

Research Paper

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Middle East and North Africa Programme | September 2017

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# Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy



**CHATHAM  
HOUSE**  
The Royal Institute of  
International Affairs

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## Summary

- The governance structure in Jarablus – following Turkey’s military intervention that drove Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from the district in 2016 – has replicated that used in other rebel-held areas in Syria, with a local council running the district. Turkey and its allies overlooked the existing local governance structure and backed a new appointed district council, which, among citizens, lacked legitimacy and created tension. The council’s inability to deliver traditional public services quickly also increased resentment towards it, resulting in widespread demonstrations that eventually toppled it in February 2017.
- The pressing need for emergency reconstruction in Jarablus has hindered Turkey’s commitment to substantial future investments there. Running the district has depended largely on short-term solutions rather than long-term planning. As a result, public services are either non-existent or of poor quality, particularly in the countryside.
- Humanitarian work in Jarablus is limited to the efforts of Turkey and organizations it approves. Syrian and international humanitarian actors cannot operate there, but they can still channel their support through approved organizations. This monopoly has increased locals’ dependence on Turkey and prevented them from raising funds to implement much-needed projects.
- Turkey’s official role and influence in governing Jarablus remains unclear, but there is a general assumption among locals that it runs the district. Thus, the failure to turn it into a successful model has created frustration towards Turkey among locals. Occasional demonstrations have been organized to protest Turkey’s perceived increased influence and its negative impact on the area.
- The absence of a comprehensive Turkish-led post-ISIS strategy has destabilized Jarablus. The lack of counter-radicalization strategies to engage with locals influenced by ISIS’s ideology, especially children, leaves them vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups. The inability of the local council to deliver services also allows such groups to use service provision to gain support and rebuild their power base. Additionally, ignoring local sensitivities contributes to ethnic tension between Arabs and Turkmen, and may lead to confrontations, which could eventually enable radicals.
- Turkey’s capacity to ensure the sustainability of its successes against ISIS depends largely on improving governance in Jarablus. To achieve this it could support the legitimacy of the most recent district council, which was formed by locals in March 2017, by enhancing its ability to govern. Short-term reconstruction initiatives should be replaced with long-term strategies such as a counter-radicalization programme to challenge ISIS’s ideology and reduce its influence. In addition, increased transparency regarding Turkey’s involvement in the running of Jarablus and its objectives, as well as the empowering of locals to govern themselves would improve the odds of Turkey achieving its goal.

# 1. Introduction

Turkey has been an essential patron of the Syrian opposition and its main link to the outside world. This support has allowed opposition groups to continue battling the regime of President Bashar al-Assad since 2011. But, in the last two years, Turkey's main priority has changed from seeking regime change in Syria to countering terrorism, due to the increasing number of attacks launched by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) inside its borders. To date, Turkey has mainly viewed the Syrian crisis through the prism of its own domestic issues with its Kurdish population, seeing in the conflict a potential opportunity to subdue the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). At present, Turkey is increasingly concerned because it has become clear that the Kurdish Democratic People's Party (PYD) and the affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – a US-backed and Kurdish-led multi-ethnic alliance – intend not only to fight ISIS but to continue to connect the Kurdish-controlled territories, east and north of the Euphrates river, in order to create an autonomous region in northern Syria.<sup>1</sup> Turkey is concerned that the military advances of the PYD-allied forces, which it sees as part of the PKK, will empower Kurdish militants who have been waging a three-decade insurgency in southeast Turkey. As a result, in August 2016, Turkish forces, backed by Syrian rebel groups, launched Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria to secure the border by fighting ISIS and restraining the growing influence of Syrian Kurdish troops.<sup>2</sup>

Within hours, the Turkish-led coalition captured the strategic border city of Jarablus and the surrounding district (of the same name) from ISIS, which withdrew southwest towards the city of al-Bab. This swift victory encouraged the Turkish-led forces to capture the remaining ISIS-held border territory and move towards al-Bab. Turkey also moved to build on its military achievements and portray Jarablus as a successful example of its project in Syria, the aim of which is to create an area of influence inside Syria that is controlled by its Syrian allies in order to prevent Kurdish forces from creating a contiguous autonomous region. Turkish authorities quickly announced plans to help rebuild the district and provide its residents with necessary public services. To achieve this Jarablus came under the direct supervision of the Turkish city of Gaziantep, the nearest major municipality.

However, after one year, the post-ISIS situation in the other areas controlled by Turkish-allied forces following Operation Euphrates Shield remains largely unclear. There is little publicly available information about the model used in governing those areas or its effectiveness. Such questions have become more urgent with the capture of additional areas from ISIS, including al-Bab in February 2017. Examining the case of one such area, Jarablus, provides a glimpse into how Turkey implements what it has been advocating for years – a safe zone in Syria. This issue has become relevant again, as the administration of US President Donald Trump has revived the discussion about implementing such zones. Additionally, Jarablus has recently become a

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<sup>1</sup> Haid, H. (2016), 'Did Turkey abandon Aleppo to fight Syrian Kurds?', Now Lebanon, 10 October 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xR2NP\\_yiU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xR2NP_yiU) (accessed 2 Jul. 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The local groups that participated in the operation are Turkish-backed Syrian rebel groups, some of which use the Free Syrian Army label. The most powerful groups among them are the Sultan Murad Division, the Levant Front, the victory bloc (kutlat al-nasr) and the Sham Legion. Jabhat al-Nusra (the most recent name used by the group is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) does not have any official presence in the area since ISIS seized it in late 2013. For more on this topic see Yalla Souriya (2016), 'Hawar Kilis Operation Room', 20 September 2016, <https://yallasouriya.wordpress.com/2016/09/20/syriaeuphrates-shielhawar-kilis-operation-room/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

destination for Syrians forcibly displaced from other areas following local surrender deals with the regime.<sup>3</sup> A few thousand have already moved to the district with many others expected to follow.

This paper provides first-hand information from Jarablus that contributes to a better understanding of how successful Turkey and its allies have been in governing the district. It analyses the governance model used, the legitimacy of the Turkey-affiliated local district council and the quality of the services provided. The paper also examines how locals view Turkey's influence and involvement in governing Jarablus, and the impact of its post-ISIS strategy to stabilize the area.

This paper draws on primary data collected from 15 semi-structured interviews with activists, business leaders, local officials, rebels and local residents. These were conducted online by the author over Skype or WhatsApp, between November 2016 and April 2017. The interviewees were selected based on recommendations from Syrian activists and local residents. The identities of interviewees based in Syria and Turkey remain anonymous due to safety concerns. It is not clear how representative the views expressed here are, but the high level of agreement among interviewees on the subjects discussed suggests that the issues highlighted merit additional attention from the Turkish authorities, the Syrian opposition bodies and international donors.

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<sup>3</sup> The local surrender deals, also known as 'local reconciliation deals', are brokered between the regime and communities in rebel-held areas that decide to surrender to stop the regime sieges and indiscriminate attacks, and avoid starvation. Those who refuse to stay under the regime's control are forced to move to a designated area. For more, see al-Shami, L. (2017), 'How the Syrian Civil War is Creating a Nation of Exiles', In *These Times*, 23 January 2017, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/19828/syria-civil-war-assad-exile-displacement-siege-aleppo> (accessed 27 Jan. 2017).

## 2. A Glimpse into Jarablus

Jarablus district, located some 125 kilometres north east of Aleppo, had an estimated population of around 90,000 in 2011.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the district's administrative centre, the city of Jarablus, had an estimated population of around 30,000. As a crossing on the Syrian–Turkish border, the city of Jarablus is considered an important trading and agricultural centre in the Aleppo governorate. Its population is composed mainly of Sunni Arabs (70–80 per cent), Turkmen<sup>5</sup> (15–20 per cent) and Kurds (around 5 per cent).<sup>6</sup> As in many other rural areas in Syria, community life in Jarablus is structured around clans and large, extended family networks. Authority traditionally lies in the hands of clan leaders who arbitrate problems and broker agreements and alliances, within and between clans and families. Influential figures – wealthy or educated individuals, religious scholars or family elders – also support clan leaders.

A small number of anti-regime demonstrations took place in Jarablus as early as June 2011 at the outset of the Arab Spring, but it remained largely calm until mid-2012.<sup>7</sup> The district did not produce local armed factions, and it was Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups from other areas in rural Aleppo, led by Liwaa al-Tawhid (the Tawhid Brigade), that pushed regime forces out in July 2012.<sup>8</sup> The fight to capture the city was quick with limited confrontations with the regime, which only had a small number of troops in the area. The centre of influence in Jarablus, as a result, shifted from clan leaders who supported the regime to the FSA groups and the clans and families affiliated with them. The FSA groups appointed a revolutionary council, also known as a local administration council, to run the city and provide public services – a practice common in areas captured by opposition factions. The absence of a home-grown anti-Assad civil movement there hindered the creation of strong local civil society organizations to participate in governance. Nonetheless, locals formed a new council in February 2013 to replace the one appointed by the FSA. Most of the public services in the area were provided by the council, as well as by Syrian organizations operating from Turkey.

Jarablus became an important supply line from Turkey to rebel groups in opposition-held areas, which encouraged rebels to establish bases there. The al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra also established a base in the area. The presence of several armed groups in Jarablus led to chaos as families and clans established their own militia groups, mostly for self-protection but in some cases also for other purposes such as smuggling, looting and kidnapping. Following confrontations and a power struggle with the armed groups affiliated with local clans, al-Nusra expanded its influence.<sup>9</sup> After the establishment of ISIS in April 2013, al-Nusra members joined the new organization and started pushing other armed groups out of the district. Thus ISIS was able to gain total control over Jarablus in September 2013, which remained largely unchallenged until Turkey's intervention in August 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> Author interview with a member of the council-in-exile, January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Syrian citizens of Turkic origin who mostly adhere to a Turkish heritage and identity. For more, see *New York Times* (2015), 'Who Are the Turkmen of Syria?', 24 November 2015, <https://nyti.ms/2ojwN6s> (accessed 6 Mar. 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ugarit Archive (2011), 'A Demonstration in Jarablus', YouTube, 25 June 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixrr2NP\\_yiU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixrr2NP_yiU) (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, a Syrian researcher from Jarablus based in the UK, March 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Alhadath News (2013), 'Jabhat al-Nusra Attacks Jarablus and Defeat FSA Fighters', 13 July 2013, <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/85453> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

### 3. Bringing Life Back

Building on its military achievement, Turkey aimed to portray Jarablus as a successful example of its project in Syria. It quickly announced plans to help rebuild the district and provide its residents with necessary public services.<sup>10</sup> These goals appeared achievable given that the district is relatively small and located directly on the border. In addition, the limited amount of fighting there resulted in minimal destruction (and thus manageable reconstruction costs). Turkey's strategy for turning Jarablus into a model can be divided into two main phases: the initial emergency response, and the restoration of services and stability.

Turkey's initial emergency actions focused on securing the district and saving lives. The Turkish-led intervention had forced many civilians to move away from the city and closer to the border. Some moved to relatives' houses while the majority stayed in makeshift camps. Following its capture of the city, Turkey's priority was to provide locals with urgent assistance such as food and drinking water. For example, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), one of several Turkish organizations involved, sent a portable kitchen capable of providing 8,000 meals a day. It also sent aid convoys full of food baskets.<sup>11</sup> Syrian civil society groups also helped in providing humanitarian aid. As a member of the stabilization committee in the opposition's Provincial Council of Free Aleppo noted:

The bakery in Jarablus was not functioning so we had to transport bread from the neighbouring city of Azaz. We also sent food baskets and non-food items such as tents and clothes.<sup>12</sup>

Turkey also worked on securing the city from further dangers from ISIS, which still posed a threat after its withdrawal. According to a rebel fighter:

One of the biggest challenges of capturing the city was not the actual fighting. It was the hundreds of mines and booby-traps the group left behind. Our main priority was to secure the city so civilians could go back to their homes.<sup>13</sup>

De-mining was a slow and delicate task, adding to the ordeal of civilians and armed groups.<sup>14</sup> It also increased locals' dependence on humanitarian organizations.

The second phase began with Turkey's efforts to restore services and bring life back to the city. The Turkish municipality of Gaziantep sent 100 aid workers and 16 vehicles to clear rubble from the city's streets.<sup>15</sup> Turkey started implementing its plan to supply free electricity via a three-kilometre underground power cable connecting the Turkish border town of Karakamis in Gaziantep province

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<sup>10</sup> Sharma, S. (2016), 'Turkey Sends Power Lines into Syrian Town Cleared of IS', Middle East Eye, 8 September 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-sends-power-lines-syrian-town-cleared-21416447> (accessed 21 Jan. 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Suleiman, K. (2016), 'Turkish Humanitarian Organization Sends Aid to Jarablus', Anadolu Agency, 3 September 2016, <http://v.aa.com.tr/640371> (accessed 22 Jan. 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with a member of the stabilization committee in the Provincial Council of Free Aleppo, February 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with a Syrian fighter who took part in Operation Euphrates Shield, January 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Mesto, M. (2016), 'FSA De-mining Jarablus after Defeating ISIS', Anadolu Agency, 28 August 2016, <http://v.aa.com.tr/636856> (accessed 23 Jan. 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Fidan, H. (2016), 'Turkey Completes Building a Camp for Displaced People in Jarablus', Anadolu Agency, 13 October 2016, <http://v.aa.com.tr/664176> (accessed 23 Jan. 2017).

to Jarablus.<sup>16</sup> Gaziantep municipality was also involved in providing drinking water, rebuilding the bakery, establishing a hospital, renovating schools and creating playgrounds for children.<sup>17</sup> Turkey's Ministry of Health created a makeshift clinic to provide basic medical services for civilians and fighters involved in the offensive. The clinic housed a team of Turkish doctors, nurses and an ambulance.<sup>18</sup> Turkey also relied on its rebel allies to secure the city and ensure the safety of its residents. Meanwhile up to 450 Syrians were trained in Turkey and equipped to become the official police force in the area.<sup>19</sup>

After securing the city, the Turkish authorities facilitated the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey.<sup>20</sup> The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD) built camps in Jarablus for internally displaced Syrians as well as for those returning from outside the country.<sup>21</sup> Freeing the district from ISIS as well as the efforts and plans to reconstruct it encouraged many displaced locals to return to their homes. One who moved back from Turkey noted:

I was excited to go back and help rebuild my town after it was liberated from Daesh [ISIS]. Turkey's promises to provide services in Jarablus made my decision easier.<sup>22</sup>

According to Turkish authorities, as of November 2016, around 10,000 people had returned from Turkey to areas it controlled in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sharma (2016), 'Turkey Sends Power Lines into Syrian Town Cleared of IS'.

<sup>17</sup> Eldorar Alshamia (2016), 'Gaziantep Municipality Transforms a Jail into a School in Jarablus', 28 October 2016, <http://eldorar.com/node/104782> (accessed 21 Jan. 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Parlak, M. (2016), 'The Turkish Health Ministry Builds a Medical Tent in Jarablus', Anadolu Agency, 8 September 2016, <http://v.aa.com.tr/643091> (accessed 22 Feb. 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Abdul al-Fatah, O. (2017), 'Turkey Deploys the First Trained Group of Police to Jarablus', Smart News, 24 January 2017, <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/217739/تحريك-اول-دفعة-قوات-من-الشرطة-في-جرابلس-لتنفيذ-العمليات> (accessed 31 July. 2017).

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Sabah* (2017), 'Turkey Will Prevent Unification of PYD Cantons at All Costs', 6 March 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/03/07/defence-minister-isik-turkey-will-prevent-unification-of-pyd-cantons-at-all-costs> (accessed 23 Mar. 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Fidan, H. (2016), 'Turkey Completes Building a Camp for Displaced People in Jarablus', Anadolu Agency, 13 October 2016, <http://v.aa.com.tr/664176> (accessed 23 Jan. 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Author interview with a resident who moved back from Turkey, November 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Kocalar, K. (2016), 'One Third of Jarablus Residents are Returnees from Turkey', Anadolu Agency, 6 November 2016, <http://v.aa.com.tr/679841> (accessed 23 Feb. 2017).



## 4. Struggle for Legitimacy

The governance structure in Jarablus remains fluid. It replicates similar models implemented in other rebel-held areas, which depend on establishing a local administrative council to run the district and provide public services. These councils represent an alternative to state-provided governance in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime. The main responsibilities include providing all basic services to their communities such as humanitarian aid, infrastructure renovation, healthcare, sanitation, education, judiciary and local security. The arrangements for local councils can vary from one area to another, but they are typically established by local communities. In some areas, local residents appoint council representatives by consensus, while in other areas, council members are chosen through direct local elections. The dependence of councils on external support from governmental and non-governmental donors and their affiliation with semi-centralized structures, such as the provincial councils and the Syrian Interim Government, have largely standardized the model across rebel-held areas. As a result, they have become the main vehicle for external financial support to communities. Nonetheless, the councils' effectiveness and roles differ within the community depending on various factors, such as capacity, legitimacy, size, and the security situation.

Theoretically, the district council represents the highest authority in Jarablus as its mandate includes executive and legislative powers. It also oversees the police and the central court. But, in practice, the authority of different actors on the ground overlaps, which creates tension and complicates governing. Likewise, rebel groups affiliated with the Turkish-led coalition play a big role in shaping council decisions. These groups, whose role is meant to be limited to fighting ISIS, played a part in selecting members for the initial post-ISIS district council, but it remains unclear to what extent.<sup>24</sup> Following the defeat of ISIS in Jarablus, rebels were also temporarily in charge of local security due to the absence of available police. The eventual deployment of police trained and equipped by Turkey has still not allowed rebels to fully pullback or reduce their influence in the city.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, rebel groups established the central court and appointed its judges, a task that is theoretically within the council's mandate.<sup>26</sup> The failure to enforce clear boundaries between different authorities, a problem common in other rebel-held areas, has led to tensions and competition among local actors. The council's ineffective management of the city caused community support to plummet and further weakened the council in the local power struggle.

By backing this appointed local council, Turkey overlooked the existing governing structure, which damaged the new council's legitimacy and created further tension among locals. During ISIS's reign, Jarablus residents that had fled to Turkey formed a council-in-exile in Gaziantep. The role of the council-in-exile, which was recognized by the opposition Syrian Interim Government, was limited to official representation. However, once the Turkish-led operation began it is alleged that the council-in-exile resumed all activities and held meetings with different actors and donors,

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<sup>24</sup> Aleppo 24 (2017), 'Rebel Groups Appoint the Majority of Jarablus Council Members', 5 March 2017, <http://aleppo24.com/?p=5992> (accessed 20 Mar. 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Author interview with a resident, March 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Bakri, T. (2017), 'Creating a Local Court in Jarablus', Zaman Alwsl, 8 March 2017, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/77270.html#.WOYiwHmhreA.twitter> (accessed 16 Mar. 2017).

including Turkish officials, to discuss its post-ISIS strategy.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, a new Jarablus local council was appointed in September 2016, following a meeting in Karakamis between Turkish officials, rebel groups and a number of influential residents of Jarablus.<sup>28</sup> The council-in-exile reacted aggressively and released a statement denouncing the new council as illegitimate. It also accused Turkey and the Sultan Murad Brigade, a majority Turkmen rebel group that was part of the Turkish-led operation, of imposing a Turkmen council and creating unrest among locals.<sup>29</sup> Turkish-backed rebel groups denied these allegations, noting that the new council was established locally, and accused the council-in-exile of being self-appointed and affiliated with the PYD, which Turkey opposes and views as a separatist organization.<sup>30</sup>

The appointed council denied the allegations that Turkey interfered in selecting its members as well as any knowledge of the council-in-exile. According to one of its members:

A number of the city's influential figures contacted Turkish officials to coordinate running the city. The officials told us to consult with locals and create a council. We did that without being aware of the existence of an old council operating from Turkey.<sup>31</sup>

Some of the council's members say they tried to come to a compromise by proposing to include some members of the council-in-exile but the latter refused. In contrast, the council-in-exile stated that the new council refused to work with it.<sup>32</sup> The exact details of what happened remain largely unverifiable. The conflict ended in September 2016 when the president of the council-in-exile resigned and retracted the allegations against the appointed council, potentially under pressure.<sup>33</sup> The tension, however, continued along family and tribal lines between those who supported the council-in-exile and those who backed the new one.

While some locals continued to oppose the new council, others took a more ambiguous position. However, the council's failure to provide sufficient quality public services as promised in the media turned people against it.<sup>34</sup> Accusations affected the credibility of the new council. Some of its members were accused of being affiliated with family members who were linked to ISIS when it controlled the district. Others were accused of being regime supporters because they had not been active in the peaceful uprisings against Bashar al-Assad.<sup>35</sup> A local activist said:

I do not know to what extent the allegations about the members of the new council are true. Most of the members are technocrats and were trying to do what they could. But people's position towards the new council was impacted by rumours whether they are true or not.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mohammed, F. (2016), 'The Local Council of Jarablus Meets with Donor Organizations', Geroun, 31 August 2016, <http://www.geroun.net/archives/63534> (accessed 16 Nov. 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Author interview with a member of the exiled council, January 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Orient News (2016), 'The Local Council of Jarablus Accuses Sultan Murad Brigade of Imposing its Agenda', 6 September 2016, <http://o-t.tv/mhH> (accessed 3 Dec. 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Abdulfatah, O. (2016), 'The Local Council of Jarablus Accuses Turkey of Creating Unrest by Forming a New Council', Smart News, 6 September 2016, <https://smartnews-agency.com/8cwReg> (accessed 3 Dec. 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Author interview with a member of the council-in-exile, March 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Qatirib, S. (2016), 'The Head of the Local Council of Jarablus Resigns', Smart News, 13 September 2016, <https://smartnews-agency.com/b15qKQ> (accessed 3 Dec. 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Author interview with a resident, January 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, O. (2016), 'Sultan Murad Brigade Controls the Local Council', Almodon, 9 September 2016, <http://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2016/9/9/المجلس-بالمجلس-تستأثر-ميراد-السلطان-فرقة-مجر-ابلس> (accessed 12 Feb. 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Author interview with an activist, January 2017.

Turkey's perceived interference and its increased influence led to protests against the appointed council. Locals generally assumed that Turkey, rather than the council, had final say over the latter's decisions. The council, however, denied this at the time. According to one of its members:

Turkey has always respected our authority and supported it. All our communications with Turkey go through the deputy governor of Gaziantep and the head of its municipality. Turkish officials have never tried to intervene in our decisions.<sup>37</sup>

Though the extent of Turkey's influence is difficult to verify independently, there were clear occasions in which it intervened directly in the running of Jarablus. In November 2016, for example, the governor of Karakamis issued a decision to temporarily close the hospital in Jarablus.<sup>38</sup> The suspension was related to residents' complaints about the poor quality of the services provided. According to a local resident:

People found it strange for a Turkish governor to directly intervene in such a low-level decision. More surprisingly, there was a public sign on the hospital's door clarifying that the governor himself ordered this suspension. People were angry and started to publically criticize the strong Turkish grip over local decisions.<sup>39</sup>

A week after this incident, people demonstrated against the raising of Turkish flags over a school that had recently opened. The protesters also demanded the disbanding of the Jarablus council and the creation of a new one.<sup>40</sup> While residents had previously demonstrated against the council for its failure to run the city, these were the first protests specifically against increased Turkish influence.<sup>41</sup>

The inability of the council to address public concerns led to larger demonstrations. Protests broke out in February 2017 following a decision to ban female teachers from wearing the niqab, a full-face veil, in schools.<sup>42</sup> The justification given for the decision was that it ensured the safety of teachers and students, but it was not well received. According to Amer Mohamad, a researcher from Jarablus now based in the UK:

People were not only angry with the council members but with Turkey as well, for approving it. Others went further and considered the ban a Turkish attempt to impose its secular ideology on locals.<sup>43</sup>

The ban motivated people to act upon their growing anger towards the council. One council member said:

The issue is way bigger than the ban. People got fed up with our inability to govern and they were waiting for an opportunity to overthrow us. The ban was issued publicly and it was implemented for two weeks before the protests started, which indicates that the ban itself is not the main problem.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Zaman Alwsl (2016), 'Jarablus's Hospital is Closed by a Turkish Decision', 15 November 2016, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/74959.html> (accessed 10 Feb. 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Author interview with a resident, February 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Hawar News (2016), 'The People of Jarablus Protest Against the Turkish Invasion', YouTube, 20 November 2016, <https://youtu.be/FL32UuGwij8> (accessed 12 Feb. 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Author interview with a lawyer, January 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Enab Baladi (2017), 'The Head of the Local Council in Jarablus is Arrested due to the Niqab Ban', 12 February 2017, <https://wp.me/p2gAZn-y17> (accessed 12 Feb. 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, February 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

Rebel groups immediately withdrew support for the council and issued a joint statement asking the central court to arrest council members and relieve them of their duties.<sup>45</sup> The court agreed to the demands, but quickly ordered their release without pressing charges. It is important to highlight here that the rebel forces followed agreed procedures and disbanded the council through official channels without force. A new council was quickly formed in March 2017 after consultations between rebel forces, Turkish officials, the opposition's Provincial Council of Free Aleppo, influential local figures and the Syrian Interim Government.<sup>46</sup> It is still too early to judge if the latest council will avoid the mistakes of its predecessor, but residents are hopeful. According to a member of the former council-in-exile:

People are optimistic that the new council will be more successful in running the city. The increased involvement of Syrian opposition bodies in forming the council is giving people hope that things will be done differently this time.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Eldorar Alshamia (2017), 'Rebel Forces in Euphrates Shield Discharge Jarablus Local Council Because of the Niqab Ban', 12 February 2017, <http://eldorar.com/node/108768> (accessed 12 Feb. 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Eldorar Alshamia (2017), 'Forming a New Council in Jarablus', 6 March 2017, <http://eldorar.com/node/109438> (accessed 6 Mar. 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Author interview with a member of the council-in-exile, March 2017.

## 5. Failure to Govern

The pressing need for reconstruction in Jarablus and its insufficient financial resources led to an ineffective management model and the poor provision of services. Turkey's desire to quickly turn Jarablus into a positive model amplified people's expectations and increased the pressure for quick results. Administration of the district focused largely on short-term solutions rather than long-term strategies. For example, the efforts to fix the electricity problem by providing a supply line from Turkey seemed like a good quick fix to help people, but it did not solve the problem or poor infrastructure. As a result, consumption demand causes constant power cuts, which in turn take time and resources to fix. The supply line lacks the power capacity to meet the needs of rural areas. The majority of villages still do not have access to electricity. According to a local business owner:

Electricity is only available for four to five hours at a time in Jarablus. There are more than 65 villages that are in complete darkness. Turkey is capable of supplying us with enough power. What we need is proper infrastructure to overcome minor problems.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, the water supply has been temporarily repaired in the city by installing a limited number of additional pumps, but there is still no solution to provide the rest of the district with drinkable water. According to a member of the initial disbanded council:

ISIS destroyed the city's central water tank, which pumps water to the rest of district. People in the city are fine with the existing short-term solution but the rest are drinking contaminated water. The problem could only be solved by rebuilding the central water tank and replacing the water pumps and pipes.<sup>49</sup>

Turkey's focus on military objectives in Jarablus has hindered its commitment to substantial investments. The security threats posed by its enemies, including ISIS, Kurdish forces and the Syrian regime, raise concerns about the value of costly investments. Any of those actors could systematically target Turkish projects in the district to settle a score. According to a local business owner:

Turkey is still dealing with Jarablus as a military zone. Turkey is interested in funding reconstruction projects, but it will not do that before the area is properly secured, which is not likely to happen anytime soon.<sup>50</sup>

Turkey's inability to invest in large-scale projects is also linked to the poorly planned nature of its intervention. Time and resources are needed to reconstruct an area like Jarablus. The municipality of Gaziantep, which is responsible for Jarablus, seems to be struggling with securing either. According to Amer Mohamad:

Municipalities prepare their plans and budgets in advance, therefore, it is not a far-fetched assumption to say that Gaziantep was caught off guard when the operation suddenly started. Adding an extra project or two is fine but adding a new district in a war zone is difficult to handle.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Author interview with a business owner, February 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Author interview with a business owner, February 2017.

As a result, the quality of most public services provided remains poor, particularly in the countryside, or non-existent. Locals report, with a clear sense of frustration, that services are not as good as they are usually depicted in the media. However, opinions differ depending on the service in question and whether it is delivered in the city or in a remote village. The availability of bread was one of the main problems until recently. ISIS troops dismantled and looted the production equipment from the bakery and emptied its store of wheat before they withdrew. Humanitarian organizations provided aid while trying to renovate the bakery. It took a few months to provide people with enough bread; however, some locals still complain about its quality. According to one business owner:

The bread crisis is over now. It was really difficult to find enough bread in the first four months after the liberation of the city. It is available now and it is even cheaper than before. The only problem we have now is that the quality is not that good.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, people have generally expressed satisfaction with healthcare services. The hospital, which is funded and run by Turkey's health ministry, provides most services and only transfers complicated cases to Turkey.<sup>53</sup> However, there is a need for more facilities. According to one resident:

The hospital provides good services but it only covers around 60 per cent of the demand. We need another hospital to reduce the waiting times. Surgeries are usually transferred to Turkey but there is a long waiting list and not everyone is transferred. We need them to improve and fast-track the referral system.<sup>54</sup>

The lack of resources and comprehensive strategies has also limited most of the services to the city and ignored the countryside. On top of the shortage of water and electricity, basic education is unavailable in rural areas. Turkish organizations equipped and funded three schools in the city, which cover most of the needs for primary education but do not provide intermediate or higher education. The problem is even bigger in rural areas where schools are not supported. According to a school principal:

The schools in the town are sufficient but the countryside is neglected. The vast majority of the schools in the villages are not supported. We do not have desks or fuel. Children sit on mattresses on the floor and they each pay around SYP 1,000–2,000 [\$2–4] to cover the school running cost.<sup>55</sup>

The absence of a capable local police force and the failure to uphold the rule of law has exacerbated the general chaos and criminal activity. The presence of rebel forces in the city has not helped improve public safety. The checkpoints they run are widely perceived by locals to be a source of income through bribes rather than a security measure. The instances of theft have increased, with some believed to be affiliated with rebels. As noted above, Turkey is leading efforts to train and equip locals to police areas they have an interest in. This police force succeeded in limiting the

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<sup>51</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, February 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Author interview with a business owner, February 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Kocalar, K. (2017), 'The Turkish Hospital in Jarablus Delivers 513 Babies in 3 Months', Anadolu Agency, 6 January 2017, <http://v.aa.com.tr/721597> (accessed 22 Feb. 2017).

<sup>54</sup> Author interview with a resident, February 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Author interview with a school principal in a village in rural Jarablus, January 2017.

presence of rebel groups in the city by taking over their responsibilities at checkpoints and asking them to hand over their bases. Some groups agreed while others maintained their presence under the pretext of supporting the police, which they say are incapable of securing the city alone. The rebels' influence remains strong in the city and in the countryside, particularly where they have maintained their role at checkpoints. As a result, the central court, which is viewed positively by the population, still lacks the authority to enforce its sentences, due to being occasionally undermined by rebels. Inevitably the weak application of the rule of law has led to increased criminality. Despite a recent improvement in the security situation, locals remain largely concerned about their safety, due to the spread of armed robberies and kidnappings. The police are still viewed with suspicion due to their failure to secure the area, while some also accuse them of being corrupt.<sup>56</sup> Others accuse the police of being fully under the control of Turkey's government.<sup>57</sup> According to one village resident:

It will take some time but the police can improve the security situation. The problem, like with many other services, is that villages around Jarablus remain unsafe because they are far from the city and there are no police patrols.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Author interview with a resident, February 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Author interview with a resident, February 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Author interview with a resident in a village in rural Jarablus, January 2017.

## 6. Monopoly over Services

The restrictions imposed by Turkey on humanitarian work in Jarablus have hindered attempts to improve the city's situation. Syrian and international humanitarian actors are restrained from directly working there or coordinating with local groups. Multiple sources confirm that the only way to operate is through Turkish authorities and in cooperation with organizations approved by Turkey. The situation is different in other rebel-held areas in Syria, where humanitarian actors have been playing an essential role in providing services in cooperation with local civil groups. Such collaboration has complemented the work of local councils and assisted them in overcoming their limited resources and providing better public services to their communities. The restrictions in Jarablus seem to have been imposed on all humanitarian actors a few weeks after the Turkish-led operation began. The opposition Provincial Council of Free Aleppo and humanitarian organizations that were providing aid there were ordered by the local council to cease their activities. According to a member of the Stabilization Committee of the Provincial Council of Free Aleppo:

Following the liberation of the city, [we] started providing bread, aid and medical supplies to locals in the city. We were working non-stop to provide services as the needs of locals were extensive. Suddenly we were told by the local council not to work in the area. We were shocked because we thought that we were on the same side.<sup>59</sup>

The limited services provided by the Jarablus council motivated some locals to look for alternatives but the restrictions prevented them from raising funds for much-needed projects in their areas. Locals were able to secure assurances of external support for funding schools in the countryside but their attempts were blocked. According to a teacher:

The local council has not been able to provide us with the needed funds to run the school in our village. We could not sit and wait so we contacted a Syrian organization in Gaziantep and other places to seek their help. Many were willing to support us but they were not allowed by the Turkish authorities to work with us directly.<sup>60</sup>

Likewise, the Syrian civil defence organization, The White Helmets, offered to support the construction of a civil defence centre and provide all the needed heavy-duty equipment and vehicles. The offer also included hiring 25 locals and paying their salaries. But the organization was denied permission to operate in Jarablus, despite the need for such a centre.<sup>61</sup> Syrian organizations usually get funds to implement projects either directly or in cooperation with other Syrian organizations. Therefore, they cannot justify funding Turkish organizations to implement projects in Syria. According to a Syrian humanitarian organization based in Turkey:

We are unable to work in Jarablus, despite allocating a substantial budget for it. We are implementers not donors. Therefore, we cannot fund Turkish organizations to do what we are paid for. We are still looking for other ways to work there.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Author interview with a member of the stabilization committee in the Provincial Council of Free Aleppo, February 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Author interview with a teacher, January 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Author interview with the director of a Syrian humanitarian organization based in Turkey, March 2017.



The restrictions ensure Turkey's total control and influence over the area. Sources within the council confirm the imposed limitations but they deny Turkey's involvement. The alleged corruption of some of the council members and their abuses of power are among the main reasons given to explain the obstacles facing non-local groups. According to a member of the now disbanded council:

Turkey had nothing to do with that [restricting external support]. Some corrupt members were creating obstacles in order to benefit financially. Others were obstructing such support merely to eliminate competition and maintain their influence.<sup>63</sup>

But Syrian organizations operating from Turkey blame the Turkish authorities. Locals also largely blame Turkey for the restrictions, and do not believe the council has the power to impose them. Though, the council is still accused of acquiescing. The locals' narrative is the more likely, as it would explain why the majority of activities in Jarablus are carried out through Turkish organizations. The restrictions are also similar to Turkey's policy that forbids all foreign actors from working directly inside Syrian refugee camps in its territory.<sup>64</sup> It is not clear, however, if Turkey's constraints are for security concerns or simply to gain more influence. The Turkish-led intervention was a military operation; therefore, limiting the number of actors involved could help control the situation and alleviate risk. If so, it is possible that conditions might change when the risks from ISIS and, from Turkey's perspective, Kurdish militants are eliminated. But this is unlikely to happen if the reasoning behind the constraints is to gain more sway in Syria as competition for influence in Syria is likely to remain in the near future.

Turkey's effective monopoly over Jarablus increases the dependence of its citizens on the country and prevents them from having autonomy. Reliance on a single source of support is not sustainable, especially if it is a foreign one. The current council will, therefore, face massive challenges if and when Turkey decides to reduce or terminate its support or to block the funds provided by international actors. The imposed restrictions could also contribute to isolating civil society groups of Jarablus from their peers in other opposition-held areas, and prevent the council from mobilizing local expertise to expand public services and improve their quality.

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<sup>63</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Author interview with the director of a Syrian humanitarian organization based in Turkey, March 2017.

## 7. Contributing to Destabilization

The absence of a comprehensive Turkish-led post-ISIS governance strategy, the failure to address local sensitivities, and the lack of programmes to counter ISIS ideology all contribute to ethnic tensions in Jarablus and raise the risk that radical groups may re-emerge there.

The absence of counter-radicalization strategies to engage with locals, especially children, who were influenced by ISIS, leaves them vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups. The Turkish-led coalition, like other anti-ISIS missions, focuses on defeating the group militarily. ISIS, however, cannot be defeated by military means alone as its radical ideology outlives its territorial control. ISIS's strategy is not limited to its military goals; it also aims to normalize its ideology in local communities through its religious preaching and propaganda. When it controlled Jarablus, some people attended such activities voluntarily, while others were forced to do so. According to locals, all penalties imposed by ISIS, no matter how small, include attending sharia courses that aim to promote and bring the group's ideology into the mainstream. Even if some people do not adopt ISIS's ideology, their exposure to it heightens the risk of it becoming normalized. Defeating ISIS militarily should be a first step in a wider strategy to counter its ideology and address the conditions that allowed it to flourish. In this context, engaging locals in public and private debates to distance them from ISIS's ideology is important. Providing people with opportunities to have a purpose and sense of normality is also a much-needed tool to reverse the group's influence.

Children, especially adolescents, are the ones most affected by ISIS's ideology due to concerted efforts to influence them. The majority of them have solely had an ISIS religious education. Children in the city of Jarablus only have access to primary school education, which leaves teenagers without the opportunity for further study. The situation in the countryside is even worse where primary school level education is not supported by the council and parents have to pay for unofficial schooling. The inability to provide education to the majority of teenagers hinders efforts to challenge the ideology that ISIS spent three years trying to impose on them. According to Amer Mohamad:

Many teenagers in Jarablus are only familiar with ISIS ideology. There were kids when the group controlled the city. Now they are frustrated due to a lack of services and opportunities. They are a ticking bomb.<sup>65</sup>

Access to employment opportunities is also an effective tool to counter violent extremism.<sup>66</sup> In addition to damaging the council's reputation, the failure to deliver sufficient public services could allow radical groups to gain support in exchange for providing services. While local activists and civil society groups are trying to find creative ways to overcome the restrictions that limit the work of humanitarian and development actors, their ability to do so is limited. Some apply for funds to implement projects and use unofficial wire transfers to get the money to Jarablus, which allows them to avoid the complications of working through official Turkish channels. However, few donors agree to use such means, due to the difficulties that come with justifying such a model as well as

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<sup>65</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, March 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Author interview with a teacher, January 2017.

monitoring and documenting it. In contrast, radical groups and their affiliated charities see a golden opportunity. They have more flexibility in spending and do not usually require any documentation. ISIS and other radical groups, such as al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria Jabhat al-Nusra under different guises have systematically used the provision of public services to generate community support and recruit members. They could maximize their impact in Jarablus by strategically supplying particular services, especially those that are unavailable or hard to come by. They might also benefit from the disparity in the distribution of services between city and countryside by focusing on the latter. Jihadi groups are still not openly active in Jarablus, but they may be operating covertly. Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, was active in secret across Syria for months before it announced itself publicly. According to Amer Mohamad:

It is not clear whether Jihadi groups are already active in the area or not. Locals write on Facebook occasionally about sleeper cells trying to take advantage of the situation to recruit. Whether this is true or not, we have to urgently act to prevent this from happening before it is too late.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, ignoring local sensitivities is causing ethnic tension between Arabs and Turkmen, and could lead to confrontation at a later stage. According to locals, this was never a problem in Jarablus in the past. But, following the Turkish-led operation, it has become a pressing concern among them. Arabs complain about bias towards Turkmen and about discrimination. Turkmen are perceived to receive better services and to occupy most of the jobs. According to a teacher:

People have started to analyse everything through the lens of ethnicity and with the assumption that Turks are favouring Turkmen over Arabs. This presumed ethnic discrimination, therefore, has become a hot topic in Jarablus.<sup>68</sup>

While the strength of this tension is difficult to estimate, all interviewees acknowledge the seriousness of the issue, regardless of whether they believe that discrimination takes place or not. Residents also disagree on the reasons behind this different treatment, and whether or not it is intentional. Amer Mohamad says:

I do not think that people are hired in Jarablus because of their ethnicity but some people see it from this perspective. Facts, in such situations, are not as important as perceptions, especially when people are convinced that what they think is the truth.<sup>69</sup>

However, others believe that such a problem exists on a large scale. According to a member of the now disbanded council:

A Turkmen mukhtar [the head of the local government of a town] of a Turkmen village along with 30 other mukhtars conducted a field visit to check on the situation in the area. They found that Turkmen villages are receiving better services and more support than Arab villages. They even sent a written statement to us in the council to express their concern.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, March 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Author interview with a teacher in Jarablus, January 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, March 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Author interview with a member of the appointed council, March 2017.

There are also different views on why Turkmen enjoy such advantages. Some people believe that Turkey is engaging in favouritism because it trusts them to be more loyal as they are of Turkish descent. ‘Turkey is making all decisions in Jarablus and nothing goes without its approval. They are empowering Turkmen because that allows them to maintain long-term influence in the area’, one local said.<sup>71</sup> Others believe that discrimination is due to corrupt local officials and rebel commanders, and that Turkey has nothing to do with it. One resident noted:

Some Turkmen officials in the council used their positions to provide better services to their community and impose conditions to hire them. Some Turkmen armed groups, like the Sultan Murad brigade, are also using their influence and connections for similar purposes. That’s why they have huge sway despite their small numbers.<sup>72</sup>

Ethnic tension, whether it is based on a real or perceived issue of favouritism, and regardless of who is responsible for it, is a sizeable problem that needs to be addressed urgently before it leads to confrontations among locals. According to Amer Mohamad:

[An incendiary event like the niqab ban] might also lead to ethnic confrontations between Arabs and Turkmen. People’s actions, however, will likely be more violent than the peaceful demonstrations against the ban. This problem has to be addressed now before it is too late.<sup>73</sup>

If this situation endures, ISIS and other radical groups will have a chance to infiltrate Jarablus and regain influence, though perhaps on a different scale than before.

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<sup>71</sup> Author interview with a teacher, January 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Author interview with a business owner, February 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Author interview with Amer Mohamad, February 2017.

## 8. Conclusion

On 29 March 2017, Turkey announced the official termination of Operation Euphrates Shield after achieving its objectives in northern Syria.<sup>74</sup> The intervention allowed it to secure its border militarily and push ISIS back. However, Turkey's military gains have not been matched by its local political achievements, as it has struggled to implement a successful governance model in Jarablus. Its failure is largely linked to application rather than the model itself, which has been relatively successful in other rebel-held areas. Turkey's ability to ensure the sustainability of its successes against ISIS depends largely on addressing the issues raised throughout this paper.

The failure of the local council – appointed after the intervention and backed by Turkey – to deliver sufficient services damaged its credibility and turned people against it. However, the newly formed council, established in March 2017, has provided Turkey with a chance to turn Jarablus into a successful model through enhancing its ability to govern by:

- Providing it with technical and financial support to improve the provision of public services;
- Enhancing its transparency in terms of decision-making as well as distribution of services; and
- Encouraging local participation in shaping its policies as well as overseeing their implementation.

Turkey's short-term reconstruction initiatives should be replaced with long-term strategies that will improve the governance of Jarablus. Essential services – such as water, electricity and education – cannot be provided adequately without substantial investment in infrastructure. Turkey could ease the pressure of self-funding such investments by cooperating with its allies and allowing them to contribute.

To meet the demand for aid, Turkey could loosen the restrictions on humanitarian work in Jarablus, and encourage local and international actors to play an active role in improving service provision. Outside support to other opposition areas in Syria has often been chaotic and poorly coordinated, and it sometimes fuels unhealthy competition between non-regime held areas. A compromise could be explored to enforce coordination of humanitarian aid and work through a single channel, but with Turkey allowing more donors and implementing partners to access it as long as standards are maintained.

Turkey should take the lead in developing a comprehensive post-ISIS governance strategy to contribute to the stabilization of Jarablus. A counter-radicalization strategy targeted at local communities would challenge ISIS's ideology and reduce its influence. Furthermore, a local reconciliation programme would ensure the inclusion of former ISIS supporters back into the community and avoid alienating them, which would only create tension and benefit radical groups. Improvements in the provision of public services would also prevent radical groups from using the

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<sup>74</sup> Gumrukcu, T. (2017), 'Turkey Ends "Shield" Military Operation in Syria, PM Says', Reuters, 29 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN17030R> (accessed 29 Mar. 2017).

lack of needed services as a means of gaining support. Local divisions – between the city and the countryside, as well as between Arab and Turkmen people – should be urgently addressed to promote peace and alleviate ethnic tension.

Turkey could address local concerns about its influence by being transparent about the scale of its involvement and its objectives in running Jarablus. It could engage more by funding and supporting local involvement with a clear strategy to empower locals and provide them with the skills needed to govern independently.

Turkey and the international community have a great deal to gain by stabilizing Jarablus and other post-ISIS areas in Syria. The implementation of the recommendations in this paper will significantly contribute towards this goal by turning Jarablus into a successful post-ISIS model. If no action is taken local needs and grievances will increase, which is exactly what allowed ISIS to flourish in the first place, and might allow it or other radical groups to regain power.

## About the Author

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## Acknowledgments

This research is indebted to the generous support and contribution of local actors and activists in Syria and Turkey, who shared their knowledge and experiences. The author would like to especially thank Amer Mohamad for his invaluable contribution and research support. Many thanks also go to Lina Khatib, Nicolas Bouchet and Mais Peachey at Chatham House for their advice, edits and tireless support in bringing this paper to fruition. Grateful acknowledgment also goes to Souha Khairallah, Noah Bonsey and to the anonymous reviewers who have enriched the findings of the research with their feedback.





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Cover image: Syrian people in Jarablus district in Syria after the area is freed from ISIS during Operation Euphrates Shield.

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ISBN 978 1 78413 242 2

This publication is printed on recycled paper.

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