



**STUDIES FOR STABILISATION**

PRIORITY RESPONSE ISSUES  
IN NORTH-EAST SYRIA

PAPER

**2**

# Countering Violent Extremism and Deradicalisation in North-east Syria

Challenges for local organisations  
and opportunities for donors



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## Executive Summary

This report examines local capacities for CVE and deradicalisation in north-east Syria (NES). Specifically, it explores the challenges, successes, lessons learned, and opportunities for donors as determined by local actors working within CVE and deradicalisation, both from the perspective of local NGOs and the Autonomous Administration of North and Syria (AANES) and its subsidiary Humanitarian Affairs Offices (HAOs). The research aspires to bridge a gap between local and international understandings of the CVE and deradicalisation challenge in NES.

Key to the development of CVE and deradicalisation initiatives in the region are matters of coordination, both between local NGOs and their international supporters, and between dedicated CVE and deradicalisation initiatives and other complementary activities. A dedicated body for the coordination of CVE and deradicalisation work emerges as the strongest recommendation from interviewees, which is felt would address ground-level problems of project implementation including insecurity, access, militia and tribal interference, and information sharing and learning. Local actors hope that such a body would also help to harmonise the approaches and activities of donors, local NGOs, and authorities working in the CVE and deradicalisation space; promote the mainstreaming of CVE and deradicalisation in ways that reflect their multidimensional character; and allow

ground-level needs, insight, and capacity to be better understood by stakeholders. The report concludes with a series of recommendations to these various effects.

### Methodology

COAR developed this report through extensive consultations with local organisations working on deradicalisation and CVE in NES, meetings with several unnamed representatives from the AANES and several of its HAOs, and a desk-based review. It therefore seeks to articulate the perspectives of local stakeholders and does not represent a comprehensive study on the issue of deradicalisation and CVE programming in the region. In accordance with the demands of the client, there is some focus on Hole camp.

COAR sought to map deradicalisation actors as part of this exercise but access to information in this regard is extremely limited and precluded the delivery of any such project. Notably, even HAOs explained that they did not maintain records of their CVE and deradicalisation partners. Ten organisations working directly within CVE and deradicalisation were nevertheless found, five of which were interviewed. Unless otherwise stated, the use of the term 'local NGO' refers specifically to the CVE and deradicalisation organisations engaged by this research.

# 1. Practical Challenges of Deradicalisation in North-east Syria

Local NGOs face difficulties across the board when implementing CVE and deradicalisation programmes in NES. Surprisingly, engagement of the AANES and its HAOs was not identified as a principal issue. Of more pressing importance were matters of on-the-ground project implementation, and particularly security-related issues and their impact on project reach, quality, and continuity. Local NGOs sought to emphasise that existing relationships with the regional administration could be enhanced to help address such practical challenges and suggested that a more multi-dimensional approach to CVE and deradicalisation could strengthen their activities if supported by more dedicated and inclusive forms of coordination.

Notable opportunities for addressing the practical challenges of CVE and deradicalisation project implementation lie in more concerted tribal and community engagement. Communities hosting primary CVE and deradicalisation targets that impede the NGO response should not be engaged merely as gatekeepers for aid access. Rather, they should be considered critical to the broader CVE and deradicalisation response and induced to support relevant projects with broader forms of support that address their most pressing needs. It was for these reasons that local NGOs warned that a failure to integrate CVE and deradicalisation projects with a broader community recovery plan would weaken project outcomes and may aggravate the stabilisation challenge by amplifying marginalisation, frustration with the authorities, and disenchantment with foreign assistance.

The AANES and its affiliated HAOs voiced a sense of alienation from NGOs, donors, and projects as their most significant challenge. These authorities felt that their contributions to CVE and deradicalisation projects were all too often limited to project authorisations, and stated that there was more they could do to enhance programme quality. Interviewees stressed that INGOs seldom provided the types of insight necessary to ensure that local stakeholders benefit from the skills and

experience of donors and vice versa. Again, the form and format of existing fora for CVE and deradicalisation programming were raised as an impediment to harnessing the collective capacity of all stakeholders.

## 1.1. Access and safety in Hole Camp

Hole Camp hosts around 59,000 residents for whom no comprehensive plan for reintegration, rehabilitation, and deradicalisation has been established.<sup>1</sup> With their future unclear, camp residents remain subject to a range of restrictions and security is high. Such restrictions are not limited only to residents however — local NGOs expressed numerous concerns regarding the manner in which bureaucratic restrictions and security constraints impact aid access and project continuity in Hole, with several interviewees drawing attention to the challenges they confront when seeking to introduce or extend CVE and deradicalisation programming at the camp.

In one example, an NGO prohibited from operating directly in Hole was compelled to enter into an informal arrangement with an AANES-affiliated charity for access. This arrangement was unsustainable however, as the NGO's access, base, and supplies were removed when 'access' payments to the AANES-affiliated charity were stopped. Such events are indicative of the control exerted by the authorities over Hole and the sensitivity with which it approaches aid to camp residents. Often, it is only through informal arrangements with power holders linked to the camp's political and military authorities that CVE and deradicalisation actors are able to undertake their work. Such phenomena are not uncommon to assistance of all types in Hole, but they are especially frustrating for local providers of CVE and deradicalisation support as their work is essential to the future of marooned camp residents.<sup>2</sup>

Safety inside the camp was raised as an additional challenge of concern. In one instance, an organisation reported that its female employees are subject to frequent violence from child residents and face a range of threats

1 See COAR's sister report on this subject within the same series: [Mapping and Assessing Release and Reintegration Models in North-east Syria's Camps](#).

2 Extortion targeting humanitarian organisations working in the camp was also noted as a persistent issue, with one organisation noting that several of its employees have received threatening calls requesting they pay bribes to ensure their continued safety. Bribe amounts demanded have reportedly been around \$500. It is unknown who is responsible.

and intimidatory behaviour. Such examples were highlighted as evidence that *Achbal al-Khalifa*<sup>3</sup> remains a prevalent phenomenon in the camp and, according to interviewees, emphasises the urgency for tailored CVE and deradicalisation projects for children.<sup>4</sup> Inadequate and insufficient education was further highlighted as an issue in this regard, with substandard camp-based schooling described as paving the way for the consolidation of extremist religious studies in the camp. These concerns should be considered especially pressing in the context of reports describing a worsening state of camp-related insecurity.

## 1.2. Militia interference

In addition to the problems of insecurity within Hole, local NGOs cited a lack of security for projects in target locations across the north-east, especially in areas where militia dominate the local security landscape.<sup>5</sup> Some militias were reported to have little interest in the protection of NGOs undertaking CVE and deradicalisation work, and interviewees claimed their organisations were subject to frequent threats, extortion attempts, and restrictions in several communities where militia wield a monopoly on violence. Tribal leaders and/or tribal militia were further reported as having sought to influence target household selection and the employment of programme staff in territories under their control.

Local NGOs widely report that neither the SDF nor the local police provide adequate protection in cases of militia interference. Typically, the formal security forces linked to the Autonomous Administration maintain a minimal physical presence in the areas where informal militia operate as the primary local security actor.<sup>6</sup> Some local NGOs have reportedly been able to navigate the impositions of local militia by adopting standard mitigation measures such as recruiting field teams from target communities and/or by engaging tribal leaders to

garner their support and patronage. However, they have largely been forced to undertake such measures independently. Moreover, owing to their limited involvement with relevant coordination fora, local NGOs also find it difficult to communicate needs in target locations in a way that might harness community leaders in service of a more harmonised approach to deradicalisation, CVE, and stabilisation more broadly. Working relationships between local NGOs and communities are therefore suboptimal, and it was suggested that more should be done to capitalise on the potentially valuable contributions of community leaders to an environment that fosters improved CVE and deradicalisation outcomes.

## 1.3. Impositions of tribal community leaders

Tribal identities play a considerable role in the acceptance and endorsement of deradicalisation programmes in NES, especially in Deir-ez-Zor, but also throughout the region. Local NGOs claimed the extent to which this is the case is underestimated at the international level, as most international stakeholders typically view acceptance in the region through the prism of Arab-Kurdish relations. It was suggested that international actors are often blind to the kind of ground-level bargains undertaken by their local aid partners to secure and sustain access in areas where tribes are a dominant feature of the social landscape. These claims are not without merit. Some tribal leaders, such as those within the Al-E'ikadat tribe, insist that all aid projects must receive approval from clan leadership in areas under their influence.<sup>7</sup> Others require that local aid projects hire tribal relatives in return for aid access. Naturally, this exposes local NGOs working within deradicalisation to forms of corruption, extortion, and interference that can go unseen by international donors and remains an abiding practical challenge for local implementing parties.

3 Literally, 'The Cubs of the Caliphate', a term used to describe young extremists and other young people targeted/recruited by adult members of extremist groups.

4 Observers noted two troubling practices in respect of the radicalisation of youth in AANES. First is the imprisonment of children with their mothers when there is no other caregiver, second is the lack of rehabilitation programmes in juvenile prisons. Where rehabilitation programmes are delivered in these settings, they are commonly described as improvised.

5 Besides direct armed pressure on local organisations working in areas where target populations are present, local NGOs are subject to regular security incidents such as IEDs, arrests, and sleeper cell attacks. Armed violence remains a high risk and rule of law is fragile in many target locations. NGOs subsequently reported that they must regrettably minimise their presence where it is often most required.

6 One could argue that the lack of security provided by the authorities results from the inability of the SDF and its affiliates to provide comprehensive coverage and their subsequent reliance on (more or less) compliant local actors to fill the gaps. Tacit acceptance of militia conduct is therefore a 'price' paid by the authorities in this bargain. Regrettably, this dynamic is far more complex than can be explored here. Further reading on this and related subjects is available here: Netjes, R. & van Veen, E. (2021) [Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict](#).

7 One notable example being Jamil al-Hefel, of the E'ikadat tribe in Jdid Ekeidat, Deir-ez-Zor governorate.



Tribal leaders are highly influential within local politics and their role as both spoilers and enablers of aid programming is sometimes poorly understood.  
CREDIT: KeshMalek.

#### 1.4. Outreach to former Hole residents

Local NGOs highlighted the difficulty of accessing former Hole residents with adequate support. It was explained this challenge arises primarily because individuals and families that have returned to the community fear being sent back to Hole, and especially families that have been smuggled out of the camp.<sup>8</sup> Most former Hole residents prefer to remain inconspicuous upon their release and do not announce their presence to CVE and deradicalisation projects in communities of return. Outreach by local organisations is further complicated by the fact that most former Hole residents who have left the camp via formal channels have arrived in Deir Ez-Zor. Outreach here was explained as particularly challenging in such a large governorate. It is also a location in which the authority of the AANES is rather constrained by rival power holders and in which the operating environment for local NGOs is less reliable than that falling within the administration of municipal authorities with more direct links to the AANES. In Deir-ez-Zor, relationships with local-level power holders may be more important than relationships with the AANES

when it comes to programme delivery. As previously noted however, local NGOs currently lack the support and resources to productively engage with community leaders beyond matters of access and permission.

#### 1.5. Absence of a regional multidimensional deradicalisation strategy

HAO representatives report that the AANES strategy for CVE relies heavily on military and policing interventions. Other activities assumed to have a direct and/or indirect positive effect on CVE and deradicalisation, such as basic needs and service provision, humanitarian aid, access to economic opportunities, and social support, are reportedly lacking from the AANES's approach to tackling the challenge of extremism. Where HAOS are permitted to look beyond security-oriented proclivities of the AANES, local NGOs claim that they do so rather narrowly, focusing on livelihoods, Hole camp, and (mainly Kurdish) IDPs produced by the effects of the various Turkish incursions and the conduct of the Islamic State.

<sup>8</sup> In all likelihood, the number of people smuggled out of Hole and residing in areas where deradicalisation organisations are currently working is small. Most of the estimated 700 people who have been smuggled from Hole (since March 2020) are assumed to have some connection to the Islamic State and many will not have stayed in the AANES.

Several local NGOs engaged by this research argued there was a need for stabilisation actors to encourage the region's authorities to adopt a broader approach to CVE and deradicalisation, and particularly one which is more responsive to the multiple dimensions of assistance geared towards reducing the appeal of extremism, both as an ideology and as a negative coping strategy. As noted later in this report,<sup>9</sup> representatives from both the AANES and HAOs explained that their offices were both open to, and actively pursuing, such an agenda. From the perspective of local NGOs, however, it would appear much more could be done in practice. Part of the solution may be to promote an understanding of deradicalisation as a cross-cutting issue that should be mainstreamed across both donor-funded aid and AANES public spending much like issues of gender, participation, and local ownership. Stabilisation donors might also insist that funded projects explicitly consider their anticipated contribution to CVE and deradicalisation outcomes.

## 1.6. Marginalisation as a driver for radicalisation

Interviewees noted that a sense of marginalisation and/or exclusion from aid provision is operating as a key driver of radicalisation across all governorates in north-east Syria. The Ar-Raqqa HAO, for instance, described how some neighbourhoods in the city have been receiving regular monthly food assistance over the past three years yet residents in adjacent areas have been provided with nothing by international agencies.<sup>10</sup> The Ar-Raqqa HAO further expressed frustration that after four years of foreign assistance to the city, a tangible strategy for transitioning from food assistance to longer-term livelihoods programming had yet to be developed. With the reduction of overall assistance to the region in 2021, the Ar-Raqqa HAO cautioned that such issues are likely to exacerbate extremist attitudes and reduce momentum for CVE and deradicalisation.

Observers in the region warn that extremist groups will capitalise on public disaffection with local and international relief and will look to recruit vulnerable youth who see few positive alternative futures and limited livelihood opportunities outside of extremist group membership.

Challenges of this kind are not limited to Ar-Raqqa. Communities regarded as neglected by international aid agencies are similarly struggling with the aggravating effect limited support is thought to have on violent extremism. Observers in the region warn that extremist groups will capitalise on public disaffection with local and international relief and will look to recruit vulnerable youth who see few positive alternative futures and limited livelihood opportunities outside of extremist group membership.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of local NGOs working within CVE and deradicalisation, an approach to aid that is sensitive to the potential downstream effects on public attitudes is necessary. They insist that this will require transparent targeting, supported by local leaders and administrative committees, and that foreign support is structured in such a way that takes a long-term approach to questions of CVE and deradicalisation. This is particularly the case in Deir-ez-Zor, a governorate that continues to receive limited humanitarian assistance and public services but which presents with particularly high demand for CVE and deradicalisation support.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See section 2.2.

<sup>10</sup> The neighbourhoods in question include Al-Baath, Al-Amin, and Mechleb. A lack of food security was highlighted as a driver of extremist violence by interviewees. Food security programmes are described as positively serving CVE by alleviating the combined economic challenges of inflation, currency devaluation, and the cost of living. They have also operated as a platform to help shift public perceptions of international aid as opposed to 'radicalised' communities and opened doors to more wide-ranging assistance.

<sup>11</sup> As COAR has noted in its sister report on the release and reintegration of IDPs, this is a challenge of particular concern in the region's many displacement and detention camps. The Islamic State is thought to prioritise the region's smaller camps where SDF security provisions and international funding is lower.

<sup>12</sup> The Food, Security and Livelihoods Working Group in north-east Syria reports that just 8% of food security and livelihood assistance allocated to north-east Syria goes to Deir-ez-Zor.

### Box 1: North-east Syria INGO Protection Working Group

The Protection Working Group (PWG) actively identifies and incorporates new and existing actors into its deliberations, including any registered in hubs outside of (but working in) NES. Members work to ensure that key protection concerns are identified and addressed, develop effective response plans in consultation with relevant stakeholders, collaborate with other sectors including the WASH Working Group, the Health Working Group, and the FSL Working Group to ensure the integration of protection principles, and implement responsive and complementary programming across sectors. The PWG is further designed to support data collection and sharing, to provide analysis to PWG peers and other stakeholders, to mainstream protection across others sectors and working groups, to advocate with donors to ensure appropriate support for protection activities, and to facilitate capacity building for PWG members, local authorities, and humanitarian organisations.

### 1.7. Coordination weaknesses

No local NGOs reported that their CVE and deradicalisation projects were linked to a centralised coordination mechanism. Local NGOs stated that their representation in relevant coordination structures was poor, and claimed that the ground-level realities of CVE and deradicalisation programming were under-appreciated at the INGO level. In the north-east, aid coordination revolves mainly around the NES Forum and is informed mainly by the insight available to INGOs. Whilst there is certainly a recognition of the complexities of CVE and deradicalisation work amongst NES Forum members, local NGOs argued that their absence from the Forum limited a fuller understanding across Forum membership. They suggested that the Protection Working Group represented a suitable vehicle for the coordination of CVE and deradicalisation activities but has yet to directly consolidate the efforts of local and international stakeholders and generate more complementary working practices.

Local NGOs further stated that international actors shared minimal information and undertook limited forms of collaboration with partners. Referring specifically to stabilisation donors, local NGOs report that they find themselves bound to confidentiality and restrictive information sharing policies that do not allow for meaningful engagement with other organisations working with CVE, deradicalisation, and other work with related outcomes. They argue that this compounds the challenge of coordination within CVE and deradicalisation and obliges them to undertake learning and capacity development in all but isolation. In addition to involvement at the PWG, One interviewee posited that an operational coordination group for local NGOs might support the complementarity of their CVE and deradicalisation interventions and enable better cross-organisational learning support.

### 1.8. Donor engagement with AANES

Representatives from the AANES and its affiliated HAOs expressed a desire for more engagement with donors on matters of CVE and deradicalisation. All HAO representatives interviewed for this research confirmed that there is currently no direct engagement between donors and the authorities and claim this reduces their ability to contribute to harmonised CVE and deradicalisation strategies, objectives, outcomes and information sharing. From their perspective, donors would ideally engage in an enhanced coordination architecture for regional CVE and deradicalisation so that approaches might be better aligned and, where possible, to share one another's insight on successful CVE and deradicalisation strategies and activities.

While some EU member states have independently engaged in direct discussions with power holders in the north-east, most donors have stopped short of providing political and material support to the region's au-

**f** All HAO representatives interviewed for this research confirmed that there is currently no direct engagement between donors and the authorities and claim this reduces their ability to contribute to harmonised CVE and deradicalisation strategies, objectives, outcomes and information sharing.





Camps remain a key site for deradicalisation and PVE programming.  
Credit: AFP.

thorities, preferring instead to channel its relationship through INGOs.<sup>13</sup> Given broader EU political priorities in Syria and the wider region, this is highly unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. Neither the AANES nor its HAOs are therefore likely to benefit from the kind of direct engagement they requested from donors in interviews for this research. As such, it appears that INGOs must do more to address problems of coordination with the AANES on behalf of their donors. Some investigation of the difficulties between (and from the perspective of) the two sides may be worthwhile so that donors can best inform the conduct and activities of their INGO partners and, if of interest, the creation of a dedicated sub-working group for CVE and deradicalisation within the PWG.

### 1.9. Limited technical and human resources

Local NGOs report they find it difficult to access global resources on CVE, deradicalisation, and rehabilitation. Reasons include the low visibility of CVE initiatives in

the region, minimal donor endorsement of information sharing, weak coordination mechanisms, limited resources for advocacy and communication, and restrictive travel to and from the north-east. Although some local NGOs explained that they have found some success engaging international support, subsequently implementing frameworks, curricula, and methodologies developed for other contexts, they report that adapting this content for NES has been resource intensive. With regard to the deployment of adequate human resources, local NGOs highlighted that extensive capacity building is often required given they are commonly obliged to recruit from target communities for reasons of contextual sensitivity and interference. This often demands time, effort, and financial resources which are not always available under the grants they typically receive for CVE and deradicalisation projects.

<sup>13</sup> The AANES is not formally recognised by the EU for reasons covered elsewhere. Each reason stands in the way of deeper links between the EU and the authorities in the north-east and are highly unlikely to change unless the EU determines that it is willing to implicate itself in the protection of the AANES and its affiliates.

## 2. Platforms for Deradicalisation Programme Development

Representatives from the AANES and its HAOs claim that their organisations are broadly in alignment with the aspirations of internationally-funded CVE and deradicalisation work. Interviewees from local NGOs tended to confirm this statement, noting the authorities demonstrate growing support for a more multi-dimensional approach to CVE and deradicalisation than has been shown previously. AANES and HAO representatives add that their organisations actively welcome the efforts of the international community on CVE and deradicalisation and are eager to contribute to effective project delivery. However, attention will need to be given to some points of divergence if partnership is to be improved. Interviewees from the AANES and its HAOs did consider that donors tend to under-prioritise the strategic interests of their institutions within CVE and deradicalisation.

Meanwhile, local NGOs emphasised that domestic capacity for CVE and deradicalisation is improving and that acceptance of dedicated CVE and deradicalisation interventions is growing. This offers opportunities to mainstream deradicalisation much in the same way that gender is increasingly incorporated across aid programming, but will require complementary investment in the localisation agenda and local NGO programme ownership. The latter was highlighted as critical in circumstances where the international response is temporarily (or indeed indefinitely) suspended by unfavourable military and political dynamics. Finally, local NGOs were eager to present successful prior interventions as evidence that they were having an impact, and that more investment should be made in gathering and sharing their experience across the sector.

### 2.1. Alignment of the AANES with International Donor Objectives

All local NGO interviewees confirmed that the AANES and its HAOs were supportive of CVE and deradicalisation projects, providing that implementing agencies and their partners sought registration and approvals from the relevant channels. HAO representatives further confirmed that no red lines relating to the location or nature of CVE and deradicalisation programme initiatives are

in effect as long as implementing agencies follow access and community acceptance best practice guidance.

Contrary to the assumption that the AANES is opposed to the use of the term “deradicalisation”, local NGOs explained that the AANES has rarely refused to endorse work described as such.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, they suggest there appears to have been something of a shift in the way that CVE and deradicalisation are understood by the authorities. For example, the AANES had initially rejected the concept of safe spaces as a forum to discuss extremist attitudes but now works to ensure timely approvals for projects incorporating such discussion fora. Evidently, this does not entail that the sensitivity currently applied to the public description of CVE and deradicalisation projects should change. However, it does indicate that understandings of what constitutes effective CVE and deradicalisation work may be steadily aligning with common conceptions amongst local NGOs and international donors.

HAO representatives highlighted that the AANES prioritises the localisation agenda and encourages INGOs to work with local partners. Local NGOs that have signed MoUs with HAOs stated that they tended to benefit from a smoother approval process when compared to INGOs. It was added that HAOs increasingly seek to distinguish themselves as NGO and civil society representatives as opposed to an arm of the AANES administration. This stance is presumably driven in part by the limited resources HAOs wield for project implementation themselves, and their subsequent reliance on other actors to address service gaps and developmental needs. HAOs therefore regard local NGOs as critical players in responding to the drivers of radicalisation and claimed to actively encourage projects proposing to deliver CVE and deradicalisation outcomes.

Although the AANES has not elaborated a definitive strategy for deradicalisation, HAO representatives were able to identify priority locations for deradicalisation programming. According to local sources, HAO priority locations for deradicalisation work broadly correspond with those of the international community and focus first and foremost on Hole Camp, then, in order of prior-

<sup>14</sup> From the perspective of an AANES representative, donors commonly approached the AANES with misconceptions about AANES red lines and restrictions such as this.

ity, Eastern Deir-ez-Zor (Baghous and Hajin), Western Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, and, lastly, Al-Hasakeh. The AANES and its HAOs emphasise that they take a broad view of CVE and deradicalisation, complementing direct interventions with indirect forms of CVE and deradicalisation assistance across matters of food security, access to essential services, and economic opportunity. HAO representatives engaged by this research stated that they encouraged both local and international NGOs to focus on these types of interventions with a view to combating extremism.<sup>15</sup>

Other dimensions of philosophical alignment between the AANES and the international community were highlighted by AANES representatives with regard to the importance of education, and especially in areas presenting high rates of IDP and refugee return. The importance of complementary and integrated protection services and case management was also emphasised, and AANES representatives were eager to explain that they adopt a rights-based approach across programming in all sectors of assistance.<sup>16</sup> These activities were explained to take a toll on limited AANES and HAOs resources however, and AANES representatives requested international funds to develop their institutional and human resources. Again, a request for improved coordination between the AANES and donors was presented in this regard. The AANES regards itself as alienated from donors, the NES forum, and stabilisation actors, and considers that its contributions to CVE and deradicalisation are weakened as a result. Representatives engaged by this research want the AANES and its HAOs to be recognised as key strategic actors in the international response to radicalisation and request more involvement in the development of multi-sectoral strategies to combat extremism.

One notable difference between the AANES/HAOs and the international community reportedly lies in the extent to which the two parties address local drivers of deradicalisation. AANES representatives explained that long-term economic recovery interventions demand greater attention than is currently demonstrated by

the international community. Indeed, some frustration was expressed that, when compared with investment in short-term food assistance, rural livelihoods were neglected by international donors within their stabilisation portfolios. Much of this frustration likely stems from the broader socio-economic challenges confronting the AANES, particularly in terms of the pressure that declining rural living standards are placing on urban service provision and quality. Crop yields, production, and food security have fallen drastically throughout the north-east and have exacerbated a continued trend of rural to urban migration.<sup>17</sup> With urban services under increasing pressure and rural livelihoods in decline, the AANES prioritises rural areas, sustainable rural development, and essential service provision within its approach to CVE. From their perspective, their attention to these issues has not been met with corresponding commitment from the international community to date.

## 2.2. Steadily Improving Local Capacity

Mapping all local NGOs working within deradicalisation and CVE is a challenge given the cross-cutting nature of foreign assistance, its effects, and outcomes. Nonetheless, it is estimated that there are at least ten local NGOs working explicitly on CVE and deradicalisation interventions in the north-east, some of which demonstrate experience dating back to the arrival of the Islamic State in Syria. Over time, these local organisations have developed tailored curricula, established safe spaces, garnered community acceptance, learned to navigate the AANES bureaucracy, and have developed effective local teams and capacity across multiple community contexts. Local NGO staff added that interest in and engagement with CVE-related civil society in north-east Syria has grown dramatically with the territorial defeat of the Islamic State. As one local organisation in Deir-ez-Zor noted, whereas only around 10 people would ordinarily attend CVE workshops in 2019, dozens now attend. Acceptance of CVE-related themes that

<sup>15</sup> Note that these statements from AANES and HAO representatives contrast with the opinions of local organisation staff who were rather critical of the extent to which the authorities worked to strengthen the breadth of possible deradicalisation options. As noted in section 1.5, it was their opinion that security-driven considerations drive the AANES/HAO deradicalisation agenda.

<sup>16</sup> As an aside, the AANES also encourages the use of renewable energy and encourages organisations to incorporate it into programming, such as solar panels for irrigation pumps and electricity provision in collective shelters and communal centres.

<sup>17</sup> Water security, for example, has had a massive impact on agricultural production. Unprecedented low water levels in the Euphrates River combined with low and erratic rainfall, recurring shutdowns at key water pumping stations, and disruptions in the regional water infrastructure have each had a severe negative impact on water availability for personal and commercial purposes, thereby reducing the reliability of agricultural livelihoods.



IS fighter captured by the SDF following the battle for Baghouz in 2019.  
CREDIT: AFP

were previously considered off-limits in some social settings is also said to have improved in recent times.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the apparent depth of local CVE and deradicalisation capacity, further support and investment was strongly encouraged by local NGOs. After INGO operations were temporarily suspended following Turkey's Peace Spring intervention of Autumn 2019, CVE and deradicalisation needs exceeded local capacity and highlighted the importance of ensuring local NGO programme sustainability in what remains a potentially volatile setting. Projects also suffered from errors and duplication in this period owing to the limited engagement of local NGOs with any meaningful coordination system.<sup>19</sup> AANES and HAO representatives suggested that the north-east Syria Forum has sought to mitigate the impact of future interruptions of this kind

by helping to promote local ownership in partnership with Forum members, stabilisation actors, and donors.

Such statements might be regarded with some skepticism however, particularly given the aforementioned insistence from local NGOs that they do not participate in coordination mechanisms to their satisfaction. They insisted that stronger support for localisation within CVE and deradicalisation was necessary, and that INGOs must operate according to values of genuine partnership as opposed to creating the impression they regard local NGOs as service providers. Local NGO representatives stressed that this is accomplished by the inclusion of local organisations across the programme cycle and granting local ownership over interventions, from target location decision-making, to activity design, and community outreach and engagement.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in Deir-ez-Zor, it is now considered acceptable to work on gender-based violence matters.

<sup>19</sup> One organisation interviewed for this research explained how the failure to properly coordinate has resulted in inefficiency. CVE research undertaken by the local organisation was duplicated by an INGO at a similar time yet reached different conclusions. The INGO had to revise its research accordingly and ultimately relied on the local organisation's local team for subsequent data collection and analysis work.

### 2.3. Repertoire of lessons learned

Although deradicalisation interventions remain relatively modest in north-east Syria, local NGOs have developed a range of best practices which offer important lessons. One NGO gave a recent example involving two of its facilitators that reached out to a female resident in Hole camp who continued to express sympathy and affiliation with the Islamic State. Over time, the resident showed growing appreciation for the activities of the local NGO and its community centre, later expressing a willingness to support further outreach amongst her peers. Another organisation explained that its presence in Hole was first met with violence by radicalised female residents, but that its project staff are no longer viewed as kaffir and are now welcomed warmly by those same women. Such examples were offered to highlight that even people who once held radical beliefs can adjust their perceptions of local NGOs with consistent and appropriate support.

Another notable example of local deradicalisation and CVE success offered by a local NGO described the engagement of a child living in Al-Hasakeh city by a locally-run deradicalisation initiative. The child had received teaching from the Islamic State for three years. At the age of 14, his life involved going to the mosque and prohibiting his mother and sisters from leaving the house. At school, he exhibited violence towards other children and was eventually expelled. The local organisation assigned a dedicated case worker to the child who engaged his personal interests. Within eight months, the child had taken up extra-curricular classes with other young people and, within a year, had over-

come his self-imposed prohibition of music. Naturally, besides the immediately positive effects on the child and the community, the local organisation involved in this work has gathered valuable information on how it might manage the deradicalisation of such young people in future.

Moreover, local organisations have developed a considerable pool of tailored guidelines, training, and curricula in spite of the challenges of adapting to both a complex context and caseload. For example, one local NGO described how Lijan Chaabiya (local committees) wanted to implement CVE activities but were unable to access sufficient information and resources to do so. The NGO subsequently developed a tailored training programme to support the committees. NGO representatives stated this approach was regarded as an innovation at the time and is still recognised as a valuable way of empowering local ownership over CVE and deradicalisation.

Failed interventions are also regarded to have offered useful experience for local organisations. Many young extremists are reportedly hesitant to attend sessions, so local organisations have learned to introduce incentives in the form of food baskets and dignity kits for girls. Similarly, some female programme participants persisted with violent extremism upon the conclusion of dedicated deradicalisation projects. Local NGOs explain they have subsequently learned to integrate their interventions with complementary programming across different sectors where possible, and expand their partnerships with other actors as necessary.

### 3. Recommendations

#### ■ **Establish a local-level coordination mechanism**

It is evident that close coordination is required to tackle the multi-dimensional challenges of CVE and deradicalisation. Presently, however, there is no real platform for local NGO involvement in the coordination of CVE and deradicalisation activities. A coordination forum that places local NGOs at its centre and feeds into other platforms as appropriate could be hosted by the Protection Working Group (PWG), which is not only structured to house a dedicated sub-working group for CVE and deradicalisation, but is also responsible for delivering coordination services that would likely help address a number of the challenges voiced by local stakeholders in this report.

A dedicated sub-working group for CVE and deradicalisation within the PWG should allow for knowledge sharing and best practice exchange at the local level, ensure local NGOs are better integrated with complementary activities in other sectors, and allow both INGOs and donors to benefit from local level insight and experience. A CVE/deradicalisation sub-working group within the PWG might help offset concerns that these authorities are excluded from international deliberations. Beyond advocating for enhanced coordination, donors are advised to fund workshops for collective decision-making, information sharing, and capacity building amongst local NGOs working within CVE and deradicalisation. Factors likely to inhibit participation (e.g. language and travel) should be managed to encourage maximum attendance.

#### ■ **Cultivate local access and extend local impact**

Improved international engagement with the access challenges faced by local NGOs is recommended. In part, this should derive from humanitarian access training for local NGOs to improve their access negotiation skills with formal administration systems and informal community and tribal leaders. Efforts might also be made to better align project staff ground presence in unsafe target communities with AANES-linked security activities. Local NGOs in receipt of approvals from the HAO should be encouraged to acquire HAO security assessments in project areas, only undertaking activities when the

HAO gives the greenlight. The involvement of local NGOs in HAO-AANES security information sharing is also encouraged (where appropriate), particularly where this might avail opportunities to sustain access, protect staff from community-level threats and intimidation, and avoid disruption to programmes caused by the operations of AANES-linked security actors. Additionally, the employment of local individuals as an acceptance measure should be accompanied with proper conflict of interest, duty of care, and code of conduct policies and assessment.

Perhaps most important however, is to encourage a cultural shift in the way that informal community-level 'gatekeepers' are presently engaged in the delivery of CVE and deradicalisation projects (and, indeed, for projects of all kinds). It is clearly essential for local NGOs to actively cultivate perceptions of their work as principled, neutral, independent, and impartial. However, they will find this difficult if community leaders are engaged merely for the purposes of project access and if community stability and development concerns are ill-considered. Additional resources that enable local NGOs to respond to community leadership perspectives as part of a more holistic approach to CVE and deradicalisation are therefore recommended. Deradicalisation and CVE outcomes are reliant on factors which often extend beyond the scope of the interventions themselves. Whether in relation to the failure to adapt food security assistance in Ar-Raqqa, or the general misalignment of donor assistance with the AANES's interest in stemming rural-urban migration, this research has uncovered examples that suggest more could be done to respond to community needs in support of CVE and deradicalisation objectives.

Enabling local partners to consult with — and respond to — the needs of community leaders would demonstrate that donors understand how different community needs affect the prospects for CVE and deradicalisation project success in view of the sector's multi-dimensional character. International stabilisation assistance that is perceived as anchored in local priorities may in turn lower barriers to access for local NGOs working on CVE and deradicalisation, reduce the interference and insecurity they

confront, and generate momentum for stabilisation which resonates beyond dedicated CVE and deradicalisation interventions.

■ **Enhance advocacy and communication capacities amongst local actors**

Resources should be allocated to enhance the capacity of local NGOs to advocate for deradicalisation priorities with both the relevant bodies of the AANES and the international community. Currently, local NGOs are reliant on individual initiatives and small funds for advocacy, media, and communication. Programming experiences are also poorly communicated, preventing the shared use of successful models, mitigations, and adaptations across deradicalisation networks. Using the recommended coordination mechanism under the PWG as a platform for such efforts, local NGO partners would likely deliver more impactful programming and operate as a more effective interface between local leaders, the AANES, and other stakeholders. Stronger local NGO CVE and deradicalisation networks might also provide for more meaningful discussion around matters of policy, such as those related to returns and the future of Hole.

■ **Sharpen project targeting**

With regards to target populations, local actors encouraged donors to prioritise families leaving Hole camp, IDPs, children, youth, women, and people with special disabilities in an inclusive manner. An emphasis on youth is strongly recommended given their susceptibility to extremist attitudes and the challenges of everyday life to which they are widely exposed both in general and particularly in camps and communities of return. One organisation working in a location where the risk of youth radicalisation is high has emphasised social cohesion, livelihoods, and citizenship-related initiatives in its work but found that its success has been limited without support from complementary interventions such as those relating to education access, vocational training, leisure, livelihoods, and youth initiatives.<sup>20</sup>

For families leaving Hole camp and returning to host or home communities, donors are encouraged to mobilise resources which provide safe and dignified returns and immediate and sustainable access to services such as food, NFIs, shelter, and livelihoods. Wherever possible, this support is to be integrat-

ed with existing mechanisms for release managed by camp security actors and municipal authorities in communities of return. Moreover, organisations should actively seek out stigmatised and stereotyped families and implement tailored programmes to support their reintegration to a greater extent than is reportedly practiced. Such work might look to leverage formal and informal media to help de-stigmatisae these families.

■ **Mainstream CVE and deradicalisation**

In addition to integrating their work with other complementary activities and promoting the use of multi-year funding, local NGOs claimed that a multi-dimensional approach to CVE and deradicalisation requires that CVE and deradicalisation are mainstreamed. They insisted that more might be done by donors and INGOs to apply a CVE and deradicalisation project lens in much the same way that gender, inclusion, and community participation are commonly mainstreamed by international assistance in NES. From the perspective of local NGOs, internationally-funded food assistance, for example, can (and should) consider its impact on CVE and deradicalisation throughout programme design, implementation, and monitoring.

■ **Strengthen local NGO capacity**

Local NGOs requested donors provide resources to build their capacity, particularly through training from international experts, funding for technical/expert staff hires, and the development of tailored guidelines and methodologies. Beyond local NGOs, donors might also consider investing in the capacity of community-level committees concerned with countering radicalisation and fostering social cohesion. These efforts are highly recommended for committees in which women, youth, and tribal and religious leaders are prominent members.

■ **Support development of an incident tracking mechanism**

Insecurity and interference arising from a lack of protection are cited as a primary limiting factor for local NGOs working in areas where existing and/or potential radical sympathies present a continued risk to stability. No coordination mechanism for the purposes of tracking and sharing security incident information yet exists however. A unified service for the consistent and timely dissemination of localised

20 For radicalised or at-risk children, child labour prevention was also highlighted as an important but presently limited activity.

security information was regarded by local NGOs as vital to the safety, sustainability, and success of their activities and the development and sharing of appropriate mitigation measures. Such a mechanism could be theoretically housed within a PWG sub-working group for CVE and deradicalisation and feature contributions from the local authorities and their affiliated security institutions as appropriate.

■ **Evaluate radicalisation projects**

Donors were encouraged to invest in monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure the outcomes and impact of CVE and deradicalisation projects in NES. The context remains relatively new, the capacities of local actors are still evolving, and this research suggests that more could be done to capture and share best approaches. Mechanisms for the dissemination of monitoring and evaluation findings across stakeholder groups is essential given the limited extent to which this is currently undertaken and may be facilitated by the aforementioned PWG coordination structure.



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