurds and Syrian Rebels Storm ISIS-Held Border Town' *New York Times* (New York, 15 June 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/world/middleeast/kurds-and-syrian-rebels-push-to-evict-isis-from-border-town> accessed 7 June 2023.
[103] *Al Jazeera English*, 'ISIL seizes part of Yarmouk district in Damascus' (Qatar, 2 April 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/2/isil-seizes-part-of-yarmouk-district-in-damascus> accessed 7 June 2023; Diana al-Rifai, 'ISIL captures strategic Syrian city of Palmyra' *Al Jazeera English* (Qatar, 21 May 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/21/isil-captures-strategic-syrian-city-of-palmyra> accessed 7 June 2023.
[104] *Al Jazeera English*, 'ISIL "controls half" of Syria's land area' (Qatar, 1 June 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/6/1/isil-controls-half-of-syrias-land-area> accessed 7 June 2023.
[105] *Al Jazeera English,* 'ISIL seizes control of Iraq's Ramadi' (Qatar, 18 May 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/18/isil-seizes-control-of-iraqs-ramadi> accessed 7 June 2023.
[106] Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, p.202.

Fateh, coordinated with Nusra to take control of Idlib in March 2015.[107] It was the first time the city had come under the control of opposition forces, and by June 2015, they controlled all of Idlib province.

But despite their success, infighting between rebel forces continued. Nusra, which had also been targeted by US airstrikes since 2014, on various occasions fought against US-backed opposition groups; in late 2015, Nusra split with Ahrar al-Sham over the application of *Shari'a* in opposition-held territories and left the Jaish al-Fateh coalition.[108] The next year, Nusra changed its name (eventually becoming Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, its current form) and announced it had ended its relationship with al-Qaida, although critics questioned the authenticity of the split, arguing that it continued to receive strategic and operational guidance from al-Qaida.[109]

Following several military setbacks for pro-Assad forces and the mounting losses in Idlib, Russia decided to intervene militarily in September 2015. Russian President Vladimir Putin took the decision to ensure the survival of Assad and prevent regime collapse, but this decision also provided geostrategic gains to Russia, which had found itself increasingly isolated following the 2014 Ukraine/Crimea crisis. Although there was a risk of ISIS taking control of Damascus should Assad fall, the narrative that Russian support was delivered solely to fight ISIS did not hold up: Russia's campaign was primarily aimed at forces other than ISIS in northern areas around Hama and Idlib, as well as in Dera'a in southwestern Syria.[110] As a result of the Russian intervention, Assad was able to make major gains in early 2016 that shifted momentum away from the opposition and eventually led to a series of poorly observed ceasefires and cessations in hostilities that favoured Assad in the medium term (and were repeatedly violated by his forces under the pretext of targeting Nusra). Around Aleppo, ISIS was able to move in after Russia repeatedly bombarded opposition forces.[111]

In November 2016, the SDF—a US-backed umbrella force that included Arab units but consisted primarily of Kurdish YPG fighters—announced they would move on Raqqa.[112] Under US President Donald Trump, who took office in January 2017, the US took several additional steps intended to target ISIS, including providing lethal support to the SDF.[113] By early 2017, the SDF had surrounded around four thousand ISIS fighters in Raqqa; in parallel, Iraqi forces were moving towards retaking Mosul—a goal that would finally be achieved in July that year. The fall of Raqqa followed in October 2017, dealing a blow to the "caliphate" from which it would never recover—although it came with heavy losses among the SDF and even heavier losses among the city's civilian population.[114] Meanwhile, Assad's forces, supported by Iranian-backed groups and other allied militias, retook Deir Ezzor and large areas of eastern Syria, taking advantage of ISIS' losses. The remaining ISIS fighters retreated to the border areas around al-Bukamal. ISIS was near defeat, but the Turkish invasion of Afrin in early 2018 drew Kurdish forces away from the anti-ISIS campaign. As a result, it took until February 2019 for the SDF to finally defeat ISIS in its last stronghold, Baghouz Fawqani. The geographical "caliphate" had ceased to exist.

[107] Ibid., p.215.
[108] Alex MacDonald & Mary Atikinson, 'Reports: Al-Nusra Front leaves Jaish al-Fatah coalition in Syria' *Middle East Eye* (London, 30 October 2015) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/reports-al-nusra-front-leaves-jaish-al-fatah-coalition-syria> accessed 7 June 2023.
[109] 'Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham' (n.d.) Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/hayat-tahrir-al-sham#_ftn39> accessed 7 June 2023); Hassan Hassan, 'Jabhat Al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, the Ruse and the Reality' *The National* (UAE, 1 November 2017); Abdul Raheem Attun, 'A Comprehensive History—How Jabhat al Nusra Broke its Ties with Al Qaeda' *Al- Maqalaat* (1 December 2017).
[110] Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, p.214-223.
[111] Anne Barnard & Thomas Erdbrink, 'ISIS Makes Gains in Syria Territory Bombed by Russia' *New York Times* (New York, 9 October 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/hussein-hamedani-iran-general-killed-in-syria.html> accessed 7 June 2023.
[112] *Al Jazeera English*, 'Syrian rebels announce offensive to retake Raqqa' (Qatar, 6 November 2016) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/6/syrian-rebels-announce-offensive-to-retake-raqqa> accessed 7 June 2023.
[113] Charlie Savage & Eric Schmitt, 'Trump Administration Is Said to Be Working to Loosen Counterterrorism Rules' *New York Times* (New York, 12 March 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/12/us/politics/trump-loosen-counterterrorism-rules.html> accessed 7 June 2023.
[114] Amnesty International, 'War in Raqqa: Rhetoric versus Reality' <https://raqqa.amnesty.org/briefing.html> accessed 7 June 2023.

ISIS looked like a spent force. It had lost control of all its territory against the overwhelming force of multiple enemies on several simultaneous fronts. While "caliph" Baghdadi managed to escape from Baghouz, it would not be long until he too would meet his end, self-detonating a suicide vest during a US raid in Idlib province in October 2019.[115] Idlib remained under the control of HTS and the ISIS-affiliate-turned-rival maintained between 12,000 to 15,000 fighters in the area.[116]

A return to insurgency

ISIS' fall left northeast Syria devasted. There are few sources that authoritatively demonstrate the total number of people killed by ISIS. A report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights documented 17,868 direct conflict-related deaths of combatants and civilians at the hands of ISIS in a decade of war in Syria.[117] The true death total was considered to be far higher, as many deaths may have gone undocumented. The count also did not include the number of people maimed or wounded. As UNOHCHR observed, "it is likely that due to the intensity of the crimes and terrorizing acts of [ISIS], the documentation efforts became less representative of the scale of the hostilities occurring."[118] Across Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor, where ISIS operated for years, the estimated number of civilians killed was at least twice the number of documented.[119] Nor did this figure include "indirect deaths" resulting from loss of access to essential goods and services, which evidently occurred throughout the areas under ISIS' control.[120] Such was ISIS' legacy.

By 2022, there remained 120,000 individuals in 11 camps and 20 prison facilities in the area—many of them women and children living in dire camp settings among hardened ISIS supporters. The possibility that ISIS could re-emerge remained a serious, long-term security.[121]

[115] Rukmini Callimachi & Fahil Hassan, 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS Leader Known for His Brutality, Is Dead at 48' *New York Times* (New York, 27 October 2019) <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/27/world/middleeast/al-baghdadi-dead.html> accessed 7 June 2023.
[116] UN Security Council Monitoring Team, 20th report, S/2017/573 (15 July 2019), para.24.
[117] United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Civilian Deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/50/68 (28 June 2022), Table A6.
[118] Ibid, para. 27.
[119] Ibid, figure 2.
[120] Ibid, para 4.
[121] UN Security Council Monitoring Team, 30th report, S/2022/547 (15 July 2022), para 89.

PART 1.2 - METHODOLOGY

Set-up & responsibilities

This report was prepared jointly by the European Institute of Peace (the Institute), a Brussels-based conflict resolution organisation, and the Rights Defense Initiative (RDI), a Qamishli-based human rights organisation.

Field research was conducted by RDI, which assembled eight teams to collect individual testimonies and host collective meetings. All team members underwent detailed training on all relevant aspects of the work. Each team was led by a team leader and staffed with three community testimony officers as well as a psychosocial support facilitator to provide direct support to the victims sharing their testimonies. RDI's secretariat was responsible for initial data entry and processing. Initial data coding was conducted by RDI team leaders and its chief of staff, after which rough data was shared with the Institute for further analysis.

The Institute provided technical advice and support to RDI on a variety of issues, including methodological design, testimony collection, the development of questionnaires, ethical guidelines, and outreach and communication. The Institute then conducted data analysis and, while the editorial process was collaborative between both organisations, held responsibility for the overall editing of the report and its formatting, translation, and publication.

Scope & selection

The main chapters in this report are organised along both geographical and thematic lines.

In Part 2 of the report, geographical chapters describe the story of ISIS' takeover, its abuses, and its defeat in specific geographical areas of northeast Syria. After extensive deliberations between the Institute and RDI, a decision was taken to focus on six geographical areas: Kobane, Hasakeh, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. These areas were selected due to their strategic, demographic, and symbolic significance in understanding the diverse impacts and suffering that ISIS wrought across northeast Syria. They present a rich diversity of ethnicities and religions, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how different communities were affected by ISIS rule. Additionally, the selection of these areas allowed for a comparative analysis of the different methods and logics of violence that ISIS employed in different contexts—whether between urban and rural areas or between the various sectarian, religious, and ethnic communities found in the region. As the research progressed, it became increasingly apparent that there was significant variation in how ISIS impacted each area. The selection of such a limited number of geographical areas naturally meant that many others were left out. This is reflective of limited time and resources and in no way indicates a disregard for the suffering endured in other areas of northeast Syria.

In Part 3 of the report, thematic chapters attempt to understand the synoptic similarities of ISIS rule repeated across northeast Syria. Focusing on four thematic areas—economy, gender, education and public healthcare and psycho-social health—allowed for a deeper analysis of the specific impact on these sectors, which a limited geographic focus would be unlikely to capture in full. The four themes were selected for their critical significance in understanding not only ISIS' ideology but also the contours of the group's violence and governance model in northeast Syria.

Sampling & outreach

The research teams employed a method of purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling where interviewees were chosen because of their unique characteristics, for example, because they suffered directly

or witnessed abuses committed by ISIS. Victims were identified through local networks via RDI and the research teams themselves, including through a form of "snowball sampling", where victims or community members would either identify relevant interviewees or reach out to the research teams following initial communication about the research project. An outreach plan was developed by the Institute and RDI to facilitate the participation of victims and other interviewees, manage expectations at the community level, and anticipate questions and misperceptions to avoid hampering data collection.

Individual interviews & collective meetings

Testimonies were collected through a combination of individual and group meetings, and all interviews started with informed consent procedures.[122]

Between March and May 2023, a total of 425 testimonies were collected, of which 165, or 39%, were conducted with women. In total, 581 people attended collective focus group meetings.

Individual interviews allowed for detailed testimony by victims and survivors, collecting details and memories of their individualised experiences of ISIS violence.

The primary aim of communal focus group meetings—consisting of groups of between 15 and 25 people—was to establish the community-level impacts of ISIS rule within a certain location. Researchers aimed to document the overall "story" of a certain geographic location by detailing life before the outbreak of the conflict, the initial stages of the conflict and ISIS' arrival, the effects on local communities, and the anti-ISIS conflict and its aftermath.

Individual and collective focus group sessions both revealed distinct regional variations in terms of victims' experiences but also how comfortably victims actively engaged and expressed themselves in group sessions—whether because of local security dynamics or the socio-economic, educational, and geographic backgrounds of the participants themselves.

Psychological care

Based in Qamishli and with staff drawn from across northeast Syria, RDI has a deep knowledge of the conflict. This ensured the organisation and affiliated research teams were immediately sensitive to the context from the outset of the project, and there was a recognition that the deep psychological traumas inflicted by ISIS and the anti-ISIS conflict needed to be approached with extreme care and delicacy. Because of this, the Institute and RDI invested extensive resources during the project's preparatory phase to ensure all staff members received adequate training in best practices in trauma-sensitive interviewing.

Furthermore, with support from the Institute, RDI ensured compliance with best practices in trauma sensitive interviewing.[123] This is a method of sensitive, professional interviewing aimed at empowering victims and other witnesses and giving them a sense of agency and control. It applies protocols for avoiding re-traumatising victims and witnesses and placing them at additional risk, which can also affect the quality and reliability of information provided and distort victims' and witnesses' memory of the event(s). Enumerators were issued with clear

[122] All enumerators ensured the informed consent of all interviewee participants. They explained their role in the project (either as staff members or volunteers), the purpose of the interview and the fact that it would be confidential and, unless interviewees specifically agreed, that no personal identifiers such as one's name, age, or place of origin would be used. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that there would be no monetary reward for participating and that there was no obligation to answer any question. Interviewees were also told they could withdraw at any point without giving any justification. Data could also be destroyed, if any participant requested this.

[123] S.F. Ribeiro and Danaé van der Straten Ponthoz,*International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict Best Practice on the Documentation of Sexual Violence as a Crime or Violation of International Law* (United Nations, 2017) <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/report/international-protocol-on-the-documentation-and-investigation-of-sexual-violence-in-conflict/International_Protocol_2017_2nd_Edition.pdf>

guidance and trained on identifying signs of trauma. Protocols were put in place to interrupt the interview and provide psychological support when the interviewees seemed distressed or otherwise in discomfort.

Security

As ISIS cells still operate and conduct attacks across northeast Syria, the research team drafted a risk assessment and security protocol to assess and manage risks related to the conduct of the research in a high-risk environment. This risk protocol, drafted by the Institute and adapted to the local context by RDI, outlined security responsibilities, threat identification and assessment, risks, security protocols, contingency planning, and ensured consent from team leaders for the adopted protocols. RDI's director and security officers were responsible for the review of all individual risk assessments.

While there were no major security incidents during the research and data collection, would-be interviewees were sensitive to the presence of ISIS cells in Manbij, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor (and particularly so in rural areas around cities in these locations). People were fearful of repercussions from ISIS cells if they shared their stories. To address this, the research teams adopted a flexible approach and expended considerable effort to build trust with people. Nevertheless, RDI ensured that the quality of statements remained high during testimony collection when utilising appropriately flexible methods.

Data processing

Each individual testimony or participant in focus group meetings was assigned a unique identification number, which allowed the data to be anonymized for privacy and security purposes. In accordance with GDPR regulations, interviewees specifically consented to the use of their data. The data were transmitted to the RDI secretariat before being recorded and then stored securely by RDI. RDI's chief of staff was responsible for making a pre-selection of relevant testimonies, which were translated from Arabic into English and then shared with the Institute.

PART 2 - THE IMPACT ON SIX COMMUNITIES IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

This part of the report details the impact of ISIS' violence and territorial control on six communities across northeast Syria. The chapters are organised with a rough chronology of the anti-ISIS campaign in mind, starting in Kobane, which was where ISIS was dealt a first major, symbolic defeat following initial victories and expansion. Subsequently follow accounts from Hasakeh, Manbij, and Tabqa, then ISIS *de facto* capital in Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor, where they made their final stand.

There were many similarities between the communities. Each community had stories of violations and human rights abuses, including public executions, massacres, torture, kidnapping, and arbitrary detention. Gender-based or sexual violence, and violations against ethnic and religious minorities were common across northeast Syria. But there were also many differences and nuances in the way ISIS affected each community. Some were never fully occupied; others suffered years of stifling social control. The different ethnic, religious, socio-economic and geographic make-ups of the areas created differences; how the Syrian war played out in the early years in each area did too.

Guided by the testimonies of people in the areas, these chapters tell the unique stories of the ISIS impact in these areas. Each chapter sets out the historical background, the early days of the Syrian war, and how ISIS moved into the communities. It then tells the story of just how much worse life would become under ISIS' control and how the suffering inflicted will take years to heal.

1. KOBANE

The Kurdish-majority city of Kobane became front-page international news in 2014 when ISIS fighters, fresh off a victorious campaign sweeping across Iraq and Syria, besieged the city for months. In what would become a major turning-point in the war against ISIS, predominantly Kurdish forces managed to break the siege on Kobane and push back ISIS fighters away from the city.

However, the human cost of Kobane's local conflict—characterised by siege, artillery barrages, and massacres—was tremendous.

Kobane before the conflict

Located on the border with Turkey in Syria's agricultural heartland, the city of Kobane—officially, but less commonly, known by its Arabic name, Ain al-Arab—lies on the Suruç (Suruch) Plain approximately 30 kilometres to the east of the Euphrates River and about 150 kilometres northeast of Aleppo city. The district's total population stood at approximately 450,000, 95% of whom were Kurds living alongside Arab, Armenian and Turkmen minorities. Syria's 2004 census counted some 192,500 people living in the Kobane central, al-Shuyoukh and Sarrin sub-districts.[124]

Kobane's name is derived from the word "company," a reference to the German Railway Company that built part of the Konya-Baghdad Railway in 1911.[125] Although the city was first founded and built in 1892, it was through the construction of the Baghdad Railway Project between 1911 and 1912 that it became an important settlement. The German company extracted black stones from the nearby Mashta al-Nour hill and used them to extend the railway between Berlin and Basra in Iraq. This railway line was later transformed into the border between Syria and Turkey. After the formation of the modern Syrian state, Kobane was considered part of Aleppo province.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians fleeing massacres (recognised by many states as the Armenian Genocide) sheltered near Kobane's railway station, and this community would go on to coalesce into a village after 1915. The demarcation of the border with Turkey along the railway line, a product of the modern colonial borders drawn up through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, left part of the city on the Turkish side. Nowadays, this is called Mürşitpınar (Murshid Pinar) village, which is home to a border crossing between the two countries.

Much of the city planning of Kobane was carried out by French Mandate authorities during France's occupation of Syria; some of the French-style buildings still exist, and the city has wide and straight streets constructed in grid-plan style like a chessboard. The Big Mosque, built in 1957, was one of the city's most important monuments, although there are also Catholic, Orthodox, and Armenian churches in Kobane, despite the fact that most Armenians re-emigrated to the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Kobane was previously divided into five large neighbourhoods including Kaneh Murshid in the northwest, Kaneh Arban in the northeast, as well as Big Bhutan, Maktaleh, and the Old Canal.

[124] Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 'Syria Population Census, 2004' (Ar.) (n.d.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20151208115353/http://www.cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf> accessed 17 August 2023.
[125] *Hurriyet Daily News*, 'Explained: Kobane or Ayn al-Arab?' (Istanbul, 28 October 2014) <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/explained-kobane-or-ayn-al-arab-73591> accessed 15 August 2023.

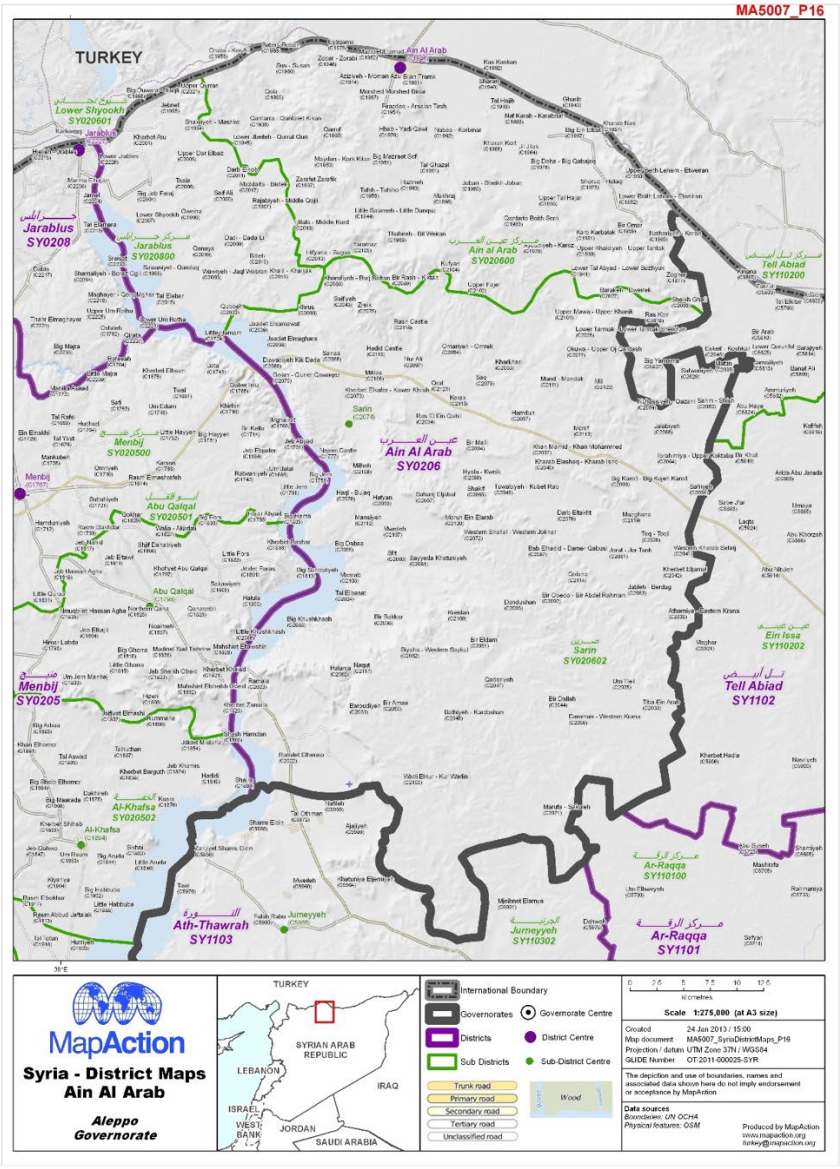


FIGURE 1: KOBANE (AIN AL-ARAB) DISTRICT IN ALEPPO GOVERNORATE.[126]

The Kurdish community in Kobane is tribal, with strong customs and traditions. There are several Kurdish tribes in Kobane that are strongly associated with Kurdish tribes on the Turkish side of the border. Many families are big, consisting of, on average, seven people, something attributable to tribal customs but also agriculture being the predominant mode of production in Kobane and the surrounding area. Youth make up the majority of Kobane's inhabitants.

Historically, Kobane was primarily an agricultural society. Its arable soil, water abundance and moderate climate—characterised by a combination of heat, rain, and humidity—supported agriculture well. Initially, the region was particularly known for cereals such as wheat and barley; later, people started cultivating industrial crops such as cotton in addition to legumes and vegetables. Kobane has high-quality natural trees as well as fruit trees. The population also has a culture of animal domestication that dates back hundreds of years. Traditionally,

[126] Map Action, 'Syria District Maps: Ain al-Arab' (4 July 2016) <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/217-2791/resource/445fbacd-87c3-4ce8-9a99-98531eb22dfe> accessed 15 August 2023.

there was little interest in professional jobs and crafts. The Armenians who came to Kobane were professionals famous for their work in industry, most notably digging artesian wells and other tradecrafts. When many Armenians left the city in the 1960s—migrating to the Soviet Union instead—it became readily apparent that Kobane lacked skilled workers in the industries that the Armenians left behind. Over time, Kobani residents gradually assumed these professions, eventually becoming key contributors to production and expertise.

The eastern regions of Syria—the areas located east of the Euphrates, including Kobane—were long looked down upon by Syria's urban elite as "developing areas" that primarily provided essential materials such as agricultural goods, vegetables, oil derivatives, gas and electricity to "developed" coastal and inland areas around the capital, Damascus. Northeast Syria ranked among the most deprived areas of the country in terms of access to basic services, including healthcare and education.

There were also severe political and security constraints meted out by central authorities: like many regions of Syria, Kobane suffered from pervasive surveillance following the various *coup d'états* that rocked Syria in the mid-20th century and culminated in Hafez al-Assad's military takeover in 1970. At the same time, Kobane, like other Kurdish-majority areas, experienced an additional dimension of systemic marginalisation in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising and ensuing conflict.

'Policy of exclusion': Anti-Kurdish repression in Kobane

After Syria's independence from French occupation in 1946, Kurdish areas of the country were systematically marginalised by authorities in Damascus.

The so-called "Hasakeh census," carried out in October 1962 by Syria's "separatist" government in Kobane and Hasakeh,[127] required Kurds to prove that they had lived in Syria since at least 1945, in addition to their ancient historical presence in the region; otherwise, they would lose their Syrian citizenship. Many complained that authorities did not give sufficient information about the process or time to prepare documents. Effectively, the census divided Kurds into three categories: those able to prove Syrian nationality; those without nationality but who were registered in the official civil registry as *ajanib* (foreigners); and those in an even more precarious situation, without nationality or registration, who became known as *maktoumeen al-kayd* (unregistered). As a result, 120,000 Syrian Kurds—20% of the total Kurdish population in Syria—were deprived of Syrian nationality as well as civil and political rights,[128] an issue that impacted future generations for decades and that successive Syrian governments failed to resolve.[129] International human rights groups as well as Kurds themselves, many of whom were left stateless because of the census, saw it as a discriminatory measure meant to deliberately target Kurds in Kobane and Hasakeh.

Statelessness became hereditary. By 2011, the number of *ajanib* registered with the Civil Registry Directorate had reached 346,242 people.[130] Whereas the *ajanib* were at least registered and issued with a "red card," a semblance of civil status, the *maktoumeen* were worse off, possessing neither nationality nor registration. As children *of maktoumeen* themselves became *maktoum*, the number of people affected only increased over time. Relying on the records of local *mukhtars* (community leaders), officials estimated that there were more than

[127] The "Separatist Movement" (which called itself the "Supreme Arab Revolutionary Command of the Armed Forces") was formed immediately after the collapse of the Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic. The census therefore took place during a period of successive coups and counter-coups that centred on issues related to the United Arab Republic and pan-Arabism. The Ba'ath Party seized power the following year.

[128] For example, the census and its resulting impacts also limited Kurds' access to health, education, employment and property or land ownership.
Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Syria: The Silenced Kurds' (October 1996) <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm> accessed 31 July 2023.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Interviews with Hasakeh Directorate of Civil Registry officials, April and May 2023.

171,300 *maktoumeen* before the 2011 uprising and conflict.[131] By the time protests started spreading across the country after March 2011, President Bashar al-Assad sought to appease Syria's Kurdish communities by granting citizenship to those registered as *ajanib* through Decree 49/2011.[132] Officials estimated that, by May 2018, the number of *ajanib* who obtained citizenship had reached 326,489, while 19,753 had not. Some *maktoumeen* were also able to obtain citizenship after rectifying their legal status, but many—presumed to be well over 100,000 people—remained without registration.[133] Assad's proposal was a plaster on deep wounds that proved too little, too late for a Kurdish population that had suffered five decades of political, economic, and social discrimination and exclusion.

In general terms, the Syrian government ruled Kurdish-majority Kobane with an iron fist, conducting arrests and restricting any space for Kurdish political activism as well as expressions of Kurdish identity, property ownership and educational rights. Authorities often refused to officially register people with their Kurdish names, although this did not stop families from using these names in everyday life. One interviewee, who lived in rural Kobane, recalled how:

> It was even forbidden to name our children when they were born with a Kurdish name. Our village was [administratively] part of Sarrin [a town south of Kobane]. At the time, the employees in the civil registry were Arabs; they mocked us and our names and refused to register us. We were forced to give our children Arabic names instead.[134]

The authorities also changed the historic Kurdish names of hundreds of villages, towns, hills and other sites across Kobane and the rest of northeast Syria, replacing them with Arabic names. Kurdish music and songs were prohibited, and authorities prosecuted those who commemorated Nowrouz, the Kurdish New Year celebration, and other Kurdish holidays.

The issue of property and land ownership was especially sensitive. Decree 1360/1964 designated a 25-kilometre strip of land along the Syrian-Turkish border as a "border area," within which Kurdish ownership was restricted. The interviewee from rural Kobane considered this part of the regime's broader discrimination against Kurdish communities:

> The regime did not allow landlords and Kurds to register their property under their names. They used their political logic to justify this. Unfortunately, many Kurdish families in Kobane have no civil record and are treated as *ajanib*. However, we have called for our human and intellectual rights and suffered from a lack of support and assistance that we needed. No one has spoken about why we were deprived of our liberties or our mother tongue.[135]

Later, in 2008, President Bashar al-Assad built on this by passing another decree that subjected all properties in the border areas to security permissions.[136] This prevented the sale and purchase of land within the border area until a security approval had been obtained, in practice significantly limiting the possibilities for Kurdish ownership as permits were more easily granted to Arabs than Kurds. The law also prohibited the registration of properties for Kurds in both Raqqa and Tal Abyad.

---

[131] Ibid.
[132] *France24*, 'Assad seeks to appease Kurds by granting citizenship' (Paris, 7 April 2011) <https://www.france24.com/en/20110407-syria-granted-citizenship-kurds-assad-protests-unrest-emergency-rule> accessed 16 August 2023.
[133] Interviews with Hasakeh Directorate of Civil Registry officials, April and May 2023.
[134] Individual testimony #64, focus group session 3.
[135] Ibid.
[136] *The Syria Report*, 'Explained: Laws Regulating Real Estate Ownership in Syria's Border Areas' (4 October 2022) <https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/explained-laws-regulating-real-estate-ownership-in-syrias-border-areas/> accessed 15 August 2023.

Kobane faced economic marginalisation, as well. Many suffered from poverty, with little to no development projects undertaken in the region and no support given for farmers or youth groups in Kobane. There were few factories or agricultural development projects undertaken in the area by the central authorities. Despite the proximity of the Euphrates River to the city, Kobane district lacked drinking water at the same time that the Syrian government established extensive irrigation channels to Arab towns and villages hundreds of kilometres from the Euphrates. Kobane would have electricity for just a few hours per day. People resented being forced to pay taxes to the government despite poor services.

As a result, many young people, and especially those with high qualifications, migrated due to the lack of employment opportunities. This caused a brain drain. One inhabitant of Kobane detailed the difficulties:

> There were no jobs and no economic projects. When we were trying to launch a project, they presented obstacles and gave us excuses. You couldn't build a factory or launch a project if you weren't able to dig a water well on your land. All these pressures on the area were designed to displace its people and residents. There was internal and external migration of the region's population to the Arab Gulf, North African countries, and other countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. In each household, there was one or more person who had gone abroad.[137]

Education in Kobane followed the Syrian government's curriculum, under which the teaching or even speaking of the Kurdish language in classrooms was forbidden.[138] In fact, instruction in the Kurdish language was considered a punishable offence, and teachers and staff from other areas of the country were brought to teach in the district—except for a small proportion of Kurdish teachers who were required to join the Ba'ath Party before being allowed into classrooms.

Many Kurdish children encountered difficulties at school because of the language barrier: learning Arabic was difficult because many parents often spoke the language poorly. Authorities' neglect or politicisation of the education system made matters worse: classes were overcrowded, sometimes with as many as 40 students per classroom, while the state curriculum was developed in line with the Ba'ath Party's heavily militaristic ideology. This trend was more pronounced in Kobane's villages; not every village had a school building, meaning pupils were forced to travel to villages with schools. These factors all resulted in higher dropout rates among children who instead went to work in industrial or manual jobs.

Kobane's health sector also suffered from neglect. There was no public hospital in the city and only one vaccination clinic. Shortages of medical staff meant there was just one general practitioner and one nurse, in addition to a private hospital called the Alloush Hospital, serving more than 450,000 people. Otherwise, patients with difficult conditions in need of specialised care were required to travel long distances to Aleppo or Damascus for treatment.

"The Syrian government imposed a policy of exclusion on our areas for decades," a villager from the Kobane countryside said, adding that:

> There were no services in Kurdish areas, with no exceptions. Even at the level of healthcare, there were no services in Kobane at that time. There was no education in the Kurdish language. The roads leading to the villages were not paved; they were just dirt roads. We [lacked] elementary, primary, or secondary schools. Even drinking water wasn't provided by the government.

[137] Individual testimony #75, focus group session 4.
[138] HRW, 'The Silenced Kurds'.

> I am not only talking about my village, Barkh Botan, but also about Kobane and its villages. They treated us as a colony, as prisoners with no value. Even the *mukhtar* used to […] rule over us. He was the authority. We were not able to discuss things with him or ask for our rights.[139]

As is often the case, the effects of this system were not equally felt across the population; women often had a more challenging time than men. One woman interviewed said:

> In the past, women suffered and had no rights. In terms of education, for example, women could not study because of tribal constraints. Under the Ba'ath regime, it was difficult to send our daughters to cities such as Aleppo, Manbij and Damascus for university because of the lack of security. Few girls from the city would study at the university. In villages, it was considered shameful for a girl to go out. When Kurdish women went to Aleppo in their traditional Kurdish dress, they were mocked.[140]

Since the early days of the regime, the relationship between the central government in Damascus and the Kurds has been tense, leading to recurrent protests and unrest in Kobane and other Kurdish-majority areas, as well as arrests and assassinations targeting Kurdish leaders and activists.[141] Tensions increased over time, however. In 2004, tens of thousands of Kurds took to the streets in Kurdish cities as well as Aleppo and Damascus following a flare-up that started at a football match in Qamishli. During the so-called "Qamishli Uprising" that followed, Kobane, like other Kurdish-majority cities, revolted against the Syrian government and drove security forces out of the city.[142] In response, the Syrian government sent in military reinforcements, arresting and imprisoning hundreds of mostly young men for years at a time—some of them are still missing to this day. Hundreds of Kurdish students were arrested at campuses around the country, while others were dismissed and expelled from universities altogether.

The conflict in Kobane

The situation in Kobane was already tense before the Syrian uprising broke out in March 2011, but quickly escalated as the uprising turned into an armed conflict and dozens of armed groups emerged across the country.

Kurdish-majority areas of northeast Syria were no different, although the pace of militarisation was slower. People were initially unwilling to take up arms. In late 2011, the Supreme Kurdish Committee, comprising the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the PYD, was formed.[143] Joint military checkpoints were set up by Kurdish parties to protect Kurdish areas, and the PYD soon after announced the formation of a military wing under the name of the People's Protection Units, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (or YPG).[144]

On 19 July 2012, the YPG took control of security buildings and government institutions; Kobane was declared "liberated" and renamed the "Canton of Kobane."[145] Many in Kobane saw this as a success for the Kurdish

[139] Individual testimony #64, focus group session 3.
[140] Individual testimony #55, focus group session 3.
[141] Robert Lowe, 'The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered' (Chatham House, January 2006) <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/bpsyriankurds.pdf> accessed 15 August 2023.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Carnegie Middle East Center, 'The Kurdish National Council in Syria' (*Diwan*, 15 February 2012) <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48502> accessed 15 August 2023.
[144] YPG members later stated that the YPG was actually formed in the midst of the Qamishli Uprising in 2004, although it emerged out of the Kurdish political underground after the outbreak of the post-2011 uprising.
See: Danny Gold, 'Meet the YPG, the Kurdish Militia That Doesn't Want Help from Anyone' Vice News (31 October 2012) <https://www.vice.com/en/article/yv5e75/meet-the-ypg> accessed 16 August 2023; Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), 'Syria: Rojava Kurdistan' (n.d.) <https://ucdp.uu.se/additionalinfo/13042/1> accessed 15 August 2023.
[145] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p.154.

popular movement that, for years, had demanded changes to the political and living conditions in the district and reiterated the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Kurds. Shortly afterwards, the PYD formed service structures in the area—structures that would form the backbone of the Autonomous Administration, or AANES, later in the conflict.

Several armed opposition factions fighting regime forces—ranging from the FSA to more Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa' al-Tawheed—challenged the YPG's control over the area under its control. In Kobane, there were sporadic but recurrent clashes between the YPG and Islamist groups including Nusra.[146] Armed opposition factions sought to seize Kobane and imposed a siege on the city from the east, west and south, with the Syrian-Turkish border acting as another boundary to the north. As part of the siege, opposition factions completely blockaded roads leading into and out of the city, besieging more than half a million Kobane residents and IDPs who fled ongoing military conflicts in Damascus, Dera'a and Homs. Water, electricity and food supplies to the city were cut off. Civilians bore the brunt of the violence: armed groups targeted civilians with kidnappings for ransom, while armed groups repeatedly sent car bombs into the city.

The arrival of ISIS

In late 2013 and early 2014, ISIS emerged as a major player in the Syrian civil war. Soon after splitting from Nusra and declaring its self-proclaimed "caliphate" covering areas of Iraq and northeast Syria, ISIS began preparing to attack Kurdish areas—including the countryside of Hasakeh and Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain, where it faced opposition from the YPG and its female counterpart, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (Women's Protection Units, or YPJ). The city had long been in ISIS' crosshairs, in part because the YPG's headquarters were in Kobane. A victory in Kobane would allow ISIS to cleanse the Kurdish population, spread into other Kurdish areas and assert control over the Syrian-Turkish border to secure the group's western flank as well as the passage of foreign fighters and logistical supplies.

ISIS' advance came from the south-west. On 13 March 2014, ISIS took control of the Qere Quzak bridge connecting areas east and west of the Euphrates between Kobane and Aleppo. Making use of heavy weaponry seized from Mosul in the summer of 2014, on 2 July 2014 ISIS seized the village of Zour Maghar, located west of Kobane, overlooking Jarablus.[147] Following partial defeats in Hasakeh around Jaza (Ceza) and Rabia and having been pushed back from the Sinjar mountains in Iraq, ISIS then regained its strength and headed to Kobane.

The full-scale assault on Kobane started on 15 September 2014, when ISIS launched a three-pronged attack on the city. Repeating the pattern of the earlier siege, it attacked the city from the east, west and south,[148] while ISIS fighters deliberately cut off water and electricity prior to their attack.[149] YPG fighters evacuated residents from front-line neighbourhoods as well as 400 villages in the Kobane countryside.[150] Many of those who were too old, sick or disabled to flee, or those who chose to remain, were executed by ISIS in villages such as Pinard, Tal Shaer, Kortek, Qaramou, Tal Haidar, Dongez and Biliq.[151] Mass casualty incidents became a mainstay of ISIS' offensive on the city.

[146] Harald Doornbos & Jenan Moussa, 'The Civil War Within Syria's Civil War' (*Foreign Policy*, 28 August 2013) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/28/the-civil-war-within-syrias-civil-war/> accessed 15 August 2023.
[147] Ahmed Ali and others, 'Iraq Situation Report: September 29, 2014' (Institute for the Study of War, 29 September 2014) <> accessed 15 August 2023. https://www.iswresearch.org/2014/09/> accessed 15 August 2023.
[148] Ayla Albayrak and others, 'Thousands of Syrian Kurds Flee Islamic State Fighters Into Turkey' *The Wall Street Journal* (New York City, 9 September 2014) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/thousands-of-syrian-kurds-flee-islamic-state-fighters-into-turkey-1411151657> accessed 15 August 2023.
[149] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), '9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/28/69 (5 February 2015), Annex II, para.270.
[150] Ibid., para.279.
[151] Ibid., para.84.

When ISIS fighters arrived at the outskirts of the city, residents fled north and entered Turkish territory near the border crossing with Suruç. Civilians and fighters who stayed behind faced unimaginable levels of violence. Indiscriminate shelling by ISIS caused huge civilian casualties.[152] Between 15 September and early November 2014, large numbers of ISIS fighters were killed, but hundreds of YPG and YPJ fighters also lost their lives in defence of the city. On 13 October 2014, ISIS conducted a triple suicide bombing, including one explosive at the border crossing at 2.00 am. Although the YPG repelled some of the attacks, ISIS by now controlled around half the city.[153]

In the following weeks, however, the tide seemed to turn. While various car bombs continued, the US-led Global Coalition against Da'esh commenced airstrikes in early October and with increased air support, Kurdish fighters pushed back ISIS. ISIS was deemed to be "retreating" from parts of Kobane.[154] Then, in late October 2014, with ISIS threatening its immediate border, Turkey permitted a convoy of Peshmerga forces from the KRI to cross Turkish territory to arrive in Kobane with heavy weaponry in tow.[155] ISIS continued its high-intensity attacks, including the detonation of more than 63 car bombs in Kobane, as the group sought, unsuccessfully, to break the Kurdish resistance.

'Everyone suffered': Forced displacement & arbitrary arrests

During ISIS' assault on Kobane, Kurdish forces hastily evacuated most of Kobane's outlying villages. More than 200,000 civilians poured across the Turkish border to Suruç.[156] Those who fled left behind all their possessions and were forced to cross minefields planted near the Syrian-Turkish border; dozens of women, children and the elderly lost their lives as a result of landmine explosions, while others lost limbs or suffered other serious injuries.

A refugee who took this treacherous route into Turkey remembered the ordeal:

> Everyone went to the border area. It was a heavy burden […] especially for those in charge of their families; those who had elderly people, disabled people and children with special needs [with them] also suffered a lot. Some carried their elderly mothers or fathers on their backs and crossed the border. The situation was catastrophic.
>
> Everyone suffered. The mines in the border zone claimed the lives of [many] civilians. Now and then, a mine would explode, [killing] women, children and the elderly. Sometimes mines would explode while cars were trying to cross to the other side.
>
> The border crossings that were open at the time were in the village of Marj Ismail on the eastern side [of Kobane] and Tal Shaer to the west. Everything was in front of us. The Turkish army was blocking the entry of livestock and cars into Turkey. People became confused. Many people stayed at the border strip because of their livestock and cars.
>
> After entering Turkey, families went to various places to work or went to refugee camps. Life for those displaced at the border strip was full of trouble and misery. People stayed outdoors. People went out of their towns and left everything behind.

[152] Ibid., para.67.
[153] *Reuters*, 'Three suicide attacks hit Kurdish town on Syria-Turkey border' (13 October 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-bombing-idUSKCN0I20RI20141013> accessed 15 August 2023.
[154] *BBC*, 'Islamic State "retreating" in key Syria town of Kobane' (London, 16 October 2014) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29629357> accessed 15 August 2023.
[155] Humeyra Pamuk and Raheem Salman, 'Kurdish peshmerga forces enter Syria's Kobani after further air strikes' *Reuters* (1 November 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-idUKKBN0IK15I20141101> accessed 15 August 2023.
[156] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), '9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/28/69 (5 February 2015), Annex II, para.279; Jenna McLaughlin, 'Most US Airstrikes in Syria Target a City That's Not a "Strategic Objective"' *Mother Jones* (23 January 2015) <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/airstrikes-syria-kobani-statistics-operation-inherent-resolve/> accessed 15 August 2023.

> While you were trying to go out, you'd look behind to see thousands of people [behind you]. You'd hope that nothing would happen to your town so that you could go back again. This was what was going on in the minds of every displaced person.[157]

One displaced woman recalled how people decided to escape ISIS to the Turkish border only when conditions became untenable during the ISIS-imposed siege:

> ISIS attacked us with heavy weapons. [We were] forced to seek refuge. Before that, we were under siege. People were preparing food on firewood. We had no gas bottles or electricity. I turned an empty margarine can into a bucket to get water out of the well [because] there were no buckets for sale. We wish we had stayed in those conditions rather than resorting to Turkey.[158]

In the countryside surrounding Kobane, hundreds of residents stayed in their villages and homes. Many of them were elderly residents who could not escape due to the lightning speed of ISIS' advances. ISIS fighters assaulted and killed many of them, while abducting others and taking them to nearby towns and cities such as Raqqa, Tal Abyad and al-Shuyoukh. Many of those taken were later killed in public squares, while the fate of some two hundred other civilians remains unknown, according to testimonies collected for this chapter. Because of Kobane's significance to the Kurdish political movement as well as the anti-ISIS conflict, even being from Kobane was sufficient grounds for persecution at the hands of ISIS fighters.

One victim arbitrarily detained by ISIS remembered their experience:

> When my brother Abdulkarim and I were coming from Cazire [Jazira] in our car, we were stopped by ISIS fighters at around 7 pm. As soon as they knew we were from Kobane, they asked us for our money, but we refused to give it to them. We told them that the money was ours, and that we had earned it through our own hard work.
>
> They took us to their *emir* for him to give his verdict on us. When we arrived at his headquarters, they told us: "We'll release you in an hour." However, an hour or two passed, and they did not release us, and we did not see their *emir*. Then, somebody came to us, tied our hands, and put a piece of cloth over our eyes and then beat us badly.
>
> Afterwards, they took us somewhere, but we didn't know where. It was at night, they put us in a cellar and above us was a petrol station. They came to us every five minutes or so and beat us up. They used various methods of torture. They would put a knife to our necks to scare us and beat us with the butt of their rifles or with cables. They tortured us with electricity.[159]

Eventually, the two men were released. Others simply disappeared without a trace. The relative of one abductee, their father, kept trying to get information about him, but "his phone was off":

> After several attempts and repeated inquiries about him, they told us that the abductees were being held at silos in Tal Tamr [after] ISIS fighters, at one of ISIS' checkpoints, abducted them all. [My father] was with his friends and a minibus driver. There wasn't just one car on the road at the time [there]. [So] ISIS abducted some 80 people and took them all to Tal Abyad. After that, we didn't hear anything about them.[160]

[157] Individual testimony #56.
[158] Individual testimony #55.
[159] Individual testimony #64.
[160] Individual testimony #68.

ISIS advances were accompanied by large-scale theft of civilian property as well as livestock, furniture, agricultural machinery, cars, crops and about anything else that ISIS fighters could lay their hands on. Service facilities and houses were destroyed and stripped down, with ISIS fighters taking anything of worth—power transformers, electrical grids, water diversion pumps from the Euphrates. Schools and other facilities were destroyed.

The ISIS offensive—characterised by use of car bombs, suicide bombings, and heavy shelling— and the fight to halt it, including through US-led Coalition airstrikes, caused major destruction in Kobane. According to the Autonomous Administration, more than 70% of Kobane was destroyed during the siege, including civilian homes and infrastructure,[161] while the remaining areas were also severely damaged.

In the countryside, ISIS converted schools into military centres for its fighters, which created protracted interruptions to local education and deprived thousands of children access to schools during the offensive and long afterwards. For others, the threat of kidnapping by ISIS prevented them from leaving Kobane to go to university. According to one interviewee, for example:

> My daughter was a university student. My son-in-law and my son [stopped] their education because ISIS was kidnapping or killing students. My children were afraid to go to university because ISIS had previously detained 13 cars, and all the passengers were from Kobane.
>
> Even until now, education is almost non-existent. In Kobane, there is a university run by the Autonomous Administration, however, it's not officially recognised.[162]

The threat of kidnapping was very real: on 29 May 2014, ISIS kidnapped 153 Kurdish schoolboys between the ages of 13 and 14 years old in Manbij as they travelled back from Aleppo to Kobane.[163] The boys were beaten with hoses, forbidden from speaking Kurdish, and indoctrinated in ISIS' ideology.[164] The boys were kept as ISIS hostages until September 2014, months after their kidnapping. During the subsequent ISIS offensive on Kobane, conflict monitors documented ISIS' use of child soldiers to attack Kobane (although it was not immediately clear when those children had been forcibly recruited into ISIS' ranks).[165]

Ideologically, ISIS' attacks on Kurds were underpinned by *fatwas*, or religious edicts, issued by ISIS' religious authorities. These justified targeting Kurds, who were said to be "atheists," "disbelievers" or even "pigs," with this messaging also distributed through audio and video transmissions. ISIS' tactics of oppression, intimidation and murder were also intended to spread terror and subjugate populations; the group also considered its brutal application of violence a way of enticing new fighters, especially foreign fighters, to join ISIS on the promise of loot, plunder, and sexual conquest. Kurdish property, and at times Kurdish women, were considered "spoils of war" and thus could legitimately be captured. Kurdish "repentance" was considered unacceptable, in stark contrast to other areas such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, where ISIS considered their inhabitants to be Muslim, even if their religious interpretation had to be corrected through the application of Islamic *Shari'a* as interpreted by ISIS.

---

[161] Olivier Laurent, ' Inside Kobani and the Kurdish War Against ISIS' (*TIME*, 27 August 2015), https://time.com/4003737/kobani-isis-photos/ accessed 15 August 2023.
France24, 'Years after IS, Syrian Kurds rebuild Kobane alone' (Paris, 9 June 2018) <> accessed 15 August 2023.https://www.france24.com/en/20180609-years-after-syrian-kurds-rebuild-kobane-alone> accessed 15 August 2023.
[162] Individual testimony #63, focus group session 3.
[163] UNHRC, 9th report, Annex II para.102.
[164] Ibid., para.167.
[165] Ibid., para.70.

‘A return to a primitive kind of life’: Destruction in post-siege Kobane

Violent clashes continued between the YPG, YPJ, Peshmerga and FSA on the one hand and ISIS fighters on the other. By mid-November 2014, the YPG and YPJ controlled the eastern and southern fronts inside Kobane and carried out operations against ISIS outside the city. At this point, the YPG and YPJ announced offensive military operations to liberate Kobane, while ISIS was forced into a defensive position. As a result of this defeat, ISIS resorted to bombing residential neighbourhoods in a last-ditch attempt to regain lost ground, including through the use of suicide bombings and remotely detonated car bombs.

Over the course of November and December that year, the YPG and allied forces retook the city, fighting house by house, street by street, and then neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Finally, on 26 January 2015, Kobane was declared liberated.[166] It is estimated that as many as 3,710 ISIS fighters died, a number that included many ISIS commanders, although the exact number is difficult to ascertain because ISIS reportedly burned the bodies of its dead.[167] The end of the siege on Kobane represented a major turning-point in the anti-ISIS conflict, and Kobane became a key hub in the efforts to eliminate ISIS’ presence in Syria while crucially solidifying cooperation between YPG fighters and the US-led Coalition.

As Kurdish forces declared the city liberated, many of the refugees who had been displaced to Turkey returned.[168] For those who returned, the ordeals of displacement, poverty and hunger accelerated their desire to return home and restore their lives. However, months of fighting had turned homes, buildings, schools and hospitals to rubble and ash. Long after ISIS’ removal, Kobane still faced the threat of mines, booby traps and unexploded munitions, which were still killing civilians after the war had ended. In outlying rural areas, dozens of villages were partially destroyed, along with hospitals, irrigation networks, sanitation infrastructure and electricity networks. Several factors meanwhile created obstacles to returns, including the scarcity of raw materials and food, the lack of manpower and the difficulty of transport within Kobane, as well as the profound psychological impacts of war.

Many residents who had fled during the siege returned to find their homes destroyed; instead, they were forced to live in tents pitched among the rubble. Kobane had turned into a dystopian landscape. One woman described what she saw after the end of the fighting:

> After ISIS’ attack, our suffering increased, and Kobane returned to a primitive kind of life. There was no electricity. Women washed clothes with their hands [and] cooked food on firewood. Water was scarce. We would take water out of the well with a bucket to get our drinking water.[169]

The lack of safety, the spread of decomposed bodies under rubble and the extinction of livestock caused by the war had turned Kobane into a ghost city. Because people who relied on agriculture and livestock had lost their primary sources of income, there was widespread unemployment. Infrastructure was destroyed, and most rural residents’ properties had been looted and robbed of crops and agricultural machinery.

One testimony described the economic destitution that Kobane residents faced:

---

[166] *BBC*, ‘Syrian Kurds 'drive Islamic State out of Kobane’ (London, 26 January 2015) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30991612> accessed 15 August 2023.
[167] Jawad al-Hattab, ‘Kurds: 3,710 from ISIS killed in Kobane’ (Ar.) *Al-Arabiya* (30 January 2015) <https://www.alarabiya.net/amp/arab-and-world/iraq/2015/01/30/-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-3710-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-> accessed 15 August 2023.
[168] *Reuters*, ‘Syrians slowly return to Kobani after Kurds win back border town’ (23 February 2015) <https://ip.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-kobani-idINKBN0LR1DI20150223> accessed 15 August 2023.
[169] Individual testimony #55, focus group session 3.

> One of my relatives lost approximately 130 sheep, which ISIS took as spoils. They took all the machinery, cars, and tractors. We lost all of it.
>
> During [ISIS'] brutal attack, people could only save themselves and their children and run away. They left heavy machinery behind and just took their cars and fled. Until today, we still see some stolen machinery in Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Manbij [after] ISIS sold its spoils [from Kobane] there. They took everything.
>
> When we returned to Kobane, the only thing we found were the walls of the house still standing. It was not easy.[170]

Those economic impacts are still reverberating throughout the area until today. According to one resident of a village near Kobane:

> Fear and anxiety continue to overwhelm us. Economically, there was a significant impact on us because […] we primarily depended on agriculture in the region. [But] for several years now, agricultural seasons have seen poor yields.
>
> During the ISIS attack on Kobane, they seized our agricultural land, plundered and stole everything, including crops, harvesters and tractors, taking everything in the village. They took control of the lands on the basis that they belonged to them. They took everything.[171]

ISIS returns

With the return of residents to the city, clean-up efforts began with rubble clearance and temporary housing and tents provided to returnees. It was amid these efforts, in a supposedly post-conflict Kobane, that ISIS launched another attack on the city. In the early hours of the morning of 25 June 2015, ISIS fighters once again attacked in what would later be described as a 24-hour 'killing rampage.'[172] A young woman, just 11 years' old when the attack occurred, remembered that morning:

> My father and uncle, who would later also be killed, went to the border gate to find out what was happening. My father came running towards us to tell us to hide inside the house. He was unarmed, and ISIS members were standing far away and shooting him.
>
> After we entered the house, we heard the sound of shooting. My uncle told us the news that my father had been killed at the hands of [ISIS]. At that moment, my mother had just prepared milk for my nine-month-old brother. She left him in my arms and ran to my father. I stood at the door of the house and saw my mother trying to pull my father, but she couldn't. She left him to come back later, but ISIS shot her [as well]. My uncle took me into the house, and I took my siblings into the room and locked the door on them. I went to my father and mother, who were still alive [lying] two meters apart. My mother held my hand, but she told me to go back to my siblings.[173]

It soon became apparent that ISIS fighters had managed to evade YPG forces (then busy on frontlines in Sarrin and Tal Abyad) through the village of Barkh Botan, where they killed 23 civilians, including women, children and the elderly.[174] The YPG later said that 'a group of mercenaries consisting of 80 to 100 [fighters]' entered Kobane 'with the aim of committing a massacre of civilians' after reaching the city in small groups reportedly disguised

[170] Individual testimony #36.
[171] Individual testimony #49.
[172] *Al Jazeera English*, 'ISIL on 24-hour "killing rampage" in Syria's Kobane' (Qatar, 27 June 2015) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/6/27/isil-on-24-hour-killing-rampage-in-syrias-kobane> accessed 17 August 2023.
[173] Individual testimony #5.
[174] HRW, 'Syria: Deliberate Killing of Civilians by ISIS' (3 July 2015) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/03/syria-deliberate-killing-civilians-isis> accessed 15 August 2023.

as FSA fighters.[175] The statement also alleged, citing anonymous local sources, that some ISIS fighters had also entered Kobane via Turkey.[176]

Once inside Kobane, ISIS fighters spread throughout the city's neighbourhoods and positioned themselves on the rooves of tall buildings. One survivor recalled the havoc that ISIS snipers wreaked through the city:

> I went downstairs to go to the bakery […] and after 50 metres, a bullet came from the direction I was walking toward. We realised that snipers were shooting at whoever they saw.
>
> The second shot came immediately afterwards and hit my hand. I saw blood coming out [of my hand]. I was trying hard to reach one of the parked cars in front of the bakery [when] I realised that the shots were coming from the Boys Secondary School that sits on a hill higher-up […] about 150 metres from my house. It didn't hit me directly because I was moving so quickly.[177]

Interviewees saw the killings as deliberate retaliation against Kurds for having broken the siege of Kobane a year earlier. Victims recalled how ISIS fighters killed anyone they encountered:

> [They] set up a checkpoint, targeting anyone who passed them by firing shots at them. No one was spared from their evil. It was as if they were hunting birds, just enjoying the deaths of innocent civilians.
>
> They left no one alive. They killed men, women, children and the elderly. They killed everyone without exception.
>
> At first, we didn't know they were ISIS fighters because they were wearing Kurdish forces' clothes. They even knocked on people's doors and immediately killed anyone who opened up. Some of them had good Kurdish and they spoke in Kurdish while knocking on the doors so that people would open the door for them. Some ISIS fighters were using guns with silencer.[178]

ISIS occupied buildings and committed massacres at several sites throughout the city, targeting the Autonomous Administration building, roadways to Aleppo and Şêranê (Shiran), the Jumarek neighbourhood in northern Kobane, the city centre, and the nearby villages of Tarmīk Bījān and Barkh Botan.[179]

But ISIS fighters also infiltrated people's homes. One man, who watched his wife tragically killed in front of him and their young children, described how ISIS fighters entered:

> When I tried to get out of bed, they shot me from behind. There were two ISIS militants standing next to us. As I remember, I was trying to get to the door to get to the gun, even though they shot me. I didn't lose consciousness.
>
> I did later, though. They killed my wife and threw my children inside the house. My children were seven and four, and our youngest was just five or six months' old. He was crawling to his mother' s body to breastfeed from her chest. He thought she was asleep. It was

[175] AANES Canton of Kobane, 'Executive council issues statement revealing circumstances of the Kobane massacre' (Ar.) (13 December 2015) <https://cantonakobane.wordpress.com/2015/12/13/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ac%d9%84%d8%b3-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d9%86%d9%81%d9%8a%d8%b0%d9%8a-%d9%8a%d8%b5%d8%af%d8%b1-%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%a7%d9%86-%d9%8a%d9%83%d8%b4%d9%81-%d9%81%d9%8a%d9%87-%d9%85%d9%84%d8%a7/> accessed 15 August 2023.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Individual testimony #1.

[178] Individual testimony #2.

[179] AANES Canton of Kobane.

> 11 in the morning. He was in his mother's lap and breastfeeding from her chest, but she was already dead.[180]

In its massacre in Kobane, ISIS deliberately targeted and executed civilians,[181] a form of revenge aimed at killing the largest possible number of civilians to avenge the group's defeat during its earlier siege of Kobane. According to statements from the YPG and the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration's Kobane Canton, 233 civilians were killed in the massacre (including 210 in Kobane itself and another 23 in Barkh Botan village, in addition to 273 people who were injured).[182]

The aftermath

As the fighting ended in Kobane and surrounding areas, life gradually returned to the city. However, the humanitarian and psychological impacts of ISIS' violence have been profound. In post-ISIS Kobane, victims, survivors and the families of those killed live with sadness and despair. One interviewee vividly described this feeling:

> When we go to the cemetery on the night of Eid and light candles, we remember and feel pain as if it were the day of the massacre. We relive the horrific scenes that we cannot forget. As we grow, our painful memories grow with us. We can't forget.
>
> I can tell *you* my story. But I can't tell it to a member of my family. My brother was a good friend of mine and I wish I'd died instead of him. He was two years older than me, but that was his fate.[183]

Another family's life was completely upended by the conflict. Their home was destroyed, the store they owned was looted and partly demolished. A family member described feeling "broken":

> Nothing was left for us. Our crops and trees were burned during the battle for Kobane. My mother had a neurological disease. We all became mentally ill. My little sister fainted.
>
> My mother doesn't remember anything anymore. She always just repeats: "It's gone, it's gone…" She does not recognise any of her children. All her nerves were damaged, until she ended up just lying on her deathbed. She was in pain and did not tell the doctors. She passed away after three years of suffering. We cannot forget this trauma.
>
> My family was in Turkey, then they left for Germany. Only me and my brother are still in Kobane. We managed to open our father's shop again. I now have a disability in my hands and legs. Despite that, I have to work as a meter reader and bill collector for the electric company so that I can afford to support my children. Living conditions are very difficult nowadays.
>
> From time to time, I see a doctor because of my injury. The medical costs make my life difficult. I always take medication because I have limited mobility in my hands and leg. My wife also receives constant treatment. I need to have an operation to remove a platinum plate, and after I contacted doctors in Damascus, they told me that would be an extremely expensive operation that could cost 10 million Syrian pounds [around €700].[184]

[180] Individual testimony #62.
[181] HRW, 'Deliberate Killing of Civilians by ISIS'.
[182] AANES Canton of Kobane.
[183] Individual testimony #47.
[184] Individual testimony #41.

Much of people's trauma—and especially their psychological symptoms—remains untreated to this day. A mother described how ISIS' attack on their family home impacted the family and caused one of her sons to develop epilepsy:

> My children were so afraid. Some of them peed themselves. My daughter looked out of the [spyhole in the door] and told me they killed my father. They killed my husband and cousin in front of me. My children were terrified, and then my son suddenly fainted.
>
> Since then, he has developed epilepsy. This [disease] has stayed with him until now. He occasionally becomes completely unconscious. After [his epilepsy developed], I took him to see several neurologists and psychologists, but [they haven't been able to help].[185]

These traumas live on in children who witnessed ISIS atrocities, impacting another generation of life in the city. Another Kobane resident described how their seven-year-old nephew developed a severe psychological condition "because he watched ISIS kill his father."[186]

Battles continued after the liberation of Kobane city, and it would take months before ISIS was pushed out of the entire district. The group's defeat at Kobane was a crucial step in the final defeat of ISIS some four years later, a major turning-point that would shape the contours of the anti-ISIS conflict that followed.

Kobane was a formative test for US (and US-led Coalition) engagements with Kurdish armed groups, many of which would later fall under the umbrella of the US-backed SDF. This Kurdish-led group, formed in late 2015, would go on to seize Manbij in mid-2016 and later advance on ISIS' heartlands in Tabqa and Raqqa in 2017.

[185] Individual testimony #57.
[186] Individual testimony #47.

2. HASAKEH

Located in the highly strategic triangle between the Syrian, Iraqi and Turkish borders and trisected by two rivers, the Khabour and Jaghjagh, Hasakeh would take on vital importance for the Syrian government, SDF and regional players during the anti-ISIS conflict.

Due to its natural resources, ISIS expended considerable effort to take control of Hasakeh. Home to the base of operations of the Kurdish-led resistance to ISIS in northeast Syria, Hasakeh was also an important military target for the group. This led to intense fighting between ISIS and Kurdish-led groups such as the YPG from 2014 onwards. Although ISIS was never able to obtain full control over the area, it still inflicted severe damage there.

Hasakeh before the conflict

Hasakeh province is located 600 kilometres east of Damascus and nearly 200 kilometres north of Deir Ezzor. It also borders Turkey and Iraq, which lie to its north and east, respectively.

At 23,334 square kilometres, the province's territory is twice the size of Lebanon, and contains 1,717 villages. Hasakeh is rich in water, containing as much as 52% of Syria's total water resources, and has historically been considered the "breadbasket" of Syria. Due to this abundance of water and agriculture, together with Raqqa and Deir Ezzor the region is also known as *al-Jazeera*, "the island."

Hasakeh province is sub-divided into four districts.[187] Bordering Deir Ezzor, Hasakeh is the southernmost of the province's four districts and contains the provincial capital that gives the district its name. Some attribute its name, which means "the thorn," to the abundance of thorny vegetation in the area. Kurdish historians, however, attribute it to the name of one of the local Yazidi Kurdish clans, the Haskan clan, whose members used to live in the area extending from Iraq's Sinjar to the Abdulaziz mountain range (known in Kurdish as the Kazwan Mountains). Hasakeh city is inhabited by Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians. Important towns in the area include Tal Tamr, al-Hol, al-Shaddadah, al-Arisha, Merkada, Bir al-Helou. In addition, there are 595 villages in the district.

Qamishli, or Qamishlo in Kurdish (and Beit Zalin in Syriac), is considered by Kurds as their capital in Syria. The city is located on the border with Turkey and in the foothills of the Taurus Mountains, close to the Turkish city of Nusaybin. A modern city, established in 1925 by the authorities of the French Mandate, Qamishlo/Qamishli's location was presumably chosen so that a French military base could be positioned at a strategic location straddling the Jaghjagh River and Aleppo-Nusaybin "Taurus" railway. Unlike other cities in the surrounding area, Qamishlo/Qamishli was planned with straight and parallel streets and well-organised city planning. It is locally known as "Little Paris." Kurds and Syriacs were among the first to inhabit the city before the arrival of the Armenians and Arabs; today, these groups live alongside small minority communities such as Assyrians,

[187] These regions were named by the Syrian government in Damascus, but renamed by the Autonomous Administration of northeast Syria (AANES) following its establishment of *de facto* control over the region during the course of the Syrian conflict. The Autonomous Administration renamed Hasakeh "Rojava." Furthermore, the Autonomous Administration divided the region into two main cantons: Qamishlo Canton, which includes the district of Qamishlo/Qamishli and Derik district/Al-Malikiyah; and the Hasakeh Canton, which includes Hasakeh and Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain. Kudish-majority districts and place-names are referred to by their Kurdish and Arabic names throughout the text.

Chaldeans, Mahlamis and Mardaliyya. Although the majority of the population is either Muslim or Christian, Qamishlo/Qamishli also has a small Jewish minority who previously immigrated from the US and Israel.

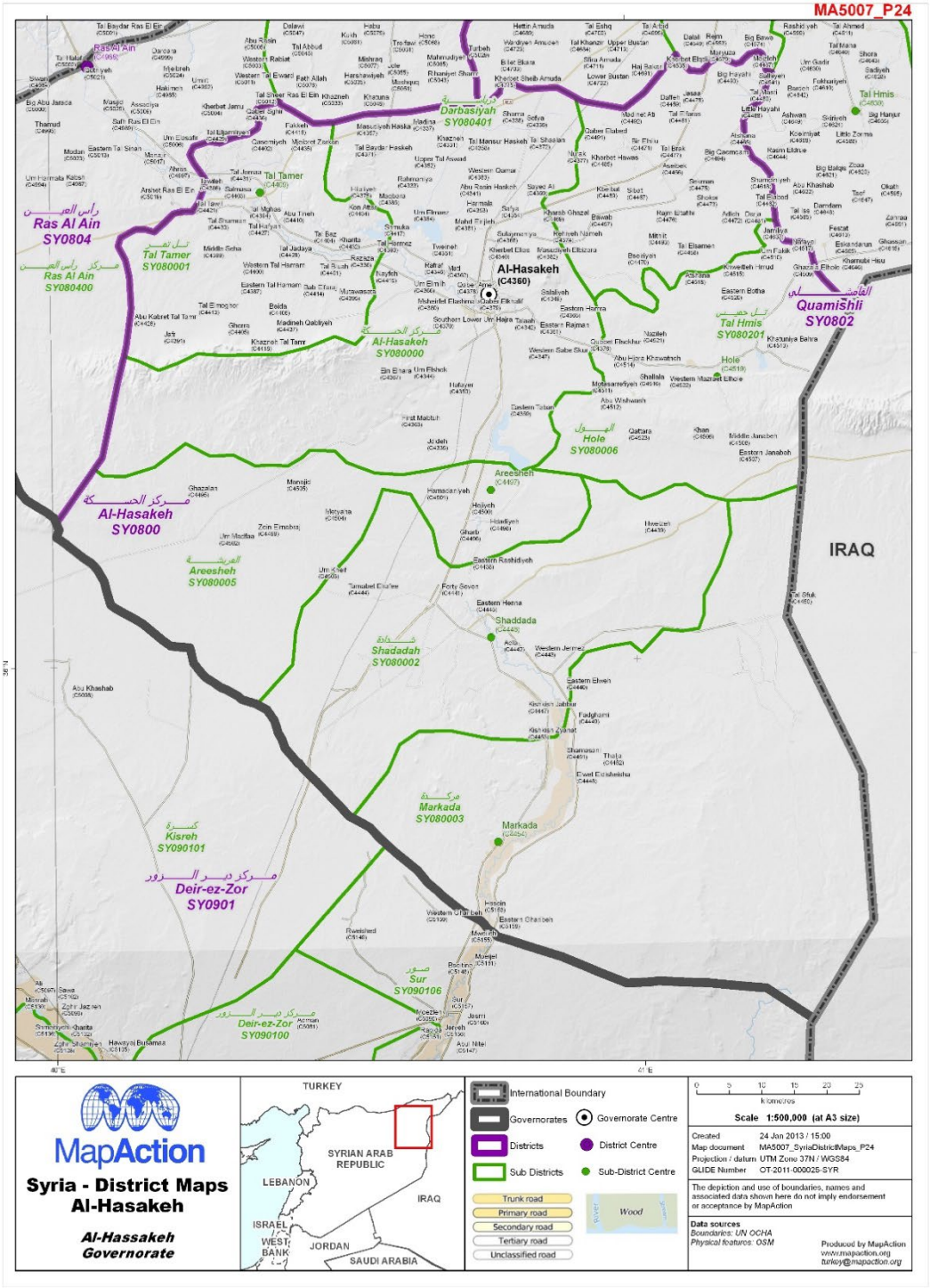


FIGURE 2: A MAP OF HASAKEH DISTRICT WITHIN HASAKEH PROVINCE.[188]

[188] Map Action, 'Syria District Maps: Al-Hasakeh' (4 July 2016) <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/217-2795/resource/398dcb1b-3367-43a9-87f7-5ab51229cc85> accessed 16 August 2023.

Al-Malikiyah's original name is Derek or Derik, derived from the Syriac word *deroni*, which means "small monastery"—a reference to the church previously located in the east of the original village. Derik/al-Malikiyah is located on the flat Hisnan Plain on the northeastern tip of the border triangle between Syria, Iraq and Turkey; the Tigris lies to the north, al-Radd to the south and Mount Judi to the east. It contains several artificial lakes, including the Safan Dam Lake on the Saffin River, a tributary of the Tigris. Predominantly Kurdish (Kurds make up 75% of the population), the area is also inhabited by Syriacs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arabs and Armenians.

The fourth district of Hasakeh governorate, situated in the northwest, is Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê in Kurdish). An ancient city with a history spanning thousands of years, Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain was among the first civilisations in the area and used to be called Washukanni, the capital of the Hurrian Mitanni empire, which rose to prominence in the 14th and 15th centuries BC. The city of Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain is located at the point where the Khabour River crosses into Syria from Turkey, nearly a hundred kilometres west of Qamishlo/Qamishli. Its inhabitants include Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, Assyrians, Syriacs, Armenians, Chechens, Turkmen and Mardaliyya.

Relations between central authorities in Syria and communities in Hasakeh, not least its Kurdish communities, were characterised by strife and conflict for decades. A longstanding policy, later taken up by the Ba'ath Party after 1963, aimed at assimilating Kurds into the crucible of Arab nationalism. Kurdish political movements were suppressed, and activists arrested, while Kurdish place names were replaced with Arabic ones. Authorities forbade use of the Kurdish language in official settings, prevented expressions of Kurdish identity or culture, and suppressed Kurdish civil rights and political parties through its security apparatus and security branches, which looked on the region as a sensitive military zone.

The Ba'athist regime's Kurdish policy was given an earlier expression by Mohammad Talab Hilal, head of Hasakeh province's regional branch of Political Security, in the 1960s. Hilal claimed that there was no such thing as the Kurdish people or a Kurdish nation,[189] describing the Kurdish question as a 'malignant tumour' and suggesting that Hasakeh should be 'purified of foreign elements.'[190] To address the issue, he proposed a range of hardline measures to displace and dispossess Kurds: forcible internal displacements followed by repopulations with Arab loyalist communities, revocations of nationality, and new legislation to restrict Kurds' ability to work or own property and/or land.[191] Hilal's vision would be implemented through two events, both with far-reaching impacts for northeast Syria's Kurdish communities.

The first was the 1962 census conducted in Kobane and Hasakeh through Decree 93/1962.[192] Requested to prove their residency inside Syria since at least 1945 without sufficient knowledge of the process of preparing their documents, 120,000 Syrian Kurds were effectively deprived of nationality overnight. Those rendered stateless were subsequently classified as either *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktoumeen* (unregistered).

The second policy targeting the Kurdish community in Hasakeh came in the form of the "Arab Belt" project. This was a term used to describe the Syrian government's confiscation of several thousand hectares of fertile agricultural land, belonging to Kurdish farmers in Hasakeh, that was then granted to Arab farmers. In the 1970s, during the completion of the dam, the Syrian government prepared a list of names of Arab peasants who would be transferred from Raqqa's Tabqa district to Hasakeh province.[193] The government granted these *maghmoureen*—Arab settlers whose land was submerged during the construction of the Tabqa Dam—

[189] Mohammad Talab Hilal, *A Study on the Aljazeera Governorate from National, Social, and Political Aspects* (Ar.) (Erbil, 2001), pp.8-9.
[190] Ibid., pp.4-10.
[191] Ibid.
[192] The decree to conduct the census in Hasakeh was based on Legislative Decree 1/1962, dated 30 April that year, and on the decision issued by the Council of Ministers, Decision 106/1962. The decree, now known as the "1962 Hasakeh Census Decree" included in its first article the following: 'A general census of the population will be conducted in Hasakeh Governorate in one day, the date of which will be determined by a decision of the minister of planning based on the proposal of the minister of interior.'
[193] The transfer order was implemented based on a decision issued by the regional leadership of the Ba'ath Party. The government assigned both the assistant regional secretary of the Ba'ath Party, Muhammad Jaber Bahbouh, and a member of the regional leadership, Abdullah al-Ahmad, to follow up on the settlement operations and to secure housing for families that would be transferred to Hasakeh province.

agricultural areas based on the rainfall rate. Between the border city of Derik/al-Malikiyah and the Iraq-Turkish border with Syria, these were areas of 150 *dunums* (an Ottoman unit that is equivalent to an acre); in the border city of Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain, the government gave each family 300 *dunums*. In autumn 1974, these families were first moved to a temporary camp near Qamishli International Airport; after the government tightened local security measures (to protect from attacks by displaced Kurdish landowners), new villages were constructed, to which *maghmoureen* families were then transferred. Resettlement ended in the spring of 1975. Over four thousand Arab families (comprising as many as 40,000 people) were transferred from Raqqa province to the Arab Belt region, constituting as much as six percent of the total population of Hasakeh province. Ultimately, hundreds of Kurdish villages and as many as 150,000 people were affected by the population transfer.[194]

Beyond these two policies, structural challenges existed. Hasakeh's population depended on rain-fed and irrigated agriculture due to the availability of fertile agricultural lands, rivers, and dams. Known as Syria's food basket, representing 29% of the total cultivated area in Syria, the region is famous for its wheat and cotton, vegetables, legumes and fruits as well as livestock breeding, wool production, dairy and other animal products. However, the Syrian government's failure to support the regional economy, the deliberate marginalisation of industry and the failure to build large factories and production companies providing job opportunities for the population led to social decline and an increase in unemployment. Hasakeh's natural resources, including oil, phosphate, and groundwater, were systemically transferred to other areas of Syria. While the people of Hasakeh served and worked in Syria's interior cities as workers, often without political or economic rights, the government brought in loyalists from central cities, the coast and Damascus to manage Hasakeh's oil fields through the Syrian Oil Company. These include the al-Jibsah fields in al-Shaddadah as well as the Suwaydiya fields; the fields of Karachuk, Alayan and the Odeh oil field in the city of Tirbespî/al-Qahtaniyah; the Rumaylan field; the Ma'shuq and Babasih fields; and the Zareba field, which faces the Turkish border. Crucially, the revenues from oil exploitation did not contribute to improving living conditions in Hasakeh or elsewhere in northeast Syria.

Other ethnic groups also faced challenges. Places with an Arab majority—such as southern Hasakeh, which includes the towns and villages of Tal Hamis, al-Hol, al-Shaddadah, al-Arisha and Tal Koçer—were politically and economically marginalised. There were high rates of unemployment here, too, partly caused by limited economic interaction with other areas of Syria and the absence of political activities or public freedoms (other than those questionably afforded by participation with the Ba'ath Party). The lack of job opportunities, security restrictions and the state of poverty prompted many to leave Syria. Tens of thousands of Christians eventually emigrated.

The conflict in Hasakeh

The persecution of Kurdish politicians and activists intensified following the Qamishli Uprising in March 2004.[195] Protests broke out following a football match in the city, when some Arab fans from the al-Fotowwa team shouted racist slogans at fans of the Kurdish host team, al-Jihad. Security forces quickly intervened in the violent altercations that followed, but unrest spread to the rest of the Kurdish areas in Afrin, Aleppo, Kobane and even Damascus. In the six days the protests lasted, Kurdish demonstrators burned the local office of the Ba'ath Party and toppled a statue of Hafez al-Assad; security forces backed by tanks and helicopters cracked down on demonstrators. With between 25 and 40 killed and two thousand Kurdish protestors detained, the events were considered among the worst political unrest to have taken place in northeast Syria. That is, until the Syrian uprising erupted several years later.

[194] HRW, 'The Silenced Kurds'.
[195] Hugh Macleod, 'Football fans' fight causes a three-day riot in Syria" *The Independent* (London, 15 March 2004) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/football-fans-fight-causes-a-threeday-riot-in-syria-5354766.html> accessed 16 August 2023.

Political instability, heavy-handed security policies and ever-deteriorating socio-economic conditions led many of Hasakeh's residents to join the early protests against Bashar al-Assad once the uprising spread out from the southern city of Dera'a in March 2011. Driven by youth coordinating with protesters in other areas of the country, these demonstrations continued until the beginning of 2012, when they changed from primarily popular protests calling for change to a local violent conflict involving Syria's armed forces and security agencies, an emerging Islamist armed opposition and increasingly organised Kurdish militia forces.

Despite the structural challenges faced by the people of Hasakeh, many would remember the time prior to the outbreak of the conflict as one in which communities lived in a state of harmony despite the diverse cultures, religions and languages found there. A woman from Tal Tamr said:

> We all lived in peace; different groups and peoples, Arabs, Kurds and Syriacs […] everyone coexisted freely with one another. Each person respected the other's religion. Everyone had the traditions and clothing of their own culture […] and did not interfere with [others].[196]

Another resident of the area also stated that they lived comfortable lives until the conflict broke out:

> After the entry of ISIS and the [FSA] into the region, chaos prevailed and the situation turned upside down. But before then, our children used to go to their schools, and we used to go to our work. We were comfortable and our life was easy.[197]

As unrest spread, however, Kurdish political parties were divided over how to respond to the uprising. The KNC, which consisted of 15 Kurdish political parties, was supportive of Syria's emerging political and armed opposition. A second group of parties, so-called "coordination committees," saw themselves as more revolutionary and advocated for arming the anti-Assad opposition and confronting the regime with force to bring about change. The third line was taken by the PYD, which joined the National Coordination Committee (NCC) but argued for avoiding armed conflict with any party and focusing on creating an administration to protect Kurdish regions from escalating violence. On 12 July 2012, the PYD and KNC agreed on the formation of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, a governing body for Kurdish-majority regions in Syria, under the auspices of the former president of the KRI's regional government, Massoud Barzani.

Political differences ensured the agreement did not last long; subsequent agreements such as the Hewler Agreement failed as well. In parallel, from 2011 onwards, the PYD started organising small armed battalions under the umbrella of the YPG. These units, along with some other Kurdish party militants, would erect shared checkpoints in Kurdish areas in Hasakeh as well as Kobane and Afrin. While it had existed before 2011, the formation of the YPG was officially announced in 2012 once the deal between the PYD and KNC fell apart.[198]

The military conflict in Hasakeh began when these forces took control of Kurdish areas in November 2012, following the withdrawal of Syrian government forces.[199] In the same period, armed opposition groups launched an attack on government forces in Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain on 8 November 2012. Several battalions, including the Ghuraba al-Sham Islamic Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra, the FSA and the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, stormed the city, entering through the border crossing from Turkish territory.[200] The YPG clashed with Islamist battalions. After

[196] Individual testimony #50, focus group session 3.
[197] Individual testimony #52, focus group session 3.
[198] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), 'Syria: Rojava Kurdistan' (n.d.) <https://ucdp.uu.se/additionalinfo/13042/1> accessed 15 August 2023.
[199] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p.96.
[200] *Al-Arabiya News*, 'Kurd-jihadist firefights rage in northern Syria' *AFP* (18 January 2013) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/2013/01/18/Kurd-Jihadist-firefights-rage-in-northern-Syria> accessed 16 August 2023.

months of fighting interspersed by more than one ceasefire, on 17 July 2013, the YPG announced it had control of Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain and liberated it from the Islamists.[201]

The arrival of ISIS

The PYD simultaneously worked to establish governance bodies in areas newly under Kurdish control and soon established the Autonomous Administration of northeast Syria (AANES) to govern over three main cantons: al-Jazeera, Kobane and Afrin.[202] Clashes between the PYD and Syrian armed opposition groups continued across Hasakeh province—in areas such as Tal Hamis and in the towns of Tal Koçer and Tal Tamr—until the end of 2013.

By early 2014, ISIS had expanded into Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces, and controlled large areas of Iraq. As it increased its territorial control, many of the battalions that had fought the YPG either pledged allegiance to ISIS or were eliminated by the group. Even then, many in Hasakeh were still hopeful that their region would remain largely unaffected. A woman remembered how, at the time:

> We never expected that such an explosion could happen and that we would lose innocent civilians for no reason. They were not armed. They were just civilians doing their work and taking care of their families, raising their children and so on. When we followed the news broadcasts about what was going on around us, we would get worried and nervous, but we also used to console ourselves that we were still safe and far away from these events.[203]

This would not last for long. In 2014, ISIS expanded into Hasakeh—which it called its *Wilayat al-Baraka* ("the blessed province") in reference to the resources in the region—taking control of Tal Hamis and Tal Brak. Thereafter, it launched a large-scale attack intended to establish control over the area, eliminate the Kurdish presence and control the Syrian-Turkish border. In its trademark style, ISIS launched multiple, simultaneous offensives: from Tal Abyad and Raqqa province towards Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain and the town of Tal Tamr; from the countryside of Deir Ezzor to the towns of al-Shaddadah, al-Hol and al-Sour all the way to Hasakeh city; and from Iraqi territory towards the countryside of Qamishlo/Qamishli and Derik/al-Malikiyah, at the farthest border of the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi border triangle.

Furthermore, in August 2014, ISIS used the areas it had captured in Hasakeh along the Syrian-Iraqi border as a launching pad for its attacks on the Sinjar region in Iraq's Mosul after the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from the area. ISIS succeeded in attacking Yazidi areas, causing the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Yazidis and the capture of thousands of families. The YPG responded and was able to open a humanitarian corridor to evacuate more than 12,000 Yazidis, transferring them to YPG-held areas and later transferring them to the KRI. Others remained in the Nowrouz displacement camp near Derik/al-Malikiyah until their areas were liberated from ISIS years later.

By early 2015, ISIS advances had left the group in control of large areas of Hasakeh province, including villages surrounding the city of Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain (though not the city itself) and the area surrounding Tal Tamr (including more than 35 nearby Assyrian villages). The group also controlled the towns of al-Sour, al-Shaddadah and al-Hol, all the way to the southern neighbourhoods of Hasakeh city, where government forces maintained a presence, in addition to dozens of villages around Tal Hamis and the south of al-Rad. The northeastern tip of Derik/al-Malikiyah stayed under YPG control, while the YPG and Syrian government forces both maintained a presence in central Qamishlo/Qamishli.

---

[201] Donna Abu-Nasr, 'Syrian Kurds Expel Radical Islamists From Town, Activist Says' *Bloomberg* (17 July 2013) < https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-07-17/syrian-kurds-expel-radical-muslims-from-town-activist> accessed 16 August 2023.
[202] Lister, *Syrian Jihad*, p.154.
[203] Individual testimony #6.

However, as would become clear soon, this did not mean that ISIS was unable to strike there.

'There was a fire burning from his back': Bombings behind YPG lines

ISIS' military campaign was accompanied by mass-casualty attacks conducted behind YPG lines, which were intended to destabilise the area and demoralise the local population. ISIS repeatedly conducted suicide attacks or remotely detonated car bombs, often with civilians as the main target. Several targeted Qamishlo/Qamishli, which was symbolically important as the Kurdish capital in Syria.

On the morning of 19 August 2015, for example, ISIS targeted the headquarters of the security forces of the Autonomous Administration, the *Asayish*, in the al-Sina'a area, killing thirteen people, including ten civilians and injuring another 50 civilians. Months later, on 30 December 2015, ISIS targeted two neighbourhoods in the city: al-Wusta, which has a Christian majority, and al-Siyahi, killing sixteen and wounding 22 others.[204]

The following year, on 27 July 2016, a motorcycle and a truck carrying explosives detonated inside a crowded market in western Qamishlo/Qamishli.[205] Consecutive explosions flattened buildings and destroyed cars. A large mushroom cloud of smoke rising over the city was visible from as far away as the Turkish town of Nusaybin, across the border, while the explosion was heard by residents several kilometres away. ISIS claimed responsibility for the explosions soon after, claiming they were intended as retaliation for Kurdish attacks on ISIS forces in Manbij. More than 60 Kurdish civilians lost their lives and over 170 other civilians were injured.

One of the witnesses of the market bombing recalled the devastation, the smell, and the smoke:

> A large and deep hole was formed in the main street because of the huge size of the car bomb. The smell of death and burnt bodies was everywhere. People were searching for days to find the remains of innocent people who had died in the explosion. The smoke caused by the explosion was black, as if strange substances were used in the bombing, causing a huge [column] of black smoke. People panicked and died of suffocation because of the smoke.[206]

A father who lost his son in the market bombing described the devastating scene:

> I finally arrived at the workshop and found [my other son] crying and screaming. When I asked him about his brother, he told me: "I don't know where he is." While we were talking, I noticed someone trying to get out of the rubble. He was unable to crawl, [just] lying face-down.
>
> There was a fire burning from his back. This was the slow-burning cork substance found in refrigerators. His entire back and legs were burning because of this substance. He was hitting the ground.
>
> I stood near his head and realized: "Oh my God, it's my son!"
>
> I was crying my eyes out and said to him: "Get up! Get up, boy! What are you doing?"
>
> There was a hole in his head and his back was in flames.[207]

A worker reflected on the loss of his uncle and several customers inside his uncle's shop at the moment the explosion ripped through the marketplace:

---

[204] *Reuters*, 'Twin suicide bombs in northeast Syria kill or wound dozens - Kurds, monitoring group' (30 December 2015) <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idINKBN0UD1VC20151230> accessed 16 August 2023.
[205] *France24*, 'Scores killed after deadly blast rocks Kurdish-majority Syrian city' (Paris, 27 July 2016) <https://www.france24.com/en/20160727-syria-kurdish-qamishli-bomb-blasts-islamic-state> accessed 16 August 2023.
[206] Individual testimony #1.
[207] Individual testimony #7.

> When I arrived at the shop, I started working. While I was doing my work, suddenly, the explosion took place. The sound was terrifying. I left the shop unconsciously. My uncle […] was killed, and so was the child who used to work for him [...] who was about eight years' old. A young man who was working for [my uncle] was killed, too. He had gotten married six months before the bombing took place. Two other people who were inside my uncle's shop when the explosion happened were killed as well.[208]

Dozens of others were killed. The wife of one of the victims ran towards the blast site, looking for her husband:

> I saw the devastation, destruction, and body parts. It was a horrific scene. I searched for my husband for a long time, but I could not find him. I saw his shoe, which had traces of blood on it, and I found his keys in front of the pharmacy. I called my brother, and we went to the hospitals to look for my husband […] but I could not identify him because the corpses had been blown [into pieces]. The bodies were unidentifiable.[209]

The brother of another victim recounted the tragic story of his cousin, a pregnant mother, who died with twins in her womb:

> When I arrived at al-Rahma Hospital [in Qamishlo/Qamishli] on the day of the bombing, the corpses had already arrived there. The doctor told me that my nephews were still alive, moving in the womb of their deceased mother. But he asked what I thought should be done.
>
> I told him: "They are six months' old now. If we decided to operate on the mother now to get them out, will they be able to survive?'
>
> The doctor told me: "No, they won't survive."
>
> So, I told him: "If I will keep them with their mother, then this is better for them." And we wrapped the coffin while they were still inside their mother's womb. I asked God never to put anyone in a situation like mine.[210]

The bombings had catastrophic consequences for people, causing widespread destruction of civilian property and public infrastructure. Hundreds of families were displaced because of the destruction of their homes or the loss of their workshops, stores, or restaurants. The constant state of terror and fear exacerbated the suffering of those who decided to stay. Some families faced destitution after they lost their household breadwinners, who were often men. One local woman who lost her husband said:

> My husband was a taxi driver from the town of Himo. There were passengers with him inside the car, and when he arrived at the scene of the bombing, the big truck had blocked the road, and he was right behind it. The truck exploded. He and two passengers died on the same day, and the other two died after that.
>
> Now my son works and takes responsibility for nine people [in the family] and their daily needs. After I lost my husband and the car that he used for our income, we could hardly secure basic needs given the exorbitant prices.[211]

Qamishlo/Qamishli was not a one-off; several other attacks targeted Hasakeh province between 2014 and 2019. On 14 June 2016, for example, fifteen civilians died and 24 others were injured in a suicide bombing that targeted

[208] Individual testimony #24.
[209] Individual testimony #6.
[210] Individual testimony #8.
[211] Individual testimony #17, focus group session 2.

the eastern entrance of Tirbespî/al-Qahtaniyah. And on 11 December 2015, three trucks armed with explosives targeted an area of Tal Tamr that was close to a crowded Friday marketplace and a local field hospital. More than 60 people died, most of them in the market, while at least 80 others were injured.[212]

In Hasakeh city, ISIS carried out a double bombing on 20 March 2015, the eve of the annual Nowrouz celebrations. Over 50 people attending were killed, and more than 150 were injured. A year later, an ISIS suicide bomber targeted the wedding of a Kurdish family on the outskirts of the city, killing more than 50 family members and attendees.[213] A woman who was there summed up how many in the area still feel today: "I am psychologically exhausted. Just mentioning ISIS […] takes me back to those events."[214]

The trauma of ISIS violence does not heal easily. One of the victims, a journalist, reflected on the psychological effects of the violence that people suffered:

> After the death of my daughter, our lives completely changed. Even now, we go to the graves every week because we find some comfort in being next to [our] daughter.
>
> What saddens me most is that my daughter was a civilian. She did not know about any weapons or carry any weapons at any point in her life. She dreamt of developing the municipality, finding new ways to carry out public work and building municipalities so that women could be employed there.
>
> However, with her death, all these things disappeared. I lost interest in my work and my life. I stopped working because of my grief and hopelessness in the wake of my daughter's death. My wife suffered from grief over her only daughter being brutally killed.
>
> As a result, I sent my son to a European country as I was afraid for him after what happened to his sister—even though he was studying medicine in Damascus. The fear for him prompted me to do so. My wife and I lost the taste for life. The death of my daughter created a backlash for me towards all religions, especially Islam.[215]

'The villages are completely empty': Displacement of minorities in Hasakeh

In Hasakeh, home to a profoundly diverse patchwork of ethnic, religious and sectarian communities, ISIS often singled out and targeted Christian communities along the frontlines and in towns and villages not under the group's control.

"Our village was made up of 24 families," a Christian man from the countryside of Qamishlo/Qamishli said:

> Now, only three families remain. Imagine only three inhabited houses; the rest have all migrated. [ISIS'] targeting [of] Christians and Kurds was more violent and harsher. One of the Assyrian villages has no traces [left] whatsoever.
>
> Qalaat al-Hadi village has one Christian family now; before, there were a hundred houses there. Tal al-Alo village used to have a hundred families. Now, there is not a single family in it.
>
> ISIS destroyed our families. Everyone migrated because of ISIS. The villages are completely empty. Frankly, everyone suffered from ISIS, but we, the Syriacs and Christians, suffered more than everyone else because our existence is in danger now. Since 1915 [during

[212] *Reuters*, 'Islamic State truck bombs kill up to 60 people in Syrian town: Kurds' (11 December 2015) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-northeast-idUSKBN0TU0NS20151211> accessed 16 August 2023.
[213] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), '10th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/30/48 (13 August 2015), para.125.
[214] Individual testimony #62, focus group session 3.
[215] Individual testimony #30.

> the Ottoman massacre of Syrian Christians], this is the biggest migration from our villages; even in 1915, we were not impacted in the same way.[216]

The man's village was among those attacked by ISIS. While some of the residents of the village fled, others did not get away in time or decided to stay:

> We were sitting in the village, as usual, in our homes. Suddenly, a group of ISIS members came in four-wheel-drive pick-ups. They were all armed and masked. They started shooting to terrorise the villagers. Then they started entering the houses and expelling people. We were afraid.
>
> Some of the people fled, but the majority did not have enough time to escape. ISIS members started looting anything lightweight and expensive from the houses. They kidnapped me with a group of my friends. I was the target of kidnapping because I am Christian. They stole two cars from me as well as everything in my house. They left nothing. They even removed the doors and windows, put them in their cars and took them.
>
> We stayed in their custody for 12 days. They tortured us for nine consecutive days and beat and cursed us. They used intimidation and threatened to behead us. Every day at dawn, around two o'clock in the morning, a Tunisian man entered the cell, put a sword to my neck and threatened to behead me.[217]

Similar attacks were commonplace in the Tal Tamr area. Between 23 and 26 February 2015, for example, ISIS launched a massive attack on a group of Assyrian villages along the southern bank of the Khabour River, near Tal Tamr, using about three thousand fighters and multiple tanks. Nearly a dozen villages were seized, and 220 Assyrian Christian residents were kidnapped during the raids, although local sources reported that as many as four hundred people were kidnapped in total.[218]

In the countryside of Tal Tamr and Qamishlo/Qamishli, ISIS also systematically targeted churches. By attacking the places of worship of non-Muslims, ISIS sought to displace populations who had historically lived in the region. On 15 April 2015, ISIS fighters blew up the Virgin Mary Church, constructed in 1934, in the Assyrian village of Tal Nasri in the western countryside of Tal Tamr.[219] ISIS also burned down the historic Tal Hormuz Church, one of the oldest churches in Syria, destroyed the Qabr Shamiya Church and Church of Tal Jazeera and targeted the Church of St. Thomas in the village of Umm al-Kif.[220]

One of the women in charge of a church in Ghardouqa, in Qamishlo/Qamishli's countryside, recounted how ISIS raided her village. ISIS had settled in a nearby village and carried out the attack from there:

> The church was destroyed. The houses around it were looted, their precious contents stolen, and then burnt down. The crosses were stolen. I told the priest about it; he said we couldn't do anything. We went and photographed the great damage. They even stole the doors and windows of the monastery and the houses around it. They did all this to us because we were Christians.

[216] Individual testimony #11.
[217] Ibid.
[218] *CBC*, 'ISIS has now abducted 220 Christian Assyrians, activists say' (26 February 2015) < https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-has-now-abducted-220-christian-assyrians-activists-say-1.2973069> accessed 18 August 2023.
[219] Reem Chamoun and Sargon Yousef, 'Demolished Assyrian village by ISIS becomes a refuge for IDPs' *North Press Agency* (10 December 2019) <https://npasyria.com/en/38302/> accessed 16 August 2023.
[220] Sam Sweeney, 'The Village Church of Tel Hormiz: A story of Syrian Christianity in adversity' *Catholic Herald* (22 January 2021) <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-village-church-of-tel-hormiz-a-story-of-syrian-christianity-in-adversity/> accessed 28 September 2023.

> A few days later, they kidnapped the son of our *mukhtar* […] who died after his release. [He] was healthy and strong but died because of the torture and the beatings.[221]

Kurds in ISIS-held areas were initially treated with greater leniency because most Kurds are Sunni Muslims; this policy changed as Kurdish resistance to ISIS fanned out from Kobane.

Later, and unlike Christians, Kurds were targeted because ISIS considered them to be "atheists" and because of Kurdish groups' armed resistance against ISIS rule. ISIS bombings frequently targeted Kurdish-majority cities, while the group also attacked Kurdish villages. The result, in some ways, was a brutal, extreme continuation of the kind of discriminatory anti-Kurdish policies pursued for decades by Syria's Arab rulers. One of the residents of the Kurdish villages in the countryside of Qamishlo/Qamishli reflected on the displacement:

> Our village was surrounded by Kurdish and Arab villages. The Kurdish villages in Tal Hamis district were destroyed and looted […] because they were Kurdish. Our village was not destroyed because there are some people from the Arab community [living there].[222]

The impact of the violence reverberates to this day. Victims pointed out that there have not been "real reparations" to cover people's losses.[223]

Meanwhile, the wounds of ISIS' highly sectarianized, community-based violence have not healed. According to the Christian man from the Qamishlo/Qamishli countryside, attacks on Christians were deeply ideological. He argued that that ideology, instilled by ISIS from a young age, continues to shape relations in Hasakeh today:

> ISIS had schools or centres teaching purely extremist religious curricula that had nothing to do with education. Children were influenced by ISIS, which trained them in *jihad* and graduated them as suicide bombers. As such, our children's thinking […] changed. Even locals from the region hate the Assyrians and Christians and consider them to be infidels.[224]

Others saw the continued presence of ISIS-instilled racism as standing in the way of reconciliation. According to a Kurdish villager:

> ISIS was able to sow discord and racism among the people of the region. There were people who did not become ISIS members, [but who lived] in our lands and homes in ISIS' name. They exploited our agricultural lands. This created a lot of hatred and destroyed the idea of tolerance and forgiveness in the region.[225]

'If he doesn't come back, it means he was killed': Forced disappearance, torture & executions in al-Shaddadah

Arrests and forced disappearances, kidnappings and torture were common features of life under ISIS rule in Hasakeh. According to the UNHRC, the group's use of torture as part of attacks against Hasakeh's civilian population amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity.[226] While ISIS was more lenient toward Arab villages, any Arabs that did not show sufficient support for ISIS' ideology would be subjected to harsh penalties.

[221] Individual testimony #75, focus group session 1.
[222] Individual testimony #30.
[223] Individual testimony #1.
[224] Individual testimony #11.
[225] Individual testimony #30.
[226] UNHRC, '9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/28/69 (5 February 2015), para.171.

The social regime imposed upon the population was strict and all-encompassing, as one man from the predominantly Arab town of al-Shaddadah described:

> The security situation […] was terrifying. There were many cases of execution, kidnapping and killing. They were not able to defend themselves, and there are no apparent reasons for the actions of ISIS towards the people. Sometimes they stormed some houses and took people, and no one knew where they took them. They never returned.
>
> Many of al-Shaddadah's residents are still missing. Their families do not know anything about them, whether they died or alive.
>
> No one was able to speak to ISIS or leave their children to play in the neighbourhood due to the fear and terror we lived with. We couldn't even talk amongst ourselves about ISIS because we were so afraid, and we were always exposed to arrest for no reason.[227]

Another man from the town added:

> ISIS would force everyone to fast, pray, not to talk about anyone and to wear *Shari'a* clothes. They would take *zakat* from shops, from anyone who owned animals such as sheep, cows, camels and crops, and from anyone wanted by [the group].[228]

A minor violation could have devastating consequences. According to a father whose son was kidnapped in al-Shaddadah:

> My son was going to the market. He was wearing shorts, and ISIS arrested him and accused him of wearing infidel clothing. Until today, he is still missing. I searched for him everywhere, but I did not find him. Later, they told me that he was accused of being a member of the Syrian army and that he was an agent of the regime. [229]

Hundreds remain missing until today. Although many relatives know that the chance that their kidnapped loved ones will return is very slim, without confirmation, they never fully give up hope. The brother of an abductee said that:

> We do not have any news about my brother. We knew that those who were kidnapped by ISIS for more than fifteen days never returned, but we still hope that my brother will return. If he doesn't come back, it means he was killed—like many Kurds who were killed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.[230]

Others lost loved ones in public executions, which ISIS used to instil terror and subjugate populations. A man from al-Shaddadah recounted how ISIS killed his son:

> My neighbour shouted in a loud voice: "Abu Abboud, there's going to be an execution today." At this point, I felt as if I was paralysed, and I did not know what to do. I went back home and told my wife. She screamed out of fear and prayed to God that our son would not be among them. She told me to go and check his name.

[227] Individual testimony #46.
[228] Individual testimony #66.
[229] Individual testimony #64.
[230] Individual testimony #43.

At about 11am, while I was praying in the house, someone knocked loudly on the door. Our neighbour shouted: "They executed Obaid! They announced his name, and she heard them saying Obaid from the house of Abu Abboud."

They beheaded my son with a sword. I did not see my son's body—although ISIS used to hang the bodies in the square, they executed my son and took him with them to a place unknown to me.

I was shocked and traumatised. I suffer from a sleeping disorder, and I have nightmares. I am so afraid.[231]

'No one wanted her once she was over 17': Violations against women & girls

Like other territories under the control of ISIS, Hasakeh witnessed horrific abuses against women and girls. Slavery and forced marriages, including those of underage girls, were common:

When we were in al-Shaddadah, ISIS brought Yazidi and Assyrian women and sold them there or gave them to ISIS commanders. Then, they would transfer whoever was left to the city of Raqqa. ISIS used to offer them to whoever wanted a woman. These women were taken for pleasure. Few were married in the Islamic way.

Also, when a husband of a woman from the city died, they would get [the widow] married after seven days under the pretext that they were in a state of war. One day, a 50-year-old man married an 11-year-old girl because her father was greedy and wanted the financial revenues that the groom would give him. The father claimed that the child wanted to marry a 50-year-old man. They always got minors married. No one want[ed] her once she was over 17.[232]

The wife of an ISIS member was interviewed for this report. Speaking from her home in one of the many camps in northeast Syria for ISIS-affiliated women and children, she claimed she was forced into marriage against her will:

My husband, an ISIS fighter, used to beat me all the time. Throughout the two years [we were married], he beat me constantly. One day, he wanted to detonate an explosive belt while it was on me and he hit me with his rifle as well. He once fired two bullets at me, but he didn't hit me. It was all because I was visiting my family. I began to see my family secretly.

He was already married at the age of 29 when he came to propose to me. I was in the market when he saw me and started following me until he figured out where I lived. He proposed to me through my brother, but my brother did not agree. The consent should be given by me. I risked my life for the sake of my family and my desire not to harm them. He was a fighter in ISIS, and he could do anything.

When we were in Raqqa, he told me to blow myself up if the SDF came. I told him I wouldn't: I couldn't hurt anyone and was not influenced by [ISIS] or their ideas and projects. I am Kurdish and all my family members are married to Kurds. My mother's sisters are from Jarabulus. We are known for our Kurdishness, although [...] we don't speak Kurdish.[233]

[231] Individual testimony #37.
[232] Individual testimony #66.
[233] Individual testimony #68.

ISIS' legacy lives on in the camps

After April 2015, the tide turned for ISIS in Hasakeh . Kurdish and Christian militias, as well as some Arab tribal groups, such as the al-Sanadid Forces,[234] recaptured large parts of the Tal Tamr and Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain countryside, supported by airstrikes from the US-led Coalition.[235] By the end of the month, the YPG had reached the provincial boundary between Hasakeh and Raqqa, and slowly, preparations for the offensive on ISIS' self-proclaimed capital began.

Even then, though, there were intense battles to liberate all areas of Hasakeh province. ISIS still held positions close to Hasakeh city, and a car bomb attack on 30 May 2015 in Hasakeh killed 50 pro-government troops.[236] Government forces repelled an attack on Hasakeh city by ISIS in early June.[237] ISIS opened another offensive later that month, which left several parts of the city in ruins, although this was also repelled by the government and YPG forces. Finally, in early August, the YPG declared the full liberation of Hasakeh city.[238]

Following the creation of the SDF in October 2015, another offensive to retake all remaining ISIS-held territory in southern Hasakeh was launched.[239] In November, the area around al-Hol was brought under SDF control;[240] in early 2016, the SDF took control of al-Shaddadah and, with it, most of Hasakeh province. Later in 2016, the SDF clashed with pro-Assad forces in Qamishlo/Qamishli and Hasakeh city. This left the Kurdish authorities with increasing control over both cities.[241]

It would not be the end of Hasakeh's troubles with ISIS. The province came to host various camps of suspected ISIS fighters and their families, managed by the Autonomous Administration and SDF. The largest of these camps, al-Hol, hosted up to 53,000 people of 60 nationalities by the end of 2022 (down from a total of 76,000 in early 2020).[242] The camp grew as women and children were displaced from ISIS-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq and ISIS gradually lost more and more territory.

Nowadays, while most camp residents are from Syria and Iraq, around 10,000 are likely third country nationals. As many as 64% of the camp's residents are estimated to be children.[243] Hardened ISIS supporters continue to radicalize people in the camp, which is also rife with crime and lacking in adequate medical care, basic services and education opportunities.

Another camp in Hasakeh province, al-Roj, is located near the town of Kari Rash, east of the main road that links Qamishlo/Qamishli and Derik/al-Malikiyah. Established in 2015 to house displaced Syrians fleeing ISIS attacks,

[234] The al-Sanadid Forces are a tribal militia associated with the Arab Shammar tribe, originally formed to fight ISIS in northeast Syria.
[235] SOHR, 'Advances for regime forces in Idlib and Tal Tamir countrysides' (9 May 2015) <https://web.archive.org/web/20150518094651/http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/05/advances-for-regime-forces-in-idlib-and-tal-tamir-countrysides/> accessed 16 August 2023.
[236] SOHR, 'At least 50 members of the regime forces and allied militiamen killed and wounded in an attack launched by IS on the city of al-Hasakah' (30 May 2015) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/18895/> accessed 16 August 2023.
[237] *Al-Arabiya News*, 'Syria army pushes ISIS back from Hasaka' (7 June 2015) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/06/07/Syria-army-pushes-is-back-from-Hassakeh> accessed 16 August 2023.
[238] YPG, 'August 1: Strong Resistance Finally Results in Full Liberation of the City Hasakah from the ISIL Terrorists' (YPGRojava, 2 August 2015) <https://web.archive.org/web/20160302164405/http://dckurd.org/2015/08/02/august-1-strong-resistance-finally-results-in-full-liberation-of-the-city-hasakah-from-the-isil-terrorists/> accessed 16 August 2023.
[239] John Davison, 'New U.S.-backed Syrian rebel alliance launches offensive against Islamic State' *Reuters* (31 October 2015) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0SP0EA20151031> accessed 16 August 2023.
[240] *AFP*, 'Syrian Kurdish-Arab alliance captures nearly 200 villages from IS' (Paris, 16 November 2015) <https://web.archive.org/web/20151118111144/http://www.france24.com/en/20151116-syrian-kurdish-arab-alliance-captures-nearly-200-villages> accessed 16 August 2023.
[241] *The Japan Times*, 'Under fresh truce, Kurd forces look to keep areas taken from Syria regime' (*Reuters,* 25 April 2016) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/04/25/world/fresh-truce-kurd-forces-look-keep-areas-taken-syria-regime/> accessed 16 August 2023.
[242] Médecins Sans Frontières, 'A lost generation live in fear inside Syria's Al-Hol Camp' (7 November 2022) <https://www.msf.org/generation-lost-danger-and-desperation-syria%E2%80%99s-al-hol-camp> accessed 16 August 2023.
[243] Kathryn Achilles and others, "*Remember the armed men who wanted to kill mum": The hidden toll of violence in Al Hol on Syrian and Iraqi Children* (2022) <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/children_conflict_al_hol_camp_syria_2022.pdf/> accessed 28 September 2023.

al-Roj began receiving Yazidis and other Iraqi refugees fleeing ISIS violence on the other side of the border; however, it was later turned into a centre for ISIS-affiliated foreign nationals in 2017. The camp's population steadily increased. Following the defeat of ISIS by the SDF and US-led Coalition at Baghouz in 2019, the Autonomous Administration and SDF expanded al-Roj to accommodate more people. Other camps in the area include those in al-Arisha and Washo-Kani.

The aftermath

Post-ISIS, Hasakeh has not been spared further conflicts and displacements. Up to 180,000 people were displaced from the Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain region during the 2019 "Peace Spring" offensive launched by Turkey and the Turkey-backed SNA against the YPG and SDF,[244] as US forces temporarily withdrew forces from the area.[245] In late November 2022, Turkey conducted an extended aerial campaign against SDF targets in Hasakeh;[246] Turkish President Erdogan vowed a ground invasion would follow, although this has not yet materialised.[247] Nevertheless, the continued threat of a Turkish-led incursion into northeast Syria has diverted the SDF's full attention from managing the camps and prisons where ISIS fighters are detained.

ISIS, meanwhile, has demonstrated its ability to still conduct serious operations in Hasakeh. On 20 January 2022, groups affiliated with ISIS attacked the "Ghuweran" or al-Sina'a prison, located on the southern outskirts of Hasakeh city, which housed thousands of former ISIS fighters. The attack, which lasted for nine days, ended with the deaths of dozens of ISIS fighters and ISIS detainees inside the prison, although between 30 and 100 ISIS leaders managed to escape. According to an SDF statement, 117 members of the SDF and its prison garrison lost their lives.[248] US forces, which remain in Hasakeh province to fight ISIS despite protests from the Syrian government and its allies, also joined the SDF to put down the prison uprising.[249]

There are in total 20 other prisons across northeast Syria, several of them in Hasakeh (including facilities in Qamishlo/Qamishli and al-Shaddadah).[250] As places where hardened ISIS fighters remain detained indefinitely without prospects for a long-term solution, they will remain targets for ISIS cells looking to rebuild their forces well into the future.

[244] United Nations, ' Nearly 180,000 displaced by northeast Syria fighting as needs multiply: UN refugee agency (22 October 2019), https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1049761, accessed 15 August 2023.
[245] *BBC*, 'Trump makes way for Turkey operation against Kurds in Syria' (London, 7 October 2019) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49956698> accessed 16 August 2023.
[246] Ali Kucukgocmen and Suleiman al-Khalidi, 'Turkish air strikes target Kurdish militants in Syria, Iraq after bomb attack' *Reuters* (20 November 2022) <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-air-strikes-hit-villages-northern-syria-sdf-2022-11-19/> accessed 16 August 2023.
[247] Hogir Al Abdo and Abby Sewell, 'Erdogan vows ground invasion of Syria, Kurds prepare response' *PBS* (23 November 2022) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/erdogan-vows-ground-invasion-of-syria-kurds-prepare-response> accessed 16 August 2023.
[248] Mohammed Hassan and Samer al-Ahmed, 'A closer look at the ISIS attack on Syria's al-Sina Prison' (Middle East Institute, 14 February 2022) <https://www.mei.edu/publications/closer-look-isis-attack-syrias-al-sina-prison> accessed 16 August 2023.
[249] Jane Arraf and others, 'U.S. Troops Join Assault on Prison Where ISIS Holds Hostage Hundreds of Boys' *The New York Times* (New York City, 24 January 2022) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/middleeast/syria-prison-isis-hasaka.html> accessed 16 August 2023.
[250] Hassan and Ahmed.

3. MANBIJ

Manbij's location is highly strategic: it sits close to the Syrian-Turkish border, the M4 international highway, the Euphrates River and the Tishreen Dam, which produces up to 630 megawatts of electricity and irrigates surrounding agricultural land. Because of this, the city has always acted as a key determinant of the balance of power in northeast Syria—a role reprised during the Syrian civil war and the anti-ISIS conflict.

Manbij before the conflict

Located 80 kilometres from Aleppo and 30 kilometres west of the Euphrates, Manbij falls within Aleppo province. The city of Manbij and the 285 villages in its district were estimated to contain some 400,000 people in Syria's 2004 census;[251] although no reliable statistics exist, today the area is estimated to host some 600,000 people, about half of whom are displaced from other parts of Syria.[252] Its population is primarily Arab, with Kurdish, Turkmen, Circassian and Chechen minorities; some of its inhabitants practice Naqshbandi Sufism.[253] Manbij is home to over 30 Arab clans and tribal culture plays a significant role in social relations, at times trumping the influence of political authorities.

Manbij is one of the largest cities in Syria and its history reaches back to the ancient dynasties that once spread across northeast Syria. The city's name derives from the Hittite word *Mabough*, which has evolved several times throughout history, to *Nambiji* in Syriac and *Nabijou* in Aramaic. It was later called *Maabij* and *Naabouj*, which means "spring." The present-day pronunciation stems from Classical Syriac.

After the end of the French Mandate in Syria in 1946, Manbij experienced a period of relative stability characterised by open political debate and discussion around democracy. This period ended in 1963, when the Ba'ath Party seized power and imposed a militarised one-party dictatorship throughout Syria. The Ba'athist regime in Damascus administered the city through the Ba'ath Party and its security apparatus, which imposed control over all aspects of public life. Party branches reached down to village level, while the *mukhabarat* threaded surveillance into every aspect of life. Even so, Manbij enjoyed a stable relationship *vis-à-vis* central authorities in Damascus, unlike other cities and regions of northeast Syria (on account of their differing ethnic, sectarian, or political compositions, as was the case in Kurdish-majority areas such as Kobane and Hasakeh).

Manbij is rural and agricultural, thanks to its bountiful water supplies and proximity to both the Euphrates and its tributary, the Sajur, which separates Manbij from the town of Jarabulus. Given the region's climate and its suitability for farming, many residents raised sheep, cows, poultry and (rainfed and irrigated) crops such as wheat and barley, as well as tree crops such as olives and pistachios. The Syrian government would buy the harvest from farmers at the end of each season, at prices determined by the Agricultural Bank Directorate in Manbij city. A farmer talked about how he used to make a living from agriculture before the conflict:

> The government used to strongly support agriculture. It would provide seeds and fertilizers, pay out in reasonable instalments, and get our produce to market. If there was a drought or

[251] Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 'Syria Population Census, 2004' (Ar.) (n.d.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20151208115353/http://www.cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf> accessed 17 August 2023.
[252] Interviews with Autonomous Administration officials, April and May 2023.
[253] Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, 'The Struggle for Syria's Regions' (2013) *MERIP Middle East Report* 269 (Winter 2013) <https://merip.org/2014/01/the-struggle-for-syrias-regions> accessed 17 August 2023.

poor rainfall, our payments would be postponed out of consideration for the farmers. The government served farmers well; the situation was incredibly good before the rise of [ISIS].[254]

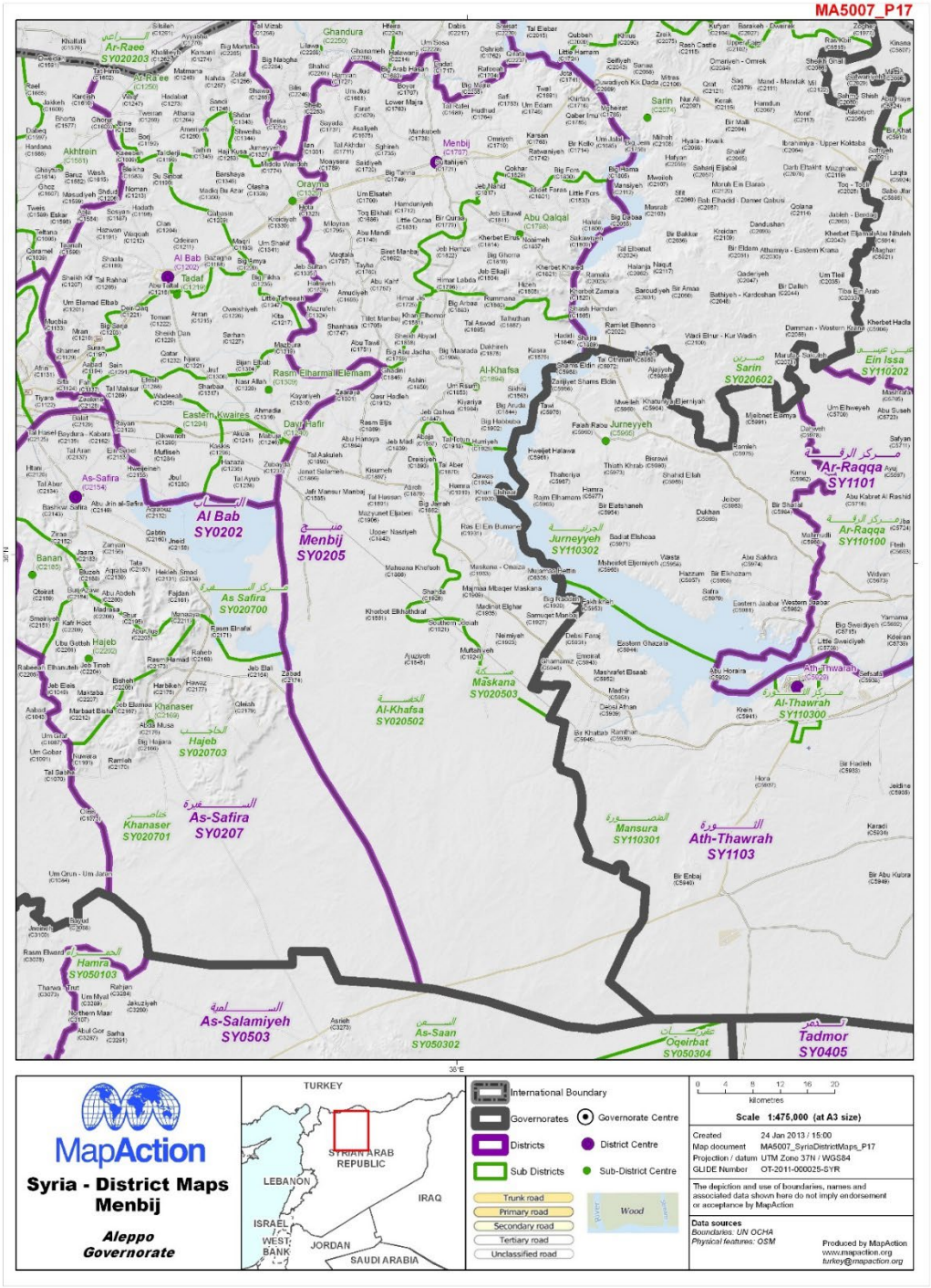


FIGURE 1: MANBIJ DISTRICT IN ALEPPO PROVINCE.[255]

[254] Individual testimony #84, focus group session 2.

[255] Map Action, 'Syria District Maps: Menbij' (4 July 2016) <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/217-2790/resource/11cb9a20-63d1-448f-9a4e-21ec63379781> accessed 17 August 2023.

A villager from Manbij district similarly remembered life in the region before the outbreak of unrest in 2011, describing the situation as "comfortable":

> Our life was good. Everyone had access to education, which was compulsory up until middle school. There was an educational renaissance, as we had both male and female students at universities. In our village alone, we had fifteen university graduates.
>
> The economic situation was comfortable. Prices were cheap and stable. For example, I was a university student, studying English literature. I used to work one day a week, and one day's work would be enough to cover my expenses for the entire week. The economy was good, and so was our standard of living.[256]

Women worked freely alongside men, both in the agriculture sector and other professions. Women could study, pursue further education, and, if they had the means, travel unrestricted for education, work, or medical treatment. Women in Manbij were free to dress as they liked, with no restrictions except those imposed by social customs, norms, and traditions. When discussing gender relations before the conflict, a woman from Manbij said:

> We were safe; we could walk around safely. We would go shopping and wear whatever we liked. When we got sick, we wouldn't be afraid or worried, because medical services were available. When a woman was about to give birth, we wouldn't worry if her husband wasn't with her, because we could take her to the hospital. As women, we would do what we liked, we were responsible for everything in the home when our husbands were not around. We would take care of shopping or anything that the home or the children needed.[257]

Forced marriage practices had almost disappeared from Manbij and new laws were passed to alleviate the injustices that women had suffered for generations. Reforms were made to an article that previously exonerated a man for "honour killings" when murdering one's wife, daughter or sister if caught in the act of adultery,[258] before that law was then abolished altogether. There were also changes in social norms that improved the lot of women, allowing them to join the police and armed forces. Organisations were formed to defend women's rights such as the General Women's Union.

Nevertheless, women were still cut out of inheritances from both their father and mother; in most cases, their estates were liquidated under law, and, to make matters worse, women had to complete difficult and expensive procedures to assert their rights.

Not everyone in Manbij benefitted from the pre-conflict situation, however. During the rule of Hafez al-Assad, and then his son, Bashar, public life was heavily securitised, and the intelligence services played a role in repressing anti-government political activism. The Ba'ath Party, through its Manbij branch, managed education, and teachers in both the city and countryside could only work if they were active, card-carrying members of the party. The party imposed its ideology from primary school onwards, where younger pupils were called the Ba'ath's *tala'a* (vanguards); high school students joined the *shabiba,* or Ba'athist Youth. Students sitting admission exams for universities could gain preference if they first underwent a month-long Ba'athist training

[256] Individual testimony #84, focus group session 2.
[257] Individual testimony #11, focus group session 3.
[258] Aman Bezreh, 'A murder in Syria reignites the debate about so-called "honour killings"' (*Open Democracy*, 13 July 2021) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/a-murder-in-syria-reignites-the-debate-about-so-called-honour-killings/> accessed 17 August 2023.

programme. As in the rest of Syria, Manbij city had plenty of schools and teaching staff while, the countryside lacked such services.

Manbij was also part of the "Arab Belt" project, when the Syrian government granted fertile lands belonging to Kurds along the Syrian-Turkish border to Arab settlers. In 1974, thousands of Arab families were moved from Manbij to 43 settlements extending from Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain to the village of Ain Dewar within the Derik/al-Malikiyah administrative region. In 1999, the government carried out another displacement operation, moving residents of upstream villages due to be submerged by the Tishreen Dam to the city of Maskanah.

Furthermore, the large merchant class in Manbij, which had long flourished due to its proximity to Syria's man trading hub, Aleppo, lost ground under the Assad regime. Land reform benefitted a rural constituency but took power away from the Sunni *Hadhrani* merchant class and members of the wealthy, powerful Albu Sultan tribe, who increasingly gravitated toward the anti-Ba'athist, conservative messages of the Muslim Brotherhood after the 1970s.[259] These groups would form the core of Manbij's Sunni Muslims who joined the Muslim Brotherhood's post-1979 insurgency, which was brutally repressed in Hama in 1982. And like Hama, Manbij too was attacked with tanks during the regime's crackdown, terrifying the city's residents for years after.

In the years leading up to the next major bout of anti-regime unrest in 2011, the Manbij region was neglected and saw little economic development. Under the reforms carried out by Bashar al-Assad in the mid-2000s, Hadhrani merchants and traders from Manbij lost out to their counterparts in Aleppo and Damascus.[260] Having retained their ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, they would become leaders in the anti-Assad opposition once the Syrian uprising broke out in March 2011.

The conflict in Manbij

Stability in Manbij did not last. Early on in 2011, the region joined anti-government protests, staging its first demonstrations within a month from the outbreak of protests in Dera'a. Soon, the city saw protests almost every night as well as the creation of a Revolutionary Council, which was dominated by Hadhrani and Albu Sultan liberals and Islamists with close connections to the Muslim Brotherhood.[261]

In June and July 2012, as Qatar furnished Brotherhood-affiliated groups such as Liwa' al-Tawheed with Libyan-sourced weapons delivered through Turkish territory, towns across Idlib and Aleppo provinces fell to the opposition.[262] Manbij, where the Revolutionary Council had created an armed wing in early 2012, came under FSA control in July that year. Assad's forces withdrew with hardly a shot fired.[263]

On the one hand, the takeover of Manbij by Syria's armed opposition ushered in a period of experimentation with participatory democracy and saw the establishment of a local council. Nearly a dozen independent newspapers emerged around the same time.[264] Due to its mixed population and social structures, Manbij acted as a more open and liberal society than other Sunni-majority cities nearby (such as al-Bab), and women were regularly seen in the street with their hair uncovered.[265]

[259] Anand Gopal and Jeremy Hodge, *Social Networks, Class, and the Syrian Proxy War* (April 2021) *New America*, p.37, <https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Social_Networks_Class_and_the_Syrian_Proxy_War.pdf> accessed 17 August 2023.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid, p.38.
[262] Ibid., p.32.
[263] Ibid., p.38.
[264] Ibid., p.39.
[265] In nearby al-Bab, by comparison, armed opposition factions oversaw an overtly religious regime in which a woman wearing trousers was considered a transgression. See: Khaddour and Mazur, 'The Struggle for Syria's Regions'.

Over time, the region became a site of chaotic, factional infighting between armed opposition groups.[266] More than 70 armed groups emerged after the government withdrawal (and local research conducted for this report even found more than 90 armed factions were present in the area.) Those who lacked access to weapons and connections to external benefactors or Brotherhood-linked Hadhrani networks conducted freelance raids on police stations to obtain weapons; kidnappings and looting were also commonplace.[267] Increasing competition between Saudi Arabia and Qatar meanwhile, led the latter to increase its backing for the Salafi-jihadi armed group Ahrar al-Sham, which announced its presence in Manbij in early 2013.[268] By April, Ahrar al-Sham-led forces were in control of the city and Liwa' al-Tawheed warned the Revolutionary Council not to resist the city's new rulers.[269]

The arrival of ISIS

Allied with Ahrar al-Sham in the takeover of Manbij was Jabhat al-Nusra, then undergoing its schism with ISIS. At the time, Manbij saw both anti-ISIS protests and religious outreach by the group through *da'wa* (outreach) meetings.[270] According to interviews conducted for this report, ISIS' Jordanian *emir* Abu al-Harith al-Urduni founded the first ISIS cell in the area in 2013 with just a few dozen fighters in Manbij at the time. Some were local emirs or members of ISIS' security and intelligence apparatus, but the majority were foreigners who had entered Syria across the Turkish border—some alone, others with their families—from various Arab and European countries as well as Uzbekistan and Chechnya.[271]

It was a turbulent time for Manbij, and many residents were unhappy about the direction the city was taking:

> Before [ISIS] came, we were ruled by the FSA. We were surrounded by chaos and gangs, and we did not feel safe. Everybody worked in their respective trade, but education came to a halt. All the schools became military bases, or else the FSA destroyed them. They destroyed and looted schools and government buildings.
>
> Before ISIS, I used to travel to Jordan. I was a builder. After the regime left, militias and gangs controlled everything. So, I stayed at home. I could not travel any more. We weren't safe anymore in our homes and with our families.[272]

At first, ISIS did not significantly interfere with the lives of Manbij's residents. Foreign fighters occupied the cultural centre downtown and patrolled public markets, carrying their weapons.[273] By July 2013, however, Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS had made a power play, halting all grain shipments from Maskanah and Raqqa to Manbij, causing the price of bread to skyrocket.[274] ISIS organised protests against the Revolutionary Council; Ahrar al-Sham stayed neutral.[275]

By January 2014, the Revolutionary Council had lost popular support and when ISIS swept across swathes of northeast Syria, in an operation led by Abu Omar al-Shishani, ISIS' future "minister of war," the group took

[266] Gopal and Hodge, p.39.
[267] Ibid., pp.42-44.
[268] Yasser Munif, 'Participatory Democracy and Micropolitics in Manbij: An Unthinkable Revolution' (The Century Foundation, 21 February 2017) < https://tcf.org/content/report/participatory-democracy-micropolitics-manbij/> accessed 22 August 2023.
[269] Gopal and Hodge, p.49.
[270] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham Expands Into Rural Northern Syria' (*Syria Comment*, 18 July 2013) <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-expands-into-rural-northern-syria/> accessed 17 August 2023.
[271] Information collected from interviews in Manbij, April and May 2023.
[272] Individual testimony #73.
[273] Gopal and Hodge, p.47.
[274] Ibid., p.49.
[275] Ibid.

control of Manbij with relative ease.[276] Ahrar al-Sham, which by then had fallen out with ISIS and, together with Nusra and the FSA, was engaged in a violent struggle against the group, was expelled from the city. Around 100 ISIS fighters, many of them British, took up residence in Manbij, earning it the nickname "Little London."[277]

Fighting in the area continued for a while, with the Syrian government accused of using internationally prohibited cluster munitions against ISIS and other rebel forces in the area.[278] However, it would be several years before ISIS was forced to relinquish control over the city.

'Their eyes spread everywhere': ISIS's stifling social programme in Manbij

After seizing Manbij, ISIS launched a widespread campaign of arrests targeting members of FSA factions that had controlled Manbij as well as civilians who supported them. While former members of Manbij's Revolutionary Council migrated to Turkey or areas remaining under armed opposition control,[279] those who did not get out in time were captured and either taken to detention centres or executed in public spaces. Their bodies were often left hanging for days. Others were taken to nearby al-Bab, where ISIS had an intelligence headquarters.

ISIS policies had a stifling social impact in Manbij. Chaos was replaced with profound fear. A Manbij resident described how ISIS forced family members or to spy on one another:

> [ISIS] tried to entice young men and children to get involved and join its ranks. It used material temptations like money, women, and the promise of *houriyat* [heavenly virgins] in paradise. Under their rule, there was no security or trust between people and their neighbours. Even within the same family, there were ISIS spies. Their eyes spread everywhere. People couldn't even speak in front of their children. You couldn't smoke in front of them, because ISIS fighters would come to the streets, give the young children sweets or money, and ask if any of their parents or carers smoked. If the child said yes, the person would be arrested. People became scared of each other.[280]

Another stated that society became "fragmented" by fear: "Everyone became afraid of each other. You started being afraid of your neighbours' son because he could get you killed."[281]

As in other areas under its control, ISIS imposed a rigid social programme based on its regressive interpretation of the Quran and *Shari'a*. A woman from Manbij described its impacts:

> ISIS banned funeral wakes. [They] put a lot of pressure on people getting married, even obliging the bride to wear black all over. You stopped seeing weddings at all. The group imposed clothing restrictions on both women and men. It forced women to wear black clothes covering their entire bodies—their faces, eyes and hands—and banned them from wearing coloured clothes.
>
> It also forced men to wear a short gown that ended above the heels, and to grow their beards and trim their moustaches. Anyone who violated ISIS dress codes was stripped of

[276] Ibid, p.49.
[277] Information collected from interviews in Manbij, April and May 2023.
[278] Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Syria: Evidence of Islamic State Cluster Munition Use' (1 September 2014) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/01/syria-evidence-islamic-state-cluster-munition-use> accessed 17 August 2023.
[279] Gopal & Hodge, p. 49.
[280] Individual testimony #63.
[281] Individual testimony #72.

> their ID card, imprisoned, whipped, forced to take a course in *Shari'a*, and abused and humiliated.[282]

There was no room for other religions; in downtown Manbij, ISIS smashed the tombstones of the cemetery because they considered them to be idolatrous.[283] Meanwhile, ISIS facilitated the quarrying and looting of antiquities in Manbij and the rich archaeological sites in the outlying countryside.[284] The group was also involved in drug sales. At the same time, it halted those economic activities that did not serve its own interests and passed laws limiting economic activity among the population. It closed individual businesses and imposed strangulating restrictions on various professions. This caused unemployment to soar and sowed poverty among all social classes. The same woman from Manbij recounted how:

> On top of all the teachers leaving their jobs, ISIS closed government offices [so] all the civil servants lost their jobs. Students were out of school, too. Many lawyers were forced to leave their careers, and so were gynaecologists. ISIS banned their profession, saying it violate[d] Islamic law and could even be considered blasphemy. The whole society suffered.[285]

The group made special efforts to recruit children, capitalising on the fact that they could be easily manipulated and indoctrinated into total loyalty to the organisation. This was achieved through religious education, by exploiting poverty and gaining leverage over the population through cash handouts, and by recruiting children into spying networks. A Manbij resident said:

> ISIS closed the schools and used all its platforms and media outlets to attract young people and drag them into its hateful terrorist organisation, inculcating them with extremist and *takfiri* ideas. We no longer had education. The schools were closed.
>
> Education also stopped for university students, as no-one dared to travel to Aleppo or Damascus to pursue their studies, for fear of [ISIS] because it banned traveling to "infidel countries."[286]

'They put my brother's head on the block': Public executions

Nevertheless, ISIS initially kept some distance between itself and the city's residents, relying on local tribal structures when it came to governance. Maintaining popular support in Manbij was vital to the group; the region served as its main gateway to the outside world, via the Turkish border. With ISIS engaged in drawn-out battles elsewhere in 2014, Manbij was spared the worst of the group's abuse.

This changed following ISIS' defeats in Kobane and Hasakeh. As ISIS started to lose territory, it increasingly ruled Manbij with an iron fist. It took revenge on residents in areas under its control, launching widespread arrest campaigns. The group instilled fear among the people by carrying out executions in public squares on various charges, such as blasphemy or for having alleged or real connections to the Syrian government, the FSA, or the PKK. ISIS also targeted other religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians and Manbij's Sufi population, seeing their expulsion as its legitimate duty in building a "cleansed" Islamic state.

---

[282] Individual testimony #76.
[283] Patrick Cockburn, 'In the small city of Manbij in Syria, we could see US and Turkish troops shooting at each other if tensions continue' *The Independent* (London, 2 March 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-us-turkey-troops-fighting-manbij-kurdish-assad-civil-war-a8236201.html> accessed 17 August 2023.
[284] Adnan Almohamad, 'The destruction and looting of cultural heritage sites by ISIS in Syria: The case of Manbij and its countryside' (2016) *International Journal of Cultural Property* 28(2).
[285] Individual testimony #76.
[286] Individual testimony #72.

On 4 April 2015, ISIS executed four people from the village of Rummana, near Manbij. The incident occurred after a woman from the village complained to the group that her husband had married another woman, who was Alawi. The woman accused him of having dealings with infidels and *Nusayris*, a derogatory, sectarian term for members of the Alawi sect. ISIS fighters responded by executing the man on the al-Dilla Roundabout in Manbij's al-Hazawnah district. Later, one of the man's sons—who was affiliated with ISIS—was killed. The woman then accused a group of young men of the murder. ISIS arrested and beheaded them publicly with a sword in front of the village mosque following Friday prayers while their families watched.[287]

A man from another family described their experience with ISIS' brutality:

> We went to an ISIS office to collect our car after they had seized it. But the fighter [in the office] kept delaying my father and then told him: "Sit near the car and wait."
>
> My father got angry and argued with him, but the fighter insisted that he sit next to the car. Finally, he stood next to it. A few minutes later, the car exploded. I was about ten metres away from my father, but I was sitting on the ground, while my father was standing. A large piece of shrapnel hit him in the stomach. I watched him lean against a wall, say the *shahada* [Islamic statement of faith] and die.
>
> I was hit by shrapnel in my shoulder and under my arm. A group of civilians were also wounded in the explosion, including a woman whose clothes were torn off. The explosion was caused by ISIS and not by an air strike as ISIS claimed.[288]

After his father's death, the man hoped that his uncles, who had been arrested, would be released. In January 2016, however, they found out that ISIS had executed all three on charges of supporting the FSA and having dealings with Kurdish groups.[289]

Many public executions were carried out with extreme cruelty—by gunfire or beheading with swords. ISIS even publicly crucified victims and left them hanging on crosses for days while preventing families from burying them, to spread terror among opponents. Executions were usually conducted in public squares or in front of mosques, especially before or after Friday prayers, to gather the biggest possible crowd.

A witness whose brother was decapitated described the harrowing experience:

> After detaining and torturing him, on a Friday morning before prayers, ISIS came to the village. They were heavily armed and had twelve military vehicles and a group of masked mercenaries. All the village residents were gathered in front of the mosque in the square, and the man with the sword appeared. He was terrifying.
>
> He first showed off his strength and swung the sword around, to spread fear in the crowd. Then they put my brother's head on the block, and with one blow, they separated his head from his body, in full view of the villagers.
>
> They didn't hand over the corpse after they slaughtered him. Instead, they carried the corpses, crucified them, and hung them for three days on the roundabouts of Manbij. Only after three days were the corpses handed over to us.[290]

Another eyewitness described the trauma of witnessing a beheading in front of their village mosque:

[287] Individual testimonies #17 and #22.
[288] Individual testimony #65.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Individual testimony #17

They brought the man, who was over 50 years' old, and said that he had been practicing witchcraft, and they would punish him as required by *Shari'a*. They beheaded him with a sword.

I tried to look away, but in the end, I saw his head separated from his body. I was deeply shocked by that awful sight. That night I couldn't eat or sleep, especially as my son […] had been detained by ISIS.

At the beginning of the execution, I hid at the back of the crowd so I wouldn't see them killing this man. The sight of him being killed next to the mosque was terrible for everyone in the village, young and old. It left a dreadful psychological scar on me and everyone in the village.

'They were waiting for her to turn 10': Violations against women & girls in Manbij

ISIS fighters adopted several methods to either obtain wives or exploit women sexually, justifying their practices on various religious pretexts. The group set up "marriage offices" to arrange two types of marriage. Through the first type, so-called consensual marriages, ISIS fighters would marry a non-ISIS or "common" woman, often seeking out particularly beautiful women and exploiting the dire economic conditions of poorer families. The second form of marriage was explicitly forced: the group would accuse a family member of blasphemy or apostasy and force the family into accepting a marriage in exchange for the charges being dropped.

A witness talked about ISIS policies against women during its control in Manbij:

> There was an ignorant man, a criminal, aged about 70. He was an ISIS judge. He took two girls from the village and married them by force at the Tishreen Dam housing complex. The group had a horrible custom: when an ISIS member had a wife or wives, he could recommend that they be passed to an emir or to other ISIS fighters in the event of his death. Then, when he died, his comrades would take the women and divide them amongst themselves, without the women having any say, and without respecting the *'idda*.[291] All this was laid out in orders handed down by ISIS' leadership.[292]

Another practice, known as "sexual jihad," saw women "married" to ISIS fighters to provide sex and boost their morale. This was barely disguised sexual slavery and usually involved some form of coercion.

The strict yet idiosyncratic implementation of religious policies did not just affect women: men too could face severe consequences if accused of immoral or impure behaviour. At least one man in Manbij was stoned to death for allegedly committing adultery. The mother of the stoning victim talked about how her son was killed on trumped-up charges:

> An ISIS patrol came and arrested my son, Alaa. When I visited their detention centre, they told me he was charged with adultery. They claimed they had done a virginity test and discovered he had committed adultery with a mute woman, who was now four months pregnant.
>
> I told them: "My son just got married, why would he be involved with another woman?"
>
> But they weren't convinced by this. I spent a month visiting them, while my son sat in prison with no idea about the charges he was facing.
>
> Then, on 10 October 2015, an [ISIS] patrol came and delivered his body to the house. They told us: "We carried out the punishment for adultery and stoned him to death."[293]

[291] Three three-month period a woman should wait before re-marrying after being widowed, as stipulated by *Shari'a.*
[292] Individual testimony #75.
[293] Individual testimony #77.

However, women certainly suffered some of the worst abuses. Like in other areas under ISIS control, in Manbij the group brought hundreds of Yazidi women and girls from the Sinjar area of Iraq and sold them at "slave-girl markets." ISIS treated these women as a sexual commodity to be bought, sold, or disposed of as the group and individual fighters saw fit. Most of the group's ideas and laws about women saw them as *awrah*, as unclean or shameful beings. One Manbij resident detailed how ISIS traded in women:

> I saw that some ISIS fighters brought girls from outside the country, aged just nine or 10 years' old. They said the girls' fathers were fighting the group, so they had taken them as hostages. There was one nine-year-old girl. They were waiting for her to turn 10, so one of them could marry her. There was an office for marrying minors. They wouldn't accept older girls, only those aged 12 to 17 years' old.[294]

Most buyers were ISIS fighters and their relatives, who had arrived with the group from other Syrian cities or from abroad. Research conducted for this report found no cases of Manbij locals buying these women as slaves; however, on dozens of occasions, Manbij residents bought Yazidi girls and women to rescue them, mirroring a practice documented elsewhere in Syria and Iraq.[295] This was carried out in coordination with the Kurdish-led SDF, YPG and YPJ, which liaised with Manbij residents and sent them money so they could "buy" Yazidis and bring them to the banks of the Euphrates, from where they could escape to SDF-held Kobane.[296] In retaliation, ISIS arrested and killed several Arab residents accused of helping Yazidis escape or smuggling Kurds or Kurdish-owned property to SDF-controlled areas east of the Euphrates.

Violations targeting ethnic minorities

ISIS also systematically targeted Manbij's Kurds. As it was locked in a protracted battle with the Kurdish-led SDF, which was backed by the US-led Coalition, ISIS viewed all Kurds in Manbij with extreme suspicion and treated them with absolute contempt. Kidnappings, killings, and other abuses were used to specifically target the Kurdish population in rural Manbij; this also included Kurds who had married into Arab clans to avoid the wrath of the group. Kurds in rural areas avoided going to the city for fear of being arrested. Anyone caught trying to leave would be charged with attempting to escape and join the SDF or PKK to fight ISIS.

The father of a Kurdish victim described how his son was killed on accusations that he worked with Kurdish forces:

> My son's charge was that he had the name "Dilberin" tattooed on his hand. An ISIS member told me: "This is the name that killed your son." They caught him at the border and brought him to Manbij. They promised me that after 15 days I could see him. But they executed him.
>
> They told me: "We killed your son because he was affiliated with the PKK." I know for sure that he was not affiliated with them. He simply had the name Dilberin tattooed on his hand. It's a Kurdish name. This is what killed him. My son had been married just 40 days earlier. He got married, and then he died.[297]

Another Kurdish victim described a relative's horrific encounter with ISIS:

---

[294] Individual testimony #69.
[295] See: Kristen Chick, 'With Mosul under siege, an unlikely chance to save ISIS-enslaved Yazidis?' *Christian Science Monitor* (3 December 2016) <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1203/With-Mosul-under-siege-an-unlikely-chance-to-save-ISIS-enslaved-Yazidis> accessed 17 August 2023.
[296] Information collected from interviews with community members and local officials, April and May 2023.
[297] Individual testimony #74.

> My sister's husband […] was working in Beirut but came to Manbij to see his family. While he was there, he was captured by [ISIS]. Fighters came to his family home to arrest his brother, [but] they also arrested [my brother-in-law] and another brother. Of course, as Kurds, they were both accused of belonging to the PKK.
>
> They were held for three months. Several other people were detained with them. After three months, they were all released except for [my brother-in-law] and his two brothers. Three months later, I was in Aleppo, and I heard that ISIS had executed [him] and hung his body up at the Seven Seas Roundabout in Manbij. I went to the roundabout and there it was, the body of my brother-in-law, hanging [there]. It was a horrific sight.
>
> I kept monitoring the place. Three days later, ISIS members came in a car and took the body away, so I followed them to find out where they would put it. I was riding a motorbike and was able to follow them without being noticed. When they reached the Matahin Roundabout, they went around it twice, trying to cover their tracks. After that, they went to the eastern cemetery in Manbij city and laid the body in front of it. They dug a [mass grave] in the pavement, measuring about 100 metres' long and two and a half metres' deep. They put the corpses on top of each other and covered them with soil, with the help of two other ISIS members, who used to sit there in a tent and wait for vehicles to arrive with bodies to bury.[298]

Almost all young Kurds in the area fled. The remaining Kurds in Manbij were trapped, as ISIS increasingly seized Kurdish-owned houses and properties. ISIS held public auctions at large warehouses in Manbij city to sell seized Kurdish real estate, furniture, cars and other items. Elderly residents and others who stayed began sleeping on farms or in the open air to avoid night-time raids and arrest campaigns by ISIS, only sneaking back to their homes just before dawn.

'They killed the men, and if the women screamed, they killed them too': The al-Buwayr massacre

After fending off the siege of Kobane and making gains in Hasakeh, the SDF and US-led Coalition prepared for their offensive on Manbij.[299] They recaptured the Tishreen Dam in late 2015 and then the town of Sarrin in early 2016. At the end of May, the offensive got underway, and progress was initially swift: by 10 June, the SDF had encircled Manbij city.[300] French special forces were also reportedly heavily involved in fighting on the ground.[301]

Nevertheless, it would take more than two months of protracted fighting before ISIS was finally expelled from Manbij. ISIS threw manpower and resources into defending the city, which it considered a vital strategic corridor and communications hub linking ISIS power centres across Syria and Iraq. Although the SDF had gained a foothold in the city by the end of June, ISIS launched the first of two major counter-offensives to break the siege the following month.[302] These were repelled, and the SDF advanced further. On 10 July, the ISIS *emir* of Manbij, Abu Khalid al-Tunisi, was killed in the fighting.[303]

---

[298] Individual testimony #62.

[299] The operation was later named after Faisal Abu Layla, a key military leader in the liberation of Kobane, who was killed early in the fight to free Manbij.
See: *Rudaw*, 'Hero of Kobane dies from ISIS sniper wound' (5 June 2016) <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/050620162> accessed 17 August 2023.

[300] *Reuters*, 'U.S.-backed forces cut off all routes into IS-held Manbij: Syrian Observatory' (10 June 2016) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-manbij-idUSKCN0YW0T1> accessed 17 August 2023.

[301] Vincent Nouzille, *Les Tueurs de la République* (Fayard, 2015).

[302] *Reuters*, 'U.S.-backed militias face second Islamic State counter attack - official, monitor' (4 July 2016) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-manbij-idUSKCN0ZK0SI> accessed 17 August 2023.

[303] *ARA News*, 'ISIS Emir killed under SDF fire north Syria' (10 July 2016) <https://web.archive.org/web/20160713063334/http://aranews.net/2016/07/isis-emir-killed-sdf-fire-north-syria/> accessed 17 August 2023.

Over the rest of the month, ISIS lost further ground. It attempted another counter-offensive to break the siege to the west of Manbij in late July. This was when the people of the village of al-Buwayr woke up to an ISIS attack.

ISIS fighters infiltrated the village, raided houses and started shooting randomly at men, women, and children. They killed the men first, then several children and women. One eyewitness, a child at the time, recounted how:

> [ISIS] members killed two displaced people who were living in the school. Three [ISIS] fighters killed my father, my mother, and my paternal uncles. They killed the men, and if the women screamed, they killed them too.

Another survivor, who was blinded by an explosion, remembered the immediate aftermath of the massacre:

> I heard a loud noise and immediately lost consciousness. I don't know what happened. I stayed unconscious for about three hours and when I came to, I heard people's voices. The paramedics had come. Someone approached me, but because of the severity of the explosion, he didn't even recognise me. It was my cousin. He told people, "Come and lift this person, he's still alive!"
>
> They carried me to the ambulance and took me and lots of other people to Manbij. When we arrived, they said I was dead, people didn't believe I was alive.
>
> One of my brothers came and asked about me, and they told him: "He's dead." Then I sat up and vomited blood.
>
> They said: "Dead people don't vomit. He must be alive. But he'll die if he doesn't get treated." So, they took me to Qamishli because there weren't enough doctors in Manbij. I was wounded in the eye.
>
> I lost my sight after the operation. They stopped the bleeding, but they had to remove both of my eyes.[304]

A young boy was left quadriplegic and unable to speak or move.[305] ISIS terrorised another man, setting him alight several times, an experience that left him with serious mental issues, including memory loss.[306]

ISIS' attack on al-Buwayr left around 30 people dead and dozens more injured,[307] and represented yet another example of the kind of extreme violence the group meted out across northeast Syria as its power began to wane.

'We were hit by friendly fire': Civilian casualties during Manbij's liberation

During the final days of the battle for Manbij, ISIS members bunkered down in their security headquarters in central Manbij and gradually withdrew to the al-Sarb neighbourhood on the northern outskirts of the city.[308] By 12 August, the SDF had full control of Manbij.

[304] Individual testimony #11.
[305] Individual testimony #32.
[306] Individual testimony #41.
[307] This number was reached through testimonies collected in and around Manbij between April and May 2023. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights conflict monitor initially reported that 24 civilians were killed.
See: SOHR, 'IS executes 24 civilians 10km away from Menbej city' (29 July 2016) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/48877/> accessed 17 August 2023.
[308] Interviews with Manbij residents, April and May 2023.

The civilian toll during the fighting had been high. ISIS killed civilians who attempted to escape and repeatedly used car bombs. The last remaining ISIS fighters, according to the SDF, used civilians as human shields.[309] They also turned civilian homes and properties into military installations, or even disguised civilian homes as ISIS bases, to divert airstrikes away from actual ISIS infrastructure.

One eyewitness, whose house ended up on a frontline between ISIS and SDF fighters, described the devastating consequences this had for his family:

> During the battle for liberation, four ISIS members turned up near my house. They were fighting with the liberating forces. Then three of them withdrew and one stayed. He was remarkably close to the house. After about half an hour, the shooting stopped, and I went out to see what was happening. I said: "Thank God, the fighting has ended, and everything is okay."
>
> That night, my brother and brother-in-law came, and the house filled up with family, with around 18 people there. When my brother and brother-in-law were about to leave, we were saying goodbye at the door when suddenly two missiles from a plane hit the house. They killed my daughter Fawzia, who was 14, and my granddaughter Naima, who was one-and-a-half years' old.
>
> We ran away carrying their bodies, but the aircraft fired at us again, killing my daughter Abir, who was 13, and my granddaughter Nadia, who was three. My wife, son and daughter went in a different direction that night. When we reached my brother's house, we couldn't find them. But when the sun came up in the morning, I saw all of their bodies […] lying on the ground after they had been hit. The Coalition warplanes had also bombed my house and destroyed it.
>
> The bombing and destruction of my house and the killing of my family were all because of the four ISIS militants who'd started fighting the liberating forces near my house. They opened fire on the liberating forces from the east and west [sides] of my house, so the [SDF] and the Coalition thought that there were [ISIS] fighters permanently stationed in my house. They bombed it with the intention of wiping them out. But the victims were my family and my home. No one in my family […] was ever part of [ISIS].[310]

This incident was not a one-off. In late July, airstrikes allegedly carried out by the US-led Coalition in Tokhar, close to Manbij, killed entire families, including young children, thinking that they were fleeing ISIS fighters.[311] Incidents like this led anti-ISIS activists from the Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently campaign group to accuse the US-led Coalition of deploying a 'scorched earth policy' and dealing with Manbij civilians 'as if they were terrorists or ISIS supporters.'[312] The US military, following an internal investigation, said 24 civilians had 'intermixed with the fighters' and that there was no evidence of negligence or wrongdoing. An on-the-ground *New York Times* investigation found more than 120 civilians were killed in attacks in which there was no evidence that ISIS fighters had been near any of the targets.[313]

[309] Suleiman al-Khalidi and Lisa Barrington 'U.S.-backed forces wrest control of Syria's Manbij from Islamic State' *Reuters* (12 August 2016) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-islamic-state-idUSKCN10N178> accessed 17 August 2023.
[310] Individual testimony #72.
[311] Max Bearak, 'An airstrike in Syria killed entire families instead of Isis fighters' *The Independent* (London, 22 July 2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/an-airstrike-in-syria-killed-entire-families-instead-of-isis-fighters-a7149771.html> accessed 17 August 2023.
[312] Lizzie Dearden, 'War against Isis: US-led coalition accused of killing civilians using "scorched earth policy" in Syria' *The Independent* (London, 5 August 2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-against-isis-usled-coalition-accused-of-killing-civilians-using-scorched-earth-policy-in-syria-a7174736.html> accessed 17 August 2023.
[313] Azmat Khan, 'Hidden Pentagon records reveal patterns of failure in deadly airstrikes' *The New York Times* (New York City, 18 December 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/18/us/airstrikes-pentagon-records-civilian-deaths.html> accessed 17 August 2023.

By mid-August 2016, the opposition-affiliated Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) documented the killing of at least 444 civilians, including 106 children, during the battle to liberate Manbij. Among them, 203 were killed in airstrikes on Manbij and the surroundings, while others died in gunfights, shelling and attempts to cross minefields planted by ISIS. The SDF lost more than 300 fighters during their campaign to liberate the city, while ISIS lost more than 1,019 of its fighters.[314]

The aftermath

The fall of Manbij was the biggest loss for ISIS since the liberation of Kobane in 2015. In the immediate aftermath of the defeat, many of the remaining ISIS fighters withdrew to Jarablus on the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkish tanks then crossed into Syria to drive ISIS out of the border town, and the FSA entered the region as part of the Turkish-led "Euphrates Shield" operation.[315] Shortly after ISIS' defeat, however, clashes broke out between Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF.[316] Eventually, a Russian-mediated deal saw the SDF turn over villages to government forces, to appease concerns from Turkey and its affiliated forces.[317]

Residents of Manbij, an Arab-majority city, soon expressed uneasiness about the possibility of being ruled by Kurdish-led authorities. The establishment of the SDF-aligned Manbij Military Council, a multi-ethnic local governance structure meant to acknowledge Manbij's demographics, allowed for a slow return of displaced people to their homes. Even though Manbij had not suffered the kind of devastation seen in Kobane, many displaced residents found it difficult to return. Operations were launched to clear rubble in the city, but as with other areas recently liberated from ISIS, mines and unexploded ordnance among the debris killed and injured hundreds more after the group's withdrawal.[318] The Manbij Military Council meanwhile, had limited resources and lacked much-needed specialists in most administrative and civilian sectors, while there was limited international support to meet the basic needs of the population through early recovery, livelihood and healthcare assistance. And yet the needs were immense: interviews with dozens of victims in Manbij revealed that close to none had received any mental health support at all since the end of the conflict.

By 2018, according to some accounts, Manbij was on a path to recovery. One visitor described it as a "boomtown" to which businessmen from Aleppo had flocked to profit from trade with the SDF-held areas.[319] Such reports, however, masked the economic insecurity experienced by ordinary families. One woman, widowed during the conflict, said:

> My son is 13 years' old, which is a critical and dangerous age. But he goes to work to earn us a living. Is that normal? Sometimes [I] borrow money from my neighbours and grocers until my son comes back with money, just so that we have enough bread to survive. Is that justice? I'm not the only one in this situation, there are many like me.[320]

[314] SOHR, 'The third US citizen fighter is killed in Manbij area and casualty number rises to about 1800 civilians and fighters' (17 August 2016) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/49446/> accessed 17 August 2023.
[315] Lizzie Dearden, 'Syria war: Turkish tanks cross border in huge operation to drive Isis out of key stronghold' *The Independent* (London, 24 August 2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-isis-latest-news-turkey-tanks-offensive-attack-syrian-civil-war-jihadist-us-jarablus-north-a7206826.html> accessed 17 August 2023.
[316] Samuel Osborne, 'Turkey threatens more Syria strikes if Kurdish forces do not retreat' *The Independent* (London, 29 August 2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-in-syria-latest-news-strikes-syrian-civil-war-isis-attack-offensive-kurds-a7215241.html> accessed 17 August 2023.
[317] Lizzie Dearden, 'Isis defeat in northern Syria opens deadly new phase in civil war as rebel groups turn on each other' *The Independent* (London, 3 March 2017) https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-northern-syria-defeat-civil-war-new-phase-rebels-bashar-al-assad-regime-sdf-turkey-us-russia-iran-a7610231.html> accessed 17 August 2023.
[318] HRW, 'Syria: Improvised Mines Kill, Injure Hundreds in Manbij' (26 October 2016) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/26/syria-improvised-mines-kill-injure-hundreds-manbij> accessed 17 August 2023.
[319] Cockburn, ' In the small city of Manbij in Syria.'
[320] Individual testimony #53.

According to Manbij's residents, there has been little progress in delivering justice and accountability to the many victims of ISIS in the area. For some, this should be economic, taking the form of reparations or compensation for material losses suffered during the conflict, including battle-related loss or destruction of property and confiscation by ISIS.

One demand from many in Manbij is for local authorities or the international community to conduct trials of ISIS members currently held in detention by the Autonomous Administration and SDF. A woman, whose husband was executed and crucified by ISIS, summed up her demands:

> No agency provided us with anything. We sometimes hear that organisations are helping people, but no one has helped us. My appeal to the international community, to international justice agencies and to honourable people around the world is that they hold jailed ISIS members accountable, help children affected by the violations, support the families of victims, and try to redress the damage they have suffered because of [ISIS'] violations and its terrorist and criminal practices.[321]

Even when people were still trying to live with their traumas in the immediate aftermath of ISIS rule, the group demonstrated that it could still be a threat. On 16 October 2016, four ISIS suicide bombers infiltrated the village of al-Mashi and blew themselves up among a group of residents, killing eleven. Taking place just a month after al-Mashi had been liberated from ISIS, it was clear that ISIS cells remained a threat in the region.

Many of the group's victims interviewed for this report feared that the group will be able to reconstitute itself and return. Manbij residents were clearly afraid to speak about or criticise the group or anything relating to it. They selected interview venues carefully, and spoke quickly to complete interviews as soon as possible, especially in rural areas.

Post-ISIS Manbij also remained caught in larger geopolitical tensions. Observers say that the divide between Turkey and the SDF-affiliated Manbij Military Council replicated similar fault-lines that plagued the city after the 1960s: with wealthy elites aligned with the Turkey-backed opposition squaring off with poorer members of Arab tribes aligned with the SDF.[322] Meanwhile, Turkish President Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to attack Manbij.[323] After US forces withdrew from Manbij in 2019, the YPG followed suit. In a telling reversal of fates for Manbij, Syrian government forces, expelled from the area in 2012, returned to the city accompanied by Russian armed forces.[324] By the summer of 2022, renewed talk of a Turkish invasion of Manbij led to increasing alignment between the pro-Assad forces and the SDF in the city.[325]

[321] Individual testimony #78.
[322] Gopal and Hodge, p.50.
[323] *Al Jazeera English*, 'Erdogan threatens to extend Afrin operation to Manbij' (Qatar, 24 January 2018) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/24/erdogan-threatens-to-extend-afrin-operation-to-manbij> accessed 17 August 2023.
[324] *Arab News*, 'Syrian and Russian troops sweep into Manbij as US withdraws' (15 April 2019) <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1569256/middle-east> accessed 17 August 2023.
[325] *Reuters*, 'Erdogan says Turkey to rid Syria's Tal Rifaat, Manbij of terrorists' (1 June 2022) <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-rid-syrias-tal-rifaat-manbij-terrorists-2022-06-01/>; Khaled al-Khateb, 'Syrian Kurds, Arabs join forces to defend Manbij ahead of Turkish military operation' *Al-Monitor* (24 June 2022) <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-kurds-arabs-join-forces-defend-manbij-ahead-turkish-military-operation> ; *The Independent*, 'US-backed Syrian Kurds to turn to Damascus if Turkey attacks' (London, 7 June 2022) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/recep-tayyip-erdogan-ap-turkey-ankara-damascus-b2095634.html> accessed 17 August 2023.

4. TABQA

Before the Syrian conflict, Tabqa's residents lived in relatively stable conditions compared with other areas of northeast Syria. However, years of uprising and war, followed by four years of ISIS rule between 2014 and 2017, left deep scars.

In many ways, Tabqa's ordeal is not over.

Tabqa before the conflict

The district of Tabqa is located on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Built on a rocky hill overlooking the 80-kilometre-long Euphrates Lake (also known as Lake Assad), Tabqa is located immediately south of the 60-meter-tall Tabqa or al-Thawrah Dam. Administratively, the district is part of Raqqa province. Around 55 kilometres to the east lies Raqqa city, while 188 kilometres to the west lies Aleppo.

Tabqa had nearly 70,000 inhabitants before the conflict, according to Syria's 2004 population census.[326] However, by 2021, the population had grown to 131,500 people, driven by wartime displacements from other parts of the country.[327] Tabqa's largest community was Sunni Arabs, although alongside them lived diverse groups of Armenians, Kurds, roughly a thousand Assyrians, and Ismailis. There were also Alawi, Druze, Circassian, Chechens, Palestinians, Iraqi and even some German residents.

The city was known as *al-Thawrah*, or "the revolution," a name commemorating the *coup d'état* (known as the 8 March Revolution) that brought the Ba'ath Party to power in Syria in 1963. Following the coup, much of Syria's industrial and commercial infrastructure was nationalised, and the new regime pursued land reform.[328] These policies quickly diminished the economic power of the old bourgeoise and created a disparity between merchants, who fared well, and industrialists, who were heavily impacted as key industries were brought under the control of the government and a new state elite closely tied to the Ba'ath Party.[329] The influx of petrodollars and foreign aid made significant development programmes possible.[330]

One of the major development projects pursued by the Ba'ath regime was based in Tabqa: the city was chosen as a home for the $340 million Euphrates dam, known as the Tabqa or al-Thawrah Dam, constructed between 1968 and 1973 with the help of the Soviet Union (although the power station for the dam was not finalised until 1978).[331] The dam is one of the largest sources of electricity in Syria, with eight turbines generating about 824 megawatts; it is also a major source of drinking water for cities as far afield as Aleppo, and irrigates around a million hectares of agricultural land around the dam while protecting villages on its fringes from spring floods. During the decades before the Syrian conflict, Tabqa underwent major urban development projects to improve its roads, electricity, water and sewage infrastructure. The city also benefitted from a national hospital and other

[326] Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 'Syria Population Census, 2004' (Ar.) (n.d.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20151208115353/http://www.cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf> accessed 17 August 2023.
[327] Rojava Information Center, *Beyond Rojava: North and East Syria's Arab Regions* (June 2021) <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2021/06/RIC-Dossier-Arab-regions.pdf> accessed 18 August 2023.
[328] Ziad Keilany, 'Land Reform in Syria' (1980) *Middle Eastern Studies* 16(3) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4282794> accessed 18 August 2023.
[329] Volker Perthes, 'The Bourgeoisie and the Baath: A look at Syria's Upper Class' (1991) MERIP 170 *Middle East Report* <https://merip.org/1991/05/the-bourgeoisie-and-the-baath/> accessed 18 August 2023.
[330] Volker Perthes, *Staat und Gesellschaft in Syrien, 1970-1989* (Schriften des Deutschen Orient-Institutes, 1990), p.82.
[331] Many workers paid their lives as a price for its completion: an estimated 91 people died during the construction of the dam.

healthcare centres, which served the population free of charge. The city had a prominent cultural centre and was also home to an important local archaeological site, the castle at Jabaar.

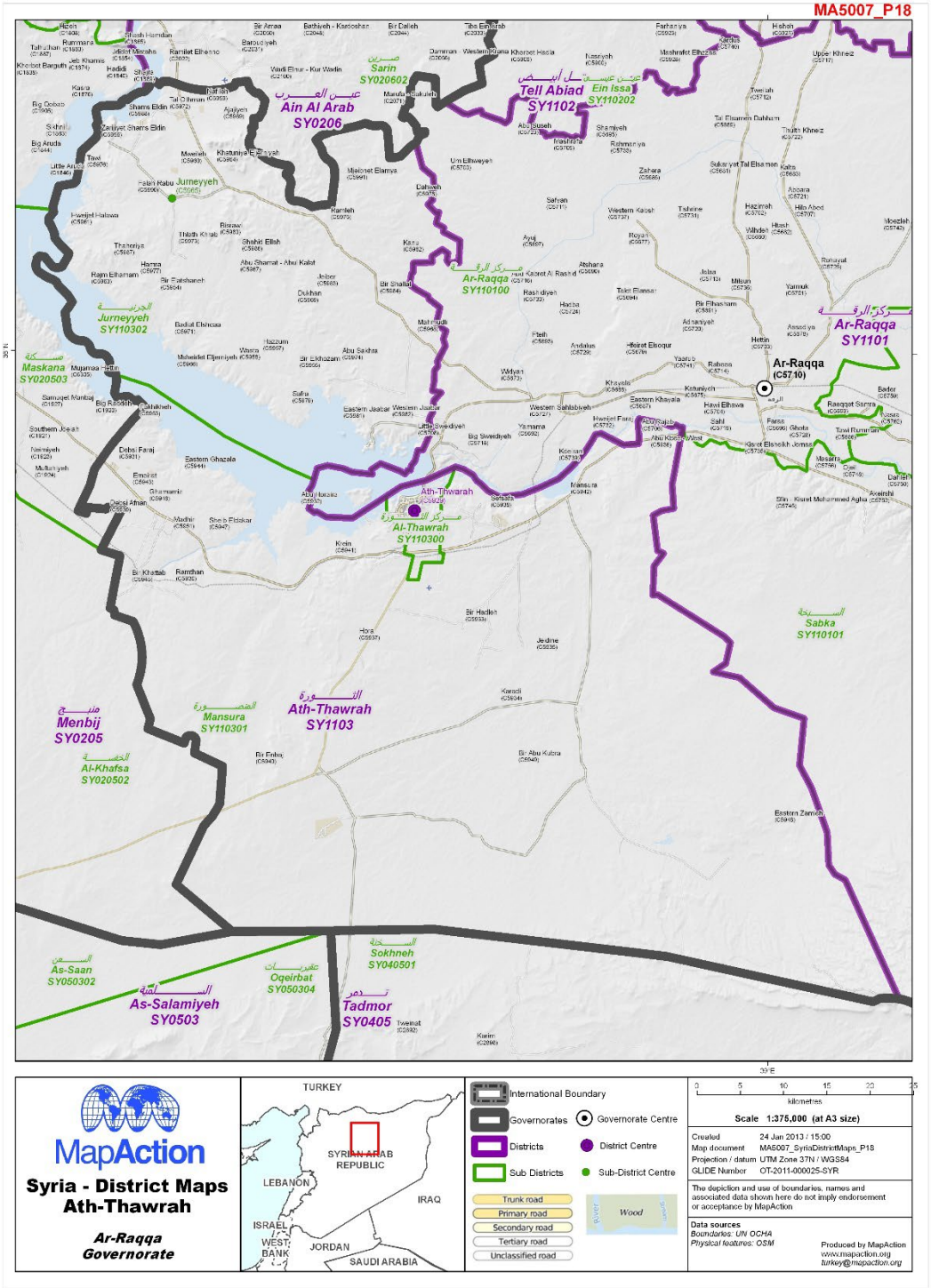


FIGURE 3: AL-THAWRAH DISTRICT WITHIN SYRIA'S RAQQA PROVINCE.[332]

[332] Map Action, 'Syria District Maps: Ath-Thawrah' (4 July 2016) <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/217-2789/resource/c3b5fbb7-9a5f-4bff-a517-5d7e25502ee9> accessed 18 August 2023.

Construction of the Tabqa Dam significantly expanded and modernised the city of Tabqa. Many of Tabqa's residents had originally migrated from other areas of the country to work on the dam, living in a northern section of the city in a lively, ethnically mixed area with bakeries, shops and restaurants known as "the Neighbourhoods" that lies adjacent to the Euphrates and Lake Assad. A distinguishing feature of this section of Tabqa, which set the city apart from other Syrian cities, was its urban planning, which had been carried out by Russian experts. Lush green vegetation surrounded the city's concrete homes and houses.

The southern part of the city was separated from the Neighbourhoods by the railway, which was built to transport materials and supplies required for the construction of the dam. This part is the original village of Tabqa, which grew out of a small, unplanned agricultural village on the bank of the Euphrates. Tabqa had farming centres for fish, poultry and agricultural land irrigated from the Euphrates where cotton, barley, wheat, sugar cane and vegetables were grown. The government also provided tools for agricultural production. The public sector also served as a significant employer in the city.

To most people, life in Tabqa was pleasant. Sharing a widely held sentiment about life in the city before 2011, one interviewee said:

> Before the crisis in Syria, we lived well. We had a lot of olive trees, farmland and cars. I had a taxi with my brothers. I was an employee at the Euphrates dam. The education levels in the city were very good. Women were free to wear anything and work in any role. The health sector was good, and services were free, affordable and available. There was a good hospital in the city.[333]

Another added:

> Before 2010-2011, the situation [in Tabqa] was good. An employee's monthly wage was around $200-$300. Health services were easily accessible and good. Many people used to go to government hospitals, not private hospitals. Everything was cheap, everything was good and available, and everyone liked to help each other and host each other.

However, the interviewee added grimly, "these things do not exist anymore."[334]

The conflict in Tabqa

Because of the generally positive living conditions and high level of service provision in Tabqa, most of the city's inhabitants were generally considered loyal to the Syrian regime in the pre-war period. But even so, the city was not immune to the security infiltration and inequalities that existed everywhere in the country.

Given the city's strategic and economic importance, the Syrian government was convinced that Tabqa's political, administrative and economic leaders should demonstrate their political reliability, if not absolute loyalty to the regime. While a handful of left-wing political parties—namely the Syrian Communist Party and parties of the National Progressive Front—were permitted to engage in politics alongside the ruling Ba'ath Party, key political and economic departments were controlled by members of the Ba'ath Party and the security services. This included the General Authority of the Tabqa Dam as well as the al-Thawrah oilfield, where administrative staff earned higher wages and enjoyed additional benefits. Many people originally from the surrounding area were deprived of the kind of prestigious jobs in strategic industrial departments offered to those migrating in from elsewhere.

[333] Individual testimony #14, focus group session 1.
[334] Individual testimony #90, focus group session 3.

This meant that once demonstrations erupted across Syria after 18 March 2011, some people in Tabqa participated while others did not. The central government responded to the popular protests with arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances targeting local residents while increasing the presence of the security and intelligence services in local communities. The brutality of the security services created a vicious, escalating cycle of protests met with repression that led to funeral marches and larger protests, and it did not take long for armed opposition factions to appear in the district amid the instability that followed.

In late 2012, armed opposition groups took control of the Tabqa Dam,[335] and by the beginning of 2013 wrested control of Tabqa itself from the Syrian government.[336] The coalition of opposition factions that controlled Tabqa included Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and a number of smaller battalions. While many of these promoted themselves using revolutionary slogans and offers to protect local communities, it became readily apparent that their ideological objectives were to establish an Islamic state in line with Islamist interpretations of *Shari'a* law. Throughout 2013, intense clashes between pro-Assad and opposition took place in and around the city and near dam. Syrian Air Force (SAF) warplanes conducted repeated airstrikes and aerial raids from the nearby Tabqa Military Airport to the city's southeast.[337]

The arrival of ISIS

When tensions between Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani and then-leader of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, broke out into an all-out schism and Baghdadi announced the existence of ISIS, Nusra fighters stationed in Tabqa split into two camps. Abu Issa, Nusra's commander in Tabqa, pledged allegiance to Jolani along with many local members of the group; others, including the so-called "migrants" of Nusra who were not from Tabqa, opted to join ISIS.[338] This sparked fighting between the two sides, and armed opposition groups joined forces with Nusra against ISIS. A short but vicious fight for the city ensued, in which ISIS made extensive use of car bombs and suicide bombers. The battles soon went in ISIS' favour and in early 2014, the group took control over most of the local area, including al-Mansoura to the east as well as Tabqa city and its surrounding rural areas.[339]

By late June 2014, when ISIS declared its so-called "caliphate" with Baghdadi at its head, the group divided territory under its control into *wilayat* (provinces). Located close to the group's self-proclaimed capital in Raqqa, Tabqa was called "Sector West" and assigned its own provincial ruler, Awwad al-Khalifa (otherwise known as Abu Hamza).[340] Under his rule, ISIS members forced local residents to pledge their allegiance to the "caliphate" and the "caliph" during Friday prayers in Tabqa and surrounding areas; tribal leaders were also forced to pledge allegiance. Those who refused knew their fate beforehand.

In August 2014, ISIS began preparations to capture Tabqa Military Airport. The group had already brutally captured Syrian army bases for the 17th Division in Raqqa and 93rd Brigade in rural Raqqa's Ain Issa, killing captive soldiers and beheading their corpses.[341] Led by Abu Omar al-Shishani, an Uzbek national and ISIS' so-called

[335] Alison Tahmizian Meuse, 'Syria rebels seize dam' *AAP* (26 November 2012) <https://web.archive.org/web/20121129050853/http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/breaking-news/syria-battle-reaches-damascus-outskirts/story-e6frg13l-1226523898402> accessed 18 August 2023.
[336] *BBC*, 'Rebels "take control of key north Syria airbase"' (London, 11 January 2013) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20984142> accessed 18 August 2023.
[337] *Al-Bawaba*, 'Fierce Syria clashes on Lebanese border force government to launch tighter border policies' (Amman, 21 November 2013) <https://www.albawaba.com/news/syria--535295> accessed 18 August 2023.
[338] Interviews with Tabqa residents, April and May 2023.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Ibid.
[341] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), '9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/28/69 (5 February 2015), Annex 2, para.22.

"minister of war," ISIS aimed to besiege the airport from all directions except the south, giving Syrian troops a corridor through which they could flee.[342]

The battle began on 10 August 2014. Initial attacks by ISIS were unsuccessful, and SAF planes launched retaliatory and largely indiscriminate strikes on Raqqa and Deir Ezzor that caused significant civilian casualties in both cities. Fighting continued for over two weeks. But after bringing in military reinforcements, hundreds of ISIS fighters finally stormed the airport after a double suicide bombing targeted the airbase's entrance, seizing the base on 24 August. Observers estimated 346 ISIS fighters and more than 170 army troops died in the battle for the airport.[343]

Once inside the airport, ISIS fighters killed more than 200 Syrian soldiers in a massacre. A UN report said the men 'were stripped to their underwear and forced to walk into the desert' while a video later broadcast by ISIS 'showed hundreds of bodies lying dead in the sand, bearing gunshot wounds to the head.'[344] Many others fled and were chased down, with an estimated 300 soldiers captured and subsequently executed by beheading in Tabqa or other ISIS-held areas. After broadcasting a video of the massacre, one of the largest perpetrated by ISIS in terms of single casualties, ISIS dug a mass grave for the bodies of approximately 500 soldiers. Interviewees recounted seeing children playing with soldiers' severed heads in the streets shortly afterwards.[345]

'No one knew what they did with his body': Torture & executions in Tabqa

Once ISIS had taken full control of Tabqa district, a new phase of terror began, defined by killings in the street and public executions and *qasas* (retribution) punishments.

Not long after capturing Tabqa airbase, ISIS members brought people whom they accused of apostasy to Tabqa's main market roundabout. On the basis of family testimonies and video evidence, the research team was able to ascertain that they gathered most of the city's inhabitants to demonstrate what would happen to those who violated ISIS' teachings. ISIS members forced captives onto their knees, with a masked ISIS member standing behind each one of them. After the order was given by the emir of the group, they shot them execution-style from behind. Blood ran down the streets.

Another massacre was committed by ISIS on 16 November 2014, when the group killed 13 people from the village of al-Safsaf following afternoon prayers.

The mother of a victim recounted the story of her son, who was killed in a mass execution during this period:

> Six months after they were detained, ISIS members sentenced my son and seven other people. They were from various clans, mostly the Bu Khamis clan. The signs of torture were visible on their bodies.
>
> The day of the *qasas* was Saturday, at 10 am. [It was done] in front of the local people. They shot them dead […] and then left them hanging outside as an example for others. [ISIS] killed people to sow fear and panic inside us.[346]

People were killed on charges of being regime agents: following the capture of Tabqa's airbase, ISIS began a campaign of arrests inside the city and outlying countryside on the grounds that they had found documents at

[342] Interviews with Tabqa residents, April and May 2023.
[343] Sylvia Westall, 'Hundreds dead as Islamic State seizes Syrian air base: monitor' *Reuters* (24 August 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-syria-crisis-idCAKBN0GO0C520140824> accessed 18 August 2023.
[344] UNHRC, '9th report', para.24.
[345] Interviews with Tabqa residents, April and May 2023.
[346] Individual testimony #49.

the airport naming regime agents operating within the city. Similarly, in 2016, ISIS killed a number of civilians in Tabqa, claiming they were operating as Turkish agents.

Others were killed on charges of atheism and disbelief. According to information gathered for this report, at least 800 residents of Tabqa were killed by ISIS members on sentences issued by the group's so-called *Shari'a* Court. Often, however, sentences were handed down without even a semblance of court intervention or due process. Those marked for execution were placed in a prison with a security tower, which was known to the people of Tabqa as the "Death Prison."

A woman described how her father was killed:

> We didn't know where our father was for more than 40 days. We later found out that he'd been sentenced to "retribution," but we didn't know where or when.
>
> Then, we found out from eyewitnesses that his death sentence had been carried out and my father was heard saying that he was innocent. He was beheaded, and then wrapped in a cover. No one knew what they did with his body.
>
> Two months later, security personnel came to confiscate my father's house and property. They forced us out and locked the house with iron chains.[347]

Another woman shared the story of her son, M., who was detained after getting into a fight with a foreign ISIS fighter. As she and her other son, Y., were walking home, a car filled with ISIS members stopped next to them. She was "so afraid of them," the woman remembered, that she rushed to get home unharmed. Only later would she learn that M. was actually in the car because he had wanted to see his mother and brother one last time. Shortly afterwards, he was executed in horrific fashion:

> I felt something had happened to my son, so I asked his little brother to go to the *qasas* courtyard [to] ask people who was going to be executed, and to come back and tell me.
>
> My son did not go, and I got busy with the housework. [Then an] ISIS member, [who] I saw in prison, came and asked me to get into the house. They wanted to talk to my little boy [Y.].
>
> ISIS members told him that the *qasas* sentence had been applied to [M.]. My son came and told me. I could not hold myself together. I was crying. I told them I wanted to see him.
>
> They said: "Come with us." It was so they could hand me his body. I was not in a state where I could absorb and understand. So, I came out and I understood from them that they threw him from a high building, from the fifth floor. He did not die straight away so they stoned him to death… by hitting his head with stones.[348]

Dead bodies were regularly strung up or crucified, and people, including family members, were forbidden from approaching them. Some had their heads cut off with swords, which would be hung separately from the body. ISIS members encouraged children to approach the dead bodies and beat them with shoes; they also handed children pistols to aim at the bodies and shoot them. Executions were often filmed and posted on ISIS' social media channels. They called these videos "versions," which were copied onto hard drives and displayed on large screens in public squares. This served two purposes—to intimidate the population, but also to drive recruitment.

[347] Individual testimony #47.
[348] Individual testimony #37.

To ISIS fighters, executions were often a righteous act of religious cleansing. In some, they instilled joy and happiness. One victim witnessed this after his relatives were executed, learning the tragic news from a prison cell where he was being held by ISIS:

> After nearly three hours, around one o'clock, ISIS members came to the al-Burj Prison. They were joyous and delighted, as if they'd just won a great victory. Someone entered and started addressing my brother. He told him that the [death] sentence had been applied to his children. In his words, the "apostate infidelity" was finished.
>
> His speech had the effect of a thunderstorm on us. We thought they wanted to scare us, their faces were smiling and joyous.
>
> At one o'clock after midnight, a Saudi [fighter] came to the cell, I don't know his name, and said: "Come with me."
>
> When I came out with him, he started playing a video on his mobile phone showing the moment they [executed] my nephews and the others with him. There were thirteen people [killed] in the main market square of Tabqa [with my nephew].[349]

Being accused of a crime, no matter how spurious the accusations, could have devastating consequences. Hypocrisy was rampant too, and often ISIS fighters used accusations to deflect attention from their own actions that ran against the group's interpretation of *Shari'a*. One victim from Tabqa recounted how his brother was killed by ISIS for selling cigarettes to the mother of an ISIS member.[350] In another case in al-Mansoura from 2015, ISIS' *hisba* police executed eight people on charges of theft after one of the men borrowed money from a creditor, who was close to ISIS' security apparatus in Tabqa, and failed to pay the amount back in time. Following a complaint from the creditor, ISIS arrested the man and seven others, executing them all on the same day and displaying their bodies in the street for hours as a warning to others.

In other cases, ISIS resorted to specific punishments for specific crimes. The standard punishment for theft, for example, was to cut off one hand of the accused. A mother who lost one child to ISIS recounted how her other son, 15 years' old at the time, lost his hand in this way:

> My second son [A.] had his right hand cut off by ISIS for theft. One day between 2015 and 2016, he and his cousin were playing football. The ball fell into the house of an Uzbek member of ISIS. My nephew climbed the wall and went into the house without their permission. My son didn't climb the wall, he [helped] his cousin to enter the house. ISIS members grabbed them and accused them of theft. [They] applied the sentence of cutting off his right hand.[351]

Another victim, who himself lost a hand to ISIS' brutal penal system, talked about his psychological condition because of what he went through: "After ISIS cut off my hand, I suffered a serious psychological illness. I was unable to work or leave the house. I was afraid of what people would think, and because it would remind me of the incident."[352]

'They had no dignity': Violations against women & girls

ISIS' treatment of women and girls, who were forced to cover their bodies and limit their freedom of movement, was just as stringent in Tabqa as in other areas of northeast Syria. One woman recounted how:

[349] Individual testimony #34.
[350] Individual testimony #48.
[351] Individual testimony #29.
[352] Individual testimony 56, focus group session 2.

> My neighbour was an old lady, they beat her in the market in front of everyone because she did not cover her eyes. A [male] member of the *hisba* asked her why she hadn't covered her eyes. She replied: "Why are you looking at my eyes?" Then he beat her in front of everyone.[353]

As well as patrolling the streets, female *hisba* units could also implement sentences including fines, prison terms, or corporal punishments such as flogging, and death sentences such as stoning. At least two women were stoned to death in Tabqa city, one near the al-Furqan Mosque and the other by the city's microbus station. One of the victims was Shamseh Abdullah, who was killed on 18 July 2014.[354] *Hisba* members would forcefully gather people from the streets and the mosques an hour before the execution of the sentences to attend the executions. The order would then be given to throw stones until the woman had died, although according to reports, residents of Tabqa refused to take part and the act was carried out by ISIS members instead.[355]

The research team also spoke with the sister of one of the women from Tabqa who was publicly stoned to death. She recounted how her sister, who was accused of prostitution, had called her the day before her death and told her that ISIS had set the time for her stoning. She had asked her sister, "Pray for me, all of you, for mercy and forgiveness, and tell my mother to forgive me and pray for me."[356] The next day, she was killed.

As in other areas, captive women known as *sabaya*—most of whom were Yazidi women and girls from Iraq's Sinjar region—were sold on slave markets in Tabqa. One woman from Tabqa described how her husband, whom she herself had been forced to marry, brought home a *sabaya*:

> ISIS […] brought us back to ancient times. The treatment of *sabaya* had nothing to do with humanity. They had no dignity.
>
> [Women and girls] were raped and sold in markets or through private groups on Telegram. They worked as maids for ISIS women and men. They were introduced to men's gatherings to serve them, despite the prohibition of mixing without wearing a hijab or *Shari'a* dress.
>
> My husband, who was an ISIS member, brought me a *sabaya*: her name was Sarah. She was 13. He got her as a gift. Then he, in turn, gifted her to me. I was confused about whether to treat her like a child or *sabaya*. I treated her like my child. She converted to Islam because of me. I set her free after she became Muslim and got married at the age of 14.[357]

Other women were forcibly married. They, too, were often subjected to severe sexual abuse. One victim from Tabqa told us how she was forced to marry a British ISIS fighter. He subjected her to physical and sexual violence, including while she was pregnant:

> My second pregnancy was with my daughter, [S.]. Because of the severity of [my husband's] beatings on my abdomen while I was pregnant, [S.] had a fracture in her head while she was in my womb. Two hours after she was born, she died of a head fracture. Her head was split into two.[358]

[353] Individual testimony #29, focus group session 1.
[354] *Al-Arabiya News*, 'Women stoned to death in Syria for adultery' (9 August 2014) <https://english.alarabiya.net/perspective/features/2014/08/09/Women-stoned-to-death-in-Syria-for-adultery> accessed 18 August 2023.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Individual testimony #27.
[357] Individual testimony #29, focus group session 1.
[358] Individual testimony #41.

‘Are my hands still there?’: Forced disappearance, arbitrary detention & torture

As part of its broader system of detention facilities, ISIS created dozens of secret prisons and torture centres in the surrounding area, including al-Burj Prison in Tabqa city, al-Sadd Prison in the Tabqa Dam complex, the Stadium Prison in Raqqa, and Point 11, which was considered ISIS’ “death and execution” prison in Raqqa.

One victim subjected to torture remembered how:

> They brought me into the torture room. I was tied up and my hands were raised behind my back. This method was called “suspension,” one of the most horrendous types of torture, which caused me so much pain. I was able to resist for about an hour and a half, and then I fainted. At the time of the al-Maghrib [evening call to] prayers, they brought me down. The same day, I was taken to the dormitory. I couldn’t feel my hands. I remember asking someone: “Are my hands still there?” They told me they were.
>
> After the al-Maghrib prayers, I was called in for investigation again. I was blindfolded and handcuffed. I felt the presence of other people [detained in the room with me]. The investigator asked his officers to cover their faces with masks and ordered them to load their weapons, which made me have an unspeakable breakdown out of fear. But there was no shooting. More than two minutes of terrifying silence and severe panic passed.
>
> The official then ordered us to take off our blindfolds. However, I couldn’t take mine off because […] I couldn’t move my hands from the torture. I couldn’t even feel my hands.
>
> He asked me: “Why didn’t you take [off] your blindfold?”
>
> I replied: “I can’t move my hands.”
>
> So, he ordered someone […] to take the blindfold off my eyes. I was surprised to see that the people who had been detained with me in the room were my two brothers and my nephew.[359]

Other victims reported being tortured by suspension, with some being left hanging from the ceiling for six consecutive days.[360] They also suffered *dulab* beatings, an infamous torture method in Syria by which a prisoner is forced inside a vehicle tire and then beaten. Another victim described their torture inside an ISIS detention facility:

> They beat me on the feet. Then, I was led to solitary confinement. They forced me into the squatting position for a long time, causing numbness in the whole of my body. An ISIS member then came and took me to the torture room, handcuffed my body to a wooden chair and beat me until I couldn’t move anymore.
>
> I screamed out: “I seek refuge with Prophet Muhammad [Peace Be Upon Him].”
>
> They told me: “You have called someone besides Allah by saying this and you must be executed—even if you were innocent of the charge for which you were detained.”
>
> I wished I was dead. In the evening, I was taken to [be] torture[d], but this time by a different method. They brought me into a room with a small screen to watch [videos] of people being killed and tortured.
>
> They had other harsh methods. I remember they handcuffed me to the prison wall standing up, and then somebody attached a piece of iron weighing about 2 kilos to my genitals. I lost consciousness. This process was repeated more than once. This is what caused my sexual dysfunction [that I suffer from] until now.
>
> After I was beaten, they moved me to solitary confinement because I couldn’t stand on my feet. The jailor asked me to stay in the squatting position. There was a camera recording

[359] Individual testimony #34.
[360] Individual testimony #35.

my movements in the room. He threatened me, saying if I moved and changed the way [I was sitting], then he would take me back to the torture room.[361]

Violations against Tabqa's minorities

ISIS destroyed Tabqa's pre-war mosaic of ethnic communities. Some fled the indiscriminate shelling and car bombs that ISIS deployed in residential areas during its military advances, or the public executions and torture it employed after subjugating an area. However, many of Tabqa's minorities were forced to migrate later under the threat of arms or because their property was confiscated. Others were made to convert to Islam or forced to pay the *jizyah* tax in return for their "protection." One resident of rural Tabqa remembered:

> ISIS confiscated agricultural land. They forced us to pay tributes for farmland. You had to convert your money into dirhams and dinars to pay the taxes they imposed on you.
>
> My neighbour was Christian, they fined her a large annual tribute of 25 grams of gold—so that she could keep her home, stay in the area and remain Christian [without having to convert to Islam]. She had to pay [that amount] ever year.[362]

Among those affected were Tabqa's Christians and Assyrians, who until the start of the conflict, practiced at their own churches in the area. Alawis, Kurds and Shi'a, who had previously lived side by side with Sunni Muslims, were also subject to pressure and intimidation. At least 600 Christian families from Tabqa city alone were displaced as part of ISIS' exclusionary and sectarian policies. ISIS pitted tribes and ethnic groups against each other and sowed discord and intra-community conflicts.

All in all, the city was transformed into "one big detention centre," according to those who lived through ISIS rule. The group established various government departments in Tabqa that were connected to ISIS' overarching governance structures. This included offices for taxation, education, recruitment, religious outreach and mosques. ISIS prohibited people from watching TV and satellite channels, and anyone who did not hand over satellite receivers would be punished with the most severe penalties and fines. Infrastructure was destroyed and exploited by ISIS to serve its agenda. The local economy suffered from the confiscation of people's property, homes and livelihoods, the closure of small enterprises, taxation and royalties such as *zakat* (taxation).

One victim described how their lives changed after ISIS' takeover of Tabqa:

> The economy deteriorated. Travel was prohibited and impossible. If you decided to travel, you'd be exposed to all kinds of risks. You'd be exposed to gangs and bandits, on top of your fear that ISIS would catch you.
>
> Education deteriorated. We did not send our children to schools opened by ISIS for fear of bombing or due to the curriculum taught by ISIS, which promoted violence and hatred. Hospitals were only for [ISIS fighters], their women and their children.
>
> Getting out of the house was not easy, either. You couldn't walk with your wife without taking proof that she was your wife. Life was difficult. Many sold their land and property to [leave]. We no longer wanted to move out of our homes because of the fear and terror we experienced when we went out.[363]

ISIS-induced poverty had profound consequences. The population of Tabqa, often well-educated compared with other cities in northeast Syria, was forced to work with ISIS in both military or civilian capacities, either under

[361] Individual testimony #58.
[362] Individual testimony #48, focus group session 2.
[363] Ibid.

direct threat of violence or because they were compelled to do so out of pure economic reality. A woman from Tabqa said:

> I was a worker, I used to get a salary, but then I got suspended. Women in the time of ISIS could not go out. Life was hard.
>
> One day, my daughter passed through four rooftop houses to escape ISIS. When they caught her, they took my husband and son and imprisoned them all. They forced them to attend a [repentance] course and whipped them. We had to pay for the *Shari'a* dress for our daughters, even if we couldn't afford it.[364]

The educational system suffered too. People said that schools were "stolen" and children dropped out. One interviewee reported that his brother, an ISIS member, forced their sister to drop out of school: she remains illiterate today.[365]

Tabqa's children suffered under the repressive regime imposed upon them. ISIS turned schools in Tabqa into military complexes, some with tunnels running beneath them.[366] It targeted children with extremist propaganda, raising the next generation on violence and extremism. Residents interviewed said ISIS contributed to illiteracy or prevented people from completing their education. A mother described how this had affected her son:

> One day, my son was watching execution videos. He was five years' old. He was holding a knife and wanted to try to slaughter his brother, who was just a few months' old. I entered the room at the right time, saw this incident, and I managed to protect my little boy.[367]

Children were recruited and placed in camps called "Cubs of the Caliphate," where they were taught about violence. Some children reportedly took part in the field executions that ISIS carried out after taking control of Tabqa airport. ISIS' recordings of the executions, reviewed by the research team, showed children standing behind prisoners with pistols, and killing them when given the order. Allegedly, some children were as young as six years of age while participating in this violence. Other children in Tabqa were forced to grow up without parents, leaving family members scrambling to take care of them:

> I have five orphaned children; they are my nephews. Their parents were executed by ISIS. My parents are sick. I have two children with disabilities, my sister is blind. I am a daily worker and I have nothing. I had been dismissed from my work at the Tabqa Dam. Two orphans were sent to an orphanage in Aleppo.[368]

People interviewed described how the trauma inflicted upon children had made them into "ticking bombs." Another common refrain was that "this generation does not care about anything" or believe in anything larger. Children who grew up in Tabqa, once a peaceful town, under ISIS rule have grown up disillusioned and deprived of their childhood.

The liberation of Tabqa

ISIS controlled Tabqa for nearly four years. Efforts to liberate the city gathered steam in the autumn of 2015. Following their campaigns to seize Kobane and large swathes of Hasakeh province, the YPG and YPJ, together with several Arab, Syrian, Armenian and Turkmen battalions, announced the formation of the SDF in late

[364] Individual testimony #89, focus group session 3.
[365] Individual testimony #29, focus group session 1.
[366] Individual testimony #16, focus group session 1.
[367] Individual testimony #41, focus group session 2.
[368] Individual testimony #14, focus group session 1.

2015.[369] In 2016, the SDF, with air support from the US-led Coalition, liberated Manbij, which borders Tabqa district. The following year, the SDF launched a campaign to liberate Tabqa, calling it "Operation Wrath of the Euphrates."[370]

ISIS fighters had holed up inside the Tabqa Dam and opened three turbines, flooding areas downstream.[371] The UN warned that deliberate sabotage by ISIS or US airstrikes, which had already damaged the entrance to the dam, could lead to catastrophic flooding of surrounding areas.[372] In March 2017, US special forces and SDF fighters were airdropped into the al-Karin area, behind enemy lines, to begin a ground assault.[373] As the SDF captured various villages in the area, ISIS forces withdrew with the SDF in pursuit. Civilians who were unable to leave were used as human shields by ISIS, with the group decreeing that each person leaving the area would be regarded as an apostate and infidel and would be executed on sight. ISIS also planted anti-personnel mines in the area, which continue to plague the area today.

By 24 March, the SDF had reached the entrance of the dam, and heavy battles ensued. Despite being on a "no-strike" list, US warplanes dropped three 2,000-pound bombs on the dam, leading the dam to stop functioning and the reservoir to rise more than 15 metres, nearly causing a catastrophic spill-over.[374] ISIS, the Syrian government, the SDF and the US then agreed on an emergency ceasefire to avert disaster.[375] A day later, the SDF said the dam was 'not damaged or malfunctioning.'[376] The SDF seized the majority of Tabqa's airbase, which it soon brought under its full control.[377]

With ISIS surrounded and its supply routes cut off, the battle for Tabqa city started on 15 April 2017. ISIS withdrew to the Neighbourhoods in northern Tabqa after sending several car bombs to stop the SDF's advances. The SDF claimed that ISIS, surrounded and besieged, had threatened to blow up the dam.[378] To avoid this scenario, which risked killing tens of thousands of people, the SDF and ISIS negotiated a deal to open a corridor through which ISIS fighters could withdraw to Raqqa.[379]

On 10 May 2017, the city of Tabqa was declared liberated, although some battles continued in the ruins and orchards of al-Mansoura where ISIS had dug extensive tunnel networks. After intense battles and airstrikes by the US-led Coalition, a difficult negotiation was conducted through elders and clan leaders. Initially, ISIS resisted withdrawal in an attempt to appease its fighters. But besieged and increasingly isolated, ISIS was forced to accept withdrawal under guarantees from the negotiators and on the condition that fighters could leave with their individual weapons.

---

[369] Kurdish Question, 'Declaration of Establishment by Democratic Syria Forces' (15 October 2015) <https://web.archive.org/web/20160224085811/http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces/1179-declaration-of-establishment-by-democratic-syria-forces.html> accessed 18 August 2023.
[370] UNOCHA, 'Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa—Situation Update No. 1 (as of 31 January 2017)' (Reliefweb, 31 January 2017) <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/raqqa_update_dec-jan_2017_0.pdf> accessed 18 August 2023.
[371] Ibid.
[372] Tom Miles, 'U.N. warns of catastrophic dam failure in Syria battle' *Reuters* (15 February 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-dam-idUSKBN15U1DZ> accessed 18 August 2023.
[373] *Rudaw*, 'Coalition airdrops SDF and US forces into Tabqa for joint operation' (22 March 2017) <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/22032017> accessed 18 August 2023.
[374] Dave Phillips and others, 'A Dam in Syria Was on a "No-Strike" List. The U.S. Bombed It Anyway' *The New York Times* (New York City, 20 January 2022) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/us/airstrike-us-isis-dam.html> accessed 18 August 2023.
[375] Ibid.
[376] *Reuters*, 'Syria dam not damaged: SDF Raqqa campaign spokeswoman' (27 March 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN16Y1JG> accessed 18 August 2023.
[377] *Al Jazeera English*, 'US-backed Syria forces pause operations near Tabqa dam' (Qatar, 27 March 2017) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/27/us-backed-syria-forces-pause-operations-near-tabqa-dam> accessed 18 August 2023.
[378] Rodi Said, 'U.S.-backed assault on Raqqa to last months, commander says' *Reuters* (31 March 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idINKBN17218T> accessed 18 August 2023.
[379] SOHR, '18 days after entering the city… the Syria Democratic Forces almost completely control al-Tabaqa and ISIS withdraw after negotiations' (3 May 2017) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/65729/> accessed 18 August 2023.

The aftermath

The offensive and ensuing evacuation deal eliminated ISIS' last territorial foothold in Tabqa. The SDF subsequently conducted mine-clearing operations and over the next year, would establish local governing structures. Some of the displaced began to return and the daunting task of rubble clearance began. While life gradually returned to Tabqa, the legacy of four years of ISIS occupation lived on in the minds of people, leaving the city battered and its people scarred.

During data collection, the research team encountered noticeable signs of fear about the possible return of ISIS. Interviewees talked about their fears of being targeted by ISIS sleeper cells. As a result, many victims approached for interviews simply refused to discuss their experiences. Even those who did agree to speak took extreme precautions, speaking to researchers briefly, clearly in a hurry to end the interview. This trend was particularly pronounced in rural areas surrounding Tabqa city.

Despite these challenges, the people from Tabqa told their own—often harrowing—stories of public executions, physical and sexual violence against women and torture. Many suffered severe psychological trauma, especially children who grew up in a decade marked by war and violence. Tabqa's suffering may have eased, but it has not ended.

5. RAQQA

Raqqa province lies in the centre of northeast Syria and spans both sides of the Euphrates River, which passes through the heart of the provincial capital of the same name.

The city would take on profound symbolic importance during the years of ISIS rule over northeast Syria as well as the military campaign to defeat the group. When Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi declared ISIS' "caliphate" in June 2014, he proclaimed Raqqa as its capital. Some have suggested that this was an attempt to portray ISIS as the second coming of the Abbasid Caliphate, with Baghdadi as caliph Harun al-Rashid, the most powerful of the Abbasid rulers. However, the decision may also have been informed by Raqqa's central location within ISIS-controlled territory and its easy access to the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Raqqa before the conflict

Raqqa city is located around 90 kilometres south of the Syrian-Turkish border, nearly 200 kilometres east of Aleppo and 140 kilometres northwest of Deir Ezzor. The province is divided into seven main districts. The main city other than Raqqa is Tal Abyad, a name meaning "white hill," which lies north of Raqqa city at a point close to the Turkish border and the town of Akçakale. Other key towns include Ain Issa, Maadan, Tabqa and al-Mansoura.

Raqqa has a long, storied history. Its name derives from the Arabic word for "flakes," *raqa'iq*, referring to the layers of clay sedimented by the seasonal flooding of the Euphrates. Floods are followed by a cracking of the soil surface as the water evaporates, leaving behind flakes or fine particles of substrate.

Raqqa is one of the ancient cities of the Arab world, with traces of influences from ancient Semitic city-states such as Mari as well as the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Assyrians, Abbasids, Selchuks and Ottomans. During the Abbasid era, between 750 and 1258 CE, there were two cities called Raqqa—the first, known as "white Raqqa" after the colour of its bricks; while the second, "brown Raqqa" (because of its brown baked bricks), was developed by Abbasid caliph Abu Jaafar al-Mansour, starting from the year 772 CE. Built in the shape of a horseshoe, like Baghdad, it served as the summer capital of the Abbasid state. Monuments of the various civilisations are scattered across the city and its environs. They include the archaeological site of Tuttul (or Tal al-Bay'a) built by the Mari civilisation, the Old Mosque in central Raqqa that was built under the caliph Mansour, and the Archaeological Museum constructed by the Ottomans as a government headquarters in 1861.

It was the Ottomans who established the modern city of Raqqa, bringing urban order to an otherwise sparsely populated area. The Ottomans intended to shore up a defensive void on their borders that extended from the Levant to the edge of the Syrian desert. Nevertheless, the city failed to provide much in the way of defence from Bedouin attacks from the desert. There were echoes of this pattern when, centuries later, ISIS swept across the desert to take control of the city.

Modern Raqqa absorbed waves of immigration, from Aleppo and its hinterland as well as other inland parts of Syria, especially the al-Sukhnah area of the Homs desert. Groups of Armenians sought refuge in Raqqa when fleeing massacres and genocide in the crumbling Ottoman Empire in 1915. Kurds also immigrated to the city, primarily from Iraq; indeed, there were so many Kurdish families that the first entries in the city's civil registry bore the adjective "Kurdish" alongside several families labelled as "Circassian." While the Kurds lived mostly to the north of Raqqa city, most of its modern residents were Sunni Arabs who primarily lived near the banks of the Euphrates. Some Armenian Christians remained in Raqqa city, although many of them had already left the

region for Aleppo by the late 20th century. By 2004, the year of the last official Syrian census, Raqqa city and the surrounding area were home to a total population of just over 506,300 people.[380]

As in nearby Deir Ezzor, clans play an important role in the area. Even so, Raqqa's clans did not represent power centres capable of contesting central authorities' economic and social structures. The Ottomans had long maintained relationships with clans and tribes in various areas of Raqqa province, but the layout of the modern city that they constructed also fragmented clan ties. This meant that, unlike Aleppo or Deir Ezzor, there were no significant tensions between different clans or communities in the decades leading up to the Syrian conflict.

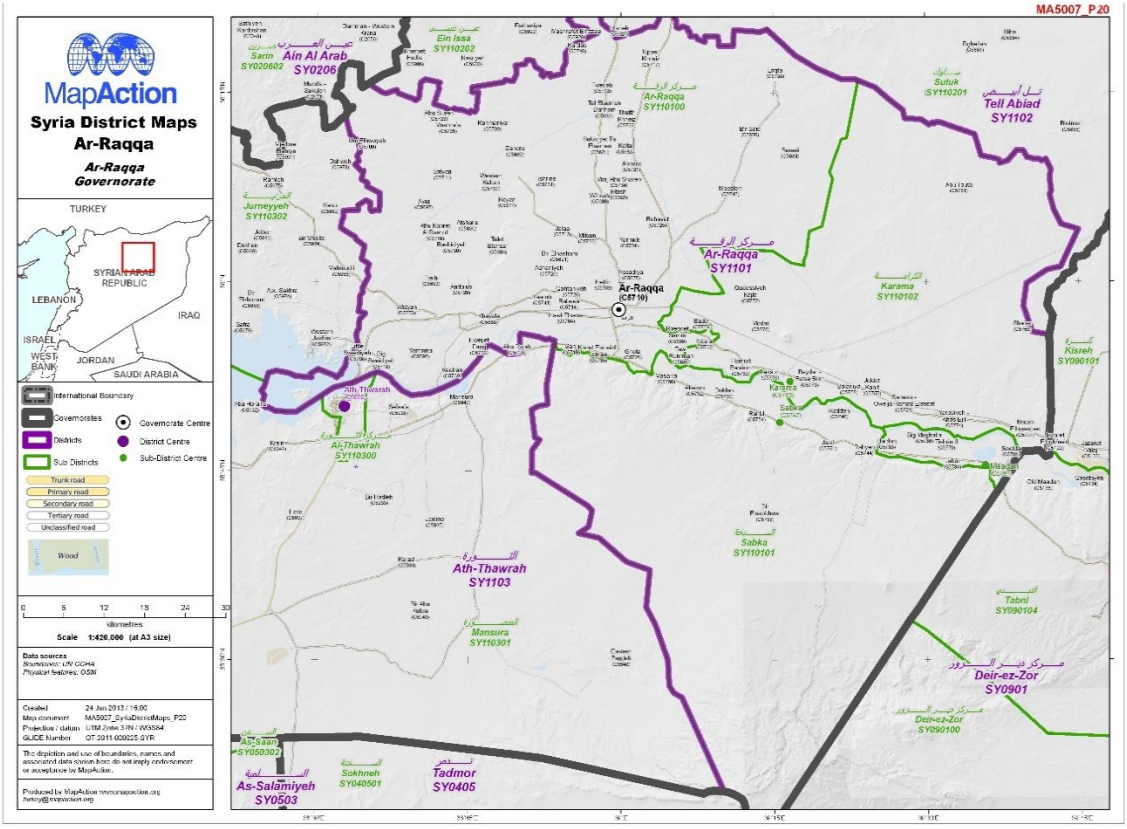


FIGURE 4. RAQQA DISTRICT IN RAQQA GOVERNORATE.[381]

Located on a periphery between desert and agricultural regions, Raqqa never took on a truly urban character. The city grew rapidly during the construction of the Tabqa Dam, which drew migrants from Syria's coastal regions who occupied administrative roles and worked in education. Furthermore, the "pioneering project" that brought water from the Euphrates through a system of canals to irrigate large swathes of agricultural land required large numbers of experienced farm labourers. This sparked an influx of migrants from rural Aleppo and Deir Ezzor, while Armenians and Kurds revived industrial production of agricultural machinery such as tractors and harvesters. During this influx, many of Raqqa's districts were named after their incoming residents' origins: Hay al-Bab for migrants from al-Bab; Hay Abna Tadef for migrants from Tadef (close to al-Bab); and Hay al-Akrad for Kurds, many of whom moved from Kobane and Afrin to Raqqa in search of work. Each new influx added to the region's unique social fabric.

[380] Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 'Syria Population Census, 2004' (Ar.) (n.d.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20151208115353/http://www.cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf> accessed 17 August 2023.
[381] Map Action, 'Syria District Maps : Ar-Raqqa' (4 July 2016) <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/217-2788/resource/a3047113-c3e8-4fc0-8ad6-8b6d96c07f91> accessed 19 August 2023.

While the government could have harnessed the electricity of the nearby Tabqa Dam and surrounding agricultural land to develop Raqqa into an industrial and commercial powerhouse to rival Aleppo, neglect by central authorities left it lagging behind other cities. Viewed as a remote, barren place whose residents were uneducated and behind the times, Raqqa's residents were referred to as *shawaya*, a derogatory name indicating backwardness and a lack of culture. As in other parts of Syria, Kurds living in the north of the province faced systemic marginalisation and political repression. And yet, even Raqqa's Arab communities were looked down upon by the authorities.

By the 1960s, despite several leftist and communist movements active in the province, the Ba'ath Party emerged bent on eliminating its ideological rivals. As in other peripheral parts of Syria, power was centralised and exerted through the regime's notorious security apparatus. Security agencies had extensive involvement in society. Security passes were required for registration or sale of agricultural land or to start new shops, restaurants or car dealerships. A semi-clandestine class of informants, known as "report-writers," emerged. Political life was reduced to the Ba'ath Party and the National Progressive Front, a coalition of regime-tolerated leftist parties dominated by the Ba'athists. The authorities relied on compliant tribal elders to fill parliament seats and represent the region at public events. Most senior government jobs were reserved for members of specific tribes or tribal factions.

Underground movements did emerge in response to the Ba'ath Party's dominance, but never seriously threatened the regional balance of power. Raqqa's Arab nationalists were closer to the Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath Party, a connection fostered by family ties on either side of the border. It also helped that Iraqi television reached Raqqa decades before Syrian state television did. Some of these tensions were accentuated by the Iran-Iraq conflict in the 1980s, in which the Syrian Ba'ath supported Iran's revolutionary Shi'a regime against its rival Ba'athist regime in Iraq.

New religious currents grew, mostly with Sufi tendencies. Following the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising starting in the late 1970s, Raqqa experienced a further crackdown on cultural activities and public gatherings. The decline in freedoms resulted in greater displays of religious affiliations, especially the expansion of Shi'a shrines across the country. In Raqqa, a Sufi shrine for Owais al-Qarni, who had fallen in battle there, was developed and completed in 2003.[382]

Others responded to the lack of economic opportunities by migrating within Syria or outside the country (often to the Gulf, Lebanon or Jordan). Initially, this led to a brain drain. However, over time, it created a further backlash. Around the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, people from both rural and urban areas of Raqqa returned from Saudi Arabia, steeped in the religious ideas of Sunni Wahhabism and the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. These were compatible with the conservative culture of the Raqqa countryside. Residents of rural Aleppo and Deir Ezzor moved to Raqqa, where they set up religious institutes inspired by similar Wahhabi teachings. The regime then facilitated the flow of Islamist and jihadist fighters to Iraq to fuel the insurgency against the US invasion and occupation. Over time, this deepened religious and clan cleavages in Raqqa's society.

Despite the comparatively lower living standards in Raqqa and its perception in Damascus as a provider of natural resources and agricultural produce, services such as education and public hospitals remained free and most of Raqqa's residents were able to get by. Unemployment was relatively low, as most of the population either worked in farming and manufacturing or as day labourers in various sectors, earning enough to make a living in the period prior to the war. Indeed, most interviewees reflected positively on pre-conflict times. A woman from Raqqa said:

[382] Alexander Dziadosz and Oliver Holmes, 'Special Report: Deepening ethnic rifts reshape Syria's towns' *Reuters* (21 June 2013) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-rebels-sectarianism-specialrepo-idUSBRE95K08J20130621> accessed 19 August 2023.

> My family and I had a reasonably good quality of life. My father worked as a [security] guard, [...] one of my brothers was also working, and my other siblings were at school or university. All our material needs were covered, and we had access to education and job opportunities. Women generally had freedom in all aspects of life, including the ability to work and study.[383]

Raqqa's residents enjoyed access to a good number of primary and secondary schools, a teacher-training institute, and vocational colleges for professions such as nursing, agriculture, and manufacturing. The population was overwhelmingly young due to a high birth rate and the practice of polygamy by some families, but also because of improvements in primary healthcare, including vaccination campaigns backed by the WHO against tuberculosis, measles, smallpox, polio and other infectious diseases. Women also had a large degree of freedom in education and work; at least one interviewee pointed out that women from Raqqa also sat in parliament.[384] Another woman from Raqqa described the sentiment that prevailed in Raqqa around the time:

> Before [ISIS], women had complete freedom, including the right to education [and] to travel freely. They weren't even obliged to show their identity cards. Women were free in all spheres, even if there were some limits since this is a tribal society.
>
> Politically, we didn't have freedom of speech. There was one party imposing its rule by force. [But] education was very good. It was mandatory up to the sixth grade—you couldn't pull your kids out before that. And it was free. We weren't afraid for our kids.[385]

This was a trade-off familiar to Syrians across the country whereby state-provided public services were expected to compensate for an absence of political freedoms and, to a lesser extent, individual social and economic rights.

All of that changed with the outbreak of the uprising and ensuing conflict after 2011. As one man put it: "People got on with their lives, even if things weren't always easy. We had everything we needed. When [ISIS] came, 90% of that was lost."[386]

The conflict in Raqqa

Raqqa was spared fighting in the earlier stages of the Syrian conflict. The city was seen as too loyal to Assad, who relied on tribes to quell dissent.[387] There were few, if any, anti-government demonstrations in Raqqa during the early days of the uprising. Possibly in acknowledgement of this, towards the end of 2011, while armed opposition groups were spreading in other parts of the country, President Bashar al-Assad chose to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Raqqa's al-Nour Mosque.[388] After the ceremony, Assad met with notables and tribesmen, many of whom had reportedly been paid up to $100,000 each for their continued support of the regime.[389]

But the tactics that had worked for the regime in previous decades began to falter. With the conflict intensifying across Syria, fighting eventually reached Raqqa province. While it was the last governorate to witness anti-government demonstrations, Raqqa was paradoxically the first to fall entirely outside the government's control. First, Tal Abyad fell to the armed opposition in September 2012.[390] Armed opposition groups, including the

[383] Individual testimony #34, focus group session 3.
[384] Individual testimony #99, focus group session 7.
[385] Individual testimony #97, focus group session 7.
[386] Individual testimony #143, focus group session 4.
[387] Nate Rosenblatt and David Kilcullen, *How Raqqa became the capital of ISIS: A proxy warfare case study* (New America, July 2019) p.13 <https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/How_Raqqa_Became_the_Capital_of_ISIS_2019-07-26_134456.pdf> accessed 19 August 2023.
[388] *Associated Press*, 'Protests, gunfire in Syria as Eid al-Adha begins' (*CTV News*, 6 November 2011) <https://www.ctvnews.ca/protests-gunfire-in-syria-as-eid-al-adha-begins-1.722106> accessed 19 August 2023.
[389] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, p.13.
[390] Kadir Celikcan, 'Syrian rebels extend grip on Turkish border' *Reuters* (19 September 2012) <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-idUSL5E8KJ8NR20120919> accessed 19 August 2023.

Raqqa Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrir al-Raqqa), a coalition of 80 mostly Islamist groups, and al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, increasingly seized large swathes of territory in the province and soon cut off the highway between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. [391]

In February 2013, armed groups were joined by Ahrar al-Sham for the offensive on Tabqa. Ahrar al-Sham organised a sub-group, Liwa Umanaa al-Raqqa, made up of fighters from Raqqa, to legitimise the offensive. In early March 2013, Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra entered Raqqa in an operation named the "Raid of the Almighty" with support from an eclectic coalition of Salafi, Brotherhood and FSA brigades.[392] The city fell within hours. Regime forces pulled out, handing the city's eastern entrance to Nusra before withdrawing to the 17th Division military base on the outskirts of the city.[393]

After the capture of Raqqa, it was not long before infighting started. Ahrar al-Sham, which had planned the attack, took over captured government buildings but, according to local activists, they were neither prepared nor interested in governing and instead transferred captured funds to the group's main base of operations in Idlib and Hama.[394] Others, however, stressed the role that Ahrar al-Sham's proxy, Liwa al-Umanaa al-Raqqa, played in introducing *Shari'a* law in the city while at the same time providing public services—including a public bus network[395]

The opposition's SNC, backed by Qatar as well as Saudi Arabia, sought to use Raqqa as a laboratory for the uprising and supported a local council formed around Raqqa-based lawyer Abdullah Khalil.[396] A supporter of the Syrian uprising from its early days and well-respected across the city, Khalil was a moderating force to Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra.

For Raqqa's residents, however, the presence of numerous armed groups created a sense of lawlessness and chaos, worsened by the fact that the Syrian military, whose forces remained besieged in the 17th Division base, subjected the city to aerial bombing raids.

The arrival of ISIS

A month after the opposition took control of the city, the alliance between ISIS and Nusra fell apart.[397] ISIS fighters had made their first public appearance in al-Mansoura district, around 35 kilometres southwest of Raqqa city. By then, Raqqa residents recounted that Baghdadi had informed key ISIS figures that he planned to cut ties with Nusra and al-Qaida.[398]

Under the leadership of Abu Ali al-Shara'i, a key figure in ISIS at the time, the group began threading sleeper cells into local communities and recruiting new members through *da'wa*, or Islamic outreach, in the areas of Sabkha, Karama, Sulukh, Tabqa and some neighbourhoods of Raqqa city.[399] Newly recruited members were expected to inform the communities in which they operated—providing information on the identity and whereabouts of community leaders and their sources of income, as well as religious families. Sleeper cell

[391] Matthew Barber, 'The Raqqa Story: Rebel Structure, Planning, and Possible War Crimes' (*Syria Comment*, 4 April 2013) <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-raqqa-story-rebel-structure-planning-and-possible-war-crimes/> accessed 19 August 2023.
[392] Barber, *Syria Comment*.
[393] Firas al-Hakkar, 'The Mysterious Fall of Raqqa, Syria's Kandahar' *Al-Akhbar English* (Beirut, 8 November 2013) <https://web.archive.org/web/20171019062932/http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17550> accessed 19 August 2023.
[394] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, pp.16-19.
[395] Barber, *Syria Comment*.
[396] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, pp.19-23.
[397] Described in more detail in the introduction of the report.
[398] Interviews with Raqqa residents, April and May 2023.
[399] Interviews with Raqqa residents, April and May 2023.
See also: Alison Tahmizian Meuse, 'In Raqqa, Islamist Rebels Form a New Regime' *Syria Deeply* (16 August 2013) <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2013/08/16/in-raqqa-islamist-rebels-form-a-new-regime> accessed 19 August 2023.

operatives also collected compromising details on city residents: information about criminal backgrounds, sexual orientations, or illicit romances would be used as ammunition later.[400]

In the following months, Nusra's governor in Raqqa, Abu Sa'ad al-Hadrami (originally Mohammed Saeed al-Abdullah), affirmed his continued support for Nusra. His deputy, Abu Luqman, meanwhile, took control of remaining ISIS fighters and Nusra defectors to ISIS.[401] Those who remained loyal to Nusra left Raqqa city and redeployed to the Tabqa Dam and nearby Jabaar citadel; Ahrar al-Sham moved its forces to Tal Abyad.[402]

As ISIS took control of Raqqa, it set up an Islamic court system with Shara'i as its chief judge. The group also stepped up its efforts to recruit foreign fighters through a social media campaign led by British ISIS fighter Abu Rania and Iman Mohammad Sheikha, a woman from al-Mayadeen near Deir Ezzor.[403]

ISIS then dealt with any remaining challengers. The group drove a 500-kilo car bomb into the headquarters of Ahfad al-Rasoul, the last remaining armed group in Raqqa[404]— reportedly the group's first suicide bombing targeting another armed group. Former Nusra commander Hadrami was then kidnapped and killed in September.[405] Local council leader Abdullah Khalil had likely befallen the same fate that May, although his body was never found, his murder was never acknowledged.[406] Muhannad Habayebna, a civil rights activist and journalist, spoke out against ISIS during a community meeting; five days later, he too was found executed.[407] By then, anti-ISIS protests had already largely dissipated after ISIS publicly executed three citizens at the city's Clock Square on charges of "spying for the regime."[408] With the stick came the carrot. When clan elders pledged allegiance to ISIS in November 2013—as they had done to Assad before, reportedly in exchange for payment—ISIS firmed up its control over Raqqa.[409]

In early 2014, as part of the emerging conflict-within-a-conflict between opposition groups and ISIS, Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and the remnants of Raqqa's FSA made a last-ditch attempt to recover the city. While they ousted ISIS from Raqqa on 6 January, ISIS returned a week later.[410] It would be three long years before ISIS would be forced to give up control of the city again.

'Their heads were hung on the iron bars': Executions of 17th Division troops

Like in other areas it brought under its control, such as Manbij, ISIS took power brutally while promising to restore order and provide security for the population following the "chaos" of opposition rule. Indeed, there are some indications that, in the initial months that ISIS had full control over Raqqa, deaths in the city fell rapidly.[411] However, there may have been multiple causes for this, including the fact that there were fewer regime airstrikes during this period (especially compared to earlier periods when the city was under Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra control).

[400] Christoph Reuter, 'Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State' *Der Spiegel* (18 April 2015) <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html> accessed 19 August 2023.
[401] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, p.25.
[402] Al-Hakkar, *Al-Akhbar English.*
[403] Interviews with Raqqa residents, April and May 2023.
[404] Meuse, *Syria Deeply*.
[405] Al-Hakkar, *Al-Akhbar English*.
[406] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, p.26.
[407] Reuter, *Der Spiegel.*
[408] Al-Hakkar, *Al-Akhbar English*.
[409] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, p.29.
[410] *Al-Jazeera English*, 'ISIL recaptures Raqqa from Syria's rebels' (Qatar, 14 January 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/1/14/isil-recaptures-raqqa-from-syrias-rebels> accessed 19 August 2023.
[411] Rosenblatt and Kilcullen, p.33.

By pushing out all other opposition groups, ISIS prevented infighting and restored a sense of order. Now set up in its chosen capital, there was also an incentive to invest in Raqqa. ISIS established ministries and government offices in the city, often staffed by foreigners who paid generously in foreign currency. Recovered ISIS files revealed that the group had mandated its forces within Syria and Iraq to seize strategic facilities such as industrial bakeries, grain silos and generators, and move equipment to Raqqa.[412] According to a RAND report, ISIS established steady access to water, electricity, and bread within three months of seizing the area.[413]

The honeymoon period did not last. By the end of 2014, electricity levels had dropped to just a fourth of January 2014 levels, indicating serious mismanagement—especially since ISIS also controlled the Tabqa Dam.[414] Many other public services similarly withered away. Even if ISIS did impose a sense of order, it was underpinned by violence, intimidation and the brutal repression of any dissent, real or imputed.

Public executions were among the most common atrocities committed by ISIS. Hundreds, if not thousands, were killed this way. One notorious location for this was the al-Naim Roundabout in central Raqqa, which locals renamed *al-Jahim*—"the roundabout of hell."[415] Here, victims were beheaded with swords, their heads planted on the iron poles of the roundabout. Others were shot dead, their bodies crucified and left hanging for days as a warning to civilians that if they opposed ISIS, they would meet the same fate.

One of the largest mass executions was conducted against soldiers based in the Syrian army's 17th Division base. ISIS had first joined the lengthy siege of the base by opposition forces in 2013.[416] When ISIS ousted Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra from Raqqa, Assad's air force had once again been able to use the base, leading some to argue that the two sides had, at best, a relationship marked by tactical pragmatism.[417] Others spoke of more enduring, outright forms of collaboration between Assad and ISIS.[418] But after having dealt a decisive blow to the armed opposition, ISIS returned to the siege and, on 23 July 2014, launched its operation to capture the base.

Two days of fighting, which started with suicide bombing attacks, ended with ISIS capturing the 17th Division's headquarters. Hundreds of government troops retreated to the base of the 93rd Brigade near Ain Issa, on the Turkish border, and nearby villages. While three regiments were withdrawn, one stayed behind to cover their retreat. When ISIS entered the base, it captured and massacred the remaining Syrian soldiers, beheading many of the corpses. At least 85 Syrian army troops were killed; hundreds remained missing for years.[419]

Residents of Raqqa and Suluk described how, in the days following the attack, ISIS displayed the bodies of the soldiers and their severed heads in town squares. In propaganda videos later released by the group, children were shown examining the mutilated bodies. One eyewitness to the massacre said:

> We saw so many massacres during that period, including the beheading of 70 or more young men barracked at the 17th Division base. ISIS said they were infidels who should not be allowed to live, and it sentenced them to death. Their heads were hung on the iron bars at the al-Naim Roundabout, or the "Hell Roundabout," as we used to call it.[420]

[412] Reuter, *Der Spiegel.*
[413] RAND, 'Raqqah: Capital of the Caliphate' (n.d.) <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/when-isil-comes-to-town/case-studies/raqqah.html> accessed 19 August 2023.
[414] Ibid.
[415] Interviews with Raqqa residents, April and May 2023.
[416] Al-Hakkar, *Al-Akhbar English*.
[417] Reuter, *Der Spiegel.*
[418] *BBC*, 'Syria conflict: Isis "overruns" Raqqa military base' (London, 25 July 2014) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28481283> accessed 19 August 2023.
[419] *Middle East Eye,* '85 Syria troops reportedly killed in IS advance' (London, 12 February 2015) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/85-syria-troops-reportedly-killed-advance> accessed 19 August 2023.
[420] Individual testimony #94.

Executions of captured soldiers also occurred outside the city. A shepherd, who used to herd his flock close to the base, remembered seeing masked ISIS fighters in the area:

> They shot seven civilians and then threw them into the [water around the] waterwheel. After three days, the corpses were floating, so I buried the ones I could. On [another] occasion I saw about 15 to 20 dead bodies piled on top of each other, but I didn't dare approach them because ISIS [fighters] were watching them. I saw several massacres; they left a deep mark on me.[421]

After taking control of the 17th Division, ISIS moved on to Tabqa Military Airport and the 93rd Brigade base in Ain Issa. The regime's two final remaining footholds in Raqqa province, they fell on 7 August and 24 August respectively.[422] Many of the captured soldiers were taken to Raqqa. Once again, the city's hellish roundabout was covered in the heads of ISIS' captives.

'They sprayed him with bullets until he was dead': Public executions in Raqqa

Public executions were not just carried out against enemy soldiers. Under its new regime, ISIS also enforced strict religious compliance through specifically appointed imams and *Shari'a* courts. The practice of magic was punishable by death, as was insulting the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). Fear of punishment spread quickly through society, according to one man from Raqqa:

> You had to stay quiet at work and be careful about what you said. A mistake or a slip of the tongue was considered blasphemy. My nephew [M.] was killed because he was moody. He used to swear, curse and use insults a lot. I warned him about it, telling him it could get him beheaded.[423]

ISIS had no qualms about killing children either:

> One day, an ISIS patrol raided the Rumaila area, and they took about 20 people. Among the people detained by ISIS were my brother's sons, [M. and A.] along with a third person called [H.]. Everyone they detained was under 18 years' old.
>
> There were lots of rumours about why they were detained. We heard reports that [ISIS] arrested them because someone filmed a video of them blaspheming, while others said they were working for the [Coalition]. Almost three weeks later, ISIS executed [H.] and crucified his body on 23rd February Street, so everybody could see it. He was executed by firing squad.[424]

Preoccupied with establishing totalitarian control over the city, the new rulers of Raqqa saw spies and agents everywhere. One witness talked about seeing his brother executed at the al-Naim Roundabout:

> After midnight, a group of armed [ISIS] fighters burst into the house, went into [my brother's] room, and took him from his bed. He wasn't wearing anything at the time. His wife screamed, and one of his brothers ran after them and gave them his clothes to cover himself with.
>
> They took him to prison. As with everyone they sentenced to death, they forced him to read the entire Quran. He completed it in fifteen days. Then they took him to the al-Naim

[421] Individual testimony #66, focus group session 4.
[422] Jeffrey White, 'Military Implications of the Syrian Regime's Defeat in Raqqa' (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 27 August 2014) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/military-implications-syrian-regimes-defeat-raqqa> accessed 19 August 2023.
[423] Individual testimony #164.
[424] Ibid.

Roundabout in Raqqa, shouting that he was an agent of the *Nusayris,* meaning the Syrian regime.

Then they cut off his head and hung it on the wall of the roundabout. His body stayed on the ground where they had thrown it. They kept the head there for more than a day to terrorise people.

When we found out that he was at the roundabout, his brothers took their guns and went there. They had an argument with the ISIS fighters guarding the place where the heads were, and they managed to overpower them and retrieve the body and the head. They fled immediately to go and bury him. ISIS caught up with them and started firing at them, but no one was injured. ISIS lost their way. After that, we buried him.[425]

It was often of no consequence if charges of spying were true or not. Rubbing a well-connected ISIS member the wrong way could have terrible consequences, and often led to people being denounced as "agents." There was no need to provide evidence of the allegations. For example, a mother recounted her son's killing after he was accused of working with the PKK:

My eldest son, [H.], 17, was arrested several times on various charges. The last time, he was accused of being a PKK member. They raided our house and detained him.

[H.] hated ISIS. He insulted them to their faces. He didn't respond to their orders. I sent him to Turkey twice, to try to get him away from ISIS, but he refused to stay there and came back.

[After H. was arrested,] I repeatedly tried to get information about him at their headquarters in Raqqa, near the White Garden. But they wouldn't give me any information. One time I went, they threatened to cut off my head if I asked again. They kept him in detention for two months or more. Then they summoned me to see him. They told me: "Come and see your son, because he will be executed."

[…] after severely torturing him, they carried out [H.'s] death sentence at the al-Jazra junction in Raqqa. They sprayed him with bullets until he was dead. There were other young men with him who were also executed on the same charges.

We were devastated by his killing. He was completely innocent. My health deteriorated, and I started taking medicines and sedatives. Whenever I remember seeing his body hanging there, my heart tightens up with pain.[426]

Even then, ISIS fighters were not done with the woman and her family:

Even after my son was killed, they kept harassing me because I'm Kurdish and from Ain Issa. ISIS accused me of being a non-Muslim. They restricted my freedom of movement.

A group of foreign fighters came to our house with their wives several times, and offered to marry my daughters in a threatening way. They offered big sums of money. When I refused, I was accused of being an agent [of the PKK] and I was flogged more than once.

All this was meant to pressure me to marry my daughters to them. After repeated visits by the women, I smuggled my young daughters to [a neighbourhood on the northwestern edge of Raqqa city] and got them married to old men from Raqqa, from the Albu Hamid clan, out of fear of ISIS.

[Another] woman was also tortured in front of me for refusing to follow their orders. She was pregnant and the torture gave her a miscarriage.[427]

[425] Individual testimony #123.
[426] Individual testimony #10.
[427] Ibid.

Many of the killings were videotaped and distributed. One of the most notorious examples was the burning alive of Jordanian fighter pilot Muath Youssef al-Kasasbah on 3 January 2015. Kasasbah had been captured by the group just over a week earlier, after his F-16 fighter jet came down during a mission targeting ISIS positions in northern Raqqa. ISIS made a high-quality, Hollywood-style film of Kasasbah's execution. They walked the pilot at gunpoint through rubble caused by US-led Coalition airstrikes, placed him in an iron cage, and dressed him up in an orange suit like those worn by US detainees at Guantanamo Bay and the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Then they burned him alive.[428]

Such a video had an obvious international propaganda purpose. But less high-profile killings were also recorded. A woman from Raqqa described the agony of seeing her husband's execution this way:

> The son of our neighbour, who had tried to get information about my husband, brought me a video and put it on the computer. It showed my husband's execution.
>
> It was done by an [ISIS] fighter wearing a camouflage suit and a mask, with only his eyes clear and the slogan "there is no god but Allah" on his head. He was carrying a meat cleaver. My husband was blindfolded, and his hands were cuffed behind his back. Then the [ISIS] fighter cut off his head with the blade. [429]

Raqqa's mass graves

ISIS dug mass graves to dispose of thousands of bodies killed in executions or massacres. Around 30 mass graves have been uncovered since ISIS' defeat in Raqqa in 2017, estimated to contain between four thousand and 6,300 bodies.[430] Many of these graves were located in Raqqa city or surrounding areas.

One of the biggest mass graves discovered was in a cemetery in the city's Panorama district. This contained at least 900 bodies.[431] Another, in the agricultural suburb of al-Fukheikha, was initially thought to hold the remains of as many as 3,500 people.[432] Other mass graves were found at the Old Mosque and its garden; the Children's Park; the White Garden; the Jumaili Building Garden; the Crown; Western al-Salhabiya; the brick factory; civilian houses in the al-Bedu neighbourhood; the al-Rashid area, as well as at least a dozen other sites.[433] In al-Amrat, a mass grave likely containing the bodies of hundreds of missing Syrian army soldiers from the 17th Division was found.[434]

Local teams have begun exhuming bodies, assigning each an identification number, and storing them securely. Most of the recovered bodies are reburied at the public al-Bai'a Cemetery, five kilometres east of Raqqa. Nevertheless, resources are inadequate. Human Rights Watch warned that the 'sites are not being protected in accordance with international best practices, thereby damaging families' chances of identifying their loved

[428] BBC, 'Jordan pilot hostage Moaz al-Kasasbeh "burned alive"' (London, 3 February 2015) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31121160> accessed 19 August 2023.
[429] Individual testimony #156.
[430] The exact number is unclear. Local officials from Raqqa's municipality said more than 30 graves had been found, while the organisation Searching for Truth After ISIS refers to 28 mass graves and Human Rights Watch documented 'more than 20 mass graves containing thousands of bodies' across Syria.
See: Searching for Truth After ISIS, 'After ISIS: Take urgent steps to find the disappeared' (n.d.) <https://truthafterisis.org/en/>; Human Rights Watch (HRW) 'Kidnapped by ISIS: Failure to Uncover the Fate of Syria's Missing' (11 February 2020) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/02/11/kidnapped-isis/failure-uncover-fate-syrias-missing> accessed 19 August 2023.
[431] *The Arab Weekly*, 'Largest ever ISIS mass grave found near Syria's Raqqa' (21 February 2019) <https://thearabweekly.com/largest-ever-isis-mass-grave-found-near-syrias-raqqa> accessed 19 August 2023.
[432] Maya Gebeily, 'Largest ISIS mass grave yet found outside Syria's Raqqa' *Rudaw* (21 February 2019) <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/21022019> accessed 19 August 2023.
[433] Interviews with civil recovery personnel in Raqqa, April and May 2023.
[434] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 'Al-Raqqah mass grave: many bodies recovered and believed to be of "17th Division" members executed by ISIS' (16 April 2020) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/160420/> accessed 19 August 2023.

ones.'[435] The lack of resources may also prevent more mass graves from being uncovered. In comparison, similar work by Iraqi authorities, supported by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and the OHCHR, had already documented 202 mass graves by the year 2018.[436]

ISIS also dumped bodies into a deep pit called al-Hota. This was a huge natural gorge of unknown depth in northern rural Raqqa, 65 kilometres from the city, near the town of Suluk. It was a main regional stronghold for Jabhat al-Nusra before it was seized by ISIS; Nusra and other armed groups, including the al-Qadsiya Brigade, had already turned the hole into a mass grave for Syrian soldiers.[437] After the fall of Raqqa, activists estimated that 200 soldiers and pro-government militia fighters had been thrown into al-Hota.[438] When ISIS was in sole control of Raqqa, it continued using al-Hota for executions; it also threatened people with being thrown into the pit. Al-Hota's edges were reportedly scattered with bodies.[439]

Similar holes exist at al-Wusta al-Shamia (Habit al-Nuk), 60 kilometres south of Raqqa and northeast of al-Sukhnah, and at al-Hota al-Soghra (Twal al-Aba), which lies 45 kilometres northeast of Raqqa city. Residents estimated that nearly a hundred victims' bodies were dumped in the latter, including civilians and even members of ISIS executed for "apostasy."[440]

It remains unclear just how many people were disposed of in the three gorges. The research team was unaware of any attempts to extract the bodies dumped in al-Hota, due in large part to the difficulty of entering the pit and the lack of equipment to extract the bodies.

'Prepare yourself for your punishment': Floggings & amputations

Raqqa, perhaps more than any other Syrian city, saw arbitrary arrests, torture and degrading treatment of prisoners. Harsh sentences, which ISIS justified under *Shari'a* law, were thought to deter people from committing crimes. There was corporal *hudoud* punishment, including amputations of hands and feet, throwing people from tall buildings, and stonings and floggings in public squares. Floggings could be administered for something as simple as the "crime" of smoking, as one man recalled:

> I was arrested several times for smoking. They flogged me and fined me 10,000 Syrian pounds. That was before the displacement of the Kurds from Raqqa, so in 2014. It was around the beginning of Ramadan. The people who did that to me were foreign fighters, they were not from Raqqa.[441]

Those who resisted arrest would not be treated with compassion. A mother described what happened to her husband and daughter when they did not comply:

> ISIS fighters came to our house to take my husband to prison. I asked them: "What do you want from him, why are you taking him?"
>
> One of them shouted at me: "Shut up!"

[435] HRW, 'Kidnapped by ISIS'.
[436] UNAMI/OHCHR, 'Unearthing Atrocities: Mass Graves in territory formerly controlled by ISIL' (6 November 2018) <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_Report_on_Mass_Graves4Nov2018_EN.pdf> accessed 19 August 2023.
[437] HRW, 'Into the Abyss: The al-Hota Mass Grave in Northern Syria' 4 May 2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/04/abyss#_ftn10> accessed 19 August 2023.
[438] Ibid.
[439] Ibid.
[440] Interviews in Raqqa, April and May 2023.
[441] Individual testimony #4.

When my husband objected, one of the ISIS fighters hit him on the head with a weapon until he was unconscious and covered in his own blood. My daughter screamed, and one of the ISIS members hit her hard against the wall. She fell, hit her head and fainted. She was bleeding from her head. We took her to the hospital; she was in intensive care for three days.

My husband stayed in their prison for about two months. They interrogated him, but he knew nothing. He is a simple person.

When they released him, he got sick with a neurological condition. He started to behave inappropriately toward us. He cursed and swore and insulted us, and he even hit his daughter. He grabbed a teapot and hit her with it, burning her leg.

That was on top of the blow she received from ISIS. So now she [too] has a nervous condition. She started wetting herself at the age of 12. She has since started walking again and her situation has improved a little.[442]

Victims said there was no presumption of innocence—rather, a presumption of guilt—in ISIS' system of arbitrary justice. The punishment for *haraba*, a word that translates as "banditry" but is used to signify theft, was amputation. A victim that suffered this punishment told us:

On the 17th day of Ramadan, a man called Abu Ramadan came in and told me: "Prepare yourself for your punishment."

I asked him why. He said: "Because you're a thief."

I said I wasn't.

He said: "Well, that's what the judge ruled."

Of course, I asked to see the judge for my hearing before the 17th of Ramadan. They took me and another person on a motorbike.

I asked him: "Is there an anaesthetic [given]?"

He said: "Yes, there is, and paramedics and security personnel."

We got there, but there was no anaesthesia. He tied my fingers with a thread and pulled them, placed the sword, and hit it twice with the hammer, and my hand was cut off.

I felt the pain, but I didn't make a sound, because I was so resigned to my reality.

But then, five ISIS members pinned me down and put my feet on a table as well. Then they hit me three times, and on the third strike they cut my metatarsus. Then one of them grabbed my feet and tore them with his hands, and I started screaming in pain.

Then they took me to the hospital. Of course, their mission was to carry out the punishment, then take the victim to the hospital until he recovered from the anaesthesia. Then they have nothing to do with it after that. I stayed in the hospital until 8 pm.[443]

'I spent so long sitting underground': Arbitrary detentions & torture

Raqqa was home to several dozen ISIS prisons, many with reputations as horrific atrocity sites. Among the worst were the prison in the al-Rashid Municipal Stadium and the Point 11 prison, near the al-Hadhri restaurant.

A military stronghold in Raqqa, the Point 11 prison, also known as the "Black Stadium," was the most prominent of all security prison.[444] It primarily housed security detainees, including YPG members arrested for the purpose

[442] Individual testimony #162.
[443] Individual testimony #169.
[444] Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, *Unearthing Hope: The Search for the Missing Victims of ISIS* (April 2022) p.29. <https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2022/04/ISIS-Missing-Persons-Report---Syria-Justice-and-Accountability-Centre---C.pdf> accessed 19 August 2023.

of prisoner exchanges but also civilians arrested by *hisba* forces on non-security-related charges.[445] Some prisons were smaller, makeshift facilities in basements or houses.

The shepherd quoted above, who had earlier seen the executions at the 17th Division military base, was later detained in the Children's Hospital, another prominent prison site:

> At the sheep market, ISIS appointed an informant. One day, they arrested me. They came to the sheep market, detained me and gathered a group of us at an apartment in al-Firdous.
>
> We were blindfolded. They kept us in the basement of the Children's Hospital for 55 days. We did not see the sun [for all that time].
>
> When I was interrogated, they asked me: "Why didn't you take a *Shari'a* course…don't you like us?"
>
> I told them that I didn't have time for it, and they beat me while I was blindfolded.[446]

Forms of physical and psychological torture were common in ISIS prisons, leaving visible marks on prisoner's bodies. A former detainee described their degrading treatment:

> They held me for seven months. They transferred me from one prison to another, including the Children's Hospital, which they used as an underground prison, and the Jumaili building, the White Garden [near the al-Baik restaurant] and apartments in the al-Bedu district.
>
> They hung me by my hands for seven days, until my feet swelled up. When they interrogated me, they accused me of being a *shabeeh* [regime loyalist]. Then they accused me of being an American agent. They accused me of all sorts of things. After six months, a panel of their "judges" came and accused me of apostasy. They said I should be executed, and not given a Muslim burial.
>
> They threatened me with punishment and took me to a room where everyone was wearing orange. They dressed me in orange too. They shaved my beard and the hair on my head. Every day, they took two or three people out to execute them. Then they would bring back their clothes, stained with blood. They did all this to make us terrified.[447]

Eventually, the man got out; many others suffered a different fate. Attempting to escape could lead to severe punishment as well. The man who later suffered the amputation, described above had earlier attempted to escape:

> One day we were digging to try to break the prison wall and escape, but we were discovered. There were 35 people in solitary confinement at the prison, in cells about a metre long and a metre wide. They moved us to the solitary cells as punishment.
>
> They wanted to know which of us had started digging to try and escape.
>
> Our punishment was to be flogged with a plastic rod. Everyone received a different number of lashes: there wasn't a specific number, it depended on the mood of the person doing it. If one of them got tired, another took over, so they could flog the entire prison population.[448]

ISIS' abuses in detention also left less visible traumas. A resident of Raqqa said:

[445] Ibid.
[446] Individual testimony #66, focus group session 4.
[447] Individual testimony #69.
[448] Individual testimony #169.

> My mental state is really bad, and it gets worse whenever I remember those events. I cry and I can't express myself. It's like it was a nightmare.
>
> My whole life changed. I've withdrawn from people. I hate sitting in any room because I spent so long sitting underground. The prison was big. It had lots of mirrors, so now when I see myself in the mirror, it triggers trauma. For two months after I was released, I felt like I was still in prison.
>
> My wife left me. I was in a bad way mentally. My hair fell out from the fear and the disease in the prison. I got diabetes. Now I am traumatised when I think about it. I was subjected to severe physical torture that I will never forget for the rest of my life.[449]

According to the Commission of Inquiry on Syria appointed by the UNHRC, the conduct of torture as part of the attacks on the civilian population in Raqqa amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity.[450]

The Christian exodus

As in other parts of ISIS' self-proclaimed "caliphate," Raqqa's minorities were systematically targeted. Displacement resulted not only from the violence but also from discriminatory "laws," policies and taxes levied against ethnic or religious minorities. On 23 February 2014, ISIS published a statement addressing Christians, stating that they would have to pay as much as 17 grams of gold annually in the *jizya*, the tax on non-Muslims living under Islamic rule.[451]

Nusra and the FSA had earlier targeted Christians in the area, such as Corporal Toni al-Mallouhi, the former mayor of al-Mansoura; ISIS vowed to execute Mallouhi but later released him when he converted to Islam.[452] Another prominent event was the abduction of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest and peace activist who had served for three decades at Deir Mar Moussa al-Habashi, a sixth-century monastery 80 kilometres north of Damascus. The Syrian government had ordered Dall'Oglio to leave Syria in 2012 due to his meeting with members of the opposition and criticising the government's response to the uprising. He later re-entered the country and was kidnapped by ISIS in Raqqa on 29 July 2013.[453] There were conflicting reports that Father Paolo was still alive, and at one point he was said to be used as a bargaining chip by ISIS.[454] He remains missing today.

By the time ISIS took full control over Raqqa, most Christians, many of whom had come to Raqqa during the Armenian exodus, had already left the city.[455] Between September and October 2013, ISIS attacked three churches in Raqqa province including the Armenian Orthodox Church of the Martyrs in Raqqa city. ISIS removed the crosses, hung black flags from the façade and turned it into an Islamic centre.[456] In October 2013, the group also burned down an Armenian church in Tal Abyad.[457]

---

[449] Individual testimony #52, focus group session 4.
[450] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), '9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/28/69 (5 February 2015), para.171.
[451] Saad Abedine and Jethro Mullen, 'Islamists in Syrian city offer Christians safety – at a heavy price' *CNN* (28 February 2014) <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/28/world/meast/syria-raqqa-isis-christians/> accessed 19 August 2023.
[452] Al-Hakkar, *Al-Akhbar English.*
[453] Ben Hubbard, 'Disappearance of Activist Priest in Syria Stirs Fears He Is Dead' *The New York Times* (New York City, 14 August 2013) <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/15/world/middleeast/activist-priest-in-syria.html> accessed 19 August 2023.
[454] Anthony Loyd, 'Fall of Raqqa sheds light on disappearance of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio' *The Times* (London, 29 December 2018) <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fall-of-raqqa-sheds-light-on-disappearance-of-father-paolo-dall-oglio-2ldfskqvb> accessed 19 August 2023.
[455] Al-Hakkar, *Al-Akhbar English.*
[456] Employee of *The New York Times* & Ben Hubbard, 'Life in a Jihadist Capital: Order With a Darker Side' *The New York Times* (New York City, 23 July 2014) <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/world/middleeast/islamic-state-controls-raqqa-syria.html> accessed 19 August 2023.
[457] Alison Tahmizian Meuse, 'In Show of Supremacy, Syria al-Qaida Branch Torches Church' *Syria Deeply* (30 October 2013) <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2013/10/30/in-show-of-supremacy-syria-al-qaida-branch-torches-church> accessed 19 August 2023.

As it seized more territory in northeast Syria, ISIS continued to attack Christians and their places of worship. At the end of 2014, only 23 of Raqqa's 1,500 Christian families reportedly remained.[458] Those who fled and wished to return would be asked to convert or pay the *jizya*. The research team made efforts to find victims and witnesses from Raqqa's Christian community, but they were unable to locate any, suggesting that Christianity had (nearly) been eradicated from formerly ISIS-held territories in Raqqa province.

Shi'a Muslims also faced mass displacement from Raqqa. The Owais al-Qarni mosque, built as a Sufi shrine, was destroyed on 31 May 2014 along with seventh-century tombs in the city.[459] There would be no place for Shi'a Islam in ISIS' capital.

'They were not the sort of people you could negotiate with': Forced displacement of Raqqa's Kurds

ISIS launched large-scale operations against Raqqa's Kurds. A report by the UN Commission of Inquiry documented these attacks, stating that ISIS began to forcibly displace Kurdish civilians from towns across Raqqa province in July 2013; it demanded Kurds leave Tal Abyad or be killed, and thousands of families fled on 21 July. Arab Sunni families were resettled in Kurdish homes, forever changing northeast Syria's demographics.[460] A resident of Raqqa recounted the forced displacement of the Kurds:

> They issued a decree that the Kurds had to leave. They made the announcement at six o'clock in the morning on the mosque's loudspeakers, for ten minutes. I don't know what their reason was, or what we had done to them so they would make such a decision. But we had to do what they said and leave all our possessions, against our will.
>
> They were armed, and they were not the sort of people you could negotiate with. They confiscated my food warehouses and my harvests, such as cumin and barley, as well as my livestock. My brother's household appliance shops in Tal Abyad were also seized. All this gave them a source of income, which they called "spoils of war." [They] believed that what they were doing was *halal*.[461]

Fighters systematically looted and destroyed Kurdish property. A Kurdish resident spoke about the impact this had on the Kurdish community.

> We lived in fear. They saw us as infidels who did not know God. I was afraid to leave my house. My son was sick, but I was too afraid to take him to the doctor. They did not just harass us, confiscate our property and subject us to insults and humiliation; they also forcibly displaced us later, just because we're Kurdish.
>
> I remember then that they announced through the mosques that we should all leave our homes and that we would be deported to Tadmur [Palmyra]. But suddenly, after they deported us, they took us to the Baghdik area in rural Kobane. They deported the entire Kurdish community from our neighbourhood. We all left with just the clothes on our backs.
>
> We couldn't do anything to resist them. I returned after a while and found my house almost destroyed, and all my belongings stolen. They even stole a cow I kept in my barn; I used

[458] Stoyan Zaimov, '23 Christian Families Trapped in ISIS Stronghold Raqqa Facing Violence, Forced Taxes' *The Christian Post* (17 November 2014) <https://www.christianpost.com/news/23-christian-families-trapped-in-isis-stronghold-raqqa-facing-violence-forced-taxes-129809/> accessed 19 August 2023.
[459] UNHRC, 'Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria' A/HRC/27/CRP.3 (14 November 2014), para.29 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf> accessed 19 August 2023.
[460] Ibid., para.28.
[461] Individual testimony #9.

to sell its milk for some extra money. I repaired some things in my house and rebuilt the destroyed parts, but later they rigged it with explosives and destroyed it again.[462]

Many others told a similar story of displacement and property theft. An Arab man from Raqqa recalled how a well-off Kurdish man went home to his neighbours before leaving the area. As the days went by, ISIS began searching for the homes of Kurds. They put blue signs on them saying "Kurdish infidel." Depending on the state of the house, they would either hand it over to ISIS foreign fighters and their families or local fighters (if the property was more modest). Because the well-off Kurdish man's house was said to be beautiful, it was taken over by a foreign fighter. [463]

A Kurdish woman went through a similar ordeal—all while pregnant:

> They came to take our house, saying that since we were Kurds, we must work with the PKK. A Tunisian ISIS emir, who spoke in classical Arabic, came into the house with female [ISIS] members. He looked around the house and our belongings. The ISIS commander gave us fifteen days to leave.
>
> I was pregnant, tired, and terrified. I went to the hospital and saw nine severed human heads on the al-Naim Roundabout. The sight traumatised me. It's still with me today. I had a premature birth.
>
> Before we were displaced, all I took from the house were my children's clothes. When I went back to try to take my belongings, I was kicked out and threatened with imprisonment. They did not give me any of my belongings. The Tunisian emir lived in the house with two women.
>
> Then we went to my uncles' house. Two weeks later, they broadcast though the mosques that all the Kurds had to leave. We were deported to Jalabiyya in rural Kobane. Then we lived in a horse stable for four months. Our lives were really hard there.[464]

The UN report concluded that "as a widespread and systematic attack against the Kurdish civilian population, these acts amount to the crime against humanity of forcible displacement."[465]

'Since you are pregnant, I'll only give you 14 lashes': Violations against women & girls in Raqqa

ISIS' *hisba* forces enforced strict rules about what women could wear and where they could go, employing an iron fist during its regular patrols throughout Raqqa. If women violated the rules, judges levelled severe sanctions against them including flogging or imprisonment. One woman described how she was detained for improper dress:

> I was going to buy medicine for my mother, who was sick. I was in full Islamic dress, but when I went down the stairs of our building, I lifted my *abaya* [full-length gown] slightly so I wouldn't trip over it. My foot had been injured in a bombing.
>
> An ISIS fighter saw me and came over. There was a *hisba* patrol car nearby. They detained me and kept me in their custody from ten in the morning until five in the afternoon. I was given ten lashes and forced to undergo a *Shari'a* course. They confiscated my ID until I

[462] Individual testimony #13.
[463] Individual testimony #127.
[464] Individual testimony #27.
[465] UNHRC, 'Rule of Terror', para.29.

had passed the course. I was so afraid of them, and I'm uneducated, but to finish this course, you have to pass their test.

I saw a lot during those hours at the *hisba* base. There were stonings and torture. Some women were waiting to undergo death sentences.

There were women who were detained by the *hisba* for months for nothing, and with no charges against them. It was terrifying, difficult and tiring. During those hours, I felt as if I had entered another world.[466]

Unmarried women who had reached puberty posed a particular threat to ISIS' social order. Many were arbitrarily arrested on suspicion of mixing with the opposite sex. In June and July 2014 alone, eight women were stoned to death in Raqqa on charges of adultery. [467] Widows were supposed to remarry, as this woman witnessed during her detention by the women's *hisb*a force:

They took us to the al-Jumaili *hisba* headquarters and kept us there for three days. I remember that they detained me on a Tuesday, and I was released on a Friday. They gave me 14 lashes with a whip. The person who flogged me was called Abu Ali al-Tunisi. He told me: "Since you are pregnant, I'll only give you 14 lashes."

They put us in a room. We were about 22 women, and most of the charges were for injecting [heroin]. One of them had been widowed and they wanted to force her to marry an ISIS fighter. She refused, so they locked her up. Another was accused of being an infidel because in an argument with her mother-in-law she had blasphemed. Her husband was an ISIS emir, so he reported on her, and they arrested her.

There were many other stories. There were young girls there who they'd tried to recruit but had refused, so they locked them up.[468]

Adolescent girls as young as 13 were seen as a commodity with which ISIS could reward its fighters and attract more young men into its ranks. This stirred residents' fears that they would be forced to hand their girls over for marriage to ISIS fighters. The situation prompted many families to marry their daughters off to other men, to prevent them from ending up being forced to marry into ISIS. One victim described how this fate—forced marriage—befell his family after his brother's children were killed:

My brother [H.] had sons, including [M.], who sold tobacco on the black market for a living. He used to buy large quantities from big smugglers. In early 2015, he was arrested and taken to prison, beaten for a week with hosepipes, and tortured in terrible ways. Then [his other sons], who were born in 2000 and 2002, were summoned, beaten and accused of being agents of the Kurds. They were all executed on the same day. They executed [M.] in the Sawami' district.

When we found out, we couldn't do anything. It was terrible for all of us. But my brother [H.] was the worst-affected. His sons had been executed. He lost his mind. He didn't know what was going on around him anymore. I would often go to work and people would call and tell me he was in Sawami' [and] I would have to fetch him and bring him home. When I went out, I was afraid to leave him alone in case he committed suicide or harmed himself.

A few days passed and they came back to harass us again—this time demanding to marry [H.'s] daughters, [S. and T.]. At first, I refused, and kicked them out of the house. Several times, they accosted me at the vegetable market and pressured me to accept, but I still refused. In 2016, two *hisba* patrols arrived, including young men and women, and arrested the two girls.

[466] Individual testimony #35.
[467] UNHRC, 'Rule of Terror', para.52.
[468] Individual testimony #150.

One of the girls was born in 1997 and the other in 1998. [ISIS] married [T.] to a Tunisian, and [S.] to a young local ISIS member from al-Qattar Street in Raqqa. That's where they took the girls. I asked around to find out about the men and find my nephew's daughters. I found out that one of them was from al-Qattar Street. I went and argued with them. I saw his brother and said to him: "Would you like it if an ISIS member came, took your sister against your will and married her?"

He said: "No, but that's the situation, whether we like it or not."

I fought with many people over the girls, but I couldn't do anything, because they were ready to charge us and take retribution.[469]

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, such forced marriages were violations of international humanitarian law and acts that amount to war crimes of cruel treatment, sexual violence, and rape.[470] Those who were married to ISIS fighters often ended up in abusive and violent relationships. A woman from Raqqa related to the research team the physical torture she was subjected to by her husband:

Before ISIS came, I wasn't married. I lived a decent and comfortable life with my family. I had no sisters and eleven brothers. I was in school until the sixth grade, but after that, my family stopped my education.

A young man proposed to me through my brother's wife when I was 15. He was from the al-Bureij area. Right from the start, there were problems. My brothers didn't accept him. They weren't convinced, as he was an ISIS member. They said: "God knows what he might do to you down the line."

However, in our area, the father has the final say over his daughter's marriage, and what he says goes. I couldn't break my father's word. And so, we got married.

A little while later, my husband started beating me. I was pregnant with my first son. We had a disagreement because I got sick, and I was worried. I had just gotten pregnant. But he wasn't convinced that I was pregnant. I asked him if we could go to the doctor to get tested. I was sure that I was pregnant. But he said he wasn't convinced. He wanted to bring my mother to the house. When she came, he started cursing me and saying there was no pregnancy. He hit me on the back, and I started bleeding. He hit me with a cane. He hit me again and the bleeding got worse. Thank God the child didn't come out. God saved my pregnancy.

My husband used to treat me like ISIS fighters treat women, because he would sit with his brother and his friends, who were also members. He learned from them how they thought women should be treated. He would say to me: "You should be flogged. I want to take you to the women's *hisba* so they can re-educate you."

He was often violent towards me. He would force my head underwater and take it out. He would hold a knife against my body. He would throw food over my head. I would put my hand on my face out of fear and to protect my face.

My hand developed a tremor, which I still have. On one occasion, he beat me while we were with his family because I washed his shoes. He threw me on my back, tied my hands and started hitting me on my face.

I later discovered that he had a neurological condition. I was good at reading, and at one point he told me to give him his medicine from the cupboard. A piece of paper came out with the medicine, and there was a report saying he had a nervous disease. It seems he was cutting himself with a razor blade, and he wanted to do the same to me on top of all the beatings and other violence.

[469] Individual testimony #9.
[470] UNHRC, 'Rule of Terror', para.51.

> When we were first married, he taught me to smoke. I started smoking with him. Then, after teaching me, he started asking me: "Why do you smoke?" and telling me to stop it. I told him I was used to it, and I couldn't suddenly quit.
>
> When he saw me smoking a cigarette, he brought a gun and hit my hands with the butt of it. Then he loaded it and put it between my eyes. I screamed and put my son on my lap. He threw away the gun, grabbed a mop and beat me until my face and chest were covered in blood. My son was on my chest, and even he was disfigured from the blood and the beatings.[471]

In Raqqa, like in the other areas under ISIS' control, slavery was also common. Enslaved women and girls were predominantly, although not exclusively, Yazidi women and girls. While captured, Yazidi men were killed, the women kept as slaves and their children were taken to be "re-educated" in ISIS' ideology. In Raqqa, these captives were often presented to senior ISIS figures, especially foreign commanders. Local fighters also bought captives from the slave market. The Yazidis were kept at the Abu Qubi' Hotel, 10 kilometres west of Raqqa, and at the Suhail Habib Farm in Kasrat Faraj, five kilometres south of the city. The children were kept at the Ba'athist Vanguard Camp on the New Euphrates River Bridge.

'The children only knew ISIS anthems': Violations against Raqqa's children

Once under ISIS control, Raqqa's schools were closed. Instead, so-called *katatib* and *Shari'a* teaching circles in mosques were introduced. The new educational programme was successful in instilling ISIS' interpretation of Islamic values in the students, as a music teacher recalled: "I returned to my previous job as a music teacher, but it had become a widespread belief that music was *haram*, even among the parents. The children only knew ISIS anthems."[472]

In Raqqa, ISIS gathered children for screenings of videos showing massacres of Syrian government soldiers.[473] One man recalled how his son's education was essentially a precursor to military training:

> My son could not complete his education and became ignorant because of [ISIS]. When I took him to school during ISIS rule, the teacher was teaching him how to carry a weapon. They would train them on wooden guns […] and promised them a real weapon after a week.
>
> They also took advantage of children and their innocence to find out what we do at home, such as smoking and other things. I withdrew my son from school immediately after that. They asked me why. I told them that my son was mentally ill, and I didn't want to leave him alone. Their curriculum was Islamic law and theology […] but it had nothing to do with Islam.[474]

Children were expected to spy on their families and communities. Hundreds of other children, reportedly between the ages of five and 16, were trained for combat roles near Tabqa.[475] Yazidi child soldiers were taken by ISIS to a training camp in northern Raqqa.[476] Children also took active combat roles: ISIS videos from Raqqa, seen by the research team, showed children as young as five years' old executing detainees.

[471] Individual testimony #145.
[472] Individual testimony #97, focus group session 8.
[473] UNHRC, 'Rule of Terror', para.60.
[474] Individual testimony #50, focus group session 4.
[475] UNHRC, 'Rule of Terror', para.60.
[476] Amnesty International, *Legacy of Terror: The Plight of Yezidi Child Survivors of ISIS* (2020) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/2759/2020/en/> accessed 19 August 2023.

‘We had to leave their bodies under the rubble for two months’: Civilian casualties during anti-ISIS operations

By late 2016, the SDF, backed by the US-led Coalition, had already defeated ISIS in Kobane, largely expelled the group from Hasakeh, and liberated Manbij. The campaign to dislodge ISIS from Raqqa started in earnest on 6 November 2016.[477]

Initially, the campaign focused on Raqqa’s northern countryside. When this area was secured, a lengthy battle around Tabqa ensued to the west, while to the east the SDF advanced on the highway connecting Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. This cut off the last major road out of ISIS-controlled Raqqa city.[478] By early June, the SDF and the US-led Coalition had taken control of Tabqa and al-Mansoura, to the west of the city. Then, the battle for Raqqa city began.[479]

The fight for Raqqa was not just strategically important; it also carried immense symbolic value. Fought concurrently with the battle for Mosul, it was the last major city in Syria fully under ISIS control, containing the group’s command-and-control centres and housing many of its top leadership. Expelling ISIS from its self-proclaimed capital was expected to put a serious, if not fatal, dent in the ambitions of the so-called “caliphate” to maintain, control and govern territory. The SDF dubbed it the “Great Battle.”[480]

Raqqa was encircled and besieged by the end of June 2017, with as many as four thousand ISIS fighters trapped inside the city. The next month saw creeping advances; after a hundred days of battle, the SDF controlled more than two-thirds of Raqqa and nearly all of its Old City.[481] The last remaining ISIS holdouts, in the north of the city and around the al-Naim Roundabout, where so many had been executed, were fought over intensely. These areas were heavily mined and boobytrapped. SDF advances, relying on airstrikes by the US-led Coalition, were slow and painstaking.[482] ISIS had ordered that no one could leave, seeing the value of citizens as human shields to protect them from airstrikes. ISIS snipers were prevalent. Those who did flee by car or boat risked being taken for scurrying ISIS fighters. One woman recalled her experience trapped in the besieged city:

> They ordered us to leave our homes, saying the area had become a frontline. We went to the al-Kahraba district. There was bombing day and night. The al-Bedu district was being shelled and besieged.
>
> It was us, my cousin’s family, and another family. We suffered so much. First, my brother [A.] was wounded. Then they kept us all under siege in al-Bedu and used us as human shields.
>
> My brother was in the bathroom. There was heavy shelling. We were sitting in the kitchen. We told him to come and hide with us, for fear of the shelling. When he came to sit with us, a shell landed on us, and he was hit in the foot. We had no means of transportation at the time. Our neighbour took him to the National Hospital, and they amputated his leg.
>
> Four days later, we decided to try and flee. My brother [K.], who had crossed the Euphrates to the liberated areas, came back to Raqqa. When we asked him why, he said: “How can I leave my injured brother here and escape on my own?”

[477] *Al Jazeera English*, ‘Syrian rebels announce offensive to retake Raqqa’ (Qatar, 6 November 2016) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/6/syrian-rebels-announce-offensive-to-retake-raqqa> accessed 19 August 2023.
[478] Tom Perry, ‘U.S.-backed Syrian militias will close in on Raqqa: spokesman’ *Reuters* (6 March 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKBN16D0YE> accessed 19 August 2023.
[479] Rodi Said and Tom Perry, ‘U.S.-backed force launches assault on Islamic State's “capital” in Syria’ *Reuters* (6 June 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKBN18X0LH> accessed 28 September 2023.
[480] *Rudaw*, ‘SDF enter east Raqqa in “Great Battle” for ISIS stronghold’ (6 June 2017) <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/060620171> accessed 19 August 2023.
[481] SOHR, ‘On the 100th day of the grand battle of Al-Raqqah…SDF control more than two thirds of Al-Raqqah city’ (14 September 2017) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/74223/> accessed 19 August 2023.
[482] Quentin Sommerville and Riam Dalati, ‘The city fit for no-one: Inside the ruined “capital” of the Islamic State group’ *BBC* (London, 27 September 2017) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/the_city_fit_for_no_one_raqqa_syria_islamic_state_group> accessed 19 August 2023.

> My brother left with a group of people, so he could show them how to escape [ISIS]. Then one of the people with them came back and said: "Everyone with us died."
>
> When we asked him about my brother, he said: "Your brother's legs were blown off by landmines left by [ISIS]."
>
> When we went to the emergency ward, we found everyone dead. We helped the son of a person who was with them, and his wife. But we found that [K.] had bled to death. My brother had also donated blood to my other injured brother, [A.].[483]

At long last, around 300 to 400 remaining ISIS fighters brokered a deal to leave the city.[484] With 400 hostages as human shields, ISIS fighters and their families—including dozens of foreign fighters and some of the group's most notorious members, including ISIS intelligence chief Abu Musab Huthaifa—made for Deir Ezzor, where ISIS still held territory.[485] After four months of intense fighting, the SDF declared Raqqa liberated on 20 October 2017, vowing to include it in a federal, democratic northeast Syria governed by the Autonomous Administration.[486]

The price of Raqqa's liberation was immense. As negotiations over the surrender of ISIS fighters were ongoing, the US-led Coalition carried out heavy bombardments. ISIS members said these had killed 500 or 600 fighters and their families.[487] While such numbers may have been exaggerated, there were undeniably high numbers of civilian casualties. A father spoke to the research team about the airstrikes during the battle, which killed many of his family members, in the final month of the offensive:

> During dawn prayers, warplanes came and started bombing the area we were in. They bombed the building where we lived. There were another five buildings next to it. Forty-five bodies of people who were killed in the bombing were identified. They included five members of my family who were killed before my eyes.
>
> I'll never be able to forget that day.
>
> The buildings were next to the al-Maari School. Everyone killed was a civilian. There were no ISIS fighters, unfortunately; they had run away. They were cowards, and as soon as they [heard] warplanes, they got into their cars and fled. We stayed, and we were killed. My children—[A.] who was 27; [AM.] who was 18; [R.] who was 17; and [H.] who was 15—as well as my sister [Z.], who was 65. They were all killed.
>
> We had to leave their bodies under the rubble for two months. There was nobody to help us get them out. Everyone else who was there was injured in one way or another.[488]

According to documentation by Amnesty International and Airwars, the Raqqa campaign killed more than 1,600 civilians.[489] A joint report by the two organisations outlined the impact of thousands of airstrikes, primarily carried out by the US but also France and the UK, and over 30,000 artillery strikes by the US military—the equivalent of one artillery strike every six minutes for four months on end. The US-led Coalition had referred to the campaign as 'one of the most precise air campaigns in history'. The Amnesty and Airwars report observed

[483] Individual testimony #79.
[484] Damien Gayle, 'Last Isis fighters in Raqqa broker deal to leave Syrian city – local official' *The Guardian* (London, 14 October 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/14/last-isis-fighters-in-raqqa-seek-deal-to-leave-former-capital-in-syria> accessed 19 August 2023.
[485] Quentin Sommerville and Riam Dalati, 'Raqqa's dirty little secret' *BBC* (London, 13 November 2017) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret> accessed 19 August 2023.
[486] Tom Perry, 'Raqqa to be part of 'federal Syria', U.S.-backed militia says' *Reuters* (10 October 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKBN1CP16T> accessed 19 August 2023.
[487] Sommerville and Dalati, 'Raqqa's dirty little secret'.
[488] Individual testimony #78.
[489] Amnesty International, 'Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US-led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa "death trap"' (April 2019) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/04/syria-unprecedented-investigation-reveals-us-led-coalition-killed-more-than-1600-civilians-in-raqqa-death-trap/> accessed 19 August 2023.

that the aerial campaign had turned Raqqa into the 'most destroyed city in modern times.'[490] De-mining groups also said Raqqa was left as the 'most contaminated city in the world' due to mines and unexploded ordnance dropped from the air.[491]

The aftermath

While the battle for Raqqa still raged, tribal leaders and prominent figures from Raqqa met in Ain Issa in April 2017 to discuss the future of Raqqa province. They established a civilian council to govern Raqqa city post-ISIS, made up of Arab, Kurdish and Turkmen representatives. Afterwards, the city would later become the headquarters of the Autonomous Administration.

However, the task at hand for the new, post-ISIS authorities was monumental. Raqqa's economy was devastated. Mine and rubble removal operations started, as did early attempts at rebuilding infrastructure destroyed during the conflict. Gradually, some progress was registered. A hospital reopened. Some residents returned to face the destruction.

ISIS was down, but not out. It would be more than a year before its final holdouts in Deir Ezzor would be conquered. Meanwhile, the group continued attacks in Raqqa—including car bombs, assassinations and occasional firefights with the SDF, with ISIS sleeper cells biding their time and hoping for a chance to plot their return.[492]

But Raqqa, once the capital of ISIS' so-called "caliphate," lay in ruins.

[490] Ibid.
[491] Humanity & Inclusion, 'Unprecedented levels of contamination in Raqqa' (12 January 2022) <https://www.hi-us.org/en/news/unprecedented-levels-of-contamination-in-raqqa> accessed 19 August 2023.
[492] Angus McDowall, 'Islamic State says hits Syria's Raqqa with car bomb' *Reuters* (4 November 2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKCN1N90LP> accessed 19 August 2023.

6. DEIR EZZOR

It was in Deir Ezzor that ISIS made its final stand, having been expelled from all its former territories in northeast Syria and Iraq. It was therefore the place where the local population suffered longer than any other area—around six years in total—under ISIS control.

However, the group remains a potent threat in the area, something the research team encountered during research for this chapter. With ISIS sleeper cells still present, conducting research and interviews posed risks; as a result, many victims agreed only to be interviewed in the relative safety of their own homes, for fear of being targeted. Continued tribal conflicts in the area further contributed to instability: during one collective meeting to collect testimonies for this chapter, an inter-tribal gunfight broke out in the same district, killing six people.

Deir Ezzor before the conflict

Deir Ezzor governorate sits on the banks of the Euphrates River in northeast Syria. It is the country's second-biggest province after Homs, covering almost a fifth of Syria's total territory. The Euphrates diagonally bisects the province: on the western banks of the river lies the Syrian desert of al-Sham, also known as Shamiyyah, whereas to the northeast lies al-Jazeera, "the island" connecting the provinces of Deir Ezzor and Hasakeh.[493] The region is divided into three districts: Deir Ezzor, al-Mayadeen and Albu Kamal.

Inhabited for millennia by a series of civilisations, including the third millennium BC Semitic city-state of Mari, the Hellenistic city of Dura-Europos and al-Basira, the area also has Roman and Byzantine ruins at Halabiye, on the eastern bank of the Euphrates.

The modern city of Deir Ezzor was founded in 1865 under the Ottoman Empire, which designated it as the *sanjak*, or administrative region, of the area. It soon emerged as a commercial centre on the *caravanserai* route between Aleppo and Baghdad, seeing rapid growth in the middle of the last century. Deir Ezzor itself boasts a late Ottoman covered market in its Old City, along with several places of worship: the Kushiya Church, the Church of the Virgin and the Hamidi Mosque, also built during the Ottoman era. Later, in 1921, France occupied Deir Ezzor as part of its Syrian mandate established under the Sykes-Picot and San Remo treaties.

Deir Ezzor has a relatively homogenous ethnic and sectarian make-up. Arabs make up most of its population, and its residents speak Arabic in a dialect close to that of Iraq, specifically the province of Anbar just across the border, where many of the Syrian clans in the area have family links. Arab tribes settled in the region during the 18th and 19th centuries and turned to agriculture, gradually coming to dominate the area in the decades that followed. Major rural tribes in Deir Ezzor included the Ageidat, al-Baggara and Bousaraya, as well as secondary tribes such as the Bakaan, Obeid, Jhaish, Abu Hardan, Marasma and Jaghayfah. In the three main cities of the governorate, other tribes are also found, such as the Kharshan, Zafir, Jweihsneh and Maamra tribes in Deir Ezzor; the Kalayeen in al-Mayadeen; and the Rawiyeen and Aniyyen in Albu Kamal.[494]

[493] Rudayna al-Baalbaky and Ahmad Mhidi, *Tribes and the rule of the "Islamic State": The case of the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2018), p.21 <https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/4421641/Tribes+and+the+Rule+of+the+Islamic+State+Organization+-+Part+2.pdf/f342c609-141b-ea69-b30a-6ce01676661a?version=1.2&t=1545393667940> accessed 21 August 2023.
[494] Ibid.

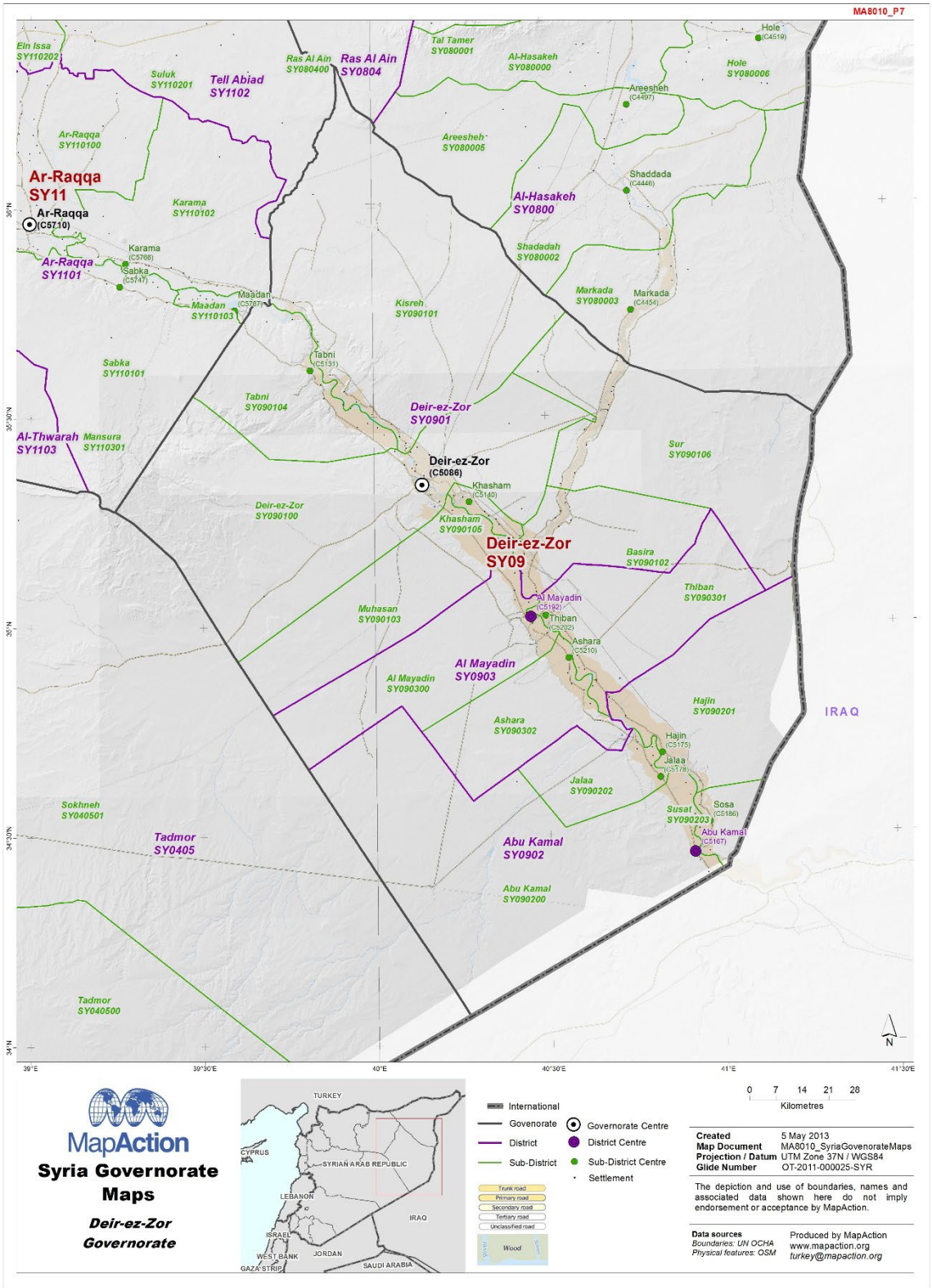


FIGURE 5: DEIR EZZOR PROVINCE.[495]

[495] Map Action, 'Syria Governorate Maps: Deir ez-Zor Governorate' (4 July 2016) <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/217-2938/resource/682e96b0-b538-47d4-a84d-33dbdc1e020b> accessed 21 August 2023.

The remainder of Deir Ezzor's population consists of Kurds, Armenians and small numbers of Turkmens, Assyrians and other Christians. The city also hosts several Syriac families. The Kurdish minority resides in the north of the province. Like the other areas of northeast Syria, Deir Ezzor served as a refuge for Armenians fleeing attack during the First World War when the then-mayor of Deir Ezzor, Haj Fadel al-Abboud, offered them protection.[496] In later decades, the Armenian Martyrs' Church in Deir Ezzor city would become a destination for thousands of Armenian pilgrims, both inside and outside Syria, each year.

The Ottomans, and later the French, forced Deir Ezzor's tribes to settle. While this effort disbanded tribal federations, it also increased the power of the tribal *sheikhs* over their members, who turned into landowners.[497] The economy became increasingly based on agricultural production and tax collection. In the following decades, under the French Mandate, Deir Ezzor saw some development, such as the construction of the suspension bridge that became a local landmark, as well as the founding of the city's first bank in 1930, the establishment of a courthouse, a national library, the city museum and a municipal stadium, along with the introduction of electricity through the Euphrates Electricity Company. Nevertheless, there was a long struggle in Deir Ezzor against the French Mandate; Mohammed al-Ayesh, one of the anti-French uprising's rebel leaders, would be imprisoned for 20 years.[498]

Following Syria's independence in 1946, the province experienced demographic and economic development, resulting from the stable situation in the country. In 1958, when Syria had united with Egypt in the short-lived United Arab Republic, the Agrarian Reform Law (Law 317/1958) was passed. Land reform redistributed lands from the wealthy landowners to the peasants.[499] Deir Ezzor's farming initially flourished due to the government's support, which came in the form of loans, seeds, fertilisers, fodder and animal medicines; as a result, the tribal sheikhs, who had been the largest landowners, lost significant power. Their authority changed from political to social, and they became increasingly dependent on the Syrian state for access to privileges.[500]

Following the coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970, dissatisfaction with the central authorities lingered.[501] Deir Ezzor was overlooked, and Damascus responded to expressions of discontent with divide-and-rule policies. On the one hand, there had been a tradition since before independence of reserving a ministerial post in various Syrian administrations for a member of the Deir Ezzor bourgeoisie. The former anti-French rebel, Mohammed al-Ayesh, had been the first in northeast Syria to become a government minister. Additionally, the Syrian state would enter strategic alliances, with key tribes in the area, who were in turn rewarded for their loyalty. Hafez al-Assad motivated tribal leaders to join the Ba'ath party and, in return, offered tribesmen positions in local administration—whether in local councils or as *mukhtars* and mayors.[502]

Besides these forms of tokenism and clientelism, the state exercised a monopoly on the exploitation of the region's resources and installed loyalists in key positions in the oil sector as well as the army and civilian governance administration. Exploitation of Syria's oil commenced in the 1960s. Gradually, its oil fields, including

[496] Abdullah Hanna, 'How the Syrians narrated the Armenian tragedy in 1915 and dealt with it' (Ar.) *Duffah Talteh (*9 March 2018) <https://diffah.alaraby.co.uk/diffah/print//revisions/2018/3/8/%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-1915%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%A7> accessed 21 August 2023.

[497] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.26.

[498] Ghassan Sheikh Khafaji, *Golden Biography: Deir ez-Zor, Bride of the Euphrates and the Syrian Jazeera* (Ar.) (House of the Raslan Foundation for Printing, 2019), pp.320-321.

[499] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.26.

[500] Ibid.

[501] Ziad Awad, *Deir Al-Zor after Islamic State: Between Kurdish Self Administration and a Return of the Syrian Regime* (European University Institute, March 2018) <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/52824/RPR_2018_02_Eng.pdf?sequence=4> accessed 21 August 2023.

[502] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.26.

those in Deir Ezzor, were developed, with oil production peaking during the 1990s.[503] The development of the oil industry in Deir Ezzor drove the growth of the city and public services, and gave rise to more companies, both public and private. Over time, it attracted migrants and created job opportunities in the major oil and gas fields that were developed in the area, most prominently the al-Omar field, 15 kilometres east of the town of al-Busira and north of al-Mayadeen; the Conoco oil field and gas plant, east of Deir Ezzor city; and the oil fields of al-Tanak, al-Ward, al-Asbaa, al-Taym, al-Jafra, al-Tabia, al-Mahash and al-Nishan. The area was also home to mines, such as the al-Tebni rock salt mine, about 40 kilometres north of Deir Ezzor city.

But like the provinces of Raqqa and Hasakeh, Damascus saw Deir Ezzor primarily as a supplier of natural resources. Despite its oil wealth and plentiful freshwater reserves, Deir Ezzor did not see investment in large-scale development projects; for example, refinement of oil was done at the Banyias and Homs refineries close to the Syrian coast.

As a result, most people in Deir Ezzor lived humble, hard-working lives. There were modest industrial activities, mainly in the public sector, focused on food production and processing, but farming was the major source of livelihoods. With lands on both sides of the Euphrates highly fertile, wheat and cotton were the most productive crops in the region; some also farmed sesame, vegetables and certain fruit trees, including olives and pomegranates, while others kept livestock. The city also had a developed handicraft sector and a reputation for its high-quality and unique designs of silk, woven fabrics, ceramics, pottery, copper, jewellery, and wooden furniture.

Some would say the authorities regarded eastern Syrians as backward Bedouins; indeed, until Syria's independence, Deir Ezzor had few schools and residents had access to few sources of education other than books. Few, if any political positions, went to people from Deir Ezzor, and relations with Damascus became increasingly securitised after Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970. While investment in infrastructure was lacking, a Syrian army special force was stationed in the province to impose security and prevent any "terrorist activities." The new constitution of 1973 imposed the teaching of Ba'athist ideology at every level of education, and special privileges, such as priority in university admission processes, were reserved for party members. Political pluralism evaporated, and any independent political activity was met with arrests and severe repression.

To make matters worse, following years of drought in the 1980s, farmers in the country's east were headed for ruin. Salt began seeping into large areas of farmland, due to the use of traditional irrigation methods and wasteful irrigation of crops. The government proved unable to offer effective solutions to this problem. In Deir Ezzor, these economic worries added to concerns over increasing political repression.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which had experienced significant growth in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, emerged in Deir Ezzor around the same time. It sought to capitalise on the discontent in the province. Brotherhood members attracted a large following and played a leading role in anti-government demonstrations, especially over the social and economic issues facing residents of Deir Ezzor. In 1982, during the Brotherhood-linked armed uprising in Hama, the government responded with a violent crackdown; although the violence was not at the same level of intensity as that in Hama or even Manbij, Brotherhood members in Deir Ezzor were arrested and disappeared into the regime's infamous detention archipelago. This put an end to political life in the governorate for decades to come.

[503] CEIC, 'Syria Crude Oil: Production, 1960-2021' (n.d.) <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/syria/crude-oil-production> accessed 21 August 2023.

Assad's policy of weakening the relationship between tribal members and their sheikhs in favour of their relationship to the state created dissent within tribes, between leaders and their tribesmen.[504] Neo-liberal reforms introduced after 2000 by Hafez's son and successor, Bashar al-Assad, heightened these divisions and contradictions. The governorate had seen some development: according to the National Report on Human Development published by the presidency of the Syrian Council of Ministers in 2007, there were now 835 schools, and illiteracy had been reduced to only 4.1%. Nevertheless, it took until 2006 before the only university in the region—the state-funded Euphrates University—was established.[505] Only 2.1% of Deir Ezzor province's population, totalling approximately one million people in the 2004 census,[506] had been educated to university level. Basic healthcare was available, and the region had nine public and 21 private hospitals; however, they often lacked personnel and supplies.

The economic difficulties led many of Deir Ezzor's tribesmen to migrate to the Gulf. There, newfound jobs, and financial stability gave migrants economic independence outside of tribal structures. A new class of businessmen emerged in Deir Ezzor to rival traditional tribal authorities.[507] These growing rifts would later manifest during the popular uprisings in Deir Ezzor after 2011.

The other important development that would impact local conditions in Deir Ezzor in the run-up to the Syrian uprising and conflict was the US invasion of Iraq. Assad, fearful the US would extend its operations to Syria, had funnelled extremist fighters into Iraq.[508] Deir Ezzor, on the border with Iraq, therefore served as an important crossing point, and the area developed a strong Salafi-jihadi presence. Fighters who returned organised hardline cells that would later play a role in the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra and, subsequently, the entry of ISIS into the area.[509]

Reflecting on the time before the outbreak of the Syrian war, Deir Ezzor's residents related their qualms with the lack of political freedom. "There were restrictions on what you could say and think. You could not talk about politics," one interviewee said.[510]

Looking back, however, many missed the relative security and prosperity of that period compared to what would follow. "Salaries were low, but life was good. My family was simple and poor, but the security situation was stable," said a teacher in a government school before the conflict.[511]

"When the Syrian regime was in control," another Deir Ezzor resident added:

> Life was stable. State employees had a good income, about $450 a month. Syria was calm and didn't have any problems, although there were restrictions on freedom. Lots of things were banned, and freedom of expression was non-existent because of the security apparatus.[512]

Nonetheless, the people of Deir Ezzor, like many others across Syria, joined an uprising in the hope of a better future—but ended up experiencing a decade of violence and terror instead.

---

[504] Baalbaky and Mhidi, pp.26-27.
[505] Ibid, p.27.
[506] Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 'Syria Population Census, 2004' (Ar.) (n.d.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20151208115353/http://www.cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf> accessed 17 August 2023.
[507] Baalbaky and Mhidi., p.27.
[508] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Peter Neumann, 'Suspects into Collaborators' *London Review of Books* (London, 3 April 2014).
[509] Awad.
[510] Individual testimony #83, focus group session 2.
[511] Individual testimony #110, focus group session 4.
[512] Individual testimony #19, focus group session 3.

The conflict in Deir Ezzor

Unsurprisingly, Deir Ezzor was early to join the Syrian uprising. The first demonstration took place in March 2011, the same month as the uprising first began in Dera'a. By April 2011, many locals in Deir Ezzor had joined nationwide demonstrations calling for political change. The security services responded with excessive violence, using live fire in response to a demonstration that started outside Deir Ezzor city's stadium.[513]

According to a detailed study of northeast Syria's post-2011 tribal dynamics, some of Deir Ezzor's tribesmen joined or supported the early protests—such as the sheikhs of the al-Baggara and Albu-Rahmah tribes[514]—however, most tribes took a more pragmatic or outwardly pro-regime stance at the beginning. Assad mobilised tribal sheikhs and pro-regime dignitaries to shore up support.[515] The regime also promised political reform if the tribes refrained from protesting. As a result, most tribal leaders remained neutral or pro-government; some tribes reportedly even supplied those loyal to the regime with weapons, such as the al-Hassan tribe in Albu Kamal.[516]

From the summer of 2011, government forces and pro-government militias took complete control over Deir Ezzor city and sought to suppress protesters with extreme force, killing at least 20 in August that year alone.[517] This accelerated the process of militarisation. Over the next months, several brigades emerged in the area, including the Ahfad al-Rasoul brigades, which relied heavily on financial support from the Gulf and was therefore able to operate independently from tribal networks.[518] There were fierce battles with government forces, which lost control over the city apart from a nearby airbase and a few neighbourhoods.

By August 2012, with Assad focused on Aleppo, the Syrian government gradually lost its dominance over Deir Ezzor city and the outlying countryside to the FSA and al-Qaida-linked fighters who had come in from Iraq.[519] One popular commander in Deir Ezzor at the time was Ismail al-Abdullah, later widely known as Abu Ishaq, who defected from the Syrian army and became a commander in Liwa' al-Ahwazi.[520] The defection of Assad's prime minister, Riyad Farid Hijab, and his ambassador to Iraq, Nawaf al-Fares, both of whom had ties to Deir Ezzor's tribes, served as another blow.[521]

Despite being in control over much of Deir Ezzor city and the countryside, the FSA failed to build a military structure strong enough to deter attacks on a local level. A chaotic situation ensued. Tribes established their own armed groups.[522] Public services were largely disrupted, either by the fighting or because Damascus cut off access.[523] Tribes also seized oil wells: the al-Shaitat tribe took the al-Tenek oil field, for example, and the al-Bkayyer tribe gained control of the Conoco plant, together with members of the AlBu Kamel tribe.[524] Some tribes

[513] *BBC Arabic*, 'Syria: Security uses batons and teargas to prevent mass demonstration from reaching the centre of Damascus' (London, 15 April 2011) <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2011/04/110415_syria_firday_demo> accessed 21 August 2023.
[514] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.27.
[515] Ibid.
[516] Ibid.
[517] *Al Jazeera English*, '"Dozens dead" in Syria after Friday protests' (Qatar, 13 August 2011) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/8/13/dozens-dead-in-syria-after-friday-protests> accessed 21 August 2023.
[518] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.28.
[519] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Assad's Aleppo focus allows rebel gains in Syria's east' *Reuters* (14 August 2012) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-east-idUSBRE87D0OH20120814> accessed 21 August 2023.
[520] Shelly Kittleson, 'The Changeling of Deir ez-Zor' *New Lines Magazine* (18 December 2020) <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-changeling-of-deir-ez-zor/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[521] Damien Cave and Dalal Mawad, 'Prime Minister's Defection in the Dark Jolts Syrians' *The New York Times* (New York City, 6 August 2012) <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/world/middleeast/syrian-state-tv-reportedly-attacked-as-propaganda-war-unfolds.html>; Martin Chulov, 'Syria's ambassador to Iraq defects in major blow to regime' *The Guardian* (London, 11 July 2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/11/syria-ambassador-iraq-defected-opposition> accessed 21 August 2023.
[522] Awad.
[523] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.28.
[524] Ibid.

worked with Jabhat al-Nusra to capture oil wells in exchange for granting Nusra a share in the profits: a prominent example was the Bu Chamel tribe, which conquered oil wells in al-Shuhayl as well as the al-Omar oil field with Nusra's support.[525]

Many of Deir-Ezzor's residents were impacted by the radical changes. "Lots of armed factions came, and each faction only cared about its own interests," one man said, adding that:

> There was looting and theft, and we had no safety. The economy tanked and agriculture struggled because there were no seeds anymore.
>
> We had no security. The place was run by armed gangs. Every gang looked after itself. There were no clinics or hospitals anymore, no medicines. Most doctors emigrated, and the situation got worse and worse. It was total chaos.[526]

Residents in other areas, however, found the situation more tolerable. "Our situation in Hajin was relatively comfortable," one tribesman said, "because the armed factions in our area were formed by local men. Being in a tribal area, they tried not to interfere with people's private lives."[527]

By the end of 2012, government forces had withdrawn from the majority of Deir Ezzor, although the city would remain divided between regime- and opposition-held areas. The city's suspension bridge had been destroyed by regime shelling, and only one bridge, which locals called the "bridge of death," remained to connect the two sides.[528] Like elsewhere in Syria, around this time, Deir Ezzor's rebel groups came to be increasingly dominated by Islamist forces backed by Gulf states. Sectarian atrocities followed: on 10 June 2013, 60 Shi'a men, women, and children, including at least 30 civilians, were killed in the town of Hatla in northeastern Deir Ezzor .[529] Afterwards, they raised a black flag and celebrated.

The arrival of ISIS

In their attempt to secure the governorate, Nusra formed the Mujahedin Shura Council, based in the town of al-Shuhayl in eastern Deir Ezzor. The formation included several factions: the al-Ikhlas Brigade, the Mu'tah Brigade (from the al-Shuhayl tribe), the Ibn al-Qayyim Brigade (from the al-Shaitat tribe), and the al-Qaaqaa Islamic Brigade.[530] When Nusra and ISIS separated in April 2013, many of Nusra's foreign fighters joined ISIS; this, in turn, caused local tribes to join Nusra, as there were "spots to fill."[531]

Until then, ISIS had fought alongside the other opposition groups in battles for the Deir Ezzor airbase and the city's security quarter, which allowed it to gradually establish a foothold in the region. Now, though, the group sought control of the entire province for itself. It capitalised on local communities' religious sympathies but was also able to pay high salaries, which made it attractive to a population that had quickly fallen into extreme poverty.

Furthermore, it successfully played tribal politics against Nusra, which was perceived to be cooperating closely with the Bu Chamel tribe. [532] By September 2013, ISIS was strong enough to launch a blistering assault on Ahfad

[525] Ibid.
[526] Individual testimony #11, focus group session 5.
[527] Individual testimony #19, focus group session 3.
[528] Ahmad Khalil, 'Crossing the Bridge of Death in Deir Ezzor' *Syria Deeply* (15 November 2013) <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2013/11/15/crossing-the-bridge-of-death-in-deir-ezzor> accessed 21 August 2023.
[529] Fernande van Tets, 'Syria: 60 Shia Muslims massacred in rebel "cleansing" of Hatla' *The Independent* (London, 13 June 2013) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-60-shia-muslims-massacred-in-rebel-cleansing-of-hatla-8656301.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[530] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.30.
[531] Ibid., p.29.
[532] Awad.

al-Rasoul, swiftly beating it, seizing its weapons and forcing its leadership to pledge allegiance to ISIS.[533] Nusra, together with Ahrar al-Sham and members of the al-Shaitat tribe, tried to take over the Conoco plant from the al-Ageidat. The al-Ageidat, for their part, sought ISIS support to fend off the attack.[534]

ISIS withdrew to the town of al-Shaddadah in Hasakeh, where it established a base of operations under the command of Abu Omar al-Shishani, later the group's notorious "minister of war." As it planned further operations against Nusra in Deir Ezzor, it built alliances with tribes that opposed Nusra, such as the al-Gu'ran tribe, who had held a grudge against Nusra following its attacks on oil wells.[535] Nevertheless, ISIS suffered various losses: Nusra and its allies managed to capture the Conoco gas plant, and parts of the Jadeed Ageidat area. By February 2014, the group was nearly pushed out of Deir Ezzor altogether.

The fall of al-Shuhayl

Eventually, over the next months, ISIS gained the upper hand over Nusra and its allies. There had, for example, been heavy fighting between Nusra and ISIS over the border town of Albu Kamal. In April 2014, 68 were killed in clashes, dozens of whom were from Nusra and its allies.[536] Slowly, ISIS chipped away at Nusra's presence: first, in the western and northern countryside of Deir Ezzor before the group used weapons acquired in Mosul in early June 2014 to send a military convoy from Iraq across the border into Albu Kamal.[537] This force fired indiscriminately during the assault and placed snipers in tall buildings, killing both fighters and civilians in the streets. The battle continued for three days, leaving more than 85 civilians dead, including women and children. Albu Kamal fell to ISIS, which then proceeded towards al-Shuhayl.[538]

Al-Shuhayl was strategically and symbolically important. Nusra had established its base of operations in the town, but it was also the hometown of Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, Jabhat al-Nusra's second-in-command. At one time, it was even rumoured to be the hometown of Nusra's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani.[539] Commanded by Shishani, ISIS besieged al-Shuhayl and bombed the town with heavy artillery installed in the nearby town of al-Basira. The shelling lasted for four days, during which at least 18 people were killed and more than 60 wounded, all of them civilians.

After several days, Nusra-affiliated fighters inside the town started running out of ammunition. They had received no outside help, despite issuing dozens of distress calls, and were left no option but to seek a deal with ISIS. In exchange for a ceasefire, ISIS demanded the fighters in the town pledge allegiance to it; it also agreed their fighters would not enter the city, the residents would not be displaced and the town's fighters would be allowed to keep their weapons. The next day, ISIS changed its conditions, demanding that all residents leave and the remaining fighters hand over their weapons. Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaish al-Islam, as well as the other factions under the Mujahideen Shura Council, refused, choosing instead to withdraw, first to al-Mayadeen. From there, Nusra moved to the mountainous Qalamoun region to the west of Damascus as well as to southern Syria's Dera'a; FSA factions moved northward. As a result, by mid-July 2014, ISIS was in control of nearly all of Deir Ezzor, apart from half of Deir Ezzor city, which remained under the control of pro-Assad forces.[540]

---

[533] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.31.
[534] Ibid.
[535] Ibid.
[536] Saad Abedine and Jason Hanna, '68 killed as Islamist groups fight each other in Syria, group says' *CNN* (11 April 2014) <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/11/world/meast/syria-civil-war/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[537] Karen Leigh, 'As ISIS Advances in Eastern Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra Faces Loss of Control' *Syria Deeply* (16 July 2014) <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2014/07/16/as-isis-advances-in-eastern-syria-jabhat-al-nusra-faces-loss-of-control> accessed 21 August 2023.
[538] Barbara Surk, 'Jihadi group captures Syrian border town' *Associated Press* (1 July 2014) <https://apnews.com/b2a2352009394ed4a0d5c5dbf93941a2> accessed 21 August 2023.
[539] Ibid.
[540] Alexander Dziadosz and Tom Perry, 'Islamic State expels rivals from Syria's Deir al-Zor – activists' *Reuters* (14 July 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-east-idAFKBN0FJ1I020140714> accessed 21 August 2023.

Deir Ezzor's tribal politics influenced how ISIS controlled the towns that now came under its control. ISIS' *wali* (governor) for Deir Ezzor was Amer al-Rafdan, from the al-Rafdan family of the al-Bkayyer tribe based in the Jadeed Ageidat area. Since the Rafdan family had been expelled by Nusra and the allied Bu Chamel tribe when ISIS took control of al-Shuhayl, Rafdan saw an opportunity to avenge the tribe's humiliation. He issued a decision to displace al-Shuhayl's inhabitants belonging to the Bu Chamel tribe for ten days.[541] Some 30,000 people were forced out, according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights,[542] and were only allowed to return after they declared their "repentance."[543]

'Take the head of your apostate son': The massacre of the al-Shaitat tribe

The al-Shaitat clan, which includes residents of Abu Hamam town and the nearby villages of al-Kishkiyah and Gharanij, is a branch of the Ageidat tribe whose lands extend deep into Iraq. As ISIS had expanded across Deir Ezzor, the al-Shaitat allied with Nusra, putting up fierce resistance against ISIS.

When Nusra was expelled from Deir Ezzor, the al-Shaitat, now on the losing side, were left in a precarious position. Although ISIS made numerous promises of clemency to tribes across Deir Ezzor in this period, the agreement concluded over al-Shuhayl and the return of inhabitants following their repentance were not extended to the al-Shaitat. Nevertheless, initially, clan elders negotiated with ISIS that their fighters would hand over their weapons in exchange for undergoing *Shari'a* courses and "repentance" sessions.[544] According to Omar Abu Layla, an activist and former FSA spokesperson in the east of Syria, the agreement also covered the oil wells. Either way, ISIS had never intended to respect it.[545]

After some initial small confrontations between ISIS and al-Shaitat members, matters came to a head in August 2014. An ISIS patrol raided a home in Abu Hamam—which they were not allowed to do under the agreement—and killed the man they were searching for.[546] Al-Shaitat members from Abu Hamam killed several foreign fighters and burned ISIS' local headquarters in response.[547] One witness reflected on what had happened:

> An ISIS patrol from the al-Battar al-Libi battalion raided some houses in the area. They killed three people by cutting their throats. That sparked a battle between the two sides, which ended with the killing of all the ISIS members at their bases in the area.
>
> The group then withdrew from our area and the surroundings, to come back and strike again more strongly. That's what happened. They came back with a heavily armed convoy and lots of fighters.
>
> There was a big battle and ISIS took heavy losses, due to the experience of some [local] fighters and their knowledge of the area. This made ISIS more and more angry, so it sent in reinforcements from several other regions, including some of its leaders, to supervise the fight. [548]

ISIS responded by detaining and then killing 50 al-Shaitat members working at the al-Tanak oilfield. Their bodies were buried in a mass grave, according to Abu Layla.[549] Outraged by the treatment of their fellow tribesmen,

[541] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.34.
[542] *Al-Arabiya News*, 'NGO: ISIS expels thousands in east Syria' (6 July 2014) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/07/06/NGO-ISIS-expels-thousands-in-east-Syria> accessed 21 August 2023.
[543] Omar Abu Layla, 'Daesh's Forgotten Massacre in Deir al-Zour' (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 24 October 2022) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/daeshs-forgotten-massacre-deir-al-zour> accessed 21 August 2023.
[544] Interviews with Shaitat members, April and May 2023.
[545] Abu Layla .
[546] Ibid.
[547] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.35.
[548] Individual testimony #183.
[549] Abu Layla.

the incident led hundreds of al-Shaitat members to take up arms against ISIS. They killed several fighters and burned the group's bases in Sweidan al-Jazeera and al-Tayyana. ISIS responded to the uprising with excessive force and treated the rebelling tribe with contempt. A member of the al-Shaitat clan recounted how ISIS killed his brothers during the clashes:

> Someone told me that two young men had been killed close to our house. I ran unconsciously. When I arrived, I saw that their heads had been cut off. Blood was gushing out of them. I lost control of myself. I screamed: "They killed two of my brothers!"
>
> I think [Y.] had been killed before [A.], because I saw his head separated from his body. I found their severed heads. I screamed and called out to my brothers: "There is no might and no power except with God."
>
> My third brother ran home and brought back a gun. He started running and shooting at the headquarters of the Chechens [foreign ISIS fighters], who fired back. I called him and told him: "Come back! They'll kill you like they killed our brothers."
>
> Minutes later, he was hit by five bullets from their base. I was too scared to go on. Removing the bodies wasn't allowed, but I carried them home anyway. When I arrived, my family and children started screaming from the sight.[550]

Using a *fatwa*, ISIS then labelled the al-Shaitat a "group that resists Islamic rule through force of arms," stating that:

> It is not permissible to conclude a truce with them, nor to release their captives, neither for money nor for any other purpose. It is not permissible to eat the meat of the animals they slaughter, and it is not permissible for anyone to marry their women. It is permitted to kill them as captives and to pursue and kill any one of them who escapes. It is also permitted to kill them when they are wounded. They must be fought, even if they do not start the fight.[551]

ISIS brought in reinforcements from Hasakeh and, on 5 August, laid siege to Abu Hamam. An al-Shaitat member who lived through the ordeal recalled what happened next:

> After about 15 days of fighting, [ISIS] took control of the area, due to a suffocating siege, a lack of ammunition and medicines, and the number of wounded, as well as indiscriminate ISIS shelling of residential areas.
>
> After the fighters left, ISIS moved in and carried out a series of killings, forced displacement and slaughter, despite promising to only target those who had fought it. This was totally untrue; they only killed unarmed civilians.
>
> My family and I went to al-Shaafah and stayed in a school on 24th Street with my siblings and the people who had fled with us. Suddenly, a big ISIS patrol arrived and surrounded the school. Some fighters came inside. My father was with us.
>
> They gathered the children and women in the school yard. One young fighter came forward and grabbed one of my brothers. He beat him in front of the women and children, then made him kneel, took out a knife from his sleeve and slaughtered him, in front of my father, the women and children. This was on 13 August 2014, between 7 and 8 am.
>
> After cutting off my brother's head, the fighter said, "God is great," then threw [his head] in front of my father and said: "Take the head of your apostate son."
>
> The children started screaming and the women were crying from the horror of what they were seeing. But my father stayed silent. He didn't say a single word.

[550] Individual testimony #78.
[551] Quotes from Abu Layla, 'Daesh's forgotten massacre'.

> Then the patrol arrested my siblings and their children. I managed to escape by jumping from the car. Some ISIS fighters chased me, but I hid in the buildings behind the school.[552]

In its assault on the al-Shaitat's towns, ISIS used heavy artillery, remotely detonated bombs, and suicide bombers. It also unleashed some of its most hardened, feared fighters against the area after ISIS forces drawn from the local population had failed to take it.[553] When the ISIS fighters entered the town of Abu Hamam, as well as the villages of Gharanji and al-Kishkiyah, residents fled with nothing more than the clothes they were wearing. ISIS had announced via the mosque loudspeakers that it would guarantee civilians safe passage, but this was a trap, as those who fled into ISIS checkpoints were killed.[554] The adult men who remained were killed when ISIS took control. According to one survivor, on 15 August, "more than two hundred people" were killed in the desert, their bodies mutilated.[555] Many others were burned, crucified or hanged. Women were captured as "spoils of war."[556]

Amid the violence, the massacre of the al-Shaitat also provided an opportunity to settle old tribal feuds. Inhabitants of Muhasan, of the Albu Khabour tribe, who had pledged allegiance to ISIS, tortured inhabitants of al-Shaitat villages and confiscated their properties after ISIS issued a decision to displace al-Shaitat residents. The attack was a retaliation for a previous attack by the al-Shaitat against Muhasan clans.[557] Such inter-tribal feuding would become a recurrent feature of ISIS violence in Deir Ezzor.

For months, ISIS continued its purge of al-Shaitat members, setting up checkpoints around the area. The al-Shaitat clan suffered violence even after they eventually returned to their homes, as one victim described:

> In Gharanij, most of the animals had died of lack of water. There were lots of corpses on the road, the houses and the trenches.
>
> There were several mass graves: one containing 30 corpses, another containing 40, another with 70 and another one with hundreds in the scrubland near Gharanij and Abu Hamam. In the houses, there were many dead people. Most of them were unrecognisable because they were decomposed and eaten by animals.[558]

After the discovery of several mass graves, sources estimated that in total, over 900 people were killed in several mass-casualty atrocities.[559] Some sources estimated it to be on the level of the organisation's attack on Kobane, its mass killings of Christians, its attack on Camp Speicher in Iraq, and its killings of Yazidis in Sinjar. Later incidents demonstrated that ISIS maintained its grudge against al-Shaitat members: in May 2015, an al-Shaitat teenager, accused of killing ISIS members, was killed with a bazooka.[560]

---

[552] Individual testimony #183.
[553] Interviews with al-Shaitat members, April and May 2023.
[554] Ibid.
[555] *Massar*, 'Al-Shaitat massacre, as narrated by one survivor' (8 December 2021) <https://massarfamilies.com/al-shaitat-massacre-as-narrated-by-one-survivor/?lang=en> accessed 21 August 2023.
[556] Interviews with al-Shaitat members, April and May 2023.
[557] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.34.
[558] Individual testimony #89.
[559] *BBC*, 'Syria conflict: 230 bodies "found in mass grave" in Deir al-Zour' (London, 17 December 2014) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30515483> accessed 21 August 2023.
[560] Gianluca Mezzofiore and Arij Limam, 'Syria: Isis executes al-Sheitaat tribe teenager with bazooka in Deir al-Zour' *International Business Times* (21 May 2015) <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-isis-kills-shaitat-tribe-teen-bazooka-deir-al-zour-1502356> accessed 21 August 2023.

‘Even if you find him, you won’t be allowed to bury him in a Muslim cemetery’: Public executions

After ISIS’ take-over of Deir Ezzor province, waves of executions followed. In July 2014, ISIS carried out dozens of executions in al-Mayadeen; residents recalled seeing 30 to 40 bodies hanging at the al-Bal’oum Roundabout.[561] The city of al-Mayadeen would, in fact, experience continuous violence and killing during ISIS rule. It was occupied by ISIS between 2014 and 2017 and renamed the “capital” of the group’s “al-Khair” province. ISIS also used the city as a training camp and gathering point for its fighters, as well as a place to store weapons and explosives. During this period, ISIS killed numerous civilians, including children.[562]

In some cases, ISIS even tried to make children carry out its executions, as one man saw during his detention by the group:

> After three days, some ISIS fighters came, blindfolded me, and tied my hands. I could no longer control myself. He told me: “We’re going to execute you.”
>
> I said: “Allah is my suffice, and the best deputy” [a common supplication].
>
> They put us on a bus [and] we rode for about five hours. I heard different voices. Finally, we reached the destination.
>
> We got off the bus, and they uncovered our eyes. We were in a fenced area with a lot of trees. I think we were on the Iraqi or Turkish border because we could see earth mounds. We entered a two-storey building. While we were there, we found out that the detainees with us were from the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra and other people accused of fighting ISIS.
>
> Finally, it turned out that we had been brought there because ISIS made a mistake. We were only meant to undergo a [repentance] session. There were five or six children among them.
>
> [A fighter] stood in the doorway and told everyone: “You are going to re-enter Islam.” They let us have a break for an hour and made us take showers. They gave us Pakistani clothes, which we put on, and then we left.
>
> There was an Iraqi called Abu Montasir, who led the unit. He gave us a lecture, saying we were disbelievers and that we would now become believers and learn about *Shari’a* law, and that we had to enter Islam again.
>
> This continued for 15 days. Finally, Abu Montasir came again and made the *takbir* [shouting “God is great!”] and said Deir Ezzor had been liberated, the [Alawis] had been routed, the mountain had been seized and they had pledged allegiance to [ISIS].
>
> Some of those present were very impressed and said we must pledge allegiance to [ISIS]. Some people there were ignorant, and five of them went out and pledged allegiance.
>
> I told one of them: “Sheikh, my family does not know where I am, I can’t swear allegiance as I’m not ready.” Only five people left. Two days later, five soldiers from Tabqa airport were brought in, and they asked us to carry out retribution on them. They selected me, a second person, and one of the children who were with us.
>
> They even brought a sword and put it on the table. They brought in the first soldier. They recited verses from the Quran and said: “Do it.” I couldn’t even hold the sword out of fear.
>
> Abu Montasir kicked me so hard that I passed out. Somebody else executed one of the soldiers.
>
> The child couldn’t do it, and he started crying. He couldn’t kill. So, Abu Montasir put his arm around him, held his hand and cut the soldier’s head off. Now the child had lost his

[561] United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), ‘9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic’ A/HRC/28/69 (5 February 2015), Annex 2, para 75.
[562] Interviews with al-Mayadeen residents, April and May 2023.

voice. He couldn't talk anymore because of what they had forced him to do, against his will. His eyes were red from crying.

They cleared the corpses from the yard and took us back inside. Then [Abu Monstasir] came back and lectured us, saying our hearts still had blasphemy in them and we couldn't implement Islamic rule.

They kept us like this for about 40 days. But they got nothing from us. We were looking after the child, who could no longer speak. I took care of him because he wasn't eating or drinking.[563]

Other videos of executions by children in Deir Ezzor, committed at the behest of ISIS, would later surface online.[564]

Victims' families were prevented from burying their dead, sometimes for up to three days. The group rarely distinguished between old and young, or between men and women—all could be subjected to the ultimate punishment. Furthermore, ISIS often filmed its crimes and then published the videos through its online channels, as well as on screens they set up in squares and other public places. A family member of a victim related how this worked in practice:

Four months after [my cousin] was detained, we found out that ISIS was holding [him] in one of its prisons. We tried to visit him. They said he would be released after two days. Even his [immediate] family went to visit him, but they wouldn't let them see him.

They told us that he would be released soon, and we tried to visit more than once, but they didn't let us, and nothing changed. A few days later, we heard that he was going to be released on bail or for a fine. But we were all shocked when they told us there was no such plan; rather, they were preparing him to be executed.

We asked them: "What is he charged with?" They told us: "Smuggling weapons and collaborating with the *Nusayris.*"

After another week of waiting for any news about him, ISIS broadcast a report on their plasma screens, which they had installed in the streets, so people could watch everything the organisation released. His mother was shopping in the market when she saw it. Her son was executed along with another person on charges of smuggling weapons and dealing with [the regime]. She was in a terrible state when she saw it. When we heard, there was lots of shouting, and we went to the media point to make sure. The video was played again, and we saw how their sentence was carried out.

We went to the detention centre where he had been held and told them we wanted the body. They said he couldn't be buried with Muslims. He was buried in a mass grave for people whom ISIS viewed as "non-Muslims." We tried looking for him, but we couldn't find him.

They told us: "Even if you find him, you won't be allowed to bury him in a Muslim cemetery."[565]

[563] Individual testimony #129.
[564] *Al-Arabiya News,* 'Disturbing ISIS video shows kids beheading and shooting prisoners (10 January 2017) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2017/01/10/Disturbing-ISIS-video-shows-kids-beheading-and-shooting-prisoners> accessed 21 August 2023.
[565] Individual testimony #179.

'They'd brought their 10-year-old children': Stonings & other violations against women in Deir Ezzor

ISIS specifically targeted women related to the group's opponents, an effective technique to exact maximum offence in tribal social structures. In several cases, women from the region were stoned to death on charges of adultery. One woman recalled watching a woman stoned to death in a public square, as ISIS forced people to watch:

> ISIS closed the roads and set up barriers, and people began to gather in the square. When everyone was there, they brought a woman out of a car, her head covered with a black bag. My sister asked what was happening. I told her I didn't know.
>
> I heard some men saying she was an adulteress and had been sentenced to be stoned to death. Then ISIS put the woman in a hole and told everyone to throw stones and pebbles at her until she was dead. They told everyone they were allowed to throw stones at her.
>
> After 10 minutes of continuous stone-throwing, the woman appeared to be dead. Nobody knew who she was. I heard an ISIS fighter telling his friend that the woman wasn't dead, and everyone had to throw stones at her again.
>
> After another round of stone-throwing, he told his friend to check whether she was dead or alive. One of the fighters checked the woman's pulse. He said she wasn't dead. So, they told everyone to stone her yet again until they were sure that she was dead.
>
> When she was finally dead, they carried the body to the car and told everyone to go home. This experience had a deep psychological impact on me, especially since I had a little sister.[566]

It was common for ISIS to make the residents of Deir Ezzor participate in stoning. "One time," a witness said, remembering the stoning of two women:

> I was doing something in the market and a *hisba* car showed up. They started shouting that there would be a stoning after noon prayers and that everybody had to be there, in front of the municipality building.
>
> After about half an hour, they brought two women covered in black, and put them in a hole that had been prepared. Some stones were put next to the hole, and they put the women inside.
>
> They'd brought their 10-year-old children to see the stoning. Most of them were Iraqis, but there were also some from […] Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.
>
> They started carrying out the sentence, hurling stones at the women in the hole. The children were throwing stones and laughing. The women were stoned to death. What surprised me was how enthusiastic the children were about throwing stones, how they laughed, and how the [ISIS] leaders were encouraging them.[567]

Stoning on charges of adultery were not limited to women, even though they were the majority. A witness described how a young man was stoned to death outside a market:

> [ISIS] fighters came in and ordered everyone present to go out to Albu Kamal Square to watch a stoning. He was a young man. They closed all the shops and forced everyone to go out and watch. We didn't know who he was or what crime he was supposed to have committed. Four

[566] Individual testimony #66.
[567] Individual testimony #99.

cars arrived, one carrying the young man. Another was loaded with stones. [ISIS] set up a security cordon around the area.

There was a circle, and the young man stood inside it. He was blindfolded and didn't know who was around him. An [ISIS] member gave a speech about him and why they were going to stone him.

The ISIS fighters were wearing masks, and none of them could be identified. The young man was lying on the ground. An ISIS fighter went and brought a car carrying the stones. Then he took a big stone and threw it at the young man. He started bleeding.

It was a terrible scene. The young man tried to lower his face to the ground. Everyone picked up stones from the car and threw them. The young man was bleeding a lot from his face and his body. After he passed away, an ISIS member read a few lines, saying he had been cleansed of sins by the stoning.[568]

On other occasions, victims were thrown to their deaths from tall buildings, which would become a signature ISIS punishment in Deir Ezzor, particularly for people accused of homosexuality. Other victims were tied by their four limbs and torn apart or dragged to their death behind cars.

"Four cars arrived carrying ISIS fighters," said a witness who saw victims thrown to their deaths from tall buildings:

After they had surrounded the place where we were standing, they got out. They were wearing black masks, and they had a young man with them who was blindfolded. What caught my attention was the young man's self-confidence. He walked lightly, without any resistance, shouting or signs of sadness.

Those of us who were standing there started analysing it. One said: "Poor guy, why isn't he afraid?"

Someone else said he was probably injected with something and that he'd lost his mind. People suggested lots of explanations.

A few minutes later, the young man was lifted onto the wall on the edge of the roof of a four-storey building. He was handcuffed and his eyes were closed. They pushed him off and he fell on his head. I saw him as he uttered his last moan.[569]

The UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that ISIS' executions of women (and men) because of their gender, and the group's use of sexual assault and rape, reflected part of a broader attack on the civilian population in Deir Ezzor, and constituted the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape, and other inhumane acts.[570]

'In the end, he flogged us anyway': Corporal punishment in Deir Ezzor

ISIS governance in Deir Ezzor was also influenced by tribal customs and rivalries. ISIS took advantage of the tribes that had suffered social and economic marginalisation; they were enlisted by ISIS for the enforcement of its strict interpretation of *Shari'a*. In one case, for instance, members of the al-Bkayyer tribe in Kasham shaved the moustache of a local leader for not following religious teachings. [571] Other punishments were far more serious, and mirrored the practices enacted by ISIS in the other territories under its control, including amputations. One local recalled how a child from Hajin was punished with amputation for allegedly having stolen something:

[568] Individual testimony #60.
[569] Individual testimony #17.
[570] UNHRC, '9th report', Annex 2 para.185.
[571] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.34.

> A group of [ISIS] members arrived outside the mosque. They didn't even go in to pray. They surrounded the mosque. Then one of them stood up and gave a speech, saying: "This person is a thief, and his hand will be cut off to fulfil *Shari'a* law."
>
> I don't remember what he had [allegedly] stolen. Then they removed his blindfold. I looked at him and I recognised him. He was just a child, from Hajin. I thought that even if he had stolen something, he could be disciplined and reformed. "Why do they need to cut his hand off?" I thought.
>
> His family begged them, but in vain. A few people tried to intervene, but [the ISIS fighters] pointed their weapons and told them that anyone trying to interfere would be killed.
>
> Nobody was allowed to leave; we all had to stay and watch. People were in a terrible state. The signal was given to carry out the amputation. The boy's head was lowered on the table and his hand was extended across it. The ISIS members had a dispute about whether to cut just the hand or the entire forearm.
>
> Finally, they agreed to cut just the hand. Then they brought a nurse who belonged to the group, who gave him a local anaesthetic. After that, they brought medical equipment, a scalpel. His hand was cut off, and blood covered the table.
>
> When the bleeding started and his hand was cut off, they wrapped it in a piece of cloth. Some people fainted or threw up. It was a terrible scene, unlike anything we had seen before. Finally, he was taken to the hospital. I saw everyone there had oppression, fear and exhaustion in their eyes.[572]

Floggings were common too, especially for women. "I was sentenced to be flogged," a victim told us. She described the psychological impact of being whipped in front of a mosque:

> They took me to the mosque at the time of the afternoon prayer, along with a worker who was being held with me and was later forced to take a *Shari'a* course. They gathered the public—men, women and children—and told them that we were spreaders of corruption in the land [a Quranic reference], that we were leading Muslims astray, and that we were sentenced to 350 lashes each.
>
> I knew I couldn't even handle 10 lashes because I'm quite small. But they were committed to carrying out the sentence, ordered by the head of the *hisba* at the time, Abu Anas al-Iraqi. One of them began to flog us. When he reached 100 or 150 lashes, he got tired and asked a colleague to finish the job for him.
>
> But the colleague refused. When I arrived, I had talked with him and told him that I was being oppressed and ISIS was oppressing me. When I saw him refuse, I realised that some members of the group weren't happy with the sentences being carried out against civilians.
>
> But in the end, he flogged us anyway, right to the end of the sentence. After that, they got pieces of cardboard and hung them around our necks. The signs said: "This person is corrupt and spreads corruption among Muslims." We had to stay like that for two hours.
>
> These words had more psychological impact on me than the flogging. I started hearing people discussing us. Some said we should be killed. But what caught my attention was the woman from ISIS, saying that we were sharing pornography. This really crushed me.[573]

At the time, the countryside of Deir Ezzor was suffering from deep poverty, in part because ISIS had imposed regressive economic laws and levied heavy taxes, including on currency exchanges. "We were banned from buying and selling except with this currency," one local said, adding that "violation was punishable by

[572] Individual testimony #83.

[573] Individual testimony #87.

imprisonment and public flogging." [574] As a result of the lack of development and stifling economic policies, people felt the economy stagnated and led to losses for people who owned small businesses and shops. Some tried to make a living by "illegal" means, for example, by selling tobacco, even though there were severe risks involved:

> One evening in June 2015, the *hisba* raided and searched my home. They found three packets of tobacco. They took me to their base in al-Saada, the village next to mine. They interrogated me and asked me where I was buying it from. When I refused to tell them, they punished me for being a tobacco seller. They said it was immoral and that I would receive 40 lashes. That wasn't enough: they also fined me 50,000 Syrian lira [around $250]. Then they left me, late at night, after forcing me to write a declaration that I would not do it again, because tobacco is a vice.
>
> But because of extreme poverty and hunger, and because nobody else in our household could work, I went back to selling tobacco again. They arrested me again and took me to the *hisba* base and detained me there until the next day.
>
> Then they gave me 80 lashes. With each lash, I was screaming at the top of my voice from the intense pain. I was losing consciousness. The only thing that gave me strength was thinking of my disabled son and my husband, who is paralysed. They have no-one to provide for them in this world besides me, after God.
>
> All that still wasn't enough for them. They fined me another 200,000 Syrian pounds [about $1,000]. After that, they tied me to an electricity pylon on the highway between Deir Ezzor and Hasakeh from 9 am until 3 pm, and everyone looked at me. I wished I was dead.[575]

Despite its strict laws, ISIS could be highly selective in its enforcement when they were violated by its own members. The testimony of a *muezzin*, who does the call to prayer at a mosque, showed how this worked:

> I arrived to make the *fajr* [dawn] call to prayer. I could hear laughing. There was a stream passing through the mosque. I was shocked to see an ISIS fighter, from China or Kazakhstan, having sex with a woman in the stream. The scene was disgusting. They disrespected the sanctity of the mosque. I made a sound so he would hear me. As soon as he heard my voice, he quickly got out, put on his clothes and hit me.
>
> He asked me: "How did you get in?"
>
> I told him: "I'm the *muezzin*, I came to give the call to prayer." He told me to get out and started beating and insulting me.
>
> I went out in front of the mosque, and he locked the mosque door. Some people had come to pray, so I told them: "Today there is no prayer at the mosque."
>
> I went back the next day for the noon prayer, and I was arrested from the mosque by the *hisba*, who accused me of inciting people not to pray. I knew that it was a plot by the fighter. They gave me 40 lashes in the marketplace in Hajin and I was imprisoned for 20 days in Albu Kamal. [576]

'I cried like I had never cried before': Torture in ISIS' prisons in Deir Ezzor

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, ISIS' use of torture as part of its attacks on the civilian population in Deir Ezzor amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity.[577] Conditions inside ISIS-controlled detention facilities were awful, characterised by overcrowding and horrendous abuses.

[574] Individual testimony #17.
[575] Individual testimony #22.
[576] Individual testimony #124.
[577] UNHRC, '9th report', Annex 2, para.171.

"The cell held about 22 people, on charges of communicating with apostates," one former detainee said, remembering how:

> They beat me severely with every weapon they had. I was screaming in pain, and I knew that I was innocent and that I didn't do any of what they were accusing me of.
>
> They tortured me with a method called the "scorpion," which is when they tie your hands behind you and then attach them with a rope to the ceiling. They beat me with a green hose, like a water hose. I remember that it was a metre and a half long. It hurt so much, my body was in a lot of pain, but nobody could help me.
>
> After being tortured for a while, I was transferred to an ISIS judge. They couldn't prove any of the charges against me. The judge ruled that they should confiscate all my devices, including a computer, modem, large batteries and internet devices, all of which were worth about $2,500. They also fined me a "deterrent fine" of $1,200 dollars so I wouldn't use these devices again.
>
> I was detained for three days at their security detachment in Hajin, then 12 days at their intelligence branch in Albu Kamal. I was sentenced to a full month in prison.
>
> I saw with my own eyes some horrible cases of punishment that happened in front of everyone. The [cell] was six metres long, with about 20 people in it. An ISIS guard would come in, take one of the inmates and slaughter him in front of everyone. No-one dreamed of denying anything. You had to confess in detention.
>
> They used to take us out in the courtyard of the prison and bring out a big plasma screen and show what they called "state bulletins." They were talking about their killings in other regions, on countless charges. We were terrified. The Coalition was bombing the organisation's positions with planes and machine guns, believing that they were bases, but in reality they were prisons.
>
> ISIS kept their captives in their bases so that the Coalition would not target them. They would go out in their cars and the only people left in the buildings would be the detainees. We would be the victims and they would not lose any of their fighters.
>
> After a while, I was transferred to the village of al-Ramadi for about 30 days. As well as being jailed, I was sentenced to 400 lashes, each 50 in a different village. I knew one of the villages, which was in Albu Kamal. I was given 50 lashes in front of a crowd there. I don't know what this was for. They said it was a deterrent to anyone who tempts himself to work with the apostates.
>
> They gave me 50 lashes at the al-Fayhaa Roundabout in Albu Kamal, and 50 more in another village, in front of the mosque, after the worshipers left evening prayers. I don't know where the rest of the lashes were because I was blindfolded most of the time.[578]

Another victim was similarly tortured in detention—one of many cases documented by the research team across Deir Ezzor. He recounted the story of his confession of being affiliated to the FSA, but how this did not get him killed, due to sheer luck:

> They detained me and took me to some unknown location. I was blindfolded, then suspended by my hands with a chain hanging from the ceiling, and with my feet not quite touching the ground. Their first question was: "Are you with the FSA?" I told them no, and said I challenge anyone to prove that claim.

[578] Individual testimony #28.

The second question was: "Where is your uncle's car?" I told them he had fled with it to Damascus.

They kept trying to intimidate and terrify me, using beating and cursing. After about an hour, one of them started to beat me really hard. I started screaming: "I'll confess!" but [the interrogator] kept on beating me. I told him the car was in al-Mayadeen, at my relatives' house, and that my father is FSA, I am FSA, and my mother is FSA and that we all fought [ISIS].

I was talking unconsciously, my eyes were closed, I don't know who was in the room. Anyway, the beating continued.

At the sound of my screams and shouts, some other ISIS members ran in. They opened the door of the room and stopped the person who was beating me. Then they took me down to the ground and gave me water to drink. They took off my blindfold. I was surprised, they didn't seem to know this person who was beating me so badly.

He didn't speak, he was mute. He was an Iraqi, about 16 years' old. He had taken advantage of their busy period and come into the room. I realised that there had been no one in the room except me and him.

So, I thanked God that no one else had heard what I said. My pain and fear were mixed with relief. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I confessed to things I hadn't done, but finally the confession was in front of a mute person.[579]

On occasions, ISIS even inflicted torture on family members of prisoners. One man spoke of how ISIS had tortured his son in front of him at a detention centre to extract a confession:

[ISIS] arrested me on charges of selling tobacco, as I was selling cigarettes, shisha tobacco and charcoal. My arrest was a trap. They sent a relative to my house to buy tobacco and then a patrol, headed by an Iraqi called Abu Rahma, surrounded my house and arrested me.

My son wasn't at home at the time, but when he came back, his mother told him what had happened: "One of your relatives snitched on your father, and a patrol raided us and arrested him. So, my son stood at the door of the house, and when the relative came, my son beat him, insulted him, and told him that [ISIS] are *Kharijites."*[580]

This person reported on my son, and a patrol came and arrested him too, while I was in prison. They brought my son, [F.], threw him down in front of me in the cell, beat him, humiliated him and whipped him with a plastic pipe, like the one on a *shatafa* [bidet].

They were beating him all over his body, and it made me so angry. I was handcuffed and sitting on my knees, so I shouted at them: "Have some fear of God! If this makes you happy, take him to another room and kill him, don't beat him in front of me!"

So, Abu Rahma loaded a pistol and put it in my son's mouth and said to me: "How about I kill him in front of you?"

I said: "If your religion commands you to do that, then do it." I had totally lost my mind and no longer had any control over my words. I didn't know what I was saying.

Then they dragged my son and hung him in front of the cell for an hour, until he lost consciousness. I shouted at them several times to let him go.

There was someone in the cell with me who told me: "Don't lose your temper, they want to kill you. Don't blaspheme or admit that you sell tobacco. They're trying to provoke you to say something wrong and then they'll kill you."

[579] Individual testimony #123.
[580] Arebel sect in early Islam, although the term is also used to refer to purported apostates in general.

> I started crying. I cried like I had never cried before. I was in a state of absolute fury at the injustice. After that, my son was imprisoned with me. I spent seven days in prison before I was given 120 lashes, released and forced to take a *Shari'a* course.[581]

Deir Ezzor under siege

After ISIS pushed Nusra and its allies out of Deir Ezzor, ISIS resumed the siege on government forces still in control of the western bank of the Euphrates within Deir Ezzor city. In late 2014, there were heavy clashes between both sides that killed over a hundred people;[582] according to SOHR, regime forces at that point used chlorine gas to halt ISIS attempts to capture Deir Ezzor's airbase, where the forces of the 104th and 137th brigades of the Syrian army were holed up.[583]

The siege was marked by frequent attacks by ISIS, regularly fired artillery and missiles at the areas under siege with little regard for the civilian population. Many civilians were killed as a result. Meanwhile, an estimated 100,000 people who remained in Deir Ezzor were unable to get out, unless they could afford sky-high prices to be airlifted out of the city, and thus were left dependent on airdrops from the UN's WFP to survive.[584] The situation worsened after the fall of Palmyra to ISIS. At that point, all supply lines in and out of the city were cut off, and citizens suffered from a lack of food, drinking water and medicine. Regime forces were reportedly considering evacuation.[585] By 2016, the city's electricity supply had fallen to five per cent of its pre-ISIS levels.[586]

In February 2016, the Justice for Life Observatory, an NGO in Deir Ezzor, described the situation facing the besieged population in the city. Describing 420 days of siege, the NGO's report stated that ISIS had:

> Cut off the electrical power supply from the station of the al-Tayem oil field which used to provide electricity for the besieged neighbourhoods [and] up till now those neighbourhoods under siege do not have electricity. The locals hence use candles as an alternative given the overly expensive cost of fuel required for running the generators or the lanterns fuelled by kerosene oil.
>
> Moreover, cutting off the electrical power supply resulted negatively on the services that are based electricity [sic], most important of which is drinking water, where water is being pumped for the locals from one main water station that is powered by a generator for three hours on daily basis; leading to a decrease in that period up to three hours every two or three days. As a result, water is not provided for all houses, and it is not sterilized due to the lack of the liquefied chlorine.
>
> As the siege escalated, four bakeries had to shut down because their supply of fuel stopped. And in order to preserve the reservoir of the wheat by Assad regime officials [sic], this resulted to a state of flour inadequacy for all bakeries. This led to the fact that the amount of the produced bread where [sic] not enough to cover all the needs of bread for the civilians there. The civilians have to wait in line for 10-12 hours in order to get their allocations of bread.

---

[581] Individual testimony #192.
[582] SOHR, '111 killed in 3 days of violent clashes between regime forces and ISIS in Der-Ezzor' (6 December 2014) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/7696/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[583] SOHR, 'Regime forces use chlorine gas to stop ISIS advances in Der-Ezzor military airport' (6 December 2014) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/7693/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[584] Hamza Abdalla, 'How do you drop food from 17,000 feet into a conflict zone? Watch our video' (World Food Programme, 16 October 2017) <https://www.wfp.org/stories/how-do-you-drop-food-17000-feet-conflict-zone-watch-our-video> accessed 21 August 2023.
[585] *NOW Lebanon*, 'Syria regime prepares Deir Ezzor evacuation' (Beirut, 26 May 2015) <https://web.archive.org/web/<20171019184314/https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565341-syria-regime-prepares-deir-ezzor-evacuation> accessed 21 August 2023.
[586] RAND, 'Deir ez-Zor: Protracted Stalemate' (n.d.) <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/when-isil-comes-to-town/case-studies/deir-ez-zor.html> accessed 21 August 2023.

According to the NGO that produced the report, regime forces capitalised on the suffering and economic desperation of young people in besieged Deir Ezzor to recruit them into armed groups; it even accused Assad at best of not doing enough to break the siege, and at worst of working with ISIS to starve the people of Deir Ezzor.[587]

Nevertheless, clashes between ISIS and the regime continued throughout 2016, with ISIS targeting pro-government fighters and their families in besieged areas.[588] Supported by Hezbollah fighters and Russian airstrikes, pro-government forces made some gains against ISIS but suffered a setback when a series of US-led Coalition strikes in mid-2016 killed nearly a hundred Syrian army soldiers.[589] The incident led to ISIS re-taking territory around Jabal al-Tharda, but more significantly, it caused a major diplomatic conflict that scrapped a nationwide ceasefire negotiated by the US and Russia over the course of several months.[590]

During the first half of 2017, with the SDF and the US-led Coalition focused on the fight for Raqqa, the Syrian army took control of most of southern Raqqa province and gradually advanced towards Deir Ezzor. Although it was losing ground across Syria, ISIS launched several last-ditch assaults on besieged areas of Deir Ezzor city and, that January, heavy fighting forced the UN to suspend airdrops.[591] By February 2017, ISIS separated the Syrian army airbase and the civilian neighbourhoods, and civilians were fearful that massacres would occur should the besieged areas fall to the group.[592] Eventually, ISIS' attacks were repelled, and over the summer of 2017, the Syrian army, supported by Russian airstrikes, managed to break the three-year siege of Deir Ezzor.[593] Yet again, however, civilians suffered under the aerial campaign when Russian airstrikes killed 34 civilians fleeing on ferries during the attempts to clear ISIS from the surroundings of Deir Ezzor city.[594]

Baghouz and the fall of ISIS

To the east of the Euphrates, the SDF, supported by the US-led Coalition, started the campaign to liberate the Deir Ezzor countryside in the autumn of 2017. By then, Raqqa had been secured and the eastern bank of the Euphrates in Deir Ezzor was fast becoming the last ISIS holdout. The SDF campaign sought to build alliances with tribal structures across Deir Ezzor and established the Deir Ezzor Military Council, which included fighters from the most prominent tribal groups. Unsurprisingly, the al-Shaitat tribe, which had suffered so during the ISIS rule, was one of the prominent tribes to join the campaign along with the al-Baggara tribe in western Deir Ezzor and al-Bkayyer in the province's north.[595]

Over the course of the next months, the SDF took control of the major oil and gas facilities on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. By the end of 2017, ISIS fighters were pushed into a final pocket of territory stretching around

[587] Ibid., pp.17-19.
[588] *BBC*, 'Syria conflict: Conflicting accounts of Deir al-Zour attack' (London, 17 January 2016) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35337440#> accessed 21 August 2023.
[589] Steve Almasy and others, 'Russia: Coalition strike kills Syrian forces' *CNN* (17 September 2016) <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/17/middleeast/syria-claims-coalition-airstrike-hit-regime-forces/index.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[590] *CNN*, 'Syria ceasefire under threat after US-led strikes kill regime troops, Russia says' (18 September 2016) <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/18/middleeast/syria-claims-coalition-airstrike-hit-regime-forces/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[591] UN News Service, 'Syria: Heavy fighting forces UN food relief agency to suspend airdrops in Deir ez-Zor' (Refworld, 17 January 2017) <https://www.refworld.org/docid/587f362840c.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[592] Nour Samaha, 'Residents of Syria's Deir ez-Zor fear IS massacre' *Al-Monitor* (24 February 2017) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/syria-deir-ezzor-islamic-state-fighting.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[593] *The Independent*, 'Syrian army breaks Isis' three-year-long siege of Deir Ezzor' (London, 5 September 2017) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-army-isis-deir-ezzor-siege-three-years-assad-regime-town-loyal-a7930276.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[594] *AFP*, 'Russian air strikes kill 34 in Syria's Deir Ezzor province, says monitor' (*South China Morning Post*, 11 September 2017) <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/middle-east/article/2110577/russian-air-strikes-kill-34-syrias-deir-ezzor-province-says> accessed 21 August 2023.
[595] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.37.

40 kilometres from Hajin to Baghouz along the Euphrates. To the west, pro-government forces took control of the border town of Albu Kamal. Although it was rapidly losing territory, ISIS demonstrated a capacity to still strike on both sides of the Euphrates. In Gharanji, the al-Shaitat village where ISIS had established a base of operations, ISIS fought pitched battles with SDF forces, using car bombs inside the town.[596] In May 2018, ISIS killed 26 Russian soldiers in al-Mayadeen.[597] Earlier, far to the west of Deir Ezzor and in the rear of the Syrian government operations, ISIS killed at least 128 civilians in the village of al-Qaryatayn.[598]

Despite these attacks, ISIS increasingly looked like a spent force. Faced with massive manpower losses, ISIS instituted the enforced conscription of all men under the age of 30 in its remaining territories.[599] The group's impending collapse prompted all actors involved in the Syrian conflict to position themselves for a post-ISIS future. Turkey, concerned by the prospect of a semi-autonomous Kurdish area in northeast Syria, invaded northern Syria in early 2018. This brought the SDF campaign to a temporary standstill: operations were paused, and fighters relocated from the Euphrates to Kurdish-majority areas around Afrin.[600] Operations resumed, although Turkish attacks in Kobane and Tel Abyad in October 2018 precipitated another pause.[601]

Additionally, despite informal commitments not to conduct attacks on each other, the US-backed SDF campaign rubbed up against the Russian-backed government campaign. Both sides sought to secure territory and strategic natural resources. Before long, the two sides came to blows. In September 2017, Russian warplanes struck SDF fighters.[602] Several months later, as many as 300 pro-government troops and Russian Wagner Group paramilitaries were killed by the SDF and US special forces when attempting to take over the Conoco gas plant.[603] In late 2018, President Trump announced a withdrawal of US troops from Syria, but the decision was later overturned, and American forces increasingly focused on countering the influence of Iranian-backed militias, which had established a strong presence in Deir Ezzor.[604]

Despite the geopolitical wrangling, ISIS was gradually squeezed out of the final pockets it controlled. Hajin, the group's "last capital," was taken by the SDF in December 2018.[605] Several thousand ISIS fighters were besieged in a four-square-kilometre area around Baghouz al-Fawqani, and an exodus of civilians from the area significantly complicated the military operation.

---

[596] SOHR, 'The violent fighting continues in Gharanij town east of the Euphrates River after killing Abu Talha al-Almani and 14 members of ISIS there (19 January 2018) <https://www.syriahr.com/en/83073/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[597] *The Independent*, 'Russian soldiers killed in surprise Isis attack in Syria' (London, 28 May 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-isis-russian-soldiers-killed-suprise-attack-deir-ezzor-a8373296.html>
[598] *The Independent*, 'Isis kills 128 civilians in 'revenge' surprise counter attack on Syrian town' (London, 23 October 2017) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-al-qaryatayn-syria-attack-kills-civilians-raqqa-islamic-state-army-revenge-a8014746.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[599] *DeirEzzor24*, 'ISIS announces general mobilisation in Deir Ezzor and the civilians of Deir Ezzor are the victims' (Ar.) (n.d.) <https://deirezzor24.net/%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%b4-%d9%8a%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%86%d9%81%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d9%85%d8%ad%d8%a7%d9%81%d8%b8%d8%a9-%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%84/> accessed 21 August 2023.
[600] Idrees Ali, 'Turkish offensive in Syria leads to pause in some operations against IS: Pentagon' *Reuters* (5 March 2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-pentagon/turkish-offensive-in-syria-leads-to-pause-in-some-operations-against-is-pentagon-idUSKBN1GH2YW> accessed 21 August 2023.
[601] *Arab News*, 'Turkish attacks in Syria prompt SDF to halt to fight against Daesh' (31 October 2018) <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1397091/middle-east> accessed 21 August 2023.
[602] Ellen Francis, 'U.S.-backed alliance says Russian jets struck its fighters in east Syria' *Reuters* (25 September 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-backed-militias-says-russian-jets-struck-its-fighters-in-east-syria-idUSKCN1C0118?il=0> accessed 21 August 2023.
[603] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria' *The New York Times* (New York City, 24 May 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html> accessed 21 August 2023.
[604] Omar Abu Layla, 'How Iranian Militias Have Swallowed Deir Ezzor' (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 February 2022) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-iranian-militias-have-swallowed-deir-ezzor> accessed 21 August 2023.
[605] Bassem Mroue, 'Syrian Kurdish-led fighters take Hajin, last town held by IS' *Associated Press* (14 December 2018) <https://apnews.com/article/eebd0879a33b4dc0b06157bd5cc47083> accessed 21 August 2023.

Some ISIS members surrendered; others decided to fight until the bitter end. After 18 weeks of intense fighting, the SDF and US-led Coalition forces took control of Baghouz. In total, the SOHR estimated that 1,168 ISIS members and commanders were killed in this final operation, along with 630 SDF fighters and 713 prisoners who were executed by ISIS.[606] Families of ISIS fighters were transferred to the al-Hol camp in Hasakeh province, while surrendering ISIS fighters were imprisoned in SDF prisons holding over 12,000 Syrian, Iraqi and foreign ISIS detainees.

The aftermath

Although ISIS' "caliphate" had finally been defeated, its violence would reverberate across Deir Ezzor for many years.

Many of the people interviewed for this report in Deir Ezzor spoke of the trauma of the period and several displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders, without much if any mental health support being provided to them.[607] The levels of destruction were appalling: 90% of Deir Ezzor city's buildings and infrastructure were destroyed, compared with 50% in al-Mayadeen and Albu Kamal.[608] The population of Deir Ezzor appeared opposed to "reconciliation" efforts made by the Syrian regime;[609] but there were also reports of local grievances against the Kurdish-led administration as well.[610] Protests against the Autonomous Administration remain a consistent feature of life in Kurdish-held areas of the province, but particularly in Arab tribal areas of eastern Deir Ezzor.

After a decade of conflict and six years of ISIS rule, communities in Deir Ezzor still fear ISIS could make a comeback in the region. As the group morphed into an insurgency, ISIS' tribal fighters remained in the area and enjoyed the continued protection of their tribes.[611] Moreover, following the 2022 attack on the Ghuweran prison in Hasakeh, when over a hundred ISIS members managed to escape, attacks against the SDF, government forces and allied Iranian-backed militias increased rapidly.[612]

Deir Ezzor will always be remembered as the place where ISIS fell. But as political disagreement over control of the province and its resources persists, it may well be the place where ISIS, if given the opportunity, could seek to reconstitute itself in the future.

[606] SOHR, 'SDF and the Coalition control the last town of ISIS in Syria and continue to advance to end it completely east of Euphrates after 18 weeks of continuous military operations' (23 January 2016) <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=113467> accessed 21 August 2023.
[607] Individual testimony #208.
[608] Awad.
[609] Ibid.
[610] Kittleson.
[611] Baalbaky and Mhidi, p.37.
[612] Adbullah al-Ghadhawi, '"Revenge for the Two Sheikhs": ISIS Renews Itself in the Syrian Desert' *New Lines Magazine* (8 August 2022) <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/revenge-for-the-two-sheikhs-isis-renews-itself-in-the-syrian-desert/> accessed 21 August 2023.

PART 3 - ANALYSING ISIS RULE & ITS IMPACTS

Part Three of this report provides an analysis of the impact of ISIS rule and anti-ISIS conflict through the lens of the economy, education, gender, mental health and psychosocial harm. In investigating these four themes through testimonies and primary material gathered for this report, it provides an in-depth exploration of the breadth and depth of ISIS' impact and draws out many of the similarities that people in northeast Syria experienced.

The chapter on economy catalogues ISIS' diverse revenue streams, from oil sales to taxes and fines, and details the devastating impact of the economic programme on ordinary people. The study on the educational system explores the impact of ISIS ideology on students, teachers, curricula, and how this led to school absences, losses in literacy and educational achievement, as well as the destruction of schools. The chapter on gender takes an intersectional approach to investigate the impact of sexual and gender-based violence, including against ethnic and sexual minorities, and the impact of the ISIS rigid social programme on women and girls, but also men and boys. Finally, the chapter on post-ISIS public and mental health impacts highlights the multiple deprivations that the region has undergone in terms of public health and psychological distress. Together, they detail the stifling social effects of ISIS' governance programme, the effects of which may endure for years to come.

1. THE ECONOMIC COST OF ISIS RULE & THE ANTI-ISIS CONFLICT IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

Twelve years after the beginning of the conflict in Syria and four years since the end of anti-ISIS hostilities, the costs associated with the conflict in Syria are staggering. At the end of 2022, nine out of 10 Syrians lived in poverty, and with food prices up 800%, 12.4 million people were considered food insecure.[613] According to one estimate, Syria has lost between $20-38 billion in annual growth capacity,[614] while the World Bank has estimated that between 2010 and 2021, Syria's economy shrank by more than half, requiring its reclassification from a middle- to lower-income country.[615] This situation is the result of damaged infrastructure and strategic assets, the loss of human capital, the decline of governance capacity and the break-up of long-established economic networks.[616] In addition, Syria also remains under comprehensive economic sanctions, intended to apply maximum economic pressure on the regime's leadership and military-security apparatus.

Indicators of economic loss fall in line with more synoptic indicators regarding the economic cost of conflict, including a broader estimate that states that each year of civil war costs a national economy 2.2% of its underlying growth.[617] Other models find that the intensity of the conflict, as measured by the number of deaths rather than the aggregate number of casualties, is a predictive factor of subsequent economic impact. Four years of civil war typically cost 18% in GDP.[618] The same studies note the wide-ranging impacts of war on all parts of society—whether in terms of birth weight and height, final level of educational attainment, or housing prices. Often, these impacts far outlast conflict-related violence itself,[619] and are incurred through a range of conflict-related effects: the looting of natural resources, the redirection of men and boys to conflict and away from education, the destruction of infrastructure and supply chains, and the collapse of trade.[620]

In northeast Syria, the widespread destruction and loss of human capital resulting from the first few years of the Syrian conflict was then followed by several years of brutal, costly ISIS rule. During the five years in which the group's so-called "caliphate" administered Syria's northeast, ISIS extracted revenues from nearly every facet of the economy—from income tax to agricultural outputs, and oil to fines for violations of proscribed behaviour.[621] While some of this revenue was, for a time, used to provide minimal public services in areas under ISIS control, nearly all the income that ISIS generated was used for ambitions and purposes that went far beyond local governance, including ISIS' extensive military campaigns and the financing of terror attacks abroad. In essence, ISIS' economic impact was principally extractive—the group depleted resources and ransacked property and assets from territory under its control without contributing substantially to its maintenance or governance, despite propaganda claims to the contrary.[622]

[613] Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 'Syria: Unprecedented rise in poverty rate, significant shortfall in humanitarian aid funding' (17 October 2022) <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5382/Syria:-Unprecedented-rise-in-poverty-rate,-significant-shortfall-in-humanitarian-aid-funding> accessed 31 July 2023.
[614] Hannes Mueller and Julia Tobias, 'The cost of violence—Estimating the economic impact of violence' (International Growth Centre, 13 December 2016) <https://www.theigc.org/publications/growth-brief-cost-violence-estimating-economic-impact-conflict> accessed 15 April 2023.
[615] World Bank, 'Syria: Overview' <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview> accessed 15 April 2023.
[616] Ibid.
[617] Paul Collier, 'On the Economic Consequences of Civil War' (1999) 51(1) *Oxford Economic Papers* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3488597> accessed 31 July 2023.
[618] Mueller and Tobias, 'The cost of violence'.
[619] Hannes Mueller, 'The Economic Costs of Conflict' (International Growth Centre, August 2013) <https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2014/09/Mueller-2013-Working-Paper2.pdf> accessed 15 April 2023.
[620] Ibid.
[621] World Economic Forum, 'How ISIS runs its economy' (16 December 2015) <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/12/how-isis-runs-its-economy/> accessed 2 May 2023.
[622] ISIS repeatedly put out propaganda statements publicising the redistribution of so-called "spoils of war" to orphans and the needy. See: Mara Revkin, *The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State* (Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, July 2016) <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Mara-Revkin_Web.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.

Once ISIS came under increasing pressure from the US-led Coalition in the air and ground advances by the US-backed SDF seized more and more territory east of the Euphrates River, the group stopped providing local services, with oil and taxation revenues funnelled towards military operations instead. The human toll of this shift was staggering. Between ISIS' extractive resource collection, its neglect of local economic needs and conflict-related destruction, communities in northeast Syria were left impoverished and marginalised—a status quo that has lasted until the present day, long after the territorial collapse of ISIS.

Methodology

A large body of academic and policy-focused work has already considered ISIS' administration and structure, as well as the cost of the conflict to Syria's economy. This chapter seeks to complement this existing body of work by offering insights into the individual and community-level economic costs of ISIS rule and the anti-ISIS conflict. Additionally, because most studies on the cost of Syria's conflict focus on government-controlled areas of the country, where access to figures concerning currency, infrastructure and trade is more easily obtained, this chapter—though not exhaustively—details the situation in northeast Syria specifically. The chapter also considers the individual, human elements of the conflict that are captured but largely obscured by macroeconomic models—the loss of homes, jobs, and opportunities—that are unlikely to be recovered during this lifetime. It considers some of the following questions: What were the primary revenue sources for ISIS in northeast Syria? What was the extent of infrastructure damage in the communities surveyed? And finally, how did the main ways that ISIS extracted revenue impact communities and households?

The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from a combination of desk research from academic and policy sources and key informant interviews, conducted by RDI with community leaders, economists, and journalists in Hasakeh, Qamishli, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor between April and June 2023.

A notable research limitation is attributable to the fact that northeast Syria's governing authority, the Autonomous Administration, operates as a *de facto* semi-autonomous entity that generates little macroeconomic data. Figures related to the Syrian economy prior to the conflict typically consider the entire country, and many of the detailed qualitative descriptions of the historical economic development of northeast Syria lack quantitative components. The absence of northeast-specific data is compounded in estimates concerning the total conflict-related costs incurred in Syria between 2011 and the present day. While the economy in northeast Syria remains closely bound to Damascus, for example through its currency and formal international status, the region has charted its own path in terms of governance and reconstruction efforts—including infrastructure construction that was denied to the northeast's communities for decades before the conflict. This report therefore consciously distinguishes whole-of-Syria figures from descriptions, and where possible, data specific to northeast Syria.

The chapter first provides an overview of the research findings in northeast Syria to contextualise the findings and describe the locations surveyed for the work before recapping the main findings regarding the macroeconomic cost of conflict in northeast Syria. It then briefly reviews the economic components of ISIS' governance system, including its main sources of revenue. Finally, the chapter moves into a description of the ways in which these macroeconomic findings had microeconomic impacts: how ISIS governance impacted communities and individuals, and how this impact has reverberated in the years since the formal cessation of the conflict with ISIS in 2019.

Northeast Syria's pre-conflict economy

Since the foundation of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1948, the northeast of the country was a predominantly agrarian region that received little investment from the central government when compared with other

regions.[623] While Aleppo and Damascus developed large factories and industrial economies, the Syrian government tightly restricted development in the northeast, citing the importance of land preservation for agricultural purposes and the sensitivity of developing regions along the Turkish and Iraqi borders.[624]

In the six decades between Syria's independence and the start of the post-2011 uprising and ensuing civil war, the government passed increasingly punitive regulations narrowing the opportunities for economic development outside its economic heartland. While other areas of the country outside northeast Syria became increasingly industrialised, the northeast remained underdeveloped, impoverished and agriculture-based, supplying oil resources, wheat and barley to the rest of the country.

While policies restricting economic growth in the northeast decreased economic opportunities for all those living in the area, other legislation specifically targeted the ethnic Kurdish population. Northeast Syria forms part of the geographic band of historic Kurdish homeland, which stretches north into southern Turkey and eastwards across Iraqi Kurdistan and into Iran. A series of government policies from the early 1950s progressively narrowed economic opportunities for the northeast and Kurds in particular. In 1952, the government passed a law prohibiting the improvement of agricultural land near the Turkish and Iraqi border on security grounds;[625] a 1962 census of Kurds in Kobane and Hasakeh later deprived 120,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship, rendering them stateless.[626] This deprived them of fundamental rights, including full participation in the Syrian economy, by limiting access to certain professions—law, medicine, engineering, journalism and public sector roles—that were otherwise afforded to citizens, and relegated them to a legal status that persists today.[627]

In 1973, then Syrian President Hafez al-Assad moved to establish a so-called "Arab Belt," a 15-kilometre-wide and 375-kilometre-long militarised strip of land along the Turkish border in northeast Syria. This displaced another 60,000 Syrian Kurds from the area and transferred their land to Arab families displaced by the construction of the Tabqa Dam.[628] Families that resisted the Arab cordon were stripped of their Syrian citizenship.[629] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, although the Assad regime supported regional Kurdish efforts towards political autonomy in Turkey and Iraq, domestic oppression of Syrian Kurds continued.[630] A severe drought throughout Syria between 1998 and 2001 led to further population outflows from predominantly Kurdish agricultural areas to the cities: 329,000 people in northeast Syria (from 47,000 nomadic households) were forced to liquidate agricultural and livestock holdings and faced food shortages.[631]

In 2004, not long after Hafez's son Bashar al-Assad became president, riots broke out in Qamishli following a football match and soon turned into a broader movement concentrated on Kurdish rights. The protests, which

[623] Lucas Chapman and Ali Ali, 'Northeast Syria's Industrial Revolution: Advances and Challenges' (Kurdish Peace Institute, 18 October 2022) <https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/economics/northeast-syrias-industrial-revolution-advances-and-challenges/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[624] Ibid.
[625] Ibid.
[626] Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Syria: The Silenced Kurds' (October 1996) <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm> accessed 31 July 2023.
[627] The number of Syrian Kurds impacted by the 1962 census is now estimated to be as high as 300,000.
See: Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), 'Statelessness in Syria: An Enduring Dilemma' (11 October 2022) <https://stj-sy.org/en/statelessness-in-syria-an-enduring-dilemma/> accessed 15 May 2023; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'Persecution and Discrimination Against Kurdish Citizens in Syria' NGO submission to Session 12 of Syria's Universal Periodic Review submission (October 2011) <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session12/SY/KIS-KurdsinSyria-eng.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.
[628] Some NGOs estimate that as many as 60,000 Kurds left the area for Damascus during this period.
See: Minority Rights Group International, 'Syria: Kurds' (March 2018) <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/kurds-5/> accessed 31 July 2023; Council on Foreign Relations, 'The Kurds' Long Struggle With Statelessness: 1920-2022' (n.d.) <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/kurds-long-struggle-statelessness> accessed 31 July 2023.
[629] OHCHR, 'Persecution and Discrimination'.
[630] Minority Rights.
[631] Francesca de Chatel, 'The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution' (2014) 50(4) *Middle Eastern Studies*, citing Frank Hole, 'Drivers of Unsustainable Land Use in the Semi-Arid Khabur River Basin, Syria' (2009) 47(1) *Geographical Research* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1745-5871.2008.00550.x> accessed 31 July 2023.

quickly spread throughout northeast Syria, were met with stricter economic policies. Law 41/2004, introduced in the months after the riots, increased punishments associated with development on agricultural land along the border (to two years' imprisonment and significant fines).[632] Four years later, this law was expanded further through Decree 49/2008, which forbids the transfer or mortgaging of property in border areas without prior authorisation through an extensive permitting process; this situation was made worse by Decree 59/2008, which mandated the demolition of buildings in violation of these regulations.[633] Although applications for construction permits in restricted areas were open to all Syrians, in practice, Kurds rarely received them.[634] As a result of these restrictions, Kurdish cities in the northeast had few of the factories—or factory jobs—that Aleppo and Damascus did, and many Kurds migrated abroad or to other Syrian cities in search of work.[635]

Concurrently, in the early 2000s, President Assad significantly expanded privatisation policies begun by his father in the late 1990s.[636] This resulted in the rise of a private business class with close ties to the regime and Assad's inner circle; some argue that these policies also precipitated increasing poverty rates among the lower classes, particularly those living outside urban areas.[637] Throughout the 2000s, groundwater reserves in northeast Syria were depleted and agricultural land was overstretched through overambitious, privatised agricultural development projects, further imperilling rural communities.[638]

Economic liberalisation also paved the way for a series of agreements with international oil giants, including Shell, Total and Gulfsands. These corporations privatised exploration of Syria's oil fields in the northeast.[639] Northeast Syria contains the country's oil reserves, concentrated largely in the al-Omar oil and gas fields east of Deir Ezzor.[640] Modest by international standards, contributing to just a tiny fragment of global oil production, these reserves still accounted for five to seven percent of the state's GDP prior to the conflict.[641] During the decade-long window between liberalisation and the imposition of international sanctions, a US company handled the distribution of Syrian oil originating from northeast Syria; following the onset of sanctions in December 2011, these revenues went to the state-owned General Petroleum Company.[642]

While poverty rates in the rest of Syria declined between 1998 and 2004, they increased in rural northeast Syria during the same period.[643] In 2004, northeastern provinces had the highest rates of rural and urban poverty, with 58% of Syria's poor living in the area and 21% of the population living on less than two dollars per day.[644] In 2005, the Syrian government cancelled state subsidies, a system on which lower-income households were heavily dependent.[645] Between 2005 and 2010, the agricultural share of Syrian GDP declined from 7.8% to 2.2%, and 56% of Syrians living in the countryside were considered poor.[646]

---

[632] Chapman and Ali.
[633] Ibid.
[634] Ibid.
[635] Ibid.
[636] Alice Bonfatti, 'The socio-economic roots of Syria's uprising' *Al-Jumhuriya English* (21 September 2017) <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2017/09/21/socio-economic-roots-syrias-uprising/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[637] Ibid.
[638] De Chatel.
[639] Ibrahim Hamidi, 'The Syrian Oil: Time for New Approach?' *Asharq al-Awsat* (9 November 2022) <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3977206/syrian-oil-time-new-approach> accessed 31 July 2023.
[640] *Enab Baladi*, 'The US and Al-Omar Oil Field: Military base or oil greed' (23 September 2022) <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/09/the-us-and-al-omar-oil-field-military-base-or-oil-greed/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[641] Dr. Peter Bartu and Maurice Ruttiman, 'Northeast Syria: The Good, Bad & the Oil' (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 8 Jun 2021)<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/north-east-syria-the-good-the-bad-the-oil/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[642] Ibid.
[643] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 'Poverty in Syria 1996-2004, Diagnosis and Pro-Poor Policy Considerations' (26 March 2020), p.27 <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/poverty-syria-1996-2004> accessed 31 July 2021.
[644] Ibid.
[645] Ibid.
[646] UNDP, 'Arab Development Challenges Report' (8 November 2013) <https://www.undp.org/publications/arab-development-challenges-report-2011> accessed 19 June 2023.

At the outbreak of conflict in 2011, therefore, northeast Syria had been left out of the economic and infrastructural advances experienced by the rest of the country. Even before the arrival of ISIS, the post-2011 uprising compounded pre-conflict economic vulnerabilities. It would not be long, however, before ISIS set its sights on the rich resources in northeast Syria—with devastating consequences.

ISIS' primary revenue sources in northeast Syria

Unlike predecessor organisations such as al-Qaida, which financed itself primarily through external donations, ISIS financed itself first and foremost through the territories it controlled in Syria and Iraq.[647] In 2017, the group's annual revenue streams were estimated at $500 million from oil, $200 million from proceeds from Iraqi and Syrian farmland, $45 million from kidnap and ransom, and a further $5 million from foreign donations.[648]

Additionally, extortion of the local population provided a significant source of ISIS income. Much of the bank looting took place in Mosul, home to a large branch of the Iraqi Central Bank, and the receipt of external donations was largely centralised in Mosul. In northeast Syria specifically, much of the group's income came from agriculture taxation, exploitation of oil infrastructure and taxation of imports arriving from Turkey.[649]

Oil revenue

Oil revenue was ISIS' largest single source of income.[650] As part of its territorial expansion across northeast Syria in 2014, ISIS seized the region's oil infrastructure in Deir Ezzor, Hasakeh and Raqqa provinces. By 13 January 2014, oil assets in Raqqa were fully under ISIS control;[651] half a year later, the group seized the al-Omar and Tanak oil fields, followed by the remaining Deir Ezzor oil fields shortly afterwards.[652] While some fields in Hasakeh province remained under Kurdish control throughout the period of ISIS rule, those in al-Hol, al-Shaddadah and Jabisah fell to ISIS in July 2014.[653]

Estimates of the amount of money ISIS earned from oil vary. Some sources indicate ISIS was earning as much as $3 million per day in 2014; others suggest the group was making about half that figure in 2016.[654] In mid-2016, Deir Ezzor's al-Omar oil field—the largest in Syria—was producing between 34,000 and 40,000 barrels of oil per day.[655] The group was able to sell oil from al-Omar for $45 per barrel, exceeding the average international closing price in 2016, by exploiting captive local markets in northeast Syria.[656]

In 2014, it was estimated that ISIS' largest oil customer was the population under its own control—with households purchasing petrol and *mazout* (low-quality heavy diesel) for daily consumption.[657] Oil traders operating within ISIS territory were required to present a *zakat* certificate indicating they had already paid tax;

---

[647] FATF, *Financing of the terrorist organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)* (27 February 2015) < https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Methodsandtrends/Financing-of-terrorist-organisation-isil.html> accessed 14 May 2023.
[648] European Parliament, *The Financing of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)* (September 2017) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/603835/EXPO_IDA(2017)603835_EN.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.
[649] KII: Qamishli, May 2023.
[650] Erika Solomon, Robin Kwong, and Steven Bernard, 'Inside ISIS Inc: The Journey of a Barrel of Oil' *Financial Times* (29 February2015) <https://ig.ft.com/sites/2015/isis-oil/> Syria oil map: the journey of a barrel of Isis oil (ft.com) accessed 31 July 2023.
[651] Because smaller oil fields did not receive individual media attention, a World Bank study estimated this based on when ISIS consolidated control over Hasakeh province in January 2014.
See: Do Quy-Toan and others, 'How much oil is the Islamic state group producing: evidence from remote sensing' (World Bank, 31 October 2017) <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/239611509455488520/how-much-oil-is-the-islamic-state-group-producing-evidence-from-remote-sensing>, accessed 3 May 2023.
[652] Salma Abdelaziz, 'Group: ISIS takes major Syrian oil field' *CNN* (3 July 2014) <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/03/world/meast/syria-isis-oil-field/index.html> accessed 31 July 2023; *Al Arabiya News*, 'ISIS militants seize another oil field in Syria's Deir el-Zour (*Associated Press*, 4 July 2014) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/07/04/Islamic-militants-seize-Syria-oil-field> accessed 31 July 2023.
[653] Quy-Toan and others.
[654] Luay Al-Khatteeb and Eline Gordts, 'How ISIS Uses Oil to Fund Terror' (Brookings, 27 September 2014) <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/how-isis-uses-oil-to-fund-terror/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[655] Solomon and others.
[656] Ibid.
[657] El Khatteeb and Gordts.

traders from outside of ISIS territory who had not paid *zakat* were required to pay a tax of 200 Syrian pounds (about $0.67) per barrel.[658]

To ensure local supply, in 2015, ISIS purchased at least five refineries in northeast Syria, keeping the former owners on to operate them.[659] ISIS supplied the crude oil for refinement, took all of the resulting *mazout*—the heavy diesel used to operate generators—and split the profits with the refinery operator.[660] From 2016, as ISIS struggled to keep refineries running because of dwindling supplies and mounting US and Russian airstrikes, the northeast witnessed a proliferation of "burners," primitive refinery-like operations that required fewer specialised parts and allowed basic refinement of crude oil into a product that could be used in generators and cars.[661] However, these "backyard refineries" were shown to expose people to highly toxic compounds, precipitating a 'long-lasting health impact on communities and their environments.'[662]

Foreign trade, truckers, middlemen & smugglers

Despite its ideological fanaticism, ISIS displayed remarkable pragmatism when it came to the oil trade. It had no qualms about doing business with battlefield enemies, whether the Assad regime, Kurdish militias in northeast Syria or armed opposition groups in the northwest.[663] While its primary market was the territory under its control, it also flowed to the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI), Turkey, and territories held by the Syrian government.[664]

Oil distribution was controlled by smugglers, truckers and middlemen.[665] ISIS' engagement with the oil generated in its territory was limited to extraction, crude sales and, in some cases, sale of refined products to independent traders; its involvement therefore typically ceased once the oil entered the trucks of independent traders. From then on, smuggling was left up to traders who paid tax to the group but operated independently of it.[666]

According to both international sources and individuals consulted for this report, ISIS initially sold oil directly to independent traders who brought their trucks directly to the oil fields, where they purchased crude oil.[667] Truckers could typically transport up to 70 barrels.[668] Initially, trucks simply lined up on the roads outside of oil refineries. However, this became untenable later in the conflict when US-led coalition airstrikes increased. Drivers were assigned pick-up times to reduce queues of vehicles—an obvious target for airstrikes.[669] Later, as ISIS came under increasing financial pressure, it sold "licenses" to truckers, allowing them to skip the line and purchase up to 1,000 barrels at a time, provided they pre-paid for them.[670]

Once truckers had collected oil from the source, they could either sell it to a refinery or a trader with links outside ISIS-held territory, or sell the crude themselves on local crude oil markets.[671] Truckers under contract with a nearby refinery would typically transport the crude oil to the refinery, while others would either link up with traders with smaller vehicles or travel to al-Qaim, on the Syrian-Iraqi border, to sell on the local oil market.[672]

---

[658] Solomon and others.
[659] Ibid.
[660] Ibid.
[661] KII: businessman, Tabqa, June 2023.
[662] Win Zwijnenburg, *Scorched earth and charred lives*: *Human health and environmental risks of civilian-operated makeshift oil refineries in Syria* (Pax, August 2016) <https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/import/pax-scorched-earth-and-charred-lives.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.
[663] Solomon and others.
[664] Al-Khatteeb and Gordts.
[665] Ibid.
[666] Solomon and others.
[667] Ibid. This was echoed by KII: male journalist, Qamishli, March 2023.
[668] Ibid.
[669] Ibid.
[670] Ibid.
[671] Ibid.
[672] Ibid.

Traders headed outside ISIS territory to destinations such as the opposition-held northwest, government-held areas or Iraq, but they also headed to market towns inside ISIS territory such as Manbij, al-Bab (near Aleppo), and al-Qaim.[673] According to key informants, the primary trade routes in and out of ISIS territory passed through the central Palmyra desert and through al-Sukhnah, both in Homs province.[674] Much of the oil smuggled out of ISIS territory passed through opposition-held territory, and while some initially entered the KRI, by 2016 the border had been closed and oil had passed through the al-Qaim market in southern Iraq's Anbar province instead.[675]

An ISIS memo from February 2015, recovered by US Special Forces during a raid in May that year, revealed that Abu Sayyaf, the emir in charge of the ISIS' oil ministry, had greenlighted several multi-million-dollar oil contracts with the regime.[676] In the six months preceding the issuance of the memo, sales to the regime had accounted for 72% of ISIS' $289.5 million earnings from oil revenue.[677] Transactions between the Assad regime and ISIS were largely handled by prominent Syrian businessmen closely affiliated with the regime. The main interlocutor with ISIS, according to both international sanctions documents and respondents interviewed for this report, was Hussam al-Qaterji. Qaterji, named in US Treasury Department sanctions from 2020, owns at least a 50% stake in Arfada, a petroleum trading company with a significant trading relationship with the Syrian government. He directly handled much of the trade between the regime and ISIS.[678]

Small-scale traders without access to someone like Qaterji resorted to more creative methods. In the early days of ISIS rule in northeast Syria, when the price per barrel was close to $90, smugglers used boats to bring oil into Turkey, loading it into 50 or 60-litre metal barrels and hoisting them across the river to the Turkish side, where tractors carried it to a waystation for collection.[679] Other smuggling methods relied on rubber tubes, horseback and carrying jerry cans by hand through mountainous terrain, predominantly through the opposition-held northwest and onwards into Turkey.[680] With the decline of oil prices in 2015 and 2016 and crackdowns in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey, these practices became less profitable and largely stopped.[681]

Peak oil production

The significant income that ISIS gained from oil production was particularly noteworthy because of the limited capacity the group possessed to exploit complex extraction or refinement technology or to expand existing oil extraction. It also struggled to maintain aging infrastructure in its territory and primarily pumped oil from existing wellheads. In inheriting oil fields and refineries across northeast Syria—many of which were constructed using old equipment that required specific technical knowledge to maintain—ISIS was heavily reliant on the cooperation of locals who had been operating the oil fields and refineries prior to their arrival.[682] In some cases, oil facilities were also staffed by militants or insurgent groups separate from ISIS, but who cooperated with the group.[683]

---

[673] Ibid.
[674] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, May 2023.
[675] Solomon and others.
[676] Benoit Faucon and Margaret Coker, 'The Rise and Deadly Fall of Islamic State's Oil Tycoon' *The Wall Street Journal* (New York City, 24 April 2016) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-rise-and-deadly-fall-of-islamic-states-oil-tycoon-1461522313> accessed 31 July 2023.
[677] Jack Moore, 'ISIS's Multimillion Dollar Oil Deals With Assad Regime Uncovered in US Special Forces Raid' *Newsweek* (26 April 2016) <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-oil-deals-assad-regime-revealed-us-special-forces-raid-452426> accessed 31 July 2023.
[678] US Department of State, 'Report to Congress On the Estimated Net Worth and Known Income Sources of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and His Family Members Section 6507 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022' (P.L. 117-81).
[679] Solomon and others.
[680] Ibid.
[681] Janine Di Giovanni, Leah McGrath Goodman and Damien Sharkov, 'How Does ISIS Fund Its Reign of Terror' *Newsweek* (6 November 2014) <https://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/14/how-does-isis-fund-its-reign-terror-282607.html> accessed 31 July 2023.
[682] Solomon and others.
[683] Al-Khatteeb and Gordts.

The highwater mark of ISIS oil production in northeast Syria occurred between mid-2014 and late 2015. In January 2016, the US-led Coalition began to target oil infrastructure in areas under ISIS control, including gas and oil separation plants, oil wellheads, pump jacks, tankers as well as related construction and repair equipment. By January 2017, having regained territorial control over much of the area east of the Euphrates, the SDF also regained control over oil resources—a significant portion of the SDF's operating revenues thereafter. Throughout 2017, under pressure from both air and ground forces and increasingly strapped for cash, ISIS ramped up oil and gas sales to the Assad regime, which reportedly became its largest revenue stream.[684] Between January 2016 and 2018, ISIS lost 90% of its oil revenue.[685]

While ISIS' total revenue from oil is difficult to calculate, it is certain that it declined over time due to US-led Coalition airstrikes and the lowering of the international price per barrel. Nevertheless, in 2014, ISIS was estimated to be earning up to $40 million per month from oil sales, with revenue tapering to closer to $4 million by October 2017.[686] This generated total assets between $1.3 billion and $2 billion during the period in which the group occupied northeast Syria, making ISIS the wealthiest terror group in the world—wealthier than small nations such as Nauru, Tonga and the Marshall Islands.[687]

Zakat collection

At the height of its power, ISIS took in more than $1 million per day in extortion and taxation revenues.[688] While much of this came from the taxation of government salaries (Iraqi government salaries were taxed at 50%), company contracts (20% of the value of the contract) and individuals and goods passing through its territory, agricultural taxes made up a sizeable portion of the revenue, particularly in northeast Syria.[689]

In August 2014, ISIS introduced its first tax—a border tax of 5,000 Syrian pounds per month (then roughly $23) on buses carrying passengers from other areas of Syria.[690] These were followed in September 2014 by taxes on drinking water, electricity and gas as ISIS began to provide basic services to populations under its control.[691] In January 2015, ISIS began opening *diwawin al-zakat* (tax collection offices) throughout its territory and announced in Friday sermons that a 2.5% tax would be collected—if necessary, by force—from local communities.[692] ISIS considered *zakat* a religious obligation, with failure to pay considered equal to apostasy.[693]

Soon thereafter, *zakat* collectors began to visit local shops and goldsmiths, tallying the value of their wares to produce tax invoices.[694] The tax was levied on all businesses and individuals above an income threshold and some portion of tax income was, at least initially, used to provide food and basic supplies to the poorest members of the community.[695] Very small shops, food stalls and small businesses in the countryside could be exempt from tax if they were determined to fall below the *zakat* threshold.[696] While these tax collection offices

[684] Levitt, Terrorist Financing'.
[685] Di Giovanni and others.
[686] Rand Corporation, 'Oil, Extortion Still Paying Off for ISIS' (27 October 2017) <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/10/oil-extortion-still-paying-off-for-isis.html> accessed 18 June 2023.
[687] Terrence McCoy, 'ISIS Just Stole $425 million, Iraqi Governor says, and became the world's richest terror group' *The Washington Post* (Washington DC, 12 June 2014) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/12/isis-just-stole-425-million-and-became-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group/> accessed 18 June 2023.
[688] European Parliament, 'The financing of the Islamic State'.
[689] Ibid.
[690] Mara Revkin, 'The Non-Economic Logic of Rebel Taxation, Evidence from an Islamic State Controlled District' (Project on Middle Eastern Political Science, n.d.) <https://pomeps.org/the-non-economic-logic-of-rebel-taxation-evidence-from-an-islamic-state-controlled-district> accessed 19 June 2023.
[691] Ibid.
[692] Ibid.
[693] Ibid.
[694] Ibid.
[695] Ibid.
[696] KII: businessman, Tabqa, June 2023.

were initially located in each town centre, they were repeatedly relocated, along with all other ISIS municipal facilities, as airstrikes intensified.[697]

In interviews with key informants, the extent to which taxation rates were standardised was unclear. Some believed the taxation scheme imposed on their city was specific; others were unsure because taxes were collected in their city by local officials with little explanation of the link to the group's overarching system. Tax collection was delegated to local offices and ISIS employees, such as the *wali,* or governor. Informants throughout the community worked in collaboration with the local male and female *hisba* units.[698]

A business owner in Raqqa recalled how business owners would receive stamped ISIS-issued *zakat* invoices indicating the amount due, which ISIS officials had independently calculated.[699] In addition to goods, infrastructure was also taxable, with ISIS levying taxes on buildings. According to the Raqqa business owner, cash savings were assessed at 2.5% of the total value, cows at 10% of their value and sheep at 40%.[700] Penalty for non-payment of taxation, according to key informants, ranged from confiscation of the goods or closure of shops or businesses to physical violence or even death.[701]

Additionally, ISIS imposed significant taxes on imports. A journalist, interviewed for this report, indicated that a standard practice was to confiscate one carload of goods for every 10 that crossed the border.[702] Later, ISIS began to tax all entry and exits from its territory, regardless of whether it was for the transport of goods.[703]

A business owner from Tabqa said:

> I received *zakat* invoices for electricity, water, and telephone bills. There was a *zakat* collector who visited my house. As for the *zakat* of agricultural crops, there were special centres for each region. If anyone falsified the value of his production, half of his crop would be seized as a punishment known as *ta'azeer.*[704]

The same key informant indicated that ISIS employed local Syrians as tax collectors whereas revenues, which were funnelled to tax offices, were handled by foreign fighters.[705]

Although ISIS referred to *zakat* as a form of Islamic almsgiving and stated in its publications and communications with the public that *zakat* was voluntary, in practice, ISIS-era taxation was mandatory. The degree of adherence to the religious mandate varied, with some local ISIS officials taking significant liberties in their interpretation of tax enforcement. Traders with good relationships with ISIS were able to negotiate favourable taxation rates, and tax collectors were lenient in their collection practices along frontlines where communities were under duress—although a punitive emphasis was often placed on individuals perceived to be non-compliant with ISIS' values, rather than the companies enabling non-compliant behaviour. As a teacher in Manbij said: "ISIS did not punish the large merchant who sells cigarettes, they punished the street smoker."[706]

---

[697] Ibid.
[698] Ibid.
[699] KII: male business owner, Gharanij (Deir Ezzor), May 2023.
[700] Ibid.
[701] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, May 2023.
[702] Ibid.
[703] Revkin, 'The Non-Economic Logic'.
[704] KII: male business owner, Gharanij (Deir Ezzor), May 2023.
Ta'azeer refers to a kind of punishment used by ISIS that is not specified in the Quran, which can in practice range from a fine or property seizure to flogging.
[705] Ibid.
[706] KII: male teacher, Manbij, May 2023.

Because of the risk of punishment, a visit to the tax office was a stressful experience. A respondent from Tabqa explained how:

> Each word that a person uttered [in front of ISIS] was calculated in advance a thousand times, because any mistake might lead to punishment or maybe even death. Almost all state employees were "semi-ISIS." The truth is that a person didn't feel that he or she was entering an ordinary institution, no matter how "civil" it claimed to be. Nobody, whether a farmer or a merchant, dared to go against the tax office.[707]

Agricultural taxation

While ISIS' oil revenues made international headlines, it is estimated that the group generated as much as $200 million by taxing agriculture.[708] Northeast Syria forms a large swath of the Northern Mesopotamia breadbasket, generating much of the wheat, barley and cotton consumed by Iraq and Syria.[709] ISIS' practice of levying mandatory "donations" from farmers on crops and confiscating agricultural infrastructure such as silos, mills and tractors and renting them back to farmers therefore deeply impacted households and communities throughout ISIS-held territory.[710]

Agricultural taxation rates were standardised throughout ISIS-held territory, with rain-fed crops taxed at 10% and irrigated crops taxed at five per cent.[711] Agricultural goods produced in northeast Syria were typically taxed at least three times, with farmers paying a specified levy, truck drivers paying a second tax and shopkeepers selling the goods paying a third tax.[712] Tax calculations varied somewhat by location, with some shopkeepers paying a tax based on their reported sales, while others paid based on the value of their total inventory. ISIS also varied the penalties and strictness of its tax collection somewhat and did not demand tax payment from communities in areas close to military frontlines. By 2016, it was estimated that ISIS had generated $56 million in income from the taxation of barley and wheat within its territory.[713]

Unlike other sources of revenue that ISIS quickly depleted—such as extortion, bank looting and the sale of already-refined crude oil—farming was an important, stable source of income for the group's so-called "caliphate." Agricultural production in northeast Syria returned to, or even exceeded, pre-conflict levels from 2015 onwards, following a dip at the beginning of the conflict.[714] Winter crops such as wheat and barley fared particularly well; summer crops such as cotton less so.[715] In March 2015, ISIS announced a tax of 200 Syrian pounds (then slightly less than $1) per *dunam*—one thousand square-meters—of land.[716]

Jizya tax and the treatment of Kurds and minorities

ISIS divided the populations under its control into three categories: Muslim believers; "people of the book", which included Christians; and "apostates", which included Yazidis and Alawis). While Alawis were generally executed and Yazidis were killed or enslaved, ISIS initially offered Christians the choice of converting, paying the *jizya* tax, leaving or facing death.[717]

---

[707] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, May 2023.
[708] The total figures presented on this source of income often include ISIS territory outside northeast Syria, namely Aleppo in northwestern Syria and Iraq, however a considerable portion of this income would have derived from Hasakeh and Raqqa, given their regional importance in agricultural production.
[709] Hadi Jaafar and Eckart Woertz, 'Agriculture as a funding source of ISIS: A GIS and Remote Sensing Analysis' (2016) 64 *Food Policy.*
[710] Ibid.
[711] Ibid.
[712] Ibid.
[713] Ibid.
[714] Ibid.
[715] Ibid.
[716] Ibid.
[717] Imran Khan, Religious prejudice in the 'Islamic State'?" *Al Jazeera English* (Qatar, 18 August 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/8/18/religious-prejudice-in-the-islamic-state> accessed 31 July 2023.

In Syria, ISIS began to institute the *jizya* tax in October 2014.[718] In one instance, in the town of al-Mayadeen in Deir Ezzor province, ISIS offered the only Christian family there the option of paying *jizya* to remain. The Christian family chose to leave, and their property was confiscated.[719] When the *jizya* payment was instituted in Syria (prior to its announcement in Iraqi territory), the payment in Raqqa amounted to half an ounce of gold, then equal to roughly $750. However, the amount appears to have varied by location.[720] According to ISIS publications at the time, the fee structure was four gold dinars for the wealthy, two dinars for the middle class and one dinar for the poor.[721] One key informant, a 41-year-old man in Tabqa, recounted how:

> Our neighbour was paying 25 grams of gold to stay in her house—a very large amount. [ISIS] was ordering the slaughter of all Shi'a and Alawi minorities and most other sects. They fled from the killing and left their homes and money, which were seized by ISIS.[722]

At the outset of the conflict, ISIS generally treated Arabs and Kurds equally, offering separate religious instruction courses in Kurdish.[723] Policies hardened as the SDF gained ground throughout northeast Syria. ISIS came to distrust the Kurdish population, accusing Kurds of colluding with the SDF, and increasingly ordering the expulsion of Kurds from the territories under its control. Such announcements were issued from mosques. Kurds were evicted from their homes and their property and belongings were seized. ISIS turned the private businesses, shops, homes, and restaurants it seized from expelled individuals, as well as municipal facilities such as stadiums and hospitals, into ISIS administration centres and prisons; it also converted some into accommodation for foreign fighters.[724] According to one key informant, ISIS operated 107 prisons converted from other buildings in Raqqa alone.[725]

Unlike Christians, Kurds—who are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim—did not receive the option to pay the *jizya* tax to avoid expulsion. A Kurdish woman in Raqqa recounted:

> [ISIS] came to take our home under the pretext that we were Kurds and worked with the SDF. A Tunisian emir came. He entered the house with ISIS women and saw the house and our belongings. We tried to take our belongings, but we were threatened with imprisonment.[726]

While some Kurds forcibly expelled from ISIS territory were sent to SDF-held areas, others were detained and tortured by ISIS when trying to leave for Kobane. A man from Raqqa recounted that when the edict expelling Kurds was announced in Raqqa, they were ordered to travel to the desert near Palmyra with 10 other families. When they encountered food shortages and devastation in Palmyra, the man decided to take his family to SDF-held Kobane:

> At the Ain Issa junction, I stood at an ISIS checkpoint. They asked me where I was going, and I told them [we were going] to Kobane. They didn't respond, so we set off immediately.

[718] Revkin, 'The Non-Economic Logic'.
[719] Ibid.
[720] Kelly Phillips Erb, 'Islamic State Warns Christians, Convert, Pay Tax, Leave or Die' *Forbes* (19 July 2014) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2014/07/19/islamic-state-warns-christians-convert-pay-tax-leave-or-die/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[721] Richard Spencer, 'Militant Islamist Group in Syria Orders Christians to Pay Protection Tax' *The Telegraph* (London, 27 February 2014) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10666257/Militant-Islamist-group-in-Syria-orders-Christians-to-pay-protection-tax.html> accessed 31 July 2023.
[722] KII: representative from Eastern Canton Economics Commission, Abu Hamam (Deir Ezzor), May 2023.
[723] KII: male shopkeeper, Hasakeh, May 2023.
[724] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, June 2023.
[725] Ibid.
[726] Focus group session, Qamishli, May 2023.

> After an hour, an ISIS car stopped us and took me to the mosque near the Tishreen Bridge, where I was detained for more than three months. I was brought to a basement where ISIS youth asked me what sect I belonged to. When I told them "Kurdish", they laughed and told me to forget any dreams for the future. I was held in chains. My charge was being Kurdish and attending the Nowrouz [New Year] festival. Three of the five other Kurds held with me were charged with collecting *zakat* money to give to the SDF. Eventually we paid smugglers to take us to SDF territory and escaped.[727]

Kurds—as well as individuals perceived by ISIS to be Kurds, such as members of Raqqa's Arab Tayi tribe who were historically integrated with the Kurdish community, or those married to Arabs—were able to remain in ISIS-held territory if they paid significant sums of money. One respondent from Raqqa was permitted to remain when his family was expelled because his wife was Arab but was ordered to pay $10,000 within 24 hours.[728]

Fines & punishments

Although not a significant source of revenue, severe fines and punishments meted out by ISIS' *hisba* police created terror amongst the population. Nearly all key informants mentioned these systems of punishment when asked about ISIS-era taxation practices. Fear of such punishment accompanied all interactions with the group. For financial infractions, such as failing to honestly report the value of an agricultural crop or shop, fines or confiscation of goods were a standard punishment. Physical punishments were typically reserved for perceived infringements of religious doctrine. As one key informant in Qamishli shared:

> A case occurred in the town of al-Hol. While a man was passing through an ISIS checkpoint, he noticed his motorcycle tire was flat and exclaimed spontaneously: "Oh Muhammed! The tire is flat!" ISIS employees at the checkpoint stopped him and imposed the death penalty on him because it was not permissible to swear and seek help except from God, even from the Prophet [Peace Be Upon Him].[729]

Other common infractions occurred when people's clothing was deemed not compliant with ISIS standards or when people failed to correctly answer religious questions.[730] In the case of inappropriate dress—or cigarette smoking, enforced by *hisba* police by smelling the hands of residents—respondents indicated that men were forced to attend 15 days of *Shari'a* instruction and purchase new garments.[731] Many punishments were intended to humiliate the violator. Moustaches worn in violation of mandates on facial hair were burned off the faces of offenders.[732] As a key informant in Tabqa recounted: "In some special cases, they made the person ride backwards on a donkey in the streets as a deterrent [and] an example to other people."[733]

Women were frequently fined, a method of behavioural control intended to confine them to the home. In the case of women found in violation of Islamic dress, their male guardians were punished with *Shari'a* instruction and forced to purchase compliant garments at an inflated price.[734] One woman, a 37-year-old hairdresser in Raqqa, recalled:

> I had a small women's hairdressing shop. They forced me to close it, took it over and broke all the items under the pretext that it was a place for grooming, which was forbidden. My shop

[727] Focus group session, Raqqa, May 2023.
[728] Focus group session, Raqqa, April 2023.
[729] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, May 2023.
[730] Focus group session, Hasakeh, June 2023.
[731] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, June 2023.
[732] KII: male shopkeeper, Hasakeh, June 2023.
[733] Ibid.
[734] Ibid.

> was converted into a place to sell oil derivatives, diesel, kerosene and other things, and our financial condition deteriorated from then on.[735]

In rural districts where women had traditionally worked alongside their husbands and other male relatives in fields and pastures, ISIS began to issue fines for women who failed to comply with the dress code.[736] This included fining women for wearing the wrong shoes, compelling them to appear in court and purchase correctly coloured shoes.[737] The effect was that women in rural areas began to remain at home and stayed inside to avoid the risk of fines.[738]

Kidnapping, looting & donations

Another source of income for ISIS was the kidnapping for ransom of largely (though not exclusively) western foreign nationals.[739] In 2014, the group was estimated to have generated $50 million through this practice.[740]

Although the US and UK refused to pay ransoms, France is believed to have paid up to $14 million for the release of French citizens. Spain similarly paid for the release of Spanish journalists.[741] In 2016, ISIS demanded $18 million for the release of 230 Assyrian Christians held in Syria; although the final amount paid for the hostages was not confirmed, Assyrian Christian organisations raised millions from individual contributors around the world to fund the release of the hostages, for whom ISIS charged up to $50,000 per individual.[742] By 2017, however, as the group had lost large chunks of territory, its fighters paid smugglers to defect. Syria's armed opposition groups would also sell captured foreign ISIS fighters to governments that wanted militants back, with Gulf states reportedly paying millions of dollars through this informal system.[743] It was a stark reversal of fortunes for the terrorist organisation that for years had been one of the main drivers of human trafficking to northeast Syria.

Looting provided a further revenue stream. Estimates of income generated by ISIS through the looting and sale of antiquities vary tremendously— amounts have ranged from $4 million to $7 billion.[744] ISIS had an established process for extracting antiquities from its territory, with the main sites being Nimrud and Mosul in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria.[745] First, a dig permit was secured from ISIS authorities for the area in question; artifacts were then unearthed and evaluated, likely by the Antiquities Division of ISIS' Department of Natural Resources, before being moved for sale on the international market.[746] ISIS imposed a tax of 20% on the sale of antiquities.[747] Because of the specialised skills and contacts involved in each step of the process, it is unlikely that the same

[735] KII: female hairdresser, Raqqa, May 2023.
[736] Revkin, 'The Non-Economic Logic'.
[737] Ibid.
[738] Ibid.
[739] Di Giovanni and others.
[740] US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Terrorist Financing: Kidnapping, Antiquities, Trafficking, and Private Donations' (17 November 2015) <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20151117/104202/HHRG-114-FA18-Transcript-20151117.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.
[741] Di Giovanni and others.
[742] *CBS News*, 'ISIS collects millions in ransom for abducted Christians' (22 February 2016) <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-collects-millions-in-ransom-for-abducted-christians/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[743] Erica Solomon and Ahmad Mhidi, 'The black market trade in ISIS fighters' *Financial Times* (London, 8 January 2017) <https://www.ft.com/content/c7a7d804-d357-11e6-b06b-680c49b4b4c0> accessed 31 July 2023.
[744] Fiona Rose-Greenland, 'How much money has ISIS made selling antiquities? More than enough to fund its attacks' *The Washington Post* (Washington DC, 3 June 2015) < https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/03/how-much-money-has-isis-made-selling-antiquities-more-than-enough-to-fund-its-attacks/ > accessed 31 July 2023.
[745] Rachel Shabi, 'Looted in Syria—and sold in London: the British antiquities shops dealing in artefacts smuggled by ISIL' *The Guardian* (London, 3 July 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/antiquities-looted-by-isis-end-up-in-london-shops> accessed 31 July 2023.
[746] Ibid.
[747] Ibid.

individuals who unearthed antiquities (once the looting of public museums had finished) were the ones who brought the items to the international market.[748]

Fighters involved in general pillaging and asset seizure—as compared to the highly regulated antiquities sector—were instructed by ISIS to take only the amount required to advance the objectives of jihad.[749] ISIS divided spoils into *ghanima*—moveable property seized from non-Muslims during military operations, which in practice were often munitions and *fay* (land acquired without force from non-believers) considered necessary to further the objectives of jihad.[750] Fighters were required to pay a 20% tax on any *ghanima* and *fay* seized.[751]

Donations formed a final important source of income. Between 2012 and 2014, in ISIS' early years and prior to its takeover of northeast Syria, ISIS grossed an estimated $40 million from wealthy financiers in the Gulf.[752] Funds originating in Kuwait in particular were significant well into the conflict.[753] While initial funding bound for Syria was largely organised by humanitarian-minded Syrian expatriates in Kuwait, others became involved in supporting specific armed groups, allegedly with ties to Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaida.[754] Many fundraising initiatives occurred publicly on social media in Kuwait.[755] Saudi Arabia enacted counter-terrorism legislation in 2014 designed to tighten channels for funding.[756] Around the same time, Kuwait and Qatar also tightened their previously money laundering laws.[757]

Bayt al-Mal

Funds collected by ISIS at the level of local tax collection offices were later transferred to the group's Raqqa-based treasury department, the *Bayt al-Mal,* a name referring to an Islamic treasury referenced in the Quran. The Bayt al-Mal provided material support to ISIS, managing payments from various *diwanin* (ministries) as well as the proceeds of ISIS extortion and plundering.[758] The Bayt al-Mal was fundamental to the day-to-day financial operations of ISIS, managing relationships with money transfer, or *hawala*, agents.

The Bayt al-Mal also handled the payment of salaries to fighters employed with ISIS, later imposing salary cuts as ISIS came under increasing financial pressure after 2016.[759] ISIS maintained an intricate wage structure, in which foreign fighters were paid roughly double that of local fighters.[760] While locals either lived modestly or suffered financial hardship as their businesses were shuttered, foreign fighters lived comparatively lavish lifestyles. One source remembered visiting the home of a Kenyan fighter in Raqqa: "I could see expensive

[748] Ibid.
[749] Revkin, 'The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State'.
[750] Ibid.
[751] Ibid.
[752] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'Remarks by US Treasury Under-Secretary David S. Cohen on Attacking ISIL's Financial Foundation' (23 October 2014) <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/10/23/remarks-by-u.s.-treasury-under-secretary-david-s.-cohen-on-attacking-isil-s-financial-foundation-pub-57007> accessed 31 July 2023; Di Giovanni and others; Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home' (Brookings, 6 December 2013) <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/playing-with-fire-why-private-gulf-financing-for-syrias-extremist-rebels-risks-igniting-sectarian-conflict-at-home> accessed 31 July 2023.
[753] Dickinson.
[754] Ibid.
[755] Ibid.
[756] Di Giovanni and others.
757 Lori Plotkin Boghardt, ' The Terrorist Funding Disconnect with Qatar and Kuwait (*The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2 May 2014), ttps://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/terrorist-funding-disconnect-qatar-and-kuwait
[758] United Nations Security Council, 'Letter Dated 26 May 2022 from the Special Adviser and Head of the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State In Iraq and the Levant addressed to the President of the Security Council' S/2022/434 (16 June 2022) <https://iraq.un.org/en/186409-letter-dated-26-may-2022-special-adviser-and-head-united-nations-investigative-team-promote> accessed 31 July 2023.
[759] Maayan Groisman, 'ISIS cuts fighters' salaries in half amid financial hardship' *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem, 18 January 2016) <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/isis-threat/isis-cuts-fighters-salary-in-half-amid-financial-hardship-441904> accessed 31 July 2023.
[760] *The Guardian*, 'Islamic State to Halve Fighters Salaries As Cost of Waging War Starts to Bite' (London, 20 January 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/20/islamic-state-to-halve-fighters-salaries-as-cost-of-waging-terror-starts-to-bite> accessed 31 July 2023.

perfumes, Ray Ban sunglasses and different bottles of Johnny Walker Red Label whisky. It was a high-class house."[761]

In 2014, ISIS announced that it intended to introduce its own currency, the gold dinar. The gold dinar was intended to be minted from gold looted from the Mosul Central Bank and tied to the international price of gold, although more than one key informant indicated that coins appeared to be either gold-plated or a kind of painted gold, rather than actual solid gold. The gold dinar was subdivided into dominations of *dirhams* made of silver and *fulus* made of copper. Gold dinar weighed 4.25 grams, in accordance with the weight of a dinar at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).[762] ISIS reportedly minted up to two tons of gold dinar, using 21-karat gold.[763]

The dinar began to appear in cities around northeast Syria in 2016 and was available from ISIS money changers, according to key informants. Reports on the value of the gold dinar against the dollar varied, however, and may have varied from one community to the next. One key informant indicated that one gold dinar was equal to $120, whereas another indicated the value was as high as $350 in his community.

While the gold dinar was ultimately of minor financial relevance to ISIS and primarily served as an indication of its aspirations to operate a parallel economic system, the appearance of the dinar was another way in which ISIS' influence aimed at local economies. Because of its high value, respondents indicated that most community members had limited interaction with the dinar, although its use was, at least technically, compulsory for a time, including for tax payments. One source indicated that in his city, at least, payment of taxes in Syrian pounds would be counted as non-payment, and the individual would be required to pay the amount plus a fine in gold dinar.[764] However, interviewees said that even when the gold dinar was in circulation as the official currency, the US dollar and euro remained the primary currencies in which trade occurred, with most households continuing to rely on the Syrian pound for everyday expenses.

Life after the conflict

Most people interviewed saw the post-ISIS northeast Syria's economic devastation as the direct outcome of years of ISIS rule over the region. Families saw the death or disappearance of breadwinners, permanently impacting the extended family's ability to access income. One woman said that her brother lost a limb to a boobytrap, plunging the entire family into poverty. Many similar tragedies occurred throughout the conflict.

Others told stories of people unable to meet basic needs. During a focus group meeting in Qamishli, participants recounted the story of a man who could not afford the costs of surgeries required to remove shrapnel from his head, which would allow him to recover physically and, hopefully, gain work.[765] Another story told of a widowed female soldier who was unable to feed her family on one income as costs had risen because of inflation.[766]

A man from Manbij said that most families in his community had lived on $500 per month prior to the conflict, earning through agricultural work, small shops and remittances from male family members working elsewhere. He said the average family now survives on just $50 per month.[767] A man from Tabqa remembered life before the conflict:

[761] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, June 2023.
[762] Newsline Institute for Strategy and Policy, 'Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser' (4 June 2020) <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/interview-isiss-abdul-nasser-qardash/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[763] Ibid.
[764] Focus group session, Qamishli, May 2023.
[765] Focus group session, Qamishli, May 2023.
[766] Ibid.
[767] Focus group session, Tabqa, May 2023.

> My brothers and I used to cooperate; we had properties in the village, including olive trees, land and cars. I owned a taxi with my brothers, as well as a commercial shop, an electrical repair shop and a car parts shop.[768]

When asked about how his life had changed, the man said he was now unemployed and responsible for caring for his elderly mother, who suffers from psychological distress, as well as his deceased brother's wife and five children.[769]

Families across northeast Syria found themselves unable to afford basic expenses or to enrol their children in school. One respondent in Tabqa indicated that she would not be sending her son to the third year of middle school because she could not afford the enrolment fees.[770] A participant in a focus group session in Tabqa said: "I have been left without a breadwinner. I cannot bear my life."[771]

While key informants were clear about the personal and community-level devastation wrought by the conflict and its aftermath, others saw the economic situation under ISIS rule as functional compared with the economic difficulties that followed. A businessman from Tabqa remarked:

> Despite the cruelty, injustice and the imposition of taxes and *zakat*, people's economic situation was actually very good for several reasons. Firstly, there were plenty of employment opportunities. For example, work in burners [primitive oil refineries] accommodated a huge number of workers as well as all of the attendant labour, whether owners of tanks, owners of burners, merchants, and farmers. And secondly, they worked under the slogan, "God is our livelihood."[772]

The respondent said that this slogan meant that because ISIS forbade price gouging as un-Islamic, market prices were competitive. Most commodities were available and, because *zakat* was a charitable Islamic concept, people generally accepted paying it when they had jobs and sufficient income. Comparing the present with the period of ISIS rule, the man reflected that there were currently few job opportunities in most communities in northeast Syria, adding that the collapse of the Syrian pound against the dollar has left most households below the poverty line. Indeed, in 2022, 90% of Syrians in the northeast were living in poverty.[773]

One of the most lasting impacts of ISIS rule and the subsequent anti-ISIS conflict has been the extent of infrastructure damage. Interviewees unanimously agreed that ISIS invested very little in the infrastructure of cities it controlled. It mainly contributed physical embellishments in the form of threatening propaganda slogans. One key informant, for example, remembered a city gate painted black and scrawled with the Arabic phrase, "We have come to slaughter you." In some cities, ISIS maintained roads in the service of enabling trade routes, with an emphasis on the main roads in and out of the group's territory.

Communities across northeast Syria are still affected by unexploded ordnance laid by ISIS in its effort to defend territory. As of December 2022, humanitarian agencies operating in Raqqa labelled it the most contaminated city in the world.[774] Contamination in Raqqa is, in the terminology of demining agencies, "diverse and complex" and will take decades to clean.[775] This is particularly evident in the level of dread creativity that ISIS employed

[768] Ibid.
[769] Ibid.
[770] Ibid.
[771] Ibid.
[772] Ibid.
[773] Euro-Med Monitor.
[774] Handicap International, 'Unprecedented levels of contamination in Raqqa' (1 December 2022) <https://www.hi-us.org/en/news/unprecedented-levels-of-contamination-in-raqqa> accessed 31 July 2023.
[775] Ibid.

in boobytrapping buildings, homes and agricultural land as it both sought to delay military advancements in 2017. Many of these explosives continued to inflict damage long after ISIS' territorial collapse in northeast Syria.[776]

Additionally, the damage sustained by northeastern cities during operations by the US-led Coalition was catastrophic and remains largely unrepaired. Under Operation Inherent Resolve, by August 2017 more than 11,000 airstrikes targeting key ISIS military infrastructure and oil refineries had been conducted across Syria.[777] The total economic cost in infrastructure losses and human capital outflow is tremendous, but also deeply personal, with individual apartments too damaged for families to return to and hopes for the future hobbled by the lack of jobs. Nearly every inhabitant in northeast Syria has lost a home, business, or some land. This is not only the result of actions taken by ISIS but also the intensity of the campaign to ultimately defeat the group.

Local researchers in Raqqa estimate that 30,000 homes remain destroyed or damaged to an extent that they cannot be used, and report that the city waterworks and electrical grid remain non-functional.[778] Respondents indicated that where infrastructure repairs have occurred, these have been largely the result of international assistance, with the Autonomous Administration contributing to limited upgrades. Similarly, one key informant estimated that 75% of Kobane remains in ruins, with few resources available to initiate repairs. This estimate, which is difficult to verify because of the limited reporting on infrastructure rehabilitation in northeast Syria, matches figures from 2015 stating that 70% of Kobane was destroyed by fighting.[779]

The industrial scale of destruction in northeast Syria's cities continues to impede life for individual households. Without public funding to rehabilitate apartment complexes and other multi-family dwellings, individual families in cities throughout the northeast have little recourse in reclaiming their individual property. One respondent offered the example of a family who owns an apartment on the third storey of a building to which they would like to return one day.[780] Because the apartment owners on lower floors cannot afford to contribute to rebuilding the stairwell or the shared entrance, the family's third-floor apartment remains inaccessible. For families whose primary remaining asset is their home, this represents a significant, potentially permanent, barrier to economic improvement.

The little rehabilitation that has occurred in communities has largely been the result of international humanitarian support delivered through NGOs, with minor contributions from the Autonomous Administration.[781] Despite the widespread destruction of oil infrastructure, oil remains an important source of revenue for the Autonomous Administration—accounting for up to 60% of its income, largely because of the depreciation of other revenue streams.[782] The agricultural sector, the other historical source of income, has been badly impacted by the 2020-2021 drought, the worst in 70 years.[783] This has led to a "disaster" for the region's pastoralists, who numbered half a million before the war.[784] But international resources are dwindling,

[776] Ibid.
[777] US Department of Defense, 'Operation Inherent Resolve, Targeted Operations to Defeat ISIS' (n.d.) <https://dod.defense.gov/OIR/> accessed 27 September 2023.
[778] RDI, 'Civil damage and humanitarian violations carried out by ISIS in northeastern Syria (Raqqa)' (Ar.) (n.d.).
[779] Joe Dyke, 'Whatever Happened to Kobani' *The New Humanitarian* (7 May 2015) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whatever-happened-kobani> accessed 31 July 2023.
[780] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, May 2023.
[781] KII: male journalist, Qamishli, May 2023.
[782] Bartu and Ruttiman, 'Northeast Syria: The Good, the Bad and the Oil'.
[783] International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 'Syria: Droughts-Final Report DREF Operation no MDRSY006' (6 October 2022) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-droughts-final-report-dref-operation-ndeg-mdrsy006> accessed 31 July 2023.
[784] Peter Schwartzstein and Wim Zwijnenburg, "*We fear more war. We fear more drought.": How climate and conflict are fragmenting rural Syria (*PAX, January 2022) <https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/2022-02/PAX_report-Pastoralist_Syria.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.

too: in June 2023, the UN announced it would be unable to provide food aid to nearly half the Syrians relying on this assistance.[785]

One possible path to economic growth in northeast Syria would be to increase international oil exports, but this remains a contentious issue. The northeast was exempted from US sanctions for a range of industries, including agriculture, construction, infrastructure and trade. But oil exports—the most lucrative of northeast Syria's native resources—remain sanctioned.[786] Recent exemptions following the devastating February 2023 earthquake have not changed this.[787] The US administration of President Donald Trump—who contemplated withdrawing troops from Syria but then, in his words, left troops behind to "keep the oil"—granted a sanctions waiver to a newly founded but well-connected company, Delta Crescent Energy, to rehabilitate oil fields and export.[788] The Biden administration subsequently favoured allowing targeted investments in northeast Syria and did not renew Delta Crescent's license, reportedly because of the objection of major oil companies that held the sovereign rights for oil exploitation under agreements signed with Damascus in 2003.[789]

Lacking outlets for international export, this led to an 89,000 barrel-a-day deal between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government, which reportedly respectively make $16 and $15 per barrel of oil. Up to $50 dollars per barrel is meanwhile lost in the hands of middlemen and profiteers.[790] The Syrian government, which has lamented the $100 billion losses in Syria's oil sector since the start of the conflict, has sought to bring the country's oil and gas fields back under its control.[791] The regime also proposed deals with Russian companies to invest in oil exploitation, as well as with the Wagner Group for protection of oil fields, which led to clashes over the Conoco gas plant between Wagner and the SDF.[792]

Syria's oil remains caught in the larger geopolitical struggle over the Syrian conflict. While communities in northeast Syria do not materially benefit from the exploitation, they do suffer from the oil industry's environmental damage.[793] It risks recreating familiar patterns of economic marginalisation that the region experienced long before the outbreak of the post-2011 conflict.

In the long term, researchers assess the options for economic growth of northeast Syria, independent from the Syrian government, to be limited, and predict the economy will remain reliant on remittances from abroad as well as NGO contributions.[794] With 90% of people in northeast Syria now living in poverty and the region caught in a semi-autonomous state, with adequate natural resources but no tax base with which to administer government services, the prospects for reconstruction—and future prosperity—remain unstable.

[785] UN News, 'UN chief insists on solidarity with people of Syria, with "no time to spare"' (15 June 2023) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137737> accessed 31 July 2023.
[786] Alexander Langlois, 'Why US sanctions waivers in northeast Syria could fight poverty but harden divisions' *The New Arab* (London, 19 May 2022) <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-us-sanctions-waivers-ne-syria-could-harden-divisions> accessed 31 July 2023.
[787] Erica Moret, 'Effectiveness of Humanitarian Exceptions to Sanctions: Lessons for the Syria Earthquake' (Carter Center, 11 July 2023) <https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/2023/effectiveness-of-humanitarian-exceptions-to-sanctions-syria-earthquake-lessons.pdf> accessed 31 July 2023.
[788] Kenneth R. Rosen, 'The American Wildcatters Who Sought Syrian Oil' *Esquire* (15 November 2022) <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a41902965/syria-oil-delta-crescent/> accessed 31 July 2023.
[789] Hamidi.
[790] Ibid.
[791] Ieva Paldaviciute, 'Syria oil sector losses top $100 billion since start of war' (Argus, 6 February 2022) <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2299198-syria-oil-sector-losses-top-100bn-since-start-of-war>
[792] Hamidi.
[793] Wim Zwijnenburg and others, *War, Waste, and Polluted Pastures: An Explorative Environmental Study of the Impact of Conflict in north-east Syria* (PAX, May 2021) <https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/2021-07/PAX_WWPP_v2.2.pdf>
[794] Langlois, *New Arab*.

2. 'TO CONTROL THE NEW GENERATION': EDUCATION UNDER ISIS

In 2014, ISIS rapidly and brutally seized control of parts of northeast Syria, establishing a well-structured proto-state in the wake of these advances. Among ISIS' 23 governing authorities, its education ministry, or *Diwan al-Taalim,*[795] was responsible for overseeing education in ISIS-controlled areas.

Relying on existing research, official databases, the voices of individuals directly affected by ISIS, insights from Syrian and Syrian-Kurdish educational experts, local officials and educators, and ISIS educational materials, including textbooks, the following chapter examines the significant impact that ISIS had on the local education sector in northeast Syria. It explores the impacts on the curriculum as well as teachers and students in areas under ISIS control from January 2014 until the group's territorial collapse at Baghouz in 2019. The chapter also analyses the enduring consequences for education in the region.

Background

The protracted post-2011 conflict in northeast Syria has had a profound, far-reaching impact on the local education system, particularly because of the period of ISIS rule between early 2014 and 2019.[796] During its rule, ISIS held significant territory in northeast Syria and imposed an extreme interpretation of Islamic law that also manifested itself within ISIS' education policies.

ISIS used education as a tool for indoctrination to shape a new generation of supporters, commonly referred to as the "Cubs of the Caliphate." The group established the Diwan al-Taalim, which was run by the group's *hisba* units. The department implemented a highly ideological educational policy that drastically changed the educational curriculum, the lives of students, and the role of teachers.[797]

Those who did not conform to the rules were punished, leading in many cases to the abduction and killing of educators, students, and their families. Under ISIS, schools, universities, and educational institutions were destroyed, contributing to the displacement of millions of students and educators. Although ISIS retreated from northeast Syria in 2019 following its territorial defeat at Baghouz in Deir Ezzor,[798] widespread repercussions of its rule are still felt today. According to UNICEF, as of 2022, over two million children between the ages of five and 17 in Syria were still out of school, with a significant number concentrated in the country's northeast.[799] Furthermore, an additional 1.3 million children were at risk of dropping out of school in 2019 while approximately one in three schools were closed nationwide.[800]

Methodology

To illustrate the story of how ISIS rule affected education in northeast Syria, this chapter relies on a combination of data sources. First, the research team conducted a thorough examination of open-source databases, research papers, reports, and newspaper articles. Copies of textbook materials and public memoranda shared with students and teachers by the Diwan al-Taalim were also examined. While this information is valuable, much of this literature does not consider the perspective of affected individuals and communities.

[795] The ministry's full name in Arabic was the "Ministry of Education and Teaching for the Islamic Caliphate State."
[796] ISIS controlled Raqqa from January 2014. In late June 2014, when the group seized Mosul, there was a distinct escalation of violence.
[797] Tegwen Gadais and others, 'Education under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria: A Content Analysis of the Physical Education Curriculum' (2022) 7 *Frontiers in Education* <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2022.854413/full> accessed 30 May 2023.
[798] *BBC*, "Islamic State Group Defeated as Final Territory Lost, US-Backed Forces Say" *BBC News* (London, 23 March 2019) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47678157> accessed 19 April 2023.
[799] UNICEF, 'The Situation for Children in Syria' (UNICEF) <https://www.unicef.org/syria/situation-children-syria> accessed 14 April 2023.
[800] Ibid.; Nabih Bulos, 'Students in Syria are a textbook case for post-Islamic State re-education' *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, 1 April 2019), <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-syria-children-20190401-story.html> accessed 29 May 2023.

In the second stage of research, the voices of affected individuals in Syria were collected through KIIs; they comprised a range of community members, including thirteen current and former teachers, three education officials, a civil council member, a former student, the wife of a former teacher, a pensioner, a freelancer, a grocer, and an international expert.[801] It also included a series of eleven focus group sessions comprising a total of 87 participants. This qualitative data was collected by RDI, with one local research partner from RDI conducting and translating all 23 interviews. Interviews and focus group sessions covered four governorates in northeast Syria (and at least eight cities within those governorates): 1) Aleppo (Kobane and Manbij); 2) Hasakeh (al-Qahtaniyah,[802] Qamishli, al-Shaddadah, Tal Brak); 3) Raqqa (Tabqa and other undisclosed locations); and 4) Deir Ezzor (Hajin and other undisclosed locations).[803] Interviews of affected persons were primarily retrospective accounts of their experiences during ISIS rule but also included their more recent experiences. The language used for these conversations was predominantly Arabic, with some conducted in English. Eight of the 23 KIIs were conducted with female participants.

Due to safety restrictions related to accessing certain regions in northeast Syria, interviews were conducted through a combined written and oral approach. In most interviews, the local RDI researcher first shared the interview questions with the interviewees. Then, interviewees responded in writing, before the local researcher conducted a follow-up phone call or WhatsApp chat to consolidate the information, ensure proper interpretation, and delve into specific questions if needed. In addition to safety issues, some affected persons who were contacted for interviews refrained from further involvement in the research for various reasons including fear of being named, while others were unable to connect with the local researcher due to local internet connectivity issues.

Finally, some topics were included in the interview protocol but did not receive a lot of coverage in this chapter. According to local researchers, this was possibly because they were too sensitive for affected people to discuss. One such topic is the destruction of schools and educational institutions. For example, an article from the North Press Agency reported that anti-ISIS battles by the SDF and US-led Coalition in Raqqa led to the destruction of a staggering 80% of the city's infrastructure, citing UN figures indicating that 11,000 buildings were either destroyed or damaged between February and October 2017.[804] However, since damage was at times caused by the SDF and the US-led Coalition themselves, and not just ISIS, few residents were willing to discuss the topic for fear of being seen to criticise the SDF in post-ISIS northeast Syria.[805]

[801] Because of the number and range of sources interviewed as KIIs for this chapter, footnotes referencing their interviews include an interview number as well as a description of each individual's gender, job and place of origin in order to still anonymise their identities but also distinguish those with similar profiles (for example, current and former teachers) from one another.

[802] Al-Qahtaniyah is the official name given to the town by the Syrian government. However, this name is contested and political: the Kurdish population refer to it as Tirbe Spiye, Christians call it Qabre Hiyore, and Arabs refer to it as Qubour al-Bid. All three terms mean "the white grave."

[803] In some cases, interviews were received that only included the origin governorate (rather than the city, town or village) of the interviewee, and are marked as such in subsequent references.

[804] *North Press Agency*, 'Raqqa witnesses self-help five after liberated from ISIS' (19 October 2022), <https://npasyria.com/en/85931/> accessed 11 May 2023.

[805] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.

ISIS' impacts on northeast Syria's education sector

Based on analysis of existing literature, interviews and focus group sessions, this chapter is grouped into four main areas: 1) teachers and teaching; 2) curriculum and textbooks; 3) students and learning spaces; and 4) lasting impacts.

Teachers and teaching

> "Following repeated threats and financial incentives, I found myself with a beard [in order] to become a model teacher under the radical group."[806]

The teaching profession changed drastically under ISIS' rule in northeast Syria, with many teachers fleeing to neighbouring countries or regions to escape.

The role of teachers

> "[The role of the teacher] was to deliver what was dictated to them without any personal diligence or information outside the curriculum."[807]

ISIS' takeover of the education system in northeast Syria drastically changed the role of teachers. Teachers became, or were forced to become, implementers of Salafi-jihadi doctrine as promoted by the new ISIS curriculum.[808]

As one male teacher from Kobane described, "Teachers were employed as an instrument through which ISIS' ideology was implemented to change the minds of students."[809] This was reiterated by a formal announcement made by the Diwan al-Taalim in May 2015:

> Indeed, the *ummah* excels through its teachers when they direct what they have assumed responsibility for with truthfulness and trustworthiness…So the importance of the teacher is to polish minds, refine souls, implant virtues and tear out vices, and to educate [future] generations with an established, correct education for that is among the qualities of the prophets.[810]

In ISIS-controlled territories, teachers were forced to make a choice: either leave their homes or pledge allegiance to ISIS. Over 140,000 educational personnel residing in ISIS-controlled territories in both Iraq and northeast Syria therefore left their posts once ISIS arrived, either to join ISIS as fighters or to flee their regime.[811] Many teachers fled to other areas of control within Syria (including Latakia, Hasakeh and Qamishli[812]) fearing ISIS brutality or repression on the one hand, or military conscription or other forms of maltreatment that may be at the hands of the Syrian government in government-controlled areas.[813] In a focus group session in Kobane, a teacher described how he and other teachers fled to Turkey for several months following a massacre on 25 June 2015.[814] He added that when students returned to school, there was a shortage of teaching staff across

[806] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[807] KII (#11): male former student, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[808] Albane Buriel, 'Education under Totalitarian Regimes: The Case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (2022) 7 *PROSPECTS*.
[809] KII (#8): male teacher, Sirrin (Kobane), May 2023.
[810] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents' (*Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi*, 27 January 2015) <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents> accessed 9 April 2023.
[811] Buriel, 'Education under Totalitarian Regimes'.
[812] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[813] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023; KII (#7): male education official, Tabqa, May 2023.
[814] Focus group session 4.

northeast Syria as many teachers stayed in Turkey, creating longer-term repercussions for the local education sector.[815]

Teachers who stayed on after the arrival of ISIS in the area were often forced to remain due to financial reasons. With the takeover of parts of northeast Syria by ISIS, teachers' wages were cut by the Syrian government, leaving most of those who did not make the move immediately with little to no financial resources to migrate. One male former teacher from Tal Brak in Hasakeh described how he "stopped receiving wages in 2015 and then stopped teaching altogether in 2016."[816] He explained how the teachers who did stay on became little more than conformists:

> Since ISIS could not create a new cadre of educational personnel and teachers for its "caliphate," it had to rely largely on existing personnel and teachers. Teacher innovation and autonomy was no longer allowed. Previously, in universities, students studying to become teachers were told that the teacher was given a kind of freedom to move away from the textbook and teach according to the culture of the [local] area. This was no longer the case under ISIS. There was no space for innovation from the teachers. Teachers were required to follow the textbook exactly as it was written.[817]

Additionally, all teaching was required to be in Classical Arabic, the language of the Quran. All other languages of instruction were forbidden since they were the "language of the enemy."[818] One exception was English, which was only taught to foreign students living in ISIS-held areas.

A male teacher from Hajin in Deir Ezzor described the changed realities of being a teacher under ISIS:

> The main role assigned to the teacher under ISIS was to instil jihad and extremist religious bigotry into the brains of [students] to prepare them for the path of God, whatever the circumstances. Before ISIS, teaching and education was different in the sense that teachers felt safer; they were not exposed to any pressures from anyone.[819]

Another male teacher from Hajin described teachers under ISIS as changing from an esteemed role model in society to instead becoming *mamlouk* (servants or subordinates) who could not disobey their masters. He added that teachers of Islamic subjects were not accepted as qualified teachers by ISIS since they "graduated at the hands of scholars who did not apply the approach of the [Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him]." [820]

A former student from al-Shaddadah reported that all male teachers were required to wear a long robe and full beard,[821] further moulding educators into this new role and to visually represent their commitment to ISIS' interpretation of Islam.

Teacher re-education & repentance

Under ISIS, teachers' professional development only involved religious re-education. In December 2014, the Diwan al-Taalim announced that schools would be required to undergo mass ideological and religious re-education and "repentance" to ensure that all teachers were in compliance with the caliphate (see Box 1).[822] This included instructing teachers to 'arm students with memorizing Quranic verses and *hadith* [teachings of the

[815] Ibid.
[816] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[817] Ibid.
[818] Ibid.
[819] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[820] Ibid.
[821] KII (#11): male former student, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[822] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Islamic State Treatise on the Syrian Education System: Full Text, Translation & Analysis' (*Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi*, 12 March 2016) < https://www.aymennjawad.org/18600/islamic-state-treatise-on-the-syrian-education > accessed 9 April 2023.

Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him] reports to support what they believe' and stressing the 'strengthening of creed in their hearts and their responsibility to proselytize to others.'[823] Under ISIS, one focus group participant said, "the teacher was considered an infidel. No one dared to say they were teachers originally."[824] Therefore, they were forced to repent completely and re-educate themselves on how to serve ISIS as teachers of the Quran.[825]

Repentance was completed by attending a formal session at a mosque where teachers proclaimed their repentance to God by signing an official document. Those who did not attend were 'considered as insisting on [their] apostasy, and in this regard, the relevant *Shari'a* judicial proceedings [were] applied.'[826] Teachers who did not comply were fired and shamed through public announcements where their names were listed and disseminated as having rejected Salafi-jihadi thought.[827] A former female teacher from Deir Ezzor described the religious repentance courses in her region:

> Teachers were invited to have a religious discourse. This lasted for a month. In my area, we spent a whole month undergoing a course in the mosque. On the ground floor were male teachers, and on the first one, there were females. Every day after *al-Asr* [afternoon prayers] until sunset, we attended the course. Friday and Saturday were off. At the end of the course, there was a test. Even university graduates had to pass it. If one failed, he/she would not be entitled to teach.[828]

Occasionally, repentance was required if ISIS suspected that a teacher had some form of affiliation with the Syrian government. One focus group participant in Raqqa recalled a situation he witnessed when a professor was accused of being a regime collaborator, and that employees were forced to undergo a 20-day repentance that included memorizing "certain verses and religious matters taught by the extremists to the people."[829]

A male teacher from Hajin described the repentance oath-taking for teachers:

> All teaching cadres were gathered inside a mosque for three hours daily over a period of 15 days. They had lectures as if they [the teachers] had been infidels and reneged on Islam. It was an attempt by the group to instil ignorance in teachers and exploit their need to know more about Islam…They were asked to memorise one of the 30 parts of the Quran. Then, ISIS publicly declared that these teachers had repented, and they were no longer misguided. These courses were not intended to raise the level of teachers educationally or culturally, but [were intended to save] the misguided.[830]

[823] Jacob Olidort, 'Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State' (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 147) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-caliphates-classroom-textbooks-guidance-literature-and-indoctrination> accessed 9 April 2023.

[824] Focus group session 5.

[825] Ibid.

[826] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents'.

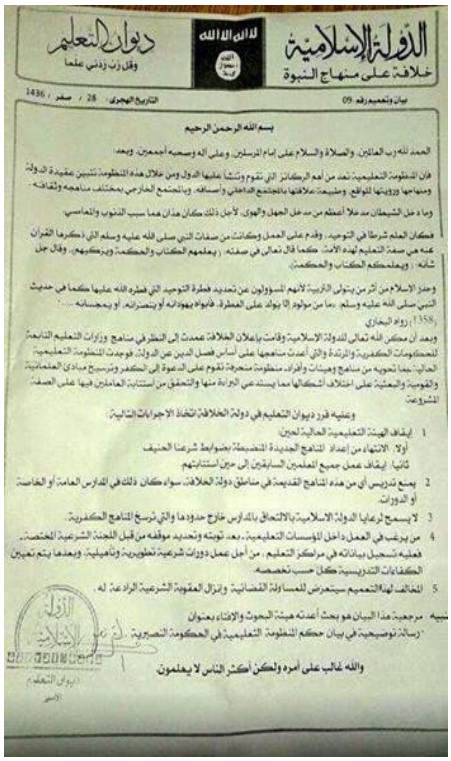
[827] Ibid.

[828] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

[829] Focus group session 143.

[830] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

Box 1. Call for Repentance of Teachers (Nineveh Province: December 2014)[831] [translated]


الدولة الإسلامية
خلافة على منهاج النبوة
لا إله إلا الله
ديوان التعليم
وقل رب زدني علما
بيان وتعميم رقم 09
التاريخ الهجري 28 / صفر / 1436
بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
الحمد لله رب العالمين، والصلاة والسلام على إمام المرسلين، وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين، وبعد:
فإن المنظومة التعليمية تعد من أهم الركائز التي تقوم وتنشأ عليها الدول ومن خلال هذه المنظومة تتبين عقيدة الدولة ومنهاجها ورؤيتها للواقع، وطبيعة علاقتها بالمجتمع الداخلي وأسافه، وبالمجتمع الخارجي بمختلف مذاهبه وثقافته.
وما دخل الشيطان مدخلا أعظم من مدخل الجهل والهوى، لأجل ذلك كانا من أهم أسباب الذنوب والمعاصي.
فمكان العلم شرطا في التوحيد، وقدم على العمل ومكانته من صفات النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم التي ذكرها القرآن عنه هي صفة التعليم لهذه الأمة: كما قال تعالى في صفته: ويعلمهم الكتاب والحكمة ويزكيهم. وقال جل شأنه: ويعلمكم الكتاب والحكمة.
وحذر الإسلام من أثر من يتولى التربية لأنهم المسؤولون عن تحديد فطرة التوحيد التي فطره الله عليها كما في حديث النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم: ما من مولود إلا يولد على الفطرة، فأبواه يهودانه أو ينصرانه، أو يمجسانه.... (1358) رواه البخاري
وبعد أن مكن الله تعالى للدولة الإسلامية وقامت بإعلان الخلافة عمدت إلى النظر في مناهج وزارات التعليم التابعة للحكومات الكفرية والردة والتي أعدت مناهجها على أساس فصل الدين عن الدولة، فوجدت المنظومة التعليمية الحالية بما تحويه من مناهج ومبنيات وأفراد منظومة منحرفة تقوم على الدعوة إلى الكفر وترسيخ مبادئ العلمانية والقومية والبعثية على اختلاف أشكالها مما يستدعي الإزالة منها والتحقق من استتابة العاملين فيها على الصفة المشروعة.
وعليه قرر ديوان التعليم في دولة الخلافة اتخاذ الإجراءات التالية:
1 إيقاف الهيئة التعليمية الحالية لحين:
أولا: الانتهاء من إعداد المناهج الجديدة المنضبطة بضوابط شرعنا الحنيف.
ثانيا: إيقاف عمل جميع المعلمين السابقين إلى حين استتابتهم.
2 يمنع تدريس أي من هذه المناهج القديمة في مناطق دولة الخلافة، سواء كان ذلك في المدارس العامة أو الخاصة أو الدورات.
3 لا يسمح لرعايا الدولة الإسلامية بالالتحاق بالمدارس خارج حدودها والتي تدرس المناهج الكفرية.
4 من يرغب في العمل داخل المؤسسات التعليمية، بعد توبته وتحديد موقفه من قبل اللجنة الشرعية المختصة، فعليه تسجيل بياناته في مراكز التعليم، من أجل عمل دورات شرعية تطويرية وتأهيلية، وبعدها يتم تعيين المكلفات التدريسية، كل حسب تخصصه.
5 المخالف لهذا التعميم سيتعرض للمساءلة القضائية، وإنزال العقوبة الشرعية الرادعة له.
نبيه: مرجعية هذا البيان هو بحث أعدته هيئة البحوث والإفتاء بعنوان:
"رسالة توضيحية في بيان حكم المنظومة التعليمية في الحكومة النصيرية"
والله غالب على أمره ولكن أكثر الناس لا يعلمون
ديوان التعليم

Indeed, the educational system is considered among the most important centres that states establish and cultivate, and through this system is made clear the ideology/creed of the state, its program, its consideration of the situation, as well as the nature of its relations with internal society and its classes, and external society in its varying directions and cultures.

And Satan has not found a greater entrance than the entrance of ignorance and arbitrary whim, and this has been among the most important causes of misdeeds and rebellion.

For knowledge has been a condition of *tawheed* and among the qualities of the Prophet (PBUH) that the *Quran* mentioned about him was the quality of teaching this *Ummah*, as the Almighty said in describing him: "Who may teach them the Book and wisdom to purify them" [Quran 2:129]. And the One whose affairs are exalted said: "Who may teach you the Book and Wisdom."

And Islam has warned about the influence of those who take charge of education for themselves because they are the ones responsible for tampering with the inborn-nature of *tawheed* that God has endowed as related in a *hadith* of the Prophet [PBUH]: "Every child is born with true faith. It is the parents who make him/her Jewish, Christian or Magian"—Bukhari 1358.

After God Almighty enabled the Islamic State and it announced the Caliphate, it has directed attention towards the programs of the ministries of education affiliated with the *kafir* and apostate governments that have been reckoned to be programs attempting to separate religion from state, so the current educational system has been found to be...a decadent program establishing the call to *kufr* and establishing the principles of secularism, nationalism and Ba'athism in its various forms—something that calls for disavowal of it and the realization of the call for repentance from those working in it on the legal level.

Thus, the *Diwan al-Taalim* has decided to adopt the following measures:
1. Putting a stop to the current educational committee for now:
a) Ceasing the preparation of the new educational programs bound by the restrictions of our *Hanif* [renunciate] law.
b) Stopping the work of all prior teachers until the fulfilment of the call for their repentance.
2. None of the old educational programs are to be taught in the areas of the Caliphate, whether public/private schools or lessons.
3. Citizens of the Islamic State are not allowed to attend schools outside its borders and which establish principles of disbelief.
4. Whoever wishes to work in the educational foundations: after his repentance, and definition of his stance before the special Shari'a Committee, he must record his affirmations in the education centres, to undertake developmental and qualifying Shari'a sessions. After that the educational qualifications of each according to his speciality will be completed.
5. The one who contravenes this statement for distribution will be subject to judicial inquiry, with the coming down of deterrent consequences according to *Shari'a* for him.

Note: The authority of this statement is the result of an investigation prepared by the *al-Eftaa* [offer Islamic guidance/ruling to Muslims] and *Buhuth* [research] Committee,[832] under the title: "Clarification Message on the Statement of Judgment on the Education System in the Nusayri government."[833]

And God is Predominant over His affair but most people do not know it.

Note: Although this document was published in Iraq's Nineveh province, the same conditions applied to ISIS-controlled area of northeast Syria.

[831] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents'.

[832] This is the same body that issued rulings justifying the treatment of Yazidis and the filmed execution of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbah.

[833] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
The term 'Nusayri' is a derogatory sectarian term used by extremist Sunnis to refer to Alawis. It originally refers to Abu Shuaib Muhammad Ibn Nusayri, a Muslim scholar who spent his life in southern Iraq. For unknown reasons, he is venerated by Syrian Alawis. Extremist groups claim Alawis adore ibn Shu'aib more than Allah.

In addition to repentance sessions, teachers who had already completed their educational degrees were subjected to additional religious education and obliged to take a "*Shari'a* session lasting two months," according to an indirect testimony from a local pro-ISIS media outlet (see Box 2).[834] In support of this, a public statement from May 2014 calling all teachers to attend *Shari'a* education sessions in Aleppo province stated:

> We ask you to attend a qualification session for teachers in *aqida* [creed] and *fiqh* [jurisprudence], and the teacher will be granted at the end of it a qualification document to teach in public schools. Whosoever refrains from the session will be barred from undertaking any teaching activity or work in the lands of the Islamic State.[835]

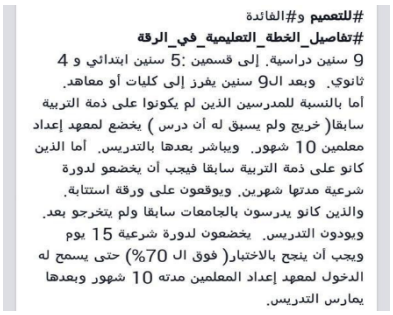
Additionally, those in university studying to become teachers had to undergo a '*Shari'a* session lasting 15 days' and 'pass a test with a score over 70%' before completing a 10-month course with ISIS' Institute for the Preparing of Teachers.[836] Teacher training sessions involved lectures on subjects from the previous Syrian national education curriculum that were now forbidden, including supposedly "blasphemous" lies in science books accused of questioning Islamic beliefs about the origins of humankind, such as Darwin's theory of evolution.[837] Lectures were reportedly delivered firmly, and often with shouting, a way of inciting fear among teachers.[838] Most re-education campaigns were led by armed brigades and those who did not abide by the strict regulations faced threats of public execution. Some were executed.[839]

Box 2. Educational Plans in Raqqa Province (indirect testimony: via local pro-ISIS Raqqa Islamic News Network [RNN])[840]

"For general distribution and benefit: Details of the educational plan in Raqqa:

Nine years of study: in two divisions. five primary, four secondary. After the nine years, selection for colleges or institutes. As for teachers who have not previously had an education qualification (graduate with no prior teaching experience), there is subjection for 10 months to the Institute for the Preparing of Teachers. And after that there is direct entry to teaching.

As for those who have previously had a teaching qualification, they must undergo a *Shari'a* session lasting two months, and they sign a document calling for repentance. As for those who have been previously studying in the universities but have not yet graduated and would like to teach, they are subjected to a Shari'a session lasting 15 days and they must pass a test with a score over 70% that the person may be allowed to enter the Institute for the Preparing of Teachers for a period of 10 months, after which the person may teach."


#للتعميم و#الفائدة
#تفاصيل_الخطة_التعليمية_في_الرقة
9 سنين دراسية. إلى قسمين :5 سنين ابتدائي و 4
ثانوي. وبعد ال9 سنين يفرز إلى كليات أو معاهد.
أما بالنسبة للمدرسين الذين لم يكونوا على ذمة التربية
سابقا(خريج ولم يسبق له أن درس) يخضع لمعهد إعداد
معلمين 10 شهور. ويباشر بعدها بالتدريس. أما الذين
كانو على ذمة التربية سابقا فيجب أن يخضعو لدورة
شرعية مدتها شهرين. ويوقعون على ورقة استتابة.
والذين كانو يدرسون بالجامعات سابقا ولم يتخرجو بعد.
ويودون التدريس. يخضعون لدورة شرعية 15 يوم
ويجب أن ينجح بالاختبار(فوق ال 70%) حتى يسمح له
الدخول لمعهد إعداد المعلمين مدته 10 شهور وبعدها
يمارس التدريس.

Inciting fear among teachers

> ISIS' main strategy for controlling what was taught was the 'infusion of terror by means of extreme violence and fear throughout all educational components.'[841] There are numerous accounts of ISIS officials inciting fear among teachers in northeast Syria, but a common thread throughout was the gruesome nature of punishments given to those who did not abide by ISIS' strict rules. In one focus group session, the father of a teacher explained:

[834] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents'.
[835] Ibid.
[836] Ibid.
[837] Ahmad Khalil, 'A Teacher in Raqqa, Living Under ISIS Rule' *Syria Deeply* (18 November 2014) <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2014/11/18/a-teacher-in-raqqa-living-under-isis-rule> accessed 9 April 2023.
[838] Ibid.
[839] Gina Vaile, 'Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory' (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Cubs-in-the-Lions-Den-Indoctrination-and-Recruitment-of-Children-Within-Islamic-State-Territory.pdf> accessed 9 April 2023.
[840] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents'.
[841] Buriel, 'Education under Totalitarian Regimes'.

> "We suffered academically. My daughter, who was a teacher, left the school; my son, who was an employee, also quit his job out of fear of ISIS."[842]

Grass-roots educator Lamiaa Suleiman received a great deal of attention in the media for establishing the Khotowat Foundation for Social Development to secretly keep teaching under ISIS rule.[843] In an interview with *SceneArabia*, she described their work:

> "We started working underground, in homes, in mosques, in cellars [...] it didn't matter where we were, but just that education continued in some way or another, outside their indoctrination camps."

Suleiman's network started in Deir Ezzor and expanded to include more than 80 educators throughout the region, secretly teaching students reading, mathematics and English while also offering psychosocial support. Aware that the teachers could be abducted or tortured for educating students outside of the ISIS curriculum, Suleiman and her teachers coordinated remotely using encrypted messages without revealing any information about the members of the network to each other.[844] However, ISIS did learn about the Khotowat Foundation and threatened the lives of those involved.[845]

A similar account was reported by a former female teacher in Deir Ezzor who had her own story of defying religious law:

> Once, the *hisba* members entered the classroom. At the time, my face was not fully covered. They protested and wanted to take me forcibly out of the school to their offices. I refused to obey saying if I put on a face veil then the pupils would not hear me well; this impinges upon sound articulation. Then they protested why I had my gloves off, I replied that it is impossible to have chalk and write on the board with a glove. At the end, they made me [swear on the Quran] not to repeat such an action.[846]

In addition to the fear ISIS incited among those in civil society networks like Suleiman's in Deir Ezzor, there were multiple reports from across northeast Syria of teachers and educators who were publicly executed. These executions were often for actions deemed to be in defiance of ISIS' rule, such as refusal to teach the new curriculum. Executions sometimes took place in front of students.[847] In another account, a teacher reported that ISIS also forcibly took possession of the homes of teachers who defied ISIS policies.[848]

Teachers who had connections to the Syrian government could be fatally punished. One interviewee from Deir Ezzor described how teachers who were still receiving public sector salaries from the government in the early days of ISIS rule were brutally executed. He stated: "A number of people were killed—including my friend from Hawayej Ziban, who was a teaching assistant at al-Furat University. He was killed and crucified."[849]

Another teacher from Kobane remembered how one of the teachers from his village was also killed:

---

[842] Focus group session 41.

[843] Bahira Amin, 'Syria's lost generation isn't lost: How teachers secretly kept education alive under ISIS' *SceneArabia* (1 April 2019) <https://scenearabia.com/Life/underground-education-isis-syria-lost-generation-khotowat-bedaya-lamiaa-suleiman> accessed 19 April 2023.

[844] Ibid.

[845] Ibid.

[846] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

[847] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.

[848] KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

[849] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

> In 2015, [a teacher] was killed in Sarrin under the pretext of teaching related to infidels with the Syrian regime. He was from the village of al-Ayouj [Sarrin, Kobane]. He had just returned to Aleppo, where he received his monthly salary. He was taken from his home.[850]

The journey to Aleppo to receive salaries was dangerous for teachers still working under the Syrian government. A mother of boys recounted how her husband, a former teacher in Kobane, went missing and was never found. In May 2016, her husband and 13 other teachers were headed to Aleppo to receive their monthly salaries to avoid forced dismissal—a requirement from the government that served to assert its continued presence in the region. However, ISIS spotted the teachers:

> [The teachers and my husband] were arrested on Qara Qozaq Bridge on the Euphrates River. After two months in captivity, [my husband's nephew] was released. He told us that they were held in the former cultural centre in Manbij, which ISIS had turned into a prison.
>
> One day in the afternoon, we were told that the abducted teachers would be freed. We gathered. We heard they had reached the security checkpoint at the village of Qomji where the Autonomous Administration would ask them a set of questions. But [the teachers who were abducted] never came.[851]

This type of punishment and abduction was not limited to schoolteachers. It also applied to school principals as well as other educators, scholars, and anyone else that ISIS deemed had the potential to influence young minds. A participant from a focus group session in Deir Ezzor described how ISIS raided and stole furniture in schools where principals were seen to have links or direct contact with the Syrian government. In some cases, these principals were forced to join ISIS.[852]

Scholars were also punished for protecting history that was deemed anti-Muslim. In 2015, Khaled al-Asaad, a Syrian scholar, was beheaded in Palmyra for refusing to lead ISIS to valuable, historical artifacts that the group viewed as un-Islamic "idols" that should be destroyed.[853] Two years later, in 2017, a group of 12 Syrians, many of them teachers, were also publicly executed in Palmyra, although the reasons for this execution were not clear.[854]

Physical acts of torture and murder contributed to the building of feelings of constant fear among teachers. The main message from ISIS was to obey or be punished; there would be no middle-ground.[855]

A teacher from Tal Brak in Hasakeh summarised the shared experience of fear and torture among teachers:

> Teaching has [historically] been [an honourable] mission. Knowledge has been the key to progress and success. However, such an experiment [under ISIS] served as a turning-point, not for me personally, but for all teachers and students who experienced [life under ISIS]. We were engulfed by fear and horror. [ISIS] sought unsparingly to instil radical ideas and ideology into our brains. Partly, they were successful in moulding minds, sowing sedition, and creating rifts among people through sectarianism and jihad, which they advocated relentlessly to install their so-called state.[856]

---

[850] KII (#8): male teacher, Kobane, May 2023.

[851] KII (#18): former teacher's wife, Kobane, May 2023.

[852] Focus group session 4.

[853] Kareem Shahin, 'Beheaded Syrian scholar refused to lead ISIS to hidden Palmyra antiquities' *The Guardian* (London, 19 August 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/18/isis-beheads-archaeologist-syria> accessed 19 April 2023.

[854] Jack Moore, 'ISIS Executes 12 in Palmyra, Including Teachers, Monitor Says' *Newsweek* (19 January 2017) <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-executes-12-palmyra-including-teachers-monitor-says-544465> accessed 19 April 2023.

[855] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), June 2023.

[856] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.

Curriculum & textbooks

> *"*[ISIS] did not keep any former book or subject."[857]

The curriculum played a pivotal role in ISIS' strategic agenda, serving as an instrument for indoctrination and the dissemination of the group's extremist ideology. Prior to ISIS' presence in the region, the Syrian government's curriculum was widespread throughout northeast Syria.

A Christian male civil council member shared how, in his area of al-Qahtaniyah:

> "The Syrian education system was very good. All Syrians [from different backgrounds] agree on this issue. Kurdish, Arab and Syrian students attended these schools and got a wonderful education."[858]

Another male teacher from Hasakeh agreed, stating:

> "All Syrians, regardless of their [religious or ethnic] backgrounds were in the same classes. No preference was given to one over the other. Words like Kurds or Arab [in the context of school curricula] were not used."[859]

Contrary to these views, Kurdish journalist Sardar Mlla Darwish, in an article on the state of education for Kurds in northeast Syria, noted that for decades prior to ISIS, 'Syrian Kurds have endured a ban on speaking and studying in their mother tongue as a result of political pressure and repression from the Syrian regime.'[860] The Kurdish Project similarly reported that under the Syrian government, 'Syrian Kurds were not allowed to use the Kurdish language, were not allowed to register babies with Kurdish names, were not allowed to attend private Kurdish schools, and were banned from publishing books or other written materials in Kurdish,'[861] leaving Kurds with limited access to an education if they were unwilling or unable to learn in Arabic.

However, with the arrival of ISIS, the government's curriculum in general was abolished.[862] ISIS textbooks and instructional materials were systematically infused with propaganda and ideological messaging, reflecting the group's radical interpretation of Islam. Notably, the curriculum was heavily militarised, with a primary focus on training young individuals to become active fighters in the group's ranks.[863]

Through the analysis of collected data, two prominent sub-themes related to the curriculum and textbooks emerged: a) ideology and the militarisation of pedagogy; and b) textbook reforms and curriculum developers. These sub-themes shed light on the fundamental aspects of the curriculum reforms under ISIS rule, which in turn provide valuable insights into the group's systematic manipulation of education for ideological purposes.

Ideology & the militarisation of pedagogy

In introducing its own highly ideological curriculum, ISIS overhauled the diverse range of subjects that once formed the basis of the Syrian curriculum. Music, physical education, nationalism, law and philosophy were among the subjects banned by ISIS in their efforts to reshape educational curricula within schools and

[857] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[858] KII (#22): male civil council member, al-Qahtaniyah, March 2023.
[859] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[860] Sardar Mlla Darwish, 'The Kurdish School Curriculum in Syria: A Step Towards Self-Rule?' Atlantic Council (20 December 2017) <https:// https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-kurdish-school-curriculum-in-syria-a-step-towards-self-rule//> accessed 19 June 2023.
[861] The Kurdish Project, 'Once Banned, 31,000 Syrian Children Now Learning Kurdish' (n.d.) <https://thekurdishproject.org/once-banned-31000-syrian-children-now-learning-kurdish/> accessed 19 June 2023.
[862] KII (#2): female teacher, Manbij, 2023.
[863] KII (#10): teacher, al-Shaddadah, May 2023.

universities.[864] This process of overhauling the curriculum was carried out in stages, as described by a male education official from Deir Ezzor:

> When ISIS ordered schools to be reopened, it initially eliminated core subjects with the exception of mathematics and reading. This transitional phase lasted for approximately four months, during which time the existing curriculum was annulled. Subsequently, a new curriculum was introduced, accompanied by newly printed textbooks that were distributed to schools. The [new] ISIS curriculum included subjects such as reading, [mathematics], Islamic education and Quranic studies, which were taught in the initial stages. Later, subjects such as jurisprudence, creed, Quranic interpretation [*tafsir*] and traditions were introduced for higher stages.[865]

Furthermore, the curriculum focused on religious studies, including memorisation of the Quran, *hadith* and other Islamic texts, while also promoting extremist views about violence, jihad and the establishment of an Islamic state. One focus group session participant explained:

> [ISIS] tried to manipulate children using all means possible, and they succeeded. If you wanted to work in the field of education, it had to be done secretly out of fear of them. The goal was to brainwash children.[866]

The impact of ISIS' curriculum extended beyond the restructuring of subjects. Education became a domain for exclusively promoting the group's interests, revolving around concepts of jihad and paradise.[867] The curriculum was also a recruiting tool that targeted unemployed youth with promises of material possessions, power, and leadership positions.[868] The indoctrination process was pervasive, aiming to mould the minds of individuals and instil a distorted understanding of Islam. ISIS' curriculum actively propagated violence, advocating for armed conflict and endorsing acts of terror.[869] A male teacher from Tabqa explained this by stating: "They changed the textbooks to be able to insert their ideology into the minds of children. The aim was to recruit the kids as the 'Cubs of the Caliphate'."[870]

As such, ISIS placed a particular strategic emphasis on primary schooling as an entry point for disseminating their interpretation of Islam.[871] Educational standards were notably low, with mathematics stripped down and subjects such as physics and chemistry later banned.[872] Figure 1 and Figure 2 (below) demonstrate the kind of Islamic textbooks introduced by ISIS in these early stages.[873] The titles of the books alone show that the focus of education was largely on the significance of the "caliphate" and Islam.

[864] KII (#7): male education official, Tabqa, May 2023.
[865] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[866] Focus group session 17.
[867] Focus group session 3; KII (#21): male grocer, Raqqa, April 2023.
[868] Focus group session 3.

[869] Olivier Arvisais & Mathieu Guidère, 'Education in conflict: How Islamic State established its curriculum' (2020) *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 88:46.
[870] KII (#20): male teacher, Tabqa, May 2023.
[871] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[872] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023; KII (#7): male education official, Tabqa, May 2023; KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[873] Communication with KII (#1) to authors, May 2023.

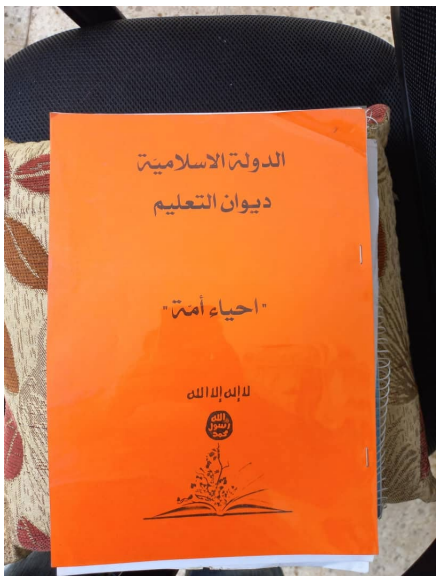


Figure 1. *Ahyaa' Ummah* ('A Revival of a Muslim Nation') textbook

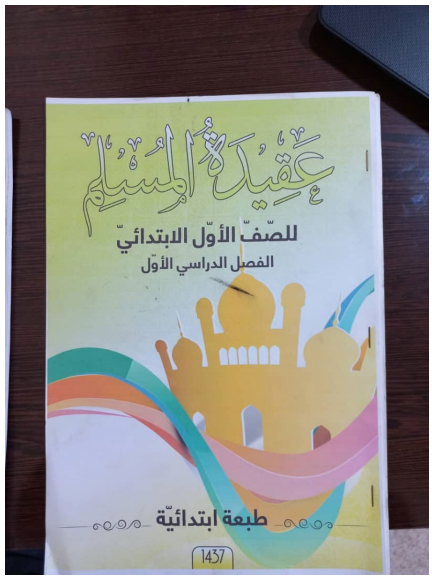


Figure 2. *Aqeedat al-Muslim* ('Faith of a Muslim') textbook

ISIS used the militarisation of pedagogy, which can be defined as incorporating military themes and practices into the education system, to instil its values among youth in northeast Syria.[874] This included the use of military-style uniforms and disciplinary systems.[875] ISIS even offered classes and programmes that were designed to prepare students for combat, with recruiters invited to speak with students and promote careers in their battalions. Violence and aggression were regularly hailed as a means of problem-solving within ISIS pedagogy, as was the marginalisation of alternative views and value systems. Elaborating on this, a former school owner explained how:

> They did not allow us to open private schools. I remember when I used to smoke, one of the children told me that he would report me to "the brothers" [ISIS] because I smoked. Another child tried to persuade him with knowledge [not to], but he said he would register a complaint and commit a suicide bombing. An 11-year-old child was imagining himself as a soldier and a fighter.[876]

Echoing this, a male civil council member who was abducted and tortured by ISIS for 12 days stated:

> [ISIS] abhorred all different ideas that did not fit their ideology. They persistently targeted education and intentionally sought to destroy the curriculum to control the new generation. They fought education, the Christian religion, even Islam. They hated everything that did not correspond to their cruel and dark ideas.[877]

This push to adopt ISIS' ideological agenda was a driving force for those who created the ISIS curriculum.

[874] Alexander J. Means & Graham B. Slater, 'Cultural studies, education, and the apocalyptic threat of war' (2022) 44:2 *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, pp.87-89.
[875] Focus group session 17.
[876] Focus group session 5.
Note: While it was unclear what the relationship was between submitting a complaint and committing a suicide bombing, it could be inferred from the context of the conversation and the quotation itself that the child here was threatening to blow up the school since the school owner was not obeying religious laws regarding smoking.
[877] KII (#22): male civil council member, al-Qahtaniyah, March 2023.

Textbook reforms & curriculum developers

ISIS utilized various forms of propaganda and psychological manipulation within its curriculum to cement its ideology in the minds of its followers. Textbooks, teaching materials and multimedia resources were carefully crafted to evoke strong emotions, create a sense of superiority, and demonize those falling outside their worldview.[878]

The textbooks and learning materials developed by ISIS eradicated elements of traditional culture and history deemed un-Islamic by the group.[879] Through vivid imagery, symbols and language, ISIS sought to shape the perceptions and attitudes of students. Figures 3, 4 and 5 (below) depict the use of weaponry and military objects in the *English for Islamic State* textbook taught to foreign students.[880] A former kindergarten teacher from Hajin in Deir Ezzor shared an emotional testimony on the drastic textbook changes:

> For example, in mathematics, instead of "1+1=2," we had "one warplane + another warplane = two warplanes." Their textbooks [went] against human nature.
>
> There were other examples that advocated killing and murder. These textbooks ran contrary to the age-group of the kids. I found myself [in a difficult place]. I [could] either endanger myself or sacrifice my work.
>
> So, I devised a scheme: I told teachers that on the surface we could pretend we were teaching their textbooks, but in reality, we would [avoid] the textbooks. Had we taught their textbooks, we would have produced monsters.[881]

For some non-religious subjects that existed in the pre-ISIS curriculum, teachers reported that they were promised textbooks that never materialised. A female teacher from Deir Ezzor recounted how after she had repeatedly asked about certain subjects: "They replied they were being printed and they would be delivered when they were ready. Actually, there were none."[882]

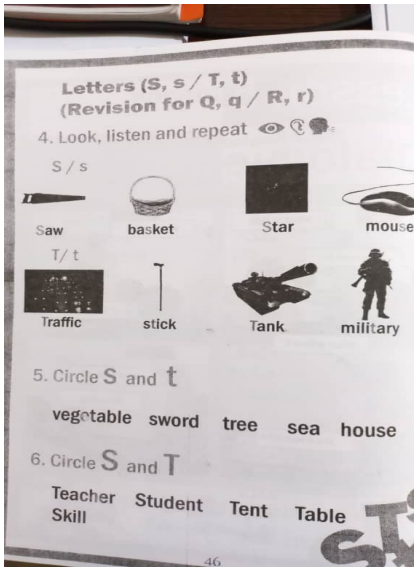


Figure 3. 'T for tank'

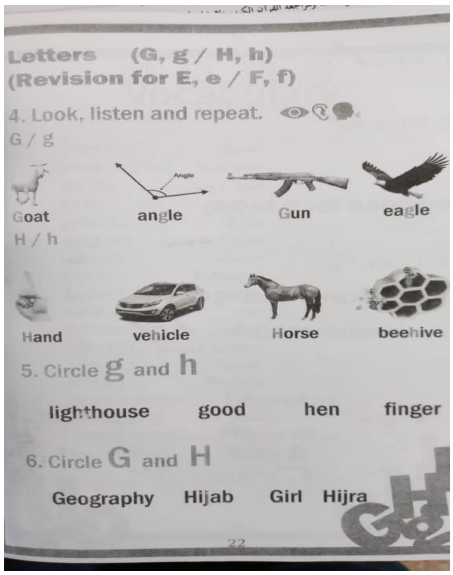


Figure 4. 'G for gun'

[878] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[879] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023; KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023; KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[880] Communication with KII (#1) to authors, May 2023.
[881] KII (#13): male former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[882] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

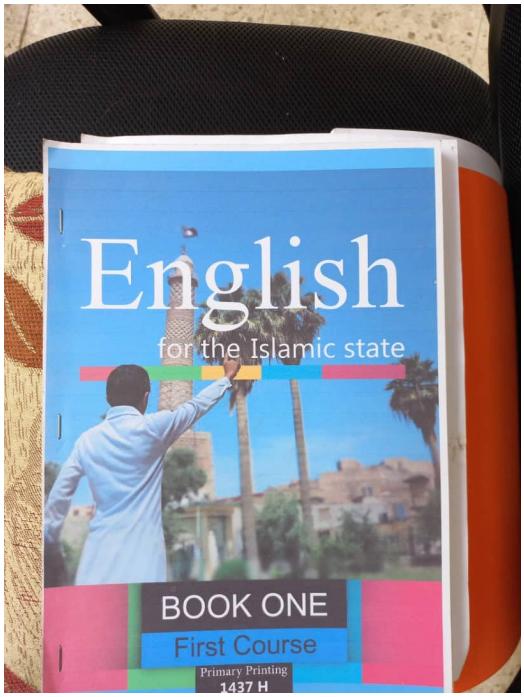


Figure 5. *English for Islamic State* textbook.[883]

Those who developed ISIS' curriculum came from a range of countries, further adding to the complexity of ISIS' overhauled education system.[884] To illustrate this, a male education official said that in Deir Ezzor, "the vast majority of ISIS members [were] from Iraq" alongside "Tunisians, Moroccans, Saudis and other Asian nationalities." He also estimated that as many as 75% of ISIS members in Hajin were Iraqi, 10% were from Deir Ezzor province itself while the remainder came from Arab countries, Europe or Asia.[885]

Together, these individuals from various parts of the world created an ISIS curriculum that reflected the systematic and calculated nature of the group's strategy. This was especially reflected in the new textbooks created by committees composed of foreigners. A male former teacher from Deir Ezzor described how: "We believe that there had been figures and leaders from other countries that ordered such changes [to the curriculum] to take place."[886] Meanwhile, a current teacher, also from Deir Ezzor, specified that the curriculum developers were "mostly from Gulf countries—Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular."[887]

The mechanism and the speed by which these textbooks were developed, printed, and published (often within a year or less) suggested that an efficient and generously funded system was already in place.[888] At the same time, the inclusion of elements of Wahhabism advocating global jihad and support for the radicalization of

[883] Communication with KII (#1) to authors, May 2023.
[884] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023; KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023; KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[885] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[886] KII (#13): male former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[887] KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
While many quotations about the curriculum were taken from interviews in Deir Ezzor, this information is common across other regions. Other interviewees confirmed this information although their quotations may not have contained as much specific information.
[888] Jacob Olidort, 'Inside the Caliphate's Classroom'; KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.

foreign Muslims strongly indicated the influence of systems of Wahhabi *mudaris* (schools) in shaping these educational materials.[889]

Historically, Wahhabi ideology recruited Muslims worldwide through educational channels, financing the constructions of mosques, schools and funding publications.[890] While the origin of Wahhabism is rooted in Saudi Arabia,[891] the extent of its influence in shaping ISIS' new textbooks is debated and hard to prove.[892] This is in part due to how the export of Wahhabism abroad usually involves complex financial trails, making it difficult to trace its origins.[893]

The curriculum imposed by ISIS promoted intolerance, hatred and violence, and was designed to brainwash and radicalise those moving through the group's education system. A female teacher from Manbij reflected on the ISIS curriculum and its connection to Islamic ideology, stating that:

> The curriculum employed by [ISIS] was a dominating, despotic one, that sought only to serve its ends and inculcate its ideology in the kid's brains for two main goals: to keep them ignorant and to easily [motivate] them to serve its agenda.

She further suggested that the new curriculum, while upheld by ISIS as being oriented around the Quran, was "in direct contradiction with the basic tenets of Islam":

> This could be juxtaposed with the words of the Muslim scholar and reformer Abdul Rahman al-Kawakbi who says, "The despotic state not only denies people the right to live in divinity; rather, it strives to keep them ignorant. The worst kind of tyranny is that of ignorance. Tyrants seek to emasculate basic knowledge, the [one thing] that [could] contribute to the development or advancement of society."[894]

Another male teacher agreed with the long-term plan of this agenda stating, that "ISIS targeted young people to instil its ideology into their minds," reflecting a "systematic policy adopted by the group."[895] Such extremist teachings had long-lasting effects on society—but especially on students.

Students & learning spaces

> "Learning while young is like carving in stone" (Rhyming saying in Arabic).[896]

ISIS drastically changed the educational landscape for students in northeast Syria. While ISIS was in power, students were denied their right to quality education and exposed to violence and fear. This section presents the voices of teachers, education officials and other affected individuals who have worked in education in

[889] Alastair Crooke, 'You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia' (27 August 2014) <https://www.noemamag.com/you-cant-understand-isis-if-you-dont-know-the-history-of-wahhabism-in-saudi-arabia> accessed 22 June 2023.

[890] Saudi Arabia's support for *Wahhabism* and *jihad* began during the Afghan-Soviet war, with significant investments made to spread the *Wahhabi* creed globally.
See: Carol E.B. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, 'Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Folly: Domestic Crackdown, Global Export' (World Politics Review, 2015) <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/saudi-arabia-s-wahhabi-folly-domestic-crackdown-global-export/?one-time-read-code=32269168655744579875 > accessed 24 June 2023.

[891] Crooke.

[892] Ali Al-Ahmed, 'Analysis: Wahhabism' *PBS* (n.d.) <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html> accessed 22 June 2023.

[893] Choksy and Choksy.

[894] KII (#2): female teacher, Manbij, May 2023.

[895] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.

[896] Bulos, 'Students in Syria are a textbook case for post-Islamic State re-education'.

northeast Syria. Three key themes related to students emerged from the desk review, interviews and focus group sessions: 1) school attendance disruptions; 2) gender; and 3) learning spaces.

School attendance disruptions

Under ISIS, the curriculum underwent extensive changes, negatively impacting student learning, but its impact on school attendance was also significant. One teacher interviewed estimated that under ISIS, 90% of students in Deir Ezzor governorate dropped out of school.[897] Various factors contributed to the disruption of school attendance, including the displacement of families, the loss of children's lives, the physical destruction of schools, and the recruitment of children as fighters.

While ISIS' rule over northeast Syria reduced school attendance rates in the region, schools under ISIS did not provide the quality, safe learning spaces to which children are entitled through international humanitarian law and conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[898] As such, schools themselves were danger zones for students, explaining why many parents chose to keep their children at home. The lack of safety at schools represents one of many reasons why students did not attend school during ISIS' rule, in addition to those considered in Table 1.

Table 1. Range of factors preventing children from attending school under ISIS rule

Factor	Description
Family displacement	ISIS' invasion forced many to flee their homes, with many seeking shelter in overcrowded camps.[899] Interviewees noted how families with the financial means and education often left to find peace and economic stability elsewhere.[900] Internal displacements resulted in significant disruptions to schooling, with many children unable to attend school due to the lack of facilities or the distance from their new homes.
School closures	ISIS was responsible for directly closing schools. For example, in 2015, an estimated 670,000 children in Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa provinces were impacted when schools were closed while the ISIS curriculum was under development.[901]
Attendance issues	Under ISIS, many parents were afraid to send their children to school and would, as such, keep them home, although at times they were forced to send them.[902] One focus group participant in Raqqa shared that they kept their children "at home to ensure their safety."[903] A teacher from Deir Ezzor governorate meanwhile described in an interview how there was also fear of sending children to school as "ISIS used to ask about family issues" and

[897] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.

[898] UNICEF, 'The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)' (n.d.) <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/#:~:text=Every%20child%20has%20rights%20%E2%80%9Cwithout,status%E2%80%9D%20(Article%202).> accessed 30 May 2023.

[899] UNHCR, 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained' (14 March 2023) <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/> accessed 30 May 2023.
According to UNHCR (2013), "Since 2011, more than 14 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety. More than 6.8 million Syrians remain internally displaced in their own country where 70% of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance and 90% of the population live below the poverty line," para.1.

[900] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023; KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

[901] Joshua Baraja, 'Islamic State locks 670,000 children out of Syrian schools' *PBS News Hour* (2015) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/islamic-state-school-closures-syria-leave-670000-children-without-education> accessed 30 May 2023.

[902] Save the Children, 'Over a million children living under ISIS in Iraq have missed out on education' (7 November 2016) <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/over-million-children-living-under-isis-iraq-have-missed-out-education-save-children> accessed 30 May 2023.

[903] Focus group session 10.

	that this "incited fear among people as innocent children could reveal what was said about ISIS [at home]" and put their parents at risk of arrest or execution in the process.[904]
Death and injury	While ISIS was in power, there were cases of students being killed while at school. In 2014 alone, UNICEF reported that at least 160 children were killed and 343 wounded in attacks on schools in Syria, although this was probably under-estimated due to difficulties documenting and accessing data.[905] The use of schools for military purposes was highlighted during focus group sessions; one participant stated, "I was shot in my hands while going to my job in the bakery by an ISIS sniper positioned above a school."[906]
Damage to school infrastructure	The conflict with ISIS resulted in damage to school infrastructure, with many schools damaged or destroyed in the fighting. [907] When school infrastructure was destroyed, students could not attend school. In some cases, ISIS targeted schools and universities, using them as weapons storage facilities and making them targets for airstrikes. In Kobane, which was never under full ISIS control, schools were closed for at least two years due to a variety of factors, including destruction and damage to school buildings.[908]
Child soldiers	Under ISIS, children were also recruited to serve as soldiers and fighters, depriving them of their right to education and exposing them to violence, trauma and, in some instances, death.[909] In 2016 alone, the UN recorded 274 cases of child soldier recruitment attributed to ISIS.[910] One researcher found that ISIS trained hundreds, if not thousands of children, for military engagement between 2014 and 2018.[911]
Gender	ISIS prohibited mixing of sexes among students, separating boys from girls starting from Grade 1.[912] Due to a shortage of schools, with many damaged from the conflict, classes were often on a limited schedule and alternative days were assigned for each gender.[913] As students got older, female students left school more often than boys in higher grades.[914]

Often, these factors intersected with others to disrupt education altogether for students in northeast Syria. For example, one focus group participant from Kobane stated: "Our houses were destroyed, many children were orphaned, and many children dropped out of schools. During the war for Kobane, schools were closed in 2014. Schools were suspended, and our children were out of school for a long time."[915]

[904] KII (#4): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[905] *Reuters*, 'Islamic State school closures in Syria affect 670,000: U.N.' (London, January 7 2015) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-unicef/islamic-state-school-closures-in-syria-affect-670000-u-n-idUSKBN0KF13720150106> accessed 30 May 2023.
[906] Focus group session 1.
[907] Muhannad Hadi and Ted Chaiban, 'After almost ten years of war in Syria, more than half of children continue to be deprived of education', (UNICEF, 24 January 2021) <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/after-almost-ten-years-war-syria-more-half-children-continue-be-deprived-education> accessed 30 May 2023.
[908] Focus group session 27; KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[909] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023; KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023; Mia Bloom, 'Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict' (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018) <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2018/armed-conflict-survey-2018/acs2018-03-essay-3> accessed 30 May 2023.
[910] Robbie Gramer, 'J Is For Jihad: How The Islamic State Indoctrinates Children With Math, Grammar, Tanks, and Guns' *Foreign Policy* (16 February 2017). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/16/j-is-for-jihad-how-isis-indoctrinates-kids-with-math-grammar-tanks-and-guns/> accessed 30 May 2023.
[911] Bloom, 'Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict'.
[912] Hosam Al-Jablawi, 'A Closer Look at the Educational System of ISIS' (Atlantic Council, 26 April 2016) <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/a-closer-look-at-isis-s-educational-system/> accessed 30 May 2023.
[913] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[914] Ibid.
[915] Focus group session 6.

A fear of miseducation, bombings and arrests further prevented students from attending schools and universities and left them confined to their homes.[916] A mother of six from Raqqa shared why she stopped sending her children to school:

> [Beforehand,] my six children were excelling in school, and the level of education was good. However, when [ISIS] came, they turned schools into their headquarters, and I immediately stopped [sending] my children. They became an uneducated and completely ignorant generation. I didn't send them to mosques out of fear that they would be influenced by [ISIS' ideas].[917]

A participant in Raqqa, meanwhile, shared the story of their brother, who had to leave his university in Deir Ezzor due to the risk of being arrested by ISIS because he was studying in a government-controlled area.[918]

Box 3 details how life changed for students under ISIS from the perspective of a teacher from Manbij.

Box 3. Through the eyes of a teacher: Violations against children under ISIS

During an interview, a female teacher in northeast Syria described the situation for students under ISIS in her region, Manbij, which was once considered a hub for scientific knowledge and education before the conflict. As a teacher since 2007, she witnessed the drastic changes that came with the ISIS rule: "In Manbij, hundreds of schools remained closed over a period of two years. Nearly 78,000 students were deprived of their right to education. Schools were renamed after Islamic symbols. Black banners were hoisted over the schools."

Students who attended these revamped institutions often witnessed or experienced lashings, beatings and other distressing acts of violence committed in public squares. Reflecting on her students, she remorsefully noted how "their childhood has been scarred. There are cases where children witnessed the beheading of their own fathers." While some students could be accompanied by mothers to protect them inside the schools, they were still afraid and risked ISIS retaliating with violence or threats of death.

This teacher also explained that of the children that were still in school, ISIS forced nearly half of all 12-year-old students, who were supposed to be in Grade 6, to move back to Grade 1 to re-educate them. Alongside this, school-aged children in Manbij were used and trained for combat missions, in violation of international humanitarian law.

Sharing a specific example of hardship, the teacher described how on 27 July 2016, ISIS committed a massacre, killing IDPs Deir Hafir in Aleppo who had been living in one of the schools in Buhayr village in Manbij. Several of those who were killed in this massacre had relatives who were university students in other cities like Damascus, Homs and Latakia. The students were not allowed back home, separating them from their families and thus resulting in additional psychological trauma. [919]

The loss of safe and quality education and the transformation of schools into ISIS headquarters had a profound impact on the lives of students. One focus group participant from Manbij expressed their frustration:

> We were students at a school. The first step was the cessation of education, and everything we planned for was destroyed. We lost our childhood. Schools became their headquarters.
>
> The first frustration was the loss of school. Our games, like football and simple things, turned into games involving firearms and weapon-like objects. We lived in a period of constant horror. Our schools remained closed, and the curriculum taught by ISIS included lessons on jihad. Their schools became mandatory, and they educated school children about mines and slaughter.[920]

[916] Focus group session 3.
[917] Focus group session 62.
[918] While the research team was unable to confirm this case, it was likely to have occurred during the period when ISIS ruled over Raqqa but not Deir Ezzor.
[919] KII (#2): female teacher, Manbij, May 2023.
[920] Focus group session 2.

While students encountered many challenges in accessing safe and quality education during ISIS rule, some of these were determined by the students' gender.

Gender

On the surface, ISIS purported to offer the same education to boys and girls. A female former teacher from Deir Ezzor believed that "by teaching girls, ISIS sought to avert criticism [about] why it only focused on boys."[921] In reality, though, ISIS assigned strict gender roles and restrictions through education, often treating boys and girls distinctly.

Many of the interviewees and focus group participants shared how boys and girls encountered these gender-assigned roles under ISIS. One male teacher from Deir Ezzor stated: "According to ISIS, men should be in the service of religion and present in all battles,[922] while women are supposed to stay at home and not work unless that serves religion."[923] A female former teacher also from Deir Ezzor described that "girls had strict rules regarding dress, which was all black."[924]

A man who used to be a student in Tal Brak in Hasakeh shared that girls who wanted an education often had to rely on volunteer teachers who provided instruction at home.[925] This gender inequality was also expressed by a male teacher from Tal Brak:

> "There was no equality between the two sexes […] as men were given precedence over women, who suffered abuse and injustice during the two years of ISIS rule we endured. This was obvious to everyone."[926]

These gender roles conflicted with the belief systems of many within local communities, with one male former teacher from Sarrin describing it as "terrorism" while highlighting that ISIS ignored the rights and roles of women in contradiction to the actual teachings of Islam.[927] As noted earlier, ISIS did not allow for gender mixing starting from Grade 1 onwards: that is, the first year of primary education around the age of six and seven.[928] According to a male teacher from Tal Brak, the segregation of classes for older children harmed students psychologically and prevented them from learning from one another.[929] Both men and women were not allowed to attend higher education institutions in government-controlled areas.[930]

While in theory ISIS allowed for equal access to its schools,[931] dropout rates among female students increased as students progressed to higher grades and were higher than dropout rates among male students. These higher

[921] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[922] While boys were typically promoted as fighters, this was not always the case. In an article on the Al-Hol camp, Ya'quobe writes about ISIS' first all-female battalion in 2014 called the 'al-Khansa Brigade.'
See: Lazghine Ya'qoube, 'Al-Hol camp: ISIS' feminine enclave that keeps growing' *Rudaw* (12 September 2022) <https://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/12092022> accessed 17 June 2023.
[923] KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[924] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[925] KII (#11): male former student, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[926] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[927] KII (#8): male teacher, Sirrin (Kobane), May 2023.
[928] As part of these changes, ISIS also initiated a six-day school week with only Friday as a vacation day. Due to a shortage of schools, with many destroyed or damaged from the conflict, schooldays were often on a limited schedule with alternative days assigned for boys and girls.
[929] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[930] KII (#1): former male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.
[931] In 2022, a pro-Islamic State Telegram channel criticised the Taliban for preventing girls from attending school on the grounds that it was not rooted in Islam. With the Taliban declaring Afghanistan an "Islamic" state, Sayyaf, the author of the article, questions the Taliban's basis for preventing women from fulfilling what he considers to be their religious obligation and then argues that the explanation lies

dropout rates were partly attributed to Sadda Sayyam, ISIS' top education official, who encouraged female students to marry ISIS foreign fighters.[932] One parent from Raqqa shared their daughter's story of being a student under ISIS and how their sister had abandoned education for marriage:

> My daughter, during the time of ISIS, was in first grade and was not allowed to receive an education. Now she is older and illiterate; she can neither read nor write because ISIS used to teach children to carry weapons and practice ["sexual jihad"]. They would forcibly marry girls they liked, disregarding their families' wishes. My sister abandoned her education because [a family member] who was an emir in ISIS, forced her to quit her studies and married her off to several foreign men.[933]

As a result, parents would withdraw their daughters from school to prevent early marriages.[934] However, other parents would still encourage their children's education, including daughters, to receive higher education in parts of the country not under ISIS control.

A participant shared that "ISIS used to harass female education exclusively, and we used to send them with difficulty to [Syrian] regime-controlled areas where universities were located."[935] Another shared the burden of women and girls requiring a guardian (*mahram*) to travel. The father stated:

> My daughter was studying in 12th grade […] in Homs. She couldn't go alone to continue her studies because they required a guardian who was a first-degree relative to accompany her. I had to send her mother with her, which increased the costs.[936]

Learning spaces

ISIS' rule over northeast Syria contributed to the destruction and closure of learning spaces and schools. While data on the exact number of schools destroyed and closed is unavailable, the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), a Syrian relief organisation, estimated in November 2016 that 1,378 out of 3,373 (41%) public schools surveyed in Syria 'were not functioning.' Similarly, a World Bank report published in July 2017 found that 53% of schools and universities were partially destroyed, while 10% were completely destroyed. Many of these learning spaces (40%) were in ISIS-controlled regions such as Raqqa.

More recent data, shown in Table 2, gives a detailed picture of the extent of destruction of educational infrastructure in northeast Syria. In addition, it shows the regional variations of impact across different areas, with 50 out of 386 (13%) schools completely destroyed in Raqqa compared with four out of 346 (1%) in Manbij.

During the course of ISIS rule and the anti-ISIS conflict to oust the group, schools were often used as 'detention centres, military bases, and sniper posts' by ISIS, the Syrian government and non-state actors, further adding to the cost to the education sector.[937] Given their placement in conflict zones, attacks on schools also led to the killing and injury of hundreds of teachers and students, putting them at risk at school or *en route* to and from school each day.

---

within the framework of cultural gender roles, which patriarchal regimes endeavour to maintain, rather than purely religious motivations. See: 'Essay By Islamic State (ISIS) Supporter' (MEMRI, 2022) <https://www.memri.org/jttm/essay-islamic-state-isis-supporter-lashes-out-afghan-taliban-banning-girls-education-claims-ban> accessed 22 June 2023.

[932] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.

[933] Focus group session 19.

[934] KII (#1): male former teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), April 2023.

[935] Focus group session 132.

[936] Ibid.

[937] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), 'Education under attack 2018' (n.d.) <https://eua2018.protectingeducation.org/syria> accessed 30 May 2023.

Table 2. The operational and physical state of schools in northeast Syria as of April 2023

Area in northeast Syria	Operating	Completely destroyed	Partially destroyed	Repaired
Raqqa	386	50	61	10 (still under repair)
Euphrates Region, including Kobane	571	22	3	28
Deir Ezzor	739	86	165	0
al-Jazeera Region	1,773	30	18	6
Manbij	346	4	1	0
Tabqa	240	12	24	24

Source: Anonymous official in northeast Syria.[938]

Reflecting on these atrocities, a male former teacher from Deir Ezzor said:

> During ISIS rule, schools were not safe. Anything could happen at any moment. ISIS turned most schools into training barracks or residences for its members. This made locals refrain from sending their children to school. How could people send their kids to be taught by an enemy? What do you expect ISIS to teach them?[939]

He further added that while there were local initiatives to rebuild schools to reopen them, future educational prospects are still unclear in areas that witnessed elevated levels of damage and destruction.[940]

According to a female teacher from Deir Ezzor, schools under ISIS "never felt safe" because "every day, you could see *hisba* members enter the classrooms fully armed. This caused fears among the kids. *Hisba* members were very arrogant, repressive, and imposing."[941]

Another former teacher from Tal Brak added that while it is well-known that schools were used by different state and non-state actors as military barracks, ISIS went further and converted some schools into "slaughterhouses."[942]

A lasting impact: The continuing education crisis in northeast Syria

> "Much attention [should be given to] shield [students] from the dangers of groups [like ISIS]. Their ideologies should be combatted."[943]

Despite the end of ISIS rule, the education system in Syria remains 'overstretched, underfunded, fragmented and unable to provide safe, equitable and sustained services.'[944] More than 2.5 million children remain out of

[938] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[939] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[940] Ibid.
[941] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[942] Communication with KII (#1) to authors, May 2023.
[943] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[944] Hadi and Chaiban, UNICEF.

school,[945] while the long-term effects of ISIS rule include the deterioration of students' and teachers' psychosocial well-being, learning loss and illiteracy, as well as present-day challenges in the education system such as those related to infrastructure.

Deterioration of psychosocial well-being

> "Students collapsed in the psychological sense. What prevailed was melancholy, a culture of murder, destruction and *qasas*."[946]

Psychosocial well-being is a 'significant precursor to learning and is essential for academic achievement; it thus has important bearing on the future prospects of both individuals and societies.'[947] However, despite this crucial importance of psychosocial well-being, it has been repeatedly undermined and ignored in northeast Syria's education sector. According to an international researcher who conducted research focused on ISIS' impact on education:

> The psychological impact on both students and teachers is not recognised enough, and even international organisations […] just want to go ahead, see education resume [with] people going to school. [They] expect it to function as normal as if nothing happened […] but there is absolutely no plan and [there are] no resources existing to address that matter, so there's been only a little bit of work done [regarding psychosocial well-being.][948]

Through interviews and focus group meetings, it became evident that children, especially those subjected to forced child labour or early marriage and those who experienced the loss of family members or friends, bore some of the worst trauma from ISIS rule.[949] One interviewee linked this trauma to the alarming rise in drug use among children in the region.[950]

Additionally, the pervasive presence of fear presents an ongoing challenge affecting both children and adults alike. Children are apprehensive about going to school. Even when students do manage to go to school, over-crowded classrooms accommodating as many as 100 children impede effective learning.[951] Participants also spoke about the remaining distrust of people in general, with one focus group attendee in Qamishli stating:

> Caution prevailed [during ISIS] and even now, when we see a strange car or truck, we rush towards it and inquire about its purpose and who is in it. Fear was dominant in the entire neighbourhood. Even now, we are still [afraid].[952]

Besides fear, the aftermath of ISIS has notably affected students' capacity to show respect towards teachers. During the interviews, this was attributed, to some extent, to the fact that under ISIS, teachers were relegated to subordinate positions and stripped of their authority. One teacher expressed concerns about the enduring effects of ISIS on student behaviour:

---

[945] Ibid.

[946] KII (#7): male education official, Tabqa, May 2023.

[947] Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 'Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning (PSS and SEL)' (n.d.) <https://inee.org/collections/psychosocial-support-and-social-and-emotional-learning> accessed 30 May 2023.

[948] KII (#9): female international researcher, Paris, May 2023.

[949] Focus group session 47; KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

[950] KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

[951] Focus group session 19.

[952] Focus group session 20.

> The region will need many years to overcome the radical group's impact on the education sector in particular. This is obvious in the behaviour of students towards their teachers. [Teachers] ought to be role models for them, [but] students disrespect their instructors.[953]

Even then, teachers themselves continue to suffer substantial mental and emotional trauma post-ISIS. A male teacher from Deir Ezzor remarked that even today, particularly in rural areas, teachers propagate "strange ideas" and "always speak about murder and weapons," adding that "ideas that were instilled before are still active, [including those related to] arms, fighting, jihad, what is *halal* and what is *haram.*"[954] A female teacher from Deir Ezzor meanwhile emphasised her lasting psychological trauma from witnessing violence first-hand:

> Once, as I was in the town of al-Ashara, I was invited forcibly to attend a beheading. My daughter, who was five [years' old] at the time, was with me. I put my hands over her eyes to prevent her from seeing the beheading.
>
> Another time, I witnessed a man thrown from the roof of al-Hikma Hospital in al-Ashara. Even though I closed my eyes to not see the scene, these recollections still haunt my memories.
>
> On another occasion, I came across a man tied to a pole in a place covered with thorns. It was Ramadan. He had marmalade on his face [to attract flies]. His "offense" was that he was not fasting.[955]

Despite the violence and other hardships that characterised ISIS rule, there are still adherents to the group's ideology in northeast Syria. A focus group recounted the tragic story of her 15-year-old nephew's recruitment into ISIS, expressing astonishment that some individuals still sing ISIS songs and listen to them.[956] However, other interviews revealed that some harbour a sense of nostalgia, believing that ISIS provided financial stability and a sense of prosperity that does not compare with people's modern-day, post-ISIS living conditions.

According to one participant, there are some in the northeast who feel that "at least under ISIS, we had a means of earning income, which is no longer feasible," adding that "we wish ISIS would return."[957]

Learning loss and illiteracy

> Our children lost their education, and now they can't even read or write. My 14-year-old son can't write or read, and the educational future of children has been destroyed.[958]

Beyond the deterioration of psychosocial well-being, interviews and focus group sessions also underscored the detrimental effects of ISIS rule on educational achievement and literacy. A participant in a focus group meeting asserted that the educational attainment rate in Raqqa, for instance, was previously 80%, whereas after the emergence of ISIS, this rate plummeted to a mere 1%.[959] Consequently, a whole generation of young people has been labelled as "illiterate" and "ignorant," something described by multiple interviewees and focus group participants.[960]

[953] KII (#3): male education official, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[954] Ibid.
[955] KII (#12): female former teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[956] Focus group session 36.
[957] KII (#9): female international researcher, Paris, May 2023.
[958] Focus group session 110.
[959] Focus group session 127.
[960] Focus group session 26; Focus group session 138.

The reasons given to explain this drastic decline varied. One participant in Raqqa candidly explained that "given the dire situation we were in, we didn't even think about education."[961] Others described how the prolonged closure of schools severely impacted students' academic performance across the board. Another participant from Raqqa suggested that ISIS' forceful closure of schools had led to "an entire generation being deprived of literacy."[962]

When analysing illiteracy rates, participants in Deir Ezzor suggested that ISIS had deliberately and systematically set out to create an illiterate generation. "Children were indoctrinated to bear arms as 'Cubs of the Caliphate,' and there was a deliberate effort to propagate illiteracy throughout society,"[963] a former teacher from Sarrin claimed, stating that "terrorist groups intentionally destroyed schools with the aim of cultivating an illiterate community."[964]

Ultimately, diminished literacy rates have enduring impacts on Syria's economy. Children who were deprived of education under ISIS have now become young adults who struggle to secure stable employment. A mother from Hasakeh expressed her anguish about her own children, now part of this "lost generation":

> Before the emergence of ISIS, my children used to attend school regularly and learn. However, due to the bombings and the loss of breadwinners in my family, I couldn't afford to provide for their educational needs, so they lost their education. Now they work and sometimes spend the entire day outside the house, trying to earn money. They have been deprived of education.[965]

In another interview, a mother of boys—and wife of a former teacher who was abducted during the conflict—recounted her family's difficulties:

> After my husband went missing, my sons left school and our economic situation changed for the worst. [My son] left the university. He was studying in Aleppo. He has assumed charge of the family at an early age. After [him], all my sons left school. I feel remorse over that. My husband was very fond of schooling. He always wanted his sons to finish their education and graduate.[966]

A fractured education system

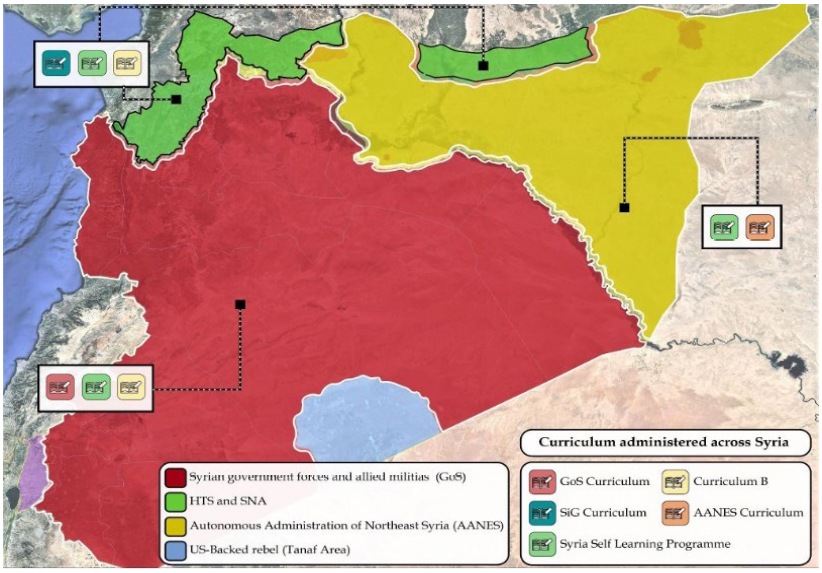
In addition to learning loss, ISIS also contributed to the overall decline of education in northeast Syria. As covered in the section on curriculum, ISIS dissolved the existing national Syrian curriculum in the regions of Syria that it ruled over.

Today, the education system remains largely fractured, in part due to ISIS rule but also as a result of ongoing conflicts in Syria.[967] This is evidenced by the curriculum map in Figure 6, taken from a report by the Middle East Institute (MEI),[968] illustrating the simultaneous use of five different curricula across the country.

[961] Focus group session 36.
[962] Focus group session 35.
[963] Focus group session 13.
[964] KII (#8): male teacher, Kobane, May 2023.
[965] Focus group session 16.

[966] KII (#18): former teacher's wife, Kobane, May 2023.
[967] Kinana Qaddour and Salman Husain, 'Syria's Education Crisis: A Sustainable Approach After 11 Years of Conflict' (Middle East Institute, March 2022) <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2022-03/Syria%E2%80%99s%20Education%20crisis%20-%20A%20Sustainable%20Approach%20After%2011%20years%20of%20Conflict_1.pdf> accessed 16 May 2023.
[968] Qaddour and Husain, MEI.

Figure 6. Map of different curricula administered across Syria.[969]



Today, schools and communities in northeast Syria rely on a combination of the Syria Self-Learning Program (SLP) and the curriculum introduced by the Autonomous Administration. The SLP is an informal catch-up program that has been 'widely adopted [by] humanitarian actors in non-formal education centres'[970] to serve approximately 14,250 out-of-school children who cannot physically attend school for several reasons—including violence, displacement, or work (because a child is out working to support their family, for example).[971] It is operated by UNICEF and uses Arabic and English as formal languages of instruction.

The Autonomous Administration's curriculum, on the other hand, is operated by its education board and targets the different communities within northeast Syria, offering instruction in Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac. It is not used in the parts of Hasakeh and Qamishli still controlled by the Syrian government (where the government's curriculum is still taught).[972]

Overall, education across northeast Syria remains sporadic, informal, under-researched and underfunded, making it challenging for education providers to properly serve the needs of under-educated youth populations.[973] In terms of international funding, MEI's report notes that northeast Syria is ineligible for certain funds, such as pooled funds from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), since the region has been excluded from the UN Security Council's cross-border resolution.[974]

Looking forward: Rebuilding education

Schools are meant to be spaces that protect children from the physical dangers around them in times of emergencies, whether abuse, exploitation or recruitment into armed groups.[975] They should 'provide children

[969] Ibid.
[970] Ibid.
[971] UNICEF, 'Self-learning programme helps children catch up on education' (20 October 2020) <https://www.unicef.org/syria/stories/self-learning-programme-helps-children-catch-education> accessed 22 May 2023.
[972] Qaddour and Husain, MEI.
[973] Ibid.
[974] Ibid.
[975] UNICEF, 'Education in emergencies: Education is a lifeline for children in crises' (n.d.) <https://www.unicef.org/education/emergencies> accessed 30 May 2023.

with lifesaving food, water, health care and hygiene supplies' and 'offer psychosocial support, giving children stability and structure to help them cope with the trauma they experience every day [during emergencies].'[976]

While addressing broader needs, an international researcher stated that in northeast Syria "nothing will happen [in terms of educational progress] if we don't address the most basic needs of students."[977] However, under ISIS, schools became both physically and emotionally dangerous spaces for students, educators and society at large.

Despite the withdrawal and territorial collapse of ISIS in northeast Syria, the state of education in the region remains fragile and subject to contention. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), there were at least 85 reported attacks on schools across Syria during the 2020-21 reporting period.[978] In some cases, *de facto* authorities in northeast Syria have implemented a local curriculum in schools, resulting in education that is not officially accredited and that impedes students' ability to obtain recognised diplomas in government-controlled areas or beyond.[979] Meanwhile, teachers who defy the requirements of the local curriculum and instead teach the government-approved curriculum risk possible arrest and detention.[980] An international academic with first-hand research experience in Syria emphasised that the Autonomous Administration's curriculum has been rejected by local communities for different reasons:

> It is perceived by local communities as not meeting their needs and not aligning with their customs and traditions. This creates additional challenges for local communities who refuse to study this curriculum and instead desire an officially accredited curriculum represented by the Syrian government.[981]

The international community has been working to rebuild and rehabilitate schools and universities in northeast Syria: UNICEF, for example, allocated funding for the rehabilitation of educational facilities, and other initiatives are in place for children who have been displaced or are unable to attend school due to safety concerns. These include temporary learning centres and mobile schools.[982] A focus group participant in Kobane discussed the implementation of the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government's curricula, noting how:

> For the past year or two, the city of Kobane has been able to recover from that shock. Now, there is significant progress in the field of education and development. Some students study in administration schools while others follow the curriculum of the government.[983]

Positive changes are sometimes emerging despite the meagre funding available for school reconstruction. According to the international education researcher:

> I remember hearing from Autonomous Administration officials that they also have very little resources to invest into reconstruction and [that this] depends a lot on the international community. In April 2022, I witnessed school buildings that were completely new, [that] had been rebuilt completely from the ground. But at the same time, we were still seeing a lot of school buildings that were completely abandoned, completely destroyed, and had had absolutely no reconstruction work.[984]

---

[976] Ibid.

[977] KII (#9): female international researcher, Paris, May 2023.

[978] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.

[979] UN Security Council, 'Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic' (23 April 2021) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/children-and-armed-conflict-syrian-arab-republic-report-secretary> accessed May 30 2023.

[980] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.

[981] KII (#9): female international researcher, Paris, May 2023.

[982] UNICEF, 'Education' (2023) <https://www.unicef.org/syria/education> accessed 23 April 2023.

[983] Focus group session 31.

[984] KII (#9): female international researcher, Paris, May 2023.

Those interviewed also described what could be done to improve northeast Syria's education prospects now and in the future. A male teacher from Tal Brak shared their perspective on the present and future, stating that "we are doing our utmost to return our students to the right direction […] to make them know right from wrong and to set a goal to attain."[985]

Another focus group participant in Hasakeh emphasised the importance of continued education:

> I insisted that [my son] continue his education. Through knowledge alone, we can rebuild our country. Japan is a great example of that. Perhaps all of you have seen the famous picture of a Japanese teacher and his students practicing their school activities amidst the ruins of houses after World War II. Education should not stop, even if it is done at home.[986]

A former student who had attended school during the years of ISIS rule spoke about the importance of education in reducing violence in the region "by activating self-protection […] in each region and intensifying courses to teach about the danger of weapons" as well as the danger of groups like ISIS.[987]

A reflection of the many challenges facing the northeast Syria's education sector, a male teacher from Deir Ezzor suggested that to improve the current situation, educators should be:

> Encouraging children to return to desks, introducing curricula that meet students' needs […] training teachers to deal with children with psychological [traumas], repairing schools that were damaged to pave the way for children to return to school, aiding teachers financially to help them devote themselves fully to their mission, and adopting new technical methods to [motivate] students.[988]

Conclusion

ISIS' five-year rule in northeast Syria had devastating consequences for the education system, transforming schools into danger zones and propagating misinformation, hate speech and fundamentalism throughout the region. Despite concerted efforts to rebuild and restore the education system, numerous challenges persist today. Ongoing conflict and insecurity in northeast Syria continue to disrupt education, leading to millions of children being deprived of schooling across the country.[989] This situation is only made worse by shortages of qualified teachers and education professionals, a fractured education system grappling with a lack of resources (including textbooks and other basic learning materials), overcrowded classrooms, inadequate water and sanitation facilities, and regular electricity outages.[990]

Addressing these many challenges will require a concerted effort from those on the ground as well as the international community,[991] and also a recognition of the central importance that education reform can play in dealing with some of the other challenges emanating from ISIS rule in northeast Syria. To this end, a male teacher from Deir Ezzor shared a call to action to support education in the future:

> Ignorance is the ardent enemy of every evil phenomenon. [Preference should be given] to education, which is key to progress. Our societies have endured enough. We hope civil society associations and NGOs pay attention to these areas [in the future].[992]

[985] KII (#5): male teacher, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[986] Focus group session 7.
[987] KII (#11): male former student, Tal Brak (Hasakeh), May 2023.
[988] KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.
[989] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.
[990] Hadi and Chaiban, UNICEF.
[991] WFP, 'Syria emergency' (2023) <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/syria-emergency> accessed 30 May 2023.
[992] KII (#4): male teacher, Deir Ezzor, May 2023.

Restoring stability and promoting psychosocial well-being as priorities in a post-ISIS northeast Syria will require a concerted effort to rebuild the education system and ensure that students have access to quality education. It is crucial to provide support for the reconstruction of damaged school infrastructure as well as the provision of educational resources. Additionally, implementing programs that prioritise the safety and security of students and teachers is essential.

These actions, along with other relevant initiatives that account for the voices of those affected, should contribute to the ongoing revival of the education system in northeast Syria.

3. GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE 'ISLAMIC STATE'

The atrocious nature of the sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) perpetuated by ISIS has long focused attention on the group's extremely conservative interpretation of how men and women were supposed to live together in its self-proclaimed "Islamic State."[993] Women were mostly confined to the household, which they could only leave if covered in a *niqab*, a full-face and body cover, and gloves, and all while accompanied by a male member of their family. All men were forced to grow beards, pray five times a day and cover their bodies in traditional dress.

Transgressing these narrowly defined rules could result in imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, beheadings, stoning and immolation.[994] Women, as wives or sexual slaves, were treated as "spoils of war."[995] Women were killed simply for working as doctors, lawyers, politicians, or journalists.[996] Sexual and gendered minorities (SGM) were systematically persecuted and murdered.[997]

And yet, women also joined ISIS' project wilfully, both locally and in large numbers from abroad.[998] In ISIS-held areas, gender norms—the societal principles that govern the behaviour of women and men, girls and boys—were highly contingent on other identity markers. Yazidi and some Christian women and girls were forced into sexual slavery, Yazidi boys and men were forcibly converted, and men belonging to ethnic and religious minorities (including Kurdish, Shabak and Shi'a men) were often slaughtered on the spot in infamous massacres.[999]

ISIS' interpretation of gender norms was so extreme because gender was central to a larger extremist project at the core of the group's identity. By regulating how men and women could behave, ISIS set itself apart from other societies—specifically other Muslim societies, but also those in the western world—and thereby defined what was different and specific about ISIS. In other words, the so-called "caliphate" was not only defined by its geographical borders but also by how men and women were allowed to act within those borders. ISIS' extremely conservative view of gender relations therefore has to be understood within the larger ideological project of Salafi-jihadi Islam as well as the particular neo-colonial geo-politics of the Middle East—specifically the US invasion of Iraq—at the time of the group's emergence.

Salafism, a revivalist movement within Sunni Islam, demands the emulation of the lives, and religious and social customs of the first three generations of Muslims following the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) in the 7th century Arab Peninsula.[1000] Social relations, including those between men and women, are therefore built on an idealised image of a desert-dwelling society that existed some 1,300 years ago. Salafism

[993] Gender-based violence (GBV) includes forms of violence perpetrated on the bases of gender identity. Primarily this pertains to violence against women and girls (VAW), perpetrated primarily by men. GBV when including sexual violence is often described as Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), but GBV can also be physical, without sexual transgression, mental, structural and economic. GBV can occur in the private sphere of a household, where it is often described as domestic violence or intimate partner violence, or in the public sphere where it can manifest as child marriage, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or so called "honour crimes." When used as a strategy of war, SGBV can comprise a war crime or crime against humanity.

[994] Lisa Davis, 'Reimagining Justice for Gender-Based Crimes at the Margins: New Legal Strategies for Prosecuting ISIS Crimes Against Women and LGBTIQ Persons' (2018) 24 *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender and Social Justice* <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmjowl/vol24/iss3/4/> accessed 20 July 2023.

[995] Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg (2023), 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles' 33(2) *Women & Criminal Justice* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08974454.2021.1962478> accessed 20 July 2023.

[996] Davis, 'Reimagining Justice for Gender-Based Crimes at the Margins'.

[997] Ibid.

[998] Speckhard and Ellenberg, 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles'.

[999] European Parliament, 'Parliament resolution of 4 February 2016 on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called "ISIS/Daesh"' (2016) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0051_EN.pdf> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1000] Bernard Haykel, 'On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action' in Roel Meijr (ed.), *Global Salafism* (Hurst, 2009), pp.35-46.

emerged at the end of the 19th century, in part as a response to western colonial domination of the Middle East and North Africa.[1001] Its anti-colonial stance tried to distil an "authentic" and "true" Islam from the earliest of the prophet's followers, an indigenous cultural essence that presented itself as an antidote to western values spread through colonial domination. Salafi interpretations of gender norms are therefore decisively and deliberately anti-modern in the sense that they defy modernity's logic of the liberal rational subject pursuing individual freedoms through choice—values that characterise western views of gender equality.[1002]

In ISIS' interpretation of Salafi Islam, not unlike in many tribal and conservative societies across the Middle East and North Africa, the individual is suspended in a larger network of relationships, governed by notions of honour and shame that bind individuals into collectives.[1003] Notions of honour and shame govern a sense of self, family and tribe, and proscribe permissive behaviours for men and women. Honourable behaviour amongst ISIS members was meanwhile closely linked to notions of piety and particularly the submission to an extremely narrow interpretation of *Shari'a* law.[1004] Honour is the basis of social status for the individual and the tribe. And while honourable behaviour is demanded from men, and thereby constructs hierarchies amongst men based on more or less honourable behaviour, women are seen as the embodiments of honour, maintained through chastity and other "honourable" female behaviours. Honour codes therefore mandate that male behaviour should protect the honour of the family, often by controlling women.

Regulating how men and women could behave within this moral code, how they could dress, whom they could marry and, most importantly, what constituted piety for men and women was therefore central to how ISIS ruled individuals, households, and communities. The enforcement of strict gender roles was a central part of ISIS rule and the group's state-building project.[1005] Regulating gender—whether through the enforcement of dress codes, the confinement of women within the household or the regulation of marriage or sexual violence—were all intrinsic aspects of how ISIS ruled and controlled populations.

Methodology

The following chapter lays out how this gendered state-building project affected men and women of different sects and ethnicities across ISIS-held areas of northeast Syria. It relies on a literature review, KIIs and data from focus group sessions conducted by RDI. Primary data was subsequently translated into English.

KIIs are quoted at length in the text below. KIIs were conducted in person and via phone by a researcher working on the ground. The security situation in some areas made in-person interviews impossible, and significantly delayed the research. Where such barriers existed, telephone, WhatsApp or Zoom interviews were organised as alternatives. A total of 27 individuals were invited to interviews, and 16 KIIs were eventually conducted. Eight individuals were direct victims of ISIS violence, four were family members of victims, and four worked in women's and human rights organisations. The majority of interview participants were female (12 participants) while four were male. Five research participants came from Deir Ezzor, four from Manbij, three from Raqqa, two from Qamishli and two from Kobane.

[1001] Saba Mahmood, 'Chapter 2: Topography of the Piety movement' in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press), p.61.
[1002] Anne Phillips, 'Gender and Modernity' (2018) 46(6) *Political Theory* <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0090591718757457> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1003] Speckhard and Ellenberg.
[1004] Katherine E. Brown, 'Violence and gender politics in forming the proto-state "Islamic State"' in Swati Parashar and others (eds.), *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2018) <https://academic.oup.com/book/25553?login=false> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1005] Ibid.

Focus group sessions were organised by RDI. A wide variety of topics was discussed in 11 sessions that brought together a total of 87 individuals.

All names of research participants have been changed to pseudonyms in this chapter and other identifiers have been obscured where necessary.

While this research is deliberately intersectional—i.e., it pays particular attention to how gender intersected with other identities, specifically sect and, to some degree, ethnicity—a truly intersectional study would have required a more careful sampling strategy. Such sampling could not be done due to time constraints. Therefore, some of the sections concerning minority groups, arguably the groups that suffered the most under ISIS rule, draw heavily on secondary literature. Because of this suffering and claims of genocide against minorities, specifically northeast Syria's Yazidi and Christian communities, these atrocities are best documented in the literature and therefore lend themselves to a secondary review.

Finally, there were areas of inquiry in this study, notably issues of how boys and girls were affected in gendered terms and other topics, that did not yield significant primary data and were therefore not included in the study.

Sexual & Gender-Based Violence

> The impact of ISIS rule on gender-based, physical and psychological violence in northeast Syria was clear. Women and girls were subjected to sexual assault, rape, torture, and horrific killings because of [ISIS'] narrow view on gender, which strictly defined the roles for women and men. Violence was used as a tool of terror and intimidation to show the strength of ISIS and its control over the territory.[1006]

In areas under ISIS control, severe forms of SGBV were widely practiced against the general population but also within ISIS' organisational structures. Sexual violence particularly targeted women from Yazidi, Shi'a, and other religious minority communities as well as the Sunni wives of fighters from armed groups in conflict with ISIS—including pro-Assad fighters.[1007] Sexual violence perpetrated against these groups was meant to enforce ISIS' dominance over other populations, humiliating them in the process.[1008] However, sexual violence was also commonplace within the organisation itself. An extensive study based on interviews with up to 260 ISIS defectors demonstrated the group's propensity to employ SGBV as an internal mechanism of rule.[1009] Former ISIS members described rapes, notably of both men and women, forced marriages and widespread domestic violence.

This violence also occurred in a broader context of widespread and systematic SGBV perpetrated by different conflict actors fighting in the Syrian conflict. As always, women and girls were the primary targets of this violence. After thoroughly investigating the period between 2011-2017, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic concluded that Syrian government forces and other armed groups employed rape and other forms of SGBV as weapons of war.[1010] During the initial stages of the Syrian conflict, women were incarcerated as part of mass arrests and enforced disappearances, especially if they were

[1006] KII: female, Deir Ezzor.

[1007] Ariel I. Ahram, 'Sexual violence and the making of ISIS' (2018) 57(3) *Survival* <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1047251> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1008] Ibid.

[1009] Speckhard and Ellenberg, 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles'.

[1010] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *"I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic* A/HRC/37/CRP.3 (8 March 2018) <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-37-CRP-3.pdf> accessed 20 July 2023.

considered to be family members of male dissidents. In detention, regime intelligence officers systematically raped women and girls repeatedly and even employed multiple perpetrator rape. As ground offences intensified, government forces and affiliated militias practiced SGBV, such as the rape of women, at checkpoints and during house searches.[1011]

Little data on SGBV against men and boys exists due to the extreme stigmatisation associated with homosexuality in Syria. However, a UNHCR study on sexual violence amongst men and boys within Syria and refugee communities outside the country found that anywhere between 10 and 40% of men and boys had experienced sexual violence.[1012] Many men and boys experienced rectal trauma because of their experiences, leading to pain and incontinence. Like women, men and boys were shamed and ostracised by their communities; in the worst cases, victims were threatened with murder. Some young survivors left school and many men reported that they had trouble finding employment due to poor mental and physical health and marginalisation by their community.

The ways that ISIS practised SGBV were extremely contradictory and in constant flux. These contradictions reveal a core tension within the group's ideology: at the same time as committing widespread sexual atrocities, ISIS also had to uphold its own notion of piety and moral superiority vis-à-vis Muslim and western societies. This often led to contradictions in how SGBV against women and girls manifested itself and how it was perpetrated against different individuals based on their gender and sect.

A woman who was imprisoned by ISIS because her husband was wanted by the group as a "traitor" had to experience these contradictions first-hand:

> They came to our door and announced themselves as [ISIS]. I asked them to wait until I could put my veil on. I tried to wake my husband, but he had fled from a window in our house overlooking an olive grove. ISIS members started taking my kids one-by-one to the next room. They asked me to wear my [*niqab*].
>
> Once I had changed, I entered the room where they held my children. [They] had covered them with blankets and told me that they were better at taking care of our children than me and my husband. After intimidating us, they forced me to go with them and took my two youngest sons away while leaving the rest of my children alone at home. I was forced into a car where a friend of my husband's was waiting—he had clearly confessed against us, most likely under torture, which is what I found out had happened later.
>
> We arrived at the industrial area, and we went down into a cellar. I realised it was the main water tank for the city of Manbij. There, an ISIS leader named Abu Hassan was waiting for us. He grabbed a gun and loaded it, and said: "Welcome, welcome." He was speaking Arabic, in a heavy Aleppo dialect.
>
> The ISIS member from the patrol that arrested me said to him: "This woman, we went to arrest her husband. She helped him escape so we brought her."
>
> [My husband's friend] had stayed in the car, but my children were with me. They were carried by ISIS members. I was crying.
>
> They took me to a cell with about 15 women prisoners: the youngest was about 20 years' old while the oldest was about 70.
>
> There were many [different] charges against them. Some had been charged with fortune-telling and astrology. Some had been charged for smoking and yet others were charged with witchcraft and sorcery. One of them was a wife of an ISIS member, who was

[1011] Ibid.

[1012] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *"We Keep It in Our Heart": Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis* (*Refworld*, October 2017) <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a128e814.html> accessed 20 July 2023.

travelling, and she told him that one of the men came to their house and tried several times to sleep with her, so her ISIS husband imprisoned her. Among the prisoners was also a 35-year-old woman who was accused of witchcraft. She was later killed by ISIS in the village of Dadar in front of a crowd after Friday prayers.

After a while, my children got sick, so I sent them to my in-laws. When I told Abu Hassan about that, he told me that it was better for them, so no one would be with me when he beheaded me.

One day, Abu Hassan came to the women's cell and told me: "I have some good news for you…we captured your husband." This was a great shock to me. I knew that my husband would be killed.

When I got out of prison, ISIS allowed me to see my husband one last time for five minutes. His head was on the ground and his hands were in handcuffs. His body showed signs of torture.

Abu Hassan asked me in front of my husband: "Did anyone hit you? Did anyone assault you? Did anyone hurt you?"

And I told him: "No."[1013]

The woman's story demonstrates the physical and psychological violence women and men experienced, the gendered nature of this violence, and the contradictions that riddled ISIS' administration of SGBV in areas under its control. To begin with, armed ISIS members presented themselves as a moral authority, more capable at raising children than the woman and her husband. This claim itself is born from the conviction that ISIS' way of life, its adherence to extremely strict and narrow interpretation of *Shari'a*, made ISIS members the stewards of the only "true" and "pure" Islam and therefore more fit to raise children.

The interaction also shows how women were made to suffer for their husbands and how the woman's role as a wife made her culpable and therefore subject to legitimate forms of physical and psychological violence in the eyes of ISIS members (such as imprisonment, the removal of her children, and the threat of violence and murder). The story also demonstrates the particularities of in-group and out-group dynamics that played out in gendered ways when it came to violence. The woman, a Sunni Muslim, at least deserved a veneer of righteous moral treatment, according to ISIS' own ideology. This way, Abu Hassan could uphold his—and ISIS'—supposed moral superiority and piety by demonstratively asking her in front of her husband if she was hurt.

The women imprisoned in the same cell who allegedly engaged in astrology and sorcery and were tortured and allegedly murdered for that transgression, did not even deserve this veneer of righteous treatment. Magic, sorcery, astrology and other superstitious practices associated with it are widely practiced in the Middle East and North Africa, even though they are not seen to be permissible in Islam. By allegedly practicing witchcraft, these women became "apostates" according to ISIS' prohibitive definition of who constitutes a Muslim. Therefore, they had to be killed. Witchcraft accusations increasingly became grounds for beheadings and acts of SGBV against women.[1014]

Because ISIS' gender ideology was a form of identity-building, the group's practice of SGBV was broadly, though not consistently, structured by different sanctioned forms of violence against in-group and out-group members. Gender-based violence was therefore also structured by the same notion of *takfir*, explained in the introduction of this report, that allowed ISIS to exclude certain Muslims from society as polytheists, apostates or heretics engaging in an act or belief that is seen as disbelief (*kafr*) in Islam or that brands a group of people as infidels (*kuffar*) from the outset. This is not to say that rapes and torture of Muslim men and women prisoners did not

[1013] KII: female, Manbij.

[1014] Kareem Shaheen, 'ISIS militias behead two Syrian women for witchcraft' *The Guardian* (Beirut, 30 June 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/30/isis-militants-behead-syrian-women-witchcraft> accessed 20 July 2023.

occur—they did and were even widespread—but it highlights the contradictions inherent to a violent organisation that tries to justify its hegemony, at least in part through moral and religious superiority.

This patterned SGBV based on in-group and out-group definitions practiced by ISIS was clearest when it came to minorities. SGBV under ISIS was therefore extremely intersectional and mediated specifically by the sectarian identity of the victims on the receiving end of that violence.

Intersectional SGBV

> All sections of society in areas controlled by ISIS were greatly affected by violence, including individuals of different ages, races, and religious and cultural affiliations. However, religious and ethnic minorities were subjected to even more persecution and discrimination, as minorities were either forced to follow the strict laws of ISIS or leave the area and move to other regions. The religious and cultural properties and institutions belonging to minorities were destroyed.[1015]

The European Council's Genocide Network concluded that 'ISIS perpetrated violence against civilians in Syria and Iraq according to certain patterns based on the perceived affiliation of their victims to ethnic, religious or political groups.'[1016] And it was the Yazidi community that was singled out for the worst atrocities.

Genocide, sexual slavery targeting Yazidis

The Yazidi are a mostly Kurdish-speaking religious group of between 450,000 and 700,000 people that live dispersed between the Middle East, the Caucasus, Russia and western Europe.[1017] Most of the community today lives in northeastern and northwestern Iraq, which is also considered the Yazidis' homeland. Persecuted throughout their history, the Yazidi are today considered one of the most threatened religious groups in the world because of their more recent persecution by ISIS, which has been classified as genocide by the UN.[1018] Although much of the Yazidi were captured in Iraq, most Yazidi women were transported to northeast Syria where they were sold into sexual slavery.

Wherever the Yazidi had been captured, women and men were separated except for pre-pubescent boys (who were allowed to stay with their mothers). Each group was then transferred by bus to temporary holding facilities. Initially, men and boys that were forcibly converted to Islam, after which they became ISIS captives and bound labourers, and transferred to ISIS-held cities (primarily Mosul, Tal Afar and Baaj). Men and boys had to work on construction sites or dug trenches, cleared rubble, and tended cattle. Men were forced to grow their beards and

---

[1015] KII: female, Deir Ezzor.

[1016] EU Genocide Network, 'The prosecution at national level of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)' (July 2017) p.5 <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Partners/Genocide/2017-07_Prosecution-at-national-level-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence_EN.pdf> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1017] There are several estimates regarding the population size of the Yazidis worldwide. One source estimated the community to consist of approximately 400,000-450,000 people including: 200,000 people in Iraq, 80,000-100,000 in Syria, 45,000-50,000 in Armenia, 20,000-25,000 in Georgia, 10,000-15,000 in Russia, and another 45,000-50,000 in western Europe. Other sources put the global number of Yazidis at closer to 700,000 people.
See: Garnik S. Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova, *"The Religion of the Peacock Angel": The Yezidis and their Spirit World* (Routledge 2017); Raya Jalabi, 'Who are the Yazidis and why is Isis hunting them?' *The Guardian* (London, 11 August 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/who-yazidi-isis-iraq-religion-ethnicity-mountains> accessed on 20 July 2023.

[1018] UN News, 'UN human rights panel concludes ISIL is committing genocide against Yazidis' (16 June 2016) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/06/532312-un-human-rights-panel-concludes-isil-committing-genocide-against-yazidis> accessed 20 July 2023.

attend prayer five times a day.[1019] Anyone attempting to escape was executed upon capture. However, by spring 2015, ISIS backtracked on its previous policies and determined that forced conversions of the Yazidi were false and could no longer be accepted.[1020]

When ISIS overran the Yazidi homeland in Iraq's Sinjar province, women and girls were moved to separate holding camps in Mosul and Tal Afar. Although rape of Yazidi women had been widely reported on a smaller scale, no mass rapes occurred at this time, even though hundreds of women and girls were held in each site surrounded by armed men. In this respect, the UN special rapporteur on Syria noted how:

> This serves to emphasise the rigid system and ideology governing ISIS' handling of Yazidi women and girls as chattel, as well as the control it exerted over the majority of its fighters. The sexual violence, including the sexual slavery, being committed against Yazidi women and girls is tightly controlled by ISIS, occurs in a manner prescribed and authorised, and is respectful only of the property rights of those who "own" the women and girls.[1021]

After their capture, women and girls were sold according to prescribed ownership and market regulations. With Yazidi women and girls treated as "spoils of war" (*sabaya*), only ISIS fighters were able to buy, sell and own women and girls, probably to prevent a "resale" back to their families—a transgression that was punishable by death. From the initial holding camps, women and girls were not immediately sold as slaves, but were moved on to several prison locations, like the notorious holding camp near Raqqa in northeast Syria.

A human rights activist who worked with Yazidi victims described the "trade" in the following terms:

> The sale and trade of captive Yazidi women and girls [took place] in Mosul, but the main market—i.e., the market for slaves or captives—was in Raqqa, where Yazidi girls and women were bought and sold for a specific amount of money, or they were given as gifts and treated as slave girls or maids. Yazidi women or "captives" were used only for trade and sex; they did not have any rights.
>
> There were children who were kidnapped by ISIS in 2014, these children were servants of ISIS families. A Yazidi child was not allowed to play football with the children of ISIS, for example, or with the toys of ISIS children, because he [or she] was a servant.
>
> Most of the sales were done through the Saudis in ISIS, who were called the Jazrawis, the Tunisians and the Libyans. These three nationalities were in control of the trade in Yazidis.
>
> Yazidi women became "wives" of ISIS members but could be resold over and over again. Unlike with Muslims, there was no marriage contract for her, no dowry, nothing, because she was a captive. Only by mere words such as "I gave you this captive" or "I sold it to you for a sum of money" would she become his and [then] used either for sexual purposes only or to serve the women of ISIS.[1022]

From these holding camps, women and girls were "auctioned off." The process was systematic: photos were taken, and the women were either sold in markets or electronically via a messenger app with their photos and "slave numbers" serving as identification. Once a Yazidi woman was bought, ISIS fighters had full property rights over the women, giving them the right to sell them on or even to give them away as a gift. However, it was

[1019] UNHRC, *"They came to destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis* A/HRC//32/CRP.2 (15 June 2016) <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/.../A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1020] Ibid.
[1021] Commission of Inquiry, *"I lost my dignity".*
[1022] KII: male, Qamishli.

stipulated that women and girls could not be sold amongst brothers and that before a "resale", they had to complete their menstrual cycles, probably to prevent the transfer of pregnant women.

While being held captive, women, and girls over the age of nine were subjected to 'brutal sexual violence.'[1023] Rape was a daily occurrence for the majority. Rapes led to physical injuries, with women reporting bleeding, cuts and bruises. Sometimes, women and girls were handcuffed or tied to a bed. Gang rape was a common threat to enforce obedience amongst the women. A woman held by a Saudi ISIS fighter in a village near Aleppo reported that:

> [H]e raped me every day that I was with him. He told me that if I did not let him do this thing to me that he would bring four or five men and they would all take turns raping me. I had no choice. I wanted to die.[1024]

Gang rapes were also, in fact, ordered and supervised by fighters against women and girls that tried to escape. Many of the women reported that they were forced to take birth-control pills.

Younger children were bought and sold with their mothers. Girls who reached the age of nine were taken from their mothers and then themselves sold as slaves. Younger children were often used as leverage or punishment against their mothers. One ISIS fighter killed several small children after an escape attempt by a woman. When the mother cried over the death of her children, he raped her and told her to stop crying over the death of her "*kuffar* children."[1025] Children kept with their mothers were mostly aware of the protracted intense violence to which their mothers were subjected; many women described their children repeatedly crying behind the door as their mothers were raped.

Boys over the age of seven, when taken from their mothers, were moved to indoctrination camps run by ISIS instructors. There, boys from the Yazidi community and other minorities were mixed in with Sunni Muslim boys undergoing the same indoctrination training. The programmes consisted of Quranic recitations as well as military training with AK-47s, hand grenades and rocket-propelled grenades. The boys were further forced to watch ISIS propaganda material that included footage of suicide bombings, beheadings, and armed clashes. Training sessions also prepared the boys for the jihad against so-called "unbelievers." When boys performed poorly, they were beaten by their instructors. For the Yazidi boys in the camps, their past was considered to have been completely erased and there was no mention of their original religion or culture. The UN special rapporteur on Syria noted that the objective of these camps was two-fold:

> On a general level, it aims at increasing recruitment, and all children are treated as potential or future recruits regardless of their background. But on a specific level, targeting the Yazidi boys uniquely, it aims at destroying their religious identity as Yazidis and recasting them as followers of Islam as interpreted by ISIS. In this way, Yazidi boys are transferred out of their own community, and through indoctrination and violence, into ISIS.[1026]

Enslavement of Christians

In October 2014, shortly after ISIS' capture of Mosul, ISIS' propaganda magazine *Dabiq* acknowledged that it was giving away specifically Yazidi women and girls 'as spoils of war' to its fighters.[1027] ISIS justified its use of sexual

[1023] Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape' (14 April 2015) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/iraq-isis-escapees-describe-systematic-rape> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1024] Ibid..
[1025] UNHRC, *"They came to destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis* A/HRC//32/CRP.2 (15 June 2016) <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/.../A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1026] UNHRC, *"They came to destroy".*
[1027] ISIS, 'The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour in Dabiq' (2014) 12 *Dabiq*, p.14.

violence and sexual slavery by saying that it was permissible to have sex with non-Muslim slave girls, as well as beating and selling them.[1028] While the *Dabiq* article did not directly refer to Christians, it included an ambiguous sentence pointing to the inconsistencies that ISIS demonstrated towards Christians:

> This large-scale enslavement of *mushrik* [polytheist] families is probably the first since the abandonment of this *Shari'a* law. The only other known case—albeit much smaller—is that of the enslavement of Christian women and children in the Philippines and Nigeria by the *mujahidin* there.[1029]

Ordinarily, the term *mushrikin* (polytheists) was reserved for the Yazidi in ISIS' vocabulary, while Christians would be referred to as one of the "people of the book." However, the paragraph above includes the enslavement of Christians in the Philippines and Nigeria within the *mushrikin* category. The article states directly that the enslavement of Alawi, Druze, Ismaili and Shi'a "apostates" is contested in Islamic jurisprudence. However, this *de jure* ambiguity about the enslavement of Christians was quickly reversed by a document that *de facto* stated that Christian women were being sold as slaves.

A so-called "price list" emerged in November 2014, indicating that Christian women were equally subjected to sexual slavery. The list was authenticated in 2015 by Zainab Bangura, the UN's special representative of the secretary-general for sexual violence in conflict.[1030] The list included prices for Yazidi and Christian women and girls from as young as one year old for $172, and as old as 50 years' old for $75. In a response to the list, the UN special rapporteur wrote: "Atrocious accounts on the abduction and detention of Yazidi, Christian, as well as Turkmen and Shabak women, girls and boys, and reports of savage rapes, are reaching us in an alarming manner," adding that some 1,500 Yazidi and Christian women and girls may have been forced into sexual slavery.[1031]

In the largest attack on Christians in Syria, on 23 February 2015, ISIS captured 35 villages primarily inhabited by Assyrian Christians along the Khabour River in northeast Syria. Although 1,200 families were able to flee to nearby Qamishli and Hasakeh,[1032] ISIS kidnapped about 226 Christian families and 60 individuals, who were then presented to the ISIS-run *Shari'a* Court in nearby al-Shaddadah. The court ruled in accordance with the *dhimmi* pact, requesting the families to pay the *jizya* tax. In reality, however, families remained hostages of ISIS. It took three years, videotaped beheadings of three hostages,[1033] and relentless fundraising by Assyrian priest Mar Afram Athneil to secure the release of the hostages. The average ransom per hostage was $50,000.

Social and Psychological Effects of SGBV

> After the defeat of ISIS, there is still physical and psychological violence. Women and girls are still subjected to discrimination and violence. Therefore, there is a need to educate society about the importance of combatting gender-based violence, encourage the active participation of women in all areas of life, and provide psychological and social support to women and girls who have been subjected to violence. The rule of ISIS greatly affected the

[1028] HRW, 'ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape'.
[1029] *Dabiq*, p.14.
[1030] Doug Bolton, 'Isis "price list" for child slaves confirmed as genuine by UN official Zainab Bangura' *The Independen*t (London, 4 August 2015) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-price-list-for-child-slaves-confirmed-as-genuine-by-un-official-zainab-bangura-10437348.html> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1031] UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 'Iraq: UN Officials Call for Immediate End to Sexual Violence Against Iraqi Minorities' (13 August 2014) <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/iraq-un-officials-call-for-immediate-end-to-sexual-violence-against-iraqi-minorities/> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1032] UNHRC, '12th Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic' A/HRC/33/55 (11 August 2016) <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/33/55> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1033] Ibid.

> mental health of women and girls, and they were subjected to severe psychological trauma and their psychological state was greatly affected.[1034]

SGBV as a weapon of war not only leaves survivors with physical injuries, it also has long-lasting psychological and social effects. In Syria, where a woman's chastity is often linked to family honour, the systematic rape of women breaks up family and community ties that are essential to community resilience. Survivors of rape and potential children born through rape are often ostracised and even expelled from the community. In the worst cases, women are killed by their relatives through so-called "honour killings."[1035] Systematic rape therefore breaks down the very social links that are essential to survival in times of war.

Many of the former wives and children of ISIS members reside in the al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. The camp has a Syrian component, an Iraqi component and an "international annex" where women and children from dozens of countries live. The number of women and children in the annex is now around 8,500, down from a high of 12,000 in 2019. In the Syrian component, there have been significant numbers released back into their communities under a tribal sponsorship programme in which a tribal sheikh guarantees their safety and integration back into society. Tensions exist between the reintegrated families of former fighters and host communities, especially in rural Deir Ezzor.

Marriages, forced marriages and the wives & children of ISIS

> As soon as ISIS members came to the area, they started looking for good girls to marry. The ISIS members were not from Sirrin. They were looking for women, and they used to enter the houses and ask: "Do you have a woman for marriage?" Their dialects were strange and different. Some of them were Chechen.
>
> We, the women and girls, hid. The owner of the house and the male members of the family were talking to them. They were afraid for us, thinking that if one of the men saw us, they would take us away.[1036]

The testimony above indicates that ISIS fighters incessantly sought "wives." From its inception, ISIS used access to heterosexual sex, child marriages, sexual slavery and the general subjugation of women as recruitment tools.[1037] Many recruits were young men from conservative communities where sexuality was highly regulated by marriages that required large dowries. However, high unemployment rates, political turmoil and a confluence of other factors had created a "marriage crisis" in the Middle East and North Africa, whereby young men and women had to significantly delay marriages, and therefore sexuality, for socio-economic reasons.[1038] ISIS' tactic of promoting access to women and sexuality within the permissible bounds of pious Islamic marriage was therefore an extremely successful recruiting tool among young men. Women became "spoils of war" to male fighters and forced marriages were commonplace:[1039]

[1034] KII: female, Deir Ezzor.
[1035] Ariel I. Ahram, 'Sexual violence and the making of ISIS'.

[1036] KII: female, Sirrin.
[1037] Nelly Lahoud, 'Empowerment or Subjugation: A Gendered Analysis of ISIL's Gender Messaging' (UN Women, 2018) <https://iraq.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/06/empowerment-or-subjugation> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1038] Navtej Dhillon, 'The Middle Eastern Marriage Crisis' (Brookings Institute, 11 July 2008) <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-middle-eastern-marriage-crisis/> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1039] Speckhard and Ellenberg.

> I tried to accept reality and cope with it. But all my attempts failed, and I could not adapt to the new situation, and he treated me very badly. He used to treat me with sexual violence and all he wanted was sex. He didn't care about my feelings or anything but satisfying his lust.
>
> In the days after I left the hospital, he treated me cruelly as if I were an animal in a house. He used to come to the house whenever he wanted to satisfy his lust and then he left me. And if he got angry with me for any reason, he would leave me without food or drink for a whole week, then he would feed me only when he wanted to have sex. The way he used to deal with me was as if I was his captive and not a wife, not as a human being or a Muslim. I always wondered if this is Islamic, but it is impossible for Islam to be like this!
>
> Meanwhile, he married a second wife who was an immigrant from the Netherlands. Her name is Samantha. This is all I know about her, and here the problems between me and him began to increase. I began to demand him to be fair and to talk to me since I was living in a prison between four walls.[1040]

And while this use of marriage as an incentive for young men to join ISIS was vitally important throughout the years of ISIS rule, the group also increasingly used marriage to attract women to its so-called "caliphate" as well. To begin with, when ISIS was still a Salafi-jihadi insurgent group, ISIS recruits and members were only men. But building a proto-state required women just as much as men. Increasingly, ISIS has promised permissible and pious sexuality to men and women under the helm of Islamic marriage. ISIS stipulated who could sign a marriage contract (*nikah*), something that could only be issued in the presence of an ISIS official.

Soon, dowries were regulated as well. Minimum dowries were set at $5,000, making marriages a serious long-term investment—ISIS declared that this was intended to protect foreign women who wanted to marry ISIS fighters, since local women had higher expectations regarding dowries.[1041] Foreign women, in fact, were not allowed to live in ISIS-held areas without being married. They had to stay in ISIS guesthouses until a suitable marriage could be arranged.[1042] Locally, through marriage, old kinship ties could be weakened and even severed, and new ones—those that suited ISIS best—could be established in their place. In this way, marriage played an essential role in creating a new society, a new state, the "caliphate" itself, an entity that set itself apart from the society that existed before, through the creation of new social bonds:

> I got married to an ISIS member. He treated me badly, very badly. As for my family, they were good to me. But my ISIS husband deprived me of my family and my relatives. He did not allow me to communicate with them—only every six or seven months.
>
> He changed the way I thought. He said I couldn't leave the house because everyone outside of it was an infidel. After a while, I began to believe him. I saw people as he described them. I was always locked in the house, as if I were in a cage, never going out. When he came, he would tell me what was happening outside. I did not know what was going on outside. For a while, my view about the society outside became his. I thought that everyone outside was an apostate. He was planting hatred in my heart: against society in general but particularly against the people of my country.[1043]

Regulating marriages is a key concern for all states. But in its attempt to build a proto-state, ISIS treated the regulation of social relations, and particularly that of marriage, as an explicit act of state-building. According to one academic study written before the group's downfall:

[1040] KII: female, Tabqa.

[1041] Aysha Navest and others, 'Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria: Agency beyond the Victim versus Activist Paradigm' 32(2) *Anthropology Today* <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-8322.12241> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1042] Speckhard and Ellenberg 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles'.

[1043] KII: female, Tabqa.

> By imposing regulations on marriages, [ISIS] is attempting to add layers of legitimacy by instilling a veneer of religious and state approval to the new families and kin/gender relations created by the regime. The regulations prove to followers that Allah governs their new lives even as they transgress local customs.[1044]

Regulating marriage in this way, especially during the chaos of war, uses God's permission for the project of religious nationalism, binding family and kinship relations to the nation-state. It is a way to link the private lives, connections and loyalties of individuals to the public life of the state via the legitimacy of religion endowed in the proto-state.

While many women were forced into marriages and sexual enslavement, many other women joined willingly. Joining ISIS willingly as a woman is another seeming paradox. Why did women, whether local or foreign, voluntarily submit to an oppressive, patriarchal and often misogynistic gender regime by marrying ISIS fighters and joining their so-called "caliphate?" At least four thousand women, and probably many more, travelled from across the globe to join ISIS.[1045] And many more joined locally as the so-called "brides of ISIS." The vast majority of local and foreign women became wives and mothers, although some joined ISIS' morality police, the *hisba*.[1046]

Like many men, women were drawn by ISIS' claim that the "caliphate" was the only legitimate way to live in the world as a Muslim under *Shari'a* law. ISIS claimed repeatedly through its media that women were 'trying to build an Islamic state that lives and abides by the law of Allah' while 'women's responsibility as Muslims was to become pious wives and mothers; they were fulfilling God's purpose.'[1047] Like men, women were drawn by their anger over Assad's violence and the global Islamophobia that ostracised Muslims in the west and elsewhere.[1048] Online propaganda promised women better, easier, more appropriate lives in religious terms, free housing and a 'life free of discrimination and the constraints and pressures of secular society.'[1049] ISIS propaganda also presented the group as a liberating force for women who already lived in conservative households.

Although Salafism is a highly patriarchal ideology, it can be argued that it is not inherently oppositional to feminism as understood as gender equality. There are, some would say, strong Islamist feminist strands within Salafism that seek a kind of women's liberation through piety rather than the individual, rational choices on which western feminism is often based.[1050] Joining ISIS could therefore be seen as a kind of liberation—even though the reality was often vastly different from the propaganda. It offered women a different kind of freedom and agency to take their lives into their own hands. It gave young women license to defy the authority of their non-ISIS fathers and husbands.[1051]

However, the reality for many ISIS wives was much the same as described above. Life was structured by (often sexual) violence, confinement, and many of the same abuses that local women experienced.

Masculinities

[1044] Brown.
[1045] Speckhard and Ellenberg 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles'.
[1046] Ibid.
[1047] Brown.
[1048] Amanda N. Spencer, 'The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State' (2016) 9(3) *Journal of Strategic Security*, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.3.1549> accessed 20 July 2023.
[1049] Brown.
[1050] Mahmood, 'Topography of the Piety movement'.
[1051] Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, '"Till Martyrdom do us part": Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon' (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, May 2015) <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/till-martyrdom-do-us-part-gender-and-the-isis-phenomenon/> accessed 20 July 2023.

> The rule of ISIS greatly affected concepts of masculinity and femininity, as they imposed their narrow vision of gender on people, and the appropriate roles for men and women were strictly defined. Men were supposed to have strong and violent roles, while women had weak roles under the control of men.[1052]

As is clear from the statement above, ISIS forced its extremely narrow gender norms on both men and women. While many men stood to gain from ISIS' highly patriarchal and misogynistic interpretation of gender relations, by being granted unprecedented power over certain women—and more power over women as a whole—ISIS' interpretation of an idealised masculinity also came at a great cost for many men.

Syria's authoritarian political system and the loss of traditional male identities throughout the war paved the way for ISIS' hypermasculine identity. It is understandable that a domineering authoritarian political system ruled by secret police and the constant threat of violence produced strong male hierarchies with an all-powerful hegemonic masculine authoritarian state at the top. Marginalisation, victimisation, and lack of agency vis-à-vis this state produce certain kinds of subordinate masculine identities for most men. Revolution against a dictator can therefore be interpreted as a revolt of one kind of masculinity against another.

The most extensive study of masculinity in the context of the Syrian conflict found that masculine values are central to the susceptibilities of joining an armed group. By joining an armed group, a 'lost masculine identity' could be reattained in situations in which traditional masculine roles were unattainable for socio-economic reasons, for example.[1053] Research amongst Syrian refugees has also shown that the loss of men's traditional roles as family breadwinners during the war came to be seen as a form of emasculation, which led some men to take up arms in response.[1054] In this sense, there is a strong connection between economic vulnerabilities, male identities and propensities to join armed groups.[1055]

Not unlike other misogynistic anti-feminist movements that have emerged in response to greater equality between the sexes in the past decades, ISIS offered its followers the opportunity to be "true" men able to live a "true" masculinity.[1056] ISIS offered its adherents a place where men and women could live out what was often considered traditional, historical gender roles.[1057] The official masculine ideal as promoted through ISIS' propaganda outlet *Dabiq* was that of a pious Muslim man (according to ISIS' own standards) who was warrior-like and heterosexual; but he was also a husband, father and protector of his community and especially the women therein.[1058] This idealised masculinity condoned and even encouraged violence against women, girls, and boys—as well as men that did not fit this narrow interpretation.

This is ISIS' particular version of what has been termed 'militarised masculinity,'[1059] which demands certain types of violent behaviour from men and boys, and typically brands those that do not want to perform this violence as cowards (or worse). However, ISIS also incorporated the notion of piety as well:

[1052] KII: female, Deir Ezzor.

[1053] Henri Myrttinen and Lana Khattab, '"Most of the men want to leave": Armed groups, displacement and the gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria' (International Alert, July 2017) p.21 < https://www.international-alert.org/publications/most-of-the-men-want-to-leave/f> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1054] Magdalena Suerbaum, 'Defining the Other to Masculinize Oneself: Syrian Men's Negotiations of Masculinity during Displacement in Egypt' (2018) 43(3) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/695303> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1055] Myrttinen and Khattab, p.24

[1056] Lisa Davis, 'Reimagining Justice', p.523.

[1057] Speckhard and Ellenberg, 'ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles'.

[1058] Dyan Mazurana and others, 'Gender Under A Black Flag: ISIL recruitment' (World Peace Foundation, 19 August 2015) <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2015/08/19/gender-under-a-black-flag-isil-recruitment/> accessed 20 July 2023.

[1059] Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (University of California Press, 1993); Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Routledge, 1994).

> Men were afraid for their lives. They were forced to grow beards. They were forced to wear long clothes such as the *jalabiya*. With those long beards, men didn't know how to eat properly anymore. Even at the time of prayer, they were forcing men to pray, even when men did not perform ablutions. "Come on, it's time for prayer, get up to pray," they would say.[1060]

As Brown wrote: 'Performance of heroic brawn is insufficient, however; fighters for [ISIS] must act with correct intentions and the correct belief.'[1061] Again, notions of honour and shame were essential to the construction of masculinities in ISIS-controlled territories. Honour organises individual men into hierarchies of honour based on masculinity. In other words, honour codes result in dominant and inferior types of manhood.[1062] Being able to wield violence more generally, and especially with intent and piety, functioned as a key marker of honour for ISIS and thereby defined a dominant interpretation of what it meant to be a man.

Again, as with ISIS' broader identity and its gendered ideology more specifically, this interpretation of manhood was set up in opposition to ideas of western men and the west's supposed moral decay that ISIS often decried, and which the group claimed resulted in 'bestiality, transgenderism, sodomy, pornography, feminism, and other evils.'[1063] By representing violent men as the protectors of society, this version of militarised masculinity justified male, heterosexual dominance over that society, thereby encouraging the oppression of women, SGM and anyone else that did not conform to ISIS' particular interpretation of masculinity.

Conclusion

ISIS reflected one of the most radical utopian projects of modern times. Its members tried vehemently, using full force and extreme violence, to create a different kind of society, one that had not existed (in ISIS' view) for at least 1,300 years. Under ISIS, "different" meant difference primarily from western liberal, democratic and capitalist societies, but also difference from those Islamic societies that ISIS viewed as morally and religiously corrupt.

As is so often the case in ideological battles between East and West, women's bodies became a civilizational battleground for this radical utopian project.[1064] By restricting, oppressing and exploiting women—or at least *some* women—by defining their role as inferior to men, ISIS claimed to build a kind of society that was forged on more "authentically Islamic" gender relations. As such, it set itself apart from western liberal societies, in which gender equality is based on individual freedoms. But at the same time, ISIS' regressive utopian gender project represents just one of a growing number of anti-feminist movements in the world today that promise men (who feel they have lost their traditional roles) a return to a place of masculine certainty defined by the rule over women. ISIS' gendered project was therefore both a rejection of the west in the context of western neo-colonial projects in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, it was also an inherently global and contemporary project forged as a backlash to growing gender equality around the world over the past half century.

Throughout history, radical utopian projects acted as projects of boundary-making: they defined who and what lay on the inside and outside of the new ideological project. Movements form identities—and in the case of ISIS, even proto-states—through inclusion and exclusion. Under ISIS, those that lay on the outside of these constantly and irregularly redrawn boundaries—Christians, SGM, Shia Muslims, westerners, Yazidis and others—were often killed, tortured and oppressed. They were seen as a kind of pollution that had to be eradicated to create,

[1060] KII: female, Sirrin.
[1061] Brown.
[1062] RW Connell, *Masculinities* (2nd edition, Polity Press, 2005).
[1063] ISIS, 'The Fitrah of Mankind and the Near-Extinction of the Western Woman' (2017) 15 *Dabiq.*
[1064] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992).

in the eyes of ISIS, a pure Islamic society. When outsiders were included in the new society, this inclusion was gendered. It was women who were included, but not as people, rather as commodified bodies, slaves and servants, a form of property that could be sold, bought and traded.

Finally, ISIS also ruled by regulating "permissible" gender relations, like so many other states and religious movements before them. Ruling through gender is efficacious because it inscribes the power of the proto-state through morality on individual bodies, instilling moral codes in people, which lead to self-regulation even where the state is absent. Ruling by gender relations then links this individual form of rule and self-rule to the relations at the household level, by proscribing how husbands treat wives and fathers treat daughters (and sons). Gender therefore legitimises the state and inserts it into everyday interpersonal interactions between individuals.

In all societies, gender norms reflect relations of power.[1065] Therefore, by studying gender in a given society—and specifically through an intersectional lens that reveals how gender interacts with other identities to produce power relations—it is possible to come to a deeper understanding of how power operates more generally. Recognising that gender is integral to power at various levels, and that it was integral specifically to the creation and maintenance of the proto-state that came to be known as the "Islamic State," logically necessitates that this power is also undone at the personal and interpersonal levels. Dismantling ISIS is at least in part a project of rewriting how individual women and men feel about themselves, how they treat their bodies and those of others, and how communities are rebuilt by deregulating what it means to be a woman, a man or a sexual and gendered minority in northeast Syria.

[1065] RW Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1987).

4. POST-ISIS PUBLIC HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOSOCIAL DISTRESS IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

The violence in Syria is not over. While active fighting in the conflict between the Syrian government and opposition groups has mostly subsided in 2023, fighting intermittently continues in northeast Syria between different military actors present there.[1066] But the many deep scars from years of conflict are still visible.

Using a combination of desk reviews, key informant interviews and victims' testimonies, this chapter aims to study the public health and mental health status of northeast Syria's populations in the wake of the violence and atrocities perpetrated by ISIS. It focuses on the direct and indirect impacts on both adults and adolescents whose right to access to equitable, adequate health services has been—and still is partly—jeopardised ever since ISIS first started seizing areas of northeast Syria, and the critical issue of psychological distress as an impact of the immense violence and human rights violations the group left in its wake.

Background

Nearly half of Syria's population remain displaced due to the conflict, including more than 6.6 million refugees and asylum seekers in addition to another 6.7 million people internally displaced throughout the country.[1067] IDPs live mainly in areas outside of government control, which in recent years have divided into three main areas: one controlled by the Autonomous Administration and SDF in northeast Syria, another controlled by HTS in Northwest Syria, and a third, controlled by Turkey and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in areas in the north of Syria. In total, the conflict has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths.[1068] Nine out of 10 Syrians live below the poverty line.[1069]

In particular, the needs for a functioning healthcare system remain enormous. Scarce resources have resulted in significant public health problems across the country. A significant element to this has been the result of deliberate destruction of civilian housing and infrastructure. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has confirmed 602 attacks on at least 350 different health care facilities in Syria since 2011, including 149 in Idlib, 30 in Deir Ezzor, seven in Raqqa and four in Hasakeh. According to PHR data, more than 90% of attacks on healthcare facilities were carried out by the Syrian government and its allies.[1070]

Disparities between government and non-government-held areas prior to the beginning of the anti-ISIS conflict have only become entrenched. By one estimate, for example, the percentage of caesarean sections in northwest Syria has more than doubled since the start of the conflict in 2011. There, the number of healthcare workers—

[1066] Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Exacerbate Humanitarian Crisis' (7 December 2022) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-exacerbate-humanitarian-crisis> accessed 3 August 2023; Lucas Chapman and Ali Ali, 'How Syria's self-administered northeast intends to bring captured foreign Daesh fighters to justice' *Arab News* (30 June 2023) <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2330621/middle-east> accessed 3 August 2023.
[1067] UNOCHA, '2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic' (31 March 2021) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2021-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-march-2021-enar> accessed on 3 April 2023.
[1068] *Reuters*, 'Syrian Observatory says war has killed more than half a million' (London, 12 March 2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN1GO13M> accessed 8 March 2023.
[1069] UN Secretary-General António Guterres, 'As Plight of Syrians Worsens, Hunger Reaches Record High, International Community Must Fully Commit to Ending Decade-Old War, Secretary-General Tells General Assembly' (UN, 30 March 2021) <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20664.doc.htm> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1070] Physicians for Human Rights, 'Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria' (n.d.) <https://syriamap.phr.org/#/en> accessed 3 April 2023.

including doctors, nurses, and midwives—per 10,000 people falls far below the WHO-recommended number of 22, with an average of nine healthcare workers across both (HTS and SNA-controlled) areas of the northwest.[1071]

The "double emergency" induced by the Covid-19 pandemic has only further compounded public health challenges in northeast Syria after years of devastation wrought by ISIS and the wider conflict. Healthcare shortages became increasingly pressing as Covid-19 spread throughout the country and critically overstretched remaining healthcare systems.[1072] Populations in northeast Syria and other non-government-held areas experienced the lack of a unified health sector and faced barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance. Across northeast Syria, as of February 2021, there were only 718 operational beds in Covid-19 facilities, compared to 1,088 beds in community-based treatment centres for handling Covid-19 cases in Aleppo.[1073] The protracted conflict, together with the superimposed burden on health infrastructure and services affected by ISIS, brought the immunisation system in northeast Syria to the verge of breakdown.[1074]

Vaccine coverage in Syria is among the lowest in the world. By early 2022, just over 2.2 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines had been administered:[1075] only 5.1% of the total population had been fully vaccinated, most with two doses, while 10% had received at least one dose of the vaccine.[1076] One WHO official interviewed for this study said that the UN and partners

> "increased the Covid-19 vaccination coverage in the whole country but did not advance the restoration of the national routine immunisation coverage to best protect children from vaccine-preventable diseases in critical and deprived geographical areas."[1077]

Health resources are reportedly most scarce in northeast Syria, where population health needs far exceed the available facilities and personnel. Some 55% of households reportedly have at least one disabled family member.[1078] Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, with a combined population of nearly 1.5 million people, had no functioning hospitals throughout 2021, despite the WHO recommendation of one hospital per 250,000 people.[1079] The most recent reports indicate that this situation persisted in 2022.[1080] In Hasakeh, there is one functioning hospital for a population of 1,127,309: in effect serving roughly five times more people than the number recommended by the WHO. Crucially, high inequality in access to public hospitals across and within governorates was reported before the conflict, especially in the north and northeastern regions, according to provider to population ratio. Relatively small governorates in the west and the south had higher spatial access and less inequality. Testing variability in catchment size showed that even at a 125-kilometre catchment, 65% of the country had

[1071] World Health Organisation (WHO), 'Annual report: Health Sector Syria, 2022' (n.d.) <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/health_sector_syria_annual_report_2022.pdf> accessed 3 August 2023; Sara Basha and others, 'Protracted armed conflict and maternal health: a scoping review of literature and a retrospective analysis of primary data from northwest Syria' (2022) 7 *BMJ Global Health* <https://gh.bmj.com/content/bmjgh/7/8/e008001.full.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023

[1072] KII: male, WHO officer.

[1073] UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic COVID-19 Response Update No.15' (16 February 2021).

[1074] WHO & UNICEF, 'Syrian Arab Republic: WHO and UNICEF estimates of immunisation coverage' (2021).

[1075] Ibid.

[1076] More than three million doses of single-shot COVID-19 vaccines arrived in Syria, through the COVAX facility, at the end of January 2022. See: UNICEF, 'No One is Safe until Everyone is Safe' (1 February 2022) <https://www.unicef.org/syria/stories/no-one-safe-until-everyone-safe> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1077] KII: male, WHO officer.

[1078] UNHCR, Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) Syria, 'Summer 2020 Report Series Disability Overview' (7 April 2021) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-needs-assessment-programme-hnap-i-syria-summer-2020-report> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1079] WHO, 'GHC Guidance: People in Need Calculations' (3 November 2020) <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ghc_pin_guidance.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1080] WHO Health Cluster Türkiye, 'Health Resources and Services Availability Monitoring System (HeRAMS), July-September 2022' (WHO, n.d.).

accessibility below the national average.[1081] Data indicates that in northeast Syria, there were no functioning hospitals in two areas: Raqqa, which has an estimated population of 707,496, and Deir Ezzor, which has a population of 765,352. In the absence of functioning hospitals, most healthcare is provided at primary health centres and mobile clinics.[1082,1083]

Despite the general cessation of all-out conflict in northeast Syria, the legacy of ISIS violence looms large. Tens of thousands of IDPs remain in camps and informal sites, alongside refugees from Iraq and other countries. Ongoing clashes in Deir Ezzor province between multiple parties continue to trigger displacement.[1084] As a result, the risk of further outbreaks of disease should not be underestimated in formerly ISIS-held areas, even though the lack of a surveillance system has been addressed.[1085] Furthermore, MHPSS assessment of human rights violations, counselling and referral services of mental disorders and psychological distress, which many have suffered during the conflict, remain elusive for the local population. Health services have also, in the words of survey respondents, been affected by structural discrimination: specifically, women and girls face a lack of reproductive medical care, while people with physical disabilities face difficulty accessing repurposed buildings, let alone specialised care.

Transitional justice mechanisms are yet to be implemented: individuals who survived ISIS in northeast Syria have yet to begin receiving consistent and substantive reparations. This stands in contrast to Iraq, where a key institutional framework for addressing the legacy of ISIS crimes against Christians, Shabak, Turkmen and Yazidis now stipulates a variety of rights and benefits—including monthly pensions, rehabilitation support and a plot of land for women and girls who survived conflict-related SGBV and children who survived abduction at the hands of ISIS.[1086] The adoption of the law by the Iraqi Council of Representatives in March 2021 represents a watershed moment in efforts to address the legacy of ISIS crimes against Yazidis and other minority groups.

An outbreak of cholera, declared on 10 September 2022, brought further misery; tens of thousands of suspected acute watery diarrhoea cases were reported in all Syrian governorates, but particularly in northeast Syria.[1087] The legacy of system decay, essential infrastructure abandonment and lack of regular supply during the years of ISIS rule forced all partners working on cholera in northeast Syria to respond to the outbreak by investing in health and WASH systems, thereby underpinning their importance as essential services desperately needed by vulnerable children and families. It also revealed how partners were forced into investing in immediate priorities rather than enabling investment to strengthen the broader health system in the mid-term. The devastating earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria on 6 February 2023 also had a significant impact on the cholera response by obstructing access to services, reducing partner capacity and diverting already limited funds. It also negatively affected the mental health of the workforce.

[1081] Mhd Nour Audi and others, 'Healthcare accessibility in pre-conflict Syria: a comparative spatial analysis' (2022) 12 *BMJ Open* <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/12/5/e059210.full.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1082] Ibid.
[1083] UNOCHA, '2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic' (*Reliefweb*, 22 February 2022) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2022-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-february-2022> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1084] UNHCR, 'Thousands fleeing fighting in northeast Syria' (UNHCR, 11 January 2019) <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/thousands-fleeing-fighting-northeast-syria-unhcr> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1085] Ibid.
[1086] IOM and the Directorate for Survivors Affairs, 'Toward Comprehensive Rehabilitation: Mental Health Service Referral System Launched for Genocide Survivors in Iraq' (IOM, 26 March 2023) <https://iraq.iom.int/news/toward-comprehensive-rehabilitation-mental-health-service-referral-system-launched-genocide-survivors-iraq> accessed 5 July 2023.
[1087] Between 25 August 2022 and 15 February 2023, 92,649 suspected cases were reported from all 14 governorates, including 101 associated deaths to date, at a case fatality rate of 0.11%. The most affected governorates to date are Idlib (27,863 cases, 30%), Aleppo (22,123 cases, 23.9%), Deir Ezzor (20,671 cases, 22.3%), and Raqqa (17,578 cases, 19%). See: UNOCHA and others, 'Whole of Syria Cholera Outbreak Situation Report No.13 Issued 28 February 2023' (*Reliefweb*, 28 February 2023) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-cholera-outbreak-situation-report-no-13-issued-28-february-2023> accessed 5 July 2023.

While multiple factors have contributed to the current humanitarian crisis—whether conflict dynamics, geographic inequalities or mismanagement of resources—research indicates that comprehensive sanctions are inhibiting the humanitarian response.[1088] Despite the existence of humanitarian exceptions to sanctions, international NGOs are persistently running into hurdles when trying to implement their projects.[1089]

International donors and aid organisations have attempted to address public health challenges in northeast Syria, including through the northeast Syria NGO Forum, the core coordination body for the humanitarian response that provides support to approximately 40 humanitarian organisations implementing substantial assistance programmes in the region.[1090] International assistance by WHO, UNICEF and USAID helped communities across Deir Ezzor, Hasakeh and Raqqa in rehabilitating health clinics, financing capacity to invest in new cold chain technologies to respond to vaccine-preventable diseases outbreaks such as measles, and combatting the Covid-19 pandemic in northeast Syria.[1091]

Nevertheless, existing evidence demonstrates that insufficient coordination among the international aid community, NGOs and local actors overseeing health systems has greatly impacted population health.

Methodology

The research team sought to assess the health and mental health impacts of the years of ISIS rule and the subsequent anti-ISIS conflict in northeast Syria by highlighting the multiple deprivations that the region has undergone in terms of public health and psychological distress.

The research was conducted in three distinct stages: a desk review; the identification and selection of key informants covering a wide range of stakeholders (including government, UN, NGO, CSO, academic and private sector sources) in the six selected geographic areas; and primary data collection comprising individual and collective interviews of victims and non-victims and KIIs. Data collection and access to target groups were arranged and overseen by the RDI and its partners on the ground.

Interviews questionnaires were drawn in collaboration with RDI in order to elicit direct and indirect responses linked to respondents' experiences of ISIS' impact on health services and mental health. RDI mobilised a national research officer who offered support in identification, selection and interview of key informants, logistics and the actual facilitation of field research. Individual interviews and focus group sessions aimed to gather victims and non-victims' experiences in ISIS-affected areas. Interviews involved both victims and non-victims; national NGO staff involved in supporting/training service providers or community groups in MHPSS; the WHO;

[1088] Grégoire Mallard and others, 'The Humanitarian Gap in the Global Sanctions Regime: Assessing Causes, Effects, and Solutions' (2022) 26 *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organisations* <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02601003> accessed 5 July 2023.

[1089] While in many publications the terms "exceptions" and "exemptions" are used interchangeably, in legal terms there is an important distinction between them. According to the following definition: 'An exemption refers to a provision allowing humanitarian actors to apply for permission to conduct their activities' whereas 'an exception is a provision that carves out legal space for humanitarian actors, activities, or goods within sanctions measures without any prior approval needed.'
See: International Peace Institute, 'Safeguarding Humanitarian Action in Sanctions Regimes' (IPI, June 2019) <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/1906_Sanctions-and-Humanitarian-Action.pdf> accessed 5 July 2023; Kathryn Achilles and Matthew Hemsley, 'Aid in Limbo: Why Syrians deserve support to rebuild their lives' Oxfam and Danish Refugee Council (Oxfam, March 2019) <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620630/bp-syria-recovery-120319-en.pdf> accessed 5 July 2023.

[1090] The forum takes the lead on operational and inter-sectoral coordination, policy and advocacy work, liaison and negotiations with local authorities, and external representation through the Syria coordination architecture as well as with donors and other key stakeholders. Due to the unique arrangements within northeast Syria, the forum is therefore the main body for thematic advocacy on behalf of NGOs on bureaucratic impediments (for example, medical referrals), operational documents required by authorities (for example, registration procedures), relocations of IDPs, Covid-19 restrictions, and other issues impacting the response. See also WHO EWARS, 'Syrian Arab Republic EWARS Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin, Week 19 (8-14 May 2023)' (*Reliefweb*, 6 June 2023) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-ewars-weekly-epidemiological-bulletin-2023-week-19-8-14-may-2023> accessed 5 July 2023.

[1091] UNICEF & GAVI Alliance, 'Solar and Mains Powered Vaccine Refrigerators and Freezers: Industry Consultation' (UNICEF, 17 March 2022) <https://www.unicef.org/supply/media/11611/file/cold-chain-industry-consultation-march-2022.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.

Autonomous Administration departments; and CSO partners. A specific field manual for interviews was used by RDI to facilitate truth-telling and psychosocial support for victims. It was based on: (a) an Informed Consent Protocol used by all enumerators; (b) voluntary participation in the interview process; and (c) trauma sensitive interviewing approaches and techniques.[1092]

Specific MHPSS technical definitions and standards were informed by the following sources: the IASC pyramid of MHPSS interventions[1093] guidelines of the WHO's mhGAP Programme Humanitarian Intervention Guide (mhGAP-HIG),[1094] UNICEF's community-based MHPSS quality standards in humanitarian settings,[1095] and MHPSS Technical Note,[1096] as well as the *Psychosocial Support for Children during Covid-19* manual.[1097] The Impact of Event Scale Revised (IES-r) scoring system was also used for victims' in-depth individual interviews.[1098] Questionnaire design was guided by questionnaire guides for fieldwork made available through the 3rd EU Health Programme (2014-2020).[1099] Victims interview questions were conducted by RDI drawing from the concept of "flashbulb memories,"[1100,] which hypothesises that major events, such as natural tragedies or traumatic events, should be recalled vividly and reliably, and that these events trigger in the subject memories of the main event in the long term, but also memories of other personal circumstances from the time of the event.

Victims' individual interviews (Group 1 respondents) explored the health impact by trauma, violence and deprivations deriving from direct or indirect exposure to ISIS. Individual personal traits, key incidents and mental health and psychological distress details were recorded with an account of personal/family coping strategies. Human rights violations were classified into several categories: confiscation/destruction of property and cultural sites; killing; abduction; detention; arbitrary detention; torture; sexual violence; massacre; forced labour; forced recruitment of soldiers/child soldiers; forced marriage; forced prostitution; human trafficking; forced relocation and displacement; and finally, obstruction of freedom of expression/assembly. The inclusion criteria of Group 1 targeted victims as primary informants, including adolescents.

Table 1: General exploratory questions

1	How has the experience of extreme violence by ISIS affected the health status and mental health of individuals and communities in northeast Syria?

[1092] Sara Ferro Ribeiro & Danaé van der Straten Ponthoz, 'International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict' (UN, March 2017) <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/report/international-protocol-on-the-documentation-and-investigation-of-sexual-violence-in-conflict/International_Protocol_2017_2nd_Edition.pdf> accessed on 5 July 2023.

[1093] Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings' (IASC, 2008) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/Checklist%2520for%2520field%2520use%2520IASC%2520MHPSS.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1094] WHO, 'Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide' (WHO, 2020) <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331901/9789240003910-eng.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1095] UNICEF, 'UNICEF Operation Guidelines: Community-based mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings' (MHN, 2018) <https://www.mhinnovation.net/resources/unicef-operational-guidelines-community-based-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1096] Zeinab Hijazi and others, 'Mental Health and Psychosocial Technical Note' (UNICEF, n.d.) <https://www.unicef.org/media/73726/file/UNICEF-MH-and-PS-Technical-Note-2019.pdf.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1097] Childline & UNICEF, 'Psychosocial Support for Children during COVID-19: A Manual for Parents and Caregivers' (UNICEF, n.d.) <https://www.unicef.org/india/media/3401/file/PSS-COVID19-Manual-ChildLine.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1098] Daniel S. Weiss, 'The Impact of Event Scale: Revised' in John P. Wilson & Catherine So-kum Tang (eds) *Cross-Cultural Assessment of Psychological Trauma and PTSD* (2007) <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-0-387-70990-1_10> accessed on 5 July 2023.

[1099] Stavroula Leka and Aditya Jain , 'EU Compass for Action on Mental Health and Well-Being: Mental Health in the Workplace in Europe' (European Council, 2018) < https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-06/2017_workplace_en_0.pdf> .

[1100] William Hirst and Elizabeth A. Phelps, 'Flashbulb Memories' (2016) 25 *Current Directions in Psychological Science* <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0963721415622487> accessed 5 July 2023; Oliver Luminet & Antonietta Curci (eds.) *Flashbulb Memories: New issues and new perspectives* (Psychology Press, 2009); Sandro Galea and others, 'Psychological sequelae of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City' (2002) 346 *New England Journal of Medicine;* William Hirst and others, 'A ten-year follow-up of a study of memory for the attack of September 11, 2001: Flashbulb memories and memories for flashbulb events' (2015) 144 *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General.*

2	What specific mental health conditions have emerged as a result of exposure to violence, and how have people coped with these conditions?
3	How has access to mental health services been impacted by the conflict, and what challenges have arisen in delivering these services to those in need?
4	How have families and community groups supported individuals coping with mental health conditions, and what impact has this support had on individuals?
5	What are the most effective interventions and treatments for addressing mental health issues in communities in northeast Syria affected by extreme violence?
6	In what ways have cultural and religious beliefs impacted the understanding and treatment of mental health conditions in northeast Syria, and how can these be effectively addressed?
7	How has ISIS rule impacted access to livelihoods and resources for individuals affected by mental health conditions, and what steps can be taken to ensure that these individuals have access to education and employment opportunities?
8	What specific policies and programmes should be implemented to address the mental health needs of individuals and communities impacted by extreme violence in northeast Syria?

Key informants' interviews (Groups 2 respondents) included seven questions related to the impact on public health systems and services and fifteen fluid questions on levels of awareness and access to MHPSS services and referral mechanisms; gaps and barriers to accessing MHPSS services and the special requirements of interventions; preferred modes of receiving information and awareness messages; and finally, roadblocks to improvement and accountability. The inclusion criteria of Group 2 targeted non-victims as knowledgeable secondary informants.

Table 2: KII questions on public health and MHPSS impacts

Public Health	
1	How has the presence of ISIS impacted healthcare infrastructure in northeast Syria?
2	What impact has the displacement of people had on public health outcomes in certain areas (for example, through increased incidence of diseases, or lack of access to essential drugs)?
3	What are the challenges encountered by healthcare providers (workers) in the field of primary healthcare services in areas previously under ISIS control?
4	How has the conflict disrupted the delivery of emergency medical care and referrals, chronic disease management services, and supply of medicines?
5	Have women faced accessibility problems to essential Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child Health (RMNCH) services? (For example, could women be assisted before and during labour and delivery by a health worker? Could women access any emergency obstetric care in case of need?)
6	Has there been a decrease in vaccination coverage or other preventive health measures due to ISIS control in certain areas?
7	What efforts have been made to provide essential health services to address the gaps in public health in previously ISIS-held areas *after* ISIS rule?
MHPSS	
1	What has been your direct experience of ISIS' impact on the health and protection needs of people affected by violence in northeast Syria?
2	What are the key priorities to address through public health and MHPSS interventions in northeast Syria?

3	How do you define psychosocial support needs in northeast Syria after ISIS? (For example, what is the importance of PSS for victims and communities more broadly?)
4	Do existing health and MHPSS projects/interventions in place in northeast Syria reflect a strategic analysis?
5	Do existing health and MHPSS projects/interventions in place in northeast Syria address the actual needs of strengthening the PHC and health system?
6	Do communication initiatives exist to meet ISIS victims' and other groups' specific health and MHPSS awareness?
7	What are the three key public health and MHPSS challenges in terms of victims' support in northeast Syria?
8	What are the most successful MHPSS interventions offered to trauma victims in northeast Syria? What did/does work and why?
9	Are the needs of some victims or potential target groups excluded from MHPSS interventions, or are those needs not met?
10	Do existing MHPSS interventions follow an identified pathway or line of case referral?
11	Do MHPSS capacity-building activities for service providers exist (such as PSS training for doctors, nurses, social and community workers)? Who is in charge of them?
12	Did/do you participate in direct PSS capacity-building? What are the strengths and challenges in MHPSS training approaches, content and monitoring?
13	What interventions should be implemented in the near future under the guidance of the MHPSS Task Forces in Syria? What should be dropped?
14	What roadblocks or potential risks did you anticipate in implementing MHPSS in the near future?
15	What approach or method needs to be in place in order to increase MHPSS awareness in northeast Syria?

The research team conducted ten one-on-one individual interviews with victims and six one-on-one KIIs either in person or online at a site in each selected area. Interviews were carried out in homogenous groups of resident settlements, IDP settlements/camps or among returnee groups, specific persons with disabilities (PWDs), MHPSS groups/associations, and community members to gain in-depth opinions, views and experiences of vulnerable adults and youth.

Important ethical considerations were considered in the survey planning and implementation. The nature of the topic demanded special emphasis on issues of safety and confidentiality because the physical and mental well-being of both respondents and researchers could be at risk if these issues were not adequately addressed. All sources have been anonymised throughout the chapter. Confidentiality of information was also emphasised: all documents and field research materials were treated as confidential and used solely to facilitate analysis.

Findings

The following section outlines the main findings regarding ISIS' impact on public health and MHPSS as well as the resulting response gaps that were identified through interviews conducted in the six selected geographical areas of northeast Syria. Findings are presented through three sections: 1) public health and MHPSS during and after ISIS rule; 2) the human dimension within victims' testimonies; and 3) mental health and psychosocial support. Drawn from victims and informants' own accounts, the conclusion then provides several suggestions to guide a forward-looking process to improve access, coverage and safety in health and MHPSS services within the northeast Syria humanitarian response.

Public health and MHPSS during & after ISIS rule

Conflict is still a dynamic in a purportedly post-conflict context. One of the key challenges for post-conflict stabilisation and recovery in northeast Syria is in recognising and transforming the structures that contributed to the rise of ISIS and the violent conflict to oust the group.

Data and information from the field show that the longer a violent conflict has lasted, the greater the extent to which it transforms the nature of an area's political interactions, economy, and society. This kind of system may become self-perpetuating if conditions particularly important for health status improvement, food security and reconciliation are not addressed. Roadblocks for the rollout of effective interventions remain in the form of security risks, disease outbreaks, attitudes and stigma related to mental health and psychosocial distress, and low funding.

Impacts on the public health system

ISIS' impact on healthcare infrastructure in northeast Syria was profound. During its rule over the region, the group attempted to recast the healthcare system in apposition to "western" modes of healthcare. The group heavily restricted and monitored the work of male and female doctors (and restricted gender mixing between medical staff and/or medical staff and patients) and frequently used healthcare infrastructure for military or repressive purposes.

These impacts were visible across all sectors of care. A protection worker reported, for example, how in several ISIS-held areas:

> Cancer cases that needed follow-up in specialised hospitals, cardiac catheterisation and other heart surgeries were denied any option. [ISIS] also monopolised medicines supply and limited it to specific people who are not specialised in the field of medicines, resulting in a state of drug chaos, and a great shortage of medicines for chronic diseases.[1101]

Another health worker interviewed observed that, while strict restrictions were imposed on any medical case that required treatment outside ISIS-controlled areas:

> Many low-quality drugs were imported due to the absence of health and drug monitoring, which allowed many individuals with little pharmaceutical experience to open pharmacies and sell medicines randomly. This led to many medical complications and injuries due to extremely serious medical errors. An extremely absurd matter that I repeatedly witnessed was the sale of drugs in stores and groceries, especially painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication.[1102]

Many Health Centres (HCs) were converted into military and service headquarters, which made them vulnerable to bombing and destruction once the anti-ISIS conflict escalated after 2014. A WHO MHPSS coordinator stated that:

> Facilities were either destroyed or abandoned and this stopped beneficiaries from accessing health care. The health system collapsed and there was no proper coordination on health delivery even though MHPSS services had no firm footprint.[1103]

In Raqqa, once ISIS' self-proclaimed capital, a project manager for a local Protection/PSS NGO said:

[1101] Ibid.
[1102] KII: male, NGO worker.
[1103] KII: male, WHO MHPSS TWG coordinator.

> [ISIS] had turned a large number [of health facilities] into field hospitals for its members or military headquarters, which negatively affected the healthcare provided to the people. For example, the National Hospital in the city of Raqqa was completely destroyed. The children's hospital in the city was partially destroyed, which led to it being out of service. Rural clinics such as the dispensary in [al-Karama], which used to provide primary care services to the eastern countryside of Raqqa city (from an area extending from al-Hamrat village to the al-Jazra area), stopped providing services due to shortages of skilled workers and the unavailability of medicines.[1104]

Meanwhile, an NGO health worker observed how "before ISIS withdrew from many areas, they booby-trapped most of the service facilities that they used to [use] as strongholds, including health centres."[1105] After ISIS' withdrawal, specialised teams were able to either dismantle explosives or detonate them following evacuations of neighbouring residential areas. Even then, the NGO employee added, ISIS also converted some HCs into detention facilities and that by "changing the structure of the buildings (converting many rooms into single cells), [they] made them unsuitable to be used as [HCs]" without subsequent rehabilitation.[1106]

Although the research team gathered evidence of extended support to rehabilitate hospitals in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor and to equip primary HCs throughout northeast Syria with critical supplies.[1107] The period of ISIS rule and anti-ISIS conflict led to destroyed critical services, including access to electricity and water, which limited opportunities local communities' ability to earn a living in the post-ISIS phase. According to the WHO MHPSS coordinator:

> When ISIS [rule] ended in western Deir Ezzor governorate […] in February 2017, communities faced the challenge of rebuilding and earning [at the same time], so often their health problems could not be attended to.[1108]

In one local example of the long-term impacts of destruction, after ISIS sabotaged four wells used by livestock farmers in western Deir Ezzor, a member of the local Agriculture Committee reported that even after ISIS' withdrawal the "local General Administration of Agriculture and the Department of Animal Welfare were aware of the problem but did not have the material capacity to rehabilitate these wells."[1109]

These issues had concerning health implications. In Raqqa, the prevalence of sewage and sanitation issues, already reported in February 2019 by REACH, continued to rise, prompting warnings that they 'may have hazardous health effects for residents, especially in the warmer summer months when the breeding and presence of vectors for disease tends to be greater'[1110]—a predictive statement at the time, given today's evidence of a causal link between deficient sanitation/water supplies and the cholera outbreak that followed.

Displacements have also created challenges. In the post-ISIS phase, between December 2018 and March 2019, large numbers of IDPs and refugees from the last ISIS foothold in southeastern Deir Ezzor (around Baghouz) were relocated to camps and large informal sites in northeast Syria. Military operations by Turkey and the Turkey-

[1104] KII: male, protection/PSS project manager for local NGO in Raqqa.
[1105] KII: female, protection/PSS employee of health NGO in northeast Syria.
[1106] KII: male, protection/PSS employee of health NGO in northeast Syria.
[1107] Critical supplies provided to primary HCs included, for example, oxygen concentrators to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. See: WHO, 'Syrian Arab Republic: EWARS Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin, 2021 Week 48 (28 November - 4 December)' (WHO, December 2021) <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/syria/EWARS-bulletin_Syria_21W48.pdf?ua=1> accessed 5 July 2023.
[1108] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1109] KII: male (anonymised).
[1110] REACH, 'Situation Overview: Area-Based Assessment of Ar-Raqqa City, June 2019' (IMPACT Initiatives, 2019) <https://www.impact-repository.org/document/reach/cf847da2/reach_syr_situationoverview_raqqa_aba_june2019.pdf> accessed 5 July 2023.

backed SNA started in October 2019 as a result, residents of camps in Ain Issa and Mabrouka were transferred away from the border area to Abu Khashab and Mahmoudliy respectively;[1111] other camps have also seen significant change. The Abu Khashab and Manbij East New camps were reported to be without permanent medical facilities.

Similarly, medical staff fleeing persecution, conflict-related violence, or ISIS' prohibitive, suffocating healthcare policies (explored in the next section) left the country during and after ISIS rule, aggravating an existent brain drain from the region. The WHO PSS officer summarised the systemic impact that ISIS rule continues to have on formerly ISIS-held areas, stating that in northeast Syria now "there is no certification for existing professionals, no professional bodies to accredit [new] staff" and no quality controls carried out by the Syrian government.[1112]

However, barriers to healthcare persist to date in all areas, with the high cost of care and a lack of medicines representing the most reported barriers.[1113] In a hospital in Deir Ezzor, neonatal survival rates are still compromised by the lack of sterilisation equipment and scanty provision of therapeutic oxygen as reported at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.[1114] Also, in part due to large-scale conflict-related damage and destruction, access and movement restrictions for both residents and humanitarian actors have persisted in several urban or peri-urban areas of Deir Ezzor, Manbij and Raqqa. For example, interviews in seventeen Development and Coordination Units (DCUs) reported that just half or less than half (26-50%) of households with a family member in need of treatment had been able to receive that treatment in the two weeks prior to data collection.

The issues of access to the appropriate levels of care, "continuum of care," insufficient attention to persons with disability (PWDs), and continuity of essential drugs supply all deserve attention. And restrictions on would-be patients' freedom of movement are not new.[1115]

Major concerns and cross-cutting themes affect all aspects and sectors of health care in northeast Syria. Some need to be tackled in an urgent and sustained manner through an agenda for sector quality improvement, something suggested by both WHO and Health Cluster members.[1116] Many of these factors are not specific to the health sector; they are also broader problems facing communities in the northeast—but still, these problems have knock-on effects that can further stymie efforts to develop a healthcare system in northeast Syria that is committed to equity, quality and integrity with a special focus on public health and primary healthcare.

Important steps were taken by the Autonomous Administration of northeast Syria to establish institutions in all service fields, including the health sector, since ISIS' collapse. For example, evidence suggests that the Autonomous Administration established or reopened as many health facilities as possible (including the Raqqa Children's Hospital) in coordination with international NGOs and local associations in an attempt to bridge service gaps; the research team meanwhile gathered accounts of significant strides made by local authorities and NGOs in assisting formerly ISIS-held communities with activities including rubble removal, restoration of water and electricity networks, sewage system rehabilitation, community and cultural centre refurbishment, and school renovations. A key challenge for the Autonomous Administration and partners is to effectively utilise

[1111] REACH, 'Camp and Informal Site Profiles – Overview, northeast Syria, October 2019' (Reliefweb, 31 October 2019) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/camp-and-informal-site-profiles-northeast-syria-october-2019> accessed 5 July 2023.
[1112] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1113] Ibid.
[1114] Ibid.
[1115] Key informants indicated that several women in formerly ISIS-held areas died during delivery or in post-partum (often at the borders with areas outside ISIS control) due to the failure to provide necessary emergency obstetric care and the inability to receive medical assistance without the approval of higher authorities and the presence of a guarantor. A local protection worker detailed how these rules were aimed at "ensuring the patient's return within a certain time frame, otherwise facing severe punishments, and sometimes even execution." KII: male, Protection/PSS worker for local NGO.
[1116] WHO, '2023 Prioritisation Health Sector Syria Coordination' (WHO presentation, 2 March 2023) <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1UJ1W2CT5fYHnRkQi3S6D348voo14UEjD/edit#slide=id.p5> accessed on 3 April 2023; UNOCHA, 'Humanitarian Update Syrian Arab Republic - Issue 11 | April 2023' (Reliefweb, 1 June 2023) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-update-syrian-arab-republic-issue-11-april-2023> accessed 5 July 2023.

all resources that are anyway scarce—both in the public and private sector (whether for-profit or voluntary)—and to strategically focus efforts on the delivery of a public health programme, particularly for underprivileged and under-served areas previously under ISIS control.

The international community has taken steps to address both specific and more systemic challenges. The EU Regional Trust Fund[1117]—otherwise known as the Madad Fund—was established in 2014 to support children from both Syria and local communities and improve their access to basic services such as education, healthcare, water and sanitation, and protection. Partners started a collaborative approach by facilitating consultations between residents and local government representatives to identify priorities, leading to increased service delivery and infrastructure projects that address community needs.[1118] According to one key informant:

> Establishing primary health care services in areas with limited health infrastructure, providing equipment to isolation facilities, and promoting effective infection prevention and control practices would have been impossible without donors recognising the relevance of community-based risk education and involvement.[1119]

However, underfunding may jeopardise progress made so far. To date, alarmingly, donors have given a little over 11% of the $5.41 billion requested by the UN to adequately assist Syrians in 2023.[1120]

Despite the steps already taken by the Autonomous Administration and international partners, community members and officials report the lack of a rational health system structure and corollary services that could ensure equitable access and coverage in several areas.[1121]

Impacts on health providers

Key challenges were experienced by all health providers in delivering essential health care services in areas under ISIS control, something that several key informants discussed during interviews.

Firstly, a protection manager in Raqqa observed how the migration and displacement of many health personnel affected the status of health services in northeast Syria. With cultural norms dictating that female (and prohibitively not male) doctors provide services to women, the resulting shortages of health workers led to service gaps. There were also reportedly no specialised female doctors in several key areas such as internal medicine, cardiology, orthopaedics or ENT.[1122]

Under ISIS, healthcare workers were forced to surrender other hospital work and "were transformed into a different type of '[ISIS] healthcare workers,' changing uniforms, attitudes and habits."[1123] Job titles, descriptions and duties changed. Midwives' jobs were maintained but heavily scrutinised and not supported,[1124] and women faced great difficulties in accessing reproductive health services that led to severe limitations to women's rights to those services because of the restrictions imposed by ISIS on women's freedom of movement—restrictions that also applied to nurses and midwives.

[1117] European Commission, 'EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (n.d.) <https://trustfund-syria-region.ec.europa.eu/index_en> accessed 5 July 2023.
[1118] USAID, 'Syria: Country Profile' (8 August 2022) <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/USAID_Syria_Country_Profile_2022.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1119] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer
[1120] UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan 2023' (FTS, n.d.) <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1114/summary> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1121] Multiple KIIs: WHO, government, NGO officials.
[1122] KII: male, child protection/PSS project manager, Raqqa
[1123] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1124] KII: female, PSS/GBV specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria.

Male health care workers faced different challenges: male gynaecologists reported that their profession was suddenly restricted only to females, in line with ISIS' ideology and its strict policies on avoiding mixing between genders, and men were prohibited from providing even emergency obstetric services in life-threatening situations. "In the event of an emergency delivery, if there was no [guardian] accompanying the patient […] no one could provide assistance, even by transporting her to the medical point, for fear of punishment."[1125]

This very real fear of retributions by ISIS among service providers—with cases of health workers killed in both Syria and Iraq—only compounded challenges. According to one key informant:

> Some health workers experienced a state of fear for their personal safety in case they refused to work under [ISIS'] laws and supervision. Some were forced to work in [ISIS] hospitals and cure the wounded, which prompted many medical personnel to risk their lives and try to escape outside areas under [ISIS] control.
>
> I personally know of […] a paramedic and an assistant surgeon who faced *qasas* punishments for refusing to cooperate and trying to escape.[1126]

Impacts on health outcomes

Because of the ongoing lack of security in northeast Syria, access to healthcare is still limited throughout the region. People are often forced to travel long distances just to access healthcare. Informants reported that health outcomes are therefore impacted by the decreased availability of health services, blocked or restricted access to health facilities, or changes in affected populations' attitudes towards seeking healthcare.[1127] These findings are consistent with several reports from medical organisations and health workers in Syria stating that the lack of access to healthcare remains a key public need and a key factor in local morbidity and mortality rates.[1128]

Critical to this narrative is the breakdown of routine immunisation systems and maternal and neonatal health services. Under ISIS, strict regulations limited patients' ability to seek treatment outside ISIS-controlled areas, while the displacement of a significant number of doctors and nurses and drugs shortages only made matters worse. The rapid decline in routine immunisation coverage has been a cause of serious concerns in recent years in Syria, particularly in previously ISIS-controlled areas. Coverage plummeted in ISIS-controlled areas due to the politicisation of the healthcare system, antagonism towards "western" models of medicine, and almost non-existent health planning; immunisation campaigns either "decreased or stopped completely."[1129] Although Covid-19 presented health workers with a profoundly challenging opportunity to redevelop a post-ISIS immunisation infrastructure, it is still a high priority, in the words of one WHO officer, "to protect children from vaccine-preventable diseases [such as measles] in critical and deprived geographical areas."[1130]

Mental health disorders and psychosocial distress have gained attention in the post-ISIS period. The systemic nature of specific morbidity reported by key informants is nowadays characterised by high rates of PTSD,

---

[1125] Ibid.
[1126] KII: male, protection/PSS project manager for local NGO in Raqqa.
[1127] KII: male, WHO MHPSS Working Group coordinator; KII: female, PSS specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria.
[1128] Marc Gelkopf and others, 'Mental health medication and service utilization before, during and after war: a nested case-control study of exposed and non-exposed general population, "at risk", and severely mentally ill cohorts' (2016) 25 *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci*; UNICEF, 'Lack of access to medical care in Syria is putting children's lives at risk' (UNICEF, 15 January 2019) <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/lack-of-access-to-medical-care-in-syria-is-putting-childrens-lives-at-risk/> accessed 5 July 2023; Ziyad Ben Taleb and others, 'Syria: health in a country undergoing tragic transition' (2014) 60 *Int J Public Health*; SAMS, 'Impacts of attacks on healthcare in Syria - Syrian Arab Republic' (Reliefweb, 19 October 2018) <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/impacts-attac ks-healthcare-syria. Accessed 8 Jan 2020> accessed 5 July 2023; Aula Abbara and others, 'The effect of the conflict on Syria's health system and human resources for health' (2015) 16 *J World Health Popul*; Mohamed Elamein and others, 'Attacks against health care in Syria, 2015–16: results from a real-time reporting tool' (2017) 390 *Lancet*.
[1129] KII: male, protection/PSS project manager for local NGO in Raqqa.
[1130] KII: male, WHO officer.

depression and anxiety, a lack of supply of psychotropic medications and a lack of referral facilities for specialised care.[1131] In addition, the lack of services in certain locations, the non-reporting of cases due to insufficient knowledge among healthcare workers and, as one specialist interviewed observed, "the difficulty in managing referral pathways," are only compounding post-ISIS health sector hardships.[1132]

The magnitude of the impact on children and adolescent health is revealed by individual interviews among victims. Interviews uncovered a recognition of the link between mental health and the ability of a child to participate in school, and the beneficial psychosocial role that school attendance can provide. The expansion of schooling improves not only household income and welfare, it also supports mental health in children affected by conflict.[1133] However, the WHO officer stressed that "participatory approaches such as psychoeducation and group interventions for youth are lacking" at present, adding that a "dramatic rise in psychosocial support needs for children and adolescents in [northeast Syria] is being compounded by a lack of skills and resources in both the health and education sectors."[1134]

When looking at MHPSS interventions as part of the public health sector crisis, referral and case management options for severe cases depict a grim picture. At the Autonomous Administration's Ministry of Health, there is no mental health unit reportedly in charge of referral and admission at secondary levels of care, where serious cases demand attention and specialised management. All MHPSS services lie within the PHC system: one mental health unit is available in Raqqa in addition to two beds in a general field hospital and al-Hol camp. The WHO officer described this situation as "catastrophic," and "compounded by a lack of staff, stigma and huge shortage of psychotropic medications."[1135]

All informants agreed, however, that access issues were a result of service gaps, operational challenges and community dynamics rather than deliberate acts of exclusion. A protection/PSS worker for an NGO stated that:

> No victims or groups are excluded; however, interventions are limited in proportion to the existing numbers, and the excluded cases are those who have distanced themselves due to a low level of awareness. Some may consider [mental healthcare] a sensitive and shameful topic, leading to fear of stigmatisation.[1136]

The human dimension: The cases of victims & survivors of ISIS violence

In northeast Syria, the aftermath of conflict has created significant psychosocial challenges and widespread trauma experienced at individual, family, community and societal levels. During interviews with victims in northeast Syria, the research team uncovered pervasive experiences of PTSD throughout local society.

PTSD was first introduced to psychiatric nomenclature in 1978 by the WHO with the publication of the International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision, Clinical Modification (ICD-9-CM),[1137] which documented the cross-cultural recognition of typical symptomatic response to exposure to traumatic life events.

There are several ways to measure and analyse trauma and conditions emanating from experiences of trauma. However, the Impact of Event Scale Revised (IES-r) scoring system was used in victims' in-depth individual

[1131] KII: female, PSS/GBV specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria. Morbidity refers to having a disease or a symptom of disease, or to the amount of disease within a population.
[1132] Ibid.
[1133] KI: male, WHO MHPSS officer; KII: female, PSS/GBV specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria; and others.
[1134] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1135] Ibid.
[1136] KII: male, protection/PSS employee with health NGO in northeast Syria.
[1137] WHO, *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders* (Geneva, 1992).

interviews. [1138] Since the Kessler-10 questionnaire predominantly includes symptoms of depression and the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire consists of 40 questions[1139] (considered too time-consuming in a fieldwork setting), the research team instead selected the IES-r as a simple but powerful self-reporting measure for assessing the magnitude of symptomatic responses to a specific traumatic life event.[1140] It measures responses between a scoring range of 0 to 88. During the course of research, respondents were asked to identify a specific stressful life event and then indicate how much they were distressed or bothered during the past seven days by each "difficulty" listed.[1141] Table 3 sets out the characteristics of the three different scoring brackets.

Table 3: The IES-r scoring system

Category	Score	Characteristics
1	24 or more	PTSD is a clinical concern. Those with scores over 24 who do not have full PTSD will have partial PTSD or at least some of the symptoms.
2	33 or more	This represents the best cut-off for a probable diagnosis of PTSD.[1142]
3	37 or more	This is high enough to suppress the functioning of an individual's immune system (even 10 years after an impact event).[1143]

Major depressive symptoms were not measured, although technical and validated instruments for this do exist, such as the eight-item module from the Patient Health Questionnaire.[1144] Generalised anxiety is also measured through the two-item Generalised Anxiety Disorder scale.[1145] Finally, in the analysis there was no attempt to look at comparisons among pairs or sub-groups, defined by patterns of PTSD symptoms over time.

Qualitative data for this chapter was obtained through interviews conducted in Kobane, Hasakeh, Manbij, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Out of the 10 victims interviewed, five were females and five were males, with an age range of 17 years' old to 50 years' old. All victims were residents in the survey area at the time of the interview. However, more than half reported that they had been displaced at least once during the period of ISIS rule.

Female symptom reporters shared a secondary report of children affected by trauma (because they witnessed terror attacks, killings, abductions or beatings, for example).

With respect to socio-economic status, the symptom reporters were mainly heads of households (widows, married women or male heads of households) who had completed primary-level education. One respondent was a secondary school graduate.

[1138] Weiss, 'The Impact of Event Scale'.
[1139] Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, 'Harvard Trauma Questionnaire' (2022) <https://hprt-cambridge.org/screening/harvard-trauma-questionnaire> accessed 3 April 2023; Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, 'Handout: Harvard trauma questionnaire' (Post-Traumatic Integration EU, n.d.) <https://onlinematerial.posttraumatic-integration.eu/modules/document/file.php/PTIP111/Handout-M1S3A1_EN.pdf> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1140] The IES-r is a 22-item self-reporting measure for *DSM-IV* (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – version 4) that assesses subjective distress caused by traumatic events. It is a revised version of the older versions of the tool and has not been updated to match the *DSM-5*, so does not include items to fully assess negative alterations in cognition and mood, for instance.
[1141] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (American Psychiatric Pub., 2013).
[1142] Mark Creamer and others, 'Psychometric properties of the Impact of Event Scale – Revised' (2002) 41 *Behaviour Research and Therapy*.
[1143] Noriyuki Kawamura and others, 'Suppression of Cellular Immunity in Men with a Past History of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (2001) 158 *American Journal of Psychiatry*.
[1144] Robert L. Spitzer and others, 'Validation and Utility of a Self-Report Version of PRIME-MD: The PHQ Primary Care Study (1999) 282 *JAMA* <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.282.18.1737> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1145] Robert L. Spitzer and others, 'A brief measure for assessing generalised anxiety disorder: The GAD-7' (2006) 166 *Arch Intern Med.* <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/410326> accessed 3 April 2023.

Each individual interviewee accepted to undergo the short IES-r questionnaire at the end of an in-depth interview, answering a series of 22 questions exploring the three areas of intrusion, avoidance and hyperarousal. Table 4 summarises the respondents' characteristics from this process.[1146]

Table 4: Individual interview respondents' characteristics

#	Location	Level of experience	Sex	DOB	Civil status	Profession	IES-r score	Main violations
5	Kobane	Direct	F	2006	Single	Unemployed	65	Killing, massacre
11	Manbij	Direct	M	2000	Married	Daily worker	54	Massacre
12	Manbij	Relative of victim	F	1984	Widow	Housewife	50	Killing
32	Hasakeh	Direct	M	1985	Married	Teacher	67	Massacre
40	Deir Ezzor	Eyewitness	M	1967	Married	Farmer	60	Torture, forced relocation/displacement
41	Kobane/Tabqa	Direct	F	1997	Single	Housewife	77	Torture, forced marriage, SGBV
57	Kobane	Relative of victim	F	1973	Widow	Housewife	56	Killing, massacre
92	Raqqa	Direct	F	1973	Married	Unemployed	57	Denial of freedom of expression
95	Raqqa	Direct	M	1992	Married	Tailor	71	Arbitrary detention, torture
195	Deir Ezzor	Direct	M	1990	Married	Unemployed	78	Torture, forced relocation/displacement

Three key findings emerge from analysis of the cases.

Firstly, the interview process uncovered evidence of consolidated signs of PTSD in all selected individual interviews according to the IES-r scores. However, a nuanced characterisation of PTSD trajectory over time should be more reflective of PTSD symptomatology than simple diagnostic status at one point in time. All IES-r scores belonged to category 3, with scores of 37 or more, therefore illustrating the nexus between a prolonged status of mental suffering and possible severe impact on physical health (even 10 years after the impact event). Even when considering recall bias or emotional reinforcement as confounders, low-intensity psychological interventions that tackle depression, anxiety, problem-solving skills, and resilience in adults as part of behavioural interventions might be inadequate in re-establishing a sense of balance.

Secondly, specific symptom profiles emerged following exposure to trauma and loss. These profiles are associated with distinct types of traumatic experiences, the degree of closeness to the person lost, the amount of social support perceived and gender. These results have implications for identifying distressed sub-groups and informing interventions in accordance with the patient's particular symptom profile.

Thirdly, rather than being characterised by symptoms specific to a diagnostic category, respondents were marked by highly intense emotional distress. Elevated inflammation has been repeatedly observed in PTSD and may drive the development of both psychiatric symptoms and physical comorbidities.

Individual interviews were characterised by the typical core of PTSD, which includes a distressing oscillation between intrusion and avoidance. Intrusion may include nightmares, unbidden visual images of the trauma or its aftermath while awake, intrusive thoughts about aspects of the traumatic event and *sequelae*, or self-conceptions. In most victim interviews, avoidance was typified by deliberate efforts to not think about the event, not talk about the event, and avoid reminders of the event. Another commonly observed characteristic was the attempt to push specific memories and recollections of the event or its aftermath out of mind by overworking

[1146] According to the trauma-sensitive interview protocol applied by the research team, participants are identified by name initials only.

or employing other strategies designed to divert attention or so exhaust someone that s/he is temporarily untouched by the intrusive thoughts. One such strategy, increasing smoking, was reported in male subjects, while no reports of drugs or alcohol use were evident.

In addition to frank avoidance, there was evidence across all individual interviews and geographical areas of "emotional numbing" which several authors identify as a not-uncommon sequel to exposure to a traumatic life event.[1147] In all case analysis, there is empirical evidence supporting three of these four phenomena. Feelings of shame and, in one case, self-destructive behaviour were reported. Severe distress was associated with difficulties in performing household duties (all women interviewed), working or studying (two men), and caring for family (three women) but not with difficulties in performing social activities.[1148]

The following sub-sections deal with several categories emerging from trauma suffered by individual respondents: loss of physical health, income and home, or disability; sustaining indirect but close experiences of violence; repeated exposure to trauma, by phases; PTSD and comorbidity; displacement (single and multiple); severe trauma resulting from experiences of targeted mass killings; and multiple traumas experienced through multiple, consecutive rights violations.

Loss of physical health, income & home, or disability

Loss of physical health, income and home, or disability were associated in all interviews, to varying degrees, with reported psychological distress; however, they were more articulated in cases 11 and 57. Respondents described factors that contributed to mental health difficulties after a terrorist attack (such as fear, loss or trauma) and types of mental health conditions that can arise after a terrorist attack (such as severe PTSD, anxiety disorders and/or depression). One woman from Kobane described the constant burden of her trauma:

> Wherever I turn around, I remember my husband at harvest time and how he used to prepare himself and head out into the fields. These days, my burden is heavy. I became both a mother and a father to my orphaned children, who always feel inferior and hurt over the loss of their father, no matter what you do to try and make them feel otherwise. Sometimes, I genuinely feel as if I have regressed psychologically. When I feel down, I feel as if I could kill myself.[1149]

This case suggests that a significant number of individuals experience persistently distressing grief symptoms after the loss of a loved one—in her case, after the death of a beloved husband. Such testimony is a case of prolonged grief disorder (PGD), as a maladaptive reaction to loss marked by separation distress, feelings of emptiness and difficulties in moving on over a long period of time. Evidence suggests that losing someone from a violent cause, for example through homicide, suicide or an accident, is associated with an elevated risk of both PGD and PTSD.[1150]

[1147] Anushka Pai and others, 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the DSM-5: Controversy, Change, and Conceptual Considerations' (2017) 13 *Behavioural Sciences* <10.3390/bs7010007> accessed 3 April 2023; Mardi J. Horowitz, *Adult Personality Growth in Psychotherapy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, June 2016); Melanie A. Greenberg, 'Cognitive Processing of Traumas: The role of Intrusive Thoughts and Reappraisals' (1995) 25 *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1995.tb02618.x> accessed 3 April 2023.

[1148] Questions have consistently been raised regarding PTSD symptom exaggeration in specific population groups (such as veterans) due to the relationship between PTSD and either disability payments or other forms of compensation. It was not possible to rule out such a bias during the data collection phase, leading to high IES-r scores.

[1149] Individual testimony #57.

[1150] P.A. Boelen and others, 'Cognitive-behavioral variables mediate the impact of violent loss on post-loss psychopathology' (2015) 7 *Psychol Trauma*. <10.1037/tra0000018> accessed 3 April 2023.

Irrespective of a specialist's uptake of the case, the victim's condition did not show signs of remarkable improvement. Her testimony also pointed to attempts at "quick fix" methods by local service providers due to a lack of staff and/or huge workloads:

> I visited a psychiatrist […] at the Red Crescent several times. She prescribed me sedatives because I couldn't sleep, but they didn't do anything to improve my condition. That's why I decided [to see] another psychiatrist who asked me to stop taking that medicine, so I did.[1151]

Also, of note here is the fact that the severity of trauma and disability deserves attention. Compared to the general population, persons with disabilities (PWDs) are at increased risk of poor mental health and functional impairment. PWDs with mental health issues and disorders are among the most vulnerable and socially excluded citizens, who are often overlooked and excluded from socio-economic activities and from exercising their fundamental human rights. Recent studies on psychological distress in PWDs show a significant proportion that will likely experience mild-to-moderate psychological distress associated with pathological worry, rumination and facets of mindfulness.[1152,1153]

In cases of trauma impacting both physical and mental health, respondents indicated that over time they reported "feeling detached" and experiencing a "loss of interest." In general, if these symptoms are pervasive, they may limit the individual's social contacts and hence the perception of social support from others, including family members.

The following case of a young worker from Manbij, illustrative of the association between trauma, disability and functional impairment, indicates that symptom severity may increase when no effective or functional family network is available to process such stressful events.

> The accident occurred on 10 October 2016, when I heard a very loud explosion and went to look for my family and relatives. I saw my uncles' bodies; there was blood everywhere. Among the victims was my 20-year-old brother. I tried to help him and tried starting the car, but I couldn't. I went back to the site of the explosion to find my mother and my other brother, [who were] also injured. I was trying to pull them out of the [rubble], when the second explosion took place. Then I was injured.
>
> Later, [I was] rushed to Manbij hospital and then transferred to one of the hospitals in Qamishli. My eyes were badly injured. I lost my eyesight after the operation. After that, I travelled to Damascus, stayed there for four months, and visited doctor after doctor, but none of them gave me any hope.
>
> My mother, both brothers and all my uncles were killed in the explosion; my father, sister and brother-in-law were injured. I was in total shock afterwards. I kept silent for a long time and could not speak from the shock. Then I started crying so hard. I couldn't do anything other than cry for my family.
>
> After that, I started to isolate myself from people and stay alone. People's voices became so annoying to me. My isolation made me think over and over about my family and why this happened to me. I was 17 years' old when it happened, and now I suffer from a lot of psychological problems because I lost my vision. I still die of fear anytime I hear a loud sound, like the sound of thunder, and I feel panicked and immediately go back to the explosion. I still

[1151] Individual testimony #57.
[1152] Alan Maddock and others, 'Rates and correlates of psychological distress and PTSD among persons with physical disabilities in Cambodia' (2023) 22 *International Journal for Equity in Health* <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-01842-5> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1153] Robyn Lewis Brown, 'Psychological Distress and the Intersection of Gender and Physical Disability: Considering Gender and Disability-Related Risk Factors' (2014) 71 *Sex Roles* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0385-5> accessed 3 April 2023.

see my family in my dreams constantly and have detailed nightmares about the explosion time and time again.

I cannot work because of my injury and disability. I began to hate everything around me and no longer trusted anyone. I feel that I have reached the point of madness. Sometimes I laugh at myself. I try to escape mentally from all sounds and thoughts, but with no results. I take tranquilizers so that I can fall asleep, smoke a lot and get angry over the smallest thing.

I can't get over my pain and my loss. I lost my values and my dignity in the prime of my youth, to become a beggar who just wants to die every single day.[1154]

Sustaining indirect but close experiences of violence

The extent and severity of trauma may also be recorded in people who sustain indirect but close experiences of violence perpetrated by ISIS. In this case, the type of loss (for example, death versus enforced disappearance) did not have any effect on PTSD class categorisation, something possibly attributable to the fact that relatives of disappeared persons and bereaved individuals—in the following case, the brother of the respondent—may not differ from each other with regard to their mental health responses to similar events.[1155] Evidence regarding the differences between the mental health responses of relatives of disappeared persons or bereaved individuals is, however, still inconclusive.

In the case that follows, a man from Raqqa recounted how his nephew was detained by ISIS because of his involvement in the "illegal" tobacco trade, deemed so after ISIS prohibited smoking and trading in related goods. The man's nephew later disappeared and was not found. His brother's two other sons were also arrested and beheaded within the space of 48 hours as an act of "retribution," a form of indirect punishment often meted out by ISIS.

The most affected was my brother [H.], the father of the three victims, because those who were beheaded after being accused of being spies were his only [remaining] sons. He lost his mind after and he no longer realised what was happening around him.

After a while, ISIS came back to harass us again, this time by forcing [H.'s] daughters [S. and T.] to marry ISIS members. In 2016, two patrols came to our house with male and female *hisba* officers, and they arrested the two girls. [T.] was married off to a Tunisian ISIS member, and [S.] to a young man from Raqqa city who also belonged to ISIS. My brother's family tried to leave, and […] I prayed for them to arrive safely, waiting all day without hearing any news from them. [We later learned that] they were shot [at] and forced to go back, and the next day they died in a mine explosion.

One of my relatives living in Turkey suggested we send my brother [H.] to Turkey for treatment with a well-known professional doctor with positive recommendations. I started preparing his papers and passport and collecting money to send him there. His doctor in Turkey told me that he suffers from "retrograde amnesia." My brother couldn't remember anything before starting the treatment except his daughter [S.'s] name, but after a long period of time he began to remember his family members such as his oldest son and his wife.

ISIS forced people to attend religious courses. Teachers in particular were forced to undergo [repentance] courses. I went to one of those courses to avoid punishment like my relatives. We witnessed a lot of massacres, beheadings [or] people having their hands cut off daily at the roundabout.

[1154] Individual testimony #11.

[1155] Carina Heeke and others, 'When hope and grief intersect: rates and risks of prolonged grief disorder among bereaved individuals and relatives of disappeared persons in Colombia' (2015) 174 *Journal of Affective Disorders* <10.1016/j.jad.2014.10.038> accessed 3 April 2023.

> I started to go out less and less to avoid witnessing these scenes and felt no interest in anything.[1156]

Another case depicts similar mental health outcomes. One woman recalled how her husband witnessed a public execution by beheading in front of the local mosque, after which he broke down and some villagers took him home:

> Afterwards, he started to become ill. He lost his speech after witnessing the retribution incident. He was transferred to Manbij hospital, and later to Damascus, for treatment. The doctors told us that he had a severe nervous breakdown and we should take him home. They said: "He is at the mercy of God." For months, he lived exclusively on liquids for food.
>
> I didn't attend the retribution incident, but since that time and until this point, when I hear the words *Allahu Akbar* [God is great] I feel terrified. I cannot forget the place of the crime. We are still suffering now from anxiety and panic. Even now, you see, while I'm talking about it, I feel shivers through my body because all the victims who had been executed that day were our relatives; they had agricultural land and used to herd their livestock near our place. We are like brothers and sisters of one family here in the village, so the impact on my husband was extreme. This series of incidents had a very big impact on everyone—men, youth and children.
>
> What made matters worse was the fact that my husband was the only breadwinner. Our lives were stable and he never suffered from any disease. But after the incident, we sold our car and our livestock to provide treatment for my husband, and even then, his health hasn't improved. We lost a lot of money and now my son and I are breeding the cattle we have left.[1157]

Repeated exposure to trauma

Repeated exposure to trauma increases the risk of severe PTSD and other common forms of mental distress in a well-established causal relationship. Furthermore, the nature of ISIS rule and the anti-ISIS conflict—and what both mean to affected individuals through, for example, a sense of persistent injustice—might be instrumental in determining mental health responses.

One male victim from Hasakeh recounted to the research team how he witnessed an explosion in a local wedding hall in 2016 while his family were celebrating a neighbours' wedding. "I had amnesia after the incident," he said, "why is why today I don't remember any details from before the explosion."[1158]

The man's wife recalled how her husband was rushed to the hospital and medicated but, because his case was critical, he was eventually taken for treatment in the KRI. He had sustained head trauma and had shrapnel lodged in his head. The man remained comatose for 40 days. He recounted how trauma emerged after that:

> A year later, I started to have [flashbacks] about that day. My memory [...] has become volatile and my whole life was turned upside down in one moment. I also suffered from sudden fainting for two years afterwards.

[1156] Individual testimony #95.
[1157] Individual testimony #12.
[1158] Individual testimony #32.

> Our living conditions have been seriously affected, as I was the only breadwinner for the family. My wife supported me and stood by my side to help me get over my misery; she helped me to improve my memory and to feel better psychologically and emotionally.
>
> Schools were closed, and people stopped sending their children to school for fear of similar explosions. I want to migrate as soon as I can, but my financial situation stops me from doing that. I was a teacher, and I had a shop before my injury, but I lost everything.[1159]

The victim's wife added that she too had suffered severe mental distress:

> I was pregnant at the time of the explosion. Now I'm mentally exhausted and emotionally burdened. I have a phobia of gatherings and crowded places, and I stopped going to weddings and celebrations as well, for fear of explosions. I've been suffering from disturbing nightmares until now.[1160]

PTSD & comorbidity

Individuals reporting a loss of physical health showed a higher level of symptoms of psychological distress, a finding consistent with the epidemiological literature on the relationship between physical symptoms and mental symptoms. In fact, PTSD is commonly comorbid with a range of physical conditions, some of which can be highly disabling. There is a body of evidence that demonstrates significant associations between life-threatening illnesses and cancer, digestive disorders and neurological conditions. Significant associations emerge between psychological trauma and musculoskeletal and neurological conditions.[1161]

The following case of a woman in Raqqa demonstrates how the violence of ISIS may have had such an impact. ISIS tried to arrest her for not sufficiently covering her face while in a car:

> They insulted me and cursed me with horrible words, and they arrested my husband as a result. He stayed in detention for a while. Then they released him but forced him to join a *Shari'a* course. After this incident, I no longer left the house for fear of arrest. This was the situation for all women in the city.[1162]

It would not be the only traumatic incident the woman suffered. What happened to her son had a deep impact on her mental health:

> In 2016, my son [who did not study in an ISIS school] was about 13 years' old. One day, he was joking with his friend, and he unknowingly uttered words insulting [God] that were considered blasphemous. One of the people present reported him to ISIS, and they arrested [him] as a result.
>
> He was detained for about a month, but I no longer knew anything about him. We asked every detention facility and *hisba* centre to find out where he was, but to no avail. After a while, I was told that somebody I don't know had smuggled my son to Turkey, and not long ago, I received a voice message from him. I don't know where he is. I no longer recognise or even remember his voice.

[1159] Ibid.
[1160] Wife of individual testimony #32.
[1161] Jordana L. Sommer and others, 'Understanding the association between posttraumatic stress disorder characteristics and physical health conditions: A population-based study' (2019) 126 *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2019.109776> accessed 3 April 2023.
[1162] Individual testimony #92.

> At that time, I witnessed [executions] committed by ISIS […] against people who were accused of the same charge as my son [blasphemy]. My health deteriorated over my disappeared son, about whom I don't know anything.
>
> As a result of my son's detention, I became gravely sick, because of the constant fear and anxiety. My mental state deteriorated. I became paralysed and got […] multiple sclerosis.
>
> Because of the travel ban imposed by ISIS, I could not travel to Damascus for treatment. Recently, I went to Qamishli city to receive care and afterwards I was referred to Damascus. The doctors and therapists in Damascus told me that my health condition is hopeless, and that I have permanent paralysis and multiple sclerosis, both of which are difficult to treat.
>
> Pain and sorrow became part of me. I cry all the time. On top of it all, my husband left me and married another woman.[1163]

At this point, the victim stopped giving additional information. Her caregiver, who accompanied her to the interview, continued:

> Her situation is awful. She is the mother of five children and is now alone. She cannot move properly since she is paralysed. A younger child helps her. I help her in my free time. Her son [A.] was killed in 2016, but in her condition, she cannot bear the truth. We even let a random person record a voice clip and send it to her, pretending he is her son. All her relatives know [A.] was arrested […] and died, but we don't know [when or] where. We were all living in a state of terror and now hide the truth from her—to give her some hope to hang on to life.[1164]

Displacement

Another specific risk category includes displaced individuals, with displaced children or families particularly vulnerable. The loss of community cohesion and continuing feelings of insecurity and internal conflict after displacement and/or return may create a general vulnerability to mental disorders in the community.

For example, a woman from Kobane recounted how:

> Our life as a family was good and stable before the massacre and the killing of my parents. When ISIS attacked Kobane in 2014, we went to Turkey as refugees. We were displaced and our situation worsened. We stayed for periods of time out in the open. After the liberation of Kobane, we returned to our city and our house. We resumed our life and repaired and fixed our house because it was severely damaged, like other houses across the city.
>
> Several months later, on 25 June 2015, the massacre took place. It was in the month of Ramadan. Suddenly, a car exploded at the border crossing with Turkey. Our house is near the crossing. We knew that ISIS had entered the city. My father and uncle, who would later also be killed, went to the border gate to find out what was happening. My father came running towards us to tell us to hide inside the house. He was unarmed, and ISIS members were standing far away and shot him. My mother had just prepared milk for my nine-month-old brother. She left him in my arms and ran to my father. I stood at the door of the house and saw my mother trying to pull my father, but she couldn't. She left him to come back later, but ISIS shot her [as well]. My uncle took me into the house, and I took my siblings to the room and locked the door on them. I went to my father and mother, who were still alive [lying] two metres apart. My mother held my hand, but she told me to go back to my siblings.

[1163] Individual testimony #92.
[1164] Caregiver to individual testimony #92.

We were all deeply affected and damaged by the pain we experienced—my uncle, all of us, and the city. It was a great ordeal. We suffered a lot and continue [to suffer].[1165]

Severe trauma from targeted mass killings

A few case studies from interviews shed light on individual experiences of protracted, severe trauma after witnessing deliberately targeted mass killings of members of specific ethno-sectarian groups that were perpetrated by ISIS.

The following testimony refers to the mass killing of members of the al-Shaitat tribe, during which ISIS executed several hundred tribal members during its summer 2014 advance through Deir Ezzor province.[1166] The man recalled his and his family members' trauma:

> When the conflict with [ISIS] broke out, as they infiltrated the village threatening to slaughter the young, in front of their older relatives, I was among the first [of my tribe] to engage [them].
>
> The battle lasted for about 10 days. Subsequently, we found ourselves besieged from all directions, without enough weapons and only a small number of fighters. [ISIS'] forces included fighters from various Arab and foreign countries, encompassing nearly 50 different nationalities. They ordered all the residents to evacuate the village for a period of one or two months, and to surrender all weapons.
>
> Afterward, people returned to their homes, only to witness a wave of raids, arrests and brutal massacres. My family and I were displaced to [another] city […] where we faced daily raids and were pursued relentlessly—not just me and my family, but every individual from the al-Shaitat tribe became a target for [ISIS]. They committed the most horrific massacres, and afterwards we discovered mass graves in some of the villages affiliated with ISIS.[1167]

The man described how his family was targeted by ISIS, and the impacts that these atrocities had on his mental health:

> ISIS arrested my four children and took them to Iraq, and we've had no information about them even until now. I received news that they were taken to Iraq, while other reports suggest they were returned to Syria. There are even rumours that they were brutally slaughtered in the city of Albu Kamal [on the Syrian-Iraqi border].
>
> My siblings, relatives and cousins searched extensively for my children among the bodies and mass graves.
>
> […]
>
> My children never leave my thoughts. They are always on my mind, and I vividly imagine how they were killed or slaughtered. I've experienced nightmares and dreams since the day they were taken. Their mother and I suffer immensely; we go through profound pain and suffer from the constant stress, anxiety and depression. Since 2014, we have been trying to forget them and accept the idea that they died, but we have not been able to accept it until now.[1168]

[1165] Individual testimony #5.

[1166] *Al Akhbar English,* 'Mass grave of 230 tribespeople found in Syria's Deir Ezzor: monitoring group' (Beirut, 18 December 2014) <https://web.archive.org/web/20141218190542/http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/mass-grave-230-tribespeople-found-syria%E2%80%99s-deir-ezzor-monitoring-group> accessed 5 July 2023; *Al Jazeera English*, 'Islamic State group "executes 700" in Syria (Qatar, 17 August 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/8/17/islamic-state-group-executes-700-in-syria> accessed 5 July 2023.

[1167] Individual testimony #40.

[1168] Ibid.

While the dismay for his children's loss is attributable to the uncertainty of their fate and the circumstances surrounding their alleged death, the man still asserted his right to justice:

> Nobody can understand the sorrow, grief and pain I've gone through since losing my four children at the hands of [ISIS]. The overwhelming emotions and the desire for retribution are still in my heart, as you feel a profound sense of injustice. However, it is important to seek justice through legal and peaceful means; resorting to violence will only further perpetuate the cycle of [violence and] harm.[1169]

Even so, he questioned current policies regarding ISIS fighters and called for robust transitional justice mechanisms to account for the crimes perpetrated by ISIS:

> Why have they not been held accountable and brought to trial until now? Every day, a portion of [ISIS fighters or ISIS-affiliated individuals] are released and they cross the borders freely to Turkey and return to their home countries. This is an unprecedented situation. We demand that the UN, human rights organisations and the International Criminal Court address this matter, restore our rights and hold them accountable. They came in the name of religion, but religion is innocent of their actions. We insist on their prosecution as well as the accountability of the countries that supported them.[1170]

There are countless victims and survivors with similar stories. ISIS also executed hundreds of tribesmen in Iraq in October 2014, killing around 335 members of the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe in Anbar's Ramadi district.[1171] The group also targeted ethnic and religious minorities, as well as anyone it deemed to be in opposition to its hardline ideology, during its rule in northeast Syria and neighbouring Iraq. This testimony supports a 2020 study based on 220 in-depth interviews with captured ISIS fighters, defectors and relatives,[1172] in that it documents how ISIS perpetrated gross abuses and violations of international humanitarian law—including collective punishment and ethnic cleansing—in a systematic way that has led to deliberate community-based traumas.[1173] The survivor's calls to reclaim justice and accountability meanwhile add a strong voice to the current debate on transitional justice in northeast Syria.[1174]

Severity of multiple traumas & multiple violations

PTSD symptom severity generally diminishes over time. However, in northeast Syria there are cases where multiple traumas associated with multiple violations of human rights have been experienced consecutively over time by the same individuals.

While recognising traumatised individuals' adaptive capacities, research underscores the continued psychiatric and medical morbidity associated with extreme traumatisation. A failure to expect resilience and adaptive capacities stigmatises survivors by labelling them as irretrievably damaged at the social level. Sometimes,

---

[1169] Ibid.
[1170] Ibid.
[1171] Mat Wolf, 'The Tribe That Won't Stop Killing ISIS' *Daily Beast* (12 October 2015) <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-tribe-that-wont-stop-killing-isis> accessed 5 July 2023; *Al Arabiya News*, 'Iraq says over 300 tribe members killed by ISIS' (3 November 2014) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/11/03/Iraq-says-322-tribe-members-killed> accessed 5 July 2023.
[1172] Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, 'ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners' (2020) 13 *Journal of Strategic Security* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907414> accessed 5 July 2023.
[1173] UNHRC, *"They Came to Destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis* (15 June 2016), p. 26(c) <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf> accessed on 5 July 2023.
[1174] Chris Bosley and others, 'Can Syrians Who Left ISIS Be reintegrated in Their Communities?' (United States Institute of Peace, 21 October 2020) <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/can-syrians-who-left-isis-be-reintegrated-their-communities> accessed on 5 July 2023.

conversely, a traumatised individual may either deny or hide the long-term consequences of exposure to multiple traumas, which may result in reduced standards of care.

The following case depicts the various combinations of traumatic incidents and human rights violations over time. A series of clustered incidents started with a local dispute between a victim's father and a foreign ISIS fighter:

> At night, a patrol came to our house and arrested my father, following a complaint filed by [the foreign fighter] against my father on charges of being a Kharijite and killing ISIS members.[1175] My father disappeared for more than a month. We didn't know anything about him. We could not even ask about him; all we knew was that he had been sentenced to [death].
>
> During that time, three women working in the women's hisba came to our house sent by [the foreign fighter] and clearly told us that one of us had to marry a British foreign fighter who worked under […] a high-ranking ISIS member, or they would execute my father. My sister was too young, so I decided to sacrifice myself to save my father from retribution. Fear of [ISIS] filled my heart and mind. I was experiencing a devastating psychological state, as killing people was a normal thing for them.
>
> [Once I agreed], an armed group brought my father to the house only to show us that he was still alive. We were under heavy security throughout the engagement period until the marriage contract [was signed] in the *Shari'a* court. Then they finally let my father go. My days were full of fear, terror, discomfort and anxiety.[1176]

The woman's agony, however, had only begun. She recounted how on the first night after the marriage:

> I was convulsed and terrified. I would not let him approach me, but he forced me. I could not help myself. He threatened me and told me, "No one can help you whatever you do." After an hour I was rushed to the hospital, where I stayed for one day [because of a haemorrhage]. He treated me very badly, even days after I was discharged from the hospital. All he cared about was satisfying himself, as if he had enslaved me or that I was an animal.
>
> Shortly thereafter, he married for the second time. He accused me of talking to strangers even though he had the key and he used to lock the front-door whenever he went out. I was about to explode. At the beginning of his second marriage, I became pregnant with twins. When he was getting angry over any trivial reason, he hit me with whatever was in his hand. My body was always covered with bruises and wounds. Not a day passed when I was not beaten.
>
> During that period, I was forbidden to associate with or visit people, [even] my family. I could see them barely twice every year, and when he was going out, he would accompany me to some of his [ISIS foreign fighters] friends' houses to sit with their wives. But I did not recognise their languages or understand what they were talking about.
>
> I gave birth in an ISIS maternity hospital because it was free. After a short period of time, I moved with him to [another] city, and all connections with my family were completely cut off. He began to take advantage of the fact that I knew nobody in the new place […] and [had] nowhere to go to. The beating and humiliation became more frequent. I tried to escape more than once, but my attempts failed. Later, we moved to the countryside, where he married again.
>
> My young son [J.] was injured by shrapnel in the head. He is still suffering from the injury until now. Occasionally, he needs expensive treatment, and my financial situation

[1175] *Kharijite* means *renegade* and comes from the Arabic word meaning "*those who left.*" It refers to a group of Muslims who were initially followers of the fourth caliph of Islam, Ali Bin Abi Talib, a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).

[1176] Individual testimony #41.

> doesn't allow me to get treatment for him. My children aren't recognised now, they have no origin, no family, and no civil registration. They are only known by the fact that their father is [name withheld]. My poor children are outcasts.
>
> After some time, we moved to [another] area, which was our last destination. The battles began, so he joined to fight and left me in the so-called guesthouses, which are like collective homes for the women and children of ISIS. Then I learned that he had died. During those difficult days, we reached a stage where we dug our graves with our own hands. ISIS fighters forced us to dig our graves and live inside them. They told us there was no hope of getting out and that it was forbidden for us to try to escape. We—my children and I—stayed [hidden] inside that grave.[1177]

Even then, the family's ordeal was not over:

> After a short period of time, we were transferred to al-Hol camp. Throughout the three-year period [we spent there], I managed to communicate with [my family] once, seven months after my arrival in al-Hol camp. I left the camp under the sponsorship of a sheikh, mediated by the Public Relations Office of the Autonomous Administration. I returned to my family's house, but my suffering only increased after my return, because my family forced me to marry an old man who promised that the children would be registered under his name.[1178]

The old man died not long after they married, leaving her children once more unregistered. Until now, the woman has trouble providing for the family, and although she has a high school diploma, she has been rejected when applying for jobs. The years living under ISIS left a deep physical and psychological impression on her:

> These were profoundly tragic years: my life was defined by terror, fear and anxiety. I didn't have the opportunity to live a decent life like all young women of my generation—only to be a victim. What would my destiny be, what would happen to me, and what is the sin I committed? What would the fate of my children be, what does society want from me, and when would my tragedy end?
>
> Everybody now links me to that era and treats me as if I belong to ISIS. I am rejected by every party, including the [Autonomous] Administration, but most of all [by] all the people who still follow the ideas and beliefs of ISIS. I am rejected by Arabs and non-Arabs wherever I go. My children and I are victims of this society, and I believe that the future of my children will be worse than what they are living now. My financial situation is very bad. I live on the good deeds of charitable people who help me because they know that I am raising orphans.
>
> My tragedy accompanies me, day and night. During the day, I face society and my family, seeing my children sleeping next to me, thinking about them all the time. At night, I get nightmares about the heinous acts that were practiced on my body and my femininity.[1179]

Clearly, mental health and psychosocial support should be considered as vital and ongoing adaptation processes to adverse and traumatic events, some of which are profound and extreme.

Mental health & psychosocial support

ISIS' prolonged presence has had direct impacts on all areas of northeast Syria, and these effects appear clearly in society through a range of mental health and distress symptoms. The direct impact of ISIS violence on the population was described by all KIIs as "shocking." For example, the protection/PSS worker in Raqqa said:

> It really is shocking to see, the huge number of people I meet during my workday suffering

[1177] Ibid.
[1178] Ibid.
[1179] Ibid.

> from PTSD, because of ISIS forcing families to attend field executions.[1180]

Most of the children who witnessed executions suffer from psychological trauma. Urinary incontinence because of the fear they were exposed to, during battles or other forms of violence, is now reportedly widespread. Women were also subjected to severe violence by ISIS.

And yet, despite many attempts to mitigate the severity of these effects, limited or no progress was reported during research. For example, a healthcare worker for an NGO in northeast Syria reported that:

> The psychological aspect does not yet receive the required attention: this may be due to the difficulty of counting cases in all areas and measuring the extent of [their] impact. We need to acknowledge that psychological damage is not limited to [an individual], but extends to their family, their community, and the environment as well.[1181]

A MHPSS strategy?

There is no conclusive evidence as of whether MHPSS interventions in northeast Syria are guided by an effective strategic analysis. On the one hand, the WHO indicates projects are implemented in line with the analysis of needs found in the 2022-23 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO). However, due to the emergency nature of the context, the health system pillars have not been implemented as intended.

According to the WHO officer, "projects are in line with strategic goals as generated from the Health Working Group" and "different assessments have been […] recommending strategic goals which NGOs utilise."[1182]

On the other hand, there is a perception that, as a specialist observed:

> Most of the current projects promote primary health care. Psychological departments rely on non-specialised psychological support, which doesn't lead to effective and meaningful treatments, because most of the initial effects have turned into advanced disorders. Non-specialised interventions cannot develop adequate long-term solutions and treatment plans.[1183]

Similarly, the Raqqa-based healthcare worker added:

> Most of these projects are short-term and depend on the availability of financial support. They are not enough to have any [meaningful] psychological impact, whether for individuals or communities.[1184]

Other informants reported that current projects do not address actual needs to strengthen integrated primary healthcare. While the first stage for a plan to integrate mental health into primary healthcare would be to carry out an analysis of the preparedness of a local healthcare system, several informants reported that the integration of MPHSS into primary healthcare should be a collaborative process requiring the engagement of all stakeholders—including primary healthcare, mental healthcare specialists, caregivers and service users, and

[1180] KII: male, protection/PSS project manager for local NGO in Raqqa.
[1181] KII: female, PSS/GBV specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria.
[1182] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1183] KII: female, PSS/GBV specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria.
[1184] KII: male, protection/PSS project manager for local NGO in Raqqa.

agencies—that ultimately produces far-reaching, coordinated, realistic and practical decisions, with all parties invested in the groundwork. Unfortunately, the lack of integrated care, which is key to advancing both primary healthcare and MHPSS side by side, meant that "some [partners] focus on primary health services and ignore the mental health aspect" while "others focus on the psychological aspect over [attention to] physical health."[1185]

Coordination across the board remains an area in need of urgent improvement. A WHO representative pointed out that:

> A cross-border platform for MHPSS service delivery exists and the MHPSS Working Group is effective in discussing the in-depth analysis of local needs. However, the acute need in [northeast Syria] is to re-build services considering that there is no MHPSS department at [Ministry of Health] level, which implies a structural loophole—no governance nor strategic planning for the time being, but only *ad hoc* operations.[1186]

Key mental health priorities

There is an ongoing disagreement on the relative importance of different risk and protective factors when looking at health outcomes.[1187]

Firstly, mental disorders are shaped by various social, economic and physical environments operating at different stages of life, and the situation is no different in northeast Syria. Risk factors for many common mental disorders are heavily associated with social inequalities. The poor and disadvantaged in northeast Syria suffered disproportionately, but those in the middle of the social gradient were also affected. As mental health disorders are fundamentally linked to several other physical health conditions, ISIS heavily influenced the social determinants in areas they controlled, with broad impact on inequalities across age groups (in terms of access to health services, schooling and livelihoods). As one informant said: "[ISIS] influenced the social determinants of mental health" as well.[1188]

ISIS' impact on mental health started emerging once severely distressed individuals started narrating their stories and receiving initial support. The PSS officer at an international NGO said:

> It was communication with beneficiaries, and the simultaneous provision of psychological and social support services, that allowed for [the discovery] that the percentage of cases of GBV increased, which caused a negative impact on the psychological well-being of the survivors.[1189]

Secondly, tools for assessing the psychological needs of those affected by ISIS encompass referral reports for existing MHPSS services, tribal assessments for problem management, community surveys to measure the severity of psychological distress, and reports that are shared by service providers in northeast Syria's MHPSS-TWG and WHO fora. Importantly, informants point to one critical shortcoming:

[1185] KII: female, NGO worker.
[1186] Ibid.
[1187] W.A. Tol and others, 'Mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings'.
[1188] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1189] KII: female, senior PSS officer for international NGO in northeast Syria.

> Until now, services provided in northeast Syria have not been able to cover most of the mental health and general health needs, and there are still gaps in terms of the type of health services available and the sites that are covered.[1190]

There is also evidence that quality of MHPSS interventions still falls short of adequate quality standards. Barriers to integrated care lie in the different reporting requirements among providers, digital systems, challenges in collaboration, bureaucracy, and variability in opening hours.[1191] Not only is delivery fragmented by NGOs' outpatient clinics, prescription drugs and other behavioural interventions, but informants' views—as seen in victims' case reports—indicated the questionable effectiveness of MHPSS services unsupported by clinical evidence. In fact, in terms of treating severe psychological distress and depression, the service landscape was clinically equivalent to there being no treatment at all.[1192]

WHO officials acknowledge the geographical and social limitations when it comes to access to MHPSS services:

> WHO is working [around the clock] to prepare operational interventions in northeast Syria by supporting community cohesion and several NGO projects. It remains clear that WHO access is linked to the availability and capacity of NGO partners; it used to be approved by the Syrian [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] and government authorities in Hasakeh.[1193]

Thirdly, cases of depression, depressive moods and PTSD are widespread. Family roles and social pressures seem to aggravate anxiety and severe psychological distress, accompanied by feelings of fear. In northeast Syria, multiple informants stressed that some of the most successful activities were those interventions provided to victims who were diagnosed with moderate or mild degrees of depression, since they relied heavily on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and the developed problem management sessions for individuals and groups (PM+) introduced by the WHO.[1194]

Table 5: MHPSS key challenges and successful interventions in northeast Syria

Key challenges	Most successful MHPSS interventions
Insufficient strategic planning	Peer groups: This involves giving clients therapeutic sessions and ensuring that they process their traumatic experiences and acquire new skills.
Lack of qualified human resources	Case management: Individualised care using CBT and behavioural techniques.
Limited access to some affected areas	Providing integrated services: Awareness services (health and PSS awareness-raising sessions); reproductive health services; literacy and livelihood programs; case management programme for cases exposed to GBV.
Lack of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists	Widespread mhGAP consultations.

[1190] Ibid.
[1191] Several KIIs and individual testimonies (summary of capsules).
[1192] See case reports in the 'Human Dimension' section of this report.
[1193] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1194] Ibid; KII: female, senior PSS officer for international NGO in northeast Syria; KII: male, protection/PSS project manager for local NGO in Raqqa.

Low awareness about psychological and mental health needs	Psychoeducation: Sessions that involve discussions about trauma and trauma-related effects.
Lack of inpatient facilities for severe cases	Safe space projects for women and girls with counselling services.
Lack of colleges offering services on MHPSS training	Improvement in low and medium depression cases, with significant improvements noted in patients' social, physical and emotional lives after participating in PM+ (Problem Management Plus) programmes.
Lack of essential psychotropic medication	Widespread counselling and options to teach relaxation techniques, deep breathing exercises and other practical exercises.
No comprehensive programmatic approaches specifically for trauma victims as prescribed by the Centre for Victims of Torture (CVT)	Acceptance of mental health services within conservative communities.
Most staff-level employees have no psychological/counselling background	Psychological resilience sessions; individual therapeutic sessions; justice and healing sessions; collective awareness sessions; special support programmes; advanced and updated training programmes and new psychological treatment methods; availability of centres designated for these services.
Shortage of necessary logistical and technical supplies to develop and support projects[1195]	
Poor coordination	

Ultimately, many informants agreed on the main, underlying issues. When assessing whether existing MHPSS interventions follow an identified pathway or line of case referral, multiple responses characterised the situation in terms of service scarcity:

> Some organisations and centres have an identified line of referral and follow-up for the case. However, the major problem lies in the scarcity of available services, which hinders the process of [service provision]—even for the limited numbers that occasionally overlap in some areas.[1196]

In addition, as one local care worker added, "the lack of integrated services is the main impediment to the referral pathway."[1197]

[1195] Informants reported that MHPSS coordination in northeast Syria has not yet resulted in any good practices: remaining key issues include the erratic and often incorrect referral of mental health cases and delays in treatments. Because of this situation and KII's response, it was not possible to fill out the corresponding columns on successful MHPSS interventions for the following two rows of the table.
[1196] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1197] KII: female, NGO worker.

Similarly, an interview with a specialist from a local foundation summarised the post-ISIS MHPSS priorities in need of addressing,[1198] and similar ideas were repeatedly raised by other informants as well. Those priorities included: awareness-raising and psychological and health education; work on establishing a "service map" for psychological services provided by different organisations; a need to establish specialised centres concerned with mental health; and a commitment to train specialised MHPSS team (especially given the sensitivity of dealing with victims and survivors and the multifaceted nature of violations committed under ISIS and during the anti-ISIS conflict).

MHPSS capacity development

In the words of one health worker in northeast Syria, "mental health has not yet received real noticeable attention [but] deserves traction, funding and coordination."[1199]

MHPSS capacity-building activities for service providers in northeast Syria do exist (for example, in the form of PSS training for doctors, social and community workers and organisations). Most protection and MHPSS service providers provide trainings and capacity-building plans for health staff, CHW, PSSWs and protection outreach workers.[1200]

However, the WHO officer said that "only health workers in international health and local humanitarian organisations with partnerships and international financial support can benefit from" these activities.[1201] In fact, specialised trainings are very rare. Training packages differ across MHPSS service providers and a variety of training techniques exist, notwithstanding the IASC standards and proactive role played by the WHO and MHPSS Working Group. An inherent criticism of higher-level institutions providing capacity-building emerged, though. A protection/PSS worker for an NGO in northeast Syria testified how they "often encountered a low level of competence and awareness of the culture of the place, as international approaches were adopted [that] did not adequately address existing psychosocial problems."[1202]

On-the-job supportive supervision was not frequently reported, and the research team was not able to obtain data or evidence on current processes of monitoring regarding: (a) MHPSS training (for example, through pre and post-assessment tests, skills demonstration exercises and observation during training); (b) techniques for measuring knowledge retention and job performance (for example, feedback from supervisors and managers, performance evaluations and periodic follow-up assessments); or (c) behaviour change assessments for measuring whether MHPSS trainings led to behaviour change in trainees (for example, through job observations of trainees and their MHPSS referral skills). Reports converge that health workers who work independently or in formal healthcare institutions do not receive such trainings. In addition, there was no data available on satisfaction and feedback from among trainees to measure their satisfaction with training programmes through surveys, feedback forms and/or interviews.

Emerging roadblocks & recommendations

The research team's data shows that the emerging systemic roadblocks for MHPSS in northeast Syria are:

- Limited awareness of MHPSS among beneficiaries (such as a lack of recognition of the need for support and treatment or non-response by some victims due to fear of stigmatisation);

[1198] KII: female, PSS/GBV specialist for local NGO in northeast Syria.
[1199] KII: male, WHO MHPSS officer.
[1200] The responsible staff in charge of internal capacity development are MHPSS supervisors, protection Officers, PSS officers and MHPSS technical advisors.
[1201] Ibid.
[1202] KII: male, protection/PSS worker, local NGO.

- Failure to attract or mobilise beneficiaries (due to fear of stigmatisation or social restrictions such as a refusal of gender-mixing between the sexes);
- Difficulty in assessing and measuring (because of the extent of harm and the number of affected individuals as well as the large geographic scope of northeast Syria);
- Security risks, disease outbreaks and low funding leading to the closure of healthcare facilities; and
- The transition from humanitarian to resilience and victim-oriented initiatives in northeast Syria that require international partners to invest in evaluations to determine which programmes or strategic interventions are considered essential for the long-term future.

Several informants also commented on the role of the MHPSS Working Group and the need to attribute a higher priority to integrated service projects. They recommended the following changes to service provision:

- MHPSS services and case management programmes in all healthcare projects;
- A psychiatric and mental health specialist available to treat medical model conditions in all projects;
- Specialised interventions and properly equipped hospitals necessary for patients with disorders that require continuous care;
- Planning for addiction rehabilitation centres; and
- Specialised training, increased numbers of specialists and effective treatment programmes.

Finally, one informant provided a "to do list" to overcome some of the challenges explored in this chapter.

> There are no dedicated mental health centres, and the psychosocial support services are very limited compared to the vast geographical area and large number of affected individuals. To ensure the success of these interventions, it is necessary to: establish specialised mental health centres supervised by experts; establish dedicated shelters for people with mental disabilities affected by the conflict and its aftermath; and [consider] whether a patient is the breadwinner of a family, [providing] assistance to their families.
>
> Additionally, awareness-raising about psychological and mental illnesses and [treating these illnesses] as any other disease […] is crucial.[1203]

Conclusion

ISIS was responsible for countless human rights violations and traumas impacting individuals, families and local communities throughout northeast Syria during the years of ISIS rule and the subsequent anti-ISIS conflict. Civilians—and particularly women and children—have been and still are among the most affected. While ISIS remains a threat across northeast Syria, prevailing post-ISIS issues such as displacement, return, lack of security and insufficient access to livelihood perpetuate the risk of poor psychosocial well-being among local communities. Still, a lack of clarity remains around the effectiveness of commonly implemented psychosocial support interventions focused on preventing mental disorders and psychological distress and also promoting well-being.

During its engagements with key informants and victims, the research team uncovered several key findings about public health and MHPSS in northeast Syria:

- Damaged health infrastructure and poor essential services have heavily constrained access and equitable coverage of essential health services—including routine immunisation programmes and reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health (RMNCH) services. In some areas, electricity and water are not consistently available, and many health facilities remain damaged or destroyed, with

[1203] KII: male, local NGO worker.

gaps in staffing wherever they exist. Authorities have failed to provide compensation for destroyed homes and businesses.

- All respondents are conscious of the urgent need to enhance MHPSS capacities—a vast problem even before ISIS' territorial collapse. Capacity is needed to detect, assess, notify/report and respond to major mental health and psychological distress cases. The confluence of UN agencies, government institutional departments and NGO partners has sometimes led to an unclear delineation of responsibilities.
- The most prevalent and significant mental health conditions in northeast Syria are PTSD, prolonged grief disorder and depression in addition to various forms of anxiety disorders. The family dimension of psychological distress impairs children's development. Suicidal ideation should be assessed in more depth.
- While humanitarian and development partners have invested significantly in the design and implementation of their programmes, there has not been requisite investment in evaluating their long-term suitability and sustainability vis-à-vis health and MHPSS needs in northeast Syria.
- Support initiatives to "close the feedback loop" and inform communities about their input are being used to adapt the health sector and MHPSS response, but they are not enough. Community members and healthcare workers both expect more community engagement.

Data and analysis explored in this chapter indicates that assessment priorities on ISIS' impact on public health and, importantly, mental health in northeast Syria ought to continue—something that can be done by building on existing research and launching new lines of inquiry regarding crimes committed by ISIS. The vast accumulation of distress and resulting senses of injustice among victims and survivors is contributing to the burden of negative mental health outcomes at both individual and community levels.

It is therefore crucial that assessment and investigation continue and that violations perpetrated against children are given particular importance when working to end impunity and improve standards for support interventions and coordination.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of his authoritative biography *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, Allan Bullock applied Christopher Wren's epitaph in St Paul's cathedral in London: *si monumentum requiris, circumspice – if you seek a monument, look around you.* This report describes ISIS' monument – one of bleak misery and destruction, of physical and mental carnage.

It is difficult to avoid cliché in describing what ISIS wrought on the people of northeast Syria: to describe ISIS' time in the area as a reign of terror is accurate but needs reflection. It is a story of relentless, soul-crushing evil, visited on a people who had done nothing to provoke the nihilistic violence that tore up their lives and communities. Through the victims' stories and in the analysis of various themes, this account describes the nature of genuine terror lived – not for a matter of days or months, but in some cases, over five years. It is difficult to read them without feeling the heavy weight of inhumanity that expunged the very breath of life in the towns and villages.

It is a story with heroism, bravery, and courage, but also of unfathomable pain, trauma and loss. The fortitude of those who survived detention, and physical and psychological torture, who dared to believe they could emerge from their torment and did so, is a remarkable feat of human resilience. The teachers who risked their lives to continue a healthy education for the children whose lives had been blighted by the poisonous curriculum forced by providing clandestine schooling. The doctors and nurses who sought to offer care in conditions that made even relatively simple tasks dangerous and life threatening. Those who organised or engaged, each in their own way, in acts of resistance, however great or small, against the regressive political and social regime imposed upon them, and often at great risk to their own life and those of their families. In some ways the greatest bravery, when one considers the all-pervading nature of ISIS' terror, is the resilience and desire of the people to rebuild their lives and try to find again some measure of joy and happiness with their loved ones, their neighbours, and their communities.

This account sought to do three things; to present the story of ISIS in northeast Syria through the eyes of those civilians who experienced it in their daily lives – not through the eyes of soldiers and not through a foreigner's lens. It sought to present the authentic experience of ordinary civilian men and women, to acknowledge their dignity as human beings – a dignity of which ISIS sought to rob them.

Secondly, the accounts and analyses of this report demonstrate the impact of the years of ISIS terror in the lives of families, towns, and villages. It narrates, in stark terms, the depth of the horrors and the scars it has left on the people. The devastation to the lives of children, the destruction of their education, and the poisoning of their minds in a deliberately designed curriculum presents an obvious and profound challenge.

Likewise, the impact on the mental and physical health of so many, and indeed the mindless tyranny exercised over the medical profession to set back healthcare by decades is also made clear. The degree of deep psycho-social trauma, not least in the extremely high estimation of probable PTSD, is a daily scourge in the lives of many.

The desire of ISIS to treat women and girls as inferior in all ways to men and boys presents a profoundly aggravating aspect to the general terror experienced by the population. The impact this had on both the daily lives and the life chances of half the population is difficult to comprehend. The reverse side of the oppression of women and children was the toxic model of masculinity that permeated the ISIS culture, through the militarisation of males, the exultation of extreme, macho violence, and the glorification of violence to be rewarded in the subjectification of women and girls as sexual rewards and prizes.

The report also addresses the economic aspects of how ISIS operated and the impact that has had on the economy of the region. Even without ISIS the civil conflict had already had a devastating impact on the region; ISIS made that impact truly disastrous, from the destruction of infrastructure and agriculture to the diversion of

oil revenues. ISIS aimed to put northeast Syria back towards a seventh century society. It did not manage that, but it has arguably put the economy back at least a hundred years if not much more.

Thirdly, the report sought to offer some modest suggestions to support the meaningful recovery of the region. The expectations of a breakthrough in the frozen conflict in Syria generally are extremely low. The more likely prospect by far is that things will remain as they are as far as relations with Damascus are concerned and in the geopolitical interests in the region. This puts in stark relief one of the dilemmas facing the international peacemaking and peacebuilding communities today. A war has been ended in respect of ISIS. Yet, beyond running repairs and hand-to-mouth humanitarian assistance, the local economy has not been able to recover. More pointedly, structured, systematic assistance in the other three areas – education, public and mental health, and gender relations – the report has highlighted remain substantially absent. This is not to denigrate the efforts of those seeking to provide aid in these areas, but the analysis indicates that in all relevant areas the nature of that assistance cannot be said to be structural, systematic, or sustainable. Four years after the fall of Baghouz the communities most directly affected by scourge of ISIS remain largely in an abyss of economic crisis, but also without the means to address the legacy of their oppressors.

The plight of the people in northeast Syria serves as a graphic demonstration of the crisis in peacemaking and peacebuilding. Notwithstanding the defeat of an enemy as terrifying and horrific as ISIS, and regardless of the evils visited upon the people there, the international community has remained incapable of concerted and sustainable efforts both to ensure genuine recovery and to prevent return to conflict.

Failure to address the damage that has been done to the society as quickly and as methodically as possible allows the future to be written all too clearly. We will see myriad families struggle with the legacy of psychological and physical trauma, making the prospect of social cohesion ever more difficult and family and social dysfunctionality almost a given. We will see a generation of children scarred, traumatised and in some cases, brainwashed into believing an entirely distorted and alien ideology, with profound ramifications in the longer term.

While the Autonomous Authority is rightly regarded as seriously committed to gender equality, the disastrous regression in the treatment of women and girls under ISIS accompanied by the cult of violently abusive masculinity will take years of concentrated effort to undo. Added into all of this is the reality that most experts believe – ISIS has not entirely disappeared. Sleeper cells, attacks on Ghuweran prison in January 2022, and more recent indications in the summer of 2023 of greater organisation indicate at least the possibilities of a limited re-emergence.

In these circumstances a small number of practical proposals can be made:

1. A renewed strategic approach should be adopted to focus on recovery and resilience in the light of the information recounted in this report. A multi-disciplinary task force should be convened by the Autonomous Administration to focus on three areas: mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS); education; and gender related issues. The task force should be composed primarily of local experts and leaders but also include the contribution of international experts and donors.

2. The task force should include and consult with the local agencies that have developed and information on victims, martyrs, survivors, death, loss, and damage. The concerns and the interests of the victims and survivors of ISIS violence should figure prominently in the development of a renewed strategy in the three areas indicated.

    a. **Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support:** The persisting crisis of mental health including indications of extremely high levels of PTSD is not surprising but needs to be addressed. The particular phenomena of ISIS' cruelty and violence from mutilations and torture, public executions and crucifixion, the all-consuming brutality of the attempts to control not only

behaviour but thought have left the deepest of scars. The response to it needs to be specific and strategic if the children and adults affected are to have a reasonable chance of building a heathy life in the coming years. Efforts need to focus on restoring a functional core in terms of health infrastructure; counselling and training of health care professionals, and systematic care provision focused especially on best practice for PTSD to adults and children.

b. **Education**: The targeting of the education system was a strategic priority for ISIS and one in which they were successful. The consequences for the communities affected will be generational unless a specific recovery programme is developed to address the challenges of the ISIS legacy. Again, this means ensuring a core infrastructure as well as provision of educational resources. Equally, so many teachers were terrorised or and traumatized that a specific programme that seeks to counsel and restore their capacity may be advisable. Closely connected to the issue of MHPSS, ensuring that schools are restored as fundamental safe havens for learning and development is crucial for the potential recovery of the region, for building resilience, and indeed restoring values of tolerance and reconciliation.

c. **Women and girls**: The impact of ISIS on women and girls needs to be assessed and addressed. Reports, testimonies, and collective meetings indicated that, especially in rural areas, the role of women and girls remains in need of attention. Likewise, while all parts of society - women, men, girls and boys – were terrorised and traumatised by ISIS as well as impacted by ISIS' oppressive approach to gender expression and roles, the particular focus on dehumanising women and girls requires a focused a strategic response to those practices and phenomena. At the same time a detailed approach to detoxifying the cult of violently abusive masculinity is also necessary.

3. The **missing**: there remain large numbers of people unaccounted for as a result of the ISIS occupation throughout the region. Likewise, there are many unidentified graves. The authorities should develop a supported strategy to account for as many of the missing as possible, locate their whereabouts where possible, and provide the appropriate support to survivors.

4. **Justice**: This report is not conceived as a substitute for accountability efforts. In the aftermath of mass atrocities, it has been widely accepted, especially by western states, that justice and accountability are core values necessary to vindicate the rights and dignity of victims, and to confirm the social values that have been so profoundly attacked. Political circumstances in northeast Syria and in the countries of origin of ISIS fighters have so far made it impossible for a credible and concerted effort to see those most responsible for crimes in northeast Syria brought to justice. While the Autonomous Administration has indicated its willingness to prosecute some of those under its jurisdiction, it lacks the infrastructure but more importantly the probable recognition of any convictions in foreign countries. The large number of male detainees represents a drain and a threat. To demonstrate that the values of justice and accountability are considered universal, especially in the light of particularly egregious acts, the governments of those detained should engage with Autonomous Administration to resolve this impasse, facilitate at least a limited number of trials for those most responsible for serious crimes, and come to an agreement on recognition of convictions and locations for imprisonment.

5. **Al-Hol camp**: The legacy of ISIS is most vivid in the camps in northeast Syria, in particular al-Hol camp, where tens of thousands of people, primarily women, girls, and boys have been held since the fall of the 'caliphate'. With regular acts of violence and exploitation occurring there, as well as continued agitation by remaining ISIS supporters, the camps remain both a humanitarian catastrophe and a

profound security threat. Efforts should be continued and expedited to support returns of those in the camps wherever possible.

This report is a collaborative effort between the European Institute of peace and Rights Defense Initiative :

The European Institute of Peace is an independent body that works with a broad range of local and international actors, including the EU, UN, national governments, regional bodies, and civil society to design and deliver sustainable peace processes. It provides practical experience, technical expertise, and policy advice on conflict resolution. The Institute is active in over a dozen countries across various regions of the world, including the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Rights Defense Initiative is an independent non-profit organisation founded in 2019. It works on monitoring and documenting human rights atrocities in northeast Syria, sharing them with international and regional accountability mechanism, and preparing studies and reports on the impact of the conflict on communities affected by it. RDI aims to support victims of atrocities to raise their voice in the international community to achieve justice for all victims. It seeks to spread a culture of human rights and the protection of civilians during conflicts in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions. This commitment extends to compliance with international human rights law.

ISBN : 242344657584