

The Border of the EU Starts at Syria's M4

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Rena Netjes is an Arabist and independent researcher. She focuses mainly on northern Syria, SDF-held northeast Syria and opposition-held northwest Syria. She has been to the different parts of northern Syria six times in recent years for field research.



Brief Analysis

Driven by forced conscription, economic deterioration, and lack of opportunities, Syrians are increasingly crossing the M4 in northern Syria on their journey to Europe.

Weekly, several thousand Syrians, mainly young, arrive in the area of Ras al-Ain in the northeast from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and regime-held areas. Most of them are on their way to Europe—Germany and the Netherlands in particular. Their first step is to cross the M4, the road that separates the U.S.-backed SDF-area to the south and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)-controlled areas in the north, with Russian bases scattered along the road as well.

Last autumn, several Kurdish contacts in northeast Syria noted that many of their friends and acquaintances had lost hope and were leaving. One of them, Fatme, from Amuda—located on the border with Turkey—told me in November “My cousin’s son (16) arrived in Germany yesterday. He went first to Ras al-Ain, then to Turkey, Bulgaria, and then to Romania, and he arrived in Germany” she says. She also reported that another cousin’s fourteen year old daughter had arrived in Germany two weeks ago. All told, ten of her relatives had left over the last two weeks, with other relatives arriving in Bulgaria. “People take their children and send them. If the situation in Syria stays like this, it will be a disaster. There is an economic siege on our area in northeast Syria, everything has become so expensive. Today, the dollar reached to 5,550 SYP.”

She estimated that about two hundred residents had left Amuda recently. “Those who left to Ras al-Ain, from Amuda and Qamishli and other north-eastern Syrian towns, arrive in Ras al-Ain via smugglers that have connections with smugglers who are in Ras al-Ain. They give them money, and they let them in and then they smuggle them to Turkey. All the armed groups... work on getting people into Turkey.”

This February—several months after my conversation with Fatme—I arrived close to the M4, where the local officials of Ras al-Ain described a steady stream of those hoping to eventually arrive in Europe. “We stopped seventy last night, the numbers vary,” the deputy police chief in Ras al-Ain tells me. “We stop them, and investigate them to see if

they have something bad in mind... ISIS or PKK.”

With permission from the local police, I and several local colleagues interviewed several new arrivals in Ras al-Ain. Many of the new arrivals—including the more than 60 that I spoke to, are from eastern Deir al-Zour. While the reasons that propelled them varied, many young men and minors explained that they were first and foremost fleeing forced conscription. The Autonomous Administration initially passed a conscription law in 2014 during the height of the SDF forces’ fight against ISIS, **currently (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3879>)** requiring men 18-30 to complete a year or service in self-defense units, some of whom have seen combat. However, as conscription efforts have continued, Arab and Kurdish residents from the Autonomous Administration, in particular, expressed that they felt targeted by these conscription efforts.

One Arab woman in her twenties had arrived alone with twin toddlers the day before from Hasaka city. She explained her reason for leaving: “There is forced conscription, that is the first point, forced conscription for girls... we can’t just stay in our homes shut in, close all our doors fearing forced conscription. We want to live.” We likewise interviewed nine newly-arrived young men. Five were from eastern Deir al-Zour, two from Raqqa, one from Hasaka, and one from the countryside of Damascus. Five of them were minors, ranging from 14 to 16 years old, and the other four were 18 to 23 years old. These young men in Ras al-Ain have no money to continue to Turkey or Europe, having paid about \$100-\$200 to make it there.

However, the situation is different in Mabrouka, a small village west of Ras al-Ain, about 13 kilometers from the M4. We had heard that the arrivals in Mabrouka are even more frequent. “Since the beginning of the year, the campaign of forced conscription has intensified,” a Kurdish young man from Amuda in Hasaka told us in Mabrouka, which is also in al-Hasaka province, but is held by the SNA. The house owner had invited some local representatives for a *mansaf* dinner with us. In the middle of the night after dinner, the earth trembles, and we run outside—our experience of the devastating earthquake.

A few hours later, we met Mohamed al-Abed, the head of the civil police in Mabrouka. When arriving at the police office, we see about 100 people standing there—while normally kept inside, they have left the building out of fear due to the earthquake. Others stopped during the night, including a 12-year-old Kurdish girl who, according to locals, had already been released. Al-Abed explained that while the local council charges them a fee of 300 Turkish lira to discourage new attempts, they are driven by a “raging hunger.” Al-Abed explained, “When asked, most of them say they want to go to the Netherlands, Germany, or Austria. Those three countries. We stopped 1,000 in one day, sometimes even 2,000. And on other days fewer. It fluctuates... They complain about forced conscription in SDF-controlled (and regime-controlled) areas. [They also leave because] there is no food, no water, no electricity.”

After some insisting and negotiations from our side, we were allowed to speak to several of those outside, although not on camera. First, we talked to three young women from Deir al-Zour, two of them who wear the niqab. They explained why they left Deir al-Zour: “The first reason is fear of kidnappings. The second is forced conscription into SDF ranks by armed gangs.” They explained that it took fifteen days to arrive and \$1,500. “There are hills and the road wasn’t easy. We came via Tal Tamer.” When asked if they want to continue to Europe, they reply: “Yes, we want to continue.” They hope to reach the Netherlands, and expect to pay \$9000 each to do so.

A 20-year-old man from the Baggara tribe al-Hisan in Deir al-Zour also said it took fifteen days to arrive via Tal Tamer. He has already paid \$2,000 and expects to pay a total of \$9,000 to reach Germany. He left “to be relaxed, without fearing forced conscription, and to find work, to be able to bring over my family.” He came with another young man from the same town and with the same story. “Over there is work.”

We went on asking other young men in Mabrouka on the terrain of the civilian police. The police were investigating and documenting them, and they were charged a fee of 300 Turkish lira from the local council for crossing into the

territory. “We increased the fee from 200 to 300 to discourage people from going to Turkey and Europe,” Huseyn al-Raad, a member of the local council in Ras al-Ain says. The efforts have not, however, appeared to be very successful.

The stories of the many young men here are similar. Many flee from SDF areas and others from regime areas—although the majority was from SDF areas—fearing forced conscription or other criminal activities, and a lack of work and lack of services like water and electricity. The amount charged by smugglers varies—several men told us also that they had paid a part of the route, such as \$ 4,000, and they would pay the rest once they arrived in Germany or the Netherlands, indebting themselves to reach Europe.

A Kurdish man (38) told us he left his town Amuda because of the curriculum at the schools, as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) teaches a curriculum according to the ideology of Abdallah Öcalan, which he and many other Kurds in Hasaka reject. “I have two children, I [left] for them.” He hopes to reach Germany or Luxembourg and expects to pay \$16,000. “I paid a part and when I arrive, my sisters [in Germany] will pay the rest.”

We met with another Kurdish man (47) and his 15-year-old son from Hasaka City. “I am a Barzani, I don’t agree with the PYD project for the area and I am afraid they will take my children for military conscription. I have this son with me, but I have another son (16) and two daughters (19 and 20) at home with my wife in Hasaka City. They stay at home in fear of being kidnapped, because the center of the *Ciwanen Shorashgar*, the “Revolutionary Youth.” is only 500 meters from our home. *Ciwanen Shorashgar* are young men from the lowest class in society, to do the kidnappings of minors, burning offices of opponents (the Kurdish National Council), etcetera. They are affiliated with the PYD.” *Do you have an idea how many members they have in Hasaka City?* “In the whole city, about 1,500 members.” Most people tell us the road from Amuda and Hasaka city is partly taken on foot, partly by cars or motorcycles, and takes about three to four days.

We meet another Kurdish young man (29) from Amuda, a hairdresser. “Recently, they have arrested many more for forced conscription. People are hiding in their homes, fearing to be forcibly conscripted. There is no education or possibility to study.” *Can you pay a bribe to get acquitted of the conscription?* “No, that isn’t possible. I sold the harvest machine to go to Europe.” *Where do you want to go?* “Germany, I have a brother there.” *How many people are leaving Amuda?* “Half of my friends have already left, every month about 50 people leave.”

We also see a family from Damascus. A child was wearing plastic around his feet, as he lost his shoes along the way. Living conditions in Damascus are so bad that the couple decided to flee via Deir al-Zour to Mabrouka—and on to Turkey and Europe.

In my country, the Netherlands, “the increase in the number of asylum applications in the past three months is mainly attributable to Syrians,” Dutch migration expert Leo Lucassen tweeted in September. The new asylum legislation has led to a crisis in the largest political party, the Liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), and Prime Minister Mark Rutte had to fly back from the Climate Summit in Sharm al-Sheikh last November. But until the conditions pushing those who are fleeing are addressed, refugees will continue to seek asylum in Europe. While the United States allocates money to the SDF, the conscription policies of the area—on top of still critical economic struggles and U.S. restrictions on funding into Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad—are helping to drive these immigration patterns. Until these dynamics are addressed, the flow of Syrian migrants is likely to continue through the M4 highway and into Europe. ❖

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