



Kobani: Rapid Perceptions Assessment

March 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned by SREO to provide insights into the thoughts and concerns of Kobani residents in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic State's withdrawal from the city.

SREO expresses its sincere thanks to all of those who helped enable this assessment, and takes full responsibility for all omissions and errors. SREO's Field Coordinator and Field Researchers conducted the survey.

This report was written by Max Marder and edited by Matt Trevithick and Daniel Seckman.

Contact: communications@sreo.org

Photo Credit: BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images

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ABOUT SREO

SREO is an independent, non-partisan research center based in Gaziantep, Turkey. SREO's team of researchers includes Syrians, Turks, Europeans, and Americans who have all spent significant time in Syria and the Middle East. Its researchers speak local languages and are dedicated to providing objective analysis of what is transpiring inside of Syria as well as in the host communities of neighboring countries.

SREO provides monitoring and evaluation services along with needs assessments and feasibility studies. Together, the SREO team has more than two decades of research experience from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Contact: communications@sreo.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The results of SREO's rapid assessment survey indicate that Kobani's future remains bleak despite the Islamic State's retreat from the city in January. First, more than 77% of the 900 Kobani residents feared the Islamic State returning to re-contest control of the city. Second, Kobani, though peaceful, is now in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Over half of the city is destroyed, and respondents were pessimistic that anyone, particularly Americans or the West, would help to rebuild it. Half of those surveyed indicated that they did not know of anyone providing humanitarian assistance in the city, where residents indicated they are suffering from significant shortages of food, clean water and electricity.

Despite proclamations otherwise, it appears the struggle for the future of Kobani is far from over.

INTRODUCTION

For several months beginning in September, 2014, international attention was focused on the small Syrian city of Kobani, known as Ain al-Arab in Arabic. Islamic State militants laid siege to the city, located on the Turkish border, causing well over one hundred thousand Syrian Kurdish refugees from Kobani and its surrounding villages to flee to Turkey.¹ The Islamic State deployed considerable forces in the conflict, drawing on its control of the territory surrounding Kobani, including Jarablus to the west, Tel Abyad to the east and Minbij to the south.

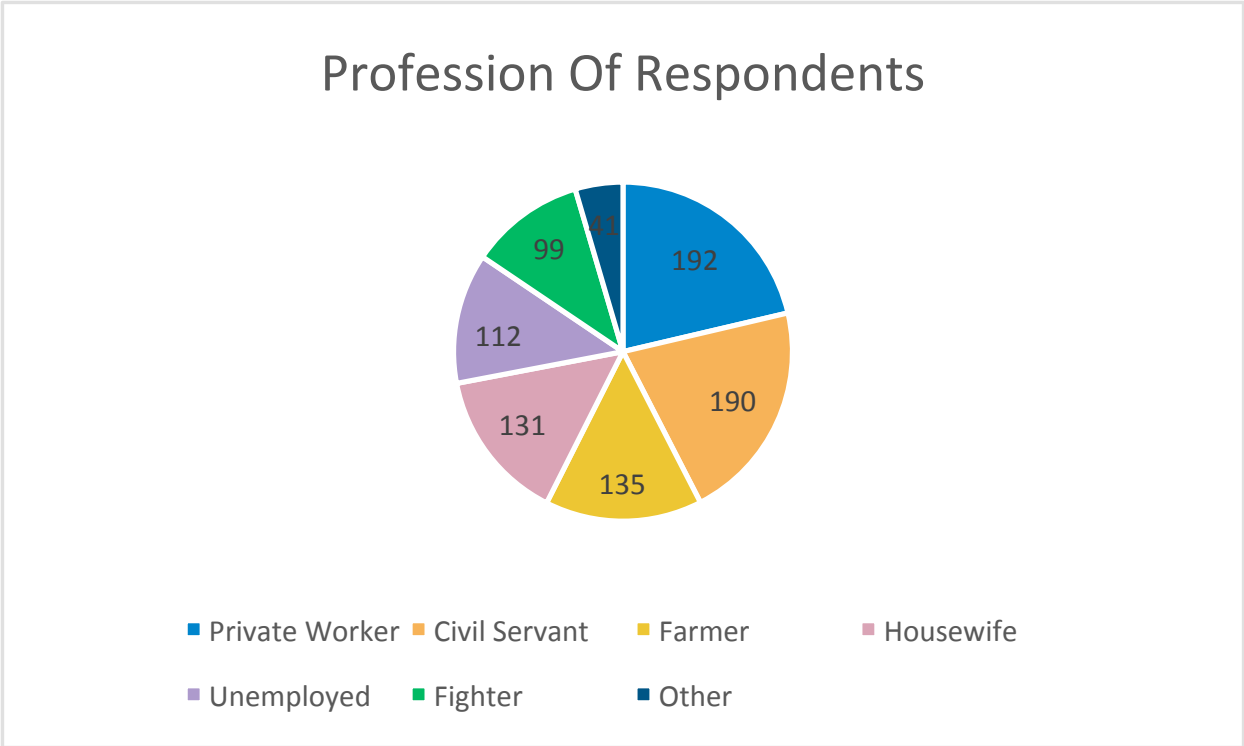
Coalition airstrikes, which until that point had been largely focused on Idleb, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, quickly shifted to supporting the defense of Kobani (75% of the coalition's Syria airstrikes in 2014 struck positions in Kobani).² The airstrikes, in concert with the Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG) on the ground, and reinforcements from Iraq, stemmed the advance of the Islamic State in November 2014, and local fighters began pushing Islamic State fighters from the city. These developments, culminated in the Islamic State's eventual retreat from Kobani in late January, 2015.

Within a week of the Islamic State's retreat from Kobani, SREO commissioned three Syrian researchers to poll 900 of Kobani's remaining and returning residents using digital survey tools regarding the situation in the newly liberated city. This survey, which represents the first large-scale and systematic polling of Kobani residents post-conflict, was conducted in the first two weeks of February 2015, and represents a rapid assessment of residents' attitudes regarding the future following the Islamic State's withdrawal.

¹ Tomlinson, Simon. "Violence erupts on Turkey-Syria border as Kurds on both sides tear down fences to let refugees flee and fighters cross to take on ISIS." Daily Mail, September 26, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2770706/Thousands-Syrians-flee-Turkey-country-finally-vows-join-fight-against-ISIS-vows-measures-necessary-smash-terror-group.html>

² Lund, Aron. "Why the Victory in Kobani Matters." Carnegie Endowment, Syria in Crisis, February 13, 2015. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59061>

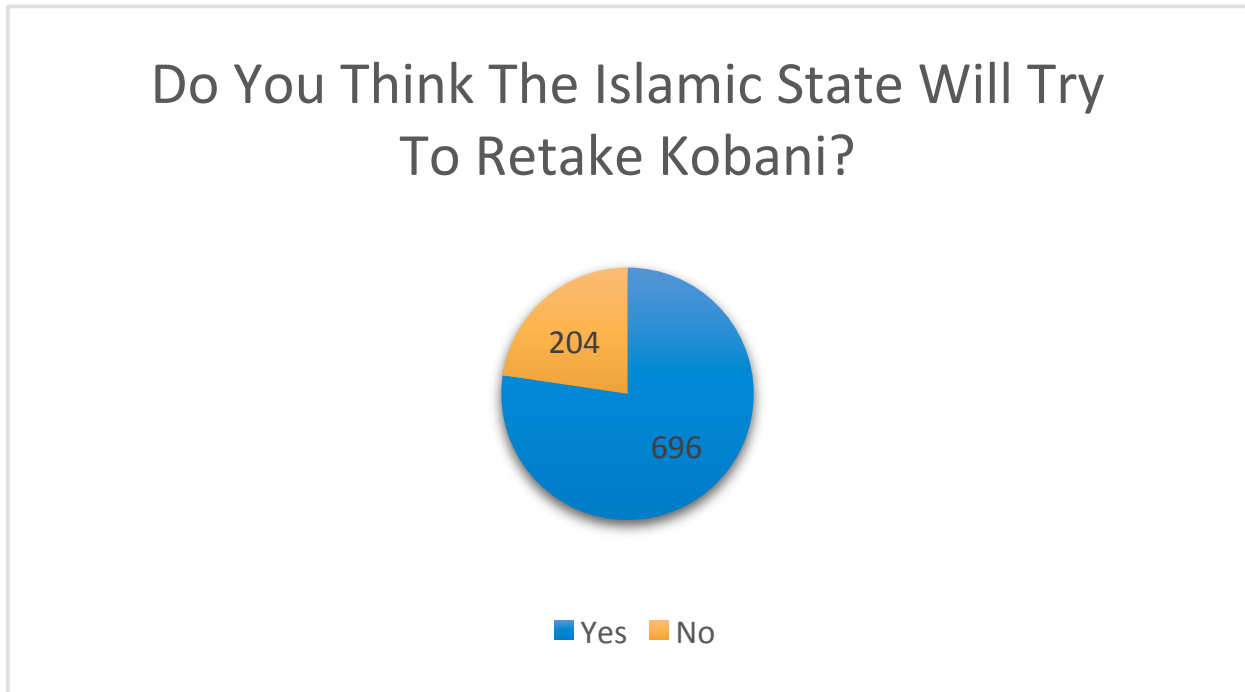
SURVEY SAMPLE



The sample for this survey consisted of 651 men (72.0%) and 249 women (28.0%) involved in a variety of different professions. The largest groups of respondents were business owners and private sector workers (21.3%) and civil servants, including teachers, doctors and office staff (21.1%). Other professional groups represented in the survey were farmers (15%), housewives (14.6%) and the unemployed (12.4%). 11.1% of survey respondents were local fighters, while 4.5% indicated that their work fit in none of the categories listed above.

FINDINGS

Fear of the Islamic State's Return



696 of the 900 residents polled (77.3%) were fearful of the Islamic State returning to Kobani. Upon withdrawing from Kobani, Islamic State publications portrayed the retreat as tactical and temporary, in contrast to international media reports and coalition military representatives indicating that the Islamic State had been irreversibly driven out.³ Importantly, as of this writing, the Islamic State still controls the largely Sunni territory to the east, west and south of Kobani. Kobani residents, in stark contrast to the international discourse, think that they are experiencing only a temporary reprieve from Islamic State attacks, and not the end of hostilities.

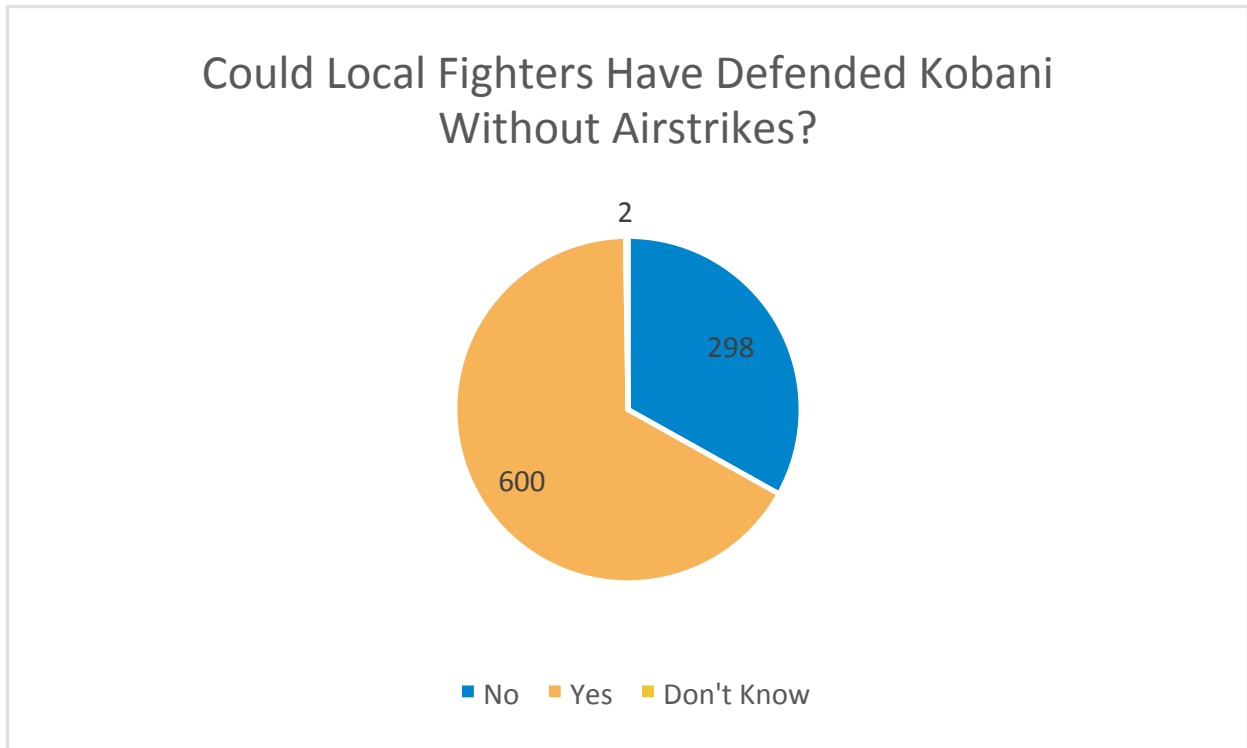
³ "After Kobani Victory, Kurds Expand Fight Against ISIS." AP, January 27, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/after-kobani-victory-kurds-expand-fight-against-isis/>

Top Urgent Needs

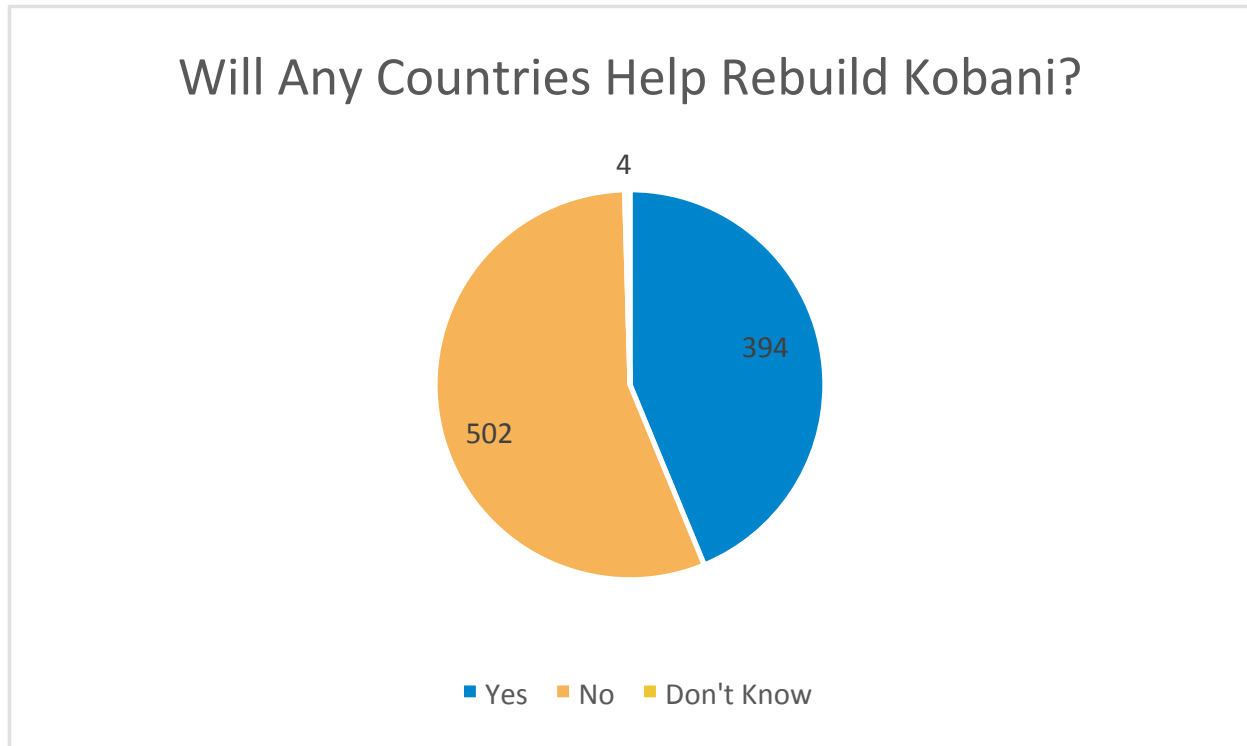
Most Urgent Needs

Highest Priority	Electricity	Clean Water	Fresh Food	Winter Clothes and Shelter	Canned Food	Heating Oil
1	34	43	574	229	12	8
2	131	366	219	102	42	40
3	371	237	59	41	116	76
4	101	144	24	126	376	129
5	161	55	11	223	259	191
6	102	55	13	179	95	456

Surveyors asked respondents to indicate their most urgent needs among a list of choices including: electricity, clean water, fresh food, winter clothes and shelter, canned food and heating oil. The surveyed population ranked fresh food as their number one priority, with 88% of respondents reporting that it was either their first- or second-most urgent need. Respondents indicated that clean water was the next most important need, with 45% of respondents expressing that it was their first or second most critical requirement. Respondents' third most urgent priority was electricity, with 60% of those surveyed answering that it was one of their top three needs. Respondents were divided about the urgency of receiving winter clothes. Canned food and heating oil were lower priorities.



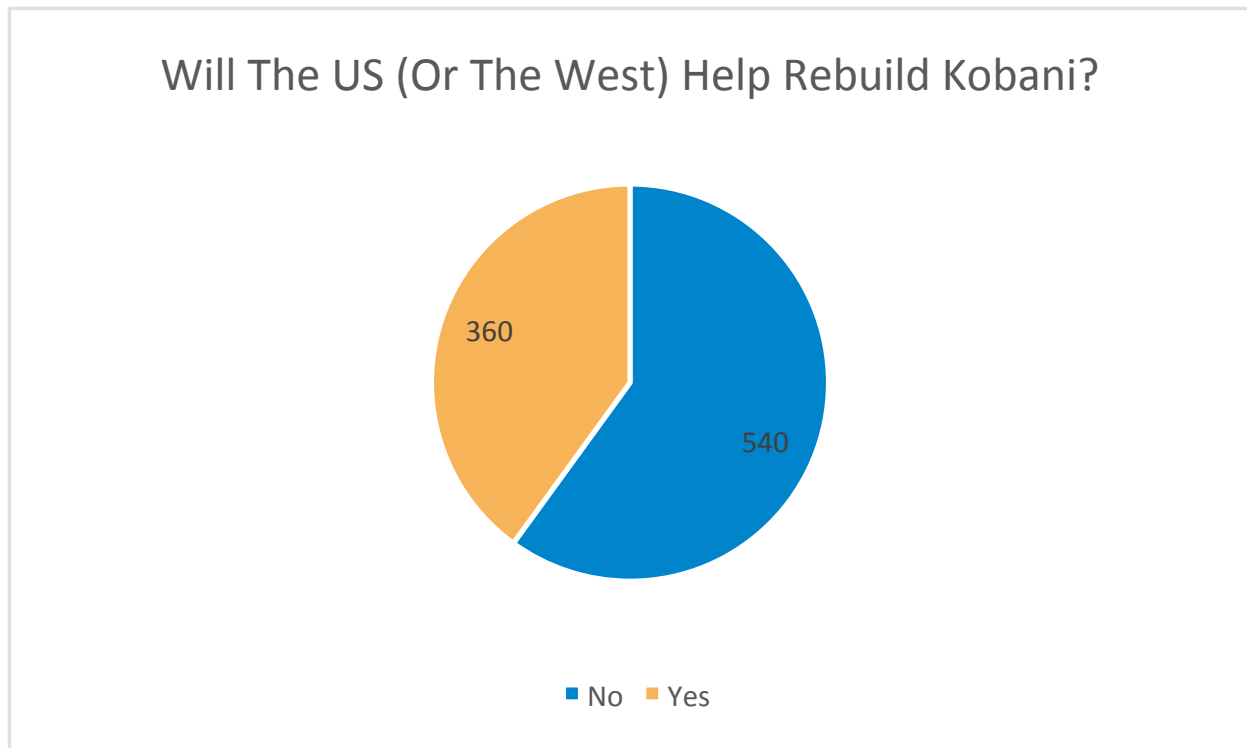
Kobani residents remained confident that local fighters could have defended the city from the Islamic State attack without air support. Exactly two-thirds of respondents thought that local fighters would have successfully defended Kobani on their own.



Approximately half of the buildings in Kobani were destroyed in its four-month siege.⁴ More than half of the residents surveyed (56%) did not believe that anyone was going to help to rebuild the city. In this context, the tens of thousands of residents who fled may not have homes to return to for the foreseeable future. For those who have returned, they've found a city with no services, electricity or sanitation.⁵

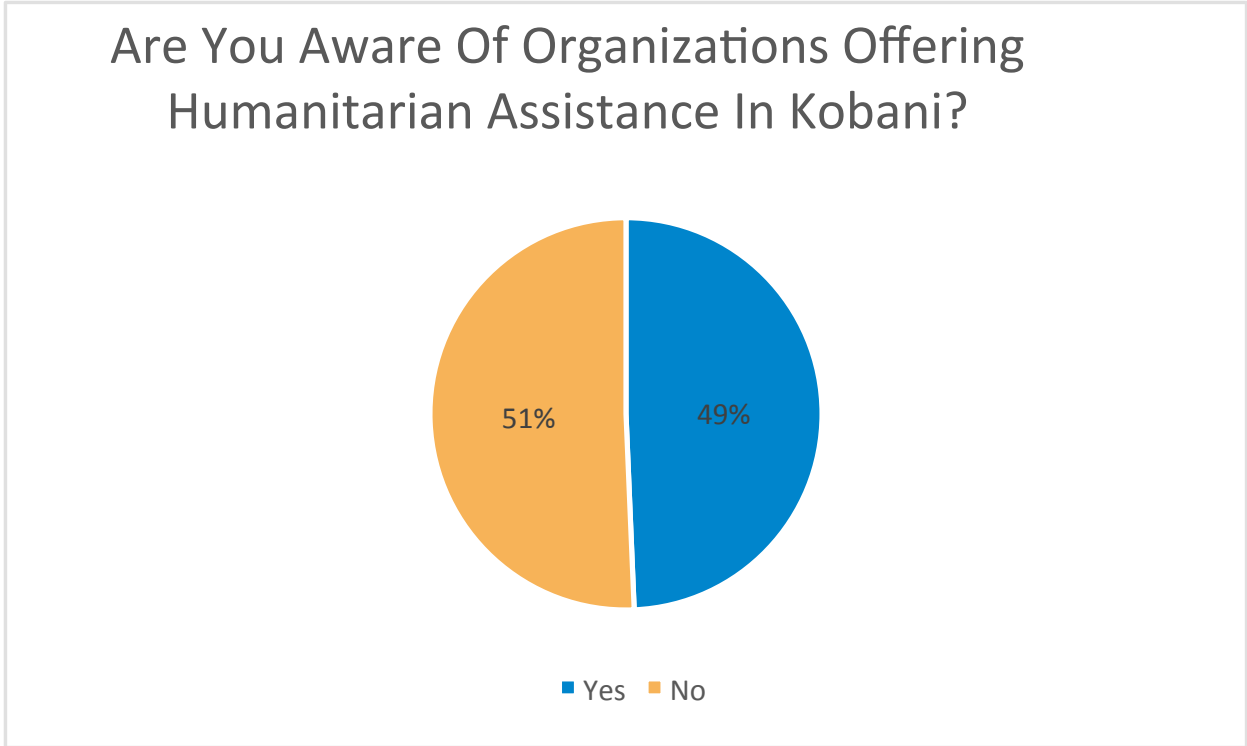
⁴ Graham-Harrison, Emma. "Kobani: destroyed and riddled with unexploded bombs, but its residents dare to dream of a new start." *The Guardian*, January 31, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/31/kobani-kurdish-forces-retake-isis-destroyed-power-sanitation-bombs-residents-hopes>

⁵ Ibid.



Kobani residents were pessimistic about Westerners in general, or Americans in particular—the very parties who claimed to have saved Kobani—helping with reconstruction. While 55% of respondents did not believe anyone would help to rebuild Kobani, an even larger portion, 60%, did not believe that the Americans or the West would help in this regard. In fact, Kobani has largely disappeared from headlines and talking points since the Islamic State’s retreat in late January 2015. This finding also partially belies the popular notion that Syrian Kurds unambiguously trust the United States and the West to help in times of need.⁶

⁶ “After Kobani victory over Islamic State group, Syrian Kurds seek alliance with moderate rebels.” AP, February 11, 2015. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/02/11/after-kobani-victory-over-islamic-state-group-syrian-kurds-seek-alliance-with/>



51% of respondents did not know of any organization providing humanitarian assistance in Kobani. Despite Kobani’s location on the Turkish border, it remains largely isolated from service providers. Partially as a result, the city is close to uninhabitable despite the cessation of hostilities. The city is facing a severe shortage of food and clean water, with the city’s water infrastructure largely destroyed during the siege.

CONCLUSION

Having successfully defended Kobani from the Islamic State, the results of this survey strongly indicate that Kobani is now facing a dire crisis of a different kind, characterized by a severe shortage of food, clean water and electricity. Over half of the buildings in Kobani were destroyed during four months of fighting. They were particularly pessimistic about the West, specifically the United States, contributing to reconstruction efforts despite substantial military from these same actors. Two-thirds of respondents reported that the fighters could have defended the city without assistance. Most interestingly, 77.3% of respondents were fearful of the Islamic State returning to Kobani.

Widespread proclamations of an unambiguous victory in Kobani belie the fact that the struggle for the future of Kobani is ongoing.



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