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Backbone of the Syrian Revolt

Inclusion of Rural Sunnis Key for International Efforts to End Conflict

Khaled Yacoub Oweis

Syria's descent into civil war following the military crackdown on the peaceful protest movement in 2011 has thrust the country's rural Sunnis to the forefront. As the civil war dragged on, the countryside became the recruiting reservoir for rival jihadist factions after the demise of the Arab- and Western-backed Free Syrian Army. Divisions within the Syrian political opposition based in Istanbul also delayed the formation of a provisional government. Foreseeing a strengthened Iran, some of these jihadists have put out feelers to the West. Whether and how they could contribute to conflict resolution needs to be explored. Yet on the ground, the jihadists have largely failed at administering the areas they have captured. That evolving disparity – disenchantment with the militants and lack of appetite for a return to Assad's rule – offers an opportunity to reactivate the dormant opposition government, which Germany initially backed but then let drift.

Up to the eve of the Syrian revolt in March 2011, President Bashar al-Assad's regime maintained that it was immune to Arab Spring contagion effects because it was "in sync" with its people – unlike Tunisia or Egypt. A massive security presence in urban centers underpinned a false appearance of confidence that betrayed the brittleness of the regime under the surface. After crushing a violent Islamist and secular opposition, culminating in the 1982 sacking of Hama and the massacre of thousands of its inhabitants, Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, had expanded the police state. Cities were ringed by security installations whose personnel were overwhelmingly drawn from Assad's minority Alawite sect.

Observing the street protests that eventually toppled the rulers of Tunisia and Egypt at the height of the Arab Spring, the Assad regime boosted its security presence in Damascus, especially on public squares. The relatively looser grip in the countryside was a factor contributing to the first major demonstrations breaking out in the southern Hauran Plain. As soon as the protests began, Assad relied on the Alawite core of the regime to respond with force, including tanks. Behind infantry and armored units came Alawite secret police whose mission was to prevent defections. The Fourth Division, a praetorian guard led by Assad's brother Maher, spearheaded the crackdown.

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Sunnis Fall Back on Rural Reservoir

The uprising took on a Sunni character from the outset. Since Bashar became president in 2000, the state, the economy, and national resources had become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Alawite ruling class at the expense of broader society, which is mostly Sunni. Minority representatives, in particular Syria's Christian clergy, were broadly part of a socio-economic alliance that underpinned the regime. Deployment of security agents in public spaces also meant that mosques became the main meeting point for demonstrators, quickly adding a religious and confessional touch to the uprising. Nonetheless, members of various minorities took part in the protest movement. Their participation lessened when the revolt began militarizing in the second half of 2011 and regime bombardment pulverized Sunni neighborhoods.

Military defections were mainly Sunni, starting with soldiers from rural regions where the regime sent tanks to crush the protest movement. Soon rural officers were setting up the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July/August 2011. The FSA was initially supported by Arab and Western nations, whose differences contributed to its failure to consolidate into a coherent force. Rivalries, especially between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, also contributed to the failure of the political opposition to unite and form a single organization that could provide an alternative to Assad. The United States, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates were more reluctant than Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to back FSA brigades to the point where they would become strong enough to topple Assad. Awash with Gulf Arab cash, corruption festered among certain FSA units, particularly in northern Syria, as they failed to respond to the Assad war machine.

Jihadist Ascendancy

With the FSA's reputation sullied, jihadist formations began overshadowing the FSA in 2012, replacing it as the military core fighting Assad's forces and their Shiite militia allies from Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In 2013–2015, the jihadists, mainly the Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of the Levant), and Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam), seized swathes of countryside and rural towns, mainly west of the north-south highway in the provinces of Hama, Homs, and Deraa, in the Ghouta region on the outskirts of Damascus, and in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib near Turkey.

While the three groups often feud, they share a broad animosity toward the Islamic State, the al-Qaeda breakaway whose June 2014 declaration of a Caliphate in Syria and Iraq they regard as dubious on religious grounds. The jihadists also distrust officers who defected from Assad's army, partly because defectors tend to be less religious and are seen as more prone to infiltration by the Assad regime. In some regions, the groups have imposed strict de facto Islamic law. Unlike in areas controlled by the Islamic State, mutilation and beheadings are rare, but the rigidness of religious codes, such as forcing people to attend prayer, and mismanagement of services and infrastructure, appear to have stoked discontent with their rule.

The jihadists initially capitalized on the failure to govern of the FSA and its allies in the Istanbul-based National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (the Coalition). A functioning opposition government was only formed in September 2013, following prolonged wrangling in the Coalition and despite U.S. opposition. By then jihadists were in control of extensive territory and the Islamic State had advanced into the Euphrates Basin in eastern Syria. Indeed, the ouster of two Western- and Arab-backed FSA units from Idlib by the Nusra Front in 2014–2015 appears to have been welcomed by local communities because the FSA in the north was seen as largely corrupt and doing little to dislodge the Assad regime.

But in June 2015, protests broke out in areas controlled by the Nusra Front in Idlib

and by Jaish al-Islam in Ghouta, demanding services and an end to corruption and arbitrary arrests. At the same time, resentment against Alawite rule in jihadist-held rural Syria appears to have remained strong as Assad's air force has continued to hit the civilian population with barrel bombs and memories of the crackdown on the initially peaceful protest movement remain fresh.

Rural Jihadists at a Glance

Jaish al-Islam: Led by Saudi-backed cleric Zahran Alloush, Jaish al-Islam is active in the outskirts of Damascus and the Qalamoun Mountains near Lebanon.
Ahrar al-Sham: Seen as the best organised rebel unit, headed by Abu Jaber al-Khafaji, an engineer from the countryside near Aleppo.
Nusra Front: Led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani, also known as al-Fateh (the conqueror), who is thought to be a Syrian of rural origin. Racked by internal divisions, the al-Qaeda affiliate remains tough in combat.
Jaish al-Fatah: A northern alliance mainly comprised of the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham. The group captured the provincial capital of Idlib from the Assad regime in May 2013.

Assad Regime Plays with Fire

Prompted by regional calculations, Assad helped lay the foundations for the transformation of the Syrian countryside into a jihadist hotbed after the U.S. invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003 and resulted in a strengthened Iran. Despite its strong ties with Tehran, the Assad regime appeared threatened by the U.S. presence next door and sought to undermine the transformation of post-Saddam Iraq. The Syrian authorities encouraged the emergence of a new breed of jihadist cleric in rural regions. Playing the role of agitators, these clerics helped recruit fighters to infiltrate Iraq, where their jihadist ideology was further consolidated.

Courtship of the jihadists was accompanied by broader tolerance of Islamists, which aided the rise of Zahran Alloush. Alloush's father Abdullah, a Ghouta cleric living in Saudi Arabia, remains well connected with the Wahhabi clerical establishment behind the Saudi monarchy. The father and son's brand of austere Islam avoided the bellicose rhetoric of the Syrian jihadists who went to Iraq and their readiness to brand their enemies as apostates. Boosted by his father's reputation, Zahran Alloush preached a more nuanced ideology that also appealed to educated city dwellers. His religious seminars in Ghouta, for example, drew adherents from the northern Damascus neighborhood of Barzeh. But Alloush was arrested in 2009 as part of a crackdown on jihadists who had fought in Iraq. Prompted by U.S. pressure, the operation also extended to more moderate clerics seen as having carved out some independence, such as Alloush. Three months after the beginning of the revolt, in June 2011, Alloush was released from Sednaya prison near Damascus, together with hundreds of jihadist veterans of the Iraq conflict. Their release helped militarize the Syrian revolt and bring a militant leadership to the top of its rural core. Alloush himself turned more hardline.

From Preacher to Strongman

Once free, Alloush, with the help of his father, set up what became known as Jaish al-Islam, a rebel formation drawn mostly from Eastern Ghouta, which is separated from Damascus by the contested neighborhood of Jobar. The group's ideology has followed Alloush's pronouncements, which changed as he sought to cast himself as a statesman acceptable to international powers. In the wake of the military coup that ousted Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, Alloush denounced democracy as a Western ploy. He called for the Umayyad Caliphate to be revived and for

Syria to be "cleansed" of Alawites. In 2015, Alloush dropped his public opposition to a representative government and came out as a verbal proponent of communal coexistence.

Militarily, Jaish al-Islam has also readjusted. In the first two years, inexperience and relative weakness caused the death of hundreds of rebel recruits in Ghouta in ambushes by Assad's forces and Hezbollah. The internal organization of Jaish al-Islam slowly improved as the group captured large arms depots from the Assad regime and extended its supply lines to Jordan, an important but unreliable conduit for Saudi aid for anti-Assad forces. Jaish al-Islam also took over tunnels and crossing points into Damascus that enriched combatants and profiteers on both sides through informal taxation of goods, protection rackets, and exorbitant prices.

Drawing comparisons with the Assad family, Alloush promoted his relatives to senior positions in Jaish al-Islam and expanded his influence. In 2014 Jaish al-Islam expelled several hundred members of the Islamic State from eastern Ghouta, most of whom had infiltrated the area from their home district of Hajar al-Aswad in southern Damascus. Jaish al-Islam also routed Jaish al-Umma, a local group in Douma that started out as a non-ideological rebel force but later adopted jihadist rhetoric in rivalry with Alloush. Jaish al-Umma launched an attack on Damascus in 2012 that shook Assad's grip on the capital but ultimately failed.

Alloush reached an uneasy understanding with larger jihadist groups in the form of the Unified Military Command for Eastern Ghouta. Established in 2014, the nominal alliance comprises Ahrar al-Sham, whose leadership stems mostly from rural Hama and Idlib, and Failaq al-Rahman, which is led by Abdul Nasser Shumair, a former captain in Assad's army from rural Homs. A smaller player in the grouping is the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, which is linked to Damascene clerics opposed to Assad such as Sariya al-Rifai and Osama al-Rifai, brothers forced into exile in Cairo and Istanbul after the revolt. A minor military player, Jund al-Sham, links Alloush to Damascene clerics and Sunni merchants whose priority is for the capital to be spared destruction similar to Aleppo. Alloush has also been courted by Moaz al-Khatib, the former head of the opposition Coalition. Khatib, a Damascene, was ousted from the Coalition in 2013, partly due to his skepticism of the soundness of confronting Assad militarily. Indeed, beyond a brief shelling of Damascus in early 2015, which was met by accelerated regime barrel bombing, Alloush has done little to alter the stalemate with Assad's forces in the capital, focusing instead on consolidating his grip on Eastern Ghouta.

His efforts have been largely successful, but at a price. Jaish al-Islam's local standing appears to have taken a beating: In July 2015, Abu Suleiman Tafour, head of the opposition judicial council in Ghouta resigned in protest at Jaish al-Islam's detention without charge of sixty members of Jaish al-Umma. Activist Anas al-Khouli was detained for two weeks after filming demonstrations against Alloush demanding the release of the detainees. These events were, however, overshadowed by the killing of a demonstrator in an area of the town of Hammouriya patrolled by Failaq al-Rahman, which led to a crowd seizing and beating Failaq al-Rahman's commander Abdulnaser Shumair, after marching on his home. Shumair's public humiliation strengthened Alloush as the strongman of Eastern Ghouta.

Still, Alloush has been dogged by the suspected involvement of Jaish al-Islam in the December 2013 kidnapping and disappearance of human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh and three of her comrades. The four had fled regime persecution in Damascus to Alloush's hometown of Douma. Fiercely independent, Zaitouneh drew the ire of Jaish al-Islam for establishing a network of mostly secular activists and advocating non-violence.

Alloush – Pick of Regional Powers

The disappearance of what became known as the "Douma Four" did little to diminish outside support for Alloush. Regionally, expansion of the Islamic State helped Jaish al-Islam be seen as an alternative to more extreme groups encroaching on Damascus, a specter that has kept Washington practically opposed to removing Assad and raised tension between the United States and Saudi Arabia, amongst others. Alloush's Saudi backing appears to have grown after Salman bin Abdulaziz succeeded the late Abdullah as king in January 2015. Salman is seen as having retrenched to the Salafist Wahhabist base of the monarchy. One of his first initiatives was a proposal for a meeting in Saudi Arabia to reorganize the Syrian opposition and integrate rebel brigades in the new structure, with a prominent role for Alloush. But the project appears to have been put on hold, with rifts deepening between Saudi Arabia and Turkey on one side and other Western and Arab members of the Friends of Syria alliance nominally backing the Syrian opposition, on the other.

In April 2015, Alloush made a publicized trip to Turkey and improved ties with Jordan, which is not keen to see Assad fall, and says its focus is fighting the Islamic State. Jordan is a main ally in the U.S. air campaign against the Islamic State, which is carried out with the tacit cooperation of the Assad regime. As soon as U.S. or allied warplanes take off from the Azraq air base in Jordan, the Assad regime turns off its air defenses to allow the jets to reach Islamic State targets in eastern Syria. On a lesser scale, the raids have hit the Nusra Front and occasionally, Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib and Aleppo, while Jaish al-Islam has not been targeted.

Resilience Marks Ahrar al-Sham

Today, Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front dominate the countryside outside Assad's control, except in the southern province of Deraa (see SWP Comments 5/2015), where the FSA remains a significant player. The mostly desert east, which accounts for all of Syria's oil production, has been divided between the Assad regime, the Islamic State, and Kurdish militias. Demonstrating depth of organization, Ahrar al-Sham has repeatedly bounced back from major setbacks, the latest being the death in September 2014 of its leader Hassan Abboud in an explosion in Idlib. Abboud was another former prisoner released from Sednaya by the Assad regime. The attack also killed most of Ahrar al-Sham's top tier, who were meeting Abboud amid an internal debate about altering the group's jihadist creed in favor of a more pragmatic variety. The new approach aimed at expanding cooperation with other brigades and outside powers to remove Assad and counter the Islamic State.

A process of moderating Ahrar al-Sham's rhetoric, which was started by Abboud, accelerated after his death as the group fell under the influence of Turkey. Ankara has strengthened ties with militant Islamist and other rebel units in northern Syria to counter the expansion of Kurdish militias on its borders. In an unusual move, in July 2015 Ahrar al-Sham published opinion pieces in two leading Western dailies, underlining its openness to talks with the United States on how to build a democratic alternative to Assad that would protect minorities. This contrasted with the group's manifesto emphasizing an "Islamic society." The articles also indicated that Ahrar al-Sham could ally with Washington in the fight against the Islamic State. In an apparent reference to U.S. help for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is pitted against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and distrusted by many Arabs for pursuing de facto separatism, Ahrar al-Sham stated that only a native Syrian Sunni alternative could defeat the Islamic State. The PYD is an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is branded a terrorist organization in the United States, Europe, and Turkey. Ahrar al-Sham's public remake appears to have the support of a wing that includes the group's new leader,

Abu Jaber al-Khafaji, another former inmate of Sednaya prison. But others in leading positions are more hardline and many rank-and-file members are ideologically inspired by al-Qaeda.

Jihadist Cooperation and its Limits

The Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham are members of Jaish al-Fatah, an Islamist alliance that was set up in March 2015 in apparent coordination with Turkey. It has captured most of the province of Idlib from the Assad regime and FSA remnants. Hoping to emulate that success, in April 2015 the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham set up the "Ansar al-Sharia operations room" to capture the contested city of Aleppo. As of late July, efforts by anti-Assad forces to take the western part of Aleppo have faltered due to regime resistance and rebels diverting resources to counter an Islamic State incursion into the northern Aleppo countryside.

At the same time, violence between Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front persists. In 2013 Ahrar al-Sham elbowed out the Nusra Front and other rebel brigades to take control of the main Bab al-Hawa crossing into Turkey, which has become a significant source of revenues from de facto tariffs. Early in 2015, Nusra Front fighters in the town of Binnij in Idlib killed Judge Abu Asyad al-Yemeni, a Yemeni recruit who was the main Ahrar al-Sham figure in the Islamic Council for the Management of Liberated Areas in Idlib Countryside.

Internal Feuds Weaken Nusra Front

Lacking the organizational strength of Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front appears to be fragmenting under the weight of internal disputes exacerbated by a strong presence of foreign jihadists. Tensions between foreign fighters, known as al-muhajiroun in reference to early followers of the Prophet who traveled to join him, and Syrian Nusra Front members grew after a unit headed by a Libyan jihadist known as Abu Abdallah al-Libi and a Tunisian known as Safina killed more than twenty Druze villagers in Idlib in June 2015. The massacre came only weeks after Abu Muhammed al-Golani, the Nusra Front's leader, had adopted a slightly softer tone toward Syria's minorities, as opposed to the Islamic State for example. In an interview with Qatari-owned *Al Jazeera*, Golani affirmed that Alawites and Druze "need to return to Islam," but said the Nusra Front would spare civilians from the two sects. But the interview was a whitewash and Golani was not asked about an incursion by the Nusra Front into the Alawite Mountain in Latakia governorate in 2013 that resulted in the killing and kidnapping of hundreds of mainly Alawite civilians. Golani also insisted on what he saw as a need to enforce Sharia law, although its arbitrary application appears to have alienated some of the group's rural base. A Syrian called Abu Islah, one of the Nusra Front's religious enforcers in Idlib, oversaw a public execution of a middle-aged woman for alleged prostitution in the town of Maarat Misreen in January 2015. Shortly after this, Abu Islah was assassinated in apparent revenge, but civilians continue to be easy targets for erratic edicts. In al-Yarmouk camp on the edge of Damascus, Nusra Front members executed two Palestinian youths in December 2014 for "cursing God." Several others in the camp were held on the same charge but released, apparently because they were Syrians and came from influential families or had relatives in other rebel groups.

Seen as indecisive and not in full control, Golani appears to have contributed to the Nusra Front's apparent lack of discipline. For example, he allowed a public dispute to fester between two main ideological figures nominally under his authority. The social media feud pitted Abu Marya al-Qahtani, an Iraqi who advocated the need to placate the local population and cooperate with other rebels, against Sami al-Aridi, a Jordanian who emphasized a harsher jihadist approach regardless of any lack of grassroots support. Qahtani also warned against

currents in the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham that sympathize with the Islamic State and said the Islamic State had infiltrated Jaish al-Fatah in the north. In a move signaling the ascendancy of the hardliners, Qahtani was eventually removed from his position as ideological head of the Nusra Front in 2014 and replaced by Aridi. In July 2015, a Nusra Front commander known as Saleh Hama, who was close to Qahtani, was reportedly dismissed.

Governing Failures

Highlighting the Nusra Front's organizational weakness, its rigid running of daily affairs and imposition in 2015 of a religious tax in some regions in the north were met by apathy or outright opposition, prompting a subsequent relaxation. In the Idlib town of Maarat al-Numaan, situated on the main north-south highway connecting Damascus and Aleppo, for example, the Nusra Front had by mid-2015 eased back on closing shops at prayer time and forcing their owners attend the mosques. The group also backed down from a ban on mosques broadcasting religious chants over loudspeakers during the holy month of Ramadan. Nusra Front considers the chants un-Islamic, but the edict was challenged by Ahmad Alwan, a local cleric with a significant following.

The relative leniency of the Nusra Front in the region is partly due to Abu al-Hareth, the group's local commander, who is from Maarat al-Numaan. While an FSA unit known as Brigade 13 also operates in Maarat al-Numaan, power belongs to Nusra Front, which controls the Sharia-based judicial system that replaced the regime. Yet, a deterioration in services and the lack of a functioning infrastructure in the town prompted the Nusra Front to grant the newly-elected Local Administrative Council a greater role in June 2015. The council is part of a civil network linked to the opposition government, which is based in Gaziantep in Turkey. In the education sector, opposition government officials supervised exams for thousands of students in Idlib after Jaish al-Fatah took control of the province.

A local council also operates in Idlib city, the provincial capital, but it does not advertise itself. Administratively, Jaish al-Fatah's takeover of Idlib appears to have been a debacle, resulting in lawlessness and looting of public and private property. Underscoring the limits to the Nusra Front's tolerance of any presence for the mainstream political opposition, in July 2015 the Front and an allied militia sacked a police station linked to the Coalition structures in the town of Kfar Nubul in Idlib. The assailants detained the station's personnel and stole cars and other equipment.

Outside Powers Hesitate

Following the capture of most of Idlib governorate by May 2015, opposition hopes were high that Jaish al-Fatah would sweep south to the neighboring governorate of Hama, home to a major base for Assad's airforce, and break a stalemate pitting Sunni and Alawite villages against each other in the Ghab Plain west of Hama city. But the flow of weapons from Turkey to Jaish al-Fatah and FSA units cooperating with it appears to have dropped since May 2015. The slowdown coincided with U.S. diplomatic pressure on Turkey and Arab Gulf nations to curb support for the militant Islamists in the north and apparent opposition to military operations that might weaken Assad to a point where he could fall without an alternative acceptable to Washington. The mass killing of the Druze in Idlib also raised Western fears of larger massacres if Jaish al-Fatah were to end up in control of Alawite territory. Aware of the damage supporting militants could do to its relations with Washington, Turkey has apparently tried to nudge the Nusra Front toward severing its links with al-Qaeda, a main reason for the U.S. designation of the Nusra Front as a terrorist group. Golani, mindful of the power of foreign fighters within the Nusra Front and

their military value in fighting the Assad regime, dismissed any such suggestions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With the exception of the Nusra Front, Syria's rural jihadists are leaning toward pragmatism. One of the motivations seems to be a fear that the July 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran could result in increasing Iranian support for Assad and a change in the military balance. The jihadists have also seen how U.S. air support has enabled Kurdish militias to roll back the Islamic State, which has been stepping up its attacks on anti-Assad forces. Among the jihadists, Jaish al-Islam has come closest to positioning itself as the Arab Sunni equivalent of the Kurdish militia, expecting outside backers to turn a blind eye to its brutality as long as it fights more extreme groups and does not jeopardize Assad's grip on power.

With the West indicating through stepped up contacts with Alloush that it can live with Jaish al-Islam, chances are fading that the fate of Razan Zaitouneh, an iconic figure of the uprising, will ever become known. The impunity with which her abduction was carried out will likely go down as the death knell of the aspirations of the Syrian revolt for a civic pluralistic society. At the same time, without the engagement of Jaish al-Islam and the hardline rural groups no international solution can be enforced. Even less ambitious steps, such as sparing residential areas from fighting, require their agreement because the jihadists can scuttle any arrangement on the ground.

Ultimately, ways need to be found to prevent a re-emergence of the Alawite police state in new guise or a Taliban-style takeover. Such prospects appear impossible without the departure of Assad, the main symbol of Sunni disenfranchisement, and a curbing of the power of Alawite security operatives. In a new political system, Sunni power would also need to be checked, for example, through a dual-chamber parliament. One chamber could be elected by outright popular vote in each governorate, the second one on a more local basis to give sway to minorities.

But a political solution remains far off, even if U.N. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has contacted jihadist factions. These talks need to be widened to reach international consensus on cooperating with the jihadists. For example, the Friends of Syria could regard whether Ahrar al-Sham facilitates the functioning of the opposition government as a test for its new rhetoric. In this sense, the administrative failure of the jihadists offers a renewed opportunity to support the moderate opposition to Assad. But Turkey, which has narrowed some of its differences with Washington over Syria, would need to agree to help.

Since its formation in 2013, the opposition government has been looking to Germany, which has been engaged in capacity-building and structural reform, for increased support. Day-to-day funding, which has been sourced from Qatar, has been intermittent, resulting in operational interruptions. So far, most German support to the government has been channeled through an international fund dedicated to specific projects. But opposition government officials say the mechanism has been too slow, especially as an administrative gap develops in northern Syria. Faster and larger German funding, for example, to fill the salary gaps left by sporadic Qatari support, would test the opposition's view that the time is ripe to get service and infrastructure projects off the ground despite jihadist control. This would be one of the few options left for the West to help provide an alternative to the Assad dictatorship and jihadist rule, as well as help a local population in dire need.

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