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# SYRIA REGIONAL PROGRAM II

FINAL REPORT

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## FINAL REPORT

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**Cover photo:** Raqqa's Al Naeem Square after rehabilitation by an SRP II grantee. (Credit: SRP II grantee)

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# ACRONYMS

AA	Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria
CSO	civil society organization
DeZ	Deir ez Zour
EMI	Eastern Mediterranean Institute
ERT/CRG	Early Recovery Team/Community Recovery Group
FAST	Facilitating Accelerated Service-delivery Tasks
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IC	International Coalition to Defeat ISIS
ICAM	Information Collection, Analysis, and Monitoring
ICRI	Iraq Community Resilience Initiative
IDP	internally displaced person
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JAN	Jabhat al-Nusra
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NLA	newly liberated area
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
RAU	Research and Analysis Unit
RDPC	Rural Damascus Provincial Council
SCD	Syria Civil Defense
SCSI	Syria Community Stabilization Initiative
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SRO	Syria Regional Option
SRP II	Syria Regional Program II
SRP	Syria Regional Program
U.N.	United Nations
USAID/OTI	USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives
YPG	People's Protection Units

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND PROGRAM OVERVIEW

USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives’ (USAID/OTI) Syria Regional Program II (SRP II) operated with the goal of achieving a moderate, inclusive, and stable Syria. SRP II sought to achieve this goal by programming toward the following three objectives, which were refined in 2017 to emphasize the program’s support to moderate civilian entities and remained the final set of objectives: 1) *maintain and increase the influence of strategic moderate entities*; 2) *strengthen communities to better resist extremism*; and 3) *enable the early recovery of newly liberated areas (NLAs) from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*. The program provided grants to strategic, moderate Syrian entities in pursuit of these objectives.

SRP II was awarded on August 28, 2015 and built on the work of USAID/OTI’s Syria Regional Program (SRP), and Syria Regional Option (SRO), which began in November 2012. SRP II included a base period of three years and two one-year option periods, both of which were exercised, bringing the total period of performance to five years. In June 2018, USAID/OTI also exercised the ramp-up option of the SRP II task order, which led to the rapid establishment of the Iraq Community Resilience Initiative (ICRI). Based in Erbil, Iraq, and operating primarily in Nineveh Governorate, ICRI supported the safe and voluntary return of displaced populations, including minorities, in areas liberated from ISIS, by improving stability and social cohesion. ICRI completed its programming in July 2019 and transitioned all staff to USAID/OTI’s Iraq Regional Program<sup>1</sup>.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

From August 2015 to August 2020, SRP II implemented **239 activities** valued at **\$61,980,263** with **79 grantees**. A total of 12 of these activities included **114 subinterventions**. An additional 34 activities were partially implemented but cancelled due to political and security considerations. To achieve a moderate, inclusive, and stable Syria, SRP II partnered with four provincial councils, 13 local councils, 45 civil society organizations (CSOs), and 17 media groups.

### EXHIBIT I. PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

	MODERATE ENTITIES	RESIST EXTREMISM	EARLY RECOVERY	TOTAL
NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES	171	33	35	239
VALUE	\$46,590,233	\$1,891,148	\$13,498,882	\$61,980,263
NUMBER OF PARTNERS	42	24	13	79

<sup>1</sup> ICRI is covered under a separate “final” report provided for that program, included as Annex I

## **MAINTAIN AND INCREASE THE INFLUENCE OF STRATEGIC MODERATE ENTITIES**

SRP II carried on the vital support to civilian governance entities first provided by SRP, and as opposition areas fell to the regime or came under the influence of extremist groups, the program made a strategic shift to focus the majority of its support on CSOs. Assistance to local and provincial councils in rural Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Idleb provinces helped these entities to provide strategic, life-saving services that included livelihoods, bread and agricultural production, vital road repairs, waste management systems, electricity and water system repairs, land titling, and civil recordkeeping. Civil society actors and media organizations, with SRP II support, became credible alternative voices as extremist groups exerted their own influence in the political and social spheres. Lastly, the Syria Civil Defense (SCD) remained a key partner for the entirety of SRP II, receiving \$36 million in assistance to deliver life-saving emergency response and community services, including heavy equipment, emergency response vehicles, core funding for stipends and operational costs, capacity building, and other forms of support that allowed SCD to serve as a source of stability and moderation as an independent, humanitarian organization serving all civilians.

## **STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES TO BETTER RESIST EXTREMISM**

Through critical SRP II support, civil society and media actors engaged with their communities through cultural, social, and media activities by rehabilitating public spaces or by launching arts and social media campaigns that highlighted local issues and advanced narratives that promoted coexistence and countered extremist ideologies. To rebuild social cohesion, SRP II provided support to CSOs to establish community centers, which served as alternative spaces to extremism for communities. These centers provided a wide range of arts, educational, and psychosocial activities to youth and women that addressed the larger issues that made communities vulnerable to extremist groups, including ethnic tensions, youth recruitment, education gaps, and lack of livelihoods. The media activities focused on increasing public confidence in opposition civilian governance structures and CSOs and promoted norms of tolerance, coexistence, and dialogue, including support to digital and social media to amplify moderate voices in the face of increasing extremist ideology.

## **ENABLE THE EARLY RECOVERY OF NEWLY LIBERATED AREAS FROM THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA**

SRP II played a significant role in enabling the early recovery of communities liberated from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) through the delivery of essential services. As early as 2017 in northern Syria, the program worked with local governance entities to prevent extremist groups from exploiting the governance and service delivery gaps left in the aftermath of ISIS occupation and violence. After the liberation of the Euphrates Shield area of northwestern Syria, SRP II assisted local and provincial councils with filling in the gaps of basic services, which included waste management, bread production, generators, solar-powered lights, school and market rehabilitations, and civic engagement activities. In northeast Syria, the program engaged communities directly to identify early recovery priorities and address them through SRP II's Syria Community Stabilization Initiative (SCSI). SCSI supported CSOs and its Early Recovery Teams/Community Recovery Groups (ERTs/CRGs) to remove rubble, rehabilitate public spaces and small but critical water and electricity infrastructure, establish community centers, and improve access to education, among other activities to empower local communities in their efforts to recover and stabilize post ISIS.

# I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

SRP II was awarded in August 2015, during the fifth year of the Syrian crisis. The peaceful protests that launched the Syrian uprising in early 2011 had long been eclipsed by the violence Bashar al-Assad's government unleashed on civilians in response, and the country's subsequent descent into a violent, multi-sided conflict. ISIS exploited Syria's political vacuum to gain control of approximately one-third of its territory, prompting a new war, separate but interconnected. In September 2014, the United States formed the International Coalition to Defeat ISIS (IC), partnering with more than 80 other nations and organizations, among them the Kurdish-led forces dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and operating under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the primary local partner force.

When SRP II began, four major sides were fighting for control inside Syria, including the Assad regime ("the regime") and its allies, moderate and radical opposition groups, the SDF and its allies, and ISIS. From 2015 to 2020, two overarching developments influenced the program's trajectory: the Syrian regime's gradual reconquest of territory from opposition groups and ISIS in western Syria with significant support from Russia and Iran, and IC and SDF's gradual territorial defeat of ISIS in the east. While the former significantly limited the program's space to support a moderate, inclusive, and stable Syria, the latter afforded it opportunities to support the early recovery and stabilization of NLAs (see Annex II: SRP II political timeline and Annex III: Areas of Significant Presence Maps).

## A. THE REGIME'S RECONQUEST OF WESTERN SYRIA WITH RUSSIAN AND IRANIAN SUPPORT

Russia became directly involved in Syria in September 2015 upon Assad's request, joining Iran and the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah in preventing the regime's collapse. Russia claimed it was targeting ISIS and other "terrorist" groups; however, the Syrian regime was intent on defeating the opposition and reclaiming territory lost to it. Contrary to their claims, Russian warplanes mostly struck areas of moderate rebel control, beginning with opposition-held areas of Hama and Homs, and overwhelmingly targeted civilian infrastructure. With Russian and Iranian support, the regime gradually reclaimed territory — whether from radical groups or the moderate opposition — across much of western Syria. By the end of 2016, a number of communities that had been under siege for years had negotiated "evacuation/reconciliation agreements" with the regime, including several Damascus suburbs, the Homs city neighborhood of al-Wa'er, and the eastern part of the city of Aleppo. Tens of thousands of fighters and civilians, including an estimated 50,000 from the city of Aleppo alone, evacuated under negotiated agreements with the regime to remaining opposition-held areas, the majority displaced to the northwestern provinces of Idleb, Aleppo, and Hama. By 2017, a massive humanitarian crisis was unfolding in Eastern Ghouta, the largest and most populated opposition pocket remaining in the suburbs of Damascus, where the regime applied "siege, starve, and surrender" tactics. The regime and the armed opposition there reached reconciliation agreements in the spring of 2018, with up to 100,000 people opting to leave regime-held areas for northern Syria. Having defeated several other opposition- and ISIS-held enclaves, the regime declared full control of the areas around Damascus in May 2018 and shifted its focus to

recapture nearly all the territory in the south, including Dara'a, by August 2018. The regime then fixed its sights on the northwest.

In northwest Syria, the moderate opposition had gradually been overpowered by radical groups, most notably Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). As the only fully rebel-held province remaining in the country, Idlib had become a gathering ground for hundreds of thousands of fighters and internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing violence from other areas. Infighting between previously aligned armed groups prevented HTS from fully consolidating control, but still left Idlib dominated almost entirely by extremist actors. HTS was the third reiteration of Jabhat al Nusra, as its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, gradually distanced the group from its origins as an Al-Qaeda affiliate. Following clashes with more moderate opposition groups, HTS emerged as the dominant power in the northwest by mid-2017, taking over Idlib city despite civilian protests, as well as the Bab al-Hawa border gate with Turkey. Although civilians continued to protest HTS and its perceived political arm, the Syrian Salvation Government, established in October 2017, the space to do so was increasingly limited. The fate of Idlib province and surrounding areas in the countryside of Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia became the focus of intensified negotiations between Turkey and Russia in 2018. With more than three million people sheltering in the northwest, including at least half of whom had fled other parts of Syria, Turkey was keen to stave off a regime offensive that would send a new wave of Syrians across the border in search of refuge. Russia, however, insisted on eliminating radical groups operating in the region and returning the last opposition stronghold to the regime. In September 2018, Russia and Turkey announced the Sochi Agreement, calling for the withdrawal of radical groups, including HTS, from a de-escalation zone that had been established a year earlier, and the deployment of Turkish troops to observation posts.

Russian airstrikes resumed in February 2019, signaling the collapse of the moribund Sochi Agreement. Two months later, Russia and the regime launched a full-scale offensive. Backed by incessant Russian and regime airstrikes, regime-affiliated forces advanced northwards from Hama, with intense fighting culminating in the takeover of Khan Shaykhoun in August 2019. Following a lull in violence, the regime launched a second Russian-backed offensive in November 2019, advancing rapidly to take control of the cities of Marat Al Numan and Saraqib, as well as the entirety of the M5 highway connecting Damascus and Aleppo. In less than three months, this period of the conflict had displaced more than a million people toward the border with Turkey, prompting unprecedented action from Turkish forces. In February 2020, after deploying thousands of forces to Idlib, Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield in the northeast to pressure Russia into a northwest ceasefire agreement and to create a safe zone along the border. The killing of more than 30 Turkish troops in February 2020 also factored into Turkey's decision to increase its military presence in Syrian, which forced Russia to the table for a ceasefire agreement. The Turkish-Russian agreement came into effect on March 5, 2020, and despite regular attempts by spoilers and several violations, the agreement held as SRP II came to a close, and the COVID-19 pandemic helped to reinforce it as both governments were compelled to refocus their attention domestically.

The human cost of Russian-backed regime operations to regain control of areas seized by opposition groups in 2012 has been staggering. For nearly five years, Russia and the regime have targeted hospitals, schools, SCD centers, and other civilian infrastructure with impunity. In the 10 months leading up to a March 2020 ceasefire alone, reports indicated that regime, Russian,

and allied military strikes had damaged more than 50 medical facilities and nearly 100 schools. The regime stands accused of using chemical weapons on hundreds of occasions, including chlorine gas, sarin, and sulfur mustard gas. In two instances, the United States met these deadly chemical attacks with retaliatory strikes against regime military targets, including after an attack on Khan Shaykhoun in April 2017 and another on the Eastern Ghouta neighborhood of Duma in April 2018. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons would later release the first report by its Investigation and Identification Team in April 2020, attributing responsibility for a series of chemical weapons attacks in Ltamenah in March 2017 to the Syrian Arab Republic's Air Force.

### **DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO END THE CONFLICT**

Many countries, including the United States, have concluded that there is no military solution to the conflict and it must be a diplomatic one. However, throughout the violence, international diplomatic efforts consistently failed to support a lasting ceasefire — let alone a free, democratic Syria. The High Negotiation Committee formed in Riyadh in December 2015, ahead of talks led by the United Nations (U.N.) to unify and represent Syria's opposition groups in negotiations with the Syrian regime. The High Negotiation Committee faced criticism for not being inclusive of Kurdish groups. The same month, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, which called for a political settlement, a new constitution, and U.N.-monitored elections. Negotiations later deadlocked, however, and in April 2016, the High Negotiation Committee walked out of negotiations in Geneva after regime airstrikes in several locations killed dozens of people. The inability or unwillingness of Western nations to prevent the fall of Aleppo paved the way for the Astana Process — led by Russia, Iran, and Turkey — to become the primary negotiation mechanism for Syria. In January 2017, the Astana trio reached a complementary deal aimed at enforcing a permanent ceasefire between the regime and opposition under the Astana process, with limited results. The triumvirate met regularly to discuss the Syria file, and in mid-2017, they agreed to establish “de-escalation zones” across the country, including one for Idlib, with each power serving as guarantor for its allies in localized truces. While at times decreasing the violence, this process also allowed the regime to strategically halt fighting in certain areas to focus more intently on other frontlines.

### **B. THE TERRITORIAL DEFEAT OF ISIS IN EASTERN SYRIA**

The United States' decision to partner with the YPG to liberate eastern Syria from ISIS put it at direct odds with its NATO partner Turkey, which viewed the YPG as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish insurgent movement that has repeatedly conducted violent attacks in Turkey and skirmishes with Turkish authorities, resulting in the deaths of 30,000 to 40,000 people since the 1970s and which Turkey considers an ongoing threat. Efforts to dilute the influence of the YPG by creating the Arab-majority (but Kurdish-led) SDF in October 2015 did not assuage Turkish concerns. In August 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield, establishing a long-term presence in northern Syria in partnership with elements of the Syrian opposition. Over seven months, the campaign succeeded in expelling ISIS from a 2,225 square kilometer area in the northern countryside of Aleppo province. In addition to pushing ISIS away from the border, Turkish-backed forces occupied territory to limit the strength of the YPG by denying the SDF control of these Kurdish-majority areas, which the SDF had held since 2012. Further east, the SDF and IC launched Operation Euphrates Wrath in

November 2016. The SDF liberated Raqqa province's second-largest city, Tabqa, in May 2017, followed by the city of Raqqa, the former headquarters of the ISIS caliphate, in October 2017.

In a race to liberate the oil-rich province of Deir ez Zour (DeZ), Russian-backed regime forces made rapid advances against ISIS in late 2017, recapturing Palmyra and continuing east to regain control of much of Raqqa's southern countryside and areas of DeZ west of the Euphrates River, including the city of DeZ. Simultaneous SDF and IC advances from Hasakah into DeZ led to a new territorial divide along the river, with regime-held DeZ west of the Euphrates, and SDF-held DeZ to the east, with the exception of a small regime-held enclave near DeZ City on the eastern side of the river. By the end of 2017, simultaneous advances against ISIS by the SDF, Turkey, and the regime had cleared most areas of Syria, with the caliphate shrinking to part of DeZ province (see Annex III). In January 2018, the SDF temporarily suspended its fight against ISIS in response to Turkey's launch of a second cross-border operation, "Olive Branch," to remove the YPG from the majority-Kurdish Afrin district in northern Aleppo.

Nearly a year passed before the SDF and IC resumed large-scale operations to defeat ISIS in its final stronghold in southern DeZ. During this time, local governance institutions affiliated with the SDF were installed in NLAs of Raqqa and DeZ to manage service delivery and support early recovery. These institutions faced numerous challenges. Although the SDF was an effective fighting force, it was not perceived as a legitimate governance entity by locals in Arab areas. First, it was a Kurdish-dominated institution that had been asked to liberate Arab areas far from its base. Second, it partnered with local actors who sought to instrumentalize their affiliation with the SDF for personal benefit or tribal revenge. Third, their ongoing negotiations with the regime to secure a protection deal made many nervous of a regime return to the northeast. Last, the group had a questionable record of upholding human rights and democratic norms. Efforts to coordinate and improve governance structures across SDF-controlled areas led to the formation of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AA) in September 2018. By the end of 2018, the SDF and IC had pushed ISIS out the city of Hajin, forcing remaining fighters into a final pocket of villages near the Iraqi border. Three months later, the territorial defeat of ISIS was announced with the liberation of Baguz on March 23, 2019.

Following the defeat of the physical caliphate, ISIS went underground but continued to operate in Syria. Remaining ISIS cells carried out attacks against security and governance institutions and personnel in both SDF- and regime-held areas of DeZ. In SDF-held areas of DeZ, ISIS cells capitalized on compounding grievances against the SDF and AA, exploiting resulting governance vacuums to operate and expand. These were particularly salient in DeZ's eastern countryside, exacerbated, among other things, by the lack of a strategic security plan to counter an ISIS resurgence, tensions linked to the legacy of ISIS rule and the tribal makeup of the DeZ Military Council, and corruption and abuses at the hands of the DeZ Military Council. After the fall of Baguz, the SDF and IC conducted large-scale security campaigns to root out ISIS cells. Nevertheless, they continued to pose a challenge to stability, and in August 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense acknowledged that ISIS remnants had reorganized and transformed into an insurgency in Syria.

The U.S. commitment to remaining in Syria to ensure a lasting defeat of ISIS was called into question on several occasions, beginning in April 2018, when the U.S. president announced an impending withdrawal of U.S. forces from eastern Syria. By August, however, the State

Department's Special Representative for Syria Engagement, James Jeffrey, had identified three policy goals that required the continued presence of U.S. forces in Syria: 1) the enduring defeat of ISIS; 2) diminishing and ultimately seeing an end to Iranian forces and proxies in Syria; and 3) political progress through the process authorized by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. The pledge of a continued U.S. presence in support of the SDF prompted renewed threats by Turkey to launch a military operation to expel the YPG from areas of northern Syria east of the Euphrates River. Fears of an incursion were heightened substantially when the U.S. president announced the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2018, which, had it not been replaced by a decision to maintain a partial presence, would have removed Turkey's strongest deterrent to entering the region. U.S. efforts to manage tensions between Turkey and the SDF intensified in 2019 with the establishment of a 'security mechanism' arrangement along Turkey's border inside Syria in which the United States would oversee the removal of YPG soldiers from an agreed area, but this ultimately failed to assuage Turkey's concerns. In October 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring in northeast Syria, following a U.S. pledge to withdraw troops from the proposed operational areas to avoid potential military conflict with its NATO ally. The Kurdish leadership of the SDF, in search of a new ally to protect the YPG from Turkey, reached a deal with Damascus that allowed regime forces to reestablish dominance over a part of the border to halt Turkish advances. Soon after, Turkey signed a deal with the Russians that gave it control of areas between Tel Abiad and Ras Al Ain. The United States withdrew its remaining U.S. troops from the northern border region, leaving approximately 500 troops in eastern Syria with the goal of protecting the region's oil from the regime and ISIS.

### **C. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE**

Although the regime has steadily regained control over territory once held by the Syrian opposition, the Syrian conflict is far from over. The regime continues to face substantial challenges reconquering remaining areas of the northwest and northeast, deterred by the presence of Turkish and U.S. forces, respectively. In reclaimed areas, many locals perceive the regime's presence as an occupation rather than a return of the state. A low-level insurgency has resurfaced in southern Syria since 2019, marked by an increase in protests and armed attacks. State institutions are weak, and the economy is in freefall, with the regime devaluing the Syrian pound by more than 44 percent ahead of the most extensive U.S. sanctions to date — commonly referred to as the Caesar Act — went into effect in June 2020.

Russia's steadfast support for the government of Bashar al-Assad has created little incentive for the regime to engage in political negotiations. The United States and others continue to rely on diplomatic engagement and economic sanctions to isolate and pressure the regime into a political settlement. Thus far, the constitutional reform process is the only element of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 to have gained limited traction since its adoption in 2015. In September 2019, the U.N. announced the creation of a constitutional drafting committee composed of 150 Syrians representing in equal parts the regime, the opposition, and civil society. Critics remain skeptical of the process and its composition, in particular the exclusion of the Kurdish-dominated AA upon Turkey's insistence, the willingness of the regime to follow through with the process, and the selection of nominees to represent Syrian civil society. It remains to be seen whether this will help revive the political process laid out by Resolution 2254 or simply be exploited as a tool for normalizing the Syrian regime.

## II. PROGRAM OPERATIONS

### A. OPERATIONAL PLATFORM DEVELOPMENTS

Given the shifting U.S. government policy in Syria, budget constraints, and evolving security and political conditions that affected program operations in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, SRP II experienced several significant changes in the program's operating platform after it launched and throughout its duration.

#### INITIAL OPERATIONAL SETUP AND MOVE TO ISTANBUL

SRP II's offices were based in Gaziantep, Turkey, at the start of the project in August 2015, continuing the operational platform established under SRP, its predecessor. As security conditions deteriorated in Gaziantep and the political sensitivities across Turkey increased in 2015 and 2016, the project adopted a lower profile in Gaziantep, transitioning from a central office to a combination of three smaller offices dispersed throughout the city, along with a work-at-home rotation. The security situation worsened enough that SRP II relocated its main office to Istanbul, Turkey, in the fall of 2016 and reduced its footprint in Gaziantep to a small representative office.

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF SCSI PLATFORM

In the fall of 2017 after a brief pilot period, the project launched SCSI platforms for management in Berlin, Germany, and for procurement in Erbil, Iraq (see text box). SCSI focused on early recovery efforts in areas of eastern Syria liberated from ISIS and under SDF control. The SRP II offices in Turkey and the SCSI offices in Germany and Iraq operated concurrently, focusing on their various areas of programming until both SRP II and SCSI consolidated (see below). Due to political sensitivities for the Turkey-based platform, the SCSI program was firewalled from the SRP II program until the programs merged.

#### FUNDING UNCERTAINTY AND OFFICE CONSOLIDATION

In April 2018, the Trump Administration announced a strategic review of \$200 million of the U.S. government's Syria stabilization assistance funding, effectively freezing the disbursement of USG funds, and jeopardizing both SRP II and SCSI's future programming. By May 2018, SRP II and SCSI initiated programmatic drawdowns and operational consolidation and cost reductions in response to the funding crisis — a process that other U.S.-funded stabilization programs were also undergoing. The U.S. interagency platform for Syria assistance based in Turkey, known as the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START), also implemented a new U.S. government policy

#### CHOOSING BERLIN

In late 2016, USAID/OTI conducted an internal management review and recommended that SRP II establish a second operational capability outside of Turkey to provide assistance to northeastern Syria. USAID/OTI concluded in April 2017 that the program should have a flexible multi-country operating platform to meet the following key considerations: 1) access to Syrian Arabic and Kurdish speaking staff that can serve in key program functions, like program development officer and monitoring and evaluation (M&E); 2) access to partners or representatives of partners to facilitate communication and coordination; and 3) a host country with a stable political and operating environment and host-country approval for the program and nature of the work. By September 2017, USAID/OTI determined that a main programmatic hub would be in Berlin, Germany, and procurement and logistics in Erbil, Iraq, with increased use of field-based staff in Syria.

directive to discontinue any non-humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria (with the exception of support to SCD). The SCSi procurement office in Erbil closed in June 2018, and the SRP II offices in Gaziantep and Istanbul closed in August 2018. Management of SRP II and SCSi transferred entirely to Berlin upon formal registration of Chemonics Deutschland in June 2018, which operated a small platform in Berlin until the end of the project in October 2020. Throughout the entirety of the project, SRP II and SCSi maintained a small contingent of field staff in the programs' operating areas in Syria for specific functions related to activity development, due diligence and price confirmation, program M&E, reporting, and contextual analysis.

Before the program ran out of funding and due to the U.S. government's new policy of cost burden sharing among coalition partners, USAID/OTI received additional funding in 2018 and 2019 from the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, German Federal Foreign Office, and other coalition donors, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to continue SCSi's early recovery assistance in eastern Syria. However, after the October 2019 Turkish invasion into northeast Syria, and an announcement by the Trump Administration of the intention to withdraw U.S. troops from the area, SCSi temporarily suspended activities in October 2019. Given the uncertain security situation and its related impact on procurement and implementation milestones, USAID/OTI decided to complete all activities in December, six months earlier than SCSi's anticipated completion of northeast activities by June 2020. The SCSi program permanently closed by April 2020.

The Trump Administration released funding to continue supporting SCD through SRP II on three separate occasions from 2018 to 2020. Through U.S. government and other donor funds, SRP II was the sole funder of SCD operations costs from September 2019 to August 2020.

#### **END OF PROJECT AND COVID-19 RESPONSE**

SRP II temporarily closed its Berlin office in March 2020, after the German government declared a partial lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing a work-at-home status until permanently closing its office in June 2020. To ensure no gap in funding between the end of USAID/OTI support to SCD and the start of new donor funding, USAID/OTI asked SRP II to maintain a small team from July through September 2020 to complete its assistance to SCD and finalize the SRP II closeout.

#### **B. REMOTE PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

Due to the unique challenges of managing a program in Syria from a separate country, SRP II used innovative remote management techniques to monitor and verify activities inside Syria. The robust, multi-layered remote management system evolved over the course of the project in several ways and built upon the systems created under the first SRP task order. Many of these evolutions and innovations were driven by the fluid operating context in Syria, which required SRP II to remain agile and flexible to react to changing circumstances to retain its ability to program effectively, efficiently, and compliantly and respond to emerging windows of opportunity.

#### **MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND THIRD-PARTY MONITORING**

At the start of SRP II, the program used a layered M&E system to verify the implementation and impact of its work as well as to leverage contextual knowledge in support of program

development. These layers include grantee reporting; engagement of field program assistants inside Syria to verify the work and survey beneficiary populations; and leveraging independent, third-party monitoring by USAID/OTI's Information Collection, Analysis and Monitoring (ICAM) project, a direct USAID/OTI contract. ICAM provided additional verification of activity implementation, contextual analysis and research of social, political, economic, and military developments inside Syria, and perceptions evaluations of the impact of SRP II's activity clusters over a longer period of time. During SRP II's second year of implementation, ICAM's scope was reduced so that it focused solely on third-party monitoring of SRP II's activity implementation. After ICAM ended in 2018, SRP II continued to have third-party monitoring of activities through other contract mechanisms through the end of the program.

### **RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

SRP II established a new Research and Analysis Unit (RAU) in 2017 to replace some of the ICAM activities and provide in-house capacity on a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research capabilities with the intent to help SRP II better understand the Syrian social, political, and economic conditions and support SRP II's ability to plan, implement, and assess programming in targeted areas of Syria. The justification for establishing the RAU within the SRP II team was threefold: to increase the speed and program relevance of information and products; to minimize the management burden for SRP II; and to facilitate greater flexibility to expand into and operate out of new locations. The RAU, in coordination with the M&E team, engaged a third-party subcontractor in Syria to carry out large-scale surveys and research on the ground. However, as a result of the sudden freezing of available funds and the U.S. government decision to pause non-humanitarian programming in the northwest, new strategic approaches and activities were put on hold, thereby reducing demand for the RAU's deliverables. During the closeout phase of the program, the RAU's focus shifted from conducting research to drafting products that examined the legacy and lessons learned from the experience of SRP II. Despite the reduction of staff and programming, SRP II continued to manage throughout the life of the program a small but highly qualified M&E and research team that developed several important products that were widely circulated within the U.S. government and used to inform other U.S. programming and diplomatic efforts. One example that was circulated within the U.S. government was a Northwest Syria Ceasefire Violations tracker, which tracked violations of the Sochi Agreement by all parties from March 2019 through the close of the program.

### **INVESTING IN KEY PARTNERSHIPS TO REDUCE RISK**

In eastern Syria, SCSl established the Early Recovery Team/Community Recovery Group (ERT/CRG) model in collaboration with the Eastern Mediterranean Institute (EMI) to carry out its early recovery and stabilization assistance. This model also heavily used the Facilitating Accelerated Service-delivery Tasks (FAST) mechanism (discussed below). By implementing its work through one partner, SCSl could quickly deploy assistance to vulnerable areas of northeastern Syria, but it also understood the risks of running so much assistance through one partner and took proactive steps to mitigate them. SCSl invested staff time and effort to conduct targeted capacity-building interventions for EMI, on topics such as awareness and prevention of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, business ethics, procurement, financial and administrative policy and procedure development, and management of a standard USAID grant. These training sessions improved EMI's ability to manage SCSl assistance efficiently and ethically.

## **COMPLAINTS HOTLINE**

SCSI also established a complaints hotline, allowing for anonymous reports of suspected misuse of assistance funds. The project continually iterated its management practices of the hotline and created streamlined protocols to receive, evaluate, and respond to complaints. These steps strengthened SCSI's ability to remotely manage and effectively monitor its early recovery and stabilization portfolio and mitigate and prevent fraud and corruption.

## **FAST MECHANISM**

SRP II developed innovative grant management processes with USAID/OTI that positioned SRP II to be the first program on the ground immediately after territories were liberated from ISIS. One of SRP II's most unique innovations was creating the FAST mechanism. FAST originally grew out of the need to pre-position heavy equipment near areas of northwest Syria that were expected to be liberated in late 2015 by opposition forces. The FAST mechanism allowed SRP II a pre-approved assistance mechanism that could be activated when the need arose. The program implemented 11 activities and 105 interventions (discrete activities within one FAST mechanism) using the FAST mechanism throughout SRP II.

# III. PROGRAM STRATEGY

SRP II pursued its goal of supporting a moderate, inclusive, and stable Syria through a set of objectives that evolved over time to adapt to Syria’s complex environment and to support U.S. foreign policy priorities in Syria. The program team designed activities to be responsive, timely, and carried out effectively by Syrian partners, despite escalating violence in many parts of the country and changing U.S. foreign policy objectives.

In 2015 and 2016, SRP II refocused its strategy on protecting moderate civilian space as communities faced increasing threats from the military encroachment of actors such as the regime and extremist groups. The program focused its efforts in establishing the necessary preconditions for moderate actors (see text box) to remain relevant, supported, visible, and influential, and to engage more with civil society organizations than had been done previously. By 2017, the U.S. government had articulated its foreign policy interests to include: 1) the enduring defeat of ISIS, 2) countering the threat of extremist groups such as the Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), now known as Haya’t Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), and 3) the promotion of a viable and lasting political solution to the conflict. To incorporate these U.S. foreign policy priorities in SRP II, USAID/OTI established three program objectives in 2017 that lasted until the end of SRP II:

- To enable the early recovery of newly-liberated areas from ISIS.
- To strengthen communities to better exist extremism.
- To maintain and increase the influence of strategic moderate entities.

Two overarching developments particularly influenced the evolution of the program’s strategy. First, the Syrian regime’s steady reconquest of territory, paired with the growing power of extremist groups in remaining opposition-held areas, contributed to an ever-shrinking space to support a moderate, inclusive, and stable Syria in the west of the country. The U.S. government condemned Russia’s intervention in Syria but declined to directly challenge it, instead emphasizing countering violent extremism. This focus reinforced the second key development, which was SDF’s gradual territorial defeat of ISIS in the east, backed by IC, paving the way for large-scale early recovery efforts in areas under SDF control. These developments defined two major tracks for SRP II’s program strategy: the moderate actors’ approach in opposition-held areas and the early recovery approach in NLAs.

## PRECONDITIONS FOR MODERATE ACTORS

**Supporting moderate values.** SRP II established that “moderate” partners are those that support (and/or exhibit) the following values:

- support a unified Syria
- believe in and/or demonstrate representativeness in action/work
- believe in and/or demonstrate inclusivity in action/work
- remain relatively independent from armed groups
- do not use violence as means of achieving goals
- believe in the need to protect personal freedoms, minority rights, individual rights, equality, and dignity

**Addressing misconceptions.** SRP II sought partners working to decrease any view or opinion that is incorrect because it is based on faulty thinking or understanding.

**Inclusivity.** SRP II emphasized that actors actively work for the inclusion and representation of all non-extremist Syrians (opposition, minorities, etc.)

## **A. MODERATE ACTORS APPROACH IN OPPOSITION-HELD AREAS**

In 2016, as the regime regained territory with support from Russian and allied militaries, and the power of Islamist and extremist factions grew, SRP II pivoted strategies to focus on supporting moderate civilian entities. Initially conceived to prepare these actors to play a role in a future Syria, the strategy had evolved by mid-2016 in response to escalating violence in which extremists and armed groups garnered influence at the expense of the moderate civilian opposition. The new strategy emphasized geographic focus areas less and focused more on the necessary preconditions for moderate actors to remain relevant, supported, visible, and influential. Armed factions derived their legitimacy and public support primarily from their military efforts against the regime. However, most factions eventually sought to broaden their public support through delivering relief and essential services. The risk of armed factions intervening in civilian affairs at the local level increased throughout duration of the conflict. As the frontlines stagnated, armed factions attempted to assert more influence over civilian affairs, either directly or through civilian affiliates.

SRP II continued to support local and provincial councils but became increasingly selective in who it deemed sufficiently moderate, legitimate, and capable to gain an edge over extremist actors. Over time, as more and more councils became either co-opted by JAN/HTS or entirely overpowered by them, SRP II was forced, both for strategic and legal reasons, to shift its support away from these groups and find new types of partners. By the beginning of 2017, SRP II had introduced programming directly addressing extremist ideology. The program increased media activities and CSO service delivery initiatives, as extremist groups gained more influence over governance and service delivery. SRP II's remaining partners were primarily CSOs. By mid-2018, and after the U.S.-government placed its stabilization assistance under review and halted non-humanitarian funding, programming in the northwest was limited to SCD. SRP II's assistance to SCD continued across opposition-held areas for the entirety of the program.

## **B. EARLY RECOVERY APPROACH IN NEWLY LIBERATED AREAS**

U.S. government policy in Syria increasingly focused on ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS and countering violent extremism more broadly. With the liberation of the northeast city of Kobani, the U.S. government prioritized assistance to the SDF and stepped up its military intervention against ISIS. To help solidify the gains of the military campaign that drove ISIS's loss of territory, the August 2016 SRP II strategy increased focus on programming in NLAs.

Large swathes of land that had been under ISIS's control for several years were rapidly liberated in 2017. SRP II was acutely aware that the defeat of ISIS would be short-lived if military gains were not paired with stabilization assistance that enabled NLAs to recover. At the same time, some stakeholders cast serious doubts that the Kurdish-lead SDF and its affiliated governing institutions could address the root drivers of instability that made communities vulnerable to extremism. USAID/OTI decided to work with CSOs that were independent of the SDF as the vehicle through which to provide stabilization assistance. However, it was clear that the needs in Raqqa and its environs would far outstrip the capacity of local CSOs to address them. To address this gap, USAID/OTI developed the ERT/CRG concept in April 2017. By pairing local technical professionals (such as engineers and project managers) responsible for the implementation of early recovery activities with community and tribal leaders, the ERT model

envisioned a bottom-up approach to recovery that empowered local communities to engage in the stabilization process and that ensured key priorities were met apolitically.

Supported by SCSJ in 2017, the ERT expanded its offices from Tabqa to include the city of Raqqa; the ERT was consistently one of the earliest actors present in NLAs. SCSJ increased its emphasis on DeZ province in 2018 and 2019 to meet critical early recovery needs in NLAs, while the stabilization work in Raqqa Province began to shift to include both soft and hard recovery activities (see textbox). The team had initial plans to increase their presence in DeZ as the remaining ISIS-held areas were being liberated. The plans, however, never gained sufficient momentum as various events affected the security situation and made the program adapt multiple times, starting in December 2018, when President Trump announced the withdrawal of the U.S. military, and stretching to October 2019, when Turkey's invasion of northeast Syria led to the decision to prematurely close the program. The programmatic decisions during this time restricted the role of the ERT and limited any expansion into the NLAs in DeZ. Ultimately, the closing operational space and USAID/OTI program's limited remaining time led to the early conclusion of SRP II's early recovery and stabilization work in eastern Syria by the end of 2019.

#### HARD AND SOFT RECOVERY ACTIVITIES

- *Hard recovery activities* are focused on upgrading physical infrastructure, improving essential services like water and electricity, and cleaning and clearing public spaces.
- *Soft recovery activities* are focused on psychosocial support, education support, building community resilience, and media.

# IV. ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

SRP II implemented a total of 239 activities with local and provincial councils, SCD, and other national-level bodies, CSOs, and communication and media organizations with the goal of achieving a moderate, inclusive, and stable Syria. To this end, SRP II provided grants to Syrian entities programming toward three main objectives: 1) maintaining and increasing the influence of strategic moderate entities; 2) strengthening communities to better resist extremism; and 3) enabling early recovery in areas newly liberated from ISIS.

## A. OBJECTIVE I: Maintaining and Increasing the Influence of Strategic Moderate Entities

As the vision of a post-Assad future for Syria receded with the evolution of the conflict and rise of extremist influence, SRP II focused on preserving moderate space by supporting moderate entities to serve as inclusive, responsive, legitimate institutions in their communities (see text box). The program continued to work directly with some of the civilian governance structures it had supported during SRP, serving as a credible alternative to regime or extremist governance models. As opposition-held areas fell to the regime or local councils came under the influence of extremist groups, the program replaced this assistance with support to civil society actors that provided alternative narratives to the extremist ones dominating the public space and social media discourse. Lastly, SCD remained a key partner for the entirety of SRP II.

### OBJECTIVE I AT A GLANCE

- Number of Activities: 171
- Value: \$46,590,233
- Number of partners: 42

## ASSISTING CIVILIAN GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

SRP II worked with a number of local and provincial councils that SRP supported in parts of rural Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Idleb provinces to improve their service delivery capacity. Assistance helped councils cope with fluctuating needs in their communities as changing lines of control repeatedly triggered large-scale population movements. Anticipating the regime's siege on the city of Aleppo, for example, SRP II and its partners pre-positioned items such as tractors and a bakery in opposition-held areas in early 2016 to increase their resilience in the face of food scarcity. The same year, support to the Hama Provincial Council allowed it to repair a vital



Maintaining the Huweiz evacuation road in the western countryside of Hama in early 2016. Photo credit: SRP II grantee.

evacuation road used by civilians and SCD's civil defense and medical teams, relief organizations, and other medical teams in the Ghab Plain area of Hama's western countryside (see photo). SRP II support also helped entities assert civilian space. In Eastern Ghouta, SRP II supported the Rural Damascus Provincial Council (RDPC) to collaborate with local councils to provide life-saving assistance to residents under siege and bombardment by the regime. As a moderate civilian entity with the potential to represent a large group of the city's residents, RDPC was a key stakeholder in nearly all activities in the area, some of which moved beyond basic needs assistance into more nuanced governance activities like land titling and civil records. By early 2017, the program also promoted the opportunity for RDPC to elevate civilians' voices in local truce negotiations. In Idleb Province, where HTS exerted increasing control over local governance entities, SRP II supported a small number of moderate and independent councils through 2017 to deliver strategic services that the extremist group would have otherwise provided and used as leverage. This included repairing electricity and water networks, establishing waste management systems, and supporting bread production, land titling, and civil records offices. SRP II and local communities generally saw these councils as credible and effective service providers, and although ultimately unsuccessful in preventing HTS interference, all stakeholders made concerted efforts to push back on extremists' attempts to exert influence over them.

### **SUPPORTING MODERATE CSOS TO RESIST EXTREMIST DOMINANCE IN NORTHWEST SYRIA**

As extremist groups gained more influence over local governance entities, SRP II turned to CSOs to undertake civil resistance and service delivery work. Civil society partners stood for moderate values that directly contradicted extremist narratives, including inclusivity, respect for human rights, and the vision of a unified Syria. The CSOs gained local credibility through community outreach, service delivery, and subtle – or at times overt – resistance to extremist groups, including through awareness campaigns and women's empowerment activities. Early SRP II programming also worked to promote coordination between CSOs, media organizations, and various moderate administrative structures on local and provincial levels to build on each other's efforts rather than conduct isolated efforts with more limited impact.

### **AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF MODERATE ACTORS THROUGH MEDIA**

As moderate groups struggled for a role in Syria's transition, they engaged in a war of ideas against the regime as well as against extremist influence. The regime, its allies, and extremist groups persistently attacked media activists — both on and offline. SRP II implemented media activities to publicize the efforts of moderate groups and amplify their voices. SRP II-supported media work included public engagement campaigns, magazines, coverage of the efforts and accomplishments of various moderate opposition entities, as well as themes such as unity, coexistence, promoting the role of women, and the importance of education. Such content provided a platform for engagement and sparked discussion, especially on social media. Additionally, SRP II developed media activities that provided coverage of other SRP II program activities and that supported partners' public outreach capacity. SRP II-supported media content received hundreds of thousands of views and interactions. It reached Syrians both in and outside of the country, along with other people around the world, helping to counter the narratives of Russia, the regime, and extremist propaganda.

## SUPPORT FOR THE SYRIA CIVIL DEFENSE

In mid-2013, SRP launched its first assistance to local emergency response teams in Aleppo that would eventually consolidate and grow into SCD, a national volunteer organization known internationally as the White Helmets. SRP II continued to support SCD through the entirety of the program, allocating \$54.7 million in assistance between SRP and SRP II, including heavy equipment, emergency response vehicles, core funding for stipends and operational costs, and other forms of support (see Annex V: USAID/OTI's Assistance to the Syria Civil Defense Since 2013). This support enabled SCD to expand and later maintain its capacity to deliver life-saving emergency response services. At SRP II's close, SCD had responded to 36,920 attacks and saved 122,550 lives since the start of the conflict. SCD teams also provided 100,703 medical services, 12,224 firefighting operations, and 162,034 civilians services, such as rubble removal, road clearance, rehabilitating public facilities, evacuations of civilians from besieged areas, and equipping camps for displaced persons.



Firefighting in western Idleb. Photo credit: Syria Civil Defense

From January 2020 until August 2020, the SCD's women's centers reached 60,853 people. A total of 60,304 people received medical services (69 percent women, 7 percent men, 24 percent children), and 147,386 attended awareness sessions on various health and public well-being topics (32 percent women, 26 percent men, and 42 percent children).

SRP II coordinated closely with a group of international donors that invested substantially in the partnership with SCD. This coordination allowed donors to complement their efforts and maximize impact. At the height of its operations, SCD was composed of 4,031 volunteers in more than 500 local communities across eight provinces throughout Syria. Following northern Aleppo's liberation from ISIS in early 2017, SCD opened six centers in the Euphrates Shield area to support the return of basic services, such as water and electrical repair, emergency response and burials, rubble removal, and mine marking and removal. In Al Bab, the largest and most strategic town in the region, SCD conducted rubble removal activities within 48 hours of liberation, making it the first responder on the scene.



Clean-up campaign in Idleb city. Photo credit: Syria Civil Defense

During SRP II, SCD worked in six provinces, including rural Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Idleb, Hama, and Latakia. As the Assad regime and its allies consolidated control over opposition-held territory, SCD's operating space shrank by 2020 to Idleb, small pockets of Hama and Latakia, and northern Aleppo. SCD's members were the last to leave Aleppo, facilitating the evacuation

of civilians until the city fell to regime forces in December 2017. During the regime's brutal campaign on Eastern Ghouta, SCD teams continued to pull civilians from the rubble, fight fires, and bury the dead. In April 2019, a Russian-backed military assault against Idlib began in earnest. The taking of large parts of Idlib, which had been a last-resort refuge for civilians fleeing the violence in the rest of the country, triggered unimaginable levels of suffering and displacement. Once again, SCD teams worked to help civilians reach safety even as they themselves were targeted by airstrikes and shelling.



Road maintenance in northwest Syria. Photo credit: Syria Civil Defense

In addition to helping civilians on the ground, SCD sought to rally support internationally. SCD capitalized on its heroic work to give voice to the millions of Syrians struggling to survive. All the while, SCD faced physical and reputational attacks from both Russia and the regime. The Russians and Syrian regime mounted a disinformation campaign that painted SCD members as Western-supported terrorists. SCD became a target of disinformation for two main reasons. First, SCD's embodiment of the revolution's original values directly contradicted the regime and Russian narrative that only violent jihadi groups comprised the opposition. Second, as the first on the scene, SCD collected damning evidence of regime and Russian atrocities. The regime and Russian airstrikes and artillery fire targeted SCD centers and teams hundreds of times, including the indiscriminate use of double-tap strikes directed at SCD emergency responders. A total of 260 SCD volunteers have been killed on the job since the group's formation in 2013.

To date, SCD remains the only national-level structure in Syria built from the bottom up. Although operating on a national level, it has preserved strong local ties across opposition-held areas through its local centers across the country. The organization's widespread popularity is derived from its life-saving work, neutrality, and presence in communities. In surveys conducted throughout SRP II, more than 90 percent of respondents viewed SCD as an effective and responsive service provider and 79 percent viewed SCD as an independent institution. SCD remained committed to maintaining its independence. As HTS consolidated control over Idlib province in late 2018, SCD ceased all cooperation with local councils given HTS's administrative and political control through its governance arm, the Syrian Salvation Government. Second, SCD announced that it would suspend work at the first sign of interference. These measures allowed SCD to operate without disruption.

**“Many factions have taken over our area and the local council and organizations have fallen in line with every new actor, but SCD has stayed independent and has not followed any military that has come to control the area.”**

**— A RESIDENT FROM SARAQIB**

From 2019 until August 2020, SRP II devoted resources to strengthen and refine SCD's capacity as a sustainable organization to receive direct funding from all types of donors and become less

reliant on intermediary organizations. In December 2019, SRP II carried out a capacity assessment to identify and prioritize areas where resources should be allocated to build SCD's capacity as an institution. The assessment concluded that, "SCD as an organization is highly effective in delivering its services to its beneficiaries. Its grass roots origins inform the organization's governance, management, and internal communications modalities, many of which are informal — although well-articulated and established in the organization's governing documents." As a result, the SRP II provided capacity building technical assistance focused on shaping corporate governance and a strategic vision, organizational restructuring, multi-year budgeting, grants application and fundraising, and strategic communications.

In each of the areas of capacity building, SCD made significant progress toward being an organization that is ready to receive and manage funding directly from donors in the final year of the USAID/OTI's support. SCD demonstrated a strong commitment to strengthening its governance, operational, and stakeholder engagement capacities, dedicating time and staff resources to the program alongside its ongoing and urgent humanitarian work in Syria and despite logistical complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. SCD has, in the process, reaffirmed its position as a humanitarian organization.

In September 2020, USAID/OTI and the SRP II program facilitated the handover of the SCD portfolio to a new U.S. government funding partner who will continue to support SCD in its life-saving work in Syria.

## Saving the Greatest Number of Lives in the Shortest Possible Time



Time and again, SCD volunteers responded to Russian-backed regime offensives across northern Syria that caused widespread carnage. Photo credit: Syria Civil Defense

*“What the White Helmets accomplish may seem like a drop in the ocean, but what they represent is immense: resilience and bravery in the face of barbarism...They also embody a spirit of civic resistance — upholding some of the ideals of the peaceful, popular uprising of 2011 and exemplifying courage and solidarity in the face of state-sponsored terror.”*

*- Excerpt from an editorial in The Guardian, recommending SCD for the Nobel Peace Prize*

As the Syrian conflict grew darker, SCD continued to offer hope in the local communities it served. In 2015, SCD members began wearing GoPro cameras on their helmets, allowing them to document both the destruction and violence they witnessed and their heroic responses to mitigate it. When eastern Aleppo, a city which had been under siege since summer 2016, fell to the regime in December of that year, SCD’s 138 members in Aleppo were the last to leave the city, facilitating the evacuation of civilians until the bitter end.

SCD harnessed its rising profile to put a global spotlight on Syria and advocate repeatedly for international action to end the conflict. Beginning in 2016, SCD’s heroism was regularly recognized on the world stage. In April 2016, it received the Interaction Award and the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the “alternative Nobel prize.” SCD was the subject of a Netflix documentary, which won two Emmys and an Oscar, and a CBS *60 Minutes* episode, which won 4 Emmys. In addition to being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize four times, SCD received numerous international honors, including the prestigious Eli Wiesel Award of the United States Holocaust Museum.

SCD’s unwavering commitment to operate as a values-driven, independent, and cohesive national organization that serves local communities turned it into one of the most pivotal actors in Syria today and undoubtedly in the future.

## B. OBJECTIVE 2: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES TO BETTER RESIST EXTREMISM

Syrian society suffers from many consequences of protracted war, extending far beyond tangible effects, such as insecurity and lack of access to healthcare, food, and water. The country's social fabric is also damaged, with political fragmentation, ethnic and religious tension, radicalization, and a lack of education acting as drivers of instability and extremism. SRP II supported grassroots

organizations to challenge the values that extremist groups espoused both on and offline and to provide alternatives to extremism through activities that engaged communities around values such as democratic freedom, tolerance, pluralism, and respect for human rights.

### CLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE THROUGH PERFORMANCE ARTS, PARKS, AND CAMPAIGNS

SRP II partners facilitated discussions in their communities that directly or indirectly addressed extremist ideologies, depending on the space available to do so. These partners held the discussions in the southern neighborhoods of Damascus and northwest Syria, involving local authorities, political actors, youth leaders, and other activists. SRP II also supported cultural interventions that provided alternatives to HTS for thousands of youth and children across northwest Syria. One partner, for example, challenged HTS on social issues by offering co-ed theater and music courses for youth. In Souran, SRP II sponsored the rehabilitation of a public park following the area's liberation from ISIS to support the return of social activities that ISIS had largely forbidden.



Children at a theater production in Saraqib. Photo credit: SRP II grantee

### OBJECTIVE 2 AT A GLANCE

- Number of activities: 33
- Value: \$1,891,148\*
- Number of partners: 24

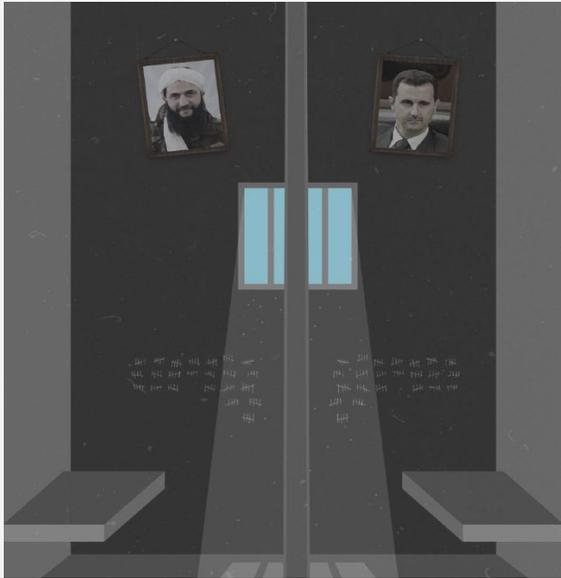
\*USD value is approximate.

### BUILDING BRIDGES ON AND OFFLINE

With its ability to reach people across seemingly uncrossable divides, SRP II's media and communications portfolio served as an important tool for strengthening communities to better resist extremism. The program supported the voice of local partners on social media that opposed extremist groups. SRP II-supported content received hundreds of thousands of views on partner websites and social media outlets such as Facebook and YouTube. Some partners were community-based groups that focused on local issues, while others were national media outlets with millions of social media followers across Syria and abroad. Media actors often received equipment to boost the quality of material shared online, as well as financial support to maintain or even increase the amount of material produced, and social media marketing support. A number of projects directly addressed extremist groups' increased use of social media as a pulpit to promote their divisive message to gain supporters and sympathizers. One activity, for example, produced animations that focused on how the presence of extremist groups negatively

affected the daily life of communities in northern Syria, including rising prices and harassment at military checkpoints. Another used satire to highlight and discredit extremist groups through a series of short animations that questioned their extremist narratives. SRP II also supported investigative articles, radio segments, and other events that encouraged engagement and coexistence between communities from different religious, political, and ethnic backgrounds.

## Discrediting an Extremist Group's Online Propaganda



An e-poster casts HTS and the Assad regime in a similar light. Image credit: SRP II grantee

In 2017, HTS relied on violence and intimidation to gain control of much of Idlib Province, invading towns, targeting civilians, and recruiting children. Yet, violence was not the extremist group's only tool. It also waged an online war, merging sectarian, nationalist, and religious propaganda in attempts to win public support.

One SRP II activity challenged this by supporting a group of Syrian media activists to call attention to HTS's misleading reporting and intolerant actions. In 2018, the group produced "street echo" surveys, audio interviews, animated videos, e-posters, and infographics, in addition to regular news coverage of events and life under HTS rule. The activists posted this content on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as those used by HTS and its propaganda arms, such as Telegram and WhatsApp.

The project succeeded in providing an alternative and accurate narrative to communities in Idlib, giving voice to those neglected and affected by HTS, especially in its strongholds. Prominent journalists followed and recognized the content and coverage, including journalists at Aljazeera, which shared one of the videos on its main news broadcast. Pro-HTS attempts to shut down the platform, such as reporting its site to Twitter, were yet another indication of the initiative's success.

## USING COMMUNITY CENTERS TO REBUILD SOCIAL COHESION

SRP II supported CSOs to bring people from different backgrounds together and create hubs for civic activity at community centers. This included the establishment of seven centers in northwest Syria, one in the Euphrates Shield town of Azaz, one in the Damascus suburb of Duma, and two in the northeast. The focus of each center's activities was tailored to the local needs and context; however, all centers provided an alternative space to extremism, serving as beacons for moderate values in their respective communities. CSOs used the centers to provide a wide range of activities, including psychosocial support for children; computer, language, and educational courses for youth; and literacy courses and discussions on women's affairs for women. CSOs also used community centers to host poetry competitions and film screenings and to conduct campaigns to raise awareness on subjects of concern to the communities, such

as mine safety. These activities provided an avenue to address larger challenges facing communities, such as ethnic tensions, displacement, youth recruitment, education gaps, and a lack of livelihoods. CSOs found creative ways to push back against extremist ideologies. One SRP II partner in the HTS-controlled town of Salqin, for example, continued to operate without segregating by sex in direct defiance of HTS ideology. Their activities and outreach campaigns engaged the community around moderate values, enabling them to provide an alternative narrative to HTS.

### **C. OBJECTIVE 3: ENABLING EARLY RECOVERY IN AREAS NEWLY LIBERATED FROM ISIS**

SRP II played a significant role in enabling the early recovery of communities liberated from ISIS through the delivery of essential services. As the IC's and SDF's military gains caused ISIS territory to shrink, the program moved swiftly into NLAs, beginning in northern Syria in early 2017 and followed by eastern Syria in early 2018. In northern Aleppo Province, SRP II worked with local governance entities to fill

governance and service delivery vacuums that extremist actors could exploit in areas liberated by the Turkish Armed Forces. In areas liberated by the IC and SDF, the program directly engaged communities to identify early recovery priorities and address them through SCSII.

#### **OBJECTIVE 3 AT A GLANCE**

- Number of Activities: 35
- Value: \$13,498,882\*
- Number of partners: 13

*\* USD value is approximate*

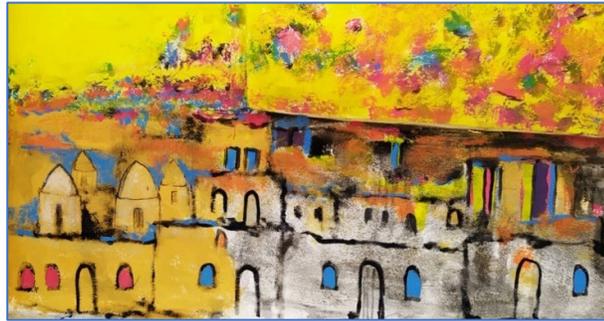
#### **ENABLING EARLY RECOVERY IN THE EUPHRATES SHIELD AREAS THROUGH SUPPORT FOR MODERATE ENTITIES**

Parallel to SCD's support, SRP II also allocated assistance to local governance entities, including the Aleppo Provincial Council's Stabilization Committee and 22 newly re-established local councils, enabling these actors to quickly fill the governance and service delivery vacuums after ISIS was expelled from a 2,225 square kilometer area in northern Aleppo. ISIS had managed basic services, security, rule of law, and communications, in addition to collecting taxes and providing subsidies. Therefore, it became critical post-liberation that communities recognized moderate entities as representative and preferable over groups and ideologies that espouse sectarianism or extremism. SRP II assistance, which included waste management, bread production, generators, solar-powered lights, and school and market rehabilitations, reached most of the population centers across the region, increasing access to basic services for hundreds of thousands of citizens. The program also supported the establishment of a community center in Jarablus that promoted moderate values through civic engagement activities. Residents reported that these activities played a key role in returning a sense of normalcy to the region.

## ENGAGING CSOS TO SUPPORT GRASSROOTS INTERVENTIONS IN THE NORTHEAST

SCSI supported 10 CSOs to carry out 12 interventions in Raqqa, Hasakah, and DeZ provinces. These grassroots activities largely focused on the psychosocial wellbeing of communities in NLAs, in particular women, youth, and those displaced by conflict. The establishment of community centers in Tabqa and Ain Issa created space for inclusive community engagement, hosting a variety of activities designed

to promote positive values. Five activities focused on improving access to education through the provision of equipment and school kits in Raqqa City and DeZ's eastern and western countryside. Lastly, the rehabilitation of Jawad Anzour Park in the city of Raqqa offered Raqqawis a safe space to meet away for their daily struggles. Speaking of the initiative, one resident said, "People say the priority is for water, sewage, and electricity, but I think that parks are just as important. They give people space to breathe and kids [space] to play and release all the psychological pressure."



Murals painted on the Jawad Anzour Park walls. Photo credit: SRP II grantee

## SUPPORTING COMMUNITY STABILIZATION IN NORTHEAST SYRIA THROUGH THE EARLY RECOVERY TEAM

SCSI supported the establishment of the ERT in Raqqa province in June 2017 and its expansion into DeZ in January 2018. The ERT model offered an inclusive approach to implementing rapid recovery interventions that empowered local communities to engage in the stabilization process.

Composed of local engineers and project managers, the ERT identified stabilization projects through the CRG, a group of local leaders and notables that hosted town halls and liaised with targeted communities to identify high-priority interventions and to gain community buy-in. The ERT implemented 49 interventions worth nearly \$11.2 million that responded to urgent community priorities in Raqqa and DeZ provinces and enabled displaced persons to return to their homes. Activities included rubble removal, road repairs, bread distributions, water trucking, and rehabilitation of water, sewage, and electrical stations and networks. Once the most basic needs were met in the city of Raqqa, the ERT moved from basic service provision and reconstruction to the restoration of public spaces.



Cinema session for children in Ain Issa Camp. Photo credit: SRP II grantee

The ERT's work included the rehabilitation of Al-Naeem Square, a famous central roundabout in Raqqa. Al-Naeem means "paradise" in Arabic, and prior to the city's occupation by ISIS, the square and its surrounding shops and cafes were a favorite gathering place for Raqqa'is. Under ISIS rule, Al-Naeem Square became known as a place of terror where ISIS frequently staged public executions. The story of Al-Naeem, including video footage of life at the square before and after ISIS occupation, was captured by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in December 2017.

Despite widespread destruction, residents quickly reclaimed Al-Naeem Square following Raqqa's liberation; many informal shops and cafes opened around it. Now, the square's rehabilitation represents a further victory against ISIS.

"Let's leave the past behind, what happened has happened," noted a nearby shop owner when construction work began last fall, referring to ISIS' use of the square. "The full rehabilitation of the square with a beautiful design will change the whole city, as this square is the city center."

The ERT also completed 750 individual ad hoc requests by residents and local councils. Ad hoc requests were short-term appeals to use ERT vehicles outside of its operational hours to support immediate, often minor, community needs, like digging sewage holes, leveling agricultural lands, and digging canal paths. After the end of SRP II support, some members of the ERT in Raqqa and DeZ joined together to continue their work in the community when funding was available.

"The existence of a civic place that guides children to adhere to life and childhood is important to keep them away from the specter of extremism, in general, the center was able to convey the vision of SRP Grantee, that the residents of Ain Issa camp are not just numbers waiting for aid, rather, they are people who can work in all areas of life "

— SRP II GRANTEE REPRESENTATIVE



Al-Naeem Square before and after ERT rehabilitation. Photo credits: SRP II grantee

## Rubble Removal Activities Proved Essential to Raqqa's Recovery



ERT removes rubble near Al-Baida Park in Raqqa. Photo credit: SRP II grantee

The quantities of rubble that filled the streets of Raqqa City restricted local movement, hindered access to services, prevented local government and civil society from rebuilding, and devastated trade and commerce. Ahmad, a schoolteacher, reflects on how a sense of despair morphed into actionable and visible change in his area after encountering the ERT's work:

*I arrived in my city in November 2017, just a month after it was liberated, and I found the city a total mess. In my neighborhood, it was even hard to distinguish between the streets and the buildings due to the piles of rubble present there. When I saw that, I became very hopeless, and I thought we would need years to remove the rubble just to be able to walk on the streets. After a few days, I saw the ERT enter the city with a huge number of heavy vehicles and highly qualified engineers and workers who started removing the rubble. I was even more surprised by the speed of the team in removing the rubble and opening the main streets. They did a great job. They were the first ones who took the initiative to enter the city, implemented the most important project for Raqqa City at that time [rubble removal] and encouraged other organizations to follow their lead. In fact, their work really earned them the title Early Recovery Team.*

# V. CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Given the ever-changing and always complex environment in which SRP II operated, the program encountered and addressed a number of challenges. Many of these challenges led to innovative solutions and valuable lessons learned.

## A. SHIFTS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The changing U.S. policy environment for Syria was a key challenge throughout SRP II, particularly in the latter half, when President Trump announced a strategic review of \$200 million in stabilization funds for Syria in April 2018, which froze USG funds indefinitely, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the northeast in December 2018 and then again in October 2019. While other donor funding and emergency Transition Initiative funds were allocated to the program, the U.S. government funding freeze affected the project, staff, and partners — at times disrupting programmatic momentum or causing unplanned drawdowns in certain types of activities. Despite the changing U.S. policy decisions —which were out of the program’s control — SRP II remained flexible and responsive, maintained a highly qualified team, and provided vital assistance, while implementing a new portfolio of capacity building support to a key partner, SCD, through August 2020.

## B. SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Security presented a recurring challenge for SRP II staff and partners, many of whom were displaced by the ongoing Russian-backed regime offensives in the northwest or the 2019 Turkish incursion and announcements by President Trump in 2018 and 2019 to withdraw U.S. troops from northeast Syria. These ongoing security challenges directly affected SRP II partners, some of whom were targeted directly, and the program, which had to adapt or shut down entire activities. With USAID/OTI approval, SRP II responded by providing a three-month salary advance and a relocation allowance to all Syria-based staff to have sufficient funds to evacuate their homes if needed and also pre-empt the concern that an increase in violence would prevent the project from being able to deliver salary payments to staff. SRP II also made staff care and resilience support services available to all field staff in Syria, and it provided refreshers on information security protocols to address increasing concerns that staff’s individual security was at a higher risk as a result of their work with SRP II and its high-profile partners. The security environment in Turkey from 2015 to 2018 also came with a host of challenges for SRP II and prompted an office relocation from Gaziantep to Istanbul as a result of two bombings in Gaziantep attributed to ISIS and PKK, as well as security threats directed at Syrian activists. During these heightened security events, SRP II adopted an effective low-profile response to maintain staff safety.

## C. REMOTE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Throughout SRP II, project staff worked hard to establish effective systems for remote management to ensure efficient implementation and decrease risks of compliance or ethics

violations. To mitigate the potential for misappropriation or mismanagement of the assistance, SRP II instituted effective responses that included a range of training activities and technical assistance to its major partner in the northeast that covered topics such as awareness and prevention of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse, business ethics, procurement, and management of a standard grant. SRP II established a complaints hotline and streamlined protocols for the program team in Berlin to receive, evaluate, and appropriately channel or respond to complaints. This included notifying the Office of the Inspector General of complaints found to be credible, and collaborating with the inspector general to investigate when appropriate. As assistance heavily focused on the rehabilitation of critical infrastructure in the northeast, the program engaged a field-based technical engineer to play a quality control and assurance role. As dynamics in Syria's northwest affected the program's ability to deliver in-kind assistance, SRP II transitioned to fixed amount awards, which allowed the program to eliminate the need for major border crossings. To ensure the proper management of the assistance, SRP II increased and strengthened its project staff monitoring with more regular site visits to partner facilities. Additionally, SRP II applied a multi-layer vetting system to verify partners inside Syria.

#### **D. REMOTE MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

SRP II has always employed multiple layers of M&E to verify the implementation and impact of its work, however, as regular travel inside Syria and to Turkey became more difficult, SRP II focused on building the capacity of its field program assistants for project monitoring and output verification virtually, through regular debriefs, reporting, and training on M&E topics. These efforts have helped to build their capacity and improve the quality of site visits and perception data collection to better assess activity results. During the first half of the program, SRP II directly engaged a larger team to monitor program activities rather than rely on outside organizations as had been done during SRP. As a result, the program had better control over the quality of the M&E work in Syria, which allowed SRP II to successfully monitor very large and complex activities across an array of sectors and geographies in a very high-risk environment. Furthermore, SRP II improved its evaluations at the project level to more effectively evaluate clusters of projects with a shared outcome. The M&E tools were also effective in ensuring that U.S. government-provided goods and services did not fall in the hands of malign actors or reputationally contribute to malign actors.

#### **E. RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

In 2017, USAID/OTI decided to change the scope of its ICAM mechanism and integrate its research and analytical support components into the SRP II program, recognizing that it was less effective and more of a cost and management burden to have an external implementer which could not keep up with the pace of OTI programming and fast-changing operating environments in Turkey and Syria. As such, USAID/OTI formed the RAU, and ICAM retained its independent activity monitoring work as a separate and distinct OTI mechanism. ICAM's analytical data capability was also integrated within SRP II's M&E team, to enable in-house SRP II data collection and analysis and to more clearly link statistical findings to SRP II programming decisions. This structure allowed advanced monitoring and research capabilities to join SRP II under one roof and be more responsive to contextual demands and the findings from quantitative and qualitative field data, allowing research products such as DeZ CSO mapping to readily benefit from SRP II program and M&E staff, Syria-based staff, and partners.

## **F. FAST MECHANISM**

Throughout the life of SRP II, the program team used the FAST mechanism to provide rapid and flexible support to moderate entities to fill the vacuum left by the departure of ISIS and other extremist groups. The FAST mechanism provided a structure with which SRP II could support a sustained campaign of rapid assistance through numerous urgent activities. In the right circumstances, the FAST mechanism allowed USAID/OTI to launch assistance swiftly and be the first to react in urgent situations, which was a vital tool for the U.S. government response in Syria. The FAST mechanism created some drawbacks for the SRP II program as well, most notably reducing the need and incentive to diversify partners by tying up resources in a single partner, making it more difficult to track individual interventions, and decreasing the intellectual rigor behind each intervention when compared with the activity cycle for a standalone activity.

## **G. EARLY RECOVERY TEAM/COMMUNITY RECOVERY GROUPS MODEL**

In 2017, communities in areas liberated from ISIS were struggling due to the lack of basic services and the limited capacity of emerging governance entities. In response, SRP II's SCSI partnered with EMI to develop an inclusive approach to implement rapid recovery interventions in areas liberated from ISIS in northeastern Syria. SRP II implemented this approach through the ERT, which was composed of local engineers and project managers, as well as influential community and tribal leaders, which formed CRGs. The profile and reputation of the ERT was high in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zour, and many interviewed residents had positive feedback on the ERT/CRGs' work, including the timely and life-saving water distribution and rubble removal, which had an immediate impact and helped the ERT/CRG gain credibility. The model faced challenges that included: 1) the fact that some residents viewed the CRG's community engagement as insufficient, believing that some projects were selected outside of the community engagement process; 2) the ERT/CRG reach varied by technical sector and geography, leading residents in some areas to feel more frustration about the pace of recovery than those exposed to more ERT/CRG activity. SCSI also recognized that it could have established a more effective system to communicate decisions, share programmatic limitations, and outline objectives to the communities where the ERT/CRG worked. In addition, channeling so much assistance through one partner meant the potential loss of opportunities to diversify partners. Nevertheless, the investment in an effective model had significant and timely impact.

## **H. OPERATING IN TURKEY**

The increasingly contentious Turkish-U.S. relationship affected SRP II's ability to operate from Turkey during the first half of the program as the government of Turkey slowed and eventually stopped renewing and issuing work permits for SRP II Syrian and expatriate staff, an challenge other implementing partners faced as well. While the Turkish government eventually issued some visas, the program questioned the viability of continuing to operate from Turkey and decided to move select staff to Berlin. Compounded by the heightened political sensitivities with working in northeastern Syria, the Turkish government's increased scrutiny of NGOs and development actors working in Syria, frequent border closures, and the eventual freezing of U.S. government stabilization funds, SRP II decided to close its main office in Istanbul and representative office in Gaziantep by August 2018 and move a small contingent to Berlin to remotely manage both the northwest and northeast portfolios. The relocation to a different country halfway through the program consumed a substantial amount of time and energy for

SRP II senior management, operations, and home-office staff, as they had to learn new host-country regulations, establish new procedures, relocate some staff from Turkey, and recruit new staff, among other challenges. Despite these obstacles, SRP II never lost sight of its programmatic work in Syria, fulfilling all of its commitments despite the operational challenges.

# ANNEX I. IRAQ COMMUNITY RESILIENCE INITIATIVE RAMP UP OPTION FINAL REPORT

## SECTION I: PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In July 2018, USAID/OTI launched the Iraq Community Resilience Initiative (ICRI) under the Syria Regional Program (SRP) II task order, with \$5 million in funding and an estimated six-month duration. In October, ICRI absorbed an additional \$6 million in funding and, due to a delay in the launch of the follow-on Iraq Regional Program (IRP), ultimately continued implementation until July 2019. The two programs ran concurrently from February through July, as programming shifted one geographic region at a time from ICRI to IRP.

As a pilot mechanism, ICRI's mandate included deepening OTI's understanding of the political and social context in northern Iraq, establishing relationships with key local partners, and testing approaches promote recovery and rehabilitation in communities impacted by ISIS. ICRI was part of a whole-of-government approach to address the recovery needs of minority communities in Ninewa Province specifically targeted by ISIS – many of whom remain displaced and feel marginalized by their own government and the international community.

ICRI fulfilled this mandate through a range of entry, pilot, and information-gathering activities. The program specifically aimed to **support the safe and voluntary return of displaced populations, including ethnic and religious minorities, in areas affected by the ISIS conflict through activities focused on improving stability and/or social cohesion.** Core partners included advocacy organizations and local NGOs representing minority communities, youth groups, and faith-based organizations and institutions. ICRI also increasingly directed support to municipalities and government directorates as the program's understanding of local political dynamics matured and the importance of public services for stability became apparent. Activities ranged in value from \$4,000 to \$300,000 USD (with an average size of \$90,000 USD), and non-governmental grantees received a significant portion of assistance in cash through fixed-amount award in hybrid cash/in-kind grants.

In response to a USG imperative to publicly demonstrate a U.S. commitment to Iraq's recovery, nearly all pilot activities were fully branded and marked. This was particularly acute for Iraq's historically persecuted religious and ethnic minorities. The violence meted out to these communities by ISIS was labelled an attempted genocide by both the Obama and Trump administrations, and reports emanating from these communities indicated that they felt abandoned by the international community, including the U.S. This forward-leaning approach allowed ICRI to test its ability to brand in a range of scenarios and to develop a number of hypotheses on how branding and marking interacted with program objectives as the program expanded to new geographic areas, in addition to visibly reinforcing the U.S. commitment to these communities.

District	Activity Count	Funding
Hamdaniya	24	\$2,483,050
Sinjar	16	\$1,612,502
Tal Kayf	15	\$1,158,690
Shekhan	4	\$229,098
Mosul	3	\$166,641
Tal Afar	3	\$117,745

As noted in the above table, ICRI activities primarily targeted Hamdaniya, Sinjar, and Tal Kayf districts in Ninewa Province. Key types of activities across all districts included:

- Micro-level economic recovery activities to help returnees re-establish livelihoods, including grants to re-equip small businesses or shops damaged or closed as a result of the conflict, rehabilitation of olive groves, in-kind support to state-owned enterprises, and equipment support to farmers.
- Activities with municipalities and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to rehabilitate small-scale infrastructure and public services, such as streetlights, street signs, school classrooms, electricity and water supply networks, and waste management.
- Grants to key advocacy and civil society groups to strengthen cooperation between different components within communities and encourage inclusive return and recovery.
- Equipment and training support to government offices and directorates to help them re-establish critical services.
- Media activities to amplify information about recovery efforts in conflict-affected communities – for example, operational support for Ezidi 24 and the “Love Your City” video campaign.

Nearly all ICRI staff and operations were based in Erbil, along with the OTI field team at the U.S. consulate. The program team consisted of two Grants Management Units (GMUs) – including four Program Development Officers (PDOs) – who split their portfolios geographically. A rotating cadre of short-term expatriate staff supported key grants management, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), and procurement functions. Outside Erbil, ICRI engaged six field program assistants in target communities to support concept development, activity monitoring, and engagement with partners and beneficiaries.

## SECTION II: ICRI OPERATIONAL PHASES AND KEY CHALLENGES

### Startup (July through mid-August)

ICRI’s startup phase roughly spanned a six-week period, from early July through mid-August 2018. Given the imperative to deliver tangible, highly visible projects, startup was rapid and intense for all four corners, with relatively little space for smaller, iterative entry activities compared to typical pilot initiatives. During this period, Chemonics deployed multiple short-term technical assistance (STTA) to quickly stand up various project functions – including MEL, activity development, grants management, operations, and program strategy – and identified the management team, including a Regional Program Manager (RPM), Operations Manager, and Senior Program Development Officer (SPDO). ICRI leveraged the existing Erbil platform under SRP II to establish project operations and recruit staff. The startup team onboarded the first full GMU during this period and transitioned some SRP II operations staff to ICRI. After initially struggling to launch activities during the first month, the team cleared seven activities during the first half of August. ICRI also yellow-lit several other concepts during this period.

#### *What Went Well?*

- A key success was OTI and the IP’s ability to launch operations and activity development rapidly. USAID publicly announced the program on Thursday, June 14, and the startup team departed for Erbil the following Monday – even before the formal contract modification was signed to activate the ramp-up option. **The existing operational platform in Erbil supporting SRP, as well as the rapid mobilization of experienced IP operations staff facilitated the responsive startup.**
- **Both OTI and Chemonics deployed experienced leaders** at the beginning of startup, including Ray Jennings and Sara Skahill on the OTI side and Michele Piercey and Garrett Dorer from Chemonics. Startup team staff shared that these experienced OTI hands provided ICRI with clear guidance during a frenzied startup effort, and they came with the gravitas to effectively manage complex

relationships within the USG. On the Chemonics side, getting senior staff on the ground early allowed them to quickly assess the resources and people required and then return to help align corporate resources to respond to a demanding startup. Still, it would have been helpful for both the IP and OTI to deploy staff with strong program management and implementation experience for the entire duration of startup. While there were many benefits to deploying senior level personnel, **strong Deputy Chief of Party-Programs (DCOP-P) and Deputy Country Representative (DCR) profiles would have helped launch implementation much faster and would have improved the strategic coherence of some of the earlier activities.**

- ICRI quickly **engaged a Chemonics employee with extensive local knowledge and contacts** to advise on program development. Wisam Khaleefah began supporting the program in a Senior PDO function almost immediately, leveraging both his personal and work experience in Iraq to forge relationships with key partners and inform programming.

### *Challenges and Lessons Learned*

- ICRI fielded an **RPM during startup without prior Chemonics experience.** While this arrangement often works on larger task orders, where an external COP can be paired with strong Chemonics deputies, it hamstrung ICRI in two ways. Despite substantial leadership and OTI experience, the startup RPM was not equipped to provide “hands-on” management of activity development or implementation. Pilot programs need RPMs who know both OTI and the relevant IP and are prepared to fill any given function on a GMU as gaps or problems arise. Also, because the startup RPM was not well-connected within the home office, he was not able to leverage relationships and institutional experience to troubleshoot problems or address bottlenecks.
- While Chemonics proactively directed several experienced managers and directors to support home office startup, **it did not establish a full Program Management Unit (PMU) with a dedicated director until late August.** An experienced OTI director with a full PMU could have provided better overall leadership and structure to the rotating cadre of startup STTA, including better hands-on support to help a non-Chemonics RPM address the bottlenecks.
- Chemonics deployed STTA with extensive OTI experience throughout the startup phase, including the former SRP DCOP-P to support activity development and some experience with grants management and MEL support. This support spurred activity development, while ICRI onboarded GMU staff. Nevertheless, there were **gaps in startup support, including recruitment and procurement.** A strong recruiter who understands the profile required for key roles like PDO and Procurement Specialist is essential during a rapid startup. Additionally, ICRI should have fielded strong procurement expertise immediately to support the activity development process – which would have facilitated faster clearances and implementation during startup.
- ICRI developed a few successful, quick-win activities in startup, such as engaging youth to remove ISIS propaganda in Sinjar and a community generator to improve electricity and water services in Bandiwaya. However, **some early activities were not appropriate for pilot or entry efforts.** For example, rehabilitation of streetlights under IRU014 ultimately took several months to clear and implement. Other early concepts included the creation of a fish farm, several livestock procurement activities, and an activity to provide psychosocial support in camps. These yellow-lit concepts were ultimately rejected. While the team was understandably responding to the demand for high-impact, high-visibility activities, the complexity of some early concepts were a drag on program startup. The **most successful entry activities consisted of large but simple in-kind procurements to support target communities.**
- During startup, ICRI developed a grant (IRU001) with the Iraq Research Foundation for Analysis and Development (IRFAD) to conduct rapid assessments and context analysis in key Ninewa

Province communities and to help identify activities that would deliver on local recovery priorities. Additionally, IRFAD provided field program assistants (FPAs) to ICRI during the first 2-3 months of implementation for activity monitoring support. While the FPAs were critical for ICRI's reach into Ninewa communities, IRFAD's research and assessment support ultimately was not useful. On the ICRI side, a revolving door of OTI and IP staff early in the program hindered our ability to provide consistent direction, technical feedback, and updates about the program's evolving needs. Additionally, ICRI was never resourced with the management or technical support to oversee a large assessment. On the IRFAD side, the Iraq team simply did not have the internal capacity to deliver on ICRI's multiple, evolving requests, and they did not feel they had the space to be forthcoming about their limitations. These issues hindered quality and delayed the research. By the time ICRI received substantive research, the program team had a better understanding of the situation and context than IRFAD, as we had already implemented a few iterations of activities in target areas. A key lesson learned is that, in most cases, **pilot and entry activities with a robust feedback loop is more appropriate for honing contextual awareness than formal research assessments.** Additionally, to conduct effective research activities, **the a program should have internal technical/management expertise (e.g., a research manager) either as a permanent staff member, STTA, or OTI bullpen resource to serve as the primary POC for the research firm, provide consistent guidance on behalf of the SMT, and shepherd the work.**

### **Program Expansion (mid-August through January)**

In early October 2018, USAID/OTI obligated an additional \$6 million to ICRI and extended the period of performance by an estimated six months. In response, ICRI moved to recruit and onboard a second GMU, hire field program assistants directly, and develop increasingly complex activities with longer timelines. Chemonics also deployed an additional wave of STTA to support recruitment, activity development, and grants compliance for the more complex activities.

#### *What Went Well?*

- In September, OTI fielded Meredith Wotten, who would ultimately become the Country Representative, and in October, Megan McGuire joined the team as Deputy Country Representative. **Consistent OTI leadership early in the program was critical** to building relationships with the USG and key local stakeholders, establishing trust with the ICRI team, and ensuring institutional knowledge among program leadership.
- In September, ICRI fielded Melike Odabasi, SRP's former procurement manager, to oversee all TAP procurement and market research for cash grants for the remainder of ICRI. An **experienced OTI procurement manager can proactively advance procurements compliantly and quickly** – even before activities are cleared – while managing relationships with other GMU staff, vendors, and diverse partners like local NGOs and government technical directorates. After ICRI onboarded this expertise, the entire activity cycle ran much more smoothly.
- In September and October, ICRI conducted consecutive events that **refined the program's strategy and partnerships.** First, ICRI invited key Ninewa Plain grantees for a one-day session to strengthen mutual understanding of both OTI programming goals and requirements and the needs of beneficiary communities. Following this session, the program team conducted an internal strategy brainstorming session to solicit input from staff about the most salient and pressing issues in the Iraq context impacting stability. This session was designed to ground truth the relevance of the strategic framework. Finally, OTI hosted a rolling assessment at the consulate in October. Conducted right after the first wave of entry activities, these exercises helped refine program objectives and narrow down target communities.

- ICRI fielded an **RPM with recent experience as a DCOP-Programs** for other Chemonics OTI projects, and her successor had the same profile and skill set. These RPMs were able to provide hands-on support to all aspects of the activity cycle, as needed, and better leverage tools and people in the home office to expedite programming. Future regional programming options should aim to identify someone with DCOP-P or RPM experience to lead the team.
- In December, after a month of negotiation with USAID and Embassy stakeholders, ICRI launched program-specific social media platforms on Facebook and Twitter – the first among USAID/OTI programs. ICRI initially engaged a local media consultant to manage the platforms, but given needs for consistent production of high-quality content, we learned that using a part-time, dynamic social media personality was not the best way to manage the platform. Rather, it was more appropriate for the IRP communications and reporting officer to create content and manage these platforms. **The social media platforms proved a useful tool to boost awareness among communities and stakeholders about ICRI activities and to reinforce USAID’s recovery efforts.**

### *Challenges and Lessons Learned*

- Ongoing **uncertainty about the timing and nature of the IRP startup** complicated higher-level planning for the activity portfolios, target geographic areas, and onboarding and management of new GMU staff. However, tight coordination within the Chemonics-OTI SMT and with individuals involved in startup planning in the home office supported scenario planning and ensured that any long-term decisions considered the impact on the long-term program.
- OTI provided clear guidance during startup about priority grantees and partners, helping ICRI be responsive early in the program to high-level USG stakeholders invested in the program. As the program expanded, **ICRI observed that some of these grantees did not have the capacity or community support to effectively implement ICRI activities.** Recognizing that ICRI had limited political space early on to push back on embassy or USG-driven ideas, it would have been useful to be more proactive about documenting capacity, political, or credibility issues with some partners. Additionally, ICRI could have conducted (a) detailed mapping of these actors and how they are all connected in combination with (b) more strategic, direct engagement with these partners on capacity needs, coordination, and activities. As the program matured, ICRI was more effective on this front – approaching the Ninewa ecosystem of partners more holistically and forcing coordination among partners where possible – but ICRI could have benefited from a more forward-leaning approach in startup.

### **Transition (February – June)**

Because of the delayed startup of the IRP program and expansion of ICRI, the extended overlap period (approximately 5 months) was atypical for OTI pilot to full task order transitions. IRP key personnel and the startup team arrived in late January, with a phased transition of local national staff beginning in February. Critical members of the ICRI expat team also transitioned early, including the Senior PDO in January and the Operations Manager in March. Additionally, the IRP management team gradually assumed responsibility for interfacing with external stakeholders such as UNDP, USG stakeholders in Iraq, and key partners. However, in general, the internal implementation and management of the two programs was mostly segregated through ICRI closeout. The siloed approach had pros and cons. While it likely hampered the feedback loop between the pilot and full program, it ensured clear accountability and division of roles and responsibilities between the two programs.

### *What Went Well?*

- The IRP startup team developed a detailed staff transition plan well before arrival, in close consultation with the RPM. Most GMU staff either transitioned to IRP right away or stayed with ICRI through closeout, and the SMT communicated these arrangements with all staff individually. **The detailed planning around staff LOE – including mitigating the need for staff to “split time”** between programs – helped keep local staff focused and accountable to respective managers.
- ICRI and IRP conducted SMT, yellow-light, and other programmatic meetings jointly, which was important for facilitating learning, division of labor, and transition between programs. The joint approach could have been extended even further to implementation meetings and internal management meetings.
- The SMT agreed to **split the mandate of the two programs geographically**, with ICRI concentrating on Sinjar District and Ninewa Plain while IRP focused on Mosul and Anbar. To some degree, the stark split limited program learning between ICRI and IRP. However, it allowed IRP to concentrate on emerging priority areas, helped the OTI team know who to contact about what, and facilitated overall clarity around division of labor in an extended transition.

### *Key Challenges and Lessons Learned*

- Especially during the first 1-2 months of IRP startup, the RPM supported IRP in planning and managing the transition and troubleshooting programmatic and operational startup issues. However, this was a strain on the RPM’s time given the size of the ICRI portfolio, and, later in IRP startup, the RPM had less time to advise or support IRP, given the pressure to finish ICRI on time. Ultimately, both programs suffered: The RPM had limited bandwidth to reflect upon and communicate lessons learned to the new team, which should be a core function of the RPM role during the transition from a pilot program. On the other hand, the time spent managing the transition detracted from the ICRI portfolio. **In retrospect, ICRI should have fielded a second experienced OTI manager for 2-3 months (“deputy RPM”) to manage day to day implementation and oversee the GMUs.** Particularly given the siloed management of ICRI and IRP, this arrangement would have allowed the RPM to provide better support to IRP and facilitate a smoother transition.
- ICRI released key staff members too soon, including the Senior PDO and the Operations Manager. Removing the Senior PDO slowed the pace of activity development, which fell solely to the RPM to oversee. The Senior PDO should have split time 50/50 between the two projects for an additional 2 months (through mid-March), which would have wrapped up ICRI activity clearances faster and better facilitated program learning feeding into IRP program startup. The Operations Manager transitioned to IRP as the Senior Grants Manager in mid-March; this function should have been backfilled an additional two months on ICRI.

### **Closeout (July)**

As an option phase under the SRP II task order, ICRI was not bound to a formal closeout date, outside of the end of the SRP II – although OAA expressed concerns about the overlap between ICRI and IRP. However, during IRP startup, the SMT agreed on a June 30 cutoff date for ICRI activity implementation, with a few exceptions considered by the SMT on a case-by-case basis. ICRI began closeout planning in April and fielded a finance and compliance review in late April/early May to conduct some cleanup, as well as an initial review of finance and operational closeout needs. Operations and grants closeout STTA support followed.

### *What Went Well?*

- ICRI fielded the **first grants closeout STTA in February** to closeout a handful of completed grants and conduct an additional triage of the activities. This helped assess the state of the grants files, FERs, and activity database, and determine the resources needed for closeout later in the Spring.
- The Program Implementation Specialist supporting ICRI fielded in April and in May extended his assignment into June and July (remote) to focus on completing closeout. Having someone intimately familiar with the activity portfolio transition to lead activity closeout (and implement activities with closeout needs in mind) created major synergies that helped close activities faster.
- In April, ICRI **developed a strategy for activities that could absorb unanticipated deobligations** through cost amendments, while keeping to the original end dates. This was important for a portfolio that cleared and implemented a high volume of pilot activities within a narrow window, as it was unclear the extent of potential cost savings in some activities. The list of contingency cost mods helped quickly and meaningfully re-program available funds into successful activities.

#### *Key Challenges and Lessons Learned*

- The RPM and OTI team spent an extraordinary amount of time over several months brainstorming and planning for an ICRI evaluation and assessment of program outcomes, to be conducted during ICRI closeout. In retrospect, a more effective approach would have been a series of half-day **lessons learned sessions every month during the 5-month transition phase**. The lessons learned session would have included the ICRI-IRP full program team, SMT, and OTI and discussed program learning from recently completed ICRI activities on a rolling basis, which would have better met the needs of program development and staff training during IRP startup.
- Implementation on over a dozen activities came to an end right during the last week of June, followed by five activities in July. The RPM departed Erbil on July 1, followed by the closeout team on July 5, and continued to work on completion and closeout of activities remotely through the month of July. While the remote completion of closeout achieved some cost savings and ensured a clear break for ICRI, the RPM and grants closeout specialist should have remained in Erbil for an additional 3-4 weeks. **Being on site would have facilitated a more efficient closeout of remaining grants and FERs and better knowledge sharing with IRP.**

### **SECTION III: LESSONS LEARNED FOR STAFFING ON A SUCCESSFUL PILOT**

Successful OTI programs are highly dependent on the right people and skills and must ensure effective collaboration and communication within the One Team. OTI program performance management tools and programming principles help ensure successful teams. However, pilot programs like ICRI face unique challenges, including high turnover, a more rapid pace, short programming horizon, and uncertainty about the future. The following points provide practical lessons learned for future pilot or startup efforts:

- The **startup team and OTI should develop tools, templates, and guidance for staff at the outset of startup** – including guidance for developing and proposing concepts, the activity addendum, local activities guide (LAG), appropriate database fields, grant and procurement documentation, and M&E and FER tools. The SMT should enforce adherence to those systems, with changes approved by the RPM and/or OTI. During ICRI, a rotating cadre of both Chemonics and OTI staff adjusted these tools and provided conflicting guidance to staff, often creating confusion.
- Both the IP and OTI should **deploy STTA with functional experience in grants, procurement, MEL, etc. to be paired with newly onboarded GMU staff**. ICRI had some success with this approach – fielding Macey Stapleton for MEL, Melike Odabasi for procurement, and Mike Provenza for grants, as examples. Pilot programs are typically not able to set aside time for extensive training and orientation. Deploying experienced STTA to work one-on-one with new staff moves programming forward while also providing on-the-job mentorship. It is important that these STTA bring previous

OTI programming experience in addition to their functional expertise, such as local staff from mature programs (e.g., SRP or LTI).

- Relatedly, the IP should establish **simple tools for assessing staff performance and ensuring adequate supervision and accountability**. Pilot program staffing structures are relatively flat with a high volume of turnover at the management level. Information on staff needs and performance is often lost between handovers (typically focused on activity needs) and in the transition to the full task order. Generally, it falls to the RPM to try to ensure consistency and keep everyone on track. A simple system akin to “activity notes,” would allow various STTA, the RPM, and OTI to make observations about staff needs and performance, which will help the full task order SMT make decisions about staffing and training needs.
- During startup, the **IP should field an experienced recruiter with a keen understanding of the profiles of various program staff**. Not all the staff hired in ICRI startup had the right skills and personalities for their positions because the recruiters lacked this experience. Additionally, the recruiter should work with the SMT and OTI to balance short-term demands with the long-term needs of the potential full task order. ICRI mostly hired Kurdish staff based in Erbil, which was the most expedient approach for the pilot effort. However, the lack of staff diversity later hamstrung IRP startup, particularly as the program expanded in Mosul.
- Particularly at the beginning of the program, the **IP should deploy an RPM and other management staff with experience running other OTI programs for the IP**. This staffing approach ensures that IP management can provide hands-on support, leverage home office resources and support, and make quick decisions to advance programming.
- A pilot program includes all the standard phases of an OTI task order (startup, full implementation, closeout, and – occasionally – expansion), all in a compressed timeframe. Additionally, the overlapping transition to a full program – often implemented by a different IP – contributes to the complexity. In this context, we saw on ICRI that staff priorities, tasks, and portfolios shifted on a weekly basis, if not more often. This situation requires substantial communication, coordination, and individual feedback and check-ins with all staff members. **The RPM and any other IP senior management must set aside significant, dedicated time every day to keep staff on track and never assume that everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing.**
- The **SMT must establish measures for mitigating staff burnout**. On a fast-paced pilot effort, it is not sustainable for staff to work six days per week for multiple months. The SMT can take simple steps such as: (a) encourage extended STTA to leave post monthly for a long weekend, (b) avoid scheduling meetings on weekend days to provide staff the opportunity to take the full weekend and (c) a policy that discourages “banking” of holidays. Additionally, staff on extended STTA in hardship posts should rotate out for a 1-2 week breaks to compensate for the lack of formal R&Rs.

#### **SECTION IV: Lessons Learned for Effective Pilot, Entry, and Mission Request Activities**

Most activities on a pilot program or startup will be pilot efforts to test a certain theory of change or approach, entry activities to establish relationships in target communities, or requests from a U.S. mission eager to leverage a new, flexible mechanism to address lingering needs.

- **PDOs should take a proactive rather than reactive approach on mission requests and priority grantees**. Initially, ICRI was reactive in fulfilling mission requests that priority grantees funneled through other USG stakeholders, and the program was stuck molding poorly conceived ideas into a minimally acceptable activity. Later, the program more proactively engaged these favored partners and realized that they had a range of concepts. Most partners just wanted to be seen doing something for their constituencies and were not wedded to specific ideas, which provided

ICRI the opportunity to develop better concepts with these partners. The approach did not stop mission requests, but it gave OTI the ability to decline ideas that did not make sense, while pointing to other ongoing activities serving those constituencies.

- **Entry activities should be relatively small, mostly in-kind, and involve procurement of highly visible equipment** or an event that equally benefits the entire community. For example, ICRI worked with Ghazin al-Zaitoun under IRU005 to install streetlights and traffic signs in Bashiqa over two months. When ICRI began working with the Shabak and Syriac councils in Bartella, a simple, one-day food festival helped test the councils' ability to collaborate and mobilize their constituencies.
- GMUs should **design pilot activities that are initially conservative but easily scalable**, which will allow the team to easily expand grants that turn out to be successful. For example, ICRI developed a series of small business support activities in every district. The initial activities served less than half of the partners' proposed beneficiaries; however, when the partners demonstrated that they could deliver quickly and the activities proved successful, ICRI modified the activities to include the remaining beneficiaries.
- Pilot programs or startups should **make conservative assumptions about local partner capacity**. In general, ICRI grantees had less technical, administrative, and organizational capacity than the GMU originally assumed during concept and activity design. ICRI provided several grants with large cash components – a mechanism that puts a greater onus on partners for reporting and implementation. Most partners did not have the capacity to properly manage the requirements in these activities, which hampered implementation and burdened the PDOs. More importantly, this dynamic ultimately undermined the trust between ICRI and partners, as the GMUs felt that partners were not delivering while partners perceived ICRI requirements to be too onerous. In a few cases, partners fully subcontracted implementation to outside firms, which disconnected beneficiary communities from the activity.

## **SECTION V: Program Learning and the Feedback Loop in a Pilot Program**

Pilot programs offer a unique opportunity for experimentation and creativity. Ensuring that this condensed period of trial and error is useful in the long term requires a rigorous feedback loop and processes to facilitate program learning. Key lessons learned from ICRI include:

- ICRI **conducted internal lessons learned sessions** twice but should have conducted them monthly – especially during the transition phase with IRP. These focused two-hour sessions, facilitated by the MEL officer, provided an opportunity to discuss lessons learned, best practices, and assumptions for no more than half a dozen activities after finalizing FERs.
- **MEL tools (and activity-level TOCs) should be as simple as possible** to ensure that field staff follow through on data collection and that the program has time to feed learning back into new activities on a condensed program. ICRI relied on key informant interviews of no more than 20 beneficiaries or stakeholders. While such data is not sufficient to fully validate a particular TOC or set of assumptions, the rapid feedback indicates whether a certain TOC or approach is worth further investment.
- The **SMT should proactively encourage staff to take risks and embrace failure as a learning opportunity**. Additionally, regular orientation for new field staff on OTI programming principles (similar to the OTI training provided at SRS events or for home office staff in Washington) would be helpful. While OTI gave two OTI 101-like trainings at the Consulate, these were not as intensive an introduction to OTI programming principles due to time and space constraints. Most PDOs join ICRI and other OTI programs from organizations or projects that do not have the same culture of

experimentation. On ICRI, PDOs naturally wanted all their activities to be successful. So, when the MEL team, another PDO, or SMT flagged issues with activities or they turned out to be ineffective, PDOs often took it personally rather than using it as a learning opportunity.

## **SECTION VI: Sinjar District Programmatic Challenges and Lessons Learned**

ICRI conducted 13 substantive activities in Sinjar District with various partners, mostly implemented during the second half of the program. Key lessons learned and potential opportunities for future programming include:

- **Economic recovery activities in Sinjar were particularly well-received.** Two activities focused on recovery in the agricultural sector, a mainstay of the local economy. ICRI partnered with Ezidi Fraternity Organization to rehabilitate 20 agricultural irrigation wells in Northern Sinuni sub-district. ISIS deliberately sabotaged wells and other agricultural infrastructure throughout Sinjar, damaging an estimated 200 irrigation wells. The restoration of 20 wells under IRU067 benefited 99 farm families. Additionally, ICRI supported the rehabilitation of approximately 50 percent of the Zaytooni olive groves, including a new generator, tools and irrigation equipment, and temporary stipend support for workers. **The unmet rehabilitation needs in the agriculture sector remain high**, including water sources, agricultural equipment, and centralized facilities such as market areas and the Sinjar grain silo.
- ICRI also partnered with Ezidi 24, an online media platform offering objective news coverage and media content to the Yezidi community and, increasingly, other minority communities in Ninewa Province. ICRI provided equipment and salary support to Ezidi 24 to expand its programming. During the five-month activity, Ezidi 24 organically grew its following on Facebook by 25 percent, from 40,000 to 50,000 followers. Additionally, the partnership with Ezidi 24 was particularly useful as a tool for creating and disseminating content about ICRI activities and other recovery efforts in Sinjar. For example, Ezidi 24 reported on the Yazda Student Transportation activity and profiled beneficiaries of ICRI's small business activity. Ezidi 24 has expressed a strong interest in developing revenue streams outside of donor support, and any future OTI grants should ideally include components to help Ezidi 24's business sustainability.
- As the Yezidi community has historically been very insular, Sinjar District had relatively limited exposure to foreign assistance or outsiders, in general, before 2014. This context impacted ICRI programming in two ways:
  - First, **Sinjar beneficiaries and stakeholders were highly mistrustful of outside actors** and unreceptive to feedback, making many partnerships challenging. IOM and UNDP also have both noted this challenge in Sinjar. For example, during the implementation of the IRU014 Sinjar streetlights activity, beneficiary communities did not understand the allocation of lights among the 12 towns or the approach for selecting installation locations. So, in the first phase of installation, the beneficiaries in the initial three target communities responded negatively to the project, complaining specifically about where the grantee installed the lights. ICRI worked with the grantee to resolve this problem with a highly consultative and communicative approach for the remaining towns, but the episode highlighted the importance of painstakingly **clear communication and community engagement in a region that has historically been highly wary of outsiders** – particularly for service delivery activities.

- Second, **management and technical capacity of Sinjar-based organizations is limited.** Hope Ambassadors, a youth NGO based in Sinjar, struggled to effectively implement a relatively minor graffiti removal activity under IRU015. Also, ICRI partnered with the Sinuni sub-district municipal office under IRU074 to conduct a cleanup campaign in Borek and improve regular trash collection and public cleaning services. The municipality had limited capacity to manage a service delivery project, with the PDO and RPM providing significant hands-on support to design outreach materials and plan the logistics and scheduling for cleanup efforts.
- One approach to addressing both issues is **to partner with experienced NGOs based outside of Sinjar but with strong ties to the Yazidi community.** For example, to implement the business support activity under IRU070, ICRI partnered with Sahara Economic Development Organization, a larger national NGO with prior experience programming in Sinjar. Similarly, ICRI partnered with Ezidi Fraternity Organization – a Yazidi NGO based in Duhok and Bashiqa – to conduct the agricultural wells rehabilitation project. Both partners proved highly adept at managing relationships with local authorities and communities, and they implemented the large activities effectively and on time. ICRI pursued costed modifications for both grants to expand the original scope.
- Another key challenge across multiple activities was the **lack of government directorate representatives in Sinjar District.** While branches of the Mosul government directorates (e.g., education, electricity, health) have re-opened offices or re-established services in Tal Kayf and Hamdaniya, they have largely not returned to Sinjar. Additionally, the directorates are unwilling to send representatives or resources to Sinjar. In addition to undermining broader recovery efforts in the district, for ICRI specifically, the gap in directorate support hindered the program’s ability to obtain approvals or buy-in for some recovery projects. In Zaytoon village for example, ICRI explored a concept to provide equipment and rehabilitation support for a community water source. However, after multiple unsuccessful attempts to engage the Mosul water directorate in the process, ICRI was unable to pursue the concept.
- ICRI also partnered with Yazda – a large Yazidi advocacy INGO – on two major activities in Sinjar. First, ICRI supported a six-month grant for Yazda’s ongoing documentation program in Sinjar and Duhok – a core activity for the organization. ICRI also partnered with Yazda to provide temporary bus transportation throughout the Spring of 2019 to help students in Sinjar access school and exams. Because Yazda is a very well-connected and trusted organization among the Yazidi community with a robust operational footprint in Northern Iraq, they can be a reliable partner. For example, Yazda implemented the student transportation activity quickly and effectively. The team successfully engaged students, parents, and school officials, and they navigated difficult logistical challenges, as well as multiple bureaucratic impediments with the ministries of transportation and education. The downside of the Yazda partnership is twofold. First, Yazda also implements other large donor-funded grants in Sinjar – including for IOM and Heartland Alliance – and they are overstretched beyond their current operational capacity. Second, Yazda is accustomed to receiving unrestricted contributions or large, extended-duration standard grants that involve relatively limited donor engagement. Their staff is not accustomed to the hands-on engagement and collaboration typical of an OTI grant, and much of their core work is not suited to “fast, flexible, short-term assistance.”

## SECTION VII: Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf Districts Programmatic Challenges and Lessons Learned

ICRI conducted nearly three dozen substantive activities in Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf Districts, primarily in cooperation with local NGOs and advocacy groups serving the district’s diverse minority constituencies, including Assyrian, Shabak, Kakai’i, and Yezidi. Key lessons learned and potential opportunities for future programming include:

- ICRI implemented a significant portion of its assistance through faith-based organizations and institutions in these two districts. For example, nearly half of its assistance in Hamdaniya District went through the church or church-affiliated NGOs such as Assyrian Aid Society. Given the central government’s marginalization of minority communities in Ninewa, faith-based organizations have emerged as key partners for delivering services or support to minority communities.

### Key Faith-Based Actors in Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf Districts

Organization/Committee	Affiliation	Key POC	Location
Ninewa Reconstruction Committee - South	Chaldean Catholic	Father Thabit	Karamles
Ninewa Reconstruction Committee - North	Chaldean Catholic	Falar Salar	Tal Kayf/Telisqof
Bartella Church Reconstruction Committee	Syriac Orthodox	Father Yacoub	Bartella
Bakhdeda Supreme Board for Reconstruction	Syriac Catholic	Father George	Qaraqosh
Mar Gorges Reconstruction Committee	Syriac Catholic	Father Matti	Qaraqosh
Assyrian Aid Society	n/a	Ashur Sargon	Ninewa-Wide
Assyrian Christian Committee	Syriac Orthodox	Bashir Shamoon	Bartella
Humanitarian Ninewa Relief Organization	n/a	Yohanna Yousif	Ninewa-Wide
Hammurabi Human Rights Organization	n/a	William Warda	Ninewa-Wide
Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq (CAPNI)	n/a	Father Emmanuel	Ninewa-Wide
Chaldean Culture Society	n/a	Ghazwan Ilyas	Alqosh sub-district

During the early days of ICRI, the program’s approach to engaging these partners was naturally reactive as we learned about these various stakeholders and responded to the political urgency of providing tangible assistance. **However, as the program matured, ICRI learned the value of proactive engagement and played an increasing role in facilitating cooperation among these partners.** For example, before the IRU079 Rubble Removal activity, each of the four church-affiliated reconstruction committees approached ICRI with separate concepts for rubble removal among their constituencies. The proposed approach largely consisted of procuring heavy equipment for each committee. As an alternative, ICRI developed an activity that forced active collaboration and resource-sharing among all committees – including Bartella’s Shabak committee – and provided funds for equipment rental and cash for work. A robust communications approach highlighted cooperation between the five committees. ICRI engaged a relatively neutral actor – Humanitarian Ninewa Relief Organization – to officially implement the grant and provide management, financial, and facilitation support. As the program matured, we learned that it is important for OTI to help facilitate this coordination, as these partners are often not talking to other. Additionally, we learned that minority-led NGOs may not be committed to the specific ideas they propose; rather, they are driven to serve their communities and be seen delivering on constituency priorities. Therefore, when the ICRI team received proposals that did not align with program objectives or were not viable, they were able to propose strategic alternatives that were equally tangible and visible.

- Similarly, ICRI learned the importance of **carefully balancing assistance across persecuted ethnic and religious minority communities, including Shabak, Kaka'i, Christian, and Yezidi**. Under the IRU006 activity in Bashiqa, ICRI provided equipment to 21 schools in the city. Following implementation, principals of schools located outside the center of Bashiqa in communities inhabited mostly by the Shabak minority complained that the assistance was targeting the center – inhabited by mostly Yezidi and Christians. The perceptions of unbalanced assistance created tensions between the minority communities, the grantee, and the education directorate. In later activities, ICRI was much more cognizant of center-periphery issues and tensions within diverse communities. With some initial resistance, ICRI ultimately agreed with the Christian stakeholders to include Bartella's Shabak Committee in the IRU079 partnership. Additionally, grants to Hammurabi Human Rights Organization and Assyrian Aid Society were paired with corresponding service delivery activities implemented by Justice Organization for Minority Rights – for example, streetlights and waste container distribution – to ensure perceptions of balance among Iraq's constituent communities. Where possible, ICRI also encouraged joint public events and communications and outreach campaigns between minority communities.
- Increasingly, ICRI directed assistance to the Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf Municipalities, even when the grantee was a faith-based organization. **This leveraged the local credibility of faith-based organizations with the service-delivery mandate of local government to ensure the efficacy and sustainability of the assistance**. For example, under the IRU078 activity with Assyrian Aid Society, ICRI procured a new trash collection vehicle as a part of the activity, which the NGO then deeded to the municipal council at the end of the activity. Mandating this approach was more effective than transferring ownership directly to faith-based organizations. In earlier activities where ICRI provided heavy equipment directly to faith-based organizations, we struggled to secure firm, written commitments that the organizations would share the resources with local government actors and follow-up reporting demonstrated that organizations were not following through on this commitment. As opposed to Sinjar District, the ICRI team generally found the Tal Kayf and Hamdaniya municipalities and mayors to be reliable partners with high capacity, committed to ensuring inclusive distribution of assistance.
- In Bartella, tensions between the Christian and Shabak communities continued throughout ICRI. Assyrian Christians are very concerned about the strong presence of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Bartella, accusing them of using their financial resources to purchase Christian properties and implement development projects to benefit Shabaks, marginalize Christians, and facilitate demographic change. To help address these tensions locally, the Bartella mayor and municipality director sponsored the creation of the **Shabak and Syriac informal committees**. The committees are charged with ensuring resources and services are allocated fairly, promoting mutual recovery interests, and mediating disputes. ICRI conducted three increasingly complex activities with the two committees to build their mutual collaboration and support them in their mandate to mitigate tensions between their respective constituencies. The three activities included a one-day food and cultural festival in Bartella (December), followed by a two-month soccer tournament (March/April) and youth cleaning campaign (May). In all three activities, ICRI observed highly positive and productive collaboration between the committees and their constituencies, demonstrating the presence of local-level resilience and relationships that may mitigate conflict.
- Also, in Bartella, ICRI supported a large grant to the **Bartella Sewing Factory**, a state-owned enterprise (SOE) under the Ministry of Industry that ISIS ransacked and damaged. The ministry

provided “loans” to the factory to support rehabilitation of the building, and ICRI followed up with in-kind industrial sewing equipment to expand the factory’s productive capacity. ICRI’s theory of change was that supporting the factory would allow more women from diverse communities in and around Bartella to resume work, contributing to inclusive economic recovery. ICRI’s assumptions under this theory of change proved invalid. First, ICRI assumed that the factory has regular buyers to create demand for increased production capacity. Activity evaluation showed that the “buyers” were actually other government entities, for example, the ministry of health requiring medical uniforms. Additionally, the activity evaluation uncovered that the local factory does not have hiring authority as an SOE – rather this comes from the ministry in Baghdad. As many of Iraq’s production facilities are SOEs, it is important to learn from the lessons of this pilot activity. Many of the SOEs are highly inefficient entities and supporting these SOEs may not necessarily generate the immediate job creation that OTI may like to see as part of economic recovery grants.

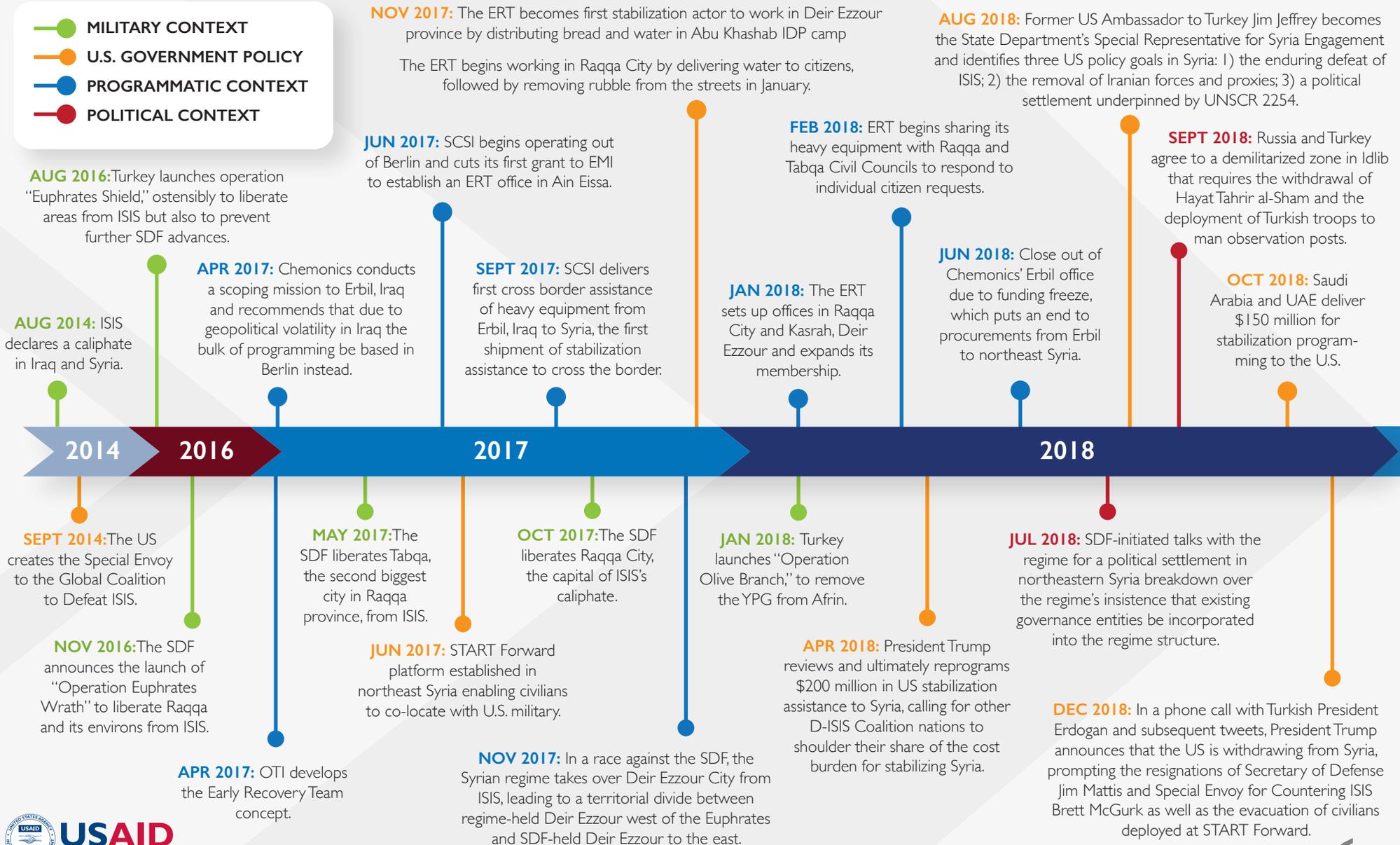
- An example of a more promising intervention in both Tal Kayf and Hamdaniya included activities to install streetlights in public areas to increase perceptions of public safety and recovery. Under IRU005, ICRI supported Ghazin al-Zaitoun to install nearly 100 streetlights in Bashiqa, in addition to road signs and speed bumps. ICRI later expanded the activity on a much larger scale in Bartella, Tal Kayf, Qaraqosh, and Karamles under IRU040 and IRU041. In all three cases, the activity evaluations showed promising results: key informant interviews indicated that the streetlights were encouraging families to go out more at night or businesses to stay open later. One lesson learned is the importance of pursuing solar power in similar, future activities. Both ICRI staff and IBTCI third party monitors noted that, during general electricity cuts, streetlights were also impacted.

# ANNEX II. USAID/OTI SYRIA COMMUNITY STABILIZATION INITIATIVE TIMELINE

# USAID/OTI Syria Community Stabilization Initiative (SCSI) Timeline

Between 2017 and 2020, USAID/OTI's Syria Community Stabilization Initiative (SCSI) helped stabilize areas in eastern Syria liberated from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by the international coalition. Through support to the Early Recovery Team (ERT), an apolitical service provider comprised of local engineers and project managers, as well as influential community and tribal leaders, SCSI delivered 63 projects focused on water, electricity, road rehabilitation, and rubble removal across Raqqa and Deir ez Zour provinces, reaching an estimated 1,000,000 beneficiaries in 102 communities.

- **MILITARY CONTEXT**
- **U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY**
- **PROGRAMMATIC CONTEXT**
- **POLITICAL CONTEXT**



- **MILITARY CONTEXT**
- **U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY**
- **PROGRAMMATIC CONTEXT**
- **POLITICAL CONTEXT**

**JAN 2019:** Talks between the SDF and the regime resume after the US announces it will withdraw troops.

**MAR 2019:** With the liberation of Baghouz in southern Deir Ezzour, the SDF declares the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria.

**MAY 2019:** The US reduces its troop presence in Syria by half to 1,000.

**AUG 2019:** OTI and Chemonics reaffirm their previous decision and determine that all activities will end by March 31, 2020.

**OCT 2019:** With the rapid deterioration in security, OTI accelerates its decision to terminate the program with all activities in the northeast ending in November, SCSi close out in March 2020, and a full closeout of the task order in June 2020.

**OCT 2019:** Turkey launches Operation Peace Spring to remove YPG elements from northeastern Syria.

**MAR 2020:** All SCSi activities are closed.

**MAR 2019:** The State Department unveils a budget request for fiscal year 2020 that zeroes out stabilization aid for Syria.

**AUG 2019:** The US and Turkey agree to establish a security mechanism in northern Syria, which temporarily staves off a Turkish incursion against the SDF.

**OCT 2019:** President Trump pulls back US troops from parts of northeast Syria in preparation for the Turkish invasion and announces the overall withdrawal of US troops from Syria.

**JAN 2020:** US strike kills Iranian Revolutionary Guards Force (IRGC) Commander Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad, causing the Coalition to temporarily halt its fight against ISIS in preparation for potential retaliatory strikes. Counter-ISIS operations are resumed later in the month.

**JAN 2019:** OTI and Chemonics agree to closeout program, including the ERT mechanism by June 2019, after remaining funds in the contract are spent as security conditions permit.

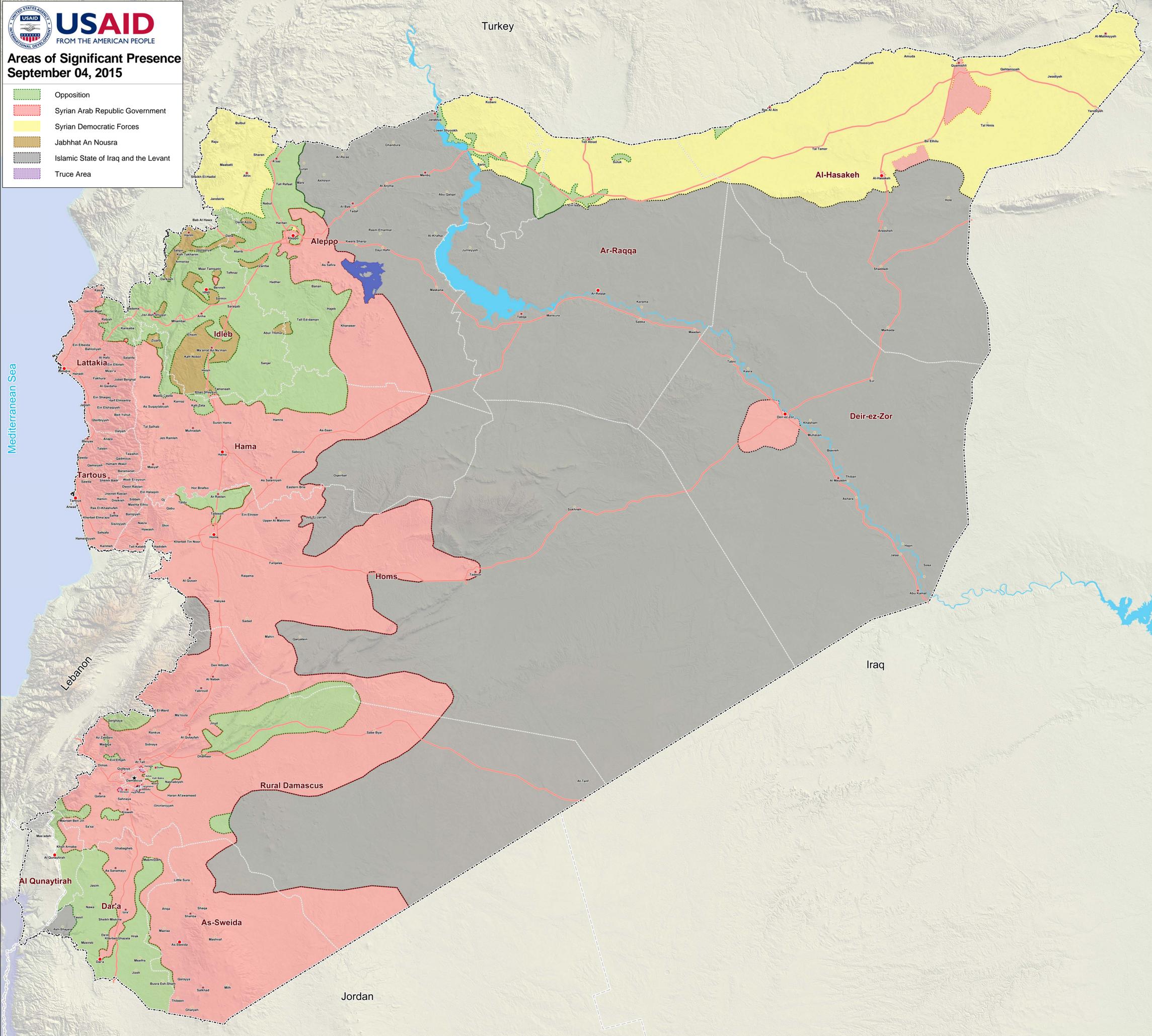
**MAY 2019:** OTI and Chemonics field teams decide to reactivate ERT operations given that security conditions have not deteriorated as anticipated.

**NOV 2019:** The US resumes large scale operations against ISIS in northern Syria.

# ANNEX III. AREAS OF SIGNIFICANT PRESENCE, SEPTEMBER 04, 2015 AND SEPTEMBER 04, 2020

**Areas of Significant Presence  
September 04, 2015**

- Opposition
- Syrian Arab Republic Government
- Syrian Democratic Forces
- Jabhat An Nusra
- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
- Truce Area

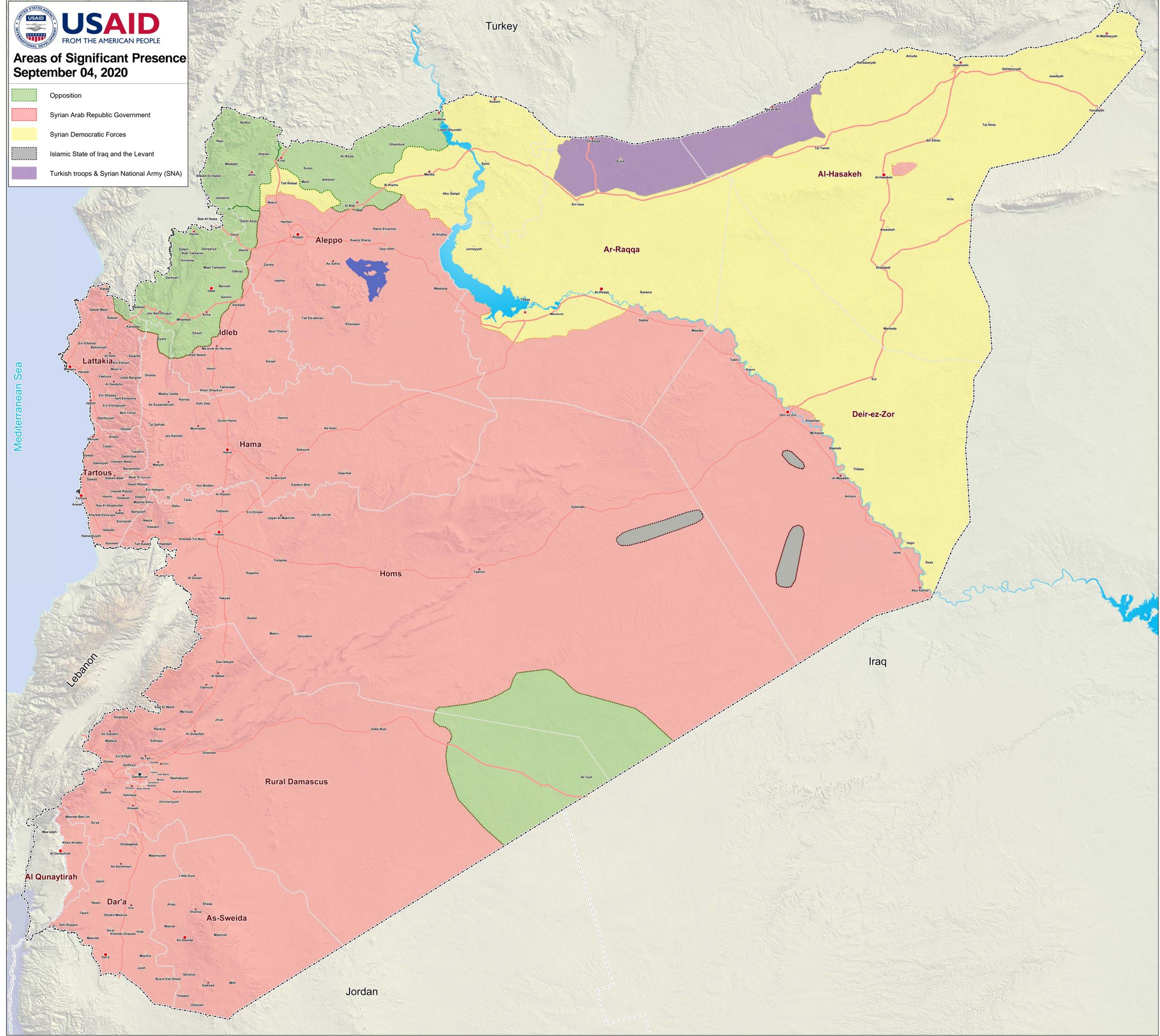




**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

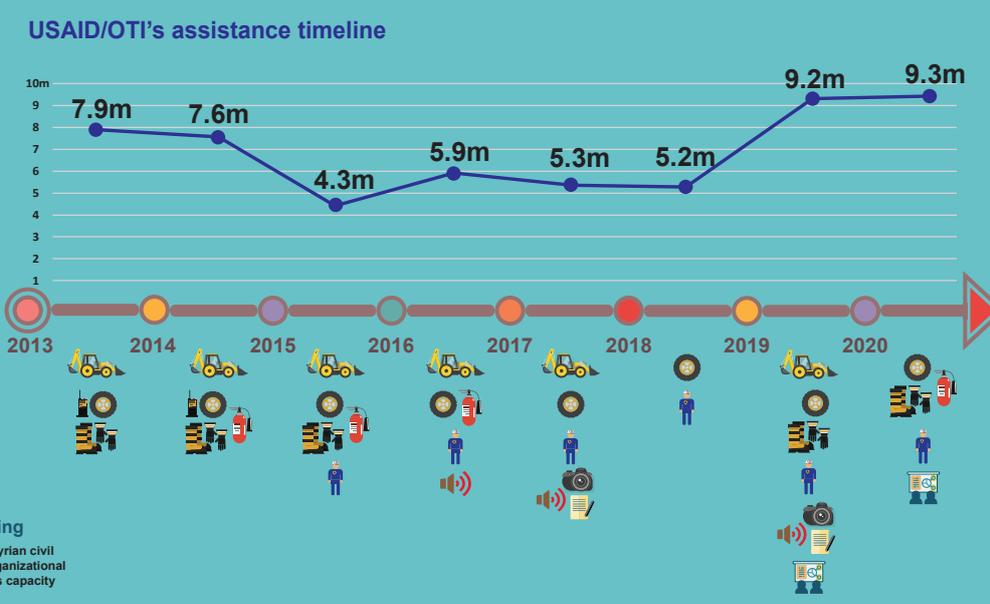
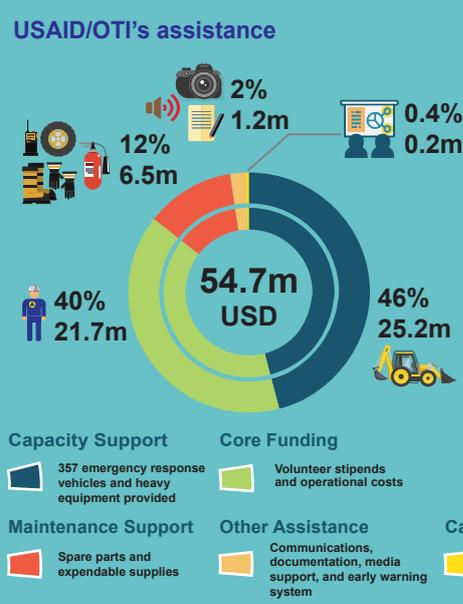
**Areas of Significant Presence**  
September 04, 2020

- Opposition
- Syrian Arab Republic Government
- Syrian Democratic Forces
- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
- Turkish troops & Syrian National Army (SNA)

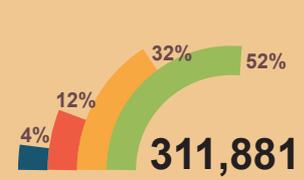


# ANNEX IV. USAID/OTI'S ASSISTANCE TO THE SYRIA CIVIL DEFENSE SINCE 2013

# USAID/OTI's assistance to the Syria Civil Defense since 2013

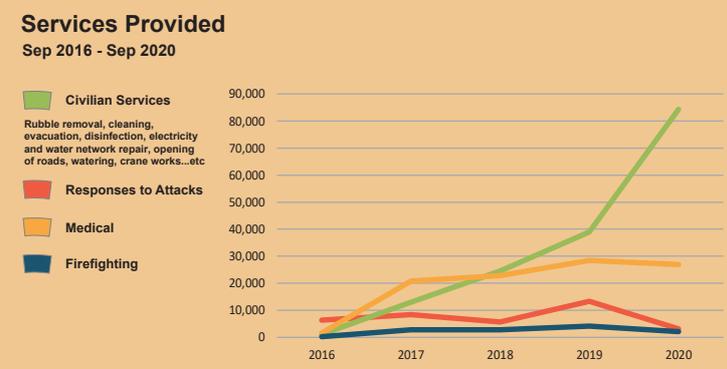


## The Syria Civil Defense at a Glance



- 4 Provinces
- 155 Entities
- 2,835 Members

  - 2,604 Men
  - 231 Women



**Areas of Operations**  
As of Sep 2020

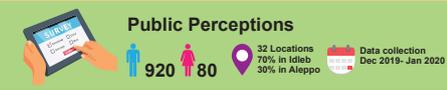


**The Sacrifice of the White Helmets**  
2013 - 2020

- 852 SCD Injuries
- 286 SCD Deaths\*
- 122,550 People Saved

\* 260 killed, 26 died as a result of illness, accident or natural death

## The Syria Civil Defense public recognition



### The Syria Civil Defense's effectiveness on the ground

- 96% Effectiveness rated as Very Good or Excellent
- 99% Quality of services rated as High

### Credit the Syria Civil Defense

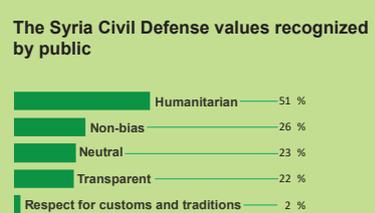
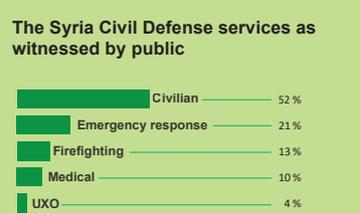
- 97% Emergency and rescue services
- 100% Firefighting services
- 93% Civilian services
- 84% UXO services
- 87% SCD most effective service provider

### The Syria Civil Defense's community support

- 92% Willing to provide assistance to the SCD upon request
- 27% Previously provided assistance to the SCD
- 82% Believe that the SCD has an essential role in the community

### Perceptions of the Media's Portrayal of the Syria Civil Defense

- 85% Trusted on how the media portrayed the SCD
- 84% Have seen the SCD referenced on social media or in the news
- 78% Stated that the media coverage of the SCD is positive
- 41% Saw disinformation in media about the SCD several times a month, once a week, or every day
- 62% Believed the existence of disinformation or false news is a problem



### The Syria Civil Defense independence as seen by the public

- 79% Described the SCD as an independent institution

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