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Syria: Humanitarian Operations and Conflict-related Sensitivity

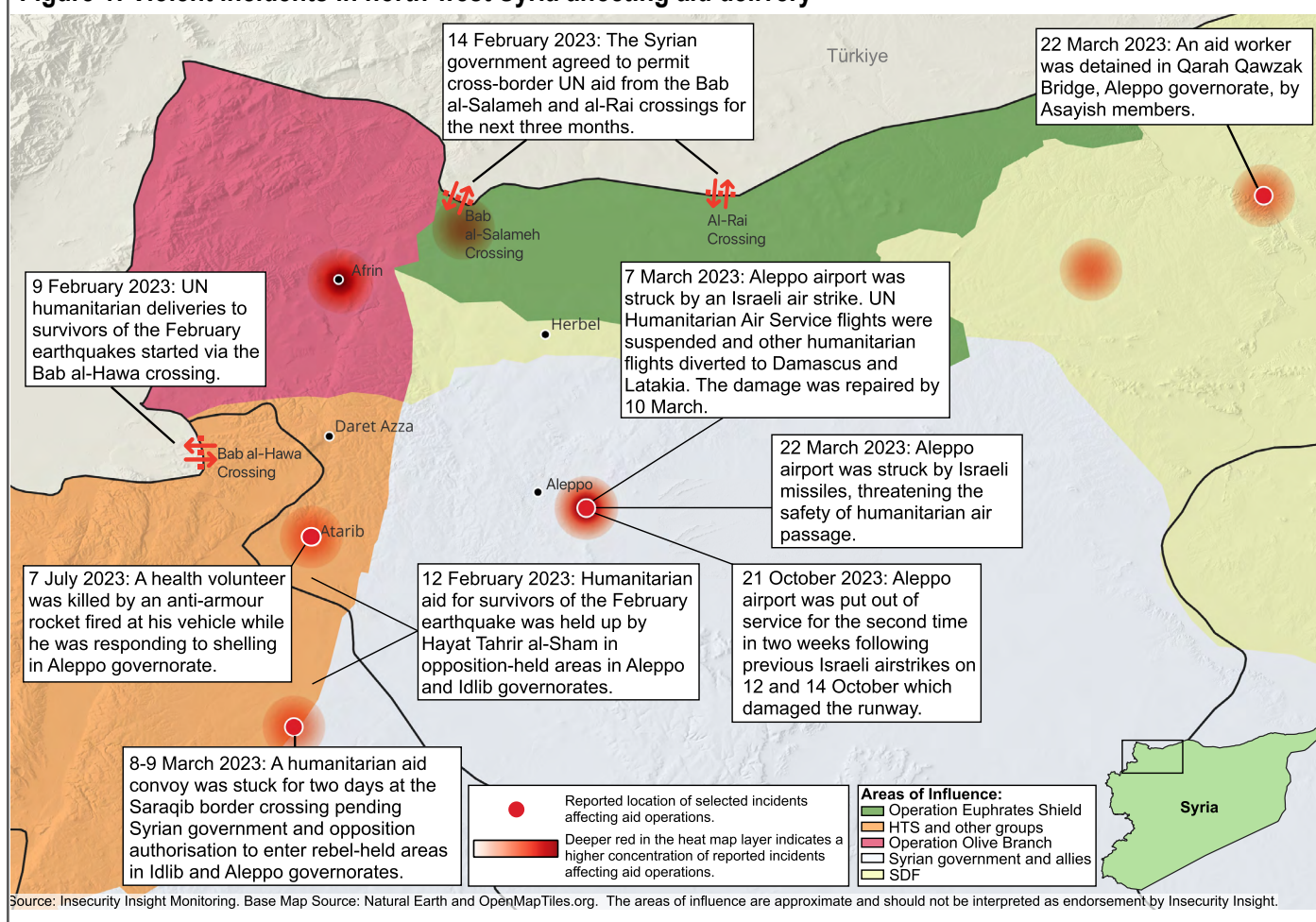
October 2023

The complex challenges created by the Syrian civil war are highly unlikely to be resolved in the next few years and will continue to affect aid operations in Syria. A changing geopolitical context is further complicating the operating environment. The discussions around aid access through border crossings from Türkiye into Syria illustrate some of the complexities and challenges aid agencies must navigate. This document discusses aid operations in northern Syria in the light of the current security context.

Summary

- Humanitarian needs remain at high levels among conflict-affected and poverty-stricken populations in Syria, and humanitarian aid continues to be politicised.
- The overall security situation has improved across north-west Syria, but internal and regional dynamics have the potential to alter the fragile status quo and may result in further civilian casualties, displacement, and violence, and will continue to hinder humanitarian access.
- Aid agencies have to navigate the challenges affecting aid access and the effective and accountable delivery of aid through complex political and conflict scenarios and dwindling humanitarian funds, while at the same time ensuring protection for vulnerable populations and adherence to humanitarian principles.
- This brief provides a summary of the current geopolitical background to support aid agencies' attempts to deal with conflict-related sensitivities. The main focus is on north-west Syria, and the brief highlights some key takeaways from the conversations around the border crossings that followed the February 2023 earthquake.

Figure 1: Violent incidents in north-west Syria affecting aid delivery



The 6 February 2023 earthquake struck an area in Syria that had been heavily affected by the civil war since 2011. The earthquake, the epicentre of which was near the Turkish city of Gaziantep, was one of the strongest ever recorded in the Levant. Turkish media coverage has focused on Türkiye, where there were over 50,000 deaths (many of whom were Syrian refugees). There were also over 8,000 deaths in Syria itself, according to the International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation. The earthquake affected some 10 million people in four of Syria's governorates, causing significant damage that the World Bank estimated in March to be around US\$5.1 billion in Syria alone. The political and security situation in Syria significantly complicated the earthquake response. The Syrian government took a full week to consent to life-saving cross-border aid access. The government and opposition Syrian National Army both impeded cross-line aid (i.e. aid that moves across front lines between opposing forces) to affected communities, while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in north-west Syria refused cross-line aid from Damascus.

Since 2014 most international aid into north-west Syria has passed through the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Syria and Türkiye. Following the earthquake in February 2023, two other crossings – Bab al-Salameh and Bab al-Rai – were opened in mid-February [following an agreement](#) with the Syrian government. In July 2023 the UN Security Council failed to adopt a resolution to reauthorise the delivery of cross-border aid to north-west Syria due to a Russian veto. This resolution had created a mechanism that allowed the delivery of humanitarian assistance into opposition-controlled parts of Syria without requiring the consent of the Syrian government. On 9 August the UN managed to reach an understanding to [reopen](#) the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for six months. However, as of 29 August the UN [stated](#) that aid was yet to restart via the Bab al-Hawa crossing. The discussions around the border crossing for aid supplies highlight a number of the wide-ranging challenges affecting the delivery of aid in north-west Syria. The politicisation of aid creates a challenging environment for maintaining aid independence and strengthening accountability to affected populations who are fearful of being compromised, while ensuring that aid can be brought into the country and that aid operations do not feed into corrupt practices. This brief examines some of the background complexities and highlights longer-term implications for the aid sector in terms of how to deliver principled humanitarian aid in conflict-affected areas.

Box 1: Humanitarian response architecture in Syria

The humanitarian response [architecture](#) in Syria is complex, and aid operations are run through three separate response hubs in Damascus, Gaziantep, and north-eastern Syria. The Syria Humanitarian Country Team coordinates humanitarian assistance from Damascus to areas controlled by the Syrian government. The Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Liaison Group in Gaziantep, Türkiye, coordinates the humanitarian assistance delivered cross-border from Türkiye into areas of north-west Syria controlled by non-state armed groups. The North-East Syria NGO Forum coordinates the humanitarian response by NGOs from Iraq and areas controlled by local authorities.

The situation in Syria in October 2023

The Syrian civil war has been an extremely complex struggle, with a variety of internal and external actors influencing developments. Actors include the Syrian government, which is allied with Iran and Russia, and the initial backers of the early non-state armed groups, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The conflict has developed to a stage where the Syrian population now experiences a stabilised, though in the majority of cases, poverty-stricken existence, with the key actors in 2023 the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by the United States. After the [Islamic State group \(IS\)](#) lost its last physical stronghold in al-Baghouz in March 2019, a rejuvenated Assad regime has increasingly reasserted its control over the country's borders.

Over the past years the intensity of the conflict has gradually declined, allowing aid agencies to run multiple programmes in various parts of northern Syria. Access difficulties and security risks remain, affecting both aid agencies and the population's access to key services. In particular, so-called security operations, in the form of air strikes, shelling, raids, and arrests, continue to affect aid agencies and impact on key humanitarian concerns such as food security, access to health care and education, and protection for internally displaced populations. Some geopolitical developments have important implications for aid access and humanitarian needs, requiring strategic choices to enable effective aid delivery and ensure the adequate management of security and reputational risk on the basis of principled humanitarian action.

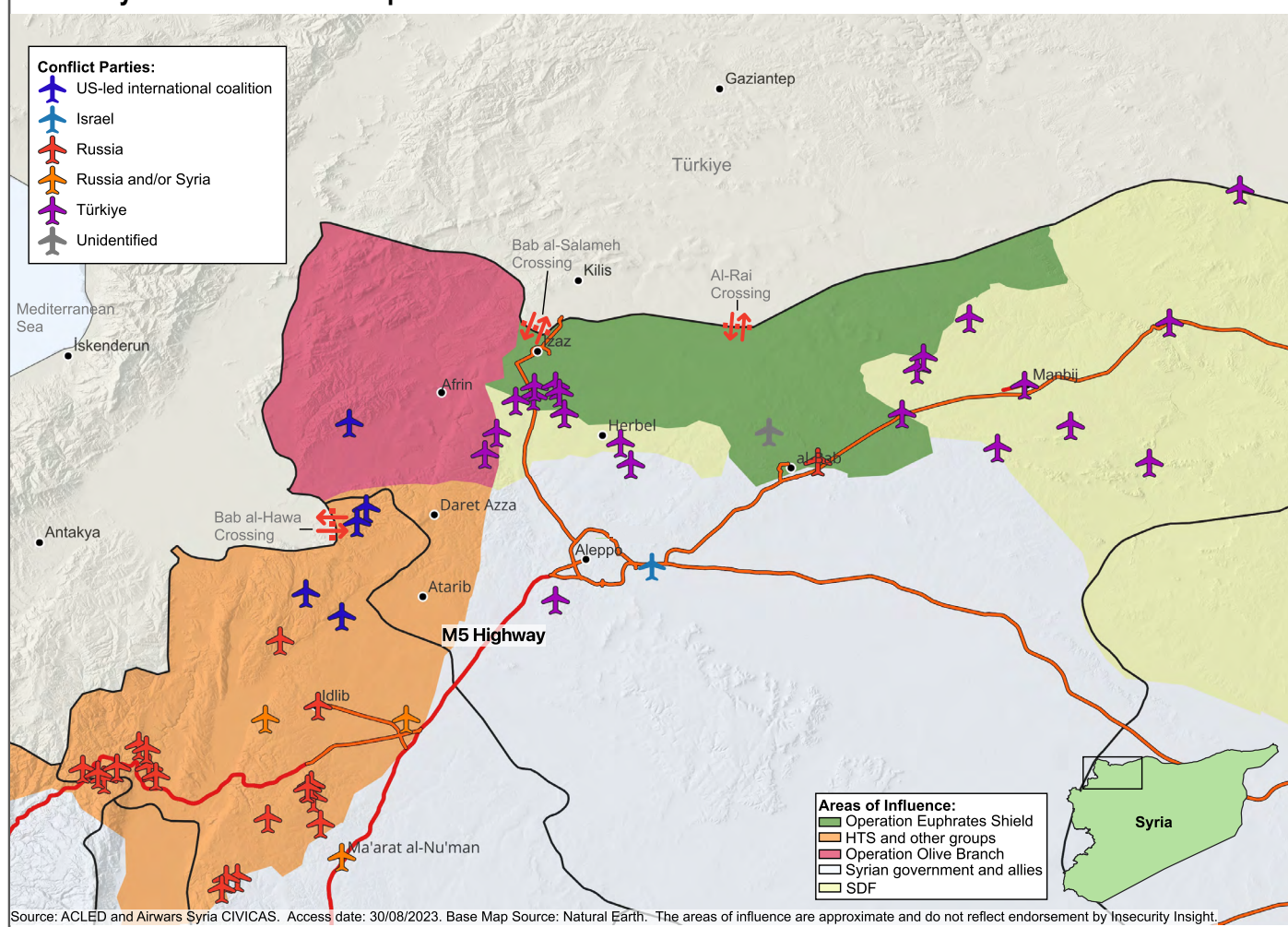
In May 2023 [Syria was welcomed back into the Arab League](#) after more than a decade of isolation, having been suspended in response to the violent crackdown on protesters in March 2011. Although Assad remains a pariah for Western governments, Syria's readmission to the Arab League shows how even regional actors that supported the armed opposition view the reality of his government's survival as being the key factor in future relations, and consider the wider "Arab identity" more important than human rights. This is occurring despite Assad's continued close ties to Iran.

Both Iran and Russia have supported the Assad regime since the beginning of the civil war, with Moscow providing [direct military support since September 2015](#), initially at least against what it claimed were IS targets. With this assistance, the Assad government has steadily regained control of territory held by opposition forces, including the opposition stronghold of Aleppo in 2016. Russian drone and air strikes in north-west Syria have continued despite Moscow's increasing focus on its invasion of Ukraine, with the most recent [reported](#) on 6 October, which was in response to the dozens of people killed on 5 October's large-scale opposition drone attack on a government military academy in the western city of Homs. The 6 October attack led to the death of a two-year-old child. The conflict is now largely frozen, with areas still under the control of HTS and other armed opposition groups now limited to parts of northern Idlib governorate and adjacent areas of Latakia and Aleppo, although localised fighting continues intermittently, with an impact on aid operations.

For example, in July 2023 a local health volunteer was killed when his vehicle was hit by an anti-armour rocket fired by the Syrian army as he was responding to the impact of shelling on the road between Al-Atareb city and Kafr Nouran town, an area under HTS control. Syrian armed forces shelling in Hama, Idlib and Aleppo governorates in May, June, July and October have caused crop fires affecting food production on at least 11 occasions in 2023. The majority of these incidents occurred in Hama governorate in May and June. A Russian air strike and shelling by the Turkish armed forces are also reported to have caused the outbreak of crop fires in Ar Raqqa governorate, while IS is also reported to have set crops on fire in Homs governorate in June 2023. In at least one case more than 100 acres of wheat were affected by the fires.

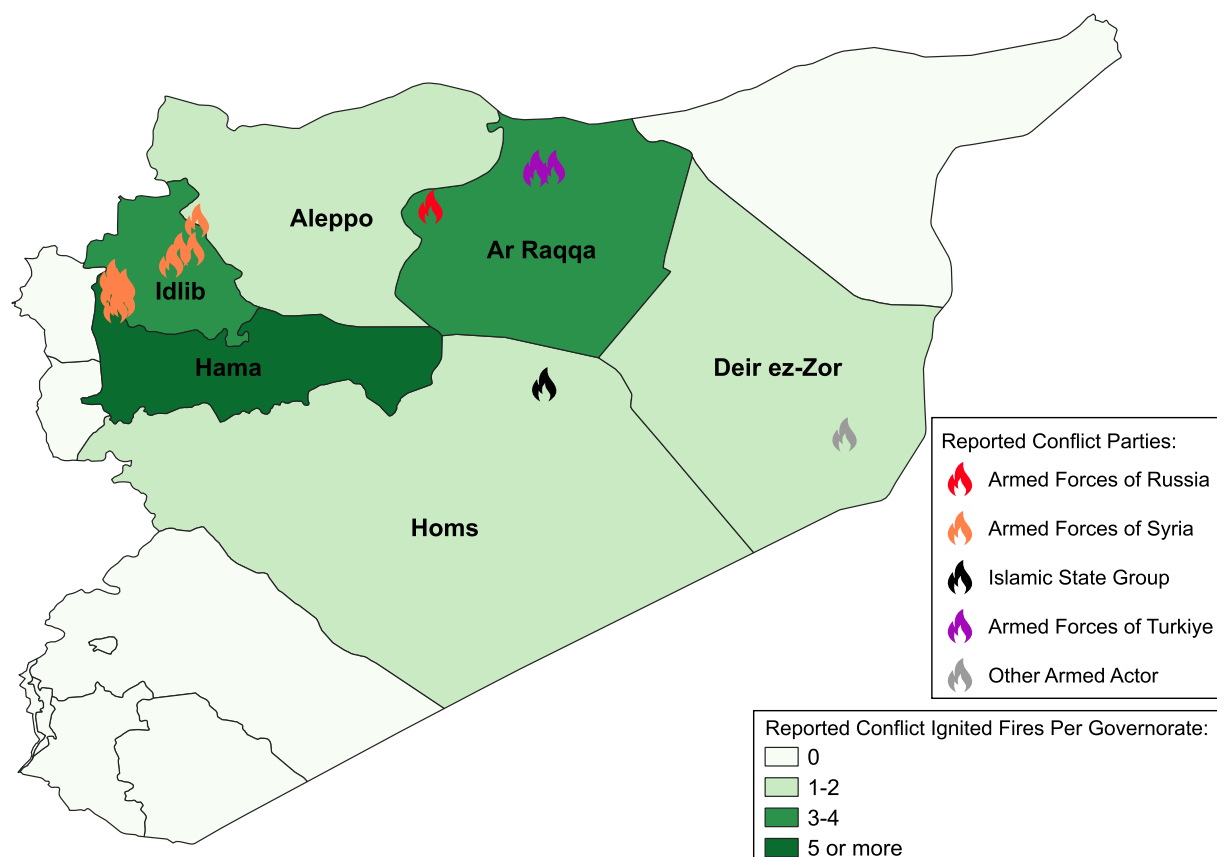
Meanwhile, Israel continues to attack targets in northern Syria, with a continued focus on pro-Iranian militia and the Syrian army, especially following the 7 October Hamas offensive from Gaza into Israel. By 23 October 2023, Israel air strikes have targeted Aleppo airport at least three times over two weeks. The strikes on 21 October 2023, targeted both runways after they had only just restarted services following previous air strike on 12 October against both Aleppo airport in the north and Damascus airport that damaged the runways of both airports, putting them out of service. Mainstream Media reported that strikes on the airports are intended to disrupt Iranian supply lines to Syria. This is highly likely, especially because Iran supports both the pro-Iranian groups of Hamas and Hezbollah, which have supported Assad during the Syrian civil war and there continues to be reported presence of Iranian troops within Syria. Both Aleppo and Damascus airports remain out of use at present, but will likely be repaired, because they are important transport hubs. However, it is highly likely that they will be targeted again, especially if Israel believes that Iran is supplying pro-Iranian militia through the airports and moving munitions into Israel from Syria or via Lebanon.

Figure 2: Reported air strikes in Idlib and Aleppo governorates between 1 January and 5 August 2023 affecting the safety environment for aid operations



Türkiye, which has occupied parts of northern Syria, on paper remains opposed to the Assad regime. However the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, offered to meet Assad for talks in July, but stated that he would not meet him if a withdrawal of Turkish troops from north-west Syria was set as a condition for the meeting. Türkiye supported the nascent FSA as well as other more radical [factions linked to al-Qaeda](#) from the very beginning of the civil war, and later conducted direct military interventions into Syria that have resulted in the Turkish occupation of significant parts of the country since August 2016. However, in 2022 the defence ministers from both countries met for the highest-level talks between the two neighbours since the 2011 Arab Spring; meanwhile, the foreign ministers of the two countries also met in Moscow in May 2023 ahead of Turkish elections as part of talks overseen by Russia. This came as Turkish shelling in Ar Raqqa governorate caused crop fires in June and July, affecting local food production. Turkish shelling also hit IDP settlements in Ar Raqqa governorate in February and Aleppo in June, and Turkish-backed militiamen attacked an aid worker in May in Afrin, Aleppo governorate.

Figure 3: Conflict-ignited crop fires in Syria affecting food security, 1 January-5 October 2023 (17 reported incidents)



Source: Insecurity Insight Monitoring. Base Map Source: Natural Earth. Names and boundaries used do not reflect official acceptance or endorsement by Insecurity Insight.

Box 2: Violence in Syrian refugee camps

Insecurity Insight's monitoring has recorded a total of 195 incidents of threats or violence inside Syrian refugee camps between January 2021 and July 2023. In these incidents, 123 residents have been killed, including women and children, and numerous others injured. In addition, over 300 more have been arrested by various security forces and armed groups. Over two-thirds of these incidents have occurred inside Al-Hol camp, and frequently involved assassinations by IS militants or sympathisers, or security operations by the SDF and Asayish police. Read more about this [here](#).

The effect of the Ukraine conflict

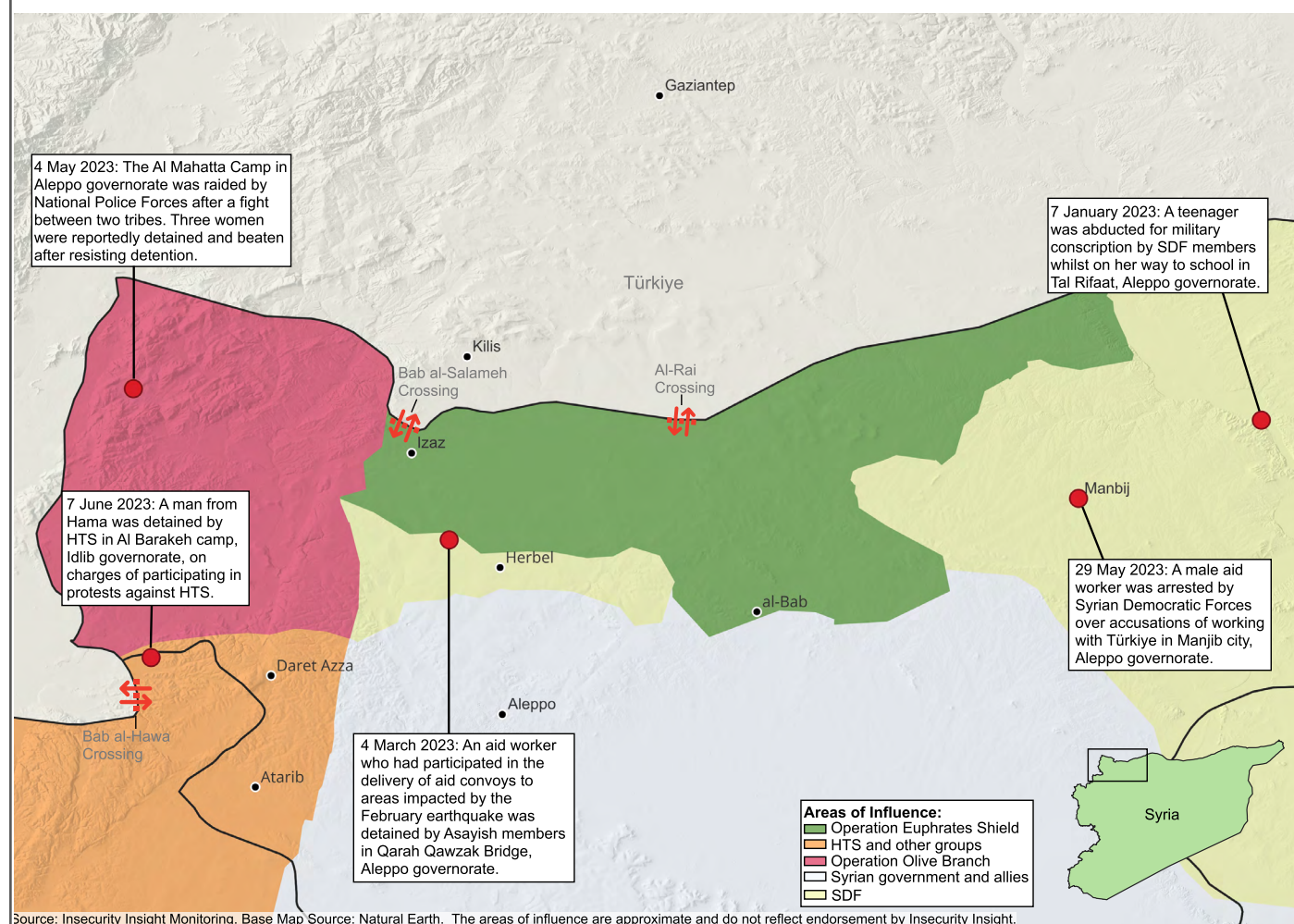
Russia's increasing international isolation following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a significant effect on the situation in Syria. Although growing Russian losses in Ukraine have not led to a complete troop and aircraft withdrawal, they have triggered a Russian regrouping in Syria and a focus on securing what Russia regards as its key facilities. In May 2022, Moscow's invasion of Ukraine was not the quick campaign it had hoped, therefore **withdrew troops from outlying positions** in Aleppo and elsewhere to focus on defending its key assets in Syria: Tartus naval facility, Hmeimim airbase, and the Qamishli, Deir e-Zor and T4 airfields. Both Tartus and Hmeimim have been expanded over the past three years and both remain key to Russian operations

both in support of the Assad regime and to implement Moscow’s geopolitical aims across the region and into Africa. Reduced cooperation with the international community – possibly exacerbated by tensions with Ankara over its military support for Ukraine and its opposition to Assad – led Russia to **veto an extension of the UN Security Council mandate** governing cross-border aid delivery through Bab al-Hawa into Idlib when it expired in early July 2023. This came in parallel with Russia’s withdrawal from the Turkish-brokered Black Sea grain initiative that facilitated the export of Ukrainian grain. The Bab al-Hawa veto prevented the import of key supplies, including food and medicines, at a time of rising food prices.

Türkiye’s role

During the conflict Türkiye has supported the FSA and other more radical factions. Following the Turkish military’s Operation Euphrates Shields in 2016-2017 and Operation Olive Branch in 2018, Türkiye occupied parts of Syria. Additional direct military interventions into Syria were carried out in 2019, 2020, and 2022, which resulted in further Turkish occupation of towns previously under the control of the Autonomous Administrations in Al-Hasakah and Ar Raqqa governorates. Since then Türkiye has resettled Sunni Arab refugees in previously Kurdish areas along the border in an attempt to **change the ethnic makeup of the population there** and so create a “buffer zone” to bolster its own security. This also allowed Ankara significant influence over the delivery of aid to north-west Syria even before the February earthquake.

Figure 4: Examples of “security operations” on the ground in camps with direct effects on aid operations, January-June 2023



Türkiye's involvement in Syria is driven by a mix of its own security concerns and economic factors. Ankara views the Kurds as a direct threat to its territorial integrity, whether they originate from Syria, Iraq, Iran or inside Türkiye itself. Although the threat from IS was used as an excuse for Türkiye's incursions into Syria (Turkish troops and their Sunni Arab militia allies have fought IS on occasions), the territory that Türkiye occupied as a buffer zone and the ethnic policies that seeks to remove the Kurdish population from areas such as Afrin clearly demonstrate Ankara's intent.

Economics is another key driver of Turkish policy in Syria, with implications for protection concerns. As of July 2023 more than **3.3 million Syrian refugees were registered in Türkiye**, which now hosts the largest refugee population in the world. This has led to complaints that the refugees are undermining Turkish domestic employment. According to the International Labour Organisation, in 2022 **half of the working-age Syrian refugees worked** mostly informally in menial jobs. This has also led to significant tensions between the Turkish population and Syrian refugees. The situation was further exacerbated by the February 2023 earthquake. Consequently, Türkiye has sought to encourage or coerce many refugees to return to Turkish-controlled areas of Syria, many which are former Kurdish population centres.

The civil war and the Syrian opposition

The last round of talks by the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which was established in 2019 to rewrite Syria's constitution, took place in May 2022, with limited progress. Although the parties agreed to hold a ninth session of talks in Geneva, no session has taken place since then.

An offensive in early 2020 by the Syrian army and allied militias, backed by Russian air strikes, regained control of the M5 highway that connects Damascus and Aleppo and brought key towns and villages in north-west Syria, such as Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, Khan Sheikhoun, and Saraqeb, under Syrian government control, while reportedly displacing around one million people. Although the line of control has seen no significant changes since the 2020 offensive, intermittent clashes still take place between Turkish-backed opposition forces and the Syrian army. Russian air strikes on opposition-held towns also continued into 2023.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Meanwhile, the Sunni Arab HTS is the opposition group in north-west Syria controlling most of Idlib governorate. Its Syrian Salvation Government acts as the sole legitimate representative of the 4.5 million people in the area. According to recent reports, HTS is attempting to stabilise the region through demilitarisation (except for its own fighters) by targeting IS sleeper cells and other opposition groups. Some armed opposition groups are also reaching out to the civilian population. For example, the HTS leader, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, met with a few of Idlib's remaining Christians (who live in the villages of Qunaya, al-Yacoubiah, and Jdayde near Jisr al-Shugur) in August 2022, which led to a ceremony to reopen a church in al-Yacoubiah the following month. That said, and despite HTS's near total control of Idlib and parts of Aleppo's countryside, rival groups continue to challenge its control, albeit unsuccessfully thus far.

Hurras al-Din

Meanwhile, on 23 August 2023 the jihadist group Hurras al-Din released a statement attacking HTS and the "traitor" elements in it for working with foreign powers, likely alluding to HTS's relations with Türkiye and its attempt to be recognised internationally. The statement also asserted that Hurras al-Din fighters continue to operate in HTS-controlled areas, although the group currently remains inactive for fear of being eliminated completely.

A possible military council

Similarly, talks about a military council resurfaced since it was first announced in 2021 by its founder, Brig. Gen. Manaf Tlass, who defected from the Assad regime in 2012 and who currently resides in Paris. Tlass is the son of General Mustafa Tlass, the former Syrian defence minister and one of the closest people to both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. The military council is presented as “a Syrian national project, far from any form of affiliation or tutelage to any party, whether international or regional”.

IS

On 3 August 2023 IS officially announced the death of its leader, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi, through an audio statement in which a new leader was also announced. This confirmation came four months after Türkiye’s National Intelligence Organisation reported that it had neutralised al-Qurashi in an intelligence operation. However, IS contradicted Türkiye’s account of al-Qurashi’s death and claimed he died in a clash with HTS, labelling the latter an «apostate» group and hinting at escalated operations in HTS-controlled areas. Although IS no longer controls any territory in Syria, the group continues to launch attacks and ambushes, mostly targeting Syrian army units and allied militiamen in north-east Syria.

Protests in Druze governorate

In government-controlled areas, thousands of Syrians in the predominantly Druze governorate of Al Sweida protested in August 2023 for two consecutive weeks against worsening economic conditions, and called for President Assad to step down. The protests began on 20 August 2023 after the Assad government announced a significant rise in the price of subsidised fuel and gas, which Syrians use to heat their homes and for transportation. This caused economic hardship for many people, despite a 100% increase in government salaries. Druze religious leaders, who were once supportive of the government, met and acknowledged the people’s right to peaceful protests against government policies. However, they did not fully endorse the demand for Assad to step down and have agreed to meet with the governor, although thus far no agreement has been reached.

Al Sweida remained under government control during the Syrian conflict and resisted being drawn into the civil war. The ongoing economic crisis, characterised by currency devaluations and high prices, has fuelled concerns about the protests spreading to other areas. Indeed, several protests were recorded in Daraa governorate, and calls for a nationwide strike and protests are ubiquitous on opposition social media accounts. Simultaneously, a movement that calls itself the “10th of August Movement” began posting pictures from various cities and towns in government-held areas calling for Assad to leave office and for a political solution to be found to the Syrian conflict based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This came as the Syrian pound experienced an unprecedented decline, with its value dropping by over 50% from January to July 2023. Indeed, since Syria’s re-entry into the Arab League in May 2023 the currency has lost over 35% of its value. Currently, Syrians in government-held areas are facing the worst living conditions since the beginning of the conflict in 2011.

The Arab League

After 12 years of isolation imposed on Syria, several Arab countries have normalised relations with the Assad regime. This shift was highlighted by the Arab League’s decision to restore Syria’s membership and invite Assad to attend the Arab League Summit on 19 May 2023 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. While some neighbouring countries hope that such efforts will facilitate the safe return of refugees, others want Assad to combat the production and distribution of illicit drugs, most notably Captagon, in Syria and reduce the country’s dependence on Iran. While normalisation holds symbolic

significance for Assad and his allies, Russia and Iran, it is unlikely that there will be any immediate improvements from such a move for ordinary Syrians or that there will be any significant impact for aid agencies. Furthermore, the Assad regime has not curbed the Captagon trade, and shipments originating in Syria continue to be [confiscated](#) in neighbouring countries and in [Germany](#). Meanwhile, living conditions in Assad-controlled areas continue to deteriorate, which will not encourage refugees to return home.

The UN, Syria and the delivery of aid following the 2023 earthquake

The earthquake that hit southern Türkiye and north-west Syria in February 2023 highlighted critical challenges facing the delivery of aid to this part of Syria and revealed the vulnerabilities of the opposition-held regions facing humanitarian crises. The UN response to the earthquake was hindered by the destruction of key infrastructure, the delicate political situation, the politicisation of aid, and the fact that the affected area was mostly outside the international state system.

The UN emphasised that it needed a Security Council resolution or the permission of the Syrian government to send humanitarian aid across the border, but the government only gave permission for aid to be delivered a week after the earthquake had occurred. However, international legal experts [questioned](#) the UN's claims and said that “deaths could have been prevented, if the UN had used a different interpretation of international law to allow it to respond in north-west Syria”. The UN's delay in responding to the earthquake in the area has damaged its image both in the area and among the Syrian opposition population, many of whom have reported to local sources their feeling of having been let down by the UN and the international community.

When the Russian veto in July 2023 meant that the UN Security Council failed to adopt a resolution to reauthorise the delivery of cross-border aid to north-west Syria without the consent of the Syrian government, the UN managed to reach an understanding to reopen the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for six months during talks between UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths and Syrian officials. Two other crossings, Bab al-Salameh and Bab al-Rai, will also remain open for three more months.

Terms originally demanded by the Syrian government in its letter allowing the UN to access the Bab al-Hawa crossing highlighted two key challenges for aid operations in Syria. As quoted from the [OCHA letter](#) to the Syrian government: “... the Syria Government had stressed that the United Nations should not communicate with entities designated as ‘terrorist’.” The government also demanded that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) supervise and facilitate the distribution of humanitarian aid in north-west Syria.

The UN called these conditions “unacceptable”. It raised concerns over the first point, stating that «The United Nations and its implementing partners must continue to engage with relevant state and non-state parties as operationally necessary”. With many IDPs likely linked to some armed opposition in the area, including HTS and possibly IS, this would have made the delivery of aid difficult to carry out in many instances. Maintaining such a principled stand on aid neutrality and independence is key for all aid operations. On the second point, the UN stated that this demand was «neither consistent with the independence of the United Nations nor practical, as the ICRC and SARC are not present» in north-west Syria.

The Syrian government appeared to “loosen” the terms of the conditions set for the delivery of aid when [replying](#) to the UN letter, reiterating its offer, but not referring to the two conditions referred to above.

Despite the principled stand over the conditions for aid being delivered through the border crossing, the UN continues to have a problematic reputation in Syria, especially on social media, with local commentators questioning the effectiveness of aid delivery and alleging corruption and complicity with the government (See [WFP Aid Cuts in Syria Reactions on Social Media](#); [Attitude towards](#)

border crossings openings in Syria for aid convoys and Earthquake-affected Populations in Syria Weary of Corruption and Favouritism in Aid Distribution).

Box 3: Balancing sovereignty and humanitarian principles in cross-border access

An IMMAP report examined the challenges caused for aid agencies' humanitarian mandates in the context of the UN's predisposition to affirm state sovereignty. The report argued that a focus on state sovereignty hampers the aid sector's ability to impartially deliver aid to vulnerable communities in areas of non-state governance in situations where states are violating humanitarian principles.

UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 in 1991 outlined 12 guiding principles that shaped OCHA's mandate in conflict zones based on the broader principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These principles outline the conditions under which international aid agencies can gain access to areas of armed conflict. In line with its interpretation of international humanitarian law (IHL) as an intergovernmental organisation, the UN prioritises obtaining legal authorisation to deliver aid through the consent of the sovereign authority, usually the internationally recognised government of the affected state.

However, this approach is based on the assumption that these governments are both willing and able to facilitate aid distribution within their borders. Complexities arise when sovereign governments arbitrarily restrict access to humanitarian aid. Such behaviour has been a recurring issue in the Syrian conflict. However, it is not unique to Syria, but has been a common feature in many intrastate conflicts worldwide that involve fragmented polities with multiple authorities.

In situations of arbitrary refusal to provide sovereign consent, legal authorisation to deliver international aid can be secured either through a UN Security Council resolution or by obtaining the consent of the "parties concerned". At the time of the establishment of the UN cross-border mechanism (UNXBM) in July 2014, there was no unified local authority in Syria from which to obtain such consent. However, the situation has evolved, and legal experts argue that the consolidation of control by the Syrian Salvation Government and Syrian Interim Government over border crossings into north-west Syria now provides a suitable local authority. This should allow for access negotiations and the possibility of obtaining consent from such parties to the conflict.

At the time of its adoption, UN Security Council Resolution 2165 played a pivotal role in facilitating humanitarian aid to areas outside of Syrian government control. Cross-border access was underpinned by the application of humanitarian and impartial principles to assist those in dire need. However, with the internationalisation of the Syrian conflict, the UNXBM has been increasingly and successfully challenged by Syrian government allies on the UN Security Council, specifically Russia and China, on the basis that it infringes on Syrian sovereignty. This development is part of a broader trend where international aid negotiations are leveraged by autocratic regimes for their own political and security gains.

The aid system effectively requires consent from a regime accused of committing war crimes against its own population. Such a stance challenges the principles of impartiality and neutrality in humanitarian assistance, with significant human and operational implications for aid agencies.

In the view of some observers, the Assad regime "has effectively co-opted a cross-border operation, originally designed to function without its approval, into one that now necessitates its consent. This shift has occurred without any evidence or assurances of a change in the regime's behaviour concerning the arbitrary withholding of aid or the persecution of Syrians in [north-west Syria]."

The UN's seemingly slow response in north-west Syria led to accusations that humanitarian assistance had been manipulated by President Bashar al-Assad's government, with claims that compromises had been made by the UN and aid groups that indirectly benefitted the regime. These sentiments are strong and widespread among affected populations, who refer to some well-known facts as evidence that they cannot trust the UN system. For instance, a daughter of Hussam Louka, a sanctioned Syrian government intelligence chief, has been **employed** by the UN's emergency fund office in Damascus. Such hiring practices indicate that UN agencies and international organisations working in government-controlled areas may employ relatives of regime loyalists as a compromise to be allowed to maintain access and provide services to the local population. The regime also enforces an unfavourable exchange rate for humanitarian assistance to bolster its foreign reserves. The UN partners with government-affiliated groups, including the SARC and the Syria Trust for Development, which may allow the regime to influence aid efforts. UN partners such as the SARC often require security clearance from the state's intelligence branches for aid projects.

The SARC is seen by the majority of Syrians living in opposition-held territory as being too close to the government. Indeed, a Center for Strategic and International Studies report noted in 2021: "Security personnel reportedly purge beneficiary lists of families blacklisted by the government before sharing those lists with the SARC".

Box 4: Examples of social media comments

"If globalization is to succeed, it must succeed for poor and rich alike. It must deliver rights no less than riches. It must provide social justice and equity no less than economic prosperity and enhanced communication". Kofi Annan

Many of the views expressed on social media in Syria underline the importance of these thoughts shared by Kofi Anan. Many social media users highlight failures of the international aid system to provide what he had envisaged. Social media users in Syria have said, for example:

- "Do not send aid, nothing reaches us, they are stealing it."
- "Better without [the passing of humanitarian aid], [since] all the aid is being stolen. Praise be to God, the thief's livelihood has been cut off. The poor don't see any [aid]."
- «Allah suffices us, and He is the best disposer of affairs. But at the same time, since the beginning of the Holy Revolution, I have not received any humanitarian aid, and I have not benefitted from anyone, organisations or otherwise»
- "False aid and hypocrisy, supplying the terrorists with weapons. This is what they want, those who want to destroy the Syrian people."
- "Russia, a criminal country [acting outside] the law, must be expelled from the Security Council. It is the one who destroyed Syria The Security Council is colluding with it in destroying the Syrian people and other peoples. Why don't they care about [Syria] and give [it] importance like [in the case of] Ukraine? [The Security Council] is playing in both camps, and the United Nations has double standards."

On social media, commentators from Syria have repeatedly stated their beliefs that the lack of aid is caused by corruption and that those who control the system have siphoned off aid intended for **earthquake-affected populations**. Social media users also expressed their fear of aid agencies being used to hand individuals over to the **Assad regime**. In their responses to the border-crossing issue, social media users expressed little support for the UN efforts, but highlighted their fear of corruption. Some even alleged that aid operations would be used to smuggle weapons into

opposition-held areas. These views from individuals active on social media and who influence others around them highlight the challenges faced by agencies that attempt to implement the principles of humanitarian action in such complex political contexts.

How will the geopolitical environment in which aid agencies are operating develop?

The complex Syrian conflict will continue to evolve. By considering various possible scenarios, aid agencies can adapt their programmes and operations to the often-changing context of the conflict.

Ukraine conflict

- Russian grain supplies to Syria are unlikely to alleviate food insecurity and reduce food prices in Syria.
- Although Russia has been providing the Assad regime with grain – much of it stolen from captured Ukrainian stocks – the escalating maritime conflict in the Black Sea means that this will become both more difficult for and less attractive to Moscow, which will not want to risk vital transport shipping or to be forced to escort vessels carrying grain.
- Furthermore, Russian attacks on Ukrainian grain and food oil export facilities will make shipping Ukrainian grain and cooking oils even more difficult.
- Compounding this, Russia's geopolitical position with regard to the global south and veto at the UN Security Council means that an agreement to reopen the Bab al-Hawa crossing is extremely unlikely in the coming months, and agreements will have to be reached with the Assad regime that remain compatible with principled humanitarian action.

Politics: Türkiye

- Türkiye will continue to seek to control parts of northern Syria and is likely to continue the policy of attempting to change the ethnic composition of key towns and villages in the area.
- Although Turkish military action has historically increased ahead of domestic elections, further military action is still possible despite the May 2023 elections having been decided.
- President Erdoğan remains under significant pressure because of the country's economy, even though he received international recognition for his diplomacy linked to Ukraine and the Black Sea grain deal. Indeed, on 24 August the new management team of Türkiye's central bank raised its key interest rate by an aggressive 7.5 percentage points to 25%. This was a direct reversal of Erdoğan's previous economic policies under which he had long argued that – contrary to traditional economic thinking – lowering interest rates helps fight inflation. If, however, this fails to improve the economy, Erdoğan may well look to another foreign military adventure to divert the public from the country's poor economic situation, as he has done previously both in Iraq and Syria.
- The Turkish government has strongly politicised the Syrian refugees coming into Türkiye and is planning to return refugees to Syria next year. Any changes to refugee policies are also likely to affect border crossings by slowing down traffic due to increased checks.

Arab League

- The Saudi-led effort to normalise relations with Assad and rehabilitate his regime seems to have achieved limited returns so far. In a recent interview with Sky News Arabia, Assad himself called the changes in inter-Arab relations “symbolic” and instead called out the Arab League for not providing “practical solutions, only speeches, statements, and formal meetings”.
- The Assad regime still maintains strong relations with Iran, and this is very unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Saudi Arabia’s plans to reopen its embassy in Damascus have come to a halt, likely due to a realisation that the Assad regime has shown no willingness to offer concessions or compromises.
- The flow of Captagon originating from Assad-controlled areas is likely to continue, because it is one of the few lucrative exports that bolster the Syrian economy, which will disappoint states who had engaged with Assad to address the illegal drug trade.
- However, attempts by the Assad regime to seek reconciliation with the Arab world may positively influence aid access through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, with the Syrian government less inclined to block UN activities.

Civil war and the opposition

- The situation in northern Syria will continue to be complex, with little change likely on the ground.
- HTS seems to have the implicit support of Türkiye in north-west Syria, and the group is trying to rebrand itself and even relax some of its social rules in order to attract investors to the areas it controls.
- The announcements of Hurras al-Din and Brig. Gen. Tlass’s military council that they would become a significant opposition movement are very unlikely to materialise on the ground in the foreseeable future. A significant number of Hurras al-Din members have been either killed or detained by HTS, with some even joining the group. Also, Hurras al-Din suffers from deep funding issues, which make it significantly weaker than HTS. Meanwhile, the military council remains a project on paper with no presence on the ground, because Tlass was never directly involved in the military operations against Assad and so has no leverage on the military factions in north-west Syria. Further, given his and his father’s relationship with the Assad regime, he is viewed by the majority of the opposition population with suspicion and scepticism as a vestige of the regime with personal aspirations for power in Syria.
- The only real threat to HTS in north-west Syria is posed by IS sleeper cells. However, it is unlikely that IS will be able to regain control of territory anytime soon. Indeed, by October 2023 there had been no significant IS attacks over the past year.
- Therefore, the dynamic in north-west Syria could involve ongoing rivalries, internal power struggles, and potential clashes, with different factions vying for control and legitimacy, but with little change on the ground. The involvement of external actors, including Russia and Türkiye, will likely continue to influence the situation.
- The protests in Al Sweida and Daraa are unlikely to cause the collapse of the Assad regime in the foreseeable future.
- The Assad security forces have not attempted to suppress the protests in Al Sweida so far. The Assad regime has presented itself as a protector of minorities in Syria, among them the Druze who make up the majority of Al Sweida’s population. Multiple Druze individuals hold powerful positions in the army and security forces, which presents the regime with a dilemma.

- It is likely that the regime will try to defuse the situation through negotiations with dignitaries and religious leaders in the governorate, while granting the locals more privileges in an attempt to isolate the demands of the protesters from the current nationwide movement. This “Syrian Revolution 2.0” has seen members of Assad’s sect, the Alawites, in Tartus and Latakia, the regime’s strongholds, speak up against the regime for the first time since 2011 in video messages posted online.
- Protests in other areas such as Daraa, Aleppo, Ar Raqqa, and Rif Damascus will, however, be met with force to prevent future incidents. Again, these uprisings are unlikely to lead to the fall of the Assad regime in the near future, and it will try to deal with each protest depending on its location and constituencies, but such protests will nevertheless further destabilise the regime, which in turn will lead to more protests in the next six to 12 months.
- The Assad government does not seem to have a solution for the collapsing economy; the US sanctions authorised through the Caesar Act are still in place, and the government’s biggest allies, Russia and Iran, are dealing with their own economic difficulties and US sanctions. They are also asking the Assad government to start repaying its debts by leasing important infrastructure projects in Syria to them. This will very likely have a lasting impact on the Syrian economy and people living in Assad-controlled areas, whose living costs will therefore continue to rise and salaries (when converted to US dollars) continue to shrink.

Syria and relations with the UN

- The UN’s seemingly delayed response to the earthquake in north-west Syria has deepened the disillusionment of the Syrian opposition and local population with international organisations and the broader international community.
- The UN’s response was also hampered by its lack of a significant presence in north-west Syria. Meanwhile, a decrease in aid deliveries to the area will likely result in increasing volatility. The UN’s ability to navigate these challenges and restore its credibility in the region will be crucial for addressing the ongoing humanitarian crisis and preventing further destabilisation.
- Syria and Russia will continue to politicise aid, creating serious challenges for aid agencies’ ability to deliver aid without compromising the humanitarian principles.
- UN responses were based on the assumption that Syria’s fractured governance would be transient, but response mechanisms originally designed for emergencies have now endured for a decade.
- The earthquake-focused humanitarian relief response has failed to address the underlying structural vulnerabilities that are often the root causes of worsening living conditions.
- The tension between the principles of state sovereignty and the humanitarian principles of humanity, independence, neutrality, and impartiality make the work of the UN very challenging.

Key considerations for agencies with regard to the security and geopolitical situation

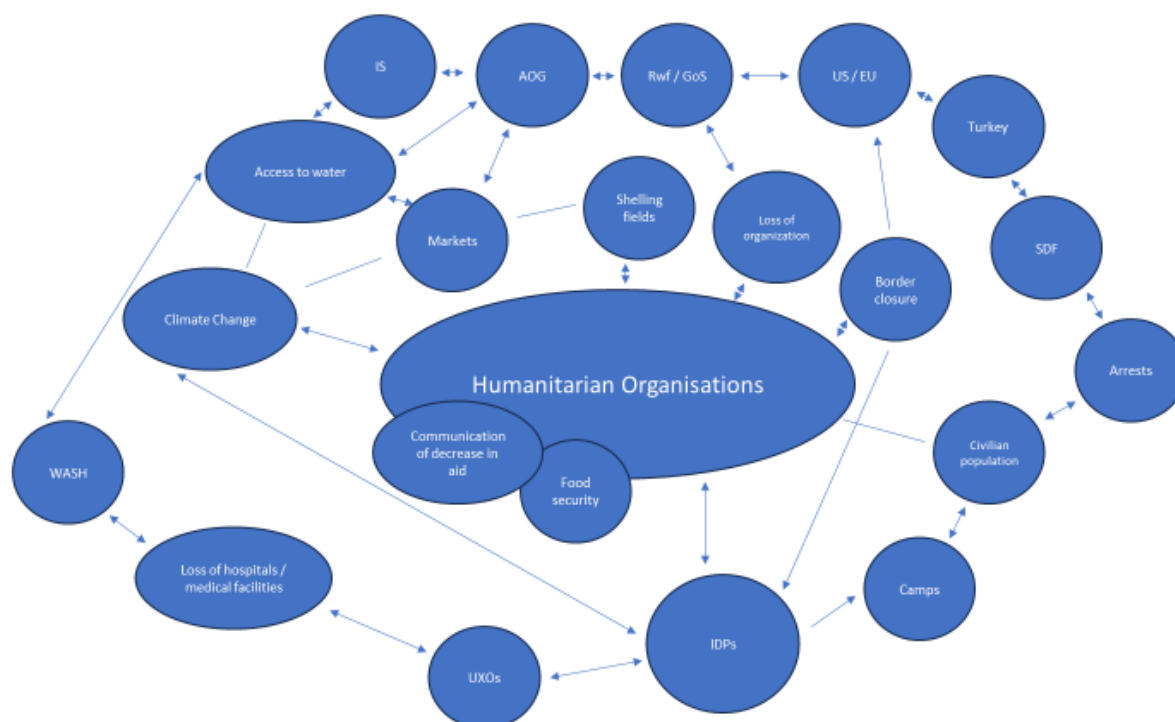
Aid work in Syria requires accepting that the crisis no longer reflects the state of emergency for which existing mechanisms were originally designed. Aid in Syria is not just responding to exceptional circumstances, but faces a protracted situation that has become the normality for the millions of people dependent on international aid to survive. Humanitarian needs are at very high levels, with an estimated 90% of Syrian civilians living in poverty. An estimated **15.3 million people** in Syria will require humanitarian assistance in 2023, compared to 14.6 million in 2022.

The conceptualisation of aid in Syria as an emergency response has also focused on the delivery of short-term interventions that address needs that are symptoms of the fragility of the whole system. The humanitarian approach in Syria will need to address not only the immediate, but also the longer-term needs of affected communities in the current context and in terms of a nuanced understanding of the Syrian conflict as an enduring crisis.

The challenges and tensions around providing principled humanitarian aid in such contexts are highly complex.

The fragmented architecture of the humanitarian response in Syria means that an organisation's physical location significantly affects not only the geographic focus of its operations, but also the type of work it can do and the political lens through which regulatory authorities view its work.

Figure 5: Aid agency operating environment in Syria



Food security

Food security will continue to remain a concern. Conflict, geopolitical developments, and economic policies will affect the availability of food, food prices, and the options available to aid agencies to alleviate food security effectively.

- The conflict in Ukraine, and in particular the difficulties with the Black Sea grain initiative, risk further disrupting grain supplies.
- Shelling during the hot months of May, June and July 2023 caused crop fires that affected local harvests.
- Blockages on key transport arteries continue to result in shortages of important staples such as bread and flour.
- Farmers are frequently attacked during the harvest season and this is likely to happen again in September and October 2023.

- Financial and economic developments will continue to affect food prices.
- Declining international funds for food security are likely to hit aid programmes.
- The lack of effective communications explaining the causes of reduced food aid is likely to result in the spreading of increased disinformation. Limited understanding of global food systems may lead to allegations that corruption is causing any decline in available food.

Health care

Syria's conflict-eroded health system continues to need support with both medical supplies and mechanisms that enable those in need to access health care. The continued politicisation of the provision of and access to health care makes effective aid support to the health sector challenging in a context of low levels of trust in the international system.

- Years of conflict and underfunding have eroded the health-care system, while the number of skilled health professionals has declined.
- The Bab al-Hawa border crossing is important for the import of medical supplies to north-west Syria. For example, during November 2022 almost a [million medical procedures](#) took place with supplies and equipment that had entered Syria as part of the implementation of the cross-border operation.
- Lines of control mean that many Syrians remain unable to reach the health care they need because it is too dangerous or impossible to access specialised services in territories under different political control.
- Health services in safer areas have seen an increase in patients and are struggling to respond to demand.
- The earthquake in Türkiye and north-west Syria in early February 2023 further limited the already precarious access to health care.
- Because health facilities and emergency responses have been repeatedly and deliberately targeted throughout the Syrian conflict and because the international community failed to protect the health system, trust in the international system is low among representatives of local health-care providers.
- Health professionals continue to be arrested for political reasons in the aftermath of political control changing hands in disputed areas as the conflict progresses. The sense of abandonment among those who struggled to provide health care under extremely difficult conditions during the height of the conflict continues to deepen as they receive little support from the international community.

Attacks on Health Care News Brief

Education

Education continues to be disrupted, with immediate and long-term negative consequences for Syria's children. Political fragmentation has inhibited a standard education response and complicates early recovery programming that is made difficult by short-term funding.

- Education in Syria has been severely disrupted throughout the 11 years of war, the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis.

Education in Danger Monthly News Brief

- An estimated 2.4 million Syrians were believed to be out of school in March 2022.
- Education continues to be affected by the complex political dynamics of the conflict. Education needs differ according to the particularities of different regions.
- In 2021 SDF forces arrested and detained teachers and students over conflicts related to curriculums. Students have also been prevented from crossing lines of control to take vital exams.
- The risk of the recruitment by armed groups of children in camps is a continuing problem.
- The role of education continues to be marginalised in the general discussion of humanitarian needs. Early recovery programming is required for the nearly 7 million children and educators in need of education support.
- Short-term funding cycles make investment into education challenging.

Protection

The protection of civilians was not assured in the aftermath of the earthquake, while geopolitical developments affect the possibilities for addressing the status of displaced people.

According to the chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Paul Pinheiro, the world “witnessed a wholesale failure by the Government and the international community, including the United Nations, to rapidly direct life-saving support to Syrians in the most dire need” in the aftermath of the earthquake.

- More than ten years of crisis have inflicted immense suffering on Syria’s civilian population, who have experienced massive and systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.
- Political divisions, exclusion, and the lack of access to justice mechanisms have continued to disenfranchise people and limit their ability to address their needs in a sustainable manner. The humanitarian response is systematically challenged by impediments and restrictions.
- Arbitrary arrests and detentions remain the second most prevalent safety concern.
- IHL principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution have often been disregarded by the parties to the conflict.
- Civilians remain exposed to explosive ordinance.
- In the north-east, approximately 56,000 people, mainly women and children, remain interned in camps in appalling conditions. Practical, longer-term solutions must be found to the issue of these people’s status, including the possibility to return to their places of origin.

Protection in Danger Monthly News Brief

Corruption and aid agency reputation

The perception that corruption is interfering with aid operations needs to be addressed in practical terms through effective communications.

Social media users have frequently expressed the view that corruption prevents aid from reaching those in need, and this has manifested itself in negative social media sentiments towards aid

passing through the [border crossings](#). Confidential interviews suggested that some aid agencies do not like to use two of the three border crossing because of the long hold-ups and the higher fees required to let aid pass through, along with intimidation by either Syrian government authorities or other actors. These allegations could not be independently verified. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated in March 2023: “Amid a deepening economic crisis, widespread corruption and continuing crippling sanctions, some government officials and some non-State armed groups have increasingly resorted to extortion, detention, trafficking drugs, including Captagon, and other illicit activities to raise funds.”

Aid agencies need to find ways of operating in Syria without their presence being seen as propping up corrupt practices.

UN presence, reputation and partners

Finding the right partners with whom to work in Syria will remain important to manage the reputation of aid agencies and to ensure they reach communities in need.

- The UN is setting up an office in north-west Syria after recognising the need for a presence on the ground. The earthquake underscored the need for better preparedness for future disasters in areas that do not neatly fit into the international state system. There is a need to explore adaptations to the emergency response system and build on contacts with local organisations in vulnerable areas ahead of future crises. The UN will continue to need to balance the rights of sovereign states with humanitarian principles.
- Activities by several de facto local authorities are also challenging for aid agencies. For example, HTS, acting as the Syrian Salvation Government, closed several key associations (among them the Education Authority and Engineering Association in north-west Syria), making it difficult for aid agencies to provide continued support.
- The reputations of the various local NGOs and civil society organisations vary and require a careful assessment of partners.

Mitigation measures in complex contextual dynamics

- **Communication:** It is important to explain humanitarian principles and to maintain a distance from geopolitical and local tensions.
- **Acceptance strategy:** It remains important to communicate the key principles of humanitarian engagement. The UN’s strong push back towards the Syrian government’s “terms” for cross-border aid transfer showed good practice by highlighting the right to maintain conversations with all actors.
- **Personnel:** It is essential to engage with staff to understand their concerns and to take the fears and concerns of local staff into consideration in any strategic planning.
- **Internal communication:** Regular communications and interaction among security, communication, programming, and strategic personnel at the local, national, international, and senior management levels can help to better integrate approaches, which is very important in complex environments.
- **Basic security:** Basic security measures should be reiterated to all staff, including strong IT procedures, social media hygiene, and the availability of communication tools that local staff can use, including VHF radios.

- **Continued analysis of geopolitics:** Understanding the geopolitical context in which aid agencies operate helps to situate and manage complex challenges.
- **Conflict sensitivity:** An increased focus on conflict sensitivity and knowledge of the context of aid operations can help to prevent the humanitarian response from inadvertently worsening conditions for Syrians.
- **Anticipatory action in conflict settings:** Planning criteria that ensure that humanitarian assessments and analysis efforts are embedded in existing local dynamics will help to anticipate dynamics outside of aid agencies' control and adjust their programmes to mitigate such challenges.

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