

Syria Armed Moderate Opposition Support (SAMOS) Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted between 08/28/2017 and 01/04/2018, and the final report was submitted 01/04/2018.

Purpose of the Evaluation and Questions Addressed

NEA/AC sought a review of SAMOS, its project for non-lethal assistance to vetted armed moderate opposition units, to inform decision-making regarding the future of the project and other similar non-lethal support programs within the Department's purview. This independent evaluation served the following purposes: 1) Understand, broadly, if the approach to increase the effectiveness of the armed moderate opposition and to provide an alternative to extremist groups has worked; 2) Review, analyze, and evaluate the outcomes and any impact of the SAMOS project; 3) Determine any recommended course adjustments in the ongoing projects; and 4) Better understand the relationship and power dynamics that these armed groups have with the communities – including governance and civil society actors – and the role of SAMOS.

Methodology

This evaluation utilized qualitative methods in its design and analysis. The evaluation team reviewed 33 documents and conducted 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) in the United States, Turkey and Jordan with U.S. State Department officials, the NEA/AC implementer, and the third party monitoring company. KII responses were aggregated and patterns analyzed across respondents and summarized. The design of this evaluation was driven in part by security limitations and the evaluator's inability to collect data directly from the SAMOS units.

Recommendations

Conduct an informal needs assessment and map CSO capacity

The Department should hold a unit commanders' meeting to conduct an informal needs assessment. This assessment will refresh data on moderate opposition unit membership in northern and southern Syria, and assess the status of the new structure, which places the military command under the SIG's Ministry of Defense¹. Gaining information about any support provided to moderate opposition units through the new structure, or the expansion of joint battalions will support the Department to make better decisions on issues such as whether to increase the quantity of medical assistance in northern Syria.² It will also allow the Department to determine what units need to be more effective in their objective to protect their communities and counter extremism. This assessment could also include capacity mapping of local CSOs working within the units' respective areas of operation, which could enable SAMOS to leverage the CSOs' expertise to support unit-level training in areas like advocacy/public communication and media/social media use.

Map assistance to increase coordination and reduce competition across entities

To the extent practicable, SAMOS-provided non-lethal assistance should be unit-specific and based on local needs, while accounting for individual community governance structures for services provision. NEA/AC should

¹ Decision No 73 formed the Military Command under the interim government's Ministry of Defense, and included changes in commanders' roles and effects on unit coordination and cohesion in September, 2017. In the south, there is no intentional engagement with the SIG.

² At the time of this evaluation, no medical assistance is provided in southern Syria through the SAMOS program.

map the activities of other Syria assistance programs that mutually support or reinforce SAMOS' programmatic objectives. Undertaking an assistance mapping exercise and subsequently tailoring the assistance based on community structures can increase coordination and minimize competition between the unit and other entities operating in the communities. NEA/AC should also integrate a rolling assessment of community-level vulnerabilities that may affect the unit's integration with the community and/or the unit's ability to protect the community against the Regime and ISIS. As part of this mapping exercise, the Department could also map CSOs and other local organizations, against local capacities and needs. Units could use this system to report a defined set of incidents and any positive impact related to moderate opposition operations.

Expand capacity-building activities

Assistance should expand to include capacity-building activities. In the North, capacity building should initially focus on advanced medical training and digital security training that builds on prior training and provides necessary support to ensure that the learning is applied. In the South, NEA/AC can use the southern Syria de-escalation zone to pilot capacity building aimed at transition/stabilization during the time between conflict and post-conflict. For example, capacity building could support SAMOS-supported units to transition to providing local protection where the FSP may not have sufficient forces. Training sequencing should coincide with unit training camps to support the greatest reach of the training. This recommendation is not practicable in the near term, but should be considered in a potential future solicitation.

Support programmatic continuity & continue data driven approach

With a new iteration of SAMOS programming, the Department should consider providing longer-term funding to allow programmatic continuity and the development of longer-term objectives. This approach should include a baseline, midterm and final evaluation of program activities. Monitoring efforts (including third party) should continue focusing on a systematic schedule of targeted monitoring that supports real-time decision-making. These data will continue to support iterative decision-making, evaluation planning, learning from localized successes and failures, and action planning.

Establish and maintain community-level operation centers

The Department should consider using its non-lethal assistance to support the units to establish and maintain community-level operations centers. These operations centers could support multiple objectives, including increasing the units' capacity to foster inter- and intra-unit coordination, increasing coordination with and protection of the community during the current conflict and de-escalation efforts.

Develop community-based participatory planning to mitigate civilian vulnerabilities

Establishment of community-based participatory planning to support programming that fosters civil-military coordination and engagement could build, repair and sustain civilian capacity to reduce vulnerabilities to local populations such as DTOs. This planning process can help identify and eliminate the underlying conditions and motivations among local community members to support DTOs and their networks.