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CONTEXT UPDATE

Northwestern Syria | February 2, 2023

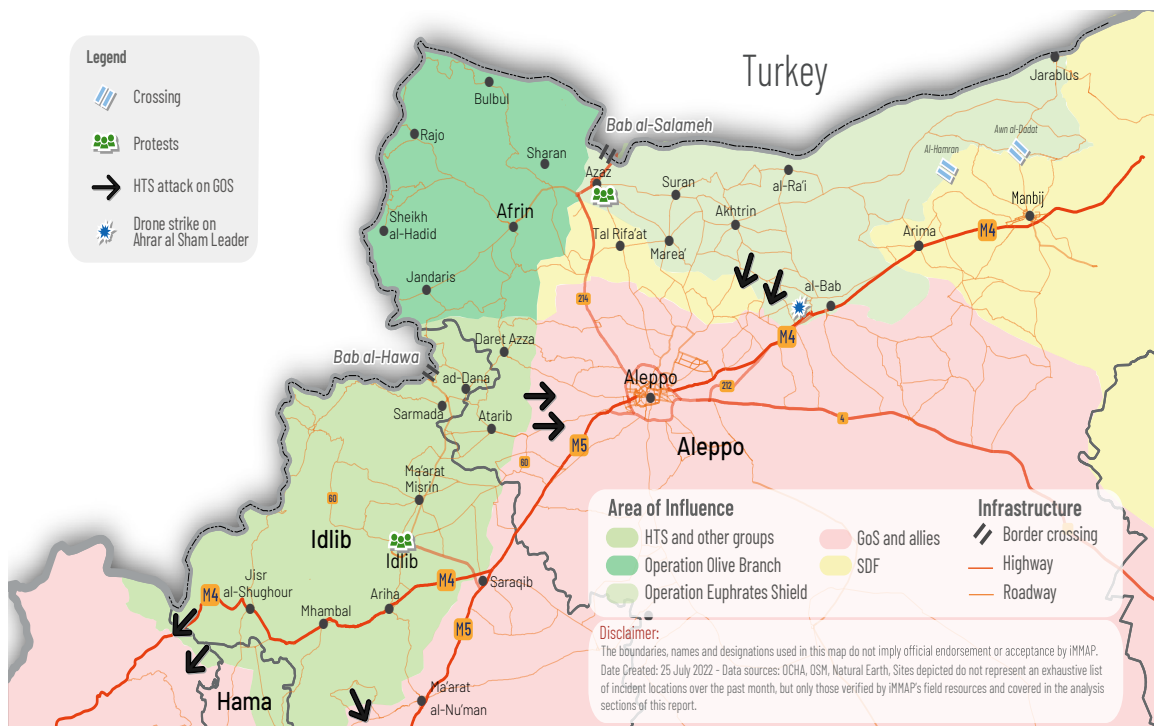


INTRODUCTION

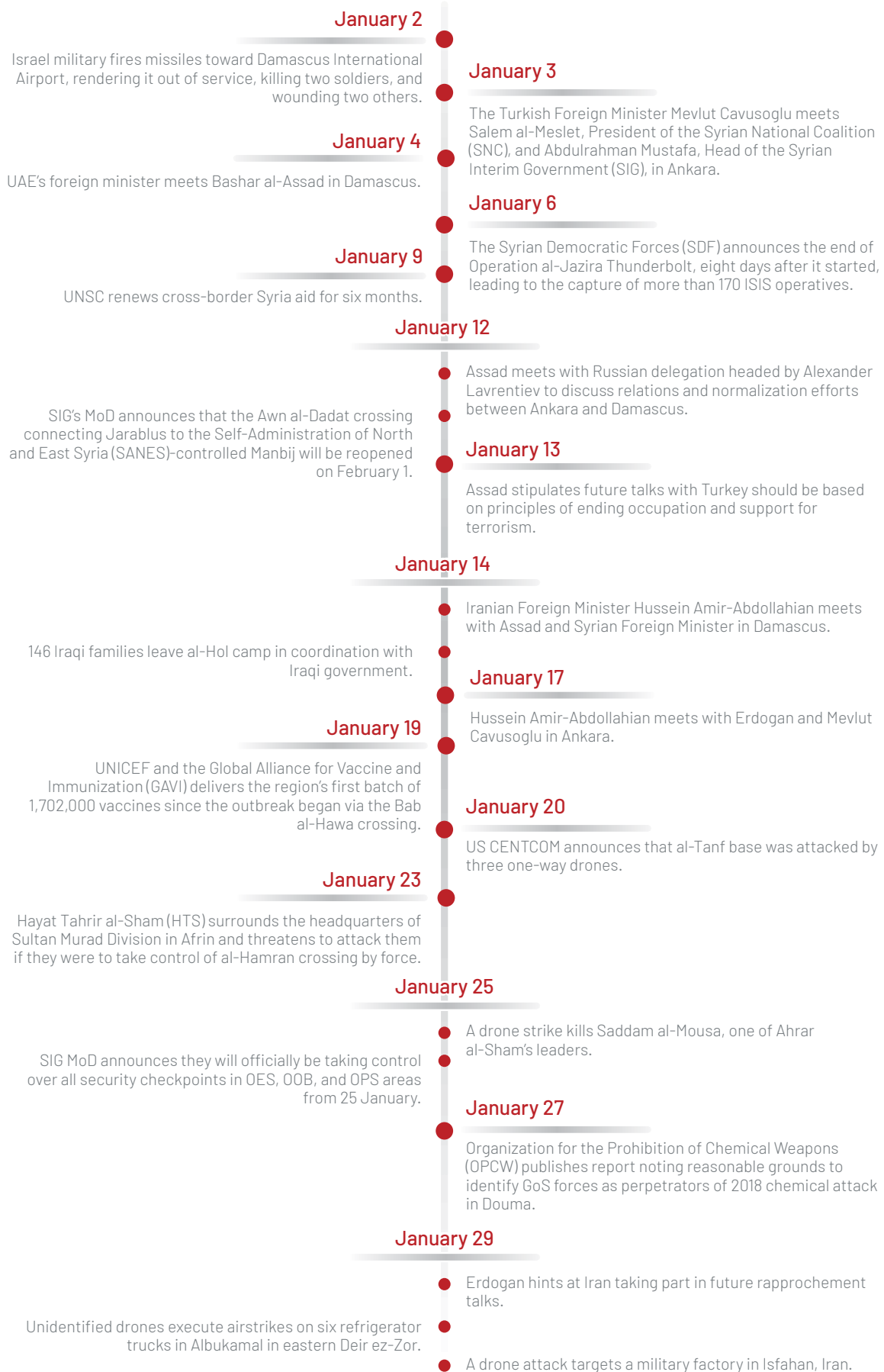
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northwest Syria, as well as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

Key Takeaways

- The extension of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) cross-border aid resolution for an additional six months has done little to assuage fears of further politicization of humanitarian assistance, as it brings reprieve to humanitarian actors and populations they support in Northwest Syria (NWS) only for a relatively short duration. To address this uncertainty and enable more long-term programming, various stakeholders are looking to explore alternative modalities of aid delivery that are more immune to geopolitical sensitivities.
- Although responses to advancing Ankara-Damascus normalization by Syria's various opposition forces varied over the last month, all were pragmatic in seeking to balance long-term strategic objectives and retaining popular support. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) capitalized on criticism directed at the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG)'s response by appealing to Syrian National Army (SNA) factions and NWS inhabitants as a more reliable revolutionary representative. Additionally, Erdogan has suggested Iran will be present for subsequent talks after initially excluding them from December's meeting in Moscow, although the pace of rapprochement may now slow as Assad reiterated demands for a wide agreement including Turkish withdrawal.
- The delivery of NWS's first batch of cholera vaccines arrived at a time when the region's medical sector faces increasingly critical challenges due to severe funding cuts over the last month. Reduced capacity due to a lack of funding has been identified by local and international actors as the key inhibitor for providing sufficient medical care to NWS's particularly vulnerable inhabitants.
- Tensions between SNA factions continue to arise as Turkey pushes for a larger role for SIG's Ministry of Defense (MoD) and limits SNA civilian and administrative roles, with HTS-allied Ahrar al-Sham initially refusing the reassignment of al-Hamran crossing control to the MoD, and its corresponding revenue redistribution. Although unconfirmed, a subsequent drone strike killing an Ahrar al-Sham leader has been attributed to Turkey, suggesting a heightened Turkish response to factions refusing to adhere to restructuring orders.
- Notable security incidents on Syria's southern borders have included multiple drone strikes on Iranian targets as the country exhibits a consolidated presence in Syria. Facing both domestic and international pressure, Iran is likely to further cement and potentially expand its influence, including with expectations for greater involvement in Ankara-Damascus-Russia tripartite talks.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

On January 9, the UNSC unanimously passed a resolution to extend cross-border aid access to Northwest Syria for an additional six-month period.¹ Russia and China have repeatedly used their veto power in the UNSC to narrow aid delivery and force the UN to operate through Damascus under the pretense of respecting Syria's sovereignty. This month's resolution, however, passed relatively smoothly, as wider pressures from the Ukrainian conflict have reduced Russian incentives to open further geopolitical confrontational fronts.

Ankara-Damascus rapprochement has prompted Syria's opposition parties to take pragmatic positions on the talks in order to balance appeal to domestic supporters and their long-term strategic objectives. President of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and the Head of the SIG met with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Ankara on January 3 to discuss recent developments, with Turkey reiterating support for the Syrian opposition in accordance with UNSC resolution 2254.² However, subsequent framing of the SIG as supportive of the talks by media outlets led to widespread criticism and protest across Turkish-backed areas. This provided HTS opportunity to leverage accusations of foreign influence over the SIG and position itself as the safeguard of the Syrian revolution. Although the leadership of the SIG, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), and the Self-Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) all varied in their responses, popular rejection of normalization by Syrians remains consistent.

The first batch of cholera vaccines arrived in NWS in January as cases continue to rise and medical facilities across the region were crippled by funding cuts in the new year, with several clinics closed and significant reductions in staff. A fundamental lack of funding has been identified as the key barrier to consistent and coordinated healthcare response in NWS, as it causes short-term planning and high levels of bureaucracy. Concerns were raised to the UNSC that this will compromise NWS health providers' ability to carry out a vaccination campaign, in addition to providing life-saving healthcare to the region's 2.1 million vulnerable inhabitants.

Turkey has continued to reduce SNA control of crossings and checkpoints across NWS, causing tensions between opposition groups as some lose opportunities for income generation. Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Division was forced to hand over control of al-Hamran crossing to SIG's MoD, after HTS was reportedly forced to withdraw their

threats to attack Second Legion's Sultan Murad Division by Turkey. SIG's MoD also announced the reopening of the Awn al-Dadat crossing connecting Jarablus and Manbij in February. This has been met with speculation by some over the timing of the decision in the context of SIG's remarks regarding Ankara-Damascus normalization, as the reopening will facilitate greater movement between the Government of Syria (GoS) and Turkish-controlled areas.

Elsewhere in southern Syria, Sweida has continued to witness weekly peaceful protests in al-Sir/al-Karama square since early December, calling on GoS authorities for political and economic change, improvement in living conditions, and addressing the widespread use of drugs. There were also protests against the fuel crisis which has caused significant transportation disruption, as several drivers went on strike due to the lack of fuel and low passenger fares. In response, pro-regime and al-Baath Party affiliates organized counter-protests, gathering at the same sites and chanting slogans glorifying Assad in an attempt to silence the protestors.³

Iran has sought to make its presence felt in Syria over the last month, prompting reactions for opposing stakeholders that are seeking to diminish its influence in the country. Following meetings with Damascus and Ankara, Erdogan has now suggested Iran may be included in further normalization talks, as Iran simultaneously increased the price of its oil sold to the GoS as well as removing GoS's ability to purchase with credit. Moreover, an attack on the coalition-supported al-Tanf base on January 20 was followed by two attacks on Iranian facilities the following week. On January 29, drones executed airstrikes on six refrigerator trucks in Albukamal while targeting an Iranian convoy crossing from Iraq into Syria.⁴ The same day, a further drone attack targeted a military factory in Isfahan. Though these attacks have not been claimed by any actor, multiple national news outlets attributed the attack to Israel, citing their source as an unnamed US official that denied the US's involvement in the attack.⁵⁶

ANALYSIS

| UNSC Resolution

Aid arrangements for Syria have been a contentious issue for several years, as Russia continues its efforts to further curtail the UN's mandate in the country. Since 2020, three aid corridors – Bab al-Salam, al-Yarubiyah, and al-Ramtha – have been shut and excluded from the scope of UNSC's resolutions, leaving Bab al-Hawa as the only remaining authorized crossing.⁷ Although Russia initially had agreed to keep Bab al-Hawa open following concerted efforts by the US in 2021, in July 2022 it pushed to reduce yearlong aid renewals through the crossing to six-month extensions.⁸ Instrumentalizing aid is therefore not novel within the Syrian context, and each year there has been a heightened risk of non-renewal, increasing the uncertainty under which humanitarian programming operates in the country.

In the lead-up to this month's resolution, both governmental and non-governmental entities feared that deteriorating US-Russian relations over the Ukraine conflict would prompt the latter to block or obstruct aid delivery. A Russian veto would have effectively closed the last critical lifeline for over four million people in NWS who primarily rely on essential assistance for their survival, including food, water and sanitation, medicine, winter supplies, and housing. However, in contrast to previous resolutions, negotiations this month were far less contentious, which has been attributed to multiple factors. First, Moscow seems averse to opening new confrontational fronts in the midst of its ongoing involvement in Ukraine, as it attempts to maintain current arrangements in Syria. Second, as negotiations over new aid mechanisms outside the UN framework intensify, Russia fears it will lose major bargaining chips, particularly when it comes to negotiations over Ukraine and related sanctions.

For instance, in August, Refugees International proposed alternative options to the UN aid modality. This includes the creation of funding pools independent of the UN, working more directly with local Syrian relief groups, scenario planning to mitigate shocks of a halt to cross-border aid, and shifting from modalities that focus on immediate needs to more long-term and sustainable approaches focused on infrastructure development and education to promote self-reliance.⁹

In Russia's view, the introduction of new aid mechanisms will give a free hand to INGOs to deliver aid without the knowledge or consent of Moscow. Equally importantly, Damascus will be deprived of benefiting from some cross-line aid that moves from areas under its control into opposition-held territories. Therefore, Russia will sustain more leverage and influence simply by restricting and keeping the current aid modality alive than by entirely halting it. Furthermore, in the context of ongoing Turkish-Syrian thawing of relations, Russia appears committed to avoiding any moves that may jeopardize the rapprochement process, as well as its relations with Turkey. Continued humanitarian aid is critical to Ankara's attempts to prevent a new humanitarian crisis that might potentially lead to an influx of refugees to its borders.

Local reactions towards aid renewal can be characterized by a mixture of relief and worry. Several demonstrations expressing disappointment with the politicization of the decision were reported, drawing employees from various sectors. While a thin deal is still better than no deal at all, the reduced 6-month period will likely pose significant challenges and uncertainty to the humanitarian response, requiring extensive planning efforts that can be achieved only through longer and more sustainable timeframes.

| Reactions to Ankara-Damascus talks.

As reported in [iMMAP's December Context Update](#), developments in Ankara-Damascus rapprochement have continued to be met with condemnation and rejection by Syrians across the country. Opposition parties across NWS have since sought to position themselves to take advantage of this popular sentiment while advancing their strategic objectives, all displaying a certain level of pragmatism in their responses to increasing diplomacy between Ankara and Damascus.

As fundamentally dependent on Turkey for their long-term position and influence in Syria, it remains in the interest of SNC and SIG leadership to meet with Cavusoglu and sustain perceptions of an informed political alliance with Turkey. However, a subsequent appearance by Abdulrahman Mustafa on Turkish news channel TRT Haber¹⁰ drew criticism from multiple news outlets in which his statements were taken as SIG support for Ankara-Damascus normalization, questioning their revolutionary credentials.¹¹

Although the SIG released a statement denying claims of support for normalization, attributing them to out-of-context quotations and mistranslations,¹² it nevertheless drew widespread criticism and spurred protests in Azaz.¹³ Turkish-backed areas have experienced persistent protests across cities in NWS since the rapprochement developments of December, including al-Bad, Azaz, and Afrin, exhibiting clear popular disapproval for closer Ankara-Damascus relations and concerns of diminished Turkish support in the region. On January 13, the attendance of SNC President Salem al-Meslet at a protest in Azaz was met with rejection by demonstrators who verbally and physically assaulted him, calling him a “traitor”, and he was subsequently forced to flee from the protest.¹⁴ After the incident, al-Meslet insisted in a televised statement that his intention was to join protesters in opposing rapprochement with the regime, attempting to attribute the attack to a few demonstrators that are not representative of the “spirit of the revolution”.¹⁵

In contrast, the response of HTS leader al-Golani’s initial statement on the recent developments was relatively sharper in tone than those made by SIG leadership and SNA factions, with HTS the first armed opposition faction in NWS to respond to the talks. The statement appealed to Syrians living in opposition-held areas by posturing HTS and the SSG as more reliable representatives of the Syrian opposition and revolution. It accused the SNC and SIG as being influenced and subjugated by foreign influence and agendas, a critique that was also aimed at the SANES.¹⁶ The statement was supplemented by continued and a slight intensification of HTS and affiliated inghimasi operations against GoS and Russian forces throughout January.¹⁷

The more definitive response from HTS and the SSG may be motivated by their apparent exclusion from normalization efforts and discussions so far, posturing themselves as potential spoilers in ongoing negotiations. However, more significantly, it displays the characteristic pragmatism of HTS as it looks to capitalize on the continuing friction between different SNA factions and their cohesiveness as a Turkish-backed force, presenting the leadership of HTS to be more disciplined and representative of the revolution. Although it remains unclear in what form reconciliation with armed groups could take should normalization talks progress further, there remains a possibility that SNA factions, or their members, would gravitate towards Idlib. Similarly, although popular views of HTS in SNA-controlled areas remain poor, this could change if Turkey falls short on their promise to provide a solution that takes the interest of Syrians in NWS into account.

While Turkey assured Syrians in their supported areas that talks with Damascus will proceed with their benefit in mind, it continued to apply pressure on the continuation of these talks by renewing their threats of a ground offensive in Northeast Syria (NES).¹⁸ The SANES noted their preference for a peaceful, and political solution over a military one, but indicated their readiness to retaliate if needed.¹⁹ SDF leadership also aimed to distinguish the SANES, the SDF, and Syrian Kurds from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), emphasizing that they do not pose a threat to Turkey and have only launched attacks in self-defense.²⁰

Following Moscow reconciliation talks between Russian, Turkish and GoS defense ministers, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Hussein Amir-Abdollahian, also made visits to Damascus and Ankara. Although Abdollahian stated that his country was “very pleased” with the breakthrough in Ankara-Damascus relations,²¹ the noted absence of Iran in Moscow will likely have irked Iran as a key stakeholder in the conflict.²² As such, the meetings Abdollahian held in Ankara and Damascus could have served to ensure their interests are being noted during these meetings, and perhaps to push for inclusion in future developments. Indeed, Erdogan has recently made statements suggesting Iranian involvement in future talks following these meetings.²³ The timing of this diplomacy is also notable in the context of Iran’s changing position on fuel supply to GoS.

Iran’s exclusion from normalization talks closely preceded Iran’s decision to halt the line of credit available and double the price of oil it sells to Damascus, leading some to speculate on how Iran will continue to use its leverage to ensure its interests are met within the normalization context.

Although Cavusoglu had initially noted he may be meeting with his GoS counterpart in January, and repeated the suggestion in February,²⁴ it is likely that such a meeting representing the next step in the normalization process will be delayed in materializing. Assad has reiterated his conditions for normalization talks with Turkey to include the full withdrawal of Turkish military presence in Syria and the end of Turkish support for what Assad considers terrorist groups²⁵ – two demands that will likely be difficult for Turkey to comply with in the near future.

| Cholera Developments

Limitations to an effective healthcare response in NWS are driving a still severe cholera outbreak across the region, as the health sector becomes increasingly crippled due to international funding uncertainties. Although initially better prepared for the outbreak than NES, NWS is seeing relatively persistent increases in cases, with Idlib surpassing Deir ez-Zor by mid-January to become the governorate with the highest rate of suspected cholera cases across northern Syria at 27.1%.²⁶ According to WHO, there were 37,910 suspected cholera cases in NWS as of January 14,²⁷ with further estimates identifying that 18% of these were cases in IDP camps. However, field reports do suggest that some cholera statistics may be inflated due to the conflation of standard winter-driven diarrhea-based illnesses with cholera symptoms, leading to misclassification.

Due to its high IDP population, it is estimated that over 2.1 million people in NWS live in subdistricts that are most vulnerable to further cholera spread.²⁸ Ghada Eltahir Mudawi, Acting Director of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), highlighted to the UNSC this month that the region currently hosts 1.8 million people in IDP camps and overcrowded settlements, which often face critically abject sanitation infrastructure and a noted lack of effective cleaning supplies and detergents.^{29 30} WASH cluster surveillance across NWS this month identified 63 camps in 49 communities with open sewers within the site, while 63 camps in 59 communities showed signs of open defecation.³¹

Local humanitarian actors, including Syria Response Coordinators and the Free Idlib Health Directorate, have increased pressure on the international community to provide further support for isolation and specialized treatment centers and have emphasized the slow delivery of medical aid and vaccines to NWS. UNICEF and the Global Alliance for Vaccine and Immunization (GAVI) delivered the region's first batch of 1,702,000 vaccines since the outbreak began via the Bab al-Hawa crossing on January 19. Although the launch of the vaccination campaign is set to begin in March with IDP populations prioritized, vaccine shortages have already been anticipated for the region's three million inhabitants.³²

A lack of funding is increasingly identified as the most immediate threat to healthcare response in NWS,³³ as several healthcare facilities halted services in the last month following the discontinuation of project funding after December. Multiple organizations have stopped supporting hospitals in Idlib, including al-Rahma in Darkush,

al-Salam in Harem, al-Ikhlas in Atmeh, Saving a Soul in Salqin, and the Hand-in-Hand Children Hospital in Kafr Takharim, comprising a reduction of 172 healthcare staff and the closure of several clinics across the region.³⁴ The interruptions to services are estimated to impact two million people across NWS, most of whom are in-camp IDPs that face further restrictions on their ability to travel to medical services elsewhere. Healthcare funding is generally limited to short-term projects supporting medical centers in NWS, with a subsequent state of continuous uncertainty often driving staff to search for work and more stable livelihoods elsewhere. The high-level of bureaucracy resulting from constant donor outreach, as well as repeated hiring and onboarding of new staff, exacerbates the burden on the capacity of medical centers to deliver consistent healthcare to vulnerable populations across NWS. At the UNSC meeting this month, OCHA Deputy Director Mudawi noted that the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan had been funded at its lowest-ever level of 47.2 percent. She highlighted that increased funding was critical to support the cholera vaccination campaign and the resilience of the healthcare sector in NWS, particularly in the wake of the cyclical uncertainty surrounding the cross-border aid mechanism.³⁵

| Changes in Control of Crossings and Checkpoints

Conflict over al-Hamran Crossing. Turkey has continued to minimize the role of the various SNA factions in matters of civil administration and control of crossings and security checkpoints this month. In early January, the Second Legion's Sultan Murad Division – whose leader Fahim al-Issa recently became the commander of the Legion – directed orders to Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Division to handover the control of al-Hamran crossing to SIG's MoD. Having only recently joined the Second Legion, Ahrar al-Sham reportedly rejected the proposal and resisted it.³⁶ Ahrar al-Sham had recently taken control of the crossing from al-Jabha al-Shamiya after the latest HTS incursion into Afrin in October. Al-Hamran crossing generates significant income for groups as it connects SANES areas to Turkish-backed areas in NWS and is a main crossing point for a variety of goods, most prominently crude oil and fuel. Unconfirmed sources have suggested that Ahrar al-Sham refused to abandon control of the crossing unless HTS is guaranteed a share of the income it generates.

This was further supported by an intervention of HTS in the following days. On January 23, HTS surrounded Sultan Murad Division's headquarters in Afrin and threatened to attack the division if they were to take control of the

crossing by force.³⁷ Tensions were reportedly resolved by Turkish demands of an HTS retreat. Field reports indicate that control of al-Hamran crossing was indeed subsequently given to the MoD and that crossing revenues would be shared across different SNA factions and the MoD, though it remains unclear if HTS preserved their share. On January 25, Saddam al-Mousa, one of Ahrar al-Sham's leaders, was killed by a drone strike.³⁸ Although the attack was not claimed and its purpose is unconfirmed, the circumstances and timing of the attack has led some to speculate whether it related to Ahrar al-Sham's resistance to adhere to recent restructuring orders by Turkey.

Awn al-Dadat Crossing reopens. In addition to the change of control of al-Hamran crossing, on January 12, SIG's MoD announced Awn al-Dadat crossing will be reopened on February 1.³⁹ After being closed for over a year, the MoD reportedly announced the reopening to curb smuggling attempts and related exploitation of people,⁴⁰ but the move can be seen as part of a broader move by the SIG to consolidate its control over crossings and checkpoints. However, the timing of the decision was also met with speculation, as it occurred following Abdulrahman Mustafa's controversial statements regarding Turkish-GoS rapprochement. The reopening will facilitate greater movement to and from GoS areas, which some have interpreted as a sign of SIG succumbing to Turkish pressure to welcome normalization.

It is also worth noting that the MoD announced they will officially be taking control over all security checkpoints from the SNA in Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), Operation Olive Branch (OOB), and Operation Peace Spring (OPS) areas on January 25.⁴¹ The checkpoints will reportedly be managed by the military police and the MoD. SNA factions have often resisted giving up control of crossings and checkpoints or unifying the revenues that they generate, but are now facing intensified Turkish pressure to enact these changes. Despite this, it is likely that some of the factions will resist this process, and as it also affects the shares of HTS, a reignition of escalations in NWS remains a possibility.

| Broader Syria Developments

Security incidents in south of Syria. On January 20, US CENTCOM announced that the US-supported al-Tanf base in southern Syria was attacked by three one-way drones, one of which they were unable to intercept and led to the injury of two members of the Syrian Free Army, with the origins of the attack unknown.⁴²

This attack is at least the third drone attack on the base over the past few years.⁴³

The next week, multiple attacks on an Iranian convoy and military factory were attributed to Israel as Iran seeks to cement their influence in the country, although no parties have officially claimed responsibility.⁴⁴ As Iran continues to face both domestic and international challenges, it has sought to consolidate and expand its presence in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Such efforts are likely to be met with resistance from stakeholders in the view that this increasing presence is a threat, most prominent of which is Israel. Moreover, the alleged implication of Iran in Syria's Captagon trade could incentivize many parties to attempt to act to limit Iranian presence in GoS-supported areas.

Fuel and power conditions continue to deteriorate in GoS-controlled areas. As reported in [iMAP's December Context Update](#), energy and fuel conditions in Damascus and wider GoS-controlled areas have steadily deteriorated in recent months, with the severity of fuel shortages and exorbitant prices even generating news coverage from traditionally pro-Assad media outlets.⁴⁵ Bassam Tomeh, GoS's Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources attributed the fuel crisis to the loss of access to oil fields in NES, as well as delays in receiving shipments from Iran.⁴⁶ In January, it was reported that Iran will be doubling the price of oil it sells to Damascus to an estimated 70 USD per barrel and will no longer be accepting oil delivery requests on credit, instead demanding advance payments for future deliveries.⁴⁷ However, a number of local, loyalist news outlets indirectly denied these claims, noting that discussions during Abdollahian's visit to Damascus in January had positive outcomes.⁴⁸

In the context of Damascus's reliance on Iranian fuel, and Iran's initial exclusion of normalization talks with Ankara, these recent developments can plausibly be seen to be a tactic through which Iran reminds Damascus of what is at stake should they be sidelined. If Damascus was to lose its line of credit with Iran, it is likely to worsen already dire conditions in GoS-controlled areas, where unsteady supply has given way to the growth of a black market in which fuel is sold at exorbitant prices,⁴⁹ with various industries, and by extension, commodities, impacted.⁵⁰

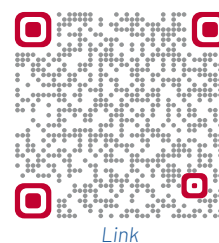
CONCLUSION

The renewal of UNSC resolution on cross-border aid to Northwest Syria to an additional six months provided humanitarian actors with both relief resulting from the unanimous passing on the resolution, as well as worry over the short duration of the extension. Critiques taking aim at the politicization of the decision and suggestions for alternative modalities are likely to remain a significant factor during the next time the resolution will be voted upon.

Conflict between SNA factions continued in January as the SIG's MoD renewed their push to take control of crossings and checkpoints and consolidate the revenue they generate under their administration. Ahrar al-Sham's refusal to hand over al-Hamran crossing is emblematic of the challenges Turkey faces in establishing a consolidated security force within the SNA, and the remaining influence HTS still maintains in OES, and OOB areas. Turkey's continuous push for minimizing the role of SNA factions in civilian and administrative matters and resulting refusal of said factions to give up valuable sources of income could lead to an escalation of infighting as well as threats from HTS to destabilize conditions of affecting aid delivery in the area.

Developments in Ankara-Damascus rapprochement have yielded responses that varied in approach and tone across the different administrations in Syria's hubs. While the response of SIG representatives was heavily criticized, HTS capitalized on these perceived shortcomings to bolster their image as the only remaining true representative of the Syrian revolution. Should Turkey-backed factions feel like their interests are being left out of future talks, this could constitute a significant factor for them to gravitate towards HTS. Though the pace and nature of future developments remain unclear, the normalization process is likely to be a drawn-out one. Assad renewed his expectations of a full Turkish withdrawal, which is a hard ask for Ankara to comply with. Though Iran was left out of the recent talks in Moscow, it seems likely that they would play a role in future developments and will as such play a significant role in steering its outcomes. This could lead into further protracted normalization talks and an extension of the current operational status quo.

Tell us what
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