Supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

ResearchReport

March 2022

Rethinking Governance – Insights from Syria during Covid-19

روجين عثمان

© Rujin Uthman

Juline Beaujouan, Abdulah El hafi, Eyas Ghreiz and Ayham Odat

Acknowledgements

This research is an output from the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), a partner in the Covid Collective. This research builds on a body of work that developed as part of the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP). Supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The Collective brings together the expertise of UK and Southern-based research partner organisations and offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19 related development challenges.

Opinions stated in this brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Covid Collective, its partners, or FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the author and PeaceRep. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the PeaceRep website.

Thanks are due to Christine Bell for peer review and editorial advice and to Harriet Cornell for editing and production work. Thanks to the Blue Team and Civilization Team for illustrating the report with original artwork.

We would like to thank Amin Al-Zoubi for for providing the translation of this report from English into Arabic.

The research would not have been possible without the courageous and crucial support of researchers and informers inside Syria, including Douha al-Jazzar, Arafa al-Mousa, Randa Ashour, Maryam Taher, Abdul Qadir Hajj Othman, Ahmed Walid al-Nasser, Muaz Ahmad Al Abdullah and many more who expressed the wish to remain unnamed. The authors are indebted to these persons' commitment to high research standards and search for truth in a county torn apart by a decade-long conflict and a pandemic.

Authors hereby thank all the people who trusted the research team and took the time to participate in this study despite their predicament.

© 2021

institute of
development
studies

THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
Edinburgh Law School

Institute for Development Studies (IDS)
Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE
United Kingdom
Email: ids@ids.ac.uk
www.ids.ac.uk
@IDS_UK

The University of Edinburgh, School of Law
Old College, South Bridge
Edinburgh, EH8 9YL
United Kingdom
Email: PoliticalSettlements@ed.ac.uk
www.politicalsettlements.org
@PolSettlements

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acronyms 1
List of Maps and Figures 2
Key Findings 3
Recommendations 5
Introduction 6
Methodology & Socio-demographic Data 11
The Main Impact of Covid-19 in Syria – A Local Perspective 14
Emergency Governance to Confront Covid-19 25
Civil Society Developments During the Pandemic 33
The Relationship Between Civil Society and Government Institutions 51
The Weak Role of Military Actors 57
The Exclusion of Tribal and Religious Leaders 59
Conclusion 63
References 65

This report is illustrated by young Syrian artists who live in northwest Syria and collaborated with the authors to offer powerful insights into the daily lives of Syrian people during the pandemic in 2021. Their artworks show the compounded difficulties of coping with Covid-19 while living in a country at war, but also the resilience and hopes of the Syrian people. More information about the collaboration and the work of the artists can be found on the PeaceRep website. Their art is also part of an ongoing public exhibition at The University of Edinburgh's Law School, Old College https://www.politicalsettlements.org/2021/04/22/young-artists-illustrate-life-in-syrian-opposition-held-areas/.

ACRONYMS

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

Civil Society Organisation (CSO)

Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)

Democratic Union Party (PYD)

Early Warning Network and Response Network (EWARN)

Early Warning and Response System (EWARS)

Governmental Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOS)

Health and Environment Authority (HEA)

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Health and Environment Authority (HEA)

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

Idlib Health Directorate (IHD)

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO)

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Local Civil Society (LCS)

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)

Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP)

Preparedness and Response Plan (PRP)

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC)

Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)

Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)

Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Syrian Expatriates Medical Association (SEMA)

Syrian Interim Government (SIG)

Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)

Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD)

United Nations (UN)

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)

World Health Organization (WHO)

LIST OF MAPS & FIGURES

Table 1: World Governance Indicators per country in the Middle East region (2020)

Map 1: Administrative division of Syria

Figure 1: Have you personally been in contact with any local CSOs since March 2020? (Aleppo & Idlib)

Figure 2: Did your organisation collaborate with other CSOs during the pandemic? (Aleppo & Idlib)

Figure 3: In your opinion, did actions of local civil society during the pandemic … (Aleppo & Idlib)

Figure 4: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Aleppo)

Figure 5: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Idlib)

Figure 6: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Daraa)

Figure 7: Have you personally been in contact with any local CSOs since March 2020? (Daraa)

Figure 8: In your opinion, did actions of local civil society … during the pandemic (Daraa)

Figure 9: Did your organisation collaborate with other CSOs during the pandemic? (Daraa)

Figure 10: Have you been in contact with any local CSO since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020? (Raqqa)

Figure 11: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Raqqa)

Figure 12: In your opinion, did actions of local civil society … during the pandemic (Raqqa)

Figure 13: Did your organisation collaborate with other CSOs during the pandemic? (Raqqa)

Figure 14: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions /civil society (Aleppo)

Figure 15: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions /civil society (Idlib)

Figure 16: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions /civil society (Daraa)

Figure 17: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions /civil society (Raqqa)

KEY FINDINGS

- **The main impacts of Covid-19 were observed in the education and economy sectors**

The effects of a decade of conflict were compounded by Covid-19 across the four governorates under study (Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, Raqqa). The closure of borders and suspension of usual economic life had strong repercussions on grassroots livelihoods and tensions at family and community levels. The pandemic also prevented thousands of school-age children and university students from pursuing their education, despite a tentative move of classrooms online. Dire economic conditions and the absence of education are potential factors that can create further popular grievances and increase the ranks of military groups, thereby fuelling the Syrian conflict.

- **All governance systems across Syria failed to use Covid-19 as an opportunity to reinforce their legitimacy and attract public support**

The pandemic revealed the limited capabilities of government institutions in the face of health emergencies. While opposition governments in northeast and northwest Syria failed to emerge as reliable service providers and alternatives to the Syrian regime, the latter securitised its response and attempted to further squeeze the opposition. Public perceptions of governance systems were generally negative, while official representatives acknowledged, often indirectly, that their response was limited by factors ranging from political influence to lack of financial and material resources.

- **Emergency governance was more efficient at the local level during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The failure of governmental institutions across Syria to protect civilians against the pandemic must be nuanced, as local institutions scored better than central institutions in terms of emergency governance. In opposition-held Aleppo and Idlib, local councils adopted a pro-active and cooperative approach to the mitigation of the crises, while communes in Raqqa governorates assumed key responsibilities in the implementation of Covid-19 relief measures and the provision of relief to grassroots. In Daraa, provincial and municipal institutions – often gathered in Corona Committees – were at the forefront of efforts to control the spread of the virus.

- **Potential non-state actors of governance were generally excluded from the emergency response to Covid-19**

Local civil society, military groups and clan elders and religious leaders were not fully identified and utilised in the official response to the Covid-19 across the four governorates under study. Two exceptions can be noted. First, the pandemic and the lack of capabilities of opposition governments set the stage for the emergence of local civil society as another non-state actor of governance – with a focus on providing healthcare and social services – in northwest Syria. Second, tribal leaders and, more generally, notables in Daraa used their historically important social role to initiate and coordinate local civilian responses to Covid-19. Both actors provided across-the-board support to grassroots populations and garnered high levels of public trust.

- **Civil society is multi-faceted across Syria and its nature and actions during the Covid-19 pandemic greatly depended on its relation with central governance institutions.**

If there are four different systems of governance in Syria, one could say that there are four types of civil society, in which nature and actions differed greatly during the pandemic. Northwest Syria provides an example of the most independent, proactive, and local form of civil society in Syria. Reversely, it is difficult to differentiate civil society from the Syrian regime in Daraa, where the actions of domestic and foreign civil society are approved and controlled by governmental institutions. Governmental control over local civil society is also tight in Raqqa where local CSOs were not given the space to emerge as actors of relief and service provision during the pandemic.

- **Levels of trust generally declined against all actors in Syria, with the exception of grassroots communities and local civil society in the northwest of the country**

Central government institutions across the four systems of governance did not gain public trust during the pandemic, due to pre-existing distrust and their inability to efficiently mitigate the impact of the pandemic proactively and transparently. Military groups were generally not trusted and excluded from the Covid-19 response across the four governorates under study. Civil society gained little trust during the pandemic, except in northwest Syria where public perceptions of local civil society were very positive. Trust and inter-reliance of grassroots communities increased across Syria due to the crucial role of civilian volunteer initiatives and local social solidarity between family and neighbours.

- **Acts of social solidarity and the emergence of Corona Committees, especially in Daraa governorate, proved that Syrian social unity is not out of reach**

While the impact of Covid-19 created a number of social tensions across Syria, between host and displaced communities for instance, the pandemic did foster social solidarity and cohesion and saw the emergence of volunteer initiatives involving individuals across identities and affiliations. In addition to crossing invisible identity lines, social solidarity crossed national borders and the Syrian expatriate community participated in the collective effort of mitigation and protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research suggests the following general recommendations relevant to the international community, humanitarian workers, and central and local governmental institutions across Syria:

- Encourage inclusive response mechanisms, based on the model of ad hoc civilian initiatives such as Corona Committees, to coordinate the response between governmental and other social actors and provide a more unified response that avoids favouring some areas and populations at the expense of others.

- Develop regional and cross-regional strategic emergency plans to design and implement the response to crises and emergencies quickly and efficiently, and allocate an emergency disasters reserve fund to central and local governmental institutions.

- Despite years of conflict, people still look at the Syrian state and/or opposition institutions performing state functions as the actors that are responsible for mitigating emergencies. There is an urgent need to unify emergency governance across Syria and build institutional bridges between the local levels of governance, especially in the northwest of the country. The role of local and municipal councils must be strengthened as well as their ability to face emergencies, building on experience gained during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Foster self-reliance of grassroots communities, especially in Daraa where grassroots communities could not rely on capable and impartial government institutions nor civil society organisations. This can be done by enhancing local skills to cultivate abandoned agricultural lands, developing local industries, and acquiring 'local' knowledge on the pandemic by hiring medical students and funding medical research centres. Self-reliance can also be encouraged through the development of online commercial and educational online tools and skills.

- Open communication channels between local governmental institutions and grassroots communities to foster civilian support of safety measures and activate a participatory approach to the response to crises. A participatory approach to emergency governance must involve citizens in decision-making and in local governance institutions such as municipalities and provincial councils. Official and independent media have an important role to play in regard to the dissemination of emergency policy and should be used as channels to justify and clarify emergency policies adopted by local and central government institutions.

- Create a legal framework to support and control the implementation of emergency measures enacted by governmental institutions at the central and local levels. Implementation should be supervised by police forces affiliated with local institutions rather than military and intelligence forces. This legal framework should also provide protection and support to frontline workers during emergencies.

INTRODUCTION

This report builds on a previous study led by Dr. Juline Beaujouan at the University of Edinburgh, assisted by two of her colleagues – Abdallah El hafi and Eyas Ghreiz – on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on local peace dynamics in northwest Syria, namely northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates which moved from the control of the Syrian regime in 2013. These initial findings were collected in a policy brief and a report under the common title 'Covid-19: Tool of Conflict or Opportunity for Local Peace in Northwest Syria?' published by the Political Settlements Research Programme (predecessor to PeaceRep) at the University of Edinburgh in July 2021.

The report concluded that the pandemic did not reinforce existing tensions and conflict dynamics, but highlighted several structural challenges to durable peace in opposition-held areas. On the one hand, relations between the Syrian government and opposition groups remained rather stable throughout the pandemic, despite repetitive breaches of the Idlib ceasefire by the Syrian regime and the Russian military. On the other, Covid-19 further damaged political trust in both the national government and opposition institutions, and highlighted the need to integrate peacebuilding efforts towards sustainable peace into all emergency Covid-19 responses to mitigate the long-term adverse effects of the pandemic, such as the deteriorating economy and lack of education and opportunities.

The report also developed an analysis of how, despite early mitigation measures and a proactive stance, opposition governance institutions in northwest Syria were unable to offer effective governance alternatives to the Syrian regime during the Covid-19 health emergency. Both the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and Salvation Government (SSG) failed to provide healthcare and social services, corner the international aid market, and gain independence from military and state sponsors. Their attempts to mitigate the pandemic were further hindered by al-Assad's regime, which blocked international aid routes in an attempt to squeeze the opposition further.

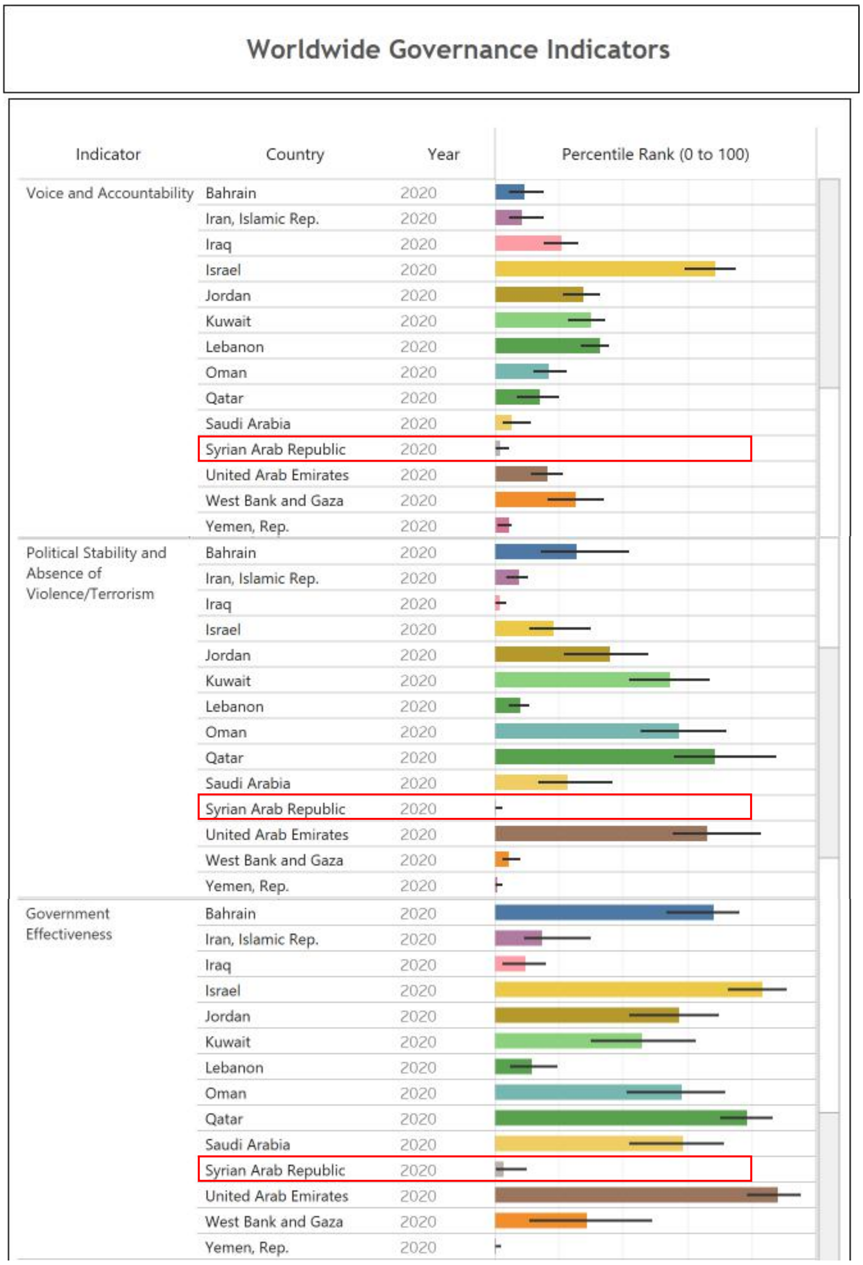
In this context, Covid-19 fostered community-engagement activities and bottom-up governance where local civil society (LCS) in northwest Syria emerged as a more legitimate, inclusive, and grounded non-state agent of governance, compared to the opposition governments in the northwest of the country. Given the results obtained during the first study and its prime access to uncovered data and local governance dynamics in Syria, the research team decided to expand the initial study and deepen the analysis of emergency governance across Syria during the Covid-19 pandemic by extending the research to Daraa and Raqqa governorates.

Governance in Syria Before Covid-19

When Covid-19 officially hit Syria in March 2020, the country had the lowest world governance indicators in the Middle East region (Table 1), scoring the lowest ranking neighbours for each indicator except government effectiveness where it is just headed of behind Yemen (Kaufmann et al., 2010).

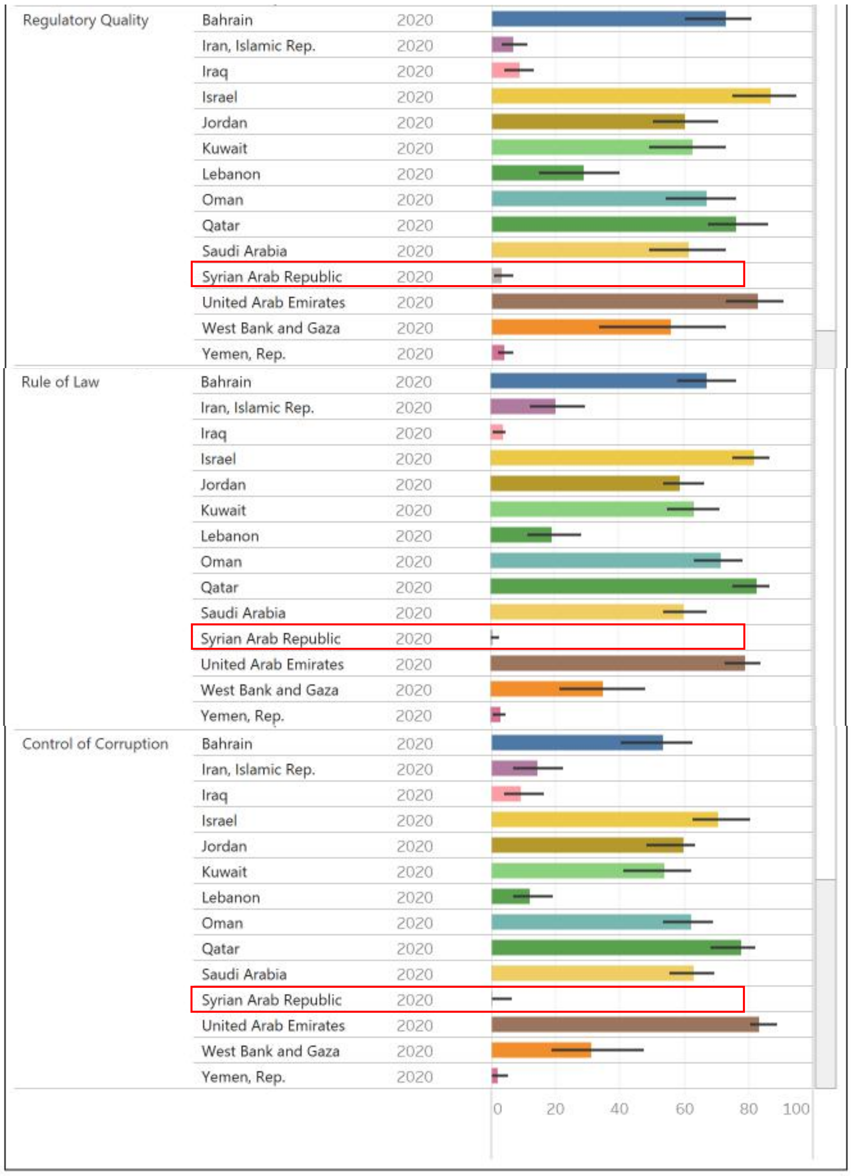
In addition to poor governance performances, in 2019, months before Covid-19 hit Syria, the country also had the lowest Global Health Security Index score (19.9) in the Middle East region, ranking 188 out of 195 countries in terms of health safety (Global Health Security Index, 2019)[1]. Besides the destruction and fragmentation of the health system, the country also suffered a shortage of health workforce – of which 70% is believed to have left the country – leaving a crippled healthcare system operating at around 60% of its capacity (OHCHR, 2020).

Table 1: World Governance Indicators per country in the Middle East region (2020)



---

[1] At the time the report was published in March 2022, Syria's index score decreased to 16.7 and the country was ranked 192 out of 195 in terms of health safety.



Source: Kaufmann et al., 2010

Syria's Fragmented Governance

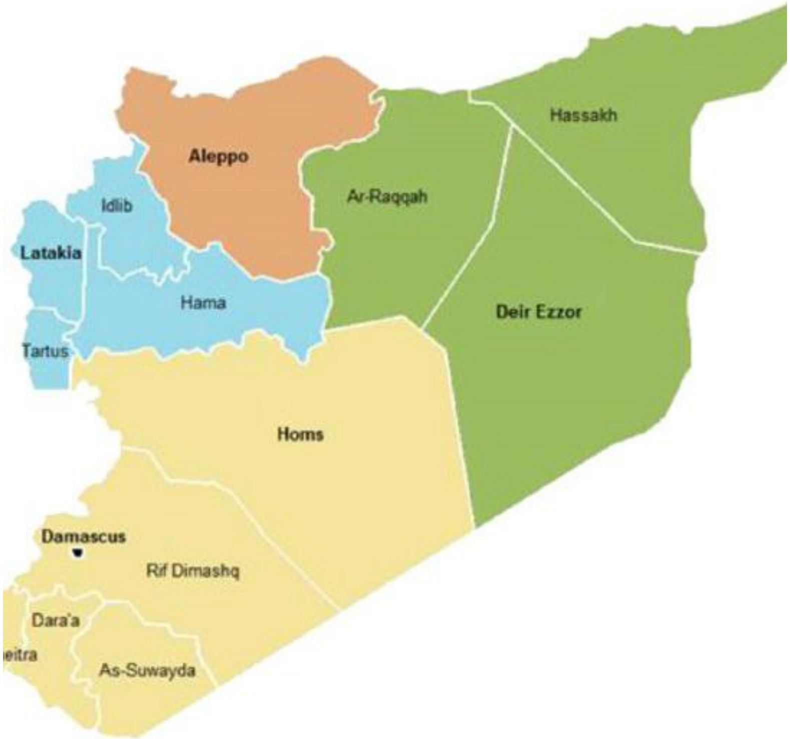
In the aim to deepen the analysis of emergency governance during the Covid-19 pandemic, and assisted by eight field researchers, the authors launched a new project across four governorates and systems of governance: Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib and Raqqa (Map 1). These four governorates are contested by several political bodies and military groups, and none is under the control of a single governance institution. While political bodies and armed groups claim the official control over these areas, governance in Syria, especially in the north and southwest of the country, is extremely localised and fragmented.

In the northwest, the report focuses on the areas of Aleppo and Idlib governorates that are under the control of SIG and SSG opposition systems and their affiliated armed groups, respectively the

Turkish-affiliated National Army – a coalition of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Salafi-jihadi factions – and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition of Salafi-jihadi groups that include the former branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, the al-Nusra Front. In Raqqa governorate, the report scrutinizes the emergency response offered in the territories administered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava, and its military arm, the Kurdish forces People's Protection Units (YPG) that are considered a terrorist group by the Turkish and Syrian governments. Finally, Daraa, in the southeast of Syria, officially returned under the control of the Syrian government in 2018 but effectively remains divided into spheres of military influence and hosts a number of opposition military groups. As such, the four cases chosen for this study reflect the fragmentation of the Syrian territory and its governance system, or what the authors like to call the 'four Syrias' (Map 2).

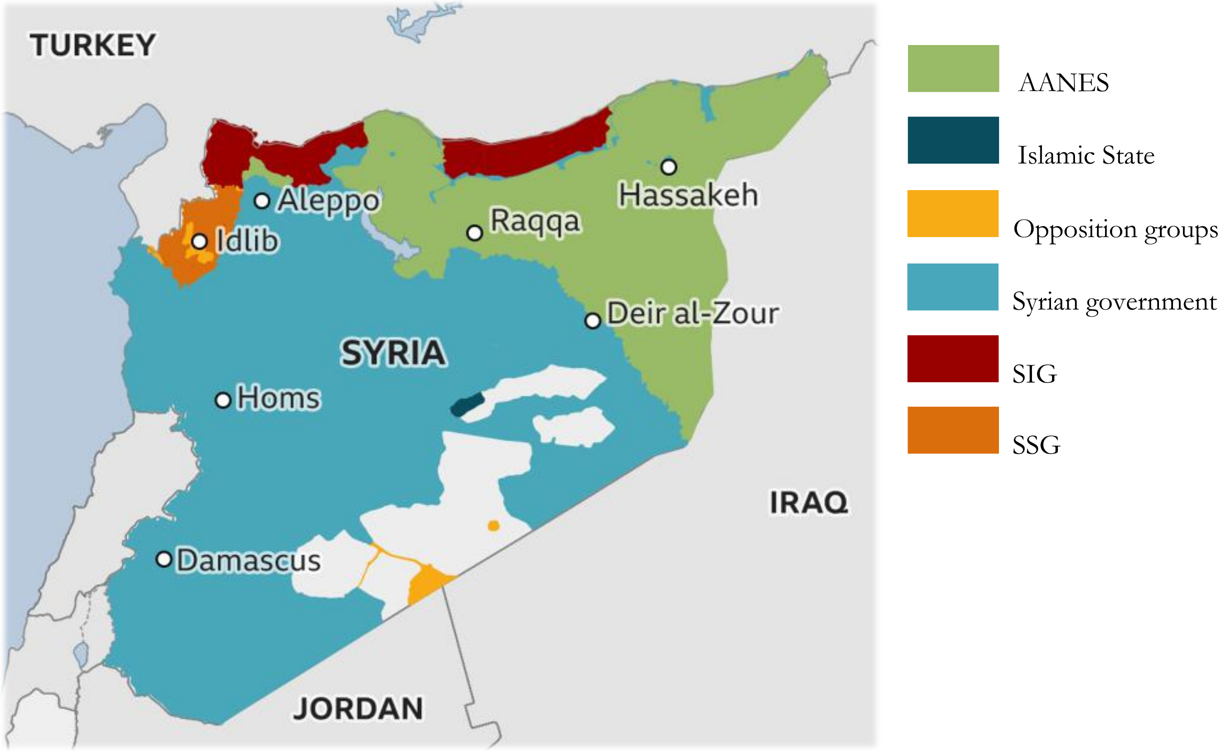
The fragmentation of the Syrian territories and governance system has been perpetuated by the conflict ongoing since 2011, and this had direct consequences for responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Most strikingly, the pandemic was dealt with by different policies enacted at the sub-national level, with little or no collaboration between opposition governmental bodies, and between central and opposition governments. Hence, the main question this study attempted to address was: *How did each governance system adapt to the emergency created by Covid-19?*

Map 1: Administrative division of Syria (regions and governorates)



Source: Doocy et al., 2012

Map 2: Territorial fragmentation and military spheres of influence in Syria (2021)



Source: Based on Janes Conflict Monitor, 2021

Our first report focused on the cases of the two opposition governments in northwest Syria, and this research showed that 'traditional' internationally-recognised and opposition governance systems failed to present themselves as the single actor in charge of the pandemic. This presents the question: *what is the implication of their failure on the governance landscape within their area of control?* As a result, the research in this report does not only focus on state government institutions but also on potential sources of non-state government actors across Syria, notably civil society, and on military groups and social leaders such as tribal and religious representatives. Finally, this second report acts as a pilot study for further in-depth research into the relationship between each of these governance actors across the four governorates under study.

The aim of this research is to offer a comparative study on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in general, as well as on the development of local, non-state forms of governance actors – LCS in particular – and their relations with state government institutions. The comparative approach of the research offers to assess whether studied dynamics were the same or different depending on which governance systems and actors were in control of the response to the pandemic. The comparative methodology is central to this research, and in using this approach, the authors provide a comprehensive investigation that acknowledges the fragmentation of the Syrian territory, its populations and governance systems. This report provides a comprehensive collection of data from its investigation, laying the groundwork for cross-fertilisation of Syrian experiences during the pandemic.

After highlighting local perspectives of the main impacts of Covid-19 on Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib and Raqqa governorates, this report offers an overview of governmental responses to the pandemic in each system of governance. It then looks at how LCS developed over the past 18 months, paying particular attention to the notion of independence and grassroots perceptions of LCS's (re)action in comparison to that of the government. This report also focuses on the role of other non-state potential governance actors – namely tribal and religious leaders and armed groups – and their relationship with state institutions, or opposition institutions performing state roles in the case of north Syria. Crucially, the report suggests several recommendations and avenues for further research on emergency and rebel governance.

METHODOLOGY & SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The data presented in this report were collected between March 2021 and August 2021 in Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, and Raqqa governorates. The authors were assisted by eight research assistants – two per governorate – to conduct interviews and collect primary data. A total of 159 interviews were conducted either via telephone to lessen the risks associated with Covid-19 (especially during imposed periods of confinement) or in person when governments loosened Covid-19 restrictions and the study could be conducted safely in this way.

The research team targeted four categories of respondents: i/ members of the civil society whom are both formally affiliated with a government or operating informally, that is, without an accreditation; ii/ official representatives of the government at the central and local level, and political representatives; iii/ grassroots communities, that is, ordinary individuals who are not part of any of the three other categories under study; iv/ community representatives or 'notables', namely tribal and religious leaders. The research team adapted to the specificities of the field in each governorate to mitigate access challenges to these groups.

	Civil Society	Government	Grassroots	Tribe/Sect	**Total**
Aleppo	16	10	10	5	41
Daraa	19	11	6	4	40
Idlib	16	10	10	4	40
Raqqa	13	10	11	4	38
Total	65	41	36	17	**159**

Efforts were made to provide a representative sample of the Syrian society by including 48.6% of women respondents, as well as internally displaced communities and ethnic and religious minorities (i.e. Yazidi, Christians). Including women in the research was one of the greatest challenges experienced by the research team, because a high number of female potential participants refused to take part in the study for fear of reprisal or intimidation from armed groups and officials.

	MEN	WOMEN
ALEPPO	28	13
DARAA	25	15
IDLIB	28	12
RAQQA	26	12
Total	**107**	**52**

Another key challenge was to access reliable sources of information in the four groups, with the exception of civil society due to its involvement in the response to the pandemic across Syria. On a few occasions, researchers' questions led to the embarrassment of official representatives of key Ministries in the fight against Covid-19, because they were unable to provide accurate information about the pandemic and required the help of less qualified staff to answer questions. Despite concerns over the response rate of government officials, only in rare cases did officials refuse to take part in the research for fear of disclosing information about their government. In Daraa, which is effectively under mixed control of the Syrian government and opposition forces, the research team managed to conduct interviews without previous approval of the Syrian regime. Moreover, regime-affiliated official representatives in Daraa showed great willingness to meet field researchers and speak freely about the Syrian government's response to the pandemic but also its relations with civil society and grassroots communities.

In Idlib and Aleppo, the relative absence of SSG and SIG's central institutions in the emergency response to Covid-19 prompted the research team to focus its efforts towards high-ranked and junior government employees working at the local level and directly involved with the implementation of Covid-19-related measures. The research team faced the greatest challenges in Raqqa, where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) impose tight control on any activity within the governorate and the government grants interviews to exclusively licensed organisations and few key individuals. The pre-existing networks of field researchers among government officials were thus crucial to successfully conducting the research in Raqqa in particular and across Syria in general, whilst these challenges explain why this report's analysis from Raqqa is comparatively less detailed than that from the other governates.

As for community leaders, initial responses to interview requests highlighted the general lack of interest and their lesser role in dealing with the impact of Covid-19, alongside the widespread perception that the pandemic is a conspiracy and therefore does not exist. These points will be developed further in the analysis in this report. While these constitute important findings and were included in the study, the research team strove to access tribal and religious leaders who could offer a different perspective, that is opinions of community leaders who took the pandemic seriously and acted accordingly at the individual or collective level to confront Covid-19.

Grassroots communities were the most fearful and hardest to access group for the researchers, and many voluntarily limited their answers by offering vague and descriptive accounts of their perceptions and relations with governmental actors and armed groups. The imprecision of these answers also reflects the general lack of grassroots knowledge on the official response to Covid-19 and the absence of dialogue with governmental institutions and, to a lesser extent, civil society. In other words, the answers of grassroots communities and the three other targeted groups (civil society, political representatives, community leaders) were analysed in light of the authors' local knowledge of the Syrian context to provide a critical and nuanced account of the impact of Covid-19 on governance. Triangulating responses also enabled the research team to build up a fuller picture of the impact of Covid-19, including how Syrian people perceived it and why.

All quotations included in the report have been anonymised to protect the safety of participants and help them free their voices in a country where all state and opposition governance actors fail to provide safe spaces to citizens to exercise the freedom of speech theoretically guaranteed by the constitution. Most importantly, the names of all participants have been changed, and those of several LCS organisations have also been scrapped from findings.

It is important to state again that the findings and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the field researchers. The findings presented in this report remain specific to the governorates where the study was conducted and should not be generalised to the rest of Syria. This is particularly true with regard to the response of the Syrian regime, whose Covid-19 policy varied greatly according to the governorate where it was implemented and the history of loyalty or opposition of populations living in these territories.

Dona Alhamoud

© Dona al Hamoud

THE MAIN IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN SYRIA – A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

While Syrians have already lived through a decade of war, the Covid-19 pandemic added more weight to the psychological burden on individuals and groups. Concerns were especially high for people with chronic diseases and IDPs living inside camps in the northwest due to overcrowding and the lack of infrastructure, running water, and hygiene rules. Across Syria, the fear of contracting the virus was reinforced by the spread of rumours and misinformed news that contributed to the demoralisation of those who contracted Covid-19.

The 159 participants in the research were asked about the main impact of Covid-19 on their lives and that of their communities. As a result, the findings below give insight into the results of local perceptions on the individual and collective consequences of the pandemic. Where participants outlined similar dynamics across governorates, their insights have not been differentiated according to geography; and where they gave different responses, local variations have been highlighted in the form of concrete examples from Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib and Raqqa governorates.

The research team was particularly interested in the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, education, and gender-based violence; these three issues being identified as potential strong drivers and/or indicators of local conflict. Researchers identified 12 respondents per governorate – two per issue among civil society and governmental institutions – with specific knowledge of these issues. Regardless of these particular research interests, the economic and educational fields were commonly cited by participants across geographies and identities as the most impacted fields during and due to the pandemic.

Economy

Covid-19 led to the deterioration of the economy, as indicated by the uncontrolled rise in prices in general and food and medical supplies in particular, such as masks and hand sanitiser. In Daraa for instance, the rise in prices was denounced by a volunteer with the Red Crescent: '*The face mask was about 5 Syrian pounds before the arrival of the virus in Syria, today [July 2021] its price is 500 Syrian pounds and a pack of general disinfectant reached 10,000 Syrian pounds [over GBP 15]*'. High prices were a result of increased demand and low supply due to the closing of international borders and interruption to imports to Syria. In Aleppo governorate, a tradesman whose activity revolved around coffee imports before the pandemic explained: '*At the beginning of the pandemic, borders with Turkey were closed and trade decreased. When borders re-opened, fees for international freight and transport increased which was reflected in the price of goods. Hence, we witnessed several waves of price increase in the governorate*'. His account was echoed in Idlib by an employee in a leading civil society organisation (CSO) who pointed to the increased costs of transportation from China.

China is also the main market for goods that are channelled to north Syria via Turkey. Merchants bring these goods through formal and informal border crossings which are managed by different political and military authorities under different regulations. Finally, agricultural goods that are usually produced in the northwest and exported to Turkey and Rojava could not be channelled via legal routes when border crossings were closed to stop the spread of the virus. These goods flooded local markets in Aleppo and Idlib, which led to a decrease in their price and considerable financial loss for farmers.

Concerns over the rise in prices predate the Covid-19 pandemic: the value of the Syrian lira has declined dramatically over a decade of conflict and its devaluation accelerated most recently due to the economic crisis in Lebanon, and the enforcement of the Caesar Act (Chokr, 2021). Over the past two years (September 2019-September 2021), the Syrian lira lost around 750% of its value (Ibid). The collapse of the Syrian currency affected all governorates regardless of the system of governance. Yet, it had a stronger impact in Aleppo due to the important trade between the governorate and Turkey, the use of the Turkish lira as a common currency, and the absence of a fixed exchange rate.

> ***'The smuggling and trade routes between regime-held areas and Idlib governorate were monopolised by some traders in coordination with influential people in the de-facto [Syrian Salvation Government] authority during the confinement. These traders managed to impose themselves as sole sources of supply to public institutions and companies, thereby controlling prices and quantities'.***

In addition to the contracting Syrian economy, several respondents across all groups denounced the role of individual traders whom they thought were responsible for the increase in prices during the pandemic. Unnamed traders were accused of monopolising medical supplies such as gloves and sterilisers and controlling prices in unregulated ways – with the help of corrupted administrative staff within local government institutions. The connivance was confirmed by a member of the Idlib Chamber of Commerce on condition of anonymity: '*The smuggling and trade routes between regime-held areas and Idlib governorate were monopolised by some traders in coordination with influential people in the de-facto [Syrian Salvation Government] authority during the confinement. These traders managed to impose themselves as sole sources of supply to public institutions and companies, thereby controlling prices and quantities*'. The corruption of governmental institutions allegedly prevented the adoption of punitive measures even though local governmental representatives in all governorates ensured that malicious traders and companies faced legal prosecutions and the cancelling of their accreditations.

In addition to internal dynamics, participants in Aleppo and Daraa governorates pointed to the decrease in cash flow sent by relatives abroad during the first months of the pandemic – Syrian expatriates being major financiers of the local Syrian economy. Between January and June 2020, the Covid-19 virus was spreading across the world, causing massive disruption and forcing the great majority of the working population across the world to interrupt its professional activities. At the same time, '*many of [Azaz] city's residents [in opposition-held Aleppo governorate] not only depend on the support of the international community but cash remittance from family members who live and work abroad*'.

Beyond territories held by opposition political and military groups, the reliance of citizens on the Syrian expatriate community applies to the whole country. The accrued economic vulnerability resulting from lesser cash flows to Syria was compounded by the shifting emergency policies of humanitarian organisations during the pandemic, as explained by the member of a CSO in Idlib: '*In the recent period, relief baskets that used to be distributed by international organisations were replaced with hygiene baskets to help people face the pandemic. But this only increased the economic impact of the virus, especially in [IDP] camps where residents depend on the relief basket, which they receive monthly*'. In other words, while hygiene products are essential to fight the virus and protect people, they do not replace other vital products, such as food, neither do they increase the capacity of Syrians without a source of income to feed their families.

Indeed, the stagnation of the Syrian economy was also attributed to the low consumption during the confinement periods and the weak purchasing power resulting from the cessation of work, the international cash assistance programme, and international remittances. In Raqqa governorate for instance, as of March 2020, while Covid-19 has not reached north-east Syria it has already caused the suspension of food voucher distributions to 3,283 households, as well as cash for work and cash for food activities in Raqqa city (NES Forum, 2020: 7)

'The Corona epidemic and the periods of confinement particularly affected the working class, whose strength depends on physical effort, and for whom it is necessary to go outside the house to earn a living'.

Across the four governorates under study, the main economic impact of the pandemic was particularly strong on the poorest households, that is, the working class in general and daily workers in particular (al-Arab, 2020). A resident of Idlib city told the authors: '*The Corona epidemic and the periods of confinement particularly affected the working class, whose strength depends on physical effort, and for whom it is necessary to go outside the house to earn a living*'. The rise of unemployment was one of the most cited effects of the pandemic across all governorates and categories of participants. The despair of the poorest segments of the Syrian population to secure a living during the pandemic led to the increase in exploitation practices by a number of factories, and more worrying, to the recruitment of child labour with meagre salaries, especially in the north of the country where the spread of Covid-19 is believed to have doubled the number of out-of-school children (Save the Children, 2020).

The economic impact of the pandemic led directly to accrued social tensions and conflicts from homes to market squares. Across Syria, conflicts between the displaced and resident populations increased because the former received more attention and assistance but also because of the lack of food and other basic necessities. A farmer who was displaced to Daraa from Damascus narrated: '*During the quarantine period, I contracted Covid-19, which forced me to isolate for a while until I recovered. When I could finally leave my house, I visited I piece of land I own and where I grow crops. There, I found that nomads had brought their sheep herd that had eaten a large part of my crop*'. In other instances, the inability of shop owners and private renters to pay their rents to their landlords created tensions, albeit relatively minor ones. Moreover, some respondents claimed that the pandemic reinforced social conflicts because it widened the gap between social classes, where wealthier families could afford medical treatment in neighbouring countries and to purchase essential health products, unlike poorer families.

The deterioration of the economy during the pandemic led several respondents to wonder about the longer-term impact of Covid-19 on the country. Such concern was voiced by a psychological counsellor working for a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Raqqa: '*Poverty will create a generation that does not believe in peaceful coexistence and freedom of thought and beliefs, which might lead to an endless conflict*'. His concerns were echoed by the manager of a Women's House affiliated with the AANES: *'The birth of a generation suffering from ignorance and poverty creates the appropriate atmosphere for all kinds of sectarian, ideological or religious conflicts. In addition, development programmes that deal with ignorance and poverty have been halted by the pandemic'*.

> ***'Poverty will create a generation that does not believe in peaceful coexistence and freedom of thought and beliefs, which might lead to an endless conflict'.***

In addition to social tensions, the increase of poverty reinforced by Covid-19 led to the further deterioration of the general security situation, with the number of beggars, thefts and instances of kidnapping increasing across Syria, with disappearances reaching a peak in Daraa and neighbouring Suwayda governorates (Mardini, 2020; al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2021). It seems that the security situation was particularly impacted in Daraa governorate, arguably because of the highly contested nature of the territory. A member of staff in the Daraa Governorate Office told the authors: *'Covid led to the expansion of the range of militias, terrorists, and armed actors that worked to fill the governance void left by the Syrian government; they provide services to local communities. This crisis was an opportunity for these opposition actors to enhance their reputation and consolidate their positions*'.

Education

Education was cited as the second most affected sector during the pandemic across the four governorates under study, especially in northwest Syria where educational facilities were targeted by the Syrian-Russian military offensive launched on Idlib in April 2019. In rural areas and villages that used to be controlled by the opposition in Daraa before 2018, several participants also accused the Syrian government of being absent or ineffective, and to have failed to sterilise or rehabilitate schools in need, thereby preventing the return of children to the classroom. This lack of governmental action caused great public discontent and reinforced tensions between the grassroots population and the Syrian government.

While all governance systems under study faced the similar impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education sector, each of the four governments took slightly different approaches to deal with the challenge; although they all took the decision to close schools and universities for different periods of time and to transfer classrooms online. Yet, according to a number of participants, distanced education had a negative impact on the ability of students to commit to their education, due to the lack of familiarity with online methods, the bad internet coverage in Syria, and the lack of mobile devices for every student, especially the poorest ones. A teacher in a private school in Raqqa explained: '*Other countries have relied on online education, but in our country, we lack the means of communication and internet coverage to implement distance education*'. He feared that the loss of an educational year during the pandemic, which compounded the impact of a decade of conflict, '*will lead to the spread of ignorance and corruption for an entire generation*'.

> ***'Other countries have relied on online education, but in our country, we lack the means of communication and internet coverage to implement distance education'.***

Similarly, the director of higher education within Afrin Local Council in Aleppo governorate referred to the findings of a questionnaire his institution conducted with students about the experience of distance education, and that found that: '*Nearly half of the students in Afrin were not committed to attending distance education and believe that electronic classes cannot replace physical ones. Their answers showed that teachers need to develop their abilities in the field of distance education, and students do not have the technical skills to work with online educational software*'.

Faced with the challenges of traditional curriculum delivery and the low educational levels of students during Covid-19, the Directorate of Education in the local councils, in coordination with Turkish governors, took the decision to promote all school children to the next grade without taking exams across opposition-held Aleppo governorate. This decision, which was only taken in opposition-held Aleppo, was vehemently criticised by teachers and parents alike, as several families invested large sums of money to compensate for the lack of an adequate educational platform in order to bridge their children's educational gaps. Some hired private tutors while others choose to enrol their children in private schools not affiliated with any government institutions and that remained open during the pandemic. In Daraa for instance, parents were asked to pay an average of 25,000 Syrian pounds (about US$10) an hour, which added to the economic burden of families during the pandemic: '*The closure of schools during the periods of confinement caused a disparity between students according to the financial condition of their families. Some families were unable to enrol their children in capacity-building courses, and some were asking to pay the amount in instalments*'.

> ***'The closure of schools during the periods of confinement caused a disparity between students according to the financial condition of their families.***

In Aleppo governorate, a researcher at an education study centre noted that SIG's decision to interrupt education led to the increase of the role of the nine private schools in the opposition-held areas of Aleppo. These schools remained open throughout the pandemic but reduced the number of teaching hours and students in the classroom.

The economic impact of the pandemic had a direct consequence on the educational field. Responses show that several – mostly university – students were pushed to drop out of school to work and help their families secure a living. Yet, the depressed labour market conditions characterised by the general lack of opportunities and high rates of unemployment thwarted their efforts. A researcher at the Directorate of Education in al-Tarya told the authors that in Idlib, several students left the university to find a job instead, but they then enrolled in military factions and illegal activities increased. This last example sheds the light on the reinforcing link between the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on conflict dynamics in Syria.

Gender-based Violence

The impact of Covid-19 on women is difficult to assess, although several reports fed into a common narrative of evidence of the harsh life of women in the Middle East during the pandemic (Phelps, 2020; Roche, 2021; United Nations, 2021). In Syria, the prevailing patriarchal male society and a decade of conflict imposed a culture of silence on women victims of violence. As reminded by the founder of a local NGO that specialises in gender-based violence in Aleppo: *'Most women who are subjected to violence in general in society do not resort to psychological support and protection centres'*. She added that the pandemic made women more vulnerable: *'Some women feared that there would be tension in the family if the quarantine was imposed and indeed, we have received many cases of women who have been subjected to violence from their husbands during Corona'*.

The pandemic seems to have resulted in accrued tensions in the immediate family circle following the suspension of working activities and schools. Active women were particularly exposed to the stress generated by these changes because they now needed to manage both online work and distance education for their children, while undertaking their own domestic work. The research conducted in four Syrian governorates highlighted that domestic conflicts between men and women increased due to the increased presence of men inside the house following the interruption or loss of their professional activity. Instances of domestic violence at the hands of male household members did not only target wives, but also children and young women.

> ***'The pandemic led to the suspension of our work at the Centre and we could not receive any victim at our premises for a long period of time. Our activity became limited to the follow-up of existing cases via the internet while our tasks were re-oriented towards health awareness and the distribution of health baskets'.***

According to staff of women's protection centres and NGOs interviewed during the study, this increase in violence emerged from the psychological stress incurred by the pandemic and its consequences on the economic situation of families, but also from the decline in the role of protection organisations during the lockdown. A volunteer working in an Orthodox Christian charity in Daraa on cases of gender-based violence observed: *'The pandemic led to the suspension of our work at the Centre and we could not receive any victim at our premises for a long period of time. Our activity became limited to the follow-up of existing cases via the internet while our tasks were re-oriented towards health awareness and the distribution of health baskets'*. The absence of institutional and social protection for women was maybe more striking in Daraa, where tribal customs remain dominant and the society is particularly patriarchal compared to other Syrian governorates.

Several respondents also pointed to the higher rate of divorce during the quarantine period. One staff member working in the Women's Creativity Centre of one of the most prominent local NGOs in northwest Syria reflected that: *'Covid-19 resulted in the dispersion of some families and in general, we saw that the rate of divorces increased during the pandemic'*. In the same vein, in a radio show, the advisor to the Minister of Awqaf of the Syrian government estimated that the curfew period led to a five-fold increase in divorce cases across Syria. The number is debated and there are no official statistics to assert that the pandemic is a direct cause of family dispersion in Syria (al-Arab, 2020; Jumi, 2020). Yet, the recurrence of the topic in the media and the interviews conducted for the research demonstrates that the reported rising rate of divorce was and continues to be a prime concern resulting from the pandemic.

> ***'The war cost the lives of many and women who do not have a breadwinner became very vulnerable during Covid-19 because their despair to secure a living and feed their children led them to accept low wages and bad working conditions'.***

The vulnerability of women during the Covid-19 pandemic was also seen in the workplace. As explained by a woman's activist who volunteered with a Christian Orthodox charity in Daraa during the pandemic: *'The war cost the lives of many and women who do not have a breadwinner became very vulnerable during Covid-19 because their despair to secure a living and feed their children led them to accept low wages and bad working conditions'*. More participants across the four governorates under study echoed the high vulnerability of widows, whom were reported anecdotally to be the first population group to turn to begging to support themselves and their families during the pandemic.

Trust

The collected data shows that the pandemic did not cause a dramatic loss of trust in governmental institutions and decision-makers, but rather it underscored their already limited abilities and weaknesses across the country. This was true across governance systems. A media activist in Aleppo argued: *'The pandemic showed that opposition institutions in Aleppo governorate are weaker than they claim. During the pandemic, we saw the inability of the authorities to deal with the emergency but we also witnessed their lack of transparency in the number of Covid cases as well as the accusation of health authorities to falsifying the number of Covid-related deaths in hospitals'*. In the northwest of Syria, the lack of capacity of the health system was mainly attributable to intense bombing campaigns by the Syrian and Russian air forces, targeting health facilities across Idlib (HRW, 2020b). As explained by a doctor: *'The hospitals in the liberated areas, with their modest capabilities, are equipped to receive the wounded from the battles or bombing related to the conflict. Therefore, they are ill-equipped to face a pandemic such as Covid-19. This was a major challenge when we tried to plan a response plan to the pandemic ... and still is one'*.

> ***'Of course, our relationship with governmental institutions [in Raqqa governorate] changed because we were hoping for more attention and more care, but we did not receive even minimum assistance to overcome this crisis'.***

The research highlighted the AANES and the Syrian government suffered from a loss of legitimacy and trust more than the SIG and SSG. In Raqqa, a woman originally from Deir ez-Zour said: *'Of course, our relationship with governmental institutions changed because we were hoping for more attention and more care, but we did not receive even minimum assistance to overcome this crisis'*. Her account was echoed by a daily worker in Raqqa: *'During the pandemic, many people who live below the poverty line did not receive any assistance; there is not enough skilled medical staff to take care of sick people. Even in education, many children are in their teens and cannot read and write'*. The respondent then added that: *'There was no one to rely on in our place. Frankly, I think that there is a lack of interest [in helping grassroots]'*.

Similar accounts were collected in Daraa where Covid-19 centres were suspected of issuing false tests results and vaccination certificates and providing differentiated treatments to patients. An IDP farmer in Daraa governorate recalled a telling example: *'One of my relatives had a conflict with the nursing staff in the health centre in the Daraa [city] because they refused to take care of his mother who was suffering from Corona. They said that they did not have the necessary means to treat her. If it was not for the donations of locals to the smaller [anonymised] hospital that managed to provide oxygen to patients, so many people like my relative's mom would have died'*.

The account of government officials across the four governorates greatly differed from those provided by grassroots and civil society organisations. This was especially the case in Daraa, where several official representatives and workers in state institutions argued that the pandemic was an opportunity that to bridge the gap created by the conflict between the state and its citizens. According to these interviewees, the efficiency of institutions to provide services in the midst of the pandemic, and the continuation of work via online platforms, were key reasons for the reinforced trust afforded to them by grassroots individuals.

Yet, and while showing confidence about their legitimacy, some official representatives also acknowledged the public discontent in governance performances. In Daraa, an employee in the Chamber of Commerce regretted: *'Citizens accused the [Syrian] government of exploiting the crisis without realising that the government is doing everything it can to secure treatment and vaccines for all'*. The general belief that the virus was an invention aimed at serving the political elite was certainly well-spread across Syria and another expression of the distrust in governance institutions, whether affiliated with the Syrian state or the opposition. As a result of the mistrust of Syrians towards official media affiliated with governments, grassroots populations turned to social media for information and this supplanted all other official local channels as the main source of information about Covid-19 pandemic.

> *‘Corona has proven that the problems exist and the division is real between the rural and city communities, the diaspora and the resident community, and the majority and minority community, especially when we talk about the fair distribution of services’.*

Finally, and despite accounts of social cohesion as a mitigating measure in the face of the pandemic, Covid-19 also reinforced social mistrust to some extent. This is especially the case in the northwest where displaced Syrians outnumber host communities. In this regard, the northwest can be described as a ‘miniature of Syria’. In Aleppo governorate, for instance, rumours spread about the fact that medical staff residing in Turkey and working in northern Syria were spreading the virus and should thus be prevented from entering Syria without a negative test. In Aleppo governorate, where the population is composed of around 70% of displaced populations, a Yazidi cleric offered a gloomy summary of the social impact of the pandemic: *‘Corona has proven that the problems exist and the division is real between the rural and city communities, the diaspora and the resident community, and the majority and minority community, especially when we talk about the fair distribution of services’*. During this period, initiatives promoting or aiming to increase social cohesion were launched by different actors across the four governorates under study. In the northwest, a ‘professionalised’ civil society was very active in not only supporting the most vulnerable groups in the face of Covid-19 but also mitigating potential conflicts arising between communities. As a result, trust in LCS increased dramatically during the pandemic, while intra-group trust remained unchanged.

In Raqqa, the strong control of the AANES over local affairs and the level of decentralisation of the Autonomous Authority allowed citizens as a part of local political institutions – the Communes – to have a prime role in the identification of vulnerable individuals or families in need of support. While grassroots participants criticised the lack of interest ‘from the above’ – both in terms of political institutions and civil society organisations – these respondents also displayed a relative increase in other confidence in and the importance of strong social links to overcome emergencies. Social cohesion was maybe most fostered in Daraa governorate, especially in areas that only returned under the official control of the Syrian government after 2018. In these towns and villages, the absence of both strong state structures and a LCS independent from the Syrian state prompted social leaders to launch spontaneous and uncoordinated initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic at the local level. But the increase in social trust to the detriment of the Syrian government is not limited to former opposition areas. As the Syrian government instrumentalised the pandemic and used it as a tool of social control (a point developed later in this report), it also crippled the national response to Covid-19 and damaged the trust of communities and citizens loyal to Bashar al-Assad.

The Positive Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Despite the overwhelming negative impact of Covid-19 across Syria, participants also highlighted some of the positive repercussions of the pandemic, which notably contributed to raising the level of health awareness among various groups of society. Moreover, the immediate health threat of Covid-19 led to the emergence of multiple forms of solidarity and cooperation among members of society in order to confront this virus. Besides, while prolonged periods of confinement and isolation generally put a strain on family relations, they were some reports of strengthened household bonds and family relationships as explained by a housewife living in Raqqa: *'Before the pandemic, my husband was always busy with work but I enjoyed seeing him more during the period of quarantine'*.

Community cohesion was strengthened in some cases through volunteer networks and grassroots initiatives launched to assist poor families through the distribution of hygiene and food baskets. Significant donations were collected to establish isolation centres and provide oxygen cylinders to local hospitals and health centres where the state and opposition institutions performing state functions did not manage to deliver adequate equipment and health services. In this regard, when these institutions resumed their professional activity after the first cycle of national lockdowns came to an end, expatriates contributed greatly to the collective effort by transferring large sums of money to their families and to civil networks operating in their towns or villages of origin. In Daraa for instance, expatriates entirely funded several Corona Committees, thereby providing vital support to the local response to Covid-19.

Besides social cohesion and solidarity, the pandemic also increased the experience and skills of several segments of the working population who were forced to work online. Despite inequalities of access and provision in education, the pandemic also opened the way to make education available to more children who live far from schools and universities; and to improve technical skills for teachers and students alike. Furthermore, all the actors who tried to confront the pandemic – from governmental institutions and civil society organisations to civilians – gained experience in dealing with emergencies. As for governmental institutions and civil society, they were 'forced' to collaborate and this showed that an inclusive and coordinated governance system was not out of reach. In the same vein, and while the action of government institutions did not match the expectations and needs of civilian populations to confront the pandemic, several respondents acknowledged the birth of a process of restoration and reconstructions of civilian infrastructures, especially schools and health facilities that had been neglected for years during the conflict. Several NGOs also expanded their competency in medical and psychological support – two fields that are key to repairing the trauma of populations confronted with a decade of conflict.

The study has shown that Covid-19 also had a few surprising and localised effects. In Jabal al-Zawiya, a highland region in the southwest of Idlib governorate, a tribal leader shared his surprise that the pandemic pushed displaced Syrians to return to the area out of fear of the impact of the virus in crowded IDP camps in Idlib and northern Aleppo governorates. The pandemic repopulated deserted areas and reinitiated life in Jabal al-Zawiya that had been abandoned previously by its inhabitants after the fighting between the Syrian regime and oppositions groups.[2] In another example, the pandemic highlighted opportunities for innovative trade through electronic commerce and a renewed interest in information technology and local and international marketing platforms, which had been damaged by a decade of war.

The respondents interviewed in four Syrian governorates under four different systems of governance offered similar accounts of the key impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. These were expressed in mostly negative terms, with the economy and education perceived as suffering the most from the health emergency and mitigating measures. The increase of poverty coupled with poor education performances were also identified as potential strong drivers for social tensions and accrued conflict at the national level, should civilians and youth be pushed to engage in illegal activities and/or military operations. Despite evident challenges brought about by Covid-19, the pandemic highlighted the capacities of grassroots and civilian networks to react to the health crisis and foster social resilience. This shows that the social fabric has not been completely destroyed by ten years of internal conflict.

© Ola Handawi & Dona al Hamoud

---

[2] By the time this report was published, more displacement followed an increased shelling campaign by the Syrian and Russian military forces between June and September 2021.

EMERGENCY GOVERNANCE TO CONFRONT COVID-19

When Covid-19 hit Syria in March 2020, the fragmentation of the territory and governance system prevented the adoption of a national strategy to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. The country is effectively divided between political and military spheres of influence and corresponding institutions and affiliated health systems. While the Syrian regime regained much territory with the support of the Russian military and Iran-backed armed groups, it has lost much legitimacy and popular support and is not the only source of authority across the country. On the one hand, the northwest has effectively been under the authority of two de facto governments since September 2013 – the SIG and SSG – even though these areas fell under the military protectorate of Turkish forces following the Idlib ceasefire in March 2020. The northeast of Syria, inhabited by a majority of Kurdish populations, is controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)-affiliated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The Autonomous Administration also retained control over the Kurdish enclave of Sheikh Maqsood in Aleppo.

As argued by Furlan (2020), while Covid-19 represented a great challenge to established governments, the pandemic offered non-state actors or opposition governments the opportunity to prove their governance capacity and project [themselves] as more reliable [providers] of governance to 'score additional points in the battle for credibility, support, and legitimacy against the government' (Ibid: 16). As such, one could expect that all governance actors in Syria saw the Covid-19 situation as a 'single-actor play on stage' (Kövér, 2021) where they used the pandemic as a stage for good and efficient health governance. The following paragraphs offer a brief overview of emergency governance in the face of the pandemic in Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, and Raqqa governorates. Considering the focus of the previous report on emergency governance in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, the two are merged into a single section on northwest Syria, while further insights are provided on Raqqa and Daraa.

Opposition-held Areas: Aleppo & Idlib

In the northern governorate of Aleppo, the opposition SIG is considered by the local population as a 'government of formality' due to its semi-official affiliation with Turkey which has the greatest influence on the policies enacted by local governance institutions (COAR, 2021: 23). Governance in opposition-held Aleppo is decentralised and implemented by a network of local councils which are subordinated to Turkey but not always affiliated with SIG. In addition to their lack of independence from Turkey, the poor financial capacities and the limited availability of human and material resources prevented official institutions from offering a strong response to the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, the decision to suspend school activities and office hours followed a decision from the Turkish education coordinators under the supervision of Turkish governorates and the Turkish Ministry of Health that was very active as early as March 2020 to raise awareness on the virus. As such, while the SIG was marginalised, Covid-19 helped the Turkish government consolidate its governance and administrative control over opposition-held Aleppo, and gained a good amount of public trust compared to the SIG and local councils (Beaujouan, 2021: 16-17).

More mitigating measures ensued, such as the suspension of physical teaching at the University of Aleppo by the Ministry of Education, the establishment of an automatic bakery by the commercial office of Azaz Local Council, and the payment of sick leave for employees of SIG ministries infected by the virus.

According to several participants, the nature of the governance system in opposition-held Aleppo governorate is a key challenge to the action of the SIG. A staff member within the Ministry of Local Administration told the authors: ‘*The main role of the SIG is not to provide services nor to take decisions in regards to the pandemic because the executive powers in Northern Aleppo governorate are the local councils. As a result, the activities of the SIG did not fundamentally change during the pandemic*’. This narrative was confirmed by a man working at the Ministry of Finance and Economy: ‘*We lack a unified administrative body which makes coordination and even communication with all official institutions difficult*’. An employee in a medical CSO agreed that the decentralised nature of the governance system prevented the adoption of a common and thus effective policy during the pandemic: ‘*The lack of unification of the [SIG] administration, the different political affiliation of local governmental and political institutions, and the lack of coordination between [SIG] offices are the main challenges to adopt a unified policy. Decisions are taken individually, within each institution*’. A medical activist added: ‘*Resources and support are distributed in an uncoordinated manner due to the presence of several independent service providers and the lack of a unified administrative and political authority*’.

> ***‘The lack of unification of the [SIG] administration, the different political affiliation of local governmental and political institutions, and the lack of coordination between [SIG] offices are the main challenges to adopt unified policy’.***

Despite these challenges, 90% of the representatives of the SIG interviewed during the research affirmed that official institutions actively collaborated to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in northwest Syria. At the government level, for instance, an emergency committee composed of senior officials was established to discuss and address the repercussions of Covid-19. Internal coordination efforts were mostly channelled through the Ministry of Health within the SIG – as the most competent institution to deal with the health emergency – and the Ministry of Finance and Economy to a lesser extent. This cooperation failed to reach local governance institutions and include local councils, which in turn responded directly to the Turkish state as explained by a worker in the Education Office of Soran [located 22 kilometres north of the city of Aleppo] Local Council: ‘*While we engaged with the Directorate of Education to develop an action plan for distance education, our role was restricted to implementing the decisions issued by the Turkish state to prevent the spread of the virus among students and educational and administrative staff affiliated with the local council*’. When the SIG announced a new confinement and set of mitigating measures in October 2021, the authors enquired with a number of local governance institutions and media about the move. They all offered a similar answer and stated that they will not follow the SIG’s decision because they are not directly affiliated with it.

As opposed to the SIG, the SSG that rules over Idlib governorate is highly centralised and characterised by a single administrative system. On the one hand, this enabled greater coordination and interdependence between all central institutions, including directorates, ministries and the military arm of the government. During the pandemic, information and policies circulated quickly and efficiently and the SSG managed to communicate a unified and coherent policy to all official institutions. In practice though, the presence of competing armed groups in Idlib territories prevented the implementation of measures enacted by the SSG across the governorate. On the other hand, the infamous affiliation of the SSG with Salafi-jihadi group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was a key obstacle to international political and humanitarian support reaching governance institutions at all levels, thereby limiting the SSG's ability to provide adequate services to the over 4 million people that live in the territories it controls.

The dependence of the SSG on a military group advocating for a radical ideology raised a lot of criticism and a high number of participants accused the SSG of being a formal and ineffective institution implementing the decisions of the military and intelligence branches of HTS. Local councils affiliated with the SSG attempted to escape the control of HTS during the pandemic, redirecting their work towards the safety of local populations, and allocating emergency projects to work as quickly as possible.

> ***'Despite its will to provide a reliable and efficient answer to the pandemic, on the long term, SSG did not manage to endorse the role of a unified authority capable of issuing and enforcing decisions across Idlib governorate'.***

SSG showed remarkable seriousness in leading the response to the health emergency and started taking preventive measures a soon as 14 March 2020, more than a week before the Syrian government officially recognised that Covid-19 had reached Syria (Zelin, 2020), and three months before the virus hit Idlib. The research shows that SSG's Health and Education ministries were the most active governmental institutions in the emergency response. Both issued preventive measures and conducted (online and face-to-face) awareness and sterilisation campaigns across Idlib. For instance, educational premises, including religious ones, were suspended for several weeks to be sanitised and to allow for the organisation of Covid-safe teaching. SSG also created an emergency response committee to coordinate the government action across its ministries and local councils. In addition to this, SSG distanced itself from HTS and adopted pragmatic policies by closing koranic schools, mosques and forbidding Friday prayers in early April 2021, which caused a rift between Salafists (al-Modon, 2020). By doing so in the early stages of the pandemic, SSG portrayed itself as the main player in charge, disseminating its actions through intense use of social media and other online platforms (Jihadology, n.d.). Finally, a common policy was drawn up between LCS working in the medical and humanitarian fields, in addition to health institutions in the governorate, including health directorates and several medical syndicates.

Despite its will to provide a reliable and efficient answer to the pandemic, in the long term, SSG did not manage to take on the role of a unified authority capable of issuing and enforcing decisions across Idlib governorate. Its lack of monopoly, coupled with mistrust in it from the Syrian people living in the areas under its control, and the influence of rival factions over various localities, were all strong barriers to a unified and efficient official response to Covid-19 (COAR, 2021: 22). Another impediment was the destruction of the health sector following intense bombing campaigns by the Syrian and Russian air forces, targeting health facilities across Idlib more than opposition-held Aleppo (HRW, 2020b). One final challenge to the action of SSG to confront Covid-19 was its failure to corner international aid markets and Assad's instrumentalisation of international aid to further squeeze the opposition (Berti, 2016).

Regime-controlled territories: Daraa

Several reports pointed to the 'politics of denial' of the Syrian government which delayed the official announcement of the arrival of Covid-19 in Syria and allegedly failed to report accurate statistics of cases in Daraa and other areas under its control (al-Zein, 2021). As stated by COAR report (2021: 8): 'Government officials long insisted that Syria was Covid-free, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, and did little to mobilise interagency coordination to develop a more comprehensive preparatory response. Most tellingly, the Syrian Government's [Early Warning and Response System] issued no meaningful reports on Covid-19 until after public officials formally admitted the first case in late March'. Even when the Syrian government acknowledged the presence of the virus in the country in March 2020, a study by Imperial College London estimated that just 1.25% of Covid-19 deaths were being reported in Damascus (Watson et al., 2020), while human rights organisations and activists pointed to the lack of adequate governmental responses in the face of the pandemic (Amnesty International, 2020; Mohamed, 2021).

On 12 April 2020, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) – the official national news agency of the Syrian government – announced that the Council of Ministers had approved the National Campaign for Emergency Social Response to be implemented by the Social Affairs and Labour Ministry in order to support the most vulnerable groups in the face of Covid-19 (Sabbagh, 2020). In SANA's words, the National Campaign began its activities by launching a digital portal, and forming a group of 18,800 volunteers across the country to distribute food and health baskets. The news agency also announced that 80,000 baskets had already been distributed in Damascus, Tartous, and Latakia – three governorates located on the western littoral of Syria and historically loyal to the Syrian regime and Bashar al-Assad.

According to the official representative of governance institutions interviewed in Daraa governorate, internal cooperation was established to face the pandemic. Like in other governorates, the Health Directorate played a crucial role bridging the central governance level (i.e. ministries) with local governance institutions such as municipal councils. The head of the municipal council in a town that remained loyal to the Syrian regime throughout the conflict, in the eastern countryside of Daraa governorate, emphasised the crucial support the city received from the Health Directorate: *'We were provided with additional cars for garbage collection, and our budget increased to help us fund cleaning positions to implement hygiene measures in the town. The Health Directorate also provided us with many tools and sterilisation materials'*. In Daraa governorate, internal cooperation was facilitated by the existence of a pre-established system whereby local institutions are affiliated with the governorate directorates, which are in turn affiliated with ministries.

Despite official claims to offer support to citizens across the country, interviews conducted across Daraa governorate clearly establish that the Syrian government instrumentalised the pandemic and used it as an opportunity to further securitise areas that had previously escaped its control; while similar dynamics were observed beyond Daraa such as in Eastern Ghouta (al-Ra'i, 2020). One notable respondent told the authors: *'The pandemic increased the gap between towns and villages depending on their political affiliation. We witnessed that the areas of as-Suwayda, Daraa al-Madina, al-Sanamayn and Izraa [that are affiliated with the Syrian regime] have received much more attention from state institutions and international organisations that work with the government's approval'*. In the same vein, a tribal leader living in an area formerly held by opposition groups reported that: *'Many opponents to the Syrian regime fear to travel to city centres to obtain health care; they fear arrests and reprisals from the regime forces'*. For those wanted by the Syrian intelligence, visiting a public hospital to receive care during the pandemic was not even an option.

> ***'The pandemic increased the gap between towns and villages depending on their political affiliation. We witnessed that the areas [that are affiliated with the Syrian regime] have received much more attention from state institutions and international organisations that work with the government's approval'.***

In addition to the different provision of health services to different areas based on political criteria, our previous report highlighted how the weaponization of humanitarian aid reached a new level with the arrival of Covid-19 in Syria (Beaujouan, 2021: 12-15). The Syrian regime demanded control over all border crossings for humanitarian aid between Syria and its neighbours, thereby claiming national authority over the Covid-19 response. Doing so called into question the validity of Resolution 2165 adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in July 2014 and that authorised UN agencies and their partners to use routes across conflict lines and four border crossings – two in Turkey, one in Iraq, and one in Jordan – to deliver humanitarian assistance to Syrian civilians living in areas beyond the control of the Syrian government.

In January 2020, Russia, backed by China, wielded its veto to prevent the renewal of al-Yarubiyah crossing with Iraq and al-Ramtha crossing with Jordan (UNSC, 2020a). Russia and China, the two allies of the Syrian regime at the UNSC, renewed their strategy in July 2020 to prevent the renewal of the two border crossings between Turkey and northwest Syria. The move was countered by Great Britain, France, and Germany, which managed to keep Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey opened as the UN's last remaining entry point for transporting assistance into northwest Syria and the four million Syrians depending on external aid (UNSC, 2020b). These decisions resulted in humanitarian distress in northeast Syria which was reliant on its strong relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan, and great delays overall in the delivery of relief in northwest Syria (Nashed, 2021).

Corona Committees

What is remarkable in the case of Daraa was the spontaneous establishment of 'Corona Committees' across the governorate, which were formed in cooperation with municipal councils in order to face the pandemic. The Committees included medical staff tasked with strengthening public health measures, alongside notable locals and humanitarian activists. These civilian initiatives were launched both in areas under the control of the Syrian military and areas controlled by opposition armed groups. The research team met members of Corona Committees in both areas, where the ad hoc institutions are similar in nature and objectives.

The head of the Corona Committee in a town controlled by the Fifth Corps – considered the military arm of Russia in southern Syria – narrated how it became necessary to take action at the local level: *'Considering the rapid spread of the virus, it became crucial for us, as the people of a small town with limited capabilities, to come together and organise our work within one committee to prevent and limit the spread of the virus. In order to ensure the success of the committee's work, we have endeavoured to include various important actors in the town and representatives of all families, in addition to representatives of some local state institutions, especially the medical ones'*. In another town where the Syrian military has a strong presence, the composition of the Corona Committee did not differ much: '*The committee includes townspeople of different positions and [political] orientations. It includes representatives of the city's health centre, the municipal council, the water corporation, school principals, in addition to the town's mayor, the town's preacher, and some more notables and decision-makers'*.

> ***'Considering the rapid spread of the virus, it became crucial for us, as the people of a small town with limited capabilities, to come together and organise our work within one committee in order to prevent and limit the spread of the virus'.***

The local and informal nature of Corona Committees in Daraa were perceived by their members as a key challenge to official state actions, especially in areas that escaped the control of the Syrian regime during the conflict: *'We have tried hard to cooperate with the state's governmental institutions at the governorate level in order to confront this epidemic, but we have not found a listening ear because we are independent of the [Syrian] state'*. In Daraa al-Balad, a stronghold of opposition military groups, a member of the Corona Committee reflected on the challenge of cooperating with the institutions of a state that is not considered legitimate locally: *'At first, some individuals responsible for local government institutions were afraid of coordinating the Covid-19 response and cooperating with us because we are considered opponents of the state. But step by step, they realised that we were fighting the same threat and that we were only trying the ensure the safety of local populations'*.

While Corona Committees in regime-controlled areas scored better in terms of cooperation with state governance institutions – especially the Directorate of Health, Directorate of Education and Daraa Governorate Council – they faced criticism from some locals and committee members who rejected the legitimacy of the Syrian government. As explained by the head of the Corona

Committee in one of these cities: *'We were able to overcome this problem by convincing these people that the purpose and goal of cooperation with state institutions in the field of crisis mitigation are superior to all [political] differences'.*

By bridging the gap successfully between political affiliations and views during the Covid-19 pandemic, Corona Committees in Daraa governorate proved that the fragmentations caused by a decade of conflict could be overcome – at least for a short period of time – to achieve a common goal, in this instance, mitigating the impact of Covid-19. Despite the relative unity the Committees brought among grassroots populations, Corona Committees faced several challenges including lack of funding because they were supported financially by voluntary donations from locals and expatriates. Members of Corona Committees worked as volunteers and did not receive any financial compensation for their role. As a consequence, some members were not able to commit wholly to a role they had taken on alongside their 'normal' jobs, which were prioritised understandably in order to secure daily economic security for their households.

Opposition-held Areas: Raqqa

Unlike opposition-held areas in the northwest and other regime-controlled areas, the northeast of Syria did not benefit from the attention of international observers and media despite the great level of destruction caused by years of conflict and the presence of the Islamic State group that installed the centre of its caliphate in Raqqa for more than three years. The Autonomous Administration was the first government in Syria to impose partial lockdown measures across the territories it controls, including the closure of routes with areas under the control of the Syrian government and SIG in early March 2020. The AANES also imposed periodic confinements and mitigating measures based on the infection rate in Rojava. Among the four governorates under study in this report, Raqqa showed the greatest level of government control and involvement in the fields impacted by Covid-19. For instance, the Autonomous Administration attempted to mitigate the economic consequences of the lockdown by waiving utility bills, lowering food prices, and coordinating home deliveries of essential goods through existing local structures.

The emergency response in Raqqa was mostly supervised by the Health and Environment Authority (HEA), linked to the AANES, although its action across the region has been considered uneven and it failed to coordinate both with local- and higher-level governmental bodies. While the response to the pandemic was not instrumentalised as much as in areas under the control of the Syrian regime, there is some evidence to suggest that the HEA sought to prioritise areas inhabited by a majority of Kurdish populations such as Quamishli and al-Hasakeh, while offering little support to Arab core areas like Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, and Menbij (COAR, 2021: 16; Abu Layla, 2021).

> *'The lack of support from the [Autonomous Administration] government and donors who shifted their priorities during the pandemic left us no choice but to stop electricity delivery and infrastructure repair projects'.*

The pandemic was accompanied by a general slowing down of local governance in Raqqa governorate where local governance bodies saw their role regressing and their actions limited in the face of the spread of the virus. This slowing of response, in return, impacted grassroots trust as explained by a high-ranked staff member in the Raqqa Directorate of Energy and Communication: *'The lack of support from the [Autonomous Administration] government and donors who shifted their priorities during the pandemic left us no choice but to stop electricity delivery and infrastructure repair projects. Due to the lack of electricity, locals had to purchase private generators, which created additional expenses on families. As a result, they lost trust in us and our capacity to deliver services'*. A similar account was offered by a judge at the Raqqa court for Civil Cases, which is directly affiliated to the AANES' Ministry of Justice: *'Our service was greatly affected by the pandemic and we suspended all but some criminal cases. As we forcibly neglected real estate and civil cases, our relationship with locals decreased'*.

While 70% of respondents reported some form of internal governmental cooperation, their answers clearly demonstrate that cooperation was limited to the implementation of preventive measures and other health recommendations issued by the Directorate of Health. A worker in the finance department of the Directorate of Education told the authors: *'We cooperated with the Public Finance and the Directorate of Health, but the nature of this cooperation was limited to awareness and material support'*. Moreover, collaboration was limited to the public sector as narrated by a teacher in a private school licensed by the Autonomous Authority: *'We submitted a study to government institutions, which included the application of all preventive measures in order to limit the spread of Covid-19. This study was intended to receive the approval to re-open and pursue teaching and exams. But we did not receive any approval even after several attempts. We also did not manage to cooperate with governmental institutions because we do not sponsor their policies'*.

Confronted with the lack of governmental capacity at the central level and little international support, Raqqa and the northeast of Syria in general adopted a bottom-up emergency response where local political and economic structures – namely cooperatives and neighbourhood communes – provided key relief efforts in coordination with the Social Affairs and Labour Authority (Bodette, 2020).

CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

In Syria, none of the governance systems had the capabilities and flexibility to provide urgent, coordinated and far-reaching responses to Covid-19. While the Syrian government instrumentalised the pandemic to further exert pressure on opposition areas and the populations living in the territories beyond its control, Covid-19 highlighted the inability of opposition governments in the northeast and northwest to offer effective alternatives to the Syrian regime. In this context, it is interesting to look at the developments of local civil society (LCS) as a non-state agent of governance and its role during the pandemic. The following sections investigate the nature and role of LCS in the four governorates under study, stressing its multifaceted character across Syria.

This report adopts Kawakibi and Sawah's (2013) definition of Syrian civil society, which refers to 'the active and voluntary participation of citizens in organisations (outside their families, friends and workplace) where they support their interests, views and ideologies'. It includes community-based organisations as well as non-governmental organisations, established locally but also by diaspora networks.

Opposition-held areas: Aleppo & Idlib

The limited ability of SIG and SSG to provide healthcare and social services predates Covid-19. The health sector in northwest Syria has been partly managed by civic actors for years. It is important to note that local CSOs are 90% joint between Aleppo and Idlib governorate, and thereby the same organisations and networks dealt with the impact of the pandemic in the areas controlled by the SIG and SSG. The main difference between the two systems of governance is the major intervention and influence of SSG in the relief sector, which this report develops in the next section.

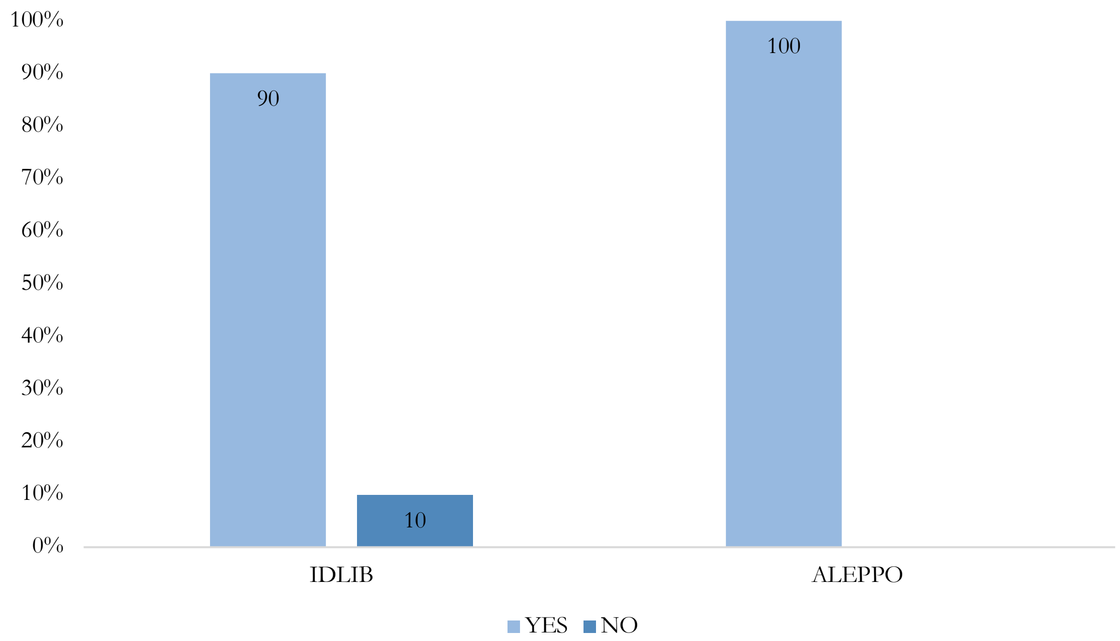
Among the key civil actors managing the health sector in opposition-held areas is Idlib Health Directorate (IHD). It was established initially in May 2013 to fill the gap in the medical sector after Syrian governmental medical institutions stopped providing medical services and prevented aid workers from entering opposition-held areas. IHD gained nominal political independence from the SIG and SSG to carry out its mission, and has since worked in collaboration with main international donors – including during the Covid-19 pandemic. In opposition-held Aleppo, Aleppo Health Directorate also strove to implement the plan to confront Covid-19 under the supervision of the Ministry of Health in the Syrian Interim government. Aside from Aleppo, main cities were subordinated to Turkish Health Directorates, namely Hatay, Kilis and Gaziantep directorates. This reality again demonstrates the strong influence of the Turkish state in emergency governance in the territories controlled by the SIG in northwest Syria.

In addition to health directorates affiliated with local and external governments, relief organisations capitalised on the experience gained during the 2013 Polio outbreaks (Ekzayez et al.

2020) and the seasonal spread of communicable diseases such as leishmaniasis. This local network in northwest Syria received significant support from a Syrian diaspora network that established medical NGOs, such as the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and the Syrian Expatriates Medical Association (SEMA) and collaborates with local civic actors directly rather than opposition governance institutions. These large NGOs and local civic actors have key roles in the management of hospitals and medical centres, and in the provision of medical services. As such, and despite the real efforts of governance systems, especially SSG, to step in as the key mitigating actors of the pandemic, when Covid-19 hit opposition-held areas in July 2020, LCS networks were 'both the first responders and the main interlocutors with international organi[z]ations' (al-Achi 2020).

The unprecedented threat posed by Covid-19, coupled with the inefficiency of the action of opposition governance and the international community, uniquely mobilised LCS and triggered the emergence of creative and coordinated grassroots initiatives in northwest Syria. Across opposition-held Aleppo and Idlib governorate, the action of LCS reached almost all grassroots respondents who were nearly unanimous about the positive role of LCS during the pandemic (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Have you personally been in contact with any local CSOs since March 2020? (Aleppo & Idlib)

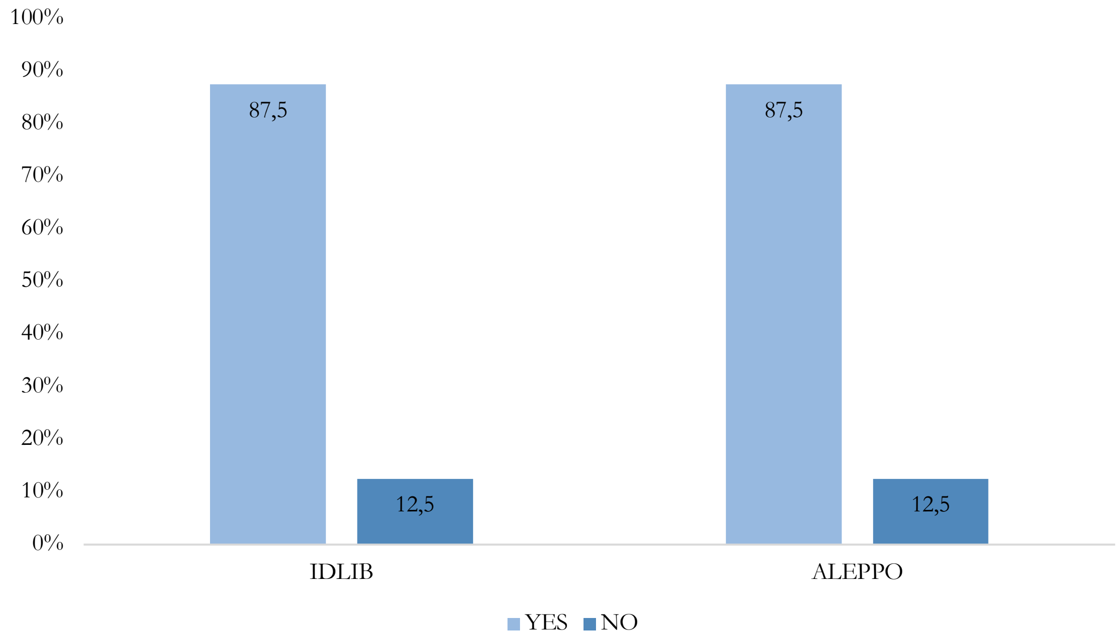


The most striking example of the collaborative stance of LCS is the launch of the 'Initiative of Volunteers Against Corona', on 19 April 2020 by IHD and the White Helmets. The initiative is an inter-sectoral operation room initially composed of around 50 local organisations and 600 volunteers (Enab Baladi, 2020a) and was the first of its kind despite the constant humanitarian emergency in opposition-held areas since they gained nominal independence from the Syrian regime in 2013. It aimed to institutionalise civil society to coordinate and facilitate the response to

Covid-19 and the protection of civilians. Under the leadership of the White Helmets, the initiative directly coordinated with SIG and SSG to establish several confinement centres for patients infected by the virus, conduct campaigns of sterilisations of schools, mosques, and public spaces, provide hundreds of awareness sessions within weeks, and distribute guidance brochures including information on Covid mitigation measures.

This new cooperative stance was confirmed by 87.5% of the members of CSOs and other volunteer initiatives interviewed in Aleppo and Idlib governorates (Figure 2). As expected, among the key civil society actors for cooperation cited by respondents were the Civil Defence/White Helmets, the Volunteer Against Corona Initiative, and the IHD and its 'Vaccine Team' that announced the launch of the vaccination campaign in northwest Syria on 29 April 2021 (Masri and al-Issa, 2021). Participants also emphasised the role of less established organisations such as Ihsan – a Syrian organisation that aims to provide Syrians with critical services to foster basic development – Watan – a coalition of Syrian CSOs specialised in the fields of relief, health, education – and Violet Organizations – created in 2012 in Idlib to provide relief to residents affected by the conflict. All these organisations and networks have one thing in common: they provide services that the state, or opposition institutions performing the role of the state, fail to deliver to Syrian citizens.

Figure 2: Did your organisation collaborate with other CSOs during the pandemic? (Aleppo & Idlib)



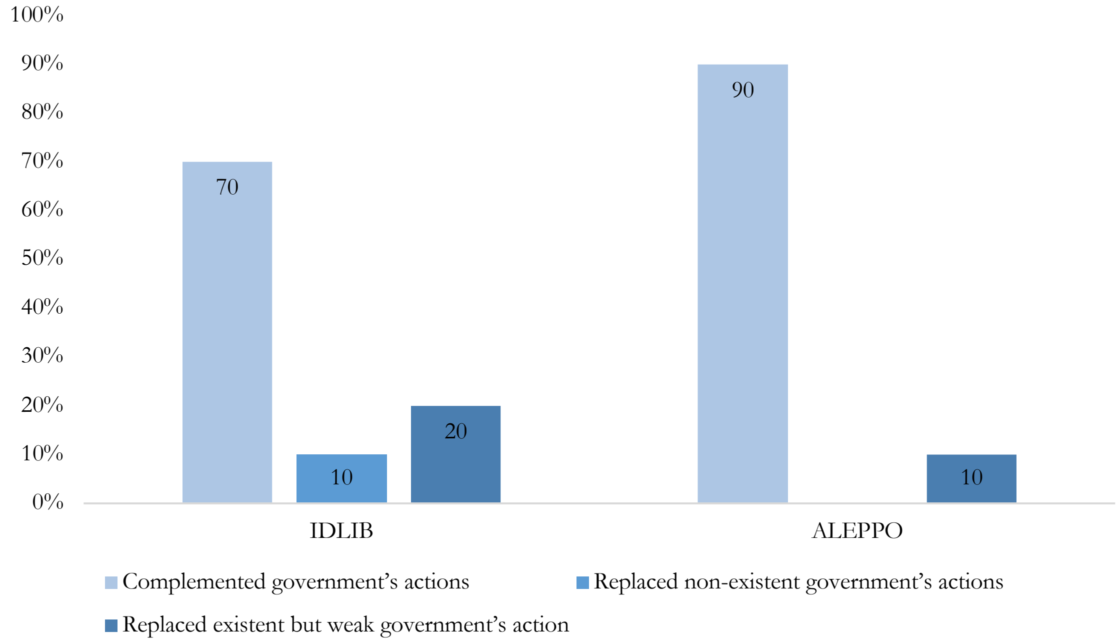
Finally, in early March 2020, the WHO-led Health Cluster cross-border operation in Gaziantep formed a Health cluster Task force to prepare a Covid-19 response plan in northwest Syria, as well as a local Covid-19 awareness team to coordinate activities in the ground. Despite the will to provide a regional integrated response to the pandemic, all participants in northwest Syria highlighted the lack of active collaboration with international NGOs or civil society actors across

Syria due to the travel ban, ongoing conflict and opposing political views, and due to political competition between the four governance systems and the perceived lack of independence of both the SIG and SSG. The local perception of the role of the international humanitarian community in northwest Syria during the pandemic is examined in the first report, which highlighted a relatively low public trust in the WHO and international NGOs compared to LCS (Beaujouan, 2021: 26).

> ***'The responsibility to act during crises in the liberated areas falls on the shoulders of the active civil society, with the absence of the Syrian government and the incomplete role of alternative local government institutions'.***

The omnipresence of LCS in northwest Syria during the pandemic is illustrated by the opinions collected with grassroots communities during the research. Almost all of the locals interviewed in Aleppo and Idlib governorates – 95% – confirmed that they have been in contact with one of more CSO since the beginning of the pandemic, either in the areas controlled by SIG or SSG (Figure 3). In fact, LCS was generally perceived as the most pro-active actor in the Covid-19 response as explained by a woman displaced in Azaz: *'The responsibility to act during crises in the liberated areas falls on the shoulders of the active civil society, with the absence of the Syrian government and the incomplete role of alternative local government institutions'*. From a grassroots perspective, it seems that LCS provided in-kind service and relief aid, while governance institutions at the central and local level facilitated and assisted LCS that needed governmental approval to implement their programmes and conduct their activities. The relationship between the two actors of governance is examined later in this report.

Figure 3: In your opinion, did actions of local civil society during the pandemic … (Aleppo & Idlib)

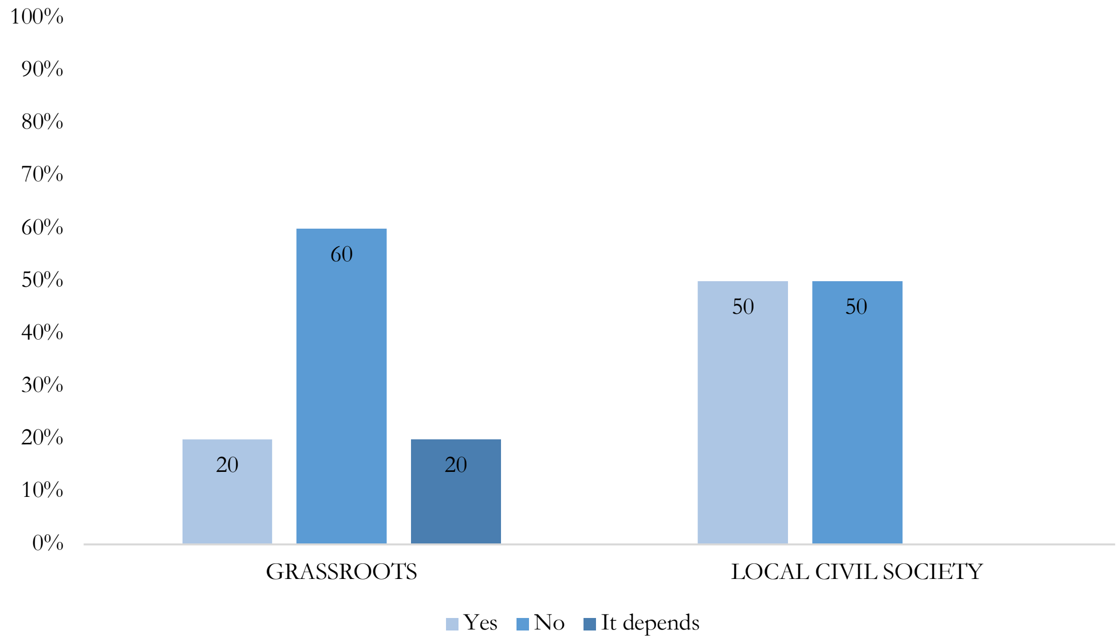


Covid-19 uniquely mobilised LCS in northwest Syria, but the pandemic also greatly affected the nature and scope of initiatives and activities carried out by local CSOs. Before the virus outbreak in Syria, local efforts focused on providing general relief and shelter for displaced populations. The virus inevitably re-oriented efforts towards providing hygiene baskets and medical support such as the establishment of isolation centres, and the development of community knowledge through guidance, media campaigns, and awareness sessions, with the aim of limiting the spread of Covid-19. This posed great challenges to the training of workers and capacity-building of small organisations that did not have the skills and/or capacities to deal with such a health emergency. This challenge was partly overcome by the spirit of cooperation and complementarity, whereby medical CSOs provided training to their non-medical counterparts.

Other challenges to the actions of LCS identified by grassroots respondents in northwest Syria were: the lack of civilian cooperation to abide by regulations; the lack of a legislative framework to help implement measures; and the absence of a unified political body in northwest Syria. Indeed, the independence of LCS of governmental institutions was a topic of debate, and members of CSOs and grassroots populations delivered two differing perspectives during their interviews.

In Aleppo, members of CSOs were equally divided on the question of their independence. Grassroots populations were more nuanced because 80% of participants believed that local civil society is not fully or at all independent (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Aleppo)



On the one hand, several participants pointed to the weight of political decision-makers in the activities of LCS. This was the case of the funder of a local centre for people with special needs in opposition-held Aleppo: *'Turkey imposed an embargo on decision-making in regard to the pandemic. This* *reduced the confidence of donors, but also the flow of financial transactions and bank transfers to bring funds to northern Aleppo'*. This discourse was echoed by an employee in a local CSO in the field of relief which is based in Turkey: *'Internally we always need the relevant Turkish institution to approve our activities [because our HQ are based there] and this sometimes delays our response. Our team does not plan, it only implements. Our dependency impacts the perception of local communities because they expect us to respond immediately in the case of an emergency. In fact, and while some situation requires a quick response, we are unable to do so because our action depends on receiving the approval from Turkey'*. Moreover, all CSOs operating in the areas controlled by the SIG must register and receive a license from administrative bodies, which may limit the scope of their work in terms of activities and/or geography.

> ***'Turkey imposed an embargo on decision-making in regard to the pandemic. This reduced the confidence of donors, but also the flow of financial transactions and bank transfers to bring funds to northern Aleppo'.***

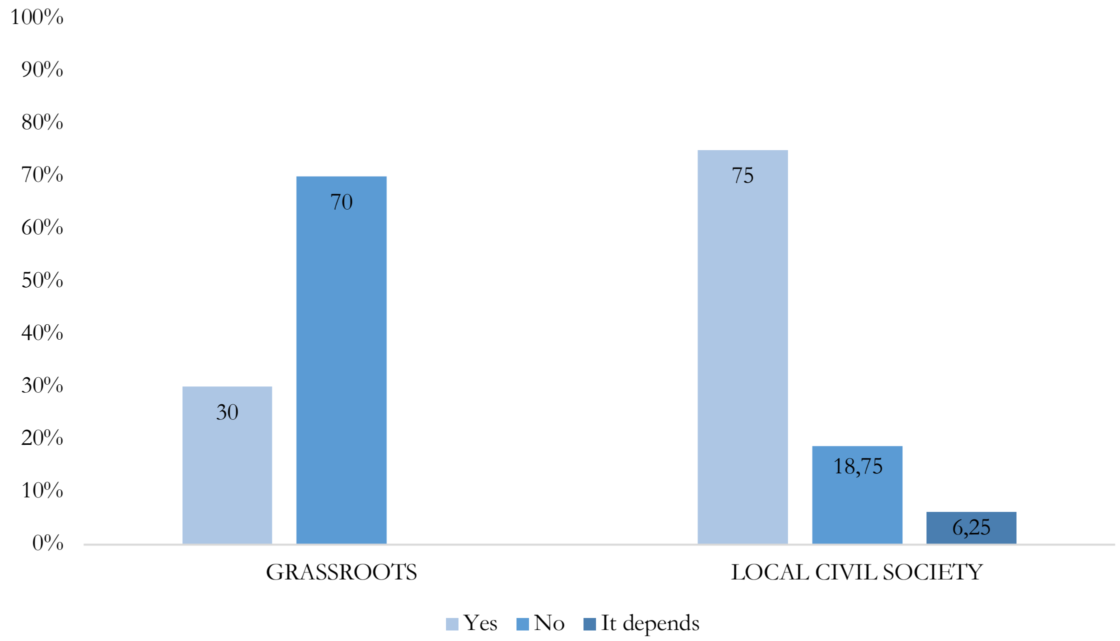
The influence of administrative institutions in northern Aleppo is especially high when local organisation targets IDP camps, which are managed by the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) which reports to the Turkish Ministry of Interior. An employee in one of the most active local organisations in northwest Syria told the authors: *'We need to obtain approvals to work in the camps. These approvals may involve political intervention in our response plan and the pre-selection of beneficiaries'*. On the other hand, the existence and action of LCS are conditional to the financial support of international donors. As such, the priorities and policies of donors directly affect the nature and scope of activities carried out by local CSOs. Finally, the work of LCS in northwest Syria in particular and across the country in general is also indirectly affected by conflicts between armed groups that can lead to a change of administrative authority or the suspension of work and threaten the safety of humanitarian workers.

In Idlib, while the great majority of LCS respondents considered their institution independent, 70% of grassroots participants saw the high presence of military groups and the policy of donors as the main obstacles to a fully independent LCS (Figure 5).

> ***'There is no fully independent business in conflict areas'.***

Most CSOs members who stated that their organisation is independent meant political independence from the SSG, while they acknowledged the challenges of dependency on external funding and donors' policies. In Idlib, CSOs must sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with SSG or the municipalities governing the areas where they want to work. Data collected during the research for this report show that when a MoU is in place, a common practice of governmental institutions is to determine the location and type of the response to an emergency, and in rarer cases, suggest names of beneficiaries. As a result, several CSOs refused to sign the document in a bid to retain their impedance and attract more international funding.

Figure 5: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Idlib)



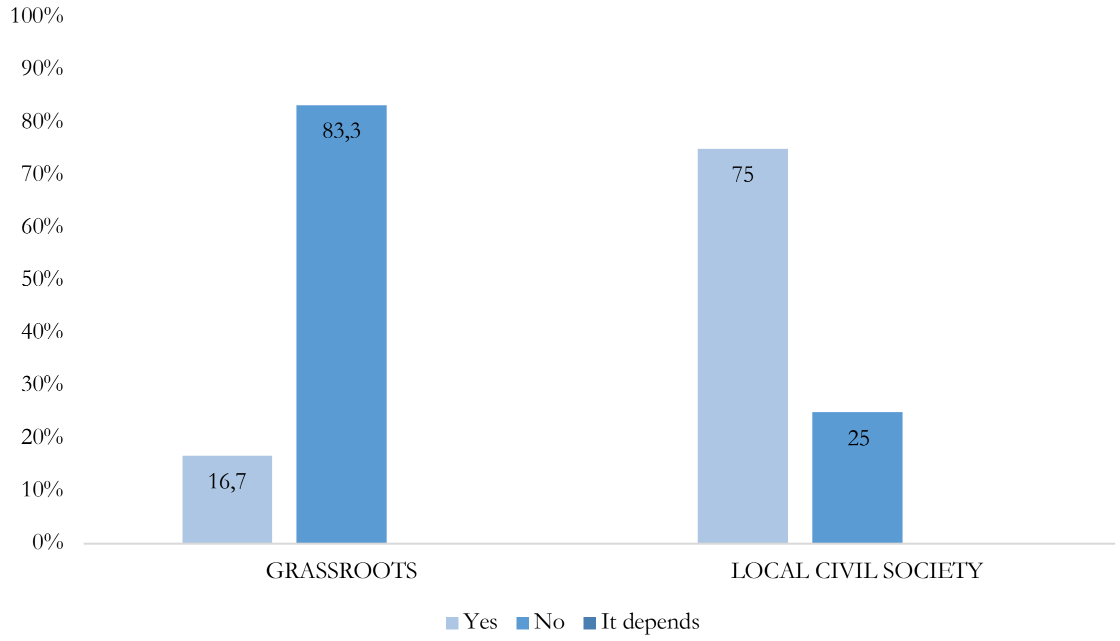
Yet, in the absence of a legal framework to regulate the roles and relations between CSOs and SSG, the absence of a MoU is often an insurmountable obstacle to the development of the activities of CSOs. The infamous reputation of SSG international is not the only obstacle to cooperating with international donors, as explained by an employee in a CSOs in the field of water and sanitation in Idlib governorate: *'Our main financier is an international donor and this donor does not like to deal with some parties on the ground because of their lack of transparency on their nature and goals. As such, the donor imposes some restrictions on our work and we avoid dealing with these parties as much as possible'*. The reality of CSOs' independence in northwest Syria and across the country may be better summarised by the only INGO worker we interviewed in Idlib: *'There is no fully independent business in conflict areas'*.

Regime-controlled Territories: Daraa

The civil society landscape in areas controlled by the Syrian government is very different than in northwest Syria. When the then-young president Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as head of the state in 2001, his wife, Asma al-Assad devoted herself to the 'revival of the Syrian Civil society' by creating the Syria Trust for Development and setting up a network of CSOs that soon became the dominant form of civil actors in Syria (Khalaf et al., 2014: 8). These so-called 'governmental non-governmental organisations' (GONGOS) 'operated both as an element of the facade that portrayed the Syrian president as a moderniser and reformist and as a lease valve for the West's willingness to support Syrian civil society (Ibid).

Twenty years into the rule of Bashar al-Assad and after over ten years of a violent conflict, the civil society landscape in regime-controlled areas, including Daraa governorate, has not changed significantly, and civic engagement still has to comply with the rule of the Syrian regime despite the collapse of the state's infrastructure (Gharibah, 2020). As stated by a number of grassroots individuals and activists interviewed during the research: *'NGOs in Daraa are parties to the conflict and it is impossible to separate them from the state'*; *'Any initiative for any organisation must go through the [Syrian] state'*. It therefore comes as no surprise that more than 83% of grassroots respondents in Daraa saw the tied relations between LCS and the Syrian government as proof of political monopoly over the humanitarian response to Covid-19, and as the reason why external funders refused to support local CSOs to address Covid-19 (Figure 6). In other words, according to several local respondents, the lack of trust of international donors in LCS operating in regime-controlled areas caused the weak funding of local initiatives and their associated weak response to the pandemic. This narrative was countered by CSO members interviewed in Daraa, of whom 75% affirmed that their organisation retains independence, despite being funded by international donors and working closely with the Syrian government.

Figure 6: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Daraa)



> *'NGOs in Daraa are parties to the conflict and it is impossible to separate them from the state.'*

The work of LCS in Darra is certainly affected by the politics and policies of funders and political institutions, both at the national and international levels. This influence may sometimes lead to the misallocation of resources and misuse of local organisations' capabilities. In a telling example, one activist narrated: *'In one of the towns located in Daraa, some in-kind supplies were provided by a local NGO to confront the virus. But more than in-kind support, the town effectively has greater needs such as the rehabilitation of its schools and health centre'*. A member of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) local branch in Daraa governorate echoed these concerns: *'One of the challenges we faced as an organisation and member of a local Corona Committee was to provide support to all towns and villages, especially those controlled by opposition military groups while they are still under the official administrative jurisdiction of the Syrian state. The security services control the decision of the Red Crescent branch in Daraa and its areas of operation, and they decided that these towns and villages represented a security danger for NGOs to operate. As a result, local civil society was not allowed to operate [there]'*.

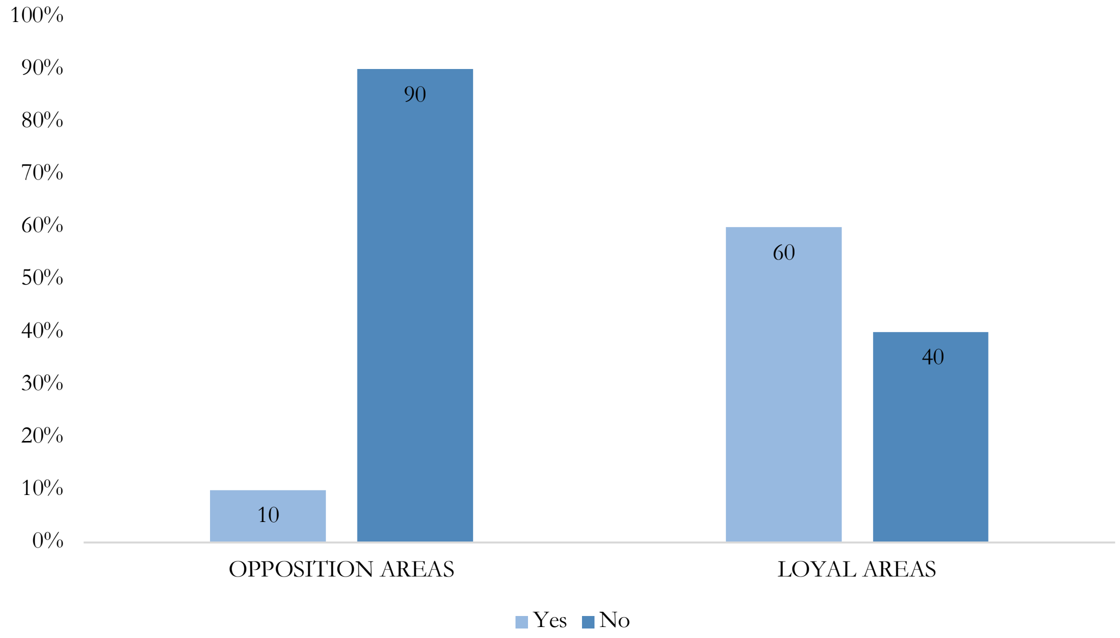
The research team met local notables in areas considered unsafe by Syrian security services for the work of CSOs. In Daraa al-Balad, Busra al-Sham, Tafas and other places, these notables narrated how the LCS landscape changed during the ten years of the conflict. Until 2018, there was a good presence of both local and international CSOs that worked in coordination with locals and notables to provide services and support in the medical and educational fields. At that time, Daraa governorate was in the hands of several opposition armed groups. However, when the Syrian regime and opposition reached settlements under the auspices of the Russian military and Daraa governorate officially returned under the control of the Syrian government, the work of local and international CSOs 'vanished'. The formal administrative authority of the Syrian government prevented the work of humanitarian organisations on the ground, including during the Covid-19 pandemic. The head of one Corona Committee in a town categorised as loyal to the opposition explained the difficulties his committee to receiving support during the pandemic: *'We have tried hard to communicate with some of the international organisations that were active in Daraa Governorate before 2018 through civil activists from the town. But our attempts were unsuccessful because these international organisations do not have licenses from the Syrian state to operate on Syrian soil, and they refused to operate through non-official channels or without using their own teams and employees'*.

If the humanitarian landscape in Daraa was greatly impacted by the military and political deals made in 2018, only a few organisations remain and these have a quasi-monopoly on humanitarian activities in the governorate. This is the case of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the Council of the Middle East Churches; both organisations were cited by all participants regardless of their affiliations and background as key actors in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in Daraa. The SARC in particular attracted the attention and criticisms of several observers who questioned its independence. The research team interviewed a volunteer within the organisation's branch in Daraa to collect his opinion on this matter: *'The Syrian Arab Red Crescent is an independent organisation that works as an aid to the public authorities in the field of humanitarian work. To combat Covid-19, we have provided our services in the field of awareness and in-kind assistance to all regions, regardless of their position towards the Syrian government. This falls within the principle of neutrality, which the organisation adheres to, as it refrains from participating in any hostile acts or debates related to political, religious and ethnic issues. Our response to the pandemic was quick and we carried activities in all [Syrian] regions. The speed of our response was facilitated by our independence, which is an advantage compared to state institutions'*.

> *'Our [communication] attempts were unsuccessful because these international organisations do not have licenses from the Syrian state to operate on the Syrian soil, and they refused to operate through non-official channels or without using their own teams and employees.'*

Despite the official independence of SARC and the organisation's commitment to humanitarian principles, a number of reports pointed to perceptions of an ambiguous status of SARC. The latter is one of the only official government partners through which the UN and other international agencies must work in Bashar al-Assad's Syria (Sparrow, 2018). Formally affiliated with the ICRC, it is perceived to be effectively associated with the Syrian regime and under the tight control of the air force intelligence (SJAC, 2019). Moreover, this research, which was conducted in areas both loyal to and rejecting the Syrian regime, suggests that SARC did not provide the same level of support across the governorate. Inhabitants of formerly opposition-held areas repeatedly told the authors that the presence of CSOs during the pandemic was limited to the distribution of a food basket by the SARC approximately once every four months, where city notables were asked to submit a list of most vulnerable families. Fewer participants mentioned that the Council of the Middle East Churches distributed some seeds and fertilisers to help farmers plant and grow crops. In the same areas, only 10% of participants said that they had been in contact with local CSOs since the beginning of the pandemic, against 60% of inhabitants in areas considered loyal to and effectively controlled by the Syrian regime (Figure 7). Despite criticisms voiced by the participants in this research and echoed in other reports before and during Covid-19 (SJAC, 2019; SACD, m2021; COAR, 2021: 18), SARC remained the most efficient primary healthcare provider in government-controlled areas in Daraa governorate and arguably across the rest of Syria.

Figure 7: Have you personally been in contact with any local CSOs since March 2020? (Daraa)

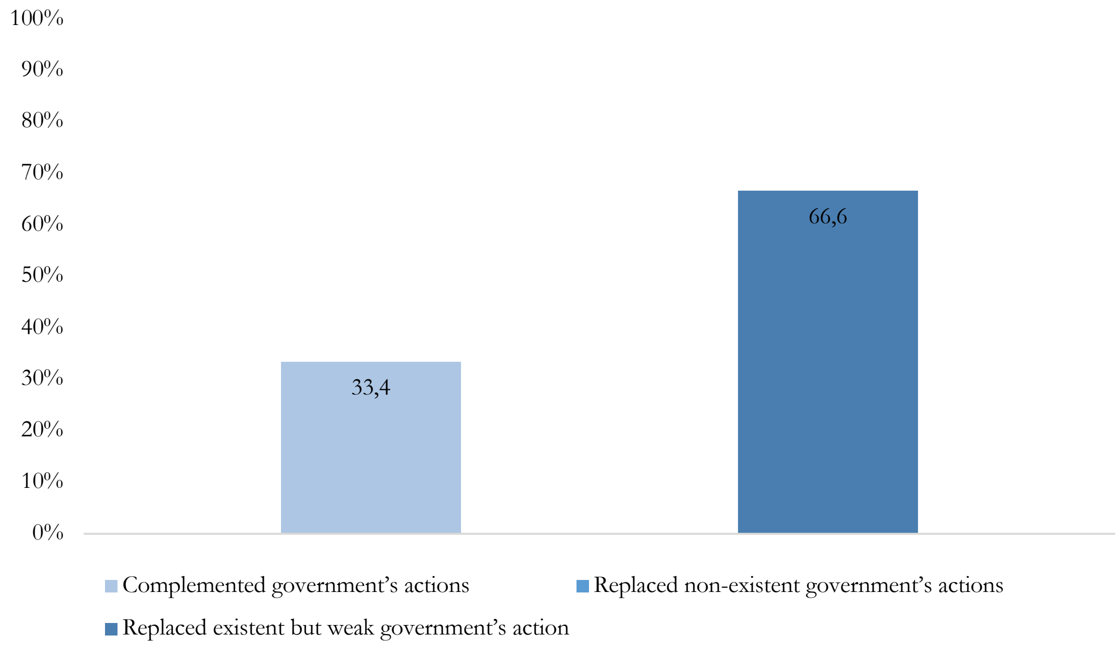


While LCS generally did not provide the level of support expected by grassroots people during the Covid-19 response in Daraa governorate, especially in areas that have slipped away from the control of the Syrian government during the conflict, a high number of participants praised the role of local civil initiatives, especially Corona Committees: *'The society has shown unparalleled solidarity, and the pandemic set an example in cooperation and collaboration. Important people in the city promoted fundraising to purchase materials needed for hospitals and health centres. The notable of the clan in the area where I live provided me with cash and a health basket because I do not have a breadwinner'*, stated one woman who lost her husband during the conflict and was displaced from Homs.

The importance of civilian initiatives during the pandemic was confirmed by the director of the national hospital in a city controlled by an opposition military group that received close to no support from the Syrian state and licensed CSOs: *'Civil financial donations remained key support for local activities. For instance, an oxygen mobilisation plant was established in [anonymised] Hospital with the support of the people of the city. We received a total of 300 million Syrian pounds [over 454,000 GBP]'*. One inhabitant who visited the same hospital echoed the words of the director: '*One of my relatives contracted Covid-19 so we went to Daraa hospital for him to receive treatment. But we did not find any interest in our situation and we did not receive any care. If it were not for the donations collected for [anonymised] Hospital, we would not have been able to get the oxygen we needed. Had we relied on the [Syrian] state, half of the people there [in opposition areas in Daraa] would have died'*.

The testimonies collected across Daraa governorate illustrate that the combined action of licensed (local and international) NGOs and civilian initiatives were considered by a majority of grassroots respondents as having replaced existent but weak government action to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 8).

Figure 8: In your opinion, did actions of local civil society … during the pandemic (Daraa)

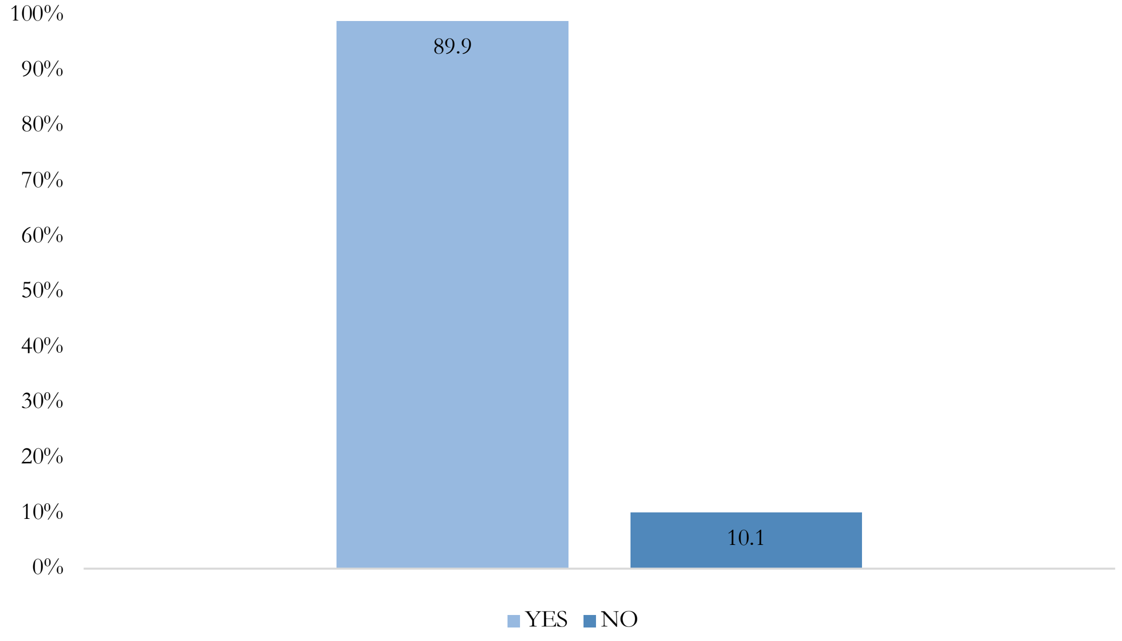


Despite the crucial actions of local communities and LCS in Daraa governorate, and as opposed to the dynamics observed in northwest Syria, the pandemic did not trigger the emergence of a coordinated civil society network in the areas under the official control of the regime. While 89.9% of the civil society members interviewed stated that they collaborated with other CSOs during the pandemic (Figure 9), the research shows that LCS in Daraa mainly cooperated with international organisations rather than other local CSOs. For instance, several activities and campaigns to fight Covid-19 were implemented in coordination with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Program (WFP), the International Red Cross (IRC) and even the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the latter in order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the 30,000 Palestinian refugees living in south Syria, of whom one third reside in Daraa camp for Palestine refugees (UNRWA, 2021).

> ***‘On the security front, we are interrogated by the Political Security and Air Security; we are asked about the size of the donations we receive, the donors themselves, and whether there are international bodies or organisations that support the committee, or if the members of the committee have contact with activists abroad’.***

For LCS, cooperation was limited by the low number of CSOs, especially those working in the medical field or health services in the governorate. Moreover, the lack of trust and the ongoing political strife in Daraa was a challenge to wide-ranging cooperation, as explained by the member of a Corona Committee in a town that is openly opposed to the Syrian regime: *‘On the security front, we are interrogated by the Political Security and Air Security; we are asked about the size of the donations we receive, the donors themselves, and whether there are international bodies or organisations that support the committee, or if the members of the committee have contact with activists abroad’*. In other words, the monopoly and strict control of the Syrian state over humanitarian activities in the areas it controls prevented the advent of LCS as an actor of emergency governance during Covid-19.

Figure 9: Did your organisation collaborate with other CSOs during the pandemic? (Daraa)



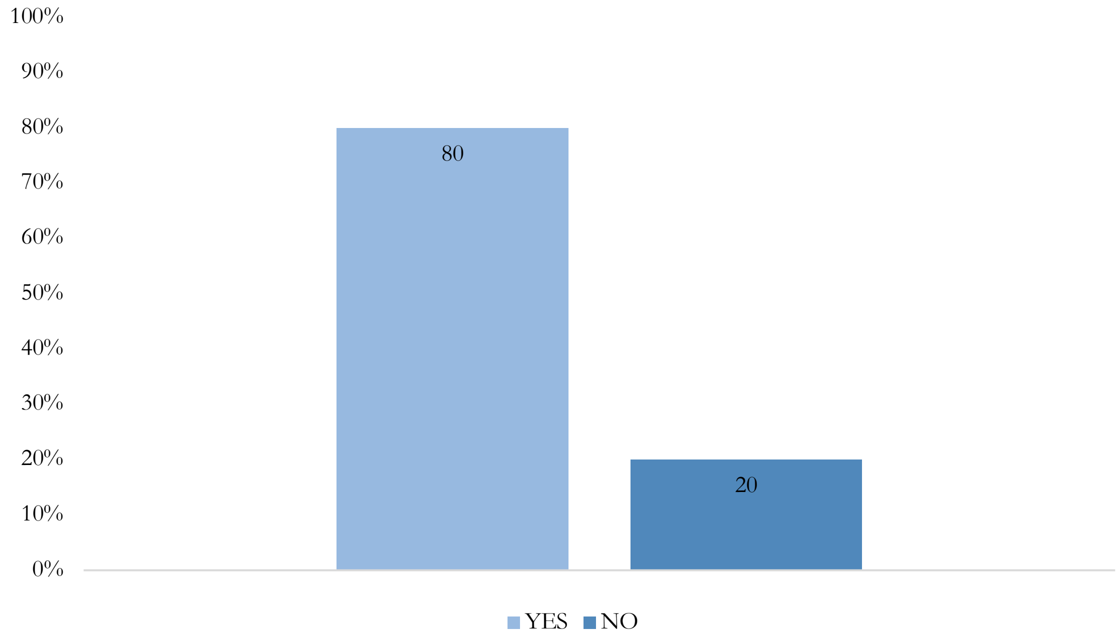
In Raqqa governorate, the civil society landscape is relatively new compared to the northwest of Syria where CSOs multiplied in the early years of the conflict, and regime-controlled territories where a network of organisations developed after Bashar al-Assad came to power and under the patronage of the first lady, Asma al-Assad. When IS established the stronghold of its caliphate in Raqqa city in August 2013, the restrictions it imposed on the work of local CSOs caused the suspension or termination of many of these organisations. As a result, many of the CSOs operating in Raqqa during the pandemic were only created after IS was driven out of the areas in October 2017, and therefore lack experience in the management of crises and emergencies. Beyond Raqqa, and despite the claim of the AANES to facilitate the mobilisation of civil society for the production of the common good and to build a democratic society, the LCS lacked an institutionalised and integrated system when Covid-19 hit the northeast of Syria. It was as recently as 17 October 2021 that civil society in Rojava held a founding conference for the Coalition of Civil Society Organisations in Northeastern Syria, aimed at 'build[ing] a common ground that brings together civil society organisations and institutions to strengthen and consolidate their role in society' (North Press Agency, 2021).

The lack of an integrated network of civil society organisations may explain why several respondents interviewed during the research regretted the lack of support from the international community in the face of the pandemic. For instance, one member in a small local NGO explained how their lack of experience in applying for international funding restricted the response of his organisation: *'We prepared studies for several internationally-funded projects aimed at preventing the pandemic, but none of them was accepted by the supporters. As a result, our response was limited to voluntary initiatives and awareness campaigns within the capabilities available to us'*. Other CSOs approached this challenge by choosing to learn from the experience of neighbouring countries, especially the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), to maximise their impact: *'This pandemic began in many countries before it reached ours, and the studies department of the organisation presented a study that relied on data and responses from these countries. This prospective study had a significant role in the speed of the response. We took it into consideration when submitting projects to donors, and some of them have been approved'*.

> ***'I think that civil society organisations are the most interested institutions in us in terms of living, and providing us with a helping hand through aid and medical centres or treatments free of charge.'***

Despite the challenges of an emerging LCS in Raqqa, the research findings show that the presence of CSOs was generally felt and appreciated by grassroots communities in the governorate (Figure 10), although their answers clearly demonstrate that international NGOs assumed the greatest role in the response to the pandemic. One housewife told the authors: *'I think that civil society organisations are the institutions most interested in us in terms of living, and providing us with a helping hand through aid and medical centres or treatments free of charge'*. A young Kurd from Raqqa narrated: *'A team sent by the UNICEF came to my neighbourhood to assess the financial conditions of the residents* *and collect information about our living situation. Shortly after, it allocated a bi-monthly food basket to us'*. The crucial action of international NGOs was confirmed by a woman displaced from Deir ez-Zour: *'I suffer from permanent diseases due to my advanced age and the harsh conditions we have been through [over a decade of conflict] such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and ischemia. I need daily medications and my financial situation does not allow me to buy them. I visited the Doctors Without Borders centre and they allocated free monthly medications and periodic medical examinations for me during the pandemic. Another local association also gave me a cash aid card every month'*.

Figure 10: Have you been in contact with any local CSO since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020? (Raqqa)



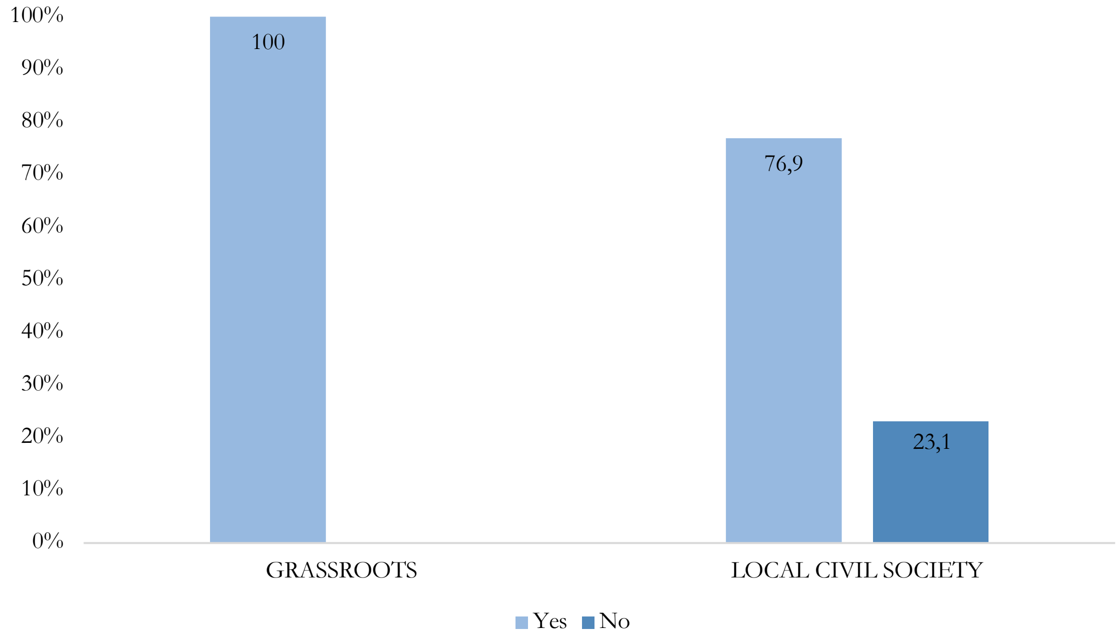
In Raqqa governorate, several accounts from both members of CSOs, grassroots communities, and community leaders highlighted the existence of trust deficit between LCS and the recipients of its work. For example, one clan elder voiced his doubts regarding the seriousness of LCS to tackle the pandemic: *'When I meet with CSOs members, we all wear a mask and gloves but as soon as the meeting is over, I can see and they take it off. Their behaviour is artificial and I could recount countless similar stories'*. The founder of one local NGO in Raqqa admitted: *'There is a crisis of trust between grassroots societies and civil society organisations. This is due to the fact that relief organisations projected a stereotypical image of civil society that only provides in-kind aid to citizens'*. In other words, LCS in Raqqa is not considered a service provider or an actor that can efficiently be part of emergency governance during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. More CSO workers believed that the mistrust of grassroots communities might stem from the lack of capacity of LCS: *'We, as a local organisation, do not have the capabilities to implement an integrated project, and this has an impact on our work policy as we need to prioritise actions and beneficiaries'*.

Moreover, the findings of the research suggest that, like in Daraa governorate, governmental institutions in northeast Syria have a monopoly over the work of LCS, as confirmed by several CSOs members: '*We need approval from [the Autonomous Administration] for any project, activity or initiative we want to carry out. Our work must be compatible with the policy and requirements of governmental institutions in the northeast but also with that of international or local funders*'. Some respondents went further, denouncing the influence of governmental institutions in the work of their organisations, thereby causing great dependence of civic action in Raqqa: '*Government institutions appropriate our projects by granting licenses and approvals and even by amending some of our initiatives. In addition to that, we also have to include the policies and criteria of the international civil society that includes donor and organisations that support our work*'.

> ***'There is a crisis of trust between grassroots societies and civil society organisations. This is due to the fact that relief organisations projected a stereotypical image of civil society that only provides in-kind aid to citizens.'***

LCS in Raqqa governorate was perceived as the least independent body across the four governorates under study: 100% of grassroots and close to 77% of members of civil society respondents stated that they did not consider LCS as an independent actor (Figure 11). In addition to the influence of political and international actors, grassroots respondents considered LCS affected by corruption and nepotism: '*Some organisations give support to people who do not need or deserve assistance while they deprive most vulnerable people*'.

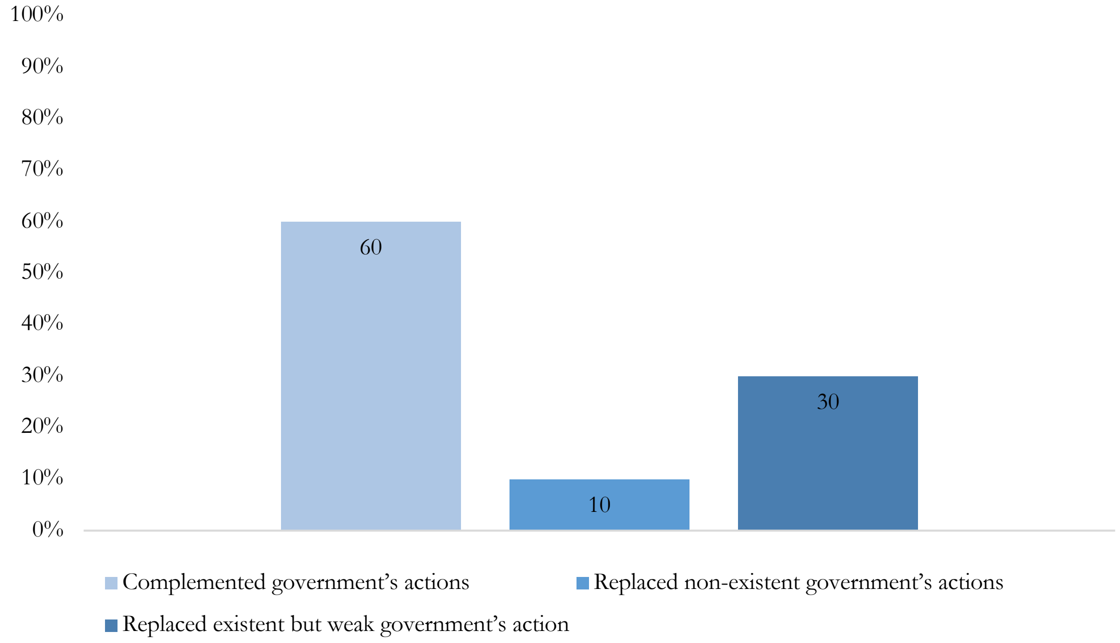
Figure 11: Is the work of local civil society influenced by some actors? (Raqqa)



Despite the generally negative perception of LCS, 40% of grassroots participants in the research believed that the actions of LCS were essential and replaced non-existent or weak government policies (Figure 12). This suggests that, for local inhabitants of Raqqa governorate, the Autonomous Administration scored relatively low rates of public satisfaction during the pandemic – especially in the field of relief – and that LCS remains a key actor of crisis mitigation in the northeast of the country.

> ***'Some organisations give support to people who do not need or deserve assistance while they deprive most vulnerable people'.***

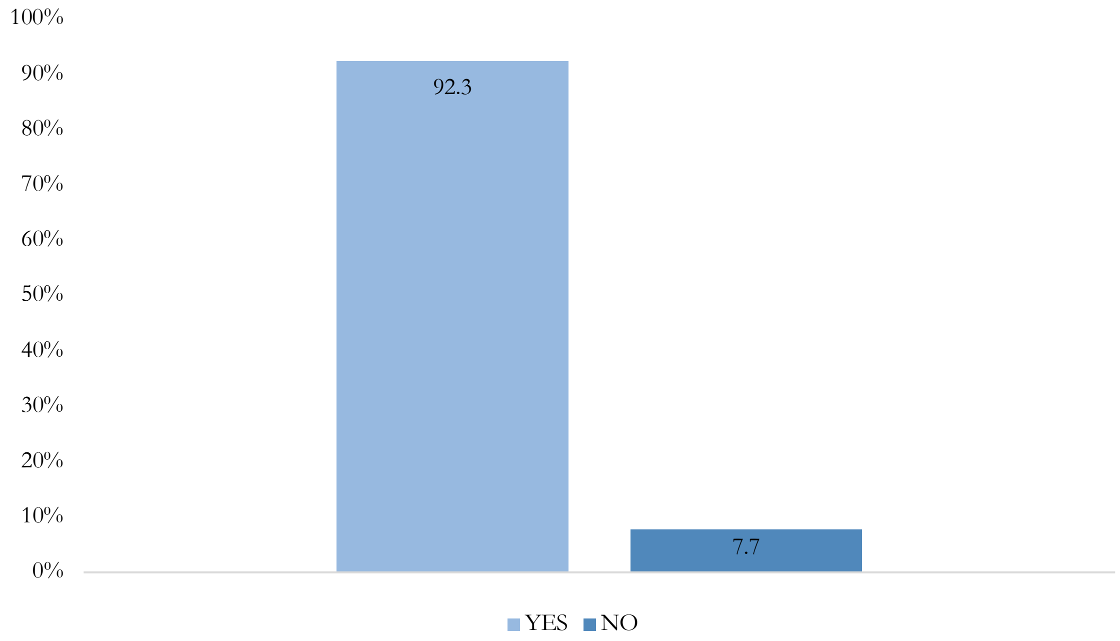
Figure 12: In your opinion, did actions of local civil society … during the pandemic (Raqqa)



Over 92% of the members of CSOs interviewed confirmed that they provided a collaborative response to Covid-19 by implementing joint projects (Figure 13). Yet it remains unclear to what extent the Covid-19 pandemic prompted internal cooperation between local CSOs and volunteer initiatives in Raqqa governorate.

At the regional level, the Health Working Group and the Northeast Syria Forum were crucial coordinating platforms, gathering together a number of local and international NGOs. In early March 2020, the two platforms established a multi-sectoral Task Force in northeast Syria to implement WHO guidance on Covid-19 and to draft a Preparedness and Response Plan (PRP). Considering the very limited involvement of the Syrian government in Northeast Syria, the collaboration between the Health Working Group and Turkey, through the Health Cluster in Gaziantep, and the KRI has proved crucial to the Covid-19 response.

Figure 13: Did your organisation collaborate with other CSOs during the pandemic? (Raqqa)



This international cooperation has been challenged by the closure of the border with the KRI on 2 February 2020 to prevent the spread of the virus, which imposed great limitations to the work of INGOs in Rojava and raised concerns that up to 82% of international staff might be asked to leave northeast Syria should the emergency border-crossing modality negotiated by the Northeast Syria Forum be cancelled (NES Forum, 2020: 1). As outlined above, the failure of the UNSC to renew the al-Yarubiyah crossing in January 2020, put a strain on the delivery of supply and logistics to northeast Syria during the pandemic. The move allegedly resulted in a US$30 million shortfall for the region's health sector (HRW, 2020a) and the cancellation of financial support for 69% of the region's healthcare facilities previously funded by the UN (IRC et al., 2020). According to local sources, Rojava registered a drop of 40 to 50% of supplies entering the region (COAR, 2021: 18).

> ***'They [CSOs] did not cooperate with my organisation to implement any of the projects that we prepared, although we desperately needed support to implement them'.***

The regional and international cooperation of CSOs failed to include the LCS, and numerous respondents regretted that efficient collaboration was slowed down by the lack of personal experience in networking and cooperative projects in northeast Syria. For example, the logistic officer in a local humanitarian organisation stated that trust in other CSOs decreased during the pandemic: *'They [CSOs] did not cooperate with my organisation to implement any of the projects that we prepared, although we desperately needed support to implement them'*. The research shows that collaborative initiatives emerged at the unformal level, between volunteer civilians, rather than the institutional LCS level.

Most strikingly, Syrian citizens came together to create the Volunteers Against Corona Project. Despite its similarity with the Initiative of Volunteers Against Corona launched in the northwest by the Civil Defence and Idlib Health Directorate, the project is very different in terms of composition since it only includes groups of volunteers who pledge to provide social services and support to their fellow citizens during the pandemic.

© Sana Aboud

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Beyond its heterogeneous nature and role, Syrian civil society across the four governorates under study in this report played a crucial role in the provision of healthcare and social services and mitigating measures in the face of the Covid-19 virus. The previous sections show that LCS complemented and sometimes replaced the action of governance institutions of the Syrian regime and its opponents in the north of the country. While the independence of LCS has been touched upon above, this section investigates the relationship between governance actors and LCS, and the level of integration of the associated Covid-19 response.

Opposition-held Areas: Aleppo & Idlib

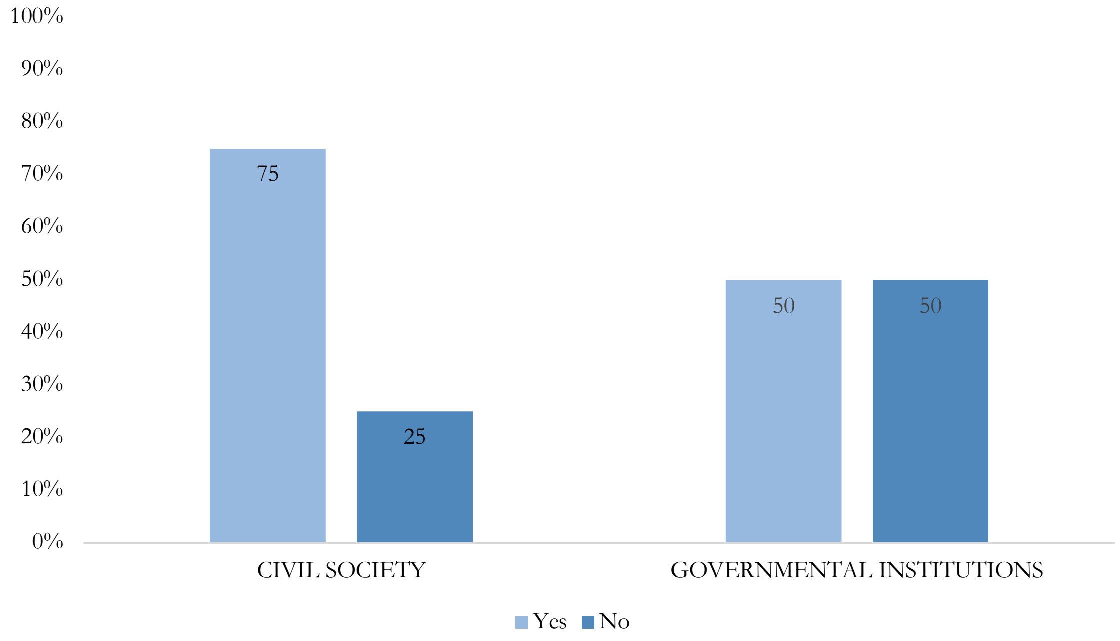
In northwest Syria, LCS was not a mere de facto substitute to the opposition governmental authorities' failure to deliver services and meet the needs of local populations during the pandemic. One could say that civil society 'inherited' the Covid-19 file, complementing the response of SIG and SSG in opposition-held Aleppo and Idlib governorates. While al-Assad's government securitised its response to the pandemic and curtailed the role of NGOs and the private sector (COAR, 2021: 3), LCS in the northwest enjoyed the relative lack of political interference in its activities. Political interference was maybe stronger in Aleppo due to the influence of the Turkish state, and for initiatives targeting displaced populations living inside camps located in Idlib, for which the management and administration fall into the direct authority of the Ministry of Development and Camp Management within SSG.

In opposition-held Aleppo governorate, as much as 75% of CSOs members affirmed that they cooperated with government institutions against 50% whom cooperated with official representatives at the central and local levels (Figure 14). On the one hand, cooperation between governance institutions and LCS happened mostly at the local level, that is, between LCS and local councils that are nominally affiliated with SIG but effectively respond to the Turkish state. For instance, Azaz Media Office, one of the few independent media outlets in northern Aleppo governorate, coordinated with local councils and the police to formulate and communicate public policies during the pandemic, such as quarantine and the closure of public spaces. A staff member of the Ministry of Local Administration admitted: *'My ministry was not directly related to the implementation of the projects [related to the mitigation of Covid-19] due to the weak role of the [central] government on the ground in terms of implementation and legitimacy'*.

> *'Cooperation decreased significantly after the Turkish government intervened to draw up procedures and general policy to confront the disease. The Turkish intervention weakened coordination between local authorities in northern Aleppo, as well as meetings and discussions among local actors'.*

A note-worthy exception within the SIG is the Ministry of Health, which communicated with a high number of CSOs and invited local media offices to officially cover the seminars and meetings it held on Covid-19. The majority of civil society workers interviewed stated that cooperation with governmental bodies mainly included the exchange of information on the number of infected cases and populations in need of assistance, and the development of common response plans and measures such as the Early Warning Network and Response Network (EWARN). Operating in the north of Syria, EWARN is a diseases surveillance system that collects epidemiological health data. It was established in mid-2013 as a counterpart to the Syrian government-run Early Warning and Response System (EWARS) following the collapse of the health system. In this framework, governmental and civil society actors divided the areas under the control of SIG into sectors to facilitate the attribution of tasks to CSOs operating in the ground and better coordinate the Covid-19 response.

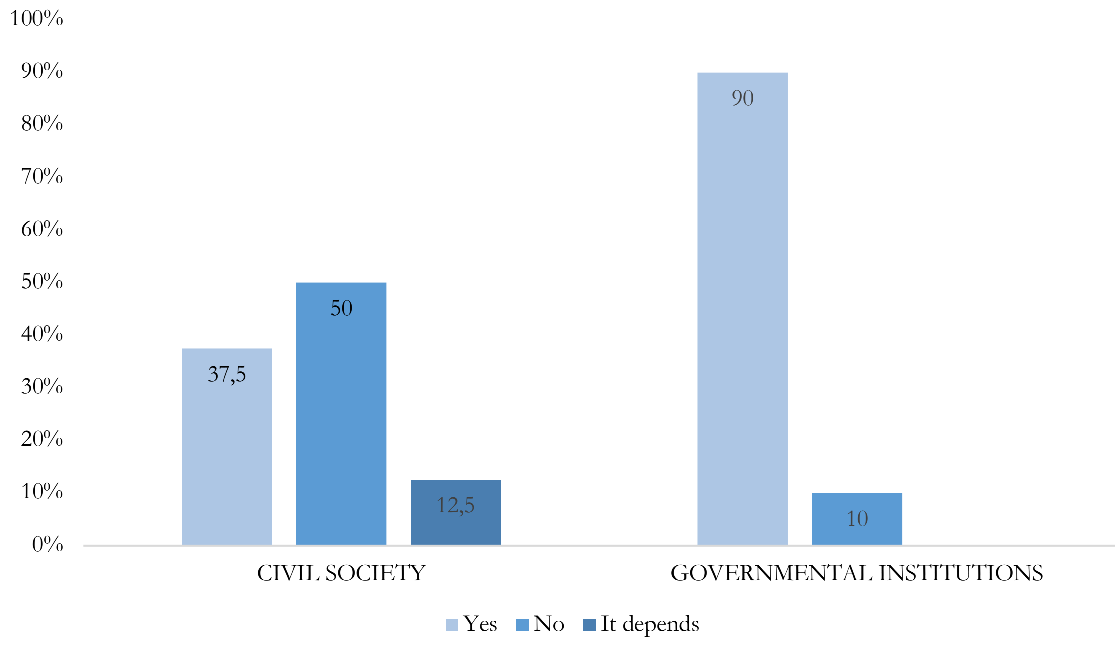
Figure 14: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions/civil society (Aleppo)



On the other hand, a number of respondents stated that cooperation between LCS and governance institutions in opposition-held Aleppo governorate was limited in scope and time. Smaller CSOs and volunteer initiatives, in particular, regretted that cooperation was not initiated by the government and that the latter failed to create a clear and inclusive response plan at the central government level. One media activist explained: *'Cooperation decreased significantly after the Turkish government intervened to draw up procedures and general policy to confront the disease. The Turkish intervention weakened coordination between local authorities in northern Aleppo, as well as meetings and discussions among local actors'*. According to several participants, the lack of independence and time factors were key challenges to the cooperation with central governmental institutions in northern Aleppo governorate, as stated by one medical activist: *'Any decision or effort to cooperate, and thus refer to the direct official or highest administrative level, requires a lot of time. This weakens the response in light of the fast-spreading virus'*.

In Idlib, the results of the research clearly emphasise a double discourse. On the one hand, the SSG relied heavily on LCS, including Turkish NGOs and Health Directorates, to face the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, 90% of the representatives of official governance institutions interviewed confirmed their collaboration with CSOs. On the other hand, LCS tried to distance itself from the SSG to avoid being affiliated with HTS, which is listed as a terrorist organisation, and jeopardise their political neutrality and cooperation with international donors. The responses of members of CSOs were far less clear-cut than that of governmental representatives, as 50% stated that they did not work together with governance institutions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19, and 12.5% indicated that cooperative endeavour varied (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions/civil society (Idlib)



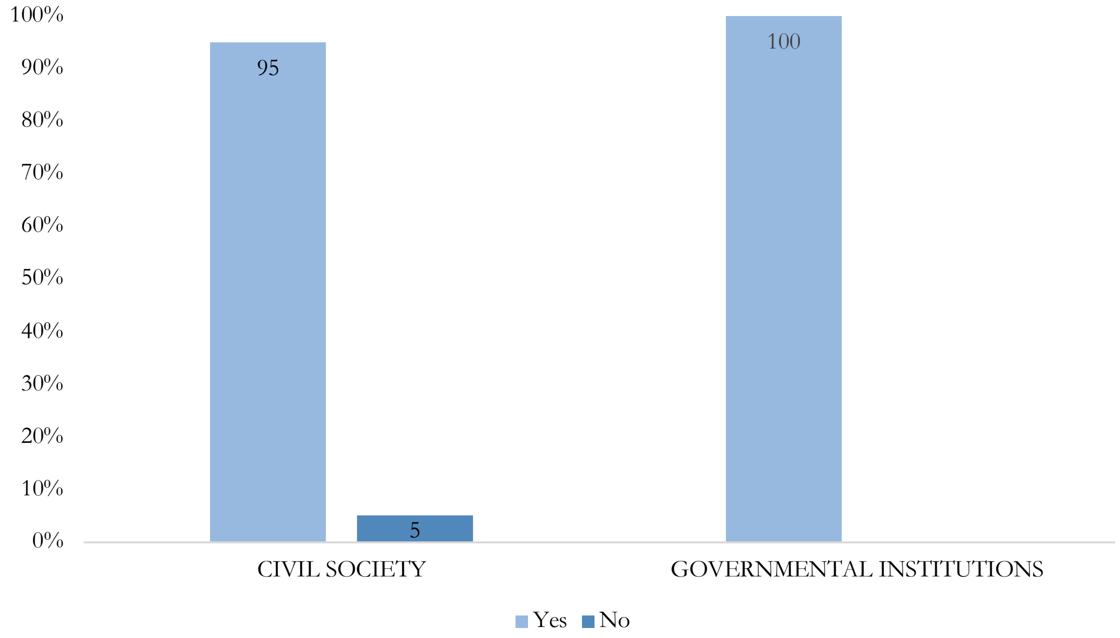
A majority of civil society representatives explained that their relationship with governance institutions should be considered as interactions rather than full cooperation during the pandemic. Among other examples, this kind of 'soft cooperation' included conducting training and awareness sessions for members of local councils and the Constitutional Committee. More active cooperation took place with the ministries of Health and Education but also with the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs, in order to facilitate the delivery of services to the most vulnerable communities.

As noted in the case of opposition-held Aleppo governorate, cooperation was not initiated by governmental institutions. A key worker at IHD told the authors that when the threat of the pandemic loomed on Idlib governorate, the Directorate contacted all government institutions and received a response rate of about 70%. Like the nominally independent IHD, a number of civil society members emphasised that, despite the challenges of cooperating with the SIG and considering the inability of the same government to provide essential services during the pandemic, cooperating and complementing governmental action was a necessity.

Regime-controlled Territories: Daraa

The monopoly of the Syrian regime on activities of LCS in the areas it controls paves the way for a de facto cooperation with the few accredited CSOs that played a key role in the Covid-19 response. As opposed to northwest Syria, Daraa respondents provide a quasi-identical discourse, with 95% of civil society representatives and 100% of government officials confirming the systematic cooperation between LCS and the Syrian regime (Figure 16). The research findings show that among the most proactively cooperative governmental institutions in Daraa are the Ministry of Health at the central level, the directorates of Education, Health, Finance, and Social Affairs at the governorate level, and the Teachers Union and municipalities at the local level.

Figure 16: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions/civil society (Daraa)

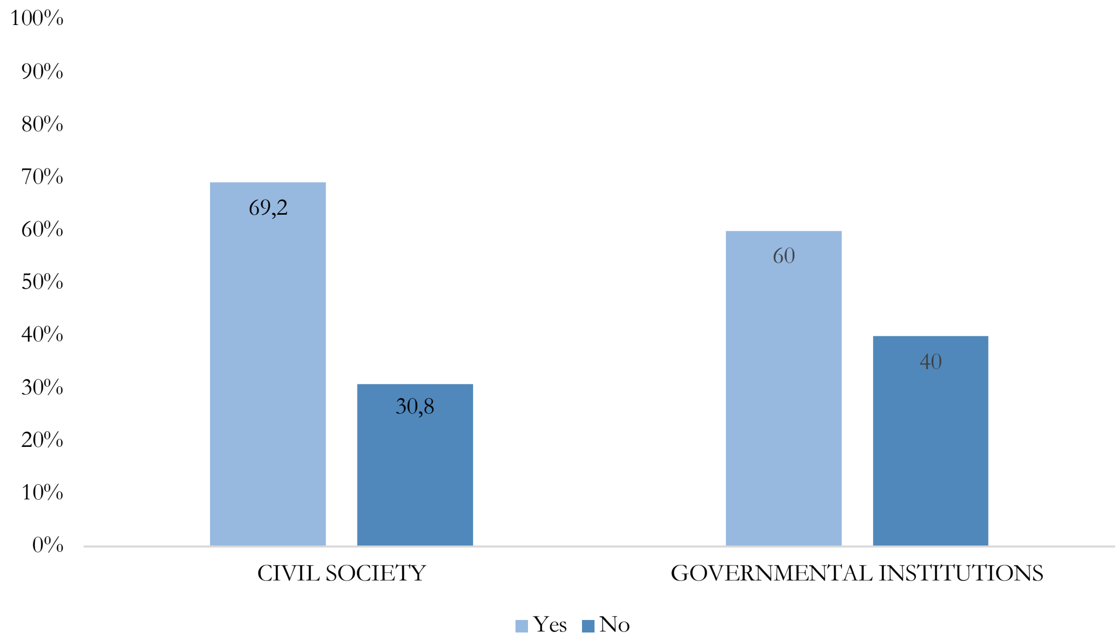


Despite an obvious collaborative stance to face the pandemic in Daraa, LCS and governance institutions followed a different path in dealing with the spread of the virus and funding their actions. As such, the collaboration did not translate into an integrated action. For instance, LCS was not included in the drafting of the National Campaign for Emergency Social Response. Instead, cooperation was limited to the implementation of preventive and mitigating measures such as the sterilisation of state offices and data sharing: *'Local government bodies provide us with data on people with special needs, elderly, women, martyrs and displaced'*; *'On the basis of the official statistics shared by local councils in Daraa governorates, we provided 763 health rations to widowed women'*. Needs were assessed by governmental bodies and international NGOs and UN agencies, and LCS only provided services without being able to check the validity of the data shared nor to contribute to need assessment despite its first-line position in the ground during the pandemic.

Opposition-held Areas: Raqqa

Like in Daraa, responses collected in Raqqa governorate show a similarity of vision regarding the cooperation between governmental institutions and LCS during the Covid-19 pandemic. In both cases, between 60% and 70% of respondents stated that formal cooperation took place in the form of grant and project approvals and the delivery of licenses to allow the work of CSOs on the ground (Figure 17). Some CSOs also reported that they were invited to attend discussions and awareness events hosted by governmental institutions to be updated about the virus and taught about prevention methods.

Figure 17: Did you or your organisation/institution collaborate with government institutions/civil society (Raqqa)



In other words, governance institutions facilitated the work of LCS through administrative procedures but cooperation did not translate into a pro-active partnership to draft and implement a common response to the pandemic. The founder of one local organisation working to empower women and children, hypothesized that the lack of cooperation might stem from a form of competition over society-building: *'Governmental institutions feel that [CSOs] take their role and do not consider them a partner to build the society. But building a strong society requires time and dialogue between all parties to reach a common goal and project aimed at protecting society. Governance institutions must understand that CSOs are an assistant and partner in this aim and they must refrain from suppressing the role of CSOs'*.

Several officials of the AANES admitted that collaboration with LCS was limited to sanitisation and awareness campaigns, while the military branch of the government told the authors that it did not cooperate unless LCS was needed for logistical purposes.

> *'[B]uilding a strong society requires time and dialogue between all parties to reach a common goal and project aimed at protecting society. Governance institutions must understand that CSOs are an assistant and partner.'*

The research team encountered challenges in collecting detailed accounts of the cooperation between LCS and governmental institutions due to the fear of participants to express their opinions freely on the role of the Autonomous Administration. While the majority of participants who accepted to meet the researchers seemed to share mixed opinions about this topic, they all limited their criticisms to vague examples, which suggests that cooperation might have been less important than they stated.

© Suwar Al mousa

THE WEAK ROLE OF MILITARY ACTORS

Our previous report shows that military groups are the less trusted actors in northwest Syria (Beaujouan, 2021: 25), which was generally confirmed in Daraa and Raqqa governorates. Despite public mistrust, military groups are heavily affiliated with the Syrian and opposition governments and may play an influential part in emergency governance. As such, it was important for the authors to examine the role of military groups in emergency governance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Opposition-held Areas: Aleppo & Idlib

In opposition-held Aleppo governorate, there were no joint activities or direct contact between LCS and military groups or institutions, and the latter generally had a weak role during the pandemic. When the virus began to spread in urban centres, the police and the National Army were tasked with the implementation of Covid-19 related measures such as the establishment of checkpoints to control the circulation of locals and enforcing the wearing of face masks for short periods of time in line with the policies enacted by Turkish authorities and local councils. In Azaz for instance, the police and the military were included in the Emergency Committee, whose mission was to follow up on the implementation of the procedures and decisions issued by the medical offices of the local councils.

In Idlib governorate, the role of armed groups did not differ much from Aleppo and participants generally mentioned the weakness of military intervention during the pandemic. Only their role, coordinated by the SSG, to regulate access to IDP camps and ensure the safety of civil society members and volunteers during the distribution of services and goods, was praised. In another instance, on 25 July 2020, the SSG imposed a quarantine on the town of Sarmin, located in the eastern countryside of Idlib city, after a female teacher travelling from the areas controlled by the Syrian regime was found the be infected by Covid-19. It was later confirmed that the woman had entered illegally through one of the smuggling crossings in the northern countryside of Aleppo before mixing with the local population and medical staff (Enab Baladi, 2020b). HTS implemented the confinement rules across the city. Finally, at the beginning of the pandemic, military checkpoints were used to check the body temperatures of those passing through, and the military groups in charge of these checkpoints were asked to transfer suspected positive cases to designated health centres and hospitals.

The military in Idlib had the strongest influence on LCS initiatives, although its involvement predates the Covid-19 pandemic. A couple of participants denounced the practice of the military to corner humanitarian aid aimed at grassroots populations and redistribute it to the families of fighters, deemed more deserving. This practice puts enormous pressure on local CSOs that can either agree to play the corrupt game of military groups and risk losing their funding that is often channelled through international donors, or refuse to do so but expose their staff to potentially violent retaliation. While the establishment of the Ministry of Development and Camp Management within the SSG to coordinate the humanitarian action on Idlib governorate contributed to the decrease of such practices, it did not eradicate it.

Regime-controlled Territories: Daraa

Several rival military groups continue to fight over Daraa territories, including the Syrian army and opposition groups. As a result, perceptions on the role of military groups differed greatly from one place to the other. For instance, the Fifth Corps which has a great presence in and around Busra al-Sham, largely intervened to impose curfews but also provided medical services because it partly manages the National Hospital in the city. Local inhabitants generally praised the group's actions during the pandemic. In Tafas and Daraa al-Balad, which were controlled by former opposition fighters who refused the reconciliation agreements with the Syrian state, the role of the military was less important and the pandemic was punctuated by military assaults by the Syrian military against the two cities (Syrians for Truth & Justice, 2021a and 2021b).

Similar to northwest Syria, military groups played a positive role in escorting civil society members across the governorate to facilitate the distribution of medical aid and goods to local populations. One member of a local NGO told the authors: *'They [military men] worked to accompany us and organise relief operations, which we provide in the areas of their control'*. In another instance, one high-ranked worker at Daraa Directorate of Education explained that the Syrian army – affiliated with the Syrian government – supported the organisation of national exams by securing the entrances to exam centres and encouraging students to wear masks and organising the circulation of students in and out of the buildings. However, the research team also collected accounts from grassroots communities that argued that the presence of the Syrian military on the roads and examination centres played an important role in intimidating students and their families, because some parents feared that their children might be arrested or abused, whilst others refused to send children to sit their exams altogether, thereby jeopardising their education.

Opposition-held Areas: Raqqa

While not the official military arm of the Autonomous Authority in northeast Syria, the SDF effectively control the region and implemented the Covid-19 measures enacted by political institutions, such as the closure of borders with regime-held areas and neighbouring countries, and the imposition of confinement rules on populations. The curfew was mainly enforced by the SDF's Anti-Terror Units, which complemented the role of the Asayesh security forces of the Autonomous Administration. Despite its role in the mitigation of the health crisis, grassroots perceptions of the SDF grew more negative during the pandemic while the same perceptions remained unchanged in the northwest and regime-held areas in Daraa. Respondents across Raqqa governorate mentioned that the presence of the SDF was key to ensuring their safety against the repeated attacks of the Syrian regime. However, the lack of communication hampered the cooperation of locals, as explained by one member of the SDF: *'Most [citizens] did not understand that what we were doing when we closed border crossings and imposed general ban. These actions were in their interests and aimed at preserving their safety, but citizens only saw our actions as disruptive'*.

THE EXCLUSION OF TRIBAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Opposition-held Areas: Aleppo & Idlib

Through the visits made by the research team, it was found that clans in northwest Syria have a positive and respected social role in the field of reconciliation and the settlement of local disputes, compared to their response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collected shows that the great majority of social leaders showed little interest in the pandemic and believed that it had been invented for political purposes. As a result, the responses of clans and religious communities was limited to individual beliefs and participation in community initiatives or through professional positions within humanitarian organisations. The research shows that clans as groups did not cooperate with LCS of governmental actors in the fight against Covid-19, either because they are not competent authorities in a legal sense, or because clan leaders were not willing to push for further cooperation to fight a virus they believed did not exist.

The data shows that clergy were also generally reluctant to confront the pandemic and even recognise its existence. Our previous report highlighted that the arrival of the virus in northwest Syria was accompanied by the spread of rumours and false information with the support of informal religious voices in both Idlib and opposition-held Aleppo governorates (Beaujouan, 2021: 16-17). For instance, some religious clerics not affiliated with any governments suggested that the virus was a lie and a conspiracy against Islam, used in order to forbid prayers and pilgrimage. The decisions of local councils and SGG to close mosques and koranic schools for several weeks caused great discontent among majoritarian Muslim local populations. This is reflected globally when similar theories spread across the world through social media, with clerics stressing that Muslims were immune to the virus and that the vaccine would turn Muslims into unbelievers (Keskin, 2020).

> *'In the recent period, there has been a meeting of all Yazidi representatives in the region, and it has been agreed to establish a community association. Perhaps the recent circumstances linked to Covid-19 have accelerated the idea that we should get our people's rights, and increase our coordination with [civil society] organisations, and the local council and institutions …'*

Islam is officially represented in governmental institutions in the northwest. It is affiliated to local councils that coordinate with the Turkish state in opposition-held Aleppo and with the Ministry of Endowment within the SSG. Despite this official representation, few efforts were made by governmental institutions to control the discourse of religious leaders regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. After mosques reopened in opposition-held Aleppo governorate, sermons were circulated by local councils to urge Muslim populations to adhere to health measures and social distancing. However, many clerics refused to follow the recommendations and spoke both explicitly and implicitly about the existence of a conspiracy. Other religious institutions agreed to cooperate with the state, for example the Imam Shatibi Centre for Science and Muslim Building in Idlib. The Centre's imam, who agreed to speak to the research team, stated that he provided health guidance during the Friday sermon, which attracts large audiences, and cooperated with the city's local council to verify the content of his preaching. The imam also confirmed that the centre worked hand in hand with the Civil Defence to coordinate the distribution of hygiene kits to the visitors to the mosque. But religious institutions in northwest Syria were generally not considered key bridges to reach local populations, and they were not invited to contribute to the elaboration of a response plan despite the prevalence of practising Islam across Syrian society.

For religious minorities that live mainly in opposition-held Aleppo governorate and are not officially represented in governmental institutions, such as Christians and the Yazidi, the religious response to the Covid-19 pandemic largely depended on the individual willingness of clerics to play a preventive role and cooperate with local councils. Some data suggests that the pandemic might have brought the realisation that minority communities must institutionalise their existence and root it within a form of active cooperation, as postulated by a Yazidi religious leader the research team met in a small village in the countryside of Aleppo: *'In the recent period, there has been a meeting of all Yazidi representatives in the region, and it has been agreed to establish a community association. Perhaps the recent circumstances linked to Covid-19 have accelerated the idea that we should get our people's rights, and increase our coordination with [civil society] organisations, and the local council and institutions ... not only in our village, but in all the villages'*.

Regime-controlled Territories: Daraa

Daraa governorate is the historical home of numerous tribes, and tribal customs and laws therefore have greater importance in the south of Syria than in the rest of the country. As a result, clan elders played an important role in the mitigation of the Covid-19 pandemic in Daraa. The establishment of Corona Committees across the governorate as local civilian initiatives to fight the virus is also a key factor for the inclusion of social leaders in the response. As a result, clan elders cooperated actively with governmental institutions, decision-makers, and LCS in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic.

This inclusion was initiated by other actors, as explained by a tribal leader in a town controlled by the Syrian regime: *'We were referred to when a general curfew was imposed on the city and more measures were taken to limit the spread of the epidemic. Military authorities thought of us as the best way to reach the people and make sure that they comply with the laws'*. He continued: *'I consider that the role we played during the Corona pandemic is one of the most important humanitarian roles we have played since 2011. This pandemic has been one of the most challenging times we went through due to the quasi-complete absence of civil society organisations and government institutions in our area'*. Despite their importance in the Covid-19 response, tribal leaders did not cooperate with central government institutions due to the inability of the Syrian state to provide medical services. Therefore cooperation remained mainly local, and relied on civilian initiatives and local social solidarity as outlined earlier in this report.

> ***'We were referred to when a general curfew was imposed on the city and more measures were taken to limit the spread of the epidemic. Military authorities thought of us as the best way to reach the people and make sure that they comply with the laws'.***

Religious leaders were also asked to contribute to the response in Daraa, and the Ministry of Endowment within the Syrian government issued rules and advice to be included in sermons and preaching. However, the Ministry failed to combat conspiracy theories that spread across the country. The contribution of religious institutions can be seen to be broader than sermons alone, because the loudspeakers that are traditionally used by mosques for the call to prayer, were used to communicate Covid-19-related measures such as the closure of public spaces, the ban on public gatherings, and the cancellation of wedding and mourning activities. One imam who preaches in a town controlled by opposition groups explained how Islam can be used as a source of prevention of the virus and justification for official measures: *'It became necessary for me to alert people about the danger of this emerging virus, based on the stories that took place during the era of the Prophet Muhammad {may God bless him and grant him peace} and the era of the Companions. At some point, it was forbidden for people to circulate freely in and out their houses until the epidemic has passed'*. Another Muslim cleric insisted on the importance of Islam during the pandemic: *'Thank God, the Islamic platform still has its role in influencing people and this is what helped me and facilitated my task in persuading people of the necessity of adhering to health rules'*.

Like tribal elders in Daraa governorate, religious leaders were also included in the response to the pandemic within local Corona Committees and were found to have a more active role in Daraa than other parts of Syria, as narrated by one IPD woman: *'When the Corona crisis broke out, religious leaders launched a campaign for donations in cooperation with tribal leaders, and the response was great because they are trusted by everyone. They are the ones who worked to manage these donations and purchase the necessary medical supplies for health centres'*.

Opposition-held Areas: Raqqa

In Raqqa governorate, like in the northwest of Syria, tribal leaders mostly took on a reconciliation role and did not participate in the response against Covid-19. Many believed that the pandemic was an invention, a conviction that was only reinforced by the weakness of responses from governmental institutions and the failure of these institutions to communicate with local populations: *'This epidemic has taken on more media hype than the [Syrian] crisis, but frankly, there has been no real response to this epidemic, except for the implementation of the ban imposed by government institutions and security services'*.

For religious leaders in Raqqa governorate, it is important to state that the strong presence of IS between 2014 and 2017 – which established its stronghold in Raqqa city – had a strong impact on the willingness of Muslim clerics to interfere with broader matters affecting local society due to the real fear of being considered a disruptive force to the Autonomous Administration. The AANES is the only governance system in Syria that issued a decision to ban preachers from mentioning conspiracy theories when talking about the Covid-19 pandemic, even though no cases were ever officially reported and acted upon. An interview with the imam of a local mosque in Raqqa countryside confirmed that the measures enacted by the government did not dissipate doubts about the existence of the pandemic: *'As a Muslim, I see that the goal of creating this virus and the media hype around it is to disperse Muslims and prevent them from performing their rituals. They [the Autonomous Authority] closed mosques and prevented the performance of prayer. At the same time, there are many places that are more crowded, such as means of transportation, that kept operating'*. The cleric did not reveal whether he was abiding by the regulations issued by the government when preaching, despite his own opinion about the virus.

> ***'As a Muslim, I see that the goal of creating this virus and the media hype around it is to disperse Muslims and prevent them from performing their rituals. They closed mosques and prevented the performance of prayer. At the same time, there are many places that are more crowded, such as means of transportation, that kept operating.'***

© Dona Al-hamad

CONCLUSION

This report presents the findings of six-month-long empirical research study conducted across four Syrian governorates and systems of governance in order to evaluate the impact of and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The questions guiding this investigation was how each governance system adapted to the challenges posed by the health emergency, and whether the latter prompted the emergence of alternative non-state forms of governance at the local level.

While each governance system adopted a different approach to face the pandemic, the review of grassroots perceptions on the main impact of Covid-19 at the individual and collective levels offered a similar account across the four governorates under study – mostly focus on damage caused to the local economy and education.

The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad saw the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'single-actor play on stage' which relied on a small number of accredited CSOs on the ground, and identified an opportunity to squeeze the opposition further in the north and 'tame' populations considered disobedient both in former opposition strongholds and in territories under regime control. The control of the Syrian regime, implemented by the military and intelligence services, left no room for autonomous and proactive civil society response, but the case of Darra governorate demonstrates that the weak and discriminating official response resulted in the emergence of grassroots governance emergency initiatives. These took the form of Corona Committees and other civilian initiatives led by locally and socially rooted actors, mainly tribal elders and, to a lesser extent, religious leaders.

In opposition-held Aleppo governorate, the fragmentation of the governance system and the pre-eminence of the Turkish state in the decision-making process obstructed the SIG's official response at a central level. Yet local administration councils at the city level enjoyed a more prominent role. The Turkish authority over the Covid-19 response also prevented the development of a fully independent and proactive LCS, despite the emergence of grassroots civic initiatives to mitigate the collective impact of the virus. While the presence of these initiatives could have offered society leaders an opportunity to involve religious and tribal institutions in the fight against the pandemic, these actors remained on the sidelines. The military were also tangential actors in the response to the pandemic. Despite a lack of strong cooperation between official and civic actions against Covid-19, opposition-held Aleppo benefitted from a relatively homogeneous response that did not discriminate according to identity or political views, in contrast to the Syrian regime and the AANES in Rojava.

In Idlib governorate, even more than neighbouring opposition-held Aleppo, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a unique mobilisation of LCS and grassroots initiatives to complement the pro-active but insufficient official response of the SSG. This action of LCS was facilitated by the relative lack of political and military interference, and stimulated by the politics of the pandemic in Syria that saw the international humanitarian market and routes cornered and controlled by the Syrian regime. The civilian nature of the Covid-19 response in Idlib was also reflected in the SSG's attempts to enact pragmatic emergency policies, thereby distancing itself from HTS and presenting itself as a firm civilian government. In a similar fashion to what was observed in Aleppo and Raqqa, the general suspicion against Covid-19 mostly accounts for the lack of inclusion of tribal elders and religious leaders, whom acted on an individual basis in coordination with LCS as a result.

Between the Syrian regime and opposition governments in northwest Syria, Rojava under the authority of the Autonomous Administration presents a middle way where the pandemic was dealt with through existing governance institutions at the most local level, the communes, thereby involving grassroots populations in the response. The inclusivity of these local structures of governance might offer a partial explanation for the lack of civilian initiatives to face Covid-19 and the weakness of LCS in Raqqa governorate. Other explanations are the strong control of the AANES over the activities of CSOs, and the presence of international NGOs that fail to integrate the local components of the response to Covid-19. The scars left by the presence of IS during three years in Raqqa, coupled with the general popular disbelief in the existence of the virus, also resulted in the exclusion of local society figures, mainly religious leaders, from local politics and from attempts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

The arrival of the pandemic in Syria and the official response to it also resulted in a loss of public trust that arguably further damaged the legitimacy of state institutions or institutions performing the state in northern Syria. On the one hand, the Syrian regime failed to rise to the challenge and protect all Syrian citizens against the virus. Instead, the Syrian regime used the pandemic as a tool in the conflict that pitted it against opposition governments in northwest and northeast Syria. On the other hand, the Autonomous Administration in Rojava and the two de-facto governments in the northwest of the country did not manage to prove their governance capacities in the face of the pandemic. The AANES especially reproduced one of the pitfalls of the Syrian regime governance by favouring one ethnic group, the Kurds, over their Arab counterparts. SIG and SSG did not discriminate their response according to identities and political views. Yet, the destruction of human and material capacities by the intense bombing campaigns launched by the Syrian and Russian air forces, coupled with their pre-existing lack of legitimacy on the ground, were insurmountable barriers to presenting themselves as better providers of services and protection, and thus, more legitimate alternative to the Syrian government.

The pandemic also did not change popular public perceptions of military groups affiliated with governance institutions; responses show that such groups remain widely considered disruptive and key contributors to insecurity. As such, Covid-19 in Syria proved the existence of a two-fold crisis of governance and legitimacy across the country. In the face of this crisis, grassroots governance – whether through LCS in the northwest, existing local governance institutions that include citizens in the northeast, or ad hoc committees in the south – might provide a more effective, legitimate, and inclusive form of governance in war-torn Syria.

REFERENCES

Abu Layla, O. (2021), 'Failing Regional Administration and COVID-19 in Deir al-Zour', *Fikra Forum*, May 28, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/failing-regional-administration-and-covid-19-deir-al-zour.

al-Achi, A. (2020), 'Civil Society is the Last Line of Defence Against HTS in Northwest Syria', *Chatham House*, August, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/civil-society-is-the-last-line-of-defence-against-hts-in-northwest-syria.

al-Arab (2020), *Coronavirus increases the number of poor and divorce cases in Syria* [in Arabic], April 27, p. 21.

al-Modon (2020), *Idlib: Suspending Friday prayers...threatens a rift between Salafis* [in Arabic], April 3, https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2020/4/3/تعليق-صلاة-الجمعة-بإدلب-يهدد-بشرخ-بين-السلفيين.

al-Ra'i, N. (2020), 'Eastern Ghouta Suffers from the Covid-19 Burden', *European University Institute*, 11 May, https://blogs.eui.eu/medirections/eastern-ghouta-suffers-covid-19-burden/.

al-Sharq al-Awsat (2021), *The 'Russian Map' penetrates east of Daraa, amid the return of security chaos* [in Arabic], October 17, https://aawsat.com/home/article/3250221/«الخريطة-الروسية»-تتوغل-في-شرق-درعا-وسط-عودة-الفلتان-الأمني.

al-Zein, R. (2021), 'Corona is spreading in Daraa and As-Suwayda' [in Arabic], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 29, https://aawsat.com/home/article/3215551/ «كورونا»-يتفشى-في-درعا-والسويداء

Amnesty International (2020), *Syria: Lack of adequate COVID-19 response puts thousands of lives at risk*, November 12, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/syria-lack-of-adequate-covid-19-response-puts-thousands-of-lives-at-risk/.

Beaujouan, J. (2021), *Covid-19: Tool of Conflict or Opportunity for Local Peace in Northwest Syria?*, Edinburgh: Global Justice Academy, University of Edinburgh.

Berti, B. (2016), 'Warring parties in Syria have weaponized aid by granting or withholding humanitarian access, complicating the work of aid organizations', *Sada Journal*, July 6, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Bodette, M. (2020), *How North and East Syria's Autonomous Structures Handle a Pandemic*, April 15, https://mjbodette.medium.com/how-north-and-east-syrias-autonomous-structures-handle-a-pandemic-49b97c188191.

Chokr, H (2021), 'Mapping the Depreciation of the Syrian Lira', *London School of Economics Blogs*, April 1, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/04/01/mapping-the-depreciation-of-the-syrian-lira/.

Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) (2021), *Syrian Public Health after COVID-19: Entry Points and Lessons Learned from the Pandemic Response*, March, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syrian-Public-Health-after-COVID-19.pdf.

Doocy, S. et al (2011), 'Food security and humanitarian assistance among displaced Iraqi populations in Jordan and Syria', *Social Science & Medicine*, 72(2): 273-282.

Ekzayez, A. et al. (2020), 'COVID-19 response in northwest Syria; innovation and community engagement in a complex conflict', *Journal of Public Health*, 42(3): 504-9.

Enab Baladi (2020a), *'Volunteered against Coronavirus'… Solidarity in northern Syria to fight Coronavirus crisis*, April 19, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/04/volunteered-against-coronavirus-solidarity-in-northern-syria-to-fight-coronavirus-crisis/.

Enab Baladi (2020b), *Sarmin experiences the first quarantine in northern Syria* [in Arabic], August 2, https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/405308.

Furlan, M. (2020), 'Rebel Governance at the Time of Covid-19: Emergencies as Opportunities for Rebel Rulers', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.*

Gharibah, M. (2020), 'Reality and Prospects for Civil Society Actors in Regime-held Syria' *Chatham House*, November, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/reality-and-prospects-for-civil-society-actors-in-regime-held-syria.

Global Health Security Index (2019), *2021 GHS Index Country Profile for Syria*, https://www.ghsindex.org/country/syria/#overviewsect.

HRW (2020a), *Syria: Aid Restrictions Hinder Covid-19 Response*, April 28, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/syria-aid-restrictions-hinder-covid-19-response.

HRW (2020b), *'Targeting life in Idlib'. Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure*, 15 October, https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure.

International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision International, CARE International, Humanity & Inclusion – Handicap International, InterAction, Norwegian People's Aid, Mercy Corps, Solidarités International, 11.11.11, Syria Relief, MedGlobal, NuDay, People in Need, Un Ponte Per, The Swedish Development Aid organization, Syrian American Medical Society, CADUS e.V, Embrace Relief (2020), *Reopen Al Yarubiyah crossing into Syria: Open Letter to the United Nations Security Council*, June 23, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/reopen-al-yarubiyah-crossing-syria-open-letter-united-nations-security.

Jihadology (n.d.), *Coronavirus and the Salvation Government – Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, https://jihadology.net/coronavirus-and-the-salvation-government-hayat-tahir-al-sham/.

Jumi, R. (2020), 'Bullying against women on social media platforms... The scourge of home quarantine or the culture of society?' [in Arabic], *North Press*, April 13.

Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A. and Mastruzzi, M. (2010), *The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodological and Analytical Issues*, http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports.

Kawabiki, S. and Sawah W. (2013), 'The Emergence and Evolution of Syria's Civil Society' in Kawabiki, S. (ed.) *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against all Odds*, p. 11.

Keskin, Z. (2020), 'Why some Muslims embrace conspiracy theories about coronavirus', *ABC Religion & Ethics*, September 30, https://www.abc.net.au/religion/muslims-coronavirus-and-conspiracy-theories/12716984.

Khalaf, R., Ramadan, O. and Stolleis, F. (2014), *Activism in Difficult Times, Civil Society Groups in Syria 2011 – 2014*. Beirut: y Badael Project and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Kövér, Á. (2021), 'The Relationship between Government and Civil Society in the Era of COVID-19', *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 12(1): 1-24.

Masri, Z. and al-Issa, J. (2021), 'Corona vaccines reach Syria ... Who will get them' [in Arabic], *Enab Baladi*, Mai 2, https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/479004.

Mohamed, H. (2021), 'COVID-19 Amidst Syria's Conflict: Neglect and Suppression', *Physicians for Human Rights*, January 13, https://phr.org/our-work/resources/covid-19-amidst-syrias-conflict-neglect-and-suppression/.

NES Forum (2020), *COVID-19 Update No.3*, March, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/20200326_covid-19_nes_forum_update_-_no.3_-_26_march.pdf.

Nashed, M. (2021), 'Aid groups urge UN to reauthorize Syria crossings as deadline looms', *Devex*, April 23, https://www.devex.com/news/aid-groups-urge-un-to-reauthorize-syria-crossings-as-deadline-looms-99646.

North Press Agency (2021), *Civil society organizations held founding conference in Syria's northeast*, October 17, https://npasyria.com/en/66267/.

Mardini, B. (2020), 'Tension continues between Daraa and As-Suwayda due to mutual kidnappings' [in Arabic], *Elaph*, April 7, https://elaph.com/Web/News/2020/04/1288094.html.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2020), *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: As global pandemic reaches Syria, fighting must stop and urgent steps taken to* *prevent an even greater tragedy*, March 28, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=25755&LangID=E.

Phelps, C. (2020), 'Rapid Gender Analysis – COVID-19. Middle East and North Africa Region', *CARE International*, June.

Roche, MC (2021), 'Bearing the brunt: COVID's impact on MENA women at home and at work', *Arab Barometer*, July 23, https://www.arabbarometer.org/2021/07/bearing-the-brunt-covids-impact-on-mena-women-at-home-and-at-work/.

Sabbagh, H. (2020), 'National Campaign for Emergency Social Response launches digital portal and begins support activities', *Syrian Arab News Agency*, April 12, https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=189807.

SANA (2020), *National Campaign for Emergency Social Response launches digital portal and begins support activities*, April 12.

Save the Children (2020), *Reversing Gain: The impact of COVID-19 on education in Syria brief*, December 9, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18588/pdf/reversing_gains.pdf.

Sparrow, A. (2018) 'How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped Up Assad', *Foreign Affairs*, September 20, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-09-20/how-un-humanitarian-aid-has-propped-assad.

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) (2019), *Inside the Syrian Arab Red Crescent*, August 8, https://syriaaccountability.org/updates/2019/08/08/inside-the-syrian-arab-red-crescent/.
Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) (2021), *Weaponization of Aid, Interference and Corruption. Syrian Regime's Methods of Control of Humanitarian Sector*, November 11, https://syacd.org/weaponization-of-aid-interference-and-corruption/.

Syrians for Truth & Justice (2021a), Southern Syria: Tafas City's Residents Concerned Despite the New Settlement Agreement, April 27, https://stj-sy.org/en/southern-syria-tafas-citys-residents-concerned-despite-the-new-settlement-agreement/.

Syrians for Truth & Justice (2021b), Syria: A Timeline of the Siege of Daraa al-Balad, August 27, https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-a-timeline-of-the-siege-of-daraa-al-balad/.

UN (2021), *Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19 in the Arab Region*, https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/violence_against_women_and_covid19_in_the_arab_states_region_-_english_version_2.pdf.

UNRWA (2021), *Vulnerable Palestine Refugees Affected by Ongoing Clashes in Southern Syria*, August 15, https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/vulnerable-palestine-refugees-affected-ongoing-clashes-southern-syria.

UNSC (2020a), *Resolution 2504 (2020) Adopted by the Security Council at its 8700th meeting*, January 10, http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2504.

UNSC (2020b), Food Insecurity, Impact of COVID-19 among Critical Challenges Facing Syria, Humanitarian Affairs Senior Official Tells Security Council, *Press Release SC/14286*, 27 August, https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14286.doc.htm.

Watson, O. J., Alhaffar, M., Mehchy, Z., Whittaker, C., Akil, Z., Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team, Checchi, F., Ferguson, N., Ghani, A., Beals, E., Walker, P. and Anonymous Authors (2020), *Report 31: Estimating the burden of COVID-19 in Damascus, Syria: an analysis of novel data sources to infer mortality under-ascertainment*, September 15, https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/mrc-gida/15-09-2020-COVID19-Report-31.pdf.

Zelin, A. Z. (2020), 'The Jihadi-Backed Salvation Government and Covid-19 in Northwest Syria', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 15, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadi-backed-salvation-government-and-covid-19-northwest-syria.

About the Authors

Juline Beaujouan is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with PeaceRep at the University of Edinburgh Law School. Juline is a scholar of Peace and Conflict Studies with expertise in non-state actors, Political Islam, local conflict management and peacebuilding in the Middle East, notably in Syria and Iraq. She received her PhD from Durham University where she was awarded the al-Sabah Doctoral Fellowship and acted as a member of the AHRC's Open World Research Initiative (OWRI). Juline is the co-editor and contributor to the volume *Syrian Crisis, Syrian Refugees – Voices from Jordan and Lebanon*, and co-author of *Islam, IS and the Fragmented State: The Challenges of Political Islam in the MENA Region*.

Abdulah El hafi co-founded and managed the Unified Relief Office in Eastern Ghouta and sat on the board of directors for two years. In 2013, he was a founding member of the Civil Defence in Eastern Ghouta in Rif Damascus. From 2014 to 2019, Abdulah worked as a coordinator and field manager for programmes funded by the UK FCDO and USAID. Currently, Abdulah is the manager of the LACU Syria Office. He also delivers training on good governance and capacity building for several local organisations, teams and councils in Rif Damascus, Idlib, and northern Aleppo governorates.

Eyas Ghreiz is a researcher and consultant in the areas of human rights and development. He is also a Masters student in International Development, specialising in conflict, security and development, at the University of Birmingham, UK. Eyas has over eight years of first-hand experience working with international NGOs and UN bodies in Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. He has published several articles in both Arabic and English and contributed to the edited volume *Syrian Crisis, Syrian Refugees: Voices from Jordan and Lebanon*, published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Ayham Odat graduated from the Institute of Business Administration at the University of Damascus in 2004, starting his career as a manager and accountant. When popular protests broke out in Daraa in April 2011, he co-established several media platforms and voluntary initiatives to document human abuses and support the victims of the conflict. Some of these initiatives include Olive Branch Gathering, Basma Gathering, and Tesel Team Gathering. Ayham also acted as a field manager on major projects funded by the UK FCDO for three years across southern Syria. Since July 2018, when the Syrian regime reasserted its control over Daraa governorate, Ayham continues its activities remotely.

About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform | PeaceRep.org | peacerep@ed.ac.uk | Twitter @Peace_Rep_

School of Law, University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge, EH8 9YL

PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK

Our Partners

We work with a range of partners: Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Conciliation Resources, Edinburgh Centre for Constitutional Law, University of Glasgow, International IDEA, Keele University, LSE IDEAS, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, and University of St Andrews.

For further questions on the study, please contact Dr. Juline Beaujouan at J.Beaujouan-Marliere@ed.ac.uk

Edinburgh Law School illustrated by © Baraa Obied and Sham Qadouni

Supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).