The project to which this and other papers in this series belong was completed over the course of several months by a small in-country and remote research team. Though the paper provides a baseline assessment of community capital in the above-named location, the authors recognize that such an exhaustive topic would certainly benefit from sectoral expertise. As such, this and other reports in the Community Capital series should be considered as summary overviews.
Introduction

Al-Malikiyeh rests at the intersection of the Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi borders. Once something of an oasis in Syria’s northeastern corner, its geography has invited inward migration since the 19th century. Arab tribes from Iraq and Saudi Arabia sought out its plentiful pasturelands, whilst Christians drawn from ancient sects found sanctuary from persecution. Later joined by Kurds on a similar journey, these diverse peoples were each welcomed in Al-Malikiyeh, and the city enjoyed an ethnic variety that was near unmatched in modern day Syria. Over time however, wealthy Christians were forced out by resentful locals, and the Kurds steadily increased in number to the point that they became a significant majority in urban and rural areas. Ever since Syrian independence, Al-Malikiyeh’s Kurdish character has been the defining feature of its treatment by the government. This treatment has been so consistent over the years that it has generated a legacy which endures even after the city was surrendered to a sympathetic Syrian Kurdish political movement, the PYD, and which has since transformed into the de facto Kurdish-dominated state, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (SA).

In many ways, Al-Malikiyeh is trapped between the aspirations of its broadly PYD-supporting Kurdish-majority population and the baggage of its past as a deliberately disempowered community. The achievements of the PYD’s communitarian democratic politics are widely in evidence in Al-Malikiyeh, and perhaps to a greater extent than most other parts of the SA: Civil society has been left to develop almost uninhibited, steady movement towards gender equality across several domains has been realised, and the local system of commune-driven governance provides a platform for representation, transparency and accountability. At the same time however, decades of socio-economic marginalisation, political manipulation, and drip-fed dependency limit the fullest expression of (what are fundamentally) PYD politics, which are further shackled by the imperatives shaping ongoing management of the SA under conditions of conflict.

Al-Malikiyeh is therefore a city looking to establish itself as a bastion of self-sufficiency, but in which longstanding GoS concern over Kurdish secession has made it extremely difficult for the city to stand on its own two feet. Though an important site for oil exploitation and the cultivation of Syria’s main strategic crops, the city had no oil refineries, no textile industry, and a limited array of agricultural enterprises operating at the higher end of the value chain. Raw materials from the city’s periphery were simply ferried further afield for processing, leaving Al-Malikiyeh little in the way of profit with which it could develop itself. The power station at nearby Rmelan, for instance, could theoretically supply Al-Malikiyeh, but...
but the city was instead connected to power produced several hundred kilometres away, in palpably less Kurdish territory, in Ar-Raqqa governorate. In essence, Al-Malikiyeh was rendered fundamentally dependent on the Syrian state in the pre-war era, and continues to struggle to find avenues to enhance its economic independence.

If this weren’t enough, the security conditions that enabled the Kurdish experiment in Al-Malikiyeh are experiencing the kind of change which threatens Kurdish-dominated authority for the first time since the PYD assumed control in 2012. The U.S. military remains in the area, ostensibly “for the oil”, but Russian, Turkish and Syrian forces are each encroaching into this space in order to finish the war, capture their own share of local raw materials and, potentially, to institute a refugee resettlement plan which bears striking similarities to the divisive Arab Belt initiative practiced by the Syrian government in the 1970s. Whether any such plan is implemented is difficult to predict, and would almost certainly require a (presently unforeseeable) U.S. withdrawal from the Al-Malikiyeh area. What is clear is that operating conditions in the city and its rural periphery are closer to change than at any time in recent years, and demand increased vigilance and monitoring from aid actors working in the area.
Security Overview

U.S. presence
For much of the Syrian conflict, Al-Malikiyeh has been largely untouched by the kind of violence experienced elsewhere in the country. Government security forces withdrew from the area as part of the 2012 agreement to pass administrative control of the north-east from Damascus to the PYD, and, barring a few isolated Turkish incursions in border areas, very little in the way of conflict has taken place in or near the city ever since. To a great extent, this is because Al-Malikiyeh has long been distant from locations where the collision of local, national, and international interests have combined to produce epicentres of violence. However, it is also because Al-Malikiyeh has been amongst the most consistent beneficiaries of the U.S. military presence despite the prevarications of Washington’s Syria policy, the termination of the U.S./SDF anti-ISIS military pact, and the apparent caprice of American military strategy.

Two reasons explain why Al-Malikiyeh has been heavily insulated by U.S. forces, both of which boil down to the city’s proximity to mission critical infrastructure. First, Al-Malikiyeh has been an important platform from which the U.S. military has been able to monitor the Semalka border crossing, which serves as one of its main gateways into northeastern Syria and a key link with U.S. bases in northern Iraq. Indeed, Semalka is the U.S. military’s land-based lifeline in the northeast, and is often used to ferry both hardware and personnel between Iraq and Syria.1 Holding a position in Al-Malikiyeh helps assure the integrity of U.S. access via Semalka, and has been an important component of the U.S. mission in Syria and the multifaceted objectives therein for several years.

The second reason that Al-Malikiyeh will foreseeably benefit from a continued U.S. presence relates to the oil and gas fields to the city’s south and southwest. After ISIS was defeated as a territorial entity in Syria in 2019, President Trump declared his intention to keep forces on the ground “to secure the oil”.2 This is a nebulous goal that U.S. military officials have since elaborated is more concerned with enabling the SA’s access to Syria’s oil wealth than it is actively enhancing oil exploitation in places like Al-Malikiyeh.3 However, it has provided a pretext for the maintenance of numerous U.S. bases, including one directly to Al-Malikiyeh’s east, and has denied GoS and Russian efforts to secure control over one of Syria’s key strategic resources. This is a position that the U.S. is unlikely to yield unless it is put under serious pressure from encroaching Russian or Syrian government forces. Indeed, there have been reports that the U.S. presence was in fact strengthened in the eastern Euphrates region.

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1 It is worth noting that Semalka is obviously not the only route by which the U.S. transports supplies into northeastern Syria. Reports claim it has also air dropped materiel into its base at the Omar oil field in Deir-ez-Zor governorate.
2 Guardian (2019), Secure the oil: Trump’s Syria strategy leaves Pentagon perplexed.
in March and April 2020, indicating a concerted effort to reinforce the status quo reached subsequent to the U.S. military withdrawals which prompted the Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring in October 2019.

Rival encroachment
American reinforcements do not entail that the situation in and around Al-Malikiyeh is fundamentally stable however. Until 2019, the security picture was generally a simple one: Local security was provided by the YPG/J until this role was assumed by the body into which this group merged in 2015, the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF). No clashes with the Syrian government were reported near Al-Malikiyeh, Turkey was more concerned with northern/northwestern parts of Syria, and Russia was fighting alongside the GoS in Syria’s more industrialized west. When U.S. regular forces entered the Syrian conflict to combat ISIS, they effectively provided an additional layer of protection to territories under SDF control. Over the past year however, attention from the GoS, Turkey, and Russia has almost simultaneously turned towards the northeast, and has cast an increasingly internationalized shadow over local security conditions in Al-Malikiyeh. Tentative incursions into the area were undertaken by Turkish forces in 2018, and the withdrawal of official U.S. military support to the SDF in late-2019 paved the way for the Turkey-led Peace Spring Operation. Some minor shelling and airstrikes struck Al-Malikiyeh and its periphery during this assault, and the event resulted in an agreement which has seen a series of joint Russian-Turkish patrols conducted between eastern Qamishli and Al-Malikiyeh.

Ever since, the status quo in Al-Malikiyeh has been increasingly precarious, with Russia weighing most heavily on the U.S. and the SDF. No serious confrontations have taken place as yet, but reports that Russian and U.S. forces encounter one another in the area are frequent, and Russia is reportedly building a new military outpost just north of Al-Malikiyeh, in the village of Qasir Deeb. Though they are unlikely to clash directly, close proximity between U.S. and Russian forces has previously produced violence in SA-held territories. In February 2020, a local man was killed when U.S. forces opened fire after being held up at a checkpoint east of Qamishli, and in early 2018, there were reports that an advance on the U.S.-occupied Omar oil field by pro-GoS milita and Russian mercenaries was foiled by American air and artillery strikes. Should Russian forces gain a foothold in the area, develop their community outreach, and represent a more serious impediment to U.S. military activity, the likelihood of U.S.-Russia confrontation in the Al-Malikiyeh area would increase, and the U.S. may find its position in the area is no longer tenable.

Looking ahead
Meanwhile, Al-Malikiyeh’s Kurdish-majority population is understandably concerned that Turkey might look to capitalize on any opportunity to move into the area should the U.S. waver in its resolve to remain. Though possible, Turkish activity of this kind is considered increasingly unlikely given the growing role of the Russian military in the area, and especially given reports of a Russian base at Qasir Deeb. In essence, the formation of a Russian base immediately north of Al-Malikiyeh enables Moscow to dictate how Turkey addresses its own concerns in the area. A direct Turkish military advance on Al-Malikiyeh is therefore unlikely, but it must be added that longer-term Russian plans for the area are unknown. Subsequent to President Erdogan’s proposal to resettle Turkey’s Syrian Arab refugees in northern Syria in November 2019, there is some anxiety amongst the local population that Russia may collude with Turkey to open the Syria-Turkey border, and that their communities will be amongst those affected by the demographic engineering many assume is implicit within Turkey’s resettlement plan. The situation in Al-Malikiyeh therefore continues to undergo a delicate process of change in which the ultimate outcomes remain ultimately unforeseeable. Dividing lines between Russian and U.S. spheres of influence are being explored by means of a perilous game of militarized cat and mouse taking place in communities
where neither enjoy unanimous support. If Russian forces prove too much of an obstacle to U.S. objectives, it may be that the U.S. elects to retreat from Al-Malikiyeh to take up positions at local oil and gas facilities further south whilst retaining access via Semalka. It may yet even leave Syria altogether. Were either to happen, one would expect the SA to engage in swift negotiations to coordinate the handover of local political authority in Al-Malikiyeh to the GoS. What follows in this scenario is unknown, and would hinge on a variety of factors ranging from the integrity of the SA/SDF elsewhere, to Russian and GoS interest in Turkey’s safe zone plan. What can be said is that the security guarantee that has been provided by U.S. forces in Al-Malikiyeh is increasingly challenged. Though operating conditions for relief and development actors are not necessarily resting on a knife-edge at this time, the possibility that local partner activities in Al-Malikiyeh will be affected by security-related issues is now greater than at any time since 2012.
Political Capital

PLATFORMS FOR POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Presence of the U.S. military reduces the prospect of militarily enforced change of control.
- Communes offer representation to every local family and inform city council deliberations.
- Extensive local commune networks theoretically engender political transparency and accountability.
- Broad support for the PYD translates to broad support for the SA and its democratic programme.
- State penetration is high, but less conspicuous than in SA-held areas with a GoS presence.
- Civil society has developed relatively unhindered since 2012.
- Local government entities encourage co-operatives as a template for community-led programming.

IMPEDIMENTS TO POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Local political decision-making securitised by imperatives driving PYD/SDF strategy.
- Bottom-up governance is (at least partially) subsumed to a Qamishli-driven political discourse.
- State penetration is such that the GoS still governs many aspects of everyday public life.
- Local authority funding is limited, placing a greater emphasis on community resources.
Governance

Exposed to foreign influence owing to its ethnic diversity and the often transboundary connections of the local population, Al-Malikiyeh was subjected to the same controls implemented in northeastern Syria by successive Syrian authorities. Al-Malikiyeh’s experience under the French Mandate (1923-46) was therefore broadly the same as neighbouring Qamishli, insofar as it was included in a land reform process which sought to co-opt the northeast’s traditionally nomadic population into more sedentary lifestyles in order to reduce the influence of rival nations and consolidate local resources. Later, upon Syrian independence, Al-Malikiyeh was targeted by the GoS-led effort to contain the autonomist ambitions of northeastern Syria’s ethnic minority groups. Kurdish political ambitions were therefore managed in Al-Malikiyeh using much the same tactical repertoire found throughout the northeast: Patronage was dispensed, inter-communal rivalries were manipulated, and unsanctioned political action was stifled. Policies designed to exacerbate the social, political and economic marginalisation of Al-Malikiyeh and its residents were also pursued, which not only stunted the community’s development, but also meant it saw limited anti-establishment activism until the mid-2000s.

This obviously changed when the outcome of the 2003 Iraq war rekindled Kurdish political aspirations in Syria, which in turn prompted the GoS to double down on its efforts to contain local political mobilisation. The background and implications of this strategy are well covered in the Qamishli report in this series however, and as broadly applicable to Al-Malikiyeh, are not explored in any detail here. What is notable with regard to Al-Malikiyeh is that cross-border socio-economic and socio-cultural exchange between local Kurds and the historic Jazira region to which they belong has arguably been more pronounced than any other Syrian city. This did not necessarily dampen the effectiveness of the pre-war GoS containment effort given there was a strong state intelligence-led component in Al-Malikiyeh, but it did lay the foundations for the city’s political economy under the PYD from 2012, and from 2015, the SA.

Transboundary exchange has forged a city and a surrounding area which retains a strong Kurdish identity, and which is broadly supportive of the Kurdish political movement in Syria, particularly that led primarily by the PYD. Indeed, the city has been described as a “bastion of PYD exclusive rule” given the PYD is the dominant faction within the SA, there is understandably less resistance to SA rule in Al-Malikiyeh compared with more ethnically diverse and southwesterly parts of Al-Hasakeh governorate. The PYD and the SDF have subsequently exerted substantial influence in Al-Malikiyeh given there is no direct GoS presence in the city and few political alternatives. On the one hand, this has allowed for the expression of the PYD’s communitarian approach to democracy to a notable extent. Among other celebrated developments, this is known to have strengthened women’s political and economic representation and has permitted the largely unimpeded development of local civil society. On the other hand however, PYD dominance has effectively...
bonded politics in Al-Malikiyeh to those determined by the PYD from its SA-wide HQ in Qamishli. This, in turn, has securitised local political discourse in a way which places the PYD’s bottom-up philosophy at the mercy of SA political and military priorities.

Ties to Qamishli
Though it may be in Syria’s far northeastern corner, Al-Malikiyeh does not exist in a bubble. It is similarly affected by the imperatives that shape ongoing management of the SA, which in turn limit the extent to which the authorities in Al-Malikiyeh have been able to apply their own Öcalan-inspired political philosophy. Reports that the dominant political/military factions within the SA serve as the city’s principal decision-makers are therefore unsurprising. Indeed, it is likely that many of the figures responsible for orchestrating the realities of everyday life in Al-Malikiyeh are based primarily in Qamishli; Both the PYD and the SDF are headquartered there, meaning a prominent cadre of Kurdish elites are just an hour away along highways (officially) under SDF control.

In some respects, this is little different than the pre-war period. Before the conflict, Al-Malikiyeh was effectively a distant satellite city of Qamishli, and was reliant on its larger western neighbour as a parent community for a number of public services and governance functions that were locally unavailable. Under current conditions however, there are further strategic considerations which motivate the retention of Al-Malikiyeh within the Qamishli orbit. Most importantly, a firm grip over Al-Malikiyeh supports the integrity of the SA economy given the city’s proximity to international border crossings with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), particularly at Semalka, and to a lesser extent, at the more southerly Yaroubiyeh. Not only does the KRG import a variety of key products including construction materials, electronics, and agricultural supplies, it may also be the SA’s largest customer for its two primary exports, oil and agricultural produce. Were Al-Malikiyeh lost to a rival, the SA’s control over this critical artery would be threatened, and could render the entire SA project extremely vulnerable. Obviously, this is unlikely for as long as U.S. forces remain in the area, but it must be recalled that U.S. Syria strategy has been broadly unpredictable. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the PYD and the SDF will work from Qamishli to prepare for any sudden changes to the status quo.

Economic sustainability is a compelling reason for ensuring that Al-Malikiyeh adheres to the broader programme of the SA and the dominant forces therein, namely, the PYD and the YPG/J, both of which are holding out for political concessions from the Syrian government whilst simultaneously resisting the pressures imposed by international rivals and GoS allies. However, the weight of this overarching framework does cast a shadow over local decision-making in Al-Malikiyeh, and effectively submits local politics to a Qamishli-driven discourse which is ultimately informed by the securitized priorities of the PYD and the YPG/J. Inevitably, this undermines the bottom-up expression of the commune system and the autonomy of the Al-Malikiyeh City Council. It also likely explains why local

**BOX 1: Communal politics**

The SA’s decentralist political philosophy has been applied throughout Al-Malikiyeh and neighbouring villages, and the city’s estimated 29 communes combine to represent the Al-Malikiyeh City Council. This body is required to deliver on policies intended to unify SA-controlled territories, but it is permitted to implement its own plans on local economic, social, cultural and political affairs in collaboration with local communes. In theory, this model enables the SA’s much vaunted bottom-up political system and empowers all layers of society to exercise some form of political representation. Indeed, communes in Al-Malikiyeh comprise between 100-500 families each, meaning practically every family in the city has a voice when it comes to local decision-making. This equally applies to surrounding villages, where a further 75 communes of varying size are found. The Al-Malikiyeh City Council is therefore acutely aware of local opinion, and is strongly positioned to respond to public service needs expressed during communal deliberations.

10 Officially is deliberately placed in brackets because the SDF may be listed as the controlling actor on zone of control maps, but Russian and Turkish patrols are undertaken on routes between Qamishli and Al-Malikiyeh, whilst U.S. forces also monitor connecting roads in the area.

11 Particularly because, as is discussed in Security Overview, above, the U.S. has similar reasons to retain a presence in Al-Malikiyeh.

12 Figure taken from: Cartier, M. (2019), Serkeftin: A narrative of the Rojava revolution, Ch.10.
administrative bodies can at times experience a frustrated kind of autonomy in which local government officials wield few financial resources to deliver public services, and in which SA-wide initiatives and funding of the SDF predominate issues of local concern.

**Limited state penetration**

Before the war, residents would reportedly avert their gaze as they walked past the local state security building. Intelligence officials effectively ran Al-Malikiyeh, and the state security office was notorious for torture. That building is now under the control of the SDF-linked Internal Security Forces (Asayish) however, and there has been no GoS presence in Al-Malikiyeh since November 2012. Red stars and pictures of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan now adorn the city’s streets and some PYD supporters proudly proclaim that it was the Kurds that forced the GoS from the city. These symbols of Kurdish pride are not necessarily an indication that Al-Malikiyeh is under full SA administration however. In many respects, they merely gloss over the reality that the GoS wields a similar level of influence in Al-Malikiyeh when compared to northeastern cities where it has maintained a physical presence throughout the conflict.

There is fundamentally no difference, for instance, between Al-Malikiyeh and the SA-administered parts of Qamishli which surround GoS government complexes in the city’s ‘green zone’. A less conspicuous GoS presence has not translated to a more drastic application of the SA’s political programme, and neither has it dismantled the various levers of power that the GoS retains in Al-Malikiyeh much as it does throughout Kurdish-majority areas. In effect, Al-Malikiyeh is subject to the same kind of Damascus-based remote management systems found in SA territories from Ar-Raqqa through to Qamishli: Residents are still required to carry out duplicate transactions for a variety of services, they must abide by the provisions of parallel legal systems, and they cannot realistically live without the services provided and/or enabled by the state. As discussed in more detail in Physical Capital, below, this is effectively a hangover from long standing GoS attempts to prevent Kurdish secession in the northeast by generating a fundamental reliance on Damascus and reduced local autonomy. In the current context, it has rendered Al-Malikiyeh as vulnerable to state administrative influence as any Kurdish-majority community in the Jazira Canton of the SA.
Socio-Economic Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Local strategic resources are contested, but the U.S. military presence helps insulate the area.
- Strong political incentives drive SA support and investment in agricultural development.
- Numerous agricultural support initiatives have been implemented in recent years.
- Several successful medium-sized agricultural cooperative enterprises are well-established.
- Crop diversification is permitted in accordance with local priorities but more basic inputs are needed.
- Limited number of local raw material processing facilities.
- Good construction material access owing to local heavy industry and cross-border trade access.
- SA’s de facto status could help insulate local business from SYP currency fluctuations.

IMPEDEMENTS TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Farmers concerned over currency depreciation and fair market value for produce.
- Few industrial facilities mean profitable raw material processing is mainly performed elsewhere.
- Sanctions prohibit foreign investment in oil, limiting Al-Malikiyeh's potential strategic importance.
- Reliance on Qamishli and areas further afield for basic agricultural inputs and supplies.
- Local businesses have poor access to capitalise on the industry.
- Underdeveloped local manufacturing and service industries.
Agriculture

Until the current conflict, Al-Malikiyeh’s agricultural economy was much like other parts of the northeast. State investment from the 1960s helped transform Al-Malikiyeh from an area of modest smallholdings into an industrial-scale producer with relatively modern machinery, equipment, storage, and processing facilities. As in neighbouring areas, cotton, wheat, and other cereals were therefore grown in massive quantities, with a variety of nationwide subsidisation programmes designed to support the cultivation of these primary strategic crops. This was not necessarily a reflection of the richness and flexibility of Al-Malikiyeh’s arable land however, and was rather more a manifestation of late 20th century government policy to prioritise strategic crop production in order to exploit export markets for Syria’s prime agricultural assets.14

What followed in the 21st century is a story well known to most observers of recent Syrian history.15 In line with his efforts to modernise the Syrian economy, Bashar Al-Assad pursued a policy of economic liberalisation geared mainly towards the development of the country’s industrial cities in the west. Inevitably, this came at the expense of the previously massive state support given to agricultural economies in rural communities like Al-Malikiyeh. When diminished state support combined with the onset of prolonged drought and elevated production costs, it went so far as to trigger large-scale rural to urban migration and heightened unemployment. Al-Malikiyeh was no different from many parts of the northeast in this respect, and the local agricultural industry was in decline when the Syrian conflict began. Contraction in the sector has continued given conflict conditions, but it is notable that agricultural production has undergone something of a renaissance in Al-Malikiyeh, and should present a number of opportunities for aid and development organisations.

Agricultural diversification

The enabling environment for agricultural production in communities like Al-Malikiyeh is clearly more challenging under current conditions than in the early 2000s. Syria’s economic crisis appears to be worsening, and poses complex and often insurmountable problems for local producers. Meanwhile, value chain disruption has been severe for much of the conflict and has contributed to consistently elevated production costs. Current conditions have therefore aggravated practically every dimension of crop production and trade, but Al-Malikiyeh and its rural periphery have been fortunate that extensive local farmland has remained a key contributor to SA revenues and national food consumption. For those that choose to cultivate it, wheat has been a major asset for local farmers, and has provided more reliability than most other crop options (despite the yearly wrangling that surrounds buy and sell prices at harvest time).16 Representing a major source of income from GoS-held areas and neighbouring export markets, strategic crops like wheat therefore provide the bulk of local agricultural revenues and are carefully managed by the local authorities. Notably however, there has been a move towards greater agricultural diversity in Al-Malikiyeh in recent years, and the monocultures of old have increasingly given way to more varied exploitation of the area’s excellent agro-ecological conditions.

The reasons for local crop diversification are not only financially-motivated, but are also political. The SA regards agricultural revenues as a core component of its ambition to develop economic independence from Damascus, both as a means to meet the needs of communities under its authority, and to leverage concessions from the Syrian government. Unlike the Syrian government however, it has not established production quotas, and reportedly takes a more holistic view of how production meets both immediate local needs and those of the SA as a whole. As such, agriculture-related projects are amongst the most prominent initiatives implemented by Al-Malikiyeh’s municipal authorities. There are now over 16 agricultural extension units and over 120 agricultural associations in Al-Malikiyeh and nearby villages,17 an agricultural ‘assembly’ has been formed in Al-Malikiyeh to coordinate production in Jazira Canton,18 and several medium-sized agricultural cooperatives have been established in coordination with the City Council.19 As a result, greater farming variety is now found in the area than at any time in recent memory, and local farmers have been steadily adapting to new possibilities.
Wheat and currency depreciation

In early June, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) issued two decisions that effectively prohibited the sale of wheat grain to rival actors, including the Syrian government. This follows some turmoil in the Syrian grain market, and comes as territorial authorities across Syria have scrambled to maintain competitive grain pricing amid the increasingly rapid collapse of the Syrian pound. On 30 May, the SA announced it would substantially increase the price it intends to pay for bulk wheat from producers from 225,000 SYP to 315,000 SYP per ton. The following day, the Syrian government responded with a bid of 400,000 SYP per ton. Both the Salvation Government and the Syrian Interim Government have also announced new prices, each of which represent substantial increases over bids announced in April 2020. However, the rapid currency depreciation driving these adjustments has continued, and on 7 June, the SA announced that currency volatility could force it to fix the grain price to a dollar conversion.

These developments will inevitably have a knock on effect for food security and public spending in territories outside the wheat-producing regions of SA, and perhaps especially in areas under Syrian government control. For communities like Al-Malikiyeh however, the decision presents several problems coming as it does at a time of national economic crisis and severe currency depreciation. When the SA has previously sought to control wheat market pricing, it has been faced with farmers angry that their produce would be purchased at unacceptably low prices. In the context of the ongoing volatility of the Syrian pound, farmers in Al-Malikiyeh and across the northeast have therefore threatened to destroy their crops subsequent to the June announcements rather than sell them to the authorities. This situation is unhelped by speculation that difficult economic circumstances have prompted the SA to engage in a kind of agricultural arbitrage. Critics claim the authorities plan to profit from price differentials in other markets without accounting for inflation in the purchase price paid to wheat farmers.

It is difficult to state with much certainty whether the SA will press ahead with its plan, nor whether it will be extended to other crops grown in communities like Al-Malikiyeh. Alongside oil, wheat represents the SA’s key point of economic leverage over the GoS, but economic conditions in Syria are both extremely poor and appear to be worsening over the medium-term. There is therefore a danger that in trying to secure a reasonable price from cross-line customers the SA will aggravate farmers if it also fails to meet their price expectations. This, in turn, could alienate one of the SA’s core constituencies, and could have particularly serious repercussions in communities heavily reliant on agriculture like Al-Malikiyeh.

Heavy Industry

Besides agriculture and some civil service employment, oil, gas, and quarrying constitute the rest of the majority of income generated by Al-Malikiyeh. Again, this is a reflection of the emphasis on raw material exploitation and trade that is the local economy’s primary asset, but it is not an industry which presents any important benefits to the community besides encouraging a U.S. military presence and placing Al-Malikiyeh in the geopolitical crosshairs. As noted in the
Qamishli Community Capital report in this series, oil fields located to Al-Malikiyeh’s southwest are currently the most productive such fields in Syria. Two sites, Rmelan and Al-Swaydieh, account for the vast majority of this output, and are a major contributor to SA revenues given the arrangements for cross-line and cross-border trade that have been established with customers including the GoS and the KRG. The manner in which facilities are managed by Syrian government- and SA-linked oil companies is covered in the Qamishli Community Capital report, and do not warrant further attention here. What was not covered with any particular attention however, were the dimensions of foreign ownership over oil fields resting in an area designated as Block 26. This includes much of the Rmelan asset, as well as other sites stretching along Al-Malikiyeh’s western and southwestern periphery, from Qahtaniyah to Tel Kojar, near the Yaroubiyah crossing.

Oil

Oil fields located in Block 26 are reportedly guarded by the SDF (at a reported rate of 10 million SYP per month), but their most interesting characteristic is that they feature foreign ownership under a joint venture between the British-based Gulfsands Oil Company, and Emerald Energy, a subsidiary of the state-owned Chinese energy company, Sinochem. On its website, Gulfsands describes Block 26 as its core asset and states the fields in which it has a stake have the "capability of producing for over 20 years at above 50,000 barrels per day from existing discoveries with a very low cash breakeven and significant potential upside". Production throughout Block 26 has stalled however, as U.S. sanctions and EU restrictive measures have placed the Syrian state oil company, the General Petroleum Company (GPC), on the list of proscribed organisations. Given they are now prohibited from working with their local contract partner, both foreign actors are precluded from engaging in operations connected with the production, delivery, or sale of crude oil from their Block 26 fields.

It is unclear when the two foreign investors will be able to formally resume operations given neither the EU nor the U.S. show any signs of relaxing their sanctions regime. Notably, local sources report that Gulfsands is linked to a family member of Syria’s wealthiest man and notorious member of President Al-Assad’s inner circle, Rami Makhlouf. In the meantime however, there is nothing which prevents GPC working to exploit Block 26 whilst a force majeure is in place on its contract with Gulfsands and Emerald Energy.

Given the urgent need to maintain domestic production, the GPC has worked as something of a junior partner to the SA, and has elected to collaborate with SA ministries as required. As touched upon in the Qamishli report in this series, this kind of partnership has been tolerated in the SA (and presumably by the U.S.) because there no other actors are currently in a position to provide the technical expertise and supplies needed to maintain production. Looking ahead, it is unlikely that foreign investment in oil infrastructure local to Al-Malikiyeh will be possible given the continuation (and expansion) of the anti-government sanctions regime. It is therefore likely that direct local employment from oil and gas, as well as business activities associated with supporting the industry will be limited, and will present little in the way of revenue to Al-Malikiyeh in particular.

A Gulfsands facility at Kherbet East, southwest of Al-Malikiyeh. Courtesy of Gulfsands.
Quarrying

Al-Malikiyeh is renowned for the numerous quarries scattered along the Syrian-Turkish border. A seam of aggregates is exploited primarily between the villages of Ain Dewar and Jam Sharaf, but quarrying enterprises also extend further east, reaching as far as the Semalka border crossing. Presently, all fifteen quarries in the Al-Malikiyeh area are found in this arc. With the exception of two facilities that extract more valuable crushed basalt, all quarries local to Al-Malikiyeh extract sand, gravel, and other building aggregates. Private quarry operations are overseen by the Al-Malikiyeh City Council, which reportedly taxes companies in accordance with a sliding scale linked to quarry size. Land in the vicinity of the Tigris River is considered as protected, but this does not mean that licencing for quarry operations will be prohibited, only more expensive. To capitalise on local quarry output, the first processing facility for stones and aggregates was opened in the vicinity of Al-Malikiyeh, near the village of Maabdeh.28

28 Local sources report this facility is known locally as the 'Kawa' factory.
Natural Capital

PLATFORMS FOR NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Extensive arable land is found in Al-Malikiyeh’s rural periphery, much of which is highly adaptable.
› Scope to support ongoing diversification of rural land use.
› Industrial facilities that capitalise on large-scale raw material production are relatively few.
› Wastewater recycling opportunities are underexplored and could reduce local water consumption.
› Aquifer depletion is modest, potentially supporting swift water management improvement outcomes.
› Groundwater reserves and above average rainfall provide some increased resilience to drought.

IMPEDIMENTS TO NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Poor soil permeability presents drainage problems during periods of high rainfall.
› Grey/blackwater pollution of Euphrates and Tigris tributaries and other surface water bodies.
› Widespread reliance on expensive fuel-powered abstraction from (mainly private) water wells.
Land

Agriculture is Al-Malikiyeh’s primary economic asset and its main employer. This owes a lot to the quality of arable land, which is not only highly adaptable, but is also extensive owing to the groundwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates river systems. Like much of the northeast, arable land in the vicinity of Al-Malikiyeh was prioritised for strategic crop production under the Syrian government. State-funded input subsidies were provided, monocultures were privileged, and production quotas were established for cotton, wheat and other cereals. Besides limited development of relatively modest water infrastructure, limited change to the local agricultural landscape was therefore observed for several decades. Despite this treatment and the onset of conflict, Al-Malikiyeh’s land has demonstrated considerable resilience and has been largely untouched by fighting. Traditional staples have therefore been cultivated in reasonable (albeit reduced) quantities in the area, and have played an important role in contributing to local food security and national consumption. The implementation of SA agricultural policy has sought to capitalise on the richness of Al-Malikiyeh’s arable land by encouraging crop diversification. This is positive, but some work may be needed to ensure that new practices do not negatively affect soil quality, local ecosystems, and seasonal planning.

Farmland

Annual rainfall in Al-Malikiyeh is relatively high compared to non-mountainous inland regions of Syria, and the local clay-based soil type is of a richness which is near-unique amongst those found elsewhere in the country. This makes agro-ecological conditions in Al-Malikiyeh closer to those found in northern Aleppo and As-Sweida than those found in neighbouring Qamishli, but owing to the pre-war enforcement of strategic crop choices by the GoS, preferred crop types were generally the same in both areas. Like Qamishli, wheat, barley, and cotton were (and are still) cultivated in large quantities in rural Al-Malikiyeh, but this has begun to change in recent years as the SA has given local farmers the freedom to diversify in an effort to increase the independence of the local agricultural economy.

One crop that has reportedly been cultivated in increasing volumes under these new circumstances is coriander. In the winter months it has occupied a growing proportion of land given the relatively limited agricultural inputs required (e.g. pesticides) allow for heightened cash-generation potential. It is also a crop which can be harvested and sold directly to traders ‘at the farm gate’, and has little to no need for intermediary processing or intermediary transactions. Though profitable, heavy coriander production can rapidly deplete the soil and must be frequently rotated with other winter crops. This is clearly something that the local farming community understands, and coriander is already integrated into a larger crop diversification and crop rotation effort. However, it remains likely that there is scope to work with local farmers and extension services to enhance crop rotation practices which consider soil fertility, encourage further crop diversification, and prevent overproduction to protect the market value of valuable crop options like coriander and other alternatives.

A somewhat unique challenge for Al-Malikiyeh is the poor permeability of the local soil type. When combined with relatively high localized rainfall and a large number of surface water bodies, this can create drainage problems in farms across the area. Periods
of high and sustained rainfall can effectively drown crops where drainage systems are poor, thereby ruining yields and annulling the time, funds, and efforts invested in production. At the same time however, good groundwater access reduces Al-Malikiyeh’s susceptibility to short drought periods, and is a key reason that Al-Malikiyeh hosts lush meadows at which vegetation can grow to as much as a metre deep in Spring. Marshland is even found in some areas, presenting a habitat which shares some similarities with the Meso-Patamian Marshes of central and southern Iraq.

**BOX 2: Three ecosystems**
The lands around Al-Malikiyeh can be roughly divided into three distinct ecosystems to which different identity groups have migrated, particularly in the first half of the 20th century. Al-Malikiyeh’s fertile flat lands are known locally as the ‘Dashta Hesna’ and, as one would expect, this covers the most water rich parts of the area. The word Hesna is derived from the name of the Kurdish clan that has long invested in agriculture and animal husbandry in the Al-Malikiyeh flatlands, and over time developed various business interests in the sector. A wilder, less fertile area extends from the Al-Safan River all the way to Mount Sinjar in Iraq. Plantlife here is nevertheless rich enough that it continues to serve as an important livestock grazing resource for the two main Kurdish clans in the area, the Abasa and the Kojar. And finally, there is the Alan, an area which lies mainly to Al-Malikiyeh’s west, and was settled predominantly by Kurdish clans from Turkey during the late-Ottoman period.

**Irrigation**
In the years leading up to the Syrian war, drought and a tripling in the price of fuel (for water pumping purposes) reduced the cultivated land area in and around Al-Malikiyeh by 25%-43% between 2001-2009. This came as some relief for the aquifers and rivers close to Al-Malikiyeh, as farmers had been consuming generous amounts of water to irrigate these massive pre-war farmlands. Unfortunately, much of the damage had already been done: In the mid-1960s there were already more than 50,000 hand-dug wells and several hundred bore-holes in the northern part of the Jazira Basin in Syria. Their number only grew with rapid agricultural expansion, and the aquifers beneath Al-Malikiyeh are now characterised by low productivity and poor water quality.

Having long ignored the infrastructural needs of this northeasternmost corner of Syria, the GoS developed an extensive plan to repurpose the waters of the Tigris River for agricultural irrigation in 2008. A lack of political will and the outbreak of conflict combined to stymie any real progress on this plan however, and it was ultimately abandoned. Most farmers in Al-Malikiyeh therefore continue to rely on inefficient pumping and drip-fed irrigation systems at great cost to both their businesses and to the sustainability of local water sources. Indeed, use of these systems represents a continuation of the rather short-sighted pre-war policies of the Syrian government, which were more concerned with securing quick profits

**Water**
The richness of the landscape and the potential of Al-Malikiyeh’s farmland is tied to the region’s wealth of water. Al-Malikiyeh sits between the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers, and had historically profited from the tributary systems of both. Perhaps because of this, the area saw minimal investment in water infrastructure for domestic and commercial purposes. Half of Al-Hasakeh governorate’s ten dams may be in the Al-Malikiyeh area, yet all but one is small, and each provides only marginal support to potable and non-potable needs for both domestic and commercial purposes. Moreover, unlike in the Euphrates River Valley, where major state-funded irrigation infrastructure projects transformed the landscape, water needs in Al-Malikiyeh are supplied primarily by private wells.

This has been a problem of growing concern in the local area since the 2000s, and could produce serious socio-economic consequences for Al-Malikiyeh’s primarily rural population given their widespread reliance on expensive fuel-powered abstraction.

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30 Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of translated/transliterated clan names but further checks are recommended.
31 Kurdish clans living in the Alan include the Hanuna, Omrka, Aleika and the Bidari each of which tend to be concentrated in particular villages or small neighbouring communities.
32 Local researchers state that there are 16 main water wells in Al-Malikiyeh as well as several key local sources: the “Industrial” reservoir, to the east of the city, the “western” reservoir, the “Municipal” reservoir, and a “ground tank” near Al-Malikiyeh’s southern entrance, adjacent to the ‘Rmeilan Garage’.
33 Syrian government figures, taken from: Balanche, F. (2018), Sectarianism in Syria’s civil war, p.57.
34 UN-ESCWA and BGR (2013), Inventory of Shared Water Resources in Western Asia, Ch. 25.
without proper consideration of the long-term impact of the area’s steadily depleting water resources.

Should it retain administrative control in its current state or subsequent to some political arrangement with the GoS, there are strong incentives for the SA to pursue irrigation infrastructure development in Al-Malikiyeh. As noted in Socio-economic Capital, above, agriculture is not only the northeast’s primary source of present and potential income, it is also actively pursued as a means to enhance the SA’s economic independence. The SA is therefore likely to strongly support programming which enhances agricultural production and natural capital sustainability, with irrigation, agribusiness support activities, and farming input supply being the most preferred forms of assistance. Given its potential contribution to kickstarting regional food exports, support to irrigation and other agriculture-focused programming may also be sanctioned by the GoS were it to restore control over the city. One would expect the Syrian government to resort to its focus on wheat and other strategic crop production however, and it may look to shape water infrastructure investment accordingly.

**BOX 3: Wastewater recycling**

Local sources report that wastewater is commonly discharged into rivers, lakes and streams around Al-Malikiyeh, where it is later extracted for use in agricultural irrigation. This not only represents a public health hazard, but the uncontrolled discharge of wastewater also negatively impacts the ecological balance of local water systems. Work to separate greywater (waste from sinks, showers etc.) and blackwater (human waste) is widely needed to prevent these effects, and filtration processes should ideally support water recycling for use in crop irrigation. Recycled greywater is of particular interest in Al-Malikiyeh given historic overuse and mismanagement of the local aquifer, as well as Turkey’s uncompromising approach to the transboundary politics of the Tigris and Euphrates river systems. Solutions can be simple depending on the planned use for recycled greywater: Indeed, greywater for use in the irrigation of trees need only pass through a coarse filtration system. More diverse agricultural purposes would evidently require more advanced filtration options, but given water recycling in Al-Malikiyeh is currently limited, work to improve recycling practices could have a notable impact on water consumption and the cost of agricultural production.

35 It is worth adding that pollution of the Tigris and Euphrates river systems is also reported as a problem upstream in Turkey.
Social Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Long history of coexistence amongst a population historically composed mainly of minority groups.
- Although initially unwelcome, Arab Belt settlers are now reportedly well integrated into local culture.
- Few complexities relating to Arab tribal influence given they are largely distant and south of the city.
- Intercommunal conflict is unlikely given the gradually homogenising (Kurdish) majority population.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Some lingering (but minor) land ownership disputes between Kurds and Assyrians/Syriacs.
- Al-Malikiyeh’s southern/southwestern periphery is inhabited by broadly pro-GoS tribal groups.
- Reduced ethnic diversity caused by departures of mainly middle-class Christian families.
- Questions over who and how many remain in the event of a change of political/military control.
Identity

Like other northeastern border towns, Al-Malikiyeh's Kurdish majority population has increased the city's susceptibility to influence from Kurdish communities abroad. As noted in this report's section on Political Capital, above, this was long considered a potential source of instability by the GoS, which undertook sustained efforts to manipulate local social dynamics to prevent deviations from Syrian government policy and to resist the autonomist ambitions of the Kurdish population. This is not unique to Al-Malikiyeh, and is an issue raised in relation to several reports in this series. However, it is notable that government containment efforts were undertaken in a community where there have always been few Sunni Arabs, and in which the proportion of resident Kurds has long been far greater than Qamishli, Syria's so-called Kurdish capital.

As such, the Syrian government was unable to heavily rely on its preferred Sunni Arab constituency when seeking to influence local affairs, and instead sought additional patronage from Christian groups and prominent Kurdish figures/landowners. With patronage systems somewhat looser than in areas with more loyalist demography, the GoS was notorious for making particularly assertive use of its local security and intelligence branches in Al-Malikiyeh. These forces had an extremely poor reputation and only served to compound the long history of mistrust between the state and the local population. The PYD therefore wasted little time in reformulating local power structures when it was handed control of the city in 2012, and it is unsurprising that the period since has seen steady Christian departures, a growing Kurdish population, and limited Arab influence.

It would be superficial to describe Al-Malikiyeh as a place of great social cohesion and fundamental peace. The vestiges of the pre-war patronage system still generate some localised tensions between prominent local families, and there are a number of unresolved land ownership disputes between Kurds and Syriacs/Assyrians. However, the experience of living under an oppressive Syrian government is one shared by most people living in the area, and has been a key reason for the strong sense of community in the increasingly Kurdish-majority population. Even Arabs that were resettled in the Al-Malikiyeh area as part of the 1970s Arab Belt initiative have reportedly integrated into the local culture, many of whom now also speak Kurdish. Social cohesion in Al-Malikiyeh is therefore good, and provides a strong basis for working with the community to address local developmental needs. Ultimately of course, it may be that the city does not remain under the control of the SA, and questions will inevitably arise as to what happens to the current Kurdish majority.

From Christian to Kurdish

Al-Malikiyeh has undergone considerable demographic change over the past 100 years. In the early part of the 20th century, the city was dominated by Christians of varied denomination and origin. Syriacs, Chaldeans, and Orthodox Christians hailing from across Upper Mesopotamia were each commonly resident, and were integral to the development of a Christian legacy which is still visible today.
in the assemblage of churches found across Al-Malikiyeh to this day. Assyrians and Armenians fleeing genocide in Ottoman-administered Anatolia therefore found some safety in Al-Malikiyeh, but the city’s status as a sanctuary for Christian minorities was to last only for a short period.

Afforded preferential treatment by the French mandatory authorities on account of their shared Christian heritage, Assyrians and other Christian identity groups soon acquired urban elite status across the modern-day SA. Such relative wealth and power enabled a Christian-led autonomist movement in the Jazira region, but its efforts were marred by civil strife and intercommunal violence, and were met with hostility from the growing cadre of Syrian Arab nationalists. Viewed by the nationalist movement as a product of French colonialism, Christians in northeastern Syria became a target of growing resentment from Arabs and, to a lesser extent, Kurds. Nationalists mobilized Arab tribes and Kurdish groups to confront the autonomists, and after the French were unable to prevent the massacre of Assyrians in nearby Amuda in 1937, many Christians in the region began to fear for their safety. By the time Al-Malikiyeh was itself struck with an (ultimately failed) assault in 1941, Assyrians and other Christian groups had all but left, and the town’s association with Christianity was subsumed by new Kurdish arrivals from Turkey.

Since this time, Al-Malikiyeh has been identified as a Kurdish city, a status reinforced in the current conflict by the SDF’s military control and the implementation of the SA’s brand of distinctly PYD-influenced politics. Kurds have subsequently moved into the area in growing numbers, steadily increasing the Kurdish majority in the city to around 75%, and to around 70% in surrounding villages. Kurdish domination of the local economic and political domains has inevitably followed, and has been further enabled by the departure of (often wealthy middle-class) minority group members owing to conflict-related concerns and/or disaffection with Kurdish politics and culture. This effect has been most pronounced in the Christian community: Local sources report there were roughly 1,200 Syriac families in Al-Malikiyeh pre-war, but that this number has since dwindled to 500. Similarly, the 300 Armenian and Chaldean families in the city pre-war now number around 70. Although relatively minor in quantitative terms, these demographic shifts have reversed the steady return of Syrian minority groups since Syrian independence and have rebalanced Al-Malikiyeh’s demography heavily in favour of local Kurds.

Arab tribes
Though they may have played a major role in driving out Christians communities in the past, Arab tribes are not especially prominent in Al-Malikiyeh, and especially when compared with more westerly/southwesterly parts of Al-Hasakeh governorate. Many Arab tribal groups in the area today are ancestors of communities found in the Syrian Desert region (sometimes referred to as the ‘Badia’) extending in an arc from northern Saudi Arabia through to western Iraq. Most are in fact distant from central Al-Malikiyeh city, having historically moved to the northeast mainly in search of pasturelands. This explains the presence of the Shamar, to Al-Malikiyeh’s southwest, mainly near the town of Tel Alo, and the Ma’amra and the Tay, both of which are found predominantly in the Rad Valley, northwest of the Yaroubiyeh border crossing. Arab tribal influence in Al-Malikiyeh is therefore limited, but it is worth noting that most of Arab tribes found on the periphery of Al-Malikiyeh district are thought to be supportive of the Syrian government.
BOX 4: The Arab Belt initiative

Carried out under the guise of a national agrarian reform plan, the Arab Belt initiative (1973-75) was essentially a large-scale demographic engineering project by which Damascus sought to separate Syrian and Turkish Kurds by resettling Syrian Arabs along Al-Hasakeh governorate’s northern border. In a scheme which bears striking similarities with Turkey’s current safezone plan, a great deal of Kurdish-owned farmland was expropriated by the state, new model villages were constructed, and Arabs displaced by flooding upon completion of the Euphrates Dam were handed a home, equipment, machinery, and preferential bank loans to restart their agricultural livelihoods.

Although the plan was never fully implemented as intended, Al-Malikiyeh was the largest of the three main sites where Arabs were resettled in relatively large numbers. Twelve villages numbering 150-200 homes were built to house over 1,500 families, and more than 250,000 acres of land (~400 square miles) were given to the new arrivals. Having been stripped of citizenship ten years prior and subjected to sustained discrimination ever since, local Kurds were initially resentful of their new Arab neighbours. Indeed, the event served as yet another driver of Kurdish independence movements in the Al-Malikiyeh area. More recently, local Kurds have claimed that the number of Arabs living in the area is often inflated by the state. They add that most Arab families that were resettled in the area have now either fully integrated with Kurdish culture, or chose not to live in the area full-time and have moved elsewhere.
Human Capital

PLATFORMS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Strong agricultural tradition and extensive experience in farming and agricultural trade.
› Local authorities demonstrate concerted interest in strengthening the local agricultural sector.
› Majority-Kurdish population represents a pull factor for some Kurdish working aged people from elsewhere in Syria.

IMPEDIMENTS TO HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Ageing population and few pull factors for youth or economic migrants.
› Enforcement of Kurdish-inspired curriculum may drive some of the brightest youth from the city.
› Labourforce development opportunities largely limited to agriculture.
› Decreasing working-aged male population.
› Public services are underdeveloped and are unlikely to attract substantial economic migrants.
Al-Malikiyeh is relatively small, and it must be recalled that many residents living in the area are in fact found in the numerous villages in the city’s rural periphery. Given the city is underdeveloped in terms of manufacturing and service industries and is largely dependent on the trade and crossline/crossborder export of agricultural commodities, ruralism is the foundation of the local employment market. Besides petty trading, some civil service employment, and work in heavy industries (quarrying, oil and gas), it is therefore industrialized farming, animal husbandry, and small-scale crop cultivation which represent the majority of local opportunities. The very sustainability of Al-Malikiyeh as it is today depends on the extent to which the natural capital that supports this activity can be harnessed by the local population, and although it faces considerable challenges, the community is fortunate that local agriculture is more resilient to change than most other sectors and that it possesses a skilled and knowledgeable agricultural workforce.

‘Space’ for agricultural livelihoods
Clearly, ensuring that working-aged people can maintain reliable employment in the agricultural sector is a significant challenge when Al-Malikiyeh lacks the kind of enabling environment that even western governments fail to provide when it comes to empowering a 21st century rural labourforce. Poor digital connectivity, public transport, access to finance, and agribusiness skill development are shortfalls that Al-Malikiyeh shares with many rural areas around the world. Indeed, these problems require such an integrated approach to governance that addressing them is likely beyond the capacity of any aid organization, and especially in a sector which faces numerous challenges including value chain disruption, high production costs, export restrictions, cross-line tariffs, and politicization (to name a few). It goes without saying that any such effort would also be undertaken in a community which is furthermore beleaguered by broader challenges of conflict, economic hardship, and ongoing political/military uncertainty.

Development of a 21st century rural economy may therefore be unfeasible in Al-Malikiyeh, but political conditions suggest that enabling agricultural employment through more traditional methods is a viable option for international development actors. First and foremost, the SA has a strong interest in agricultural development. It relies on farming output as a critical source of revenue, and considers agriculture as key to its effort to secure a greater degree of economic independence and, ultimately, durable political concessions from Damascus. Regarded as fundamental to the SA’s political project, a relatively impressive list of initiatives to support agricultural livelihoods in Al-Malikiyeh have already been implemented, from the creation of several substantial agricultural co-operative organizations, the retention and expansion of pre-war agricultural extension services, and the growth in local agricultural association bodies. The likelihood that the SA will view programming that builds upon this work favourably is high, especially when any such work focuses on skills development designed to enhance local agribusiness.

Internationally-funded programming is also likely to be largely sustainable in the event of a change of control in Al-Malikiyeh from the SA to the GoS. Certainly, the Syrian government has previously sought to manipulate agricultural outputs from the Jazira region as part of its longstanding pre-war effort to constrain Kurdish-led autonomy. As it increasingly embarks on national reconstruction however, it is unlikely to curtail economic growth arising from a more empowered agricultural workforce given there are few alternative contributions Al-Malikiyeh can make to the troubled national economy. International donors are therefore likely to find operational conditions amenable to agricultural skills development, which may in turn provide space for securing longer-term outcomes for the local workforce.
Ageing workforce

Detailed demographic information for Al-Malikiyeh is unavailable, but it is thought thousands of people have chosen to leave the area since the early 2000s, when the government embarked on a policy of redirecting state support away from agriculture and into industrial development and services in Syria’s major cities. This has left Al-Malikiyeh with a steadily ageing population, and although this has been offset to some extent by the arrival of Kurds seeking to live under the SA, poor local livelihood options are likely to perpetuate a trend towards the outward migration of Al-Malikiyeh’s working aged population. Indeed, some reports suggest that with predominantly young males still leaving the area, women in Al-Malikiyeh are struggling to find a partner and polygamy is on the rise. For a largely rural economy in which manual labour is an important part, this is a matter of long-term concern. Certainly, there are no local cultural norms which impede working-aged women from taking up roles traditionally assumed by men. In fact, women have long worked in agriculture across the northeast. However, the weakness of other local sectors highlights the importance of creating attractive local opportunities within agriculture in order to stem the loss of the population, and to alleviate livelihood pressures experienced in economic migrant destination cities. Where possible, programming concerned with enhancing rural livelihoods should therefore look to capitalize on existing agricultural knowledge for many of the same reasons detailed in the ‘Rural knowledge’ section of the Qamishli report in this series. If the male labour force is indeed shrinking, then support to women’s agricultural livelihood programmes is also strongly recommended.

Education

Having been implemented across the region since 2017, the SA’s Kurdish-inspired curriculum is in effect at all levels of compulsory schooling in Al-Malikiyeh. The SA therefore assumes responsibility for regulating the city’s free public education system, appointing teaching staff, paying staff salaries, and procuring all school resources. Like the entire SA-controlled northeast, there has been some controversy over the implementation of the Kurdish curriculum in Al-Malikiyeh. In particular, residents are widely concerned that student qualifications are unrecognized outside the SA and grant access only to northeastern Syria’s employment market and SA-run universities. This has prompted many parents to pull their children out of the local education system and to send them to pursue their studies in state-run facilities in GoS-held areas. Local Christians and Muslim Arabs that do not conceive of their future in a Kurdish-dominated society are most likely to make this decision, but many Kurdish families worried about their children’s prospects have also elected to avoid the Kurdish curriculum. This is less of a problem now than when the concept of the Kurdish curriculum was first introduced to Al-Malikiyeh, when the heavy-handed closure of some (mainly Christian minority) schools resulted in brawls between parents and the local security services.

One of the founding principles of the SA’s education authority is that an individual should have the right to study in one’s own language. This has been welcomed by many in Al-Malikiyeh, particularly the city’s local minorities, who have enjoyed a greater sense
of freedom and autonomy and have few ambitions to return to the cultural restrictions of the old state-run school system. Local sources add that several (exclusively Christian faith-based) schools are permitted to pursue the national curriculum whilst simultaneously teaching in the language associated with their faith. These include the city’s two schools managed by the Syriac church, and the local Armenian prep and primary school. These are very much in the minority however, and prioritize the entry of pupils from corresponding minority groups rather than prospective Kurdish pupils.
Physical Capital

PLATFORMS FOR PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Irrigation is underdeveloped and outdated, presenting numerous improvement opportunities.
- Good rainfall and suitable soils entail generous groundwater for water management projects.
- Strong interest from local authorities to develop water infrastructure to support agricultural revenues.
- Underdeveloped public service infrastructure likely presents numerous intervention opportunities.

IMPEDEMENTS TO PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Limited public service infrastructure owing to long standing GoS marginalisation of Kurdish areas.
- Dependence on other areas (incl. GoS) for raw material processing facilities reduces revenues.
- Underdeveloped irrigation networks make scant use of groundwater availability.
- Local authorities lack equipment and maintenance to ensure long-term reliability of the Safan Dam.
- Turkish interference (including attacks) on local water infrastructure cannot be discounted.
Infrastructural Underdevelopment
In common with practically all of Kurdish-majority northeastern Syria, the development of local industrial enterprise was actively impeded by the Syrian government for decades. Al-Malikiyeh may be close to the bulk of the northeastern oil industry, but no refineries were ever built in the area, and a pipeline was instead installed to transit crude from the northeast to government strongholds in Syria’s industrialised west. Al-Malikiyeh’s agricultural outputs equally suffered from limited investment at the more profitable end of the value chain. As has been noted previously, farmers across the region were forced into strict government-mandated production quotas for strategic crops, often to the exclusion of more lucrative or suitable alternatives. Subsidies were provided for cotton, wheat and other cereals, and entire harvests were bought by the state. However, most processing facilities were constructed in urban areas elsewhere, meaning Al-Malikiyeh had no textile industry to speak of, and a limited number of artisinal dairies and flour mills built largely to meet local needs. Similarly, the thermal power plant at Rmelan was designed to meet only strategic needs related to extracting local oil wealth, with most electricity for Al-Malikiyeh’s settlements provided by the Ba‘ath, Tishreen, and Thawra dams in the patently less Kurdish Euphrates River basin.

Enforcing such economic dependency on communities like Al-Malikiyeh was of course deliberate, and was part of the Syrian government’s long standing strategy to prevent and discourage a Kurdish secession attempt. Although the SA is striving to develop self-sufficiency and to liberate itself from its dependency on Damascus, communities like Al-Malikiyeh have been left far behind more developed parts of the country. Al-Malikiyeh has therefore been viewed primarily as a provider of raw materials and little else, meaning it has not been furnished with much in the way of infrastructure for public services nor to empower local socio-economic development. This much is evident from the challenges the city faces with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlights the extent to which Al-Malikiyeh has been deliberately weakened over the decades by GoS policy.

Hospital systems and COVID-19
Inadequate local infrastructure presents a variety of public service problems and stymies local economic development. However, it is an issue which has neared into particular focus in Al-Malikiyeh during the current COVID-19 pandemic and the earlier shutdown of cross-border aid access via the Semalka crossing. With Semalka closed to international assistance, the partial closure of the border with the KRG, and the GoS prioritising areas under its control, cities throughout the SA are experiencing severe medical supply shortages. Appeals to the international community have subsequently emphasised that the northeast’s hospital system may be unable to cope with a serious increase in the COVID-19 caseload. In addition to having only two small facilities prepared to treat COVID-19 patients (one in Al-Hasakeh, the other in Al-Malikiyeh), the SA has severely limited available capacity, equipment, and personnel to test for COVID-19 independently. Until it received two testing machines from the KRG in April 2020, samples were sent to Damascus for verification, but this was inevitably a painfully slow process and emphasised that the GoS does not intend to proactively coordinate with the SA. In April 2020, Save the Children warned that the SA has “fewer than 30 intensive care unit beds, only ten adult ventilators and just one paediatric ventilator”. As a relatively small community distant from places where the SA is actively developing a COVID-19 response (Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Menbij), it is likely that a serious outbreak in Al-Malikiyeh would almost certainly leave many without adequate treatment. For the time being, the SA’s limited ability to absorb the effects of the pandemic have prompted it to effectively shut down.

Water Management
Al-Malikiyeh has historically been rich in groundwater sources owing to higher than average national rainfall and its position just 12km west of the Tigris River. Although this has not translated into an extensive surface level irrigation network like that developed in the Euphrates basin, local ecological conditions did prompt the GoS to invest in a series of dams to support a combination of potable and
commercial needs in Al-Malikiyeh and beyond. As a result, five of the ten dams in Al-Hasakeh governorate are found in the vicinity of Al-Malikiyeh. Though no major issues are currently reported, these structures may deteriorate given both longer-term maintenance and wastewater pollution are reportedly of concern. More worrying, however, is the extent to which dams in the Al-Malikiyeh area are subject to potential Turkish interference. Filled for the first time in June 2020, the Ilısu Dam places Turkey in even greater control over the Tigris River. Yet Turkey has been a difficult partner when it comes to water sharing with Syria, and particularly with resources flowing into the SA. Were it to decide to withhold the waters of the Tigris from passing downstream, the dams of Al-Malikiyeh could be dangerously depleted. There is an additional risk that Turkey may directly attack dam infrastructure in Al-Malikiyeh given the experience of Al-Hasakeh city in the post-Peace Spring period.

Dams
By far the largest and most important dam in Al-Malikiyeh is the Al-Safan dam, just 6km southwest of Al-Malikiyeh, in the village of Karifr. The Al-Safan’s reservoir is the city’s secondary source of potable water, and is relied upon frequently during hot summer months when demand commonly exceeds supply from the city-based
In May 2020, several of the reservoirs local to Al-Malikiyeh spilled over after a period of heavy rain. Although unusual for that time of year, the incident was not extraordinary. Some spillover is usually observed throughout the year and locals were advised not to panic.

This attack was reportedly carried out on October 9, 2019. No confirmation nor the damage it caused was found by this research. It is likely the attack was carried out to emphasise Turkey’s control over water flow into northeastern Syria from transboundary river sources and aquifers.

As ever, an additional note of caution arising from discussion of water management in northeastern Syria relates to Turkey’s dominance over transboundary flows. The Al-Malikiyeh dam network is supplied primarily by groundwater sources originating in Turkey, which in turn rely wholly on Turkish flow rate management. Turkey has refused to recognize the international character of either the Tigris or the Euphrates river systems however, and instead operates in accordance with contentious (and historic) informal resource sharing agreements between itself and the Syrian government. Even before the SA came into existence, Turkey was accused of frequently breaching these agreements, and has proven itself an intransigent partner when it comes to water sharing given its continued unilateral pursuit of its own water management programmes.

The newly constructed Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River is less than 100 km north of Al-Malikiyeh and places the city’s water security — not to mention its economy — even further into Turkish hands. Unaccountable to its downstreams peers and eager to enforce its own agenda in northeastern Syria, the possibility that Turkey may look to ‘weaponize’ the waters of the Tigris in order to erode the SA’s economy cannot be discounted. Given its position, Al-Malikiyeh would inevitably be amongst the first casualties of any such efforts. Locations in the vicinity of Al-Malikiyeh’s second largest dam, the Bourze, were reportedly shelled by Turkish forces during its Operation Peace Spring assault, and though the U.S. military presence is likely to preclude any further such attacks for the time being, they become increasingly likely if U.S. forces withdraw and the SDF fails to arrange for the GoS and its allies to step into the area and prevent a Turkish-led advance. This is not as far-fetched as it might appear: Turkey may have secured a buffer zone in northwestern Al-Hasakeh and northeastern Ar-Raqqa governorates following Operation Peace Spring, yet it continues to damage water infrastructure critical to Al-Hasakeh city. In addition to the need to develop irrigation and wastewater systems detailed in this report’s section on natural capital, risks of this kind to the local dam network emphasise the importance of efficient water management in Al-Malikiyeh.