

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# War Economy, Governance and Security in Syria's Opposition-Controlled Areas

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This paper explores links between the war economy and civilian security by using evidence from the three opposition-held areas in Syria. The study of Eastern Ghouta, Daraa and Atareb shows how different type of behavior by non-state armed groups engaged in criminal war economy, shaped by the broader war economy conditions, impacts on the ability of the local populations to address their security predicaments. Our findings will challenge the assumption prevalent in the scholarship on the war economy that civilian security is unequivocally undermined by insurgents' criminal war economy dealings. We show that in some local contexts a diverse range of economic choices and actors provide the local population with more opportunities to develop coping strategies by engaging in different parts of the war economy.

## Introduction

Scholars argue that, a thriving war economy is one of the factors that is contributing to the persistence of armed conflict in Syria (Yazigi 2014: 7; Herbert 2014: 69; Ohl et al. 2015: 8; Steenkamp 2017: 1; Al Abdeh 2013). It is said that since the start of the war in 2011, the proliferation of lucrative criminal activities, through looting, bribery, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, the illegal trade in oil, weapons, drugs and antiquities, illegal migration and document forgery, has created vested interests. This observation particularly applies to the myriad of insurgent armed groups, for whom the extraction of resources from the war economy is alleged to have reinforced incentives to continue fighting (Yazigi 2014: 4).

Such claims echo a prominent argument in scholarship on contemporary warfare that emphasises the criminalization of the war economy and portrays its armed protagonists as violent entrepreneurs who pursue military combat alongside self-enrichment (Cockayne 2010; Raeymaekers 2014; Wennmann 2007; Cramer 2006). A common view holds that the pursuit of economic agendas by armed groups harms wider community interests and aggravates human suffering in zones of conflict. In that sense, Syria's combat landscape provides an abundance of evidence that ordinary Syrians in opposition-controlled areas struggle to provide for their basic needs, while combatants pursue their illicit business in the war economy, epitomised most visibly in armed groups' engagement in the smuggling of antiquities (Steenkamp 2017; Vigal 2017; Khalaf 2015; Al Mahmoud 2015).

While such accounts of the conduct of non-state armed groups in Syria are broadly accurate, the actual local war economy

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dynamics in terms of the combinations of actors, activities and their interactions around extraction and distribution of resources, display significant variation. The war economy in Syria is diffused due to the extreme territorial, political and economic fragmentation associated with the diversity of protagonists involved in the conflict, and the variable opportunities provided for resource extraction (Yazigi 2014: 6; Lock 2005). Consequently, various arrangements among different actors – enemies or competitors – are forged to extract resources from the war economy, affecting the security of the local population in multiple and ambiguous ways (Vigal 2017: 815–816).

The main motivation behind this paper is to take a fresh look at the debates on the war economy and its impact on civilian security. Civilian security is understood to mean protection from exploitation by armed groups and an opportunity for self-security through the application of different coping strategies (Hart-Lidow 2016: 5; Darby 2009: 709).

The main argument we put forward is two-fold one. Firstly, we contend that a criminality perspective, which posits the public as the victim of the war economy, provides an oversimplified explanation of the impact of non-state armed actors' economic agendas on civilian security. Secondly, we highlight that the economic activities of insurgent groups take place within a broader military, security and economic context that determines the availability of resources and the types of actors involved as well as the activities and interactions that influence how people respond to war-induced uncertainty. The broader context needs to be considered when analysing the link between the war economy and civilian security.

This study of the three opposition-held areas in Syria shows that the pursuit of the illicit activities by non-state armed groups is compatible with different behavior towards other local actors around resource extraction and distribution. Overall, where the war economy was more diverse and there was more interaction among the opposition armed

groups and other local actors, the population had more opportunities to engage in different parts of the war economy, and to develop strategies to cope with the harmful impact of the exploitative practices of armed groups.

### Methodology

Empirically, we investigated three opposition-held areas in Syria: Eastern Ghouta, the Daraa countryside, and Atareb in the Aleppo countryside. During the research period (February-June 2015), no single opposition armed group exercised control of the territories or made attempts to organize the provision of public goods and services. Opposition armed groups consisted mostly of locally-recruited personnel with limited to no presence of extremist, transnationally recruiting groups such as *Jabhat Al Nusra* (JAN)<sup>1</sup> and the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL). All three are mainly agricultural areas with local industry and trade primarily related to agriculture.

The crucial differences among the three areas are due to their respective geostrategic positions.<sup>2</sup> At the time of research, Eastern Ghouta was under siege and surrounded by government forces. Daraa has a well-controlled border with Jordan, allowing the passage of humanitarian aid while also restricting the movement of arms and fighters. Atareb lies along the Turkish border, in a region where fewer restrictions are imposed on the entry of goods and people into Syria (Vigal 2017: 820). This provides a variation in the conditions in which the war economy operates allowing for the observation of different patterns of interaction among its protagonist as well as the analysis of variations in the responses of the local populations to cope with the impact of the economic activities of armed groups.

The fieldwork for this paper involved face-to-face and Skype interviews with citizens in the three localities. Stakeholders consulted included civil society members, the members of local administrative councils, members of armed groups, media representatives, and businessmen.<sup>3</sup> Interview data was

complemented by extensive desk research of reports, media content, and scholarly articles. We also interviewed donor agencies, UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations. Triangulation of the research findings included several consultations with international and Syrian experts and activists, and two focus group discussions with representatives from civil society and media organizations.

The paper first provides a brief review of debates on the contemporary war economy and war-time governance. The empirical section then uses the three case studies to analyze three aspects of the war economy: the criminal economy involving insurgent groups; interactions among a range of local actors around the extraction and distribution of resources in the war economy; and the responses of the local population. The concluding section summarizes the findings and reflects on how this context-specific knowledge contributes to the study of the impact of war economies on civilian security in war zones.

### **Unpacking the War Economy and Interactions among its Protagonists**

Contemporary war economy is conventionally understood as including all economic activities during war, irrespective of their legal status (Keen 2008; Goodhand 2004). Yet, scholarship is dominated by accounts of the war economy as consisting of manifestly criminal and illegal economic practices, with the latter comprising illegal trade in otherwise legal goods<sup>4</sup> (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Cramer 2006; Heupel 2006; Wennmann 2011; Cockayne 2010). This body of work considers war as 'business by other means' and as a 'privatized form of self-enrichment' in which commercial transacting among formally opposed groups is a salient practice that financially benefits criminal networks, including non-state armed groups (Cockayne 2010; Raeymaekers 2013; Cramer 2006; Andreas 2009: 33). From this perspective, the exploitation of the local population through

predatory practices, including through the manipulation and taxation of humanitarian aid, is part of the resource extraction strategy of non-state armed groups. The criminal war economy controlled by insurgents, posits civilians as helpless victims whose sole protection from its harmful effects are the various forms of the 'coping economy' that enables the survival of the local population (Wennmann 2005: 483; Pugh et al 2004: 9; Justino 2013: 2; Péclard and Mechoulan 2015: 2).

The above perspectives have come under criticism from several directions. Gutierrez-Sanin's (2003) deconstruction of the 'criminal rebels' thesis demonstrated that there is nothing static about the identity of actors, their interests and motives for engaging in the war economy and behavior towards other actors. Rather, Gutierrez-Sanin (2004) makes a point that in contemporary conflicts, political, military and profit-seeking agendas of non-state armed actors mix in complex ways resulting in a variable and fluid constellation of actors, alliances and activities, which affect the civilian population in manifold ways. Cockayne (2010) argues that although the extractive strategies of armed groups are inherently coercive, the extent to which the population is directly extorted varies, and so does the vulnerability of the population to the harmful effects of the economic agendas of armed groups. The suggestion that the various forms of survival economy provide the only option for self-protection of the local population exposed to non-state armed groups' predation, is premised on a view of the formal/legal economy seen through a prism of destruction and disruption that reduces sources of livelihoods and productive capacities. Such a view, however, sidelines the different opportunities that emerge through the adaptation of the local economy to war conditions, both for violent extraction as well as for the development of coping mechanisms (Palmer 2008: 61; Cramer 2006: 197; Raeymaekers 2014).

Recent literature on war-time orders has challenged another dominant aspect of the

criminality perspective on war economy. While the criminality perspective associates the war economy with disorder and lawlessness that disproportionately affects the civilian populations, research shows that, although they are violent actors, rebels are often interested in governance and sometimes use the proceeds from the criminal war economy to provide common goods (Kasfir 2015; Staniland 2012b; Arjona 2014; Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015; Weinstein 2007: 164–165). The likelihood of channeling the criminal war economy proceeds towards the wider community interests increases, if those groups are recruited locally (Reno 2010: 64; Staniland 2012b: 143). Other factors that may affect such outcomes are not directly addressed, primarily, because the war-orders perspective developed through the study of long-lasting insurgencies in resource rich countries. Thus, while it provides insights into the behavior of non-state armed groups, it concomitantly downplays the presence of other actors who jostle to assert authority over local territories and fails to emphasize how these actors affect the behavior of insurgent groups, in general, and around the extraction and distribution of resources, in particular (Péclard and Mechoulan 2015; Hagmann and Péclard 2010). Literature on war-time orders also does not explicitly address war-related local economic transformation. This is an important gap as there are different adaptation patterns in countries influenced by their unique economic profiles. Economic profile, such as a manufacturing or agricultural-based economy or, for that matter, drug production and trafficking-based economic activity, influences the kinds of activities and actors involved as well as the modalities of their interactions, with vast differences in the impact on the quality of the lives of people in war zones (Hart-Lidow 2016: 5; Staniland 2012a; Schouten 2016; Palmer 2008). Ultimately, as argued by Justino et al (2013: 300), how non-state armed groups negotiate, cooperate, coerce or intimidate other local actors to pursue their economic

agendas, and the consequences such activities will have on the coping strategies of local populations, will depend to an important extent on the broader economic landscape, and not just its criminal part.

In the following section, these ideas will be explored, using evidence from the three opposition controlled areas in Syria.

### **Variegated Pathways of War Economy, Governance and Security in Syria: Empirical Evidence**

The main aim of this section is to describe the war economy involving insurgent groups in rebel-held areas of Syria, as well as to examine interactions among a range of local armed and civilian actors around the extraction and distribution of resources, and the responses of local populations to protect themselves from the harmful effects of the armed groups' practices. The three localities illustrate the different profiles of war economy that have emerged in the presence of locally-recruited armed groups, who make no explicit claim to govern those territories.

#### ***Eastern Ghouta – A Predatory Insurgency?***

Eastern Ghouta lies in the agricultural belt of Syria, to the southeast of the capital, Damascus. In October 2013, after the insurgent armed groups took control of the area, the government forces imposed a siege. At the time the research was conducted, it was the largest besieged area in Syria and subject to intense shelling. Entry to Eastern Ghouta was only possible through two checkpoints: one manned by insurgent groups at the Eastern Ghouta side and the other controlled by government forces. Underground tunnels were also created to surpass these checkpoints and to supplement the flow of licit and illicit goods. The control over these main routes for the circulation of goods and people, provided a strategic asset to the armed groups on both sides of the conflict. Those routes became profitable channels used by the opposition groups, regime forces and assorted merchants to extract war economy resources (Sadaki 2016).

Eastern Ghouta's agriculture based pre-war economy suffered extensive physical destruction, including to infrastructure (Al Zoughbi 2006). A lack of fuel, electricity, water, fertilizers, and fodder, severely disrupted agricultural activity, and the associated processing industry, and limited the possibilities for legal economic activities during the siege (Sadaki 2016).<sup>5</sup> Eastern Ghouta inhabitants have suffered acute food shortages and widespread malnutrition.<sup>6</sup> At least 397 civilians have died of starvation since the start of the siege (ACAPS 2017). Before the siege, the area received over 100,000 internally-displaced people (IDPs) (SAMS 2017), which has further strained the resource-base and coping strategies of the local population.

**The criminal war economy and its protagonists**  
At the time of research, the Islam Army, created in 2013 through a merger of some fifty opposition groups, was the main non-state armed actor operating within the besieged area (Lund 2016a: 1). Given the siege, the main economic activity comprised of smuggling basic commodities, including food and fuel, through the checkpoints and tunnels. Transporting people across the blockade was particularly difficult and risky, but provided high profits, up to one million Syrian pounds (SYP) per hour, and equivalent of around \$5,900.<sup>7</sup> The first of the tunnels, beneath the Damascus-Aleppo Highway, was excavated in August 2014 to allow for the entry of humanitarian aid. This tunnel quickly became a supply route for the armed groups and a *de facto* commercial enterprise. The daily income for rebel groups could be as high as SYP 15–20 million (\$88,000–\$118,000).<sup>8</sup> More tunnels were dug over time; including one housing a fuel pipeline as fuel smuggling became one of the most profitable businesses in the Syrian war.

The Islam Army's control over the supplies of food and fuel meant that prices were determined within an illicit network comprising of rebel and government forces and various merchants with the additional risk-costs of participating in the war economy

being passed on to civilians. To pass through the tunnels and the checkpoint, a percentage of the sales value of the goods was charged (Sadaki 2016). Basic goods were sold, by armed groups, at highly inflated prices. Prices were as high as 55 times their cost in Damascus, 15 km away from Eastern Ghouta. The price inflation was largely a result of the multiple rounds of informal payments that occurred before goods could reach the local population in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>9</sup> While vital to ease the strains of war on the local population, this lucrative trade provided revenues to the Islam Army and to their collaborators on the other side of the border, as well as for the various entrepreneurs linked to both parties, who controlled the market in the besieged area (Lund 2016b). As to the impact on the local population, the overall effect was extreme food insecurity due to the limited supply and high prices of goods and the heightened vulnerability of the local population to the extraction strategies of the armed groups (Sadaki 2016).

#### The local actors' interactions

The struggle for control over the commercial routes across the line of siege initially provoked frequent clashes among insurgent groups and even led to assassinations (Lund 2016a; Lund 2016b). To undercut its rivals, the *Jund Al Asefa* armed group colluded with government forces, and in February 2015<sup>10</sup> blew up the tunnel controlled by the Islam Army. Subsequently, the Islam Army cajoled smaller groups to merge and could end the violent competition over the tunnel. With the rival *Fajer Al Ummah* brigade, the Islam Army set up an office to manage the tunnel (Syria Deeply 2017a; Syria Deeply 2017b). These arrangements resulted in the Islam Army being able to exercise tighter control over the supply of food, medicine and fuel reaching the besieged area.

The relationship between the Islam Army and the local civilian structures through the Local Administrative Councils (LACs), were strained in Eastern Ghouta and, at times, confrontational. LACs grew out of the popular

mobilization of the Syrian uprising and serve as rudimentary civilian governance structures across the opposition-controlled areas with different capacities in different areas (Hajjar et al. 2017). Most LACs evolved over time and developed organizationally, albeit unevenly, to include specialized offices (for example, medical, education, and agriculture offices) to respond to the needs of the local population. Although formally elected by the local population, many LACs are associated with different armed groups (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2013). Several LACs were active in Eastern Ghouta at the time of research, of which the one in the city of Duma was the most developed (Turkmani et al 2015: 45; Angelova 2014).

Given the siege conditions, the LACs in Eastern Ghouta were poorly resourced and lacked the capacity to respond to the service delivery needs of the local population, including for the provision of basic goods and law and order. Accessing funding available through INGOs, which would enable LACs to be more effective, was undermined by the impact of the resource extraction practices of armed groups. For example, LACs were unable to accurately project costs to apply for funding from the INGOs interested in supporting agriculture. Even in cases where the funding was obtained, price fluctuations could easily take the project costs over-budget and undermine effective delivery (Turkmani et al 2015). The LACs seemed unable to influence the armed actors' activities to curtail costs.

The relationships between the Islam Army, the LACs and the local population were strained both because of the Islam Army's collusion with the government forces to exploit the siege conditions as well as due to instances of direct coercion. For example, Islam Army commanders allegedly run private prisons where a local citizen and a LAC member are among a group of prisoners (Lund 2016a). Additionally, as part of their military strategy, the Islam Army colluded with Syrian government forces to prevent civilians from leaving Eastern Ghouta (Amnesty International 2015; Sadaki 2016).

Instances of direct violence against the local population through, for example, the seizure of land and farms for extortion by armed groups added to the antagonism.

#### Local population coping strategies

Operating the tunnels allowed the insurgents to control economic life in the besieged area and consequently gave them greater influence over the security of its inhabitants, particularly compared to under-resourced LACs (Turkmani et al 2015). The conditions along the supply routes, through the checkpoint and the tunnels, dictated the intensity of shortages of various goods and their prices. For example, the destruction of the tunnel in February 2015 resulted in acute shortages of food and basic commodities. The impact was compounded by violence between the Islam Army and its competitors over the control of the main economic activities resulting in both reduced food and physical security for the population.

The siege not only created the opportunity for armed groups to exert control over and extract rent from the provision of basic goods, but also severely restricted economic opportunities for people in Eastern Ghouta. Consequently, the coping strategies that civilians could develop were severely circumscribed. Movement restrictions and shortages of fuel and fertilizers, along with continuous shelling, prevented the resumption of viable agriculture. This forced many farmers to resort to asset divestment and the selling of valuable possessions, including livestock, at a fraction of their value.

However, some people adapted and employed innovative forms of economic activity to meet the local demand for goods and services. This included, for example, new forms of commerce through renting privately-owned electricity generators and the use of organic waste as an alternative fuel source.

#### *Daraa- Tamed Predation?*

The governorate of Daraa, in the south-west of Syria, is under opposition control. Daraa Province is demarcated by an international

border with Jordan and an internal border with the government territory. At the time of research, the main road between Daraa and Damascus was exposed to intense fighting between government and opposition forces, and dotted by multiple checkpoints, which hampered the provision of basic supplies and posed protection risks to civilians (ACAPS 2014: 9; SNAP 2014).

Although infrastructure and productive capacity suffered substantial damage from shelling, significant sections of the electricity grid were operational and providing over 50 per cent of health facilities and schools with an adequate electricity supply (ACAPS 2014). While agriculture and the agriculture-related processing industry, which underpinned the pre-war economy, were severely disrupted, there remained pockets of viable agriculture in the northernmost areas (Teitsworth 2013: 30).

In mid-2013, the controls on the border with Jordan increased, restricting the passage of people and goods (Lund 2017). Increased border controls stemmed the flow of refugees from Syria into Jordan leading Daraa to receive some 320,773 IDPs<sup>11</sup> further compounding the food insecurity in the area. By January 2014, around 20 per cent of Daraa's population was reported to be in acute need of food assistance (SNAP 2014).

**The criminal war economy and its protagonists**  
No single opposition armed group controlled the Daraa governorate during the period of research. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and moderate Islamist brigades, which recruit mostly locally, had the strongest presence. JAN operated in some pockets in the territory.

The armed groups used diverse resource extraction strategies in exploiting opportunities provided by a porous informal border manned by Syrian government forces and a tightly-controlled one run by the Jordanian government. Smuggling, including high-profit margin commodities such as arms, fuel, and antiquities, was rife across the border with the government forces.<sup>12</sup> Smuggling

across the border with Jordan fell sharply after the border controls were stepped up, but was not curtailed. The illicit economy of smuggling operated in concert with the informal taxation of trade and people passing through numerous checkpoints along the border with the government forces. The government forces facilitating this trade, imposed informal levies on the passing traffic of people and goods travelling in both directions (Turkmani et al 2015). The fees were high and beyond what most *bona fide* businessmen could afford. For example, freezer trucks were charged around SYP 150,000 (US\$880) to pass and a truck loaded with vegetables around SYP 15–20,000 (US\$88–120) depending on the weight of the cargo. Sometimes the truck and the cargo would be confiscated and the driver forced to pay the bribe to get it back (Turkmani et al 2015).

Another stream of illicit revenue extraction included the manipulation of humanitarian aid by networks of armed actors and the smugglers enjoying their protection. A steady supply of aid was provided from Jordan under the UN auspices. A more limited supply of humanitarian aid was also transported across the borders with the government force. Some of the humanitarian aid found its way to the local stall markets (Turkmani et al 2015: 32). Some market stalls operated as enterprises run by shadow businessmen who enjoyed free movement across the border with the government forces under their protection as well as the protection by the FSA. Smuggled arms were also available for purchase at the market stalls.

Other forms of illicit activities in Daraa are oil smuggling, especially through the desert<sup>13</sup> and Swedia<sup>14</sup> and various forms of informal taxation of goods as well as different types of criminal trade due to its specific geostrategic, economic and demographic conditions. These included a highly lucrative trade in forged documents as an estimated 50 per cent of Daraa inhabitants did not possess the required documents to travel to Jordan.<sup>15</sup> Due to the abundance of archeological sites in Daraa, smuggling antiquities, including of

items unearthed by the armed groups' own excavation squads, developed into an industry. This extremely profitable trade relied on collaboration with partners on the other side of Daraa's borders, and with the links to transnational organized criminal networks (Sabi 2015).

#### The local actors' interactions

Although small, JAN's presence was important in shaping the profit opportunities for the opposition armed groups. In May 2015, JAN, in collaboration with the FSA, temporarily seized the main crossing on the Jordanian border at Nasib leading the border to be sealed.<sup>16</sup> JAN troops spearheaded a looting of the crossing facilities and were joined by a large number of civilians (Reed 2015). The Jordanian government subsequently opened a new crossing, close to As-Sweida, managed through a tri-partite arrangement involving opposition armed groups, regime forces and Jordanians (Turkmani et al 2015). Under the new arrangements, goods and trucks, after crossing the Jordanian side of the border, had to be escorted by armed opposition for a fee to the nearest regime checkpoint where the trucks paid customs duty to the government. Only a small group of local businessmen could afford the multiple rounds of taxation; for many businessmen trade became prohibitive, negatively affecting the local economy (Arabi 2015). Compared to the volumes of trade and the commercial importance of the Nasib crossing, the inferior infrastructure of the new crossing, coupled with lengthy and unpredictable procedures, affected the supply of goods entering Daraa. Acute food shortages in Daraa followed the closure of Nasib. The commercial sale of humanitarian aid through the networks of traders linked to the armed groups intensified, causing further strain on coping strategies.

A different type of arrangement, which ultimately benefited local population and the economy, was negotiated between the opposition and government forces around the supply of electricity. Opposition armed

groups controlled a majority of the hydroelectric dams in Daraa Province (Turkmani et al 2014). After government forces failed to capture the hydroelectric dams, an agreement was reached to exchange water for electricity (Turkmani et al 2014). The electricity supply, however, remained vulnerable to the changing military objectives of the armed groups. For example, in February and December 2014, opposition forces attacked Khurbat Ghazala traction current converter plant that supplied Daraa with electricity leading to shortages (Turkmani et al 2014).

The opposition armed groups' relations with the LACs differed. Whereas some communication between the FSA and the LACs was maintained, there was no interaction between the Islam Army and the LACs. The LAC struggled, even with the FSA, to implement projects. For example, the LACs failed to get support from the FSA to implement a campaign to stop the digging of water wells which was causing water shortages, with a knock on economic effect by impairing vegetable growth and electricity generation.<sup>17</sup> Islamist groups, on the other hand, occasionally interfered with civil society projects supported by the LACs to improve the living conditions of the local population. This included them obstructing a project funded by the World Health Organization to set up a field hospital as they wanted control over the implementation of the project.<sup>18</sup> Financial and military calculations driving the armed groups' conduct also interfered with the LACs' attempts to set up police and courts in Daraa. Armed groups set up their own judicial body, whose priority was to deal with disputes between the armed groups, including over the Nasib crossing. By taking over justice dispensation in Daraa, the armed groups controlled the smooth running of the commercial routes, at the expense of the provision of law and order for the public.

Adding to the complicated relationship between the armed groups and the local population was the interference of the armed groups in the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Because some civilian bodies distributing aid in Daraa are linked to different armed groups, and because of poor monitoring of aid, those groups were able to influence the distribution of humanitarian aid according to political loyalties and along kinship lines<sup>19</sup>. This enabled privileged access to goods to some sections of the local population and disadvantaged other (Turkmani et al 2015: 30).

#### Local population coping strategies

Commercial collaboration across the enemy lines, the heavy taxation of traded commodities and the manipulation of humanitarian aid, in combination, determined the availability and prices of goods and food in Daraa. In August 2015, one kilogram of rice cost SYP 338 in Daraa, compared with SYP 158 in Damascus.<sup>20</sup> Although various goods passed through the checkpoints along the government-controlled border, bread, which has been turned into a strategic commodity in the Syrian war, was not allowed through, even for a hefty bribe (Turkmani et al 2015: 27; Martinez and Eng 2017; Ciezadlo 2015).

Besides the proliferation of criminal and illegal activities in Daraa, various forms of legal economy survived and new forms of economic activity developed. Notably, some agricultural production was sustained, particularly growing vegetables. Farmers could sell part of their crop to the government territories, but were charged fees by the government forces (Turkmani et al 2015). Relying on remittances, humanitarian aid and the ingenuity of some farmers in producing fodder for their livestock, more intensive farming was also possible in some areas. Olive oil extraction was one type of legal economy that benefited from new investment, including from international sources. A profitable trade in solar devices developed in response to the demand created by the damage to electricity networks. The international humanitarian presence spurred cars sales and rental businesses. Collaboration between the regime forces and FSA facilitated remittances and cash transfers, and new money exchange

offices opened. Some were co-owned by the FSA as the boundaries between legal and illegal activities of war economy and their actors increasingly blurred.<sup>21</sup>

Opportunities for the local population to mitigate the harmful impact of war on their livelihoods involved a mixture of illegal and legal activities. Some people joined in smuggling; others seized on opportunities and adaptations to engage in formal economic activities; and some sections of the local population had to sell anything from livestock to houses, and personal possessions to survive.

#### ***Atareb – Extreme Criminality with Some ‘Positive Externalities’?***

Atareb is situated in the countryside of Aleppo, adjacent to the governorate of Idleb. Besides the international border with Turkey, Idleb has three informal internal borders: with the Syrian regime, with the area controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and with the territory, which in February–June 2015, was controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL). Intense fighting between these parties caused significant physical destruction across the governorate, with some areas particularly hard-hit. The electricity grid, whose core was in Aleppo, suffered extensive damage (ACAPS 2014).

Atareb was seized by opposition forces early in the conflict. Due to its proximity with the Turkish border and the relatively low rate of military attacks for the governorate, the area attracted an IDP population equivalent to a third of the domicile population (Turkmani et al 2015). The relative safety from military attacks meant that the largely agricultural area received a jolt from businesses relocating from other parts of Syria. These dynamics changed the economic profile of the area and created multiple economic opportunities in the war economy, particularly its legal part.

The criminal war economy and its protagonists  
The two opposition armed groups, composed largely of local fighters, had a strong

presence in Atareb in February-June 2015. While a multitude of armed groups, including JAN and other *Al Qaida* affiliates, operated in Atareb's surroundings, *Ma'rouf Hazem* and *Shuhada Atareb* of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were the dominant forces. Armed groups, supported by Turkey, enjoyed access to cross-border trade and controlled the main border crossings (Steenkamp 2017). The ability of armed groups to engage in illicit trade was enabled by this arrangement with trade in crude oil originating from the ISIL – and, to a lesser degree, Kurdish-controlled – territories throughout Idleb and the Aleppo countryside, the main component of the criminal war economy (Steenkamp 2017; Vigual 2017). While the trade in oil incurred informal taxation at many checkpoints dotted throughout the province, it was taxed at two locations in Atareb. One was a checkpoint on the road to Turkey, and the other was a checkpoint on the road to Aleppo, operated by *Ma'rouf Hazem* and *Shuhada Atareb* members accordingly. Other goods, particularly those destined for the government-controlled areas, incurred heavy taxes and truckloads of goods were frequently stolen by the various armed groups active in the area.

The presence of many armed groups in this region and a lax border regime with Turkey contributed to the proliferation of extreme forms of criminal activity (Schanzer and Tahiroglu 2014; ACAPS 2014). Kidnapping, trafficking in people, arms and drugs, trade in forged documents, and smuggling of antiquities thrived, and created a 'regional conflict complex' as suggested by the criminalization perspective on war economy (Pugh and Cooper 2004: 2). The presence of armed groups and organized criminal networks presented a risk to the physical safety of ordinary citizens, who otherwise faced few restrictions to free movement (ACAPS 2016).<sup>22</sup> In terms of economic opportunities for the local population, mobility is important, and is undermined by the risks of kidnapping and robbery. Armed groups in Atareb were less involved in skimming humanitarian aid as it

was distributed mostly by the LAC. In Idleb, however, the FSA occasionally engaged in an indirect form of extortion of the local population by cutting the supply lines and taking food for their own troops (Sotloff 2013).

#### The local actors' interactions

A thriving criminal war economy in Idleb and the Aleppo countryside was underpinned by mutually beneficial arrangements among the non-state armed groups. This included arrangements made with ISIL, which at the time had virtual monopoly on oil smuggling in Syria. Although trucks entering ISIL territories were taxed by the opposition forces, ISIL could leverage its access to crude oil to obtain other concessions, including to avoid armed confrontation. However, such agreements were subject to changing military calculations. For example, when factions of the Free Syrian Army clashed with ISIL, as in the northern countryside of Aleppo in Spring 2015, the oil delivery route was disrupted leading to a hike in oil prices (Turkmani et al 2015).

There were also examples of collaboration and conflict between the armed groups and government forces. For example, while there was intense fighting for the control of the road infrastructure in Idleb countryside, opposition groups in Atareb collaborated with government forces in Aleppo to help ease shortages caused by damage to the electricity infrastructure. This agreement followed the military struggle, won by the FSA, for the control of the electricity distribution plants (Turkmani 2015: 53). The agreement, which enabled a more stable supply of electricity to Atareb, was jeopardized occasionally because of each party's military priorities (Turkmani 2015).

The relations between the opposition armed groups in Atareb and the LAC were established gradually and developed into a regularized form of cooperation. The foundation of their relations was laid in a joint effort to repel ISIL's attempts to capture Atareb in early 2014. In the aftermath, the FSA local brigades and the Atareb LAC agreed to move

the two checkpoints controlling the access to Atareb outside of the town perimeter. The checkpoints managed by the *Ma'rouf Hazem* and *Shuhada Atareb* brigades accrued substantial profits. The levies charged on goods were regulated by the local court, revenues were recorded and subsequently shared between the FSA and the LAC (Turkmani et al 2015: 60). This collaboration created a system of compliance between the armed groups and the civilian authority present in Atareb. The proceeds from those informally-regulated and, in some ways, illegal transactions given the ambiguous legal origins of some of the goods passing through the checkpoints, provided revenue for the two armed brigades and also for the LAC.<sup>23</sup>

Although the arrangements between the armed groups and the local civilian structures benefited the local population, the relationship between the armed groups and the local population remained uneasy. There was a perception that the FSA, in the words of one activist, '[...] only provided support to their soldiers, they were not interested in anyone else' (Martinez and Eng 2017). The *Ma'rouf Hazem* brigade apparently kept close watch on the movement of goods and the origins of aid supplies making people suspicious of their collaboration with the LACs.<sup>24</sup>

#### Local population coping strategies

The booming criminal economy in Atareb created a fluid and rapidly-changing environment in which the local population adapted its coping strategies. The arrangements between the opposition armed forces and ISIL provided access to fuel, which compared to many other opposition-controlled areas in Syria, helped ease the strain on everyday life. However, households and businesses depending on such arrangements for the regular supply of fuel were vulnerable to the fluctuating dynamics of the military and business interests of those groups. Electricity supply, which depended on running diesel-fueled generators, was interrupted whenever military objectives disrupted the business arrangement over oil. Access to crude oil

made oil refining a novel source of livelihoods for many ordinary people; oil refining turned into a cottage industry and whatever was not locally consumed, was sold across the border with Turkey (Yazigi 2014: 6; Steenkamp 2017: 10).

Versatile new businesses also developed in Atareb's surrounding area, including in construction, retail trade and manufacturing. The latter, for example, included the equipment needed for the oil smuggling business (Steenkamp 2017: 10; Al Abdeh 2013). Spurred by armed groups' criminal economic activities, repairing trucks used for oil transport also provided new forms of business. Manufacturing generators, mainly run by people who relocated their business to Atareb, also thrived due to the insufficient supply of electricity.

This stronger legal economy enabled the LAC in Atareb to raise its own revenue, however modest, by charging fees for electricity, water, and sanitation services akin to a properly functioning public authority.<sup>25</sup> The LAC organized the purchase of flour and vegetables to control local food prices, which helped ease the strain of food shortages on the local population. The LAC also set up rudimentary security institutions such as a civil defense council and a police force, increasing the sense of order and security for the local population.<sup>26</sup> The local economy was also propped up by the presence of international organizations able to operate in the broader area of Atareb due to the proximity of the open border with Turkey. Not all sections of the local population were able to benefit from either the criminal economy or the legal economy; many people still relied on subsistence farming and the sale of household possessions to survive.

#### Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored how the engagement of non-state armed groups in the criminal war economy affects the coping strategies that the local population develops to protect itself from their harmful impact, highlighting the interactions among various

actors and activities in the broader war economy. We have done so based on the proposition that a criminality perspective in the mainstream scholarship on war economy fails to account for the adaptation in the broader economy and a variety of local processes and interactions that may affect the response of local populations.

The criminal economy that has developed against the pre-war economic profile in three localities (Eastern Ghouta, Daraa and Atareb) varies in its profile and scale, ranging from that comprised mainly of the manipulation of the supply of basic goods to full-blown criminality. The interactions among its protagonists were influenced by their military/profit calculations and contingent on the resources available in the broader economy, which itself had been transformed by conflict, and its variable geography. The involvement of armed groups in criminal and illegal economic activity entailed different forms and extents of coercion, varying from predation in the Eastern Ghouta siege, to less exposure to such practices in Daraa and Atareb. Local population coping strategies varied as result. In contrast to Eastern Ghouta, where siege conditions pushed people to rely disproportionately on asset divestment with only limited alternatives for income generation, in Daraa and Atareb, more diverse opportunities existed in both the legal and illegal economies.

Syria presents an exceptionally fluid and diverse conflict context in which to study the link between war economy and everyday security. With coalitions in a perpetual state of flux, it is not always possible to clearly identify the actors. The insurgency is relatively recent and heavily reliant on external patrons, which affects incentives to engage in local governance. The pre-existing social ties of armed groups, that is, their embeddedness in social relations, are good predictors for the type of arrangements that advance common interests, and hence civilian security. This kind of predisposition for engaging with the civilian structures was demonstrated

in the Atareb case. Our analysis shows that whether and how such arrangements that are beneficial to civilian security materialize, is contingent on broader economic and political conditions that affect war economy micro-dynamics.

We do not underestimate the scale and severity of individual insecurity in each of the three cases we have studied, even in those seemingly positive instances, where the war economy offered more diverse copying strategies, notably Atareb. Nor do we overemphasize the significance and potential for sustaining some of the benefits from engagement in different areas of the war economy over the long-term. Equally, we do not overlook long-term economic, political and social repercussions of criminal war economy and the challenge they present to post-war reconstruction. Rather, our analysis points to a need for a more fine-grained examination of these dynamics, one that captures and explicates the different interactions that produce an entangled illegal, and legal economy, their actors, and the wider public and private interests in conflict zones, which can affect civilian security in manifold ways. Every armed conflict and its locality has its salient war economy dynamics and actors, which are a product of endogenous and exogenous factors that shape the behavior of the war economy participants. This diversity within and across countries is, by and large, obscured when looking at the war economy through a criminality lens, as has been the case in extant accounts of Syria's war economy. Our analysis above attempts to overcome some of the conceptual and policy implications of maintaining a criminality-focused perspective and enables the tailoring of more context-specific responses.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It has since changed its name to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTC).

<sup>2</sup> In the war economy scholarship border control is considered a strategic asset for the armed groups (Andreas 2009).

- <sup>3</sup> For the full description of the methodology, see: Turkmani et al 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> On the importance and difficulty of conceptual clarification of 'criminal', 'illegal' and 'illicit' in war economy context, see: van Schendel and Abraham 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> See: 'Survey of Syria's agriculture sector reveals impact of war', available at: <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/fao-in-action/stories/stories-detail/en/c/878242/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with a member of civil society organisation which runs farming project in Daraa, 15 April 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with traders and media representatives based in Eastern Ghouta, 9 May 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> Syrian Untold. 27-7-2017. The Economic Map of Ghouta: Tunnels and 'the Prince of Cheese'. Available at: <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2017/07/the-economic-map-of-ghouta-tunnels-and-the-prince-of-cheese/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Syrian Untold. 27-7-2017. The Economic Map of Ghouta: Tunnels and 'the Prince of Cheese'. Available at: <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2017/07/the-economic-map-of-ghouta-tunnels-and-the-prince-of-cheese/>.
- <sup>10</sup> See <http://stepagency-sy.net/archives/36463>.
- <sup>11</sup> Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic 2016, [www.reliefweb.net](http://www.reliefweb.net).
- <sup>12</sup> Smart Media, Smuggling between Sweida and Daraa under the regime's eyes. 16 March 2016. <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/165994>.
- <sup>13</sup> Enab Baladi, Deraa- The regime controls electricity and smugglers provide diesel through the desert. <http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/98782>.
- <sup>14</sup> Almodon, Corruption in Swedia. 1 May 2016, <http://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2016/5/1/>.
- <sup>15</sup> Humanitarian Needs Overview-Syrian Arab Republic 2016.
- <sup>16</sup> Nasib closed for the 4th day and the losses are \$100million, Bal Arabi, 4 April 2015.; What is the significance of Nasib crossing, Al Jazeera, 17 April 2015.
- <sup>17</sup> Skype interview with a member of local administrative councils unit, 7 March 2015.
- <sup>18</sup> Skype interview with a member of local administrative councils unit, 7 March 2015.
- <sup>19</sup> Al Ghad, Al Rukban Camp: Humanitarian aid is not reaching all refugees, 18 June 2017. <http://alghad.com/articles/1677222>.
- <sup>20</sup> Smart Media, Smuggling between Sweida and Daraa under the regime's eyes. 16 March 2016. <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/165994>.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with a member of Syrian civil society organisation based in Daraa, 8 April 2015.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with traders and members of civil society organisations based in Idlib, 10 April 2015.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with a member of the local administrative council in Atareb, 5 May 2015.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with a member of the local administrative council in Atareb, 5 May 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with a member of the local administrative council in Atareb, 5 May 2015.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with a member of the local administrative council in Atareb, 5 May 2015.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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