

# The Human Rights Impact of Illicit Trade in the cases of Syria and Iraq



No Peace Without Justice  
Non c'è pace senza giustizia





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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.a Geographical and political context

Syria has great natural wealth and human resources, especially oil, gas, phosphates, crop diversity, temperate climate and archaeological sites. Moreover, its geographical location makes it an important land bridge between the European and Arab commercial markets across the borders of Turkey to the North and Jordan to the South. Syria also operates a commercial traffic with its neighbouring countries through its border crossings that create economic arteries. The control of these trade routes has always been crucial for the rulers in Damascus. The Assad regime, which has ruled Syria since the 1970s, has further strengthened the control of the central authorities of Damascus over Syria's borders and commercial routes by providing to the army and the security apparatus a critical role to play in this regard, as a mean to gain political support, protections and economic advantages.. This system of co-optation led to widespread corruption and created a large number of beneficiaries willing to support and assist the political power in Damascus.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 and the emergence of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the central authorities in Damascus lost control of several regions and cities, greatly affecting the Assad regime which, in order to protect its areas of control strengthened its security and military presence in and around the main cities. A new geographical reality has emerged for Syrians. The areas outside the control of Damascus were surrounded, besieged and controlled by security and military checkpoints. People can move across the various checkpoints only according to the conditions and controls imposed by who is in control of each specific checkpoint.

The widespread corruption in the State institutions, chiefly the security and military branches, played a fundamental role in the management of the checkpoints. Whoever wishes to cross must pay bribes to those in charge of the checkpoint and the money goes to the higher-ranking official who accepts it as bribes. This exacerbates the situation of imposing royalties on passers-by and their goods

or food, and on the passage of cargo trucks. This form of transit arose through developing understandings between agents of the two controlling parties. With the passage of time, they have taken a common form in terms of the customs rates, prices, quantities, and transit times. Some crossings issue customs papers and seals.

Some of the crossings that were previously checkpoints have been recognised as a regular crossing, while some took the traditional form of royalties and taxes. Taxation was not limited to the regime and its militias. Taxation was applied by opposition factions, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Eastern Syria as well as by extremist organisations such as Al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in their areas of control. Factions controlled not only the internal crossings of Syria, but also the external border crossings, and imposed royalties and taxes on the residents of their areas of control. As it will be illustrated in this report, these taxes are worth millions of dollars per month and control over the crossings has become an obsession for all warring parties.

These checkpoints and crossings represent a heavy burden draining the sustenance of the Syrians, resulting in a huge increase in their suffering. On the contrary, to the warring parties the checkpoints are a source of great wealth.

## **1.b Methodology and objectives**

This research aims at providing an overview of the direct and indirect impacts of illicit trade on the human rights violations against individuals and communities in the context of the Syrian conflict. The field-based research has been carried out primarily through the involvement and direct participation of local civil society organisations and human rights activists, which have deep knowledge of the political and institutional dynamics of the war in Syria, as well as their ramifications into illicit trade and the illegal exploitation of the conflict dynamics. As they are already well plugged into the human rights community, including access to the victims of violations, they can play a critical role in obtaining information about the human rights impact of illicit trade.

The present document represents the final product of a mapping process, based on two fundamental criteria:

Openness and inclusiveness: The document has an open and public approach aimed at fostering the involvement of local actors.

Local ownership: The document reflects policy priorities and methodologies identified on the ground by national democracy and human rights advocates, and focuses on the priorities and methodologies as perceived by the local CSOs. The preparatory work for the development of this document aimed at fostering the involvement of the affected communities, not replacing them, and strengthening their direct participation.

The main source of information for human rights documentation work are those who have experienced violations, those who have seen violations, those who have heard about them, and those with insider information about the commission of violations. All of these people have legitimate needs: what will happen to their testimony, to them, and to their families or other loved ones. Moreover, their information, at the time that it was collected and later as prospective testimony, have the potential to contribute to the accountability for the violations identified through the documentation work. This accountability may come in various forms, simply through exposing the factual basis of the violations; through the mechanisms such as truth commissions; through vetting; or through criminal prosecutions, at the national and international levels. It is therefore crucial for those running and participating in the documentation of human rights, in whatever capacity, to have a witness management system that addresses the wide range of concerns and needs of those providing information about the violations, while ensuring the information gathered is as useful as possible to the human rights documentation work.

The Guiding Principle underpinning this document is that the wellbeing of the witness has been our primary consideration. There is no piece of information, no document, no photograph that is worth a witness' life, sanity, or safety; or that of their families and loved ones; and indeed, that of the documenter. In practice, this means that every decision taken; from identifying possible witnesses to the preparations to collect their testimony, from the publication of the report to information-sharing, is reconsidered on whether it might have a negative impact on an individual witness, whether and how that impact can be mitigated, or if the decision has to be reformulated.



In order to corroborate and validate the results of the research, the authors conducted a series of interviews with witness and people informed about illicit trade in Syria. The selection of the witness was based on the following criteria:

- 1) Geographical criteria: The territory of Syria was divided in four main areas: 1-North-East (Al-Hassakah, Al-Raqqa, North-Eastern countryside of Aleppo and Deir Al-Zur); 2 - North-West of Syria (Northern and Western countryside of Aleppo, Idlib and its countryside and Northern countryside of Latikia); 3-Central Syria (Homs and its countryside, Hama and its countryside); 4. Southern Syria: (Damascus and its countryside, Dara'a, Al-Suwayda and Al-Quneitra). For each region an equal number of witness were identify and contacted in order to ensure a balanced and uniform geographical coverage.
- 2) Chronological criteria: In order to ensure that testimonies could cover all the phases of the decade-long conflict in Syria, witness were selected on the basis of timing of the information they could provide, with the aim to ensure the coverage of all phases of the conflict.
- 3) “role” criteria: in order to cover all possible angle of the research, a selection was made based on the involvement of the witness and in which capacity they were they able to provide information. Three main categories were identified: a) primary victims of human rights violations; b) residents of areas around the crossings; c) people who have worked with the main actors of illicit trade or have direct knowledge of their work; d) people who have been directly involved in illicit trade in conjunction with parties or individuals involved in human rights violations.
- 4) Gender criteria: whenever possible witness were selected on the basis of their gender to ensure a balanced representation of the human rights violations committed.

Around forty individuals agreed to share their experiences and testimonies with the researching team and a series of interview was conducted, either on-line or with in-person meetings, depending on the location of the interviewee as well as factors related to health and security concerns. NPWJ and the researching team used the PEACE model to conduct interviews and discussions with people who may have information about the violations, adopting a ‘free flow’ approach to

interviewing, as opposed to a closed-question interview structure, or filling in a form.

In human rights documentation work, it is critical that the witnesses gain a full understanding of the documentation work; how it is collected, what it will be used for, the potential risks and benefits of participating, and the purposes of which they agree their information could be used. On the basis of this understanding, they decide freely on whether they want to participate or not. Informed consent is a process, not a form.

The PEACE model was developed in the early 90s as a collaborative effort between law enforcement officers and psychologists in England and Wales to address the challenges with the evidence presented in the courts at that time. This model takes a conversational, non-confrontational approach to receive credible and reliable information from a witness. The broad strokes of the PEACE model can be used as tools in other aspects of human rights documentation to promote proper planning, monitoring, and evaluation of the work.

Since the first quarter of 2020, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has posed further challenges to the human rights documentation work, which had to be taken into consideration to ensure that a rights-based approach remained a core element of the field work. Witnesses may have additional needs that had to be considered in the planning phases, such as stigma and denial of health care; quarantine or isolation which may lead to coercion or to situations where basic needs of those quarantined are not met. Women, children, and young people may find themselves trapped in households where they face interpersonal violence with no possibility of escape. Individuals who are stateless or without appropriate documentation may also face additional difficulties in accessing information and remedies. Other measures, including legislative or policy measures adopted by the governments in the name of preventing the further spread of the Covid-19 epidemic may be enforced in ways that lead to human rights violations while some measures put forward with a public health justification may not meet international human rights standards, for being unnecessary, disproportionate, and/or discriminatory. In some instances, such measures may interfere with the collection of evidence-based information relating to human rights violations and abuses, as well as adding a further layer of violations and abuses experienced by the witnesses. In

such cases, people working with witnesses need to ensure that the novel threats to human rights posed by the spread of the pandemic are taken into account at all phases of the documentation work, ensuring that safe and secure methodologies are employed, such as the use of new information technologies.

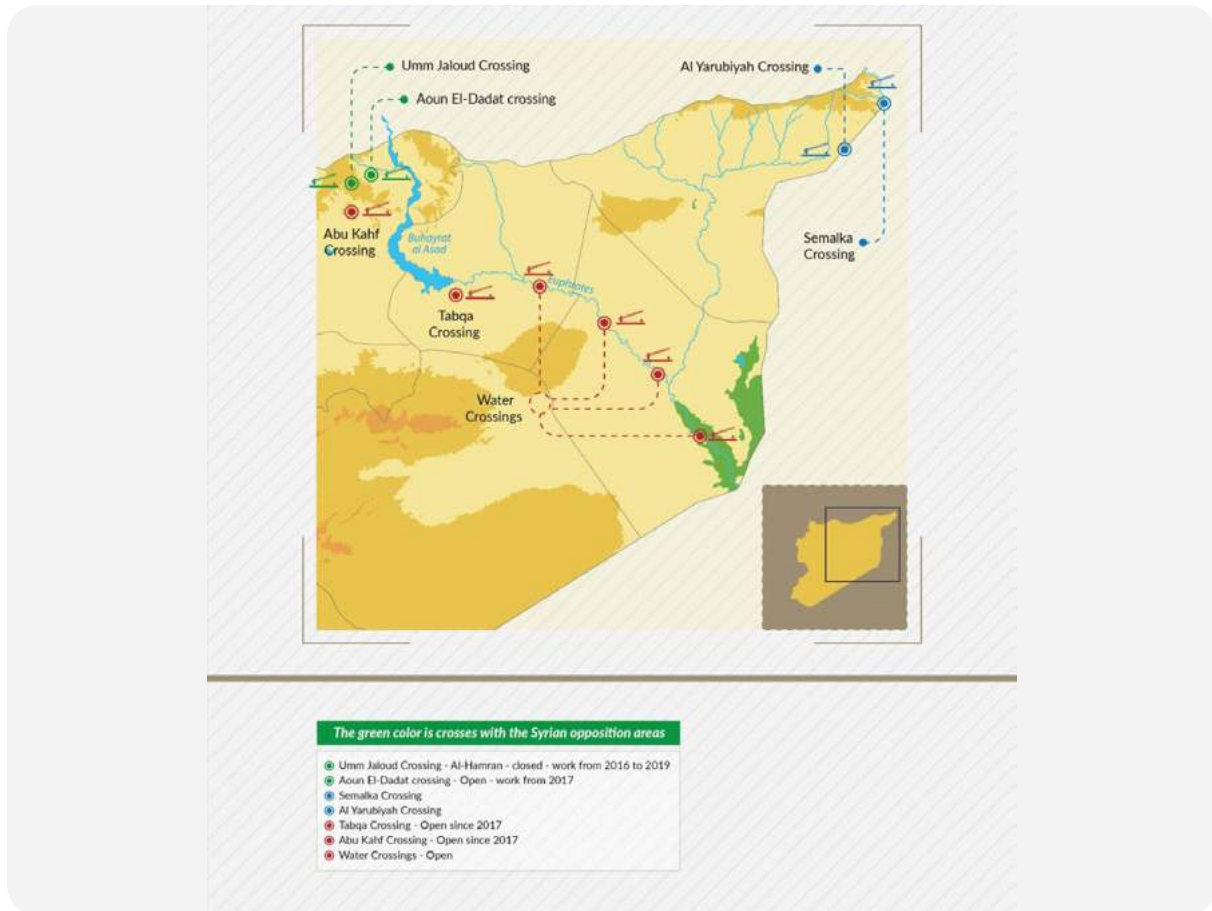
## 2. CROSSINGS AMONG AREAS OF INFLUENCE IN SYRIA

This document aims at shedding light on internal and border crossings to review their development, management and to estimate their revenues over different periods of time. The research presents these checkpoints in different time periods based on four geographical regions of Syria: North-East, North-West, Central Syria and Southern Syria. The research analyses each checkpoint in detail in terms of their location, historical background, current situation, control, and financial returns. The research also examines border crossings based on their location, revenues, the control exerted over them, and how they operate.

The research was based upon gathering information from reliable open sources such as audio-visual and print media networks, and Syrian revolutionary activists who are familiar with these crossings, their origins, and their history. The research also relied on persons currently or previously living at the areas of these crossings, the recognised revolutionary institutions such as the coalition and the Syrian Interim Government, and the research centres specialised in Syrian affairs.

The data have been collected, analysed, and organised according to spatial and temporal sequences in an impartial and transparent manner.

## 2.a Crossings in Eastern Syria



Historically, the Eastern Euphrates area has always been a rural region producing raw materials such as wheat, cotton, and oil to be processed at the factories of Western Syria. The region's economy was closely linked with production, marketing, and trading processes that mainly took place in Damascus. The region's economy was heavily controlled by the central government to prevent separatism among the Kurdish people and the nomadic Arab tribes moving between Syria and Iraq, which render the border very porous.

The Syrian uprising in 2011 and the subsequent, complete control of the Kurdish forces over the region did not change these economic dynamics. Today, Eastern Syria depends on specific basic resources:

- Revenues of wheat, cotton, and oil;
- Migrants' remittances;

- Support from the Iraqi Kurdistan Government;
- Western and American support to be delivered from Iraq.

The fragility of Eastern Syria's economy, its dependency on foreign aid, and the lack of means to process the raw materials produced, is evident. Wheat and cotton production, for instance, continued to be sold to regime-controlled areas until at least 2019, with the central government in Damascus buying most of the region's crops. Since 2020, the Autonomous Governance has begun to prevent farmers from selling their products to the areas controlled by Damascus. Despite this public decision by the Autonomous Governance, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is in control of the region since ISIS defeat in 2017, continues to conduct sales and purchases of goods within areas under the control of the central authorities in Damascus as well as with Syrian-opposition controlled areas. Indeed, SDF cannot sever its links with the general Syrian market as it needs medicine, foodstuff, construction materials inter alia and continues to allow traders to transport wheat from Al-Hasakah to regime-controlled Governorates, where it is sold at higher prices and purchase medicines and food.

SDF has established several crossing-points between its areas of influence and the surrounding areas controlled by the forces loyal to Damascus and the Syrian opposition. Most of these crossings are used to move oil in the first place, followed by crops and livestock, in addition to human trafficking and contraband smuggling. Beneficiaries have emerged and exploited these crossings to achieve illegal gains through monopolising trade for specific persons or smuggling goods and prohibited substances. Moreover, gangs have emerged to work in different ways, by controlling civilian property, exploiting crossings by force of arms to smuggle goods, or forcing civilians who want to cross to pay to avoid physical violence and arrest. It is worth mentioning that some of these gangs are linked to the SDF forces controlling the area.

The control of Eastern Syria has changed hands several times since the inception of the war in 2011. The Jazira region was under the control of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) from 2011 to May 2013. After that, SRF retreated in favour of factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Deir ez-Zor was equally divided in control and influence between the SRF and the FSA but by the end of 2013, FSA

took control over the whole oil fields in Deir ez-Zor. The Islamic State (ISIS) fully controlled the region between April 2014 and mid-2019. Since then, Deir ez-Zor and its oil fields have been under the control of US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to the east of the Euphrates river, while Iranian militias, Russian forces and the Syrian Army regained control in the areas west of the Euphrates.

In early 2013, Al-Hasakah and Raqqa were gradually getting out of the Syrian regime control, except the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah, as they remained nominally under the influence of the Syrian regime until 2020. In parallel with the domination of ISIS in the countryside of Al-Hasakah and Raqqa, FSA took control of the Raqqa city on 6 March 2013, only for the urban centre to fall after a few months under the control of ISIS, which would reign until October 2017. Since then, it has been under the control of the Kurdish SDF or the so-called autonomous administration.

Since October 2019, the Syrian regime and the Russian forces have controlled the international and main roads in the countryside of Al-Hasakah and Raqqa to the Iraqi border, including the Hasakah city and two security squares inside Qamishli city, the southern countryside of Qamishli, Kobane to the east of the Peace Spring region and Euphrates to the west, Ain Essa in the northern Raqqa with its main road to Raqqa and Tabqa Dam, and Tabqa city. The only exception for control is the adjacent parts to the regions of Peace Spring that are under the control of the Turkish forces. Peace Spring region is located in the east of Euphrates to the Turkish borders, from Tell Abyad in the west to the Ras al-Ain in the east. It is bordered to the South by the international highway M4. Since October 2019, Peace Spring region has fallen under the control of Turkey and its local allies, being the Syrian National Army. Other regions and oil fields in the countryside of Al-Hasakah and Raqqa are controlled by the SDF and US forces.

### **2.a.1 Land crossings between SDF and Government-controlled areas**

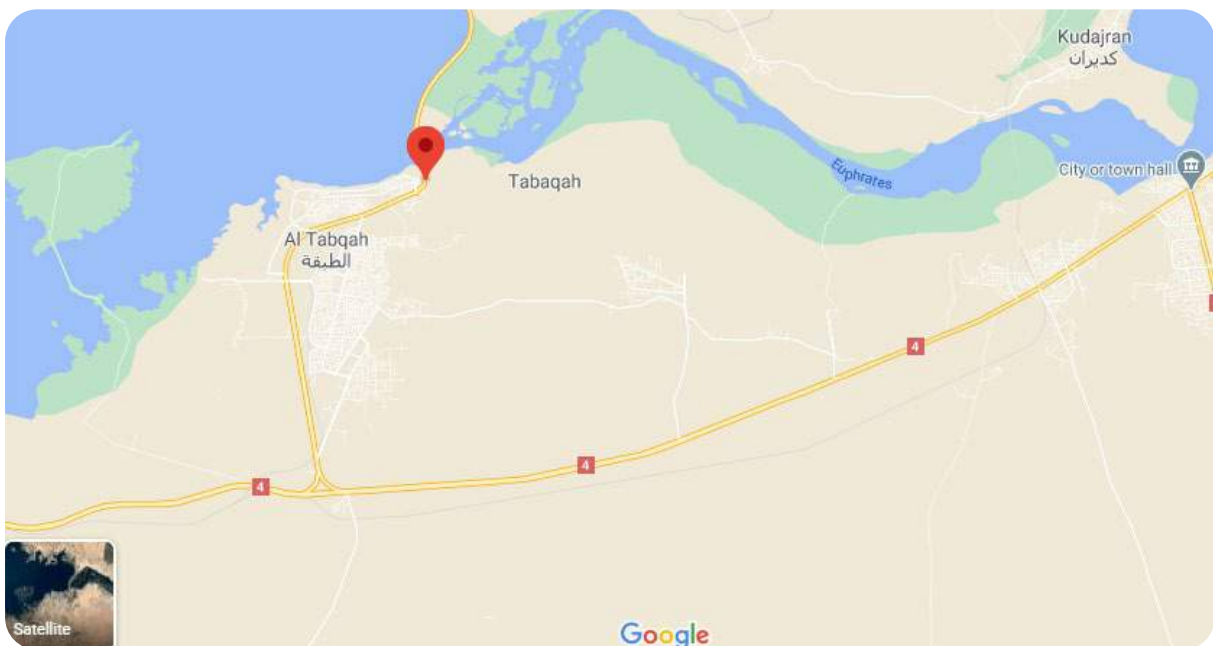
#### **Tabqa Crossing**

The crossing was established by the SDF at the Euphrates Dam. The crossing is the only bridge linking the two sides of the Euphrates River and it acts as the

main corridor for convoys that transport oil through the companies of Hussam al-Qaterji, who established a militia with the support of the Assad regime and Russia to protect his convoys. This militia is involved in human rights violations through its participation to the military operations of the regime against the civilians.

Through this crossing, oil, gas, and fuel are transported in large quantities from the SDF areas to the regime's areas. Some of these convoys transport crude oil directly to the Jandar station near Homs, some carry the crude oil to the Homs refinery, and others transport oil derivatives, such as gasoline and diesel, directly to the main governorates, where the SDF manufactures fuel. Daily movement is estimated at 200 tank trucks at the minimum.

The crossing constitutes an essential resource for the SDF, securing more than 30 million \$ a month, from oil revenues only.



### **Manbij Area Crossings**

Manbij is considered an area of strategic importance as it connects the Northern and Eastern countryside of Aleppo with the countryside of Jazira. The area includes many crossings, the most significant of which is the Abu Kahf Crossing in the countryside of Manbij, separating the Assad forces from the Manbij military forces loyal to SDF. Manbij has become an important crossing point for all kinds



of goods, whether to Manbij or to the surrounding areas. The crossing is used for importing goods from the regime-controlled areas to the SDF-controlled areas and for transiting civilians. The passage through the crossing is not free, taxes are imposed by the two controlling parties and royalties must be paid for the passage of civilians to avoid being abused, beaten or arrested.



## 2.a.2 Land crossings between the SDF and the opposition

### **Villages of Um-Jaloud – Al-Hamran Crossing**

The crossing is located in northeastern Aleppo and it links the SDF-run village of Um-Jaloud, situated northwest of Manbij (22 km), with the village of Al-Hamran, which is controlled by the factions of the Euphrates Shield Forces (ESF). The crossing was opened in late November 2016 through an agreement between the SDF and the opposition. The crossing was envisioned to be a humanitarian corridor at the beginning. It is currently the most important commercial crossing for fuel and petrol; feeding all ESF-controlled areas, Idlib, the western countryside of Aleppo, and Afrin with fuel and liquid petroleum (gasoline, diesel, kerosene), in addition to

food products, construction and industrial materials, and cars trade.

The crossing was opened under the Al-Sham Legion faction, yet their control did not last long due to the royalties imposed and widespread abuses against the civilians. Additionally, the faction used the crossing revenues to enrich its leaders and support its members. This led the Al-Jabhat Al-Shamiyah faction to attack and seize the crossing at the beginning of 2017, citing Al-Sham Legion's violations as the reason. However, the situation did not change. The significant revenues of the crossing prompted multiple factions, including the Sultan Murad Brigade, Al-Hamzat, Al-Suqur, Al-Sharqiyah Division, and others, to attack and attempt to gain control of the crossing and expel Al-Shamiyah from the region in the same year. These militias had committed major abuses and imposed high fees on the goods traded in and out the crossing, according to the village residents. Therefore, the Levant Front fought them and took control of the crossing in April 2017. The competition to obtain control of the crossing intensified and evolved into a battle between the Sultan Murad Brigade, Al-Hamzat, Al-Suqur, Al-Sharqiyah Division and other factions on the one hand and the Levant Front on the other. The competition ended in favour of the latter and the crossing remains under the control of the Levant Front and supervised by the Interim Government since 25 October 2017. The trade volume at the crossing reaches an average of 100 trucks entering the SDF-controlled areas for 50-100 trucks exiting towards the ESF-controlled areas daily. SDF imposes unspecified customs duties on various goods, excluding medicines and medical materials. The crossing is also a civilian passage, allowing buses to transport civilians to and from the Eastern regions. The opening of the crossing led to the creation of a diesel and fuel market in the Al-Hamran village, which is considered one of the most significant markets of the region. It has revitalised the commercial traffic and created various jobs, as seen in a number of restaurants and cafes opened at the village.



### **Aoun al-Dadat Crossing**

This crossing is located in the north of Manbij city and in the countryside of Aleppo, mostly used for the transit of civilians. Aoun al-Dadat crossing was established after the liberation of the village from ISIS in late 2017. The Southern half of the village is under the SDF control while the Northern half is under the ESF control. This crossing can be considered as a humanitarian point, facilitating the movement of civilians with no significant commercial traffic. However, there are no free crossings in Syria as the controlling parties exploit everything to gain financial resources for the personal benefit of individuals or groups. For this reason, civilians must pay fees to cross.

The crossing is also used by buses and commercial vehicles that serve the cities of the Eastern countryside of Aleppo.



The three crossings are subject to various kind of fees, only medicine and personal goods are free of fees. All goods are subject to specific customs based on their type and size, along with an additional 5% tax imposed if they are imported from Turkey. In the crossings between the SDF and the Syrian Government, goods with an estimated value of 100,000 SYP or less pay a tax of 8000 SYP while for goods with an estimated value of 500,000 SYP, the tax is approximately 4%. The SDF-imposed taxes are up to 2000 SYP for trucks loaded with heavy machinery to ensure the safety of movement within the SDF-controlled areas. Moreover, SDF controls the trade of some materials, such as cement, in the only region where the import and sales of cement to traders is allowed.

The crossings are not free from human trafficking between the two parties, with an entry tariff of 80,000-150,000 SYP per person.

The revenues of the crossings at the opposition-run areas are directly collected by the militias controlling the specific crossings as they remain the sole beneficiaries of the revenues.



### **2.a.3 Crossings on the Euphrates River**

Tens of river crossings link the SDF-controlled areas in Deir ez-Zor with the regime-controlled areas. All these crossings have come into operation when the SDF and the Syrian Army took control of Deir ez-Zor. The importance and role of each crossing is different. Some are assigned to transport civilians across the riverbanks by small boats, with each boat carrying a couple of people. Others use large ferries to carry cars and transport goods and fuels between the two banks.

SDF-controlled areas to the South, starting from the Southern countryside of Raqqa and ending at the Western countryside of Deir ez-Zor, are connected with the areas under the control of Damascus and its militias by water crossings. Parties controlling these crossings have varied over time since the expulsion of ISIS from the area. The region is now under the control of the Iranian and Russian-backed militias, in addition to the Syrian Army's Fourth Division. These crossings played an essential role in funding the dominant militias. The Fourth Division has supported and provided protection to the Qaterji militia to transport oil by its convoys. Qaterji militia established crossings across the river to transport oil from the SDF-run areas by pumps to the tankers. Furthermore, Iranian militias have significantly dominated the area since 2019, as well, monopolising the trade

in most of these crossings, which are sources of vast financial resources for the militias and their leaders at the expenses of civilians.

Oil, crops, and livestock were transported from the SDF-controlled areas towards the regime-administered areas through these crossings. In contrast, industrial and construction materials and agricultural fertilizers were transported in the opposite direction, similar to the civilians' passage between the banks of the river. However, there have been smuggling operations through undeclared deals between elements affiliated with the SDF. Those elements are assisted by smugglers on the one side and leaders of the Iranian militias and Syrian officials on the other side. These operations produce financial gains to both sides through trading various types of goods and smuggling human beings. Oil is the main good transported through these water crossings from the SDF-administered areas to the regime-administered areas in a continuous flow. Large quantities of crops such as wheat, barley, yellow corn, legumes, and vegetables are also transported although SDF essentially purchases construction and industrial materials, along with a limited number of foodstuffs.

Ferries and boats are not the only means of transport operating at these crossings, there are plastic pipes put into the river to facilitate oil smuggling.

How do the crossings on the Euphrates River work?

Oil is transported from the oil fields to the East bank by tank, trucks, or small cars. Then the oil is unloaded into tanks on the ferries, which move the oil to the West bank of the Euphrates, controlled by the forces loyal to the central government in Damascus. Since January 2019, SDF has developed a mechanism to transport oil across the Euphrates' banks through the extension of plastic pipes. SDF puts water crossings under heavy guard to regulate this commerce. Pipes are equipped with booster pumps. These pipes are installed on the oil tank trucks coming from the oil fields and pump the oil towards the opposite bank of the Euphrates, where the regime has set up large tanks to collect oil.



*A photograph of an oil pipe between the banks of the Euphrates River*

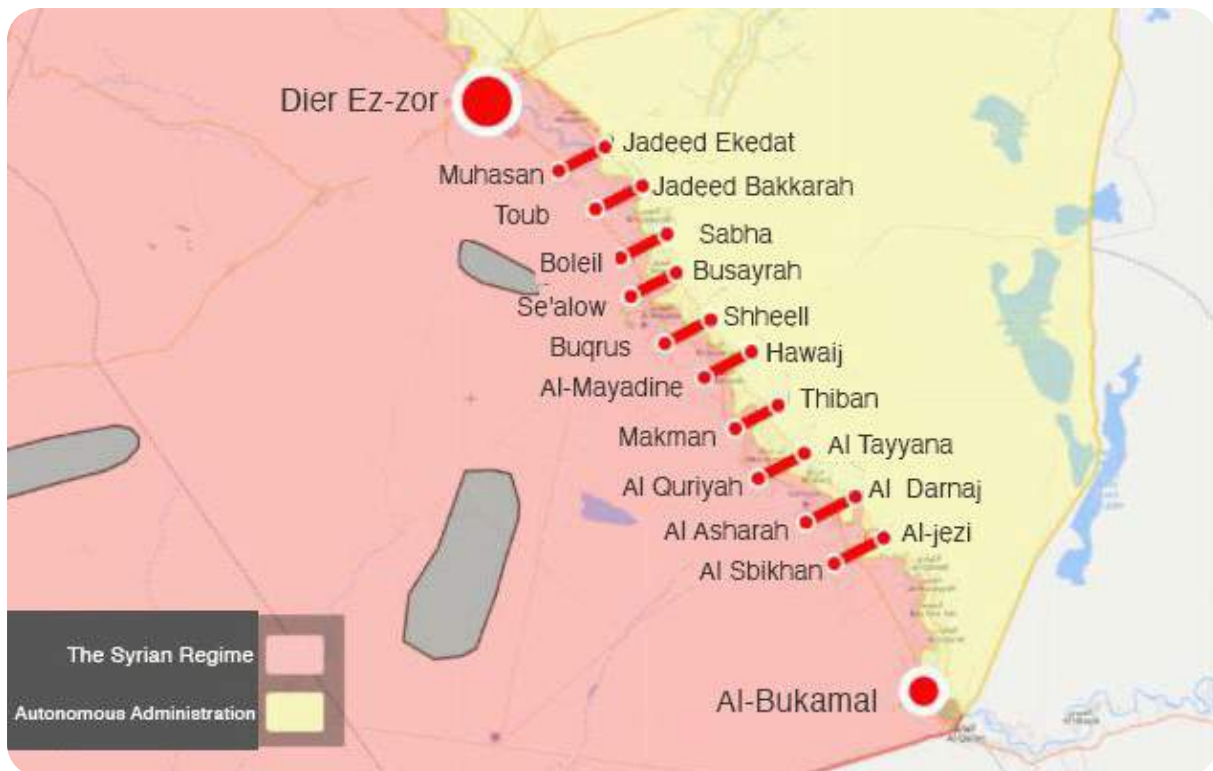
These facilitators are distributed between the areas controlled by the regime and the SDF in Deir ez-Zor. They facilitate trade between the two parties indirectly, pay off the leaders of the SDF and the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, and report administratively to the SDF. Most of these traders are from the region and has been employed by Iran since late 2019, when the Fourth Armoured Division of the Syrian Army withdrew from the area. This also resulted in the expulsion of all traders working with the Qaterji Company from the territory and the complete control by the Iranian militias over these transactions.



*Satellite image showing tank trucks transporting oil on the Euphrates River. This photo shows a number of large trucks parked at the Buqrus Crossing, an area under the control of the regime, while the Al-Shehail Crossing is situated on the opposite side*

It is worth mentioning that the International Coalition Forces and the SDF conducted many raids and closures on the crossings used for smuggling between 2018 and 2020. However, the crossings were quickly re-established and have continued to operate ever since.





*A picture depicting the most important crossings*

## **2.a.4 The secret tunnel network excavated by Iran in Al-Bukamal and Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor**

Like ISIS, the Iranian militia have started major operations to create tunnels within their areas of control in Deir ez-Zor, following the increase of air-strikes on their sites.

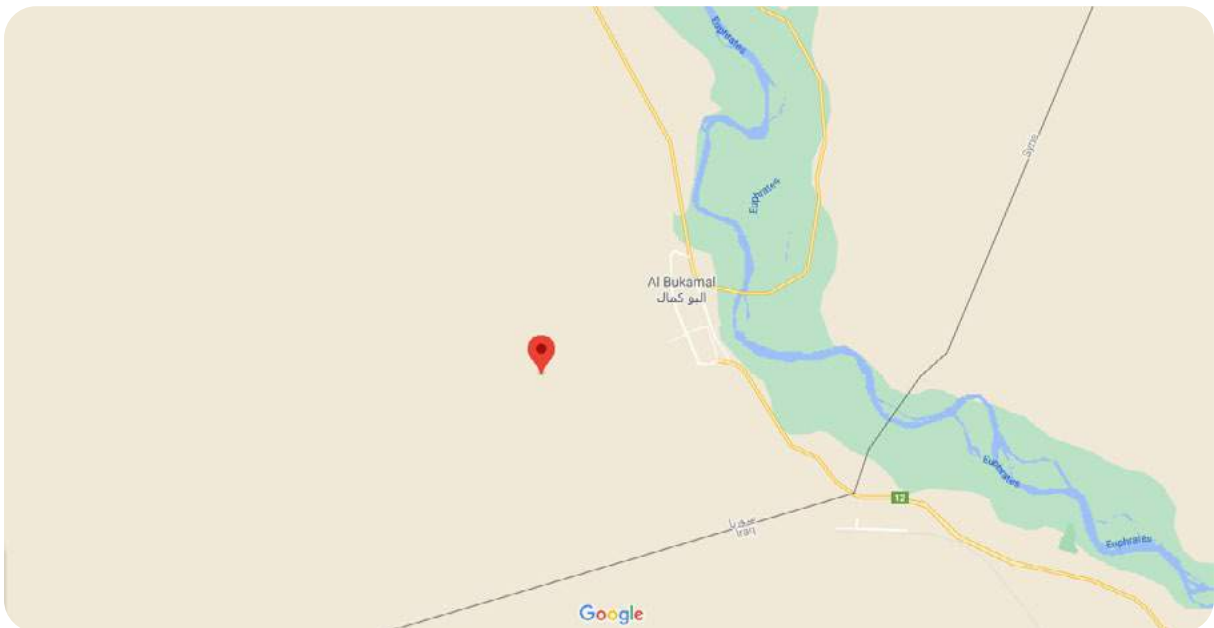
### **Al-Bukamal**

Most of the Iran-administered sites in Al-Bukamal were previously controlled by the ISIS. The Iranian militia extended the underground tunnels by excavating a long tunnel around these sites, especially at the green belt area to store weapons. Excavation process has been supervised by Iraqi and Iranian military figures, such as Abu al-Hassan al-Iraqi, one of the leaders of the Iraqi Hezbollah, and Mahdi al-Iranian, who facilitated the deployment of excavators and heavy machinery from Iraq.



### The outskirts of Al-Bukamal

These tunnels are located near the Iraqi border from the Badia side of Al-Bukamal. Videos show trenches connected to each other and to underground tunnels to protect the storage of missiles and heavy weapons. Most of the personnel at these sites are Afghans and Iranians, with a few Iraqi.



**Behind Al-Hamdan in Al-Bukamal**

These tunnels are located 14 kilometres away from Al-Bukamal towards Badia, exactly behind Al-Hamdan, where 8 underground tunnels with excavators and military vehicles are present.



**Among the houses of Mayadin**

Iranian militia has excavated trenches and tunnels between the houses near Al-Bakr and close to the post office and the Cultural Center of Mayadin on the Corniche street.



### Mayadin - Badia

This site has several tunnels and three underground storage areas. They contain large quantities of weapons and tens of military vehicles with anti-aircraft defence systems that can enter the underground tunnels, in addition to 30 fighters.



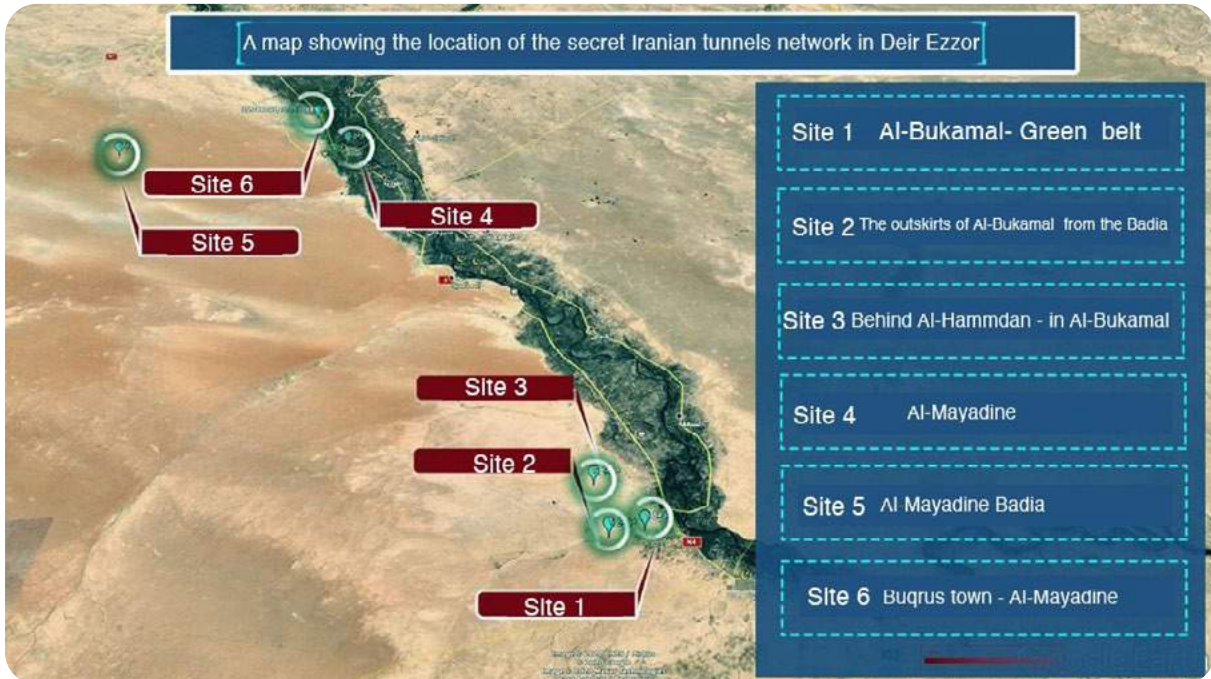
### Buqrus - Mayadin:

On the outskirts of the Buqrus town of the Mayadin city, there is a location underneath a huge tunnel from the Badia side that was previously used by ISIS. It contains cars and weapons.



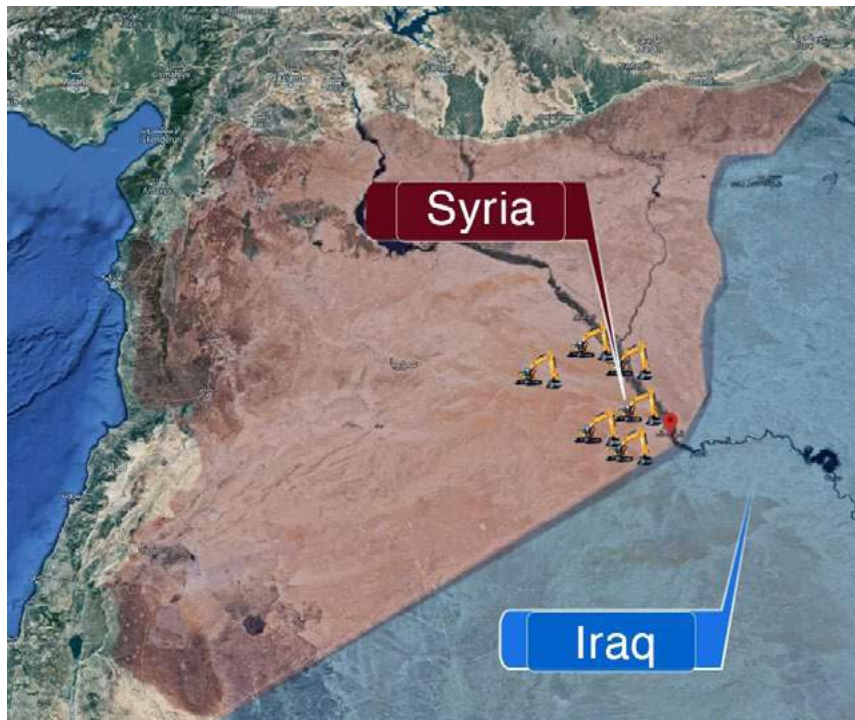
## The outskirts of Mayadin

On the outskirts of Mayadin, there are many trenches and tunnels, specifically at Al-Mazari, Al-Haidarya, and near the archaeological site of Ain Ali.



These tunnels are used by Iranian militias as protective measures and only a limited amount of people can access these tunnels, which are used to store oil and fuel imported from the SDF-controlled areas, as well as facilitating movement and transportation around the archaeological excavations widely conducted by the Iranian forces in the Eastern region of Syria.

There are also tunnels on the Syrian-Iraqi border, linking both countries with each other, about 2-3 kilometres away from the Al-Qaim border crossing. Only militias can access these underground networks, which are used for transportation of weapons and missiles. Moreover, there are secret crossings to bring in unconventional weapons and high-level personalities.



Some of these tunnels were initially dug by ISIS but the main sections have now been modified and expanded while their fortifications have been strengthened. These areas are often used as operation rooms for the meetings of significant militia figures or for devising military plans, but most of them function as storages for weapons coming from Iraq.

### 2.a.5 Border crossings with Iraq

**Semalka Border** is a border crossing between Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, across the Tigris River. The crossing is located in the Dohuk Governorate.

**Al-Walid Crossing:** an illegal crossing established by the SDF.

**Al-Yarubiyah Crossing:** located between the Syrian city of Al-Yarubiyah in Al-Hasakah and the Iraqi city of Rabia.

These three crossings are controlled by the SDF and they are the main arteries for the humanitarian aid and military convoys that the SDF receives from the US forces and the international coalition. SDF also exploits these crossings commercially, imposing customs duties on goods and cars to pass through them. They are an important market for the SDF products such as gas and oil, crops, and livestock

because they are exported to Iraq, producing financial resource for SDF.

### **2.a.6 Witness testimonies from Eastern Syria**

Mr. Issa, 38 years old, a resident of Al-Tabni, West of Deir ez-Zor and under the control of the forces loyal to Damascus, said: “I work as a farmer, and my family resides in the city of Raqqa (under the control of the SDF). I have to visit them from time to time and check on them. To reach the opposite bank of the river without being intercepted by the regime forces, the controlling militias, or even the SDF, I work with a smuggler called Hamza Al-Khalaf and I pay him 80.000 SYP to go there and the same amount to come back. The smuggler has close relations with the National Defence Militia on the one side and with the SDF on the other. The three parties share that amount of money in a proportion they agree upon in return for not obstructing the smuggling operation and allowing this smuggler to move between the two sides. However, the controlling forces on both sides do not allow the crossing of people or commercial goods without a smuggler and they may shoot the boat as happened in many cases.” Regarding the method of smuggling, Mr. Issa replied: “Smugglers gather a number of people who want to go to the SDF-run areas, they take between ten to fifteen people in a single trip. Divided into two batches, passengers agree with the smugglers to wait for them if they want to return.”

Mr. Abdullah, 32 years old, from Ma’dan Atiq, in the Eastern countryside of Raqqa and under the control of forces loyal to Damascus, said: “I am a construction worker and my financial situation is bad. Finding a job has become difficult, my wife is sick and requires dialysis. This type of treatment is not available in our area so my wife and I go to the Raqqa National Hospital whenever my wife needs dialysis. I used to deal with a smuggler called Salem Al-Aidan who takes 150.000 SYP every time I go with my wife and the same amount when we return. Smugglers in our area agree on a price of 75.000 SYP per person.” He added: “Because of our living conditions, I tried to reduce the cost so I asked one of our acquaintances who works in the fishing sector to take my wife and me in his small boat to the opposite side of the river. When I arrived at the opposite side, members of the SDF were waiting. They stopped me, prevented me from crossing, and insulted and beat me severely in front of my wife. Indifferent to my wife’s health condition, they forced us to go back. The controlling forces did that to us on both riverbanks;

if there is no prior coordination with a smuggler who deals with both sides, they do not allow anyone to cross.”

Mr. Abdul, 20 years old, a student from Raqqa, controlled by the SDF, said: “I am a high school student, I used to go to the regime-controlled areas to take the high school exams by dealing with a smuggler known for transporting students and teachers. He takes 40.000 SYP from each person and I am forced to deal with a smuggler to avoid crossing the checkpoints and crossings established by the SDF for fear of being taken to compulsory recruitment in the ranks of the SDF. Everyone aged between 18 and 27 is taken for recruitment.” “I have proof that I obtained an academic postponement issued by the Syrian regime’s recruitment division, a postponement of army recruitment. However, SDF does not recognise it so I resort to smugglers. Smuggler collects and transports students and teachers in a small Kia 2700 truck. He drives through land and river roads from the Southern countryside of Raqqa across the Al-Kasrat area for about 12 kilometres until we reach the village of Tell Ghanem Al-Ali, under the control of the regime forces. Upon arrival, I pay 1500 SYP to the regime’s checkpoints in return for my passage without obstruction or arrest even though my legal situation is clear. To return, I deal with the same smuggler who wait for me at the same place, then we drive through the same roads and I pay the smuggler again in the same way.”

Mr. Muhammad, a civilian from Raqqa residing in Turkey, said: “I work and live in Turkey but my family lives in Raqqa. I always try to visit them but this visit is expensive and hard, the traveller could be arrested.” “Both the residents in Turkey and residents in the areas controlled by the Syrian National Army (the armed Syrian opposition) head from the Aoun al-Dadat Crossing in the countryside of Manbij, northeast of Aleppo, to Raqqa and other areas in North-eastern Syria. If the identification papers are official and the person has no security issues with the parties controlling the crossing on both sides, they must pay between 50\$ to 100\$ to the dominant National Army factions, which, according to what I know, are Ahrar al-Sham, the Ninth Division, and the military police, to be allowed to travel with no obstacles. SDF also imposes royalties but they are not set to a fixed amount.” Muhammad added. Concerning the security issues, he said: “It is not only the presence of military fighters or weapons in general; criticism at the political level and service conditions, or even a post on social media may be enough to be wanted by the security authorities.” “The crossings may not be



operated constantly. The crossing periods vary, sometimes they are open and sometimes closed. That is why we, as travellers, resort to smugglers who ask for huge sums of money ranging from one million to two million SYP. This amount is divided between four main parties comprising the smuggler, the controlling forces on both sides, the SDF elements, and the national army.” “Many of those I know were arrested this year after entering the SDF-administered areas during the last Eid holiday and were accused of belonging to anti-SDF military factions, being loyal to Turkey, or entering the territory illegally. Those arrested end up paying money and such cases happen frequently when some elements do not receive their share.”

Mr. Abu Muhammad said: “I travel from Turkey to the areas controlled by the National Army and then to the Raqqa across the Aoun al-Dadat crossing. Entering Syria from Turkey requires a paper in order to guarantee our return to Turkey for a specific period of time. When I return through the Aoun al-Dadat crossing after ending my visit, members of the National Army stop me and ask me to pay 100\$ to cross and if I do not pay, they won’t let me cross.” “I am not the only one, they stop everybody and ask for royalties directly. I see people who do not have any money and wait there for hours without being allowed to pass. I try to evade payment and tell them that I already paid when I went to Raqqa, but to no avail. I am forced to pay because my leave will expire and if I do not cross, I will not be able to enter Turkey again and it will be much difficult.”

Mr. Muhammad said: “I am a van driver transporting passengers through the Aoun al-Dadat crossing when it is opened. Once, I found an elderly woman heading from the SDF-controlled areas and to the city of Al-Bab, North of Aleppo. National Army prevented her from passing through. She sat on the sidewalk at the crossing for two days because she did not have enough money.” “At the end of the second day, officers allowed her to pass after one of her relatives transferred the requested sum to the checkpoint personnel. Then she got in the van and told me her story. I dropped her off at her relatives in the city of Al-Bab.” “I know those in charge of the transit office, as they call it, and there are two people responsible for receiving money transfers for those who do not have any money, the first one is called Latouf and the second is Abu Ahmed. Both are members of the National Army. In order to prevent any passage without payment, they closed the paved road completely and put an office on the side. People can only pass through the

office door, where they have to pay the royalty. This scene reminds me of what the Syrian regime did with the returnees from Lebanon when it had imposed the exchange of 100\$ per person to let them enter Syria.”

Hammam al-Issa (a nom de guerre), a field leader at the National Defence Forces in Ma’dan, located at the eastern countryside of Raqqa, said: “The forces controlling the water crossings on the Southern and Western sides are divided into two main factions. The first one is represented by the Syrian National Defence Forces, the Tribal Army, and the Fifth Corps - all of them being militias backed by the Russian Federation - and they control the riverbank from the eastern countryside of Raqqa to the outskirts of the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor. The second wing is represented by the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Fatemiyoun Brigade, Iraqi Hezbollah, and other factions affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards - all of them being supported by the Iranian militias. They control the riverbank from the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor and Mayadin to the Iraqi border in the countryside of Al-Bukamal.” “There is no dispute over trade and smuggling between the dominant forces because they have an agreement with each other to the benefit of all parties. Most of the goods passing through our checkpoints are gas cylinders, basic foodstuff, some medical supplies, gasoline and diesel, and construction materials, yet in a smaller percentage. However, transfer of people is more intense in the areas administered by the Iranians compared to the operations at our checkpoints and we have no problems with that.” he added. “Concerning the methods of work”, Hammam clarified, “we do not work openly but we agree with a dealer from the local population to be our intermediary for purchasing smuggled goods from the SDF-run areas. They sell and distribute goods to the stores and provide us with the list of commodities and the amounts needed from the SDF-controlled areas, making the work easier with no obstruction. In most operations, we use the water crossings at the Ma’dan city and Zour Shammar village to the east of Raqqa and the Al-Tabani crossing to the west of Deir ez-Zor. In contrast, Iranians use fixed or temporary water crossings in the countryside of Al-Bukamal and Mayadin.”

Mr. Samer, 29 years old, who owns a warehouse in Ma’dan, controlled by Damascus, said: “I get gas cylinders from a dealer called Zain al-Ramla who is affiliate to the National Defence Forces. He supplies gas to the stores in the area.” “Working with dealers is convenient because they get protection from the regime forces and do

not face any issues. They provide us with gas cylinders even if the payment is not made immediately. Some merchants pay after selling their goods. Dealer sells me one cylinder of 24 kg for 55.000 SYP and I sell it to the civilians or restaurants for around 75.000 to 90.000 SYP, according to the market's demands. Prices of gas cylinders are relatively high in the region, due to its scarcity. Therefore, I trade goods brought by merchants from the SDF-run areas. I cannot sell the cylinders at lower prices because I need to cover the charges of the warehouse including its rent and my family's living expenses. I do not face any issues with the supply of the gas cylinders as merchants from the Fifth Corps and National Defence Forces assured me that they can provide me with 200 to 500 cylinders within 24 to 48 hours at maximum without any problem."

Abu the merchant said: "I have been working in trade for twenty years in and around Manbij. We used to suffer from the dominance of the security branches of the regime. They would receive a share of our incomes by force. That situation is not much different now that I returned to the area with my family after the expulsion of ISIS and reassumed my work in trade. However, the conditions of trade have differed a lot. I have to bring goods from Turkey, the regime-run or the SDF-controlled areas through the crossings controlled by the opposition factions, regardless of their names." "The problem is that the dominant faction only allows the transit of goods if it has a share in the overall profit, either through a partnership or the imposition of royalties, which may amount to thousands of dollars per vehicle. I work hard to determine which goods are valuable and suitable to trade for the current season, then the faction's leader takes half of my profit because he has the power of arms. I will not specify the types of goods I work with for the safety of my life and my family. Talking about the military factions is forbidden."

Mr. Abd al-Majid, a shopkeeper in Mayadin, controlled by Damascus, said: "Our region is one of the main areas under the influence of the Iranian militias. They control all types of businesses and no one can work without agreeing and trading with them. Militias let dealers buy fuel only from their own distributors. Taking advantage of their military power, they monopolised the market completely, producing considerable profit to control the region. Militias purchase the bulk of fuel from the SDF-administered areas, either through smugglers or dealers working for the militias."

Mr. Osama, a businessman in Al-Bukamal, under the control of forces loyal to Damascus, said: “I get fuel from dealers affiliated with the Iraqi Harakat Hezbollah Al-Nujaba and the Fatemiyoun Brigade militias. As I do not own a gas station, all I have is a small stall, I pay the dealers after selling all the quantity I get. I am not the only one working in this way, everyone who trades with fuel in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor adopts the same method. There is no other way to work because militias are the only ones who are able to buy fuel from the SDF-controlled areas and they monopolise this field of trade by military force. Whoever works alone will be arrested, tortured, or killed.” “This monopoly led to the complete control of the fuel prices by the militias. They do not allow the freedom of commercial competition to be exercised with fuel or any other commercial sector under their control.” Regarding the quantity and availability of fuel, Osama added: “Dealers affiliated with the Iranian militias told us that they could provide us with any quantity of fuel, regardless of its weight. They have an agreement with the SDF leaders through the smugglers who own ferries or boats operating between the banks of the Euphrates River.”

Mar’i al-Hajj, a resident of the Al-Bukamal and a fisherman, said: “I work by the Euphrates River and observe how the Iranian militias use the river for smuggling in both directions. But I noticed that for the past two months, they have not relied on the main crossings, such as the Salhiya crossing, but have rather created temporary river corridors. Iranians cannot buy the conscience of all the SDF patrols; therefore, an agreement is made between the two parties through smugglers for the operations to take place far away from the SDF patrols and checkpoints.”

Mr. Hadi, a fisherman from of Diban, under the control of the SDF, said: “Smugglers turn to find primitive ways to transport fuels across the banks of the Euphrates River to be able to bring large quantities daily. They are now laying and pulling pipes every day between the banks of the Euphrates River to speed up the transfer of diesel and gasoline from the areas run by the SDF to the areas controlled by the regime forces. Smugglers serve either as mediators between the two parties or as dealers who enjoy close relations with the two leaders. After laying the pipes, a thrust pump is installed, called Nashal, to speed up the process of pumping and unloading fuel to the tanks at the other bank.” “The SDF checkpoints and patrols do not hinder these operations although they are carried out under their

full sight and hearing, because each party takes its share of the profit. Smugglers also modify ferries to be convenient for fuel transportation by inserting tanks with a minimum capacity of 1000 litres, making it easier to transport fuel faster. Smuggling operations are carried out almost on a daily basis and are concluded by sunset.”

Hays al-Kamal, a smuggler working at the Diban water crossing, which is under the control of the SDF, said: “I and a group of smugglers pass through the SDF-run crossing for a sum ranging between 5000\$ to 8000\$. We pay them in exchange for being allowed to transport fuel without their military forces getting in our way. We do not transport fuel only. We go to the regime-controlled areas loaded with oil and return with goods or people; we always try not to return with an empty boat.” “On the opposite riverbank, near the city of Mayadin, tankers are pulled up to fill in their tanks. I already know that these tankers belong to the Iranians but it does not matter to me as I get paid from both parties in return for transporting fuel and coordinating to determine their working hours. The sum varies between 2 and 5 million SYP per day depending on the quantity, speed, etc.” When we asked about the shootings or arrests, Kamal answered: “Smuggling can’t be carried out safely without prior coordination with all parties. Some smugglers or fishermen transport goods and people without paying a percentage of the profit or paying a daily or monthly lump sum of money to the SDF. When these smugglers reach the opposite side, they will be beaten and arrested, their boats will be shot, people they bring will be returned to where they come from, and their goods will be confiscated. Without any payment, you will not survive unless you are lucky.”

Mr. Omar, a pharmacist from Raqqa, under the control of the SDF, said: “The areas controlled by the SDF are vast, stretching from the eastern countryside of Aleppo; passing through Raqqa, the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakah; to the Iraqi border. This makes it a fertile ground for the push and sale of drugs to all age groups, drugs have turned into an epidemic affecting young men in particular. The most popular types are hashish, crystal methamphetamine, captagon, and tramadol. These types spread like wildfire throughout the Eastern Euphrates region. Due to their extensive availability, SDF lost control of them.”

Khalaf Al-Hamoud (a nom de guerre), a pusher of crystal methamphetamine at one of the neighbourhoods of Raqqa, said: “Goods are delivered from the eastern

countryside of Deir ez-Zor in bags, each one contains 1 kg. This substance is requested the most in Al-Karamah in the eastern countryside of Raqqa by pushers and dealers. When I deliver it to them, they start dividing the quantity into small portions so that pushers can buy them.” “Work is no longer the same as before; pushers and dealers trade with their own money and do not accept working as small distributors. They saved money from the initial proceedings of this field of trafficking and started buying and selling on their account to gain a tremendous amount of money.”

Najm al-Haddad, a drug smuggler from Hajin, under the control of the SDF, said: “I get all types of narcotic drugs through dealers representing the Iranian militias that control the opposite side of the Euphrates River. These drugs are usually of Iranian origin but they might be of Iraqi or Lebanese origin from time to time. Out of my experience in this field, I can differentiate between them. Most of the narcotic drugs are brought through smuggling between Syrian and Iraqi territories via the railway crossing (an illegal crossing established by the Iranian militias between the houses of the civilians in the village of Al-Hari near the Iraqi border, east of Al-Bukamal; bombed by the International Coalition more than once). Then, they are stored in warehouses belonging to militias in the villages of Al-Hari and Al-Suway’iya under the indirect protection of the Iranians through their control of the nearby military points. Drugs are divided into smaller quantities to facilitate their distribution to dealers. These quantities are not only sold to northeastern Syria, but also to all Syrian governorates.” “After the arrival and preparation of the goods in the warehouses, dealers and pushers in the regime-administered areas bring me into contact with other smugglers and dealers in the SDF-run areas. This is rather easy as we coordinate with each other via WhatsApp, or we visit the leading dealers in Al-Bukamal and Mayadin. The two parties agree on the quantity, price, and appropriate date of the sales. The other smugglers and I secure the smuggling route and determine the proper place and time to complete the operation. The operation is usually carried out through small boats and dealers from both sides wait on the opposite riverbanks. Of course, it is not that easy. To ensure safe access, I coordinate with the military forces on both sides. I have distinct relations with the leaders of the SDF who facilitate my work in return for a financial share. Still, it is easier in the regime-run areas because dealers of that region coordinate with Iranians on the Euphrates River. However, I do not transport all the load myself and I sometimes use fishermen’s boats and young

men with the aim of not revealing the operation publicly. After the arrival of the goods, dealer receives them at the SDF-controlled areas and distributes them to the pushers to be transferred to other areas such as Raqqa and Al-Hasakah. This process is carried out in coordination with the leaders of the Internal Security Forces since transferors have to possess a security card or be shown on a military mission to facilitate the transportation of drugs without being stopped at the checkpoints. I followed these same steps previously.”

Mr. Ammar, a merchant and owner of a food warehouse in Al-Hasakah, said: “The region suffers from over-exporting in general, which deprives us, the people of the region, of its resources. SDF allows exporting to Iraqi Kurdistan through major merchants without any observation on the exporting methods, quantities, or types. This may put the region in a suffocating crisis soon as exports are not limited to a certain type but include everything from underground resources to agricultural crops and livestock. This is not only happening at the SDF-administered areas. I have relatives in Al-Bukamal and they told me that the Iranian militias do the same without any accountability. These practices indicate that the dominant powers do not care about us as civilians, as merchants, or as citizens, rather they only care about collecting customs duties and profit of trafficking.”

Mr. Hassan from Al-Bukamal, a truck driver transporting livestock between Syria and Iraq, said: “Traders buy large herds of livestock as they smuggle between 2500 and 5000 heads of sheep daily to the Iraqi territory when the railway crossing in the village of Al-Hari is unobstructed. Merchants pay royalties to the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, which control the crossing, and to the Sayyid al-Shuhada militia, which facilitates coordination and passage. Royalties reach up to 17 million SYP per vehicle. It is not limited to smuggling livestock and transporting vegetables, foodstuff, and commodities of all kinds as the crossing is also used for military supplies and contraband trade. We, as the people of the region, see everything unfolding but cannot object to them because talking about these issues will end up by killings or kidnappings.”

Mr. Hazem, a resident of Deir ez-Zor and owner of a grocery store, said: “The Iranians’ control of the region has affected all aspects of life, the most important field being trade. There is no competition in the market and prices are very high so people cannot afford to buy many commodities. This is due to two reasons;

royalties are imposed at the checkpoints and their dependencies and the export are not inspected.” “Iraqi merchants are granted the permission by the Iranians to pass through the Al-Sekak crossing and buy large quantities of almost all materials under the sight of the regime forces. They return to Iraq with the goods easily thanks to the facilitation of the process by the controlling powers. This has caused a scarcity of commodities, fruits, and vegetables and a subsequent increase in their prices.”

Mr. Abd al-Razzaq, a livestock merchant from Raqqa, said: “Livestock at the SDF-controlled areas have two main markets. The first one is towards the Iraqi territories, merchants buy livestock from Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, and Al-Hasakah in large numbers and export them to Iraq through the Semalka crossing with the facilitation and encouragement of the SDF. SDF recommends merchants to sell their livestock abroad in order to increase its profit, yet this results in a sharp increase at the prices of livestock and meat in the SDF-run areas. The second market is considered to be illegal, smugglers transport livestock to the areas under the control of the regime forces, mostly towards Mayadin and Al-Bukamal. Livestock owners always seek profit and whoever pays more will get the herd. For this reason, although SDF prevents the export of livestock to the regime-controlled areas, smuggling continues to be carried out.”

Mr. Bashar, a truck driver on the Al-Hasakah-Semalka road, said: “We, as truck drivers, pay a customs fee of 800\$ to 2200\$ in exchange for being allowed to pass through the Semalka crossing and return to Syria. I transport various types of goods but most of what I export is livestock, followed by fruits and vegetables. Every now and then, I transport tons of copper extracted from the rubble of houses in order to be recycled in Iraq.”

The dominant force of the region is the SDF. Their malpractices and violations have not stopped since they came to power. SDF recruits civilians by force, imposes royalties on merchants and civilians, spends public money to its interests as a militia and a military force, gets a considerable share of the livelihood of the people and utilises all methods to loot them, arrests and kidnaps whoever opposes to or reveals its practices, and prevents civilians from travelling whenever it wants. All these practices have no legitimacy. Previous testimonies clarify the nature of the practices of the SDF, Syrian Army forces and the militias backed by Russia



and Iran. Testimonies were focused on smuggling human beings and restricting their movement, forced recruitments, imposing royalties, aiding the regime with underground resources and crops, trafficking of drugs and contraband, and monopolising trade; in addition to over-exporting of the underground resources, crops, and animal wealth to the neighbouring countries without taking into account the needs of the local population.

### 2.b Crossings in Northwest Syria



Control over border crossings has become an obsession for many of the fighting factions in Syria, because of the huge sums that can be earned by customs, taxes, commercial exchanges, and smugglings. In particular, crossings with neighbouring countries represent a key factor in sustainable support for all warring parties. Border crossings with Turkey – especially- have played a critical role in supporting the opposition-controlled areas, through providing humanitarian support as well as providing a safe entry point in and out of Syria. These crossings have been focal points for many battles and disputes to gain control over them.

Militias in the countryside of Aleppo led by Al-Tawhid Brigade entered Aleppo in July 2012, they gradually took the control over many neighbourhoods in the north and east of the city until 2013, except some Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods, such as Sheikh Maqsoud, Al-Ashrafyeh, Bani Zaid, Alskn Al-Shbabi which were under the control of Kurdish factions until late 2020. The FSA factions controlled the industrial areas (Sheikh Najjar), several military airports and main roads connecting the north, east and west of Aleppo with the city, however, they lost many regions between 2015 and 2016. Following the Russian military intervention in September 2016 in support of the government of Damascus, the remaining armed opposition factions in Aleppo concluded an agreement with Russia under the auspices of Turkey. Under this agreement, in December 2016 the last groups of fighters with their families left the last four besieged neighbourhoods, and since then Aleppo has been under a joint administrative and military control of the Syrian Army, Russia and Iran.

Since late 2011, some FSA factions managed to seize many regions in the west, north and east of Aleppo countryside. But in 2013, their grip slipped because of growing internal fighting among the FSA factions on the one hand, and between Al-Nusra Front and Jund Al-Aqsa and ISIS on the other hand, leaving the area under ISIS control. The Kurdish militias also took advantages of this retreat to gain control of a vast region on the western Euphrates banks.

The countryside of Aleppo has been under the control of many local and regional parties since 2014: the Syrian regime: it has control of a 20 km road from the south of Aleppo to the eastern countryside of Hama; ISIS controlled a third of east and southeast of Aleppo regions; Kurdish factions had control of a third of the northern countryside of Aleppo, including Afrin and Manbij to the west of Euphrates; the Syrian opposition factions control a quarter of the countryside, as well Manbij in the east to Afrin in the west-north of Aleppo, and the entire western countryside of Aleppo, except the towns of Nubl and Al-Zahraa.

Since the end of 2016 and after the Turkish military operations “Euphrates Shield” and “Olive Branch” the countryside of Aleppo has been under the control of various parties: Turkey, through its armed opposition factions, control the entire north of Aleppo to Jarablus on Euphrates, with exception of Manbij and the western countryside of Aleppo; The Kurdish SDF control Manbij, Tall Rifat and Minaq.

The central authorities of Damascus, assisted by Iranian militias and Russian forces, regained control over the rest of northern countryside of Aleppo to the south of Al-Bab city, and regions in the south, east, and west of Aleppo along the international road M5.

Between 2012 and 2016, Idlib and its countryside became areas of control and influence for many factions. Considering that the centres of control and influence were changing with each battle between Al-Nusra front and the FSA factions, Al-Nusra front often won these battles and seized more regions. Armed factions began to control cities in Idlib countryside in 2012 such as, Saraqib, Ma'arat al-Nu'man and Haram, in addition to strategic military sites. Then they liberated most of the countryside of Idlib, south to Hama countryside, east to Aleppo countryside, and west to Latakia countryside, then the entire Idlib in late March 2015.

Following the signing of the Astana agreement between Turkey, Russia, and Iran in 2016, the control of factions begun to diminish under the military pressure of the Syrian Army. The control and influence over Idlib in 2020 can be divided as follows: Idlib, the west regions of Euphrates and the western countryside of Idlib within the Turkish influence; The Security Corridor region, which connects Aleppo with Latakia via Idlib, is a joint control zone between Russia and Turkey, following the Sochi Agreement between Russia and Turkey. The remaining areas, specifically in the north and south of the Security Corridor, remains under the influence and control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Few villages are under the control of local factions of Ahrar al-Sham and Sham Legion and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra front).

Controlled area and places in this region repeatedly varied over the past years. The various control areas are linked by land crossings that were opened and closed, as some of them were later created according to the point in time and the dominant forces, and they are currently divided into two main areas.

The first area is the northern regions adjacent to the Turkish border. They are under the control of the Turkish-backed factions of the Syrian armed opposition and have four types of crossings: (1) with SDF (2) with the areas controlled by Damascus and its militias; (3) with Al-Nusra Front; and (4) from Syria to Turkey. The second area is the regions which are controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

(formerly known as Al-Nusra Front), and are linked with the surrounding regions by crossings: (1) with the areas controlled by Damascus and (2) with the Syrian armed opposition in the North.

These crossings constitute a huge financial source for the armed factions of all affiliations, since those factions use their military power to open those crossings and use them to trade in all types of commodities, along with imposing fees on civilians in return for passage and transport of goods. The smuggling of contraband and money also has an important role in these crossings. The control of these crossings led to the illegal enrichment of figures and factions in control of the crossings that repeatedly and frequently violated human rights of civilians, either by imprisonment, stealing and killings.

### **2.b.1 Border Crossings with Turkey**

These crossings are the ones which existed before the Syrian Revolution and the ones which were established after the liberation of north-west Syria. They include humanitarian, commercial, and military crossings.

#### **Bab Al-Hawa Crossing**

Bab Al-Hawa is a humanitarian and commercial crossing Class A, it allows the crossing of civilians, goods, relief trucks and humanitarian aid and works daily from 8 am to 6 pm. The Bab al-Hawa crossing (Cilvegözü), situated in Sarmada 55 km from Idlib, links Sarmada in Syria with Reyhanlı in the Turkish province of Hatay. It is largest and most important crossing in the northern Syria, as it is the economic mainstay of the north with monthly revenues estimated between \$2.5 million - \$5 million. Revenues are as follows: Customs on aid, money, industrial and construction materials, and military support from some countries (weapons and military equipment), nothing can pass without paying customs; human trafficking generates a significant revenue, as one person should pay \$2500 to cross into Turkey. Six to ten operations per day are conducted in many ways, such as ambulances, patient escorts, or even transit.

Several military opposition factions (Harakat Hazm, Syria Revolutionaries Front, Islamic Front, Suqour al-Sham, Jaysh Al-Islam) took control of the crossing in mid-2012. In 2015, Ahrar al-Sham Movement (ASM) took control of the crossing and developed a civil administration. In a dispute between ASM and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on 26 July 2017, the crossing was handed over to civil administrations under the influence of HTS, which controls all the crossing's revenues. Bab al-Hawa has nearly 400 employees and includes five executive departments (Immigration and Passports, Customs Administration, Police Station, Healthcare, Garage and Machinery), in addition to many administrative offices (General Bureau - control and follow-up, studies and legal affairs, technical, financial, media, public relations, human resources, statistics and planning, health and agricultural quarantine, Medical coordination and Garage Department).

Humanitarian and relief aid convoys are duty-free and commercial trucks can cross with a daily average of 250 trucks. All Turkish goods are allowed to pass into Syria, with the exception of internationally prohibited items and Turkish side prohibited items, and recently, the importation of fuel has been free of duties. The crossing has its own customs fees which are calculated in US dollars, where the daily average of revenues is approximately \$85,000.

A study published by the French Evry website in March 2017 according to the Turkish Federation data considered Bab al-Hawa crossing the most important centre for exports in Turkey. The study shows that 108,000 trucks passed through the crossing in 11 months (330 days) in 2014, from Turkish territory across the Bab al-Hawa to Syria, compared to (55,000 trucks) In 2013. The study indicates that exports to Syria reached in 2014 (\$1.8 billion), and it increased by 20% in 2014, 15% in 2013, and 9% in 2010, according to the Turkish Statistical Office.

### **Bab Al-Salama Crossing**

Bab Al-Salama is a commercial humanitarian crossing class A that regulates the entry of civilians, goods and humanitarian aid. All aid is supervised by IFAD, Turkish Red Crescent and IHH. It works 24/7, and for commercial transportation from 8 am to 12 pm.

Bab Al-Salama crossing or Öncüpınar is located on the Syrian-Turkish border, north of Aleppo, and connects the Turkish Kilis province and the Syrian city of

A'zaz. Syrian opposition factions (the Northern Storm Brigade (NSB) then Al-Tawhid Brigade) took its control in mid-2012. When ISIS took control of A'zaz, in 2013, the crossing stopped working until the Northern Storm Brigade (NSB) recaptured it after the expulsion of ISIS from A'zaz. The NSB joined the Al-sham Front in being responsible for the crossing until October 2017, when the Al-sham Front handed it over to the Interim Government.

In Bab Al-Salama, Syrian and Turkish traders exchange various commercial materials and goods. It is considered the most prominent commercial and humanitarian artery that connects the cities and regions of the northern countryside of Aleppo with Turkey. The crossing has 220 employees working in different departments (Customs, Immigration and Passports, Transportation, Services), except the security guards, in addition to 850 workers registered in the crossing's regulations as dockworkers in the separating area between Syria and Turkey. Turkish trucks are not permitted to enter but their cargo is off-loaded to Syrian trucks, at a daily rate (400 workers).

Bab al-Salma has stopped allowing the passage of civilians since 2015. Only specific lists - issued by the Turkish side and renewed annually, for some workers in "humanitarian and health organisations" and a number of "traders and entrepreneurs" - are allowed to pass according to special conditions determined through an agreement between the chambers of commerce and industry in the northern and eastern regions of Aleppo and Kilis. Also, emergency cases that do not have treatment in the Syrian regions, cold medical cases through the health office, and some workers in the military sector, and free police can enter.

A weekly average of 50 trucks of humanitarian organizations, free of customs and demarcation, enter the crossing, as well a daily average of 300 Turkish trucks of commercial materials (approximately 150 Syrian trucks). Cargo of two Turkish trucks is loaded-off into one Syrian truck, as the maximum cargo of Turkish truck is 27 tons, while the Syrian truck carries 50 ton at minimum.

Customs Directory have standardized customs duties on imported goods. Regulation is available on the crossing site (<https://web.facebook.com/syriaig/posts/1941068022637211>).

Duties are calculated in Turkish Lira (the daily duties are 200,000 TL, approximately \$53,300) that are kept in a bank account belonging to the Interim Government, according to the director of the crossing.

### **Al-Rai Crossing**

Al-Rai Crossing is located in Al-Rai subdistrict of Al-Bab, 60 km from the northern Aleppo, and links the Elbeyli in Turkey with Al-Rai in Syria.

The FSA Factions took control of Al-Rai in 2012, then ISIS captured the town in February 2014. In 2016, the ESF wrested control of al-Rai from ISIS and opened the crossing in November 2016 as class B (a crossing for humanitarian cases and commercial goods, but not for civilian transit). In August 2017, it was officially classified as class A crossing through a Turkish-Syrian agreement. It was turned to a main crossing to regulate the commercial traffic and reduce smuggling in December 2017, according to WikiLeaks. Sultan Murad Division initially administrated the crossing, succeeded by the Interim Government then the National Police in November 2018.

### **Jarablus Crossing**

Jarablus crossing is located in the city of Jarablus 100 km to the north-east of Aleppo in far north of Syria on River Euphrates. It was a customs point before 2011 linking the village of Karkemish on the Turkish side with the city of Jarablus in the Syrian territories. After falling under the opposition factions' control in 2012, the crossing turned into a passage point for travellers and some goods without a specific customs mechanism. It is considered an essential escape for Syrians in the eastern regions of Aleppo. The crossing was closed by the Turkish government when ISIS controlled Jarablus in 2014 and was reopened in 2016 after the expulsion of the group from the city. The factions of Euphrates Shield ran the crossing at that time. The crossing was not considered as being commercial until 2018 when it was run by the Syrian Interim Government which took charge of it. The crossing was class C (a humanitarian crossing) until 2018 as Turkey upgraded it to class A (a civilian and commercial transit). The crossing is under the military protection of the Ninth Division faction and is used for trade exchanges in accordance with a specific and declared customs list, in addition to the entry of humanitarian,

medical and military aid. Civilians also pass the crossing in accordance with lists and laws set by the Turkish side. Civilians leaving willingly and wishing to return permanently to Syria are allowed to cross, after handing over the Turkish temporary protection card (Kimlik). Humanitarian aid trucks enter the crossing under the supervision of AFAD, the Turkish Red Crescent and iHH. An average of 180 commercial trucks also cross it daily. Turkish trucks are allowed to enter all areas served by the crossing. The commercial traffic has revived the whole northern region, Jarablus in particular, as it has become a commercial area that supplies its surrounding with food and medicine to Al-Hasakah.

### **Ras Al-Ayn**

Despite that fact that the crossing is located in the northern regions of Al-Hasakah and links the Syrian city of Ras Al-Ayn with Ceylanpınar in southern Turkey, it will be mentioned here because it is under the control of the Syrian National Army. The region does not share any crossings with SDF. Turkey announced that work had started on opening the crossing in the middle of 2020. The crossing was used to introduce harvesters for wheat and barley crops in the region. Locals also passed the crossing from Turkey under permits to harvest their crops. Later on, business activity began in the crossing at a larger scale. It is worth mentioning that the cities of Ras Al-Ayn and Tal Abyad fell under the control of the Syrian National Army after the launch of Operation Peace Spring against SDF in October 2019.

### **Hatya crossing**

Hatya crossing is located in the northern countryside of Idlib, specifically in the village of Hatya in Jisr Al-Shughur district. The crossing is not used for trade exchanges, but it is considered a crossing for entering materials intended to be recycled from Syria to Turkey, such as scrap, copper, iron and the like. The persons in charge of the crossing use its work mechanism to smuggle Syrians into Turkey in return for money. The Turkish government considered it as also being a humanitarian crossing offering its services to civil defence members, emergency cases and some civil society organisations and entities working for the management of refugees camps and the humanitarian organisations providing support to those camps. The crossing also enables the entry of specific individuals as it is being opened for one day a week. Some basic humanitarian aid passes the



crossing, considering that it is new and unequipped in a sufficient manner for the passage of trucks and aid materials. The crossing on the Syrian side is under the control of a civil entity that was chosen by organisations and entities benefitting from its work, such as the civil defence organization.

### **Khirbet Al-Jouz Crossing**

Khirbet Al-Jouz crossing is located in the village of Khirbet Al-Jouz in the western countryside of Aleppo and was opened in 2014. It is a humanitarian crossing, restricted to delivering bread, foodstuffs, humanitarian aid and medicines to the refugee camps spreading on the border with Turkey and to the villages and hospitals of the western countryside of Aleppo. It is helpful in terms of the delivery of requirements of civil organizations and the entry of workers in the civilian field, such as local councils, civil society organisations, and doctors.

The crossing serves thousands of locals and displaced persons and links the Syrian village of Khirbet Al-Jouz and the Turkish village of Guvecci. It is one of the most important crossings with respect to medical aid since all serious medical cases of locals and displaced people pass it and get referred from field hospitals in the western countryside of Idlib to Turkey. The crossing on the Syrian side is under the charge of Ahrar Al-Sham Movement which manages work through a checkpoint affiliated with it.

Following the liberation of the area, the crossing was under the control of Ansar Al-Sham and Ahrar Al-Sham factions. However, Ahrar Al-Sham launched an attack on the crossing in 2016 and took control of it on the pretext of combating “corrupt persons”. Yet, that control did not last for long. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra) attacked the crossing and the surrounding villages in 2017 and imposed its control on the area and the crossing, which prompted the Turkish side to close it.

The crossing was used for human trafficking to a large extent through submitting false sick reports, replacing the names of companions of sick people, or selling permits issued by military factions or civilian committees.

## **Olive Branch Crossing**

Olive Branch crossing is located in the border village of Hamam in Kumlu district east of Hatay. It is around ten kilometres from the town and district center of Jindires. The crossing was opened after nine months of declaring full control of Afrin district by the National Army faction with the help of the Turkish Army. Turkish Minister of Trade Ruhsar Pekcan announced that Olive branch crossing was put into operation in 2018. It was officially considered a humanitarian and commercial crossing and no customs duties were imposed. Turkish government said that it would be a crossing for enhancing trade in the region, helping to rebuild the region, and facilitating the entry of humanitarian aid, which would contribute to reducing the prices of commodities coming from Turkey for the local population.

## **Al-Yamdia Crossing**

Yamdiya crossing is an unofficial crossing between Syria and Turkey and was established under the cooperation of the Civilian entities and military faction in Syria with the Turkish side in 2013 after the opposition controlled a large number of villages in the countryside of Latakia. The crossing links the Turkish village of Yayladagi and the Syrian village of Yamdiya located in Turkmen Mountain.

The crossing serves a large number of fighters operating in the northern countryside of Latakia and the western countryside of Idlib. It is supervised by the Sultan Abdul Hamid Brigade through a checkpoint. Work in the crossing is restricted to the entry and exist of some fighters of the military factions, the entry of foodstuffs to the area and the entry of medical staff of the Martyr Osama Ablaq Hospital.

The crossing allows the entry and exit of the fighters of the First Division and the Second Coastal Division as well as elements of Faylaq Al-Sham and National Liberation Front using Turkish temporary protection card, “Kimlik”. Injuries and serious medical cases are also transferred through the crossing and referred from the Osama Ablaq Hospital to Turkey. It is currently considered a military crossing because work in it is restricted to military factions. The area of Yamdiya is considered important to human trafficking and smuggling operations across the

mountain forests which form the border between the two countries. Traffickers often do their work through understandings with controlling military factions.

### **Atma Crossing**

Atma crossing is located between the area of Atma in northern Idlib and the area of Deir Ballout in the southern countryside of Afrin on the Syrian-Turkish border. It is around 20 km far from the Bab Al-Hawa crossing and is considered an important strategic artery for armed factions because military supply operations are conducted through the crossing.

The crossing was established with the aim of transferring medical cases and medical staff and entering humanitarian and military aid in 2014. It was under the joint control of factions, such as Hazm Movement, Ahrar Al-Sham, Islamic Front and Faylaq Al-Sham. However, when Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham controlled the area in 2017, it recruited all traffickers to serve it and exploited the situation through smuggling goods and scrap in both directions and also imposed rackets in kind and in money on organizations, which prompted the Turkish side to completely close the crossing.

The area surrounding the crossing was exploited in all types of smuggling operations to a large extent during the period that preceded the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, but the situation became dangerous to locals, residents of Atma Camp and the Turkish side after the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The Turkish government completely closed the crossing, following the HTS capture of the area.

### **2.b.2 Internal crossings with Government-controlled areas**

Those crossings separate areas controlled by two warring entities and are numerous. Some of them were small checkpoints operating in an undeclared manner, while others were developed into official crossings recognised by the two sides. They were opened and closed in accordance with military developments. The main crossings among them are as follows:

## Al-Mansoura Crossing

Mansoura Crossing is located in the Mansoura, west of Aleppo, where the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) is controlling the area. On July 2018, it was opened and considered a competing crossing with the Al-Eis, which is under the control of HTS. The SLF announced that it would impose nominal fees on goods entering the regime-held areas, and goods entering the liberated areas will be free of duties. However, as a result of the subsequent battles and agreements, the crossing was subjected to the HTS and its terms and taxes in January 2019.

50 trucks pass through the crossing on a daily basis loaded with various types of goods, taxes on one truck varies between \$800 and \$1.500. Additionally, sums are deducted on the human trafficking of people fleeing from the areas controlled by Damascus, where a person pays between \$1.500 and \$3.000. Ultimately, the revenues of the crossing are estimated at \$1.5 million a month.

In January 2020, the Assad forces announced the closing of the Mansoura crossing due to the battles in the area, the progress of the Assad forces, and the violation of the de-escalation agreement.

Location of the Mansoura village in the western countryside of Aleppo:



## Al-Eis Crossing

Al-Eis crossing is located in the southern countryside of Aleppo between Al-Eis area and Al-Hadher. It was opened by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in 2018 and witnessed trade between the areas of the regime and the opposition, mainly including agricultural crops, livestock, scrap and various commodities and food supplies. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham imposed taxes on the movement of goods and people in both directions. The revenues of the crossing were estimated at \$1 – \$1.5 a month

Work in the crossing continued until the beginning of 2020 when it stopped as a result of the battle that broke out in the area and ended with the total control of the Syrian Army of the area. Nevertheless, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham managed to collect large amounts of money during the period of operating the crossing through the rackets it imposed on passing cars, trucks, and people.

Al-Eis Village location :



## Abu Dala Crossing

Abu Dala crossing is located in the village of Abu Dala in the north-eastern countryside of Hama, and the village is under the control of militias loyal to the Syrian regime through militias headed by the so-called Sheikh Ahmad Darwish.

The crossing was the main supplier of gas and gasoline to Idlib. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham imposed high taxes on merchants or purchased those two materials for its benefit and sold them in the Idlib markets. The activities at the crossing included the smuggling of civilians from the regime areas to the opposition areas. The crossing was closed after the HTS took control of the village on October 6/2017, because of disputes between the HTS and Ahmed Darwish over sums of money estimated at \$2 million.

Trade in the crossing was not definitely restricted to gas and gasoline but it also included trade exchanges of all types, including contraband. The crossing's revenues have reached approximately \$ 700,000 per month.

Abu Dala village location:



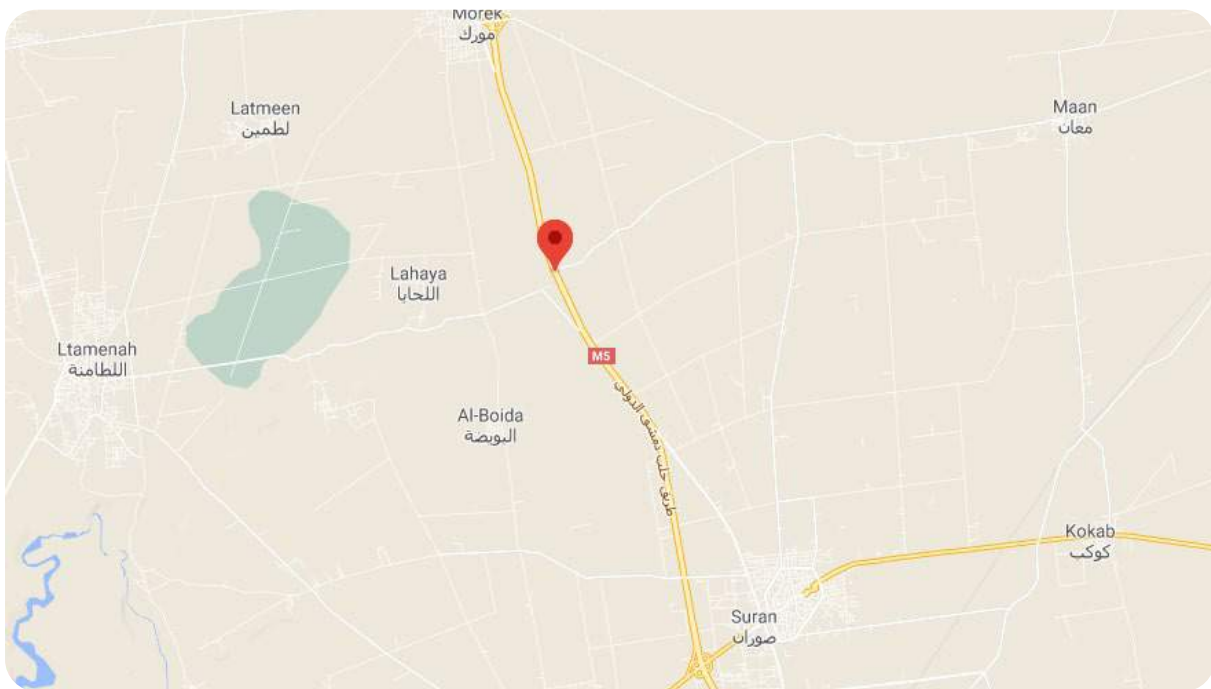
**Morek Crossing**

Morek crossing is located 4 km south of the village of Morek in the southern countryside of Idlib. It was opened after several months of the closure of Abu Dala crossing in 2017 by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which imposed its taxes in the crossing on cars passing in both directions. The crossing was considered an alternative to the previous crossing, but it was more important to both parties and secured

more revenues as a result of its strategic location on the road between Damascus and Aleppo.

The crossing was subject to phases of closure and reopening as a result of the dispute over control between the Syrian Liberation Front and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. On 25 August 2019 it was definitely closed by the central authorities in Damascus..

Morek Crossing location:



### **Qalaat Al-Madiq Castle Crossing**

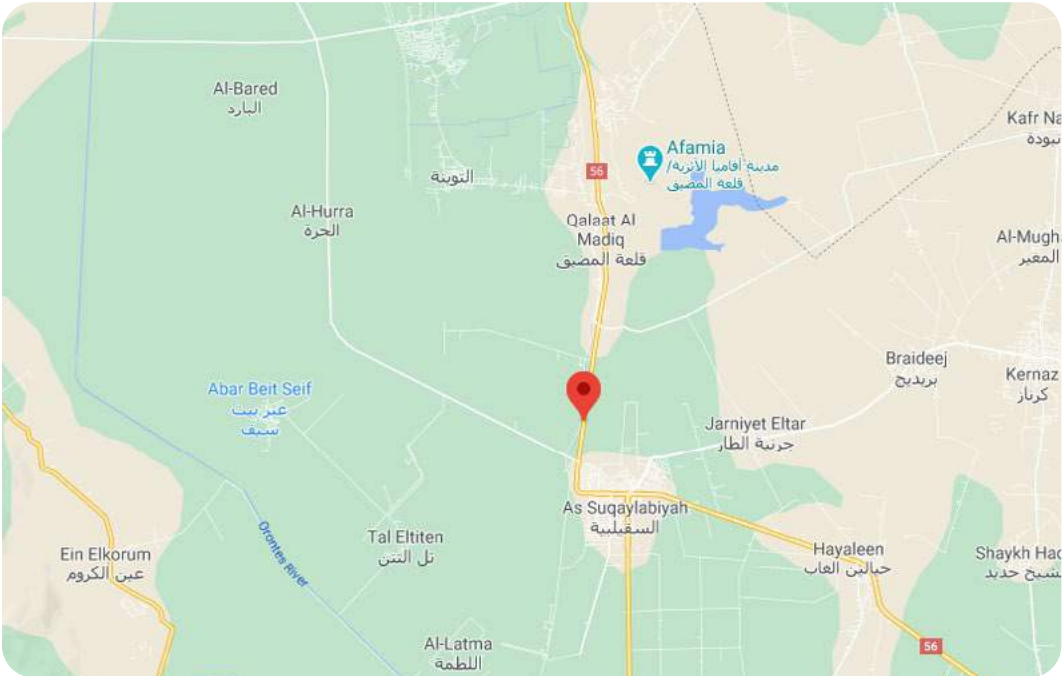
Al-Madiq Castle crossing is located in the eastern side of Al-Ghab plain in the north-western countryside of Hama near the ancient city of Apamea. Unlike most of the crossings, this crossing was not established in this place directly, but the process was gradual after the people of the village made understandings and undeclared truce with the regime forces in 2012, lasting for a period of almost three years. The crossing was the most important point for people aiming to leave the areas controlled by the Assad forces. The process was considered easy in this place in comparison with other crossings, given that the area had no military presence. With the passage of time, commercial trucks were also allowed to pass.

Out of greed for imposing taxes and levies on passing people and merchants, many factions affiliated with the armed opposition, such as **Jaysh Al-Nasr and Ahrar Al-Sham** aimed at taking control of the area. The situation remained unchanged until Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham took over in 2017. The crossing was characterised by the ease of passage and the relative calm, which made the locals and merchants prefer it. Services in the crossing were not restricted to one type of commodities but included all types of trade and transit.

The crossing has been an exchange point for prisoners between the Syrian Army and opposition forces on several occasions. It was also used as an arrival point for forcibly displaced people from all Syrian governorates, the first of whom were the people of the city of Daraya in 2016. The process of the entry of IDPs into the town is conducted through the southern crossing of the ancient castle which is controlled by the Assad forces. Afterwards, they would be sent to the northern part of the castle, which is controlled by the opposition factions.

The crossing was completely closed in 2019 after the Syrian Army regained full control over the area.

Qalaat al-Madiq crossing location:





## **2.b.3 Internal crossings among the opposition factions**

These crossings separate the areas controlled by the armed factions with the help of the Turkish Army in northern Aleppo and the areas controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham under the name of Syrian Salvation Government.

### **Ghazzawi Crossing**

Ghazzawi crossing is located in the village of Ghazzawi to the northwest of Aleppo near the border with Turkey. It is considered as being a corridor linking the areas of Afrin and Samaan which are located in the northwest of Aleppo and are under the control of the armed opposition factions. SDF established the crossing when it was in control of the area. The opposition factions controlled the area in 2018. The Nouredine Zanki Movement managed the crossing and exploited it financially in an inexplicable way, given that the crossing was in the liberated areas and there is no reason for its existence. The crossing later became a financial resource for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham after it took control over it in 2019 and closed all roads connecting the areas controlled by the group and Afrin district. However, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham opened the crossing again for commercial traffic and civilians in the same year.

The existence of the crossing in the region had no positive role. The crossing was only a means of imposing rackets and taxes on commercial materials and goods, particularly fuel, which had a negative impact on commercial traffic, noting that the National Army did not impose any charges for the passage of trucks or people, while taxes were imposed on the other side where Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had control. The crossing supplies the areas of Idlib with all types of commodities, and yet it forms an artery of oil, gas, gasoline, and diesel tankers, whether those coming from SDF areas or from Turkey.



*Ghazawiya crossing location seen at the left*

## **Deir Ballout Crossing**

Deir Ballout crossing was established by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham after it took control over the cities and towns of the western countryside of Aleppo. The crossing is located on the outskirts of the town of Deir Ballout, which is adjacent to the administrative border of Idlib governorate. It is mainly allocated for the passage of civilians and is also a pathway for very low commercial traffic.

### **2.b.4 Crossings with ISIS**

#### **Al-Saan Crossing**

Al-Saan crossing is located in the northeast of Hama. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham exploited the crossing for arms and oil trade with ISIS. The operation of the crossing began secretly in 2015 when ISIS took control over areas of Hama countryside. The operation of the crossing stopped after the Syrian Army retook control over the area in 2018.

## **Witness testimonies from North-west Syria**

Mr. Mohammad, currently residing in Turkey, said, “I am from Idlib city. I decided to immigrate to Turkey at the end of 2017, as a result of the security conditions that deteriorated drastically and the control of the armed factions over all aspects of life in the city. However, reaching Turkey was not easy. We talk here about smugglers connected with the controlling factions. I went to one of them called Abu Ahmad in an area close to the Atma camp. I told him that I wanted to enter Turkey in the company of my children and wife. He asked about our number, and I told him that we were five people. He remained silent for a while and said that I had to pay 3,500 dollars for each person to pass in a safe way, and that, if I liked, there was an alternative road at a lower cost of nearly 1,000 dollars, but that he could not guarantee anyone’s life there, because there were risks and the road dangerous. I did not have that amount, because he wanted 17,500 dollars which was the equivalent of 8 million Syrian pounds at that time, and yet I was not able to stay in my city any longer. Therefore, I decided to sell my house and belongings to secure the amount and travel with the aim of starting a safe life for me and my family. After a short time, I managed to sell the house and asked for the smuggling roads, but the prices were almost the same. Some smugglers said that Hayat gets the largest part of the amount and that they did not take much, while the risks they face were great. I agreed with one of those smugglers and said to him, ‘I will give you half the amount now and the other half after we reach Turkey.’ He refused at the beginning, but he agreed later. The journey began on the day he set. We went at night and crossed a dirt road between trees until we reached an open area ending with a dirt barrier. The smuggler said, ‘We will walk quickly at my signal.’ We passed and crossed the dirt barrier. He used to stop us to make sure that the road was clear of the patrols of the Turkish Gendarmerie. After that, we continued until we reached Turkey, after walking on foot for a long distance. I found a car waiting for us near some houses. I agreed with the smuggler to let the driver take us to the Turkish city of Reyhanlı. I paid him the rest of the amount, and then we parted.”

Mr. Abu Azzam, a former leader in the Free Syrian Army, said “I was present in the area of Peace Spring Operation and I am well familiar with the work of the factions affiliated with the Syrian National Army. The main factions operating in the region are Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya, the 20th Division, Al-Hamza Division,

known as 'Al-Hamzat', Ahrar Al-Shamiya along with several other factions. They also control Ras Al-Ain crossing. After imposing their control over the area, those factions seized the land which were owned by the Syrian state and also seized the grain silos, where the people of the region used to store their crops. However, those factions did not use their control for the benefit of the locals, because they sold the crops to the Syrian regime through the so-called intermediary Hussam Qaterji, who is subject to international sanctions; and the same also applies to Bahaa Qaterji because they are brothers and there no difference between them, given that they are both subject to international sanctions. The process took place through the territories of SDF, where the faction of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya alone controlled three silos in areas of Tal Abyad in 2019. Meanwhile, the other factions, Al-Hamza Division, Failaq Al-Sham, Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya and other factions controlled the remaining silos in the entire area between Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain, which have a total number of 14 silos containing more than 80 thousand tons of wheat and barley. Those large quantities were transported from the silos to warehouses near the village of Al-Rihaniya in the north of Al-Hasakah at a close distance to M4 International Road, which separates Peace Spring areas and SDF areas. The load would pass from there at night out of the sight of Turkish patrols. The deal used to take place through the intermediary between Al-Qaterji and the factions, i.e., the so-called 'Al-Marssoumi', who is from Deir Al-Zour. He worked as a smuggler and tobacco seller and is known to the people of the area for his work as an intermediary between the factions and SDF or the Syrian regime. He worked in smuggling after the control of ISIS. He used to secure the passage of goods, and money was received through him under the supervision of SDF forces, because each side has a share of the trade.”

Mr. Mazen Qabbara said, “I currently work in a company for importing agricultural crops in Urfa province in Turkey. Over the years 2019 and 2020, I entered into a deal with the local council in the Peace Spring area. As a company, we presented to them offers to buy agricultural crops like wheat, barley, and cotton, provided that the purchased goods will be transferred from Syria to Turkey under regular approvals from Turkey. However, all our offers were rejected, and we were unable to find out the reason. We found out later on that the armed factions in control of the area sold the agricultural crops to the Syrian regime through Syrian intermediaries, and therefore they rejected the purchase offers of our company. The sale through the local council will be subject to attained funds to monitoring,

and they will be included in the budget of the Syrian Interim Government through the local council. However, selling them in the said way will be of benefit to the factions and the members of the local council who personally benefit from such funds which will not be subject to any control.”

Mr. Essa, a merchant of household goods in the northern countryside of Aleppo said, “Business in our region is subject to controls and regulations that are different from those applied in other regions. Most of the goods come from Turkey without any problems on the Turkish side, but problems start when the goods reach the Syrian side. You will not be able to enter them without paying money to the so-called ‘Economic Office’, which is an office located at each border crossing and run by the faction in control of the crossing, assuming that the faction leader does not have a share in the goods, as in most cases. Obtaining an approval for the entry of the goods is difficult and requires strong relations with the armed faction. Most of my goods used to enter through Al-Rai crossing between 2017 and 2018. The crossing then under the control of a faction named Sultan Murad Division. As far as I know, the management of the crossing was later transferred to the Interim Government under the protection of the police. However, Sultan Murad Division still controls the crossing.

I had to pay money to the Economic Office to let the goods pass. The amounts paid varied, depending on the quantity and quality of the goods, and ranged from 500 dollars to more than 5,000 dollars. Those amounts belonged to the Division and were not spent to serve the people of the region or repair what the war and conflicts destroyed and or even on the camps or affected families. I know many merchants who were offered money by the military factions in exchange for operating as silent partners in a secret way, in the sense that the trade name will be for the merchant while the faction in control of the crossing has most of the profits. In that case, the merchant does not pay fees in return for the passage of his goods. Of course, business in this case is based on monopoly, and no one else is allowed to import the goods in which the faction trades.”

Mr. Abu Hazem, a farmer from Tal Abyad, under the control of the Syrian National Army, said: “The military factions rule the region by force of arms and control our means of livelihood since their control over the area after the battles with SDF. The two sides force us, as peasants and farmers, to sell agricultural crops

to them or through them only at prices much lower than real market price. We are not allowed to sell our crops freely. I feel that I am a labourer working for them and not an owner of my land. I work hard, plant and harvest. SDF used to come and take the crop at a price imposed by them, and it is the same case now after the control of the National Army. People who disobey their orders will be either arrested or have their property confiscated on the charge of dealing with SDF. The regime followed the same method in the past. The leaders of armed factions get the real profits of agricultural crops. That matter is no longer limited to agricultural crops because they confiscated the money and property of many tribal leaders and merchants on the charge that they had attended meetings held by SDF. Civilians are helpless. When we did not attend the meetings of SDF we used to be punished, and it is the same situation now but in reverse. I feel that the method of Assad rule is the same method in which those who control by arms force rule now.”

Mr. M.A. said “Some military forces considered to be part of the opposition have to be held accountable immediately. We are in an area governed by force and not by the law. I am a civilian and do not belong to any political party or to the Free Army or any other side. While I was passing a checkpoint affiliated with Sultan Murad Division, the person in charge of the checkpoint asked me to pay a sum of money in order to allow me passage. I refused and was involved in an altercation with him. The checkpoint was affiliated with a group led by the so-called Abu Al-Waleed Al-Azza. Following the altercation with him, I was arrested and sent to a prison belonging to the group. I found the prison full of detained men and women. The prison had separate rooms, and there were no records or real charges. That is what I found out later. The whole matter aimed to blackmail families financially. I was subject to torture, beating and humiliation. I faced a charge of being an informant for the regime. I do not know how it happened, but I became guilty. My family later contacted the people in charge of the prison, and the negotiations to release me started. The truth is that all they wanted was money. I was released after paying 500 dollars. I was released without charge. It is sad that such people speak in the name of the Syrian Revolution. The thing that I never forget from the period of my detention is the sound of detained women late at night. I used to hear about but the detention centres of the regime, but I lived horrible days in the prisons of those who call for fighting the regime crimes.”

Mr. Mahran, a displaced person in Idlib from Hama, said “After I was displaced to Idlib to escape from compulsory service in the regime army, I decided to enter Turkey but I did not want to enter illegally. Therefore, such matter required a passport that can only be obtained from the areas controlled by the Syrian regime. I was introduced to some intermediaries who communicate with people in control of Abu Dala Crossing in Hama countryside. The crossing was under the control of a group that worked for the regime and was led by a person named Ahmad Al-Darwish. We reached an agreement through an intermediary to pass from Idlib to Hama in a car belonging to Al-Darwish and stay under his protection. They would take me to Immigration and Passports Office in Hama, extract a passport for me, even though I am a wanted and ‘pursued by security forces’, and accompany me until I return safely to Idlib for 2,500 US dollars. I agreed to those terms and told them that I would pay only when I return safely. The intermediary did not mind, knowing that I would not manage to evade because I was wanted by the regime on the one hand; and Al-Nusra Front controlled the crossing on the side of Idlib since the intermediary worked only with knowledge of Al-Nusra Front. I actually managed to obtain a passport in that way at the beginning of 2017.”

The so-called Abu Mahdi, a former member of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (Al-Nusra), said, “I was among the people present at Al-Eis Crossing. The crossing was open for the passage of civilian and commercial traffic between the two sides. The main trade at the crossing was car trade. Merchants used to import cars and changed their serial numbers in agreement with merchants on the opposite side. Afterwards, cars would pass after paying fees to the checkpoint. I do not know who would pay on the opposite side. Fees varied according to the type and year of manufacture of the car. They started from 1,000 dollars upwards. There are many types of trade conducted through the crossing. The main commodities sold to the regime areas are crops, cotton, and vegetables. On the other hand, fuel and gas trucks passed from regime areas to Idlib. These materials do not pass free of charge on both sides. Trade in this respect was regulated by conditions. The command of the crossing on our side did not permit any merchant to pass his goods, given that they monopolised some types of materials for their benefit. As I mentioned earlier, car trade was restricted only to certain merchants working for Al-Nusra under their personal name, no other merchants were permitted to work in this field. The crossing was generating huge profits that I could not estimate, because I was not among the people authorised to receive the money. However,

traffic was very heavy through the crossing, in addition to the traffic in relation to smuggling wanted persons which was conducted through coordination between the two sides. Any person or group would pass to our side by cars belonging to the security service. When they arrived, they used to get out of the car and take another car belonging to the intermediary who would take them to Idlib or north Aleppo. The car belonging to the security would return without being obstructed under orders from the crossing commander. The intermediary used to take between 500 and 2,500 dollars for each person. Prices varied according to the security condition of the person wishing to cross, for example a wanted civilian who had a price, a person that defected from the army had a different price, and so on and so forth.”

Mr. Mohammad Mahdi, a civilian residing in Al-Bab, said, “I have some relatives in Idlib. I go to visit them every now and then. For that purpose, we pass the road of Ghazawi crossing between the control areas of the National Army and the areas of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. The crossing is under the control of Failaq Al-Sham faction on the north side and is under the control of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham on the opposite side. As civilians, we pass for free and do not pay fees or rackets, but we are subject to inspection and security checks. The two sides have lists of wanted people on various and numerous charges. If a person wanted to cross and his name was on those lists, he would be arrested. However, trucks loaded with commercial materials do not pass for free. What I saw was that members of Failaq Al-Sham did not impose rackets, fees or taxes, but they asked in some cases for a tip and such amounts were small. The opposite side handled the crossing as being customs crossing and imposed a specific price on each truck according to the type of goods. They did not permit the passage of commercial vehicles without prior coordination and the inspection of the goods and calculation of their value. The matter is now known to everyone here, that Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham controls all aspects of civilian and commercial life in Idlib and the surrounding areas.”

Mr. Abu Al-Abbas (code name) said, “I currently work with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, because it controls Idlib and Idlib countryside. I will not be able to support my family if I do not cope with the status quo. I neither support them nor oppose them. All what I want is to get revenues that will enable me to live. Therefore, I have been employed in the office of ‘Border Security’ since 2018. My job is to check the names of the smugglers and the people who want to pass to Turkey. I



search for the names in the lists of persons wanted by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. If people do not have security issues, I will issue a receipt for them in a normally way. If a person is wanted, we will report him to the internal security division to take an action against him and arrest him. Smuggling operations are all linked to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. No smuggler can work without having an approval and paying the fees. The process is done as follows: The smuggler brings the names of the civilians in the first stage. I check the smuggler's security permit and then check the names of travellers. Afterwards, the smuggler pays the fees and states the destination and time of passage, and I give him a receipt that is often valid for three days. Accordingly, the smuggler will do his work without being obstructed by the forces and checkpoints of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Documentation issued by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham with regard to smugglers and smuggling operations.

**مكتب العبور**

رقم الإيصال: 004484  
 مدة الإيصال: ابتداءً ٢٠١٩ / ٢ / ٢٠١٩ : انتهاءً ٢٠١٩ / ٢ / ٢٠١٩  
 كتلة: دركوش  
 مكتب: دركوش  
 اسم المهرب الثلاثي: [Redacted]

ملاحظة	محل وتاريخ الولادة	اسم الراكب	الرقم
		[Redacted]	1
		[Redacted]	2
		[Redacted]	3
		[Redacted]	4
		[Redacted]	5
		[Redacted]	6
		[Redacted]	7
		[Redacted]	8
		[Redacted]	9
		[Redacted]	10
		[Redacted]	11
		[Redacted]	12
		[Redacted]	13
		[Redacted]	14
		[Redacted]	15
		[Redacted]	16
		[Redacted]	17
		[Redacted]	18

**مكتب العبور**  
**نقطة تفتيش**  
**دركوش**

إجمالي عدد الركاب: ١  
 عدد ركاب المرتجع: ٠  
 عدد ركاب العبور: ١

ملاحظة: قيمة الإيصال يدفعها المهرب. اسم وتوقيع مكتب الإيصال: أبو بكر [Signature]

ختم مكتب العبور

Photo of a passage receipt in the area of Darkush in the north of Idlib:


Translated copy:

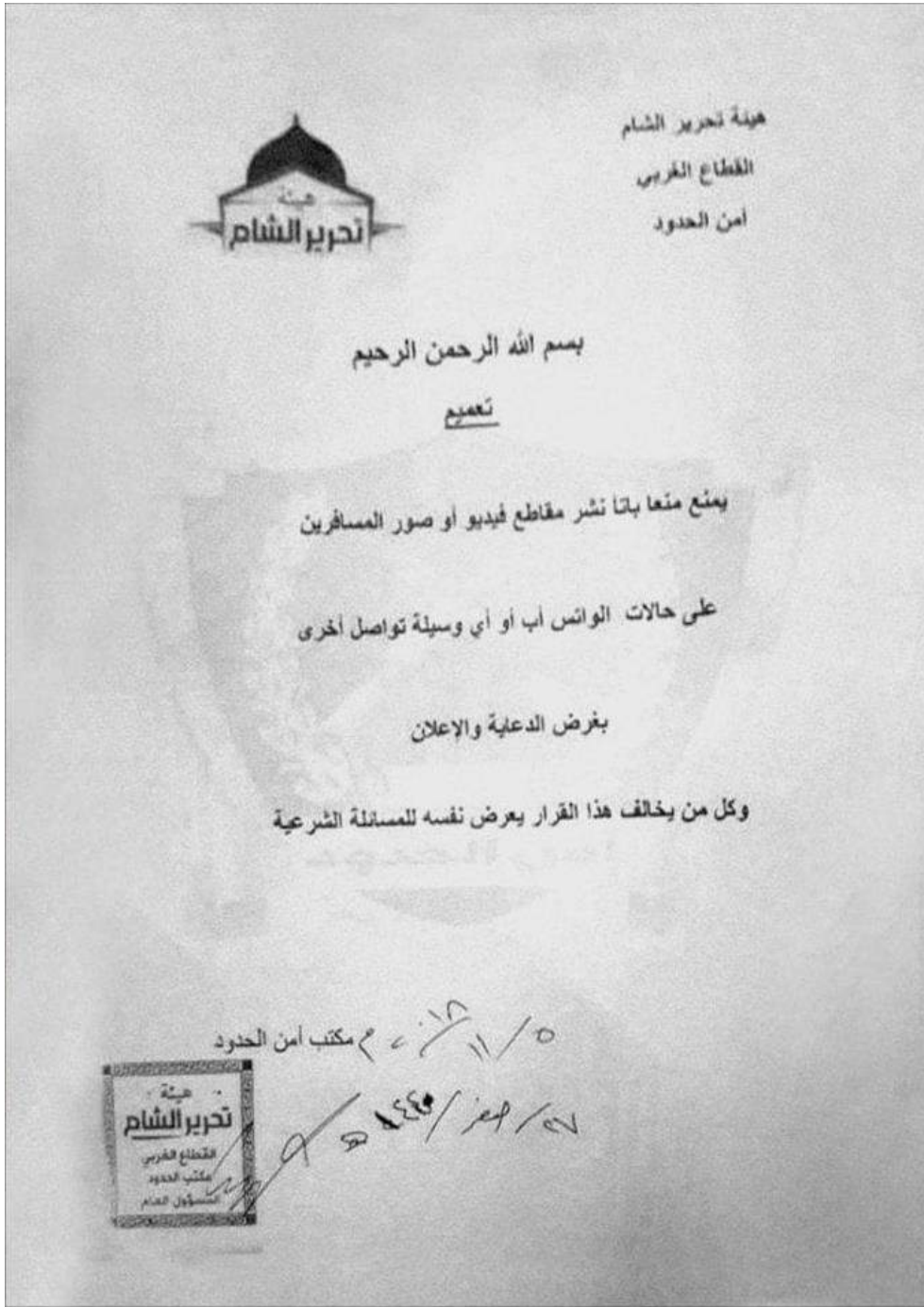
<b>Passage Office</b> Block: <b>Darkush</b> Office: <b>Daria</b>		Receipt Number No. 004484	Receipt Validity From: <b>23/3/2019</b> To: --/--/201-
Smuggler's Full Name: [Text blotted]			
No.	Passenger's Name	Place and Date of Birth	Comments
1	[Text blotted]		
2	[Text blotted]		
3	[Text blotted]		
4	[Text blotted]		
5	[Text blotted]		
6	[Text blotted]		
7	[Text blotted]		
8	[Text blotted]		
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			
Total number of passengers:		<b>8</b>	Amount: <b>200</b>
Number of return passengers:			Amount: \$
Number of transit passengers:			Amount: \$
Comment: The receipt value shall be paid by the smuggler. Name and Signature of issuing clerk of the receipt [Signature]		Seal of Passage Office	



Photo of a passage receipt in the area of Harim in the north of Idlib

Translated copy:

<b>Unmarriageable Person Detection Office</b>	No. [Text blotted]
Valid for <del>three days</del> <b>one week</b>	Date: <b>9/3/2020</b>
Block: <b>Harim</b>	
Smuggler's Name: [Text blotted]	Passage Area: <b>Harim</b>
Girl's Name: [Text blotted]	Guardian's Name and Number: [Text blotted]
Comment: <b>Her brother was verified – born in 2004 in Aleppo</b>	
The value of this receipt is 500 SP in return for office services.	Seal and Signature
Collected upon each renewal.	[Abu Mojahed]
	[Signature]



Administrative decisions by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to control and manage smuggling operations

Translated copy:

[Logo]

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham  
Western Sector  
Border Security

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

Circular

It shall be absolutely prohibited to post videos of photos of travelers  
on WhatsApp status or any other means for the purpose of publicity  
and advertisement.

Anyone who violates this decision shall be held accountable  
according to Sharia provisions.

Border Security Office

5/11/2018 [Signature].

27 Safar 1440 AH

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham  
Western Sector  
Border Security  
General Official



هيئة تحرير الشام

القطاع الغربي

أمن الحدود

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

قرار إداري

- ١ \_ يمنع قطع أي وصل لمهرب ليس لديه اضبارة أمنية
- ٢ \_ يمنع قطع أو تفريغ أي وصل إلا بوجود المهرب والركاب
- ٣ \_ المهرب ملزم بوضع اسم النليل على الوصل
- ٤ \_ يعتبر الوصل ملغى بعد انتهاء مدته
- ٥ \_ مدة الوصل هي ثلاثة أيام ضمنا
- ٦ \_ لا تسترد قبعة أي وصل ضائع
- ٧ \_ يتم دفع قبعة الوصل كاملة
- ٨ \_ تغلق مكاتب القطع في أوقات الصلاة





Translated copy:

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham  
Western Sector  
Border Security

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

Administrative Decision

- 1- It is prohibited to issue receipts to smugglers who do not have security dossiers.
- 2- Receipts shall be issued or given only in the presence of the smuggler and passengers.
- 3- Smugglers are obliged to put the name of the guide on the receipt.
- 4- The receipt shall be deemed void after the end of its validity period.
- 5- The period of validity of the receipt shall be three days inclusive.
- 6- The value of a lost receipt shall not be refunded.
- 7- The value of the receipt shall be paid in full.
- 8- Issuing offices shall be closed at prayer times.

Border Security

[Signature]

Abu Khalil [Text illegible]

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham  
Western Sector  
Border Security  
[Text illegible]

## 2.c Crossings in Central Syria



The map of military control in the region constantly changed over the course of the conflict. Currently the area is under the control of the Syrian Government and several militias, mainly Lebanese Hezbollah which has control over large parts of the Syrian - Lebanese border and over most crossings between the two countries.

Several land crossings were established in the region. The places and affiliation of those crossings varied depending on the forces in control of the location. The main traffic of these internal crossings was human trafficking of people fleeing from the areas controlled by Damascus and smuggling contraband to other areas, given that Lebanese Hezbollah is one of the main producers of contraband in Syria in general. Such crossings produced financial gains for forces of the Syrian regime.

The region also has witnessed a different type of crossings over a specific period of time, when the Syrian Army besieged the areas controlled by opposition factions, whether such areas were inside Homs city or in its northern countryside. As the siege of Homs began, relations were established between some merchants and checkpoints belonging to the Syrian Army. The regime's treatment with Homs

differed from that of northern Syria, because the rebels controlled large areas of the city and its northern countryside. The Syrian Army used siege and starvation tactics against the liberated areas in mid-2012. Crossings were established in two areas after a truce was concluded with the regime in 2016 in the countryside of Homs.

Baba Amr, in the west of Homs, was the first neighbourhood to be liberated by the opposition forces and became a bastion for defectors, activists and daily demonstrations for a few months. In March 2012, the Syrian Army retook control of the neighbourhood after 28 days of sustained bombardment. After that, military operations moved to the old neighbourhoods of Homs, where factions attempted to resist until mid-2013. In May 2014, the opposition factions withdrew from the old neighbourhood of Homs and some of them went to Al-Waer neighbourhood, which was under the control of factions from the opposition, while others went to the northern countryside of Homs. In March 2017, the opposition fighters withdrew from Al-Waer and handed it over to Damascus.

In mid-2012, the armed factions controlled over a vast region of the northern, western, and eastern countryside of Homs to Palmyra and Al-Quaryatayn, but the Syrian Army regained control of many towns in Al-Qusayr and Abil in east-southern Homs by the end of April 2013. Then in June 2013, the opposition factions withdrew from Al-Qusayer, Talkalakh and nearby regions, since Al-Qusayer and the border regions between Lebanon and Syria have been under the control and influence of the Lebanese Hezbollah militias. In 2020, Hezbollah has decreased its dominance and allowed the Syrian authorities to re-enter in the area. Regarding the eastern countryside of Homs, it has been under the control of Damascus in different phases. Palmyra was occupied by ISIS between 2014 and 2017, then the Russian forces took control. It has subjected to a military control of Russia, and a civilian administration of the Syrian government until the late 2020. Additionally, the northern countryside has been governed by a military control of Russia, and a civilian administration of the Syrian government since 2018.

At Tanaf is located in the southeast of Homs on the border with Iraq and Jordan, it has been a U.S military base from 2014 to 2020, and US-backed Maghawir al-Thawra, who is a local faction based in Al-Badia to expel the remnants of ISIS in the region.

The local factions seized most of towns and villages of the western countryside of Hama by the end of 2012, without achieving a complete control over any of Hama's neighbourhoods. The liberation operations had lasted to the late 2016, when the opposition factions took the control of the entire Hama, excluding the city of Hama and the western countryside.

As the factions weakened, their control also weakened in the countryside, and they lost the entire countryside by 2020 to be under the control of Damascus and Russia. Some strategic hills like Jabal Zayn al-Abdin and some military sites in the western countryside of Hama have been within the military control of Iranian militias.

### **2.c.1 Crossings in Homs Old City**

The Syrian Army completely besieged 14 neighbourhoods in Old Homs in the middle of 2012. The siege lasted for nearly two years until the two sides reached an agreement in which the city residents were forcibly transferred to the northern countryside of Homs in the middle of 2014. Throughout the period of the siege, no crossings were established between the warring parties but a front line extending along the outskirts of the besieged area, which allowed for the establishment of smuggling corridors from time to time. These smuggling corridors were unannounced and unofficial and food and tobacco were secretly introduced into the city at night through night-time meetings taking place in Jub Jandali, under Assad forces' control, and Bab Tadmur, then under rebels' control. These operations brought in a great fortune for those in control of these smuggling corridors.

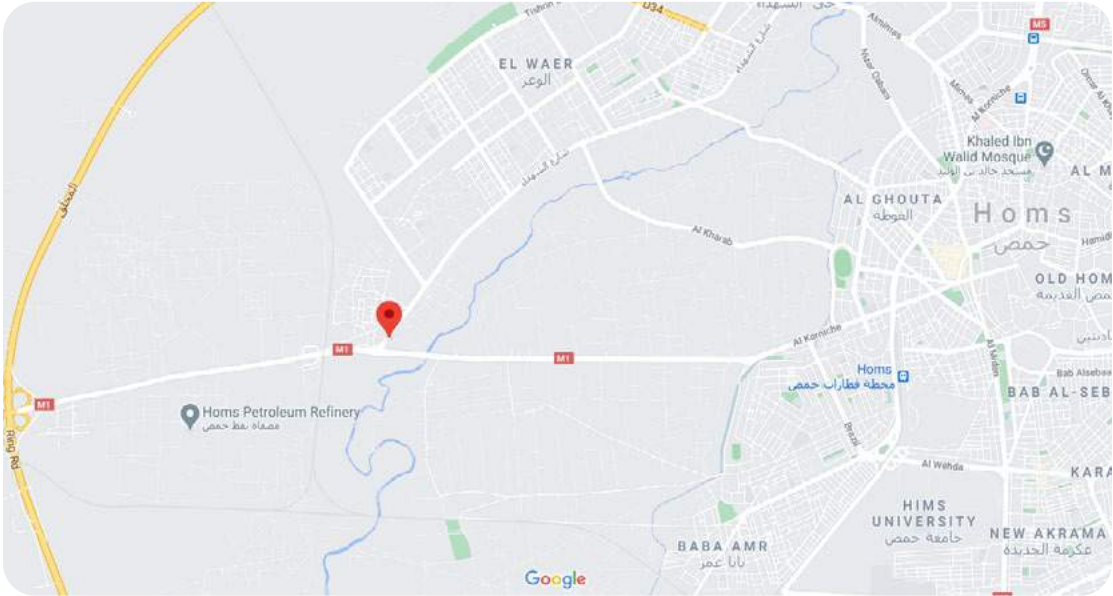
### **2.c.2 Crossings in Al-Waer neighbourhood:**

Al-Waer neighbourhood is located on the northern side of Homs and separate it from its northern countryside. In similar terms to what happened in the neighbourhoods of Old Homs, the neighbourhood was completely surrounded in the middle of 2013 and the siege lasted until the middle of 2017.

During that period, the western checkpoint of the neighbourhood, known as Mazraa Crossing, turned into a crossing through which various types of goods,

medicines and supplies entered. That provided a large financial resource for those in control of the crossing. The crossing did not operate regularly or during agreed working hours, but it was used as an instrument through which the Syrian Army controlled the lives of the besieged people, allowing the entry or exit of some civilians through the crossing in unpredictable and random ways in exchange for taxes imposed on individuals, cars and commodities. The crossing represented the only way for people wishing to flee through smugglers. It is necessary to point out the human trafficking, as Al-Waer was the only crossing for smuggling people fleeing from regime to this neighbourhood, or for smuggling wanted people outside Al-Waer to the northern Syria or the northern countryside of Homs. This operation cost was \$1,500 to \$3,000 per person, depending on the importance of the person, the timeframe, and the destination.

The location of Al-Mazra checkpoint in the Al-Waer neighbourhood:



### 2.c.3 Crossings in the northern countryside

Areas controlled by the Syrian opposition are concentrated in the northern countryside of Homs, which contains dozens of villages, including Talbiseh, al-Rastan and al-Zaafaranah, in addition to al-Hula valley and the towns of Taldou and Kafr Laha.

On May 25, 2012, a full blockade was applied on the northern countryside of Homs, and many checkpoints were spread across the roads leading to the besieged villages during the first years of the blockade. Some foodstuffs and fuel were being introduced into these villages, but this was not done in an official way nor within specific or regular periods of time, rather they were fluctuant depending on the military control or the responsible personnel of the checkpoint. The checkpoints did not perform the role of the official crossing, but were more for goods smuggling and irregular civilians' transit, as an example of those checkpoints: Taqsis checkpoint, Teramaleh checkpoint, Talamari checkpoint, al-Dar al-Kabira checkpoint, and Al-Sama'ilil checkpoint. These checkpoints have entered a new phase earlier in 2016, being official humanitarian crossings, with frequent closures and re-openings by both parties.

There are two official crossings in the northern countryside of Homs, which separate the opposition and the regime.

### **Al-Ghasbia Crossing**

Al-Ghasbia Crossing is located on the southern side of Al-Dar Al-Kabirah village. It was opened in May 2016, following an agreement between the Supreme Sharia Court and Damascus. The agreement stated that a humanitarian crossing would be opened in the northern countryside, provided that the military factions would open the Homs detour that connects the city with Safita in Tartus. The operation of the crossing was initially limited to the passage of employees, students, and civilians individually (without carrying goods), but it later turned into a road for the entry of food and relief materials to the besieged towns, and after that to a commercial point and a market for merchants from both sides. The crossing was completely closed in 2017. During the period of operating the crossing, the Russian-backed National Defence militia was the main beneficiary imposing a 25% tax on all goods transiting through the crossing.

### **Al-Sama'ilil Crossing**

The crossing is located in Al-Sam'ilil village which is adjacent to Taldou district in the northwest of Homs city. It was opened in 2017 as a humanitarian crossing to facilitate the entry and exit of civilians and medical cases into areas under

opposition control in the northern countryside of Homs. As with the Al-Ghasbia Crossing, the Supreme Sharia Court managed the crossing on the side of the besieged area in agreement with the Syrian forces through the negotiation committee. The terms of the agreement, which were approved since the opening of the crossing, varied, considering that they included the exit of students, employees and humanitarian cases. However, the most important terms were the entry of foodstuffs and allowing for the entry of goods after being inspected at the checkpoint, and merchants could only leave the besieged areas after obtaining a personal approval. The crossing was closed just five days after its opening and its operation only partially resumed later on.

### **Taqsis Crossing**

A third crossing appeared in Taqsis town in the northern part of the besieged cities, administratively part of Hama. The crossing was not official, because it was used to pass trucks loaded with commodities or fuel secretly in agreement with checkpoint members, which provided the besieged areas in the northern countryside of Homs with a small part of basic materials and daily requirements. The operation of the crossing continued until 2018.

## **2.c.4 Crossings with Lebanon**

The border between Syria and Lebanon extends over four governorates. The two countries are linked by five main crossings, and Homs governorate has the largest of share of those crossings. During the early years of the Revolution, the opposition used the areas between crossings to supply weapons, medicines, logistical and medical equipment, communications devices, and foodstuffs through smugglers moving between the two countries. Refugees seeking shelter in Lebanon also used these roads. These smuggling roads were closed in 2016, once Damascus and its allies retook control over the entire border. There are five crossings on the Syrian-Lebanon border: Jadidah Yabous (Masnaa on the Lebanese side), al-Dabousieh (al-Aboudieh), Jousia (Al Qaa), Tal Kalakh (Al-Buqeiha), and Tartous (al-Arida).

### **Official crossings**

#### **Masnaa Crossing**

The crossing has the name of 'Jdeidat Yabous Border Centre'. It is the main border crossing between Syria and Lebanon, located between the Syrian town of Jdeidat Yabous and the Lebanese town of Masnaa. Traffic on Masnaa has increased since the beginning of the Syrian revolution because passengers to and from Syria rely on this crossing to travel through Beirut International Airport.

### **Al-Dabousieh Crossing:**

The second most important crossing on Syria-Lebanon border is a bridge crossing with a length of 45m connecting al-Aboudieh village in Lebanon with al-Dabousiya in Syria opened in August 2007. In recent years, this crossing also has witnessed heavy traffic, as passenger enter Lebanese territory through it to travel through Beirut International Airport.

### **Jousia Crossing**

The crossing gained importance due its location in al-Qusayr in the countryside of Homs, which was controlled by the regime and the Lebanese Hezbollah in 2013. It is a gateway between the northern Lebanese Bekaa and the countryside of Homs. Jousia crossing described as Lebanon's main lung in the northern Bekaa region, as it is only 40 km away from Homs and 65 km from Al-Aboudieh to Homs. However, it was completely closed in late 2012, due to the battles that took place in the Al-Qusayr, then it was reopened in 2017 by the Syrian and Lebanese sides.

### **Tal Kalakh Crossing:**

The crossing links Tal Kalakh on the Syrian side with the area of Wadi Khaled in Lebanon in Al-Baqia area, which is a few kilometres far from the border. This crossing is connected to the Al-Mshayerfeh area and the villages surrounding it in the western countryside of Homs. It is one of the crossings that maintained their activity over the past years.

### **Al-Arida Crossing:**

Arida crossing is located in Al-Arida village and links Lebanon's Tripoli and Tartus governorate on the Syrian coast. There is traffic of goods through the crossing,



in addition to the passage of trucks loaded with phosphate and sand from Syria to Lebanon and vice versa. There have been strict measures in the crossing with regard to the entry and exit of Syrians through it.

### **Illegal crossings**

Hezbollah has established its own area of control along the international border and exploited such area in its contraband activities, such as growing hashish and manufacturing drugs, and changed the religious identity of the area after the displacement of its people. Iranian-backed Hezbollah exploited the border in operations of smuggling various types of commodities, goods, and equipment, played a big role in helping the Syrian regime to circumvent the US and European sanctions and paved the way for Iranian policies who became able to move from Tehran to Beirut without any barriers or obstacles. It is not possible to estimate the number of illegal crossings along the border. According to Lebanese officials, the number of smuggling points reached 140 crossings, through which various types of smuggling operations are carried out, which generate large flow of cash.

According to statements by Lebanese officials Hezbollah smuggles prohibited items, commercial goods, fuel, and hard currencies into Syria, as well as weapons and engineering and logistics materials for its military operations. “Smuggling on the Syrian border amounts to \$2.5 billion”, according to statements by Lebanese officials.

The great power on the Syrian side consists of the elements of the 4th Division headed by Maher al-Assad, the brother of Bashar al-Assad. The 4th Division forms a strong alliance with Hezbollah, and plays an important role in smuggling between the two countries, especially in trafficking drugs and hashish, protecting fuel tank trucks and flour trucks coming from Lebanon through illegal crossings, and also in protecting smugglings through the official crossings.

### **Witness testimonies from Central Syria**

Mr. Alaa Abu Khaled said, “I am one of the civilians who were besieged in the neighbourhoods of Old Homs. The regime besieged us in June 2012. Food and even tobacco were available during the first stage of the siege, but the situation

became difficult with the passage of time. After the siege intensified, some faction commanders opened roads mainly for smuggling tobacco and a very small amount of food through points at an equal distance between the two sides. The meeting point was on the direction opposite to the neighbourhood of Job Al-Jandali, which was considered as front line facing the siege. On the opposite direction, the Al-Huda Battalion was stationed under the leadership of the so-called Abu Omran. Of course, there were other people who smuggled tobacco and food, but I would only mention the people from whom I bought such stuff. The meetings between the two sides took place at night, and each party used to impose a truce on its side. The besieged party sends unarmed elements carrying money. They would meet on the opposite side army elements carrying the goods, and the exchange took place. I know such details because I was a friend of Abu Omran. The regime sold the goods at exorbitant prices in comparison with their market price, for example one kilo of Arabian tobacco (unpacked tobacco) was sold in the market for 2,000 SP, but it was sold to the besieged people for 150,000 or 200,000 SP. Prices were unimaginable under the siege.”

Mr. Haitham Al-Masri said, “I was among the people besieged in the neighbourhoods of Old Homs. During the siege period, many roads were opened to pass food and tobacco, either between rebel areas or towards the regime forces. The smuggling roads that were established between the besieged people and the regime were numerous and at different periods of time throughout the two years during which Homs was besieged. The first of the people I remember dealing with the regime in smuggling or trade was the so-called Abu Waleed Al-Azza, who was a faction commander in Homs and is currently in the liberated north, the so-called Abu Jamal Al-Hindi, the so-called Shaalan Al-Nakdali, the so-called Abu Omran, and the so-called Al-Dairi. All of them were commanders of factions, except for Al-Dairi. All of them made deals with the regime forces to buy tobacco and some canned food in most cases. I could not buy food from smugglers because it often came in small quantities that the smuggler used to please the members of his battalion and lure new members to join him. Two types of tobacco were sold, either as packets or raw (unpacked) in grams. A packet was sold outside the besieged area for no more than 100 SP at best, but its price in the besieged area ranged from 35,000 to 75,000 SP, depending on its type. Raw tobacco was sold in grams, and the price of one gram ranged from 3,500 to 5,000 SP depending on the period and the smugglers who were often in agreement.”

Mr. Abu Murhaf said, “My family and I were besieged in the neighbourhoods of Old Homs. My wife gave birth to our second child during the siege. It was very difficult to get food, let alone water, electricity, and fuel, whether for cooking or heating. My young child was in a difficult condition in the first few months of his life because he and my wife suffered from malnutrition. It was necessary to get powder milk, which was almost impossible. Fortunately, a supply line was established between the besieged area and Al-Waer neighbourhood through Al-Basateen area. On the opposite side, Al-Bara bin Malek Battalion was in charge of the entry of materials in terms of food, tobacco, military supply, or medical supply. In view of its absolute control, it imposed taxes on any materials entered. I managed to get powder milk, but the price was unreasonable: the price for one bag was 25,000 SP. However, I had no choice, because my child’s life was more important to me than anything else. I got milk after begging a number of commanders of battalions in control of the road. Money alone was not enough. Through my contact with a friend of mine in Al-Waer neighbourhood, he informed me that the so-called Abu Shaalan, the commander of Al-Bara bin Malek Battalion, received half a million Syrian pounds every week in exchange for protecting the road and allowing for passage. That amount does not include the rackets imposed by the members of his battalion on the commodities to be passed to the besieged area, because Al-Waer neighbourhood was not completely besieged during at that time, and materials were reaching it easily.”

Mr. Abdul Moati said, “I am a defector from the ranks of the regime. I joined the Free Army after my defection. Later on, the regime forces laid siege to the neighbourhoods of Homs. A relative of mine and I were among the besieged people. We terribly suffered during the siege. In the early months of 2014, my relative was hit in the leg by shrapnel from a rocket. He was no longer able to walk or support himself because his injury was severe. The siege was at its worst at that time. Securing food or medicine was extremely difficult. At that time, the regime forces promoted a settlement for wanted people, if they surrendered. I saw many people surrendering. The regime released them, and they returned to their families. There were defectors, like me, among them. I said to myself that it was the right opportunity to get my cousin out to provide treatment for him, before being forced to amputate his leg. My cousin and I were wanted for security reasons. He was an organiser of demonstrations and worked for a media network, and I was a defector. I really asked some of my friends who came out of

the siege through a settlement, and they gave me the phone number of an officer in the Military Security Branch. I contacted him and explained the situation in detail. He asked me to surrender and go to the Military Security Branch to be investigated, as part of the settlement procedures, but I am a defector and did not want to surrender in that way. After days of argument over sporadic phone calls, I convinced him to pay him 150,000 SP in exchange for allowing me to pass to his side without entering the branch, grant me a few days to disappear from sight permanently, and let my injured relative enter the branch and leave it safely. That actually happened. We left the besieged area by passing through the front of Al-Qarabis neighbourhood and later reaching Al-Ghouta area where the officer waited for me. After that, I went to the house of one of my acquaintances, and my relative went with them to the branch. On the following day, I got false papers and agreed with a car driver to take me to the northern countryside of Homs. I paid him 10,000 SP in exchange for not being stopped on the regime's checkpoints which were spread in the city and on the outskirts of the northern countryside of Homs. I arrived and kept waiting for my relative who came out of the branch and visited it several times in a period of one week. During that time, they made him feel safe and that his situation became legal. After the end of the first week, he tried to go to Lebanon where his displaced wife and children lived. While he was on his way to the Lebanese border, a checkpoint stopped him and he was arrested. We were unable to reach out to him after that. Some lawyers confirmed to us that he was killed in the regime prisons during the year 2020. I do not know how he was killed. My relative's name is Emad Skaf if you are able to help me."

Mr. Jaber said, "I was among the people who were displaced to the northern countryside of Homs. I fled my city, Homs, for fear of being arrested on the grounds of participating in demonstrations and helping wounded people that were shot by the regime forces during the demonstrations. The situation in the northern countryside of Homs was not good. The regime had laid siege to most of the towns and villages of the countryside extending between Homs and Hama, and the situation became unbearable in 2014, which made me consider migrating to the Syrian liberated north. There was a smuggling road between the liberated areas, but it was dangerous and highly expensive. Nevertheless, I decided to take such risk. I contacted a smuggler, and he instantly agreed and requested an amount of 75,000 SP. After that, the attempts to cross began. We went to a road that crossed for more than 10 times and returned home each time without any

success whenever the smuggler told us that the regime forces sent out surprise patrols and ambushes on the smuggling road. One day, the smuggler told me that we would try again tonight. We were a group of 45 young men, and we all wanted to cross to the liberated north. We passed the villages of Al-Ghasbeya and Izzedine by car and reached an area close to Taksis village. We got out of the car and started to walk in the dark. We passed the villages of Janan and Salmiya along with areas unknown to me. We passed near villages loyal to the regime, military units, and regime checkpoints. The smuggler accompanying us changed at each stage. There was a process of receipt and delivery between smugglers, and each of them agreed with the regime forces that controlled his area. There was hushed silence, and one of the most important conditions of the journey was not to light cigarettes. When morning dawned, we were in an area named Tulul Al-Humur, as the smuggler told us. We entered a place similar to a barn. The smuggler told us to sleep quietly and not to make or utter any sound, no matter what happened, and gave us water. We slept and resumed our journey in the evening. We crossed new areas unknown to me and also mountains and valleys until we reach the area of Al-Tamanah at dawn on the second day. The smuggler provided a big truck for us. We got into the truck, and each one of us paid 2,000 SP in exchange for driving us to the area of Sarmada. After I arrived, but I heard stories about people who died during their attempt to cross from the same road.”

Mrs. Fatima said, “I am a resident of Homs city, but I am originally from Idlib where my father’s family lives. After the deterioration of security situation in Homs, my family and I went from Idlib to an area near Saraqib, which was then under the control of the Free Army in 2014. I got married there, and my husband decided that we would emigrate in the company of his family that consist of one brother and two sisters along with me and my husband as well as his sisters’ four children. He decided then to go to Jordan. He agreed with a bus to take us to Al-Raqqa, which was under the control of ISIS, and we would take a new road from there. Our journey started with passing to the area of Al-Safria through the checkpoints of the Free Army. We passed near an airport. It was Kweires airport, I presume? I do not know a lot about the names of the areas we passed. There were some dirt roads and some paved roads. We crossed many checkpoints affiliated with the Free Army, and they used to ask us every time about our destination and verify our documents. They thought that we were going to join ISIS, because my husband’s sisters and I wore niqab. We were subjected to some verbal harassment

by some elements, but the matter ended peacefully. After we arrived at Raqqa – I do not know the name of the area – we met elements of ISIS and many checkpoints. They did not give us a lot of bother, with the exception of a few questions in a presumed attempt to convince us to stay in their areas. We dealt with them kindly and cautiously. After that, my husband and his brother agreed with a bus that carries people wishing to go to Jordan. We waited for a few days in a house we rented until the completion of the number of people who wanted to pass. The driver requested 55,000 SP for each person, even though we had children among us. However, he refused to negotiate. We agreed because we had no other choice. We were nine people and paid at that time 495,000 SP. The journey started, and the driver and his assistant had an agreement with the checkpoints of ISIS. They neither stopped nor searched us. We used to pass after they talk to the driver. I figured out later that he worked for them, and that the process was done through them. We passed many rugged areas, mostly in Al-Badiya, and uninhabited areas. We passed a checkpoint for ISIS every now and then, but we kept moving. The driver turned off the lights and engine in the evening and waited for a phone call. He told my husband at that time that we reached an area near Al-Rukban at a highway connecting Syria and Iraq. After a while, the driver restarted the engine and crossed the highway quickly and the lights turned off and we crossed a dirt road and then faced a new, and then stopped the bus after a while, after a period of restarting the engine and across the highway quickly with the lights turned off. We crossed a dirt road after which we passed a new checkpoint for ISIS. The bus stopped after a while, and the driver said, ‘Continue your way on foot from here.’ We carried the bags and walked around three kilometres towards the Jordanian barrier. We reached the area of Al-Rukban on the Syrian-Jordanian border.”

Mr. Malath said, “I am a resident of Al-Waer neighbourhood. I participated in the demonstrations that were staged to express rejection of the regime in Syria the demands of freedom and justice. After the start of the Syrian Revolution, the regime laid siege to some areas in Syria, including Al-Waer neighbourhood in Homs city. That siege was relentlessly laid, and we were linked to the surrounding areas only by some checkpoints, the most important or effective of which was Al-Mazraa checkpoint under the control of Republican Guard Forces affiliated with the regime. That barrier did not allow civilians to pass freely, but it rather forced them to pass in specific times. Otherwise, it would close completely, as was the case most of the time, let alone imposing rackets on people passing the checkpoint,

and arresting, beating or humiliating some of them. On the opposite side, i.e., in the besieged area, there was 'Al-Bara bin Malek' faction or 'Awsoud Al-Sunnah', as it later changed its name, had control over the checkpoint opposite the regime. However, they did not impose rackets on people passing the checkpoint, but they used to ask for some food from the people coming to the neighbourhood if the regime allowed them to enter it. The Republican Guard elements imposed certain conditions on people passing the checkpoint, allowing only for the passage of students and employees. Each person was allowed for a small amount of food that was enough for two or three people. In order to enter it, such person had to pay an amount ranging between 3,000 and 10,000 SP in exchange for passing with food. I must mention that in the elements dealt, in most cases, with some intermediaries to smuggle wanted persons outside the besieged area towards the areas of liberated north."

Mr. Yarub said, "I was among the people who were besieged in Al-Waer neighbourhood. When the siege got intensified, I looked for a way to get out of the area towards the north, but I was conscripted for reserve military service by the regime. I contact an intermediary that can be called a smuggler. He requested 600,000 SP from me in exchange for passing to Al-Ghouta area in Homs city, provided that I had to hide from sight until my final departure from the city. I agreed to that in spite of the risk because danger under the siege was not less grave. On the specified day, a Kia Rio car entered carrying one person. I later figured out that he was a security element. We passed the checkpoint, without anyone stopping the car at all. No other checkpoint stopped until I reached Al-Ghouta neighbourhood. The man, who asked me not to speak throughout the trip, dropped me after I paid him the agreed amount. I hid myself in a house of one of my acquaintances for two days, during which we experienced indescribable fear of being caught. Two days later, I managed to reach another smuggler that would take me in the same way to the liberated areas in Hama countryside. One day later, a car came to my place. I got into the car, and the driver asked me not to talk to any element or group on our way, even if a checkpoint element asked me questions directly. I did as he told me. We passed through the checkpoints in a smooth way. The driver showed his security card at each checkpoint and greeted the elements, and we would pass after that. We changed the car in an area unknown to me in Hama city. The driver asked me to pay him the agreed amount, which was then 150,000 SP. Afterwards, I got into a new car and moved within

a convoy of 10 cars, all of which belonged to the so-called Ahmad Al-Darwish, a commander of pro-regime militia. I did not pay them money, because I knew a man close to Al-Darwish and I asked him to do me a favour. The man agreed to provide the service for me for free. His men drove me through the convoy to a crossing leading to the liberated areas. A car took me to the nearest point and then returned. I continued my way. That's how the siege period in 2015 ended.”

Mr. Mohab said, “The siege laid to Al-Waer neighbourhood saw different periods of time, during which the regime forces allowed for the entry of food in limited and small quantities, but at one stage the elements of Al-Bara bin Malek faction made an agreement with the elements of Al-Mazraa checkpoint to bring them diesel and gasoline. Fuel was sold to us in the besiege area as it was sold for people outside. The quantities were limited and the amounts are large. You must have a good relationship with the elements of the group in order to get some fuel. The price was not fixed, but it rather fluctuated according to the quantities which the regime forces allowed to pass, in spite of imposing rackets on them. I bought the fuel several times. In first time, I paid 1,000 SP for one litre of gasoline that I used to fuel my motorcycle, which was later destroyed as a result of bombardment. One day, I bought from them 20 litres of diesel for 2,000 SP to run the generator. At the time, the price of one litre of diesel did not exceed 100 SP.”

Mr. Abu Tariq, a merchant in the northern countryside of Homs, said, “Commodities, foodstuffs and fuel entered the areas of besieged northern countryside of Homs through the regime's checkpoints after bribing the people in charge of those checkpoints. Those checkpoints did not operate regularly, but they were opened and closed in different periods of time. Each checkpoint imposed its rackets on the goods in exchange for their passage in agreement with the major merchants of the region who controlled trade because of their close relationship with commanders of factions in the besieged areas. One of the main checkpoints in 2017 was the checkpoint that which linked the besieged area of Al-Houla with the village of Khirbet Jamea in Hama countryside. That checkpoint was controlled by a militia lead by the so-called Ahmad Sighati. It was known in our region that the so-called Ahmad was working under the umbrella of Air Force Intelligence. He was one of the most prominent commanders of Desert Hawks militia which is affiliated with a general in the regime force. Sighati was responsible for bring trucks loaded with goods of all types into Al-Houla area, and from there the goods would pass



to other villages and towns. The checkpoint imposed an amount of 250,000 SP on each car passing through it. That amount could increase depending on the volume of the car. The checkpoint used to generate a weekly amount of approximately 25 million Syrian pounds from the rackets imposed by it. The deals were made through major merchants linked with the commanders, mainly the so-called Manhal Sallouh. The situation remained as I told you until the Russian troops announced their sponsorship of an agreement between the regime forces and the factions affiliated with the opposition in the north of Homs. After reaching the settlement, the two sides opened two official crossings, i.e., Ghasbeya crossing and Al-Samalil crossing, but those two crossings did not last long. Nevertheless, trade through the two crossings was controlled by the so-called Manhal Sallouh under the umbrella of Sharia Court in order to avoid suspicions, given that the area was tense. Manhal was an unpopular figure among the locals because he took part in the settlement process and the forced displacement to which the area was subjected.” The forces of the Syrian regime and the pro-regime militias focused on the strategy of the crime of siege and starvation in different areas in Homs and its countryside after failing to resolve the battle militarily. Such siege formed three main spots, i.e., the neighbourhoods of Old Homs, Al-Waer neighbourhood and the northern countryside of Homs. The controlling forces used their influence to starve the locals, restrict their freedom and prevent them from moving freely even to the other neighbourhoods or villages of the governorate. They exploited their urgent need for food, medicines and fuel, as monopolistic commercial relations were established between the controlling entities in light of the increase in cases of disease and hunger. Such trade produced profits in millions because of controlling the price of goods and doubling prices to unimaginable figures through stages ranging from controlling sides to controlling merchants and civilians or small merchants. As a result of restricting freedom, security pursuits and forcing young people to do compulsory or reserve military service in the ranks of the regime’s army, the besieged people were force to resort to smugglers dealing with those controlling forces, which asked huge amounts of money from those who wanted to cross; arrested some and killed others. As the case is in the other regions, the finger of suspicion was not pointed at a single side for committing those crimes, but all controlling forces contributed to restricting the freedom of civilians and violating their rights at all levels, whether at the personal level or the community level.

## 2.d Crossings in Southern Syria



Southern Syria includes the governorates of Daraa, Al-Suwayda, Quneitra, and part of the Damascus countryside. This region is currently under the complete control of the forces loyal to Damascus, assisted by Russian forces. Most of the region has been in the control of the opposition since the inception of the conflict in Syria and linked with its surroundings by land crossings.

Since September 2011, many towns and neighbourhoods in Daraa formed local armed groups. Clashes were fluctuating for months. By the end of 2013, Nawa city, most of the north-western and eastern countryside, and Al Ramtha border crossing with Jordan were liberated, as well as regions in Daraa and Al Qunaitira. In 2014, the opposition factions seized an air force base around Daraa, as well as a 25 km borderline with Jordan, including the village of Muzayrib and Abdin, then they controlled Da'el in the countryside of Daraa in late March. The liberation process stopped in mid-2014 because the control of FSA factions over most of south Syria became an arena for the influence of US, Jordan, Emirates, and others. Since 2015, the control of FSA factions over Southern Syria had weakened and the entire South returned under the control of Damascus, including Daraa and Al Qunaitira, assisted by the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Russian Army and Shiite militias supported by Iran.

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, As Suwayda has been a special case; it is not out of the Syrian regime control neither under its control. When the threat of ISIS expansion approached the countryside of As Suwayda, the people formed local armed groups to protect the villages and surroundings areas. These groups worked under decentralised command and participated with the Syrian Army in battles. Both parties were able to coexist for years according to this condition to late 2020. However, since 2018, Russia had a prominent influence on these armed groups without changing their local nature. Iran has entered As Suwayda by late 2019 and has extended its influence by getting closer to dignitaries, sheikhs, and religious and historical leaders of the governorate.

Daraa is an agricultural reservoir for Syria due to the abundance of farming areas, which put pressure on farmers in the opposition areas to find markets to sell their produce. To secure the daily necessities, fuels, fodder, fertilisers, and food supplies, they were forced to supply their crops to the areas under the Damascus's control. The Syrian Army imposed a blockade on Daraa, which began as a partial blockade since the first months of the revolution. At that time, goods from As-Suwayda or the capital, Damascus, were crossed safely to Daraa, against payment of bribes to the soldiers and officers who controlled the checkpoint. However, with the development of the revolution and the liberation of many areas in Daraa and its countryside, royalties and taxes on goods and trucks increased and had been relied upon by controlling forces and the security agencies as an important source of funds.

These checkpoints were not official crossings; the bribes and royalties imposed differed from one checkpoint to another. On these crossings, financial fees were imposed on the transit of civilians and goods; they were the main corridor for smuggling crops towards the regime's areas and caused the area to be flooded with prohibited substances. The regime's Fourth Division is the prominent dealer of these substances, in addition to some Druze and Iranian militias. The revenues of the crossings and the contraband trade caused the continuity of many figures and factions who violated the rights of civilians, increasing their suffering.

This status continued until the regime decided to officially open the crossings and impose flat customs duties. Since then, trucks should be sealed in order to pass after paying taxes, whether or not they are crossing from or to regime areas.

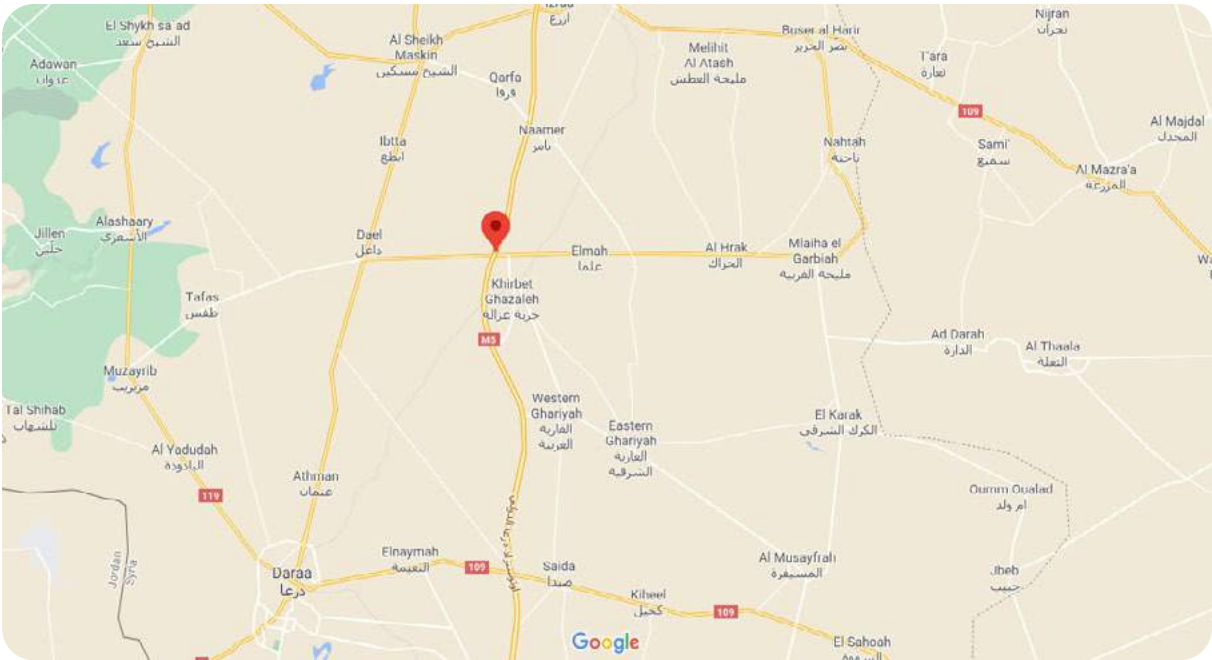
## 2.d.1 Khirbet Ghazaleh Crossing

The crossing was established in 2017 in the Khirbet Ghazala village, north of Daraa, along the road to Damascus. The crossing was selected due to its important strategic location on the Damascus-Amman International Road, which in addition to being a junction linking eastern Daraa with its west, means that Khirbet Ghazala is the most important crossing to the rebel-controlled areas in southern Syria. Work at the crossing officially started on 3 May 2017. Taxes varied depending on the material and the quantity and ranged from SYP 50,000 (\$100 dollars) to SYP 2 million (\$2000) for some goods such as small capacity generators. The crossing revenues are estimated at over \$500,000 per month, but these revenues did not reach the state treasury but were instead shared between Shabiha, security forces and the Assad army who controlled the area.



*Price in 2017*

**Khirbet Ghazaleh location:**



**Da'el**

The city of Dael is located on the Old Daraa-Damascus road, west of Daraa al-Balad. It is considered a passage to reach the western countryside of Daraa and Quneitra Governorate. The city was under the control of the Military Council in Dael, who imposed taxes on goods leaving Daraa, mostly crops. The council stated then that the crossing's revenues had to be distributed between the Local Council in Dael and the Dar Al-Adl Court, which succeeded the Military Council in controlling the checkpoint. The crossing's revenues are about \$30,000 per month, according to the Justice Court.

Da'el location:



### Western Ghariyah

The village of western Ghariyah is located directly south of the city of Khirbet Ghazal, and a crossing was established in it to control the transit and was controlled by the Fatah Al-Sham Front organization, affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The road is vital to both the southern and eastern parts of Daraa because it supplies crops to Damascus and a commercial crossing for the same areas.

Western Ghariyah location:



### 2.d.2 Crossings of particular importance

**Kafr Shams crossing:**

Kafr Shams is a town within the al-Sanamayn area and is considered part of the Horan Plain. A crossing was established in the town, which came under the control of the Horan House of Justice Court, which estimated the crossing’s revenues around \$30,000 a month. The crossing witnesses a significant traffic of goods to and from the area.

**Samma Al Haniyat Checkpoint / Eastern Mleiha:**

The Samma crossing is considered one of the important crossings on As-Suwayda side, and it is located between the eastern town of Al-Maliha in Daraa and Samma Al-Haniyat town in As-Suwayda. The crossing is under the control of the rebels on the Daraa side, while it is under the control of Druze militias on the other side. The actual power in As-Suwayda is somehow for the pro-regime militias, but it makes independent decisions. The crossing is an artery of the opposition areas, as basic, food and building materials enter it, while the vegetables for which Daraa is famous come out. Before opening the Khirbet Ghazaleh crossing, Samma was the only crossing where Damascus allowed the entry of gas, diesel and petrol through.

## 2.d.3 Border crossings with Jordan

### **Nassib crossing**

Nassib Border Crossing or Jaber Border Crossing is one of the two border crossings between Jordan and Syria, located between the Jordanian town of Jaber in Mafraq Governorate and the Syrian town of Nassib in Daraa Governorate. The crossing was under the control of the opposition factions in 2015, and then it was closed completely. However, the Jordanian side established a dirt corridor near the crossing for the passage of relief trucks loaded with flour and food in general or international aid; the crossing witnessed the passage of emergency cases at different times.

The Syrian Army recaptured the crossing during its 2018 military campaign launched on the southern governorates, in cooperation with Russian forces and Iranian militias. After several months, the crossing officially reopened between the two countries.

Nassib Crossing location:





## The Old Daraa Customs Crossing

The Old Daraa Customs Crossing is the other border crossings between Jordan and Syria and the oldest border centre between the two countries, located south of the Daraa and 80 km north of Amman. It is the second most important crossing after Nassib.

The opposition factions took control of the crossing in 2013. However, Jordan announced the closure of the crossing due to the military conflict over the region in Syria and diverted all traffic to the Nassib crossing. The crossing has not been officially open since then and its operations remain limited to the entry of international aid and evacuation of emergency cases.

## Tell Shihab Crossing

Tel Shihab is a town located in the southwest of Daraa on the border with Jordan. The opposition factions took control of it in 2012. In 2014, following consultations with international organisations, the Jordanians allowed the border point to be used as a humanitarian corridor to facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid trucks within specific controls, dates, and conditions. The corridor was completely closed in 2018, after military operations took place in the area.

Tal Shihab location:



## 2.d.4 Witness testimonies from Southern Syria

Mr. Bashar said, “The crossings in southern Syria, in general, were centres for theft of people. I remember an incident that I witnessed at a crossing in the town of Kafr Shams, northwest of Daraa. At a checkpoint between the areas under the control of the Syrian regime and those under the control of the Syrian opposition, there was a woman named Umm Ahmad, coming from Damascus, trying to reach the town of Karak. I was waiting for her in the liberated areas and when she arrived at the checkpoint, she was forced to pay 5000 SYP for transit. The checkpoint could be called a crossing and was under the command of the Military Security and a group of members of the regime’s 9th division.” “She also was forced to return from the same crossing and was warned of passing through another crossing would expose her to arrest, which means that she would have to travel around Daraa to reach the south-western countryside. This procedure was aimed at paying the royalty again to the checkpoint members, who used their strength and weapons to steal from civilians.”

Mr. Abu Khaled said, “I am an Isuzu truck driver. In 2017, I was transporting vegetables from the city of Tafas to Damascus, which means that I have to pass through the Dael crossing that officially imposes customs duties. Members print a receipt of 10000 SYP upon passing the crossing, while I pay 15000 SYP as a royalty for a lieutenant in the Air Force Intelligence in exchange for not seizing the car or being arrested. Noting that the checkpoint is under the command of Air Force Intelligence and the 15th division of the regime.”

Mr. Bishr said, “I was working in a field hospital in Daraa, within the areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army, in December of 2016. The hospital needed an echo-ultrasound machine; after multiple searches and attempts, we had no choice but to buy the machine from Damascus and bring it to the liberated areas.” “It was difficult, as the checkpoints around the area did not allow the passage of medicines and medical equipment. Therefore, we contacted one of the smugglers, who told us that the way could not be direct from Damascus to Daraa; we had to carry it to As-Suwayda and then bring it to Daraa by paying royalties to the checkpoints. The machine was transported to Al-Suwayda then to Daraa through the Samma area checkpoint, controlled by Air Force Intelligence, Military Security, State Security, and members of the army affiliated with the 15th division. We paid

at that time 350.000 SYP since each security agency took 100.000SYP, and the army elements took 50.000SYP.”

Mr. Abu Ayman, a taxi driver operating between Damascus and Daraa, said, “I used to enter the liberated areas through the Khirbet Ghazala crossing, which was under the control of the Military Security. Fees were imposed on every passer-by, mostly women, children and the elderly because young people were arrested directly and were taken to the Military Security branch in the town of Izraa.” “I was transporting passengers through the checkpoint. Upon arrival, I ask the passengers for identification cards and 5000 SYP, to be given to the lieutenant of the Military Security. He was called Abu Haidar and was responsible of security inspections. He used to record the names of those who were crossing and determine the duration of the visit. For example, if the passenger said “I want to stay for two days,” Abu Haidar will look at his schedule and then would say, “You have to stay a week.” He forced people to return during his next shift to get a new royalty during their return with the same value as the first 5000 SYP per passenger. Passers-by were not allowed to bring in devices, luggage, electrical machines, etc. Only some clothes were allowed. Most of these families lived in regime-controlled areas, and their children lived in liberated areas to escape security pursuit or compulsory service in the Syrian regime army.”

### 3. SOURCES

1. Cadres in the Syrian interior.
2. Syrian activists and media professionals
3. The Syrian Interim Government: its ministers and its spokesperson.
4. The local council in Daraa
5. The local council in Al Qunaitra
6. The local council in Damascus countryside
7. The local council in Homs
8. The Syrian Interim Government Office in Jordan
9. Syrian National Coalition
10. Al Jazeera Media Network
11. Sky News Arabia
12. Al Arabiya Net of Al Arabiya News Channel
13. Anadolu Agency
14. Jusoor Centre for Studies
15. Orient TV news
16. Hala news
17. Alrai Newspaper Jordan
18. Enab Baladi
19. Zaman Alwasl
20. eqtihad.net
21. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
22. Baladi News
23. Syria TV
24. Alaraby Al-Jadeed
25. Ayyam Syria Newspaper
26. Shaam News Network
27. Almodon Newspaper
28. Alsouria.net
29. Watan FM
30. 7al.net
31. Smart News
32. Levant Newspaper
33. Welati News
34. Erem News

## Table 1 Chronology of the Syrian conflict.

February 2011

Popular demonstrations are held in Syria to call for political and social reform and to show solidarity with pro-democracy protesters in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Syrian security forces are able to contain the demonstrations, making a number of arrests.

March 6, 2011

Following the arrest of several students by the Syrian police for writing anti-government graffiti, anti-government demonstrations are held in the city of Daraa.

March 19, 2011

Syrian security forces seal off the city of Daraa, in an attempt to prevent protests from spreading. Dozens of protesters are reportedly killed when security forces open fire on demonstrators.

March 30, 2011

In his first speech since protests began, President Assad is defiant, blaming the unrest on foreign conspirators seeking to destabilise Syria. He offers no concrete reforms or concessions.

April 12, 2011

The government begins to use heavy military weaponry against hubs of protest. Soldiers and tanks are deployed to the cities of Baniyas and Homs.

April 28, 2011

Human rights groups and opposition groups estimate that the death toll exceeds 500.

May 9, 2011

The European Union imposes an arms embargo and applies travel restrictions and asset freezes to 13 senior Syrian officials.

May 19, 2011

The United States imposes new sanctions against Syrian officials. The new sanctions, which include asset freezes and travel bans, extend to Assad himself.

May 23, 2011

The EU votes to extend sanctions to include Assad.

June 10, 2011

Syrian tanks and troops move into Jisr al-Shughur. Thousands of residents flee across the border into Turkey.

July 1, 2011

Large demonstrations are held throughout Syria. In Hama, tens of thousands reportedly participate in street protests.

July 3, 2011

Syrian tanks and troops are dispatched to Hama, where security forces raid houses and arrest suspected dissidents.

July 29, 2011

A group of defectors from the Syrian military announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army, an opposition militia. The announcement calls on other members of the Syrian military to defect rather than participate in violence against protesters.

August 3, 2011

The UN Security Council condemns the Syrian government for its use of violence against protesters.

August 8, 2011

In a sign of the Assad regime's increasing diplomatic isolation, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia recall their ambassadors to Syria..

August 18, 2011

U.S. Pres. Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French Pres. Nicholas Sarkozy, and British Prime Minister David Cameron issue statements calling for Assad to step down as president.

August 23, 2011

UN human rights officials estimate that more than 2,200 people have been killed by Syrian security forces since mid-March. The UN Human Rights Council votes to open an investigation into possible crimes against humanity.

September 15, 2011

Following a four-day conference of Syrian opposition activists in Istanbul, 140 people are selected to form the Syrian National Council.

September 27, 2011

In the first large-scale battle between government forces and the armed opposition, Syrian troops clash with army defectors—including members of the Free Syrian Army—in the city of Al-Rastan. After five days of fighting, government forces establish control of the city.

October 2, 2011

The Syrian Nation Council issues a statement calling on the international community to defend protesters in Syria.

October 4, 2011

China and Russia veto a UN Security Council resolution that condemns the Syrian government's crackdowns and indicates that the continuation of violence against protesters could lead to international sanctions..

October 29, 2011

The Arab League denounces the Syrian government's use of violence against protesters.

November 1, 2011

Qatar's foreign minister announces that Syria has accepted an Arab League plan for dialogue between the Syrian government and the opposition. The plan calls for the Syrian government to cease violence against protesters, allow journalists into the country, and release political prisoners.

November 12, 2011

The Arab League votes to suspend Syria. Arab diplomats criticize Syria for failing to implement the Arab League's peace agreement. In Syria, embassies and consulates belonging to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and France are attacked by angry crowds following the vote.

November 16, 2011

The Free Syrian Army attacks several army checkpoints and an air force intelligence base near Damascus. The attacks, the first to target government forces near the capital, are seen by many as an indication of the armed opposition's increasing confidence.

November 27, 2011

The Arab League votes to impose sanctions against Syria, including a ban on senior Syrian officials traveling to other Arab countries, a freeze on assets linked to the



Assad regime, and a ban on commercial flights between Syria and other Arab countries. Turkey announces that it will also adopt the Arab League's sanctions.

December 12, 2011

Syria holds elections for local councils as fighting continues in several cities. The opposition dismisses the vote as irrelevant and calls for a boycott.

December 13, 2011

As fears of a civil war grow, Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reports that more than 5,000 people have been killed since protests began.

December 19, 2011

Syria signs an agreement allowing Arab League monitors to enter the country to observe Syria's implementation of the Arab League peace plan, which the country accepted in November and the first Arab League monitors arrive in Syria.

December 27, 2011

The rest of the Arab League delegation arrives in Syria. Although the observers' first statements about the situation in Syria are positive, reports indicate that violence against protesters in Homs continues while the monitors are in the city.

January 28, 2012

Citing an increase in violence in Syria, Elaraby announces the suspension of the Arab League monitoring mission. The announcement comes after several Arab countries withdrew their members of the monitoring delegation over concerns for their safety.

February 4, 2012

Russia and China veto a UN Security Council resolution that condemns the Assad regime's violent crackdown and calls for a transition to a democratic political

system in Syria. The Syrian army begins an assault on the city of Homs. The attack continues for several weeks.

February 15, 2012

The Syrian government announces that it will speed up its plans to hold a referendum on a new draft constitution, scheduling the referendum for February 26. The draft constitution, praised by Syrian officials for incorporating democratic reforms, is dismissed by the opposition and much of the international community as a ploy meant to draw attention away from violence in the country.

February 16, 2012

The UN General Assembly passes a nonbinding resolution condemning the Syrian government's crackdown and calling on Assad to resign.

February 23, 2012

Kofi Annan, former secretary-general of the UN, is appointed as a joint UN and Arab League peace envoy for Syria..

March 16, 2012

Annan submits a peace plan to the UN Security Council, calling on the Syrian government to stop using violence against the opposition and to accept a cease-fire monitored by the UN.

April 2, 2012

Annan announces that Assad has accepted April 12 as the deadline for the implementation of the cease-fire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from cities as required by the UN peace plan. Over the next several days, media reports indicate escalating violence.

April 14, 2012

Amid reports that Syrian forces have resumed attacks on civilians and opposition fighters, the UN Security Council passes a resolution authorising the deployment of a team of monitors in Syria to observe the cease-fire. The first monitors arrive in Syria the following day.

April 19, 2012

As violence escalates, Ban Ki-moon, the secretary-general of the United Nations, states that Syria has failed to adhere to the terms of the UN peace plan and that both government and opposition forces have been responsible for breaching the cease-fire.

May 7, 2012

The Syrian government holds legislative elections. The elections are dismissed by the opposition as meaningless, given the weakness of the Syrian People's Assembly and the ongoing violence in the country.

June 16, 2012

The UN suspends its monitoring operations in Syria, citing difficulty of guaranteeing the monitors' safety amid ongoing violence.

July 14, 2012

The International Committee of the Red Cross announces that it will classify the conflict in Syria as a civil war. The new designation means that combatants are subject to international humanitarian law and may be prosecuted for war crimes.

August 2, 2012

Unable to broker a resolution to the crisis, Annan resigns from his position as the UN and Arab League peace envoy for Syria. Lakhdar Brahimi, an Algerian diplomat, is appointed as Annan's replacement.

August 16, 2012

The UN formally ends its monitoring mission in Syria.

September 25, 2012

Amid heavy fighting in Aleppo, a fire destroys hundreds of shops in the city's historic covered market, parts of which date back to the 15th and 16th centuries.

January 2, 2013

The UN estimates that 60,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011.

January 30, 2013

Syrian officials accuse Israel of launching air strikes against a Syrian military research facility near Damascus. Israel does not formally acknowledge the attacks, but unofficial reports suggest that Israeli jets bombed a convoy carrying advanced weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

May 19, 2013

The Syrian army launches an offensive against al-Qusayr, a strategically important town held by the rebels in western Syria. Thousands of fighters belonging to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, an ally of the Syrian government, reportedly take part in the battle.

July 25, 2013

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announces that the UN estimates that more than 100,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict.

August 21, 2013

The Syrian opposition accuses pro-Assad forces of having killed hundreds in chemical weapons attacks in the suburbs of Damascus. Amateur video at the scene of the alleged attacks appears to show victims, including many children,

suffering from respiratory distress and convulsions. Other videos show large numbers of dead adults and children with no visible signs of injury. Syrian officials deny having used chemical agents and assert that if such weapons were used, rebel forces are to blame. Officials from the UN, Europe, and the United States demand that UN weapons inspectors be given immediate access to the sites of the alleged attack.

September 9, 2013

Russia proposes a plan to put Syria's chemical weapons stockpile under international control.

September 14, 2013

The United States, Russia, and Syria reach an agreement for a plan to place Syria's chemical weapons stockpile under international control.

September 16, 2013

The UN inspectors' report confirms that rockets carrying the nerve gas sarin were used on a large scale in the attacks on August 21. The report, however, does not specify which side was responsible for the attacks, and it does not give an exact number of victims.

January 22, 2014

An international conference, Geneva II, is held in Switzerland in hopes of arriving at a negotiated end to the conflict. No progress is made, and the sessions are suspended in February.

June 23, 2014

The last of the Syrian government's declared stockpile of chemical weapons are removed from the country under the terms of the U.S.-Russian agreement from September 2013.

June 30, 2014

After making significant territorial gains in Iraq in addition to its territory in Syria, the extremist militant group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) declares itself a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader.

September 23, 2014

The United States and a coalition of Arab countries expand their air campaign against ISIS to strike targets in Syria as well as Iraq.

May 20, 2015

ISIS takes control of Palmyra, an ancient city in eastern Syria with a rich collection of Greco-Roman monuments. ISIS later disseminates photographs and video of its fighters demolishing artifacts and structures.

September 30, 2015

Russia carries out its first air strikes in Syria.

March 2016

Syrian troops, bolstered by Hezbollah fighters and Russian air support, retake Palmyra from ISIL.

September 22, 2016

After a brief cease-fire fails, Russia and Syrian government forces begin heavy bombardment of rebel-held territory in Aleppo.

December 22, 2016

The Syrian government declares victory in Aleppo after the last rebel fighters are evacuated from the city.

April 7, 2017

The United States strikes Shayrat air base, a government-controlled air force base, with dozens of cruise missiles in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack carried out by government forces against rebels in Khan Shaykhun.

June 6, 2017

The Syrian Democratic Forces, a U.S.-aligned predominantly Kurdish force, launch an attack on Al-Raqqah, ISIS de facto capital in Syria. The attack is supported by U.S. air strikes and special forces.

October 17, 2017

The Syrian Democratic Forces announce that Al-Raqqah has been cleared of ISIS fighters.

June–July 2018

Syrian government forces launch an offensive to retake the southwest region from rebel forces. The assault initially focuses on the province of Daraa and later expands into surrounding areas, including the province of Al-Qunaytirah. The region is successfully captured after rebels surrender in exchange for safe passage to the province of Idlib.

October 15, 2018

A buffer zone is implemented in and around Idlib, according to an agreement negotiated between Russia and Turkey a month prior. The agreement is meant to de-escalate a potentially devastating attempt by the government to capture the last rebel-held territory.

April–June 2019

Idlib comes under assault from Syrian government forces backed by Russian air strikes, but rebel forces are able to push the fighting back into the neighbouring province of Hama.

October 9, 2019

Turkey launches an offensive into the Kurdish region of northeastern Syria.

February 28–March 5, 2020

Turkey and Russian-backed Syrian government forces come into direct confrontation after dozens of Turkish soldiers are killed. The confrontation ends after a cease-fire is brokered by Turkey and Syria's ally Russia.



## **Table 2. Main Syrian armed forces involved in the conflict**

### **Islamist and Jihadist armed groups**

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra Front)

The Islamist Front

Al-Jabbah Al-Islamiyya Al Suriyyah

Harkat Ahrar Al-Sham Al-Islamiyya

Jaish Al-Islam

Al-Tauhid Bargaid

Liwa al-Haq

Syrian Islamic Liberation Front

Ajnad Al-Sham Islamic Union

### **Moderate armed groups**

Free Syrian Army

Popular Front

Fatah al-Intifada

Arab Nationalist Guard

Ghubara al-Sham

Jaish Al-Sham

Hazzm Movement

Northern Storm Brigade

Ahrar Souryyiah Brigade

Mavros Krinos

### **Ethnic armed groups**

The Eastern Kurdistan Islamic Front

The Kurdish Islamic Front

The Kurdish Union Party

Syrian Democratic Forces

Kurdish People's Protection Units

The Asaish

Jabhat al-Akrad

Assyrian Armed Groups

The Syrian Union Party

The Syrian Military Council

### **Syrian Government armed Forces**

Syrian Arab Army

Syrian Arab Navy

Syrian Arab Air Force

National Defense Force

Military Intelligence Directorate

Jaish al Sba'bi

Shabiha

### **Foreign Pro-Regime armed groups**

Badr Organisation

The Ba'ath Brigade

The National Army

Kata'ib Hezbollah

Hezbollah

Jaish al-Muwahhideen

The Hauthis

Faylak Wa'ad al Sadiq

Faylak Wa'ad al Sadiq

Asa'ib Ahl al Haq

Liwa Abu al-Fazal al-Abbas

## Annex I – Traffic of narcotic substances within the Syrian context

The manufacture of narcotic drugs of all kinds in all areas controlled by the Syrian regime has become a widespread business which, according to available open sources, has grown into a multibillion-dollar operation. The New York Times recently reported that the global values of drugs seizures in 2020 amounted to 2.9 billion dollars, more than three times the value of Syria's legal exports. In the same article, published in December 2021, the NYT indicated Syria as “the world's newest narcostate”.

Before 2011, Syria was mainly a transit country for narcotics coming from Lebanon and either sold locally or smuggled to neighbouring countries. However, since 2011, in particular after the arrival of the Lebanese Hezbollah militia in Syria, the country has turned from a transit hub to a production country, with an organised network of production facilities run by influential figures in the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. There are tens of narcotic drug factories in several governorates, including a factory in the Al-Bassa area in the countryside of Latakia; factories in Al-Tadamon and Jamraya, under the direct supervision and leadership of the Fourth Division, led by Maher al-Assad, brother of Bashar al-Assad; several small production facilities are also located along the Syrian-Lebanese border.

The Syrian Lebanese border has become a main centre for smugglings, and officials on both sides are involved. They put under their command smugglers who use the roads extending from the Lebanese Bekaa Valley and the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr to the Damascus countryside, or the northern routes to the areas of Tartus and Latakia, where drugs are prepared and added to locally manufactured quantities to smuggle them to different countries.

Seizures of Syrian drugs have multiplied in the last few years: a load of 5 tons of narcotic pills were found in Greece in 2019; two similar shipments were found in Dubai in the same year; 4 tons of hashish were found in Port Said, Egypt, in April 2020, wrapped in products belonging to the Milkman Company, owned by the Syrian businessman, Rami Makhoul. Additional seizures took place in Saudi Arabia, Romania, Jordan, Bahrain and Turkey. To date, the largest shipment of narcotic pills has been recorded in July 2020, when Italian authorities announced

the seizure of 14 tons of captagon pills - a derivative of amphetamines - hidden in huge rolls of paper for industrial use and iron wheels, in the port of Salerno. Local authorities estimated its value in 1 billion euros.

Additionally, the increase in availability of drugs has also determined an unprecedented spread of the use of hashish and captagon pills among Syrians. In Al-Suwayda Governorate drugs and illicit substances are now being openly sold in public, shops and kiosks under the sight and hearing of government agencies, which have become a partner in this trade.

In Al-Suwayda, one kilometre south of Al-Suwayda National Hospital, there is a small narcotic store with a sign depicting the marijuana plant, to indicate that the store sells drugs. Additional similar kiosks are located besides Albaldi playground and Albasil circle.



A picture of one of the kiosks selling hashish in Al-Suwayda, southern Syria.

The Lebanese Hezbollah militia is the primary source of drugs in the city. The militia main operative in the city until last year was Ahmed Ali Jaafar, nicknamed Abu, who had close relations with security and military figures within the Syrian regime. Hezbollah would deliver drugs to a farm owned by Abu Yassin, south of Al-Suwayda, and from there begin distributing them in the city. Brigadier General Wafiq Al-Nasser, Head of the Military Intelligence Branch in Al-Suwayda from

2011 to 2018, is considered a significant partner in the promotion and trafficking of drugs in the region, thanks to his close association with Iranian militias. Since April 2013 his name is listed in the European sanctions list in association with “arbitrary detention and torture of detainees in Suwayda”. Brigadier General Loay Al-Ali, also subject of Canadian, British and European sanctions for human rights violations and crimes against humanity, succeed Al-Nasser as Head of the Military Intelligence Branch in Al-Suwayda and continued to work closely with Iranians and Hezbollah in the trafficking and smuggling of drugs. Drug smugglers from Lebanon or Al-Qusayr obtained security clearance to facilitate their passage into Al-Suwayda and avoid inspections, controls and accountability. Additionally, one of the local Bedouin leaders monopolises the market of hashish in the north of Al-Suwayda, particularly in the Lajat area. He is also very close to Hezbollah and the military security.

Drugs have so much spread in Al-Suwayda that they are accessible for boys in schools, especially because the dealers and pushers have absolute protection from the military security forces and local militias associated with Hezbollah.

Damascus is also witnessing a frightening increase of drugs distribution and locally manufactured drugs, pills and hashish without supervision or deterrence. It is customary to sell them publicly on hot drinks stalls or in cars parked next to parks and public places. Seller asks customer: “Do you want a regular cup of tea or with half a crescent?”, a metaphor for the drug pill bearing two crescent logos. The owner of one of one kiosk in the al-Shaalan area confirmed that he is not subject to raids because his brother is an officer in the intelligence branch. “Selling drinks is not enough, rental of kiosk is more than 500 S.P per month, we can’t work if we don’t sell pills, also we don’t force anyone to buy it,” he said.

Although the Syrian Ministry of Interior carries out periodic raids to arrest drug dealers, they look only for small sellers. They aim to cover up the big dealers and issue periodic statements to show that the Ministry is working hard to eradicate this scourge. Narcotic pills are also spread in Damascus’ schools under several names, such as “yellow apple, half crescent, Galaxy with hazelnut”.

There are several locations considered as centres of drugs distribution within Damascus, including the training centre of the Military Intelligence Division,

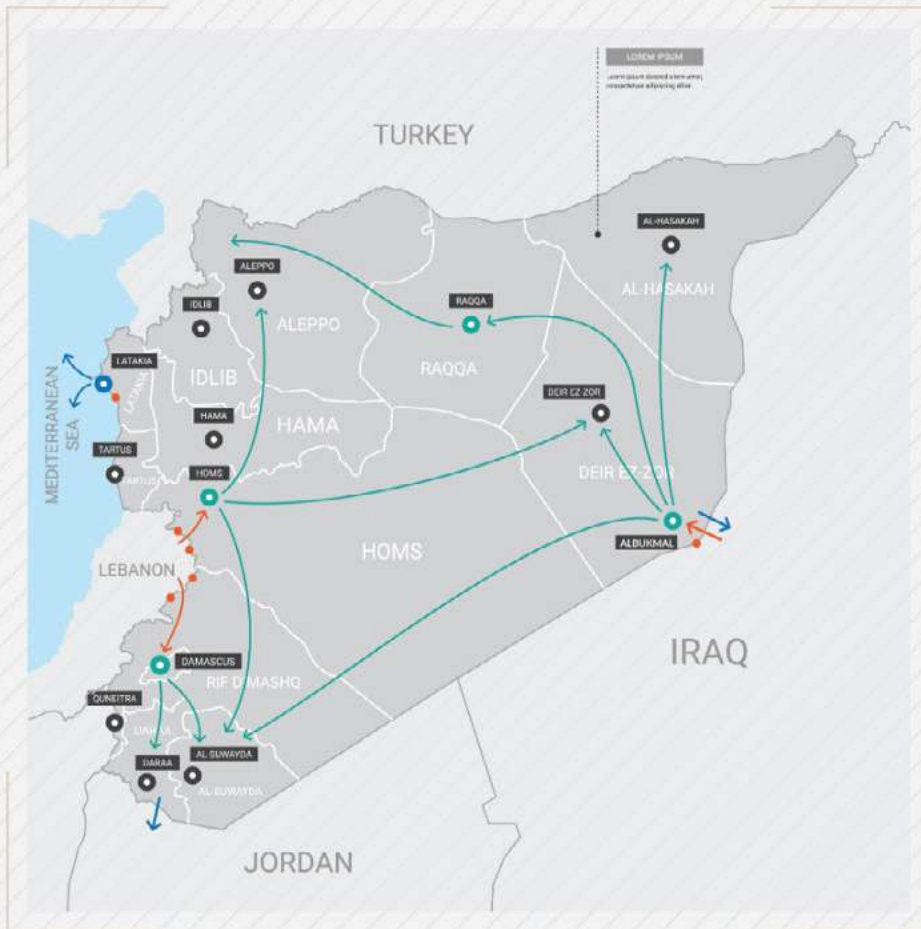
known as the Maysaloun School; the training centre of the General Intelligence Department, known as the Najha School; Sayeda Zainab camp of the Special Forces.

Iranian militias are involved in the distribution of narcotics in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

An alternative road for the traffic of drugs is the Eastern Badia Road, which links Al-Qusayr in the western countryside of Homs to Al-Suwayda and from there to Daraa, where drugs are mostly purchased in the Kharab al-Shahem area, which has become, under the protection of Hezbollah and the Fourth Division officers, an important production facility for narcotic pills. The Fourth Division appointed one of its leaders as head and supervisor on the pills presses to ensure receiving all the revenues.

Smuggling and trafficking to Jordan have increased dramatically, especially after Hezbollah took control of the border crossings. The close cooperation between Syrian officers and Hezbollah leaders facilitates these smuggling operations. Dealers use warehouses, some of them located in the Bali Military Airport, to store narcotic drugs, which are first transferred, sometimes using ambulances, to warehouses in the village of Qusayr, close to the border and then smuggled into Jordan.

Iranian militias and those backed by Russia dominate the drugs market in North-Eastern Syria as well as across the border with Iraq. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards produce, distribute and smuggle drugs to the areas controlled by SDF; The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Militia control the illegal railway crossing, located in the village of Al-Hari on the Syrian-Iraqi border, and monopolise the smuggling of drugs across the border. Finally, the Russian-backed National Defence Militia sells and distributes illicit substances in Deir ez-Zor, its primary area of operations. Local militias also play a major role in transporting drugs to north-eastern Syria along with the Syrian Army officers. While militias are in charge of smuggling prohibited substances across the Euphrates River into the areas controlled by SDF, through a network of smugglers and pushers, the Syrian Army is in control of the smuggling toward Raqqa and the Manbij areas. These operations are conducted utilising military columns directed to the 93rd Brigade headquarter in Ain Aisa city



- import areas
- distribution areas
- export areas



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