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CONTEXT UPDATE

Northwestern Syria | October 4, 2022

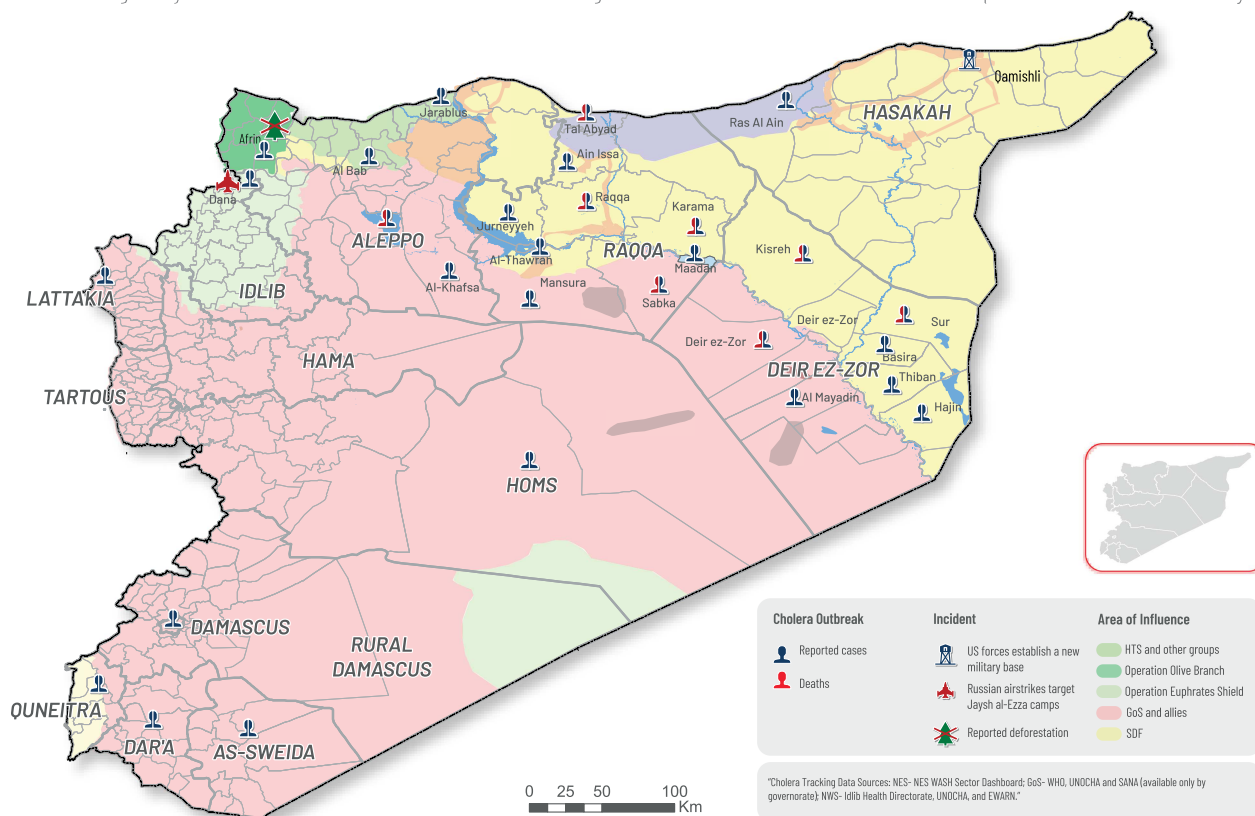


INTRODUCTION

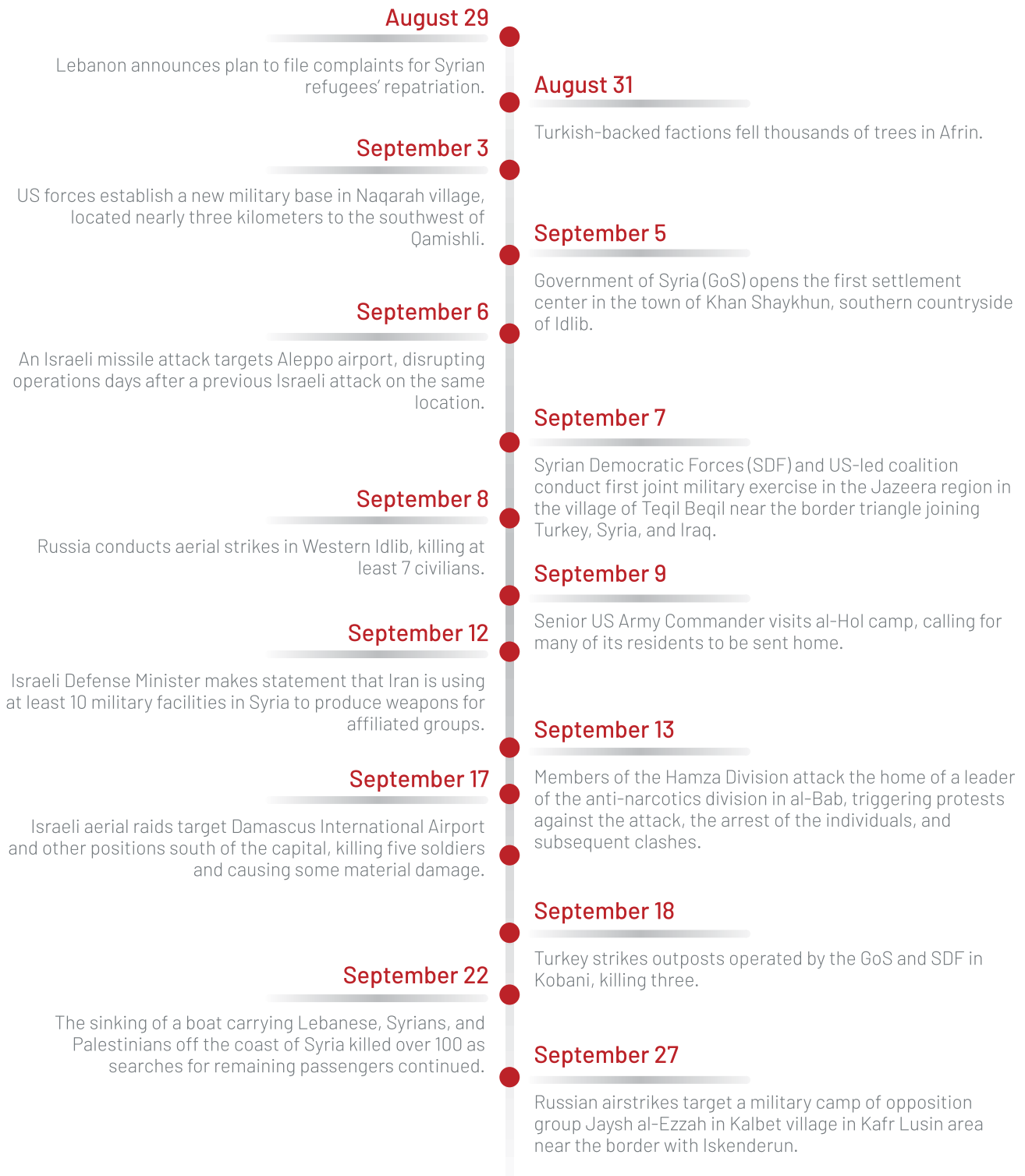
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northwest Syria, as well as Whole of Syria, 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

- A rapidly spreading cholera outbreak has overtaken Syria, with most cases concentrated in the northeastern part of the country and government held areas in September. First cases were reported in Northwestern Syria (NWS) later in the month, with poor health coverage, overcrowding, and poor drinking water access leaving NWS and much of Syria vulnerable. There will likely be accelerating case numbers as resources continue to be stretched in NWS and educational campaigns fail to materialize a significant shift in attitudes among the population.
- Russian forces have expanded bombardments in Idlib, with recent attacks increasingly extending to central and northern Idlib in areas previously perceived to be more secure. Should attacks continue to be similarly unpredictable, this is likely to result in further displacement.
- Displacements in NWS increased in August, with economic factors influencing many IDP's decision to relocate. The "Caravan of Light" campaign generated a significant following and international media attention before its sudden end, highlighting the continued or renewed interest of many Syrians in NWS and Turkey to follow friends or relatives to Europe as their economic and social conditions deteriorate.
- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its affiliated Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) have made recent steps towards religious tolerance to protests by the group's hardliners, with a small number of high-level resignations in response. Meanwhile, the education sector is suffering in Idlib, where teachers often work unpaid and privatized education is expanding.
- Prospects of a fresh Turkish ground offensive have receded in recent weeks, with conciliatory statements largely voiced by Turkish officials taking the center stage. Talk of potential normalization between Ankara and Damascus has sparked backlash in NWS and has implications for all areas of Syria.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Following an increasing number of confirmed cholera cases in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor throughout late August, the Syrian Ministry of Health declared an outbreak of cholera on September 10.¹ Primarily concentrated in Northeast Syria (NES), the outbreak has been attributed to contaminated water from the Euphrates River. Although two shipments of medical supplies have reached Northwest Syria (NWS) and NES from the WHO, these have been accompanied with warnings from the organization regarding the limited ability of medical facilities to deliver treatment.² Officials from the Turkish-backed Syria Interim Government (SIG) in northern Aleppo have expressed concerns about the inevitable spread of the epidemic to NWS, noting the weak capacity of the healthcare system and high population density.³ The SIG and various humanitarian actors have begun conducting awareness and education campaigns in the region,⁴ as the first confirmed case of cholera in NWS was recorded in Jarablus on September 19⁵ and first cases were announced in Idlib on September 26.⁶

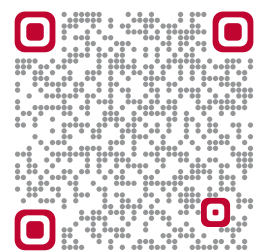
A sharp uptick in displacement in NWS was largely attributed to economic decline, with various push factors motivating some to return to areas of NWS from Turkey. Increased anti-Syrian sentiment and loss of faith in Turkish protections motivated the rise of the “Caravan of Light” in September, a short-lived movement towards mass exodus from Syria and Turkey to Europe attracting a following of 60,000 and international media attention.

Russian forces have expanded bombardments in Idlib, with recent attacks increasingly extending to central and northern Idlib in areas previously perceived to be more secure. This targeting fuelled limited iterative displacements in early September and extended to camps near the Bab al-Hawa crossing late in the month. Towards the end of September, Russian airstrikes targeted a small armed group’s positions near the crossing, injuring civilians and causing damage in nearby displacement camps where cholera had recently been detected. Demonstrations against normalization continued for weeks in northern Aleppo after Turkish statements hinted at rapprochement with Damascus, and proliferation of drugs motivated clashes between military police and a Turkish-affiliated faction in al-Bab area.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has made further steps towards religious tolerance in September, with increasingly moderate decisions by the group influencing critiques and even resignations from the group’s more hard-line leaders. However, the group reportedly issued oral instructions to schools in Idlib barring married underage women from education this month. The education sector has continued to decline as teachers are often forced to work without compensation, and privatization of education becomes increasingly widespread in the region.

Prospects of a fresh Turkish ground offensive have receded in recent weeks, with conciliatory statements largely voiced by Turkish officials taking the center stage. The heads of the Turkish and Syrian national security bureaus have held multiple meetings since the end of August to lay the groundwork for a potential meeting between their country’s respective foreign ministers.⁷ Turkey’s shift in policy has angered the Syrian opposition, instigating rallies in Turkish-backed opposition-held areas, with tensions and demonstrations continuing for several weeks after the initial reconciliation remarks made by the Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu. Although HTS made delayed statements opposing normalization, members of Hizb al-Tahrir in Idlib and western Aleppo accused HTS of supporting rapprochement.⁸ HTS’s subsequent arrests of some of the group’s members then triggered protests in Idlib in mid-September.⁹

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ANALYSIS

| Emerging Cholera Threat

The ongoing cholera outbreak highlights the cross-sectoral implications of Syria's prolonged drought and negative coping mechanisms local populations have been forced to take in response to it. Although running at depleted levels, the Euphrates sees regular sewage flows and pollution runoff into its stream, which has acutely increased the risk of the spread of disease to those dependent on it as a drinking water source. The deteriorating economic crisis and the impact of drought has also restricted the affordability of treated water in Syria. This has driven resurgence of the old agricultural practice of using cheaper "brackish" or refined sewage water for crop irrigation- a practice utilized by farmers in NWS.¹⁰ The pervasive use of this contaminated water for drinking, irrigation, and sanitation across Syria indicates the current severity of existing water shortages, in addition to the difficulty of securing safe alternatives under worsening economic and environmental conditions for many across the country.

The prolonged drought in Syria has been exacerbated by the targeting of key water infrastructure and the politicization of water provision. Water supply routes for hundreds of vulnerable communities are often dependent on rival actors and are therefore regularly used to increase pressure on opposition forces. For example, the Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria recently identified ongoing Russian support for the Syrian government in its targeting of civilian infrastructure, highlighting one airstrike on a water station serving over 200,000 people.¹¹ Turkey also continues to repeatedly cut off supply from Alouk water station since it took control of the plant in October 2019 during Operation Peace Spring (OPS).¹² The station acts as crucial infrastructure for the NES region, providing direct water access for 460,000 people predominantly in Hasakeh and Tal Tamer cities, with up to one million people indirectly relying on the source. The politicized disruption to the Alouk plant, including the complete shutdown seen in June, has an acute impact on humanitarian conditions in the region.

The impact and spread of the current cholera outbreak in NES demonstrate the fragility of water infrastructure in the region. This is underpinned by a vulnerability of Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES)-governed areas to Turkish and GoS control, as well

as poor management of alternative groundwater sources. Mismanagement by SANES local authorities of groundwater sources and a failure to expand current infrastructure has driven many farmers and households to build private wells with little oversight or planning. This overexploitation of the water table has diminished a sustainable alternative source for many across NES, with SANES now facilitating the sterilization of Euphrates water in response to the cholera outbreak.¹³ Like NES, NWS residents have been driven to drilling boreholes and wells to meet demand for water, depleting groundwater resources and, in the case of shallow wells (which are cheaper and easier to drill), leaving water highly susceptible to pollutants and contamination.¹⁴ Potential for water contamination, high population density, and the utilization of brackish water in agriculture leave NWS susceptible to the spread of cholera from other regions of Syria.

Moreover, the wider coordinated WASH response to the outbreak, supported by WHO and UNICEF, has faced a limited reception within the most-affected communities. There is pragmatic doubt in the capability of the government and the broader health sector to be able to respond effectively to an extended cholera outbreak. These concerns are acute in NWS, where urgent warnings regarding inadequate medical supply routes have already been raised regarding limited access routes at the Bab al-Hawa crossing.¹⁵ But as they face growing pressure from increasing numbers of IDPs in the region, humanitarian organizations and medical workers have expressed particular concern regarding the capacity and equipment required to deliver care in NWS camps. They note an urgent need to improve the quality and performance of camp medical centres with current resources insufficient to respond to another epidemic following COVID-19. This severity of the humanitarian risk should the cholera outbreak reach camps across NWS and NES was highlighted by the leadership of the Syria Response Coordinators team.

They note the impact on camp populations would be disastrous, as they already face a stark lack of food and clean water, in addition to widespread, open sewage infrastructure among high population densities.

Preventative measures undertaken thus far in NWS have predominantly been comprised of educational campaigns from local authorities, including Aleppo's Health Directorate. These have concentrated on spreading awareness via official channels on social media, the publication of brochures and physical outreach by medical teams across cities. People have been informed of the risks of contaminated water sources and asked to take necessary precautions against the spread of cholera, such as the need to clean and sterilize fruits and vegetables and to visit medical centers on the display of symptoms.

However, according to field reports, this has not yet successfully translated into a change in attitudes and water usage among citizens, with little monitoring from authorities to ensure effective impact of these campaigns. Only a minority of people have taken preventative measures of water filtration or improved water hygiene so far, whilst a significant majority remain indifferent to the disease and its impact. At worst, these preventative measures and those taken to contain the disease are seen as further disruption to daily life in already fraught economic conditions, as authorities are prompted in some cases to destroy agricultural lands irrigated with unsanitary and potentially contaminated water.¹⁶

This has reportedly driven an overall negative perception of the work of medical organizations associated with these campaigns, which should encourage a more integrated approach with existing community structures, such as mosques and schools or universities. In addition to increasing the material capacity of medical centers across the region, awareness campaigns can be tailored to educate on the immediate dangers to the lives of citizens through institutions perceived as sympathetic to the daily economic pressures they face.

| NWS Trends and Displacements

Upticks in displacements. August 2022 saw a sharp uptick in new IDPs in NWS, with 13,260 displacements recorded—the majority of these citing economic deterioration as the primary reason for their displacement.¹⁷ There has been a noted trend in increases of IDPs arriving from abroad—almost entirely originating from Turkey,¹⁸ as deportations, anti-Syrian sentiment, and economic woes act as major push factors for displacement of refugees back into Syria (although not necessarily to their areas of origin).

In early September, renewal and escalations of airstrikes and clashes in Aleppo and Idlib have increasingly targeted the northern region of Idlib province, which have typically been safer than southern regions that face constant bombardment. These strikes have killed civilians and instilled a greater sense of insecurity among the local population, with increasing unpredictability in strikes. According to field reports, strikes in early September motivated temporary displacements of approximately 40 families who returned to their areas of origin when the security situation stabilized.

In late September, Russian forces targeted positions of the Jaysh al-Ezzah faction near Kalbet village, close to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. Jaysh al-Ezzah, an armed faction, was reportedly conducting military drills in the area, and was aware of the attacks prior to their being conducted. The airstrikes injured 8 civilians and caused material damage in the surrounding camps, including Kafr Lusin in Dana subdistrict, where the first cases of cholera in Idlib were recorded only two days prior. The attack reveals increasing willingness by Russia to target areas close to the border with Turkey that have typically been perceived as relatively safe from aerial bombardment. These attacks did not result in displacements, as they are perceived to be geographically isolated and limited in scope. However, any increased frequency or decreased predictability of similar aerial bombardment would undermine security and stability in the area. This would likely result in displacements and threaten humanitarian operations.

Caravan of Light. Turkey's June announcement of its intent to facilitate voluntary return of millions of Syrian refugees and the regular deportations seen in recent months of IDPs back to Syria has contributed to increasing dissatisfaction and insecurity among Syrian refugees living in the country. Ahead of Turkey's 2023 elections, nationalist rhetoric against Syrian IDPs has been increasingly instrumentalized within the political dialogue to scapegoat a deteriorating economic and employment crisis in the country.¹⁹ This has culminated in worsened living conditions for refugees in the country and stricter deportation responses to undocumented IDPs by the Turkish authorities.²⁰ Many refugees have reportedly lost trust in Turkey to uphold their protected status, as domestic pressures are perceived to surpass previous guarantees of safe return²¹ to Syria.

These concerns, along with a worsening economic crisis in Turkey as the country's currency is rapidly devalued, have motivated many to consider following friends and relatives to seek refuge in Europe. This desire motivated the early September establishment of the "Caravan of Light" movement- an apparently leaderless movement to facilitate a mass exodus of Syrians from northern Syria and Turkey to Europe. Anonymous activists have used Telegram and various social media platforms to call for Syrians to travel from NWS and Turkey to the EU border, with news of the campaign spreading widely and quickly gaining international media attention.

Numbers of those registered on the Caravan's social media pages reportedly exceeded 60,000,²² including over 2,500 Syrians who left Idlib to gather at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing to join those in Turkey. However, some groups moving towards the border in NWS were met with assaults from HTS-affiliated forces, who used live bullets on crowds of up to 400 people and arrested several journalists accompanying the group.²³ Turkish security measures across NWS also aimed to prevent an escalation of people heading to the border. This included tightened security checks along main connecting roads to Syria, with stricter verification of documentation authenticity carried by refugees and subsequent deportation to opposition-held areas of those who did not meet requirements.

The momentum of the Caravan was ultimately curtailed as people gathered at border points, including at Bab al-Hawa, where the vulnerability of such mass movements of people was exposed. Campaign organizers eventually called off the Caravan as members were targeted by people smugglers whilst borders remained closed, with warnings from refugee rights activists over the "brutal treatment" that members would be exposed to on the journey.²⁴ A key consideration must now be the humanitarian protection response in NWS to this concentration of vulnerable people at the border, and the potential consequences on already stretched resources dealing with the sharp uptick of IDPs amid recent escalation of violence in the area.

The Caravan of Light has also illustrated the future implications of Turkish foreign policy, particularly around the treatment and return of Syrian refugees. Growing opinion in Turkey claims that after a decade of war it is time for refugees to return home and has driven Erdogan's policy announcements of voluntary return. However, the Caravan has demonstrated that, for many Syrians, return is not an option under the current status quo. This adds to the pressure currently faced by President

Erdogan in the lead up to Turkey's 2023 elections. As Erdogan shifted policy positions from an initial welcome of Syrian refugees towards a policy of voluntary return, he has reiterated a commitment to ensuring safe return conditions. However, the Caravan has been utilized by his opponents ahead of the election to amplify criticism that this is not a long-term solution to the repatriation of refugees and thus the economic crisis, intensifying a key argument in their electoral dialogue. Not only does the Caravan highlight the exodus of people still seeking to move from Syria into Turkey and beyond, but it also implies that any return of refugees to Syria would not be fully voluntary. This undermines Erdogan's previous positioning, inviting international criticism and calling into question his commitment to safe return as debate on the issue advances over the next year.

Developments between Turkish-backed groups. As drug manufacturing and proliferation plagues all areas of Syria, the narcotics trade has become a source of contention between law enforcement institutions and armed factions. The Turkish-backed military police in northern Aleppo, associated with the Turkish Ministry of Interior, tasked with combatting crime, reportedly cooperate with armed factions to enforce anti-narcotics policies against some distributors. However, these factions themselves are often at the heart of manufacturing and smuggling operations, which have led to tensions and even clashes between armed groups in the area. In mid-September, members of the Hamza Division, a faction associated with Turkish-backed forces, were reported to target the home of a leader of the military police in al-Bab in apparent retaliation to recent anti-narcotics operations. Public outrage over the attack and lack of accountability motivated ensuing protests, with attacks by the Hamza Division leading to violent clashes and public sentiments contributing to an eventual investigation into the matter and the dismissal of the leader of the group behind the original attack.²⁵

Such tensions over income-generating crossings and activities have been recurring issues among Turkish affiliated groups. These economically fueled issues are likely to continue or worsen as economic conditions rapidly deteriorate across Syria. Another Turkish-affiliated faction was reported to have cleared a forest near Maydanki Lake in Afrin in late August.²⁶ Occurrences of tree clearing and logging have been a recurring issue in Afrin, with land cleared and wood sold by faction members facing increasingly dire economic circumstances. Some trees that have been logged or cleared include income-generating forests, such as olive

or fruit trees, pointing towards long term environmental and economic consequences of this deforestation.

Further, the latest confrontation comes after a long period of upheaval and protests in Turkish-controlled northern Syria, as factions and civilians alike have protested statements hinting at normalization made by various Turkish officials. Although Turkey has made efforts to reassure their Syrian opposition affiliates, any potential actions towards normalization would likely fuel greater distrust in NWS and northern Syria and would be met with protests and instability.

| HTS's Shifting Policies and Defections

HTS rebranding. In late August, Idlib's small Christian populations in Yaqoubiyah and Ghassaniyah celebrated Saint Anna's Day, marking the first such event celebrated at the region's Armenian church in over a decade. The church was closed soon after the Syrian war started in 2011, after which extremist groups seized control of the area and displaced much of the local Christian population.²⁷ Today, the population of Christians in Idlib has dwindled to around 200 individuals, the vast majority of whom are elderly. Pictures circulated on local media outlets depicted worshippers surrounded by extensive security presence. This represents a major event in evolving HTS policy towards religious minorities that has been shaped over previous months and included steps towards greater protections for Christians, such as allowing them to apply for a police station in their villages and local administrators moving to resolve various grievances raised by Christians. Some local officials are reportedly sympathetic to the Christian population. The relatively tolerant move starkly contrasts with those of HTS's predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, which routinely intimidated, repressed, and even persecuted Christians and other non-Sunni groups, kidnapping Christians on multiple occasions.²⁸

While these celebrations were met with joy in the Christian community and gleaned limited international attention and praise, the response has not been uniformly positive. The move was controversial amongst moderate and hardline opposition groups and armed actors, many of whom view such moves towards religious pluralism and more moderate politics as appeasement by HTS leadership. Critique on social media platforms further targeted HTS hypocrisy in appealing to Western audiences after past intolerance and recurring abuses of religious minorities. However, commentators expressing such views have reportedly been targeted by HTS and arrested or forced to delete relevant posts.

This gesture of religious tolerance is the latest in a series of progressive actions and changes by HTS's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, to shift towards more moderate, internationally palatable policies and stances. These moves have ranged from the subtle- Golani's shifting dress to more Western clothing and shortening beard- to more dramatic, with Golani meeting with Christian and Druze leaders and community members in July, and now allowing for Christian worship. Golani has been widely cited to be attempting to appeal to the international community, seeking removal from US terrorism lists and legitimization of his leadership globally.

HTS defections. Moves towards tolerance and moderacy by Golani and HTS leadership have left many of the group's hardliners on the fringes. HTS has seen several high-profile resignations and defections in recent months, highlighting increasing discord between Golani and his allies and the group's more ideologically extreme members. The latest in this series of resignations was a senior judge in HTS, who departed his post in mid-September.²⁹ He is one of several HTS judges who have resigned since late 2021- one of whom was arrested in July soon after his announcement of his departure.³⁰ Although defections remain limited in number, they are believed to be motivated by ideological disagreements with Golani's increasingly moderate policies, reflecting discord within HTS's highest levels.

Education in NWS. Despite some more liberal policy shifts and posturing by Golani and HTS leadership, the group is far from turning towards moderation in many of its social policies. The latest example of this is the group's recent reported ban on married underage women attending schools.³¹ School principals contacted in Idlib claim this was delivered via oral instruction, which the Press Office of the Education Directorates in Idlib deny issuing. Over the course of the conflict in Syria, the rate of underage marriage has dramatically increased, although current figures are not readily accessible, and the emergence of hardline factions has detracted from women's rights, among them access to education. In areas of Idlib under HTS control, which are more conservative than other areas of northern Syria and NWS, women's education is further curtailed by fears of women and girls facing harassment or violence traveling to schools. Strict social norms often prevent young women and girls from accessing or completing education- an issue further entrenched by the recent HTS policy.

Education remains a major issue across Idlib, where teachers are poorly paid or unpaid and multiple concerns pose extensive barriers to education. In many schools in Idlib, teachers have been forced to work on a voluntary basis, with a recent report surveying schools across NES and NWS finding that nearly 35% of 10,971 teachers assessed in Idlib did not receive salaries.³² Over 73% of those assessed teachers in Idlib who are receiving payments³³ depend on NGO and international support for their salaries, largely facilitated by local organizations. This has motivated disruptions in education, such as previous strikes,³⁴ and contributes to poor and decreasing quality of education in the region. The HTS-affiliated Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) facilitates the provision of aid baskets to teachers in some cases, in lieu of actual salaries.³⁵

As the public education system deteriorates and the SSG turns a blind eye to teachers' protests and public concerns, the emergence of privatized educational institutions³⁶ is a concerning trend— one that is likely to make education even more inaccessible for the impoverished population. The SSG's Ministry of Education has reportedly allowed private entities to rent some buildings to operate schools and institutes. With low salaries or no compensation in public schools, teachers are likely to prefer teaching in private schools, leaving families no choice but to enroll children in relatively high-cost private schools in order to access education.

In Northern Aleppo, unlike in Idlib, the vast majority of teachers surveyed for the same report received salaries for their work. However, salaries are reportedly insufficient to meet costs of living in northern Aleppo, resulting in a Teachers' Syndicate strike that has closed schools in Azaz and camps through the end of September. Across northern Syria and NWS, fears of safety at school are most prevalent in Afrin, where 17% of students surveyed for a recent report said that they did not feel safe in school (compared to 9% in Idlib and 6% in Northern Aleppo).³⁷

| Broader Syria Developments

Normalization. While Turkish officials' recent statements hinting towards potential normalization with Damascus have not translated into substantive conciliatory acts, it remains significant that high-ranking officials in Ankara are openly discussing a potential rapprochement. In recent years, Turkey has embarked on several relations-mending endeavors with former regional rivals, with Damascus emerging as the latest chapter in those efforts. Recent changes in Turkish positioning holds great significance

for NWS, where Turkish backing has been critical to sustaining the opposition in their last major territorial stronghold. As such, the statements made triggered prolonged backlash in the area, prompting Cavusoglu to meet the heads of opposition groups and reaffirm Ankara's support. ³⁸

Previously, the possibility of normalizing relations with Damascus was inconceivable, especially given Turkey's direct support to opposition groups, its occupation of large swathes of territory in the north, as well as its investment in administrative, economic, and service infrastructure in territories under its control. For several years now, the main Turkish opposition parties have peddled the idea of re-establishing diplomatic channels with Damascus in an attempt to resolve Turkey's refugee problem. While Erdogan's administration has long rejected re-engaging Assad, growing anti-refugee sentiments paired with deteriorating economic conditions and electoral considerations ahead of the much-anticipated 2023 Turkish elections, are likely contributing to Erdogan's shifting calculations in Syria.

However, given the vast chasm between Ankara and Damascus, the path towards normalization will likely be fraught with complexities and challenges. In addition to preventing a Kurdish autonomy south of its borders, Turkey seeks to: 1) neutralize security threats to its soil emanating from the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) Syrian offshoot, the People's Protection Forces (YPG); 2) repatriate existing Syrian refugees in Turkey while preventing a fresh exodus into its territories; 3) and finally, carve out a political settlement that involves power-sharing arrangements between the Syrian opposition and the regime. The latter is the only viable option for Turkey to drop its support for the Syrian opposition that it has backed since the start of the crisis. Not only is Damascus unlikely to concede to any of these demands, it also currently does not have the capacity to meet them.

Moreover, Damascus has repeatedly called on Turkey to withdraw its troops from Syrian soil and cease its support for opposition groups.

These diverging expectations are likely to present significant obstacles to achieving a rapid, all-encompassing normalization. Further, a hastened reconciliation carries significant political and security risks for Turkey, both domestically and in areas under its influence. With this understanding, both sides are likely to pursue incremental, transaction-oriented re-engagement.

Optics. Any signs of an Ankara-Damascus rapprochement, even a gradual one, will benefit Erdogan, although it is unlikely to influence the polls in any significant way unless it ushers in substantive returns. From Damascus' perspective, a rapprochement is a Turkish admission of its Syria policy failure, a concession from Erdogan rather than from Assad. The regime can benefit from re-establishing its regional status and potentially distance Turkey from opposition organizations. More importantly, Damascus will hope that increasing normalization with surrounding states can further bury the peace process and any talks of a political resolution to the crisis.

Economic crisis. Syria is currently experiencing the worst economic crisis since the conflict erupted more than a decade ago, with economic factors contributing to increased displacement in NWS (see 'Upticks in displacements'). Rapid depreciation of the local currency amid diminishing purchasing power and increasing costs of living, combined with a decline in domestic production and exports, have resulted in severe economic hardship and record levels of food insecurity for the general population. The crisis is driven by a range of factors, including rampant corruption and clientelism, as well as the economic collapse of neighboring Lebanon, which dealt a huge blow to the regime's finances. Amid sanctions, Damascus had largely relied on Lebanese banks, which hold \$40 billion worth of Syrian assets, for transacting with the outside world. With asset freezes and financial restrictions, the regime has become increasingly desperate to replenish its depleted coffers. These challenges have been compounded by western sanctions on Russia.

Furthermore, sanctions levied by the US and the European Union (EU) have also had a crippling effect on the Syrian economy, with illegal trade and illicit economic activities flourishing, including money laundering, drug trafficking, arms trade, and human trafficking. With Damascus' reduced financial capacity, the regime has imposed austerity measures, cutting subsidies and reducing public spending, as mass unemployment and deteriorating public services have contributed to growing grievances and increased migration from regime-held areas.

ISIS resurgence and al-Hol. The Asayish conducted the second phase of a campaign to pursue ISIS sleeper cells over the course of three weeks from late August to mid-September. Upon conclusion of the operation, the SDF reported that they arrested 226 individuals, including 36 "extremist" women.³⁹ In conjunction with the campaign in the camp, the commander of US Central Command, General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, visited al-Hol

camp in early September. In a press conference held at the US embassy in Amman, he urged countries from around the world to repatriate their nationals from the camp, rehabilitate and reintegrate them into society.⁴⁰ This visit coincides with increased international interest in al-Hol, as violence within the camp and concerns of ISIS resurgence have fueled pushes for increased security and repatriations.

While visiting al-Hol, Kurilla also stated that he believes the camp has turned into a breeding ground for ISIS, as they have exploited conditions in the camp to acquire new recruits and spread their ideology.⁴¹ Since the launch of the security campaign in the camp, ISIS has increased its attacks in SANES areas.⁴² Through its media outlets, ISIS also claimed responsibility for 8 attacks, killing 10 SDF and GoS members in one week in mid-September, with operations targeting Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah.⁴³ Upon conclusion of security operation in the camp, there were extensive joint efforts exerted by the SDF and the US-led International Coalition to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. The SDF announced the arrests of six ISIS members and seizure of weapons and explosives in two separate operations Raqqa.⁴⁴ The Asayish announced that they thwarted an attempted terrorist attack on al-Hol Camp in addition to other operations in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor.⁴⁵

Although recent ISIS operations have been largely focused on NES, the group continues to pose a threat in NWS. Field reports indicate that the group has maintained a foothold in al-Bab city, Jarabulus, the areas between Azaz and Akhtarín, Atma camps in Idlib, the city of Idlib, the western countryside of Aleppo, and Darat Izza.

CONCLUSION

A cholera outbreak in Syria, initially concentrated in NES and in GoS-controlled areas, spread throughout much of the country in September, with cases reported in NWS later in the month. Prolonged drought in Syria has forced many to rely on drilling wells or private water trucking for drinking water, leaving room for water pollutants and insufficient sanitization. Further, farmers have increasingly relied upon the use of refined sewage water to water fields, creating potential for contamination of produce and pollution of drinking water sources. Initial cases were attributed to water from the Euphrates River, but the outbreak has rapidly spread to other areas, with the hard-hit health sector unprepared and under resourced to combat rising caseload. NWS is particularly vulnerable, with high population density and a failing healthcare sector likely to contribute to catastrophic impacts of the outbreak.

Displacement spiked drastically in August in NWS, with HNAP findings indicated economic challenges to be the main driver of these movements. Increasingly anti-Syrian sentiment and poor economic conditions in Turkey may have influenced some relocations of refugees into NWS and contributed to the establishment of the “Caravan of Light” movement in early September. The short-lived, anonymously led movement gained a large following and international attention and sought to motivate a large-scale exodus of Syrians from northern Syria and Turkey to gather at the Turkish border with Europe. The movement was abruptly dissolved but demonstrated Syrians’ continued or renewed interest to follow friends and relatives to Europe as conditions in Turkey and Syria continue to deteriorate. Russian bombardments, increasingly targeting areas of central and even northern Idlib, appear to have motivated only limited iterative displacements. In northern Aleppo, anti-narcotics operations and normalization prospects have motivated recent protests and clashes.

HTS’s moderate rebranding efforts included increased steps towards religious tolerance in September and previous months. This has impacted increased disagreement from the groups’ more hard-line leaders, motivating several high-level defections in recent months. Education continues to be a major challenge in Idlib, with many teachers working without compensation and a new HTS oral instruction to bar married underage women from schools further limiting access.

Although the threat of an imminent Turkish ground offensive in NES has receded, Turkish officials’ recent statements hinting at potential normalization with Damascus have generated new insecurity in Syria. Although Turkey has since made various efforts to pacify allied groups in NWS, these statements motivated protests across northern Aleppo and have contributed to increased mistrust of Turkey among civilians and factions alike.

Endnotes

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