

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

|                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>                  | <b>1768</b>                      |
| Land:                              | Syrien                           |
| Kilde:                             | iMMAP                            |
| Titel:                             | CONTEXT UPDATE – Northwest Syria |
| Udgivet:                           | 11. august 2022                  |
| Optaget på<br>baggrundsmaterialet: | 19. december 2022                |
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# CONTEXT UPDATE

Northwest Syria | August 11, 2022

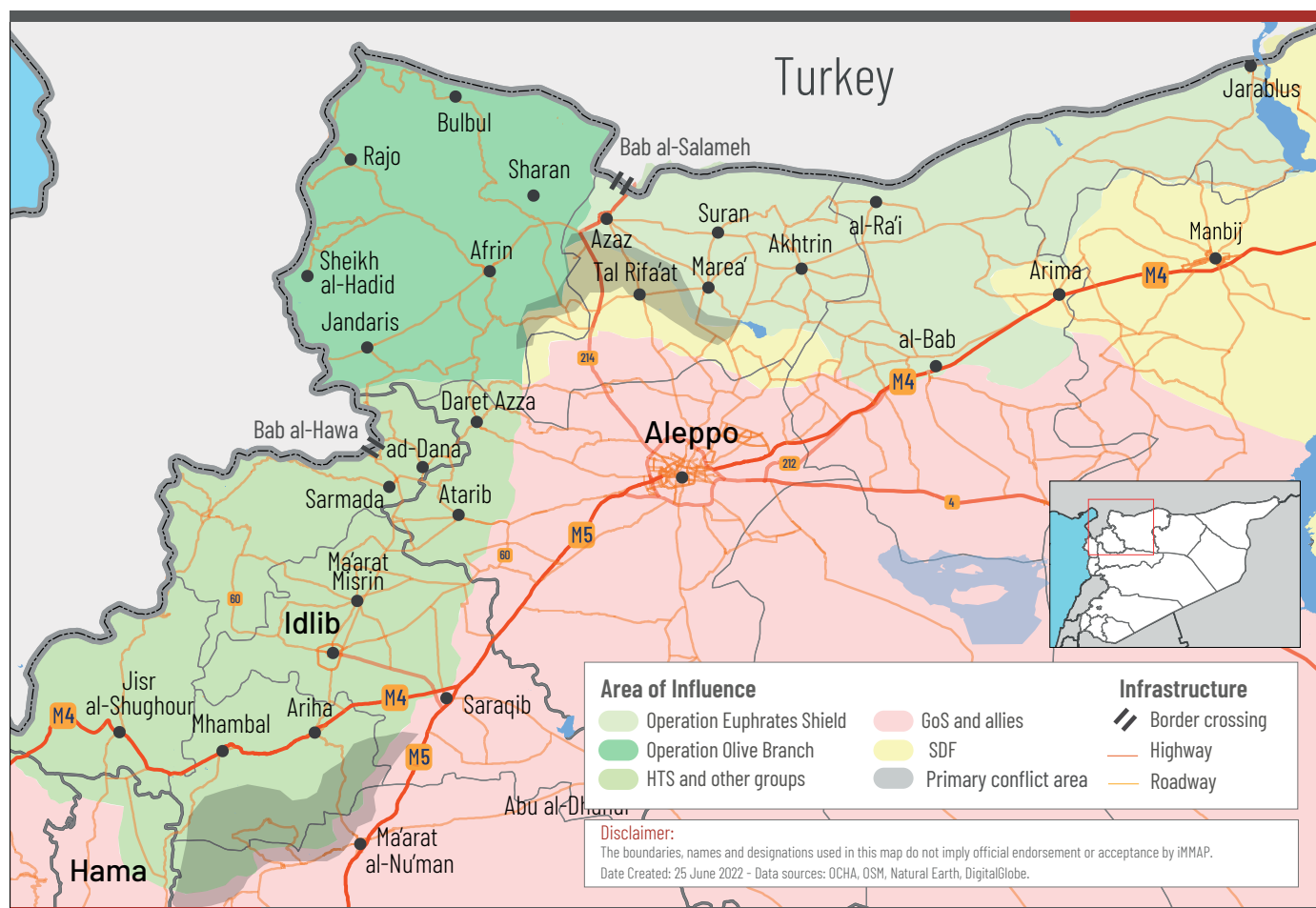


## INTRODUCTION

This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews (KIIs), 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

- All eyes were on the UN Security Council (UNSC) negotiations in early July as the authorization of Bab al-Hawa border crossing usage went up for renewal. Although the US and other council members rejected Russian proposals for a six-month extension, the council ultimately voted to extend operations until January 2023. This shortened extension threatens the stability of humanitarian aid provision and planning, casting doubt about their continued operation post-January.
- This comes amid growing concerns over a potential Turkish incursion into northern Syria, which could exacerbate the already poor humanitarian conditions in the region. Iranian and Russian leaders expressed varying degrees of opposition to Turkey's plans during a trilateral meeting held in Tehran on July 19. It remains unclear how the lack of consensus will impact Turkey's actions going forward, although movements on the ground and Turkish statements indicate an intention to move forward.
- Routine shelling between the pro-Government of Syria (GoS) forces and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib has significantly escalated following Turkish threats, particularly since the conclusion of meetings in Tehran. This continues to detract from humanitarian conditions and access in the region.
- Increased infighting between Turkish-backed opposition groups in northern Aleppo, largely owing to tensions between Ahrar al-Sham and various factions, has resulted in multiple clashes in June. HTS seized the opportunity to move into areas of Afrin with limited opposition, under the guise of support for Ahrar al-Sham. Although clashes were resolved by a Turkish-facilitated truce in mid-June, the local balance of power is likely to shift in favor of HTS moving forward.
- Recent weeks have witnessed increased anti-terrorism operations by the GoS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the US in multiple areas across Syria. US officials have expressed concerns that a Turkish incursion might create opportunities for ISIS' resurgence in Syria.





# TIMELINE

## 2022

- **Late May**  
HTS carries out extensive military maneuvers in various locations in Idlib.
- **June 27**  
US drone strikes kill a senior Hurras al-Din official in Idlib province.
- **July 6**  
The Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) declares state of emergency in preparation for a potential Turkish offensive.
- **July 12**  
UNSC votes to extend cross-border aid for six months following a July 8th Russian veto of a one-year extension.
- **July 12**  
US drone strike in Afrin kills first and second ISIS leaders in Syria.
- **July 19**  
Iran, Russia, and Turkey meet in Tehran to discuss trilateral relations, with a particular attention given to developments in Syria.
- **July 22**  
Russian airstrikes on the villages of al-Jadidah and al-Yacoubia near the city of Jisr al-Shughour in Idlib.
- **July 22**  
Russia and Ukraine sign an UN-backed grain deal to unblock exports from the Black Sea ports and ease a global crisis.
- **July 22**  
The SDF announces arrest of 19 suspected ISIS affiliates in al-Hol.
- **July 28**  
Spokesman for the Turkish President reiterates that a military operation could happen at any time.
- **July 28**  
GoS forces targeted the Jabal al-Zawiya area in Idlib, as well as areas in the western countryside of Aleppo.
- **August 2**  
Turkish forces increase military reinforcements to posts in Idlib and establish three new military bases in the area.
- **August 3**  
HTS-affiliated Salvation Government imposes irrigation fees on farmers amid ongoing water shortages.
- **August 4**  
Bab al-Hawa border crossing management reveals that Turkey has deported approximately 2,000 Syrian refugees in July alone (10,000 in 2022).



## SUMMARY OF EVENTS

On July 8, Moscow vetoed an initial UNSC proposal that would have extended cross-border humanitarian aid from the Bab al-Hawa crossing into Syria for twelve months. Two days later, the council ultimately adopted a compromise resolution that extended the cross-border humanitarian aid mechanism for only six months, leaving the future of operations uncertain after January 2023. The Russian veto would have deprived 2.4 million Syrians dependent on humanitarian aid through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for survival.<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian actors have proposed multiple alternative avenues for aid delivery as the future of UN operations grows more uncertain.

As the population of Northwest Syria (NWS) and relevant stakeholders awaited UNSC's decision, armed actors in Syria continued to reinforce positions and prepare for a threatened Turkish invasion of areas in Northeast Syria (NES). Recent talks held in Tehran between Iran, Turkey, and Russia reportedly did not generate the support Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sought from his Iranian and Russian counterparts, who voiced varying levels of opposition to a potential offensive and to construction of units to resettle Syrian refugees in NWS. Erdogan's government has indicated that an invasion remains on the agenda and could happen at any time, with Ankara continuing to reinforce its positions in northern Syria. Increasing uncertainty amidst the threat of a looming invasion has placed a significant burden on civilians in target areas, as well as governmental and humanitarian entities operating in the region. Many of those internally displaced people (IDPs) originating from the areas under threat of Turkish invasion, Tal Rifaat and Manbij, currently reside in areas of NWS under Turkish and Turkish-backed opposition control. In late July, the Turkish foreign minister said in a television interview that Turkey would be willing to support the GoS against the SDF,<sup>2</sup> despite the SDF and GoS coordinating in recent reinforcements opposing Turkish invasion in NES.

The escalation of recent weeks has exacerbated these challenges. Routine mutual shelling between the GoS and Russia and opposition actors in Idlib has ramped up in June and July, with shelling and bombing resulting in civilian casualties and property damage. Meanwhile, ISIS continues to pose security threats, with growing concerns over the group's revival increasing in the recent period. As the GoS ramps up its anti-ISIS operations in Syria, the US-led coalition have conducted several operations against ISIS and Hurras al-Din in June and July, resulting in the assassination and capture of several high-ranking leaders. US officials have expressed concerns of ISIS resurgence in the wake of a Turkish invasion, with sporadic ISIS attacks occurring in multiple parts of Syria in recent months.



# ANALYSIS

## | UNSC Resolution

Just days before cross-border aid's previous extension came to an end, Moscow vetoed an initial UNSC proposal on July 8 that would have extended cross-border humanitarian aid from the Bab al-Hawa crossing into Syria.<sup>3</sup> In the lead up to the UNSC meeting, many feared that the twelve-month agreement, which has been in place for the past eight years, would be blocked by Russia. Observers believe that Russia's threat of closing the last corridor for aid agencies is a bargaining chip motivated by EU and US sanctions over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Further, it serves the purpose of hoarding aid among elites close to the GoS and forcing non-GoS areas into submission. However, in addition to benefiting terrorist groups, Russia contends that cross-border operations continue to undermine Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity by circumventing Damascus. After several days of deadlocked negotiations, UNSC voted to extend the mandate for an additional six months (although the UK, US, and France abstained from voting).<sup>4</sup>

Instrumentalizing aid is not novel within Syria's context, as Moscow has threatened on numerous occasions to veto UNSC aid renewals. However, the impasse was broken when the UN was forced to cave to Russian demands, reauthorizing its mandate for a shorter period. In the absence of a compromise, the Russian veto would have effectively closed the last critical lifeline for 2.4 million of the 4.1 people in NWS who primarily rely on UN aid for their survival.<sup>5</sup>

While a thin deal is still better than no deal at all, the reduced period poses significant challenges and uncertainty to the humanitarian response, which requires extensive planning efforts achieved through longer, stable, and more sustainable timeframes. It also means that the life-saving aid may be threatened in the middle of winter. Responses to the potential closure of the crossing and to the failure to achieve a longer extension have been overwhelmingly negative. On the ground in NWS, relief organizations and volunteers have demonstrated against the shortened timeframe. International groups and actors, too, have expressed disappointment, with statements issued by numerous organizations and entities in the period leading up to and following the vote. These reactions have included calls to explore alternate strategies and pathways for aid delivery, with major concerns underlying international actors' disinclination to operate through GoS areas and channels.

Although the most recent extension postpones concerns of impacted civilians and humanitarian aid providers another six months, the same issues are likely to arise when the scenario is repeated in January 2023. In the event of a temporary or permanent closure of the critical crossing in the future, organizations may change aid modalities to more cash and voucher assistance (CVA) and the population may rely more heavily on unofficial channels to transport essential items. Further, although such a decision would drastically impact UN aid provision and programming, other humanitarian organizations would still be able to operate. However, despite possible mechanisms that might allow for stable humanitarian aid delivery (outlined below) and other channels that might be used to mitigate the impact of such a closure, the failure to renew cross-border operations would likely cause increased economic stress, contributing to greater competition over increasingly limited resources. This is likely to influence renewed fighting between armed groups and renewed displacement that might spill into other regions of Syria and neighboring countries.

Several organizations and individuals have put forward a number of proposals for alternative mechanisms to ensure continued aid delivery to the region. The director of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing's media office has called upon the UN to transfer the Syrian humanitarian dossier from the UNSC to the General Assembly (GA) to prevent Russian intervention in future renewal votes. The Idlib Health Directorate has proposed the formation of a coalition of non-UN organizations to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery regardless of future UN resolutions, while a group of Syrian organizations have proposed the establishment of a separate humanitarian fund. With humanitarian groups unable to amass the necessary stockpile stores within NWS in the event of Bab al-Hawa's closure due to security challenges, it is likely that these actors will begin to seriously consider these alternatives, especially as Russia continues to hinder the reauthorization of aid operations.



In the event of a halt in UN cross-border operations, smuggling would be likely to occur between areas of NWS and neighboring areas. Smuggling channels currently operate from GoS--controlled territory, Turkey, and to some extent from SDF-controlled territories to NWS. Within NWS itself and although limited in quantity smuggling occurs from Turkish-controlled Operation Olive Branch (OOB) regions to areas of Idlib under the control of HTS. Although smuggling may supplement current aid available, it would not be sufficient to sustain the area's population in the event of a closure, which would be likely to cause competition over resources, waves of displacement, potential reactivation of conflict, and tip what is already a precarious humanitarian situation in NWS.

Further, although unofficial channels already exist between these territories, HTS has recently undertaken significant efforts to prevent smuggling by digging a series of trenches along its control lines separating areas under Turkish and Turkish-backed forces control.<sup>6</sup> This has impacted smuggling of various goods, with field resources indicating a subsequent increase in the prices of goods such as sugar (which is taxed), diesel (which is controlled by the Imdad Company), and cigarettes (which are considered haram, and thus must be smuggled). HTS restricts the import of certain vegetables and imposes taxes on others, exacerbating the existing economic hardship of many families. HTS has also continued to restrict humanitarian organizations in Idlib in attempts to control NGO operations, arresting employees and otherwise targeting organizations operating in areas under its control.<sup>7</sup>

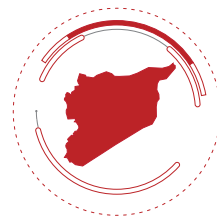
## **| Impact of Turkish Aggression**

In the lead up to the trilateral Astana summit talks held on July 18 in Tehran, Turkey had hoped to secure some form of endorsement from Russia and Iran to launch its offensive, although these hopes were reportedly dashed.<sup>8</sup> During the meeting, Erdogan reportedly reminded his Russian and Iranian counterparts that the 2019 consensus to establish a 30 kilometer corridor on the Syrian side of the border to push back Kurdish elements was never fully realized.<sup>9</sup> However, both Russia and Iran reiterated the importance of preserving Syria's territorial integrity, despite acknowledging Turkey's border concerns.<sup>10</sup>

Resistance to a potential Turkish incursion seemed greater on the Iranian side, as both Iran's Supreme Leader<sup>11</sup> and President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized the importance of maintaining stability and expelling elements uninvited by the GoS.<sup>12</sup> Both Putin and Raisi reportedly voiced objections to Turkey's construction of settlements in NWS, which Ankara aims to use as shelter for repatriated Syrian refugees.<sup>13</sup> Upon returning to Turkey, Erdogan emphasized that an incursion would stay on his agenda until "terrorism" concerns were adequately addressed.<sup>14</sup> It remains to be seen whether Turkey will proceed without support or postpone or even abandon incursion plans entirely. However, realities on the ground appear to suggest the former, as military actors have continued to reinforce their posts throughout July.

Turkey has escalated its military reinforcements to the city of al-Bab in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, with field resources indicating that over a dozen military convoys have arrived recently at Turkish posts in Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) areas. These convoys are reportedly arriving once every couple of days, transporting military equipment, including tanks, artillery, military bulldozers, armored vehicles, and reinforcements and ammunition. On the opposite side, the GoS, SDF, Russia, and Iran have also started to reinforce their military presence in areas where Turkey might attempt to launch an operation. The GoS intensified its reinforcements in Tal Rifaat and Manbij, while the SDF have reportedly established several joint military operations rooms with Damascus in the same areas. Beyond military preparations, recent escalations by the various actors involved, including mutual shelling and drone strikes, have also intensified in recent weeks, particularly following the conclusion of the trilateral summit.

While Turkey appears to be testing the waters ahead of a fresh offensive, gauging the SDF's and its allies' readiness to respond and hoping to take advantage of Russia's distractions in Ukraine, it is also likely that Ankara is attempting to disorient and demoralize the opposition before launching an offensive. Either way, these intensifying escalations continue to have devastating consequences on the civilian population, as many remain caught in the crossfire. Moreover, continued shelling and mutual shelling place another layer of burden on humanitarian actors operating in the region, forcing them to contend with renewed displacements and heightened need in the face of decreasing donor funding.



## Escalation of Shelling in Idlib

As relevant actors prepare for a potential Turkish incursion, shelling and other military maneuvers have escalated in HTS-controlled areas of Idlib. Mutual shelling by pro-GoS forces and the HTS have become routine in many locations within the province, despite a 2020 agreement between Turkey and Russia halting outright military operations. In late May, HTS reportedly carried out extensive military drills on various fronts with the GoS in areas of Idlib, Latakia, and western Aleppo.<sup>15</sup> In the following month, multiple areas of NWS witnessed mutual shelling between both Turkish-backed opposition forces and pro-GoS forces and between HTS and pro-GoS forces. This heightened violence extended into July, with a number of areas in the de-escalation zone in NWS (particularly focused in Idlib) have seen increased mutual shelling between GoS forces and Russian allies and HTS and Turkish-backed opposition groups.

In the first half of July, Turkish-backed forces shelled GoS posts in eastern Idlib and the GoS targeted Turkish outposts north of Saraqib. Field resources indicate that bombing, shelling, and mutual shelling has continued between various opposing groups in NWS throughout early and mid-July. This has included both air and ground attacks in Jabal al-Zawiya and other areas of Idlib that have long been under consistent and even daily fire. After an extended period of respite, Russian airstrikes in Idlib resumed in early July, with reports of strikes near Balshon and Marian villages in mid-July. Field resources have further reported GoS shelling in the Idlib countryside in mid-July, with mutual targeting using heavy machine guns between GoS forces and HTS and Turkish-backed opposition. Russian warplanes targeted the villages of al-Jadidah and al-Yacoubia on the outskirts of the city of Jisr al-Shughour in Idlib province on July 22, killing seven civilians and injuring 12 others in an attack on residential areas and a poultry farm.<sup>16</sup> Some residents took to the street in protest over Russia's actions.<sup>17</sup>

Despite increased violence, Turkish officials recently met with local leaders in Jabal al-Zawiya, seeking these individuals' assistance in persuading displaced people to return to the area. However, with increased ongoing shelling, such efforts are unlikely to generate significant returns. Turkey's lingering threat of an incursion, coupled with intensified mutual shelling between the various actors involved, as well as growing infighting among Turkish-backed groups have created a climate of uncertainty, rekindling fears of violence and displacement among civilians and humanitarian groups. Relief organizations fear that this continued uncertainty could further destabilize economic prospects and security conditions, posing significant obstacles to planning and implementation amid increasing donor fatigue and reduced capacity.

## HTS- Turkish-backed Opposition Relations

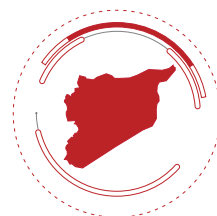
Following the Turkish threat to invade NES in May 2022, areas of OES territory in northern Aleppo saw an escalation of clashes between multiple Turkish-backed groups. A primary faction involved, Ahrar al-Sham, was backed in these skirmishes by HTS against elements of the so-called "Third Legion" – also affiliated with Turkish-backed opposition. In mid-June, HTS took advantage of the chaos surrounding infighting between Ahrar al-Sham and other Turkish-backed groups to make their own advances, entering Afrin under the name and banners of Ahrar al-Sham and ostensibly in support of the group.<sup>18</sup> HTS was able to capture several positions in Afrin from Turkish-backed groups. HTS has long worked to develop relationships with other regional factions, capitalizing on fraught relations between Turkish-backed opposition factions to smoothly move into Afrin.

In doing so, HTS demonstrated its ability to threaten parts of OOB and OES territories and revealed weaknesses in Turkish-backed forces' ability to defend areas under their control. HTS has further demonstrated increased willingness to interfere in the affairs of other areas of NWS beyond territories under its control. Tensions between factions and HTS's demonstrated capacity to threaten Turkish-backed opposition and Turkish-controlled areas contribute to a lack of accountability for HTS infractions and indicate a shift in regional balances of power in HTS's favor.

Clashes between factions continued over the course of the first half of June and were eventually halted when Turkish intelligence facilitated a truce on June 19.<sup>19</sup> Despite a relatively speedy resolution, civilian casualties and the instability caused by continued internecine conflict between opposition groups threatens governance, stability, and access in opposition-controlled areas.

## Return Trends

Meanwhile, there has been a tangible increase in the number of Syrians returning to northern Syria from Turkey, with guaranteed visits to Turkey, housing, and occasional financial incentives facilitating returns. UNHCR's Turkey representative said in mid-June that the agency was observing 800 individuals, largely singles, returning to northern Syria each day, despite inhospitable conditions.<sup>20</sup> Turkish authorities reportedly deported 100 Syrians on July 13 through Bab al-Salama border crossing, despite their possession of Temporary Protection ID cards. This is the third mass deportation of Syrians this year. Turkey said that these refugees were not forced to return to Syria, although deported individuals have contested this claim and have noted their removal was without their families.



While previous Turkish housing projects in northern Syria had targeted IDPs in NWS, new plans to build 240,000 additional housing units significantly expand existing projects.<sup>21</sup> With five million people already living in NWS, these projects and the prospect of further returns have raised concerns regarding space and resources. Further, according to a June report by the Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), the majority of beneficiaries of housing projects in OOB territory were fighters in Turkish-backed armed groups and their families, revealing disparities in the allocation of such housing schemes<sup>22</sup> that are likely to continue in the distribution of new housing units. STJ has further reported over 300 arbitrary arrests in Afrin in the first half of 2022, with these targeting the population's Kurdish majority.<sup>23</sup>

Displaced individuals living in areas under Turkish-backed control welcome the potential for Turkish invasion, as Turkish assumption of power in Tal Rifaat or Manbij would allow many to return to their homes in areas currently under SDF control. Field reports indicate that a Turkish assumption of power in Manbij would allow the return of an estimated 250,000 IDPs from areas of OOB and OES, relieving crowding and providing additional agricultural lands and resources. Those displaced from SDF-controlled areas of Tal Rifaat (estimated to be a similar number) are distributed between Turkey and camps in northern Syria. Turkish capture of these areas would open avenues for the return of these IDPs and refugees to their homes, offering some potential legitimacy to Turkey, in addition to agricultural land and areas for additional settlement. This would allow for decreased crowding in areas under Turkish and Turkish-backed opposition control, as well as provide additional opportunity for development in line with Erdogan's professed vision to return one million Syrians from Turkey.

However, some civilians in OOB and OES areas have expressed dissatisfaction with Turkey's focus on securing its southern borders rather than prioritizing existing territory under the control of Turkish-backed opposition. There are also reported fears of exchanges of territory for areas under opposition control, as seen with Aleppo and areas of OES in late 2016. However, it is unclear how widespread these concerns are, and there has been no indication that such an exchange is under consideration.

## Extremist Activity and Counteroperations

As sporadic ISIS attacks have targeted various actors and civilians throughout Syria and the GoS has ramped up its anti-ISIS operations, several counter-terrorism operations have been undertaken in areas of NES and NWS in recent months. Following the capture of a senior ISIS official in Northern Aleppo in mid-June (discussed at greater length in iMMAP's June 2022 NES Context Update), the US and the SDF have conducted several operations against ISIS and other extremist groups in NWS. On June 27, US forces launched a drone strike in Idlib, killing a senior Hurras al-Din official.<sup>24</sup> On July 12, the US conducted a drone strike outside of Jandayris in the Afrin region, resulting in the killing of two ISIS leaders in Syria.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, on July 21, ISIS sleeper cells targeted an SDF checkpoint in Shaddadi, south of Hasakah, with reportedly two members seriously injured.<sup>26</sup> The following day, the SDF and its Internal Security Forces arrested alleged ISIS affiliates in al-Hol southeast of Syria.<sup>27</sup> Both Washington and the SANES have expressed concerns about instability around a Turkish incursion allowing for a resurgence of ISIS in Syria. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East highlighted this fear in a speech in mid-July and voiced additional justifications for Turkish invasion including the devastating humanitarian impact.<sup>28</sup> Concerns that ISIS may capitalize on the potential Turkish incursion have been noted by US officials. As the SDF and other security actors are likely to divert resources to the frontlines in the event of a Turkish offensive, the potential security vacuum left could be exploited by ISIS.



## CONCLUSION

With the UNSC's renewal of cross-border operations, ongoing Turkish threat on NES, tensions between Turkish-backed factions and HTS, and ongoing escalations of violence in areas of Idlib, July 2022 and the preceding month has been an eventful period in NWS and across Syria. The renewal of cross-border operations via Bab al-Hawa, while continuing a lifeline for millions in NWS, comes as a disappointment to humanitarian actors and the local population due to the short period of the extension. While Western actors sought to extend UN operations for an additional year, Russian opposition limited this to a mere six months, raising challenges for humanitarian planning and security of aid in the area. Come January 2023, similar political challenges are likely to hinder Western efforts to provide stability in aid provision to the area, highlighting a need for alternative avenues to assure life-saving aid for those dependent on it in NWS.

The continuing Turkish threat on areas of NES, while welcomed by those displaced from these areas to parts of NWS, contributes to ongoing insecurity in NWS as well as other parts of Syria. The US has expressed fears of increased ISIS activity in the face of Turkish incursion, with various actors conducting extensive anti-terrorism operations in NWS and other parts of Syria in June and July. Turkey and other actors have continued to reinforce military positions in Tal Rifaat and other areas of NWS, despite a July summit between Turkey, Iran, and Russia revealing Turkish counterparts' opposition to invasion. Despite a lack of international support, Turkey has continued to indicate that an imminent invasion remains on the agenda, although inaction since initial threats several months ago detracts from the credibility of such claims.

Escalations of violence in Idlib have included mutual shelling between the GoS and HTS, as well as Russian attacks. With its June operations in Afrin, HTS has further threatened Turkish-backed opposition groups, as tensions between various factions exposes fractures and weaknesses in the groups' ability to defend areas under their control. HTS's efforts to improve relationships in Afrin and capitalization of these weaknesses to enter the area have tipped the local balance of power in its favor.



## Endnotes

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