

# FROM THE GROUND UP: COMMUNITIES BATTLING THE DRUG CRISIS IN SOUTHERN SYRIA

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## SUMMARY

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- Public frustration over the unchecked spread of drugs in southern Syria has surged, fuelled by the regime's failure to take decisive action. Despite repeated assurances, the regime has prioritized facilitating in the narcotics trade to advance its political and financial interests, rather than engaging in genuine efforts to combat it. Consequently, Daraa and Sweida have become major hubs for drug production, driving widespread substance use disorder and a spike in drug-related violence.
- With no viable alternatives, local communities have taken matters into their own hands. Grassroots initiatives have emerged, combining security efforts with non-violent approaches to confront drug networks. These efforts include cutting off social support for dealers, supporting substance use disorder recovery, and destroying confiscated drugs. Communities have also ramped up security by organizing patrols, launching anti-drugs campaigns, and, in some cases, resorting to extrajudicial actions to disrupt the trade.
- While these local initiatives have seen some success, they face significant challenges due to limited resources, expertise, and coordination, which restrict their overall impact. The use of extrajudicial measures raises serious ethical and legal issues, and without addressing the root economic and social drivers of substance use disorder, the crisis continues.
- A lasting solution requires a comprehensive strategy—one that addresses not just the symptoms but the root causes of drug trafficking and substance abuse. Strengthening legal frameworks, fostering economic growth, expanding mental health services, improving rehabilitation programs, and bolstering community education are crucial for long-term change and regional stability.

## INTRODUCTION

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Since regaining control over southern Syria in 2018, the Assad regime has overseen a surge in drug production and trafficking, turning a local issue into a global operation. Today, Syria stands as the world's largest producer of Captagon, an illegal amphetamine, with provinces like Daraa and Sweida serving as key smuggling hubs<sup>1</sup>. While the trade is driven by lucrative foreign markets, its local impact has been devastating. Drugs are now widespread and often cheaper than over-the-counter medications, fuelling a sharp rise in substance use disorder across all demographics. Particularly concerning is the targeted marketing of narcotics to teenagers, turning schools—once safe spaces—into distribution points. The surge in drug substance use disorder has led to spikes in crimes like robbery, kidnapping, and domestic violence, further destabilizing the region.<sup>2</sup> Drug trafficking has also increased external security threats, with Jordan adopting a hardline stance against smuggling, including the use of airstrikes within Syria.

Despite the escalating crisis, the Syrian regime's security forces show no genuine interest in curbing the trade, largely due to the regime's direct involvement in facilitating it for economic and political gains. This has reportedly allowed drug networks to operate with impunity, protected by regime-linked entities such as Military Security, Air Force Intelligence, and Iran-backed militias. Arrests, when they occur, are often superficial, with traffickers quickly released through bribes or interference from higher authorities.<sup>3</sup> With the regime's inaction eroding trust in state institutions, local communities have taken matters into their own hands.<sup>4</sup> Across Daraa and Sweida, grassroots efforts have emerged to counter the drug trade, blending non-violent initiatives with security-focused actions. Strategies include demobilizing drug dealers, cutting off their social support, supporting substance use disorder recovery, and destroying seized narcotics. Communities have also ramped up security measures, organizing patrols, launching security campaigns, and, in some cases, taking extrajudicial actions.

This policy brief examines these underreported community-led efforts to combat the drug trade in southern Syria. It outlines the strategies and actions taken by residents to confront trafficking and reduce drug

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1 UK Government, 'Tackling the illicit drug trade fuelling Assad's war machine', 28 March 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tackling-the-illicit-drug-trade-fuelling-assads-war-machine>.

2 Haid Haid, 'Locals fight their own war on drugs in Syria's Daraa Province', Middle East Institute, 9 January 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/locals-fight-their-own-war-drugs-syrias-daraa-province>.

3 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Sweida, September 2024.

4 Ibid.

## NON VIOLENT EFFORTS

consumption, while also highlighting the challenges these initiatives face. The brief offers recommendations to strengthen and support local efforts to curb drug trafficking and mitigate associated risks. Central to this study are 13 semi-structured interviews with Syrian analysts, residents, civil society workers, and community leaders from southern Syria, conducted by the author between August and October 2024. Interviewees were assured anonymity to encourage candid responses and reduce risks.

To tackle drug trafficking and abuse in southern Syria, communities have mobilized various non-violent strategies. Initiatives such as demobilizing drug dealers, cutting off social protection, supporting recovery, and destroying seized drugs reflect a pragmatic, multifaceted approach to address the issue before resorting to more aggressive measures.

### DEMobilizing DRUG DEALERS AND PROMOTERS

In Daraa, community leaders have implemented initiatives aimed at reintegrating those involved in the drug trade, offering pathways to redemption rather than punishment.<sup>5</sup> These efforts seek to break the cycle of drug-related activities by fostering accountability that is supportive yet firm, encouraging change while upholding community standards.

One notable example is the seven-day demobilization initiative launched in July 2024. Community leaders invited drug dealers, promoters, and others involved in the trade to surrender voluntarily. Participants were required to turn themselves in to local forces, backed by guarantees from their tribes, and sign a commitment to cease all drug-related activities. In return, their names were removed from the list of wanted individuals, allowing them to reintegrate into society. However, the agreement was strict: any breach would lead to severe penalties, showing a clear resolve to maintain order and safety.<sup>6</sup>

No similar structured initiatives have been reported in Sweida. However, religious leaders there have taken a different approach by issuing rulings that ban others from associating with individuals involved in the drug trade until they confess and reform. For example, in March 2024, social and religious leaders in Shahba de-

clared a boycott of anyone involved in drug trafficking, preventing them from receiving community support during significant life events like weddings and funerals. While these rulings are punitive, they offer a way back for offenders who acknowledge their actions and demonstrate a commitment to reform.<sup>7</sup>

These examples illustrate the varied approaches in Daraa and Sweida, showing how community-driven strategies—whether through formal initiatives or traditional customs—aim to address the challenges of drug trafficking. In both cases, the focus remains on promoting a safer, more cohesive community, with a clear path for those willing to change.

### SUPPORTING RECOVERY AND ELIMINATING SEIZED DRUGS

Efforts in Daraa have also focused on supporting recovery for individuals seeking to overcome substance use disorder, reflecting a growing awareness of the need for a comprehensive approach. Sources indicate that Central Committees<sup>8</sup> in some areas have set up facilities where individuals with substance use disorder can stay for up to a month, engaging in activities like fieldwork and exercise to aid in detox.<sup>9</sup> However, specifics on treatment remain unclear.

The Eighth Brigade, a group of former opposition fighters operating semi-autonomously under the nominal umbrella of the regime's Military Intelligence, has also contributed to these efforts, working alongside local medics to establish support systems for recovery.<sup>10</sup> Although specific details about the treatment remain scarce, a common approach seems to involve administering sedative-like medications to ease withdrawal symptoms.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, no similar initiatives have been documented in Sweida, according to available open-source data. This absence could be attributed to several factors, including fewer resources, a lower preva-

5 Salam Abdullah, 'Final warning for drug dealers', Horan Free, 19 May 2023, <https://www.horanfree.com/archives/13627>

6 Daraa Media Team Facebook page [Arabic], 10 July 2024, <https://shorturl.at/8Us3O>.

7 Sweida 24 Facebook page [Arabic], 25 March 2024, <https://shorturl.at/ukQTQ>.

8 The Central Committees in Daraa are local bodies made up of former opposition commanders and local notables, playing a key role in addressing local concerns, such as security and services, as well as resolving conflicts and disputes.

9 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Daraa, September 2024.

10 Walid Al-Nofal, 'Local communities combat drugs in Southern Syria', Syria Direct, 27 March 2024, <https://shorturl.at/d0wsB>.

11 Research interview with a Syrian civil society workers, Daraa, October 2024.

lence of substance use disorder compared to Daraa, or a preference for keeping such activities discreet.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond rehabilitation, local communities have taken on the task of destroying confiscated drugs, driven by mistrust in authorities. Residents have ensured that seized drugs are destroyed publicly, preventing them from re-entering the black market. Community movements in Daraa and Sweida regularly organize public events to burn or dispose of seized drugs.

For example, in February 2024, the Rijal Al Karama (Men of Dignity) movement, a local armed group that operates independently of regime forces, publicly destroyed nearly 200,000 Captagon pills in Sweida.<sup>13</sup> A similar event was held at Daraa Dam in July 2024, involving a wide range of community representatives.<sup>14</sup> These events not only demonstrate collective action against the drug trade but also aim to ensure full transparency in the disposal of confiscated drugs.

These public destruction events, which are typically attended by local notables, go beyond simply eliminating drugs; they serve as powerful symbolic gestures. By uniting residents in these acts, communities reaffirm their commitment to confronting drug trafficking head-on and protecting their social fabric from its harmful effects.

## CUTTING OFF SOCIAL PROTECTION

When these non-violent measures fall short, community actors often resort to more assertive tactics, though these must be handled delicately. In the close-knit societies of southern Syria, strong solidarity means an attack on one member can be seen as an attack on the entire community, often leading to dealers receiving protection from their tribes.<sup>15</sup> To prevent backlash, efforts typically begin by isolating individuals from their social networks, gaining support from tribes, leaders, and religious figures to withdraw protection from known dealers.

In Sweida, where religious values hold significant influence, efforts to remove social protection for drug dealers often involve local religious leaders and community notables. For instance, in January 2024, the Rijal Al Karama (Men of Dignity) movement convened a meeting in Dhibin with local dignitaries, sheikhs, and leaders. During this gathering, they authorized the movement to

lead a campaign against those accused of drug-related activities. This authorization effectively stripped social cover from those engaged in illegal activities, signalling a unified stance against the drug trade.<sup>16</sup>

In Daraa, where tribal ties remain strong, anti-drug efforts typically involve consultations with tribal leaders and local notables. For example, in September 2024, a meeting in Sahm Al-Jolan brought together local dignitaries and Central Committee leaders to strip tribal protection from drug dealers before launching a crackdown. The event featured speeches from community leaders about the dangers of drug use and the need for strict measures. Representatives from various villages pledged support for anti-drug efforts, vowing not to shield anyone involved in drug activities.<sup>17</sup>

These nonviolent initiatives reflect the commitment of local communities to creating safer neighborhoods. However, as the limitations of these efforts to curb the drug trade become apparent, communities are increasingly supplementing them with stricter security measures to disrupt narcotics networks in their areas.

12 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Sweida, September 2024.

13 Omar Yousif, 'Will Community Initiatives Succeed in Curbing Drug Smuggling Between Syria and Jordan?', al-Jazeera, 21 February 2024, <https://shorturl.at/EvScc>.

14 Daraa Media Team Facebook page [Arabic], 6 July 2024, <https://shorturl.at/hvxUf>.

15

16 Syria TV, 'Has the Men of Dignity Movement started pursuing drug traffickers in Sweida?', 26 January 2024, <https://shorturl.at/q6ZKl>.

17 Daraa 24, 'Drug crisis in southern Syria: lack of solutions and escalating challenges', 19 September 2024, <https://shorturl.at/LXbKb>.

# SECURITY MEASURES

The escalating drug trade in southern Syria, despite non-violent initiatives, has led local communities to implement a range of security measures to disrupt narcotics networks. Extending beyond traditional law enforcement, these efforts include organized campaigns and even extrajudicial actions, reflecting a determination to combat the pervasive drug problem and protect neighborhoods, even at great risk.

## COMMUNITY PATROLS

To curb drug smuggling, especially near the Jordanian border, communities have set up local patrols to monitor and intercept illicit activities. Often comprising volunteers, these patrols actively monitor their areas to track the movement of people and goods, particularly in areas known for smuggling routes. While these measures can serve as a deterrent, they sometimes lead to clashes with traffickers.

In Sweida, these efforts gained traction after a series of Jordanian airstrikes targeted suspected smuggling sites inside Syria in 2023.<sup>18</sup> The strikes highlighted the dangers of drug trafficking, prompting residents to organize patrols, primarily composed of young men, to secure commonly used routes and deter traffickers.<sup>19</sup> In towns like Dhibin, Malah, and Khirbet Awad, residents formed dedicated groups to monitor roads, issuing stern warnings to those involved in illegal activities.<sup>20</sup> These initiatives were implemented with backing from local community leaders, religious figures and armed factions.

In some cases, these community efforts have intercepted drug shipments, after clashing with traffickers. For instance, in March 2024, a patrol in Mayamas, Sweida, stopped two individuals on a motorcycle carrying 30,000 Captagon pills and hashish. The shipment was believed to be en route to the Daraa countryside for eventual smuggling into Jordan.<sup>21</sup>

Similar initiatives have emerged in Daraa, where local communities have set up patrols and mobile checkpoints to monitor routes known for smuggling. Often

led by former opposition fighters, community leaders, and concerned residents, these patrols also aimed to disrupt drug flows and prevent traffickers from using their neighbourhoods as transit points.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in Inkhil, former fighters have established patrols and surveillance systems to monitor suspicious activities that might indicate drug-related operations.<sup>23</sup>

## SECURITY CAMPAIGNS

Unlike civilian patrols, these campaigns involve direct actions like intelligence gathering, raids, and arrests to disrupt drug networks. Local armed groups coordinate with community leaders and religious figures to ensure broad support and minimize backlash.

In Daraa, the Central Committees play a central role in anti-drug efforts. Collaborating with local armed groups, they have organized security campaigns, such as the January 2024 raid near Dael targeting a known drug network, resulting in arrests and one fatality.<sup>24</sup> In another instance, in September 2024, they coordinated a raid on tents near Ibtāa, leading to arrests and the dismantling of suspected drug operations.<sup>25</sup>

The Eighth Brigade has also independently conducted anti-drug operations. For example, in June 2024, it launched an operation in Al-Jiza, leading to the arrest of a group leader accused of trafficking.<sup>26</sup>

In Sweida, the Rijal Al Karama (Men of Dignity) movement has led similar campaigns. In January 2024, they initiated a security operation in Dhibin after securing local support, deploying an armed convoy to conduct raids and arrests.<sup>27</sup>

Some of these anti-drug campaigns have even extended beyond targeting individuals, targeting the sites used for the production of drugs or coordination of its trade. In December 2022, a site linked to Iran-backed militias near Zizon village, reportedly used for drug

18 Suwayda 24, 'Grassroots movement in border villages to combat smuggling', 30 January 2024, <https://suwayda24.com/?p=22260>.

19 Walid Al-Nofal, 'Local communities combat drugs in Southern Syria', Syria Direct, 27 March 2024, <https://shorturl.at/d0wsB>.

20 Omar Yousif, 'Will community initiatives succeed in curbing drug smuggling between Syria and Jordan?', al-Jazeera, 21 February 2024, <https://shorturl.at/EvScc>.

21 Suwayda 24, 'Foiling the smuggling of 30,000 Captagon pills', 03 March 2024, <https://rb.gy/k7csf8>.

22 Research interview with a community leader, Daraa, September 2024.

23 Walid Al-Nofal, 'Local communities combat drugs in Southern Syria', Syria Direct, 27 March 2024, <https://shorturl.at/d0wsB>.

24 Zaman al-Wasl, 'For the second time, a drug manufacturing facility linked to Iranian militias has been targeted west of Daraa', 06 February 2024, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/151620/>.

25 Al-Arabiya Syria Facebook page [Arabic], 5 September 2024, <https://rb.gy/p4mwru>.

26 Radio al-Kul, 'Clashes between the Eighth Brigade and a local group in Al-Jiza', 24 June 2024, <https://rb.gy/2q14i3>.

27 Syria TV, 'Has the Men of Dignity Movement begun pursuing drug traffickers in Sweida?', 26 January 2024, <https://dub.sh/dRfWCY5>.

manufacturing and coordination, was hit by three rocket-propelled grenades.<sup>28</sup> Around the same period, an armed group attacked a purification station near Khirbet Al-Shahm in western Daraa with explosives, targeting it for being a launch point for smuggling drugs into Jordanian territory.<sup>29</sup>

## ASSASSINATIONS

Targeted assassinations have emerged as a prominent, albeit controversial, tactic in combating the drug trade in southern Syria, particularly in Daraa. These actions appeal to local groups due to their relative effectiveness, low cost, and minimal risk of retaliation. Many residents, especially those with military backgrounds, have easy access to weapons and the skills to use them.<sup>30</sup>

While tracking these incidents is challenging due to varied motives, reports indicate that drug-related assassinations are common. Open sources suggest between 58 and 150 killings in 2023,<sup>31</sup> and at least 39 individuals accused of drug trafficking were reported killed from January to July 2024, with 11 in July alone.<sup>32</sup> However, it is unlikely that all of these killings are linked to community-led efforts to combat drug trafficking. While some of these assassinations may be carried out by residents seeking to address the drug issue, others could be perpetrated by rival drug networks.<sup>33</sup> Anti-drug vigilantes operate in organized, geographically-based groups, enhancing their ability to gather intelligence and execute targeted actions with reduced risk.<sup>34</sup>

The profile of those targeted suggests a focus on individuals connected to state-backed entities, particularly those tied to the regime's intelligence agencies and military units like Military Intelligence and the Fourth Armoured Division, led by Maher al-Assad. Both have been accused of facilitating drug smuggling across southern Syria, with connections extending to external

actors like Iran-backed militias.<sup>35</sup> A high-profile case was the assassination of Mustafa al-Mesalmeh, a militia commander linked to Syrian military intelligence, who was among 11 individuals sanctioned by the UK and US in 2023 for involvement in the drug trade.<sup>36</sup>

In Sweida, targeted killings, though less frequent, follow similar patterns.<sup>37</sup> On March 6, unknown assailants killed Awad Al-Shuwa'er and severely injured Khaled Al-Shuwa'er near Salkhad; both were known for cross-border drug trafficking. Notably, Khaled had survived a previous Jordanian airstrike targeting his home, underscoring how regional actors, including neighbouring countries, are also engaged in counter-narcotics efforts.<sup>38</sup>

Despite ethical and legal concerns due to the extrajudicial nature of the measure, these covert operations persist driven by a belief that such measures are necessary to confront and dismantle the powerful drug networks that operate with relative impunity in Daraa and Suwayda.

28 Sharif Abdulrahman, 'Targeting of a facility used for drug production west of Daraa', Horan Free, 3 February 2023, <https://www.horanfree.com/archives/13348>.

29 Zaman al-Wasl, 'For the second time, a drug manufacturing facility linked to Iranian militias has been targeted west of Daraa', 06 February 2024, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/151620/>.

30 Haid Haid, 'Locals fight their own war on drugs in Syria's Daraa Province', Middle East Institute, 9 January 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/locals-fight-their-own-war-drugs-syrias-daraa-province>.

31 Ibid.

32 Daraa 24, 'Increase in the number of deaths among those accused of drug trafficking in Daraa', 14 August 2024, <https://dub.sh/eJu7La4>.

33 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Sweida, September 2024.

34 Haid Haid, 'Locals fight their own war on drugs in Syria's Daraa Province', Middle East Institute, 9 January 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/locals-fight-their-own-war-drugs-syrias-daraa-province>.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Sweida, September 2024.

38 Syria TV, 'The killing of a prominent figure in drug trafficking by local factions in Sweida', 6 March 2024, <https://dub.sh/e20hkb>.



# CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite their determination and local successes, community-led initiatives in southern Syria face significant challenges that limit their effectiveness in combating drug trafficking and substance use disorder. While these efforts have been vital in maintaining some local control, they are constrained by a lack of resources, legal frameworks, and comprehensive support services. Moreover, the reliance on extrajudicial measures raises ethical concerns, and the failure to address underlying economic and psychological drivers of drug abuse leaves the root causes largely unaddressed.

## LIMITED SCOPE AND IMPACT

These initiatives have been largely improvised and limited, focusing mainly on low-level dealers. While arresting traffickers or relocating dealers can temporarily disrupt drug activities, they rarely dismantle the larger, organized networks controlled by powerful smuggling rings linked to actors like the Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias. Prominent drug dealers often operate under the regime's protection, making it difficult for local groups to take effective action.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, community-led efforts address only symptoms—targeting small-scale users—without tackling the systemic issues driving drug production and distribution.<sup>40</sup> This selective enforcement weakens the credibility of anti-drug campaigns, raising doubts about their true motives. Additionally, relying on violence risks escalating conflicts, as targeted killings can lead to cycles of retaliatory violence, further destabilizing the region.<sup>41</sup>

## EXTRAJUDICIAL MEASURES AND LEGAL AMBIGUITIES

The use of extrajudicial measures reflects the desperation of communities to address the drug crisis but raises serious legal and ethical concerns. Tactics ranging from unauthorized arrests to targeted killings bypass legal frameworks, leading to individuals often being punished without due process.<sup>42</sup> Instances have been reported where people targeted by community groups were later found to be drug users rather than traffick-

ers, highlighting the risks of administering justice without proper oversight.<sup>43</sup> Such practices not only risk violating human rights but also create a volatile environment where justice appears arbitrary and subject to abuse. Without legal oversight, these actions can result in wrongful accusations and misuse of power, eroding community trust and perpetuating violence.

## FAILURE TO ADDRESS STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF DRUG ABUSE

A major limitation of community-led efforts is their inability to address the underlying structural drivers fueling drug use and trafficking. Southern Syria's economic situation has deteriorated sharply, marked by high unemployment, scarce job opportunities, and deepening poverty. These conditions have pushed many, particularly young men, to turn to the drug trade as a means of survival.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the prolonged conflict has taken a heavy psychological toll on the population, leading many to self-medicate with drugs to cope with issues like depression, anxiety, and PTSD. This combination of economic hardship and untreated mental health challenges creates a fertile ground for drug substance use disorder, yet these root causes remain largely unaddressed. Rather than confronting these deeper issues, most community efforts have focused on reducing drug supply, which, while important, is insufficient for long-term success.<sup>45</sup>

## INSUFFICIENT REHABILITATION SERVICES

Another significant limitation is the lack of comprehensive rehabilitation services for those struggling with substance use disorder. While some initiatives in Daraa have set up temporary facilities to offer basic care, they are hindered by a shortage of trained medical staff, inadequate facilities, and a lack of essential resources such as medication and funding.<sup>46</sup> Sources indicate that local clinics can only provide sedatives to manage withdrawal symptoms, a short-term solution that does little to address the underlying causes of substance

39 Research interview with a community leader, Daraa, September 2024.

40 Walid Al-Nofal, 'Local communities combat drugs in Southern Syria', Syria Direct, 27 March 2024, <https://shorturl.at/d0wsB>.

41 Haid Haid, 'Locals fight their own war on drugs in Syria's Daraa Province', Middle East Institute, 9 January 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/locals-fight-their-own-war-drugs-syrias-daraa-province>.

42 Research interview with a Syrian civil society workers, Daraa, October 2024.

43 Daraa 24, 'Drug crisis in southern Syria: lack of solutions and escalating challenges', 19 September 2024, <https://shorturl.at/LXbKb>.

44 Research interview with a Syrian community leader, Daraa, September 2024.

45 Research interview with a Syrian analyst, Sweida, October 2024.

46 Rashid al-Horani, 'Rising numbers of drug addicts in Daraa amidst lack of treatment centres', Horan Free, 21 November 2023, <https://www.horanfree.com/archives/14544>.

use disorder.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, many of those struggling with substance use disorder fear seeking help due to security concerns, as traveling to larger, better-equipped centers in Damascus might expose them to arrest or forced conscription at government checkpoints.<sup>48</sup> Effective rehabilitation requires more than temporary care; long-term support, including psychological counselling and social reintegration programs, is essential to help individuals overcome substance use disorder.

Addressing the drug crisis in southern Syria requires a multi-pronged approach that goes beyond short-term solutions. This includes creating economic opportunities, improving mental health services, and establishing clear legal frameworks. Only by tackling the broader structural drivers of substance use disorder can sustainable progress be made. Without these measures, the region risks remaining in a cycle of drug abuse, violence, and instability, beyond the reach of local action alone.

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47 Research interview with a Syrian civil society workers, Daraa, October 2024.

48 Daraa 24, 'Drug crisis in southern Syria: lack of solutions and escalating challenges', 19 September 2024, <https://shorturl.at/LXbKb>.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Community-led efforts in southern Syria have shown remarkable resilience and commitment in combating drug trafficking and substance use disorder. However, for these initiatives to be truly effective and sustainable, they must address more than just the immediate disruption of drug supply chains. Achieving lasting success requires a comprehensive approach that tackles the underlying legal, economic, psychological, and structural factors driving drug use and trafficking. The following policy recommendations aim to strengthen these grassroots actions by addressing their current limitations and mitigating associated risks.

## ESTABLISH LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Creating a legal framework is crucial to ensuring that anti-drug measures are both lawful and effective. By formalizing community policing with clearly defined mandates, local authorities can enhance security and reduce drug activities without resorting to violent or extrajudicial actions. Additionally, introducing restorative justice practices, such as community service and rehabilitation for minor offenses, can facilitate reintegration and help break the cycle of violence. Independent oversight bodies should be established to maintain transparency, uphold ethical standards, and ensure accountability in anti-drug initiatives.

## STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Enhancing local economies is vital for diminishing the appeal of drug-related activities, especially among the youth. International organizations and donors should focus on creating sustainable job opportunities and supporting skill development programs to help reintegrate former drug users and dealers into the workforce. Microfinance initiatives can encourage local entrepreneurship, driving economic growth and reducing the incentives for involvement in the drug trade. By offering viable alternatives, these economic efforts can weaken the influence of the drug economy and bring renewed hope to communities struggling under its impact.

## ENHANCE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Addressing the psychological drivers of drug substance use disorder requires expanded access to professional mental health care. Early intervention and a supportive environment are crucial for those seeking help, and empowering community members to provide initial support can build a stronger safety net. Healthcare

workers, teachers, and other key figures should receive basic training to recognize signs of substance use disorder and mental health issues, enabling more effective and compassionate responses. Peer-led support groups, facilitated by trained community members, can also offer a cost-effective way to provide emotional support, share resources, and foster a sense of belonging.

## STRENGTHEN REHABILITATION EFFORTS

Community-based rehabilitation programs must be supported to ensure safe, accessible, and effective care for those struggling with substance use disorder. To address the shortage of specialized medical staff, training local healthcare workers in basic substance use disorder treatment and counselling can help build capacity, particularly when facilitated through partnerships with international health organizations. Mobile rehabilitation units offer a flexible, scalable solution, bringing essential services to remote or insecure areas where access to treatment is limited.

## PROMOTE COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

Raising public awareness is key to shifting attitudes toward drug use and substance use disorder. Educational campaigns can inform communities about the dangers of drug abuse, the signs of substance use disorder, and the available resources for treatment. Workshops, seminars, and school programs play a critical role in educating young people about these risks and promoting mental health. Involving youth in anti-drug campaigns through community projects, such as arts and sports, fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, which can reduce the likelihood of substance abuse. These initiatives not only support individual well-being but also strengthen community resilience against the challenges of drug substance use disorder.

Local communities have the potential to be at the forefront of the fight against drug trafficking, but they need the right tools, resources, and support to succeed. Through a coordinated, multifaceted approach, these communities can lead the way toward sustainable solutions that address the root causes of the drug crisis, ultimately building a safer, healthier, and more resilient future for all.

