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.
FIGURE 1. Al-Hasakeh city
FIGURE 2. Al-Hasakeh City and nearby area
Introduction

Al-Hasakeh is the provincial capital of Al-Hasakeh governorate and lies within the Jazira Canton of the de facto autonomous governance project of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (commonly referred to as the Self-Administration, hereafter, SA). Relatively insignificant until state investment in the rural economy and oil infrastructure triggered a 1960s economic boom, the city is now amongst the largest in Syria. Its growth has been anything but straightforward however: Though surrounded by a wealth of natural resources and possessing a strong agribusiness sector, industry and services have received limited state support, and the polyethnic composition has been a longstanding source of tension often exploited and ill-managed by the city’s governing authorities.

Inevitably, these issues have been exacerbated by the current crisis, largely because the administrative and economic functions of the city and the wider subdistrict are divided between the Government of Syria (GoS) and the SA, and because both parties retain an influence in the city despite the SA’s overarching responsibility for city administration. Parallel structures managed by the two parties present civilians with a complex local bureaucracy, and though elements of the SA and GoS systems are relatively well integrated, they highlight the difficulty of managing a socially diverse city in which deeply rooted differences between Arab and Kurdish populations pose a considerable challenge to inclusive governance. Despite superficial displays of unity and pragmatic forms of coordination in the political and economic domains, local Kurdish and Arab populations are mutually antagonistic, have been hostile towards one another, and their relationship is a defining characteristic of the city’s political economy.

Following the so-called ‘Battle for Al-Hasakeh’ and the establishment of the SA as the city’s dominant authority in 2016, it was hoped that Kurdish-Arab differences might be allayed by the SA’s celebrated equality-driven governance model. The reality, however, is that Arab tribal communities have been widely excluded from important decision-making fora and are seldom appointed to ranking positions within the Kurdish-dominated SA. Combined with locally controversial SA conscription, taxation, and education policies, as well as reports of underserved Arab-majority communities in Al-Hasakeh’s southern neighbourhoods, the real and perceived sense of exclusion experienced by Arabs has aggravated local tensions. Naturally, this presents fertile ground for the GoS’s exploitation of anti-SA sentiment at a time when Kurdish control is increasingly challenged by broader geopolitical shifts including the Turkish intervention in the northeast, a much diluted U.S./Kurdish military pact, and the growing military and political reach of the GoS and its allies.

Al-Hasakeh rooftops. Courtesy of Haitham Al-Falah
Syrian Kurdish symbols and an Asayish observation tower in Al-Hasakeh. *Courtesy of ANHA.*
Security Overview

Urban Stability

Though Al-Hasakeh’s political and security status may be as complex as its ethno-sectarian composition, the city has been relatively stable since 2016. This largely remains the case, but with the tide increasingly turning against Kurdish autonomy with U.S. military prevarication, Turkey’s 2019 incursions, and the growing local political and military influence of the GoS and its allies, the ability of SA-linked armed and security forces to maintain the status quo is in question. How these dynamics will ultimately unfold is unknown, but the most widely held assumption is that the authority of the SA will erode to the point that it will cede the city to the GoS by way of a nonviolent political agreement. Local forces falling under the armed wing of the SA, the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), may also merge with the Syrian government’s Syrian Arab Army.

Presently, an uneasy collection of rival armed and security actors operate in the city, but confrontation between these groups seldom occurs and is almost always swiftly resolved. In addition, the presence of local GoS-linked security and military actors is circumscribed, and Kurdish groups are reported as relatively professional, accountable, and unified by a competent central command. Kinetic-style security incidents of direct concern to local partner organizations are therefore improbable under current conditions, but this does not imply reduced caution given the extent to which local security dynamics are entangled with deep-seated mistrust between Kurdish and Arab populations, not to mention ISIS sleeper cells and the presence of rival forces from the Russian, Turkish, and U.S. militaries stationed at or patrolling near key infrastructure in the wider area.

The GoS has sought to undermine Kurdish self-determination for decades, and retains an Arab (partially tribal) military and security presence in order to counterbalance Kurdish authority through tried and tested forms of elite and ethnic patronage. These networks can be considered as somewhat latent given they do not actively contest Kurdish control at this time. However, it is worth noting that they have increased their control over local business and caused greater public reliance on GoS institutions at the expense of parallel SA bodies. Should a political agreement for the city (or the wider SA) be reached, it is likely that existing GoS-linked armed and security forces will step in to fill the security vacuum and more openly assert their links with the local political economy.

Armed Actor Overview

After suffering unsupportable losses to ISIS, GoS-linked armed groups were forced into a surrender deal by the ascendant YPG/J in the so-called

Asayish-managed entrance to Al-Hasakeh city. Courtesy of ANHA.
'Battle of Al-Hasakeh' of 2016. This left a minor state-affiliated military presence confined to an area known locally as the ‘Security Square’, perhaps best understood as a kind of Green Zone for GoS-run administrative buildings. The Security Square is currently overseen by three Arab-majority GoS-linked armed groups, two of which are identifiably tribal in character and composition. Despite their identification with local Arab and tribal communities, none of the city’s GoS-linked groups have a positive local reputation. In particular, Al-Hasakeh’s National Defence Forces (NDF) are disfavoured by both Arab and Kurdish communities given their reputed involvement in kidnapping, extortion, and harassment. This activity is thought to be less common in recent times, but it is a reputation earned by past behaviour which is also reported to include conflict with other GoS-linked groups over the control of local businesses in the city.³

Kurdish forces coordinate fairly well with their GoS counterparts, and relations are cordial despite earlier conflict between the two sides during the battle for the city. Kurdish forces are viewed more positively than GoS-linked armed and security actors, and the designation of specific mandates to each SA-linked group by the SDF’s Military Council helps discourage the perception that they operate as independent militia. That said, there is some friction between the city’s population and elements of the SA’s local security apparatus, particularly the intelligence services and units within the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) responsible for SA policy enforcement. Tensions between the SA and non-Kurdish citizens have flared when the Asayish has been deployed to enforce controversial SA diktats on matters of taxation and conscription, and local resistance to such change has been common. This is less of a problem today than it was in the 2016-19 period, when a less circumspect approach towards conscription and enforcement under cover of the U.S.-led coalition often threatened to damage the SA’s relationship with the population and worsen Arab-Kurdish tensions. However, it should be noted that recent instances of SDF conscription undertaken in the city are alleged to have broken international law, with accusations of child abduction for military recruitment amongst the most egregious examples.⁴
Political Capital

PLATFORMS FOR POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Coordination between local GoS and SA service provision structures is fairly effective.
› Anxiety over GoS interference post-Peace Spring is rising, but space for active civil society remains.
› SA local governance structures may endure in some form given the moribund GoS counterpart.
› Potential governance structure continuity enables sustained engagement, networking, and learning.
› The prospect of rights and freedoms is driving civic engagement from the Kurdish community.
› Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms are permitted by the SA.

IMPEDEIMENTS TO POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Reliance on central state functions empowers the GoS to exert considerable local leverage.
› Local bottom-up governance is increasingly bound to top-down TEV-DEM strategy.
› Parallel GoS/SA governance bodies generate additional bureaucracy for civilians.
› SA legislative missteps have aggravated social tensions and diminished local SA credibility.
› The future of the SA is on the table, creating significant political uncertainty.
Governance

Preoccupied with armed opposition movements elsewhere, the GoS has been content to allow the SA to pursue its own governance project in the city. Identity politics in places like Al-Hasakeh were always likely to produce pockets of local resistance to Kurdish-dominated authority, and the state will have been aware that this not only obliged a continued GoS-linked security presence in many locations, but also entailed patronage opportunities and the SA’s reliance on a variety of GoS governance structures and state-provided services. Indeed, with ISIS all but defeated, the legitimacy of the Kurdish project now heavily rests on the ability of the SA’s decentralised governance model to deliver to those living under its administration and balance competing local interests.

This broader context has produced various forms of political and economic coordination between the SA and the GoS which, for Kurdish SA supporters, might appear counterintuitive for a historically marginalized people aspiring to autonomy via a radically different form of government. The reality, however, is that Kurdish cooperation with the GoS results from a deliberate survival strategy which requires the SA permit the entry of the Syrian state into territories under its control in an often uneasy marriage of convenience. This takes various forms in the political domain, but is most notable in Al-Hasakeh for the restraint with which SA political structures are increasingly forced to operate, and for the complex bureaucracy that now pervades the city.

Convergence with Damascus

In the early years of the SA, local authorities in Al-Hasakeh frequently miscalculated the balance necessary to avoid overreaching their local legitimacy. Numerous city-wide policies were instituted, only to be repealed in response to public protest, or as a result of limited enforcement capacity. Amendments to Syrian law related to matters of taxation, conscription, and education were especially contentious, and were a source of frustration for non-Kurdish residents in particular. For instance, despite a month of protests against the imposition of a new SA-designed curriculum in late-2017, the Asayish closed several schools in the Arab-majority Ghurin neighbourhood in order to enforce the change.

Such a heavy-handed response was poorly received, and though debate over the curriculum continues, Al-Hasakeh’s local authorities appear to have become more reticent over instituting their own distinct programme in the city. Indeed, the kind of bottom-up politics espoused by the dominant political force in the SA and the leading party of the TEV-DEM coalition, the PYD, is likely to increasingly give way to Kurdish unity and wartime imperatives following several changes in the wider conflict environment. ISIS and much of the Syrian opposition have been defeated, the SDF/U.S. anti-ISIS pact is now diminished, and Turkish-led incursions have prompted the SA to soften its stance against the GoS and permit the entry of government troops across the northeast. Talks on the ‘reintegration’ of the entire SA region with the GoS were held in December 2019, and though tangible outcomes are likely some way off, the process effectively set the SA on a path towards political convergence with Damascus.
Local sources report that vomiting and diarrhea have been traced to consumption of local agricultural output.

BOX 1: Governance Structures

Al-Hasakeh’s principal unit of local government is the baladiya, a municipal authority which sits above the neighbourhood-level commune in the SA governance hierarchy. In Al-Hasakeh, SA baladiyat are duplicated across three parts of the city: east, west, and south. A GoS local administration oversees the Security Square but is regarded as almost entirely ineffective. SA baladiyat are subject to SA-wide policies intended to unify the Kurdish territories, but are permitted to implement their own policies on local economic, social, cultural and political matters in line with the SA’s decentralist political philosophy. Though vaunted as a bottom-up political system which empowers all levels of society, the central authorities of the PYD-dominated TEV-DEM strongly influence local affairs, and there have been reports that local Kurdish security forces frequently cite security issues as rationale for blocking the plans of the baladiyat. The result is an administration which can perpetuate a feeling of detachment among citizens, particularly in a diverse city where the de facto government was effectively installed by a Kurdish-led military campaign.

Looking ahead, it is likely that governance bodies in Al-Hasakeh will adopt a more muted tone in an effort to salvage the cultural and political freedoms Kurds and other minorities enjoy under the SA. To do so, they are likely to fall largely in step with the objectives of the strongest elements within the SA structure, namely, the PYD and its military wing, the YPG/J. Decision-making in Al-Hasakeh is therefore expected to increasingly emanate from the TEV-DEM Executive Council, as well as prominent local PYD YPG/J-linked officials working behind the scenes of formal governance platforms. Simultaneously, the reach of the GoS is likely to grow, further checking the expression of SA politics and undermining the legitimacy of SA governance in the city. Several well-established forms of GoS influence are already present and would likely emphasize this effect, such as the continued reliance on numerous central government institutions, broad support for the GoS amongst local tribes, and both SA- and GoS-linked business figures that bind Al-Hasakeh’s economic success to markets in GoS-held territory.

Interdependence and Parallel Governance

Public services and governance functions are variously administered wholly by the GoS, or by the offices of the SA in coordination with parallel GoS counterpart offices (i.e. pre-war governance structures). This presents three sets of problems, the first of which derive from the fact that the GoS-controlled institutions upon which the city relies include the judiciary, the Civil Registry Secretariat, banking and financial systems, and the Directorate of Services. Evidently, control over such critical governance bodies provides considerable leverage for the GoS. SA authorities in Al-Hasakeh are therefore frequently beholden to Damascus, and their independent administration of even the most basic forms of city management can be limited. For instance, taxation policy in the SA is centralized, but the absence of an SA-controlled banking or financial system means city planners have few mechanisms for tracking tax inflows.

The second problem set derives from overlap between the political offices of the SA and those of the GoS. This is not necessarily a matter of poor coordination: Local reports suggest that parallel GoS and SA governance bodies coordinate fairly well in Al-Hasakeh. Rather, the nationally-oriented agenda of the GoS and the more local concerns of SA-linked local governance bodies can sometimes result in different decisions, leading to mismanagement and inaction. On this issue, local sources raise the example of Al-Hasakeh’s sewage system, noting a state of confusion between the water authorities of the SA and the GoS on the regulation of discharge into the Khabur River. As this situation has dragged on, it has had increasingly damaging effects downstream, contaminating irrigation water and farmland in southern rural areas.

Thirdly, civilians are reluctant to exclusively use SA public services where a GoS counterpart exists, and which would have been the
primary interface in the pre-war era. There are two main reasons for this, namely, the inconvenience and cost of having to conduct repeat transactions with dual service providers, and anxiety over potential exposure to future bureaucratic and security challenges. Neither concern is without foundation. For example, land and property buyers begrudgingly pay licensing and certification fees to both the SA and GoS land registries in order to fully protect against ownership claims.

Justice, Citizenship and Civil Society

Justice
The SA has created a parallel system of justice which requires that locals abide by both SA and GoS justice systems, laws, and legal frameworks. Many residents view the SA’s judicial system as an unnecessary duplication, a sentiment that is not helped by SA attempts to introduce laws regarded as insensitive to local social norms.14 Where unpopular changes to the legal code have proven so contentious as to provoke disputes and violence, the SA has often been forced to rescind its plans. In addition to the two formal legal systems operating in the city, customary mediation mechanisms conducted via familial and tribal authority remain an important source of dispute resolution. Whereas pre-war the GoS reportedly sought to undermine such community-based mechanisms, the SA is not reported to have interfered in Al-Hasakeh’s informal justice systems.

Citizenship
Long-term, citizenship is clearly a matter of significant importance to Al-Hasakeh’s Kurdish population. The city has a strong experience with the repression of Kurdish communities following decades of deliberately anti-Kurdish GoS policy, indeed, like Kurds across the country, all those living in the city today were only granted Syrian citizenship in 2011.15 Formal civic engagement is therefore a relatively new experience for many of the city’s Kurds, and has driven their demands for freedom and justice, a strong willingness to develop their status as equal members of society, and international/diaspora support for Kurdish rights. Combined with a robust local security apparatus in receipt of international support, this has contributed to the human security of the city’s Kurdish population. In theory, it should also contribute to more effective and inclusive local governance: Were any SA-GoS integration undertaken as part of some future political settlement in Al-Hasakeh or the wider north-east, the legal and citizenship status of Kurds is likely non-negotiable (and is rumoured to have received support from the Russian government).

Civil Society
Although lying some distance from the frontlines, the Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring in northern/northeastern Syria had a major impact on civil society in Al-Hasakeh. Overnight, many local organizations were forced to prioritize basic services as IDPs sought shelter in Al-Hasakeh and its nearby camps. Inevitably, this aggravated shortfalls that civil society had previously helped to meet, whilst the drawdown of international support prompted a number of
local organizations to either adapt, freeze, or cease ongoing activities. With operations steadily restarting in the city, Peace Spring largely represented a temporary disruption. However, it has also reset the climate in which both internationally-sponsored and locally-driven civil society work is undertaken across the governorate, including in Al-Hasakeh city.

Activists report civil society work in the area now comes with heightened risks given military operations in the northern Al-Hasakeh countryside, the growing presence of the GoS and its allies, and reports that civil society work undertaken in areas handed by the SA to the GoS are now subject to unclear procedures. Al-Hasakeh’s civil society organizations are likely to resist for as long as possible, but the likelihood that their activities will fall prey to the vagaries of GoS civil society legislation is mounting. In the event of a change of political/military control, many local civil society actors will be required to seek registration with the GoS in addition to the SA. However, experience from reconciled parts of Syria suggests that these applications may neither be readily accepted nor respected, and the current configuration of civil society in the city would likely change considerably. Many organizations may therefore adapt their activities, reframe partnerships, or evacuate the city entirely.

**BOX 2: Humanitarian and Development Agency Operations**

Organizations operating in Al-Hasakeh do so with the authorization of the GoS and are licensed to work from Damascus. Humanitarian and development organizations are also required to secure licences from the SA, specifically from its Office of Humanitarian Affairs, which approves programme implementation and reserves the right to intervene in aid work. Some reports claim the SA’s Office of Humanitarian Affairs has sought to interfere in aid operations in Al-Hasakeh city, and often intervenes to determine staffing, target populations, and the scope of planned and ongoing projects. These reports reference the behaviour of the Office of Humanitarian Affairs across the entirety of Al-Hasakeh governorate, but reports from Al-Hasakeh city additionally describe the Office as renowned for its discrimination against local Arab organizations. UN agencies operating in Al-Hasakeh city are licensed by the GoS and include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO. In addition, the ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent operate in the area as well as local humanitarian actors such as Syrian Mar Afram Organization (a UN partner organization), Al-Bara, the Al-Mawada Association, the Al-Yamama Association, and the Al-Bir Charity.
Socio-Economic Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Spirit of entrepreneurialism has been restored owing to local security provided by the SDF.
- Cooperatives are small-scale, but present opportunities for inclusive socio-economic development.
- National/regional demand for key local outputs (oil and wheat) likely to trigger sustained investment.
- Positive externalities supported by a well-established IDP population and largely unproblematic property rights.
- Security-related risks to business and livelihood continuity will likely remain relatively low.

IMPEDEMENTS TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Monopoly and nepotism saturate trade outside (and increasingly within) the SA.
- Elite capture of strategic commodity trade hits local revenues earned from wheat, oil, and gas.
- Checkpoint economics are working their way into the area following the fallout of Peace Spring.
- SA political-military imperatives have reproduced elite capture and opaque patterns of trade observed elsewhere in Syria.
- Available economic opportunities tend to favour Kurds in an Arab-majority city.
- Levers of economic policy control are shared between the SA’s local authorities and the GoS.
Business Environment

There has been a trend towards increased local business activity evidenced by higher levels of local investment and industrial development since the SA secured control of Al-Hasakeh. Growth has not been especially striking however, and neither has it been evenly distributed. In fact, local economic development has been largely limited to several industries which have benefited from particular conditions within the wider enabling environment and the particularities of the local political economy. This much is obvious when one considers stronger growth in the local wheat and oil industries. Both are enmeshed with war economy systems, elements of which have been actively supported by the SA in order to exert control over key productive sectors, and to bypass constraints faced by ordinary commercial actors under conflict conditions.17

Al-Hasakeh's involvement in these systems reflects the pragmatism of the Kurdish central authorities described in 'Political Capital', in so far as that the SA relies upon GoS markets and systems to sustain a certain level of income to buttress its political aspirations and military/security apparatus. That said, there is evidence to suggest that the SA has implemented its own economic agenda to some extent in Al-Hasakeh, even if much of this activity was undertaken in the earlier years of Kurdish control and has declined in more recent times. The city's several dozen 'cooperatives' are the clearest manifestation of this, and represent community-focused organizations which embody the kind of social ecology, radical gender equality, and direct democratic governance inherent to the SA's municipalist ideology. Ultimately, these organisations have had limited success in reforming the local economy however, and — in many ways — are metaphors for the Kurdish project’s inability to free itself from the shackles of the GoS and the broader conflict environment.

Cooperative Enterprise

The SA celebrates agricultural, industrial, and female cooperative enterprises as the backbone of its economic model. As in other parts of the world, cooperatives in the SA are intended to realize the economic welfare of members through equal ownership, control, and management. Communal solidarity and environmental protection are also enshrined as core principles in the ‘Cooperative Contract’ regulated by the SA's House of Cooperatives.18 There are over twenty cooperative organizations working in and around Al-Hasakeh city, most of which are focused on farming and livestock (a total of 15),19 and were enabled after the SA'S Economy and Agriculture Commission handed GoS-owned land to cooperative members.20 Several small-to-medium industrial cooperatives are also present, and include bakeries, power generator services, and dairy product processing facilities, some of which are entirely managed by women (e.g. ‘Inanna Kitchen’, and ‘The Women's Dairy Farm').

The development of cooperatives is a notable achievement, but the reality is that they have had a marginal impact on the economy and livelihoods, are mainly small-scale operations, and represent more of a socio-economic experiment than a dedicated challenge to Syria’s prevailing economic environment. Whether they will continue in the event of the city being returned to GoS control is also uncertain. Local agricultural cooperatives may be at risk given they currently work land previously owned by the state, whilst the
ideological underpinnings of a communal economy may not survive Syrian government control.\textsuperscript{21} That said, cooperatives have contributed to a greater spirit of inclusive entrepreneurialism which will have been noticed by local civil society, by Al-Hasakeh’s female population, and the city’s population in general.

\textbf{BOX 3: Institutional Barriers to Business:}
Several barriers to business result from the model of governance in effect in the city (and other SA territories). As touched upon in the Political Capital section, Kurdish local government bodies are unable to freely implement their economic, trade, and planning policies owing to the predominance of central Kurdish policy and the balance that must be struck with the GoS. Some have noted that this produces a rigid bureaucracy which lacks structure and direction, and which has encouraged nepotism and favouritism within business circles.\textsuperscript{22} It is also the case that the SA does not control all the levers necessary to fully direct economic policy. In Al-Hasakeh, the GoS still pays staff salaries in a variety of local industries (e.g. schools and flour mills), whilst the entire Kurdish region is dependent on Syrian state banks to provide liquidity and relies upon the Syrian Central Bank to supply domestic currency.

\textbf{War Economies}
The adaptations, imperatives, and forms of opportunism wrought by ongoing conflict-related dynamics are a major driver of economic activity in Al-Hasakeh. The city is therefore little different from many other parts of Syria in this regard, and despite its ostensibly democratic appeal, humanitarian and development actors would do well not to idealize the Kurdish system. Economic interdependence between the SA and its political rivals has reproduced many aspects of the Syrian war economy, with cronynism, elite capture, and opaque patterns of trade widely in evidence. This much is obvious from the reported failure to seriously reinvest wheat and oil revenues into the city’s public services. Both industries are subject to significant SA influence, but their reliance on cross-line and cross-border market access has encouraged commercial activity which is antithetical to the SA’s celebrated cooperative enterprise model. It must also be noted that Operation Peace Spring has increasingly complicated trade within the SA. With the GoS and its allies permitted to take up positions near Al-Hasakeh to buttress against deeper Turkish-led incursions, cross-line ‘checkpoint economy’ dynamics are also working their way into the area.

\textbf{Realities of Economic Growth: Construction and Real Estate}
Two sectors which have seen considerable growth in Al-Hasakeh in recent years are construction and real estate, both of which appear to have responded to significant IDP inflows. Shelter needs are reported at close to zero, a figure which is especially surprising given the city’s population comprises around 50% IDPs. To some extent, this is explained by the fact that a majority of local IDPs have been in the city since the earliest phases of the conflict, and are well-established in family homes or rental accommodation. However, it also results from a particularly active private construction and real estate sector comprising small-medium local businesses stimulated by rising land prices, relative local stability, expatriate and migrant remittances, and lowered licensing restrictions implemented by the SA.

Such traditional supply/demand dynamics have been important to growth, yet they have been accompanied by particular conflict-related conditions which illustrate the extent to which Al-Hasakeh’s economy is bound to less inclusive forms of development. Most notably, the closure of major Syria-Turkey border crossings since 2014 coupled with the challenge of domestic procurement has increased dependency on cross-line and cross-border trade, which has in turn encouraged the formation of local monopolies on the import, trade, and distribution of construction materials.\textsuperscript{23} In the main, these monopolies are variously controlled by the new business elite and smugglers who retain exclusive import/export rights, variously secured by virtue of their connections with figures within the PYD and YPG/J and its trading partners in GoS-held areas, the KRG in northern Iraq, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey.
New Business Elites and Opaque Trade Patterns
The stabilization of Al-Hasakeh under SA control triggered the emergence of a new city-based (and primarily Kurdish) business elite. Few of these figures were previously known to be wealthy, and their ascent in local business circles is ascribed to links with the SA and the SA’s key cross-line and cross-border trading partners. This phenomenon has been witnessed to such an extent in Al-Hasakeh that several members of the city’s Kurdish IDP community have overseen commercial operations that have experienced surprisingly rapid expansion, drawing attention to the identity of their partners and financiers. The strength of Kurdish influence in the local economy is demonstrated by reports that retail outlets in Kurdish-majority neighborhoods have increased in number, whilst there has been an obvious decline in Al-Hasakeh’s pre-war market hubs in other parts of the city.

Fundamentally, cross-line and cross-border connections provide forms of market access and protection unavailable to ordinary business, which in turn enable local monopolization. The isolation and partial embargo of the SA by neighboring countries has played into the hands of these systems, presenting local elites with the promise of low risk opportunities and quick profits. This is often discussed in terms of the city’s key strategic commodities (wheat, oil, and gas) and the entities and individuals associated with commercial operations in these industries. However, as the above example of construction material supply illustrates, monopolization by elite figures touches practically all of the city’s productive sectors. For example, research indicates that intermediary trader incomes have grown from selling even the outputs of small-scale agricultural producers, and that channels for the independent sale of commodities have narrowed significantly in Al-Hasakeh and across the region.

24 The most notorious of which is the cross-line intermediary, Abu Dalu, an affiliate of the GoS and the Al-Qaterji Company.
Natural Capital

PLATFOMS FOR NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Favourable agro-ecological conditions for summer/winter cropping and livestock.
› Mutual SA/GoS dependence on agriculture, oil, and gas sustains the value of key natural assets.
› Agricultural input support and technical expertise are likely highly cost-effective interventions.
› Fairly effective SA/GoS coordination on resource exploitation (though war economy a major factor).
› SA emphasizes environmental sustainability as a matter of policy.

IMPEDEIMENTS TO NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Massive reduction in GoS agricultural support has received limited SA or private sector attention.
› High costs throughout the agricultural value chain, from inputs to trade.
› Poor access to inputs and equipment, and poor quality and high cost of available items.
› Dilapidated irrigation systems and over-exploited natural water courses/water tables.
› Oil and gas fields operate at reduced capacity and profits poorly reinvested into the city.
› Makeshift micro oil refineries have had serious environmental and public health impacts.
Cotton production has decreased considerably in Al-Hasakeh in recent years, primarily owing to high production costs and the greater viability of alternative cash crops requiring fewer inputs like coriander.

Local reports estimate as much as 60% of the population within Al-Hasakeh subdistrict finds employment in the city's three agricultural systems.

The export of livestock to the KRG has proven more lucrative than sales to domestic markets, mainly because the logistics of doing so are cheaper and there is generally a higher demand for meat products.

Agricultural Land

Surrounded by a wealth of natural resources, and falling within the historic ‘fertile crescent’, agricultural land has been central to Al-Hasakeh’s economy in modern times. Areas on the city’s periphery benefit from conditions sympathetic to winter grain production, sizable pasturelands enable a reasonable livestock trade, and during summer, an extensive network of canals, wells, and dams support a diversity of irrigated crops. These favourable agro-ecological conditions provided a platform for major state investment from the 1960s until the current crisis, positioning Al-Hasakeh as a major industrial-scale agricultural producer with modern machinery, equipment, storage and processing facilities, and a fairly sophisticated distribution network. In the years leading up to the current crisis however, state investment was withdrawn, and the role of the Syrian government is now much diminished. Combined with the damage experienced by the wider Syrian economy, a weakened enabling environment for agricultural production, and trade disruption, this has produced extensive and often lasting effects on agricultural value chains. Reversing their impact could take decades, but it must be emphasized that Al-Hasakeh’s agricultural systems present short-term recovery opportunities which likely rest well within the competence of local partner organizations, particularly in terms of agricultural input supply and the provision of technical and agribusiness expertise.

Rich Agricultural Tradition

It is unsurprising that the richness of arable land, pastures, and availability of surface water in and around Al-Hasakeh city supports high levels of agricultural production. Crop farming benefits from deep top soils and climatic conditions especially well-suited to dry-land (i.e. non-irrigated) winter crop production (wheat, barley, lentils, beans and other legumes), and during hot dry summer months, two rivers, the Al-Khabur and its tributary, the Jaghjagh, feed an extensive network of canals, wells, and dams capable of supporting a diversity of irrigated summer crops (maize, sorghum, fodder, vegetables, and ((decreasingly)) cotton). Combined with bovine and poultry livestock farming, these two agricultural systems (winter and summer cropping) have been a major source of employment in Al-Hasakeh subdistrict, and support a small city-based agribusiness sector. This has remained the case throughout the conflict, largely because of Al-Hasakeh’s importance to the production of key crops and livestock for domestic consumption within SA-, GoS- and opposition-held areas, and because of new opportunities to export to the KRG in northern Iraq. Sustained demand for the city’s main economic outputs both now and for the foreseeable future is largely positive for Al-Hasakeh, and the city could build on the legacy of several products which had been internationally competitive prior to the current conflict (wheat, legumes, and cotton). Local farming output has not been as lucrative as it might have been under ordinary conditions however, with even the most well-established local value chains experiencing severe disruption.
Agricultural Value Chain Disruption

Wheat is practically synonymous with Al-Hasakeh, and though it has remained profitable owing to relatively stable prices offered by the GoS and the SA, local sources estimate profit margins have shrunk by as much as 50%. Reports from the field attribute much of this to the combined impact of the withdrawal of pre-war state subsidies, and add that farming inputs such as fertilizers, machinery, and equipment are variously expensive, unavailable, or of poor quality. Given such issues affect crop production more generally, support for elevated operational expenses is advisable, and the supply of even basic agricultural inputs is strongly recommended. Such initiatives are within the competence of many potential partner organizations, and are likely sustainable in the event of a change of political control given the extent to which the GoS and SA rely on the city’s primary productive industry.

Of course, any such investment will be made in a weakened agricultural enabling environment. Extension services have been largely suspended, logistical costs have risen, rural development policy planning has been limited, cash-based transactions are now more common than credit, middle-men have exploited trade network disruption, and available capital has shown a preference to invest in more stable local ventures. The SA has not ignored these various challenges, but it lacks the financial means and technical capacity to replicate pre-war GoS support and control structures, and cannot meaningfully subsidize inputs, ensure quality control, and regulate production. Outside of farming and livestock cooperatives established in line with the SA’s communal politics, Al-Hasakeh’s agricultural market is therefore left largely to private sector liberal dynamics. This may have encouraged some positive adaptations in the industry (e.g. greater emphasis to more profitable wartime cash crops like herbs and spices), but it has also exposed the vulnerabilities of local producers to the weaknesses and inequalities of the wider Syrian economy. Located in a drought-prone region, it must also be noted that year-round output is reliant on consistent water supply. This is currently assessed as a serious challenge in and around Al-Hasakeh, and may be subject to upstream interference given the provenance of the city’s main water sources in Turkey or Turkish-held areas.

Oil and Gas

Several nearby oil and gas installations are worth noting for the scale of their remaining reserves, pre-war production levels, and importance to the national economy. These include the Al-Shaddadeh oil field, some 60km to the south, the Tishreen/Kabibah oil field, to Al-Hasakeh’s southeast (in the vicinity of Al-Hol), and the Gypsum gas field. At present, installations at these locations are officially managed by the Energy Authority of the SA and operate at reduced capacity. Pre-war, oil fields local to Al-Hasakeh produced around 30,000 barrels per day. Though government estimates indicate output is now closer to a fairly modest 15,000 barrels owing to a combination of damage and poor maintenance, they are nevertheless exploited by a diversity of private operators enmeshed in a complex value chain crossing frontlines and international boundaries. Such networks are explored in more detail in other reports in this series, but are worth noting here for their role in stimulating the proliferation of local makeshift wells, refineries, and filtration facilities. These informal installations have become a matter of growing public health and environmental concern near Al-Hasakeh, particularly in southern rural areas, and indicate a need for more sustainable local livelihood options.

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A makeshift oil facility in Al-Hasakeh governorate.

Courtesy of Middle East Eye.
Makeshift Oil Facilities: Health and Environmental Concerns

Since conflict began in Syria, oil and gas found in the vicinity of Al-Hasakeh have been exploited by various combinations of non-professional civilian actors, ISIS, and other armed groups. The 2012-2017 period in particular witnessed the proliferation of makeshift oil wells and refineries to Al-Hasakeh’s south and southeast, and a related increase in rudimentary extraction and filtration methods. The impact of *ad hoc* oil and gas exploitation has yet to be systematically investigated, and is likely less pronounced in Al-Hasakeh than in Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa governorates given the larger number of makeshift sites uncovered by satellite imagery in these locations. However, local sources report that primitive fossil fuel extraction, processing, and distribution methods in the vicinity of Al-Hasakeh are ongoing, and have contributed to sufficient leaks and spills that there is serious concern over the respiratory health of Al-Hasakeh’s population and pollution to farmland south of the city.

The increase in makeshift fossil fuel facilities is a consequence of a variety of related factors, ranging from a decrease in skilled staff, a lack of equipment, U.S.-led and Russian attacks on fossil fuel infrastructure (formerly) under the control of ISIS and other armed groups, and the socio-economic necessity driving civilians towards livelihoods which privilege negative coping strategies. Re-professionalization of the sector is needed to improve safety standards and decrease health and environmental risks posed by current methods of fossil fuel exploitation. Officially, this falls to the Kurdish Energy Authority of the SA, but it is known that private actors linked to the SA and GoS extract the majority of local oil revenues and are tied into unregulated crony capitalist war economy systems.

Given foreign investment is highly unlikely under current conditions, the GoS and state-linked oil companies hold the keys to the kind of expertise and equipment necessary to professionalise local operations and ramp up production at Shaddadeh and Tishreen/Kabibah. The SA has permitted some involvement from the central government in Al-Hasakeh’s oil industry, mainly by allowing state-linked private company staff to support day-to-day oil field management and, of course, by engaging in cross-line oil trading. But it is unlikely that coordination will extend much further given the importance of oil revenue control to the SA in the context of its continued political standoff with the GoS. With ad hoc oil exploitation therefore set to continue, humanitarian and development actors are encouraged to concentrate on the identification of makeshift sites and the public health impact of such sites through civil society and relevant health and environmental authorities. Such studies could support donor-funded public health strategies, a locally-led public health response, assessment data for the development of alternative livelihood options, and may also help identify environmental recovery interventions.
Social Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Balanced intercommunal relations are central to the local legitimacy of the SA.
› Intercommunal relations are the basis of trade between SA and GoS areas.
› Tribal and familial linkages to Iraq and other states support local remittance and business income.
› SA governance model has increased female participation and leadership.

IMPEDEMENTS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Ethnic and religious differences historically manipulated by local authorities, especially the GoS.
› Lack of inter-communal trust, as well as mistrust within constituencies.
› Poorer IDP and non-PYD Kurds are reportedly marginalized by the SA.
› Intercommunal dialogue hostage to broader geopolitical circumstances.
› Democratic capacity building and human rights activism likely to be upended by GoS return.
› Local NDF is a vehicle for rallying anti-Kurdish sentiment, perpetuating Arab-Kurdish tensions.
The most evident example being the 1962 census exercise, which stripped as many as 150,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship, condemning many in Al-Hasakeh governorate to poverty and discrimination.

In particular, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent autonomy granted to Kurds in northern Iraq.

A spate of looting and damage to property hit the city’s Christian community in mid-2019, but the perpetrators were never identified and the attacks stopped after several weeks.

Identity

Though often considered a predominantly Kurdish city, Al-Hasakeh's modern population is majority Arab, and echoes Syria’s history as a sanctuary for minority ethnic and religious groups. Alongside the city’s Sunni Muslim Arab majority, Kurds, and Assyrian and Syriac Christians are found, many of whom are bound to the wider Middle East through tribal and familial connections dating back centuries. Inevitably, such diverse and multi-layered identities have proven problematic for a government whose political ideology has been to foster a unified sense of Arab nationalism. State-led efforts to manipulate internal and transnational connections between Al-Hasakeh’s various ethnic and religious groups have been a long standing feature of city politics, and have persisted throughout the administration of the SA. Pre-war, concerted state-led efforts were made to exacerbate tensions between communities marked by ethnic and religious differences, whilst traditional socio-political authorities (e.g. family-based dispute arbitration) were commonly marginalized in favour of centralized state decision-making bodies. Over time, these tactics helped fragment Al-Hasakeh’s social landscape, most notably, by dividing the city’s two largest constituencies, Arabs and Kurds.

Arab-Kurdish Relations: Tensions and Grievances

The suppression of Kurds has been a feature of Al-Hasakeh’s socio-political landscape since the height of Syria’s Arab nationalism. However, at no time since these early years of Syrian statehood have claims for Kurdish autonomy been so great, and seldom has the government been so obliged to defend its ideological foundations against such claims than the current conflict and change in neighbouring Iraq. Hard-line nationalists and pragmatic realists within the GoS are likely to debate the nature of Kurdish freedoms in a ‘post-war’ northeast for some time. But in the interim, decades of state-imposed anti-Kurdish policies and Arab-Kurdish tensions will rest long in the memory, and have found unique expression in Al-Hasakeh in several ways.

The politics of local Arab-Kurdish relations likely explains why a broad-based opposition movement failed to materialize in Al-Hasakeh in 2011-2012. Indeed, protests in Arab-majority neighborhoods failed to meaningfully converge with those held in Kurdish-majority areas. Local Kurds viewed Syria’s destabilization as an opportunity for the GoS to collude with Arab populations under cover of war, whilst local Arab communities feared that the Kurdish independence movement would spread from northern Iraq. Ultimately, the concerns of both sides were well-founded, and have only helped to reinforce long-standing anxieties in a broader climate of Arab-Kurdish mistrust and competition spanning much of Syria's northeast. In addition, before it was confined to the Security Square, the GoS-linked majority Arab NDF militia was a menace to...
For instance, old Syrian passport versions cautioned against travel to Iraq, and, until 2013, prior travel to Iraq was used by the GoS as just cause for detention and, in some cases, forced disappearance.

Local sources explain GoS officials sometimes label local Jabour as ‘Saddamists’, likely referring to the prominent roles held by a number of influential Jabour in the former Iraqi Ba’athist government.

In addition to maintaining patronage networks, the GoS has sought to undermine tribal relationships which diverge from its political ideology. Most notably, it has spent decades working to sever centuries-old transborder connections between Al-Hasakah-based Syrian tribes and their Iraqi peers, especially where it perceives these cross-border relationships are founded on shared sympathy for Iraqi Ba’athism. This is a subtle phenomenon however, can often play out at the individual level, and is a reminder that tribes should not be regarded as monolithic. For example, though local elements within the Jabour are tied into GoS patronage networks, other members have historically been targeted by the GoS for their real and perceived identification with Iraqi Ba’athists. Given the extent to which Al-Hasakah’s tribes share common lineages, dialects, and business links with their modern day Iraqi counterparts, GoS interference is likely to remain a feature of the city’s transnational tribal networks — especially where these commonalities support links which are contrary to the objectives of the central state.

Marginalization and Discrimination
The SA prides itself on its inclusive human rights-based governance system, and though there is much to celebrate in this regard, there are two areas where its performance is notably poor. First, Arab IDPs of a lower socio-economic standing reportedly experience lower levels of service provision than all other groups. To some extent, this is because many wield fewer resources and fewer familial connections, and are therefore obliged to live in IDP camps and poorer rural areas. However, it is also reportedly because the SA actively channels IDPs to these locations as a way to minimize a perceived Arab threat to Kurdish self-determination. Evidence for such a
threat is of course scarce, but with over 95% of respondents from the Al-Hol and Areesheh IDPs camps stating they had no intention to return in late 2018, a focus on multi-sector basic service provision for this vulnerable group is critical. The second issue relates to the treatment of non-mainstream Kurds, specifically those linked to the Barzani-led Kurdish movement. Though this highlights a need to strengthen good governance principles, the extent to which this is feasible is questionable. Most assessments do not envisage the SA will remain the dominant local political power, meaning work to improve inter-communal relations may therefore be most advisable.

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**Arab IDPs**

Arab IDPs from Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor reportedly experience everyday discrimination from Al-Hasakeh’s Kurdish authorities. Most reside in southwestern parts of the subdistrict and the southern side of the city, and, where feasible, have been directed to these areas by the Kurdish authorities given concern they present a security threat to Kurdish communities. Whether this is a realistic threat or not, officials in Al-Hasakeh claim the city has absorbed the maximum possible number of IDPs, and were quick to emphasize that IDPs produced by Operation Peace Spring would have few options in the city. Poorer Arab IDPs are especially marginalized, and there are reports of serious service shortfalls in nearby IDP camps, restrictions on IDP movement outside camps, and corruption and blackmail target Arab IPs by SA-affiliated military and civilian officials.

**Political Privilege Afforded to PYD-aligned Kurds**

Kurdish authorities in Al-Hasakeh present an image of collaborative decision-making across all Kurdish constituencies, but reports indicate that preferential treatment is afforded to groups subscribing to PYD ideology. Much of this is shrouded by political processes which are vaunted as transparent and inclusive, but which in reality centralize local decision-making within the PYD. Indeed, local sources indicate non-PYD aligned Kurds are prevented from attaining middle-high level administrative positions, and have at times been detained for arbitrary reasons. Those most commonly marginalized are Kurds linked to the Kurdish National Council (KNC), and supporters of the Iraqi Kurdish National Party and/or leading figures in the Barzani family. Calls for unity between Kurdish factions in the city have increased since Operation Peace Spring and continued Turkish-led activity in northern/northwestern Al-Hasakeh governorate, but as of May 2020, meetings to find ways to unite in support of the Kurdish cause have not proven especially productive and internecine differences persist.
Human Capital

PLATFORMS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- SA receptive to leadership, private sector, and civil society engagement of women and youth.
- Space to mobilize women and youth groups to inform programming and peacebuilding.
- Skilled and experienced aid and development workforce.
- Concern over youth employability demands a skills-focused livelihood agenda.

IMPEDEMENTS TO HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Tradition and conservatism perpetuates pre-war marginalization of women in civic life.
- Unrecognized SA curriculum could weaken employment market access for the city’s youth.
- Kurdish ethnocentric education system accentuates differences between local identity groups.
Women’s Political and Economic Participation

Besides its philosophy of bottom-up democracy and its communitarian approach to the economy, the SA is renowned for its agenda to enhance the role of women in society. Women co-chair government bodies at all levels, there is a dedicated Women's Economy Committee, and women-focused civil society associations and human rights organizations have been supported to strengthen the role of women in civic life. One might therefore assume that female participation has subsequently rocketed in Al-Hasakeh city, but local reports suggest that gender-based discrimination remains a significant issue, and that the SA's radical gender policies have only marginally reversed the city's pre-war conservatism. Hard numbers appear to support this assessment: In 2010, Al-Hasakeh governorate had amongst the highest rates of female labour force participation (31%), yet in 2018, women from the governorate comprised just 3% of the country's workforce. Such figures do not evidence a socio-economic environment which has been fundamentally reshaped by the SA's ideology, and it is therefore unsurprising that women reportedly find it difficult to confound traditional gender role expectations in Al-Hasakeh city.

A Political Platform for Women’s Empowerment

In many ways, this situation reflects the challenges faced by women in Syrian communities similarly bound to ruralism and primary industry. Attitudes in Al-Hasakeh were never likely to drastically change in the short time that the SA has been in power, and it cannot be held responsible for the city’s slow progress towards gender equality. That said, the SA can be credited for emphasizing the issue and for creating space within local political circles for greater expression of female leadership and participation. This is a notable achievement, and provides a platform for external support to the involvement of women in local governance strengthening, the diversification of their skills, and the mainstreaming of female participation and leadership via civil society platforms. It also enables local female voices to inform programme choices to an extent seldom possible outside of SA-held areas.

Education

In most other parts of Syria, disruption to education largely results from displacement, damage to school facilities and other supporting infrastructure, or a decline in teaching staff numbers and/or quality. In Al-Hasakeh however, an additional challenge lies in ensuring social mobility for thousands of young people taught according to a SA-imposed curriculum unrecognized outside of Kurdish-held territory. Entangled with the right to self-determination that defines the rivalry between the GoS and the SA, this problem is not unique to Al-Hasakeh city, and is bound to broader questions of identity in the Syrian state. However, it is notable here for its potential impact on the employment prospects of the city’s local young people, and for its apparent ethnocentrism in a city notorious for intercommunal tension.
Controversial Curriculum

Criticism of the Kurdish education system has been witnessed across several ethnic and religious groups. Though free to pursue the curriculum in their own language, non-Kurdish ethnic and religious groups have voiced concern that the Arab nationalist narrative that saturated pre-war curricula has effectively been replaced with a contemporary Kurdish equivalent.⁴⁷ This concern was evident in Al-Hasakeh city in 2018, when a series of demonstrations were held to protest the imposition of decidedly Kurdish educational narratives on (mainly) minority religious populations at local Assyrian and Christian faith schools. Arab populations have also shown discontent with the Kurdish programme. Local reports claim that heavily inflated class sizes in Arab-majority GoS-controlled parts of the city result from parental concern over the quality of the Kurdish curriculum and the long-term prospects of their children in the employment market.⁴⁸

The impact on the city’s young people is hard to gauge at this stage, but it is difficult to argue that the SA’s approach to education has contributed to their socio-economic prospects and fostered a shared sense of solidarity across local ethnic and religious groups. External support to education as it is currently configured in the city may therefore exacerbate local social tensions if the likely impact of programmes is poorly assessed. Rather than dissuade programming concerned with increasing education access, mobility, and quality however, humanitarian and development actors should instead demonstrate greater commitment to conflict sensitivity than is commonly found in education programming.
Physical Capital

PLATFORMS FOR PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Minor conflict-related damage to the city's hard infrastructure entails limited need for reconstruction.
- Shelter needs reported at close to zero despite a large city-based IDP population.
- Relatively resilient city infrastructure, as demonstrated during Operation Peace Spring.
- Water and irrigation systems need improvement but are a largely uncontroversial entry point.
- Existing partnerships between local authorities and international aid and development agencies.

IMPEDIMENTS TO PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Inconsistent power and potable water, with some disparity noted in GoS-held neighbourhoods.
- Turkish-linked armed actors can manipulate Aloukh water pumping station to force SA concessions.
- Some SA/GoS competition for ownership of e.g. hospitals can affect service quality.
- Poor SA/GoS coordination can compound city management issues e.g. sewerage and pollution.
- Civilian infrastructure initiatives conducted outside of government e.g. *ad hoc* irrigation systems.
Public Service Infrastructure

Compared with areas which were or are under the control of the opposition, Al-Hasakeh has experienced relatively little conflict-related damage. Pre-existing infrastructure supporting local public services has therefore only experienced episodic disruptions caused by the broader conflict environment, and needs across most areas are reported as low according to the latest available data (Figure 2). Indeed, the city demonstrates a notable degree of resilience despite being a natural destination for IDPs fleeing violence: In the period during which the Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring was at its height (September-November 2019), needs in Al-Hasakeh city remained relatively stable.49

Despite a general level of functionality, there are a number of service shortfalls of note for their importance to civilian wellbeing and the city’s economic success. These include water and power, the supply of which is intermittent and often inconsistent. Power is provided via the national grid, meaning Al-Hasakeh is subject to the kind of blackouts witnessed in most parts of Syria and receives a limited amount of state-supplied electricity per day (between 3-12 hours). This has increased reliance on privately-owned generators, many of which are owned by SA-linked business associates and are a poor value option for most civilians.50 A survey of local water networks highlights several issues related to local physical infrastructure, specifically in terms of their management by the local authorities, the quality of potable water supply, and the current state of irrigation systems for agriculture.

Water Networks

Rising at Ras-al-Ain on the Turkish frontier, the Al-Khabur River flows through the steppes of northern Al-Hasakeh governorate, then south to meet the Euphrates in Deir-ez-Zor. This river system was the focus of the massive Khabur River Project in the 1960s, a large-scale irrigation scheme which built three dams on Al-Hasakeh city’s eastern, western, and southern peripheries, and a canal network designed to support several million acres of farmland. Having transformed Al-Hasakeh governorate into Syria’s breadbasket, the project was instrumental to the growth of modern Al-Hasakeh city and the expansion of its rural economy. Still critical to the city’s success, local research indicates that poor water supply and its impact on the local economy is of growing concern, particularly for a drought prone region which has only begun to recover from a prolonged dry spell that began in the mid-90s. This is not only a matter of importance for the city’s productive sectors, but is also of concern for civilian wellbeing. Potable water services remain inconsistent, and cuts lasting as long as a week are common. It is also worth noting that Turkish-linked armed groups control the nearby Alouk pumping station and have reportedly cut supply on several occasions; sometimes in order to compel the SA into providing more consistent electricity in Turkish-held areas further north.51 Service disparities are also witnessed across different city neighbourhoods, with potable water in GoS-controlled neighbourhoods sometimes available for just one in every three days.

Water Management

Large-scale water infrastructure in and around the city is currently managed by the SA by way of unofficial agreement with the GoS. This arrangement has allowed the SA to maintain some continuity within local water management institutions (e.g. local expertise), but these offices are reportedly struggling to ensure existing systems meet local commercial and domestic demand. This is not necessarily a matter of mismanagement on the part of the SA, but reportedly results from long standing under-funding of local government bodies and the challenges posed by persistent drought periods. This will likely remain a problem for as long as the SA retains local authority, and is not expected to improve markedly should the GoS return to power given water networks were reportedly deteriorating prior to the current conflict. Despite capacity shortfalls, water provision is a matter upon which the SA and the GoS coordinate fairly well. For instance, local Kurdish authorities have permitted the Syrian government’s General Water Directorate to engage international development organizations in the rehabilitation of potable water networks, with a new pumping station under development at the eastern dam (from which most of Al-Haskaeh’s drinking water is drawn).52
Local sources report these canals service an estimated 22,000 hectares of farmland to Al-Hasakeh city’s north.

Subsidies were repealed pre-war, and fuel costs across Syria have been high for several years, including where most of Syria’s oil is found, in Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor governorates.

Inefficient and Deteriorating Irrigation Systems

Irrigation canals most critical to local agriculture lie north of the city and include the Tel Hormuz, Safia, Tel Mansour, and Hill Glad systems. Most of these systems were part of the 1960s Khabur Valley project and benefit the stronger agricultural tradition north of the city, particularly in settlements near Tel Tamer with large Assyrian populations. Southern areas were not necessarily excluded from the Khabur project, but have become increasingly reliant on ad hoc systems (wells and channels) built at the initiative of local users exploiting the reservoir of the southern dam. Demand for water for commercial purposes from these systems is greatest during hot summer months, and has been especially pronounced over the past 20 years of lower than expected rainfall. Effective irrigation systems are therefore essential for year-round farming, but have reportedly been poorly maintained despite suffering limited conflict-related damage. As in other parts of Syria, fuel-powered water pumping systems are costly to operate and are cited as a major drag on summer cropping. Given the importance of local agriculture to Al-Hasakeh’s economy and national domestic consumption, there may be scope to exploit coordination between the GoS and the SA on hard infrastructure projects, as well as more basic forms of support around updating outdated technology and improving water and land management techniques.