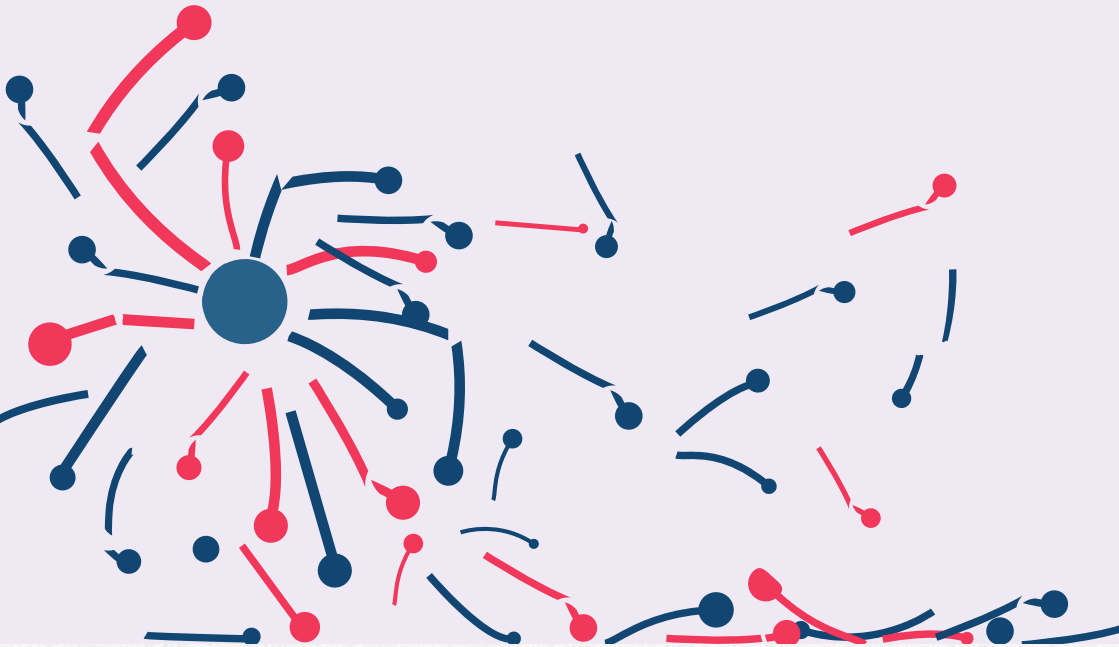


Militarism and Destructive Environments From the Perspective of Youth in Northern Syria



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Badael is a rights-based organisation founded in 2013 with a mission to foster transformative justice as the basis of a genuine and sustainable peace in Syria. Championing locally-owned alternatives, we endeavour to buttress the scope and impact of inclusive grassroots civic action and foment the development of holistic truth and understanding within and around the Syrian context.



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Background

Creating spaces that foster learning, activism, co-thinking, and civic engagement among young people is a top priority for Badael. Such spaces are crucial for the development of societies. This emphasis arises from the need to protect and empower the excluded majority in Syria, especially youth, enabling them to lead grassroots citizen movements and initiatives within their communities. It is under this strategic priority that Badael initiated a youth platform to empower and mobilize young Syrians as pivotal change agents, whose perspectives are integral to the growth of a robust grassroots civil society.

The youth platform also aims to enable Syrian youth in cultivating greater social resilience and enhancing their ability to shape discourse and thinking on topics and priorities key to young people within the Syrian civil society. During the platform's establishment meeting, five topics, "Safe Spaces", "Social Cohesion and Inclusion", "Militarism and Destructive Spaces", "Formal and Informal Education" and "Political Participation and Civic Engagement", were identified by participants as urgent issues for Northern Syria's youth. These issues were addressed through think spaces, and the outcomes have contributed to the development of 5 knowledge papers.

The think spaces served as non-prescriptive, deductive environments where 16-20 youth from Al-Atareb, Darat Azza, and Killi, aged 18 to 30, unpacked the conceptual and practical aspects of each issue. They built on their lived experiences, creativity, and peer exchange in a space facilitated by Badael. This paper reflects the outcomes of the first think space, focusing on the youth's conceptualization and analysis of the topic "Militarism and Destructive Environments From the Perspective of Youth in Northern Syria". "

Militarism and Destructive Environments – Conceptual Unpacking

Destructive environments are understood as those environments where youth engage in self or other people's harm and any activity that leads to disruption of civil peace. Examples of those environments are drug abuse and dealing, petty crimes, prostitution, involvement in gangs, electronic theft, enrolment in armed groups¹, and enrolment in mercenary groups abroad.

Youth involvement in destructive environments and in militarism should be understood in the broader context of structural deprivation. As of June 2023, over 90%² of the Syrian population is under the poverty line. Conflict profiteers are seen to withhold economic capital and create familial-tribal exclusionary economic cycles, which exclude and disadvantage youth outside the familial-tribal web. Furthermore, locally provided higher education degrees in the North are not recognised even in other non-government controlled areas, let alone regionally and internationally. Those factors coupled with norms around power and masculinity show up in young men's exertion of physical power or violence, speed driving to assert presence and other forms or risk-taking activities. Militarism became an accepted and even celebrated sign of power in society, manifesting in youth increasingly dressed up in camouflage and military outfits, drawing authority and power from connections with armed groups, and exhibiting (illicit) wealth.

1 Some armed gangs operate like drug cartels or hired hit groups.

2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/factsheet-eu-and-syria-crisis-13062023>

Participants classified the reasons behind youth engagement in militarism into push and pull factors.

Push factors:

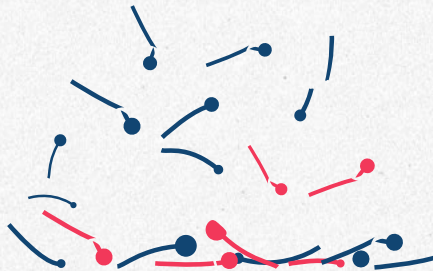
- war and destruction
- living in small high high-density localities with no rule of law
- lack of civic awareness
- the prevalence of gangs imposing rent on the population
- de facto authorities under-prioritising prevention or disengagement
- Internet addiction among adolescents and young adults
- early marriage
- High dowery for marriage
- Unemployment
- Inaccessibility of education due to high fees
- A sudden change of fortune
- Weak opportunities for youth
- Insecurity, widespread fear, lack of rule of law
- Corruption
- Lack of trust in society
- Escape from reality
- Dysfunctional family background
- Loss of purpose and prospects for the future
- Lack of safe environments to express and process sexual violence.
- Militarised masculinity norms.
- Inability to access one's own land due to armed groups' control of olive orchards.

Pull factors:

- Fame
- Sense of belonging – community of peers
- Sense of purpose
- Sense of Authority
- Sense of power
- Alignment with the group’s narrative
- Discipline
- Sense of adventure
- Ability to avenge grievances.

Young people often get pulled into those environments through their peers, for example, drug gangs or armed groups infiltrate student groups and recruit from schools and universities, or use extortion.

As for abusing and trading drugs, a key contributing factor is the lack of enforcement of medical and pharmaceutical regulations and the widespread sales of prescriptive medication over the counter (OTC), which facilitate access to addictive drugs and contribute to the war economy. A particular at-risk group that was highlighted is nurses who have access to addictive medication and work in high-stress environments and low income. This group is at a higher risk of using and trading.



Change of fortune

A young man, Khalil³, from well-off family used to go out with his peers as a high schooler. His friends introduced him to new friends and they rented a hall to start a computer café business together. Due to the lack of business regulations, underage children were able to lease the place and turn it into a gambling venue with kids whose families are connected to the de facto authorities. Khalil's family's fortune took a blow and they were no longer rich, which led Khalil to start engaging in petty theft to finance his gambling addiction, until one day he stole his engaged sister's necklace which led to her fiancé leaving her under pressure from his family. Young men's engagement in destructive environments not only impedes their future but that of the female family members due to social stigma in honour communities.

Peer recruitment

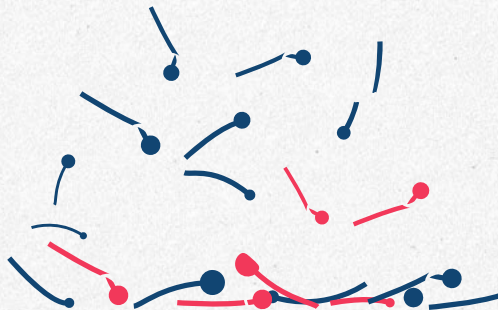
A 13 year old boy developed a drug addiction through peer pressure. He was offered drugs for free the first few times, then he was used to perform motorcycle thefts to finance his drugs and pay his drugs debt.

Gendered dimension

There is a discrepancy in young men's and young women's involvement in militarism and destructive environments. This is governed by social norms. For example, early marriage impacts women and men differently, while early marriage prevents women from participating in the public sphere and often limits them to domestic and care roles, it puts significant pressure on young men as providers and heads of households when their characters are still forming, and they lack the experience and capacity to challenge those norms. On the other hand, young men have mobility privileges women don't have and are under much less societal scrutiny. Therefore, men get exposed

3 Pseudo name.

to more diverse and potentially destructive environments, as they are more accessible to recruiters. The lack of mobility privileges puts financial pressure on women because they can only do certain acceptable jobs for women during the daytime which further contributes to their destitution and can lead to survival sex or sextortion. Nevertheless, women also have agency in the militarised milieu, some women join women-only brigades, they wear a special uniform, and anecdotally, the population fears them.



Impacts of Youth Involvement in Militarism and Destructive Environments

Youth comprise one-third of the population in Syria⁴, and their involvement in destructive environments and militarism has long-lasting impacts on society. Participants viewed those impacts as follows: Society loses its most active group. Social cohesion is disturbed due to further loss of trust and a sense of insecurity. Eventually, those impacts produce an idle generation and lead to social apathy. All of which feeds the violence continuum in the context at the private, institutional, and community levels.

The Status quo of prevention, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration practices

Currently, practices in Northern Syria related to prevention, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration are limited to awareness raising and not necessarily informed by best practices in the field.

Risk of doing further harm – Public marathon for drug abusers

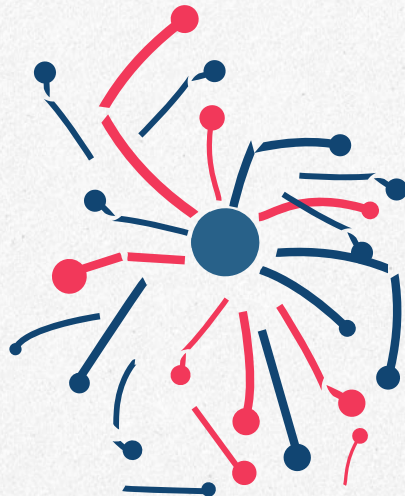
An example of those uninformed practices was a marathon initiative organised for people who abuse drugs. The initial idea was to hold the marathon in a public space which would have exposed participants to social stigma and possibly abuse. The organisers were advised to hold the marathon somewhere more private, and a closed event was held in a private space instead. Should the marathon have gone on publicly as planned, it could have endangered its target group with the risk of social stigma and physical harm.

The intention to intervene is there but access to resources and best practices remain a challenge in Northern Syria, as most resources are in foreign languages and Arabic speaking trainers cannot access the North. However, a number of anecdotal success stories of two drug

4 UNICEF, Adolescent Development and Participation, 2022. Accessed on: <https://www.unicef.org/syria/adolescent-development-and-participation>

abuse rehabilitation centres were shared. These centres are run by The Green Crescent (opened in October 2023) and The Independent Doctors Association (opened in 2022), respectively. A significant shortcoming of those centres is their lack of capacity to receive and treat female patients.

When it comes to militarism, there are no safe avenues to raise the impacts of militarism on society, and even less so to discuss mechanisms to enable youth to disengage, be rehabilitated and reintegrate in society.



Who Needs to Do What

First line individuals

First and foremost, participants highlighted the role of everyone who is in direct contact with youth in detecting early signs, be it the family, teachers, or health professionals. Those early signs include but are not limited to:

- Changing friends and usual company
- Changes in their outfit (military or gang-like outfits) or physical appearance
- Behavioural changes

Authorities and Capital Holders

- Some participants recommended that authorities⁵ should develop and enforce penal articles for engagement in destructive environments⁶.
- Other participants recommended that authorities should make drug test labs available, accessible and connected with a rehabilitation referral system.
- Most participants recommended authorities should hire counsellors for schools and universities as a necessity not a luxury.
- Most participants recommended authorities should ensure a safe investment environment and the safety of economic activities to encourage capital holders to release it.
- The Ministry of Health in the Salvation Government can control the irregular sales of pills.
- The Ministry of Defence in the Salvation Government can regulate the

5 This term is used to refer to the Syrian salvation government ministries and their local affiliates.

6 While participants recommended this, it is important to note that punitive action with no rehabilitation and reintegration prospects can be counter-productive.

access and use of arms by its affiliated military factions and prohibits the use of weapons outside the job.

- Participants recommended capital holders should invest their economic capital in community development and pro-peace enterprises.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

- NGOs should offer family support programmes to guide parents in how to prevent their children, especially late teens and young adults, from engaging in destructive environments.
- NGOs can facilitate dialogue spaces for youth to think together about those environments and destructive practices, offer peer support, and avoid rigid top-down awareness raising.
- Ensure a safe, stigma-free and non-judgemental environment for youth engaged in destructive to share their challenges and the reasons that led them to engage in those environments.
- Introducing subjects related to protection from sexual harassment and violence, and digital security.
- Offer gender-sensitive psychosocial support to young people at risk and their families.
- Strengthen life skills and critical thinking among youth.

Collective Areas of Responsibility

Two collective areas of responsibility were mentioned:

- Countering social stigma by transforming societal perception towards people who commit mistakes small or large is key to opening the door for their disengagement, acceptance and reintegration.
- Ensuring youth participation and social inclusion in private and public spheres, so young people feel their agency, impact, role, and value in society.

The role of youth

When asked about their own role, participants reflected on the need for them to show up as active citizens in society, access their agency to leverage duty bearers to deliver on their areas of responsibility through protests and civic public action to demand the authorities to provide rule of law, decent work, and ensure reduction in higher education fees.

A direct role for youth participants raised to intercept internet addiction and the digital space as a recruitment ground is being active on social media through creating constructive and appealing content such as contests for peers that offer recognition and feed self-worth.

Most notably, they underscored the need for them to self-organise to create an alternative system to the current chaos.

Untapped potentials

5 areas where direct changes or interventions can be introduced to current structures:

1. Imams can use their platforms and focus sermons to raise awareness among young men and fathers
2. Spreading leaflets where youth hangout: markets, schools, cafes, internet cafes
3. Better use of the social media: Facilitating psychosocial support through social media channels – and through Instagram stories
4. Inviting people who had the experience of involvement in destructive environments and made a full return to society to share their experience and become frontline practitioners in preventing young people from going down that road.
5. NGOs should listen to youth to learn about the unspoken challenges to be able to develop early responses.

Conclusions

“We want to live in a world free from fear and violence, we are scared to even demand our rights” group work participants

Youth in Northern Syria feel invisible locally, nationally, and internationally. If and when they are seen, they are seen as a challenge or an at-risk group rather than a source of creativity and solutions. The Youth Peace and Security agenda in Syria is nearly entirely absent from the North and remains challenged in terms of ensuring equitable representation of youth in hyper-localised contexts often characterised as ‘hard to reach areas’.

Indeed, there is a generational depression and loss of future prospects for the generations who were born or grew up in the past 12 years. When asked about their one message to the international community, it was:

“Find solutions to recognise our education, and acknowledge our knowledge and skills, we are the ones who lived through war and found daily solutions to survive and maintain a civic space in a hyper-militarized environment, while the entire country was left to military rule by those with access to and control of arms.”

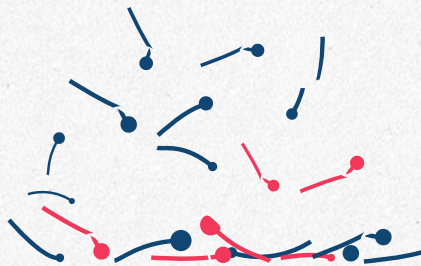
This sense of abandonment and depression requires multilateral actors and INGOs to:

- Creatively invest in cultivating local pro-peace economies including in hard to reach contexts.
- Resource prevention work that addresses the push factors mentioned earlier in this paper and invests in building the capacity of front-line practitioners and facilities.
- Ensure financial counter-terrorism measures do not undermine the protection of the civic space in an increasingly closing environment.

Independent civil society and civic grassroots movements exist but are under constant survival threats due to the volatility of the funding landscape and its context-detached requirements.

- Effectively resolve the policy conundrum pertaining to addressing the specific needs in areas of limited statehood in Syria. There is a need for a concerted effort to respond meaningfully to the unique challenges in those areas and those their population endure. Currently, none of the normative frameworks⁷ offer avenues at least for interventions that would ensure resilience and recovery work is not asymmetric and further risks hampering social cohesion.

The message is loud and clear, Syrian youth in the North require to be seen and heard. They are adept at accessing their peer group and continue to hold on to their civic values and agency despite the hostile environment. None of this should be taken for granted, and this invaluable human resource should receive the necessary conditions to thrive and maintain its drive and ambition for a peaceful and just Syria for all.



7 The UNODC Regional Framework for the Arab States 2023-2028. The EU Drugs Agenda and Action Plan 2021-2025, the EU Strategy and Action Plan to tackle Organised Crime 2021 – 2025, the Action Plan against Firearms Trafficking and the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in human beings 2021-2025, to name a few.



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