



# A New Sheriff in Town: A Rapid Assessment of Jaish al-Fatah's Control Over Idleb City

June 2015



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This assessment was commissioned by SREO to analyze the situation in Idleb city during a highly fluid time. SREO would like to thank the respondents in Idleb city for taking the time to provide honest and forthright testimony about the changes that are ongoing in their community.

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*Photo Credit: Khalil Ashawi. Idleb, May 8th, 2015.*

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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 to organizations involved in the Syrian humanitarian response. Together, the SREO team has more than two decades of research experience from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IDP Internally Displaced Person

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In late March 2015, a recently formed umbrella group of rebel battalions named Jaish al-Fatah announced that it had “liberated” the city of Idleb from Syrian government forces.<sup>1</sup> This represents a significant milestone in Syria’s ongoing conflict given that Idleb city was only the second of Syria’s 14 provincial capitals, after Ar-Raqqa, to fall out of government control. Since the fall of the city, Syrian government aircraft have bombarded Idleb from the air with barrel bombs and other indiscriminate ordinance.<sup>2</sup> Activists have reported widespread chlorine gas attacks by Syrian government helicopters in Idleb city and its countryside since the rebels began to take territory in March.<sup>3 4</sup>

Given the significance of Idleb city’s fall for humanitarian actors, policymakers, analysts, and Syrian civilians, SREO commissioned and executed this rapid assessment of the humanitarian and security situation in Idleb city. This assessment also examined civilian attitudes towards the Jaish al-Fatah fighters currently in control of the city. Field researchers began surveying city residents approximately one month after the city changed hands in order to balance timeliness with allowing residents to form informed views on the changes in the city.

Field researchers completed 500 surveys between May 2<sup>nd</sup> and May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Among the 500 respondents, 109 self-identified as Jaish al-Fatah fighters, allowing

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<sup>1</sup> Lund, Aron. “Syrian Rebels Capture Idleb.” *Syria Comment*. March 28, 2015. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-rebels-capture-idlib-by-aron-lund/>

<sup>2</sup> Oakford, Samuel, “Syria’s First Responders Say They Need a No-Fly Zone, But No One Listens,” *VICE News*, May 18, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/syrias-first-responders-say-they-need-a-no-fly-zone-but-no-one-listens>

<sup>3</sup> Shaheen, Kareem, “Assad regime accused of 35 chlorine attacks since mid-March,” *The Guardian*, May 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/24/syria-regime-accused-of-using-chlorine-bombs-on-civilians>

<sup>4</sup> El Deeb, Sarah, “Activists say suspected chemical attacks in Syria’s Idlib province injure 40, kill a child,” *Associated Press*, May 2, 2015, <http://m.startribune.com/world/302294041.html?section=world>

this assessment to disaggregate and compare the perspective of civilians and fighters alike.

This assessment found that the humanitarian situation in Idleb city has deteriorated significantly since the government lost control of the city. The majority of respondents indicated that the availability of electricity, clean water, food, healthcare and security were all significantly worse since Jaish al-Fatah took over. Interestingly, Jaish al-Fatah fighters themselves agreed with this, but by a slimmer majority. Civilians' most urgent need was security, followed by livelihoods. Non-fighters in particular also highlighted education and food security as urgent needs.

Respondents overwhelmingly blamed the Syrian government, not Jaish al-Fatah, for the deteriorating situation. Civilians were much more likely than not to say that the city's fall was good news, that the new actors were treating them respectfully, and that the biggest threat to their security was the Syrian government.

This assessment also found that Jaish al-Fatah's component brigades have amalgamated to a surprising degree. While Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were the most often identified individual armed groups, many more respondents perceived Jaish al-Fatah as a united whole. Rather than dividing the neighborhood of the city by armed group, each of the components of Jaish al-Fatah were cooperating with one another and largely administering the city together.

## INTRODUCTION

On March 28, 2015, Syrian rebels and jihadi fighters announced that they had captured Idlib city, only the second provincial capital to fall out of government control since the start of the Syrian crisis.<sup>5</sup> An umbrella group of Syrian rebel factions called Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), opposed to both the Syrian government and the Islamic State, took the city.<sup>6</sup> The coalescence of the diverse groups comprising Jaish al-Fatah has been attributed to increased cooperation and compromise among foreign sponsors of the Syrian opposition, namely Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup>

Jaish al-Fatah's most prominent members are the al-Nusra Front—al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria—and Ahrar ash-Sham (the Islamic Movement of the Free People of the Levant), a hardline Sunni Islamist brigade. However, more moderate brigades associated with the Free Syrian Army are also members of Jaish al-Fatah. Since the fall of the city, the government of Syria has launched heavy airstrikes in Idlib, and could be mobilizing for a large-scale counter-attack to retake the city.<sup>8</sup>

Jaish al-Fatah has built from its success in Idlib city, scoring numerous gains throughout the province, most notably in Jisr al-Shaghour, al-Mastouma and Ariha. Though its victory in the provincial capital was militarily significant, the humanitarian cost in Idlib city has been high, with few services remaining functional. Civilian infrastructure in the city was largely destroyed.<sup>9</sup> All three of

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<sup>5</sup> Lund, Aron. "Syrian Rebels Capture Idlib." *Syria Comment*. March 28, 2015. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-rebels-capture-idlib-by-aron-lund/>

<sup>6</sup> Joscelyn, Thomas. "Jihadist coalition captures checkpoints around the city of Idlib." *The Long War Journal*. March 27, 2015. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/jihadist-coalition-captures-checkpoints-around-city-of-idlib.php>

<sup>7</sup> Sinjab, Lina, "Syria: How a new rebel unity is making headway against the regime," BBC, May 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32540436>

<sup>8</sup> Lund, Aron. "Syrian Rebels Capture Idlib." *Syria Comment*. March 28, 2015. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-rebels-capture-idlib-by-aron-lund/>

<sup>9</sup> "Syria: Mass Displacement from Idlib." *Save the Children*. March 31, 2015. <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/2015-04/syria-mass-displacement-idlib>



Idlib's Ministry of Health hospitals, and 90 percent of the city's schools, were no longer functioning.<sup>10</sup> The increase of violence in Idlib city and the surrounding countryside displaced tens of thousands of civilians.

According to the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, approximately 30,000 civilians were displaced in the immediate aftermath of the city's fall.<sup>11</sup> In subsequent weeks, the number of displaced topped 100,000, with some displaced for a second time.<sup>12</sup> Many traveled to camps near the Turkish border while others have fled to nearby villages.<sup>13</sup>

This rapid response assessment took place over the course of eight days, from May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 through May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015. SREO decided to conduct research five weeks after the fall of the city from Syrian government forces, to balance timeliness with allowing respondents to provide an informed viewpoint on the changes in the city.

Field researchers conducted surveys with 500 respondents in Idlib city, 109 of whom identified themselves as fighters, almost certainly with Jaish al-Fatah. Therefore, this evaluation has disaggregated the responses of civilians and fighters where appropriate and compared them.

This assessment found that the humanitarian situation in Idlib has deteriorated since the Syrian government lost the city to Jaish al-Fatah. Strong majorities, between 70 and 75 percent, reported that the availability of electricity, clean water, food, healthcare services and security were worse during the evaluation period than when the Syrian government controlled Idlib. Civilians reported worsening

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<sup>10</sup> "Idlib Situation Report: April 7-14." *OCHA*. April 17, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Hasselberg, Catherine. "Concerns about ongoing fighting in Idlib and its impact on civilians." *United Nations Radio*. March 30, 2015. <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2015/03/concerns-about-ongoing-fighting-in-idlib-and-its-impact-on-civilians/#.VTY4hiErLIU>

<sup>12</sup> "Idlib Situation Report: April 7-14." *OCHA*. April 17, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> "Syria: Mass Displacement from Idlib." *Save the Children*. March 31, 2015. <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/2015-04/syria-mass-displacement-idlib>

conditions in higher proportions, but a majority of fighters expressed that the humanitarian situation had worsened as well.

Still, civilian respondents largely blamed the Syrian government, and not Jaish al-Fatah, for the humanitarian crisis in the city. Civilians reported that they have been exposed to shelling and bombardment from government aircraft since the city fell. Previously the major service provider in Idleb the government has cut off supplies and destroyed vital infrastructure since losing the city. Respondents indicated that security was their biggest concern, and that it was the Syrian government that most threatened it.

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of this assessment was to complete a timely and informed comparative assessment of the humanitarian and security situation in Idleb city before and after the Syrian government's retreat. SREO's evaluation team prioritized analysis on five indicators of the humanitarian situation in the city: electricity, food security, healthcare, clean water and security. Another primary objective of this assessment was to uncover what civilians' greatest and most urgent needs were during this fluid period. Additionally, this assessment sought to analyze civilians' attitudes toward Jaish al-Fatah and to discover the nature of the relationship between civilians and fighters. Furthermore, the composition of Jaish al-Fatah fighters in Idleb, and how its component brigades divided control of the city's neighborhoods, was of interest to the evaluation team.

Finally, the results of this assessment may have significance beyond the immediate situation in Idleb city, given Jaish al-Fatah's recent territorial gains throughout Idleb province, most notably in Jisr al-Shaghour. As the first major triumph for Jaish al-Fatah, Idleb city's condition may shed light on other situations in other locations in the province that have come under the umbrella group's control.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Geographic Scope and Sample*

Field researchers surveyed respondents in six of Idlib city’s largest neighborhoods. The sample was not structured in advance by neighborhood—field researchers were allowed flexibility in obtaining a representative sample while also reducing risks to their safety. Al-Jamarak and Harat Al-Hayashi were the most sampled neighborhoods because of both their size and their relative level of safety during the evaluation period. Field researchers reported that Dabit, the Western Quarter, the City Center and Al-Qasour were being shelled more heavily during the evaluation period.

**Table 1: Location of Respondents by Neighborhood**

#	Location (neighborhood)	# of Resp. per location
1	Al-Jamarak	142
2	Harat Al-Hayashi	134
3	Dabit	78
4	Western Quarter	57
5	City Center	47
6	Al-Qasour	42

### *Data Collection*

The data for this assessment was based on a 21-question survey designed by SREO’s evaluation team in Gaziantep, Turkey. The majority of questions were close-ended, but open-ended and qualitative questions were included to allow participants a wider range of expression and to supplement the assessment’s quantitative findings.

Five field researchers completed 100 surveys each, totaling 500 surveys. Surveys were administered on tablets using digital collection software, and each took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. When field researchers could access the Internet, they uploaded data to a secure server, allowing SREO’s evaluation team in Gaziantep to begin analysis.

Field researchers worked individually, enabling the five of them to cover a broad area of Idleb city. Respondents were identified on a random basis in the streets. Interviews were primarily conducted in the streets and respondents' homes, and occasionally in cafes and restaurants. Generally, respondents felt comfortably expressing themselves in public. Field researchers worked to collect a random sample and to interview both young and old; men and women; fighters and civilians; and residents of both poor and wealthy neighborhoods.

Some residents were nervous and refused to answer the survey. However, the majority of respondents were willing to participate in the survey once field researchers assured that their identities would remain anonymous.

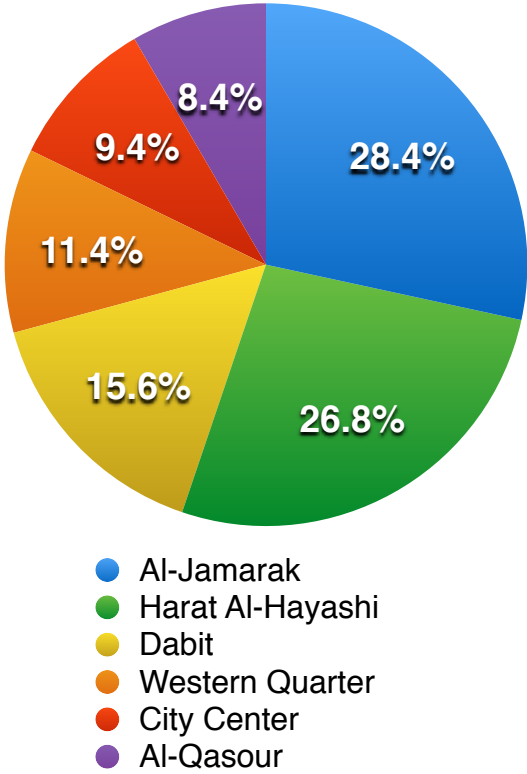
Of the 500 respondents, 109 were Jaish al-Fatah fighters. Many fighters were selected in the sample to their disproportionate visibility in the streets. Fighters were very happy and curious to participate in the survey. Field researchers reported that fighters seemed upbeat and optimistic, likely from their recent victory.

All of the field researchers for this assessment were male, complicating efforts to attain gender parity in the sample. Often, females were not comfortable talking to male field researchers. Occasionally, when field researchers attempted to interview women, their male companions spoke for them.

## RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of respondents (75.2 percent) for this assessment were men. All five of SREO’s field researchers were men, reducing the ability of this assessment to obtain gender parity. Furthermore, due to the fluid situation in Idleb city and the increase in insecurity due to Syrian government aircraft, men were much more visible in the streets than women. The most visible and accessible sub-group in this assessment were Jaish al-Fatah fighters, the overwhelming majority (99.1 percent) of whom were men.

**Figure 1: Respondents by Neighborhood**

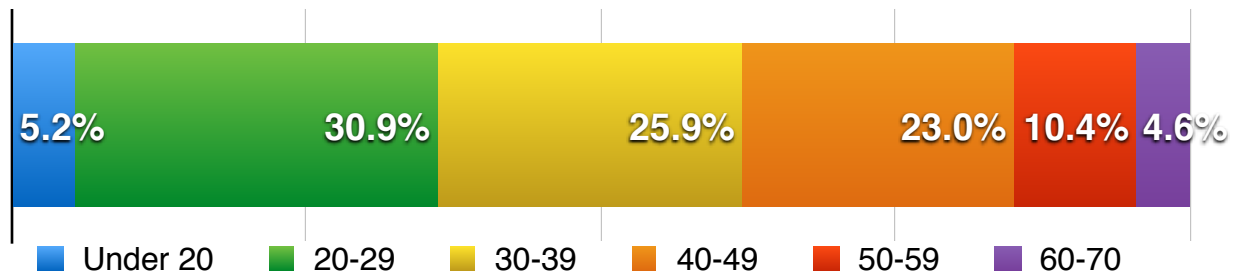


Respondents were dispersed throughout six of the largest neighborhoods in Idleb city. The slight majority of respondents were surveyed in the two neighborhoods of Al-Jamarik (28.4 percent) and Harat al-Hayashi (26.8 percent). Surveys were also

conducted in Dabit (15.6 percent), the Western Quarter (11.4 percent), the City Center (9.4 percent), and Al-Qasour (8.4 percent).

The average respondent was about 36 years old and male. The median age of respondents was 36 years old, indicating a relatively normal age distribution. Only 5.2 percent of respondents were under 20 years old and only 4.6 percent were over 60. Nearly four-fifths of the sample was aged between 20 and 50 years old.

**Figure 2: Respondents by Age**

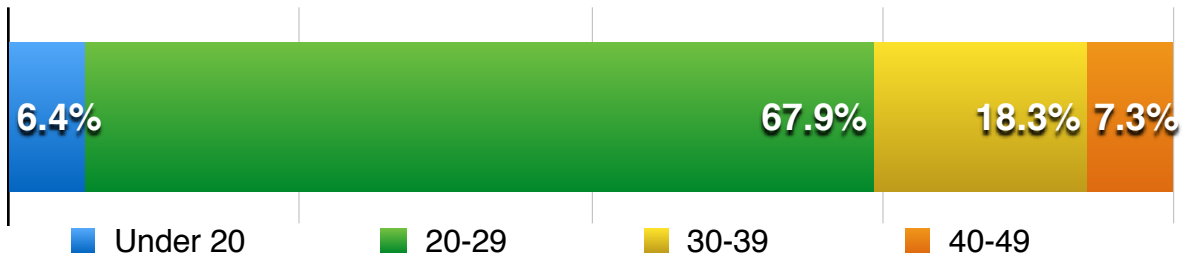


The most well-represented professional group among the sample were Jaish al-Fatah fighters (21.8 percent). Field researchers chose respondents in Idleb city on a random basis, and made no attempt to avoid interviewing fighters. Furthermore, fighters were generally curious about the field researchers' work, happy to provide testimony and have their views included. After fighters, the next most well-represented group was housewives (16.8 percent) followed by private sectors employees and business owners (15.6 percent). Unemployed respondents comprised 14.2 percent of the sample, and 12.6 percent of respondents were farmers. Students and public sector employees/civil servants each represented 9.4 percent of the sample.

76.6 percent of respondents surveyed were married. Among professional groups, housewives, private sector employees, farmers, public sector employees and the unemployed were disproportionately more likely to be married than unmarried. Students were the only professional groups that were more likely to be married

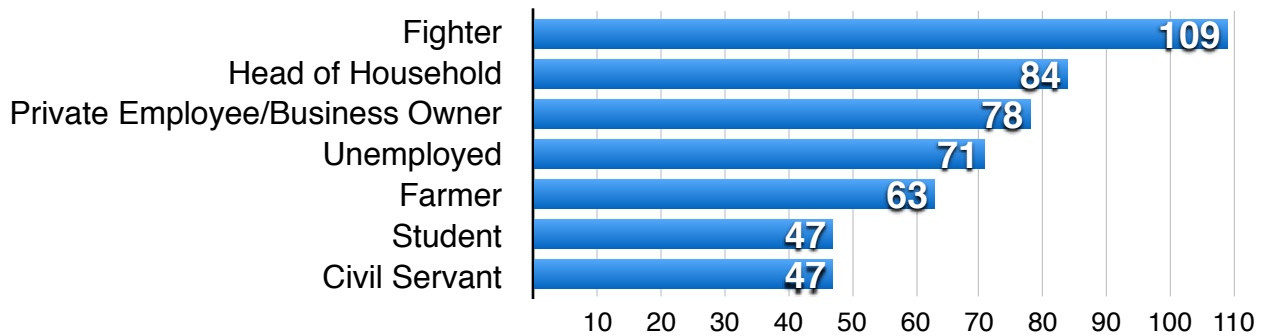
than not (27.7 percent were married). Just over half of the fighters (51.4 percent) were married.

**Figure 3: Fighters by Age**



The majority of the respondents sampled had completed either a secondary (46.2 percent) or university education (29.8 percent). Only 3.8 percent had no formal education while 19 percent had only received a primary education. Six of the respondents (1.2 percent) held a masters degree.

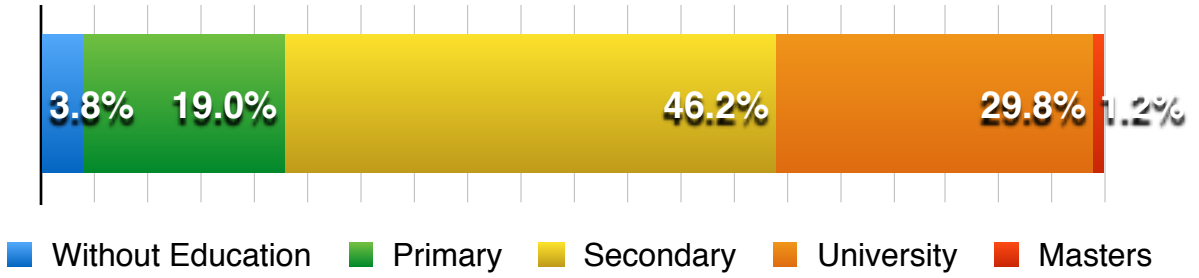
**Figure 4: Respondents by Professional Group**



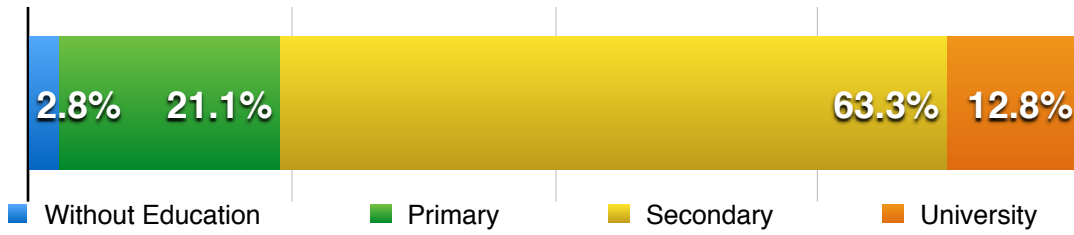
Similar proportions existed for the educational level of fighters, except that they were less likely to have received a university degree (12.8 percent).



**Figure 5: Respondents by Education Level**



**Figure 6: Fighters by Education Level**



## FINDINGS

### **Humanitarian Situation**

The results of this assessment revealed that the humanitarian situation in Idlib city has deteriorated significantly in the six weeks since the city fell out of government hands. Respondents were asked whether the availability of five indicators—electricity, clean water, food, healthcare and security—were better, the same or worse with the city under the control of Jaish al-Fatah compared with when the Syrian government controlled the city. A majority of respondents reported that all five indicators have become less accessible since Jaish al-Fatah took control of Idlib. Interestingly, Jaish al-Fatah fighters largely agreed with civilians on these issues, though the majority of fighters that reported that the situation was worsening was slimmer than the testimony provided by civilians.

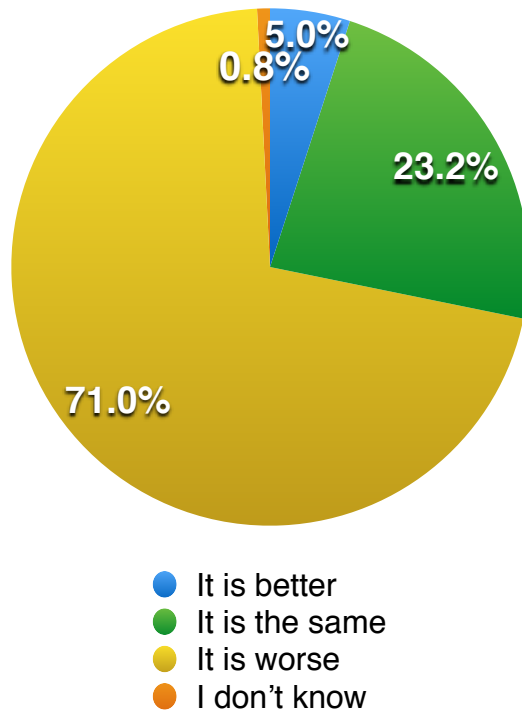
Importantly, respondents, even when disaggregating fighters from the sample, largely blamed the Syrian government for the worsening humanitarian situation in Idlib more than Jaish al-Fatah.

### *Electricity*

Out of the 500 respondents surveyed for this assessment, 71 percent indicated that the electricity situation in Idlib was worse now than when the Syrian government controlled the city. Remarkably, this was the most positive comparative indicator of the five-issue area SREO assessed. A significant minority, 23.2 percent, reported that the electricity situation was the same as before, while 5 percent reported that it had improved.

When removing the fighters from the sample and only analyzing the responses of civilians the results are starker. A larger majority, 72.9 percent, of civilians reported that the electricity situation had worsened, 24 percent said that it remained the same, and only 2 percent reported that it had improved.

**Figure 7: Respondents by Comparative Opinion on Electricity Situation**



Among fighters, 64.2 percent reported that the electricity situation had worsened while 15.6 percent said that it had improved.

### *Food Security*

This assessment found that respondents agreed even more about the deterioration in the availability of food since the city changed hands than they did about electricity. Exactly 75 percent of respondents expressed that they were more food insecure after the city fell than when the government was in control.

Less than one-fifth of respondents (18.2 percent) reported that the food security situation was static while just 4.2 percent reported improvement.

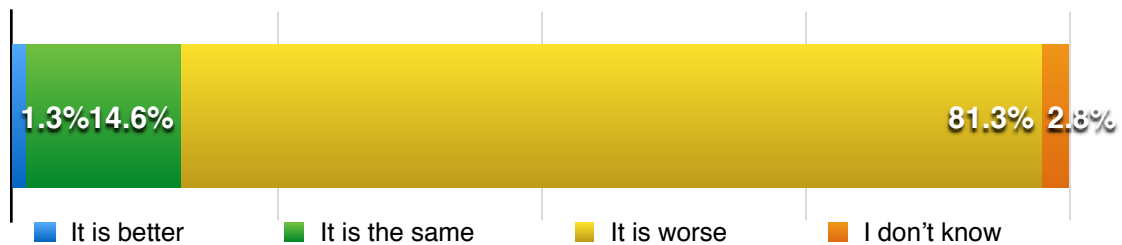
Among civilians, the percentage of respondents reporting comparatively increased food insecurity rose to 81.1 percent. Only 1.3 percent of non-fighters expressed that the food security situation had improved under Jaish al-Fatah.

**Figure 8: Respondents by Comparative Opinion on Food Security**



A small majority of fighters (53.2) also testified that the food security situation was worsening compared with 14.7 percent who reported improvement.

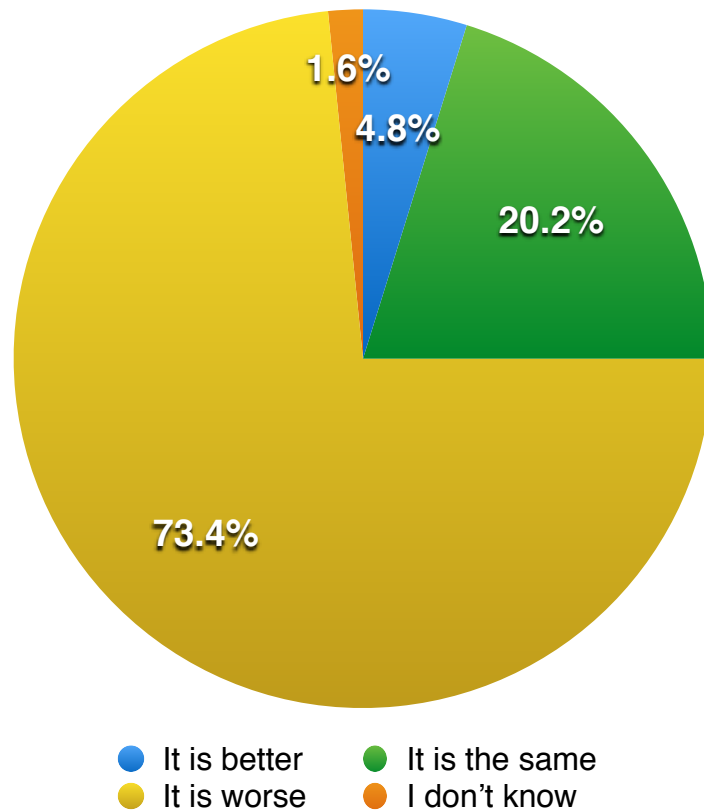
**Figure 10: Civilians by Comparative Opinion on Food Security**



### Healthcare

In line with the findings above, a large majority of civilians, and a slim majority of Jaish al-Fatah fighters, reported that the healthcare system in Idleb city had deteriorated since the Syrian government's retreat. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73.4 percent) reported that the healthcare situation was worse now relative to March. One-fifth (20.2) percent said that the healthcare situation had not changed while just 4.8 percent reported that it had improved.

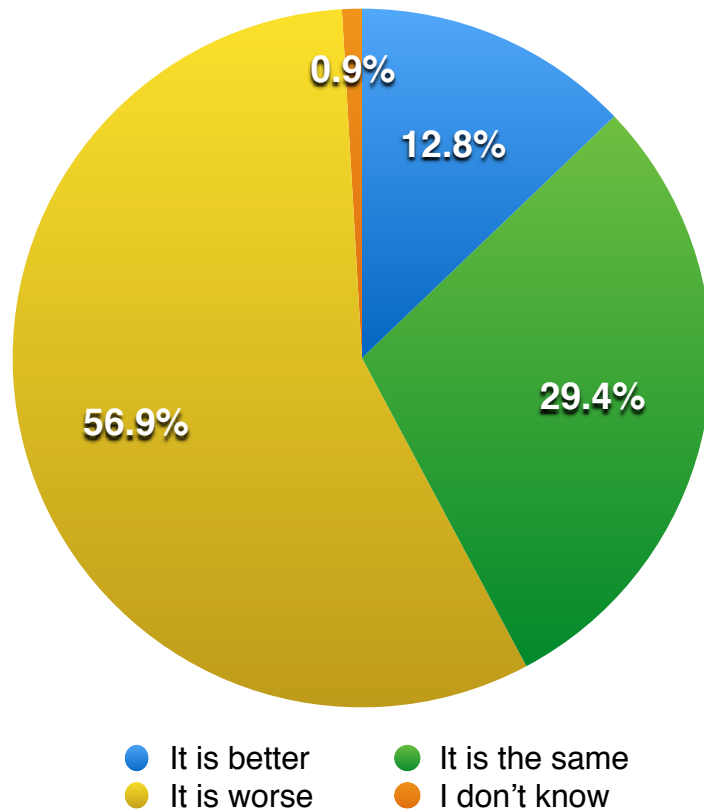
**Figure 10: Respondents by Comparative Opinion on the Healthcare Situation**



Of the 391 civilians surveyed, 78 percent said that the healthcare situation was worsening compared to just 2.6 percent who reported improvement. Just under one-fifth of civilians (19.4 percent) reported that the situation was the same as before.

Fighters presented a relatively more positive image of the healthcare situation since they took control of the city. However, a majority (56.8 percent) still reported that the healthcare system was worse off since government forces left the city. 29.4 percent of fighters expressed that the healthcare situation had not changed in quality, while 12.8 percent reported improvement.

**Figure 11: Fighters by Comparative Opinion on Healthcare Situation**



### *Clean Water*

By a small margin, clean water was the most comparatively worse of the five indicators used in this assessment. Three-quarters of total respondents (75.2 percent) reported that the clean water situation had worsened while 20.4 percent said it had remained the same. Just 4 percent of respondents indicated that clean water was more available since the city fell.

Among civilians, 81.1 percent said that clean water was less available in May than in March. Only four civilians in the sample (0.8 percent) reported that clear water was more available.

As with the electricity situation, fighters agreed with civilians in substance but not in scope. Sixteen of the fighters sampled (14.7 percent) said that the clean water

situation had improved since they took control of the city. Still, a majority (54.1 percent) reported that clean water was comparatively less available.

### Security

A vast majority of respondents (72 percent) said that security has worsened since the fall of the city. This percentage jumped to 74.7 percent when fighters were removed from the sample. A minority (18.8) reported that the security situation was no better or worse than when the government controlled the city, while 7 percent expressed that security had improved. Among fighters, 13.8 percent said that security was better after the government left the city.

**Figure 12: Respondents by Comparative Opinion on Security**

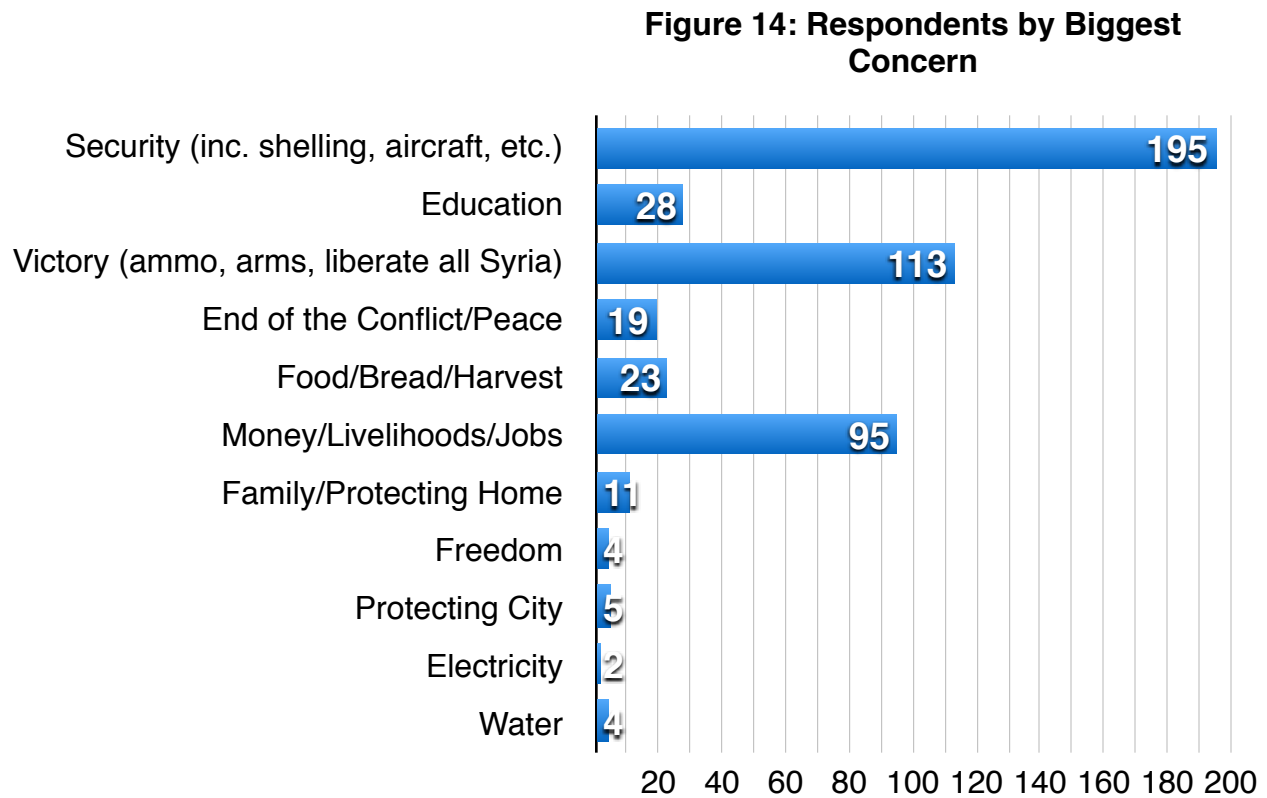


**Figure 13: Fighters by Comparative Opinion on Security**



### Biggest concern

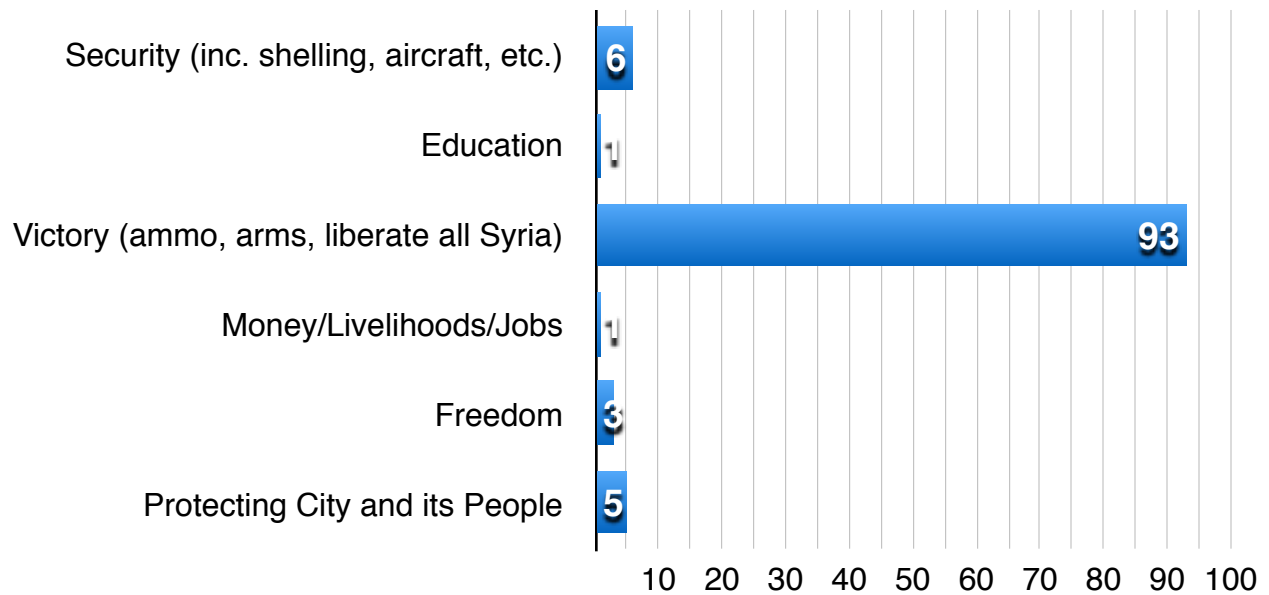
When asked to name their biggest concern in one word, the most common reply involved concerns regarding security (39 percent of respondents), including words like “shelling” and “aircraft.” The second-most-common concern among all respondents (22.6 percent) was related to victory on the battlefield, alternatively expressed as “victory,” “arms,” “ammunition,” or “liberating Syria.” The third-most-common concern (19 percent) was related to livelihoods, expressed with words including “money,” “work,” and “livelihood.” The next most-common concerns were related to education (5.6 percent), food security (4.6 percent) and ending the conflict/peace (3.8 percent).



Unsurprisingly, fighters and civilians had very different concerns. “Victory” (85.3 percent) was fighters’ biggest concern by far.



**Figure 15: Fighters by Biggest Concern**



For civilians, security was the top concern (48.3 percent). Livelihoods represented the second-most-common concern (24 percent), while education (6.9 percent), food security (5.9 percent), victory (5.1 percent), and ending the conflict/peace (4.9 percent) were also common concerns.

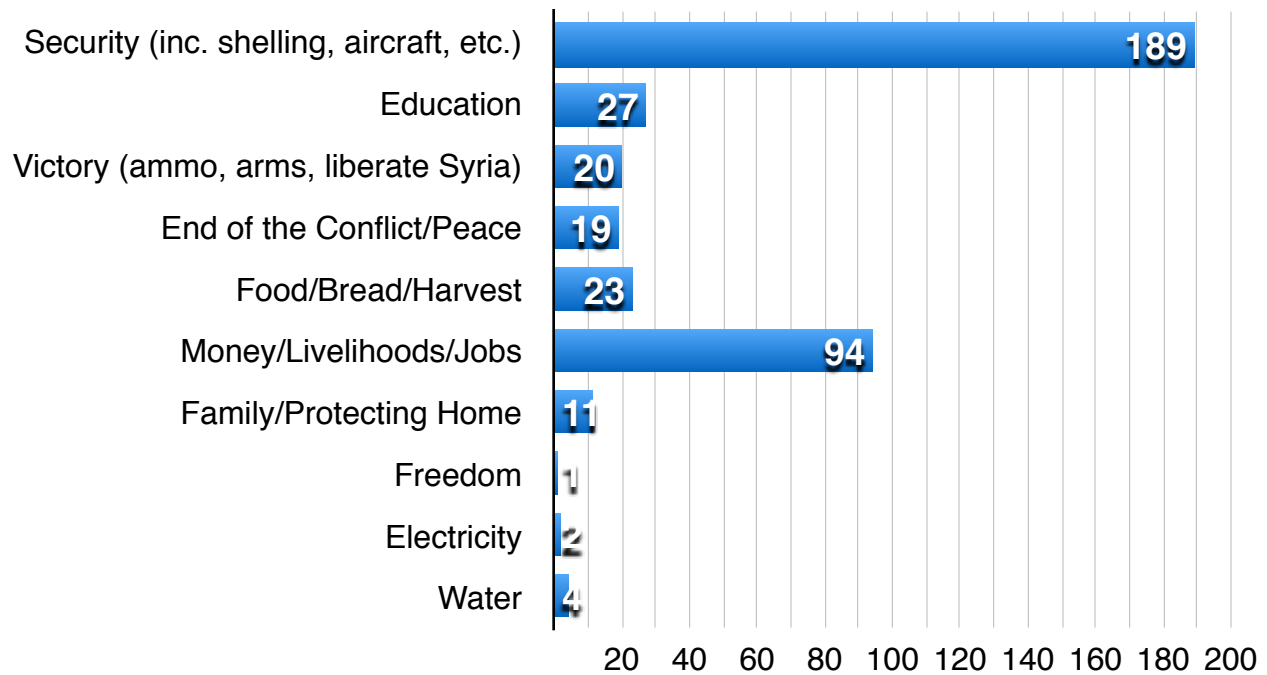
### **Attitudes regarding Jaish al-Fatah**

Despite the consensus among respondents that the humanitarian situation—in terms of electricity, food security, healthcare, clean water and security—had all gotten worse since Jaish al-Fatah took control of Idleb city from the Syrian government, respondents maintained a relatively positive attitude toward the fighters.

Many civilians in Idleb regarded Jaish al-Fatah as liberators. Furthermore, since the Syrian government lost the city, there have been widespread reports of collective punishment waged by the government against city residents, including the immediate cessation of public services and indiscriminate shelling from

government aircraft. A significant amount of Idleb city's critical infrastructure has stopped functioning, or has been destroyed in the fighting.

**Figure 16: Civilians by Biggest Concern**

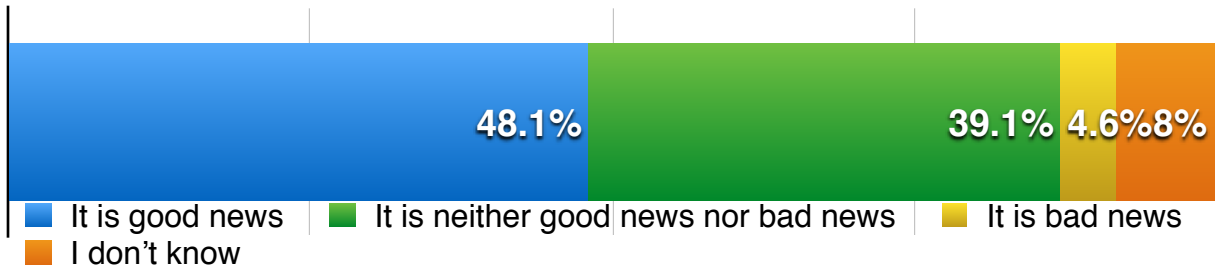


A majority of respondents in Idleb city (57.4 percent) reported that the Syrian government's loss of territory to Jaish al-Fatah was "good news." It is important to note that this finding is somewhat ambiguous: a sizeable minority (31.6 percent) reported that the city changing hands was "neither good news nor bad news" while 6.6 percent did not know. Only 4.4 percent of respondents reported that it was "bad news."

Unsurprisingly, 90.8 percent of Jaish al-Fatah fighters reported that it was good news that they took control of the city.

Disaggregating fighters from the sample reveals more ambiguous results. Among civilians, 48.1 percent said the fall of the city to Jaish al-Fatah was good news. 39.1 percent said it was neither good nor bad news while 8.2 percent did not know. Only 4.6 percent of civilians said the government's loss of Idleb city was bad news.

**Figure 17: Civilians' Opinion About Jaish al-Fatah Taking Idleb City**



Respondents were also fairly confident in Jaish al-Fatah's ability to hold the city. Only 3 percent of all respondents (and zero fighters) indicated that they thought the government would retake Idleb. Yet only 31.2 percent of respondents answered outright that the government would not retake the city, while 36 percent said the government would "maybe" win the city back and 29.8 percent said that they didn't know.

Among fighters, 78.9 percent said that the government would not retake the city, while 16.5 percent reported that it might.

Civilian-only results were more ambiguous. An overwhelming majority reported either that the government would "maybe" retake the city (41.4 percent) or that they did not know (36.8 percent). Still, civilians were more likely to answer that the government would not retake the city (17.9 percent) than that it would (3.8 percent).

**Figure 18: Will the Syrian Government Retake Idleb City?**



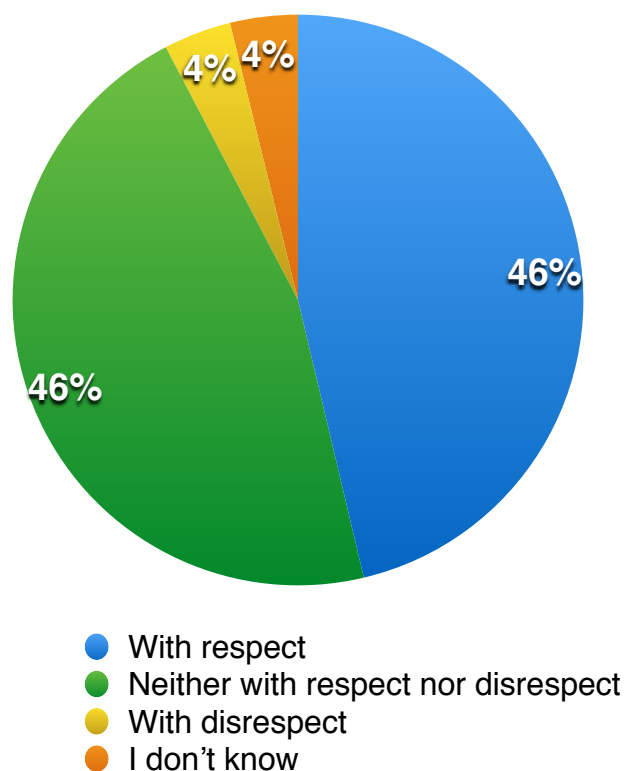
### *Jaish al-Fatah's Relationship with Civilians*

Respondents were also asked to evaluate how the new rebels were treating civilians. 93.6 percent of the Jaish al-Fatah fighters self-reported that they were treating civilians with respect.

More importantly, 46.3 percent of civilians reported that they were being treated with respect while just 3.8 percent reported being treated with disrespect. A sizeable group of civilians (46 percent) expressed that they were being neither respected nor disrespected while 3.8 percent did not know.

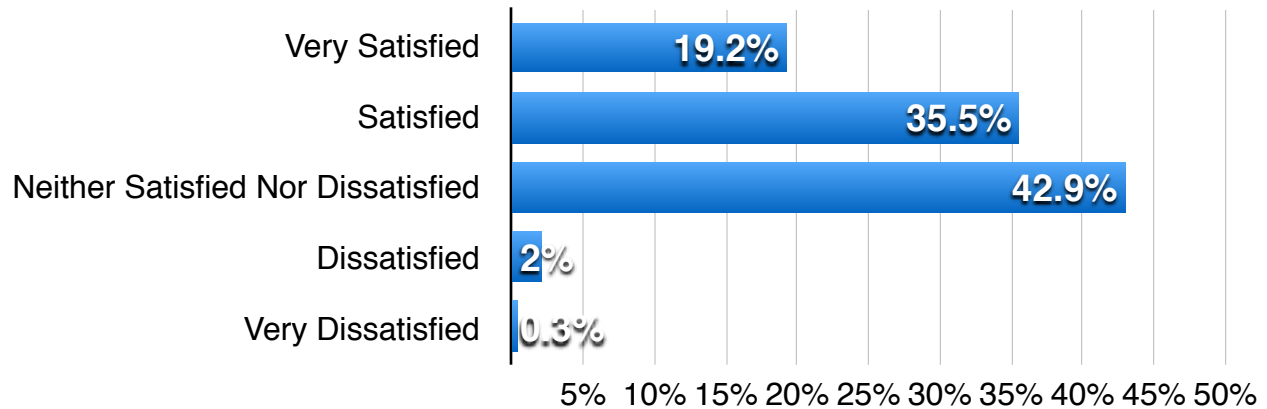
Civilians were generally pleased with the rebels' behavior since pro-government forces retreated from the city. A majority of civilian respondents were either satisfied (35.6 percent) or very satisfied (19.2 percent) with rebel conduct since they took control of Idleb. Only 2.3 percent of civilian respondents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with rebel conduct. However, the largest group of

**Figure 19: Civilians by How Jaish al-Fatah Treats Them**



civilians (43 percent) reported neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction with rebel behavior, rendering this finding somewhat ambiguous.

**Figure 20: Civilians by Satisfaction Level with Rebel Conduct**



### **Security**

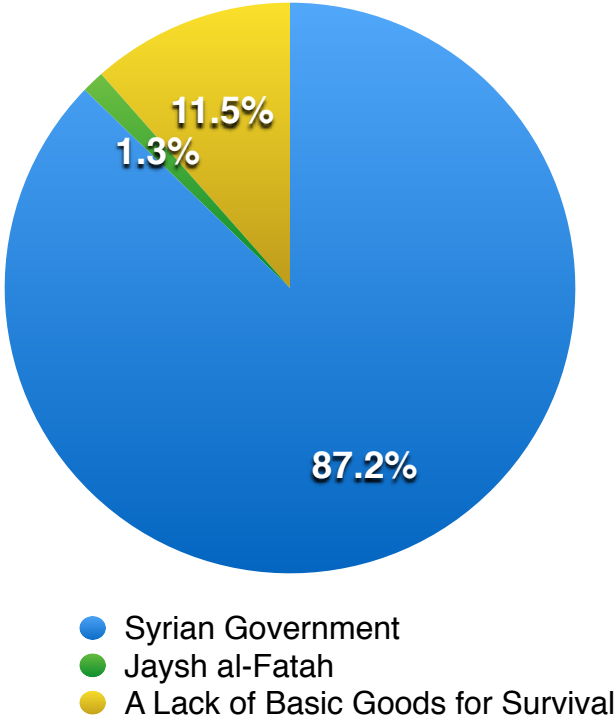
Civilians in Idleb city overwhelmingly identified security as their biggest concern. Specifically, less than one-fifth of respondents (18.6 percent) reported feeling “safe” in Idleb city at the time of research. However, only 20.2 reported feeling “not safe,” while the remainder (61.2 percent) reported feeling “sometimes safe.”

Civilians felt less safe than fighters. Among civilians, only 8.6 percent felt safe, compared with 45.9 percent of fighters. About one-quarter of civilians (25.3 percent) reported feeling “not safe,” compared to less than two percent of fighters. Roughly two-thirds of civilians (63.7 percent) and half of the fighters (52.3 percent) said they felt “sometimes safe.”

In comparative terms, respondents felt less safe than when the government controlled the city. Fifty-six percent of respondents felt less safe in May than in March as compared to only 23.2 percent who felt more safe. A small percentage, 17.4 percent, felt as safe as they did before the fall of the city.

However, respondents were unambiguous in identifying the cause of their insecurity. Even when disaggregating fighters, 87.2 percent of civilians identified the Syrian government as the biggest threat to their safety compared to 1.3 percent who answered that Jaish al-Fatah was their biggest threat. Despite a serious humanitarian crisis in Idleb city, only 11.5 percent of civilian respondents identified “a lack of basic goods for survival” as the biggest threat to their safety, meaning that over seven times as many civilians felt threatened by the Syrian government than shortages of food, healthcare and clean water.

**Figure 21: Respondents by Biggest Threat**



**Composition of Jaish al-Fatah**

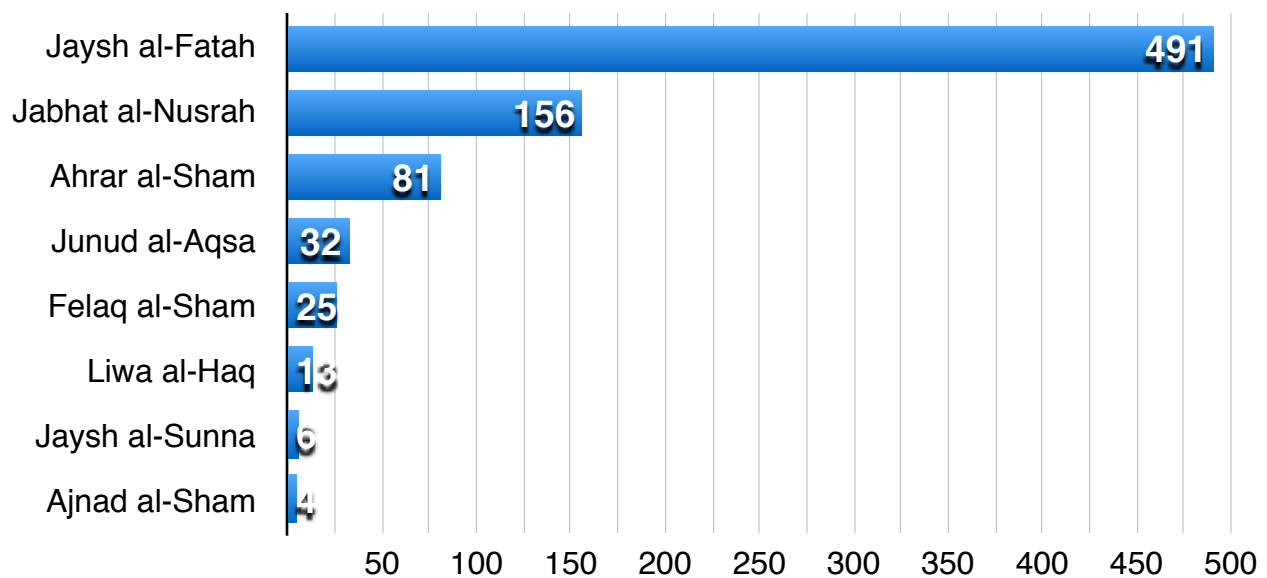
Respondents were asked which armed group controlled their neighborhood, and were given a choice of Jaish al-Fatah, as well as seven of its known component brigades: Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Junud al-Aqsa, Felaaq al-Sham, Liwa al-

Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, and Afnad al-Sham. Respondents could select as many options as applied to their neighborhood.

SREO's evaluation team had hypothesized that upon taking control of Idlib city, Jaish al-Fatah's component brigades would divide up control of the city's neighborhood's amongst themselves, administering different areas separately. This was incorrect and does not seem to have been the case.

While nearly all respondents (98.2 percent) said that Jaish al-Fatah controlled their neighborhood, just over two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) did not identify any individual brigade's presence in their neighborhood. Interestingly, this dynamic largely extended to the fighters themselves, 57.8 percent of whom also did not name any individual group separate from Jaish al-Fatah, indicating that perhaps fighters had forgone their association with their original group. Over 99 percent of fighters reported that Jaish al-Fatah was in control of the neighborhood they were in, showing that for these fighters, no individual was greater than the team.

**Figure 22: Respondents by Which Armed Group Controls Their Neighborhood**



This finding indicates that respondents were either unwilling or unable to distinguish individual component brigades from one another, or that Jaish al-Fatah's component brigades have been mixing and sharing power so collaboratively that any distinction between its original component brigades has declined in relevance. Dabit was the only neighborhood out of the six in this sample in which more than half (59 percent) of respondents identified an individual component brigade.

Of the identifiable individual brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were by far the most visible. Just under one-third (31.2 percent) of respondents identified Jabhat al-Nusra as one of the armed groups controlling their neighborhood while 16.2 percent identified Ahrar al-Sham's presence in their area. In other words, among the respondents who did identify an individual component group within Jaish al-Fatah, 94.6 percent highlighted Jabhat al-Nusra and 49.1 percent identified Ahrar al-Sham. It is unclear whether these two groups were singled out more often because of their relatively larger size, their individuality, or their reputation.

Junud al-Aqsa (6.4 percent), Felaaq al-Sham (5 percent) and Liwa al-Haqq (2.6 percent) were also identified individually by a minority of respondents. Restricting this only to the respondents that identified any individual group at all, these three brigades were picked out 19.4 percent, 15.2 percent, and 7.9 percent of the time respectively. Less than 1.5 percent of all respondents singled out Jaish al-Sunna or Ajnad al-Sham.

Furthermore, Jabhat al-Nusra's and Ahrar al-Shams were spotted in each of the six neighborhoods in the sample in fairly consistent proportions. These two groups were respectively the first- and second-most frequently identified in each neighborhood.

Jabhat al-Nusra was identified by 24.6 percent of respondents in Al-Jamarak, 19.4 percent in Harat al-Hayashi, 57.7 percent in Dabit, 36.8 percent in the Western Quarter, 38.3 percent in the City Center and 26.2 percent in Al-Qasour.



For each neighborhood, roughly half as many respondents singled out Ahrar al-Sham as Jabhat al-Nusra: 10.6 percent in Al-Jamarak, 9.7 percent in Harat al-Hayashi, 29.5 percent in Dabit, 22.8 percent in the Western Quarter, 21.3 percent in the City Center and 16.7 percent in Al-Qasour.

### *Al-Jamarik*

The biggest neighborhood in the sample, Al-Jamarik, was found to be controlled by a range of armed groups comprising Jaish al-Fatah. Three-quarters of respondents (75.4 percent) did not identify an individual component brigade within Jaish al-Fatah. Of the individual brigades that were singled out, as with all five other neighborhoods, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were the first and second most often mentioned groups. However, while Al-Jamarik represented 28.4 percent of the sample, only 22.4 percent of the total respondents identifying Jabhat al-Nusra, and 18.2 percent of the respondent identifying Ahrar-al Sham, were located in Al-Jamarik. Half of the respondents in the sample who identified Jaish al-Sunna were Al-Jamarik residents. After Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, Junud al-Aqsa was the next most identified group in Al-Jamarik. Felaaq al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq and Ajnad al-Sham were not singled out as groups operating in Al-Jamarik.

### *Harat al-Hayashi*

The second-most well-represented neighborhood in the sample was Harat al-Hayashi. 76.9 percent of respondents in this neighborhood identified only Jaish al-Fatah as being in control of the area. While Harat al-Hayashi represented 26.8 percent of the sample, only 16.7 percent of the respondents who singled out Jabhat al-Nusra, and 16.1 percent of those singling out Ahrar al-Sham, were residents of Harat al-Hayashi. Liwa al-Haqq was relatively over represented in this neighborhood—61.5 percent of the respondents in the sample that identified Liwa al-Haqq lived in Harat al-Hayashi. Junud al-Aqsa and Felaaq al-Sham were relatively

underrepresented in this neighborhood. Ajnad al-Sham and Jaish al-Sunna were only identified by one respondent each.

#### *Dabit*

Individual brigades were distinguished from Jaish al-Fatah more often in Dabit than any other neighborhood. Only 41 percent of respondents identified Jaish al-Fatah alone as controlling the neighborhood. Relative to its proportion of the total sample, 15.6 percent, Dabit hosted a disproportionately high number of the respondents identifying Junud al-Aqsa (43.8 percent), Jabhat al-Nusra (28.8 percent) and Ahrar al-Sham (28.4 percent). Over half of the respondents identifying Felaaq al-Sham individually (56 percent) were residents of Dabit. Liwa al-Haqq had a disproportionately low identification rate in Dabit (15.4 percent). Jaish al-Sunna and Ajnad al-Sham were both reported to be present in Dabit.

#### *Western Quarter*

The Western Quarter hosted residents who largely identified individual brigades proportionately relative to the sample. Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were once again the two most identified groups and the percentage of Western Quarter respondents who identified those two groups accorded with the size of the neighborhood relative to the total sample. Junud al-Aqsa, Felaaq al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq and Ajnad al-Sham were recognized only by a handful of Western Quarter residents, however this level aligned with the smaller representation of both these groups and the Western Quarter relative to the sample as a whole. None of the respondents in the Western Quarter reported Jaish al-Sunna being present in the area.

#### *City Center*

While respondents located in the City Center represented less than 10 percent of the total sample, more than 10 percent of the respondents identifying Jabhat al-

Nusra (11.5 percent), Ahrar al-Sham (12.3 percent), Junud al-Aqsa (12.5 percent) and Felaaq al-Sham (16 percent) were City Center residents. Only one respondent in the City Center identified Liwa al-Haqq as one of the armed groups in control of the neighborhood while none selected Ajnad al-Sham or Jaish al-Sunna.

#### *Al-Qasour*

The smallest neighborhood in the sample, Al-Qasour was only controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham according to the neighborhood's respondents. Jabhat al-Nusra was among the armed groups in control of the neighborhood according to 26.2 percent of respondents, Ahrar al-Sham was singled out by 16.7 percent of respondents. None of the respondents in Al-Qasour mentioned the presence of Junud al-Aqsa, Felaaq al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna or Ajnad al-Sham.

## CONCLUSION

The Syrian government's loss of Idleb city to the rebel group Jaish al-Fatah represents a significant political, military and humanitarian development in Syria's ongoing crisis. While the city's fall signifies a serious battlefield setback for the Syrian government and a triumph for the nascent coalition of rebel groups under the banner of Jaish al-Fatah, civilians now face a growing humanitarian crisis characterized by a lack of basic services.

Research for this assessment took place over the course of eight days from May 2nd-May 9th, 2015—five weeks after Idleb city was claimed by Jaish al-Fatah. Field researchers surveyed 500 respondents in the city, including 109 fighters.

This findings of this assessment indicated that across various humanitarian indicators, civilians in Idleb city have suffered since the city changed hands. Between 70 and 75 percent of respondents reported that the availability of electricity, food, clean water, healthcare services, and security were worse during the evaluation period than when the Syrian government controlled the city.

However, civilians still regarded Jaish al-Fatah's victory as good news, and they were far more likely to say that rebels were treating them with respect than with disrespect. Civilians were 68 times more likely to identify the Syrian government as the biggest threat to their safety than Jaish al-Fatah.

Indeed, respondents reported that since losing Idleb, the Syrian government has actively shelled and bombarded the city. Over four times as many civilians reported feeling less safe since the city fell as reported feeling more safe, and considered security to be their biggest concern. Fighters expressed their top concern was victory and the liberation of all of Syria.

Interestingly, this evaluation found that Jaish al-Fatah's component brigades had amalgamated and coalesced to a surprising degree. Most respondents, civilians and fighters alike, made no distinction between the groups comprising Jaish al-Fatah. Rather than dividing up the city by neighborhood, Jaish al-Fatah fighters were mixed with other fighters from previously unaffiliated groups. The two most frequently identified individual groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, reportedly had a presence in all six neighborhoods surveyed in this assessment.

Given Jaish al-Fatah's territorial gains in Idlib province—not only in the capital but also in Jisr al-Shaghour, Mastouma, Ariha and elsewhere—its performance in service delivery and local governance, as well as the level of cooperation among its component brigades, are of paramount importance for civilians under its control. Thus far, civilians in Idlib largely approve of Jaish al-Fatah despite the worsening humanitarian situation in the city. Follow-up research is necessary to examine changes in both the humanitarian situation in the city and civilian relations with Jaish al-Fatah.

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