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Jaime Cachua, in Rome, Ga., with Sky Atkins, left, his father-in-law and a Trump voter like many of those close to Jaime. Jaime fears he will be deported.

PAST HOLDS CLUES  
TO RULING STYLE  
OF SYRIAN REBELS

PRAGMATIC BUT STRICT

In Province It Controlled,  
Taxes, Stability and  
Jailed Critics

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR  
and JUSTIN SCHECK

Every fall, when farmers across the rolling, red dirt hills of Idlib Province in northern Syria harvest their olive crops, they routinely find at least one representative of the local tax authority stationed at any oil press.

The tax collector takes at least 5 percent of the oil, and farmers grouse that there are no exceptions, even in lean harvest years.

The collectors work for the civilian government established under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the rebel movement that just spearheaded the swift overthrow of the 54-year Assad dynasty. The Islamist group has administered much of opposition-held Idlib Province since 2017.

Measures like the olive oil tax, introduced in 2019, have prompted protests and even occasional armed clashes and arrests.

Yet the Syrian Salvation Government, as the Idlib administration was known, persisted. It taxed goods entering its territory and generated revenue by selling fuel and running a telecom company. It also controlled the local economy through licensing regulation programs that looked a lot like a conventional government's and proved that it was fairly adept at managing those finances to build up its military operations and provide civil services.

The portrait of the rebel group detailed in this article was gleaned from interviews with experts, representatives of humanitarian or other organizations working in the territory under its control, local residents and reports by the United Nations or think tanks.

Since 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has controlled the province. Continued on Page A6

An Immigrant Felt He Belonged in the U.S., Until Now

By ELI SASLOW

ROME, Ga. — His wife was spiraling into insomnia, and his children were afraid to go to school, so Jaime Cachua sought out the person he trusted most in a crisis. He sat at his kitchen table in rural Georgia across from his father-in-law, Sky Atkins, the family patriarch. Jaime, 33, hadn't seen his father since he was 10 months old, when he left Mexico in a car seat bound for the United States. It was Sky, 45, who had stood by Jaime at his wedding, helped him move into his first house and stayed at the hospital overnight when one of Jaime's children was sick with pneumonia.

"We have to prepare for the worst-case scenario," Jaime told him. "There's a chance we could lose everything." "Isn't that a bit dramatic?" Sky asked. "How? Help me understand."

Jaime muted the football game on TV and began to explain his new reality as an undocumented immigrant after the election of Donald J. Trump, who had won the presidency in part by promising to deport more than 11 million people living in the country illegally. Trump's aides were discussing plans to build detention camps and enlist the military to carry out mass deportations beginning on Day 1. Their local Georgia congresswoman, Marjorie Taylor Greene, was

saying she couldn't "wait to see it happen." Jaime's best chance to become a legal U.S. resident was a new program for immigrants like himself, people who were married to U.S. citizens and had lived in the country for at least 10 years without committing any crimes. But, just a few days earlier, that program had been struck down by a Trump-appointed federal judge.

"There's nothing to stop them from rounding me up once he takes office," Jaime said.

Sky had spent much of his adulthood preparing to protect his family in a crisis. He'd learned survival tactics in the Army and had trained in hand-to-hand

combat as a Georgia corrections officer. In the last few years, as he sensed the country becoming more polarized and volatile, he'd built up a small collection of firearms and a cache of emergency supplies. He'd been anticipating a moment when the government might rise up against his family, but this particular crisis was one he'd helped to create.

"I'm going to be straight with you," he told Jaime. "I voted for Trump. I believe in a lot of what he says."

"I figured as much," Jaime said. "You and just about everyone else around here."

"It's about protecting our rights as a

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Kennedy Aide  
Filed to Revoke  
Shot for Polio

By CHRISTINA JEWETT  
and SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

The lawyer helping Robert F. Kennedy Jr. pick federal health officials for the incoming Trump administration has petitioned the government to revoke its approval of the polio vaccine, which for decades has protected millions of people from a virus that can cause paralysis or death.

That campaign is just one front in the war that the lawyer, Aaron Siri, is waging against vaccines of all kinds.

Mr. Siri has also filed a petition seeking to pause the distribution of 13 other vaccines; challenged, and in some cases quashed, Covid vaccine mandates; sued federal agencies for the disclosure of records related to vaccine approvals; and subjected prominent vaccine scientists to grueling videotaped depositions.

Much of Mr. Siri's work — including the polio petition filed in 2022 — has been on behalf of the Informed Consent Action Network, a nonprofit whose founder is a close ally of Mr. Kennedy. Mr. Siri also represented Mr. Kennedy during his presidential campaign.

Mr. Kennedy, President-elect Donald J. Trump's choice for health secretary, has said that he does not want to take away access

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Civilian Militias  
Backfire in War  
In Burkina Faso

By ELIAN PELTIER  
and ARLETTE BASHIZI

OUANGOLODOUGOU, Ivory Coast — They were falling asleep on a thin mat that they had been sharing since they were married five years ago. Suddenly, the roar of motorcycles woke them up. Armed men then dragged Rainatou Diallo and her husband, Adama Diallo, out of bed and into their courtyard.

Without a word, the men shot Mr. Diallo dead. As Ms. Diallo fled the village, one of many engulfed by violence in Burkina Faso, she recognized her husband's masked killers: They were neighbors.

Burkina Faso, a nation that once prided itself on tolerance and peaceful interethnic relations, is now home to one of the deadliest conflicts in West Africa. Since the current military leader, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, seized power in a coup in 2022, he has escalated a war against Islamist insurgents that has now killed tens of thousands of people and displaced nearly three million others.

To beef up the ranks of his embattled military, Captain Traoré's government recruited tens of thousands of men into a civilian militia, known as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland. The militia was created by a previ-

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As Peace Settles on a Town, Its People Rush to Get Back Home

By CARLOTTA GALL

TEL RIFAAT, Syria — The skies were quiet the other night in the northwestern town of Tel Rifaat, Syria, and relief was palpable among fighters and civilians who have lived for years under the constant threat of bombardment.

A man named Ali, 48, guarded the northern entrance to town, sitting in a chair on the road next to a wood stove at an old police post. He gave only his first name for security reasons. But there was no danger of attack, he said, and no bombing.

As night fell in the courtyard of a primary school, Syrian rebel fighters from the town — who helped recapture it from government-allied forces two weeks ago — knelt for the evening Muslim prayer. They were still elated by their victory, which ended their own lives of displacement, spent in tents, and those of many families from the town, who were already coming home.

"The people of Tel Rifaat really wanted to return to their town," said Firas Alito al-Ageid, 40, commander of the rebel unit. "This was the most important thing. They had the desire to return."

A farming town of some 50,000 people before the civil war that erupted in 2011, Tel Rifaat was first controlled by forces opposed



DAVID GUTTENFELDER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Returned residents riding the streets of Tel Rifaat, Syria, which endured eight years of fighting.

to the government of President Bashar al-Assad, who fled to Russia this month. It was well known as a rebel stronghold — surrounded by many towns loyal to the government — and almost every family contributed fighters to the opposition.

But in 2016, Tel Rifaat was

captured by Syrian Kurdish fighters who backed the Assad regime and who then jointly controlled the town with the government. Most residents fled their homes.

For the past eight years, rebel fighters had been trying to regain territory in this pocket of

northwestern Syria, including in Tel Rifaat. Late last month they succeeded.

On Friday, rebel fighters and commanders — part of the opposition Syrian National Army, an umbrella group backed by Turkey that earlier was known as

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The N.B.A.'s New Arms Race

The Cavaliers are among the teams spending big on training centers in the hope of luring top talent. PAGE D1

A Distinct Path to the Heisman

Travis Hunter, a two-way standout at the University of Colorado, was honored as the player of the year. PAGE D2

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Drones Rattling New Jersey

Sightings started a month ago and residents are looking to the skies, wondering why they still don't have definitive answers from officials. PAGE A19

Scrutiny of Top Adams Aide

Prosecutors investigating corruption allegations against Ingrid Lewis-Martin are said to have presented evidence to a grand jury. She has resigned. PAGE A19

Test for New N.Y.P.D. Chief

Weeks ago, Jessica Tisch was in charge of street sweeping and trash pickup. Suddenly she was leading a manhunt for the killer of a C.E.O. PAGE A19



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Where Opera Still Rules

A writer savors opening night of Teatro alla Scala in Milan, a temple of opera, for pomp, pageantry and politics. PAGE C1

A Black Art Dealer's Legacy

Artworks owned by Marshall Marcell were loaned to a Louisiana museum. Now his heirs want them back. PAGE C1

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A.I. aficionados are relying on advice from Claude, a chatbot from Anthropic. Is it a passing fad, or a preview of artificial relationships to come? PAGE B1

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Protests ignited by a feud between the president and his onetime mentor have disrupted the movement of goods and worsened fuel shortages. PAGE A10

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Farah Stockman

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Polly Mellen, Tastemaker

With photographers like Richard Avedon, Irving Penn and Bert Stern, she created some indelible images of modern fashion. She died at 100. PAGE B5

