



Idlib Lives

The untold story of heroes

Idlib's frontline humanitarians and activists are proving another Syria is possible. This report tells their stories.

Peace Direct and The Syria Campaign. May 2018.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The only way to create a new Syria is through civil society. There’s no other way. It can’t happen through weapons, it can’t happen through realities that others are trying to impose. What will get us to the Syria we dream of is the collective power of civil society through their different work and visions.

“After seven years I know that change happens on the individual level, not by changing the head of the regime. We’ve been oppressed for 50 years. This regime has planted a small Assad inside each one of us. Working on the individual is the only way for salvation.”

- Raed Fares, Union of Revolutionary Bureaus

No-one could have predicted the price history would exact from Syrians for their call for freedom and democracy. In Idlib, we see the culmination of this cost: more than 2.6 million civilians packed into what is being described as a 'kill-box'¹, with the Syrian regime and Russia launching daily aerial attacks. Nearly half of these civilians have already been forced to flee their homes elsewhere in Syria. Since January 2016, more than one person every minute has been

displaced to Idlib². The continuous arrival of people in need of aid, shelter and healthcare has created a predictable and preventable humanitarian crisis in Idlib. Finally, the nature of the aid operation in Syria, and its loss of impartiality, means that aid provision continues to fail those that need it most in opposition-controlled areas³, of which Idlib is the most populous. As many as 1.73 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance.⁴

The brutality of the Assad regime has allowed extremist groups to set up and flourish in the region and these groups threaten life twice over: firstly, they provide the justification for aerial attacks and secondly, through their attacks on civilians and attempts to control the area's resources, services and funding. These extremist fighters, numbering close to just 10,000, are endangering the other 99% of the population of Idlib.

While many Syrian towns and cities fell under the control of Islamist groups, the Islamic State (ISIS) was completely pushed out of Idlib in 2014. Another group Al Nusra (now Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS) focused on Idlib from their earliest presence in Syria and while they maintain a foothold, large population centres, such as Atarib and Maarat Al-Nu'man, succeeded in pushing them out. Extremist groups remain unpopular across Idlib.⁵

In contrast, civil society enjoys popular support with the local population and they provide essential services, such as education and humanitarian support. They also shine an important spotlight on the actions of armed groups, which deserves the backing of the international community. However civil society alone cannot be expected to defeat these groups, nor can extremism be bombed out of existence – extremists thrive in poverty and chaos. A present and resourced civil society is a critical component to containing, and ultimately defeating, these groups.

Facing attacks from all sides, civil society in Idlib continues to operate with remarkable effectiveness and determination. In areas best known internationally for massacres, there are untold stories of hundreds of groups providing the services civilians need to survive. But to look at only the services provided is to miss the point: Idlib's civil society represents the best chance for free and democratic institutions and its heroes prove that another Syria is possible.

Despite the predictable nature of the crisis facing Idlib, there is a lack of ideas and long-term planning from the international community and those with a remit to support civil society. We have seen a worrying decline in funding to these local Syrian groups, despite their struggle to survive both the Syrian regime and extremist groups. This report demonstrates that ideas for a just and equitable society should come from civil society – it is a call to those with the remit to support them to do so.

SAVING LIVES UNDER FIRE

Seven years of war and the massive displacement of people have created an acute humanitarian crisis in Idlib. According to the UN, 65% of the population are ‘people in need’⁶, with assistance most urgent in protection and health sectors. Syrian-led organisations have been at the forefront of the humanitarian response, providing a remarkable range and breadth of services, based on locally-identified requirements. Leaders of these organisations speak of their successes and the most critical challenges they face.

Stopping the Bombs

Across all interviews conducted for this report, aerial attacks were identified as the biggest challenge facing humanitarian providers and civil society groups. The targeting of these attacks does not match the Syrian regime and Russia’s “fighting terror” claim – rather it shows a systematic effort to target civilians and vital infrastructure.

Recently, UN officials have warned that Idlib may become another ‘Aleppo’⁷, a term now used to denote the large-scale destruction of an entire area. However, such an analogy ignores the fact that civilians across the province have nowhere else to go, with little chance to return home, even if the fighting ceases. Furthermore, more than 440,000 people live in camps or public buildings⁵. We have not yet witnessed a sustained aerial war waged on camps and the human cost will be unimaginable. In addition to the immense burden responding to the aftermath of the bombardment, the daily threat of attack makes day-to-day operating for civil society groups a huge challenge. The call for protection from the sky is the most repeated demand from civil society.

“There is no humanity when all of these kinds of weapons are hitting us on a daily basis and no one is interfering...The international community is hearing and seeing everything that happens. Where is the humanity in this situation? There is no humanity! In one of my Facebook posts, I actually said I would like to submit an enrolment application to be an animal and not a human anymore. Maybe the world would pay more attention if we were animals.”

- Mohammad S (pseudonym), Vice Principal at a school

“We can’t have gatherings in the areas where we go to collect blood because we are afraid that the shelling might target the group of people gathered in the street. As a result, the blood collecting team has to go to many different areas to collect, say, 20

bags of blood, because they need to go to each person's place to collect the donation individually.

"Our team's cars are at risk of being targeted during their missions, especially at night, so they can't turn any lights on and have to drive in complete darkness."

- Dr Fedaa, Independent Doctors Association

"If the international community is really committed to supporting civil society here, there should be more efforts and pressure on decision makers from all sides to stop random airstrikes. Clearing our skies would help activists and volunteers move more freely to work for their communities.

"Any future plans to build peace and support civilians won't succeed unless the Assad regime and Russia's airstrikes are over. And all these millions of dollars of funds coming from international NGOs will go to waste because it can't save civilians from rockets and barrels dropping over their homes."

- Mohammad Rasem, Zoom In

PROGRAMMING FROM THE GROUND UP

Local humanitarian providers and other civil society organisations in Idlib started as community-led volunteer groups and many have grown into large-scale operations with hundreds of staff. These roots help to maintain levels of trust necessary to serve the population, identify community-driven needs and provide services in response to the fast-changing context on the ground.

The considerable human resource and expertise that has been developed is now running services driven from the ground up. This allows groups to deliver services in response to fast-changing developments: from rapidly digging trenches following flash flooding, to providing housing for internally displaced people, these organisations can act with a speed not possible for an international NGO. Their expertise also allows for more long-term planning: an example being the formation of 'Hamlat Idlib al Koubra' (Idlib's Great Campaign), a coordinating body made up of key service providers, including the White Helmets (Syria Civil Defence), Violet and Molham volunteers. The Campaign managed the response to the large-scale displacement of people, with each organisation leading on different elements. The White Helmets took on transportation, Violet is providing food baskets, Molham is assisting with blankets, and Rakeen is supplying clothes. Finally, medical practitioners and education providers have been at the forefront of fortifying their centres or moving them underground in response to the ongoing threat of aerial attacks. This fortification work is not currently funded by international donors due to outdated regulations.

International donors and implementers should stop seeing humanitarian response as a series of projects and instead, invest in these groups as institutions, giving them the autonomy to determine what response is needed, where.

"We should receive whatever we need to keep humans alive... What they [donor governments] are doing is the opposite. They hinder medical support and all the support for organisations working in the area. I really hope that we will be able to stay alive and to preserve our dignity. We went out against the regime because we wanted dignity. I want the humanitarian organisations to be truly humanitarian and empathise with us, treat us with dignity, and support us."

- Anon, Medical worker

"Civil society groups are able to prevail over the violent and extremist ideologies of ISIS and al Qaeda, but we fear that donor bodies and the international community

are not aware of this fact. If the international funding stops most organisations will not be able to continue working because we cannot sustain ourselves.”

- Mohammad Rasem, Zoom In

“More coordination with donors with regard to our needs is really important. It’s really important for us to be heard as staffers in the field, to have need assessment come from the field.”

- Dr. Fedaa, Independent Doctors Association

Never giving up

The commitment of Syrian organisations and civil society leaders to continue to serve, especially whilst being targeted, is remarkable. Many of those interviewed have had the opportunity to leave but have chosen to stay because of their commitment to working for their communities. Indeed, some had moved away and returned home to serve their fellow civilians, while others who were forcibly displaced from elsewhere in Syria have re-established their work in Idlib. Most are not only motivated to support their communities to survive but to pursuing the greater goal of building a free and democratic country.

“We could have left for Turkey, but who could we have left? My father kept caring about others saying, ‘what about the other people who can’t leave, who is going to help these people?’”

- Muznah, Women Now for Development

“We’re working under circumstances only the mad can work under. But I’m happy this way. I don’t want to leave. The more challenges that come my way the more determined I become.”

- Raed Fares, URB

“I’m optimistic and I hope we will be able to provide more unique services, which are needed in the area. I mean the services that are rarely provided and that are needed. I can’t even imagine stopping. That couldn’t happen. We could only stop if we were all dead. Death is the only thing that can stop us.

“Life never stops. What we have been through has been making us stronger. If people stayed at home to grieve at the time of war, life would have stopped a long time ago and even before us.”

- Dr Fedaa, Independent Doctors Association

Creating solutions

Faced with challenges, those interviewed have developed creative solutions in order to continue their work. From teaching over WhatsApp to the creation of new reconciliation committees, innovation is being championed by communities and support for such creativity is urgently needed – particularly when there appears to be no end to aerial attacks. This creativity is the deepest expression of love and humanity – to look at the impossible and find the possible. Proper resources should be invested to support this.

“In 2018 we will launch a new project called Peace Ambassadors. It will involve reconciliation committees to restore the Syrian social fabric, focusing on minorities and bridging the divide between Bedouin tribes and residents of urban areas. We also aim to prepare the communities in areas outside of the control of the regime to accept the other, as we anticipate the coming phase.”

- Mohammad Rasem, Zoom In

“Many of the women are also university students and their university schedules clashed with their hours at the SCD [White Helmet] centres. I came up with an alternative schedule that accommodates university schedules and allows the women to attend classes.”

- Nora Halabi (pseudonym), White Helmets

“For the last period, the main problem was with Syrian regime bombing and some people cannot come to the University centre because of financial and security problems, so I gave them all my number and they can ask me anything. Sometimes, I have to give the lecture on Whatsapp. They can ask me anything because I know there are many problems they face, so I try to help them whenever they need.

“I have a group of 30 law students. They couldn't come to the University so I told them to take this lecture through Whatsapp. I tried to explain the material to them in English. I didn't allow them to speak Arabic throughout the session. They were sending voice messages and I sent messages to them, and they sent answers on voice message.”

- Abdulkafi Alhamdo, Free Aleppo University

“In 2015, we started with hairdressing courses and nursing, and at the beginning of 2016 we started wool knitting courses and training on handmade accessories. The training on accessories was something new in the area and I’m proud to say that the trainer at our centre had come up with the idea. She came to me and told me about her idea of creating accessories - hair buckles, bands, clips and ribbons - and then she took two weeks off to watch videos and learn from YouTube. She came back and started a training course.”

- Muznah, Women Now for Development

WOMEN LEADING THE WAY

The Syrian conflict has disproportionately affected women and girls.⁹ The rise of extremist groups has exacerbated the exclusion of women from leadership roles in governing and civil society bodies, and women and girls face numerous threats to their rights, including child marriage.

However, Syrian women in Idlib, and elsewhere, are pushing back on attempts to silence and restrain them, with many examples of women founding and leading civil society groups. Women hold key positions in some Local Councils, schools, healthcare and humanitarian organisations. In fact, women-led projects are proving they can shift community perceptions, even in highly conservative communities.

These examples remain too few, but their success is a critical opportunity to build upon. Women in Idlib have a deep understanding of the community's needs and their programmes offer a vision of a more equitable society. For this reason, it is vital that women-led groups are supported to expand their work.

Led by women

Many of the women-led projects were started in response to acute challenges. For example, the work of female White Helmets came from a need for broader access to services. While male White Helmet volunteers were focused on search and rescue and the removal of exploded weapons, in a more conservative society women were able to go into homes, when men could not, to conduct awareness training sessions or provide maternal health services.

Many families have lost husbands, sons and fathers who have been killed or left home to fight, leaving women to manage the household and earn a living. This has led to the development of economic empowerment activities, including training in business, leadership or dressmaking, as well as professional trainings for those with secondary or tertiary education, which has opened up new opportunities with professional organisations, such as NGOs.

“When the local community here can feel the positive impact of women working, not only in the educational, administrative and leadership fields, but also the women who have learned a vocation and have started to sell their products, they won't push against them.”

- Muznah, Women Now for Development

“The Syrian organisation for Women is an idea that we started in January 2017 after we saw the amount of projects for women that were not prioritising their needs. To avoid scattering and diluting efforts, we had to take the initiative and speak for ourselves and for other women. There is a lot of work needed in the field of awareness.”

- Mariam Shirout, Syrian Organisation for Women and Zoom In

“Many of the women are university students and we work around their schedules so they can attend class. We allocate mothers an hour and a half a day for childcare and breastfeeding, which can be used in a flexible manner. We also offer four months maternity leave and a month of sick leave at 80% pay.”

- Nora Halabi (pseudonym), White Helmets

“Another project we started called ‘The Damascene is the daughter of Idlib’ aims to integrate women who were forcibly displaced from the Damascus countryside into the local communities in Idlib. As part of the project, women in Idlib teach displaced women their skills, and well vice versa.”

- Mohammad Rasem, Zoom In

“We have been doing a lot of work with IDP [Internally Displaced People] women, including vocational training and nursing. We have been trying to have new and unique vocational training, which could give trainees important skills that they can use in the marketplace, and therefore be economically empowered. Currently, many women are unfortunately not able to be independent, and that’s what we are trying to fix in our work. There was a lot of work focusing on women’s empowerment here in Al-ma’arra, but we felt that practical steps for women’s economic empowerment have not been highlighted enough. There isn’t a lot of work being done in marketing and project management.”

- Muznah, Women Now for Development

Shifting perceptions

All respondents identified a shift in attitudes to their work, especially in Idlib, which has historically been regarded as a highly conservative area of Syria. Often, this change has been brought about by brave female leaders who have created programmes that were initially met with challenges or scepticism, but have since come to be respected by the community.

“When we started, the community was not very supportive or accepting of the idea of women working with the Syria Civil Defence [SCD, or the White Helmets], as the community is quite conservative. But after they saw the impact of these centres on their lives, everyone became supportive of our work and people now even want their daughters to join the SCD.”

- Nora Halabi (pseudonym), White Helmets

“Criticism is always possible. In the beginning, the surrounding community did not find it normal to see a woman doing multiple jobs and going wherever she wants to. Slowly, the community started to change their thoughts about me. Now, I think they see me as a good example and role model for other young girls in the area.”

- Mariam Shirout, Syrian Organization for Women and Zoom In

“After the revolution, a lot of work chances have been created and afforded to women. A lot of things and concepts have changed since 2011. I know several women from the leadership programme who are now working while their husbands stay at home with the children. What people care about now is having an income for a living. This is common now and there is no rejection from the community for that.”

- Muznah, Women Now for Development

“The idea is to have impact on the society. It’s slow but we’ve seen a huge difference since 2013. For example when we opened the first women’s centre it wasn’t accepted by the community. Now there are dozens of women’s centres and it’s become normal for women to work. People want their daughters to work at our centres. Same with the centre for teenage girls.”

- Raed Fares, Union of Revolutionary Bureaus

FACING DOWN THE THREAT OF EXTREMISM

Looking beyond humanitarian work, a broad range of civil society groups remain active in Idlib, aiming to achieve pluralistic, participatory communities. These include governance-based bodies, such as Local Councils, as well as civil society groups that focus on issues, such as women's rights, local development and media projects. Those interviewed for this report repeatedly emphasise how their vision of a peaceful, democratic Syria continues to motivate their work.

From around 2013, these civil society groups increasingly faced threats of intimidation and violence as extremist groups strengthened their position amongst the range of opposition groups in the area. Mostly notably, HTS began to dominate, seeking to seize control of Local Councils and services, and the resources they control.¹⁰

Although the presence of HTS remains an issue of critical importance, the group's domination of Idlib is not uniform; Atareb, Ehsam, and Armanaz have managed to keep HTS out altogether. Badama, Heish, Junudiyeh, Kafr Takharim, and the rest of the west Aleppo countryside, have managed to keep HTS influence to a minimum.

Beyond this immediate threat that HTS presents to civil society as it seeks to seize control and resources, the rise of HTS also damages the hopes of civil society for peace and stability – their presence alone provides a justification for regime and Russian assaults.

All sources in Idlib have outlined that the population does not like the presence of HTS in the area. Many in Idlib believe the presence of HTS provides an excuse for military strikes against them and they are painfully aware it impacts their aid. A study conducted in July 2017, found that 77% of those surveyed disagreed with HTS and other Salafist groups in Idlib, 73% rejected HTS-affiliated councils in Idlib. Nearly all of them believed HTS was against the aims of the revolution.¹¹

An analysis of the number of Syrian civil society groups by sub-district across Idlib shows a correlation between the number of civil society organisations operating in an area and the number of anti-HTS protests in the locality. The greater the number of civil society activities, the more likely they will be able to counter HTS.

The ability of communities to push back against HTS influence has to a large degree, been dependent on the capacity of civil society groups to arrange street protests and acts of resistance against the group¹², often at great risk to themselves. Indeed on 2 March 2018, HTS was driven back from entering Atarib by dozens of civilians protesting on the streets. Afterwards, the Head of the Local Council reported they have an agreement that the group will not try and enter again.

If the people of Idlib are to remove HTS, they will need help. Councils need funding so they can continue to run essential services, community organisations need support to challenge HTS influence, protesters need media coverage of their campaigns and there needs to be recognition of the fact that civil society alone can only do so much against a military actor. ISIS carefully and quickly closed down external aid organisations and media in their areas of control, allowing them to wield absolute control over the areas they managed within their caliphate. Should HTS be able to reduce the number of external influencers and media workers operating in Idlib province, they will be better able to exert their control in the area as extremism breeds in darkness. Maintaining a stake in the community allows ‘the light to get in’.

In Idlib, many of these civil society groups have received international funding, often under donor ‘stabilisation’ programmes. Funding has been mainly bilateral, with Western donors, such as Germany, the US, and EU, funding different strands of work. Implementing partners, including Adam Smith International, Creative, GIZ and others.

However, stabilisation funding is under threat, as many local communities report that funders are withdrawing due to fears of HTS influence. Local Councils and communities are using the threat of cuts in funding, or actual cuts in funding, to try to push back against HTS control, though they report it difficult to maintain power when they are unable to provide services due to lack of funds.

The reluctance of donors to provide funding that may end up benefiting HTS, even indirectly, is understandable. However, cutting funds to civil society risks increasing HTS influence, rather than stemming it. By starving civil society of funds, the international community will reduce their capacity to resist HTS.

Unlike the extensive anti-ISIS campaigns from Western governments and foreign donors, HTS have not been faced with counter-messaging campaigns in the same way. Idlib’s communities need resources to push back against HTS control, by maintaining the resources that give them power in the face of the group’s threats, and with political back up when they raise their voices against them. Promoting and fostering civil society is empowering them to push back. There needs to be more, not less, of this work in the region.

Abdulkafi Alhamdo teaches linguistics and the modern novel at Free Aleppo University in the Idlib countryside.

When Free Aleppo University opened its doors, thousands of people started studying – some of them had been fighting, some didn’t do anything – a university helps the youth change. My students are heroes.

If we leave Syria, we are afraid that this generation may go to the Syria regime or they may adopt extremist views. We should teach them the meaning of democracy, the real meaning of freedom and democracy. Without us they might be lost.

They [The Salvation Government – the civil authority affiliated with HTS] came to the University and appointed a president of the University. We, of course, don't consider him the president. When he comes to our classes, we don't even look at him. All the students protested until they kicked him out.

So they [The Salvation Government] closed our doors. We gathered outside the University and I started teaching fourth year students linguistics. Some students who don't belong to the class joined because it's outside and even some people on their balcony were listening. When we were teaching outdoors they [The Salvation Government] were listening.

These problems with The Salvation Government, we can overcome but we cannot overcome bombing. We cannot do anything. When there is heavy, heavy bombing we stop going to the University physically and give the lectures online.

Raed Fares is the founder and Chairman of Board of Directors of the Union of Revolutionary Bureaus (URB). Most of URB's employees are women. They run six centres for teenage girls, 12 centres for children and the most popular radio station in Idlib. In a recent survey in the area, Radio Fresh was voted the number one radio station by 95% of the people surveyed in the local community.

We broadcast all sorts of programmes: kids, societal, religious, and we also have drama series.

We have been training 28 women in radio, including editors and presenters, for two years. Last year, music and the voice of women were banned. We didn't want to tell them to go home and we didn't want to lose their skills. I came up with the idea to digitally change their voices through a computer software to make them sound like male voices. We also played animal sounds in the background of news: goats, roaches, frogs, roosters, whatever you can think of. It was clear to everyone listening that it's a woman's voice and that we did it as a sarcastic response to the music ban.

We have a show called “Marsad” which observes the movement of warplanes and warns people through breaking news if a jet just took off from an airbase for example.

We have a good reputation in the area and that’s mainly because our work on the ground speaks for itself. Most people now believe that the work of civil society is the best thing that happened in the last seven years.

Muznah, Managing Director for Women Now Maarat al-Numaan Center, studied biomedical engineering at Aleppo University before starting a free education centre for women in 2014.

We have two centres in Idlib – an empowerment centre and an internet cafe for women. We have a daycare room and trained babysitters.

We started with a leadership programme for women, which includes a package of skills that prepares women to be in decision-making positions. Those skills have helped many women to get work with Local Councils and civil society organisations.

Once a woman starts to leave the house and attends courses, she gains knowledge, sees her friends and meets new friends. That alone is supporting and empowering her.

My mother keeps telling me, “I see my dreams coming true in you.”

The woman who lost her husband needs to be the breadwinner for her children. For them, life still exists. We have the desire for living, achieving and being independent.

I know several women from the leadership programme who are working now and their husbands are staying at home with the children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are for those in the international community who have capacity to support civil society in Idlib.

Idlib is a big problem that needs big solutions. The baseline is pessimistic, priorities are lacking and decisions to intervene are taken on the basis of risk, rather than possible benefit.

Continuing a policy of support for the aftermath of aerial attacks and the containment of the terror threat, with the goal of merely keeping people alive through basic humanitarian intervention, is problematic in the long-term and undermines trust in the international community.

Idlib stands at a critical point, but if international politicians, donors, international NGOs and policy-makers invest in civil society, we will see ideas and solutions flourish.

Finally, serious consideration should also be given to the inclusion of the people in Idlib in any political process. Representing just over 10% of the pre-conflict population, with the largest concentration of civil society their voices must be included.

Mitigating and ending aerial attacks

“The funding is important and it has helped us but stopping the aerial attacks is our number one demand. We all know that the international community can stop the shelling if they wanted to.”

- Muznah, Women Now for Development

Beyond the impact on civilian life, aerial attacks have a broader impact in the way they target and inhibit the capacity of civil society to operate.

As some of the interviewees argued, it is within the power of the international community to prevent aerial attacks. It is imperative that the international community explores all options for a meaningful cessation of the aerial attacks on Idlib. Such cessation would also provide the conditions for real, credible peace talks.

The international community should:

- **Urgently explore all measures to protect civilians and stop the aerial attacks.**

Halting the aerial bombings should be the most immediate civilian protection priority of the international community and should be approached with renewed energy and focus.

The fact that Idlib is a geographically contiguous territory bordering Turkey means that some protection options may be simpler to implement than in other regions of the country. All protection measures should be undertaken with a clear focus on saving lives and link to a broader strategy for a negotiated end to the war.

- **The 'Friends of Syria' should re-engage in the protection debate.**

Efforts should be made to reclaim the protection argument back from the Astana process, making it a condition of the Geneva talks process.

In the short-term:

- **Donor governments should provide specific funding for the fortification of facilities and buildings.**

Currently the divide between emergency humanitarian and development funding is creating a gap for projects that bridge the two, such as protective measures for hospitals in Syria. This is the key demand from Syria medics.

- **Support should continue for members of civil society who have been forcibly displaced.**

Humanitarian workers, civil society actors and media workers have paid a heavy price for their work, with many displaced more than once and targeted by many sides of the conflict. For those displaced from 'reconciled' areas, they are unlikely to be able to return. Many of these actors have been engaging in internationally-funded work and should be supported to continue this work once they reach Idlib.

Supporting civil society to resist extremism in Idlib

“Civil society groups are able to prevail over the violent and extremist ideologies of ISIS and al Qaeda but we fear that donor bodies and the international community are not aware of this fact. If the international funding stops, most organisations will not be able to continue working because we cannot sustain ourselves.”

- Mohammad Rasem, Zoom In

Extremist groups in Idlib are known for their efforts to dominate resources in the community, including flows of aid. The best way to help civil society to defeat extremist groups is to ensure that they have the resources to continue their work. Conversely, sudden cuts in funding can be

used by HTS to rally support from communities who feel dependent on any group that can offer material support.

Ensuring that international support does not indirectly benefit HTS, but instead supports genuine civil society groups, will require deep analysis and contextual understanding when designing programmes. There is a need for donors, and those working with them, to examine HTS control on a granular level community-by-community or neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood, to ensure support continues any and everywhere it is possible, whilst not positively impacting HTS.

The international community should:

- **Keep funding civil society work in Idlib.**

The most successful and immediate way to counter increasing HTS influence, and to support those attempting to counter them, is continued humanitarian intervention in Idlib, which allows communities to be self-sufficient and stand up to HTS.

- **Communicate clear donor strategies and instill confidence on the ground.**

Donor nervousness, including unclear and inconsistent funding cycles for stabilisation work and humanitarian aid programmes, does little to help civil society actors. Pulling funding and failing to renew or offer new funding is counter-productive. Clear and long-term commitments of support should be offered.

- **Develop a more agile and transparent relationship with organisations.**

Heavy bureaucratic burdens attached to funding cycles are undermining transparent relationships between donors and local organisations.

Civil society groups say the ability to share the threats and challenges of their work would be advantageous but many are not doing so in fear that funding would be impacted or cut. Most local organisations feel that a more responsive and agile system could be implemented to the benefit of all. Such a system would also allow civil society groups to pause work if HTS interference meant there was a need for negotiations with the extremist group.

Find new ways to partner with civil society

"Most projects are being designed by the donor without the grantees being involved in the designing process and later on the grantees will be asked to implement the programmes that the donors have created without consulting them. And it's like either they take or they leave it. They don't have choices, so they accept this non-practical ineffective plans that have been made by the donors to at least keep

receiving fund and provide the local community with something which is better than nothing."

- Khaled K (pseudonym), humanitarian worker

Idlib's civil society is mainly supported by international organisations which subcontract work based on international priorities and strategies. This approach is particularly damaging when civil society is having to fend off threats from extremist groups in such a fast-moving context.

A more flexible and long-term approach to civil society groups will allow them to identify and support the needs of their communities. The development of local humanitarian groups, such as Violet and SCD, shows the capacity of groups to try and address emergency humanitarian needs. However, the civil society groups we interviewed prioritise working on a much broader range of issues. For example, numerous interviewees emphasised the need for greater prioritisation of education programmes, especially given the limited opportunities available for young people.

The international community should:

- **Provide sustainable funding.**

Where possible, include civil society work in humanitarian programming. As we have seen from recent reductions in funding from the US State Department, stabilisation funds are vulnerable to cuts in line with political agendas. Humanitarian aid is less likely to be affected than stabilisation funding.

- **Build a new model of support, which is led by local organisations, adaptable to changing contexts and based on local priorities.**

This report has highlighted just a small sample of the number of civil society groups in Idlib. There is no shortage of talented individuals and organisations. However, they are often hamstrung by a model of support where they are simply the 'implementers' for projects designed by the international community. Instead, local partners should play a much more central role in dictating the priorities for programming and devising their activities. Shifting to a more locally-led model of support can better meet the urgent needs of local communities, builds trust and allows them to have a stake in contributing to some form of stability in their lives.

- **Specific programming for Internally Displaced People.**

Displaced groups report difficulties in finding funding or opportunities to provide secular schooling and local community work in Idlib. It is also important to consider programmes that assist their integration into Idlib society and reduce possible tensions with the communities there.

- **An increased focus on education.** Despite the significant humanitarian needs, civil society groups continually emphasise the need for more focus on longer-term needs, and in particular the need for more support to educational programmes, not least because of the very large youth population in Idlib.

Focus on women-led programmes

“The Syrian women are brilliant and they are doing a lot of great work. They are free. No entity can control them or stop them from doing what they want to. Neither HTS nor JAN [Jabhat al-Nusra], not even the society, nothing can stop them. The women are strong and independent here. Support them so they can keep doing what they are doing!”

- Mariam Shirout, Syrian Organisation for Women

This report has highlighted a range of civil society groups that showcase the capacity of women-led organisations to continue to operate in Idlib. The survival of these groups is vital for the women and communities they work in. The women-led groups have access to better information on community needs, and as evidenced by the case of women staff of the White Helmets, they can provide support in a way that male-only organisations cannot.

However, the need to support women-led groups goes beyond the pragmatic arguments around the efficacy of their programmes. The women-led organisations offer a vision of a more equitable and democratic society in Syria and offer a powerful counter-argument to the conservative vision offered by HTS and other Islamist groups. Organisations, such as Women Now for Development, have proved that even in conservative communities, they are able to establish local trust. Now more than ever, it is vital that such groups are supported.

There have been efforts to include women in the Geneva peace negotiations but these have been denounced by many groups as ‘tokenistic’. International studies have shown that the degree to which women are involved in peace negotiations can significantly affect the long-term effectiveness of peace processes. The same principle holds at the local level. Without women-led groups in a leading role in Idlib, the goals of the broader civil society movement – of a peaceful, democratic society – cannot be achieved.

The international community should:

- **Expand support for women-led organisations.**

Women-led work is often addressing very specific needs and a lack of international

support limits their ability to build standalone specialised programmes, such as psychosocial support for female victims of the conflict. The women-led organisations should be supported to design and lead their own programmes and strategies.

- **Ensure that a gender-lens is used across all programming in Idlib.**

Across all programming in Idlib the international community should continue to adopt a gender-lens that aims to strengthen the role of women in decision-making in civil society groups and local councils.

Methodology

This report looks at the social, political and humanitarian situation in opposition-held territories in north-western Syria, with a particular focus on the role of civil society. The majority of this territory is situated in Idlib Governorate, though some of the activities or groups included are in contiguous parts of Aleppo and Hama. In most analysis these opposition-held territories are grouped together as 'Idlib', and this report follows that convention.

This report is based on interviews with more than 20 humanitarians and civil society representatives currently working in Idlib. Interviews were also carried out with multiple international organisations and analysts and research conducted by The Syria Campaign, Peace Direct and independent experts.

In some places sources have been anonymised in order to protect their security.

Thanks to Ameenah A. Sawwan and Ranim Badenjki for conducting interviews for this report.

Footnotes and further reading

Footnotes

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12. How my Syrian hometown fought the Islamic State and won. Haid Haid, Middle East Eye, 14 September 2017. [Source](#)
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Further reading and resources

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- Women in Syria. Gender Action for Peace and Security. [Source](#)
- Averting Disaster in Syria’s Idlib Province. International Crisis Group [Source](#)
- Peacebuilding and Violent Extremism. Peace Direct [Source](#)
- Uprooted entrepreneurs form 'Little Damascus' in northwest Syria. AFP [Source](#)
- Splitting civil society from the jihadists in Idlib. Ruwan Rujouleh, The Washington Institute [Source](#)
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After the Idlib City Council refuses to hand over administrative control, HTS takes it by force.
Syria Direct [Source](#)

Idlib Local Councils Face Crisis of Trust Under Difficult Circumstances. Huda Yahya, Syria
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Keeping the lights on in rebel held Idlib. Sam Heller, The Century Foundation [Source](#)

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