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# NORTHERN SYRIA

## Key crises to watch

### GENERAL CONTEXT AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION OVERVIEW

Syria continues to face an array of intractable challenges that put operating within its multiconflict system among the most complex humanitarian endeavours in the world. Significant and far-reaching influence from multiple state players and broader geopolitical dynamics inform and frame the Syrian crisis. The resulting uncertainty generates significant strategic and operational pressures on the humanitarian response in the country. These pressures could worsen the significant crises affecting the country and the needs of Syrians.

As at 2023, there were 2.8 million IDPs in Northwest Syria (NWS), 1.9 million of whom lived in 1,421 so-called last-resort sites (OCHA 28/04/2023 and 22/12/2022). The vulnerability of communities in NWS remains acute: 3.3 million people are food-insecure, three million need healthcare, and the majority of IDPs have been displaced three to seven times (ECHO 06/01/2023; Action for Humanity 04/05/2023; OCHA 22/12/2022). In 2022, 58% of pregnant women and 36% of under-fives in NWS were anaemic, underscoring the compounding health issues prevalent in the area (PAC et al. 18/10/2022).

In early 2023, several earthquakes worsened many of the dynamics outlined above. A 7.8 and another 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit both southern Türkiye and NWS on 6 February, and two more large earthquakes followed on 20 February, accompanied by thousands of aftershocks. Thousands of aftershocks. The earthquakes killed 4,500 people and injured over 10,400 in NWS. The quakes damaged at least 10,600 buildings and destroyed 1,870, compounding a complex humanitarian crisis (OCHA 28/04/2023). The earthquakes struck a part of NWS that had experienced significant conflict and economic crises over the last few years, as well as Gaziantep in southern Türkiye, a key hub of the humanitarian response to NWS. The impact of the earthquakes has reduced the affected population's resilience and increased their vulnerability to other crises, such as those highlighted in this report.

As NWS experiences several overlapping and acute humanitarian crises, Northeast Syria (NES) experiences structural, political, social, and economic pressures that result in similar humanitarian needs. The pressures in NES stem from its position as a key conflict area between Türkiye and the People's Defense Units (YPG)/Women's Protection Units (YPJ) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as well as the differing interests of the US and the Russian Federation. These environments cultivate macrolevel uncertainty, hinder the region's access to external markets, and bring the threat of further conflict into the area.

Around 276,800 IDPs residing in over 259 sites in NES need assistance. NES also has more people with disabilities than most other areas in Syria, affecting 40% of the population. Climate issues, including structural drought, affect harvests in the region, putting further structural pressure on the food chain and local economy. Conflict-related tensions pose significant challenges for Syrians living in NES. At the beginning of 2022, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) staged an attack on al-Sina'a Prison in al-Hasakeh. The group also regularly attacks areas in Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Hama, and Homs governorates (OCHA 22/12/2022).

#### About this report

**Aim:** this report provides an overview of three key humanitarian crises in northern Syria that are expected to deteriorate or see a significant humanitarian impact in the next 6 to 12 months. It aims to inform humanitarian decision-making and programming by anticipating humanitarian needs and constraints in humanitarian operations. It does not exhaustively list all the current and anticipated crises affecting northern Syria.

**Methodology:** this report is based on the secondary data review of public sources and interviews with contextual experts collected in June 2023. Crises were selected based on contextual knowledge and the close monitoring of the situation. For each crisis context, the ACAPS team collected existing information, mapped out relevant crisis drivers, highlighted recent developments and humanitarian impacts, and anticipated their probable evolution over the coming months. The report does not list the crises by order of importance or probability.

**Limitations:** the future is inherently complex and uncertain. The outlook sections of this report present potential deteriorations and developments of the highlighted crises, considering their specific scope and the information available as at July 2023. The emergence of new information and the influence of factors not accounted for may invalidate the outlooks. Operational constraints and insecurity hamper data collection in Syria. This report is limited to publicly available information and complemented by discussions with subject matter experts. For some crises, it is difficult to accurately estimate the scale of the current and future humanitarian impact.

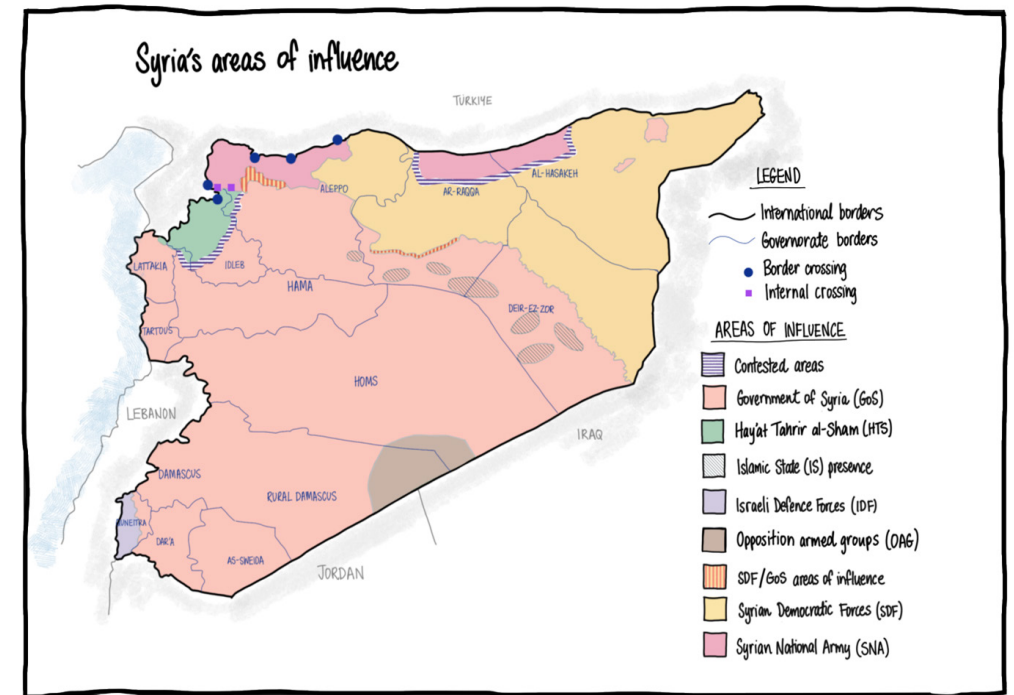
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## Acronyms

- AANES = Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria
- AFNS = Aid Fund for Northern Syria
- GDP = gross domestic product
- GoS = Government of Syria
- HTS = Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
- IDP = internally displaced people
- ISIS = Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
- NES = Northeast Syria
- NWS = Northwest Syria
- PYD = Democratic Union Party
- SDF = Syrian Democratic Forces
- SIG = Syrian Interim Government
- SNA = Syrian National Army
- SSG = Syrian Salvation Government
- YPG = People's Defense Units
- YPJ = Women's Protection Units

## CRISIS TO WATCH #1: HUMANITARIAN ACCESS CONSTRAINTS IN NWS



Source: ACAPS using data from "Northwest Syria – Areas of Influence and Border Crossings" International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) maps, 2023

## Context overview

A series of UNSC resolutions governs the present structure of humanitarian aid in NWS. These resolutions have come together since 2014 to allow the UN to orchestrate crossborder aid from Türkiye into NWS without the explicit permission of the Government of Syria (GoS) (UNSC 12/12/2022). These resolutions are renewed periodically every 6–12 months, often resulting in intense discussions between the five permanent members of the UNSC.

NWS comprises five distinct territorial zones with specific dynamics and challenges. Only the first two (Idlib and the Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas) are accessible from Türkiye, where the humanitarian response to NWS is located. All five zones are part of the same contextual landscape (ECHO 06/01/2023).



Those living in NWS face an interconnected system of crises that interact in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. In areas accessed from Türkiye, the most acute crisis relates to uncertainty around the structure of the aid response in NWS, how this could change, and the potential ways that any resulting changes could shift other crises into a larger crisis in the humanitarian system (UNSC 12/12/2022).

Of the five territorial zones, the first comprises roughly half of the governorate of Idleb and small parts of Aleppo and Latakia governorates. This area has the largest number of people in need. It is often referred to as 'Idleb', where three million people live (Al Jazeera 15/03/2023). The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the affiliated group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) nominally control this area. Many international state groups, including the EU, GoS, Russian Federation, UK, and US, have denounced HTS (The Wilson Center 13/07/2022). Türkiye maintains a significant military presence in Idleb.

The second major contextual zone comprises the Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas, which border Idleb in the west and Manbij in the east. The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) ostensibly governs these areas with its affiliated armed structure, the Syrian National Army (SNA). These groups are opposed to the Damascus-based GoS. The groups that make up the SNA tend to follow the Government of Türkiye for their strategic positioning even while having significant operational autonomy (Syria Direct 18/03/2023).

The third major zone is Tel Rifaat, a narrow territory just north of Aleppo city that borders much of the SIG-controlled area above. This area is a mixed security environment, with some forces associated with the GOS, Iran, and the Russian Federation. A more significant presence is of the YPG/YPJ, who have a strongly antagonistic relationship with the Government of Türkiye (Rudaw 11/06/2022). The YPG/YPJ groups in Tel Rifaat and SNA formations often exchange indirect fire in areas of northern Aleppo under SIG/SNA oversight (Yeni Şafak 12/11/2019). This area is not presently accessible directly from Türkiye, so the line of contact effectively operates as a frontline.

The fourth zone is around Manbij city. The Kurdish-affiliated AANES controls this zone, governing from al-Hasakeh (Rudaw 19/05/2023). Political and military tensions between Kurdish groups and the Government of Türkiye make this area inaccessible to humanitarian responders from Türkiye.

The fifth zone refers to the areas of NWS under GoS control. These are not accessible from Türkiye, and the access regime runs from Damascus instead.

## Key drivers of the crisis and recent developments

The geopolitical stalemate in the region is a key driver of humanitarian access constraints in NWS. The US and its allies support the existing crossborder aid mechanism, emphasising the scale of need inside NWS and the potential issues any transition could cause. The Russian Federation and the GoS want to end this mechanism, viewing it as a violation of Syria's legitimacy and territorial integrity. The relationship between the Russian Federation and Türkiye influences this situation. Türkiye wants to maintain the current access arrangement because of concerns about how any breakdown could affect the humanitarian situation in NWS (UNSC 09/06/2023).

Another key driver is the politicisation of humanitarian aid organisations in Syria, with debates around whether aid delivery to NWS should be crossborder or crossline. These debates build into discussions of how the entire humanitarian response should be organised. The UN's response is based on multiple access hubs in different regions. These hubs typically serve as a workaround to the challenging access environment resulting from the various conflicts and sanction regimes (MEI 27/06/2023). The UN response has resulted in key nodes in the GoS-held areas (Damascus), Jordan, Lebanon, NES, and southern Türkiye. The UN has broadly been split between the entities from Damascus and those from southern Türkiye, in Gaziantep (CSIS 04/06/2021). The situation drives access constraints as the question of how the response should be organised effectively concerning crossborder aid falls along political lines.

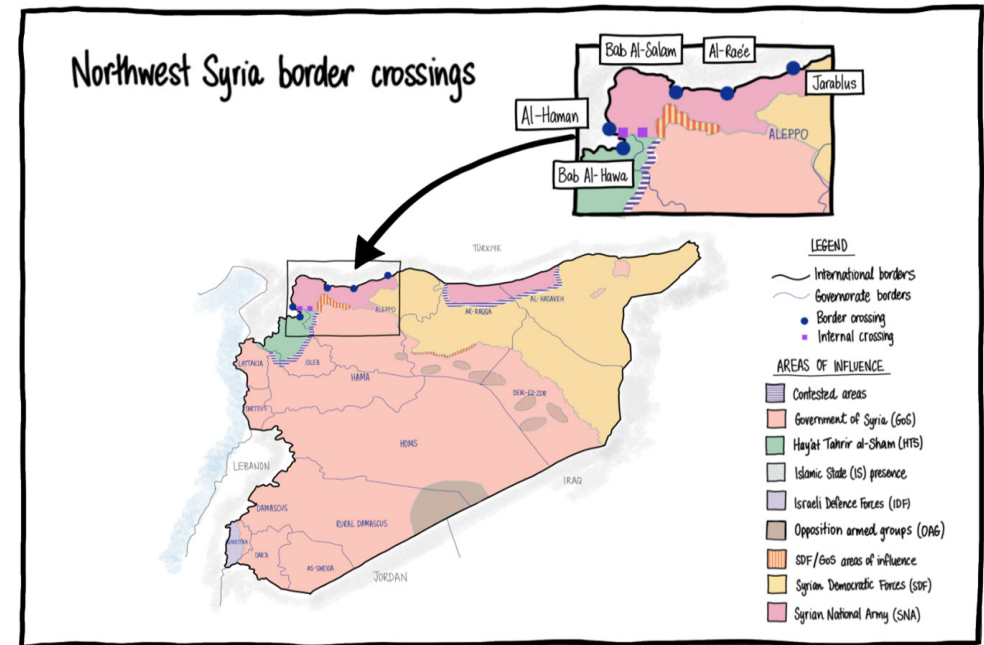
Governing structures, service delivery, and resource control also contribute to access constraints. Various factions in Syria strive for legitimacy by providing services, exerting control, and managing resources (Heydeman 27/01/2023). The crossborder resolution affects this dynamic, as it guarantees access to resources for the SSG and HTS. These groups can subsequently use these resources for service provision and maintaining authority over their areas of control, potentially destabilising the fragile economic security situation in NWS. This resolution prevents the GoS from having complete control over its presumed borders, raising questions about its legitimacy as the sole UN-recognised state authority inside Syria. It also raises questions over the positioning and role of the SSG/HTS and the viability for Türkiye to continue backing these entities (ISPI 15/09/2022). The resolution will remain a critical push-pull factor in the question of legitimacy, which could lead to significant consequences if the fragile environment begins to decay (Heydeman 27/01/2023).

The infrastructure around border crossing points and the humanitarian response form a crucial component of the economic structure for many organised armed groups that operate in NWS (Heydeman 27/01/2023). Any disruption to this system could affect access and humanitarian operations, especially amid conflicts between various groups (ISPI 15/09/2022).

The fragmentation of armed groups, particularly the SNA in Euphrates Shield/Olive Branch areas, into decentralised, economically driven, extractive entities could lead to checkpoints. Checkpoints would make travel across certain areas more difficult and could result in aid diversion, creating a significant general challenge that could restrict humanitarian action. The presence of armed groups and their interests can complicate reaching populations at risk.

On 11 July 2023, the UNSC failed to reauthorise the crossborder mechanism for humanitarian aid delivery into NWS after the mandate expiry on 10 July. This expiry came after the rejection of two draft resolutions to renew crossborder humanitarian operations in NWS (UNSC 11/07/2023). Brazil and Switzerland, the co-penholders of the Syrian humanitarian file at the UNSC, submitted the first draft resolution. To reach a consensus, they sought to extend the use of the Bab Al Hawa crossing point by nine months after their initial 12-month proposal was shelved. The Russian Federation vetoed this proposal, despite 13 of the 15 members voting in favour. China abstained from the vote. The Russian Federation's competing draft, which sought a six-month extension, was defeated by a vote of three against (France, the UK, and the US) to two in favour (the Russian Federation and China) (UN 11/07/2023). The GoS praised the Russian Federation's decision to veto the first resolution, referring to it as "a western UN Security Council draft resolution violating Syria's sovereignty under the pretext of delivering cross-border aid" (CNN 11/07/2023). As at August 2023, the UNSC has not agreed to extend the crossborder mechanism. Such an agreement is unlikely, as the Russian Federation seems likely to veto any proposal from western UNSC members.

Bab Al Hawa was the main entry point for UN humanitarian operations into NWS, handling 85% of deliveries (UNSC 24/07/2023). Its proximity to Idlib gives it a strategic location, as this is where most people in need in NWS live (UNSG 11/07/2023). The UN has not delivered humanitarian aid through Bab Al Hawa since the mandate's expiry on 10 July and has continued to use other available access points, such as Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rae'e, for UN aid delivery and personnel transport to NWS (OCHA 21/07/2023). The permission to keep these two crossing points open expires on 13 August (SCR 11/07/2023 b).



Source: ACAPS using data from "Northwest Syria – Areas of Influence and Border Crossings" International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) maps, 2023

## Outlook

Uncertainty around the access environment has persisted for years. For the millions of people who depend on humanitarian aid for their basic needs, access will remain a pressing issue in the response at large in NWS.

The best-case scenario for the humanitarian response is that the resolution continues to be renewed, and it is unnecessary to transition to a new aid delivery modality. The outcomes involving any transition will lead to some degree of impact for humanitarian programming inside NWS, which is how the situation looked as at August. The impact of any given breakdown of the macro-access environment in NWS depends on whether it is possible to successfully transition to a new system. In case the resolution fails, the transition will be from a system that UN agencies in Gaziantep broadly oversee to an unspecified alternative.



Better-case outcomes will involve constructing a new system in which the UN remotely maintains its role. A possible or alternative system would involve INGOs or the Government of Türkiye taking over key aspects of the response to ensure business continuity. Currently, the UN has taken the lead in directing contingency planning for three out of four of the critical pillars of the response: coordination, access negotiations, and logistics. The Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) provides a degree of business continuity for the fourth (funding). This setup could give some protection against major bottlenecks in any transition. Humanitarian responders and decision makers should be aware that the institutional and contextual environments and the interplay between them are highly complex and will likely cause substantial challenges in planning a significant transition. Humanitarian responders should consider the possibility of such systems malfunctioning and plan for unseen obstacles causing challenges or systems taking longer than expected to work in new environments.

In such a complex and contested contextual environment, it is important for humanitarians to consider the worst-case outcomes to better inform their contingency planning. In worst-case outcomes, any sudden halt to the present access regime (e.g. failure of contingency planning) could catalyse a systems crisis for the humanitarian response in NWS. This situation could see uncertainty and disorder pass through the response in the following ways.

- The UN-run Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund may have to hand over much of its caseload to the AFNS without the latter being able to test or set up its systems. While substantial contingency planning is already occurring between the funds, humanitarian responders should still consider likely challenges in transitioning and the interface between the funds, particularly as the AFNS gets systems up to speed.
- The UN may have to stop its role as coordinator for the trans-shipment hub without a clear alternative. Other logistical issues relate to how the WFP has been using Bab Al Hawa to ship hundreds of truckloads of food into NWS every month. This would require substantial contingency planning to ensure that they continue at a similar level following any systematic change to the regulatory environment.
- The OCHA-run coordination system could also face challenges if OCHA's role is questioned or if it relocates to Damascus or Amman. This situation could reduce the apparent inertia in the response, leading to the increased decentralisation of cluster or NGO activities and possible duplication.
- It is unclear how the sector will replace the UN's role in access negotiations if it cannot meaningfully cross the border from Türkiye into NWS. This issue raises significant questions about risk and compliance. A crucial aspect of the UN's role has been absorbing and reducing risks for aid responders working in areas where denounced groups operate. If there is a reduction in the UN's role here, the risks for INGOs and NGOs regarding counterterrorism legislation will likely rise.

- Access and acceptance could lessen over time if there are significant blockages to aid provision into NWS. Many people inside NWS cannot differentiate between UN agencies and INGOs, increasing the possibility of misdirected frustration. There is also an ingrained history of emergent narrative creation in NWS that has the potential to turn against humanitarian responders should the highly political situation cause fear and anxiety in NWS.

Even with the potential use of alternative mechanisms of humanitarian aid delivery into NWS, the non-renewal of the resolution creates a gap that increases human suffering significantly (UNHCR 20/07/2023). The UN has had a major role in supporting regional humanitarian responders in logistics, finance, procurement, ground assessments, and monitoring (OCHA 21/07/2023). Non-UN responders in the region would likely face a number of challenges to fill these gaps, leading to disruptions to humanitarian response.

More families in NWS could face starvation with the steady increase in food prices. Even with aid, 44% of the population in NWS cannot afford bread. Families who eat fewer meals cannot afford meat, fruit, or vegetables. Poor diet quality could have serious health consequences over time, including chronic malnutrition and poor educational performance (CARE et al. 06/01/2023).

The current situation would also affect national and international organisations' emergency preparedness and prevent long-term and sustainable project implementation (MSF 05/07/2023). The limited resources will likely be prioritised for emergency care, leaving Syrians in NWS without critical services, including mental healthcare, livelihoods, and agricultural support, which are essential for resilience building and reducing dependency (CARE et al. 06/01/2023).



## CRISIS TO WATCH #2: ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION IN NES AND NWS

### Context overview

Syria is split between political groups with specific contextual drivers and dynamics. While there are many differences between NES and NWS, there are also some similarities. One of these similarities is the acute economic crisis that has been a key structural pressure across both contexts in recent years. Syrians are experiencing a deteriorating economic crisis and its consequences, including escalating expenses, the scarcity of commodities and services, and the devaluation of the Syrian pound and the Turkish lira (Syria Direct 28/12/2022). While NES still uses the pound, NWS adopted the lira in June 2020 as an alternative to the collapsing pound (The New Arab 26/05/2023). This means the economic developments in Türkiye affect NWS, especially the current fluctuations and fall of the lira. Sanctions, inflation, and large-scale unemployment also contribute to the economic degradation many Syrians experience in these areas. Across the entire country, economic pressures have pushed 90% of the Syrian population below the poverty line (The New Arab 22/12/2022).

Before the earthquakes, NWS was isolated and grappling with significant economic challenges because of conflict dynamics. The impact of the earthquakes has severely damaged critical infrastructure, destroyed buildings and roads, and broke down electricity and phone networks (The Tahrir Institute 20/02/2023).

In NES, the Self Administration has partially maintained the social support system in areas under its control inherited from the GoS. Despite this, diminishing resources in the region have made social support inconsistent and unreliable (iMMAP 01/2022). Within NES, approximately 700,000 displaced people are almost fully dependent on humanitarian aid (MSF accessed 28/06/2023). Households must resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as borrowing money for essential items and sending children to work because of insufficient income and limited employment prospects.

Over 75% of the population in NWS are food-insecure, and one million people are at risk of food insecurity (OCHA 20/04/2022). Severe drought, high fuel costs, price increases, and a reduction in the flow of the Euphrates River have shrunk the harvestable cereal area, leading to continued low agricultural yield and worsening food insecurity (OCHA 22/12/2022).

The economic crisis has led to the adoption of negative coping mechanisms, as households have no remaining assets to draw on. Parents eat less to leave food for their children, and children are sent to work instead of school. Girls and boys also face the risk of early or forced marriage (UNICEF accessed 16/06/2023). One of the reasons for such arranged marriages is to alleviate the financial hardship resulting from conflict (OHCHR 12/06/2023). Out-of-school children are at risk of child labour. Increasing poverty has also caused IDP households to take on more debt (PiN 15/03/2023).

### Key drivers of the crisis and recent developments

The key drivers of the difficult economic environment are varied and come from within and outside the NES and NWS contexts. Some drivers are similar in both areas, and others are specific, as detailed below. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to the deterioration of the macroeconomic environment and increased global oil and cereal prices and global inflation. The rise in commodity prices following the invasion has weakened the fiscal position of many groups inside NES and NWS and contributed to inflation (WB 17/03/2023 a). Food prices across Syria were already rising before the earthquakes. The WFP uses standard food items to monitor food inflation. These prices have almost doubled in the past 12 months and are 13 times higher than in 2020 (WFP 14/03/2023).

The crisis has had a domino effect on sectors and livelihoods in Syria. For example, high transport costs have caused some workers in the public and private sectors to stay home, as earnings are lower than the cost of their commute (The New Arab 22/12/2022).

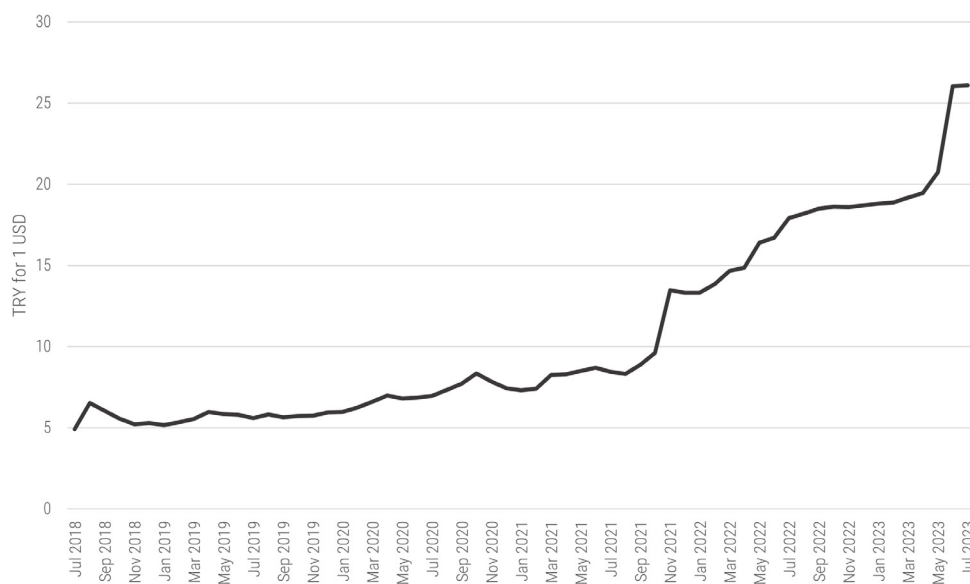
The US and its allies have imposed economic sanctions, driving economic deprivation in NES and NWS. These sanctions create obstacles in accessing essential goods, reduce funding for aid organisations, limit travel and movement, increase bureaucratic challenges, and hinder the revival of economic activity across Syria. For example, unintended obstacles have prevented the import of essential supplies to reconstruct schools, homes, and hospitals. There are also difficulties in accessing fuel and other oil derivatives needed for cooking, heating, and transportation. This results in supply shortages or price increases, worsening economic conditions (HRW 22/06/2023). Sanctions also discourage investment into the economic recovery, resulting in a key stumbling block (Valdai 26/05/2023).

The broad nature of the sanctions and the ambiguity surrounding multiple legal frameworks and humanitarian exceptions cause a 'chilling effect', another driver of the crisis (EPRS 05/06/2023; The Carter Center 10/2020). Private parties and financial institutions often choose not to engage directly or indirectly with Syrian individuals or entities, even in sectors not subject to sanctions (HRW 22/06/2023). The sanctions also prevent the local population from opening bank accounts, working online, or using online resources and technology services, as these are blocked from access. The sanctions mean that money cannot be sent into Syria, and the local population cannot make a living from online jobs or start e-businesses (The Tahrir Institute 20/02/2023). This further reduces options for making a living and meeting basic needs.

## Drivers specific to NWS

Much of NWS is closely tied to the Turkish economy, including the widespread use of the Turkish lira and goods and services originating in Türkiye (TNH 06/06/2023). This connection makes these areas vulnerable to economic shifts and changes within Türkiye. The structural issues that have affected the Turkish economy since 2013 have been a significant driver for the harmful economic environment across most of NWS (EuroNews 21/12/2022). The region is experiencing harsh economic ramifications from the depreciation of the Turkish lira, the lack of mechanisms to facilitate imports and exports with the Turkish lira, and the lack of an authority to manage monetary policy. The lack of monetary management authority also affects the shift to the lira. The ramifications of these situations include worsening existing problems, such as inflation, low incomes, limited employment opportunities, and a lack of access to basic commodities and services (The New Arab 26/05/2023). Outside of such direct impacts, the global economic shifts following the Russian invasion of Ukraine have also significantly stressed the Turkish economy.

Figure 1. TRY-USD exchange rate



Source: ACAPS using data from Investing (accessed 21/07/2023)

Along with issues related to frozen conflict and intragroup violence between organized armed groups in Idlib and northern Aleppo, this array of factors has contributed to the acute deterioration of humanitarian conditions in NWS, particularly in IDP camps (UNHCR 18/05/2023; Syria Direct 28/12/2022). The February 2023 earthquakes also affected NWS's economy, as they destroyed commercial and industrial facilities, causing stagnation in the commercial sector and a steep increase in the prices of basic goods (ILO 28/03/2023; Al Jazeera 15/02/2023). Following the earthquakes, households in NWS reported difficulty generating income. As a result, most households could not meet priority needs, such as food, clothing, and household supplies, or afford basic healthcare services (IRC 20/02/2023). Even though supply chains have recovered from the initial disruptions following the earthquakes, the overall economic situation in NWS is still the predominant factor affecting trade and consumer prices (REACH 06/07/2023).

There have been notable spikes in cooking oil, lamb, and chicken prices. Some sellers change the currency of their stock price as the Turkish lira fluctuates, causing further variations in the prices of both local and imported goods. Electricity is mainly sourced from Türkiye and has significantly increased in price, as has fuel. These increases have affected the local production costs of basic commodities and agricultural products, leading to low wheat harvests in Syria. These low harvests force NWS to depend on Türkiye for wheat and flour imports, where prices have also increased. As a result, many Syrians are unable to meet their daily calorific needs (OCHA 20/04/2022; The New Arab 26/05/2023).

Inflation affects the humanitarian response as value assessments struggle to keep pace with inflation and the cost of living crisis, reducing the purchasing power of cash vouchers over time. Inflation also affects support to bakeries, as projected budgets are based on earlier wheat prices. Supply chain disruptions affect in-kind food baskets. The increase in bread prices has already led to unrest (OCHA 20/04/2022).

The lack of a functional economy makes the population of NWS highly reliant on humanitarian aid to meet their needs. The population's wellbeing depends on the volume of the flow of humanitarian aid into NWS. Commerce is mostly centred around smuggling operations that de facto authorities (including the GoS, the SDF, the SIG, and HTS) control in the respective areas (The New Arab 26/05/2023). Access challenges, limited funding, and limitations to the operational environment compromise the ability of humanitarian responders to deliver critical aid to NWS, leading to widespread food insecurity, the lack of education access for children, limited healthcare access, and limited access to specialised protection services (Protection Cluster 24/06/2022).





## Drivers specific to NES

A range of interrelated drivers has sharply reduced economic activity in NES. These include significant losses in human capital, destroyed infrastructure, degraded basic services, and disrupted trade. Various factors, such as COVID-19, prolonged drought, rapid currency depreciation, high inflation, and the ripple effects from the crisis in Lebanon, Türkiye, and Ukraine, affect NES's economy. Commodity and fuel prices have risen, leading to a substantial decline in the population's purchasing power, a major contributing factor to the humanitarian needs in the country (REACH 03/01/2023).

At the end of 2022, the Government of Türkiye escalated hostilities in northern Syria and parts of Iraq, affecting NES's economy. These included shelling, artillery, and drone strikes (SIRF 25/11/2022). Apart from causing civilian casualties and injuries, the attacks have resulted in the large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure, causing power and internet cuts in parts of NES. This disruption has further affected economic activity reliant on electricity and internet access. The hostilities also discourage the population from engaging in trade and other economic activities. The shelling of agricultural land also affects the economy, as NES is the primary agricultural region within Syria (REACH 17/02/2023; SIRF 25/11/2022).

## Outlook

Following the February earthquakes, Syria's real GDP in 2023 will likely contract by 5.5% across the groups operating in the country (WB 17/03/2023 b). Even though the fragmentation of Syria makes such economic estimates difficult, the indications point to a decline in overall economic activity in NWS. Prices are likely to increase, leading to more hunger, poverty, and migration as a result of poor living conditions (Syria Direct 28/12/2022). With fewer economic participation opportunities, negative coping mechanisms are likely to persist. The WFP's funding crisis will likely worsen this situation, cutting approximately half of basic food aid to Syria. As a result, 2.5 million of the 5.5 million people who rely on WFP for their basic food needs will no longer have access to aid (Al Jazeera 13/06/2023).

Despite owning more resources than those in other areas of the country, the AANES has been unable to establish a better standard of living for those under its control. Issues that persist in the governance structure, including Bashar al Assad privatising sectors and requiring businesses to deal with him directly, partly cause this difficulty. As a result, NES's economic situation is unlikely to improve soon (Syria Direct 28/12/2022).

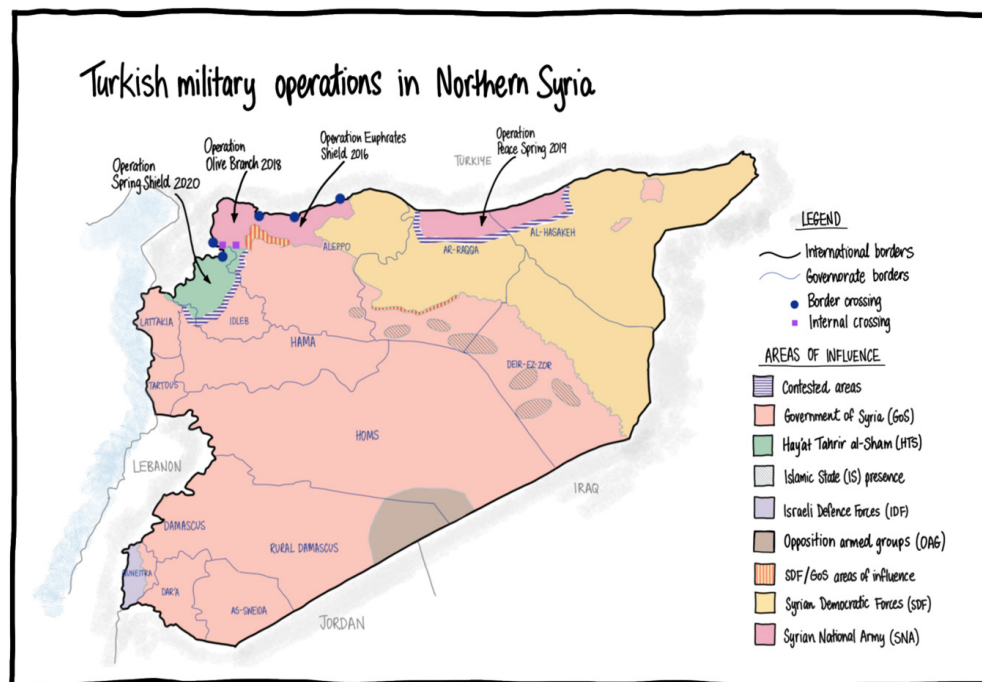
The prospect of Turkish military intervention in Syria would mean the destruction of critical infrastructure and property, including businesses that sustain part of the population. It would also force civilians to close shops and marketplaces that are key to local economic

activity. This would lead to shortages, inflation, and overall uncertainty among the population. The potential for casualties and injuries would also affect the workforce. In the event of military intervention, negative coping mechanisms, including taking on debt, are expected to rise significantly, as during previous interventions. People with a higher risk of economic vulnerability, such as households with people with disabilities and women-headed households, will likely face even more constraints as humanitarian needs increase (Protection Cluster 24/06/2022). There is an urgent need to provide the population with food, shelter, NFIs, and cash-based interventions to allow them to purchase market items and stimulate local economic activity.

People across the region will continue to feel the effect of sanctions, with little to no economic boost from potential foreign investments and shrinking opportunities for Syrians to make a living. The drought threatening livelihoods will likely worsen this situation, as will low global economic outputs, which could see inadequate resources set aside for Syria.

The need for a thorough and all-encompassing humanitarian response will probably persist throughout NES and NWS. This response will require immediate relief to address urgent needs and substantial assistance in the early stages of recovery, encompassing aid to revitalise vital services, local markets, and livelihoods, to enhance community resilience amid diminishing social assistance (iMMAP 01/2022).

## CRISIS TO WATCH #3: TÜRKIYE'S ASSERTIVE INFLUENCE OVER NORTHERN SYRIA AND THE LOOMING THREAT OF FURTHER DISPLACEMENT



Source: ACAPS using data from "Northwest Syria – Areas of Influence and Border Crossings" International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) maps, 2023

### Context overview

The border between Syria and Türkiye has influenced the countries' relations since the 20th century. The beginning of the war in Syria in 2011 reshaped this relationship, especially concerning northern Syria's security, political, and socioeconomic conditions along the border with Türkiye. This region is divided along different areas of control, with HTS in the northwest, the SDF in the northeast, and Türkiye's direct and indirect influence over three cantons in between (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022).

Türkiye's military involvement in the Syrian crisis is broadly divided into three main areas of focus. With the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and an exodus of Syrian refugees towards Türkiye, Türkiye called for the removal of Syria's president, Bashar al Assad, and allowed arms and rebel fighters to cross to Syria. The prolongation of the conflict and the

resistance of the GoS led Türkiye to narrow its focus towards the border areas. Increased security threats resulted in tightened border control, with entry and exit permits (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022). A second policy concerned interventions to eradicate the Islamic State (MEI 02/05/2023). Türkiye's main policy area in Syria has focused on preventing the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Syria. In 2012, the Syrian army started to withdraw from the prevalent Kurdish areas in NES, and the PYD, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, started replacing state officials with their own affiliates. Türkiye viewed these moves as threatening its national security, which justified subsequent military interventions (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022). The Kurdistan Workers' Party is a Kurdish militant group that launched an insurgency in southeast Türkiye in 1984. Its leader was based in Syria at the time, and many attacks were initiated from there (CFR 12/06/2023). Despite its efforts, Türkiye has been unable to halt the formation of the Kurdish AANES that governs NES, comprising self-governing structures in Afrin, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Euphrates, Jazeera, Manbij, and Tabqa. The Syrian Democratic Council, which has close ties with the SDF, leads the AANES. Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD) primarily controls the ruling coalition Movement for a Democratic Society, meaning a single Kurdish party effectively makes decisions for the entire region (Atlantic Council/FPRI 13/08/2019).

Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria have had a significant humanitarian impact, including civilian deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people (UNSC 24/10/2019). Human rights abuses have also characterised Turkish incursions into Syria, affecting civilians' rights, and there have been reports of Turkish-backed forces committing sexual violence against women and men (HRW 17/08/2022). On multiple occasions, there have also been reports of Turkish-backed forces interrupting the supply of water from the Allouk water station, close to the town of Ras Al Ain, affecting 460,000 people in Kurdish-held areas (HRW 31/03/2020). During the 2018 Turkish incursion into Afrin, Turkish-backed groups seized, demolished, and looted the properties of Kurdish civilians and committed abuses, such as unlawful arrests, torture, and disappearances. SDF forces also committed international humanitarian law violations, including preventing civilians from fleeing the hostilities. The GoS also prevented those escaping from entering areas under its control (HRW 17/08/2022).

The war has caused significant demographic changes in NWS. Since the uprising in 2011, the region has received multiple waves of displaced Syrians from other parts of the country and from within Idlib and Aleppo governorates. 2.8 million of the 4.5 million population in NWS are IDPs (GSC 03/2022). The increased number of IDPs has put enormous pressure on services and resources, while severe humanitarian needs continue to stretch response capacity. In Türkiye, there are 3.7 million Syrian refugees, under 60% of whom live near the border (Al Jazeera 27/07/2022).



## Key drivers of the crisis and recent developments

In 2015, the Russian intervention in Syria allowed the GoS to regain all opposition strongholds except those in the northeast and parts of the northwest. Since 2016, Türkiye has adopted a more assertive role and conducted several military operations in Syria. The changes have allowed Türkiye to establish control over part of NWS, with troops stationed in Idleb and west Aleppo, and set up a governance system in the Turkish-controlled areas. Türkiye has provided de facto support, training, and salaries to some militant factions serving as the Free Syrian Army headquarters, later renamed the SNA in 2017. The SNA is a coalition of armed Syrian opposition groups. Türkiye has also established local councils and civil institutions, providing education, health, infrastructure, and energy services as regulated by the provincial border governments of Gaziantep, Kilis, Reyhanli, and Sanliurfa (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022).

Türkiye named the first of these operations Euphrates Shield, which started in August 2016. It aimed to capture the city of Al-Bab from the Islamic State while preventing the PYD's armed wing, the YPG, from expanding its control between Manbij and Afrin. Manbij and Afrin were already under Kurdish control (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022). Türkiye exercised administrative control over this zone from its provinces of Gaziantep and Kilis. In 2018, Turkish forces also took Afrin from the YPG during Operation Olive Branch (VOA 22/01/2018). The third operation, Peace Spring, occurred in October 2019 in NES, in an SDF-controlled region. The SDF are a YPG-led armed group. Türkiye took control of the area between Tell Abiad and Ras Al Ain, creating a third zone of influence (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022).

Operation Spring Shield in February–March 2020 led to the demarcation of new boundaries around Idleb, which anti-GoS groups defended. On this occasion, Türkiye took a military role, with troops deployed to areas along the border with the Syrian regime. The Syrian Salvation Army, the administrative arm of HTS, continues to govern the area. Türkiye supports the provision of services in the Idleb area through Turkish and Syrian-Turkish private and non-profit companies (MEI 02/05/2023).

In NES, Türkiye has created industrial zones to establish a stable economy for both their economic interests and to incentivise Syrians to remain in Syria and refugees in Türkiye to return. The border with Türkiye in NWS is closed, although the region remains connected to the Turkish border economy and GoS areas through internal crossings (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022).

Over the past year, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly expressed his intention to conduct a new military operation in northern Syria to secure the Syrian-Turkish border (Al Jazeera 20/07/2022). In November 2022, the Turkish forces launched a series of air strikes in northern Syria (and Iraq), claiming they were responding to an SDF car bomb attack in Istanbul earlier in November (MEI 07/12/2022). At the beginning of 2023, and in the run-up to the Turkish presidential elections in May, Erdoğan shifted his approach to Syria. The HTS commander in Idleb, Abu Muhammad Al Jolani, made statements underlining his

concerns about the possible normalisation of relations between Türkiye and the GoS while acknowledging an understanding of Türkiye's interests in doing so (MEI 02/05/2023).

## Outlook

The current status quo in northern Syria is subject to the interests of different and contrasting parties between whom tensions persist, and the risk of a conflict escalation is ever present. Within this equilibrium, Türkiye's positions and intentions are significant in multiple policy areas (Tokmajyan and Khaddour 30/03/2022).

Should Türkiye pursue an approach that sees the normalisation of relations with the Syrian regime, the risk of renewed large-scale population movements would be very high. IDPs who had fled the regime's control would struggle to find safety, and Türkiye wouldn't accept new influxes of refugees from Syria. The forced repatriation of Syrian refugees from Türkiye was a central point of the opposition's campaign in the run-up to the elections (ICG 02/06/2023). Erdoğan also faces increasing domestic pressure and has pledged to repatriate one million Syrian refugees in 2024 (Reuters 31/05/2023). The potential path to normalisation with the GoS could mean the unsafe return of millions of Syrians, who will be left to face safety concerns and protection threats, a dilapidated economy with disrupted basic services, and limited access to humanitarian assistance.

While unlikely as at August 2023, it is possible that following Erdoğan's victory in the recent elections, the Turkish Government may decide that they can begin a new offensive and pursue a more aggressive position in NES. Eased relations between Ankara and Damascus could also increase the likelihood of escalation in NES. The two governments could agree to small-scale operations towards SDF-controlled areas (ICG 02/06/2023). The risk of potential conflict creates an omnipresent and permeable sense of uncertainty, creating structural pressure on humanitarian operations. This risk makes planning, operating, and assisting the affected populations difficult. As at August, it seemed unlikely that Türkiye will attack the western side of Euphrates River, specifically Ain al-Arab, Kobani, and Manbij, although the risk might become more likely over the next 6–12 months.

Possible new offensives carry significant risks of displacement and a deterioration of living conditions, increasing the need for external assistance. Far-reaching escalation can severely constrain humanitarian access. Based on previous Turkish military operations, human rights violations will likely intensify again as new offensives occur.

The border area between Syria and Türkiye remains largely dependent on trade. Parts of NWS adopted the Turkish lira in 2020 to curb the impact of the depreciating Syrian pound, only to experience the depreciation of the Turkish lira (AA 18/06/2020). Any increase in violence in this area could affect the supply and prices of key commodities, increasing the population's humanitarian needs and reliance on external assistance to meet basic needs when food security levels are at a record high.