HOW REGIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS UNIQUELY CONSTRAIN GOVERNANCE IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA

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Kheder Khaddour is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. His research focuses on issues of identity and society in Syria.

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Summary

In 2012, when Bashar al-Assad's regime withdrew most of its security forces from the Jazira in northeastern Syria, it ceded local power to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing. The PYD replicated past regime behavior, focusing on maintaining a secure hold of this strategic geographical area at the expense of effective governance. This approach has hindered the prospect of building a self-sustained administration. At the same time, outside actors such as Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and the United States have inadvertently reinforced the PYD's security-focused rule while pursuing their own security concerns. Exploring potential avenues to peace and stable governance in Syria requires carefully identifying the interrelated nature of these various actors' security concerns in the Jazira.

Control at the Expense of Governance

- Due to its location and its ethnic-based local representation, the Jazira has long been vulnerable to external influence from Syria's neighbors, particularly Iraq and Turkey.

- From the early 1970s until the Syrian war broke out, the two Assad regimes kept the Jazira region under the firm grip of their security agencies and sought to contain and control local politics by keeping the region underdeveloped and dependent on Damascus.

- Faced with similar challenges after 2012, the PYD and its military wing reproduced similar patterns of rule. It did so by centralizing power with its military commanders, promoting a new class of local leaders, and increasing the population's dependence on PYD-provided services and security, while containing unsanctioned political activities.

- The actions by others—the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—has, sometimes inadvertently, reinforced PYD rule over the Jazira.

Diagnosing the Jazira's Many Security Concerns

- The complex ways that the security interests of regional actors are interwoven with local dynamics in the Jazira continue to incentivize a security-focused approach that has undermined prospects for effective governance.

- Any viable Syrian peace process must move beyond proposals of decentralization and Kurdish autonomy, and instead focus more attention on the multifaceted rivalries among local and regional actors in the Jazira. Identifying the ways that multiple interests are in tension is a first step in the direction of an eventual compromise that would encourage more effective, responsive governance in the Jazira.

- A realistic, durable path toward peace in Syria would likely require that relevant parties—Iraqi Kurdish parties, the PKK, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—seek to advance their security concerns in ways that leave room for potential compromises on the maximalist ambitions of their respective agendas.

Introduction

The Jazira region has long been a corridor for exchanges between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey located at the intersection of the three countries. Though most of the Jazira today is part of Syria, this northeastern corner of the country has continuously been open to influence from its neighbors. Local communities of Arabs, Assyrians, Kurds, and Syriacs have remained spread across the borders of the three countries and have stayed connected.[1] Since Syria became independent in 1946, governments in Damascus have kept the area underdeveloped and marginalized to insulate the territory from the outside. Starting in the early 1970s, then Syrian president Hafez al-Assad and his successor Bashar al-Assad continued this approach and kept decisionmaking centralized in the state's security agencies while containing the Jazira's politics.

After the uprising in Syria in 2011, the Jazira became a focal point for regional rivalries. In July 2012, the Assad regime withdrew most of its security personnel from the region amid Syria's growing war. The resulting vacuum was filled by the Syrian Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arm, the People's Protection Units (YPG). The PYD and the YPG are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a leftist Kurdish party led by Abdullah Ocalan that has fought the Turkish state for decades. In 2014, the YPG was the main ally on the ground that received U.S. military aid as the United States launched a military campaign in Syria against the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Today, much of the Jazira is under the tight control of the PKK-trained YPG militants, although the Syrian regime's security agents have maintained a presence in the region's main urban centers—in al-Hasakeh and in parts of al-Qamishli. Once it took power starting in 2012, the PYD/YPG established its own civil administration in the Jazira. However, decisionmaking remained highly centralized in a network of professional YPG militants trained at the PKK's military base in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. The PYD's administrative institutions have served less as instruments of governance than as mechanisms of containment and surveillance to promote a new and loyal circle of elites that have emerged alongside those put in place by the Syrian regime.

After the uprising in Syria in 2011, the Jazira became a focal point for regional rivalries.

Meanwhile, the PKK, Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Turkey, and the United States have many regional interests at stake in the Jazira, and these interests will continue to generate tensions if they remain unaddressed.

Turkey is concerned that the expansion of the YPG into its Kurd-populated southeastern border areas may further stoke unrest and a push for autonomy among Turkish Kurds. Meanwhile, the KDP in Iraq does not want to see the influence of PKK-affiliated groups extend into territories it has authority over either. For the United States, whatever happens in the Jazira is tied to its military campaign against the Islamic State. The U.S. military aid that the YPG received allowed the PYD to expand the territory under its control, triggering an August 2016 Turkish military intervention in Syria to roll back Kurdish advances. Washington is concerned that Turkish-PKK hostility might undermine its efforts to eradicate the Islamic State in Syria in tandem with the YPG.

> **The Jazira is important because the future security conditions and governance prospects there will shape the development of several issues central to Syria's future.**

These regional agendas have profound implications for the Jazira—both for the Assad regime in Damascus and the burgeoning PYD Kurdish movement. As the Syrian regime strives to reconstitute its pre-2011 state, the region is important because the future security conditions and governance prospects there will shape the development of several issues central to Syria's future. These include the Assad regime's relations with Turkey and Iraq's Kurdistan region, the future role of the United States in Syria, the eventual role of the PKK in Syria, and the prospects for the recognition of Kurdish political and cultural rights in Syria. Examining how these actors' various security interests relate to each other is an important early step toward achieving the compromises needed to promote stable governance in the Jazira and the rest of Syria.

From the French Mandate to the Assad Regime

The Jazira, roughly equivalent to Syria's al-Hasakeh Governorate, is located in the far northeastern corner of Syria, with Turkey to its north and Iraq to its east (see figure 1). Before the post–World War I settlement defined the borders of modern Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, the Jazira straddled territories that would later be integrated into each of the three states. While mountains divide it from Turkey, the lands between the Jazira and Iraq remain unrelentingly flat. Geographers have defined the Jazira as the land between Sinjar Mountain in northwestern Iraq and Abdul Aziz Mountain, located some 45 kilometers (about 28 miles) west of the city of al-Hasakeh.[2] The Euphrates River crosses the region, entering Syria from Iraq, irrigating the lands around it. Geographers have described the Jazira as a land where people stay without becoming rooted because, until the end of the nineteenth century, its population was largely nomadic.[3]

Figure 1: The Jazira and Its Surrounding Neighborhood
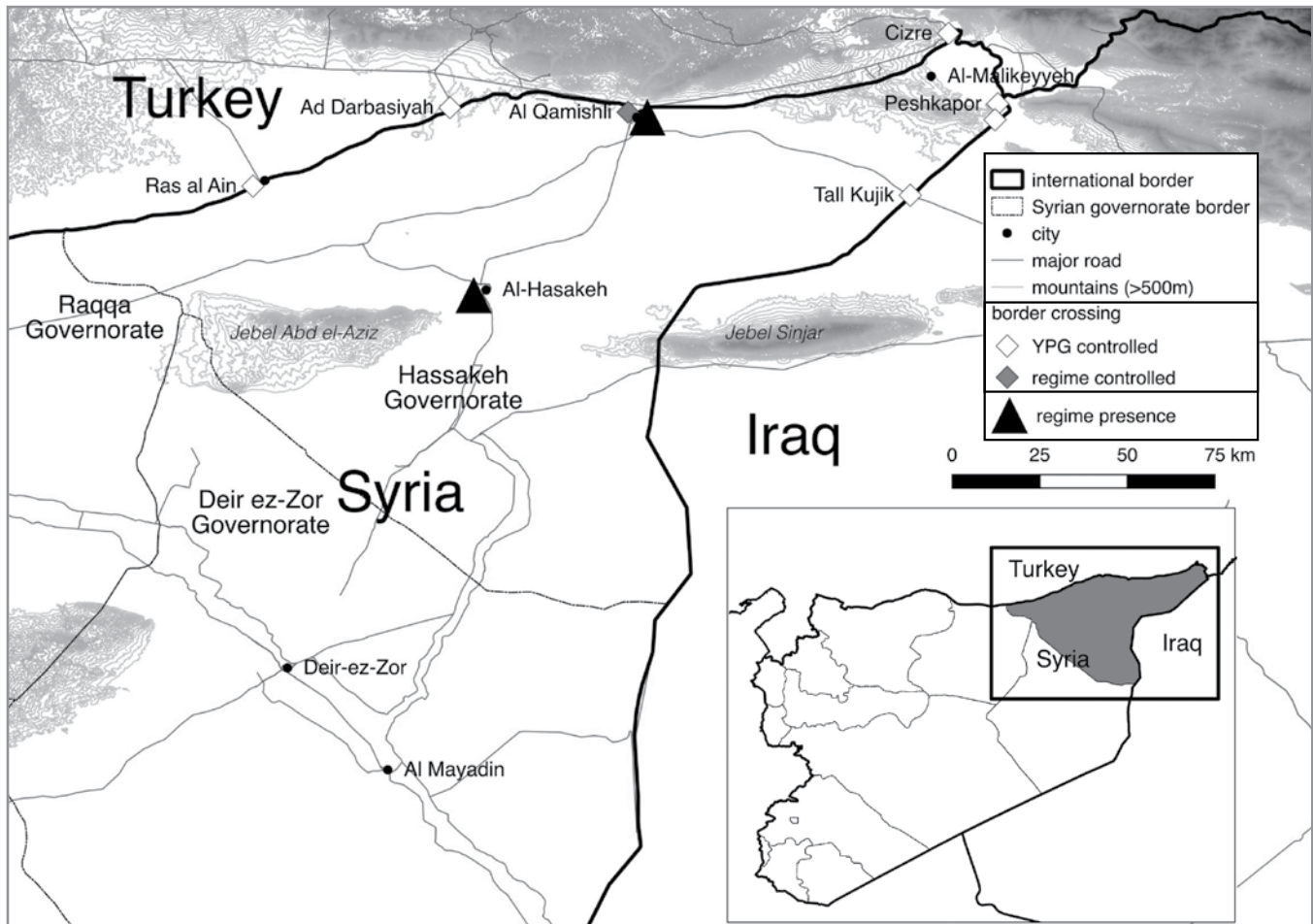
Outside Interference in the Jazira

For much of the twentieth century, the Jazira was strategically important because the area found itself on the front lines of Syria's rivalries with both Turkey and Iraq. That said, the heterogeneous composition of the Jazira, and the divides that came with it, meant that no one in practice really dominated the region.

During the French Mandate over Syria (1923–1946), the Mandatory authorities sought to lay down the foundations of a modern state. Administratively, they transformed the Jazira into a governorate. To encourage the tribes to become sedentary, they introduced regulations on land ownership to persuade tribal leaders to settle in return for being granted property rights. Arab and Kurdish landowners and tribal leaders, as well as members of the Assyrian and Syriac communities, came to form a class of elites mostly concentrated in the city of al-Hasakeh, the governorate's capital. A second city, al-Qamishli,

located on the Syrian-Turkish border, became an important trading center when Kurds from southeastern Turkey resettled there to work as traders or be employed by the Jazira's landowners.

Due to its location and its ethnically driven local politics, the Jazira has been highly exposed to external interference and border tensions. Containing and controlling local politics constituted one of the main security challenges facing Syrian governments after independence. To tighten their hold over the area, the central authorities mobilized local communities politically within defined boundaries. As early as the mid-1950s, the Jazira's communities were organized under the umbrella of political parties according to their religious and ethnic identities. While Arabs tended to join the Baath Party, the Communist Party, and Nasserite parties, notable Kurdish figures with tribal links to the Kurds of Iraq established the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) in 1957, as a sister party of the Iraqi KDP. That same year, the Assyrian and Syriac communities organized under the banner of the Assyrian Democratic Organization.[4]

Due to its location and its ethnically driven local politics, the Jazira has been highly exposed to external interference and border tensions.

The Jazira is the only Kurdish-populated part of Syria that borders Kurdish-populated parts of both Iraq and Turkey. That is not the case of other Kurdish populated areas in Syria, such as the Kurdish pocket of Afrin in the northwest of the country, which remains disconnected from the Kurdish communities and political dynamics in Iraq. Consequently, the Kurdish community in the Jazira was of special concern to the Syrian authorities, who viewed Kurdish aspirations in neighboring Iraq, in particular, as a potential security threat. Indeed, during the 1950s, the movement for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq launched by Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his KDP inspired the Kurdish national movement in Syria. Such Kurdish aspirations were less evident in Syrian Kurdish areas located farther away from Kurdish communities in Iraq and Turkey.

Under Hafez al-Assad, who took power in 1970, worries about outside interference also went beyond the Kurds. The Jazira's Arab community was exposed to Iraqi influence at a time when the Syrian-Iraqi relationship was characterized by mutual antagonism. During the early 1980s, when Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad was at the peak of its popularity, it nurtured support among the Syrian Arab tribes of the Jazira.[5]

The Assad regime sometimes used ties between Kurds in Syria and Turkey as a form of leverage against Ankara in Turkey's fight against the PKK, which began in the early 1980s. Occasionally, this has led to strategic setbacks for Damascus. Due to long-standing divergences with Turkey over the annexation of the disputed Hatay Province and water sharing, the Syrian regime allowed the PKK to operate from Syrian territory as a means of applying pressure to Ankara. In 1998, tensions rose and peaked when Turkey deployed troops over the northern Syrian border and threatened to cut off water in the Euphrates

River from flowing through Turkey into Syria. The Syrian regime had to accept an agreement imposed by Turkey known as the Adana Agreement.[6] Damascus expelled Ocalan, the PKK leader who had been residing in Syria, and leaked information that helped the Turkish intelligence services identify, capture, and arrest PKK militants.

Methods of Control Under the Assads

Amid these risks of interference from Iraq and Turkey, the successive regimes of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad have kept the Jazira and its residents under constant scrutiny. True decisionmaking power has been placed in the hands of security agents trusted by the regime, while administrative structures and political organizations have served as channels through which the regime could organize the Jazira's local communities.

Even as the Syrian security agencies have been responsible for keeping a close eye on political activities in the Jazira, they also have been granted the power to interfere in minute administrative decisions. For instance, peasants were restricted to cultivating only grain, rather than other important agricultural products, because this might have allowed the region to become more autonomous from Damascus. Another example is that the Syrian government introduced a new law in 2004 that anyone wishing to develop real estate in Syria's border areas, including the Jazira, had to seek permission from the security agencies first.[7]

Noting the career trajectories of security officers that the Assads have entrusted to maintain security in the Jazira underscores the region's importance to Damascus. Many security officers serving in the Jazira have been promoted if they successfully managed the situation there. For instance, Muhammad Mansoura, who had been based in the Jazira during the late 1970s as a military intelligence officer, in early 2005 became head of Syria's Political Security Directorate, a security agency in charge of monitoring political dissent across the country. When Syrian Kurds rioted after a football match in al-Qamishli in 2004, the security threat posed by this political unrest convinced the regime to send a senior official—Hisham Ikhtiyar, then the head of the Baath Party's National Security Bureau—to resolve the crisis.[8]

The successive regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad have kept the Jazira and its residents under constant scrutiny.

Relations among the Jazira's various communities have evolved over time and have been forged mainly by the urban middle classes of the different religious and ethnic groups, as well as on the basis of tribal relationships. The Arab Shammar tribe, for instance, has historically been allied with the Kurdish community. However, the Syrian regime has kept an overarching approach of maintaining political representation based on belonging to a specific ethnic community.

One important aspect of this approach has been that Damascus has put its security agents in charge of managing the delicate power balance between providing sanctioned political channels for the Jazira's Kurdish communities and stifling unsanctioned political activism. Whereas the Baath regime in Iraq often suppressed the Kurds violently, Hafez al-Assad sought primarily to contain Kurdish political mobilization.

Until the Syrian uprising evolved into an open conflict in 2012, the Syrian regime managed this by carefully controlling the political and economic avenues for Kurdish advancement in the Jazira. It tolerated the emergence of Kurdish political parties because these were useful structures through which Damascus could frame, control, and manage political action in the community. The Assad regime could also contain the Kurdish national movement by co-opting party members through the Syrian state professional associations. The regime capitalized on its sway over syndicates for lawyers, teachers, and engineers so as to promote a Kurdish middle class that was either loyal or that Damascus could at least influence.[9] For Kurds and other communities in the Jazira, a connection with political parties was often the only avenue for access to professional associations and the benefits they provided. These policies ensured that the Jazira's middle class would remain dependent on the regime.[10]

> **The Syrian regime sought to maintain its control by pursuing a policy of divide and rule aimed at keeping the Jazira's local politics split along ethnic lines.**

While there were many political parties, their capacity to engage in political action was highly constrained. In fact, these parties were used primarily to curtail mobilization that might take place apart from them. This was well-illustrated by the behavior of the Kurdish parties during the 2004 riots in al-Qamishli, when Kurds demonstrated against the government and tore down a statue of Hafez al-Assad. The parties, pressured by the regime's security agencies, declined to support the demonstrators, effectively curbing their momentum and leaving the Kurds divided.[11]

More broadly, the Syrian regime sought to maintain its control and prevent broader intercommunal alliances by pursuing a policy of divide and rule aimed at keeping the Jazira's local politics split along ethnic lines. It often exacerbated Arab-Kurdish divisions by overtly favoring Arab candidates to parliament over Kurdish ones, or by heightening Kurdish mistrust of Arabs. During the 1990 parliamentary elections, for instance, Kurdish candidates filled three out of four slots on an electoral list independent from the regime-favored alliance.[12] Four years later, during the 1994 elections, the regime, wanting to avoid a recurrence of that situation, created a list of its own, known informally as the shadow list (*qaimat al-dhil*), so as to block Kurdish candidates on the independent list. Two of the slots on the shadow list were assigned to candidates from the Jibouri and Tayy tribes, the two most important Arab tribes in the Jazira; one to a member of the Syriac community; and only one remaining seat was reserved for a Kurd.[13] This policy fostered simmering tensions among the

Jazira's various ethnic communities, prevented them from working together against Damascus, and allowed the Assad regime to maintain firm control over the region.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 further heightened tensions between the Jazira's communities. It provided an unprecedented opportunity for Iraqi Kurds to establish a semiautonomous region and therefore forced the Assad regime to contain a rekindled national movement of Syrian Kurds within the Jazira, which is geographically very close to Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurds who participated in the 2004 al-Qamishli protests recalled hearing cheers for then U.S. president George W. Bush, whose invasion of Iraq had made possible the emergence of a semiautonomous Kurdish region. In response, members of the Arab tribes responded with chants in support of Iraq's former president Saddam Hussein. Not only did this reflect the mistrust among ethnic groups in the Jazira that the regime's divide-and-rule policies had nurtured for decades, but also the area's vulnerability to developments in surrounding countries.

The regime contained the unrest by playing on Arab-Kurdish mistrust. Security agents and al-Hasakeh's governor thanked members of the Tayy tribe for cooperating with the regime in repressing the demonstration, confirming feelings among the Kurds that the Jazira's Arab tribes were complicit with the regime in containing Kurdish aspirations.[14] The regime also incited anti-Kurdish feelings by persuading the Arab tribes to view the Kurdish demonstrations as a part of a larger U.S.-led conspiracy to divide Syria.

For the Assad regime, local administrative structures in al-Hasakeh Governorate were a potent instrument for stirring up communal rivalries, dispensing patronage, co-opting local elites, and preventing independent political action. To some degree, Damascus calibrated its tactics to suit different groups of citizens. Prominent positions in the governorate, such as the head of the Rumeilan oil field, were usually assigned to Alawi officials from outside the Jazira.[15] Members of the Tayy and Jibouri tribes were appointed to local government institutions, such as the governing council of al-Hasakeh Governorate (*majlis al-muhafaza*), or even to parliament in Damascus. Middle-class Arabs, Assyrians, and Syriacs were appointed to key state institutions. By contrast, Kurdish notables, mostly co-opted through their professional associations, were rarely appointed to leadership positions in local government or state bodies, so as to limit their capacity to mobilize broader Kurdish solidarity against the Assad regime.

Damascus also managed affairs in the Jazira by modifying al-Hasakeh Governorate's administrative makeup to garner more supporters. Following the 2004 al-Qamishli protests, the government issued a five-year economic development plan that reorganized each of the Jazira's districts (*nahyeh*) into municipalities (*baladiyyeh*). While the apparent aim was to provide local administrative bodies with broader decisionmaking powers in managing their own affairs, in reality it served to expand the Assad regime's class of loyal

supporters, by creating more positions of responsibility in the newly formed municipalities to which Damascus could appoint supporters.[16]

The Jazira and the Syrian War

In the early stages of the 2011 uprising, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad resorted to these same tactics involving political parties and administrative structures in the Jazira to curb the mounting dissent. Initially, most Kurdish parties shied away from overtly supporting the protests. The regime took other unprecedented steps to placate the street protesters. The most significant of these consisted of granting Syrian nationality to those Kurds who had been stateless for generations.[17] Another measure was publishing in the official *Tishrin* newspaper accounts of the March 2012 celebrations of Nowruz, a festivity inherited from the Zoroastrian cult that Kurds consider a symbol of their own national identity.[18]

These steps did not ultimately have the impact the regime anticipated. Initially, the older generation of Kurds and political parties refrained from joining the demonstrations, recalling that their previous attempts at political mobilization had been crushed. Yet the largely youth-led uprising in the rest of Syria encouraged a new generation of Kurds to mobilize in protests that the regime couldn't entirely contain through the Kurdish parties.

When Syria's neighbors began to get involved, the Assad regime ended up facing a double threat, from the expansion of an Iraqi Kurdish national movement into the Jazira on the one hand, and from Turkish-supported rebels seeking to take over Syria's northeast on the other. By 2012, the Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, the son of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, had doubled down on his support for Kurdish Syrian parties in order to project KDP influence into the Jazira. He provided their leaders with a safe haven in Iraqi Kurdistan's capital, Erbil, and began recruiting Syrian Kurds to set up a Syrian peshmerga military force.[19] Meanwhile, Turkey supported Syrian rebels in their fight against Syrian government forces.

The Assad regime made a strategic choice to withdraw most of its security forces from the Jazira and allow PKK-affiliated Syrian members of the PYD and the YPG to deploy in large pockets of the region. While the YPG (as an enemy of Barzani's KDP and Turkey) did counter Assad's foreign rivals to some degree, this decision also opened the Jazira to far greater PYD influence.

The PYD's Efforts to Control the Jazira

While the Syrian uprising in 2011 altered power relations in the Jazira to the detriment of the Assad regime, the region's exposure to outside influences and tangled local politics has induced the incoming PYD to replicate many of the patterns of control that had been in place before.

Assad's Lingering Presence in the Jazira

The Assad regime largely withdrew from the Jazira in 2012, but it has since maintained its authority in the region's two main urban centers—in al-Hasakeh and in parts of al-Qamishli. Because the Syrian government continues to maintain essential structures of power that previously allowed it to rule over all of the Jazira, the region effectively has become home to a dual security arrangement, with the PYD controlling the majority of the Jazira outside of these city centers. The regime's and the PYD's administrative networks, while competing, do duplicate each other's functions, at least with regard to monitoring and militarizing local populations by setting up systems of control over them. For example, young men in the Jazira are subjected to compulsory military service by both sides. Since neither side recognizes the official military-service documents of the other, youths can potentially be recruited into the ranks of both forces.

> **The Assad regime made a strategic choice to withdraw most of its security forces from the Jazira and allow Kurdish-affiliated groups to deploy in large pockets of the region.**

The Assad regime's ongoing presence has effectively hindered the ability of the PYD administration to gain full authority and legitimacy in the Jazira. Damascus effectively left the administration a system of mere control and monitoring that cannot be developed into an instrument of governance capable of replacing all the functions of the state.

The decisionmaking of the Assad regime in the Jazira remains highly centralized in the security agencies, which still control levers of state power that limit the governing potential of the PYD. The regime's security officials in al-Qamishli and al-Hasakeh are still active, continuing to conduct arrests and send prisoners to Damascus in order to show their superiors that they are doing their job.[20] Al-Qamishli's airport and the important border crossing between al-Qamishli and the Turkish city of Nusaybin both remain under regime authority. And most importantly, though the PYD administration has issued its own law on land, property, and construction, the Syrian state controls al-Hasakeh's land registries, so it can invalidate any land transactions, or declare illegal any construction project, undertaken within the laws of the PYD administration.[21]

For the PYD, this all means that the Assad regime is hindering its capacity to govern by exploiting the regime's ongoing control of vital state resources—Damascus remains the only guarantor of important legal and practical aspects of governance related to citizens' daily lives.

The PYD's Administrative Restructuring

To legitimate its military control, the PYD established a separate administrative system in parallel to that of the Syrian state that functions alongside it in the Jazira's two main urban centers, al-Hasakeh and al-Qamishli. In November

2013, the PYD and the YPG began reorganizing the territory they had taken along the Syrian-Turkish border, dividing it into three cantons. The first, corresponding to al-Hasakeh Governorate, they call the Jazira Canton. The second, in northern Aleppo Governorate, includes Kobane and the areas around it. The third canton is in Afrin, in the northwestern corner of Aleppo Governorate. This subdivision placed the three noncontiguous Kurdish areas under a unified political entity controlled by the YPG and affiliated forces, providing political cover for the movement's military control in the Jazira.

The cantons are subdivided into a series of municipal units with defined territorial boundaries. These overlap roughly with the administrative boundaries of the Syrian state prior to 2012. While each municipality has a council responsible for entire towns and villages, the PYD's main innovation consists of a system of communes (*kominat*), which established councils responsible for neighborhoods and even smaller groupings of homes. Municipal councils and the communes they oversee are responsible for providing basic municipal services such as water, electricity, and garbage collection.[22] The PYD appoints to these bodies reliable local figures or members of political parties with which it is affiliated.

This PYD administrative structure has been a potent tool for incorporating the territories it controls into a wider political entity. In other words, the PYD's establishment of the cantons was aimed at formalizing and legitimizing politically what the YPG had gained militarily. Indeed, as the territory under PYD control changed and expanded, so too did its political agenda, although its aims of consolidating and legitimizing its self-rule were far from fully achieved. The YPG's extension of its military control beyond the Kurdish cantons in March 2016 indicated as much. The PYD declared that its goal was to establish a federal structure that integrated the cantons, which it named the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria. The fact that this federal system's geographic scope expanded as YPG military control did suggests that the PYD was more concerned with legitimizing its local military control and authority than governing on behalf of Jazira's citizens in a particular fashion.

The PYD's Efforts at Governing and Control

The PYD's administrative network plays an important role in efforts to tighten control over strategic areas in the Jazira. It ensures residents remain dependent on the PYD administration for the provision of services and protection, while also putting in place a system to monitor them. The YPG has kept a tight rein over the cities located on the Jazira's borders with Turkey, where the PYD has instituted a dense network of municipalities and communes. For example, in al-Qamishli, located on Syria's border with Turkey, the PYD established three municipalities. In addition, each of the roundabouts on the road from al-Qamishli to the Iraqi border displays YPG flags, pictures of Ocalan, or pictures of YPG members killed in battle.[23]

More broadly, since taking control of major areas in the Jazira in 2012, the PYD/YPG has had to address a challenge faced by Syria's central authorities in the past—namely, managing communities organized under the aegis of ethnic-based political parties that have maintained links to external actors. The Syrian conflict has strengthened relations between Kurdish parties other than the PYD and the Iraqi KDP, such as the KDPS. These parties have refused to cooperate in administering the Jazira for as long as it is militarily dominated by the YPG. In addition, with rare exceptions, the PYD has not been able to attract to its side key Arab tribal leaders or members of the Assyrian and Syriac communities.[24] Indeed, a majority of parties and elites in the Jazira mistrust the PYD's mission, which does not even enjoy unanimous support among the Jazira's Kurds.

Not unlike the Assad regime, the PYD has largely failed to set up effective institutions for local governance, instead resorting to security-based rule—municipalities and communes have functioned primarily as appendages of the PYD. The legacy of the Assad regime's policies compounded the PYD/YPG structure of decisionmaking centralized in the PKK-trained cadres and created a context in which these cadres have delegated no authority to the administrative institutions the PYD has created. These institutions have served principally to contain rival Kurdish and non-Kurdish political parties that might challenge the YPG's military dominance. In taking this approach, the PYD and the YPG have reproduced patterns of rule employed by the Syrian regime.

Top PKK-trained PYD and YPG cadres occupy a decisionmaking structure parallel to the officials nominally tasked with administering the region, and these military figures tend to hold more power.[25] These military cadres intervene in both administrative and political matters. Besides maintaining a near-exclusive monopoly over security, they manage natural and financial resources, intervene in judicial affairs, and make local administrative appointments. The decisionmaking process is secretive, restricted to a small number of officials, and enforced through commanders operating alongside administrative institutions.[26]

While the administrative institutions put in place by the PYD are largely powerless, they serve as a key bridge between the party's militants and the Jazira's population. That is significant, because ties were nearly nonexistent when YPG forces first deployed there in 2012. These institutions also have allowed the PYD to create a basic administrative apparatus to legitimate its territorial gains, allowing the Kurdish party to provide basic services and creating a mechanism for it to restrain political activities.

Cultivating a New Generation of Leaders

By granting formal leadership roles to local figures in the administrative bodies of cantons, municipalities, and communes, the PYD has sought to co-opt and promote a new class of local elites. It has done so to create an alternative

to officials appointed by the Syrian regime. While those in leadership positions are usually professionals with loose political ties to the PYD, those in daily contact with the population (who, therefore, represent an important source of intelligence) are often PYD members or members of PYD-affiliated organizations. Most heads of communes, for instance, are linked to the PYD, representing a vital nexus between the party and the population. Through its appointments, the PYD tends to empower more peripheral figures who generally come from the lower-middle class and who had been bypassed by the Syrian regime for past appointments. Because the PYD administration offers such individuals an avenue to social mobility, it ensures their loyalty and independence from the regime's networks of authority.

This includes individuals from a range of groups in the Jazira. Among these ranks are Kurds who hail from second-tier families compared to the large landowning families that have led the traditional Kurdish parties.[27] It also includes Arab tribal leaders long allied with the Kurds, such as Hamidi al-Daham of the Shammar, who is co-president of the Jazira Canton, or members of the Jazira's Arab tribes who are rivals of tribal leaders with which the Syrian regime has usually dealt. Members of the Assyrian and Syriac communities from the Jazira's important urban centers like al-Qamishli and al-Hasakeh have constituted the cornerstone of the Syrian state administration in the governorate, serving in senior positions such as mayors and as directors general in schools and hospitals. In response to this, the PYD has promoted Assyrians and Syriacs who come from smaller towns around al-Qamishli and al-Hasakeh, such as Qataniyyeh or Rumeilan, whose inhabitants had been habitually excluded from positions of power.

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While the PYD's administrative institutions in the Jazira have included members from the area's different communities, these individuals have been chosen by the PYD and accept the YPG's monopoly over military and security affairs. This monopoly has placed all political organizations participating in the administration in a position of dependency. That is why the Iraqi Kurd–affiliated KDPS, finding itself unable to share in the management of security in the Jazira, has refused to participate in the PYD-backed administration. The KDPS and other Kurdish political parties can still operate within their offices and conduct limited political activity. However, if they wish to organize demonstrations, they must ask for permission from the administration's military police, the Asayish.[28] So while the PYD and the YPG have created an administrative framework that ostensibly includes members of different communities in the Jazira's administration, they have done so while seeking to maintain tight control over the region's security apparatus.

Exploiting External Threat Perceptions

The dynamics of power in the Jazira remain tied to the surrounding regional situation and the perceptions of external threats that the PYD has been able to exploit. While security-focused and centralized decisionmaking is characteristic of the PYD, in places where outside threats are limited like Afrin, the PYD administration has more successfully partnered with local leadership. Many middle-class officials there participate in the PYD's administrative institutions, which is necessary for proper governance of the area.[29] This seems to suggest that the Jazira is distinctive—a place where the tangled interests of various regional actors have resulted in poor cooperation between PYD officials and local leaders and poor administrative performance, while also fostering a strong security apparatus.[30]

Providing the Jazira with security and services is not the PYD's only tool for maintaining control, though it seems to have been its most effective one. Since the PYD deployed in the Jazira, and even before announcing the establishment of its own administration in the area, the PYD also created a number of social organizations meant to direct society and disseminate its ideology, inspired by the PKK's Abdullah Ocalan.[31] However, it appears that ideology is only a small factor binding the Jazira's population to PYD rule (as Ocalan's ideas have never been very popular in al-Hasakeh and al-Qamishli). One notable illustration of this dynamic is that the PYD has baptized communes with the names of its martyrs. This includes one al-Qamishli commune named after the martyr Serhad, whose identity remains largely unknown to the commune's residents themselves.[32]

More important than ideology, then, has been the ability of the PYD to provide those who now live under its authority with the services and protection they have desperately needed since the Assad regime withdrew most of its forces. The PYD communes are a case in point. Initially established as the most basic units of self-rule to spread Ocalan's PKK ideology, the communes gradually evolved to instead provide citizens with security and basic services, which proved to be a more reliable means of PYD control. They came to duplicate the tasks of municipal councils and eventually became an important body through which the party could monitor society. In al-Qamishli, for instance, there are over 160 communes, each one encompassing 150–160 households.[33] By offering their residents water, electricity, as well as garbage collection services and appointing the leaders of communes from within their own district, the PYD has garnered much information about their inhabitants. While originally meant to mobilize the population behind Ocalan's ideas, communes effectively became a means to keep the population in check, while taking on more practical governing roles.[34]

> **More important than ideology has been the ability of the Democratic Union Party to provide services and protection that are desperately needed since the Assad regime withdrew most of its forces.**

The danger of the Islamic State has also allowed the PYD to compel local populations, particularly in eastern Jazira near Rumeilan, to tolerate a form of military rule in return for protection. By the end of 2014, the administration issued a law on compulsory military service. Any young Syrian above the age of eighteen had to undergo six months of military training.[35] The YPG enforced the law by relying on party organizations or commune leaders to provide it with recruitment lists. For instance, at the al-Hasakeh branch of al-Furat University, YPG members used a pro-Ocalan student organization to recruit students for training.[36] The conflict with the Islamic State is playing in favor of the PYD and the YPG in other regards as well. By creating a threat, it neutralizes political dissent, while the dire economic situation in the Jazira ensuing from the conflict makes the population increasingly reliant on the party for the provision of services and access to economic opportunities.

Economic conditions have sometimes facilitated collaboration with the Syrian state. For instance, a delegation from the Syrian Ministry of Health has met with PYD officials to discuss the delivery of medicine to the Jazira.[37] Middle-class professionals and Syrian state employees, who were initially reluctant to work for the PYD administration, eventually needed to do so to make a living amid rising inflation, while also maintaining their employment in the state. This underlines how the PYD has used the constraints of the local population to enhance its power. At first, the PYD's challenge was to integrate young Syrians into its political apparatus and limit dissent. But as the security situation changed, young people were left with one of two choices: to accept military service or leave the Jazira to become refugees in Turkey or Europe. Many have chosen to leave.

Regional Security Interests in the Jazira's Neighborhood

The impact of the PYD system of rule in the Jazira has created a paradox. While major actors with interests in the region—Iraq's Kurds, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—have either opposed or discouraged the emergence of an autonomous PYD entity, their pursuits of their own strategic priorities have also indirectly reinforced the PYD administration as a system of control in various ways.

Since 2015, the KDP-dominated Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has intermittently closed the border between Iraq and the Jazira. That is because the KDP's repeated attempts to persuade the PYD to share decisionmaking power in the Jazira with KDP-supported parties have come to nothing. The Dohuk Agreement of October 2014 between the PYD and Iraqi Kurdish parties close to the KRG temporarily revived the possibility of

finding a power-sharing formula, but the agreement ultimately failed because the PYD refused to allow a military force other than the YPG to be deployed in the Jazira.[38]

Yet the border closures risk backfiring on the interests of the KDP and its affiliated Syrian Kurdish parties. Though they have limited the PYD administration's ability to be economically self-sufficient, they have also kept the livelihood of the Jazira's population at the mercy of the PYD. This has also meant, more broadly, that the Jazira's sole economic outlets are regime-controlled areas, increasing the area's vulnerability and reinforcing the desire of many inhabitants of the Jazira not to sever their ties with Damascus.

Meanwhile, the Turkish intervention in Syria to contain the PYD, known as Operation Euphrates Shield, has only encouraged the YPG to intensify its control over the Jazira and turn it into a military bastion against Turkey. Ankara's actions have empowered the PKK-trained PYD cadres to tighten their security measures and further militarize the region to defend against a potential attack from Turkish troops or affiliated forces.

The presence of a U.S. military airport in Rumeilan now means that the area has become a regional military base similar to those on which the United States relies in the Gulf.

The United States, meanwhile, sees the YPG as a convenient ally against the Islamic State, but it does not want the PYD to become an established political entity that could disrupt relations with Turkey. Washington, albeit for very different reasons from Ankara, has also inadvertently encouraged the Jazira's militarization. The YPG has played a major part in the U.S. campaign to combat the Islamic State, and U.S. military aid has further consolidated PYD decision-making in the hands of PKK-trained YPG military commanders. The Jazira has effectively been turned into a reservoir of military recruits to sustain the campaign against the Islamic State.[39] The presence of a U.S. military airport in Rumeilan now means that the area has become a regional military base similar to those on which the United States relies in the Gulf. As the campaign against the Islamic State continues, these tensions remain unresolved.

The PYD also is still forced to rely on the Assad regime in important ways. The PYD has gained control of critical infrastructure but has remained reliant on the Assad regime for the technical expertise to make use of it. As the PYD/YPG took charge of large parts of the Jazira, the Assad regime exploited the YPG's manpower to ensure that strategic infrastructures would not fall into the hands of the other opposition forces, even as it sought to ensure that the PYD administration would be unable to break completely free from a dependency on Damascus.

The Jazira's energy supplies offer a good illustration of how this dynamic has been playing out. Since 2014, YPG forces have been in control of the Rumeilan oil fields. However, the PYD administration does not control an oil refinery—the closest one is located in Homs—or a pipeline to export the oil.[40] Consequently, the PYD administration has resorted to smuggling oil through

regime-controlled areas. Electricity production reflects a similar reality. Even though the Rumeilan power plant is controlled by the YPG, its senior engineers and technicians are all Syrian state employees from outside al-Hasakeh Province. These employees, who are still being paid by the Assad regime, are also the only ones who have the skills required to operate and maintain the plant. The plant supplies electricity to the headquarters of the security agencies in al-Hasakeh and al-Qamishli, but not to the cities' residents, who rely largely on private generators.[41] The YPG also took over the Mabrouka power plant in 2016, which could potentially allow it to provide a constant supply of electricity to al-Hasakeh residents. However, this plant too requires skilled personnel in order to function properly.

> **Major actors with interests in the region—Iraq's Kurds, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—have either opposed or discouraged the emergence of an autonomous entity.**

Despite its limited presence in the Jazira, the regime has kept its political symbols in place in public spaces, signaling its continuing presence alongside the PYD/YPG. In al-Qamishli's city center, an area under the shared security control of Kurdish forces and the regime, a statue of Hafez al-Assad remains in place at one of the main roundabouts. The political symbols of the PYD/YPG, in contrast, are present in outlying neighborhoods under the total military control of Kurdish forces. At one of al-Hasakeh's roundabouts, meanwhile, pro-Assad Baath Party flags can be seen on one side of the street and YPG flags on the other.[42]

Against this backdrop, major actors with interests in the region—Iraq's Kurds, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—have either opposed or at least discouraged the emergence of an autonomous entity. But their pursuits of their respective strategic priorities have also indirectly helped reinforce the YPG's system of military control. The PYD has been unable to consolidate effective institutions of self-government in which the Jazira's communities can fully take part. It hasn't done so because regional dynamics have not allowed for this, and the PYD has been largely motivated by an imperative of control in a region marked by sectarian and ethnic diversity. Nor has the PYD put in place a system of legitimate governance, but rather one focused on preserving power. Its failure to establish an administration that focuses on governing instead of controlling and containing is hardly a surprise, given the Jazira's complexity and what is at stake for the Syrian regime and neighboring countries.

What Does the Future Hold for the Jazira?

The Jazira has not suffered the same degree of violence and repression as other areas in northern Syria. However, considering how the interests of regional and international actors have been intertwined in this northeastern corner of the country, the Jazira will continue to retain a striking complexity, whatever political framework is adopted in Syria once the conflict ends. Any Syrian

peace process can only be successful if it finds a compromise among the apprehensions of many actors—the Assad regime, the PKK, the KDP, Turkey, and the United States—with vital interests in the Jazira.

As a result of the PYD's focus on security, the Jazira has continued to suffer as a region, remaining underdeveloped, marginalized, and dependent on the outside. Further underlining the limited options of the region's inhabitants is the fact that if the PYD project fails to establish an administration that offers governance rather than control, the Jazira may again fall under the authority of Damascus. It is hard to imagine the Jazira emerging from such challenges without careful reflection on the competing priorities of all the actors with stakes in the outcome.

Decentralization of political power from Damascus to Syria's provincial capitals will not go to the heart of the Jazira's core problem, which lies in the competing, often incompatible, security concerns of each of the major political actors involved there. This is what has prompted those who control political power there to engage in a security-centric approach, which in turn has only thwarted the area's development. That is why any Syrian peace process ought to seek to identify possible solutions for the Jazira that move beyond decentralization and encourage the various political actors involved to explore ways to settle for less than their maximalist objectives.

In the meantime, developments in the Jazira will continue to be tied to the same security challenges that have plagued it and other parts of Syria for several years. This includes the unresolved conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK separatists, as well as the evolution of relations between Damascus and Ankara. No less important will be how the relationship between the PKK and Masoud Barzani's KDP evolves, which may determine whether the Jazira's eastern border will be open. Any lasting solution would need to address the demands of Turkey and the KDP that the Jazira not remain under the effective control of a PKK-related organization. It would also mean providing the PYD with assurances that it will remain in the Jazira even after the defeat of the Islamic State. Another factor would be guarantees to the Syrian state that the Jazira will remain within the framework of state institutions. In short, any political solution in Syria should be grounded in a recognition of the complex ways that the security concerns and strategic objectives of all these sides intersect in Jazira.

Decentralization of political power from Damascus to Syria's provincial capitals will not go to the heart of the Jazira's core problem.

Notes

1. Syria's Arab, Assyrian, Kurdish, and Syriac communities can be described as ethnic rather than sectarian communities because their differences do not relate primarily to religion. The vast majority of Kurds and all tribal Arabs in the Jazira are Sunni Muslims, but the two groups diverge in terms of language, social customs, and a belief in separate ancestry. Assyrians and Syriacs are Christians, adding an element of religious difference compared to Sunni Kurds and Arabs, but they also have a distinct linguistic history and set of cultural practices, while maintaining a belief in separate descent from their Kurdish and Arab neighbors.
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3. Jordi Tejel Gorags, "Un Territoire en Marge en Haute Djezireh Syrienne (1921-1940)," *Etudes Rurales* (July-December 2010): 61–76.
4. See Mohamed Jamal Barout, *Al-takawwun al-tarikhi al-hadith lil-Jazirah al-Suriyyah* [The historical formation of the Syrian Jazira] (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, November 2013), 749, 778.
5. Author interview with a tribal sheikh from the Jazira, Gaziantep, Turkey, June 2015.
6. Al-Jazeera, "Ittifaq Adana al-Turki al-Suri: protokol amni hammal hawjo" [The Turkish-Syrian Adana Agreement: A Multifaceted Security Protocol], Al Jazeera, August 11, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/events/2016/11/8/اتفاق-أضنة-التركية-السوري-بروتوكول-أمني-حمال-أوجه.
7. See Law no. 41 of 2004, and its update with Law no. 49 of 2008: http://parliament .gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5588&cat=4784&%2049%20law,%202008.
8. "Amni Liwa Mohammed Mansura: taqrir khas: bi-l munasiba rais al-amn al-siasi fi Suriyya" [General Mohammed Mansura: Special report on the occasion of the appointment of the head of political security in Syria], *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=30163.
9. See this useful list of Kurdish parties: Ghadi Sary, "Kurdish Self-Governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition," Chatham House, September 15, 2016, 7, https:// www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-09-15-kurdish-self-governance-syria-sary_0.pdf.
10. Author interview with an al-Qamishli resident (via Skype), September 2016.
11. Julie Gauthier, "Les événements de Qamichlo: irruption de la question kurde en Syrie?" *Études Kurdes*, no. 7 (May 2005): 97–114.
12. Author interview with an al-Qamishli notable (via phone), January 2017.
13. Author interview with an al-Qamishli resident (via Skype), September 2016.
14. Author interview with an al-Qamishli protester, Istanbul, July 2016.
15. Author interview with an al-Qamishli resident (via Skype), September 2016.

16. Fabrice Balanche, "Les Municipalités Dans la Syrie Baathiste: Déconcentration Administrative et Contrôle Politique" [Municipalities in Baathist Syria: Administrative decentralization and political control], *Revue de Tiers Monde*, no. 193 (2008): 170.

17. "Al-Assad yasdur marsum li tajnis akrad shamal-sharqi Syria" [Assad issues a law for naturalizing the Kurds of Syria's northeast], BBC Arabic, April 7, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2011/04/110407_syria_kurd_nationality.shtml.

18. "Fasaifusa al-tanawwu al-mujtamai masdar quwwa sayaskut al-muamara" [The mosaic of diversity is a source of strength that will defeat the conspiracy], *Tishrin*, March 22, 2012, http://archive.tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/254095.

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21. Author interview with an al-Qamishli resident (via Skype), September 2016.

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23. Author interview with a resident in al-Qamishli (via Skype), September 2016.

24. On the tribal dynamics in YPG-controlled areas, see Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, "Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal Regions," Carnegie Middle East Center, February 28, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/02/28/eastern-expectations-changing-dynamics-in-syria-s-tribal-regions-pub-68008.

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26. Author interview with Maria Fantappie (International Crisis Group senior analyst), Istanbul, August 2017.

27. Ibid.

28. Author interview with a resident in al-Qamishli (via Skype), September 2016.

29. Author interview with a resident from Afrin, Gaziantep, Turkey, June 2014.

30. Ibid.

31. Research assistant Yazer Othman's interview with the head of al-Qamishli's municipality council, September 2016.

32. Author interview with a resident in al-Qamishli (via Skype), September 2016.

33. "Ziadat adad al-kominat fi Qamishlo" [Rise in the number of communes in al-Qamishli], Anha: Hawar News Agency, December 13, 2016, http://www.hawarnews.com/زيادة-عدد-الكومينات-في-قامشلو/.

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38. International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 8, 2014), 10–12, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf.

39. Author interview with Maria Fantappie (International Crisis Group senior analyst), Istanbul, August 2017.
40. Author interview in al-Qamishli (via Skype), October 2016.
41. Author interview in al-Qamishli (via Skype), September 2016.
42. Research assistant observation in al-Hasakeh, December 2016.

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