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# A Fractured Border: Syria, Türkiye, and Cantonization

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## Summary

Several factors related to the civil war in Syria have engendered the cantonization of the country's north. From east to west, five northern border regions are to various degrees self-governing, though four are backed by, and even dependent on, Türkiye. Ongoing indirect negotiations between Türkiye and Syria—which were previously at loggerheads—may result in an adjustment of the boundaries of these cantons, but will not alter, let alone reverse, the phenomenon of cantonization.

## Key Themes

- The cantonization of much of Syria's north is a fait accompli. Cantonization was midwived by Turkish intervention and Russian-backed Syrian regime military action, the earlier wholesale flight of commerce from Aleppo to southern Türkiye, a cross-border aid economy increasingly controlled by Türkiye, and the Astana Peace Process, which was born in 2016 and is ongoing.
- In part thanks to Astana, Türkiye was able to shift from supporting the Syrian opposition's project of overthrowing the Assad regime toward how to tackle what it considered the Kurdish problem on its southern border.
- Damascus' security rapprochement with Ankara is itself the result of Astana. Indirect negotiations through Astana evolved into Russian-mediated talks outside that framework, but inspired by it.

## Findings

The economic viability of the Syrian cantons Türkiye created through military operations was achieved thanks to the preexisting, war-engendered phenomena of wide-ranging cross-border commercial activity and increasingly Turkish-controlled channels of international aid.

If the Syrian regime ever had any illusions about retaking the northwest, its experience in Daraa, which is less sociopolitically complex and less densely populated, surely disabused it of such notions. The major lesson of Daraa is that, if faced with opposition, the regime has next to no ability to absorb the rebel-held northwest and its population.

Cantonization will not soon be reversed. In fact, it may not even have ended. Rebel-controlled Idlib and the three Turkish-dominated cantons will continue to exist in one form or another until a national framework reunites them and the Kurdish-run northeastern canton with the rest of Syria. That particular scenario is almost certainly a long way off.





## Introduction

Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 shifted the dynamics of that country's civil war, which had begun as a civilian uprising in 2011 and turned into an armed conflict the following year. The intervention ultimately put an end to the Syrian opposition groups', and their international backers', aspirations to topple the regime and enabled President Bashar al-Assad to regain territory he had lost to the rebels. The turning point came in 2016. With Russia's help, especially that of its air force, the regime launched a military campaign in June of that year; by December, when the operation ended, regime forces had recaptured Aleppo. This victory marked a reversal of the regime's long-running misfortunes on the battlefield.

Also in 2016, Türkiye, which had since 2014 served as a nerve center for international humanitarian aid destined for Syria, asserted far greater control over the phenomenon, which had turned into one of the biggest and most complex aid campaigns in history. This, along with the fact that the displacement of so many Syrians to southern Türkiye and rebel-held northwest Syria had shifted much economic activity between Türkiye and Syria from Aleppo to the border areas, would serve Ankara well in its efforts to ensure the economic viability of the northern zones that it subsequently carved out of northern Syria for Türkiye-aligned Syrian rebel groups. Indeed, later in 2016, Türkiye launched its first of several military campaigns in Syria; Euphrates Shield resulted in the creation of a Turkish-dominated zone of the same name in northwest Syria and symbolized Ankara's new and decidedly interventionist approach to the Syrian conflict.

The Syrian regime's revanchism and Türkiye's interventionism impelled Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to inaugurate the Astana Peace Process at the end of 2016. Astana was to be a framework for Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, and by extension the Syrian regime, to bargain over the fate of Syria's northwest, and to strike deals with each other instead of slipping into conflict. Astana was also the beginning of the cantonization of Syria's borderlands. As the Syrian regime and its allies recaptured territory (largely in agreement with Türkiye), the opposition and its social base became more and more concentrated in Turkish-friendly Idlib, located in the northwestern corner of the country and governed by Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In fact, demographically speaking, Idlib turned into the epicenter of internal displacement in Syria, with millions of Syrians who were opposed to the regime winding up there as a result of flight or expulsion. In the following years, due in part to Astana-inspired understandings, Türkiye would go on to carve out two additional zones of influence in northwest Syria, Afrin in 2018 and Peace Spring (named for the Turkish military operation of the same name) in 2019, and consolidate its military presence in Idlib. Finally, as the threat posed by the Islamic State receded in 2016, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its civilian wing, with the cooperation of the United States, came to control a large chunk of territory in northeastern Syria independently of, and despite the opposition of, the Astana trio.

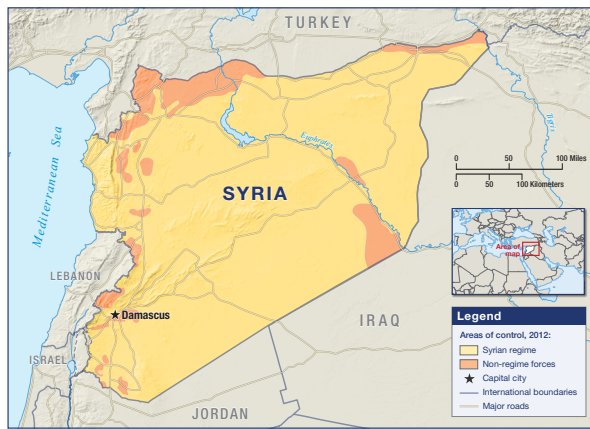
The result of all this is that today, Syria's northern borderlands are cantonized. From east to west, these regions are to various degrees self-governing, though four are backed by, and even dependent on, Türkiye. Cantonization will not soon be reversed. In fact, there may continue to be adjustments to the cantons. Recent Russian-mediated negotiations between Türkiye and the Assad regime have only underlined the continuity of the process. Despite the major earthquake that struck Türkiye in February 2023 and its heavy toll, meetings between Turkish and Syrian regime officials, mediated by Russia, have not stopped. That is because the situation in Syria's four northwestern cantons, and even that of Syria in general, represents a major pressure point for Ankara, which knows that it cannot stabilize the border without reaching an understanding with the Assad regime. The larger result of any such understanding, even if it involves adjusting the boundaries of any or all of the northwestern cantons, will be to consecrate cantonization in the Turkish-Syrian border regions.

# The Evolution of Syria Aid Efforts: From Internationally Managed to Turkish-Controlled

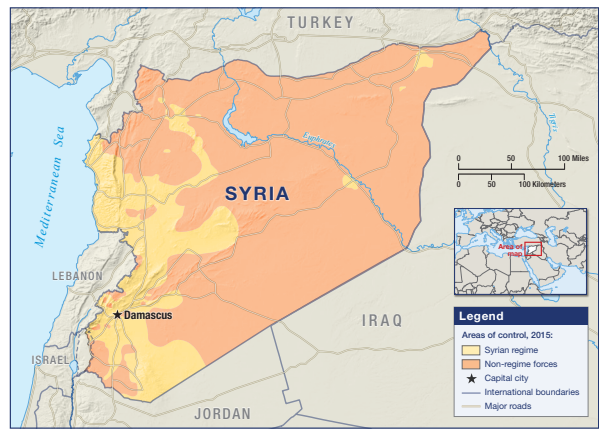
In spring 2011, when the first anti-government demonstrations began, hardly anyone imagined the scale of the war, destruction, and humanitarian crisis that would soon befall Syrians. If 2011 was marked by protests, regime crackdowns, and hit-and-run operations by scattered opposition groups, in 2012 the conflict became a full-fledged and internationalized civil war with a marked increase in levels of violence.<sup>1</sup> Toward the end of 2012 and into the beginning of 2013, the regime lost large swaths of land to various rebel groups. Damascus withdrew its forces from the Kurdish-majority areas of the northeast in the summer of 2012, and also began losing ground to rebels in rural Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, and Idlib Governorates, all of which came to be ruled by a multiplicity of armed groups and nascent local civilian opposition bodies. This pattern, which continued well into 2014 and 2015, meant that a growing part of the Syrian population was outside regime control and under various forms of rebel rule.

**Map 1. Evolution of Territorial Conflict in Syria 2012-2022**

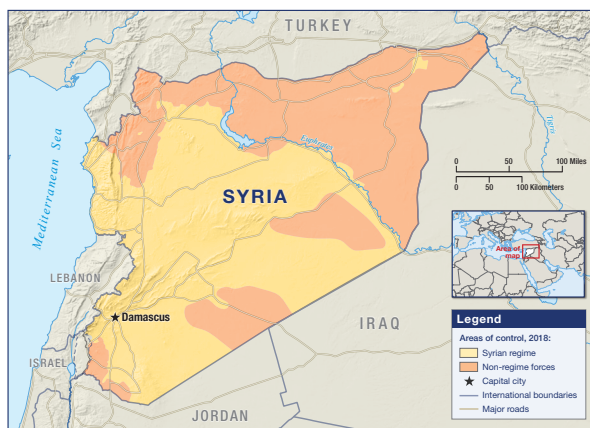
2012



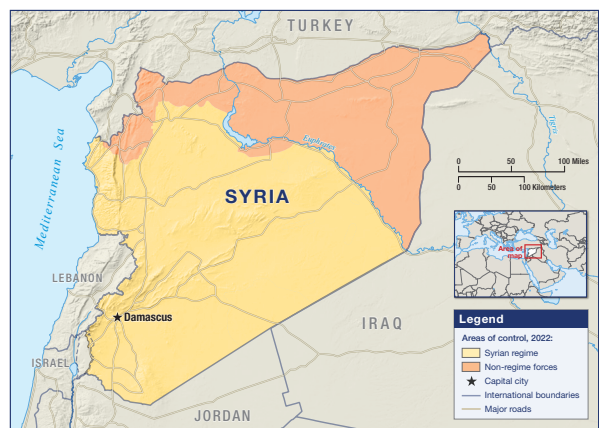
2015



2018



2022



From an economic perspective, the regime's loss of large swaths of territory meant that the mode of economic activity in those areas underwent a major transformation. In the northwest, the border crossings with Türkiye became the main gateway to the outside world in terms of human mobility, humanitarian aid, and commercial goods. Before 2011, Aleppo was the main economic and administrative center of northwestern Syria. Yet in late 2012, Aleppo became marginalized as it was divided between the regime and its opponents. Economic activity shifted to the northern border areas, and Türkiye became the main source or conduit for commercial activity.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a multibillion-dollar cross-border economy took shape. In 2014, Turkish commercial exports to Syria through the northwest stood at around \$1.8 billion, almost reaching the pre-2011 level, after having plummeted in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Commercially, southern Türkiye, especially Gaziantep, became an important destination for Syria's business community. Many Syrians moved their business operations to Türkiye, but continued to supply the same markets, such as Iraq and the Gulf, from their new base.<sup>4</sup> In essence, the Syrians who relocated to southern Türkiye were becoming not only part of Türkiye's economy, but also part of the economy of rebel-held northwest Syria.

Alongside the rise of this Türkiye-based cross-border economy was the growing role of Türkiye as a launching pad for increasingly large amounts of humanitarian aid bound for Syria. Initially, most of the aid entering the country was channeled through Damascus and in accordance with the regime's specifications. The United Nations (UN) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) that operated out of the Syrian capital had limited access to the north. This was due in part to logistical difficulties, but also because the regime blocked delivery of cross-line aid (aid that goes to Damascus first and then to opposition areas through the frontlines, or lines of contact), and also rejected cross-border aid to rebel-held areas as a violation of the country's sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> Starting from mid-2013, however, increased pressure on the UN to authorize cross-border aid from Türkiye without the regime's prior approval was applied by large INGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders),<sup>6</sup> relief organizations affiliated with the Syrian opposition,<sup>7</sup> and the "Friends of Syria," a coalition of Western and Arab countries that supported the opposition.<sup>8</sup> In July 2014, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2165, which authorized cross-border aid delivered from several countries, including Türkiye, *without* the consent of the Syrian government.<sup>9</sup>

This was a major turning point. It laid the legal foundation for the UN to operate directly in non-regime areas and, perhaps more importantly, provided legal cover for those organizations that were already providing such cross-border aid in some shape or form. The UN's contribution in 2014, the year Resolution 2165 was passed, remained modest. Even though the UN's role grew over the years, the lion's share of cross-border assistance continued to be delivered by organizations outside the UN system.<sup>10</sup>

Ankara facilitated the process of aid delivery by allowing southern Türkiye to become a hub for cross-border response without imposing many rules and regulations on the INGOs. It also participated in organizing the delivery of aid to Syria. The so-called "zero-point operation" illustrates this role as facilitator. As a Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) document explains, the zero-point operation method started in August 2012. INGOs that wanted to channel "in-kind" aid to Syria could do so in coordination with Türkiye's Disaster and Management Authority (AFAD) and TRC, which cleared the items and transported them on TRC trucks to the zero point—a designated border crossing with Syria such as Bab al-Hawa or Bab al-Salameh.<sup>11</sup> If pre-authorization from the *vali* (the governor of a Turkish province) was needed, TRC facilitated it. At the zero point, the TRC trucks were offloaded and their cargo loaded onto Syrian trucks contracted by the receiving

aid organization inside Syria.<sup>12</sup> This was not insignificant. In 2014, for example, TRC facilitated the movement of humanitarian goods valued at \$ 220 million.<sup>13</sup> This system stayed in place well after the passage of Resolution 2165 in mid-2014, which authorized UN cross-border aid.

Türkiye's role effectively ended at the zero point where, in essence, the international humanitarian community met the Syrian implementing partners. On paper, the procedure included Turkish authorities' verification of the goods and a security check of the receiving partner.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, many accounts suggested that this mechanism had flaws. First, it was possible to transport aid to Syria without prior coordination, for example by going directly to Bab al-Hawa. Second, even when coordinated in many cases, there was an absence of thorough monitoring by TRC or AFAD.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Türkiye had no mechanism in place to monitor where the aid actually ended up once it crossed the border.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014, Türkiye gradually began to take a more hands-on approach to the matter of humanitarian aid. It would later become apparent that this was because Ankara was seeking to oversee and even manage aid supply, as opposed to facilitating the work of INGOs. The reason for this is that it believed these INGOs maintained strong ties to Western intelligence agencies, had little respect for the Turkish state, and even undermined Türkiye's national interests by supporting Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria.<sup>17</sup>

For instance, Ankara pushed INGOs to register officially. Then, in 2015, it demanded that their employees obtain work permits.<sup>18</sup> The same year, once the new UN cross-border mechanism had firmed up, Ankara created a new registration system whereby INGOs had to register and obtain approval from the relevant Turkish authorities.<sup>19</sup> In 2016, the screws tightened more, with authorities conducting snap audits and showing up at INGOs' offices to interview employees and view documents.<sup>20</sup> Türkiye also cracked down on *hawala* informal transfers, which had facilitated the transfer of large sums of money without a paper trail.<sup>21</sup> The culmination came in February–March 2017, when Mercy Corps, a large American organization that operated out of Türkiye and claimed to provide aid to up to 500,000 people a month in northern Syria, was kicked out without explanation.<sup>22</sup>

## **Türkiye and the Syrian Regime Create a New Political Reality in Northern Syria**

Mercy Corps' expulsion coincided with Türkiye's first direct military intervention in Syria, Euphrates Shield, which occurred in 2016. Two more such campaigns would follow, one in 2018 and the other in 2019. Through these three major military operations, all of which included Turkish-backed Syrian rebels alongside Turkish forces, Türkiye carved out three cantons in northwestern Syria (Euphrates Shield, Afrin, and Peace Spring), and extended a protective umbrella to a fourth (rebel-held Idlib). Crucially, however, this alone was not enough to ensure these cantons' viability. That quality derived in large part from the pre-existing, war-engendered phenomena of wide-ranging cross-border commercial activity and increasingly Turkish-controlled channels of international aid.

Ankara's moves were not spontaneous. For example, Operation Euphrates Shield, the first of the three military campaigns, came about as a result of close coordination with Moscow. In return, Russia was able to support the Syrian regime's efforts to recapture rebel-held eastern Aleppo without having to worry about an adverse reaction on the part of Türkiye. As it turned out, Russia's direct intervention in the conflict ended the opposition's chances of toppling the regime, enabled Damascus to regain large chunks of territory it had lost to the rebels, and squeezed the latter into the northwestern corner of Syria.

Today, the Assad regime is the only local player capable of expanding its territorial control. Nonetheless, no such expansion can happen without a prior understanding with regional and international powers that support the cantons in the north. Any unilateral attempt by the regime to capture a canton would bring it into conflict with Türkiye (in the case of the Euphrates Shield, Afrin, Peace Spring, and HTS-controlled Idlib) or the United States (which backs the SDF in the northeast). Moreover, even if Damascus came to some sort of agreement with Ankara—say, through Russian mediation—to significantly expand its control in the rebel-held northwest, it would not be able to administer the area as one. The regime's continuous struggle to govern Daraa since 2018 is the best indication of this. Damascus has managed to secure certain strategic roads and assets, eliminate rivals, and extract resources, but it can neither effectively control the whole of Daraa—due to still-simmering resentment—nor offer services to the local population.

### Türkiye Assumes an Interventionist Role

In December 2016, while Operation Euphrates Shield was in progress, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran established a negotiating framework for northwestern Syria. Named the Astana Peace Process, after the city in Kazakhstan where meetings were held, the framework was launched with two related aims in mind. The first was to marginalize the Geneva Peace Process, which had not yielded any results. The second was to provide a platform for Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to negotiate among each other over Syria, particularly the northwest. Türkiye was now able to shift its focus from supporting the Syrian opposition's project of overthrowing the Assad regime toward how to tackle what it considered the Kurdish problem and other issues on its southern border. This proceeded in coordination with Iran and Russia, whose cooperation within the Astana framework gave Türkiye a measure of flexibility when it came to its options in northwestern Syria.

In the years following Euphrates Shield, Türkiye conducted two more military operations, in line with Astana-inspired understandings. In 2018, it dislodged the Kurdish-dominated People's Defense Units (YPG) from Kurdish-majority Afrin, in the process creating a second Syrian canton beholden to Türkiye. And in 2019, Türkiye carved a 30-kilometer-deep border canton, Peace Spring, out of an area under the control of the SDF, of which the YPG is the backbone. Also, through Astana, Turkish forces bolstered their presence in Idlib, which was ruled by HTS but fell under a Turkish umbrella of protection.

Beyond its military activities, Türkiye brought its humanitarian, stabilization, and governance roles to a new level. Up until Türkiye's intervention in Syria, for instance, TRC had underscored that its relief operations since August 2012 had been carried out "without violating their [Syrians'] border rights."<sup>23</sup> But as Türkiye moved into northwest Syria—with the Euphrates Shield operation, followed by that of Afrin in 2018 and Peace Spring in 2019—it unilaterally reshaped the internationally recognized border. Turkish forces

expanded existing small border crossings and opened new ones. Notably, Jarablus and Al-Ra'i crossings in the Euphrates Shield area were enlarged and expanded to serve as civilian, humanitarian, and commercial crossings in November 2016 and May 2017, respectively.<sup>24</sup> Also, unlike in the early years of the aid response, Türkiye closely monitored what entered through the border crossings and by whom.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, in Syria, Turkish-controlled areas were attached to the nearest Turkish province (*vilayet*), and the governors became the *de facto* administrators of these regions. For example, soon after the Euphrates Shield operation ended, Gaziantep's mayor visited Jarablus, praising her country's success in improving municipal services.<sup>26</sup> Such visits by Turkish officials—including high-ranking ones, such as the interior minister—became common and reflected Türkiye's growing influence in the region.<sup>27</sup> On the practical level, Turkish authorities assigned “assistant governors” to be intermediaries between Turkish governors and local councils in Syria. In general, these Turkish officials enjoy strong authority over locals.<sup>28</sup>

Some sectors are directly supervised by the relevant ministries in Türkiye, whose staff coordinate with local Syrian staff as well as Turkish bodies that operate in Syria. For example, in the Euphrates Shield area, Türkiye has since 2016–2017 monopolized some sectors, such as education and health, as well as camp management in certain areas, notably in Afrin and the Peace Spring area.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the Turkish private sector is part and parcel of Türkiye's stabilization efforts in northern Syria.<sup>30</sup> Turkish construction firms, for example, have implemented infrastructure and housing projects.<sup>31</sup> Telecommunications is another business that Turkish private firms invest in through hand-picked local partners who, according to one such investor, take care of the Syria side of the business.<sup>32</sup>

When it comes to humanitarian aid, AFAD holds the keys to Turkish-controlled areas of northwestern Syria. For any organization to work in either of the three Turkish-controlled cantons, it needs to be registered in Türkiye and coordinate with various Turkish governmental bodies. This is perhaps most visible in Afrin. Any organization that works in Afrin has to be registered in Türkiye and coordinate with AFAD.<sup>33</sup> Approximately fifty organizations operate in Afrin,<sup>34</sup> all of them either Turkish (such as IHH, Hayat, and TRC) or Syrian (Al-Amin, BAHAR, SAMS, Ihsan, and so on).<sup>35</sup> All operate in accordance with Türkiye's policies and receive funding from channels vetted by Ankara.<sup>36</sup>

Essentially, Türkiye has created a parallel aid system that operates alongside the existing one (led by the UN and Western INGOs) in a peculiar relationship characterized by cooperation and power struggles. For example, due to the West's opposition to the Turkish military operation that created a canton out of Afrin, no INGO that receives funding from Western governments has the authorization to work in there.<sup>37</sup> The Peace Spring scenario was similar to Afrin due to political reasons, mainly related to the Kurdish factor and Türkiye's decision to launch the operation despite Western opposition. But the other similarity is that Türkiye sought to dictate how aid should flow into the region. This put it at odds with large INGOs and the UN, which opposed the politicization of aid by Türkiye.<sup>38</sup>

In the Euphrates Shield area, Western aid systems still operate alongside those of Türkiye. For instance, UN operations continue in internally displaced people's camps, in cooperation with INGOs and Syrian organizations and without much interference from Türkiye.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, especially since 2021, Türkiye has sometimes rejected contributions from humanitarian organizations or dictated the terms of delivery.<sup>40</sup> In doing so, rather than allow foreign aid organizations it did not trust to lead the charge, Ankara could ensure that Turkish agencies were the ones that would pull the strings and implement programs on the ground.

Additionally, Ankara was motivated by the desire to counter the Kurdish presence in the region, prevent new waves of displacement, and even return Syrian refugees to northern Syria. According to Türkiye's interior minister, by the end 2022, some 500,000 Syrians had already "voluntarily" returned to Syria (a figure that cannot be independently verified).<sup>41</sup> Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has also mentioned on several occasions that his country is working to return 1 million Syrians to some 200,000 homes across thirteen different locations in northwestern Syria, with the costs covered by foreign aid.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the challenges and shortfalls, especially in the early going, in many ways Türkiye's humanitarian and other projects prevented the further deterioration of the situation in these northwestern areas and improved the availability of food, electricity, shelter, banking, education, and health services. To be sure, Türkiye's approach was political and not merely humanitarian. It was a calculated effort entrusted to high-ranking officials (*valis*, AFAD senior managers, the Interior Ministry) to stabilize the region in cooperation with certain preferred aid organizations. By and large, it worked. Moreover, Türkiye's interventionism has afforded Ankara a major say in the fate of Syria's northwestern borderlands.

### Daraa and the Limits of the Syrian Regime's Revanchism

In becoming a haven for those who either could not coexist with the regime or were shunned by it, the rebel-held northwest turned into the epicenter of internal displacement. A major contributing factor to this trend was the regime's siege-bombard-evict campaigns, which it carried out between 2016 and 2018 against parts of several opposition-held enclaves across Syria: Eastern Ghouta, Duma, rural Homs, and others. As the regime advanced on these enclaves, part of the population was evicted or fled to the northwest. Even as such a process facilitated the regime's takeover of these previously anti-regime areas, it served to make a future takeover of the northwest that much more difficult and unlikely.

In fact, if the Syrian regime had any illusions about retaking the four cantons of the northwest, its experience in Daraa, which is less sociopolitically complex and less densely populated, surely disabused it of such notions. Although Russia brokered a deal that helped the regime to reassert its authority over this rebel-held region of southern Syria in 2018, Damascus still lacks full control and faces fierce resistance. Over the past few years, it has succeeded in expanding its military and security control over urban areas of Daraa governorate with important infrastructure, convinced locally rooted networks (including former members of the armed opposition) to change sides, and eliminated some of its enemies.<sup>43</sup> Yet chronic conflict has eroded the regime's ability to govern and provide basic services. Thus, in essence, the regime's approach has been securitized; Damascus extracts resources without being able to govern the territories and the population it oversees.

The regime broke the opposition in 2018 with Russia's help, but did not reassert control over Daraa all at once. A few enclaves, most notably the Busra al-Sham region, parts of Daraa city, and the Tafas region remained in the hands of former opposition groups that, thanks to the Russian-brokered deal, were allowed to keep their light arms. Between 2018 and 2021, the regime conducted several military operations as a result of which it eliminated, incorporated into its ranks, or expelled (to the northwest) elements of these groups.<sup>44</sup> The regime had the ability to mobilize its forces, home in on a given region, and achieve military success. However, it could not, and still cannot, claim effective control over a large governorate that is home to many people who resent the regime. Even today, in areas such as Nawa, Jasem, and Daraa al-Balad, the regime's security forces lock themselves in their buildings or barracks after dark, fearing an attack. This situation, which is akin to a low-intensity war, contributes to the region's instability.

In the face of this reality, the regime has, on the one hand, sought to control strategic infrastructure that generates revenue, and, on the other, pursued a security approach to tame dissent. For instance, regime forces seized control of the Nassib crossing with Jordan in 2018 (after having lost it in April 2015), thereby connecting Damascus with Jordan. Since 2018, commercial traffic has increased, bringing revenue to the state but also to regime forces that man the road and extort money from merchants transporting goods and even ordinary motorists.<sup>45</sup> Since 2018, several factions within the regime's military-security apparatus have alternated in controlling the highway, sometimes fighting each other for control. In January 2023, the regime's Fourth Armored Division, led by Bashar al-Assad's younger brother Maher, took over the crossing.<sup>46</sup>

The regime's security-focused approach in Daraa has had a profound impact on local governing structures. This is reflected in the changing role and function of the mayor (*ra'is al-baladiyyah*) of a given town. Before 2011, in their capacity as technocrats and bureaucrats, mayors provided services to their constituencies. Today, they have assumed a more securitized role in collaboration with the intelligence services, one that includes silencing dissent. For example, Inkhil's mayor, Yasin al-Zamel, is reportedly associated with an assassination squad, one that includes former opposition fighters and targets locals opposed to the regime.<sup>47</sup> He has himself been subjected to at least four assassination attempts for his collaboration with the security services.<sup>48</sup>

Across Daraa, this phenomenon is accompanied by an erosion of the state's capacity to govern and its lack of resources. There is an ever-increasing trend in Daraa—caused by the bankruptcy of the state—of locals raising money so that the state can carry out its role as provider of basic services. Already in 2019, there were reports of individuals paying for fixing electricity pillars, buying cables, and hiring workers to extend state electricity lines to their household.<sup>49</sup> In January 2023, residents and expatriates of Da'el, a city in Daraa, raised 1.2 billion Syrian pounds (about \$18,000) to improve basic services.<sup>50</sup> In a similar vein, during the recent fuel shortage, the Inkhil town council asked locals to raise funds to buy fuel for garbage-collecting trucks.<sup>51</sup>

Setting aside the more remote Peace Spring canton, on which Damascus does not seem to have designs, rebel-held Idlib, Afrin, and Euphrates Shield are together at least four times larger than the territory the regime recaptured in southern Syria in 2018, and approximately 5.4 times more populous.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the region's sociopolitical situation is far more complex than Daraa's. Even if the Syrian regime were to attack and defeat the rebel forces, administering the area would most likely prove impossible. The regime's expertise is governance through the military and security services, as Syrian state institutions have largely lost their capacity to govern. As a result, in this context, the major lesson of Daraa is that, if faced with opposition, the regime has next to no ability to absorb the rebel-held northwest and its population.

## Why Cantonization Is Here to Stay

In retrospect, Astana can be said to mark the beginning of the cantonization of Syria's northern borderlands. Although its importance should not be overstated, as it functioned in tandem with other developments—Turkish interventionism, the Syrian regime's recovery of territory it had lost, and Kurdish rule in the northeast—Astana played a role in enabling the Syrian regime and Türkiye, in coordination with Russia, to redraw the map of the northwest without a significant risk of hostilities erupting between their militaries or proxies. A new chapter in the region's history had begun.



Once Türkiye entered the Astana track, the outlines of a transformation in Turkish policy toward the war in Syria became visible. For Türkiye, Astana was a better framework than Geneva for it to tackle the security challenges on its southern border. For the Syrian regime, Astana, of which it was not officially a part, was an opportunity to regain a say, through the offices of Iran and Russia, in the affairs of Syrian territory beyond its control. This in turn led to tangible gains, such as retaking some of that territory, including important urban centers, as the fate of the northwest increasingly came to be tied to the Astana track.

Astana-derived understandings should be viewed as part of a continuum that, technically, began before Astana was even formalized. For example, in the summer of 2016, Türkiye withdrew its support from the rebels in control of eastern Aleppo. This enabled the regime to launch an offensive, with Russia's help, that eventually resulted in its recapture of the city in December of that year. Simultaneously, Türkiye launched Euphrates Shield in August 2016, without the Syrian regime getting involved. The invasion was aimed at fighting the Islamic State as well as preventing Kurdish forces from connecting Manbij with Afrin, both of which were under their control.<sup>53</sup> Through Astana, Russia played an important role in these understandings, tolerating Turkish intervention in return for Ankara withdrawing its support from Aleppo rebels.<sup>54</sup>

Ever since, Astana has remained a platform for the Russia-Türkiye-Iran troika to discuss affairs related to Syria, and to strike bargains. For instance, in 2017, the sides agreed that Türkiye would establish observation posts in opposition-held Idlib, while Iran and Russia would do the same in the regime-held part of the divided governorate. Despite disagreements, escalation, and at one point even direct Russian-Turkish confrontation, the observation posts' agreement has held.<sup>55</sup> And understandings in the spirit of Astana, even if not directly the outcome of an agreement reached through that framework, included Afrin and Peace Spring.

On the face of it, the existence of the Astana framework, through which Türkiye and Syria can barter indirectly, and its proven track record, would appear to make it possible for Ankara, Damascus, and Syrian rebel or opposition groups to agree on further matters, such as who controls which parts of the northwest. Even with the lesson of Daraa aside, however, agreement over full incorporation of any canton into regime-controlled territory is exceedingly unlikely. At most, the regime might find a way to regain strategically important territory or urban centers.

In fact, for rebel groups in *any* of the five cantons to agree to their fiefdom's absorption into regime-controlled Syria would necessitate guarantees that the territory would enjoy a large measure of autonomy. This would require the adoption of a decentralized system of rule. The problem is that any move toward decentralization on the part of the Syrian state would become a security concern for Türkiye because it would raise the specter of formalized autonomy for the Kurdish-controlled areas in the northeast. This is something Ankara cannot countenance. As for the regime in Damascus, any step toward sharing power through broad decentralization would represent a major concession and a threat to the stability of the Assad regime.

Consequently, this is a rare matter over which Türkiye and Syria agree entirely. Even setting aside the thorny issue represented by the wishes of the population of the cantons and the various rebel or opposition groups that wield power there, neither Ankara nor Damascus is keen to pursue any agreement that would include the reincorporation of these areas into regime-controlled Syria. In effect, not only is the cantonization of the Turkish-Syrian border a *fait accompli*, but there is virtually no chance of its reversal in the near future.

This is significant, particularly as minor territorial gains for this or that side through Astana (or Astana-style) bargains cannot disguise the magnitude of loss for all involved. As a result of the war, the Syrian state was forced to forfeit part of its territory and population, dealing it a serious blow. Türkiye may well have overstretched itself with its commitments to Euphrates Shield, Afrin, Peace Spring, and Idlib—all the more so following the massive earthquake in February 2023—without having significantly weakened the Kurdish-controlled northeast. And the inhabitants of all five northern cantons are consigned to life in entities that are not fully part of either Syria or Türkiye, yet also not independent.

## Conclusion

The war in Syria, which began just over a decade ago, has ended. Little by little, the Assad regime, which for so long was preoccupied with trying to regain territory or simply remain in power, has clawed its way back to a position in which it enjoys some regional standing. In this context, Astana played a facilitative role. Damascus's security rapprochement with Ankara is itself the result of Astana, which led to Russian-mediated talks between Türkiye and the Syrian regime outside that framework. Today, the regime is able to reap the benefits of its long struggle to become master of Syria once again—not by retaking Syria's territory in its entirety, but through the possibility of manipulating cantonization to its advantage and thereby securing small gains.

Türkiye and Syria do not share enough common ground to normalize ties. Yet their interests align sufficiently to enable certain trade-offs when it comes to the cantons lining their shared border. This is particularly true of the four northwestern cantons. Meetings between Turkish and Syrian regime officials are ongoing. The calculations are highly complicated, as the areas the two sides are negotiating and bartering over have been shaped by the war—that is, all the demographic, security, and economic factors in play are an embodiment of the war's impact. What may materialize is a series of security and economic understandings over parts of one or more of the four northwestern cantons.

For example, Ankara might prove amenable to Damascus encroaching on this or than canton if, in return, the Syrian regime refrains from subjecting the remaining rebel-held area of the canton to bombardment. This would enable Ankara, which controversially aims to return some of the Syrian refugees in Türkiye to their country, to make a plausible case that there are safe areas in northwest Syria. Also, it is conceivable that, in return for allowing Damascus to take control of a lucrative border crossing here or highway there, Türkiye might expect cooperation from the Syrian regime in pressuring the Kurdish-run northeastern canton.

Any number of the scenarios that may emerge from a deal between Türkiye and the Syrian regime, to whatever degree they involve adjustment of the boundaries of one or more northwestern canton, could once again redraw the political map of Syria's northwest. Yet none would do away with cantonization itself, or even fundamentally alter the phenomenon. If anything, the deal would consecrate cantonization through

semiformal acknowledgment. As such, though Idlib and the three Turkish-dominated cantons constitute a thorn in the Syrian regime's side and a burden for Türkiye, and despite the fact that they require a constant supply of aid through the Syrian-Turkish border, they will continue to exist in one form or another until a national framework reunites them as well as the Kurdish-run northeastern canton with the rest of Syria. And that particular scenario is almost certainly a long way off.

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