North-Eastern Syria: From Marginalisation to Extremism… What Next?

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Even prior to the outbreak of the revolution, north-eastern Syria, which suffered from wilful marginalisation under the Assad regime, had given indications of impending explosion. Despite the region’s vast agricultural wealth and oil resources, the local population suffered from the worst degrees of marginalisation and discrimination in the country in both economic and social terms. By 2011, around one million inhabitants had left their homes and villages to live in miserable camps on the periphery of cities in the country’s interior, driven by the absence of basic necessities in a region of limited development and opportunities. For the region’s inhabitants to get involved in the revolution seems only natural, just as the tribal nature of their society perhaps foresaw a proclivity towards violence.

The region’s elite, however, failed to establish an effective civil administration, while the opposition factions provided neither political advice nor administrative assistance to manage events within the general context of the revolution. No serious thought was given to exploiting the region’s considerable wealth and resources in support of the revolution and its independence. The Syrian opposition has wasted the opportunity to turn the north-eastern region of the country into a base for overthrowing the regime instead of a haven for the most dangerous enemies of the revolution. Today, north-eastern Syria is plagued with extremism and its rising appeal, particularly in the form of Islamic State, along with the near total destruction of local infrastructure and the subjugation of local tribal communities through economic coercion.

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Addressing the problem of endemic extremism in this region requires an in-depth specialised study of regional social structures, and delineation of the factors that affect them. This should focus in particular on understanding and exploiting tribal opposition to extremist ideologies. There is also need to learn lessons from the experience of similar regions, especially nearby Iraq with its similar social fabric and conditions. Chief among these lessons is the premise that defeating extremist groups, or mitigating and containing them, will not succeed unless a coalition is forged with the local communities. It also requires the restoration of the ability of the Syrian people, and especially those of the north-east region, to exercise their political rights, determine their own fate, and put an end to the propaganda for a global war against Sunni Arabs. Development efforts should also be given utmost importance: the lack of opportunities for a decent life, compounded by widespread illiteracy, ignorance and the absence of social justice, will continue to be a combustible mixture waiting for the first spark to ignite.

If unaddressed, the ineffective war against IS will soon engender a more extremist and better developed wave of ideological religious violence. The best hope for anti-terrorism forces is to work with the local population, concentrating on its development and renewal, as opposed to seeking a purely military solution to a deeply complex problem resulting from decades of marginalisation.
Even prior to the outbreak of the revolution, north-eastern Syria, which suffered from wilful marginalisation under the Assad regime, had given indications of impending explosion. By 2011, the lack of development, compounded by rapid population growth and severe drought, had driven around one million inhabitants from their homes and villages in Deir ez-Zor, Hasaka, Raqqa, and Aleppo’s eastern countryside to live in miserable camps on the periphery of cities in the country’s interior. For the region’s inhabitants to get involved in the revolution seems only natural, just as the tribal nature of their society perhaps foresaw a proclivity towards violence.

The ensuing armed struggle soon managed to liberate large swathes of the region, starting with most of the Deir ez-Zor region, followed by Raqqa, which in 2013 became the first governorate to be completely outside the regime’s control. However, given the low interest of outsiders in what was occurring there, and the local society’s failure to produce leaders capable of filling the void in authority, various extremist organisations succeeded in turning this vast region, rich in oil and agriculture, into a safe haven. Shielded from danger, the Islamic State (IS) quietly built its strength prior to launching its bid to impose control over Syria’s eastern territories and large swathes of Iraq, rendering it the world’s most dangerous threat to peace and security.

Today, the international community’s anti-terrorism efforts, which rely on military power without any processes to improve political, social, or economic conditions, facilitate the consolidation of extremist gains and the appeal of radical ideology. The best hope for the anti-terrorism forces is to work with the local population, who still remain at least partially resistant to IS and their like. The Syrian people, and the inhabitants of the north-eastern region in particular, must regain their ability to exercise their political rights and see demonstrable social and economic development occur, and must be assisted in this process through cooperation concerned regional countries and international powers. Otherwise, the region will continue to be an arena of multiple and endless conflicts.

**Marginalisation and Discrimination in a Wealthy Region**

Syria’s north-eastern region comprises the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Hasaka, or what in social, cultural, and economic terms is considered part of the Euphrates Basin or al-
Jazira region. It is situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and also includes the eastern and southern countryside of Aleppo, the Iraqi governorates of Nineveh/Mosul, Saladin/Tikrit, Kirkuk, and Anbar, and Urfa, Mardin, Dyarbakir, and Batman in Turkey. A historic area where early civilisations thrived, these territories today, including those in Syria and Iraq and, to a certain extent, Turkey, share interconnections and similarities, inhabited by Arab tribes with similar origins, values, and culture. The north-eastern region of Syria is a complex ethnic and religious environment, with a population that includes Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Yazidis, Assyrians and Syriacs.

North-eastern Syria covers 76,010 km², or approximately one third of the country,¹ and is home to a population of 5.3 million, or 21.5% of Syria’s population of 24.5 million.² Prior to the war, the region generated around half the country’s economic resources. Excluding Aleppo’s countryside, it comprises 42% of Syria’s agricultural lands, and, with both the Euphrates and Khabur Rivers, the two most abundant waterways in the country, accounted for 58% of wheat production, 78% of cotton production, 72% of yellow corn production and 41% of Syria’s sheep population. Its oil wells also produced 360,000 barrels a day, or around 95% of Syria’s total production.³ Yet despite these positive aggregate numbers, the region’s population suffered from the worst degrees of marginalisation and discrimination in the country. Al-Jazira’s inhabitants neither benefitted from the region’s agricultural wealth, which was instead plundered through the mechanism of state capitalism, nor from its oil resources or employment opportunities in the oil fields. The region’s inhabitants complain that around 90% of well-paid jobs in the oil sector went to people from distant coastal areas, at a time when the local population was forced to emigrate in search of work in the country’s interior or neighbouring countries. And for those relying on local subsistence for their livelihood, the onset of drought in the 2000s created a situation of forced emigration. We estimate that the number of Syrian workers from north-eastern Syria in Lebanon alone exceeds 800,000, a result of the shrinking amount of arable land lost to drought

¹ Deir ez-Zor 33,060 km², Hasaka 23,334 km², and Raqqa 19,616 km².
and the failure to establish production or service-oriented institutions capable of absorbing the young workforce.

Given this situation of economic under-development despite abundant resources, al-Jazira prior to the 2011 revolution suffered the country’s highest poverty rates in both rural and urban settings.⁴ A UNDP report found that “poverty incidence is highest in the North-Eastern rural region (17.9 per cent), followed by North-Eastern urban region (11.2 per cent),” with just under 36% of the population qualifying as poor and extreme poverty rates more than quadruple those of Syria’s coastal region.

This marginalisation and discrimination extended beyond economic terms to include education and the provision of other social services. The first university in the region was inaugurated in 2006, half a century behind other regions. A 2005 report by the UN and the Syrian State Planning Commission showed that, in 2004, the percentage of those who could read and write (between the ages of 15 and 24) in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa Governorates was the lowest in Syria, while a report by the Central Bureau of Statistics stated that, “the northern and north-eastern governorates top the illiteracy list with the highest rates recorded in Raqqa, over 38%, compared to a national average of 19%.”⁵ Discrimination and unemployment also affected the well-educated: their chance of finding employment in the public sector was very low, and their presence in the security services and the army, the two institutions that effectively controlled the country, was either symbolic or non-existent. Employment numbers were also very low in the civilian government sector, especially compared with the coastal regions where the regime’s sectarian base is located. For example, according to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of those employed in the “administrative and clerical sector”⁶ in 2010, i.e. government employees who process bureaucratic matters for the public, was only 13,434 in Hasaka, but more than double that number (30,611) in Tartous, a governorate with barely half the population (1.4 million vs. 768,000).

⁶ Syrian Arab Republic, Council of Ministers, Central Bureau of Statistics, the Workforce in 2010
This situation of poverty, poor educational standards, and under employment was reflected in all human development indicators, and can only be explained by the wilful policies of successive governments. Both the region’s inhabitants and researchers point the finger of blame at the regime’s sectarian tendencies. Indeed, the regime feared this large homogenous Sunni bloc, far from its area of control but close enough to the borders of its sectarian foe, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, to whose regime they believed most of the population was loyal.

**The Revolution: The Crisis Deepens**

With the escalation of armed confrontations in the region, rebels gained control over most of the oil fields, specifically in Deir ez-Zor, and began financing their military operations through the extraction, refinement, and the sale of oil. This was a turning point which, contrary to expectations, proved highly detrimental. The region’s elite failed to establish an effective civil administration, while the opposition factions provided neither political advice nor administrative assistance to manage events within the general context of the revolution. No serious thought was given to exploiting the region’s considerable wealth and resources in support of the revolution and its independence. Instead, some of the factional leaders became warlords with less interest in the objectives of the revolution than in amassing large sums of money. They no longer paid much attention to their popular base on which they relied early in the revolution since they now controlled oil, the main source of income for the community and its leaders. Excesses prompted by opportunism began to surface, and competition for the oil wells turned into sources of socio-political division and full-blown conflict.

The widespread opportunism among the rebels paved the way for the infiltration of extremist organisations that took advantage of local conflicts to consolidate their presence and recruit angry and disaffected elements to their ranks. Some larger tribes called upon the al-Nusra Front to protect their assets while others joined IS to regain what they deemed was theirs by right. Eventually, all the oil wells were taken away from the tribes by the Islamic State, who monopolised oil production, distribution, and sale, using these assets to build arms supply and
launch a huge war marked by the destruction of all local armed groups and subjugation of local tribal communities through economic coercion.

The areas under IS control in Syria and Iraq today correspond almost exactly to the geographic, demographic, and cultural lines of the historic al-Jazira region. IS control has held firm here, but failed in other areas such as Idlib and Aleppo, from where the organisation was permanently expelled in 2014. The secret lies in the region’s social structure and political circumstances, coupled with an environment that closely resembles that of the Arabian Peninsula: an organisation that raises the banner of jihadi Salafism in its bid to restore authentic Islam finds in the al-Jazira region a version of its ideal “antecedent,” not only from the perspective of its tribal environment but also its symbolically similar political circumstances. The region’s population has flexed little political strength at national or regional levels and does not have a strong representative. This is especially true since the downfall of the Arab Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The historic fear of falling under the control and influence of Iran from the east, or of the Western world remains valid. These two threats, which IS uses to mobilise its followers, have had a very deep impact on the hearts and minds of the region’s inhabitants, especially since the agreement between Iran and the West to work together to destroy IS. The Islamic State uses every occasion to reiterate that its aim to reinstate the nation’s past glory renders the group a global target, with “nation” here referring implicitly to the Sunni Arabs (though its official propaganda is careful not to make this distinction obvious in order to preserve the global nature of Islam as a religion for all mankind).

This infiltration by IS, along with the indiscriminate nature of foreign air strikes, brought to an end what remained of local infrastructure and capabilities. The population of al-Jazira, and in particular its youth, have been left with a stark choice: they can either join IS to ensure their daily livelihood, accepting what this entails in terms of imminent personal danger as members of a globally targeted terrorist organisation, or emigrate and deal with the double loss of one’s fate at the individual level, and of the youth and meagre skilled workforce at the regional level.

**Wasted Opportunities**
The Syrian opposition has wasted the opportunity to turn the north-eastern region of the country into a base for overthrowing the regime instead of a haven for the most dangerous enemies of the revolution. Likewise, the international anti-terrorism effort is currently wasting the considerable opportunities that the region has to offer; it is hobbled by a narrow strategy, relying on military power without any concomitant political, social, or cultural backup, which facilitates the consolidation of extremist gains in society, entrenching their intellectual and ideological presence.

The ill-conceived anti-terrorism war that the major powers are waging is destroying all aspects of social life in the region. This, together with the feverish efforts of extremist organisations in the fields of education and propaganda, is pushing the region’s inhabitants towards the extremists. A deep transformation is taking place. There has been an increase in the number of ideological adherents to IS relative to those driven by economic interest. The number of locals killed who served in the ranks of IS is clearly on the increase, as is the number of those who carry out suicide missions on its behalf - a phenomenon hardly registered in previous years. Given the total isolation imposed by both IS and the world on the inhabitants of regions under the organisation’s control, together with the increasing deprivation and rain of bombs killing ever-increasing numbers of them, and the intense propaganda of eternal salvation through martyrdom, it is not hard to imagine why such large numbers of desperate and hopeless youth are adopting jihadist thought and putting an end to their miserable lives for the chance of a better afterlife.

The outcome of the destructive policies of the big powers in the Middle East in general, and particularly in areas under the Islamic State’s control, represented by the war on terror in its current one-dimensional form, will ultimately benefit IS and others like it. The war will keep strengthening the organisation’s power as long as it is not based on clear objectives and realistic political and social policies that are developed in parallel to, or in advance of, the military and security aspects. Though the war in its current form could kill large numbers of ideological jihadists, the concepts behind the ideology will triumph and reap additional support as long as the killing is free and unjustified. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, haphazard Russian airstrikes on the north-eastern region in January and February 2016 killed 390 civilians able to be identified by name. Among them, 247 were killed in Deir ez-Zor, 97 in Raqqa, and 46
in Hasaka, including 64 children and 51 women. During that same period, dozens of inhabitants were killed in the same areas by IS. It is believed that many of them died while carrying out suicide missions.

The region’s marginalisation under the Assad regime has allowed extremist organisations to easily infiltrate and win over the poor and illiterate local inhabitants, controlling and mobilising them into a quasi-reserve army. The manner with which the international community is dealing with terrorism is gradually compelling many to adopt IS’s ideology with deep conviction. This is the ultimate objective of extremist leaders and theorists who do not hesitate to expose the local population to external dangers, in addition to the internal restrictions, to produce the largest number of vengeful individuals, angry at everyone and everything, who find no way out of their predicament except through the martyrdom offered by jihadist ideology.

The best hope for the anti-terrorism forces is to work with the local population. Despite their enticements, scare tactics, and propaganda, the extremists have failed to win over entirely the north-eastern population in sufficient numbers due to the tribal communities’ innate rejection of religious extremism. The tribal environment gives priority to kinship and blood ties, which act as a bulwark against purist ideologies, religious or temporal, which try to do away with the network of tribal relationships and interests.⁷

What Is the Solution?

The first step in addressing the problem of endemic extremism is an in-depth specialised study of regional social structures, and delineation of the elements and factors that affect them. This should focus in particular on the prevailing social culture, i.e., how the tribal instinct may be opposed to, and in competition with, extremist ideologies because of the threat they pose to traditional cultural links, entrenched and unchanged for hundreds of years. There is also a need to learn lessons from the experience of similar regions, especially in nearby Iraq with its similar social fabric and condition; to study the experience of jihadists; and to learn about the war waged

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against them in Afghanistan and Pakistan that differs only slightly from the situation in Syria. We believe that a study of this nature will show that defeating or containing the extremist groups will only succeed if a genuine coalition is forged with the local communities that harbour vital enmity towards these organisations and their totalitarian tendencies. However, the effectiveness of these factors will disappear – or backfire – if the current superficial and ill-advised policies continue. A flagrant example of such wrong policies is that of the tribes that waged an exceedingly bitter war against IS in 2014, losing around 1700 young men in the process. The only support they received was under the wing of Kurdish factions and their leaders; the fact that they were prevented from forming their own factions weakened their status and popularity among the local Arab population who began to see them as schemers ready to ally themselves to anyone seeking control of their regions. Sympathy shifted to IS, who professed to defend them from the greed of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, whose ambition was seen as being to take their land and use it to build a Kurdish state.

The solution thus also requires that the Syrian people, and the inhabitants of the north-eastern region in particular, regain their ability to exercise their political rights, determine their own fate and, through genuine and tangible measures, bring an end to the propaganda for a global war against Sunni Arabs. If this does not happen, the region’s inhabitants will continue to feel a deep sense of injustice and persecution that the jihadists will seize and skilfully turn into a tool of systematic destruction. Care should also be given to development policies in this region, devastated despite its huge potential, that require a safe climate and effective guidance and management. The lack of opportunities for a decent life, compounded by widespread illiteracy, ignorance, and the absence of social justice, will continue to be a combustible mixture waiting for the first spark to ignite.

North-eastern Syria’s complex problems require, above all, the help of its well-educated citizens, support from the regional countries concerned, and cooperation with the active international powers impacted by events on the ground (such as those targeted by migration). Without cooperation among these parties, the region will continue to be an arena of multiple and endless conflicts which will not remain confined and may prove become impossible to control. The world would then then have to face a new form of ideological violence “beyond Islamic State,”
just as the latter has evolved from an al-Qaeda organisation in Iraq which many thought had been defeated by comprehensive military strikes, only to re-emerge as an invigorated and more cohesive entity, able to take advantage of the devastated social structures of destroyed towns and cities.
About the author

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