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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FIGURE 1. Tell Abiad city
FIGURE 2. Northern Syria
Introduction

On a visit to the Balikh Valley in 1946, renowned archeologist, Sir Max Mallowan, offered a scathing assessment of the region’s importance. Though he acknowledged its apparent self-sufficiency, it was, said Mallowan, the kind of “marsh to which a Roman legionary might well have been relegated with a grant of land in return for long and loyal service by an ungrateful government”. Sitting in the upper reaches of those now barren marshlands, Tell Abiad has been administered much as Mallowan described for most of Syria’s recent history. Left largely to its own devices, it has moved slowly with the times, seldom receiving concerted investment from the state, and even less in the way of visits from notable dignitaries. In many respects, Tell Abiad has therefore been the archetypal provincial backwater since the formation of the modern Syrian state; an unremarkable place toiling quietly in agriculture, and possessing little which might enliven the upward mobility of its people.

The current conflict, however, has thrust Tell Abiad onto the geopolitical stage on more than one occasion. Eighteen months under ISIS featured the displacement of thousands, and though Arabs and Turkmens were among those to flee, it was minority Kurds and Christians which bore the brunt of ISIS rule. From the outset, the city’s minarets announced that both must leave or be killed, and upon the departure of all but a few, ISIS undertook the looting and destruction of their property. Displaced Arabs from the then ISIS strongholds of Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa were resettled in the abandoned homes, and the city became notorious as a transit point for the entry of goods and fighters that helped fuel the ISIS proto-state.

ISIS’s terrible dominion ended when the SDF moved into the city in mid-2015, but this too provoked a wave of displacement and massive local reorganisation. Fearing retribution, Arabs that had endorsed the expulsion of the Kurds both prior to and during ISIS control fled the advancing Kurdish forces. In their place, a broadly representative council was formed, and in a radical change for a traditionally conservative community that had known only deeply patriarchal shades of Islamism since 2012, a 27 year old female co-mayor was appointed under the then cantonal authorities of the YPG. The spectre of ISIS remained in the form of intermittent bombings, but life steadily returned to something closer to normal under the SA and the SDF: unexploded mines were cleared, streets were cleaned, and shops reopened. American military support helped insulate these authorities for four years, but a Kurdish-dominated politics was never sustainable in a city that remained overwhelmingly Arab, and whose non-Kurdish tribes had grown weary of ‘Kurdification’ and perceived abuses imposed by SDF forces.

It was for this reason that, after months of Turkish pressure, Tell Abiad was targeted as the beachhead for a Turkish-led advance to expand President Erdogan’s so-called safe zone in northern Syria. Described as the “achilles heel of the Syrian Kurdish belt”, an ostensibly coordinated American military withdrawal in October 2019 precipitated a decisive advance by Turkish forces and Turkish-linked Syrian National Army (SNA) proxies operating under the banner of ‘Operation Peace Spring’. These forces met little in the way of local resistance, and among the forces to enter Tell Abiad as part of the Peace Spring offensive were Arab tribal militia comprising formerly exiled Tell Abiad residents seeking to reestablish their status and return to their homes.

Within a month, these and other SNA militia had effectively carved out petty fiefdoms in an area reaching 30km into Syrian territory from the Turkish border, and spanning from Tell Abiad in the west, to Ras Al-Ain in the east. An agreement between Russia and Turkey brought a formal end to the advance in November 2019,
and required all Kurdish-linked forces to withdraw from the Peace Spring safe zone. To prevent any further Turkish-led attacks on SDF-held parts of north and northeastern Syria, the SDF asked Russian and Syrian government troops to take up positions on the periphery of the newly annexed territory and, for the time being, front lines have remained largely static. Turkish efforts to unite safe zone territories into a contiguous area cannot be discounted however: Turkey remains fiercely committed to ridding the border of what it perceives as a terror threat manifested by pro-Kurdish militants, and may yet look to close the gaps where Kurdish forces are active.

With the dust settling from Peace Spring, Tell Abiad is now officially under the administration of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). In practice however, the city is bound to the hard power directives of Ankara and the hearts and minds-style investment of the Turkish Gubernatorial Office of neighbouring Sanliurfa province. Turkey has stated that it intends to resettle Syrian refugees in Tell Abiad and other Peace Spring areas, but its investment in the region has yet to reach a level which would convince many refugees to willingly relocate. Some rehabilitation and development work has taken place, most notably in the form of Tell Abiad hospital and the introduction of Turkish services that were previously unavailable locally. But the overwhelming impression from this study is that Turkey has yet to demonstrate it intends to meaningfully develop Tell Abiad, and has instead implicitly permitted the criminal behaviour of SNA proxies in ways which may exacerbate social cleavages, hamper local recovery, and place the local authorities under mounting pressure from an dissatisfied public. Moreover, with few local livelihood opportunities outside of an agriculture industry which has been broadly captured by the SNA and its war economy partners, there is a strong possibility that residents will view military recruitment as their most viable career option. Turkey’s current actions only partially tally with President Erdogan’s stated objective to develop a ‘safe zone’, and experience from Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas suggest the city is heading for a similarly precarious kind of stability in limbo.
Security Overview

Until Operation Peace Spring, Tell Abiad had been under the control of the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) and the Self-Administration of North and East Syria (SA). These organisations oversaw city management for four years post-ISIS, but wielded only tenuous authority throughout the entirety of this period. A municipal administration was established to represent the city, but most policy was driven from nearby Kobane, and little was done to enforce a distinctly SA-led local governance programme. This is likely because the SA knew that its long-term control over Tell Abiad was unsustainable from the outset. Indeed, Tell Abiad and the surrounding countryside host an overwhelmingly Arab tribal population, and many of these tribes have a long history of tension with Kurds in neighbouring areas. Outward support for the SA was therefore limited, and its introduction was preceded by a widely negative public response to the demographic change wrought by the entry of SDF troops. Resident Arabs that had endorsed the expulsion of the Kurds both prior to and during ISIS control fled in large numbers, and were joined by others that did not envision life under a Kurdish-dominated polity. Combined with later reports of limited Arab representation under the SA, perceived and actual SDF abuses only served to exacerbate local anti-Kurdish sentiment. By the time the U.S. military withdrew from the area in late-2019, the disconnect between public and local government had grown to such an extent that exiled tribal militia were broadly welcomed when they reclaimed the city under the banner of the Turkish-aligned Syrian National Army (SNA) in October 2019.

The Syrian National Army

Formed by Turkey in 2017, the SNA is an amalgam of (mainly northern) armed opposition groups organised into several brigades officially subject to the authority of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). In practice, the SIG does little to orchestrate SNA activities however, and the SNA is best understood as an umbrella for disparate Turkish-backed military proxies which broadly retain their pre-SNA form, and upon which Turkey relies to ward off its rivals, marshal local differences, and provide ground-level enforcement of its northern Syria agenda. Plugged into the command and control structures of the Turkish military to a far greater extent than they can be considered a unified army in and of themselves, SNA factions are answerable to Turkey alone, and are accountable to one another only insofar as they are patrons of the Turkish guarantor presence in Peace Spring, Olive Branch, and Euphrates Shield areas.
As with Turkey’s other military interventions in northern Syria, Peace Spring has effectively recreated an armed opposition enclave, albeit one officially under Turkish control. Turkey, however, has not demonstrated much in the way of controlling the behaviour of SNA-linked groups operating in the Peace Spring zone. Indeed, many SNA factions operating in Tell Abiad are as competitive as they are cooperative, and have exploited a lack of local accountability to indulge in war economy activities and inflict a variety of abuses on the resident population. Economically-motivated theft, extortion, kidnapping, clashes, and killings have each been reported since SNA-linked groups carved their own petty fiefdoms in Tell Abiad, with private and public property theft reportedly occurring with alarming regularity.7

The plunder of local agricultural output by SNA-linked groups trading with cross-border Turkish partners represents the most well-publicised example of this kind. This activity is claimed to have become so systematised as to have implicated local political officials,8 and so rife that it has negatively impacted local grain availability and pricing.9 Competition over this local resource has even devolved into open conflict in recent weeks, with two local SNA factions reportedly clashing over the sale of Tell Abiad grain to Turkey through June and July 2020.10 Several civilians have reportedly been killed or injured in these clashes, but no direct intervention by Turkish forces has so far been observed. Discussions will be taking place in the background, but the fact that such incidents can spiral into localised violence suggests that Turkey implicitly permits the excesses of SNA groups in order to retain their loyalty. Indeed, few SNA factions are ideologically invested in the Turkish intervention, and have instead made a pragmatic choice to support a party which enables their own, mainly local ambitions.

Public reception
It is difficult to assess the extent to which the behaviour of SNA-linked groups has reduced support for the Turkish intervention in Tell Abiad. Following a general protest in June 2020, some secondary sources note an anti-Turkish and/or anti-Turkish proxy movement has gathered pace in Peace Spring and other such areas, but evidence for this is thin and was claimed mainly in the Kurdish-linked press.11 Besides the June demonstration, a few isolated protests against Turkish and SDF-linked authorities have taken place in Tell Abiad, but these have been small, and were almost exclusively undertaken to elicit a response to grievances arising from particular incidents involving SNA factions and affected community groups. Of course, an unconvinving response to SNA behaviour does not entail the Tell Abiad public is broadly content with Turkish control. There is every chance that locals are fearful of complaining about the SNA given the freedom with which constituent members operate, and because Turkish efforts to moderate SNA factions have so far proven broadly ineffective. Turkish-trained military and local police have been assigned to Tell Abiad in the past six months, but the former has reportedly engaged in the war economy in much the same way as the groups it was supposed to regulate, and the latter has little power beyond everyday civil criminal matters.

It must also be recalled that the Turkish intervention has restored the status of many Arabs disenfranchised and/or exiled by the rule of the SA and the SDF between 2015 and 2019. This very much applies to the majority of clans within the Jais tribe, Tell Abiad’s largest and most prominent tribal grouping, as well as the two local Turkmen communities, the Slouk and the Hamam. Individuals hailing from these groups that were not compelled to leave the area by the entry of the SDF were generally unwilling to help the Kurds prevent the Turkish advance, and in fact saw Peace Spring as an opportunity to break with the SDF’s unsustainable domination of an Arab-majority city. This sentiment was widespread in all but one tribe prior to Peace Spring,12 and was especially pronounced for returnee Arab tribal militia, many of which had received training in Turkey, and were eager to displace Kurdish minority rule and retake their communities from the SDF.

Continued insecurity
When Presidents Erdogan and Putin reached a deal requiring SDF-linked Kurdish combatants to withdraw from the safe zone created

7 See, for instance, unconfirmed reports noted here.
8 SOHR (2020), Turkey loots 20,000 tons of wheat from Tell Abiad silos. As claimed in this report, the brother of the Head of the Tell Abiad Local Council is among those to have purchased grain taken from Tell Abiad silos by local SNA-linked groups including Jabha Al-Shamiiyah and Jaish Al-Islam.
9 NPA (2020), High prices of bread in Tell Abiad amid people’s resentment.
10 SMART (2020), Clashes between two SNA factions injure civilians in Tell Abiad, Ar-Raqqa.
11 See, for instance: NPA (2020), Villagers in Syria’s Tell Abiad protest against Turkish-backed opposition groups.
12 The Bou Assaf clan of the Jais tribe is/was reportedly split over its support for Turkey and the SDF. In July 2019, prominent Bou Assaf sheikh, Obeid Khalaf Al-Hassan, was assassinated by unknown gunmen, likely for his forthright support for the SDF and his (therefore) controversial position in local tribal society.
by the Turkish advance, Operation Peace Spring reached an official conclusion. The formal end of the advance has not resulted in the termination of hostilities and insecurity however. The criminal behaviour of the SNA has already been noted as one dimension of this continued local insecurity, but two others merit attention. First, and much like other areas where the SA/SDF has been replaced by Turkish-dominated political and military authorities, bombings have become an infrequent but deadly local hazard. Attacks in Tell Abiad were most frequent in the immediate aftermath of Peace Spring, and like other formerly SDF-held communities, those undertaken in the area were widely blamed on the SDF member group, the YPG/J (Kurdish People’s Protection Units). Turkey similarly pointed the finger at the YPG/J for an attack in early July 2020, in which several civilians were killed in the city centre near the SNA’s local headquarters on Al-Firn Square.

If these post-Peace Spring bombings were carried out by the YPG/J, then they are indicative of the regular drumbeat of Kurdish-led insurgency in formerly SDF-held areas. Regardless of their origin, they highlight that local rivalries are far from settled, and that Turkey has yet to achieve the kind of security sought by its October intervention. This brings into focus the second dimension of continued insecurity, namely, that the city remains a front line in Turkish efforts to diminish a perceived Kurdish threat which encompasses both the safe zone and peripheral SDF-held areas. As recently as July 9, 2020, Turkish and SNA forces reportedly bombarded several villages west of Tell Abiad, namely, Khirbet Baqa, Kor Hassan and Ahmadiyya. Based on readings from local sources, these communities likely contain amongst the largest Kurdish populations in the Tell Abiad area, and indicate an ongoing low level conflict between residual anti-Turkish Kurdish elements and the SNA. More worryingly, southern parts of Tell Abiad sub-district have served as a staging post for a number of probing attacks carried out on neighboring Ain Issa, home to the SNA’s political headquarters and just a few miles outside the 30km deep safe zone extending from the Syria-Turkey border.

To insulate Ain Issa from further Turkish and Turkish-linked advances, the SDF engaged the support of the Syrian and Russian militaries in late-2019. Troops from both parties are now stationed alongside the SDF in the city, but this has not halted intermittent Turkish-linked attacks, including attacks against Syrian government forces. “Intensive” shelling was reported in western Ain Issa on July 1, 2020, most likely conducted from southern Tell Abiad sub-district. Syrian government reinforcements subsequently arrived, but concern has been raised that Turkey may use Tell Abiad to pressure the Kurds in Ain Issa, and/or to close the gap in the Turkish-controlled belt along Syria’s northern border. For the time being, a further Turkish advance is improbable: Russian forces are present in both Kobane and Ain Issa, and agreed to enhance coordination with the SDF on July 7 in order to maintain Turkey’s commitment to the Russia-Turkey post-Peace Spring deal. Low-level insecurity of the kind described here is therefore likely to persist for the foreseeable future, or until Turkey’s long-term plans for Tell Abiad and other border areas become clearer.
Political Capital

PLATFORMS FOR POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› ‘Big ticket’ public services projects are funded predominantly by the Turkish government.
› Şanlıurfa Gubernatorial Office supports municipal authorities with funds and a capable bureaucracy.
› Restructured municipal council wields more local legitimacy than under the SA/SDF.
› Tell Abiad municipal council free to raise revenues through local taxation.
› Civil society developed under the SA has, by and large, adapted to Turkish aid regulations.

IMPEDIMENTS TO POLITICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Uncertain political future given long-term Turkish ambitions for Peace Spring territories are unclear.
› Independence of the local bureaucracy is compromised by the insertion of Turkish officials.
› Syrian Interim Government is largely ineffective, except perhaps within the education sector.
› Future as a safe zone destination for Syrian refugees is questionable owing to underdevelopment.
› Reported SNA interference in aid and development work.
Governance Systems
To reflect the varied social and political characteristics of the territories under its control, Turkey has deployed a differentiated approach to governance in northern Syria. In Idleb, its preferred model has been to tolerate the Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham-linked Salvation Government, and to orchestrate political and military oversight as necessary. Elsewhere, it has sought to reinvigorate the role of Syrian municipal councils by aligning them with the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and placing them under the authority of Turkish provincial authorities. Subsequent to Turkey’s Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring operations, Syrian municipal authorities from Afrin to Ras Al-Ain have therefore been enmeshed with Turkey’s domestic bureaucracy in a manner tantamount to a formal annexation.

In Tell Abiad, this happened just days after the SA and the SDF were forced to withdraw from the city in late-2019, and followed a sustained Turkish-led programme of community and tribal outreach which not only set the tempo for Peace Spring, but also the subsequent capture of local government and its reimagination, restructuring, and enlistment in Ankara’s northern Syria plan. Tell Abiad’s municipal council now oversees everyday local affairs as a nominally SIG-linked body reliant upon — and subject to — considerable levels of Turkish support and influence. The dimensions of that support and influence have been such that they overshadow the role of the fragmented and ineffective SIG, and locate local governance capacity squarely between the Tell Abiad municipality and the Gubernatorial Office of the Turkish province of Şanlıurfa.

Municipal councils of northern Syria
Since the towns of Syria’s northern corridor fell under opposition control in July 2012, no Syrian government authorities have been present. In their place, municipal council bodies were formed by political activists and prominent community figures, each of which has been subject to the influence of the various military and political authorities that have moved into the north throughout the conflict. Turkish-led military interventions between 2016-19 have in each case led to the disengagement of municipal councils from their founding and/or previous political partners and their subsequent alignment with the Turkish government and the SIG. In many ways, Turkish control has further reactivated the role of municipal councils in northern Syria, many of which had suffered from severe marginalization and disruption when ISIS was present in the region, and which only began to recover meaningful functions where the SDF was present. This is very much the case in Tell Abiad, where a period of sustained calm under SA control strengthened municipal council capacity post-ISIS, and has continued now that the municipality has been effectively incorporated into the Turkish governance hierarchy.

The Syrian Interim Government
The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) is an opposition government in-exile which styles itself as the legitimate inheritor of the Syrian state. Based in, and endorsed by Turkey, the SIG is officially the government to which the Tell Abiad municipality belongs, but its claims to legitimacy in the city have little bearing on the actual machinations of local government. One could argue that Tell Abiad’s municipal council is aligned with the SIG in name only, and would sooner claim

Announcement of the Tell Abiad’s Municipal Council’s alignment with the SIG in October 2019. Courtesy of AA.
Itself as an independent administrative body with localised aspirations than a vehicle for SIG policy. This is common to SIG-aligned municipalities throughout northern parts of Idleb, Aleppo, Ar-Raqqah and Al-Hasakeh governorates, and is in many ways a symptom of the fragmentation known to characterise the SIG umbrella. Indeed, it is difficult to discern a unified political, economic, or social discourse across SIG-linked municipalities, and there is reportedly no evidence that Tell Abiad is working to a deliberate SIG agenda. As such, it cannot be said that the SIG is an overarching institutional framework for the consolidation of municipal council activities, and neither does the SIG play a substantive role in articulating an official vision for development and recovery in Tell Abiad. Through its funding and orchestration of local political and security matters, it is therefore the Turkish government, and the Turkish Provincial Government in Şanlıurfa which determine local governance activities and delineate conditions of the operating environment.

Turkish rule and the safe zone

Like other Syrian border towns under Turkish control, Tell Abiad’s municipal council has been officially aligned with the SIG and placed under the authority of the neighbouring Turkish provincial government; in this case, the Gubernatorial Office of Şanlıurfa. No policy or budgetary information are known to have been published by this office however, meaning there is likely a great deal of flexibility in how the Tell Abiad municipality is managed from Turkish territory. This would be consistent with observations in other Turkish-controlled parts of Syria, where Ankara has generally allowed its provincial authorities to set the terms of engagement with their Syrian counterparts. Equally however, it does mean that the exact contours of the Tell Abiad-Şanlıurfa relationship are difficult to determine when viewed in isolation from Turkey’s broader northern Syria strategy.

From a uniquely local perspective, one might be left with the impression that the Gubernatorial Office operates rather more as a municipal council partner organisation than as a hierarchical superior. Independent municipal tax collection is ongoing, and the Gubernatorial Office provides technical expertise to local public service projects as necessary. Turkish officials have also gone to great lengths to talk up the achievements of the Tell Abiad municipal council whilst hiding the fact that it is the Şanlıurfa Provincial Government which now sustains the very viability of the council in its current form. This is likely considered laudable by those that favour Syrian-led local administration. But the reality is that Turkey has been working quietly in Tell Abiad in much the same way as it has in other northern corridor towns, acting to both assert its local authority and enact its own regional political programme through various forms of control and influence. The most obvious displays of Turkish control are the Turkish-trained police officers patrolling Tell Abiad’s streets in Turkish-bought police cars. Unlike their SNA counterparts, these forces generally maintain a low public profile, but their behind-the-scenes presence is something of a metaphor for the more subtle forms of Turkish influence.

Şanlıurfa Governor, Abdullah Erin (centre), chairs a December 2019 meeting at which the plan to deploy 4,000 police to Tell Abiad and Ras Al-Ain was announced. Courtesy of Şanlıurfa Gubernatorial Office.

There are three subdistricts within Tell Abiad district: Tell Abiad, Suluk, and Ain Issa. The two former subdistricts fall entirely within Turkish controlled parts of Ar-Raqqah and Al-Hasakeh governorates, but only a small portion of Ain Issa subdistrict falls within Turkish jurisdiction. It is likely (not known) that the administration of Turkish-controlled parts of Ain Issa subdistrict is undertaken by a combination of the Tell Abiad and Suluk municipalities.

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in the city, many of which indicate steady progress towards the realisation of the northern Syria safe zone plan elaborated by President Erdogan. This plan has received a great deal of attention elsewhere and is not explored here in any particular depth. It is only worth noting that recent Turkish-orchestrated governance activities suggest that many of the foundations for the enactment of this plan have already been laid in Tell Abiad, and have fundamentally reset the city’s political, economic, and security arrangements, as well as the local operating environment for humanitarian and development actors.

The cost of maintaining Tell Abiad and other Turkish-managed territories in Syria is borne primarily by the Turkish state. No figures have been published, but funds are likely derived from both the Gubernatorial Office budget and a variety of government departments. Besides paying civil servant salaries in Tell Abiad, Turkey’s domestic budget incurs costs for: local security provision via the Ministry of Defence and the National Intelligence Organisation; for aid and development via the Turkish Red Crescent, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, and other government-linked NGOs; and for public services via Tell Abiad’s municipal council and the Turkish ministries of health, education, and religious affairs. Whether this is ultimately a worthwhile investment depends on Turkey’s long-term plans for Tell Abiad and the wider safe area.

As yet, there are no indications that Turkey intends to yield the territories it has gained in Syria, but its current level of investment in Tell Abiad does not appear to equate with a plan to develop it into part of a corridor capable of receiving the millions of refugees proposed by the safe zone initiative. Tell Abiad is largely underdeveloped, and though it has reportedly received thousands of new arrivals since it was captured by the SNA, more funds are needed if it is to represent an antidote to the foreign policy concerns that prompted Turkey’s intervention. UNHCR estimates that 242,360 Syrians voluntarily returned between 2016 and May 31, 2020, yet only 89,000 came from the 3.6 million Syrians that have sought refuge in Turkey. Turkish ambitions to resettle 2 million Syrian refugees in the safe zone would therefore appear fanciful without concerted action, and it is likely that many of people arriving in Tell Abiad since October are in fact internally displaced people fleeing conflict theatres elsewhere in Syria. Moreover, many Syrians are now well-established in Turkey, have no personal connection with Syria’s border towns, and will be unwilling to uproot their families when they have better prospects for upward social mobility in exile.

**BOX 1: Turkish governorship**
Governors in Turkey are state officials charged with responsibility for the administration of both national and provincial affairs within their designated provincial jurisdiction. They are appointed by the Turkish President upon the recommendation of Parliament, and as civil servants, may be removed from office or reassigned to another of Turkey’s 80 provinces at the discretion of the Ministry of Interior. As such, Governors are not democratically elected and are not appointed to serve a fixed term. The incumbent Şanlıurfa Governor, Abdullah Erin, has been in office since 2016 and has generally maintained a low profile. Following Operation Peace Spring, Erin’s jurisdiction was extended from Şanlıurfa provincial districts to include an area stretching from Tell Abiad in the west, to Ras Al-Ayn in the east i.e. an area sometimes called the Peace Spring safe zone.

Creating a pro-Turkey society
There have been hard and soft dimensions to the manner in which Turkey has pursued its objectives in Tell Abiad. Harder dimensions of Turkish behaviour most obviously include local military dominance expressed through the Turkish Army’s orchestration of SNA member groups and management of local security. It is also alleged to include interference in the selection and election of local political representatives. Preferred candidates have reportedly been added to municipal council election lists, and the outright insertion of Turkish officials into the local bureaucracy has also been claimed by local sources. In early December 2019, for instance, Tell Abiad’s Mayor was appointed following a closed Turkish-managed selection process, just one month after the city had fallen under...
Such actions lend considerable weight to claims that Tell Abiad’s municipal council wields only a constrained kind of autonomy, and that it is ultimately a Turkish hand which both guides and sanctions local political decision-making.

Whilst it is likely Ankara which steers the hard power dimensions of Turkish influence in Tell Abiad, the Şanlıurfa Gubernatorial Office is the primary vehicle for the expression of Turkish soft power. This is sometimes described as ‘Turkification’, a process by which local social, economic, and political conditions are blending with those found north of the border. Turkish officials would likely prefer to describe it as the creation of a pro-Turkish society, pursued primarily through the deployment of hearts and minds-style public service projects. Since assuming control, the Gubernatorial Office has overseen the rehabilitation of Tell Abiad’s hospital and, in the absence of local access to formal banking services, it has also opened branches of the state-owned Turkish postal service to support wire transfer services and salary payments. Shortly after the conclusion of Operation Peace Spring, a customs gate for trade was also established between Tell Abiad and the neighbouring Turkish town of Akçakale. Developed by the Şanlıurfa Governorate Office and the Turkish Trade Ministry, this gate formalises the import/export business between Turkey and western Peace Spring areas which, during the SA’s time in Tell Abiad, had been under only partial Turkish control. Turkish media credits the gate with having rejuvenated economic and social life in Tell Abiad, and also cites the deployment of Turkish aid to develop local civic infrastructure, from roads, to bakeries, and waterworks.

After falling under Turkish control, the Turkish government sought to consolidate aid work in Tell Abiad into its own relief and development framework. New procedures were established which effectively led to a crackdown on Turkey-based cross-border INGOs and a reduction in local organizations unable to comply with Turkish red tape. Layers of bureaucratic obstacles mirroring those found in other Turkish-held areas were subsequently introduced. For instance, Turkish nationals are now required on project staff lists, and detailed accounts of funding and beneficiaries are required. With many local and international organisations having ceased local operations or relocated elsewhere, responsibility for the coordination and delivery of the aid response now rests firmly in the hands of the Turkish authorities.

**Aid Environment**

Working in Tell Abiad

Current registration requirements demand that aid actors aspiring to work in Tell Abiad must obtain a work permit from the Turkish government. To do so, organizations must register with the Şanlıurfa Gubernatorial Office, and must coordinate with this office and its various departments throughout the life cycle of any proposed and ongoing projects. Emergency relief programmes should therefore be undertaken via the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), but an education programme must in the first instance be implemented in coordination with the Turkish Education Directorate of Şanlıurfa. Coordination with municipal councils through a memorandum of understanding is also required, and project outcomes must be shared with the Turkish provincial...
authorities. As such, AFAD is the ultimate authority for the monitoring, coordination and supervision of all aid and relief projects in Tell Abiad, whilst Turkish government departments are also heavily involved in the coordination, approval, and implementation of development projects via ministerial branch offices of the Şanlıurfa provincial government.

These requirements belong to a process which is reportedly subject to strong Turkish influence, and is littered with several practical restrictions and ethical concerns. Most notably, organizations are obliged to work within sectors and projects determined and approved by the Turkish authorities. Programmes within food, sanitation, education, health, and security are likely to face fewer obstacles, but basic services are largely off limits given AFAD imposes restrictions on any work related to infrastructure, water, and electricity. Indeed, projects in these sectors are ordinarily led by municipal councils in partnership with the Turkish authorities, allegedly because Turkish contractors are targeted for tenders in these sectors, and because they are the kind of big ticket projects which demonstrate the capability of the local administration. Unsurprisingly, such restrictions indicate potential Turkish government interference in programme selection, and the relegation of community needs to the political and economic imperatives of the Turkish government. Projects may also fall foul of the interests of the SNA, with local sources adding that some factions are rumoured to have purchased greater development support in areas under their control with resources extracted from the local agricultural industry.
Socio-Economic Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Border proximity means commodity availability is good, if not better, under Turkish control.
› Growing use of the Turkish Lira helps insulate Tell Abiad from Syrian currency and price volatility.
› Use of the Turkish Lira is likely to deepen Turkish investment.
› Agriculture is by far the most important industry for local livelihoods and incomes.
› Potential to exploit geographic position and relative economic stability as a Syrian ‘border market’.

IMPEDEMENTS TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

› Agriculture has been captured by the SNA, disenfranchising producers and landowners.
› War economies built around agricultural output have diminished revenues accruing to the public.
› Impotent municipal council relative to the SNA; some officials may participate in war economies.
› SNA checkpoints extract tolls, posing challenges for the movement of goods and services.
› War economies feed insecurity, driving a wedge between the Tell Abiad public and the authorities.
› Few economic opportunities outside the trade and production of agricultural products.
Trading with Turkey

It is not as if Tell Abiad was entirely closed to Turkish markets when it was under the control of non-Turkish military and political actors. Cross-border smuggling was rife, and provided something of a life-line to the community which many others in Syria have often lacked. Evidently, Peace Spring has brought all of that activity under Turkish control, and the opening of a customs gate between Akçakale and Tell Abiad has helped systematise and formalise the import/export business. This has only occurred to some extent however, and actors in both Tell Abiad and Turkey have looked to exploit ongoing conflict conditions to benefit from cross-border differentials and to monopolise aspects of the local economy. Regarded as the primary spoil of war, SNA groups have engaged Turkish and Syrian partners to extract value from across the agricultural value chain in Tell Abiad, effectively replicating the kind of war economy systems for which the Syrian government is often criticised.

This activity has had various negative effects explored throughout this report, and is a key feature of the political economy now present in the city. Equally however, it also highlights one of the ways in which Tell Abiad might partially finance its recovery, as its annexation has created some favourable conditions for local commercial activity. The most obvious such benefit arises from the steady adoption of the Turkish Lira which, at a time of severe economic hardship in areas using the Syrian Pound, helps insulate Tell Abiad from currency instability and price volatility. Where the community is able to find ways around the exploitative behaviour of local military factions, additional benefits may accrue from Tell Abiad’s status as a border market, both for Turkey and for Syrian government-held areas.

War economies

Ever since the conclusion of Peace Spring and the incorporation of Tell Abiad into a Turkish-orchestrated safe zone, there have been repeated claims that Turkey and SNA-linked factions have failed to respect private property. The most egregious of these allegations is the ongoing plunder of Tell Abiad’s agricultural output, which several sources claim is so systematised that it involves an organised network of local municipal officials, Turkish trading companies, Turkish government institutions, SNA-linked armed groups, SNA-affiliated companies, and Syrian government-linked businessmen from as far afield as Ar-Raqqa city. This began in October 2019, when tens of thousands of tons of locally-produced grain and barley were reportedly seized from large silos and private landowners in the Tell Abiad area by SNA-linked factions, namely, Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyyah, Faylaq Al-Majd, and Ahrar Al-Sharqiyyah. The phenomenon has been observed throughout Peace Spring territories, and if reports on the issue are true, implies the plunder of the region’s most valuable economic resource with implicit Turkish consent.

Arriving at the end of the 2019 harvest season, SNA-linked groups encountered practically full storage facilities and worked to coordinate the sale of their contents with a variety of parties. Contracts were reportedly awarded to a Turkish shipping company (Öz-Duy), the Turkish Grain Board in Şanlıurfa was identified as a primary client (Toprak Mahsulleri Ofisi), armed actor business arms were established (e.g. the Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyya-linked Al-Sanabel Shirkrak Grain Silo, southern Tell Abiad subdistrict. Courtesy of Halab Today.)
but the extent to which it appears to have been captured by the Cross-line and cross-border smuggling is nothing new to Tell Abiad, almost certainly be limited. To purchase large quantities from local producers, making it even more likely that grain and other products will be ferried elsewhere for sale and consumption in Turkey and government-held areas. Tariffs on cross-line and cross-border exports will likely be small to non-existent, and revenues accruing to municipal authorities will remain under their full control. Proposals from the municipal council to develop alternative grain storage facilities in the area have been ignored.

With stocks and strategic reserves from last year’s harvest now largely sold or withdrawn from the market, the SNA has reportedly sought to enforce several new trade arrangements on future agricultural output: Prices paid to producers are reportedly halved those paid to farmers in Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas; a ‘zakat’ payable to the SNA of 20% is imposed on all farmers; producers have been restricted to selling their output to designated entities; and pesticide and fertilizer prices have been increased. Meanwhile, property (land and machinery) which the authorities allege is owned by SDF-linked civilians has been confiscated. Local sources were unable to verify all of these claims, but if true, they accompany an agricultural business environment which was challenging even before the arrival of the SNA. Unable to store all locally produced outputs owing to damage to several of the 10 silos in the Tell Abiad to Ras Al-Ain area, traders have been unable to purchase large quantities from local producers, making it even more likely that grain and other products will be ferried elsewhere for sale and consumption in Turkey and government-held areas. Tariffs on cross-line and cross-border exports will likely be small to non-existent, and revenues accruing to municipal authorities will almost certainly be limited.

Cross-line and cross-border smuggling is nothing new to Tell Abiad, but the extent to which it appears to have been captured by the SNA, Turkey and its partners is said to have had several negative effects on the local economy. The most obvious impact has been on the price of goods which were previously abundant in the area, and in which Tell Abiad had been largely self-sufficient pre-war. Indeed, protests in Tell Abiad in summer 2020, most recently in late-June, were partly motivated by civilian dissatisfaction over the price of locally-produced bread. More worryingly however, is the prospect that the local population will increasingly view the SNA-led exploitation of the local agriculture industry as feeding into the various other violations inflicted on the local population detailed in previous reports. Whether this devolves into more serious local discontent remains to be seen, as does the extent to which local and regional food security is undermined by losses from one of Syria’s most prolific agricultural regions.

**Accelerated integration: The Turkish Lira**

Steady progress towards conjoining Tell Abiad to Şanlıurfa has increased use of the Turkish Lira (TL) for large-scale commercial transactions. As in other parts of Turkish-controlled Syria, administrative channels have also taken up the currency to administer a variety of civil servant and military salary payments via the Turkish National Post Office company (PTT). This was broadly the extent of the TL’s infiltration into Tell Abiad until around December 2019, when the rapid depreciation of the Syrian Pound (SYP) accelerated the rate at which the TL is now adopted for everyday commercial use. Shipments of TL are known to have arrived in other Turkish-held areas including Afrin and northern Aleppo, whilst municipal councils in these areas have also signed off on legislation which prices everyday staples in TL to insulate business and consumers from wider economic instability in Syria. Tell Abiad has broadly followed suit, and it is likely that the TL will enter into such use over the medium-term that it may ultimately displace the troubled SYP if its depreciation continues.

The implications for Tell Abiad are several fold. First and foremost, increased circulation of TL is anticipated to stabilise prices for...
everyday goods in Tell Abiad. Many goods available in Tell Abiad are imported from Turkey, meaning some coordination with the Turkish government is likely in order to shield the area from instability and enhance the appeal of the area as a destination for refugee returns. Second, and relatedly, increased use of the TL is likely to accelerate the integration of Tell Abiad with Turkey and consolidate its command over the local economy. Third, more widespread adoption of the TL is likely to deepen Turkish investment in Tell Abiad, maintaining the differential recovery trajectories that safe zone areas have followed since falling under Turkish control. Fourth, and importantly for aid and development organisations, a steady transition to the TL may drive the integration of northern Idleb, with both Olive Branch, Euphrates Shield and Peace Spring areas, creating a more contiguous Turkish annexe along Syria’s northern border. Such an area would likely erode many of the current political and economic differences between these areas and force aid agencies to adapt parameters for engagement accordingly.

**Border market potential**

Beyond serving as a point of convergence for transnational commodity and service flows, flourishing border markets commonly owe their success to a combination of uniquely geographic factors. Whereas traditional marketplaces evolve slowly and rely on the size and quality of the labourforce, border markets can experience sharp growth (and declines) due to transborder price, tax, and currency differentials. Successful border markets additionally rely on a skilled cadre of local traders (to capitalise on differentials), the relative porosity of borders (to acquire opportunities), and an efficient combination of productive and transport infrastructure (to sustain trade). Combined with various other forms of political, economic and territorial integration with Turkey, increased use of the Turkish Lira may therefore position Tell Abiad to better exploit the growing ease of doing business with (and, essentially, in) Turkey as a Syrian ‘border market’ community. The community may also find border market opportunities arising from its status as simultaneously within and outside Syria, serving two way border market functions. Presently however, the exploitation of these conditions in Tell Abiad has been taken up primarily by SNA-linked armed groups. As described in War Economies, above, these groups have sought to monopolise elements of the transborder and cross-line agriculture trade, reportedly purchasing and plundering grain and other crops from local producers and distributing in partnership with Turkish and Syrian government traders that have penetrated the local bureaucracy. In theory, however, other forms of business in Tell Abiad could be equipped to capitalise on Tell Abiad’s current position as increasingly ‘Turkish’ territory in more equitous fashion. What this looks like in practice is difficult to say, but it would almost certainly have to be relatively small-scale to avoid the attention of the SNA given Turkey does not appear inclined to protect local businesses affected by SNA profiteering.
Natural Capital

PLATFORMS FOR NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Local farming conditions have supported near self-sufficiency in Tell Abiad for centuries.
- Renowned for especially high quality agricultural produce.
- Significant contributor to Syria’s strategic crop portfolio (wheat, barley, cotton).
- Large-scale livestock industry and extensive pasturelands.
- Water availability not reported as an immediate problem beyond the cost of diesel pumping systems.

IMPEDIMENTS TO NATURAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Land has been regarded as the main spoil of war by successive authorities, including the SNA.
- Seizure of formerly public and private farmland and pastures by SNA armed groups.
- Local rivers are increasingly reliant on irrigation run-off from elsewhere (including Turkey).
- Upper sections of the Balikh River have entirely dried up and the Ain Arous Spring is diminished.
Land

Tell Abiad is not blessed with especially unique topography and shares many geographic similarities with other rural border towns in northern Syria. This is not to say that the area lacks land suited to agriculture and livestock: to the contrary, these are by far the most productive sectors of the local economy. Rather, Tell Abiad is an unremarkable northern border town with few valuable natural resources and little of note beyond the suitability of rural areas to animal husbandry and the production of staple crops. Indeed, the city was never so large or strategically important that it attracted noteworthy state investment prior to the current conflict, and most pre-war agricultural infrastructure was broadly adequate for a community of its immediate potential. By and large, Tell Abiad was therefore left to its own devices: The Balikh river valley region to which Tell Abiad belongs has been largely self-sufficient since late prehistory, and the subdistrict’s contribution to government-issued strategic crop quotas in the modern era was always considered satisfactory.

With other few natural resources to fall back on, Tell Abiad was obviously hard-hit when the Syrian government withdrew much of its support to the farming industry in the early 2000s. The city continues to reel from the impact of that change, and, with the onset of war, local farming has inevitably suffered broadly the same negative effects as those detailed in other reports in this series. Trade disruption, increased production costs, and a weakened enabling environment contribute to the difficulties faced by Tell Abiad’s farmers much as they have elsewhere in the country, and are similarly likely to have lasting negative effects on local agricultural value chains. Producers have also been forced to contend with successive armed groups that have considered local agricultural output as the spoils of war and, in the case of the SNA, continue to do so with near impunity. Even so, agricultural systems present Tell Abiad’s principal community asset, and support for exploitation of the land that is mindful of the role farming plays in the local political economy is recommended as a primary focus for aid and development.

Farmland and pastures

Farmland in Tell Abiad is predominantly non-irrigated, but is sufficiently well-watered from natural sources to support year round cropping and livestock. Both activities were the main source of livelihoods and commerce in Tell Abiad pre-war, and have remained so, albeit in diminished form. Syrian government strategic crops (wheat, corn, and cotton) still account for the majority of local output, and are renowned for their excellent quality. Indeed, wheat produced in Tell Abiad is regarded as perhaps the best in Syria, highlighting both the quality of local agro-ecological conditions and the strong knowledge and traditions of the area’s farming communities. Animal husbandry, predominantly in the form of sheep and goats, has similarly served important socio-economic functions for many in the community, yet like arable land, has also been sequenced by conflict parties throughout the war. Value accruing from the estimated 80,000 livestock animals in the area has reportedly been seized largely by SNA-linked factions, and reflects agriculture’s status as the main prize for successive controlling military actors.
Land seizures
Reports that the Turkish-backed SNA seized thousands of hectares of public and privately-owned agricultural land in Peace Spring areas are common. One such report claims as much as half a million hectares have been taken over by SNA groups as a result of the Turkish-led invasion, a large proportion of which was allegedly seized from residents displaced by the various shifts in control experienced by northern Syria since 2011.\textsuperscript{37} Rural Tell Abiad is no different, but it must be recalled that whilst the SNA is the latest to assert control over the area’s primary economic asset, it is not the first. Land transfers are claimed to have been similarly practiced by ISIS and the SDF, and each conflict party is alleged to have deliberately disenfranchised the primary constituencies of their respective enemies. Kurds may be suffering the brunt of the most recent marginalisation at the hands of the SNA, but resident, refugee, and IDP Arabs, Turkmen and Christians have each been affected by land seizures by military actors over the years. Rural property rights-related issues will therefore persist across practically all communities in the area, with land ownership disputes likely to prove a source of local grievances for a prolonged period.

Water
Perhaps the most striking feature of the local landscape is the relatively good surface water access embodied by Balikh, Jallab, Fermokh, and Hashishe rivers. These rivers punctuate a largely unremarkable arid grassland landscape with narrow corridors of richer vegetation, and provide an important source of water for Tell Abiad subdistrict’s agriculture and livestock industries. The Balikh is the most prominent of these rivers, is the second largest tributary to the Euphrates in Syria, and has been canalised along much of its length to enhance agricultural productivity. Originally, the Balikh was fed primarily by the Ain Al-Arous Spring, with the area’s several ancient archeological sites attesting to the river’s natural capacity to support ancient human settlements in the Tell Abiad area.\textsuperscript{38} However, extensive groundwater abstraction for irrigated agriculture in the upper basin has had a far-reaching impact on the spring and downstream river flow rates.\textsuperscript{39} Ain Al-Arous currently falls dry for most of the year, and the upper Balikh is no longer a perennial river. This was noted in a problem in a survey of the area from the mid-1990s, which described the river as an “entirely dry...dessicated channel” in the upper portions of Tell Abiad subdistrict.\textsuperscript{40} River Pollution
Today, the middle and lower portions of the Balikh are sustained by irrigation return flows from intensive agricultural projects in Turkey and, to a lesser extent, from areas around Lake Assad. This is very much the case for the Balikh’s sister river, the Jallab, which is fed by irrigation run off and was transformed into a perennial river itself when a dedicated Balikh Irrigation Project was initiated in the pre-war era. To date, that project has only achieved around 50% of its aspiration to irrigate 185,000 hectares in the Balikh Valley by importing irrigation water from the Euphrates and Lake Assad. Even so, when combined with imports from Turkey’s own massive damming and infrastructure projects, the Balikh project has contributed to a sevenfold increase in the amount of water flowing into the Balikh basin when compared with the original natural capacity of the Ain Al-Arous spring.

\textsuperscript{37} TEVNA Kurdi International (2020), Research report on agricultural crops in Ras Al-Ayn.
\textsuperscript{38} Most obviously, Tell Sabi Abyad, at which archaeological digs have discovered the oldest recorded items found in Syria, dating from between 7500-5500 BC.
\textsuperscript{39} An estimated 2,000 mechanised extraction systems were found in the area pre-war and experience from other northern border towns would suggest that many more unauthorised systems have been built since the beginning of the conflict. Women Defend Rojava (2019), The magnitude of economic losses due to the Turkish invasion.
\textsuperscript{40} Wilkinson, T. (1995), The archeological landscape of the Balikh Valley, Syria, p. 28.
Historically, the Balikh was renowned for its cleanliness, but the drastically increased contribution of irrigation inflows has entailed a deterioration of local water quality. Water salinity in the Balikh and Jallab was four and two times greater than that of the Ain Al-Arous Spring in 2010 respectively, and the discharge of sewage water from Tell Abiad (and other areas) further contributes to the river’s salinisation and pollution. This is not thought to be a problem of immediate concern for Tell Abiad itself, but will have long-term implications at the confluence of the Balikh and the Euphrates downstream in Ar-Raqqa. At present, no survey data was found which quantifies the scale of this problem. The extent to which Turkish plans to build three further irrigation canals on the Balikh account for the current state of the Balikh basin is also unknown.
Social Capital

PLATFORMS FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Turkish ‘annexation’ insulates against damaging societal effects of the current Syrian economy.
- Increased ethnic homogeneity post-Peace Spring reduces prospects of intercommunal tensions.
- Local animosity directed towards SNA proxies to a greater extent than the Turkish state.
- By far the majority identity group, Arab tribes have restored their status in local leadership positions (albeit under Turkish control).

IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Successive waves of displacement and arrivals have dramatically recoloured the pre-war population.
- Only one local tribe can be described as partially sympathetic towards Kurds.
- Rivalry between Kurds and Arabs has resulted in the killing of several high profile figures in the area.
- Conflict, targeted assassinations, and displacement have exacerbated Arab-Kurdish differences.
- The return of more conservative politics post-SA has resulted in more harassment of women.
- Entanglement of most local Arab tribes with SNA militia, many of which are locally competitive.
Identity

Tell Abiad was developed from a village settlement by the French in the 1920s, primarily to provide the Mandatory authorities with a vantage point from which to monitor Syria’s northern border during the Turkish War of Independence (1917-23). France’s involvement in this conflict and its commitment to the creation of an Armenian state meant many Armenians fleeing violence in southern and eastern Turkey viewed Tell Abiad as a potential safe haven. Armenians were therefore Tell Abiad’s first inhabitants, and were later joined by Baggara tribe members from Deir-ez-Zor serving with the French Levant Army. Advances in farming and irrigation technology at this time allowed for greater exploitation of the land, whilst trade networks were formed with the newly established Turkish Republic. Both encouraged these early Arab and Armenian communities to settle in Tell Abiad and nearby areas indefinitely, which in turn led to the formation of Tell Abiad as a modern settlement and the arrival of other Arab tribal groupings.

By the middle of the 20th century, Arabs far outnumbered Armenians, and besides the arrival of a relatively small number of Kurds and Turkmen, little changed the city’s composition until the current conflict. Though Tell Abiad remains a fundamentally Arab tribal society, considerable demographic change has occurred. Around half the local population left in response to the ISIS takeover, and thousands of Arabs from ‘ISIS-friendly’ communities were bussed into Tell Abiad to move into the abandoned homes. Later, when it fell under SDF control, many of those new Arab arrivals left with others that did not envision life under a Kurdish-dominated authority. The city was also a major destination for large numbers of Arab IDPs during the battle for Ar-Raqqa. Indeed, displacement to the city was so significant at this time that, despite the earlier departures, the city’s pre-war population of 20,000 had nearly doubled by late-2017. Though population numbers reduced somewhat following the liberation and steady recovery of Ar-Raqqa city, the local Arab community is still larger than in 2011, and now represents a greater proportion of the population than at any time in recent history. Evidently, this shift has been aided by the displacement of original Kurdish residents prompted by ISIS between 2014 and 2015, and later exacerbated by Turkey’s 2019 intervention and the withdrawal of the SDF and the SA. Today, local sources estimate around 90% of the local population is Arab, less than 10% is Kurdish, and the remainder is represented by Armenians and Assyrians.

Kurds and Arab Tribes

Tribal systems dominate Arab society in Tell Abiad and are the pre-eminent means of local social organisation. Having long received support from the Syrian government, most tribal leaders have been able to retain their status as both community notables and forces for local political mobilisation throughout the various shifts in local political control. This has been a major factor in the changes witnessed in the city over the past nine years, and has been a driving force for the clear territorial, cultural, and social divisions now found between Kurds and Arabs in the area, as well as between the local Arab tribes themselves.

The Jais are the largest tribe in Tell Abiad subdistrict and are divisible into several clans of varying political opinion. Of those clans, three have been particularly influential in shaping the contours of Tell Abiad’s conflict-affected society. The Bou Assaf, to Tell Abiad’s south (mainly near Ayn Issa), were broadly supportive of the KSA and the SDF, and formed the Liwa Thowar Ar-Raqqa militia in order to help liberate Tell Abiad from ISIS in 2015. Their sympathy with the Kurds is contrasted by the wartime inclinations of Bou Jarada and Jamilah clan members, to Tell Abiad’s west, many of which aligned themselves with ISIS between 2013-2015, are strongly anti-SDF, and played a key role in supporting the Turkish-aligned SNA to force the SA from the city in late-2019. In fact, many such members of the Jais tribe have a long history of conflict with Kurds, and responded violently when the YPG occupied Tell Abiad for a short while during the uncertainty that preceded the ISIS takeover.

Like most of the Jais, most other tribes in the area show similarly dubious support for the Kurds. The Hannada, directly to Tell Abiad’s
south, were largely neutral on conflicts in the city until a heavy-handed Asayish conscription attempt effectively turned the entire tribe against the SDF. Prior to this incident, the Hannada had been well-positioned to resolve inter-communal disputes, but are now generally content with the status quo under Turkey and are less likely to help build bridges between Kurds and Arabs. Similarly, the less prominent Naim, Baggara, and Annanza tribes may have fought alongside the SDF in the liberation of Raqqa under the banner of Liwa Suqur Ar-Raqqa,

but many leaders from these clans have since aligned themselves with either the Syrian or Turkish governments. Local Turkmen communities are similarly antipathetic to Kurds. Most have a natural affinity with Turkey, were allegedly supportive of ISIS, and have been reportedly subject to SDF-imposed forced displacement from Turkmen majority villages near Tell Abiad.

Inter-tribal differences on the issue of the SDF and Turkish intervention have also been a source of local tension. In July 2019, the senior Bou Assaf tribal figure, Ubaid Khalaf Al-Hassan was found dead in the village of Ali Bajliyah. A major supporter of the SDF and a vocal critic of Turkey, Al-Hassan was among several other SA/SDF-friendly figures killed in the area in the lead up to Peace Spring. The extent to which other local tribes were involved in these killings is unknown, but Al-Hassan was the latest in a line of assassination and attacks targeting tribal leaders, council officials, and others close to the SA in 2018-19, none of which were roundly condemned by other leading tribes.

Turkish Proxies: Misconduct and Conservatism

Having wielded Tell Abiad’s tribes to force through its military advance and buttress its subsequent administration, Turkey is now faced with managing its relationship with some of the more conservative elements of the SNA and the wider population. This is clearly a more significant challenge in other parts of Syria under Turkish control, not least Idlib, where Turkey has been unconcerned by its insulaion of Islamic extremism by means of its transactional arrangement with Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham. However, Turkey has been so concerned with eradicating what it perceives as the existential threat of an autonomous Kurdish region that it has also tended to ignore the ideology and misconduct of groups involved in its other military operations along Syria’s northern border. This is as much the case in Tell Abiad as it is in Afrin, both of which reportedly saw local Arab tribesmen leave with the entry of the SDF, and which later returned to exact revenge as Turkish-trained proxy militias alongside others under the SNA umbrella.

Since they returned to the area, there have been claims that membership of the SNA conceals the decidedly Salafist inclinations of some of these militias, and that they have begun to impose themselves in Turkish-held territories. This is probable in Tell Abiad: Several of the Arab tribal militia that helped spearhead Operation Peace Spring were indeed accommodating towards ISIS and/or included former ISIS members, and in many ways a manifestation of the religious conservatism that has long characterised Tell Abiad.

Residents in Tel Abyad gather to demand the arrest of SNA-linked Faylaq Al-Majd fighters involved in the shooting of Ammar Al-Hajji. Al-Hajji was killed after resisting a robbery attempt. Courtesy of Elizabeth Tsurkov.

46 Liwa Suqur Ar-Raqqa translates as the Raqqa Hawks Brigade.
47 In 2015, several hundred Turkmen were reportedly forced from the nearby Tell Abiad villages of Tell Hamnam Al-Turkman, Wastash Al-Maksour, and Sakhrat Al-Khaddam following SDF anti-ISIS operations.
48 In 2017, Al-Hassan publicly called on local tribal leaders to support the SDF in its operation to liberate Ar-Raqqa from ISIS and was known to have been close to the SDF. His criticism of Turkey was also forthright, stating in November 2018 that tribes would be the first to confront Turkish forces if they entered Tell Abiad.
49 A similarly notable example is that of the killing of Kurdish official, Omar Aloush. Aloush played a key role helping to stabilise Ar-Raqqa alongside the SDF and the U.S., and was killed by unnamed gunmen in Tell Abiad in 2018.
50 Turkish officials insist that Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham does not pose the same kind of transnational threat as ISIS or Al-Qaeda, that it responds to Turkish demands, and that a transactional relationship can be formed with the HTS-linked Salvation Government. It is therefore thought less dangerous than Huras Al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party, even though both organisations currently profit from what is largely a Turkish-imposed status quo.
51 For instance, the Sukhanya clan fled Tell Abiad in 2015 and relocated mainly to the Sanliurfa area in southern Turkey. It was claimed Sukhanya homes were then taken over by the YPG, and...
the clan became vehemently opposed to the presence of a Kurdish-dominated administration in the town. Reportedly trained by the Turkish military, a Sukhnaya militia participated in the Peace Spring offensive and returned to the area.

52 Leading Kurdish politician, Hevrin Khalaf, was killed several days into Peace Spring by Ahrar Al-Sharqiya, an Arab SNA militia composed of former Ahrar Al-Sham and HTS combatants from Deir-ez-Zor governorate. It is claimed that leaders of the group are former ISIS members.

53 For more on this, see Socio-economic Capital. Other examples include SNA-linked fighters confiscating vehicles of alleged SDF sympathisers, the theft of agricultural equipment, and property appropriation.

54 Hamar News (2020), What happened to Tel Abiad city during three months of occupation?

Abiad and other northern border towns. It is therefore unsurprising that they have reportedly been joined in the city by SNA militia with similar ideologies from across Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo governorates, and that combatants and civilians linked to these forces are now found across Tell Abiad and in the abandoned homes of former Kurdish residents in particular.

The behaviour of SNA proxies is a problem for Turkey, insofar as it now ‘owns’ the politics of numerous Syrian border towns which may contrast with its own political vision for the area. In the more immediate sense however, the entrance of Turkish-aligned proxies is reported to have resulted in both sharp societal change and a variety of abuses against the local population. Reports that private property and city resources have been plundered by SNA-linked armed groups are frequent, killings, kidnaps, and extortion attempts have been widely claimed, and women reportedly face greater harassment owing to the influence of conservative SNA-linked groups. Detailed in Security Overview, above, the lack of oversight to prevent such practices is an alarming dimension to Turkish management of the city and likely exacerbates the challenge of strengthening social cohesion. This is not necessarily because the local population is divided between anti- and pro-Turkish camps, but because it creates a political and security climate which is likely to work against forms of social cohesion which challenge this behaviour.
Human Capital

PLATFORMS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Improvement of health and education are amongst Turkey’s apparent development priorities.
- Widespread rehabilitation of local schools and consistent Turkish Education Ministry support.
- Syrian Interim Government demonstrates capacity in the education sector, and may serve as a useful local interface.
- Strong agricultural tradition and extensive experience of rural population with farming and trade.

IMPEDIMENTS TO HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Turkish initiatives to deliver religious education have attracted some criticism in urban areas.
- Adoption of a joint Turkish-Arabic language curriculum further disrupted youth education.
- Livelihood development in agriculture undermined by exploitative behaviour of Turkish-linked SNA.
- Recruitment to Turkish security services privileged over more sustainable, growth-centred livelihoods.
Education
To enhance its reputation and strengthen the quality of public services in areas under its control, development of the education sector represents a top Turkish priority. Indeed, Turkish efforts to restore the education sector have been observed in all three Turkish zones in northern Syria (Olive Branch, Euphrates Shield, and Peace Spring). In the Euphrates Shield zone, there are reportedly over 30,000 students studying in 98 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and several high schools. Likewise, in Afrin, 45,000 students attend 204 schools that were rehabilitated or newly constructed as part of Turkish efforts to engender trust in the northern Syrian communities under its control.55 Tell Abiad has similarly witnessed Turkish investment in both schools and the general education system, with the restoration of 267 schools offering education to more than 22,500 students. The amount of work carried out at most of these schools is likely limited, and the numbers may be inflated given all this will have been accomplished in just 8 months. It is also worth recalling that, contrary to experience of local sources, the Turkish press credits Peace Spring with putting an end to the use of schools and other such public infrastructure as PKK military bases, and that schooling in fact came to a halt under the SA.56

Changing curricula
The Turkish school rehabilitation programme in northern Syria has not only involved the repair of school infrastructure, it has also sought to implement structural changes in teaching methods and curricula. Much like when they were under the administration of the SA, schools in all three Turkish zones in Syria provide instruction in the language of the dominant authority, and Turkish is now taught alongside Arabic in Tell Abiad. Notably, education is one area in which the SIG does demonstrate some competence and consistency across Turkish-held territories, albeit with oversight from the Turkish Ministry of Education. SIG offices reportedly oversee preparation of the joint Arabic-Turkish curriculum, and are responsible for its delivery in communities across the Turkish-held north according to standards set by the relevant Turkish Ministry of Education provincial directorate.

Livelihoods
If public pronouncements are to be believed, one of Turkey’s primary objectives in Syria is to enhance the appeal of territories
under its control to increase the rate at which Syrian refugees leave Turkey and return home. To date, this effort appears to have centred predominantly on big ticket public service projects, such as schools, hospitals, water, power, and banking services, no doubt partly to provide a sense of normalcy to potential returnees. Notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of refugees residing in Turkey have no affinity for the places to which Turkey hopes they will return, this kind of work has so far been focused almost exclusively on stability initiatives and has offered little in the way of local economic growth and development. Certainly, basic needs must be met, but if there is any plan to enhance economic opportunities in Tell Abiad, then it has been neither evidenced nor articulated in any apparent detail to date.

Security over economic development
UNHCR figures indicate voluntary returns from Turkey over the past four years have been limited. If returns are to accelerate to a rate aspired by Turkish policymakers as part of the safe zone plan, then much more to enhance livelihood options and economic opportunities will need to be done in places like Tell Abiad. Without this investment, it is entirely possible that the growing assimilation of Tell Abiad with Turkey may in fact have the opposite effect, and will instead drive even more Syrians to seek a future in Turkey. This is especially likely over the long-term given youth in the area are now being educated in the Turkish language, but the lack of local economic opportunity also has more immediately troubling implications for the community.

Military Police assigned to Tell Abiad by the Turkish government have reportedly been looking to increase recruitment to the SNA and other safe zone security services, offering relatively attractive salaries for young men with few alternative job options. In some respects, this is positive for families that would have otherwise found it difficult to meet their everyday needs. However, it comes at a time when the very security services these men are joining are alleged to be involved in the plunder of Tell Abiad’s main economic assets. That Turkey has so far turned a blind eye to this activity and is instead sponsoring recruitment into Turkish-linked security services is a strong indication of its priorities in Tell Abiad. Indeed, these security services are at least partially responsible for stunting the subdistrict’s development, threaten to deepen already sensitive social cleavages, and are a vehicle for the expression of Turkish, rather than local Syrian aspirations.
Physical Capital

PLATFORMS FOR PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Damage to infrastructure occurred mainly during the anti-ISIS offensive and most has been repaired.
- Demonstrated Turkish interest in physical capital improvement to enhance its local legitimacy.
- Turkish Health Ministry directly supports Tel Abiad hospital, effectively replacing previous NGO support.
- Nearby Tell Sabi Abyad is amongst the largest and most successful archeological dig sites in Syria.
- Deepening economic interdependencies may deepen Turkish investment in local infrastructure.

IMPEDIMENTS TO PHYSICAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

- Cross-line politics determine electricity availability in Tell Abiad and water supply to SDF-held areas.
- Rural and community-based healthcare left mainly to civil society, creating service discontinuities.
- Successive changes in political control seriously complicate the work of the property registry office.
- Informal property transfers and appropriations have disenfranchised displaced original residents.
- Turkish contractors reportedly favoured for public infrastructure tenders issued by the municipality.
Built Environment

If Tell Abiad is to serve as the kind of city that Turkey hopes will attract Syrian refugees then there is much to achieve. Local sources report public services are poor, and that much basic rehabilitation and development has so far been left in the hands of local civil society organisations rather than undertaken by the Turkish authorities. Unlike many other parts of Turkish-held Syria, Tell Abiad has not been plugged into the Turkish power grid, and was instead connected to the Tishreen power station by way of agreement between Russian and Turkish military officials in December last year. Supply is reportedly inconsistent however, and the lack of progress on basic service and local infrastructure since this time raises serious questions as to whether Tell Abiad’s status as a ‘safe zone’ community will ultimately provide the city’s built environment with any notable benefits. After an initial public relations blitz in late-2019, Turkish officials have made fewer visits to the area, and it is becoming increasingly clear that greater investment will be necessary if it intends to retain the city over the long-term.

Cross-line Infrastructure Politics

The Alouk water pumping station is in fact closer to Ras Al-Ain than it is to Tell Abiad, but having been similarly captured by Turkish-linked forces in 2019, is a useful example of the kind of cross-line resource politics affecting Peace Spring areas. Since Spring 2020, there have been multiple reports that SNA groups have cut supply from Alouk, affecting some 450,000 people in predominantly SDF/SA-held Al-Hasakeh governorate for extended periods, most notably in Al-Hasakeh city, Tel Tamr, and the Arisha and Al-Hol displacement camps. This has been noted by a variety of organisations, including the UN, which has highlighted particular concern over water and sanitation continuity at a time when COVID-19 poses a major threat to public health and the region’s already precarious economy. A joint statement was also issued by 49 Syrian organisations in March 2020 condemning Turkish management of the Alouk issue, yet it remains a matter of concern at the time of writing.

Damage to the station and supporting infrastructure caused by fighting in October 2019 has been fully repaired, and there is currently no maintenance-related issue which explains why Alouk should cease operations. Repeated interruptions since October have therefore been widely blamed on SNA-linked groups seeking to pressure the SA into living up to a December agreement to trade electricity from the SDF-controlled Tishreen Hydroelectric Dam in return for water from Alouk. Turkish officials have formally responded to these accusations by claiming that it is in fact the SDF which is responsible for service interruptions because it fails to supply enough power to support Alouk’s full-time needs. These officials add that power sent from Tishreen met just 15% of demand in Tell Abiad and nearby areas in April 2020.

Regardless of the culpable party, delivering such core state functions is a key dimension to the legitimacy and credibility of Turkey and its associates in Tell Abiad. It is therefore unsurprising that Turkey has remained quiet when activists and NGOs have demanded that Alouk be placed under a neutral civilian administration, and especially during times as perilous as the current COVID-19 crisis.
Further interruptions can therefore be expected for as long as the SDF denies power to Turkish-held areas and Tell Abiad remains disconnected from the Turkish power grid. Meanwhile, Tell Abiad will remain amongst the most poorly serviced cities in Turkish-held northern Syria. Though support for the Turkish intervention broadly remains, that goodwill is likely to erode if local services do not noticeably improve.

Tell Abiad Hospital
Hospitals have been key Turkey’s efforts to enhance its local reputation and strengthen the quality of basic services throughout territories under its control. This has been observed in all three Turkish zones in Syria (Olive Branch, Euphrates Shield, and Peace Spring), with the construction of new hospitals in Jarablus, Al-Bab, and Afrin serving as the centrepiece of its efforts to win over the hearts and minds of civilians now living under Turkish-orchestrated civil administrations. Staffed by Syrian health professionals and managed by officials from the Turkish Health Ministry, these newly built hospitals include facilities for surgery, maternity, and the kind of advanced equipment that has been inaccessible to many residents since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. In many ways, hospitals have been the most prominent symbol of Turkey’s longer-term intentions for areas under its military protection, and have signalled to the public that Turkey is working to improve the welfare of civilians to a greater extent than any previous wartime local administration.

Tell Abiad has similarly seen Turkish investment in its own local hospital, which Turkish media widely claims had been used as a former PKK headquarters when the area was under SA control. The extent to which the latter claim is true and impeded the work of hospital staff is unknown, as is the extent to which the hospital was damaged by ‘PKK terrorists’ during Operation Peace Spring. Most such statements are likely highly politicised: Tell Abiad Hospital had received support from MSF prior to the Turkish advance, and was the only functioning public hospital in Ar-Raqqa governorate throughout the Ar-Raqqa offensive and post-offensive periods. Data on patients arriving at the hospital prior to Peace Spring is in fact as comprehensive as can be expected, and paints a picture of a hospital functioning relatively well amidst extremely challenging circumstances. If anything, Tell Abiad Hospital operations were as — if not more — impeded by the Turkish military advance than anything that came before it, and it is therefore unsurprising that work on the hospital was completed within a month of Turkey’s arrival.

Regardless of its pre-Peace Spring condition, Turkey’s swift and deliberate focus on the Tell Abiad Hospital and others in Turkish-controlled areas highlights the importance it attaches to the development of public service statement projects. When it comes to public health services which sit outside of hospital care however, there is less evidence of concerted Turkish investment. In fact, community-based health services ranging from mental health support, child health services, health promotion, community clinics and others are left almost entirely to the Turkish-managed aid sector. Given such services are more commonly used by children, the elderly, and those living with frailty or chronic conditions, work in the non-hospital healthcare space is recommended in order to help reach the most vulnerable, and to integrate more locally-focused health services into the Turkish Ministry of Health-managed hospital system.

The renovated Tell Abiad Hospital in January 2020, now with Turkish signage. Courtesy of IHA.
One of the core challenges faced by the Tell Abiad municipality relates to property ownership issues and the resolution of disputes over both agricultural and urban land. A succession of different controlling actors have moved into Tell Abiad since the conflict began, which has in turn created problems of continuity within the local property registry office. Not only has this office operated according to the often conflicting directives instituted by the city’s various controlling actors, the manner in which these authorities have wrought often sudden demographic change has led to the loss and/or destruction of ownership documentation, contracts, and other property-related paperwork. The Tell Abiad municipality is reportedly working through outstanding unresolved or problematic property ownership claims, though it must be recalled that this is not only an administrative task, but one of local justice with implications for long-term social cohesion.
In many cases, an absence of adequate documentation to support a local property ownership claim is the result of haphazard and illegal property transfers that have taken place subsequent to changes in the local conflict environment. Since 2014, Tell Abiad has experienced both elastic and indefinite voluntary and forced displacement on a great scale relative to the size of its pre-war population. Most observers would draw attention to the massive population increase triggered by the arrival of IDPs fleeing the SDF-International Coalition mission to liberate Ar-Raqqa. But the majority of this displacement was temporary, and more egregious ownership issues have in fact arisen from the arrival of the SNA and the related disenfranchisement of mainly Turkish opponents, Kurds, and Christian populations. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has reported on the appropriation of private property by SNA-linked groups in both the Tell Abiad countryside and city centre, and notes this is a practice which is common to other areas where the SNA is present in northern Syria. Of note, parallel incidents were reported by other rights-based groups when the SA/SDF controlled Tell Abiad. These reports were disputed by the SDF, and were discredited in lengthy reports undertaken by the UN and other organisations.

Tell Sabi Abyad

Tell Sabi Abyad is regarded as amongst the largest and most successful archeological projects in the Middle East and in Syria in particular. It is located close to the village of Hamman Al-Turkman, to Tell Abiad’s east, and is the site of several settlements dating from the neolithic period to the Late Bronze Age. Settlements found at Tell Sabi Abyad consist of a group of four ‘mounds’, each of which were built close to the waters of the upper Balikh River, which, unlike today, supported a highly diffuse river pattern and abundant vegetation in remote antiquity. Dozens of previously unknown archeological sites have been uncovered by excavations in recent years, and include the discovery of monumental architecture and other buildings, jewelry, burials, figurines, and archives with hundreds of cuneiform texts which tell the story of a regional seat of the Assyrian royal house until the 12th century. Tell Sabi Abyad has also yielded the earliest pottery found in Syria, dated at circa 6900-6800 BC. Projects associated with the exploration of the site report they have much to explore and actively contribute to public awareness of Syria’s cultural heritage through literature, radio, television and international exhibitions. Excavations are thought to have been suspended given conflict conditions, but had taken place for several months each year. Findings from Tell Sabi Abyad are housed at the National Museum of Damascus and the National Museum of Ar-Raqqa, and are an important contribution to Syria’s history given the destruction wrought to much of the country’s most valued artifacts and cultural sites.
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