

A cessation of US government support to moderate civil society organizations and local, grass-roots governance institutions in the Northwestern governates of Aleppo and Idlib, Syria, will result in an immediate surrender of these areas to the so called Islamic State and other ISIS-like actors, including the Al Nusra Front (formerly Al Qaeda) and Ha'yaat Tahrir Al Sham. This will result in an opportune recruitment and breeding ground for a new generation of members into these terrorist organizations, the normalization of violent Islamic fundamentalism across entire communities, and ultimately the resurgence of new ISIS-like organizations that are tried and tested from battle.

The Syrian revolution began as a peaceful movement for democratic change and was spearheaded by youth speaking out for greater political legitimacy and a foundational shift toward democratic norms. Perhaps ironically, the southern Syrian town of Da'raa, where the revolution for democracy began in 2011, is now one of the last remaining pockets of resistance to the brutal Assad Regime. The past seven years have witnessed an unbroken stream of heinous atrocities committed by the Assad Regime against its own people – including countless chemical attacks, barrel bombs, forced starvation, and forced displacement of communities - with the purpose of re-taking all of Syria.

The power vacuum created by the Syrian civil war also resulted in a ripe opportunity for violent extremist organizations, most notably the so called Islamic State, Al Nusra Front (formerly Al Qaeda), and Ha'yaat Tahrir al Sham, to take advantage of the lack of formal governance structures, security apparatus, and provision of social services to exert absolute authoritarian control over vast swaths of the Syrian, including both her people and resources.

Violent extremist organizations, particularly in Syria's western provinces, have learned from ISIS's experience that they can no longer ride into town with an armored convoy and declare victory. Instead, they are systematically and methodically applying a "winning hearts and minds" approach learned from Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations that have found ways to imbed themselves into the institutional fabric of society.

In response, through funding by Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and US Agency for International Development, Development Transformations (DT) has been engaged in countering violent extremism programming by providing institutional, technical, financial, and capacity building support to emerging and nascent civil society organizations and local grass-roots governance institutions in Syria since 2014. Syrian civil society organizations and grass-roots governance institutions formed at the village, province, and governorate levels, have displayed an inspiring level of resiliency to maintain the moderate and democratic Syria they initially envisioned, and have worked together tirelessly to maximize the resources available to them to meet immediate service provision needs. While successes appear incremental, they are nevertheless critical to ensuring a moderate, free, and democratic Syria.



"Free Weapon Zone" Campaign Poster in the entrance of Al-Atareb.

For example, DT supported the civil society organization known as Civic Center of Atareb to implement a campaign called "A Unified Community Against Extremism" from May to September 2017. Through this campaign, Civic Center worked closely with the local council (recognized as one of the strongest governance bodies in the region), the Free Syrian Police, other civil society organizations to identify community needs and approaches to repel the teachings of violent extremist organizations. The campaign was successful in establishing a communication line between the local government institutions and the community, and in encouraging citizens' active role in the decision-making process in the city of Al-Atareb.

This campaign was followed with another called “Free Weapon Zone.” This campaign advocated against the use and display of weapons in public places and the homes of families where children can see their parents cleaning their weapons or laying them in the open. A large proliferation of weapons were in the hands of all segments of society, and the Free Syrian Police worked with Civic Center of Al-Atareb to confront this issue by holding those who violated this new policy accountable. The campaign was highly successful in diminishing the normalization of violence in the community and creating a peaceful united community where people feel secure.

The community of Al-Atareb was strongly tested in its determination to remain free of gun violence in March of 2018 when the violent extremist organization Ha’yaat Tahrir Al Sham began taking neighboring communities and advanced toward Al-Atareb. The community responded by gathering together and forming a human blockade on all roads leading into the community. Impressively, they maintained this blockade until HTS finally withdrew from its outermost checkpoints.



Young women and girls taking part in a “Whose Your Husband?” campaign on the dangers of marriage to foreign fighters.

DT works across Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Hassakah, Raqqa, and Rif Damascus supporting civil society organizations of all stripes. Inspiring movements such as the example from Al-Atareb are found in all of these areas, but are rarely given the media attention they critically deserve. These and other similar success stories are a clear example that countering ISIS and Al Qaeda-linked organizations originates with building a strong civil society and forming legitimate governance institutions that work hand-in-hand to respond to critical community needs in an accountable manner. These seeds must be planted in order for the same communities to repel the advances of violent extremist ideologies and the pressure they wield.

A cessation of US government assistance to sustain and maintain pockets of moderate communities in western Syria will inevitably, and quickly, result in a complete surrender of these communities to the advances, resources, and persistence of violent extremist organizations. DT and other similar organizations are prepared to continue building from the foundational steps that have been built in these areas to counter violent extremist activity, but can only do so with the support and funding of the US government and the realization that this is a critical issue of national security interest.

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