

2.1.3 [2] Analysis of Current Conditions in Free Areas of Syria

Situational Analysis

In northern Syria, four discernible blocs are fighting for control of territory that includes Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Raqqa and Dayr al-Zawr provinces:

- **The Syrian regime** – the regime’s aim is to maintain its sovereignty over all Syrian territory and it has employed sectarianism as a primary tactic to maintain power.
- **Syrian rebels** – a diverse array of moderate, mostly Sunni Islamist armed groups intent on overthrowing the regime and establishing a new political order. These groups cooperate and allocate most of their resources to fighting the regime.
- **The Islamic State** – an extremist salafi-jihadi group, which prioritises exclusive control of territory through elimination of rivals. Its focus is regional, and it has established areas of control that span Syria and Iraq.
- **Kurdish forces** – technically neutral, Kurdish forces’ primary aim is to entrench aspects of Kurdish sovereignty in areas where the ethnic group is concentrated.

Typical of many civil conflicts, the Syrian rebels’ focus on taking power meant they postponed the task of governing until after the fall of the regime, resulting in limited efforts to establish interim governance in areas where they are strong. The rebels include a large number of independent groups with competing political visions; this diversity has made coordination over issues of governance difficult and costly. As a result, governance is not as strong in rebel-held areas as in areas held by the regime, the Islamic State or Kurdish forces. Independent and semi-independent governance structures have therefore arisen in areas where Syrian rebels are strong. These structures include networks of defected police, rebel courts and local administrative councils that provide services and coordinate aid delivery. Syrian rebel groups maintain influence over these governance structures, and have also maintained particularly strong influence over judicial structures.

The Free Syria Police (FSP) is an umbrella term for mostly-independent networks of defected police officers that have established rudimentary policing operations in areas where the Syrian rebels are dominant. They are revolutionary entities who share a general ideological affinity with the Syrian rebels and do not operate where the regime, Kurds or the Islamic State are in control. Currently, two provincial-level police commands exist: the Aleppo Free Police (AFP) and the Idlib Free Police (IFP). FSP stations vary in terms of their effectiveness, their mandate and their overall level of organisation. Their authority depends on several factors, the most important of which are:

- **The strength of the relationship between an FSP station and local armed groups**
- **The centrality of an FSP station in the work of a local rebel court or other judicial structure**
- **The sophistication and maturity of an FSP station’s overarching command structure**

FSP networks enjoy the strongest relations with more moderate Syrian rebel groups. Key armed groups that have established relationships with FSP stations include:

- **Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zinki (HNDZ)** –moderate Islamist group composed of army defectors and volunteers, led by an anti al-Qaeda and anti-Islamic State salafi commander, Sheikh Tawfiq Shahab al-Din. HNDZ is most powerful in areas of the western countryside of Aleppo. HNDZ has empowered stations connected to the AFP network as primary policing bodies in towns in which it is strong. These are the most effective stations in Aleppo.

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- **Jaysh al-Mujahidin (JM)** –coalition of relatively moderate, Muslim Brotherhood-linked armed groups strongest in the western countryside of Aleppo. JM has given AFP stations in its areas of control considerable prerogatives, but also maintains separate security battalions.
- **Harakat Hazm (HH)** –moderate nationalist group, strong in Idlib and in parts of the western countryside of Aleppo. It has a good relationship with FSP stations and has worked to integrate them into the rebel courts that it backs in both provinces.
- **Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF)** –moderate nationalist coalition of groups strongest in Idlib province. In some towns, particularly in southern Idlib province, SRF factions support IFP stations, but also maintain their own security battalions.

FSP stations work with any local rebel court structures operating in their areas. These court structures are usually linked to, and supported by, local armed groups. Rebel courts in areas where moderate armed groups are dominant tend to rely more on FSP stations to support court functions, increasing the authority of those stations. Courts linked to Islamist rebels tend to rely less on FSP stations and more on their own capabilities and rebel security battalions.

In Aleppo province, rebel courts in the western countryside rely more on FSP stations than other court networks. Principal among them is the Central Court in al-Qasimiya (CCQ), a western countryside town controlled by HNDZ. In the same region, the Central Court in Darat ‘Izza (CCDI) and its branch commissions also rely on FSP stations for investigatory work and to run detention and corrections facilities, although somewhat less so than the al-Qasimiya court. The Darat ‘Izza court is linked to JM and HH. In the northern countryside and Aleppo city, the Islamic Front maintains the Aleppo Sharia Commission, a loose network of courts. The FSP does not play a central role in its work.

In Idlib province, rebel courts are more atomised. Most operate as independent sharia courts. Although no formal network exists, Idlib province rebel courts generally look to the Sharia Commission in Binnish as the primary rebel judicial structure. Although courts do not rely on FSP stations to the same extent as in Aleppo, FSP stations have more responsibilities in areas where moderate courts are connected to more moderate armed groups. While the FSP typically applies Syrian criminal procedures, these courts variously apply Sharia law, the Unified Arab Code, and aspects of Syrian civil law.

Three conflict trends that have emerged over the last year will have an effect on the strength of FSP stations and their ability to provide security in their areas of operation, as well as justice provision and the programme more broadly:

Conflict Trend	Likelihood	Impact
The gains of the Islamic State –threatens the ability of FSP stations to function. Currently, the Islamic State poses the most significant threat to rebels in the northern countryside of Aleppo.	High	If the Islamic State takes over northern countryside Aleppo, it will close a major supply line from Turkey and threaten rebels in the western countryside, undermining the FSP’s ability to function as a coherent network in Aleppo. If it continues to push westward toward Idlib, FSP stations there may suspend cooperation with the AJACS programme over fears that links to the West will make them vulnerable, should the Islamic State take over. However, if rebels are able to hold out against the Islamic State in the northern countryside,

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		the FSP should continue to function.
Regime gains in Aleppo province – The regime’s intent to place rebel-held Aleppo city under siege threatens the FSP’s work in the city and elsewhere in the province. The regime made progress toward this goal in July 2014 and currently needs only to cut one remaining supply route into the city to complete its encirclement.	High	If the regime can encircle Aleppo city, it will cut FSP stations off from the rest of the AFP network in Aleppo and deal a significant blow to the rebel groups in the area. However, a siege may take over a year to resolve before the regime can turn its efforts toward other areas in Aleppo where the FSP operates. Nonetheless, a successful siege of Aleppo may signal the beginning of the end for the rebels in the province and will lay the groundwork for their potential elimination at the hands of the regime and the Islamic State.
Growth in moderate rebels’ influence – The continued growth of moderate rebel groups will have a positive impact on the FSP as they are more likely to support and empower FSP units.	Medium	If moderate rebel groups successfully hold back the Islamic State’s advances in northern Aleppo, continue to successfully fight the regime in Idlib and Aleppo and receive greater military aid, their influence and territorial reach is likely to continue to expand, yielding benefits for the FSP.
Programming Risk	Likelihood	Impact
Regime and Islamic State contestation of areas under opposition control.	High	This may result in significant physical risk to programme beneficiaries, including possible assassination of police or justice actors.
Beneficiaries submit fraudulent invoices for stipend/operational fund payments.	High	This would reduce programme impact and reduce programme and beneficiary legitimacy.
Conflict dynamics inhibit stakeholder ability to operate effectively affecting delivery of training, equipment and material support.	Medium	Effective programme delivery may become highly complex. Given rapidly shifting conflict dynamics, ARK closely monitors event timing and equipment distribution to ensure maximum beneficiary and equipment security.
Absence of strong governance institutions beyond the provincial level, and, in certain cases, beyond local levels.	Medium	This may lead to weak institutionalisation of justice and security provision across the liberated provinces and will require the identification of local stakeholders who are legitimate, competent and accountable.
Rival police, armed security forces or provincial structures are in operation.	Medium	This will undermine prospects for a unified police command and the implementation of standardised practices. The prospect of AJACS support should be leveraged to reinforce the need for unity.
Violent extremist activities result in border closures.	Medium	Material support and assistance will not be able to be released to beneficiaries, impacting on their ability to provide services to their communities.
Political developments mean programme loses political support in Turkey.	Low	The programme team would be required to relocate to other neighbouring states, such as Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq.