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.

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Qamishli Community Capital Analysis
FIGURE 1. Qamishli city
Established in the 1920s by Assyrians fleeing genocide in Ottoman-administered Anatolia, Qamishli has witnessed great change in its short 100-year history. As the first to fully harness the land’s fertility in partnership with newly settled Arabs, Assyrians were integral to the industrialization of Qamishli’s agricultural potential, and to the development of a city capable of exploiting nearby oil and gas reserves. By the 1960s, Assyrians had capitalized on the area’s natural resources to such an extent that they comprised around two thirds of the city’s growing population. However, they soon found themselves marginalized in a newly Ba’athist Syria. After government land reforms partially nationalized landholdings across the northeast, many Assyrians were once again dispossessed and dispersed across the wider region. Qamishli’s progress experienced only the briefest of delays however, as the Assyrian exodus was offset by the mass arrival of another minority, the Kurds. Similarly seeking refuge from persecution, the Kurds quickly established themselves through business and family ties with local Arabs, and bolstered their presence by connecting with Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. Their status soon grew to the point that Qamishli became known as Syria’s Kurdish capital, and Kurdish culture blended with Arab, Assyrian, Syriac and foreign influences to produce one of Syria’s most multi-ethnic societies.

Successive authorities have struggled to govern such a heterogeneous population however, as forms of socio-economic organization common to people spread across rival countries have exposed Qamishli to considerable foreign influence. Under both Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad, the Syrian government (GoS) sought to advance its Arab nationalist philosophy in the northeast through carefully calibrated political, economic and social policies designed to divide ethnic and religious communities and suppress minority autonomy. Qamishli’s minorities may have therefore enjoyed diverse political representation, but local activism was always carried out under the watchful eye of Damascus. Despite the public support they received, the city’s Kurdish political parties were kept from the real levers of local power, and their relationships with other identity groups, particularly Arabs, were often manipulated by the GoS.

Political containment of this kind has had effects which have endured the current conflict and, in many respects, are in fact mirrored by Qamishli’s current majority administration, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (hereafter, SA). Such a securitized approach to governance may be at odds with the SA’s decentralised and bottom-up political philosophy, but there are good reasons for careful management of the city under current conditions beyond managing a complex population. Qamishli is close to what are currently Syria’s most productive oil fields, the city’s countryside is an agriculture producer of national importance, and Qamishli is a key seat of Kurdish power in Syria, serving as the headquarters of both the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), and the dominant political actor in the SA and the TEV-DEM coalition, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).\(^1\) Moreover, the Syrian government may have conceded official control of north-eastern Syria to Kurdish actors in 2012, but it retains a firm grasp on many of the most important local political and economic resources and presents a consistent challenge to SA authority.

Despite the SA’s comprehensive governance programme, the involvement of the GoS has nevertheless been required by Qamishli’s majority-Kurdish administrators. A continued GoS presence downtown has acted as a major deterrent to interference by the SA’s Turkish rivals, and has largely insulated Qamishli from serious conflict. Moreover, Damascus still performs a variety of functions which ultimately govern many of the everyday legal and practical...
aspects of people’s lives. What this means for the future of Qamishli is unknown. Theoretically, local SA and GoS bodies could integrate fairly well as part of some broader negotiated political settlement for northeastern Syria. However, the SDF’s control over Qamishli’s nearby oil fields with support from the U.S. military remains a major obstacle to productive discussion. As long as American forces are in the area, limited progress on a settlement is anticipated. Much in the same way as Qamishli was insulated from Turkey’s recent October Peace Spring operation in northern/northeastern Syria, little is therefore expected to change in the city until one or all international powers in the northeast adjust their current strategies.
Security Overview

Urban Stability

Though plunged into uncertainty by the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. military support to the SDF and the subsequent Turkish-led Peace Spring operation in October 2019, Qamishli maintains the relative stability it has enjoyed for much of the Syrian conflict. Reports of security incidents are few, and clashes between local GoS- and SA-linked forces have been rare. To a great extent, this is because of the restrained nature of GoS-SA rivalry found across Syria’s north-east. Indeed, President Al-Assad’s 2012 decision to allow Kurdish political/military forces assume control over the region remains a strategic necessity if the GoS is to concentrate on more pressing military-political priorities elsewhere. Lines of territorial control between the GoS and the SA are therefore well-defined in Qamishli, and besides two short-lived clashes in 2016 and 2018, occasional flare-ups are swiftly contained. Extended confrontation between the two parties is even less likely now that Russian forces are in a position to enter the city and de-escalate any tensions.

Local stability is very much in the interest of Qamishli’s Kurdish majority administrators. The SDF has consistently presented itself as neutral in Qamishli, avoiding confrontation with GoS troops in order to prevent bombardment of SA territories. This approach is not only concerned with supporting SA strategy: GoS-linked troops stationed in downtown Qamishli represent a vital deterrent to any potential Turkish incursions, and have effectively insulated the city and nearby areas from any serious Turkish provocations. A further layer of protection has been provided by international military actors stationed near Qamishli Airport, where Russian forces are now reportedly building a permanent helicopter base after the areas on the city’s near periphery were abandoned by the U.S. military in October 2019. As such, Qamishli suffered limited shelling and few airstrikes compared to other major cities in northern Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa governorates during Operation Peace Spring. It was also excluded from areas to which joint Russian and Turkish patrols were assigned as part of the post-Peace Spring Russia-Turkey agreement, and was a notable omission from Turkey’s safe zone proposal of 22nd October 2019. Given a long-term Russian presence in Qamishli is expected, and providing a political agreement between the GoS and the SA remains on the table, the city is unlikely to experience sustained conflict for the foreseeable future.

Limited ISIS Threat

Balance between the various competing local and international parties in Qamishli city may provide for an overarching sense of stability. But it must be noted that ISIS remains a threat and has undertaken a variety of attacks in the city over the past eight to ten months. These range from targeted attacks against religious minority Christians (against which it practiced systematic persecution in areas previously under its control), to seemingly indiscriminate bombings which have killed dozens of civilians and (mainly) SDF-linked security personnel. As ever, the scale of the threat posed by ISIS is difficult to determine given such attacks are carried out by sleeper cells and seldom follow a readily discernible pattern. However, given ISIS’s most serious attacks were carried out when the SDF was preoccupied with Operation Peace Spring, it is reasonable to assume that future operations will be similarly opportunistic, occurring mainly during periods of SDF vulnerability.
Local Armed Actors

The post-Peace Spring agreement reached between Turkey and Russia required that PKK-affiliated elements of the SDF, namely, the YPG/YPJ, retreat to a minimum of 19 miles from the Syria-Turkey border. Since Qamishli is excluded from the related Russia-Turkey patrol arrangement, Russian and GoS troops have therefore assumed responsibility for ensuring that the YPG/YPJ jeopardizes neither the agreement nor the city’s stability. Notably however, neither Russia nor the GoS have insisted that all elements of the YPG/YPJ must leave the city and its countryside pursuant to the October agreement. In fact, local YPG/YPJ units have simply been absorbed into other SDF-linked security forces including the Internal Security Forces (Asayish), Kurdish intelligence services, and the regular police. To date, this has not been reported as a problem for the continuation of the Turkey—Russia deal.

With the YPG/J merged into local armed forces, Kurds therefore constitute the majority of SDF-linked security force membership, and operate alongside individuals from a variety of other ethnic and religious backgrounds. This includes Arabs and Arab tribes, as well as Christian and non-Christian Assyrians, Syriacs, Armenians, some of which are represented by their own dedicated militia (e.g. the Sutoro, and the Syriac Military Council). The composition of local SDF-linked forces therefore reflects Qamishli’s diversity to a greater extent than is often found across other major cities in the SA. Combined with their reputation for discipline and relaxed approach to local conscription, this likely explains why they are not regarded with any particular antipathy in areas under their control. At the time however, the majority ethnic or religious identity of SDF- (and GoS-) linked units in the city is regarded as something of a problem, insofar as these units tend to be well-connected with leading figures from corresponding identity groups. This can reportedly colour armed actor behaviour with ethnic and sectarian overtones and militate against social cohesion.

As is common across Syria, the NDF’s reputation in Qamishli is poor. Comprising majority Arab tribal units (mainly from the Tay tribe), the Sootoro, the Khansawat (an all-female unit), Syriac- and Armenian-majority militia, and political and military intelligence branches, residents regard the NDF as unprofessional, and strongly identify the group with exploitative smuggling networks. As shown in Figure 1, NDF forces control downtown central Qamishli and southwestern areas of the city, an area sometimes referred to as the ‘Security Square’. This encompasses key local infrastructure including the city’s international airport, the Nusaybin—Qamishli border crossing, and the Qamishli National Hospital. Of note, a Hezbollah presence is rumoured at the airport, where Iranian-linked border crossing, and the Qamishli National Hospital. Of note, a Hezbollah presence is rumoured at the airport, where Iranian-linked military personnel reportedly oversee the transfer of weapons into GoS areas and the entry of foreign GoS-allied actors.

Under ordinary conditions, cross-line movement restrictions apply only to rival armed groups and civilians are free to travel without restriction. As such, local borders drawn between the GoS and SA borders. As such, local borders drawn between the GoS and SA...
should be viewed less as military front-lines and more as administrative boundaries delineating the jurisdiction of their armed and political branches in the city. That said, when GoS- and SDF-linked forces do collide, clashes have tended to take place at checkpoints. Bombings and grenade attacks have also been reported in the vicinity of security HQ buildings, most recently on 20th April 2020, when unidentified assailants threw two grenades at the NDF HQ near the Al-Salam roundabout.¹²
Political Capital

PLATFORMS FOR POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Extensive network of commune-level administrations in SA areas provides strong local insight.
› Political status quo is unlikely to shift dramatically in the near- to medium-term.
› Civil society has developed relatively unhindered in SA areas since 2011/12.
› Co-operatives are a template for community-led programming.
› Presence of international militaries reduces the prospect of militarily enforced change of control.

IMPEDEMENTS TO POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Manipulation of ethnic/religious identities for political purposes remains a feature of local governance.
› Qamishli’s importance to SA political ambitions encourages top-down governance practices.
› SA authority and legitimacy is constrained by the GoS’s control over key levers of local power.
› Parallel GoS/SA governance bodies generate additional bureaucracy for civilians.
› Unknown whether SA governance systems will survive a NE Syria political settlement and how.
› Reduction in cross-border aid likely to reduce the richness of local civil society programmes.
In modern Syria, the Jazira roughly equates to the totality of Al-Hasakeh governorate. Before the First World War settlement determined the borders of Syria, Iraq and Turkey, it spanned territories that were later integrated into each of these countries.

**Governance**

In common with the historic character of the broader Jazira region to which they belong, Qamishli’s Arab, Assyrian, Kurdish, and Syriac communities maintain diverse forms of exchange with their neighbours in Turkey and Iraq. Successive authorities have struggled to govern such a heterogeneous population however, as forms of socio-economic organization common to people spread across rival countries have exposed the city to considerable foreign influence. In the modern era, the area’s character was first recognized as a challenge by authorities operating under the French Mandate (1923-46), many of which instituted land ownership reforms in order to co-opt a traditionally nomadic region into more sedentary lifestyles and reduce cross-border exchange. This largely succeeded in consolidating the Jazira’s population around agricultural and trading centres like Qamishli, but matters of security and political identity soon emerged as issues of existential concern in an independent Syria.

Confronted with regional movements for Kurdish autonomy, Syrian governments since the mid-20th century have responded mainly via a policy of containment, characterized by economic marginalization and the deliberate atomization of the local political landscape along ethnic and religious lines. Susceptible to greater foreign influence than most, Qamishli has therefore been a primary target of these efforts, and its governance has often been viewed primarily through a security-focused lens. Now that the SA is formally charged with running (much of) the city, reports suggest that it has similarly adopted GoS tactics. Firstly, because the GoS retains many of the essential power structures that enabled it to control Qamishli in the pre-war era, thereby impeding the full authority/legitimacy of the SA. And secondly, because the city is a lynchpin in the SA’s political project and a key piece of northeastern Syria’s political puzzle.

**Containment**

Under both Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad, practically all ethnic and religious groups were afforded some form of political representation in Qamishli. Rather than an indicator of a politically progressive city however, this was an example of the tactical repertoire needed to retain control over a diversity of identity groups with links to external actors. Indeed, parties belonging to the city’s various identity groups were tolerated largely because they provided a platform for state management and monitoring of local political action. Decision-making power was therefore channelled through loyalists placed within these structures, whilst trusted security operatives ensured limited deviation from central government policy by reminding the city’s population that power ultimately rested with Damascus. Besides ordinary forms of securitized political containment such as stifling unsanctioned political activism and arresting potential political opponents, this endeavour was so carefully calibrated in Qamishli that it involved preventing farmers from cultivating lucrative crops in order to suppress the area’s economic independence. Similarly, if middle class professionals wanted to access the benefits of professional association membership, they were required to join political parties under overt state influence. Such forms of control effectively silenced local activism and contained the prospect of (mainly Kurdish-led) anti-government mobilization for much of the second half of the 20th century.

In the early 2000s, Syrian government efforts to retain authority in Qamishli were seriously tested, and particularly when the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq enabled Iraqi Kurds to move towards their own semi-autonomous region under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). With a shared border and a variety of socio-economic connections, the KRG rekindled the aspirations of Syrian Kurds in Al-Hasakeh governorate and made some form of Kurdish mobilization in northeastern Syria increasingly likely. Ethnically-motivated violence at a 2004 football match between Arab- and Kurdish-linked teams in Qamishli proved to be the spark, and triggered large-scale anti-government demonstrations across both the city and Syria at large. Ultimately, pressure from state security agencies meant political parties in Qamishli showed little support for the protestors and the momentum was lost. However, the events revealed a secondary — and no less important — facet of longstanding GoS efforts to counter Qamishli’s vulnerability to adversarial foreign influence, namely, fostering Arab-Kurdish mistrust. The 2004
anti-government demonstrations were swiftly portrayed by the GoS as part of a U.S.-led conspiracy to extend its Iraqi endeavour, divide Syria, and disenfranchise Arabs. It therefore came as no surprise that the GoS reserved special thanks for the Arab Tay tribe in helping to suppress the Kurdish-led protest movement in Qamishli, that it failed to meaningfully engage with the demands of the protesters, and that it roundly condemned their actions.

This kind of identity-based divide and rule politics has been sewn into the region’s political fabric for decades. In Qamishli, it has ranged from the appointment of middle-class Arab tribal figures to local government leadership positions, to the assignment of trusted individuals to manage strategic facilities such as the nearby Rmelan oil field. Such tactics have long served as an effective means to orchestrate intercommunal rivalry, prevent community mobilisation, and dispense patronage, and have shown themselves to be extremely resilient to change. After overall jurisdiction was handed to the PYD in 2012, Qamishli was not thrown into disarray, and neither was it wholly surrendered by the government. Instead, the reach of the state was partially retained by maintaining many of the same pre-war systems of community management, often to the extent that Damascus remains the preeminent guarantor of the legal and practical aspects that govern people’s everyday lives. Though the SA may be well-established in Qamishli, the GoS retains numerous assets which greatly impede the independence, authority, and legitimacy of the SA despite the city’s ostensibly pro-Kurdish character.
Reach of the Syrian Government

In 2012, the GoS effectively surrendered the Jazira region to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). It did not fully withdraw from Qamishli’s urban centre however, opting to retain administrative networks which sit alongside those of the PYD and, since 2015, those of the SA. This lingering presence has not only created dual forms of governance in the city, whereby two parallel justice systems are in effect in SA and GoS territories, and in which civilians are required to make an array of duplicate transactions for governmental services. It has also been developed into a kind of remote central state management system through which GoS security and intelligence services control key levers of local power which limit the SA’s political autonomy. This takes physical form, such as the government’s management of Qamishli Airport and the city’s trade crossing with its Turkish sister town, Nusaybin. And it takes administrative form, such as the government’s retention of land registry control, which effectively annuls SA-designed legislation on land and property, and means that Damascus ultimately determines the legality of construction projects throughout Al-Hasakeh governorate. The summary effect has been to ensure that the behaviour of the SA is constrained largely to parameters defined by the GoS, and invites the question as to the extent of the SA’s actual governance capacity in Qamishli.
PYD/YPG-dominated Governance

Much like the Syrian government before it, the SA has laboured to govern a population that has long been organized along ethnic lines and has maintained cross-border connections. Many local Arab, Arab/tribal, Syriac, and Assyrian communities mistrust Kurdish-dominated rule in Qamishli, often because of the city’s historically manipulated political landscape. The SA is also challenged by Kurds whose loyalties lie in places other than the PYD, and which PYD-inspired politics have been unable to entice into the avowedly pro-Kurdish project. Lacking even unanimous support amongst Kurds and forced to contend with the GoS, the SA has resorted to reproducing some of the same methods of governance previously adopted by the GoS in order to sustain local legitimacy and compel public acquiescence. To do so, it has therefore introduced a local administration which is nominally independent, but which is in fact bound to the dominant forces within the SA and the SDF, the PYD and the YPG.

Leading PYD and YPG figures are therefore thought to play a pivotal behind the scenes role in Qamishli, working primarily to assure their respective political and military dominance. Reports indicate that the PYD and YPG constitute an unseen parallel structure which orchestrates the public-facing administrative bodies of the SA in accordance with their own interests. With the exception of the GoS-controlled Security Square, it is therefore this cadre which exercises most control over local security in Qamishli, and which appoints local officials to the city’s municipal councils and commune-level committees. Most appointees are reportedly chosen for their status as PYD members in order to buttress this centralized approach to governance, but it is also the case that Arabs, Assyrians, and Syriacs have also been handed mid-level leadership positions in the local administration. These individuals hail almost exclusively from groups that have either been traditionally overlooked by (or opposed to) the GoS, likely because the PYD intends to purchase their loyalty in order to improve its own local legitimacy. This latter point likely explains why Kurds from historically less prominent local families have also been selected for positions of power.

The securitization of local politics is a phenomenon present throughout northeastern Syria, but it is particularly pronounced in Qamishli for three main reasons. First, because the city’s proximity to the border heightens demand for firm administrative control in order to defend against any potential interference from the SA’s Turkish rivals. Second, because the reach of the Syrian government in the city is so deep that it presents a conspicuous challenge to the SA’s authority (and therefore the authority of the PYD and the YPG). And third, because Qamishli holds symbolic importance as a seat of Kurdish influence in Syria, and is the official headquarters of the PYD and the SDF. The municipal council and commune network is therefore particularly dense in Qamishli. Two municipalities have been established to govern Qamishli’s population (east and west, either side of the Security Square), and over 160 communes provide the SA with detailed information about developments across city neighbourhoods.

Such an expansive administrative network not only renders a great deal of insight into Qamishli’s local political landscape to help protect the integrity of the SA. It also provides a broad platform for the delivery of public services which, alongside preventing local violence, has been the primary means by which the SA has achieved a measure of public legitimacy in Qamishli (and elsewhere in the northeast). Communes play a critical role in this regard, assuming responsibility for water, power, and council services. Commonly led by individuals residing within the commune itself, they therefore possess a great deal of knowledge as to the performance of public services and local needs. It should be noted, however, that communes are not always afforded the resources necessary to fully address local the needs of their communities and are secondary to the overriding (and often highly securitised) strategic priorities of the SA and the SDF.

Civil Society

Operation Peace Spring’s impact on civil society was not so pronounced in Qamishli as it was in other parts of Al-Hasakah
As a result, local organizations were not forced to prioritize basic service provision to anything like the extent found in areas more directly affected by fighting and international agency withdrawals. For many of the reasons outlined in ‘Security Overview’, above, the likelihood that instability will impede local civil society and/or aid operations remains low at this time. Having benefited from a prolonged period of relative stability in which to develop the third sector, this helps consolidate much of the progress made on basic rights in Qamishli to date, including for minority groups whose cultural freedoms were previously suppressed under the GoS.

That said, some change is expected given the Iraq—Syria Yarouboyeh/Rabia crossing has been closed to international cross-border aid since January 2020. Many local organizations were heavily reliant on resources from this crossing, and its closure is likely to drive demand for material assistance from Syria’s industrialized west and entry points controlled by the GoS and its security partners. This is a potentially troubling development for internationally-sponsored services in SA-managed parts of the city. The UN stated it would cover shortfalls resulting from a reduction in international cross-border support in partnership with the GoS, but according to one source, supplies to Kurdish Red Crescent-supported health facilities in the city are now down by as much as 40%. Clearly, this is a greater problem in parts of the SA where public services are fewer and of poorer quality than those found in Qamishli. But it does mean that resources directed to the relatively rich civil society programme in the city may be increasingly directed towards more basic forms of assistance.

**Co-operative Enterprise Expansion**

The growth of cooperative community-led enterprise has been notable in Qamishli. As described in the Al-Hasakeh report in this series, cooperatives are celebrated as the backbone of the SA’s economic model and intend to realize the economic welfare of members through equal ownership, control, and management. Ultimately, their economic impact through employment and commerce is likely marginal. It is expected this is also the case in Qamishli given most local cooperatives are small-scale operations providing products and community services with limited commercial potential. For instance, around a third of the 30 co-operatives in Qamishli provide power generation services to city neighbourhoods on a non-profit basis. It must be noted, however, these initiatives are evidence of a strong culture of autonomous problem solving by local communities, and are often undertaken in partnership with commune or municipal level government and specialist professionals. Cooperatives also play an important role in improving community relations, curbing monopolisation, and preventing price inflation for commodities and services. This is certainly the case for the local health co-operative, Zanîn, which has worked to prevent the dumping of expired medicines into local markets and procured supplies for local health facilities.

**Suspicious Aid Spending**

Local researchers claimed that bogus aid projects were becoming increasingly common in Qamishli, many of which reportedly brought limited benefit to target populations and were instead designed to increase the wealth of SA and SDF-linked officials. Evidence for this claim was not found from other sources and must therefore be treated with caution. However, it was claimed that a number of suspicious projects had been undertaken in the city and nearby camps, and were identified owing to inflated project costs for various activities including camp support, urban lighting, health awareness, child spaces, and seminars and training courses. Where material goods and services are involved, the monopoly of traders, brokers, and contractors was cited as a key reason for reduced project efficiency. Particular attention was drawn to the supply of medical supplies and equipment to nearby camps, where the influence of SA-linked traders over the Simalka—Fishkabour crossing was claimed to increase commodity prices. As noted above, the termination of international cross-border support via Yaroubiyeh/Rabia may exacerbate this problem given it will drive increased reliance on the Simalka/Fishkabour route and GoS—SA crossing points.
Natural Capital

PLATFORMS FOR NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Agricultural economy of national strategic importance likely to command investment and protection.
- Rich agricultural tradition and adaptable agro-ecological conditions.
- Fairly industrialised agricultural sector largely unharmed by direct conflict-related damages.
- Pre-war oil extraction at nearby fields constituted roughly 5% of Syria’s GDP.
- Irrigation networks for farming are reportedly sufficient, albeit in need of modernisation.

IMPEDIMENTS TO NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Diminished pre-war agriculture indicates elements of the sector may be unsustainable ‘post-conflict’.
- Local landowners amongst hardest hit by conflict, many (esp. Christians) subsequently emigrated.
- Oil exploitation at Rmelan and Swaydieh oil fields at an estimated 20% of actual potential.
- Nearby oil fields lie at the heart of unresolved and ongoing internationalised rivalry.
- Concern over the sustainability of Qamishli’s aquifer given the overexploitation of groundwater in both Syria and Turkey.
Fires in cereal crops are not unusual near harvest time in Syria and may have started accidentally given 2019 saw especially high temperatures and high winds. There is nevertheless evidence that a significant proportion of the 85,000 hectares lost to fires in 2019.

The reasons for the region’s agricultural slowdown are debated, but likely boil down to some combination of over-exploitation of the soil, limited commercial viability of continued expansion, and Syria’s land reform measures.

Cotton is no longer produced in the same quantities as it was pre-war, nor indeed pre-2000. There are several reasons for this, mostly derived from high production costs in a context where central government subsidies have been withdrawn and necessary inputs are difficult to procure at fair prices.

Land

Though sometimes considered a dusty outpost in Syria’s far north-east, Qamishli has a climate similar to those found throughout coastal regions of the Mediterranean and falls within the historic ‘fertile crescent’. The city’s countryside therefore benefits from conditions sympathetic to the production of winter grains and legumes, whilst the local canal, well, and dam network supports a diversity of irrigated crops during hot dry summers. A historic association with nomadic pastoralism highlights the area’s suitability to livestock farming, but this activity has been massively eclipsed by industrialized crop cultivation over the past 70 years. The scale of these operations and their importance to the national economy was brought to international attention by a series of fires that ripped through wheat fields during the last throes of ISIS in the region.

And though the sector has demonstrated considerable resilience under conditions of conflict, it has struggled to meet pre-crisis production levels owing to a variety of factors common throughout rural Syria. Damage to the Syrian economy, a weakened enabling environment, and trade disruption have each exacted a heavy toll on Qamishli’s farming community, and it must also be recalled that producers have laboured against years of diminished support from the central government in a historically neglected part of the country. Local agricultural value chains are therefore likely to feel the effects of recent history for some time, but it must be acknowledged that — like the entire northeast — local agricultural systems present readily accessible short-term, and potentially high impact recovery opportunities, particularly in the form of agricultural input supply and the provision of technical and agribusiness expertise.

Agricultural Industrialization

Qamishli had been a largely transitory space until the 20th century. Few major settlements were ever established, and the area was occupied mainly by semi-nomadic peoples that made scant use of the land besides sheep and cattle grazing. When exiled Assyrians and (later) Kurds arrived however, they bought land from Bedouins and the administrations of French Mandate period and turned to farming to support the needs of their growing communities. Geared mainly towards local consumption, agricultural output was fairly modest in the first half of the 1900s. However, the advent of independent Syria in the post-World War II period saw both the private and public sector turn its attention to the agricultural potential of the northeast. Besides state investment in agricultural infrastructure, Qamishli was amongst the main destinations for wealthy — often ethnic minority — urban merchants, and the combined attention received from these two sources resulted in the large-scale deployment of industrial machinery, the development of extensive irrigation systems, and, relatedly, a significant increase in the proportion of locally cultivated land.

Qamishli’s agricultural expansion soon came to a halt much as it did in other parts of the northeast. However, the period had established the Qamishli countryside as a key node in Syria’s agricultural industry, and a major contributor to surplus production in a number of strategic crops, several of which, specifically wheat and cotton, were amongst Syria’s major pre-war exports. Qamishli has been synonymous with

Unloading wheat grain at a mill in Qamishli. Courtesy of Reuters.
**BOX 2: Rivers, Irrigation, and Upstream Supply**

Much like all cities along Syria’s northern border, Qamishli makes use of waters from rivers originating in Turkey. Tributaries of the Euphrates, primarily the Jaghjagh River, provide only a small amount of Qamishli’s water for domestic and commercial use however, with most water abstracted instead from the subsurface aquifer upon which the city rests. Groundwater in the Qamishli region was exploited from 1955 onward, when preparations were made for the construction of dams on the Jaghjagh River in Turkey. Soon after, a number of wells were drilled, mainly along river channels to compensate for the reduction in surface water flow. Over the years, the number and depth of wells increased, and by 2000, nearly 4,000 (mainly privately owned) wells were drawing from the aquifer beneath Qamishli.

The massive expansion of wells has compounded the challenges posed by Turkey’s unilateral pursuit of a comprehensive water management programme along its southern border. Iraq has voiced serious concerns about the impact of Turkish water projects downstream, and the overexploitation of the aquifer in both Turkey and Syria suggests that groundwater quality may have been affected. More worryingly, the suspension of abstraction from over 1,500 wells in the late 1990s did not result in a groundwater level rise or an increase in spring discharge in the Qamishli area. This suggests that Qamishli’s aquifer system cannot be sustained without controlled measures to secure freshwater replenishment from area’s further north, and it is conceivable that Turkish control over upstream supply could be used to undermine SA authority in Qamishli. This poses a challenge for agriculture in the Qamishli countryside given many farmers still use inefficient and out-dated surface irrigation methods and demands a regional (i.e. transnational) approach to groundwater management.

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**Rural Knowledge**

The city’s focus on wheat production is a reflection of the extent to which Qamishli’s untapped agricultural potential was unleashed by major investment, but it must be recalled that industrialized farming sits alongside skilled small-scale production concerned with local consumption. Founded on the agricultural endeavours of its early minority populations, there is a strong local tradition of self-sufficiency in the Qamishli countryside, and smallholder production under the SA is well-integrated into local food systems to ensure that nearby food markets can meet local demand. Wheat and other cereal products still dominate, but having been freed from the obligation to produce strategic crops by the GoS, a growing diversity of crops are now grown year round and there are numerous commune-level agricultural associations. It would be wise for international actors to consider the strong knowledge base amongst local farmers and local agricultural associations as one of Qamishli’s major community assets. Besides ordinary support to agricultural development by means of supplies and extension services, one area this might take shape is in the development of local agribusiness. For a city and nearby countryside so strongly associated with farming, Qamishli has relatively few small- to-medium industrial or commercial facilities which harness this key community asset, likely because of the pre-war emphasis on export-friendly strategic crops.

**Oil**

Concurrent with agricultural development, the discovery of oil at the Swaydieh and Rmeilan fields in the mid-20th century further cemented Qamishli’s importance in the northeast. Fossil fuel production in these fields contributed greatly to Syria’s pre-war domestic consumption, and brought such wealth to Qamishli that the area amusingly drew comparisons with Texas in the United States. The reality, of course, is that Qamishli is no Dallas. Output from Rmelan and Swaydieh has always been modest by Middle Eastern standards, and the fields were in fact experiencing a marked downturn in production even prior to...
the current crisis. Qamishli’s nearby oil and gas fields have nevertheless acquired increased significance in a context of ongoing conflict and associated national economic hardship, and as of Spring 2020, have the highest output of any Syrian oil fields.

A Key Strategic Asset

The small town of Rmelan, around 60km east of Qamishli, was the former headquarters of the state-owned Syrian Oil Company. Surrounding by high walls and barbed wire, the facility was a sign that revenues accrued from nearby oil fields were intended more for the GoS and its affiliates than residents of Qamishli and other nearby communities.\(^{30}\) These revenues were not insignificant: Oil contributed an estimated SYP 161 billion to Syria’s GDP in 2010 and had accounted for around 50% of Syria’s foreign exchange earnings for over 50 years pre-war.\(^{31}\) According to figures from the Syrian Ministry for Petroleum and Mineral Resources, pre-war production volumes at the Rmelan field and its sister site, Swaydieh, were equivalent to roughly 45% of Syria’s total productive capacity (200,000 barrels per day ((Bpd))). This meant the two sites constituted around 5.5% of Syria’s entire pre-war GDP. In terms of their immediate strategic and economic importance (i.e. notwithstanding reserves and potential), this marks Qamishli’s nearby oil fields as the most valuable in Syria at the time of writing.

Since 2012, Rmelan and Swaydieh have been under the control of Kurdish-dominated political and military bodies. First, by the YPG and PYD-linked local councils, and since 2015, by the SA, a small contingent of U.S. forces, and the SDF. Pre-war, crude oil was sent either via pipeline to Syria’s two main refineries on the outskirts of Homs and Baniyas, or to the Port of Tartus for export. However, a combination of conflict-related damage, political-military rivalry, and imperatives internal to the SA mean this has not been an option. Sabotage to the main pipeline linking the northeast to Homs forced the closure of all 1,300 wells at Rmelan in 2013, and prompted the PYD to move quickly to rehabilitate local oil infrastructure. Under the SA-linked ‘Distribution of Al-Jazira Fuel Company’ (known locally as the KSC),\(^{32}\) small refineries, temporary pipelines, and an array of makeshift extraction and processing facilities were established to restart production, and new distribution networks were formed that responded to conflict conditions on the ground.

Undertaken in partnership with the GoS, this work circumnavigated problems of downstream oil infrastructure to the extent that output from Rmelan rose to around 15,000 Bpd in mid-2015,\(^{33}\) around 16% of its pre-war capacity. More recent reports indicate production has since grown, albeit slowly owing to a combination of inadequate maintenance and conflict-related damage. As of 2019, Rmelan is running at an estimated 20,000 Bpd, around 22% of its pre-war capacity of 90,000 Bpd. Swaydieh is currently faring better, running at just over 50% of its pre-war capacity 116,000 Bpd output.\(^{34}\) A marked near-term increase in production at the two sites is assessed as improbable. Restrictive measures implemented by the EU and the U.S. government have made it extremely difficult for local operators to import the equipment needed to further rehabilitate local oil infrastructure. Moreover, foreign investors with a stake in these two fields have agreed to a force majeure on their contracts with the Syrian government given they would be subject to excessive penalties for working alongside the state-owned General Petroleum Company.

**BOX 3: Doubling Syria’s Proven Reserves?**

Referring to a 2009 study by Damascus University, an article published in the (U.S.) National Interest foreign affairs magazine claimed that undiscovered oil in northeastern Syria could increase the country’s proven reserves by 50%.\(^{35}\) This (and other articles on the subject) claim most of these undiscovered reserves are to be found mainly at the Rmelan and Swaydieh fields. If true, this would be a boon to Syria’s struggling economy, and would theoretically help accelerate recovery across the country. The reality, however, is that these rumours are based on a preliminary study that has yet to be confirmed by further investigation. Moreover, even if these reserves do exist, they would be difficult and costly to extract. Not only is Syrian oil generally of a poor quality, it is also extremely deep, and would require levels of investment that would deter investment from most oil companies. Reports that massive undiscovered reserves lie beneath the Qamishli countryside should therefore be treated with caution.
Socio-Economic Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Historic and continued importance as a cross-border trade hub.
- Strong commodity availability at local markets.
- Strategic importance of local oil trade likely to ensure Qamishli included in a political settlement.
- Dominance of strategic crops (esp. wheat) likely to provide enduring (albeit fluctuating) revenues.
- Agricultural sector has suffered limited conflict-related damage.
- Industrial/manufacturing agribusinesses are limited relative to the importance of local agriculture.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Internationalized rivalry over local oil assets has effectively frozen oil production levels.
- Restrictive measures prevent supplies needed for rehabilitation of local oil infrastructure.
- Syria-Iraq border trade monopolised by SA-linked contractors and traders.
- Commodity prices are high for residents and often fluctuate.
- Agricultural project sustainability will rely on careful assessment given pre-war sectoral decline.
In November 2013, the Asaysih arrested Ayed Hamada, the (now former) Deputy Director of Rmelan oil field on charges of collaboration with ISIS and other radical groups. That the Syrian government did nothing to protest showed the PYD and its affiliates were being left to administer oil facilities in the area.

Both Rmelan and Swaydieh were kept out of reach of the ISIS oil network, such as it was between 2013 and 2019.

Oil Exploitation

As Syria’s most productive oil fields, Rmelan and Swaydieh place Qamishli close to the epicentre of latent internationalized rivalry over one of Syria’s most prized strategic assets. ISIS-related security risks to local oil infrastructure are now much diminished, and fossil fuel facilities in the vicinity of Qamishli are now under full SDF and U.S. military control. This provides a key revenue stream for the SA and its affiliates, and has enabled the U.S. to reinforce its sanctions regime against Damascus. However, the GoS, Russia, and Turkey each have a vested interest in the oil found in the Qamishli countryside, making Rmelan and Swaydieh key factors in the eventual settlement of the situation in Syria’s northeast. Meanwhile, the sale of oil to both cross-line and cross-border customers continues as one of the most poorly kept secrets of the Syrian war. Cross-line sales have shrunk considerably following pressure from the U.S.-led coalition to stop the SA from trading with sanctioned private entities and the GoS, but the Syrian government remains a crucial partner for oil exploitation and some trade therefore continues. This highlights the complex nature of management at local oil fields, very generally summarised as under SA administration and U.S. military protection, but reliant on GoS expertise and national infrastructure. Meanwhile, international investors sit in the background, prevented from developing the resource owing to EU and U.S. sanctions. For the time being, the involvement of rival actors has stabilized production at around 20% of pre-war capacity, but any expansion at Rmelan and Swaydieh is unlikely for as long as the region’s prevailing political stalemate persists.

Hybrid Control and Management

Were it not for the involvement of the Syrian government, output from Rmelan and Swaydieh would likely be lower. Besides paying the salaries of specialist professionals to strengthen management practices and help restart production after conflict-related damages, the GoS has supplied essential equipment, spare parts, and ensured the delivery of materials critical for everyday operations. For those unfamiliar with the nature of GoS-SA rivalry, this might seem a peculiar strategy. It may be similarly striking that the KSC had supplanted the state-owned General Petroleum Company as the northeast’s primary oil distribution company as early into the conflict as 2013, and that the PYD had such authority over the industry at this time that it was free to arrest senior GoS-linked oil officials. However, these events fit neatly with the assessment that the GoS made an early strategic choice to become a client, investor, and background party in (what were then) PYD-managed oil facilities for two main reasons: A) to concentrate state military/political efforts elsewhere (e.g. to prioritize gas fields in central Syria which feed power stations for more populated urban centres), and; B) to retain domestic oil access by agreement with Kurdish-led actors which remained at least partially dependent on Damascus.

The result was to create a hybrid GoS-SA oil management structure that has maintained roughly the same form at Rmelan and Swaydieh since around 2012. The two fields are therefore administered by the PYD-linked KSC, with day-to-day operations overseen by dedicated Energy Committees at each site. Energy Committees manage both industry-standard oil infrastructure and makeshift
extraction and refining facilities, and each is reportedly led by an individual with close links to senior YPG/YPJ or PYD figures. Committee Directors are supported by two deputies, one of whom is appointed by the KSC, and the other by either the Al-Furat Company or the Syrian Oil Company, both of which are state-run entities falling under the GoS Ministry for Petroleum and Mineral Resources. The involvement of these senior GoS-linked representatives is an important partnership for the SA. Not only does it provide access to the experience and technical expertise necessary to maintain (and potentially expand) production at oil facilities at Rmelan and Swaydieh in the absence of foreign investors, it has also reportedly helped retain the integrity of much of the local workforce.

An International Scramble

In theory, the ‘dual’ administration of oil fields in the vicinity of Qamishli means that their reincorporation into the national fossil fuel network would be relatively straightforward. This is clearly of critical interest to the GoS: In a context of international sanctions and inconsistent supplies from neighbouring and partner countries, Syria’s increased access to oil (and oil revenues) will depend on the rate at which it is able to integrate then ramp up production at fields in the northeast. However, the sheer strategic value of Rmelan and Swaydieh preclude a straightforward political solution between the GoS and the SA, and any ongoing political negotiations relating to Rmelan and Swaydieh are undertaken in a broader geopolitical climate burdened by international rivalry and divergent objectives.

Shortly after the Turkish-led Peace Spring operation, President Erdogan proposed a safe zone which encompassed the Rmelan and Swaydieh fields. Erdogan’s plan included a proposal to use revenues procured from safe zone oil to help rebuild Syria’s north and resettle millions of displaced Syrians currently resident in Turkey. Neither Russia nor the U.S. have formally responded to this proposal to date, preferring instead to pursue their own path. For its part, Russia has signed an agreement with the GoS which grants it access to the Syrian energy sector, of which Rmelan and Swaydieh would obviously represent an important part. The Russian military is now stationed in Qamishli, is building a base north of Al-Malikiyeh, and is known to have carried out (and attempted) patrols in areas close to Rmelan. Meanwhile, the U.S. military presence in Syria’s northeast purports to protect the SDF’s control over facilities like Rmelan and Swaydieh, and President Trump has said that he wants a U.S. oil company to enter the region to develop the resource. However, given the fairly modest size of proven reserves, sanctions, and the massive infrastructure rehabilitation challenge, it is unlikely that any company would find investment in the area’s oil facilities commercially viable at this time.

Cross-line/Cross-border Oil Sales

When sold cross-line to the GoS, crude oil from Rmelan and Swaydieh is either refined locally at small-scale makeshift facilities managed by the local Energy Committee, or is shuttled to GoS-run refineries in Banias (Tartous) or Homs via truck or GoS-held pumping stations. Cross-line distribution is primarily managed by subsidiaries of the conglomerate Al-Qaterji Company, run by the U.S. and EU sanctioned-businessman, Hussam Al-Qaterji. Given Al-Qaterji’s close links with the upper echelons of the Syrian government and his standing arrangement with powerful SA-linked figures (most likely in the inner circles of the YPG/YPJ or PYD), Al-Qaterji vehicles enjoy unimpeded cross-line access and are never stopped at SA/GoS checkpoints. At present, the value of cross-line sales are difficult to determine. In 2016, it was thought that as much as half of the oil produced in the vicinity of Qamishli was consumed in GoS- and SA-held areas. More recently however, the U.S. is known to have clamped down on the SA’s use of Al-Qaterji, and since August 2019, cross-line sales are thought to have reduced dramatically.

A reduction in cross-line sales suggests that oil produced by Rmelan and Swaydieh is now sold in growing quantities to the KRG and, perversely, to Turkey. Indeed, oil from the two sites plays a critical role in sustaining the civil and military arms of the SA, and it is unlikely that the loss in cross-line sales to the GoS has simply been swallowed by the SA’s leadership. Various unnamed sources within the KRG and U.S. military have been quoted as claiming that

38 Typically, crude is trucked for pipeline transit from the GoS-held T2 station, in Deir-ez-Zor governorate.
39 Al-Qaterji is a member of the Syrian Parliament and manages businesses in partnership with President Al-Assad’s cousin, Rami Makhlouf. Born in Ar-Raqqa and now living in Damascus, he uses family members to serve as leading figures in his various subsidiary companies, and is known to have established a militia that fought alongside the YPG in Afrin and participated in the siege of Aleppo in 2016.
cross-border trade to the KRG is extensive, perhaps as much as 6,000-8,000 Bpd, and that much of this relatively cheap fuel was ultimately sold or smuggled into Turkey.\(^{41}\) Dozens of trucks from Rmelan and Swaydieh reportedly cross into the KRG each day, and a makeshift pipeline runs across the southern bridge of the Simalka/Fishkabour crossing near Al-Malikiyeh (Dêrik).\(^{42}\) For the time being, it is unlikely that trade with Iraq and Turkey will slow. U.S. military forces in northeastern Syria depend on supply lines transiting Simaka/Fishkabour, meaning a continued U.S. presence effectively guarantees the continuation of the cross-border oil trade. This is positive for Qamishli, as the SA’s loss of the Simalka/Fishkabour crossing to the GoS would likely redirect oil revenues, harm the local economy, and bring an end to a significant proportion of foreign stabilization funding.

**Trade and Livelihoods**
Qamishli’s proximity to the Turkish and Iraqi borders means it has traditionally been an important regional import and export hub. Its role in this regard has reportedly been strengthened by current conflict conditions and the SA’s control over the city and the wider region, giving rise to a combination of new, growing, or adapted types of formal and informal business and trade. To some extent, these new economic models have offset the depletion of revenues from local agriculture, which had been suffering even prior to the current conflict owing to a combination of state neglect, reduced subsidies, and an extended drought period. However, it has also created a class of predominantly Kurdish business figures that have accrued increased wealth through the exploitation of elite connections, relaxed business regulations, and access route manipulation. This, in turn, has resulted in a reported increase in local corruption and has implicated the elements of the SA and the SDF in practices which undermine the prosperity of Qamishli’s general population.

**Trade Networks**
The distribution of goods and services to and from Qamishli takes place across multiple axes and is both cross-line and cross-border in form. Pre-war, three cross-border routes were integral to Qamishli’s markets. Two between Syria and Iraq (Simalka/Fishkabour and Ya’rroubiyah/Rabia), and another, between Syria and Turkey (Qamishli/Nusaybin). The Syria—Iraq routes will be recognizable as key cross-border aid entry points, but each has been variously used for both formal and informal trade (i.e. smuggling) throughout the conflict. This is equally the case for cross-line supply routes, with Manbij being a key node in the network supplying Qamishli with goods from Aleppo and Turkey (and vice versa).

The movement of goods is big business in Qamishli, and brokers, mediators, and contractors working out of the city are amongst the city’s wealthiest figures. As is common throughout Syria, their activities are commonly undertaken in partnership with the ruling authorities, especially the SA, which has enabled some individuals to develop monopolies over the distribution and sale of certain items, most notably construction materials, medicines, and imported foodstuffs. Cross-border, much of this is concentrated at the SA-managed Simalka and Yaroubiyeh crossings, but is also undertaken with the involvement of the Turkish authorities and the GoS at the Qamishli/Nusaybin crossing even though this route has been officially closed.
since 2012. Like the sale of oil from Qamishli’s nearby oil fields to Turkey via the KRG, the contributions made to Qamishli’s markets by Turkish trade stand in stark contrast to the current impasse over a formal Syria—Turkey aid crossing.

Although such activity has been a major contributor to market functionality and, in essence, a continuation of pre-war patterns of trade, it was described as exploitative in the current context. Political Capital, above, noted the ways in which existing trade networks can negatively impact aid programming in Qamishli and the wider northeast, drawing attention to claims that figures involved in trade are generally unscrupulous as regards the duties they impose, the quality of items they import, and the prices ultimately applied in local markets. Though most items may therefore be available in Qamishli, they are often expensive and their prices can be unstable. Moreover, the activities undertaken with proceeds from trading operations do little to enhance local socio-economic conditions. A large proportion of trader revenues are reportedly either sent abroad or locked up in property investment portfolios, whilst an increase in the number of money exchange and remittance services in Qamishli has been linked to brokers and traders seeking to maintain a street-level business front in order to profit from conflict-related currency fluctuations. In the main, those involved in these activities were identified as coming from both old and new Kurdish money as Qamishli’s wealthy Arab and Christian landowners were hit hardest by the depreciation of the agricultural economy and have fewer connections to the SA.

Public Sector Livelihoods

Besides trading, contracting and brokerage, a variety of important activities have emerged which have arguably less questionable socio-economic effects. One such area is public sector employment, in which thousands of opportunities have been created in Qamishli through the civil, military, and security branches of the SA. Civil service with the GoS had long been an important source of employment in the city, and part of the recent growth in public sector work in Qamishli can be explained as resulting from the duplication of various pre-war governance functions. However, it is also true that the strategic importance attached to Qamishli by the SA and the SDF has meant that a diminished GoS administrative presence has been more than offset by the ascendance of SA-linked institutions. It is also worth noting that employment with the SA tends to pay better in several mainstream professions than service with the GoS. For instance, in an effort to attract staff to support the implementation of the SA-wide curriculum, teachers in SA-run schools are reportedly paid more than their GoS counterparts.\textsuperscript{43}
Social Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Strong culture of cross-border exchange amongst Kurdish and other minority communities.
- Mutual dependencies in business have long engendered intercommunal personal bonds.
- Syrian minorities have a platform for greater cultural expression than in the pre-war era.
- Intercommunal rivalry is rather more historic and political than it is bloody.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Kurdish/Arab differences have been (and remain) a target for sowing identity-based political discord.
- Increased power and wealth of Kurds has fuelled Arab resentment, especially in the countryside.
- Long-term Kurdish domination may reduce sense of belonging and prompt departures of non-Kurds.
- Tribes are politically split, and have been recruited to either support or sow local discord with the SSC.
Identity
Before the conflict, Qamishli’s population was fairly balanced. Around a third were Arab, another third Kurdish, and the remainder of the population derived from the city’s various minorities, predominantly Assyrian, Syriac, and Armenian Christians. Although Qamishli has not witnessed anything like the same intensity or frequency of conflict found elsewhere in Syria, the ethnic composition of the city’s population has nevertheless undergone substantial change. Local sources estimate Kurds now comprise roughly half of the city’s population, Arabs 45%, and Christians just 5%. Explanations for this change are rooted in Qamishli’s recent history as much as they are in current political-military dynamics, and combine to tell a story of a city where intercommunal tensions sit alongside forms of everyday exchange founded on a common agricultural heritage. As a defining characteristic of the northeastern region, Arab-Kurdish relations clearly dominate this discussion. However, it must also be recalled that the very creation of the SA has allowed for the expression of minority identities previously suppressed by pre-war GoS policy, not to mention a greater — yet still constrained — role for women in the public space.44

Kurdish-Arab Relations in the 20th Century
Causes of Arab-Kurdish rivalry are usually couched in terms of competition over oil, foreign (mainly Western) interference, and the contrary ambitions of indigenous Kurdish and Arab leaders. Each such conclusion has been (and remains) variously valid. Yet the chief reason is that the Kurds are a landlocked people surrounded by neighbours who have spent decades trying to subjugate or assimilate Kurdish culture. Though Kurds may have found some safety from violent persecution in northern areas, the battle to express their basic rights and defend their culture has been an enduring feature of their experience in Syria. As the country’s ‘Kurdish capital’, Qamishli has been amongst the focal points of this struggle, and though this is an important thread for much of what follows, it is first important to emphasize that sectarianism is not the only defining feature of Arab-Kurdish relations in the area.

At the level of everyday interaction, differences between Kurds and Arabs in Qamishli are not fundamentally antagonistic, and there was seldom direct confrontation between the two communities until the 21st century. Mutual dependencies and the shared experience of living in a largely marginalized rural area fostered an atmosphere of coexistence and drove diverse forms of interpersonal and economic exchange. Local sources therefore describe an area in which good neighbourliness is still generally found, and in which Arabs commonly speak Kurdish and intermarriage is the norm. Of course, the Arab-Kurdish relationship has not been without its problems, and particularly towards last century’s end, when the Kurdish independence movement gathered pace and economic hardship highlighted income disparities between Kurdish families and their Arab peers.45

The Iraq War and the 2004 Riots
In 1998, the Syrian government withdrew its support to the PKK. This, combined with the death of Hafez Al-Assad in 2000, emboldened a new wave of Kurdish political activism across Syria’s northeast. With the country’s rural economy weakening however, these events provided fertile ground for the GoS to lay the blame at the door of wealthy Kurds in cities like Qamishli, which it claimed were pursuing a separatist plot that would cause further damage and disenfranchise Arab populations. This stirred up some resentment at the beginning of the 21st century, but it was not until the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) was recognized in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi constitution that Qamishli became embroiled in serious Arab-Kurdish rivalry. A pro-Kurdish demonstration was shut down in Qamishli in March 2004, but this was a mere pre-cursor to events several days later, when fans from a visiting Arab football team arrived at the Qamishli stadium brandishing knives and chanting their support for Saddam Hussein’s notoriously anti-Kurdish politics. Fights broke out when local Kurdish supporters replied in support of the U.S. military, and several people were killed in the ensuing violence.46
Social Capital

Local sources explain that pre-war, the number of local Kurds that supported Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK, and therefore, the PYD, was relatively low compared to those that favoured the politics of the Kurdish Democratic Party, the Barzani family, and the KRG of Iraq. It has since become evident that the riots in Qamishli were orchestrated by the Syrian government. Indeed, the GoS had been inciting anti-Kurdish sentiment amongst local Arabs for some time prior to the incident, likely because it expected it would come under pressure from Kurdish parties following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the legitimacy this would lend to claims for Kurdish autonomy on Syria’s northern and northeastern borders. Before the riots, state security forces had reportedly armed Arab tribes in and around Qamishli, and had frequently turned a blind eye to acts of violence carried out by these groups against Kurds and Kurdish-owned property. Clearly, the combined impact of these events compounded mistrust between local Kurds and Arabs, and became so pronounced that it developed into a palpable feature of community relations not only in poorer Arab-majority villages, but also in Qamishli’s more ethnically balanced urban centre.

Kurds and Arabs Under the Self-Administration

With the onset of war in Syria, parts of Qamishli outside the security square are now politically, culturally, economically and demographically dominated by Kurds. As touched upon in Political Capital, above, there has been a move to integrate some of the city’s more historically marginalised groups into the SA administration. Similarly, and as noted in Security Overview, there have also been attempts to diversify the composition of the SA’s armed forces by inviting Arabs and other minorities to join the SDF (with the promise of a regular salary). This is said to have had only a marginal positive impact on intercommunal relations however, and local sources were eager to draw attention to an enduring sense of Kurdish-Arab mistrust.

The extent to which mutual suspicion overshadows everyday interactions between Arabs and Kurds is difficult to gauge, but a general feeling of injustice amongst Arabs was reported, and particularly in majority-Arab towns in the Qamishli countryside. Kurdish domination of many domains of public life have aggravated these sentiments, exposing some communities and neighbourhoods to GoS-led efforts to incite Arab resentment of the SA and to recruit Arab tribesmen into destabilizing the SDF. This phenomenon is apparently less pronounced in Qamishli than it is in other SA-held areas with stronger Arab representation (e.g. Ar-Raqqa), and it is likely the city’s history of Arab-Kurdish coexistence will limit the prospect for local sectarian concerns to spin out of control. Even so, local support for the SA is not unanimous across ethnic groups, and the impact of aid and development projects must be carefully assessed to ensure they do not inflame local political differences.

Tribe and Clan

Both Kurds and Arabs maintain tribal affiliations in the Qamishli area, but it is arguably a stronger source of self-identification for local Arabs than Kurds, most of whom are reportedly united by their support for the Kurdish-led project in Syria despite their own internal political differences. Though most (not all) Arab tribes are broadly opposed to Kurdish domination of Qamishli and the SDF’s monopoly on violence, many have nevertheless acquiesced to living under the SA. This much is reflected by the striking fact that several Arab tribes in and around the city have both pro-GoS...
and pro-SA ‘factions’ which follow their own dedicated sheikhs. This indicates that whilst elements within many local tribes can be ‘turned’ against the SA, this is counterbalanced by alternative elements which demonstrate acceptance of the SA and the SDF for the benefits this has afforded. Major tribes present in the Qamishli area that cannot be regarded as either wholly pro-SA or pro-GoS include the Jabour, Bakara, and the Adwan. The two exceptions to this are the Shammar, who have a long history of coordination with Kurds in the region and whose militia generally works alongside the SDF, and the Tay, which is fiercely loyal to the Syrian government and supplies many local NDF fighters to Qamishli.

BOX 4: Local Christian Differences

The Christian population of Qamishli is an excellent example of how polarizing the current conflict has been within, as well as between communities. Little serious fighting has taken place in Qamishli, but two discernable Christian factions have nevertheless emerged and fall on either side of the region’s political front-line. The most prominent such actor on the Syrian government’s side is the Sootoro, which espouses neither separatism, independence, nor special status for Christians, and instead takes the line that the interests of the wider population are harmed by the ethno-centrism of the SA's project. An armed group that has its origins in the Popular Committee movement, the Sootoro was amongst the first auxiliary pro-government forces to emerge in the earliest phases of the conflict. Once part of the NDF, the group now claims it is an independent organization, albeit one which reportedly receives some limited financial support from the Syrian government and is said to be on good terms with Russia and Iran/Iranian-linked groups.

The Sootoro’s respect for the sovereignty of the Syrian government is not shared with other local Christian organizations. For instance, the local Syriac Union Party has opposed a return to Damascus-based rule since it became one of the SA's founding parties, and has subsequently worked to promote Syriac culture in ways that were impermissible under the GoS. This is a crucial point when it comes to explaining the difference of opinion amongst Qamishli’s Christians: Those who were prevented from the fullest expression of their culture have tended to support the SA, whereas those that have been disenfranchised by the ascent of mainly Kurdish business owners have sided with the GoS. Today, most of Sootoro’s funding is secured from Christians exiled from Qamishli, many of whom were wealthy landowners forced out by a combination of declining local agriculture and the SA’s control over trade access routes.

48 Though based in Qamishli, the Sootoro has extended itself elsewhere on occasion, most notably by undertaking anti-ISIS operations in partnership with the Syrian government and others between 2015-17. In addition, the Sootoro, has served as a voluntary fire service, a relief provider, and a local emergency response actor.
Human Capital

PLATFORMS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Strong agricultural tradition and extensive experience amongst the rural population in farming and agricultural trade.
› Relatively sizable middle-class, evidenced by the large number of civil service employees.
› Democratic rights and freedoms have been more easily pursued in the SA.
› Space to mobilise women and pursue women’s political and economic empowerment.
› Skilled and experienced aid and development workforce.

IMPEDIMENTS TO HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Traditional interpretations of gender roles persist in both rural and urban areas.
› Female economic empowerment has lagged behind the SA’s public commitment to gender equality.
› Enforcement of Kurdish-inspired curriculum may drive some of the brightest youth from the city.
› Overcrowding in GoS-run schools likely dilutes teaching quality and educational outcomes.
Education
As in other parts of the SA, the region's Kurdish-inspired curriculum has been a subject of ongoing debate in public schools. New curricula were first introduced to early years education by the SA in early 2015, and by 2017, the system had been extended to all levels of compulsory education. 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 Qamishli, particularly 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 school system. However, it is also the case that the SA has taken steps to ensure that its own curriculum is taught in minority schools, and that no Syrian government curriculum is delivered in areas under its control past early years education. In 2018, it ordered the Asayish to close several Syriac Christian and private schools in Qamishli that pursued the Syrian government curriculum, and would not permit them to reopen until they agreed to switch their instruction to the SA's new approach.49

Curricula and Overcrowding
The Kurdification of the local education system has been a matter of dispute for many city residents, particularly Christians and Muslim Arabs, who do not conceive of their future in a Kurdish-dominated society. Many residents are also concerned that SA-issued qualifications are unrecognized in government-held Syria or abroad, and grant access only to the northeastern employment market and SA-run public universities. Though there is one such tertiary education institute in Qamishli, the University of Rojava, local sources report that a significant number of parents anxious over their children's prospects elect to sidestep the independent system implemented by the SA. Schools inside GoS-held areas of the city are therefore heavily oversubscribed, with some operating at 5-times their ordinary capacity.50 Most local university students similarly opt to study outside of the SA, preferring either the city's GoS-recognized University of Córdoba or tertiary institutions in Al-Hasakeh. The SA has sought to curb this behaviour by prohibiting taxis and buses from transiting SDF checkpoints when serving as school transport. This has proven largely ineffective however, as parents living as far away as SA-run Amuda and Ras Al-Ayn still accept the cost and inconvenience of sending their children to Qamishli's GoS-run schools. Clearly, this places even greater pressure on the local GoS education authority, which has responded by squeezing two school shifts into a day, and cancelling many extra-curricular and recreational activities like music, art, break periods, and sports. With some government buildings having also been adapted into school facilities to help accommodate the numbers, it is clear that mistrust of the SA school system is significant. Indeed, pupil numbers in SA-administered schools in the city have reportedly shrunk considerably, suggesting that dissatisfaction with the SA's current approach to education is so great as to have driven many residents from the city altogether.

49 Enab Baladi (2018), Why did the Kurdish “Self-Management” close the Syriac private school in eastern Al-Hasakeh?
50 As stated by a GoS-run school director in Qamishli, here: France 24 (2018), Syria parents spurn Kurd schools over university fears.
**Women’s Participation**

As is well known, the SA has instituted an agenda which enshrines various provisions concerned with advancing women’s economic and political participation.\(^{51}\) 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 given space to strengthen the role of women in civic life. This has resulted in increased awareness amongst Qamishli’s women that entering the public sphere plays an important role in gaining equal citizenship, and local women’s organizations report there has been an increased proportion of women involved in Qamishli’s civic life.\(^{52}\) Sadly, it is also reported that local gender-sensitive societal norms, customs, and traditions obstruct women’s empowerment in the city, and particularly in the economic domain. Civil society organizations concerned with women’s issues nevertheless have the freedom to pursue their work in Qamishli unimpeded, and they are committed to breaking down barriers to women’s economic empowerment by a variety of means, including the pursuit of non-traditional job opportunities, raising community awareness, and advocating for legal provisions which give flexible employment options, and which account for their multiple roles in society and the family.

**Obstacles to Women’s Economic Empowerment**

Beliefs surrounding gender roles in Qamishli have been cited as amongst the primary barriers to women’s participation in the local workforce. A lack of trust in women’s ability to achieve in employment feeds into a lack of confidence amongst women, and a reluctance to engage in work or livelihood-related development projects which challenge social norms. Evidently, this can restrict women’s involvement in the workforce to professions which are locally regarded as ‘normal’ for women, many of which do not afford the opportunity for economic independence. This much is obvious in the apparent contradiction found in perceptions of women’s roles in rural and urban Qamishli. Whereas women may find it difficult to secure work in the city, they have historically worked alongside men in rural industries and agriculture and are considered to have proven themselves in the hard labour associated with this domain.

Another challenge lies in the fact that work towards women’s empowerment in the city is still fairly young. Until 2011, gender-focused civil society work in the city was limited only to the GoS-linked Women’s Union, and most projects were focused on training women for traditional professions. The number of local organizations working in the area has of course grown under the conditions presented to civil society work by SA control, but active organizations tend not to push far beyond the existing template for women’s empowerment work. This is partly a financial resource-related constraint, insofar as funding for gender work is reportedly low. However, it is also likely a symptom of the challenging economic conditions present in the city. Women seeking employment in Qamishli likely find it difficult largely because the city’s poor economic performance means there are simply few available opportunities.
Physical Capital

PLATFORMS FOR PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Local infrastructure has been largely undamaged by conflict.
› Public and private initiatives help fill infrastructure maintenance gaps.
› SA is likely reticent to spend on physical infrastructure given ongoing political uncertainty.
› Existing GoS/SA coordination on strategic infrastructure (e.g. oil) may enable further coordination.

IMPEDEMENTS TO PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Budgetary limitations mean physical infrastructure rehabilitation can be neglected/short-termist.
› Inconsistent public power network increases reliance on private or civil society initiatives.
› Contracting and tender processes for hard infrastructure projects are reportedly rife with corruption.
› Material supplies are subject to elevated costs owing to trader monopolies and cross-line controls.
Built Environment

Qamishli has been fortunate to have avoided the worst of the fighting in Syria and shows few physical scars from the conflict. Damage levels are therefore much lower when compared with other large SA-held cities like Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh. This is fundamentally positive, and means that infrastructure-related challenges in the city are less concerned with extraordinary reconstruction, and rather more related to ordinary maintenance. However, it is also the case that several elements of Qamishli’s built environment are crumbling owing to neglect and the repeated application of short-term remedial measures. This is most evident in the poor state of the road network within Qamishli and its nearby countryside, which has now been in a state of decline for several years. The consistency of the local power grid is also a longstanding problem, and has driven increased use of private generator systems. Residents often take matters into their own hands to address such basic infrastructure problems, but this seldom results in the kind of sustainable solutions required for some of the city’s more dilapidated infrastructure. In some cases, such as with the power network, local infrastructure problems transcend the capacity and jurisdiction of the local authorities and require coordination with the GoS. Finally, where private actors are engaged to carry out hard infrastructure projects, there is concern that tendering processes lack transparency and systems of patronage reduce project efficiency.

Power Grid

Qamishli is around 70km west of the gas-fed Swaydieh Power Station. This station was designed to supply the majority of power to Al-Hasakeh governorate, but has not operated at anything like full capacity in recent times as the local electricity network infrastructure is malfunctioning. Indeed, no meaningful remedial works had been carried out on the local power grid since the beginning of the conflict until late-2019, when the Turkish-led intervention into northern Syria targeted a variety of strategic infrastructure facilities across the region. Damage to transmission stations and overhead cables throughout northern Al-Hasakeh prompted the Hasakeh Electricity Company to undertake repairs in the area, including in the Qamishli countryside. Work to repair the main turbine at Swaydieh station was also completed in March 2020, but observers are skeptical that this will have a noticeable impact on currently inconsistent power services in residential areas. Of note, power is supplied consistently to strategic facilities in the city, in both areas of GoS and SA control.

At present, the city power network is unable to withstand elevated usage periods, especially during winter, and is known to breakdown frequently. When fixes are carried out, they are often temporary. Street lighting does not work at night in many areas. Diesel-powered private generator systems have been amongst the main responses to the inconsistency of the national power grid, with around 400 of these systems estimated to be in use in the city in 2017. These are often costly, which is reflected in the fact that there are at least ten large generator systems in Qamishli that have been jointly installed by communities working together as co-operatives. These systems serve at least 150 households each and not only provide more consistent services, but also spread the cost to an extent that some poorer families receive free power.

Crumbing Road Networks

Qamishli’s roads and bridges are reportedly in a poor state of repair. This includes routes connecting the city to the nearby countryside and high volume thoroughfares. Some reports describe routes as so degraded that frequent road users face heightened annual vehicle maintenance costs, which is a particular issue for drivers, truckers, and heavy machinery users who rely on Qamishli’s roads for their livelihoods. A sizable proportion of the SA’s budget for Jazira was dedicated to civil engineering and roadworks in 2019, with officials claiming that a regional assessment had been undertaken and that new strategic routes were planned. In Qamishli, these were to be built between the city and its airport, as well as between Qamishli and other major northeastern cities like Amuda. Some work has been completed since this time; eastern and western entrances to the city were broadened, and the Al-Antariya neighbourhood was...
connected with the city centre. But this funding has not resulted in more permanent repairs to the many minor problems which combine to result in a poor overall network.

Neighbourhood-level communes have worked with their corresponding municipal councils to identify priority areas and have presumably fed into planning for the Jazira level budget. Unwilling to wait for slow moving local authorities to take action however, civilians sometimes take matters into their own hands and perform ad-hoc repairs. Though these are obviously short-term fixes, they are little worse than the work undertaken by municipal labourers. Roads patched in recent years have lasted no more than 12 months in some cases, and whilst the municipality has blamed this on flooding, even normal rainfall is reported to damage roads owing to the poor quality of materials used and badly planned excavation works.
Civil Engineering: Contracting

Both the GoS and SA departments engage international partner organizations to implement public infrastructure projects in areas under their administration. These partners hire local contractors and implementing organizations to deliver the work, yet reservations were raised as to the transparency of the hiring process and costs of implementation. Qamishli is not an especially industrialized city, and has little in the way of specialised manufacturing facilities. It therefore relies on external suppliers for many types of construction materials and specialist equipment, most of which is transited either from Aleppo or Damascus (via Menbij and Deir-ez-Zor respectively), or from northern Iraq via the Simalka crossing. Whether moving cross-line or cross-border however, the transit of construction materials into Qamishli via these routes exposes them to points of entry monopolised by the GoS and the SA and their preferred business associates.

This is not the only way in which foreign support to Qamishli’s infrastructure may be hampered by the mechanics of the local and regional economy. Local sources report that both GoS and SA departments conduct sealed envelope-style tender processes for infrastructure contracts, likely as a deliberately opaque method to award contracts to businesses affiliated with local political and security figures. As in Political Capital, above, it was claimed that the majority of contracts were determined in this way and that the influence of political and military actors in the determination of project spending should be a consideration for foreign aid programming.