

**Syrian operating context**

Programming in Syria is extremely challenging, given the ongoing violence both at the local level and related to the wider conflict. There are high levels of sensitivity on all sides around third party involvement in Syria and projects can easily become politicised, resulting in a potential increased risk to field staff and beneficiaries. Having programmed safely in Syria for the past six years, ARK is acutely aware of the wide variety of issues that this project could face, particularly when it is programming in Idlib initially, given Violent Extremist Organisation Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) increasing control there, as well as the challenges involved in bringing together beneficiaries from communities that are bitterly divided.

Given this operating context, ARK places great importance on duty of care to its staff and beneficiary partners. The single most important component of duty of care, given the conflict context in which ARK project teams work, is personal safety, encompassing both physical and mental welfare. Risk management is an integral component of effective programming across all aspects of ARK's activities. Into its ninth year of programming and operating in fragile and conflict-affected areas characterised by a proliferation of asymmetrical threats, ARK has already handled a range of risks, from beneficiary injury (e.g. landmine strike) en-route to training, to medical emergency in situ, detention of beneficiaries by regime or opposition/extremists, kidnap, and physical targeting. That ARK maintains a functioning, capable staff and has delivered over \$100m of assistance to thousands of beneficiaries inside Syria is testament to a strategy that balances the imperatives of delivery with the need to appropriately manage, transfer or mitigate risk.

**Risk Management Approach**

ARK has extensive experience and ongoing projects in Syria as well as in multiple other hostile, fragile or challenging locations. It has repeatedly demonstrated that it understands risk management and has appropriate and responsive Duty of Care measures in place. ARK has an established Security Risk Management (SRM) process with a dedicated set of Standard Operating Procedures that cover topics such as Travel; Personal Security Measures; Office Security Measures; Workshop Logistics; Incident Response; Home Security Advisories; Natural Disaster Actions On (e.g. earthquake in Turkey), IT and Social Media Security. The Senior Management Team will work with the project manager to maintain and update the SRM procedures and ensure that SOPs are followed by the project team and beneficiaries.

**Risk Assessments**

At proposal development stage, the team runs through a table-top exercise, red teaming all possible risks to the project (from operational to physical, cyber, reputational, etc) to ensure that adequate mitigation, management or avoidance measures are in place, and this is repeated on project award, with all members of the project team included in and fully briefed on this: As part of the inception phase, the Senior Management Team and project team review the range of risks identified in the proposal risk assessment, amending these as required and developing any additional mitigation measures as necessary. Where additional information is needed as a result of changes in the conflict context, the project team works with partners and contacts on the ground to better understand the risk profile and develop appropriate/achievable mitigation measures.

**Risk Monitoring**

The Project Manager works with national staff and stakeholders on the ground, monitoring the situation on a daily basis, tracking chronic risks, identifying and suggesting mitigations to emerging risks and raising these to HMG if there are significant project implications. ARK has a broad network of interlocutors from across its projects who provide regular information and analysis that feed into the risk monitoring process. The risk

assessment and response measures are reviewed in the weekly project meeting to ensure risk monitoring information is incorporated and the assessment is kept updated. Project partners are also included in this process to ensure that they contribute to risk awareness and the development of appropriate mitigation measures and responses. ARK's extensive networks in areas such as Idlib allow the production of tailored analyses products, such as a product last week on the security and safety situation in Idlib derived from ARK's extensive in-country networks.



### Executive Summary

The following report examines the recent deterioration in security and safety conditions in Idlib province, and the implications for civilian life in Idlib City and other towns in the province's countryside. ARK interviewed six residents of Idlib and surveyed their opinions regarding the poor security situation and its roots, including poor law enforcement. The report also looks at a new law enforcement force in Idlib City, the Idlib Military Council. This is a newly-formed body that could potentially replace the Executive Force established by Jaish al-Fatah, which is currently handling security in Idlib City.

### Key Takeaways

- Idlib has experienced a surge in IED attacks and crime in recent months.
- Interviewees were dissatisfied with the current conditions and poor law enforcement in Idlib.
- Interviewees hope that the Idlib Military Council can be a successful alternative to the current law enforcement force in Idlib.
- The clear hesitation of interviewees to discuss certain security-related matters points to widespread fear of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which many blame for the deadly attacks and which many believed to have eyes and ears in various local organisations.

### Featured Photo



An image reportedly showing the aftermath of a car bomb near the main market area in Idlib city on June 22, 2017. Five people were said to have been killed in the attack.

Photo credit: [EuroNews Arabic](#)

### Mitigation Plans

ARK has established mitigation plans for a wide-range of events, which are documented in the risk assessment and in SOPs. The specific project security needs of ARK's international and Syrian staff, partners and sub-contractors will be fully assessed during the post-award security review and inception phase to ensure that these are relevant to the prevailing operating context and priority geographies. As part of ongoing work planning, and as the project progresses, ARK will coordinate context assessments with HMG as required, to raise and address any specific or potential duty of care concerns arising from particular tasks or work locations. As noted above, the Project Manager and Project Officer will maintain regular communication with project staff and researchers to assess threat levels, design responses, and inform contingency plans.

The specific security needs of ARK's Syrian staff and partners will be assessed during the post-award security review and inception phase. As part of its ongoing conflict sensitivity reviews, an integral part of its risk management, ARK ensures that any programming does not place its Syrian or other staff or partners at increased risk. Given the areas this project will be operating in, there is a residual risk of staff, partners and

project activities being involved in attacks carried out by conflict actors. The ARK team assesses that their work on this project is unlikely to increase that risk, and will ensure that the activities they engage in do not otherwise increase existing contextual risk levels. This is particularly relevant in the initial selected operating geography in northern Syria, with a focus on Idlib, where any perceived challenge to HTS control could result in arrest of project staff, partners and beneficiaries or other sanctions against the project. ARK has been programming in Idlib since 2012, and its sister company TSN has been providing counter-HTS research and programming in Idlib since 2016. ARK is also currently conducting Conflict Analyses in the seven major CSSF target cities in Idlib for CSSF. These involved seven hundred surveys and dozens of interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observation exercises. This not only ensures that ARK has an unparalleled and nuanced understanding of the security and operating environment and can propose conflict sensitive interventions, but also that ARK can track change over time and engage with the broadest range of conflict actors. ARK is therefore able to navigate the challenges of operating effectively in this context. ARK's selected project officer for component one of this project is from Idlib and has extensive networks in the province that will feed into project atmospherics, risk assessment and implementation.

### **Security Planning**

**Syria:** Emergency response plans will be drafted and briefed to the full project team and to project partners as part of the inception phase and audits of these will be included in the scheduled quarterly (and latterly bi-annual) reviews. ARK will train its Syrian staff, liaisons and partners on security procedures that should be followed in the event of a threat to the project team or a change in the operating context. All local staff and liaisons will be provided with security procedures and robust SOPs in Arabic. The project officers will maintain daily communication with liaisons and partners to assess threat levels, advise on responses if necessary, and inform contingency plans.

**Turkey/Beirut:** Each ARK office has a security officer duty roster and an incident muster point and ARK practices security drills every three months to ensure that all staff are aware of the procedures to follow. All human resource files are kept updated with Emergency Contact and Next of Kin details. ARK provides staff with comprehensive medical insurance coverage, and international staff are provided with life, medical emergency, evacuation and repatriation cover.

In times or environments of increased threat, the Senior Management Team and Project Manager use a dedicated Whatsapp groups to issue notification on required response, such as movement restrictions, requirements not to set patterns of movement, or delaying travel. All employees are included in call trees which are activated after any incident in an operational locality. Call trees are tested monthly. ARK also has the ability to geo-locate staff (and equipment) through tracking software on their phones, which can be set to alarm in the event that staff deviate from identified routes. Travel in or through hostile locations is linked to an operational response and medical evacuation capability.

In the event that there is a resolution to the current conflict during the lifetime of this project and it becomes more feasible for the Project Manager to travel into and around Syria, he will receive an accredited HEAT course prior to deployment. This includes training on operating in an insecure environment, including surveillance awareness, travel & vehicle safety, physical and mental health safeguarding, conflict management, crowds and civil unrest, working with Close Protection, security and communications, battlefield awareness, first aid, and kidnap, hostage and detention survival scenarios. All travel will be closely coordinated

between ARK's Senior Management Team and the HMG Project Manager to ensure that all trips are planned and resourced appropriately. All participants will be briefed to ensure they understand all aspects of the security plan. Any international ARK staff deploying to Syria would be covered by ARK's existing medical emergency, evacuation and repatriation insurance with *Northcott Global Solutions*, which also covers terrorism, war-related risks and kidnap.

### **Incident Management**

In the event of an incident, the Security Manager will activate the appropriate SOP and coordinate a response with the Country or Project Manager and Country Liaison to provide an immediate response. Post-incident, ARK's Senior Management Team meets to review both the situation and existing security protocols, updating these where required and communicating them to all relevant employees, beneficiaries and donors. An incident report is generated and logged in a master ledger, including initial response and subsequent mitigating actions. Incidents are grouped into relevant security domains (for example Physical or Cyber) and are analysed post-event to look for specific trends that may affect programmatic activity.

Given that it is not feasible to provide Syrian-based staff or liaisons with insurance, in the event that local staff members or liaisons are seriously injured or killed during the course of the project, ARK will pay a designated family member three months' salary in compensation. If a staff member is kidnapped, ARK will continue to pay their salary while they are held, and, as appropriate, will work through its local networks to try to secure their release. ARK would not negotiate directly and does not pay ransoms to secure a staff member's release.

ARK staff, many of whom are local nationals, have also had to deal with the psychological costs of war, from displacement and personal security threats, to the consequences of seeing family and friends imprisoned, tortured and killed and as such, ARK's medical insurance provides counselling to staff.

### **Emergency Medical Response and Evacuation.**

The project's Office Administrator's duties will also include being the focal point and interface for any subsequent in-country medical requirements with medical providers. ARK personnel will be briefed on these protocols and will be both briefed on, and issued with, local numbers to call in the event of an emergency. ARK is currently providing capacity building support for the Idlib City Council for CSSF and has provided charitable assistance to the Idlib Medical Council in the past, ensuring relationships of trust can be leveraged in support of different emergency scenarios.

In-country Syrian staff involved in a life-threatening medical emergency will be treated in the nearest local clinic or aid station as identified during the security audit phase. ARK will provide all necessary and appropriate support to them including working through existing referral mechanisms to hospitals in neighbouring countries. Local staff (including partners' staff) supporting ARK will also be trained on the said procedures to obtain support from local referral systems, clinics or aid stations, ensuring that the wellbeing of all ARK staff and that of its partners is taken into consideration.