



Policy Brief

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Covid-19: Tool of Conflict or Opportunity for Local Peace in Northwest Syria?

Evidence shows that local communities played a central role in mitigating the impact of Covid-19, helping to bridge the governance gap in northwest Syria.

As Covid-19 was spreading across the world in the early months of 2020, Russia and Turkey reached a ceasefire deal in the contested Idlib province. Syria entered a year where there was a relative lull in fighting and bloodshed. But nearly a decade of violent conflict put a strain on the capacity and resources of governmental bodies to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the 13.4 million Syrian people in need of humanitarian assistance. This was especially the case in opposition-held areas in the northwest of the country, which is home to over 4 million civilians – more than half of whom are internally displaced. While the economic and humanitarian toll of the pandemic in Syria has attracted much attention, fewer studies have looked into the impact of Covid-19 on local peace dynamics.

A research team led by Juline Beaujouan, University of Edinburgh, conducted a long-term study in northwest Syria to evaluate the impact of Covid-19 on issues of political trust, social cohesion, and youth inclusion. This brief highlights some of the key findings of this study, with the aim of informing policymakers, funders, and peacebuilders on opportunities to support local peace in Syrian opposition-held areas and other complex conflicts.

KEY FINDINGS

- Official responses to Covid-19 were highly politicised.
- Opposition governments were not trusted to deal with Covid-19.
- Covid-19 had no positive nor negative impact on social cohesion, including relations between host and displaced communities.
- Local civil society assumed a central role in the response to Covid-19 and was the most trusted actor during the pandemic.
- Covid-19 fostered bottom-up governance and community engagement activities, whereby civic actors and administrative local councils coordinated the provision of medical services and community awareness.
- The establishment of an umbrella organisation to represent local civil society and support cooperation and knowledge exchange across Syria is important and must be encouraged.

THE RESEARCH

The data presented in this brief were collected between June 2020 and April 2021 in northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates. The researchers conducted 62 interviews with members of civil society, local political representatives, military personnel, and grassroots communities. Most of these interviews were conducted via telephone to lessen the risks associated with Covid-19. Some participants were met in person when the de-facto governments loosened Covid-19 restrictions in early 2021 and the study could be conducted safely. The main aim of the study was to identify local conflict dynamics in opposition-held areas resulting from ten years of violent conflict, and how these dynamics were affected by the pandemic. Researchers focused on issues of political trust, social cohesion, relations between displaced and host communities, the role of local civil society, and youth inclusion in community engagement activities.

50 additional testimonies were collected via an online survey specifically designed to collect people’s perceptions of political trust and social cohesion during the Covid-19 pandemic. This method guaranteed a higher level of anonymity and safety to grassroots communities participating in the research. Besides gathering data on local conflict dynamics, the researchers also collected socio-demographic indicators to ensure that the sampled populations were representative of the general population, and to ensure the inclusion of women and internally displaced people in northwest Syria.



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112 testimonies



FINDINGS

Opposition governance institutions used the Covid-19 crisis as a political tool

The de-facto Syrian Interim government in northern Aleppo and Salvation government in Idlib governorate both competed to manage the Covid-19 file in opposition-held areas in an attempt to secure international recognition and gain legitimacy. The two opposition government bodies lobbied key partners of the international community in northwest Syria, mainly the Idlib Health Directorate but also NGOs such as the Syrian American Medical Society, to promote their own agenda. The Syrian Interim government used its strong ties with Turkey to claim political legitimacy, access to medical supplies and distribution capacity. The Salvation government used a humanitarian argument, namely referencing the high number of vulnerable communities hosted in Idlib governorate, most of them inside IDP camps.

Opposition governments are not trusted as key actors capable of handling Covid-19

Strained state-society relations and mistrust pre-existed the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, governmental actors across Syria are also key conflict actors, and their reputations have been recurrently and generally damaged by lack of governmental capabilities, latent corruption, and involvement in violent policies. It comes as no surprise that more than half of the respondents we interviewed put little to no trust in the Syrian Interim and Salvation governments.

The pandemic did not aggravate tensions between host and displaced communities

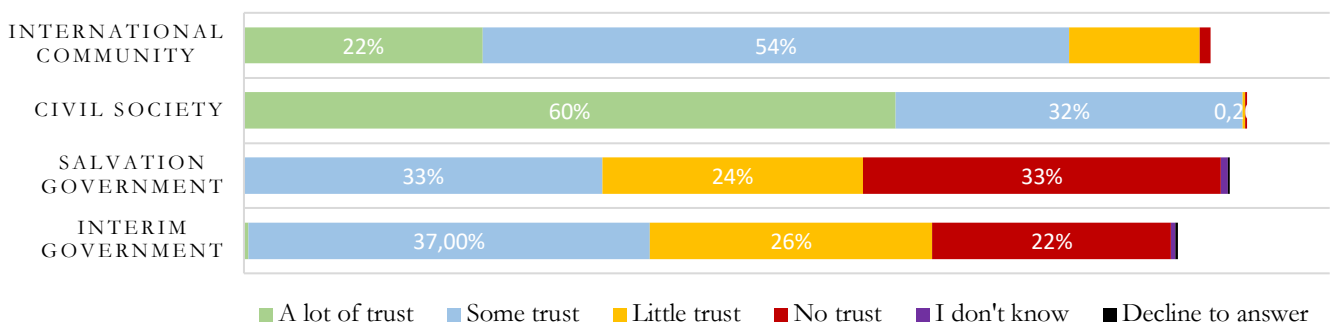
Covid-19 generally did not have any strong impact on social cohesion in northern Syria, although there were some local variations based on local specificity. Sporadic tensions linked to the prioritisation of displaced communities for the distribution of health kits and aid were mitigated by solidarity initiatives and awareness campaigns launched by civil society and university students.

Local civil society assumed a central role during Covid-19

Local civil society was endorsed by the international community as an alternative to governmental bodies and a neutral actor to provide relief and protect grassroots communities. As a direct consequence, local civil society gained legitimacy and confidence inside and outside Syria. The pandemic affected the missions and tasks of local civil society, which became a key transmission channel to fight misinformation and raise public awareness about the virus and mitigating measures, via door-to-door and mobile campaigns.

Local civil society became the most trusted actor during Covid-19

Deprived of independent state structure and support, more than 90% of people interviewed trusted and relied on local civil society alongside their own close circles to provide protection and mitigate the impact of Covid-19. The international community was trusted on average three times less than local civil society.



Covid-19 fostered community-engagement activities and bottom-up governance

Confronted with the lack of capacity and resources to mitigate the impact of Covid-19, local governance entities mobilised local capital. In April 2020, the Health Directorate in Idlib and the Syrian Civil Defense launched the Initiative of Volunteers Against Corona, an inter-sectoral operation room composed of around 50 local organisations and 600 volunteers. The initiative is the first of its kind since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in March 2011. More actions were launched by academic institutions such as the Free University of Aleppo. Local leadership proved to be more efficient than external humanitarian programmes and governmental actors in identifying the need of populations, and more inclusive in terms of gender, ethno-sectarian identity and age – thereby fostering social cohesion and local social peace.

READ MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Visit the ‘Local Voices at a Crossroads’ series hosted by Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS):

- Towards a greater role of the civil society in conflict settlement in Syria after Covid-19?
- The politics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria
- Political trust at a time of pandemic

<https://www.cspps.org/stories>

Visit the Political Settlement Research Programme (PSRP) at the University of Edinburgh to read from the authors and for news and updates from the project:

- Young artists illustrate life in Syrian opposition-held areas
- Covid-19 Peace and Transition Processes

<https://www.politicalsettlements.org/>

LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Mistrust in governmental actors and information about Covid-19 were the greatest challenges to protecting Syrian communities in opposition-held areas.
- Covid-19 did not aggravate local conflict dynamics in the short term (violence escalation, social tensions) but it is likely to have long-term repercussions on the local economy.
- Local civil society played a key role in terms of conflict mitigation and mediation at the local community level.
- Local civic actors were more rapid, innovative, and efficient to respond to Covid-19, compared to the de-facto governments and programmes funded by the international community.
- Community engagement activities empowered local populations during Covid-19. They also fostered inclusion of youth and displaced people.
- It is crucial to encourage the establishment of an umbrella organisation to represent local civil society and support cooperation, knowledge exchange, and cross-fertilisation of ideas, policies, and actions across Syrian governorates.



About the Authors



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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

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Abdulah 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 Defense in Eastern Ghouta in Rif Damascus. From 2014 to 2019, Abdulah worked as a coordinator and field manager for programs 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.



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Eyas is a researcher and consultant in areas of human rights and development. He is also a Master student in International Development, specialising in conflict, security and development, at the University of Birmingham, UK. Eyas has over eight years of working experience 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.

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*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 authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Covid Collective, its partners, or FCDO.

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