

## The Last Bastion of the Syrian Revolt

Southern Syria Offers Non-military Venues to Strengthen the Moderates

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

After almost four years of civil war, most of Syria since has been carved up between the regime, Kurdish militia and Jihadists, with the exception of the south, where civic organizations in areas outside regime control have room to operate and Western and Arab support has helped moderate rebels remain significant players. Yet, their position has become tenuous as the local al-Qaeda affiliate has taken the lead in fighting the Assad regime in the south and as the priority of the United States shifted to curbing hardline Jihadists through airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Saving the south as a model that could halt the disintegration of Syria would require a change in the ambivalent position of outside powers to help Western-backed rebels advance against the regime. Germany and other European countries doubtful of a military approach can still help open the region to more streamlined civilian support and shape a stalled UN ceasefire initiative focused on Aleppo to be tried in the south, where the military balance is less tilted toward Assad and the stakes are higher if breaches occur.

Street demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad's rule first erupted in March 2011 in the city of Deraa, weeks after the arrest of 15 children who scribbled graffiti inspired by pro-democracy slogans in Tunisia and Egypt. The seizure and torture of the children might have become a footnote in the Assad regime's history of violence had it not been for the close-knit society in the Deraa governorate and discontent at the time over abuses by the region's security chief, who was a relative of Assad. Indeed, the south's sense of identity was awakened by the dismissive reaction of the ruling Alawite elite to the popular outrage over the children's arrest.

### Composition of Syria's South

The south is comprised of the three provinces of Deraa, Qunaitira, and Suwaida, which contains the wheat-producing Hauran plain and borders Jordan. Deraa, the largest governorate, is marked by the influence of large families (*ashaer*), its social mobilization in times of need (*faza'a*), as well as high levels of schooling, as compared to the rest of Syria.

Decades of divide-and-rule tactics by the Assad regime altered Syrian society, and a new avenue for upward mobility became holding membership in the ruling Baath Party. Its brand of national socialist dogma and support for peasants found some appeal

in the south, and party membership was more widespread in Deraa compared to other parts of Syria. At the same time, defence continued to be paid to established clans. The society is deeply conservative, but religion has been imbued with a local tradition of moderation dating back to al-Nawawi – a 13th century religious scholar – and other Islamic jurists from Deraa.

Geographically, the Damascus-Amman highway cordons off the province into a flat western sector that includes the city of Deraa, where the Aba Zeed, al-Mahameed, and al-Masalmeh clans are prominent. Other large Deraa families, such as Zu'bi and al-Rusheidat, are split up between Deraa and Jordan. East of the highway lie the ancient town of Busra al-Sham, which has a Shiite minority, and Busra al-Harir, home to the Hariri family, Hauran's biggest clan. Bedouins from the Shummar tribe, which has a large presence in Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, inhabit a rough rocky terrain known as al-Lajah.

The region extends to the outskirts of Damascus and it has served traditionally as a haven for smugglers and illicit activities. Ties between the south and the Arab Gulf states have been enhanced by thousands of engineers, teachers, doctors, and other professionals from Deraa who fled to Saudi Arabia during the rule of Assad's father, the late Hafez al-Assad, in the 1980s to escape a bloody persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, poor neighborhoods that ring Damascus from the south, such as Hajar al-Aswad and Qadam, are largely inhabited by people from Deraa and its Golan Heights hinterland. Administratively, the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights are part of the governorate of Qunaitira, west of Deraa. The two provinces are linked economically, with Qunaitira, which is mainly pastureland, providing cattle and dairy products for Deraa and the rest of Hauran.

After the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in the 1967 war, Golan Heights refugees and their descendants poured into Damascus and sank into poverty and destitution. Many blamed Hafez al-Assad, who

was defense minister at the time, for losing their land. When the revolt broke out in 2011, one of the first street slogans in Deraa mocked Bashar's brother Maher, who heads the elite Fourth Armored Division, daring him to send his troops to liberate the Golan. Indeed, the division's forerunner, the so-called Defense Brigades, had overrun the city of Hama in 1982. The division has remained geared toward internal repression, although it is the army's best-equipped and -trained unit.

### **Pressure Boils Over**

Confident in the security apparatus, Bashar al-Assad publicly belittled any need for democratic reforms and showed little interest in defusing brewing unrest in Deraa. His cousin Atef Najib, head of Military Intelligence in Deraa and de facto viceroy of the city, refused to release the 15 arrested children at a meeting with Deraa notables in March 2011. In the following weeks and months, hundreds of demonstrators were killed in the south before the revolt began militarizing in the second half of 2011. By 2013, the rise of jihadist brigades would undermine the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the nucleus of the armed effort against the Assad regime.

Mass discontent had been gathering momentum for years against Najib, whose grip on Deraa was marked by extortion that reached into people's daily lives and restrained a new class of Sunni entrepreneurs that had emerged as a consequence of economic liberalization but hit a wall of bureaucracy and corruption. In the agriculture sector, security bans on the sale of fertilizers became lucrative business for mostly Alawite intelligence operatives, who allowed farmers to buy fertilizers in return for bribes. Restrictions were also placed on property transactions in the south under the pretext of it being a border region. The regulations translated into income for Najib and his cohorts.

Regionally, the Assad regime had become more closely associated with Shiite

Iran and encouraged proselytization drives financed by Iran to convert rural Sunni Syrians to Shiism. Several Shiite places of worship, known as *hussainiyat*, were built in the south. In contrast to poorer eastern regions of Syria near Iraq, the campaign did not gain traction, but “Shiitization” contributed to rising resentment against Assad and the secret police in Deraa.

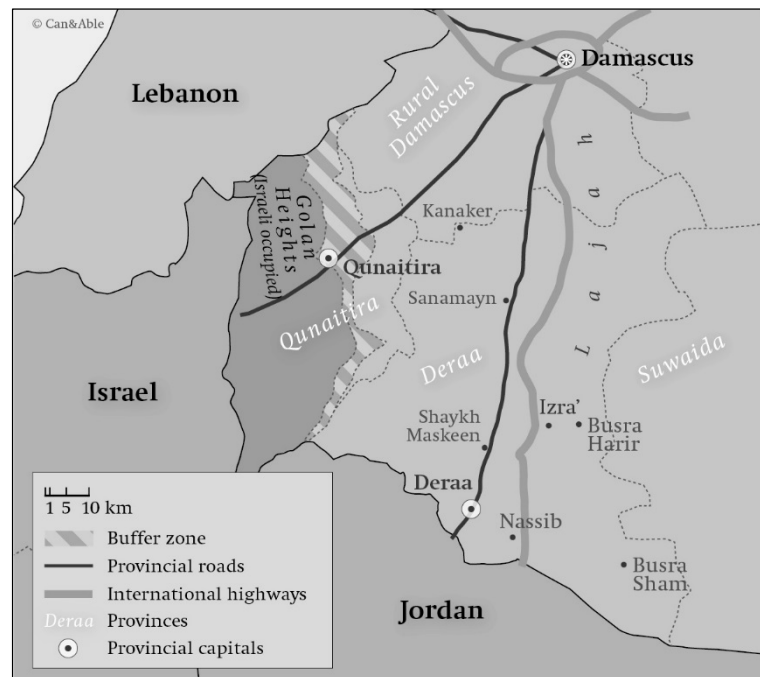
### Military Balance

Before the uprising, up to one-third of the Syrian army, around 90,000 troops, was deployed in Hauran, which was regarded as the primary defensive line against Israel. After the revolt militarized, dozens of bases belonging to Assad’s army and intelligence dotting the hills of Qunaitira and Deraa slowly but steadily fell in attacks, mostly spearheaded by the al-Nusra Front – the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria – with the participation of FSA brigades grouped under the Deraa Military Council umbrella and backed by a US-led Military Operations Center (MOC) in Jordan.

The presence of the Nusra Front in Qunaitira was strengthened by several hundred fighters who fled to the area after they were routed from the eastern province of Deir al-Zor in June 2014 by the so-called Islamic State – the other al-Qaeda offshoot that had declared a caliphate. The Nusra Front has intensified its attacks in Qunaitira since then, capturing several positions facing Israeli troops in the Golan across a UN-patrolled armistice line, including old Qunaitira – which had been almost completely flattened by Israeli troops before they withdrew from what then became the buffer zone in 1974 – and a nearby crossing on the armistice line. Al-Harra, one of the positions that fell, apparently served as an eavesdropping base under Russian command. The presence of UN peacekeepers in the buffer zone eventually became untenable. Most of the mission was forced to withdraw to Israeli-controlled territory in 2014.

But the Assad regime still maintains large military and security bases in the Qunaitira

**Map:**  
**Southern Syria**



and Deraa provinces, boosted by guerrillas from the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, who deployed in areas facing Israeli troops on the Golan and in Busra al-Harir. Several armored divisions and regime intelligence units are headquartered in the towns of Izra’ and Sanamayn on the Damascus–Amman highway and in the province of Suwaida, whose Druze population has remained largely on the sidelines of the current conflict. The regime also holds the Nassib border crossing east of Deraa, and container trucks – mainly carrying produce from Lebanon and Syria to Jordan and the Gulf – still pass Nassib via a Suwaida detour. In the city of Deraa, the FSA and jihadist brigades hold most of the old city as well as a secondary border crossing with Jordan that has been closed. The regime is concentrated in the eastern sector of Deraa, from where Assad’s forces fire artillery across the city and on nearby rebel villages and towns.

A 2012 regime campaign of aerial and artillery bombardment against residential neighborhoods across the Hauran drove tens of thousands of families to Jordan at the same time as a refugee influx from Homs

in central Syria was underway. Complaining of the costs of hosting the incomers and citing security risks, Jordan had quietly closed its borders in front of the refugees by October 2014 after having received at least 620,000 people, many of whom have relatives among northern Jordanian families. A snowstorm in early 2015 resulted in a respite from regime barrel-bombings in the Hauran, but by mid-January the bombardment had resumed.

The rebels in Deraa and the rest of southern Syria continue to project a sense of moderation and a consensual streak. Major confrontations within the armed opposition and splits into alternative administrative structures in rebel areas that have damaged the opposition elsewhere have been avoided. An opposition Deraa Provincial Council, composed entirely of cadres still living in Hauran, was elected at the end of 2014. Among local civic organizations, the Civic Defense Council has managed to plug a gap in municipal services. The group, which is run by two doctors, is close to the National Co-ordination Body for Democratic Change, one of the last opposition groups with members present in the country. The Supervision and Follow-up Council, which is financed by Abdelbasset Abdelsamad, a Syrian expatriate in Kuwait from the southern town of al-Geza, has also been effective. It has engaged in activities such as building a hospital and organizing school exams by taking a neutral position toward the different armed brigades. But dithering by the outside backers of the opposition – with regard to how far to push militarily from the Hauran against Assad’s seat of power in Damascus for fear of a jihadist takeover – has actually helped strengthen the Nusra Front in southern Syria.

### **Nusra’s Restraint**

The emergence of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State in 2013 as the most formidable groups among the plethora of anti-Assad forces across Syria provided outside powers justification for hardly extending

themselves beyond making verbal calls for Assad to leave power. Countering indiscriminate killings of civilians became secondary to the risk of jihadists replacing the regime if Assad fell. In a twisted logic, most key members of the MOC – the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, France, and Britain – began seeing their priority as containing the jihadists rather than supporting military action that could undermine Assad, despite blaming the Assad regime’s mass killing of civilians for stoking jihadism in the country.

In the south, the Nusra Front was weak until the Deraa Military Council started to stutter. Support from the MOC became ad hoc, to the point that rebels would receive just enough weapons to hit minor regime targets but not enough to mount large-scale attacks. For example, this forced Ahmad Fahd Ni’mah, head of the Deraa Military Council, to order rebel withdrawal from the contested town of Khirbet Ghazaleh in May 2013. The town lies at a strategic road juncture and Jordan did not want a rebel takeover to disrupt cross-border container-truck movement. As a pragmatic ex-Syrian Air Force colonel, Ni’mah realized that the opposition could not afford to antagonize Jordan. But the withdrawal from Khirbet Ghazaleh ended up dealing a blow to the morale and reputation of the FSA in the south. A year later, the Nusra Front abducted Ni’mah, and he has not been heard from since. His disappearance – and likely death – ushered in the demise of the Deraa Military Council and left FSA brigades little choice but to cooperate with the Nusra Front in attacking a series of regime fortifications to preserve their credibility.

In September 2013, the hardline jihadists received a boost to their efforts to demonstrate what they regard to be the futility of the FSA and cooperation with the West. This boost came when the United States called off airstrikes against Assad’s forces, which were planned in response to a chemical weapons attack on rebel positions in the suburbs of Damascus, in return for a Russian-brokered deal for Assad to turn in

his chemical weapons and join the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Yet, this did not make other Islamist brigades more palatable to the Nusra Front. In November 2014, the group assassinated a commander of another Islamist rebel group in Qunaitira on suspicion of belonging to the Islamic State. Kassab Masalmeh was the spiritual leader of the Free Yarmouk Martyrs Brigades, named after the Jordan River tributary that separates Syria from Jordan. Between March and May 2013, the Yarmouk Martyrs had briefly abducted 25 UN peacekeepers from the Syrian side of the Golan frontier before releasing them in a move that gained them publicity – this was more than a year before the Nusra Front engaged in a similar abduction. The killing of Masalmeh weakened the Yarmouk Martyrs, and there was a threat that the group would become another casualty of the rise of the Nusra Front and share a fate similar to that of the Syria Revolutionaries Front, a Saudi-backed FSA brigade that collapsed during a lightning offensive by the Nusra Front in the northern province of Idlib in 2014.

Signaling different dynamics in the south, FSA units mobilized to rescue the Yarmouk Martyrs and deployed in their stronghold of Sahm al-Golan, 10 kilometers north of the Yarmouk River. The Nusra Front backed off, but the killing of Masalmeh could make it easier for the Yarmouk Martyrs to smooth their relationship with Jordan, a relationship that had soured over its refusal to meet Jordanian requests to abandon Masalmeh. Indeed, the group appears to have received some funding and logistical support from the MOC prior to the dispute over Masalmeh.

The survival of the Yarmouk Martyrs group illustrates the limits to Nusra Front's reach as well as the relative capability of FSA units to regroup after the demise of the Deraa Military Council. Unlike in the north, the Nusra Front lacks superiority in numbers against other rebels. Moreover, although it occasionally sends shots across the bow of moderate rebels, in the form of assassinations and kidnappings, the group does not

appear to have managed to establish a popular base, such as in central and northern Syria. A complete jihadist takeover of the south therefore appears unlikely.

But on the battlefield against the regime, the Nusra Front reigns supreme, due to its willingness to employ suicide bombers and the expertise of its fighters. Also, an apparent understanding among the Nusra Front's mostly Jordanian leadership in the south – namely that it would gain little from hitting Israel or Jordan – has helped shield it from US airstrikes that have been targeting the group, as well as the Islamic State, in the north and east of the country.

### **Israel Loses Golan Stability**

Assad's forces east of the buffer zone had kept the frontier quiet since 1974. This has changed since the start of armed confrontations in Syria. In June 2011, a pro-Assad Palestinian faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC), sent hundreds of Palestinians in Syria to demonstrate at the Golan border, where several were killed by Israeli forces. The mobilization was a message to Israel that Assad could destabilize the region, but it backfired and helped turn Palestinian refugees in Syrian camps against the regime and its Palestinian proxies.

The situation has escalated since Hezbollah deployed with Iranian support on the Syrian side of the Golan frontier. Strikes by Israel on Hezbollah targets and retaliation by Hezbollah threatened open warfare between the two sides by January 2015. Hezbollah has claimed that its presence on the Syrian side of the Golan is needed to prevent the Nusra Front from penetrating nearby Hezbollah strongholds in south Lebanon and has accused Israel of backing the jihadist group. Although Israel might have lines of communication with jihadists in southern Syria, outright support for the Nusra Front is unlikely. Still, the presence of the Nusra Front in Qunaitira appears more preferable to Israel than the possibility of seeing the Islamic State, which has

established a foothold in southern Damascus and in Lajah in eastern Deraa, on its borders. The mid-2014 ouster of Nusra Front fighters from Deir al-Zor and their redeployment in Qunaitira have resulted in the Nusra Front becoming a bulwark of sorts against the Islamic State in southern Syria.

Amid the chaos, Israel also prefers that Assad not fall and that Syrian regime troops remain on the opposite side of the Golan front, instead of having to face Hezbollah there. In September 2014, Syrian dissident Kamal al-Labwani, a former political prisoner who was at the forefront of the opposition to Assad before the revolt, visited Israel. His visit might encourage others in the opposition to follow, but Israel was uncomfortable with Labwani's remarks that the Syrian opposition should make peace with Israel in return for Israeli help in overthrowing Assad. Israel's experience in Lebanon has made Israeli policy-makers wary of unreliable proxies. Therefore, the extent of Israeli involvement in the conflict has remained limited to occasional air strikes, reconnaissance, and helping wounded Syrian fighters and civilians.

### **Moderates Regroup**

Since the Nusra Front abducted Ni'mah, two moderate southern commanders have emerged, each regrouping FSA brigades in largely separate operating theaters and under the MOC umbrella. In December 2014 Bashar al-Zu'bi, a commander who comes from a civilian background, formed the Southern Hawks Alliance, comprised mainly of his own Yarmouk Army, itself an amalgamation of Liwa al-Bara and Liwa Aisha. Weeks after, Colonel Saber Safar became head of what is called the First Army, a merger mainly between his al-Hamza Brigade in northwest Deraa and the al-Omari battalion of Lajah Bedouins to the east. The Omari battalion fought several battles at the end of 2014 with Islamic State fighters who had penetrated Lajah. Previously, the battalion was a division of the Syria Revolutionaries Front, which was chased out of

northern Syria by the Nusra Front. When brigades were formed to protect their hometowns during the early days of the uprising, southern FSA units were mostly formed according to local roots rather than religious ideology.

In Kanaker, 30 kilometers southwest of Damascus, the local FSA brigade struck a deal with regime forces surrounding the town, which resulted in a tacit ceasefire in 2014. Under the deal, the regime has refrained from shelling the town while the rebels do not target the garrison next to it. In Deraa also, both sides have largely refrained from targeting the infrastructure, as Deraa provides water for areas under the control of the regime in Suwaida, and Suwaida sends electricity to Deraa.

Mergers between different FSA-allied groups could lead to a more effective command-and-control structure, helping to ease US concerns about sophisticated weapons going to extremists. But the Western-backed brigades will continue to play catch-up to jihadists unless they can show that they have regained the initiative militarily against the regime. In this, the Nusra Front is not their only hardline rival. In 2013, the Muthanna Battalion, a small Salafist movement, emerged as a strong player in the city of Deraa. The group attracted members away from the FSA largely due to its reputation for discipline and paying salaries on time. It has coordinated with the al-Mu'tasim Billah Brigade, an FSA unit set up by a cleric from the al-Masri clan.

### **Outside Backers Overreach**

The success of the Nusra Front in spearheading attacks on regime forces in the south and the ease with which Ni'mah was captured cast doubt on the effectiveness of the support for southern rebels. Indeed, the support appears to have dried up in 2014 against the backdrop of the change in US priorities described above. Nonetheless, a major regime base in the town of Shaykh Maskeen, north of Deraa, fell in January 2015 to an offensive by jihadist units, in-

cluding the Nusra Front, and the FSA. The town had served as the headquarters of the 82nd Air Defense Battalion. But the rebel advance appears not to have been the result of a strategic plan but rather a reaction to a regime attack on opposition positions surrounding Shaykh Maskeen.

In general, the treatment of southern rebels by their backers as mere proxies with disregard for their cause has created frustration. In 2014, the MOC asked Ibrahim Habbous, a southern commander with a reputation for competence, to attack Islamic State fighters who fled to Hajar al-Aswad after being expelled from the eastern Damascus suburbs of al-Ghouta by Salafist fighters loyal to Zahran Alloush, the Salafist head of the Saudi-backed Army of Islam. Habbous did not consider turning his guns against the Islamic State to be a priority and declined the MOC request. Had he agreed, he would have found it difficult to convince his own men to forego fighting the regime. Consequently, Arab and Western support was cut off from Habbous, and his Tahrir al-Sham brigade was diminished. Still a respected figure among moderate rebels, Habbous maintains lines of communication with Jordan.

### Jordan's Priorities

Under pressure from its allies, Jordan, along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has hosted US training for several thousand fighters since 2012. The kingdom has also taken part in the US-led bombing campaign against jihadist targets in Syria and Iraq. Yet, Jordanian interests in the Syrian conflict have been focused – almost from the beginning of the revolt – on maintaining internal security and commercial transport links with Syria. Jordan has not been keen on democratic transformation to its north, nor would it have liked to see Islamists empowered in Syria, thereby emboldening the kingdom's own Muslim Brotherhood. Video footage showing the burning of a Jordanian pilot by the Islamic State, which was broadcast by the group in early Feb-

ruary 2015, has enforced official views that Assad is not the most immediate threat. Thus, the authorities have refrained from public criticism of Assad, like that expressed, for example, by Saudi Arabia, which has been Jordan's main financial backer in times of need. The kingdom has also opposed the Qatari and Turkish approaches to Syria, seeing them as encouraging jihadism, and has prevented southern opposition figures – perceived as being linked with Qatar – from operating through Jordan.

Jordanian recruits, who swelled Nusra Front ranks, and a lack of US appetite for military action to oust Assad, alarmed the kingdom further. The country's intelligence branch, the *mukhabarat*, became heavily involved in the Syria file. Dozens of Syrian activists and their families, almost all from Deraa, were expelled to Syria in the last few weeks of 2014 after having communicated with their home regions or having transferred money back there.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Jordanian officials largely see the conflict in Syria as becoming a choice between al-Qaeda and the Assad regime, in which they prefer the latter. The resilience of the moderate rebels and civic organizations in the south contradicts this view, which has nevertheless been gaining traction internationally. Meanwhile, the UN Special Envoy has pursued a "local ceasefires" or "local freezes" plan that the Syrian opposition fears will result in surrendering contested cities and towns to the regime and burying the 2012 Geneva plan for a political transition.

#### **Build up an international aid mechanism:**

In the absence of agreement to impose much-talked-about no-fly zones to protect civilians, Germany should help build an international aid mechanism to develop the civilian institutions operating in the south. These administrative bodies have been undermined by the lack of a unified structure within the Syrian opposition and among the international community to channel aid. A non-lethal equivalent of the

MOC would help prevent duplication and facilitate access by local organizations to outside support.

**Facilitate the Syrian interim government's work in the south diplomatically:**

On the opposition side, Germany and other European countries have pledged to work with the Istanbul-based National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces and its provisional government. But links of the latter with the south are weak, partly due to Jordan's caution about dealing with opposition figures it regards as being supported by Qatar and Turkey, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Germany has been lending technical assistance to the provisional government to accelerate the awarding of projects and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Helping extend the reach of opposition technical cadres in exile to the south would require diplomatic work in order to heal rifts between Jordan, Qatar, and Turkey over Syria and to lift Jordan's objections about certain opposition figures.

**Implement lessons learned with regard to local ceasefires:** Germany has been highly supportive of the UN initiative focused on trying to reach local ceasefires. But the south, as the Kanaker experience shows, might be better grounds to pursue a deal than Aleppo, where efforts are currently centered. Local ceasefires were struck in 2013–2014 in besieged neighborhoods on the outskirts of Damascus, where the rebels were militarily weak, leaving the regime with little incentive to honor terms of the deals, such as allowing the delivery of regular food supplies. Ceasefires can work when there is a balance of power, and interests. With its relative stability and a more limited reach of al-Qaeda, the south could become a model in providing an alternative administration to the regime and a testing ground for functional ceasefires.

**Curb the reach of the regime's air force:** Eventually, however, Western and Arab governments comprising the MOC will need to equip southern rebels with weapons to curb the reach of Assad's air force. Syrian planes

often bomb targets right at the Syria-Jordan border, also raising the need for contingency plans to react to possible Syrian regime retaliation against Jordan if rebels down jets in the border zone. Curbing Assad's air force would boost the popularity of the FSA and help lessen the indiscriminate killing of civilians, and thus work against the radicalization of the local population.

**Address the long-term challenge of refugee-hood in Jordan:** Steps also have to be taken to improve the lot of Syrian refugees in Jordan, where cuts in UN food aid in 2014 have driven back many refugees into gloomy refugee camps in the desert and raised tensions between the refugees and the indigenous population. The kingdom has complained that it is not being compensated for the strain on its schools and infrastructure. But with doubts over whether the kingdom is committed to using aid money specifically to help deal with the refugees, reaching an agreement with Western governments on how to assist the kingdom has been difficult. Germany, which has a large water-assistance program in Jordan and regular access to Jordanian officials, could help in this regard. At the same time, it should help the kingdom to develop a strategy that conforms with international human rights norms to address what will likely be a long-term refugee presence. So far, Jordan has not taken steps that would encourage the refugees to stay in the country, such as opportunities for legal access to the labor market – a step Turkey took at the end of 2014.

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