

### 2.1.3: Question 2

#### **Current conditions in free areas of Syria, including threats and impact on contract delivery**

*Having operated in Syria for the past 24 months we understand the evolving political and conflict context and have the networks and credibility with Syrian S&J stakeholders to deliver in an increasingly challenging political and security context.*

#### **Current conditions in free areas of Syria**

The Syrian conflict has become a protracted, multi-sided struggle for identity, authority, territory, resources and ideology, fuelled by regional geo-political feuds. Within this conflict, we consider the “free areas of Syria” as those areas not under the control of the regime or of the Islamic State (IS). Various shades of opposition groups operate within these free areas, but the more moderate opposition is under intense pressure from the regime, extremists, and internal rivalries. Since the AJACS design team undertook its work, the area under control of the moderate opposition has shrunk as regime counteroffensives have progressed, Jabhat al Nusra has gained territory in Idlib and the IS has advanced in northern Syria. These developments threaten the integrity of free areas of Syria. This makes the successful delivery of AJACS more challenging, and underlines the urgency of delivering the desired impact to help counter violent extremism, support a credible moderate opposition and improve S&J services for the people in free areas of Syria.

#### **We are uniquely positioned to understand developments in Syria**

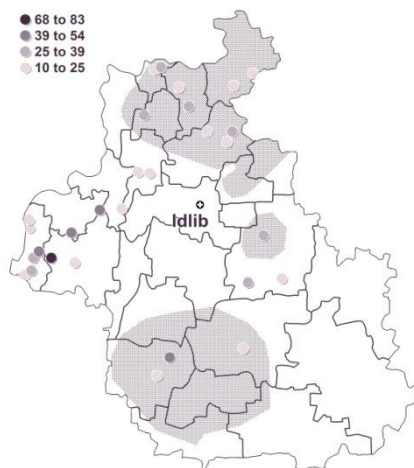
Our team draws on our country-wide network of 200 researchers and field offices which engage with S&J actors on a daily basis, and is reinforced by our deep Syrian expertise.

- Team Leader Matthew Waterfield led the UK and US Syria Stabilisation Response Team in 2012-13 and a number of project in Syria for ICSP in 2014.
- Deputy Team Leader Bassam al-Kuwatli is a leading member of Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) founded the premier Syrian research organisation RMT
- Aktis Managing Director Andrew Rathmell pioneered the study of the Syrian security sector<sup>1</sup>

Our extensive networks in Syria and contact with S&J actors means that we can track this highly complex situation in real time (see figure 1), and provide AJACS researchers and project staff with live information of the conditions in free areas of Syria, including threats and impact on contract delivery, and analyse its impact on project delivery. Our partners RMTeam are the only Syrian research organisation and will provide us with robust data on conditions in free areas of Syria.

**Figure 3: Our researchers and project staff already have up to the minute understanding of the local context and S&J actors operating in AJACS areas**

Idlib Police Stations, by number of staff



**RMTeam has a network of 150 researchers in Syria delivering cutting edge research for donor programmes:**

- Aktis Strategy – focus group discussions and key informant interviews S&J research for the FCO ICSP
- Caerus – media research included survey questionnaires for 500 persons across 7 governorates with 18 key informant interviews
- Caerus – perceptions survey across 7 governorates, with 25 survey questionnaires per week for the last two years
- Norwegian People’s Aid – monitoring and evaluation support to the project working with Local Councils in Syria and trained NPA partners in the M&E tools developed
- International Republic Institute – support to the political training programme

#### **Impact of threats on contract delivery and our mitigation measures**

There are five key threats that are most likely to occur and will impact upon the delivery of AJACS – we have ranked them as follows from 1-5 (1 = most likely to occur and most significant impact on delivery of AJACS; 5 = least likely to occur and least significant impact on delivery of AJACS).

#### **Threat 1: Loss of territory in free areas of Syria shrinking areas in which AJACS could operate**

In the face of rising extremism, regime advances and the ascendancy of the Islamic State, there is a threat of loss of further territory for the free areas of Syria.

**Our answer: Multiple, flexible delivery channels and expanded coverage to other free areas of Syria.** The existing ICSP programme is focused on Idlib, Aleppo and Latakia but our programme is designed to be geographically fluid. We can flex our programme into all the free areas of Syria as the conflict dynamics dictate. Our pre-recruited Syrian staff and local researchers enable us to expand the geographical coverage, including to Deraa, rural Damascus and rural northern Hama, as required. Furthermore while donors prescribe that AJACS is not to work directly with Democratic Union Party (PYD) police there are opportunities to undertake S&J community engagement in Kurdish areas Such as Afrin and Hassakah. Access to opposition areas from Jordan or northern Iraq will require good relations with the authorities in Amman and Arbil

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East*, (I.B. Tauris, 1996; 2013); “Brotherly Enemies: the Rise and Fall of the Syrian-Egyptian Intelligence Axis, 1954-1967,” *Intelligence & National Security*, (Spring 1998); “Syria’s Intelligence Services: Origins and Development,” *The Journal of Conflict Studies* (Fall 1996).

as well as administrative and logistical infrastructures, which we have prepared and can offer to AJACS donors.

**Threat 2: Fluid conflict geographies means AJACS staff and resources are exposed to various threats by extremists, including capture and diversion:** The conflict map below provides an overview of current areas of control but in reality there are often few fixed lines between the various armed groups. In the main areas currently of interest to AJACS, there is no coherent central military-political opposition authority, but competing, overlapping and ever-changing spheres of influence, and different armed groups forming ever-changing alliances. The fluid nature of the conflict poses security risks for our staff as well as risks of diversion of equipment and resources from AJACS to extremists.

**Figure 4: The conflicts in free areas of Syria are localised and fluid. Our in-depth on the ground knowledge means that we can offer the detailed understanding of local community and conflict dynamics AJACS needs to succeed. In Azaz for example we understand the broader picture of the conflict in northern Syria as well as the intricacies of four armed opposition groups competing for influence especially in light of the impending moves by IS.**



**Our answer: Conflict-sensitive and flexible in-Syria presence.** The programme is designed to be responsive to context, scaling up, down and adapting as necessary depending on the situation on the ground.

Responding to a dynamically changing situation is imperative to the success of AJACS. We have a proven capability to assess conflict in real time and the systems in place to embed this understanding in management processes. Our Resilient Peace® framework uses proxy indicators to identify changing patterns of conflict and violence at community level. This allows real-time decisions to be made to shift the types of packages of activity we will provide under AJACS, as well as shifts in the approach to how this is delivered, providing lower profile support during sensitive periods.

**Threat 3: The dominant role of armed actors in provision of security and justice**

Armed opposition actors are the primary stakeholder for security and justice provision in free areas of Syria. In some areas armed actors provide policing and justice services directly; in others the armed actors permit civilian security and justice actors to operate, including the Free Syria Police. Our research has revealed that while many armed actors play a key role in protection, they are also often seen as the major source of insecurity at the community level. As one Idlib police officer noted in an Aktis focus group earlier in 2014: *"Brigades are in charge, since police and courts follow the strong. No one can oppose the strong."*

**Our Answer: Engage armed actors to create a civilian space.** Our experience under ICSP has demonstrated the importance of working on improved military-civilian coordination so as to promote the space for civil security and justice service provision. As the police do themselves, we will engage with carefully selected armed actors to foster dialogue with communities and other S&J actors to develop norms for civilian-military cooperation.

**On ICSP we are proactively responding to the risk of Azaz falling to IS**

IS is 16km away from Azaz and the population is poised for Azaz to fall to IS in the coming days and weeks. One of our Aleppo Community Engagement Officers is in daily contact with our S&J partners on the ground. We have taken pre-emptive action in consultation with our partners to suspend operations, and efforts are underway to recover the unspent \$3,000 grant. We will stand ready to scale up the project as soon as the situation changes.

### **Evolving provincial police structures – consensus by armed groups for civil police to be established**

In Aleppo the police structures have evolved from disparate bands of defected police, security committees from various armed groups and volunteers from the community. The Aleppo Free Police Brigadier-General Shallef has, with the support of the Head of the Provincial Council Abdulrahman Damam and Commander Abdulkader Saleh of the Tawheed Brigade (at the time the most influential brigade in Aleppo), garnered sufficient consensus to establish the AFP. The Tawheed Brigade considered a police that worked in partnership with the Sharia courts to implement the Arab Unified Code would be beneficial to have civilian actors managing civil S&J, freeing the brigade to fight on the frontline. The Commanded of Tawheed brigade was killed in battle in November 2013 and since then his replacement has allowed this brigade to be integrated with the Islamic Front. During this period of upheaval the AFP kept a low profile and since then has developed relations with a range of other non-extremist armed groups to expand its remit across Aleppo. The picture in Idlib is more fractured with a relatively weak provincial council inhibiting the development of the Idlib Free Police. Whereas in Latakia there are no recognised police as yet, but some of the early community engagements there under ICSP will lay a foundation for the development of the Latakia Free Police.

**Threat 4: S&J concepts are contested in free Syria, requiring contextualised interventions:** Security and justice are contested concepts in free Syria. Communities in opposition-held areas have widely differing views regarding the role and identity of new justice and security institutions, including different views on the role of defected police or judges versus “new” police or self-appointed judges, and different views of which legal systems apply. For instance, many of our beneficiaries differ strongly on whether free police should be applying existing Syrian law, the Unified Arab code, or various interpretations of Sharia. In another example, in some communities there is a desire to keep police and courts away from most disputes so that communities, elders (notables) or religious leaders can settle disputes.

**Our answer: Localised and community-owned solutions.** By designing S&J packages of support in collaboration with a wide set of community and S&J stakeholders, we will avoid imposing unsustainable solutions while still promoting effective community security solutions. We have already had successes with this approach. One example has been our work with FSP leaders to devise their own community-oriented policing policies that draw on international practices but suit their own circumstances. Another example has been our work with local police stations which have to co-exist with local sharia courts but are able to nonetheless involve women in oversight of local policing activities through a project-based approach.



Community Policing with students in Marat Al Numan

### **Addressing exclusion of vulnerable groups as a peacebuilding tactic**

As the front-lines flow back and forth across communities, it will be the most vulnerable groups – children, the old, and women – who will need particular assistance, for instance if IS is forced to vacate a community. AJACS will therefore consider interventions that assist these groups with specific justice and alternative dispute resolution steps as well as with trauma and welfare support, to help avoid a repeated cycle of violence and revenge.

**Threat 5: Limited capacity and legitimacy of national structures that inhibits institutionalisation:** The most legitimate emerging, opposition governance structures are at the local level. Where local governance structures have delivered services that impact on the daily lives of Syrians, they have been able to gain credibility; this legitimacy is an asset that can be used to promote community resilience and improved security and justice provision at the local level.

Opposition-controlled provincial and, in particular, national governance structures, including the Interim Government, however, have often not delivered in the eyes of Syrians. For instance, RMT polling in August 2014 revealed that 75% of respondents considered the performance of the Interim Government to be bad or below average.<sup>2</sup>

**Our answer: Deliver locally in partnership with national structures, but without becoming dependent on them.**

Our community development approach for this programme involves prioritising local needs while engaging provincial and national structures at the appropriate point. For instance, when we are training and equipping judicial actors in line with expressed community justice needs, we will engage the Interim Government Ministry of Justice to ensure that it can help scale up the local initiative to other communities. This dual approach will help build legitimate local S&J structures and processes that can progressively be scaled and institutionalised across free areas of Syria. Once the Interim Government is established in Syria AJACS can scale up to support to the IG including the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior.

### **Local knowledge produces results**

In advance of ICSP community engagement projects for Latakia, we collected information through social media and face-to-face meetings allowing the design of the ICSP intervention to be tailored to meet the specific context of Latakia. We then used this foundation to deliver the Latakia Free Police community engagement programme. The research process allowed the project to be started in three weeks as opposed to the stand-up of the Free Aleppo Police in Aleppo where no community based local research had been carried out and progress was slower.

<sup>2</sup> RMTeam 'Polling on the Interim Government' (August 2014).