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CONTEXT UPDATE

Northeastern Syria | August 13, 2023

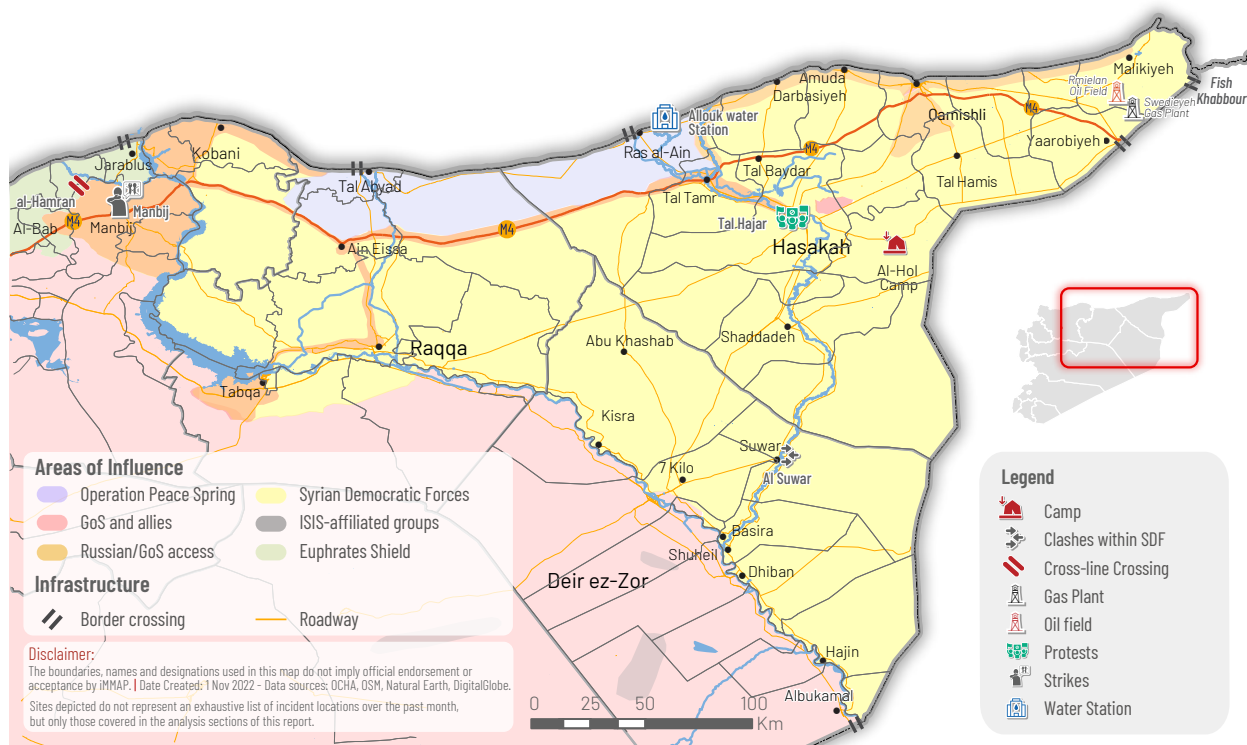


INTRODUCTION

This report was generated by iMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northeast Syria, as well as Whole of Syria, and the operating environment for humanitarian actors. The contents of this report solely represent the analysis of iMAP and do not represent the views or positions of iMAP's donors and partners. Moreover, the names and designations used in this report do not imply acceptance by iMAP's donors and partners.

Key Takeaways

- Despite an improved wheat harvest to previous seasons', protests persist in Northeast Syria (NES) over the deteriorating living conditions most recently exemplified by rising fuel prices, shortages of water and gas, and insufficient public services.
- Protests appear to be further fueled by rising tensions compounded by perceptions of corruption within the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) interference, impacting the levels of public acceptance of the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) within communities, as exemplified by the recent incident with Abu Khawla, the head of Der ez-Zor's military council.
- Following failure to renew the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) on cross-border aid access through Bab al-Hawa, the UN engaged Government of Syria (GoS) in negotiations to try and exact concessions on the demands they set in their note verbale offering conditional access of aid through Bab al-Hawa. Although it seems an "understanding" was reached on access for an additional six months, concerns and skepticism persist due to the lack of details on how moving to this "consent-based" model would be operationalized, as well as the assurances that would be granted to humanitarian actors under this new arrangement.
- Jordan doubled down on its role as a catalyst in bringing Assad back into the Arab fold, this month engaging Turkey and announcing they are aligned on topics of refugee return, as well as hosting a meeting with GoS army and intelligence chiefs in Amman. Despite these attempts, the Syrian government (GoS) shows little to no signs of offering any real concessions, and arguably, in fact, showing setbacks on critical topics in the Amman plan including aid access and Captagon trade.
- Instability in Idlib continues as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) crackdowns and mass arrests target opposition voices and internal operatives. Clashes with a new faction, "Saraya Dir' al-Thawra," that aims to destabilize HTS only adds to the volatility, potentially impacting humanitarian access and safety.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The conclusion of the wheat harvest season in July brought a reprieve to farmers in NES, marked by a surplus of wheat production that exceeded local needs. Despite challenges such as drought conditions and rising input costs, this season's positive outcomes were attributed to reasonable pricing strategies. However, the region remains cautious about future challenges posed by a depreciating Syrian Pound and escalating fuel prices.

Notably, despite what is generally perceived as a positive harvest season, demonstrations across different areas, including Tal Hajar in Hasakah, highlighted economic struggles due to rising fuel prices, water and gas shortages, and inadequate public services. Some of the main issues protestors voiced their concerns about included the Allouk water station's malfunction and limited access to water, delays in subsidized gas cylinder distribution, and questions regarding the perceived arbitrary fuel price hikes and lack of transparency in resource management. Further adding to public discontent is growing perception of SANES policies and actions increasingly favoring the benefit of the PKK. Although SANES' held a meeting on August 2 aimed to address poor living conditions agreeing on various measures including increasing subsidized bread and fuel allocations, the SANES capacity to implement them remains uncertain.

Escalation in Der ez-Zor involving Abu Khawla and the SDF highlight community tensions. Although normally enjoying a less than positive reputation, the amount of support received by the head of the military council following a recent altercation between SDF's Asayish and Der ez-Zor's military council served as an example of the rising public dissatisfaction with the SDF.

Following negotiations between the UN and GoS on conditions and terms for utilization of Bab al-Hawa , an understanding was reached allowing access for an additional six months. Specific conditions that raised concerns in GoS's letter to the UN included ceasing coordination with local de-facto authorities and coordinating and conducting deliveries through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). While the UN's statement indicated the new understanding allowed for

engagement with all parties for principled humanitarian access, details of concessions remain unclear, causing apprehension and skepticism among humanitarian actors. While the new consent-based model offers short reprieve to the aid-dependent population in NWS, potential operational challenges, and risks, especially considering GoS's history of aid politicization, raise concerns.

July also marked Jordan intensifying efforts to re-engage Damascus, as marked by a visit to Turkey in which it was announced that the two countries are aligned on topics of refugee return, as well as Jordan hosting a meeting with GoS chiefs of security and intelligence to discuss progress on enhancing border security and curbing Captagon trade. Despite these attempts, the Syrian government (GoS) have made little to no real concessions on key topics including aid access and Captagon trade. During the upcoming Cairo meeting the GoS will likely try to leverage reaching this understanding, although vacuous, as a goodwill gesture, and try to exact benefits in return. Arab nations might interpret this as substantial progress that potentially merits accelerating forced refugee returns into Syria as part of their step-by-step approach. Alternatively, this could be used to further cement Assad's return as a fact they are forced to engage with regardless of any real concessions he will or will not make.

Instability persisted in Idlib as HTS crackdowns continued with mass arrests targeting opposition voices and internal operatives escalating since mid-June. Reasons for these campaigns revolved around charges of treason and espionage, including sharing vital information with entities like SDF, GoS, and Russia. HTS's response included increased security measures and forming a crisis cell, while a new faction, "Saraya Dir' al-Thawra," targets HTS leaders and fighters demanding prisoner release. Speculations regarding faction's origins and motives varied, with some scenarios including potential ties to SNA's Third Legion, or the group being a front used by HTS to further crackdown on dissidence and opposition within their ranks. These factors combined lead to heightened trouble and instability in Idlib, potentially impacting humanitarian access and safety due to new checkpoints and security measures.

ANALYSIS

I Improved Wheat Season Gives Reprieve to Farmers in NES

SANES announced it will no longer be receiving or buying wheat from farmers past July 31¹, signaling reaching a sufficient capacity to cover the local needs for the year, and the conclusion of this wheat harvest. Indeed, figures of wheat received by SANES this season, estimated at about 1,150,000 tons,² far exceeded the volume needed to cover the 600,000-700,000 tons of local needs in NES estimated by SANES.³ Field sources confirm that this season is perceived as being generally positive by farmers, with the main success factors attributed to setting wheat prices in USD at an acceptable price of 43 cents per kilogram rather than in the continuously deteriorating SYP.

The volume of wheat output has also shown notable improvement from previous seasons, where SANES reportedly received 400,000 tons in 2022, 185,000 tons in 2021, and 609,000 tons in 2020.⁴ Field resources note that while farmers are satisfied with the improvement, they still consider the production to have been limited, attributing said limitations to factors which included prevailing drought conditions, rising cost of agricultural inputs, as well as the rising fuel prices. Another challenge experienced during this season was the delays some farmers experienced in receiving payment for their invoices, which some reported to exceed 45 days.⁵

While this season is considered a positive one, farmers are also cautious of challenges they may face next season in the face of a continuously depreciating Syrian Pound, and rising fuel prices. Indeed, on July 16, the SANES circulated an internal memo stipulating the new prices for various categories of fuel including those subsidized for farming purposes. Farming fuel (Mazot) and harvesting fuel both saw an increase from 425 to 525, and 1200 to 1700 SYP respectively, with some expecting further increases in the near future.⁶

iMMAP's Food Security and Livelihood Unit is currently working on an extensive Wheat to Bread Value Chain assessment which will be taking a more detailed look at some of the improvements, and challenges that characterized different relevant processes in NES. The report is expected to be published during the month of August.

Syrians in NES Protest Deteriorating Living Conditions.

Although some improvements can be glimpsed through the improved wheat harvest in NES this month, rising popular dissatisfaction with living conditions persisted as illustrated by the various protests that took place in different locales. In Hasakeh's neighborhood of Tal Hajar, demonstrators protested the general deterioration of economic conditions marked by recent increases to fuel prices, unavailability of gas and water, as well as lack of sufficient public services.⁷ Due to the Allouk station being inoperable, residents decried their lack of access to water for almost a month. SANES also allocates one gas cylinder per family per month at a subsidized price of 10,000 SYP (having been 7,500 until recent increases in pricing), however, families noted these disbursements have lately been delayed by months.⁸ Field sources indicate that the SDF's general security forces were also present during the demonstrations where they confiscated some protestors' phones to prevent them from photographing the protests, and arrested a number of protestors.

Protests were further motivated by the sense that the recent rise in fuel prices were arbitrary and were not justified since there were no apparent additional costs incurred on the SANES's behalf that would be attributed to improvements made to the infrastructure, or expertise involved in extracting, processing, or distributing local fuel.⁹ A sense of lack of ownership of local resources also seems to have been a driver as protestors believed the output of local oil fields, and the Swedieyeh gas plant would be more than sufficient to cover the local needs if managed correctly. A prevailing local perception, that appears to be on the rise, is that rising fuel prices aim to increase profits made the SANES whose institutions are increasingly driven by interference from the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK).

Field sources note that over the past three years, there has been an increasingly prevalent perception that decisions made by Democratic Union Party (PYD) have been increasingly prioritizing the interests of the PKK over those of the local populations in NES. Anecdotal evidence is often shared on the increased involvement of members of the party in the local economy by establishing new businesses that undercut pre-existing local ones, while simultaneously making it more difficult for non-party-aligned individuals to maintain or expand their own businesses. Contributing to growing dissatisfaction, and lack of confidence in decisions made by the SANES.

Another way that the PKK's growing involvement in the SANES areas manifests and draws public critique is the rising rates of forced conscription, especially children and minors, into the SDF. A recent report by the UN highlights a steady increase in the number of child soldiers enlisted by armed groups over the past three years. In 2022 alone, 1,696 children were recruited, a significant jump from the figure of 813 for the year 2020.¹⁰ While a number of other armed actors contribute to this practice, the report identifies the SDF as being involved in half of these cases (637).¹¹ Although in 2019 the SDF pledged to refrain from recruiting children under 18, the practice has continued among groups operating in SDF-controlled areas, including the PPK-linked Revolutionary Youth.¹² This, according to field resources is another cause of communal tensions with the SDF as families often fear that directing any public critiques on this practice would jeopardize their children's well-being and safety.

Clashes in Der ez-Zor highlight growing community tensions. Another example of this can be seen in the recent incident that took place in Der ez-Zor in July were notable tensions were observed between the SDF and the head of Der ez-Zor's military council, commonly known by the name Abu Khawla. Tensions within the area grew following an exchange of hostilities between members of the SDF's Asayish, and the Der ez-Zor's military council.¹³

Although Abu Khawla's reputation and local approval and acceptance are usually quite poor due to allegations of corruption among others¹⁴, he notably had the support of a portion of the community and tribes in the recent altercation.

A main contributor to this was the tribal ties he has to the local community. However, it could be argued that a further polarizing factor that manifested in this incident was the deteriorating public opinion on the SDF, which made it easier for tribes in the area (a lot of which are Arab) to support who they consider to be one of their own, against an entity they consider to be increasingly misaligned with them.

The SANES held a meeting on 2 August to decide on measures aiming to alleviate the prevailing poor living conditions. Decisions reached as part of this meeting included increasing the allocated bread share for individuals by 25%, increasing fuel rations for irrigation by 20%, as well as a number of other economic, accountability, and security measures, they undoubtedly hope would lower public dissatisfaction.¹⁵ While a lot of these measures would, in theory, play a very positive role in improving living conditions to a certain extent, it is unclear if SANES would be willing, or even able,

to put them into effect. Additionally, SANES still needs to address some of the social tensions that exist within their areas, which would ideally entail further accountability and anti-corruption measures be implemented.

This is very important considering recent geo-political developments manifesting in various parts of Syria. As opposition groups across Syria all strive to be perceived as a reliable negotiating party in any conversation on a political solution to the Syrian crisis, we have been noticing a trend in which de-facto authorities and their security arms increasingly rely on suppressive tactics aimed at dissidence that would undermine their position. Some semblances could also be seen in NWS's HTS's continued arrest campaigns in Idlib, and recent arrest campaigns within SNA factions against their own members. Although the situation in NES remains largely unique and different from those, continued antagonizing of local populations under their administration could lead to more severe instances of the recent incident in Der ez-Zor.

| Whole of Syria Developments

Access through Bab al-Hawa to resume, but humanitarian actors still face uncertainty in new operational environment.

As reported in iMMAP's [June Context Update](#), the failure of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to renew cross-border access of aid through Bab al-Hawa came as a surprise to most actors, particularly due to the air of optimism prevalent prior to the vote as many were hopeful that a 12-month extension would have been possible. In a note verbale shared with the UN, GoS offered to authorize use of Bab al-Hawa for an additional six months under conditions that were rejected firmly by OCHA and other humanitarian organizations and actors. These conditions included that the UN does not coordinate with the local de-facto authorities, deemed by GoS as terrorist entities, and that the implementation of humanitarian deliveries was coordinated through the ICRC and SARC.¹⁶ These were deemed 'inoperable' due to the two entities' lack of presence in and expertise working in NWS. In the period following receipt of the letter, the UN engaged GoS in discussions aiming to negotiate these terms, while maintaining GoS's approval to use the crossing in what has largely been referred to as a consent-based model.

On August 8, the UN's Spokesperson for the Secretary-General made a statement in which it was announced that an understanding was reached with GoS on the continued use for an additional six months.¹⁷ The statement welcomed this extension along with GoS's authorization for Bab al-Rai and Bab al-Salameh for an additional three months.

The initial announcement noted that engagement with GoS was done to "continue providing cross-border humanitarian assistance, at the necessary scale and in a principled manner that allows engagement with all parties for the purposes of seeking humanitarian access and that safeguards the UN's operational independence"¹⁸, but did not provide exact details on the nature of concessions made by the UN or GoS as part of the negotiations. This predictably caused many humanitarian actors to be wary of any changes to the operational environment they may face under this new arrangement.¹⁹

While offering some reprieve to an increasingly aid-dependent population in NWS, the GoS's history of aid manipulation and politicization gives little faith to organizations that any role they play in aid delivery in NWS would be benign. Other anticipated operational challenges may be contingent on how de-facto administrations in NWS react to this approach. Although the general phrasing of the UN statement alludes to their continued ability to engage opposition parties in their operations, there currently is no evidence available on assurances in this regard. This is especially important when considering the recent instability exhibited within opposition areas, where forces like HTS continue to adopt increasingly violent and repressive tactics to address any dissidence, much of which can be attributed to their perception of losing influence as talks on the future of Syria continue to exclude them. As such, lack of sufficient assurances on how authorization and communication with local authorities, could lead to severe hinderances to aid access, as well as pose risks to the safety of humanitarian workers.

While the UNSCR-reliant aid mechanism was far from stable, reliance on GoS's "consent" for aid access might set a dangerous precedent for future renewals. Putting the fate of aid under the complete control of GoS and sidelining the role of the UNSC altogether in future renewals poses major risks, especially when considering Assad's history of aid denial, manipulation, and politicization. For example, a few days prior to the statement, Syria's UN Ambassador, Bassam Sabbagh, reportedly shared a letter with Martin Griffith, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, thanking him for "clarifications on some essential operational modalities." But he also indicated that Syria looks forward to involvement of the ICRC and SARC in the ongoing humanitarian operations in NWS "when circumstances permit".²⁰

GoS has been making considerable gains in reclaiming legitimacy on the global stage in recent months. Through deferring to Assad's decision on use of Bab al-Hawa, he also made progress in further weakening critiques to aid obstruction on basis of breaching sovereignty, an argument instrumentalized extensively by Russia and China in previous votes on renewals, which now appears to have further materialized. Although the exact nature and details of how a solution to Syria might eventually look like, GoS has been the chief providers of input in shaping that vision, and following this development, Assad is inching closer to regaining control over border areas he had lost control over.

It is also important to note that a potential motivator for GoS's apparent willingness to respond to the UN's concerns this time around is political posturing. Although making progress in restoring diplomatic relations with Arab countries in the past few months, there has been somewhat of a recent loss of momentum in the past month. This was exemplified by Saudi Arabia's hesitation on continuing work in their embassy in Damascus, as well as not appointing an ambassador to Syria despite similar appointments elsewhere.²¹

This perceived hesitation could be attributed to the fact that since the meeting in Amman in May, the GoS and Assad have offered little to no concessions to their Arab counterparts. As such, it is possible that even if real concessions were made by the GoS to the UN on access this time around, they were motivated by wanting to demonstrate progress to their Arab counterparts, especially when considering that a meeting is slated to be held in Cairo in mid-August to follow up on progress made on commitments made in the Amman meeting. As such, there are no guarantees renewals will be granted in the future.

Furthermore, GoS's reference to SARC and ICRC's involvement when "circumstances permit" could also become a pressure point for future negotiations on access. Actors will be better able to assess further impacts of the transition to this new modality as more details emerge in the coming days, and weeks. In order for this "understanding" to have the intended benefits, the UN will need to engage with humanitarian organizations with full transparency on terms agreed upon with GoS and ensure that any operationalization of these terms happens in consultation with them.

Re-embrace of Assad continues, but faces potential delays. In July, Jordan recommitted to their instrumental role in returning Assad from his isolation from the region. Following a visit to Damascus, the Jordanian foreign minister met with his Turkish counterpart in Ankara to discuss a number of matters relating to Syria in continuation, and consistent with, Jordan's emerging "step-by-step" plan for a solution in Syria. The minister also noted Ankara and Amman are "on the same page" regarding Syria in terms of the end result being refugee return and called for an international fund to facilitate the voluntary and safe return of Syrian refugees. Jordan also hosted a meeting on July 23 in Amman which included the participation of the two countries' army and intelligence chiefs to discuss border security and curbing the Captagon trade.²²

It is worth noting that since the recent Arab regional efforts to re-engage Assad, even according to the Jordan's three-tiered plan, the GoS has not displayed much or any signs that could be interpreted as concessions. The next meeting to follow up on items of said plan is reportedly slated to take place in mid-august in Cairo. The GoS-UN recent "understanding" could be instrumentalized as a show of good will to their Arab counterparts. Although such gestures can be superficial in terms of real substance, especially when considering that the allowing UN aid into Bab al-Hawa could, at best, be described as a return to a worse, less-stable version of the status quo, there remains a concern that Arab countries would consider them as substantial, and in according to their step-by-step approach, basis to continue and ramp up the forced return of refugees from neighboring countries into Syria.

Perhaps more notably though, is that this increased progress towards autonomy could also be used to signal to Arab countries that regardless of any concessions they may exact from him, they are making a return to the regional stage as an autonomous, sovereign state, rather than a government whose authority is contested, and can therefore be steered. This could motivate Arab countries to settle for less substantial gestures made by Assad as sufficient to bring him in further, for fear of losing out on any benefits they would otherwise gain.

Instability in Idlib persists. Areas under the rule of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham continued to experience instability during the month of July. The group's crackdown in recent months on opposition voices belonging to Hezb al-Tahrir among others seem to continue to with mass arrest campaigns continuing to take place.

In addition to this, since mid-June, HTS has been carrying out a mass-arrest campaign that primarily seems to target operatives within its own ranks. The arrests have reached higher-ups within the group including the Human Resources department for the military branch, the head of a security department overseeing surveillance cameras and internet lines in Idlib, the media liaison officer, persons working in the office of the SSG president, as well as high-level personnel. All in all, it is reported that more than 300 people have been arrested so far with the campaign still ongoing.²³

Reasons for these campaigns reportedly revolve around charges of treason and espionage which local media reports to have been operating in various, independent, cells. Accusations included passing on vital information, and documentation which according to some sources involved sharing the full documentation and Identification of HTS operatives by a HTS HR staffer to various entities including the SDF, the GoS and Russia.²⁴

In response to this, al-Golani reportedly formed a minor crisis cell that includes himself, as well as two major figures of the leadership. However, this formation notably excluded Abu Maria al-Qahtani touted to be the number two man in HTS who handles security issues for the group, including matters relating to "espionage".²⁵ HTS's response also included erecting of new crossings and barriers, and significant increase in security measures. One of which is the full replacement of personnel operating the Atmeh-Deir Ballout crossing connecting Idlib to Afrin. Though unable to verify the accuracy of information pertaining to the reason these arrests, field resources confirmed the sense of tension currently prevailing within the ranks of HTS as out of the ordinary. HTS on their part have made little to no public comments on the matter.

Another factor exacerbating the security conditions in Idlib is the emergence of the newly established "Saraya Dir' al-Thawra" faction in mid-June. The faction's actions as well as video-statements indicate they primarily target HTS leaders and fighters. Their demands included the release of prisoners held by HTS.²⁶

Speculation on the background of the faction and if or which they belong to any of the existing armed groups. Some think of them as a natural response to the recent measures HTS has taken to dismantle and repress and dissidence within their areas, while others speculate they could have ties to the SNA's Third Legion²⁷. Another theory is the group is put together as a façade for HTS to eliminate voices that might oppose them in the coming period while minimizing the negative perception that would be associated with it.

The continuation of these three factors all spell trouble and instability in Idlib and could manifest in decreased access for humanitarian actors due to new checkpoints, security measures, and any prolonged exchange of hostilities that may develop.

CONCLUSION

Although the wheat harvest season in NES was generally perceived to be a positive one, and a noticeably improved one to previous seasons, challenges were still encountered by farmers who faced delays in receiving payment for their yields, and fear that the upcoming season will bear further challenges in the form of rising cost of agricultural inputs, especially fuel, and a depreciating Syrian Pound. Further aspects of the increasingly worsening living conditions in NES were noticed in the protests held in Der ez-Zor, Manbij, and Hasakeh all of which included demands of exacting measures to alleviate the economic burden families suffer from. Although SANES is set to implement some measures aiming to alleviate some of these conditions, it remains unclear if they are able, or willing to follow through on their promises.

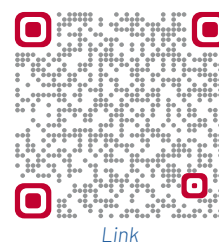
This also comes at a time of increasing communal tensions as exhibited by the security incidents between the SDF and the Der ez-Zor Military Council. A growing sense of SANES policies increasingly favoring PKK interest at the expense of non-party-aligned persons is contributing to a sense of abandonment by the SANES and SDF. In July, this manifested in local tribes backing the Military Council's head, Abu Khawla, despite him being a contentious and divisive figure locally.

The month of July also marked a significant shift in how aid is delivered into NWS as failure to renew the UNSCR that authorized access ushered in the introduction of a new modality for aid delivery that depends on GoS authorization. While the UN announced an understanding was reached with GoS that would address concerns regarding the initial conditions set by GoS to allow accesses, the details of the concessions the UN had to made to reach such an understanding, as well as guarantees that would be offered to humanitarian workers to ensure the continuation of aid delivery in a principled and safe manner requires further clarification.

This development also marked a significant win for GoS as the de facto authorizer of aid to NWS. It would also make future objections to referring to UNSCR for future access even more difficult as objections on the basis of breaching sovereignty will now have more backing. Furthermore, this win could both be used as offering to facilitate further Arab re-engagement, and failing that, a message that Assad's return to the international arena as sovereign is taking place regardless of their position or approach, further pushing them to engage for fear of benefits they would lose out on otherwise.

The months to come could hold potential for increased instability across Syria's various hubs as opposition entities try to cement and expand their authority, and influence, while being increasingly excluded from any real discussions or diplomatic engagement. One potential scenario is the increasingly insecure factions and authorities employ progressively repressive tactics to remove any dissidence from being public. This can be seen in the case of HTS's crackdown in Idlib, which if continues, would lead to a very difficult operational landscape for humanitarian workers to navigate.

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