

Research Paper

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Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria Lessons from Atarib



Contents

Summary	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Atarib: Strategic Importance and Resilience	6
3. ISIS in Atarib	8
4. ISIS Versus Local Community Groups	11
5. Local Resistance to ISIS	14
6. The Partial Reconciliation Process: The Fate of ISIS Members in Atarib	17
7. Community Resistance to al-Nusra in Atarib	19
8. Conclusion: Lessons for the Wider US-led Fight Against ISIS in Syria	22
About the Author	25
Acknowledgments	26

Summary

- Even before the US began to mobilize international, regional and local partners to counter ISIS in Syria in the latter part of 2014, some local communities had shown their effectiveness in resisting takeover by the group. Early that year, local rebel groups had achieved notable success in pushing ISIS out of much of western Syria – including Idlib governorate, Aleppo city, and northern and western rural areas of Aleppo governorate – after local resentment towards ISIS’s actions – such as kidnappings, torture and the targeting of activists and opposition leaders – had built up over the preceding months.
- This paper examines events in Atarib city in the period before, during and after its local community and armed groups came together in early 2014 to resist an attempt by ISIS to seize full control of the city. As elsewhere, ISIS had previously intensified efforts to impose its authority over the city through coercion and intimidation. The strength of relations between civilians, the city’s authorities and local rebel groups meant that they were able to work together successfully to defend the city.
- Drawing notably on first-hand interviews with a set of local actors in Atarib, including activists, civilians, police and former ISIS members, a case study is presented of the substantive role that Syrian local communities can play in resisting extremist groups, and what motivates them to undertake such resistance.
- Also examined are the successes and failures of the local reconciliation and reintegration process after ISIS was repelled in Atarib. While recognition of the need to reintegrate former ISIS supporters meant that the majority were able to remain within the local community, the process lacked enforcement measures to ensure that former members did not later rejoin ISIS elsewhere, or switch allegiance to the ideologically similar al-Nusra as that group moved in to take control of former ISIS strategic positions and weaponry.
- Following the defeat of ISIS in Atarib, al-Nusra began to rebuild its strength in the city, and in turn moved to take full control in early 2015. While this time Atarib’s local armed groups were reluctant to enter into conflict with a potential strategic ally against the Assad regime, al-Nusra’s attempt to take the city was met with strong resistance by the local community. While this did not prevent al-Nusra seizing control of a key military base outside the city, an all-out military confrontation was averted, and the group was held at bay.
- A sole focus on defeating ISIS in Syria militarily will likely further enable al-Nusra, which has been able to exploit the power vacuum where its rival has collapsed. If the progress made by the international military coalition in the fight against ISIS in Syria is to endure, it will be critical to engage local communities, and to forge a clear, comprehensive and participatory strategy that takes account of specific community dynamics, sets the protection of civilians as a priority, and addresses the deep-rooted political, economic, social and cultural issues that have seen extremist groups rise and flourish. Strong local communities that are empowered to create their own alternatives and solutions will have the incentive to fight for them.

1. Introduction

In response to the rapid capture by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) of large areas of territory in Syria and Iraq in the second half of 2014, the US administration of Barack Obama led efforts in mobilizing international, regional and local partners to cooperate in confronting the group.¹ But while the US-led anti-ISIS campaign – the conduct of which has been broadly unchanged in the early months of the Trump presidency – has succeeded in degrading ISIS’s strength on several levels, gains have generally been more tactical than strategic. This limited progress can be attributed to an overwhelming focus on military goals and a failure to take full account of the conditions that allowed ISIS to flourish as Syria descended into civil war. Among the consequences of the strategy hitherto has been to drive some locals closer to ISIS, and to render others indifferent to resisting or fighting the group.² The US-led campaign thus lacks popular partners from the local communities, and fails to set out post-ISIS mechanisms to rehabilitate and reintegrate the group’s former members. In the absence of such mechanisms, it appears that other radical groups, notably the ideologically similar Jabhat al-Nusra,³ have taken up former ISIS fighters and supporters – some of whom have switched allegiance either for their own protection or because al-Nusra is perceived as their only option.⁴

If the progress made in the fight against ISIS in Syria is to endure, it will be critical to engage local communities. There is evidence that, even before the start of the US-led anti-ISIS campaign, some Syrian local communities were able to resist ISIS. In early 2014, notably, local Syrian rebel groups achieved significant success in pushing ISIS out of much of western Syria (including Idlib governorate, Aleppo city, and the northern and western countryside of Aleppo governorate) quickly and without much external support,⁵ after local resentment towards ISIS’s actions – including kidnappings, torture and the targeting of activists and opposition leaders – had built up over the preceding months.⁶

This paper examines the local community resistance to ISIS in the city of Atarib, in Aleppo governorate, where a coordinated uprising of local armed groups and civilians was able to resist a takeover by ISIS at the beginning of 2014. The uprising followed a gradual build-up of tensions between ISIS, which had established itself in Atarib during 2013, and the local community, as ISIS intensified its efforts to impose its authority over the city and its residents. The group’s defeat in Atarib subsequently encouraged other armed groups to join the fight, and together they were able to push ISIS out of the surrounding region.

¹ Solomon, E. and Dyer, G. (2016), ‘Middle East: The factions behind the fight against Isis’, *Financial Times*, 23 May 2016, <https://next.ft.com/content/c1e5ccca-1e6a-11e6-b286-cddde55ca122> (accessed 20 Jul. 2016).

² Haid, H. (2016), ‘What did we achieve in the fight against ISIS in 2015?’, *Now Lebanon*, 5 January 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/566442-what-did-we-achieve-in-the-fight-against-isis-in-2015> (accessed 21 Jul. 2016).

³ The group’s name has changed several times since its rise in 2013. In July 2016 it changed its name from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham after breaking ties with al-Qaeda. The group renamed itself Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017, marking a large-scale merger with other Syrian rebel groups. For consistency, this paper refers to the group as Jabhat al-Nusra, or (chiefly) uses the short-form al-Nusra.

⁴ Author interview via Skype with local activist Waleed, September 2016.

⁵ Abouzeid, R. (2014), ‘Syria’s uprising within an uprising’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 16 January 2014, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_syrias_uprising_within_an_uprising238 (accessed 18 Jul. 2016).

⁶ Landis, J. (2014), ‘The Battle between ISIS and Syria’s Rebel Militias’, *Syria Comment blog*, 4 January 2014, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/battle-isis-syrias-rebel-militias/> (accessed 19 Jul. 2016).

The involvement of local communities in the resistance to ISIS was crucial to its success, and helped to maintain good relations after the group was repelled. People in Atarib informed ISIS supporters that they would be safe if they chose not to fight for the group, and this encouraged many people to refrain from fighting. There was also a degree of local reconciliation, with the aim of reintegrating ISIS supporters in the community: ISIS members were allowed to continue to live peacefully in the city if they denounced the group and stopped fighting for it.⁷ Despite some identifiable failings in this local process – including as regards reintegration of former ISIS members, the fate of ISIS prisoners, and protection mechanisms for ISIS members who had chosen not to fight – it achieved considerable success in reintegrating the majority of ISIS supporters. As a case study, events in Atarib in the period examined in this paper offer valuable lessons in how to address the issue of reintegrating ISIS members into their local community that could usefully inform the broader strategy against the group.

The experience of the local community in resisting ISIS in Atarib was, moreover, significant when al-Nusra attempted to take control of the city in February 2015. During al-Nusra's campaign to eliminate the US-backed opposition armed group Haraket Hazem, al-Nusra apparently threatened to besiege Atarib and demanded the surrender of locals who were members of Haraket Hazem.⁸ While the majority of armed groups were reluctant to openly resist al-Nusra, regarded as a potential strategic ally in the war against Assad, Atarib's civilians and 'notables' came together to establish checkpoints and resist an attempt by al-Nusra to capture the city – an effort that succeeded in keeping the group's fighters out of the city itself.⁹

Such instances of local resistance to jihadist groups tend to be overlooked in policy debates about countering ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria. There are, however, important lessons to be drawn from the successes and failures of resistance by local communities that may be applied to the US-led coalition's ongoing intervention against ISIS and ideologically similar groups. As such, this paper analyses the dynamics that drove local residents and armed factions in Atarib to confront ISIS in early 2014, as well as the local community response in the face of al-Nusra's apparent attempt to exert control over the city a little over a year later. It aims to contribute to fostering a better understanding of the significant role that local communities can play in resisting extremist groups in Syria, and what motivates them to undertake such resistance. The paper also examines the extent to which these communities were able to deal with ISIS's local members, and scrutinizes the local reconciliation process whereby many of the latter were able to reintegrate with their community.

The research focuses on the city of Atarib, where the fight against ISIS began, in 2013–15, drawing notably on commentary from members of the local community who were involved, in various capacities, in the events of this period. The city's narrative highlights the importance of taking characteristics of local communities in particular areas into consideration in studying the dynamics of the Syrian conflict, particularly as regards non-state armed groups. There are clear lessons to be applied to the wider conflict from the study of Atarib's resistance to ISIS – notably, for example, the

⁷ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Abdulla, July 2016.

⁸ Akhbar Alaan (2015), 'Al-Nusra Front Besieges Atarib City', 1 March 2015, <http://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/arabs/2015/3/1/exclusive-source-alaantv-alnusra-front-besieging-alatarib-city-fear-of-perpetrating-massacres> (accessed 16 Jul. 2016).

⁹ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Abdulla, July 2016.

city has civil and armed group characteristics in common with other areas of Syria such as Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Kafr Nabel in rural Idlib. Nonetheless, it is critical that there should be a nuanced approach to fighting extremism that takes account of local community identities and interests. Strong local communities that are empowered to create their own alternatives and solutions will have the incentive to fight for them.

Methodology

Central to the research for this paper is a set of semi-structured interviews with 15 local actors in the author's home city of Atarib, including activists, civilians who participated in the resistance against ISIS and al-Nusra, armed groups, police and former ISIS members. The interviewees were randomly selected based on recommendations from local activists. Because all crossing points into Syria from Turkey have been closed, it was not possible for the author (who most recently visited Atarib in 2013–15) to conduct direct field research on the ground. Instead, most interviews were conducted by the author online, principally via Skype and WhatsApp, between May 2016 and March 2017. Several interviewees were interviewed more than once. The paper also draws on secondary sources, including official statements and news coverage, as well as social media commentary confirmed by credible activists.

It should be noted that it was not possible to conduct interviews with residents of Atarib who continue to support ISIS. Expressing support for, or association with, ISIS could lead to social stigma or possible prosecution for being part of a 'sleeper' cell.

It is not possible to make an accurate assessment of the numbers of local community members who were actively involved in the resistance campaigns against ISIS in January 2014 and against al-Nusra in February 2015. It is clear, however, that people participated in many different capacities, including through active participation in the resistance or through donations of money, arms, ammunition, food, etc.

Furthermore, it is not possible to accurately gauge the number of ISIS members in Atarib before and after the 2014 uprising, nor to differentiate fully between committed members of ISIS, sympathizers, and those who opted to support or tolerate the group while it was delivering services in the city. The group depended on a large network of informants and members who were not publicly affiliated with the group, not least with the aim of creating suspicion and mistrust among locals.

2. Atarib: Strategic Importance and Resilience

Atarib, located some 25 kilometres west of the city of Aleppo, had an estimated population of around 30,000 people, mainly Sunni Arabs, as of 2011.¹⁰ It is the administrative centre of Atarib district, and a large trading and agricultural centre in Aleppo governorate. The city came to serve as a strategic transport hub between the city of Aleppo, the northern countryside of neighbouring Idlib governorate, and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian–Turkish border. As in many other rural areas in Syria, community life in Atarib is structured around large extended family networks. Authority traditionally lies in the hands of the ‘notables’ in each extended family – variously, wealthy or educated individuals, religious scholars or traditional family elders – and these figures play a significant role in settling problems and brokering agreements and alliances, both within and between families.

These long-established family networks are one of the factors that have allowed the development in Atarib of strong local rebel groups, in opposition to President Bashar al-Assad, with solid relations with the civilian population – a pattern that is also seen in many other rebel-held areas. Anti-regime demonstrations took place in Atarib as early as April 2011, and the city swiftly became an important hub for organizing protests in the wider district as well as in Aleppo city itself.¹¹ Atarib also assumed military significance against the Syrian regime following the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and was among the first urban centres to host local military officers who defected from the Syrian regime in early 2012.¹² The city soon had one of the largest numbers of defected officers¹³ in rural Aleppo, and the local FSA groups that were subsequently formed there went on to establish the al-Mutasem Bi’ Allah brigades¹⁴ and played a crucial role in driving Assad’s forces out of most of rural Aleppo, part of the city of Aleppo and rural Idlib.¹⁵ Atarib also became a crucial supply line from Turkey to rebel groups in opposition areas.

The rebel groups that developed in Atarib were made up of locals from the city itself and from the wider district. These groups received strong community support because they were able to push the Syrian regime out of the area and reduce the scale of atrocities committed by pro-Assad forces, which allowed locals to go back to their homes. Rebel groups were also actively involved in facilitating the provision of aid to civilians, but remained largely focused on fighting the regime without otherwise intervening in civilian affairs. The participation of anti-regime fighters in peaceful demonstrations – before and even after they took up arms – also helped to ensure strong ties with fellow activists who were members of local civil society groups.

¹⁰ Author interview via Skype with local activist Abdualla, November 2016.

¹¹ Diamond Atareb (2011), ‘The First Demonstration in Atarib’, YouTube, 22 April 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoLvV9UrH5o> (accessed 9 Nov. 2016).

¹² Diamond Atareb (2012), ‘The Defection Clip of Officer Ahmed al-Faj and Officer Murshed al-Khaled’, YouTube, 12 February 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPhgK3xXL6U> (accessed 9 Nov. 2016).

¹³ Syrian Revolutionary Coordination Committees Union in Aleppo (2012), ‘Securing the Arrival of Defected Officers’, YouTube, 15 February 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AAOB18O-aI> (accessed 9 Nov. 2016).

¹⁴ The Free Coordination Committee of Sarmada (2012), ‘The Formation of al-Mutasem Bi’ Allah Brigades’, YouTube, 9 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trtKeqypKp8> (accessed 9 Nov. 2016).

¹⁵ Author interview via Skype with local activist Abdualla, November 2016.

The strength of civil society¹⁶ in Atarib was also an important factor in the city's resilience. As elsewhere in Syria, formal civil society did not exist in Atarib prior to 2011. With the uprising, however, local activists quickly established a local coordination committee as part of the network of activists across the country involved in organizing civil disobedience against the Assad regime. Atarib had two main civil society movements, Multaqa shabab al-thawra (the Revolution Youth Forum) and Tajmoua souria liljamiy (the Syria for All Assembly), but there were other activists operating alone or in small groups.¹⁷ The civil society groups remained largely independent, and brought together members from different ideological backgrounds (Islamist and other). Most provided aid and relief, and a small number worked on issues related to democracy, civil education and the rule of law. After the Syrian regime was forced out of Atarib in July 2012, a council of notables was formed – including elders and other influential figures (such as doctors, lawyers, intellectuals and religious scholars) – to facilitate decision-making through consensus and ensure the wider representation of different families. In October of that year the council of notables agreed to establish a revolutionary council, part of a network of local administration councils intended to serve as an alternative to the Syrian regime in opposition-held areas, to run the city and provide public services.¹⁸ The revolutionary and notables' councils also set up and supervised a local court and police station.

¹⁶ In this paper, 'civil society' is used in a broad sense to refer to notables, activists, local movements and initiatives, local administrative councils and other governing committees or structures, local relief organizations and local organizations working in the public sphere.

¹⁷ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Mahmoud, September 2016.

¹⁸ Diamond Atareb (2012), 'The Formation of the Revolutionary Council in Atarib', YouTube, 3 October 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqEuY2fRI_I (accessed 9 Nov. 2016).

3. ISIS in Atarib

It was not just the city's notables and civil society groups who saw the provision of public services in Atarib as a way to secure community backing. ISIS too, when setting its sights on Atarib, used public services provision to portray itself as the most efficient governing body in the area and thus win local support.

The incursion of ISIS into Atarib was gradual. In late 2011 al-Nusra was established in Syria with the support of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which was at that time exploring opportunities to expand into Syria. Alongside a series of significant military operations against regime targets, which allowed al-Nusra to forge strong ties with local rebel groups across Syria, the new group swiftly established a reputation among local communities in opposition-held areas for fighting corruption and providing public services while avoiding direct intervention in their lives. In Atarib itself, the prior dominance of established local rebel groups, in combination with al-Nusra's own stringent recruitment procedures and the existence of a stronghold for the group in a nearby village, meant that the presence of the group was limited to a small number operating a centre for *dawa* (missionary activity). Nevertheless, al-Nusra's reputation among locals was initially favourable, and the group maintained cooperative relations with local rebel groups in the city.

The situation deteriorated following the split between ISI and al-Nusra in April 2013, when the latter refused to merge with ISI within the newly created ISIS. As elsewhere in Syria, this division caused the majority of al-Nusra's foreign members in Atarib to defect and set up a branch of ISIS in the city. ISIS members took over al-Nusra's centre in the city as well as its weapons and other belongings.¹⁹ ISIS, dominated in Atarib by foreign fighters, was viewed there as an outsider group, whereas al-Nusra was able to retain enough local members to avoid being seen in the same vein. Again as in other areas of Syria, ISIS made efforts to embed itself in the community by recruiting as many locals as possible, and also through provision of *dawa* as well as awards, local amenities and services. Meanwhile, the limited military capacity of FSA groups in Atarib (and elsewhere), in the absence of substantive international support, prompted them to make common cause with any other group against the Syrian regime. Thus, despite all ideological and strategic differences, and notwithstanding its apparent long-term ambition to control the city, ISIS was allowed to operate in Atarib. While initially seeming to accept coexistence with other groups in the city, it was certainly encouraging members from other groups to defect to its ranks.²⁰

ISIS used *dawa* activities and a rewards system to forge a connection with the local population and promote itself as the only true implementer of Islam. Its frequent public *dawa* forums were used to convey ISIS's interpretation of Islam and the importance of jihad, and were held along with promotional events such as contests to memorize passages of the Qur'an, or quizzes to boost attendance:²¹

¹⁹ Author interview via Skype with local activist Ahmed, October 2016.

²⁰ Author interview via Skype with local activist Omar, May 2016.

²¹ Aleppo Media Center (2013), 'ISIS's *dawa* activity', YouTube, 24 July 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VXQPYZk_pI (accessed 1 Sept. 2016).

The idea of those public contests was simple. They used to ask people easy questions so whoever participated would win. They knew that people were poor, and that by paying sizeable amounts for silly questions – usually 5,000 SYP [then around \$20] for a regular prize, with the big prize going up to 25,000 SYP [around \$100] – the number of people attending these events would double every time.²²

Additionally, most such activities organized by ISIS were designed to appeal to children, who were regarded as being easier and cheaper to recruit than adults. Those attending were then encouraged to sign up to ISIS's regular sharia courses or Quranic memorization classes, as a first step in recruiting them:

The majority of Daesh's activities were targeting children. It is way easier to win over a child with a gift or a small amount of money. Giving away money to children also helped bringing their families closer to the group.²³

ISIS also used the provision of public services to generate community support and recruit members. Although, compared with other areas, the services offered by ISIS in Atarib were basic and minimal, the group managed to maximize impact by careful selection of what to supply, when and to whom, based on what was most needed, especially in the case of services that were otherwise unavailable or hard to come by. Moreover, it directed local people to its centre in the city in order to take delivery of the services that it provided:

Daesh was always trying to take advantage of crises to win more support. When cooking gas was not available in Atarib, Daesh started providing it at cheaper rates to people who registered at its centre. Similarly, when drinking water was not available, Daesh used a water tanker truck to provide people with water. It distributed water for free to its members, and at a low rate to those who registered their names at its centre. As a result, people started joining Daesh to receive its services and support.²⁴

Through such efforts to provide better services, ISIS promoted itself as the most efficient governing body as a step towards taking administrative control of the whole city. In the case of the local court, ISIS accused the incumbent ulema (religious scholars) of issuing rulings that were in contradiction with sharia, and of inefficiency and inexperience. After consulting with the council of notables, the city's police chief, the leaders of other armed groups and the revolutionary council, the head of the court invited ISIS to participate in the existing court. ISIS declined, insisting that all members of the court be replaced by its own appointees, and when the local community refused to allow this the group established a separate court. This rival court then entered into competition by attempting to decide the cases brought before it in record time:

It was known to everyone that filing a complaint with the Daesh court was quicker and more efficient than the local court. More importantly, anyone who filed their complaint with Daesh's court saw the verdict go in their favour, which is what made its court popular.²⁵

According to one interviewee, in order to maintain this record of efficiency, ISIS's court was willing to do whatever it took to solve its cases, including coercing people to confess and comply:

²² Author interview via Skype with local activist Waleed, September 2016.

²³ Author interview via Skype with local fighter Omar, September 2016.

²⁴ Author interview via Skype with local activist Waleed, September 2016.

²⁵ Author interview via Skype with local activist Mustafa, September 2016.

One day my friend had a car accident in the city and his gun was stolen from his car in the ensuing confusion. He filed a complaint with the local court, but nothing happened due to lack of evidence. He later lodged a complaint with Daesh's court. A few days later, Daesh found a suspect, charged him and gave a gun back to my friend, but it was not the same gun he lost.²⁶

Similarly, ISIS was reported to have made efforts to take over Atarib's main bakery by offering to provide bread at lower prices. It also offered to supply thousands of free litres of diesel to the city's revolutionary council on condition that the latter allowed ISIS to run it.²⁷

Fear of ISIS apparently played a significant role in persuading people to join the group for their own protection. The group swiftly established a wide network of informants, using money or other forms of leverage, through which it was able to gather intelligence and thus better understand the local dynamics, identify key players, recruit supporters and eliminate potential threats:

ISIS had a big network of informants in the city, which created mistrust between people as they did not know who could be spying on them. As a result, many people joined ISIS in order to protect themselves.²⁸

²⁶ Author interview via Skype with local activist Mosa'b, September 2016.

²⁷ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Mahmoud, September 2016.

²⁸ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Abdualla, July 2016.

4. ISIS Versus Local Community Groups

Its increased influence in Atarib encouraged ISIS to compete more directly with other groups for control of the city. As already noted, an initial tactic was to show its efficiency and ability to manage crises, as a means of generating sufficient public backing that would allow it to take administrative control of the city as a whole. However, its ambitions in this respect were frustrated by the existing strength of local civil society, and this led to more direct competition for governing control in Atarib. ISIS's response was one of 'carrot-and-stick', giving rise to a series of skirmishes between ISIS and locals.

A key focus of ISIS's strategy to establish full territorial control in Atarib – as implemented more successfully in other areas²⁹ – was to draw attention to the inefficiencies in locally run governing bodies. As described in the previous chapter, the group attempted to take control of the local court, eventually setting up a rival court after the community refused to allow it to install its own appointees in place of the established ulema. ISIS also made efforts to take over the local police station and the checkpoints controlling access to the city, accusing those already in charge of incompetence or corruption:

During Daesh's public *dawa* events, the host speakers used to publicly criticize the police, the checkpoints and even the local court, and talk about its corruption, incompetence, not following sharia, etc. They were trying to turn locals against those in charge.³⁰

Throughout the second half of 2013 ISIS coupled its tactic of direct competition with local bodies in Atarib, as elsewhere in the conflict, with violent and coercive measures including kidnappings, forced disappearances and assassinations targeting its rivals. In the case of Atarib, however, the presence of a strong local civil society, backed by local armed groups, meant that ISIS was frustrated in its efforts to govern the city by coercion. ISIS responded by stepping up arrests, abductions, intimidation and assassinations of those who opposed or questioned its actions, or who were perceived as engaging in anti-ISIS activities.³¹ The chief targets were independent activists and citizen journalists – notably among them Samar Saleh and Mohammad Al-Omar, both of whom were kidnapped in Atarib in August 2013 and whose fate remains unknown. A number of FSA members and commanders who had been backing locals against ISIS were also kidnapped:

Daesh kidnaped many local FSA fighters because they were the ones protecting us from them. On 18 December [militants at] one of Daesh's checkpoints kidnapped two FSA commanders, the leader of the Shouhada al Atarib brigade, Nezam Barakat, and the leader of the Ahrar Atarib group, Mosaab Mansour, whose fate is still unknown. These two leaders were usually the first ones to show up to defend us whenever there was a problem with Daesh.³²

²⁹ For more information on ISIS's territorial strategy, see Zelin, A. (2016), *The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote29-Zelin.pdf> (accessed 9 Oct. 2016).

³⁰ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Mahmoud, September 2016.

³¹ Author interview via Skype with local activist Omar, May 2016.

³² Author interview via Skype with local activist Mustafa, September 2016.

The campaign of repression in Atarib provoked hostility and anger towards ISIS within the local community. Forced disappearances and assassinations were often carried out by masked men under cover of darkness or at ISIS-controlled checkpoints, although ISIS would deny any involvement in or knowledge of such incidents, even when eyewitnesses stated otherwise:

It drove people crazy, the spike in the number of people who were forcibly disappeared. All evidence indicated that Daesh was the one behind the majority of them. However, Daesh was always denying the whereabouts of those people. In many instances Daesh denied arresting people, yet a few days later the same people were presented and sentenced in front of the group's court.³³

In response, the local authorities in Atarib banned the wearing of masks within the city, and proscribed the making of arrests without prior authorization by the local court. ISIS members repeatedly violated these restrictions, leading to confrontation with locals:

We had many skirmishes with Daesh over the ban on masks and random arrests. Every now and then we used to hear over the walkie-talkies that a number of unknown masked individuals were trying to arrest or kidnap someone from the city. We used to immediately go and stop them. Daesh was always responsible for such incidents. People used firearms against Daesh many times for the purpose of scaring them, but nothing ever developed into a serious fight.³⁴

ISIS's intervention in the personal lives of Atarib's residents also led to tensions and occasional clashes. Some of its members asked people to behave in accordance with the group's strict interpretation of Islamic rules banning smoking, music or women walking unaccompanied. Unused to such strictures, members of the local community made clear their objections:

One day we were demonstrating against the Syrian regime in one of the of the city's squares. Daesh's local leader and other members passed by. Their leader started complaining about the music we were playing as well as our dancing. He was shouting that his people are not dying so we could sing and dance. Locals argued with him and he was beaten up as a result.³⁵

ISIS's use of public executions provoked particular outrage. Concerning the execution of one FSA commander who had had a poor reputation locally, one Atarib activist commented:

The execution of Hassan Jazra, an FSA commander, and some of his fighters by Daesh in the city on 1 December 2013 increased anger towards the group. They brought them from Aleppo to execute them in Atarib in order to intimidate us. We understood that but we showed them that they cannot intimidate us. We argued with them and we almost fought them but they ran away.³⁶

Despite Jazra's unpopularity within the local community, they regarded his public execution as intimidation on the part of ISIS to coerce them into submission.

Eventually, a series of threats by ISIS to storm Atarib, together with the discovery there of the body of a local FSA fighter believed to have been kidnapped, tortured and killed by the group, were the catalyst for the city to rise up against ISIS. On 2 January 2014 ISIS fighters attempted to arrest a

³³ Author interview via Skype with local activist Mosa'b, September 2016.

³⁴ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Abdualla, July 2016.

³⁵ Author interview via WhatsApp with local teacher in the ISIS-controlled town of Manbij, May 2016.

³⁶ Author interview via Skype with local activist Ahmed, October 2016.

local man, Mahmoud Haid,³⁷ on charges of corruption and affiliation with the Syrian regime. Local residents intervened to prevent his arrest, and demanded that ISIS follow the correct procedure in lodging a complaint against him before the local court. The city's police and local court similarly took action to prevent his detention, whereupon the arrest squad withdrew angrily. ISIS members later returned with a warrant demanding that the head of the local court be brought to the ISIS-controlled police station in al-Dana, a nearby town under ISIS authority. Atarib's own authorities refused to hand anyone over, insisting that locals should be questioned or prosecuted within the city itself. ISIS's local commander then went to the police station in Atarib and threatened to storm the city if the group's demands were not met.³⁸ At about the same time the body of a local FSA fighter, Ali Obeid – a known opponent of ISIS who had last been seen heading towards one of the group's checkpoints outside the city – was discovered in a town close by, apparently showing signs of torture; ISIS was assumed to be the main suspect. This chain of events provoked demonstrations against ISIS on the streets of Atarib, and the city's notables and local armed groups began discussing how to defend the city.³⁹

³⁷ The author's cousin.

³⁸ Author interview with local resident under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

³⁹ Author interview with local commander under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

5. Local Resistance to ISIS

ISIS's response in attempting to take military control of Atarib in January 2014 meant that the clash with locals escalated rapidly from a local skirmish to a full-scale confrontation. Fear of ISIS was widespread, and the true extent of the group's power in the city – and the number of groups that had sworn secret allegiance to it – was unknown. It is likely that ISIS's power in the city was overestimated at this time, and that the prevailing uncertainty and mistrust hindered chances of forging local alliances against the group. However, ISIS's move to take control of Atarib was a turning point. ISIS began this new phase by establishing a series of checkpoints to isolate the city and prevent opposition reinforcements from reaching it, and also mobilized its forces from areas of Aleppo and Idlib in preparation for storming the city. Its forces were divided into two groups: one focused on attacking from the northwest; and the other on seizing the Regiment 46 base – considered the key centre for the local armed groups protecting the city⁴⁰ – on the eastern side. For ISIS, capturing Atarib would be of particular strategic importance, since this would by extension allow the group to control other neighbouring towns and villages in rural Aleppo. According to one activist:

Atarib is important not only as the centre of the whole area in northern rural Aleppo, but also as a revolutionary centre itself. It played an important role in liberating many areas in rural Aleppo from Assad's regime. It also has strong civil and armed groups. Thus, controlling it would have allowed Daesh to dominate the whole area.⁴¹

The strong relations that already existed between civilians, local authorities and rebel groups in Atarib meant that these various parties were able to work together effectively to defend the city. In response to the threat of an ISIS takeover, an emergency meeting was called between representatives of a number of local armed groups, the city's local authorities and the council of notables, at which it was agreed to defend the city in the event of attack by ISIS. Preparations for the armed resistance were to be led by the local rebel groups, and among the various roles assigned at the meeting, two local military leaders were unanimously appointed to the roles of principal commander and military commander.⁴² A general public meeting followed, convened via walkie-talkies and broadcasts from the city's mosques, at which members of local armed groups and civilians were urged to participate in the defence of Atarib in whatever way they could. Based on instructions from the newly designated military commander, civilians set up makeshift checkpoints at all the main entry points to the city, while some local armed groups and business figures began distributing weapons:

The sense of solidarity among civilians was unbelievable. It reminded me of the early days of the peaceful demonstrations against Assad, everyone was working together. Some people started cooking and looking after those who were at the checkpoints. Others were taking turns at the checkpoints or

⁴⁰ Notably, the Regiment 46 base had particular significance as a key strategic turning point in the struggle to free the city from Assad's forces.

⁴¹ Author interview via Skype with local activist Mustafa, September 2016.

⁴² Author interview with local commander under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

were patrolling throughout the city. Some donated money, ammunition, arms. Even restaurants were serving food for free.⁴³

People in Atarib also made contact with key figures and rebel groups in neighbouring towns, appealing to them to join the fight against ISIS, or at least to prevent ISIS reinforcements from reaching the city.⁴⁴

Civilians also had an important role in persuading some local armed groups to join the resistance against ISIS, as well as in dissuading most local militants from fighting with it. Not all armed group leaders in Atarib were committed to the fight against ISIS: some were afraid of possible reprisals if ISIS overcame the local resistance; others were wary of giving rise to internal divisions, given that some of those under their command were against fighting any other group that opposed the Assad regime. However, the anti-ISIS demonstrations that took place in Atarib demonstrated the strength of local support for armed resistance, and encouraged some local leaders – especially the commanders of small local factions – to join forces in defence of the city. Such groups merged to form *tajammu' thuwwar al-Atarib al-Islami* (the Islamic Coalition of Revolutionaries in Atarib),⁴⁵ which became the main group fighting alongside local civilians to keep the city from an ISIS takeover.⁴⁶

In some instances, local pressure influenced armed group members to join the Atarib resistance against ISIS, despite orders from their commanders not to participate in the fight:

One of the local groups, *Liwaa Amjad al-Islam*, did not participate and did not even let us use their heavy weapons in the attack on Daesh's centre in Atarib. After a few attempts to convince them to deploy their heavy cannons in the fight, people gave them one last warning to either use their weapons or they would use force to break in and use them. Only then, they agreed to use the cannons. Other individuals disobeyed their leading commander and fought because they felt ashamed for not taking part in protecting their community. Those individuals were locals, and they had strong family and social ties with the local community, which pressured them to join in the fight in order to get the support of locals.⁴⁷

The local community's unified position against ISIS was even more critical in encouraging most local recruits not to join in hostilities against Atarib. Such members sent messages, via their relatives, confirming their unwillingness to fight:

It felt really good to know that your own people refused to fight against you despite your disagreement with them. Almost all of the local Daesh members and fighters told us from the beginning that they would not fight. Furthermore, some ISIS members, as well as those who had pledged to fight with the group, turned against them. One of those people was among the first to die in the fight against Daesh.⁴⁸

⁴³ Author interview via Skype with local activist Mosa'b, September 2016.

⁴⁴ Author interview with local resident under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁴⁵ Ez-Eldin, O. (2014), 'The official announcement of *tajammu' thuwwar al-Atarib*', YouTube, 8 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTvVe7edQuU> (accessed 10 Sept. 2016).

⁴⁶ Author interview with local resident under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁴⁷ Author interview with local police member under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁴⁸ Author interview with a family member of former ISIS supporter under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

The speed of ISIS's defeat in Atarib encouraged other groups to join the fight and expel the group from their areas.⁴⁹ Hostilities officially started on the evening of 2 January 2014, within hours of ISIS's threat to storm the city, as the group began shelling from a nearby town. Resistance members in Atarib immediately returned fire, and the ISIS centre in the city was surrounded. Those ISIS members who remained in the centre engaged with a local effort to negotiate their surrender, but kept talking for hours in the hope that reinforcements would arrive to rescue them.⁵⁰ ISIS forces stormed the city early the next day, but were quickly repelled by locals.⁵¹ A further meeting was convened in the city's largest mosque during Friday prayers, at which residents were briefed by the military commander of the resistance against ISIS. He appealed to the members of the local community to forget about any differences they may have and work together to defend the city.⁵² Later the same day, led by the military commander, armed civilians joined local armed groups in storming ISIS's centre and capturing ISIS members there – mostly foreign nationals – who had opted to fight rather than surrender. Following the defeat of ISIS in Atarib, other opposition groups based in rural Aleppo and Idlib – which had hitherto shown reluctance to take a clear position against ISIS – began to send representatives to the city to show support for the resistance and to declare their willingness to fight ISIS in their own areas. The battlefield thus widened to include all the areas under opposition control in Aleppo, Idlib and elsewhere.

⁴⁹ Although many groups like Jaish al-Islam, Jaish Al-Mujahdeen and Ahrar al-Sham participated in the fight against ISIS elsewhere in Syria, this paper only focuses on the groups who were present in Atarib at the time of the fight.

⁵⁰ Author interview with local resident under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁵¹ Author interview via Skype with local fighter Omar, September 2016.

⁵² Ez-Eldin, O. (2014), 'A speech by tajammu' thuwwar al-Atarib', YouTube, 10 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIFPIJzE5Rw> (accessed 10 Sept. 2016).

6. The Partial Reconciliation Process: The Fate of ISIS Members in Atarib

What is notable about the local resistance to ISIS in Atarib in early 2014 is that it was followed by a local reconciliation process that, notwithstanding clear shortcomings, allowed some former ISIS members to leave the group and reintegrate with the community.⁵³ Prior to the confrontation that saw ISIS defeated in the city, Atarib's residents offered protection to ISIS members if they abstained from fighting. The advice was clearly relayed, via public communication channels, walkie-talkie and the mosques, that those who opted not to fight on behalf of ISIS would be safe; and most local ISIS members subsequently conveyed, via their families, that they were unwilling to fight. Such individuals received protection guarantees from the city's local military leaders and notables on condition that they did not leave their homes during the fight, and indeed all those who chose not to fight remained at home. Those who decided otherwise went to their designated assembly point at the group's centre.⁵⁴ According to one testimony:

We decided to give people a way out in case they want one. We all make mistakes, and people should always have a second chance. Moreover, killing locals, even if they are members of ISIS, will badly impact the relationship between the residents of the city. Luckily, almost all of the locals decided not to fight, which weakened Daesh and preserved the unity of our community.⁵⁵

After the defeat of ISIS in Atarib, its local members were issued with clear instructions to surrender their weapons to the nearest armed group and to declare their dissociation from ISIS. They were no collective punishments or prosecutions, although all former ISIS members were temporarily banned from carrying weapons in public. Prosecutions were, however, pursued in the case of some individuals against whom charges were already pending, or against whom there was sufficient evidence to warrant criminal prosecution. One witness noted:

Many of those who joined ISIS in Atarib and in other places only did it for financial reasons, influence or protection. Some, if not the majority of, former members are likely to join whichever extremist group replaces ISIS if they are treated as enemies. We tried to win them over instead of keep pushing them away so that they rejoined ISIS elsewhere.⁵⁶

An evident flaw in how the post-ISIS phase was handled was that there was no defined follow-up mechanism in the process of integration of former ISIS members. Moreover, there were no clear protection measures put in place for ISIS members who abstained from fighting. A number of the city's religious scholars issued *fatwa* authorizing residents to confiscate the weapons of ISIS members who had been involved in fighting, and some people used such decrees as a pretext to attack the homes of foreign ISIS members and seize their weapons and valuables.⁵⁷ Although in certain cases the opportunity for 'bounty hunting' in itself motivated some locals to participate in the fight against ISIS, casualties arising from this period of chaos and confusion included locals who

⁵³ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Abdualla, July 2016.

⁵⁴ Author interview with a family member of former ISIS supporter under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁵⁵ Author interview via Skype with local fighter Omar, September 2016.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Author interview via Skype with local activist Waleed, September 2016.

were mistaken for ISIS militants because they were masked. In some cases, looters who could be identified were later detained for illegally breaking into houses without being officially ordered to do so, but the majority remained unidentified or otherwise went unprosecuted.⁵⁸

Moreover, there were no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that former ISIS members did not join other radical groups. Most local armed groups refused to allow ex-ISIS fighters to join their ranks, but one consequence was that many instead joined al-Nusra – which also took control of most ISIS military bases and weapons in many of the areas from which ISIS had withdrawn. That they were able to do so apparently reflected local rebel groups' fear of any confrontation with al-Nusra.⁵⁹ Equally, there were no clear mechanisms to protect former ISIS members, a number of whom suffered discriminatory behaviour and social stigma. Some ex-fighters were reported to have subsequently rejoined ISIS elsewhere, although it is not clear whether they were motivated to do so as active supporters of the group or because the local reprisals caused them to turn back to ISIS.⁶⁰

As regards captured ISIS fighters, there was no clear plan to determine how these would be handled after the group was defeated in Atarib. Initially, the local group Liwaa Amjad al-Islam was put in charge of all ISIS prisoners, but the Liwaa subsequently handed responsibility for ISIS detainees to the more established Ahrar al-Sham movement, which already controlled a large prison at the Bab al-Hawa crossing and was thus understood to have both the will and the necessary resources to hold the captives. According to local accounts, however, the detainees were then handed over to al-Nusra and later released; some then joined al-Nusra, while others rejoined ISIS in Raqqa.⁶¹ In the absence of any formal follow-up, however, it remains unclear precisely what happened to the ISIS prisoners, or who was responsible for setting them free.

Despite these undoubted failings in following through the local reintegration process in Atarib, the city's experience none the less stands as a clear example of an effort to acknowledge and address the issue of reintegrating ISIS members fully within a local community. Elsewhere in Syria, by contrast, current anti-ISIS coalitions – both local and international – have been driving local communities out of conflict areas, and only a small number of those displaced have been able to return after fighting has ended, either for security reasons or because they are otherwise prevented from doing so. Evidence has been reported, for instance, of systematic abuses including the deliberate displacement of thousands of civilians and the razing of entire villages in areas under the control of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria, often in retaliation for residents' perceived sympathies with, or ties to, members of ISIS or other armed groups.⁶² There have also been increasing instances reported of communities in various areas preventing people who have fled ISIS-controlled areas from resettling locally, ostensibly because of fears that the displaced groups may in reality introduce ISIS 'sleeper cells' to these areas.⁶³

⁵⁸ Author interview with local police member under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁵⁹ Author interview via Skype with local fighter Omar, September 2016.

⁶⁰ Author interview via WhatsApp with the father of a man who moved to Raqqa to join ISIS under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁶¹ Author interview with local police member under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁶² Amnesty International (2015), 'Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes', Amnesty International, press release, 13 October 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/> (accessed 12 Jul. 2016).

⁶³ Haid, H. (2016), 'Internally displaced Syrians facing new challenges', Now Lebanon, 14 June 2016,

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567095-internally-displaced-syrians-facing-new-challenges> (accessed 11 Sept. 2016).

7. Community Resistance to al-Nusra in Atarib

Following the defeat of ISIS in Atarib at the beginning of 2014, al-Nusra began to rebuild its strength in the city, and in turn moved to take full control the city. As with the case of ISIS, this attempt at full control was also met with strong local resistance. In the final months of 2014 al-Nusra shifted from a hitherto largely ‘soft-power’ strategy, with its fighters taking on local rebel groups in an effort to eliminate potential threats in the areas that it saw as being part of its future emirate. The group increasingly intervened in the daily lives of Atarib’s residents, notably attempting to impose strict dress codes and to ban behaviours such as smoking. On several occasions the group demanded to be given control of the police headquarters and local court, but the people of Atarib once again insisted that local officials should remain in charge of the city’s institutions.⁶⁴

In late February 2015 al-Nusra declared war on Haraket Hazem (an FSA group mainly composed of fighters from northern Syria who had been vetted and armed by the US) and surrounded Hazem’s bases, including the strategically important Regiment 46 base east of Atarib. Perceiving the offensive as an attempt to take control of the city, the local population again rose up in opposition. Two key factors motivated this response. First, Hazem was a largely local armed group – including the former *tajammu’ thuwwar al-Atarib al-Islami*, which had spearheaded the fight against ISIS in Atarib. Second, Atarib’s residents and armed groups attached particular significance to the Regiment 46 base, which, not least because of the earlier history of the conflict against Assad’s forces, was considered critical to the city’s protection. Also fresh in residents’ minds was the struggle for control of Atarib in early 2014, when the city and the base had been besieged in the ISIS offensive.⁶⁵

The success of Atarib’s uprising against ISIS encouraged the local community to mount a new resistance against al-Nusra. This time, however, local armed groups were less willing to enter into conflict against a group that was regarded as being of significant military value against the Assad regime, and of which many members were themselves locals. Atarib’s armed groups instead mainly chose to act as mediators, or observed from the sidelines.

The city’s community leaders, notables and small group of local military leaders met to discuss the situation. According to one interviewee:

We, civilians, did not [previously] think that we have that much power in deciding our own fate. The fight against ISIS was a big moral boost. It showed us our power. It also made us believe in and trust in one another, which encouraged us to take the lead in resisting al-Nusra. We also figured that if a group is fighting on our side that does not automatically make it a friend.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Author interview via Skype with local activist Ahmed, October 2016.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Mahmoud, September 2016.

A public meeting was also convened by the city's notables in the same square in which the fight against ISIS had been declared in 2014. It was unanimously agreed that armed action would be taken against al-Nusra to prevent it capturing the city and the Regiment 46 base. The public declaration stated:

We are not against al-Nusra, but we will all be if it dares to storm the city and the Regiment 46 base; those are red lines that we will not allow anyone to cross. The Regiment belongs to the city because we are the ones who freed it from Assad. We will all die before they can enter either the city or the Regiment.⁶⁷

Atarib's notables also made a public appeal for citizens to arm themselves and to set up checkpoints to prevent al-Nusra entering the city,⁶⁸ and subsequently released a video statement denouncing the attack on Haraket Hazem and urging al-Nusra to focus on the fight against the Assad regime. They also reiterated that the Regiment 46 base was part of the city of Atarib, and called on all locals to take up arms in defence of the city.⁶⁹

For members of Atarib's local community, the success of the city's resistance against ISIS was a critical factor influencing al-Nusra's subsequent actions in avoiding a full-scale military confrontation with locals in Atarib:

They [al-Nusra] witnessed first-hand what happened here during the fight against ISIS. They were scared of facing the same fate. They learned from ISIS's mistakes. It was clear to them that they couldn't win a fight against the local community even if they were to win militarily.⁷⁰

Undeterred, however, al-Nusra did undertake a decisive – and carefully timed – offensive to take control of the Regiment 46 base:

[T]he Regiment base was seized while people were sleeping after the public meeting in the city. When we woke up the next morning the fight was over. All Hazem fighters withdrew from the base to Atarib, taking with them the bodies of those who were killed in the fight. It would have been completely different if the fighting had happened during the day, especially if the bodies of locals had arrived in the city while the actual fighting was still going on. We would have definitely gone there to fight and protect the base.⁷¹

Having secured control of the base, al-Nusra immediately stood down the forces involved in the siege, ordering them back to their designated areas in an effort to ease tensions with locals:

Al-Nusra did not actually besiege Atarib. Rumours were circulating about al-Nusra's intentions to besiege the city, but that did not happen. On the contrary, they demobilized their forces to indicate that they were not interested in further escalation [of the confrontation].⁷²

⁶⁷ Atareb Syriafree (2015), 'Public Statement by Atarib's Civilians, Notables and Military leaders About The Regiment 46 Base', YouTube, 27 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ldcsxjf6KM> (accessed 10 Sept. 2016).

⁶⁸ Atareb Syriafree (2015), 'Public meeting in Atarib With Regards to Jahbat al-Nusra and The Regiment 46 Base', YouTube, 26 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7MYhzoCiuo> (accessed 10 Sept. 2016).

⁶⁹ Atareb Syriafree (2015), 'Public Statement by Atarib's Civilians, Notables and Military leaders About The Regiment 46 Base'.

⁷⁰ Author interview via Skype with local activist Mosa'b, September 2016.

⁷¹ Author interview with local resident under condition of anonymity, September 2016.

⁷² Author interview via Skype with local activist Ahmed, October 2016.

An official statement was also released by al-Nusra, expressing gratitude to the people of Atarib for their support and denying reports of any intention to enter into conflict with the local community:

We would have never been able to fight and defeat Assad without your support. We are from you and you are from us. Do not listen to the lies and accusations that aim to drive a wedge between us. We have no interest in seizing your town. Our goal has never been to control territories or to rule people. We hope that you will continue the jihad with us until the dictator [Assad] is toppled.⁷³

Thus, despite some similarities between the two cases, the dynamics of resisting ISIS and al-Nusra in Atarib were in reality different. Whereas in early 2014 the decision to fight ISIS was unanimous, there was significant division a year later over how – or whether – to confront al-Nusra. ISIS was perceived as an external group, not least as the majority of its members were foreign nationals. By contrast, a large number of al-Nusra fighters were from Atarib district, and many residents regarded the group as local. ISIS was in conflict with FSA groups and activists, while al-Nusra was seen as having a positive record in fighting the Assad regime. Strategically, because al-Nusra shared many front lines with other rebel groups in various areas, there was a high risk that conflict with the group in Atarib would spread elsewhere, to the benefit of regime forces. ISIS had a pattern of escalation, to the extent of declaring war on almost all it encountered, but al-Nusra was seen to be acting to de-escalate tensions with locals. It was also easier for local leaders and notables to communicate directly with al-Nusra leaders and negotiate with them, whereas it was difficult to make contact with ISIS representatives, let alone reach any agreement. When rumours began to circulate about al-Nusra's intention to besiege Atarib, the city's notables conveyed a verbal message to the group's district leader, warning that al-Nusra would suffer a similar fate to ISIS in 2014 should it attempt to besiege or storm the city. The district leader responded with a reassurance that he would never allow al-Nusra to take such action, and subsequently invited Atarib's local leaders and notables to a mass feast apparently to underline this message.⁷⁴

⁷³ Jabaht al-Nusra (2015), 'Press Release About Latest Developments With So-called Harakat Hazem', Ana al-Muslim, 1 March 2015, <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?543154-الثالث-البيان-الآخر-التطورات-خصوص-البيان> (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁷⁴ Author interview via WhatsApp with local activist Mahmoud, September 2016.

8. Conclusion: Lessons for the Wider US-led Fight Against ISIS in Syria

The experience of Atarib in 2014–15 is presented as a case study of the substantive role that Syrian local communities can play in resisting extremist groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra, and what motivates them to undertake such resistance. It also examines the successes and failures of the local reconciliation and reintegration processes following the uprising against ISIS in early 2014.

The strong relations that already existed between the local authorities and rebel groups in Atarib allowed them to work together effectively to defend the city and prevent ISIS from taking control. Civilians also played a crucial role in motivating some local armed groups to resist ISIS, as well as in persuading the majority of the group's local militants not to fight their fellow citizens. The combined local resistance was thus able to achieve marked success in pushing ISIS out of most of western Syria, quickly and without much external support.

A year later, the record of resistance against ISIS encouraged the local community to mount a new resistance against al-Nusra, even though local armed groups were less willing to enter into direct conflict against a potential strategic ally in the fight against the Assad regime. The strength of community resistance in Atarib was, once again, essential in repelling al-Nusra's incremental efforts to assert dominance, or even military control, of the city.

What is particularly notable about Atarib's resistance to ISIS is that the local mobilization against the group was followed by a reconciliation process whereby some former ISIS members were able to reintegrate with the community. Prior to the confrontation that saw ISIS defeated in the city, Atarib's residents offered protection to ISIS members if they abstained from fighting. As a result, ISIS local members were not collectively punished, the intention being that they should be allowed to continue to live peacefully in their area. Although the failings of the process are also examined in this paper, it remains the case that Atarib's experience is by far the most nuanced in terms of addressing the post-conflict issue of how members of ISIS and other extremist groups may eventually be rehabilitated and reintegrated.

Notwithstanding, it is evident that in the post-ISIS phase there was no comprehensive follow-through on the processes of reintegration and rehabilitation of former ISIS members, or in instituting clear protection measures for ISIS members who had chosen not to fight. As a consequence, some of those previously associated with ISIS were subject to discriminatory behaviour and social stigma in Atarib in the period that followed the uprising. Some ex-fighters were reported to have subsequently rejoined ISIS elsewhere, although it is not clear whether they were motivated to do so as active supporters of the group or because the local reprisals caused them to turn back to ISIS.

There were, moreover, no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that former ISIS members did not join other radical groups. While most local armed groups refused to allow ex-ISIS fighters to join their ranks, many instead joined al-Nusra – which also took control of most ISIS military bases and weapons in many of the areas from which ISIS had withdrawn. Additionally, there was no clear plan

to determine how to handle captured ISIS fighters after the group's defeat; while local accounts suggest that detainees were eventually handed over to al-Nusra and later freed, it remains unclear precisely what happened to them, or how many went on to rejoin ISIS in other areas or transfer their allegiance to al-Nusra.

Three years after rising up against ISIS, the city of Atarib remains under local control, supported by strong civil society and rebel groups in opposition to the Assad regime. This local community strength has contributed to this city's ability to protect itself in the face of the recent significant expansion of al-Nusra's influence following the group's merger with other rebel groups in the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or Levant Liberation Committee alliance. Both before and after the merger, al-Nusra launched a large number of offensives to capture key strategic areas and resources, but Atarib has evaded HTS control.⁷⁵ The city's residents believe that their ability to work together, bolstered by the continued strong presence of rebel groups in the city, as well as Atarib's record of resistance to al-Nusra's previous attempt to take control of the city in early 2015, are chief factors that continue to hold al-Nusra at bay.⁷⁶

Local support for, or tolerance of, armed groups depends largely on the way the local community perceives any such groups – notably whether they are regarded as better, similar or worse alternatives to other groups in the area. In ISIS-held areas, therefore, its losses against groups that are not perceived as more acceptable by local communities allow it to capitalize on its own defeats and use local fear of rival groups as a recruiting tool.

In the context of the wider conflict against ISIS in Syria, the risk of driving support for the group by default has resonance for progress of the US-led coalition's current alliance with the SDF. The Kurdish-led, multi-ethnic SDF is perceived as a hostile force not just by many Arabs, but also by Kurds who oppose the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) affiliated with it. ISIS's territorial losses at the hands of the SDF have effectively become de facto Kurdish gains, and local communities have in many cases come to regard the alliance's offensives against ISIS as a pretext for the SDF to take advantage of US support to expand Kurdish control into Arab-majority areas.⁷⁷

Thus, increased tension between Arabs and Kurds has fuelled a cycle of mistrust and fear of the SDF alliance, and the US-led coalition and its allies have come to be regarded by many communities as another 'bad actor' in the conflict. These negative perceptions have hampered the anti-ISIS campaign, driving some locals closer to ISIS and rendering others indifferent. As one interviewee in an ISIS-controlled area put it:

We hate Daesh and their actions, but we know what to expect from them. The fear of what might happen if Assad or the Kurds take over our areas is our main concern now. I wouldn't really be surprised to see more people fighting with Daesh against them.⁷⁸

75 Haid, H. (2017), 'The Core Reason for the JFS Fight Against Syrian Rebels is Competition Over Resources', Atlantic Council blog, 7 March 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-core-reason-for-the-jfs-fight-against-syrian-rebels-is-competition-over-resources> (accessed 19 May 2017).

76 Author interview via Skype with local activist Ahmed, March 2017.

77 Haid, H. (2017), 'The Ramifications of the SDF Governance Plan for Raqqa Post-ISIS', Atlantic Council blog, 11 May 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-ramifications-of-the-sdf-governance-plan-for-raqqa-post-isis> (accessed 19 May 2017).

78 Author interview via WhatsApp with local teacher in the ISIS-controlled town of Manbij, May 2016.

In the absence of one national popular army in Syria, it is critical that the West's policymakers and military strategists should avoid the mistake of engaging local armed groups as regional or national forces in opposition to ISIS without the full commitment of existing local actors in affected areas.⁷⁹ As part of this, local residents' needs and concerns must as a priority be taken into account – with an understanding that these may vary from community to community – in order to gain trust and win support for the campaign to defeat ISIS at local level. Equally critically, the root causes of the tensions and grievances between Syria's Arab and Kurdish communities must be tackled, with the goal of building a genuine alliance based on shared values and equal rights. Linked to this, there is an urgent need to facilitate a dialogue between the FSA and the SDF in order to coordinate their efforts and avoid seeding future conflicts that will once again end up benefiting radical groups.

Where gains have been made against ISIS, the lack of a clear strategy to rehabilitate and reintegrate former ISIS members and supporters in their communities is in effect empowering other radical groups – as was seen to a degree in the case of Atarib – by driving former ISIS supporters towards ideologically similar groups, or strengthening ISIS numbers elsewhere. Fighting ISIS should therefore be coupled with locally sensitive reconciliation and follow-up processes to provide the group's members who refrain from fighting with a chance to leave the group without fear of reprisal – a deal that is usually offered to those who defect from the Syrian regime. Public communication channels – including traditional broadcast and print media, social media and local mosques – should be used to convey clear information to ISIS members about where to go and what to do should they choose to leave the group. Clear protection guarantees should also be made, with the backing of local leaders and notables, with enforceable penalties for violating them. The process should not, however, preclude the criminal prosecution of former ISIS fighters via local courts where there is sufficient evidence to do so. Additionally, there should be a mechanism for dealing with ISIS prisoners who are captured in combat, as well as enforcement mechanisms to prevent former ISIS members from joining other radical groups such as al-Nusra.

This paper has given an account of how the fight against ISIS in Atarib in early 2014 was led by locals who chose to stand up to the group, yet al-Nusra was subsequently empowered around the city. A sole focus on defeating ISIS militarily, without a broader strategy to address the conditions that first allowed ISIS to flourish, will likely further enable al-Nusra, which has been exploiting the power vacuum in areas where ISIS has collapsed. A strategy to defeat ISIS – and other ideologically similar extremist groups – can only be successful if it is undertaken comprehensively and in cooperation with local communities to identify and address the deep-rooted political, economic, social and cultural problems that have allowed such groups to rise and flourish. Strong local communities that are able to create their own alternatives and solutions will have the incentive to fight for them, especially when they trust that what comes next will not be worse. The current US-led coalition against ISIS must therefore forge a clear, comprehensive and participatory strategy that both addresses the issues that have seen ISIS and similar groups rise, and sets the protection of civilians as a top priority. In the absence of such a strategy, it is unlikely that the coalition can present an existential threat to ISIS, or defeat it without the risk of its re-emerging in a new form.

⁷⁹ Haid, H. (2017), 'The Ramifications of the SDF Governance Plan for Raqqa Post-ISIS'.

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Cover image: People demonstrate outside the offices of ISIS (ISIL) in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo on 6 January 2014.

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