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# CONTEXT UPDATE

Northwestern Syria | December 1, 2022



## INTRODUCTION

This report was generated by iMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in 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 iMAP and do not represent the views or positions of iMAP's donors and partners. Moreover, the names and designations used in this report do not imply acceptance by iMAP's donors and partners.

## Key Takeaways

- Following an incursion by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) into areas of Afrin in October, Turkey unilaterally changed the structure of the Syrian National Army (SNA), as well as factions' roles. The recent incursion and restructuring has altered civil and military institutions in northern Aleppo and has implications for inter-faction power dynamics and alliances.
- The GoS's increasing shift to targeting areas of central and northern Idlib included a reported use of cluster munitions on an IDP camp in November, drawing international condemnation. Increased unpredictability of GoS attacks has not yet caused significant long-term displacements, it remains likely this will change in the future.
- In reaction to a PKK/YPG-attributed bombing in Istanbul early in the month, Turkey launched unprecedented airstrikes in Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq. This has been followed by escalated mutual hostilities between Turkish-aligned actors and the SDF, elevating fears of a Turkish ground offensive.
- Cholera continued to spread in Northwest Syria (NWS), with additional facilities prepared and dedicated for the comprehensive treatment of Cholera in several locations. However, certain areas experience significant difficulty addressing cholera cases due to hindered access to medical supplies.
- As humanitarian actors continue contingency planning for the upcoming UN cross border renewal decision in January, the education sector in NWS has continued to suffer from inadequate funding and support. Winter conditions further exacerbate humanitarian need in NWS, particularly in camps, as rising costs, gaps in humanitarian funding, and politicization of fuel provision pose significant challenges to access.



# TIMELINE



# SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The recent Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) incursion into areas of Afrin continued to have implications on the power dynamics and structure of factions within the Syrian National Army (SNA) in Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), and Operation Olive Branch (OOB) areas. Following a series of meetings between SNA leadership and Turkish officials, the SNA underwent a restructuring, now entirely divided into three legions. SNA factions that assisted HTS in the recent incursion were assimilated into the Second Legion. Further changes aimed to minimize the role factions had played in managing crossings and civil institutions, with these responsibilities now delegated to civil institutions. Ahrar al-Sham, a notable ally of HTS, underwent significant, with five internal groups' renouncement of the leadership of Amer al-Sheikh (who had enjoyed closed ties with HTS), and appointing Yousef al-Hamawi in his stead. This caused a significant loss to HTS, which was further compounded by the Eastern Sector of Ahrar al-Sham announced joining the Second Legion in November.

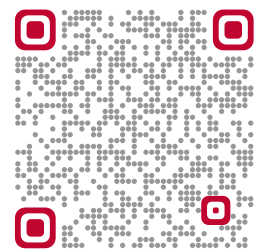
A Russian-supported Government of Syria (GoS) attack utilized cluster ammunition in targeting of the Maram IDP camp in northern Idlib, drawing widespread condemnation. The attack led to at least ten deaths, dozens of injuries, infrastructure damages, and (largely temporary) displacement. Further displacement was recorded from Kuwait al-Rahmeh Camp in rural Afrin due to the recent HTS incursion. Al-Rahmeh camp has been frequently attacked in recent months by different entities due to its proximity to areas in which hostilities are exchanged between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), SNA, and recently, HTS.

An attack in Istanbul causing six deaths and dozens of injuries was attributed to the PKK/YPG. Turkey quickly arrested the alleged perpetrator and launched a campaign aiming to apprehend those involved in coordinating the attack. Though the SDF denied responsibility, Turkey launched 'Operation Claw-Sword' targeting various areas in Northeast Syria (NES). The exchange of attacks between SDF and Turkish affiliates resulted in civilian and military losses as well as the damage and destruction of facilities including grain silos, hospitals, and oil fields. Although Turkey's attacks at the time of writing consist of airstrikes, shelling, and drone strikes, and despite Russian and US calls for de-escalation, there is renewed speculation of a new Turkish ground offensive in Syria, fueled by Turkish statements.

Cholera continues to spread in Northwest Syria (NWS), with EWARN reporting a total of 17,414 suspected cases in the region by November 28. Efforts to improve cholera treatment capacity in NWS have led to the establishment of six fully functional cholera treatment centers (CTC) and units (CTU) across al-Bab, Azaz, Jarablus, Afrin, Daret Azza and Darkosh.<sup>1</sup> These provide capacity for 126 beds with another 11 CTC/CTUs under development, with many other oral rehydration points designated and hospitals equipped for cholera treatment across the region.<sup>2</sup> Laboratory water testing has also continued in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, with treatment for dangerously low chlorine levels.

Ahead of the upcoming UNSC Resolution's expiration, Idlib's education sector has continued to face challenges of increasing privatization, lack of funding for teachers' salaries, and numerous other obstacles. Access to basic items and essential aid was reportedly hindered by road blockages and limitations on movements during clashes between HTS and various SNA-affiliated factions. These closures were largely resolved following the cooling of tensions, although fuel remains significantly impacted by changes in jurisdiction over crossline access points. In Idlib, access to fuel is further impacted by a recent change in the status of companies allowed to distribute fuel products as part of a recent decision made by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). Needs in NWS are further exacerbated by the harshening winter conditions that started to affect vulnerable populations and IDPs in the area over the past month.

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## SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY (SNA)

The below organogram is based on a chart that was widely circulated on local Telegram channels on November 13, following leaks from a series of meetings held between the Turkey and factions of the SNA. This has been altered, based on field reports received by iMMAP, to reflect recent changes to the SNA structure since the original chart's circulation, as well as highlight the role certain factions played in the recent HTS incursion in NWS. Blue signifies opponents to HTS in the recent incursion, while red denotes groups that aided HTS in its advancement into Afrin.



### FIRST LEGION



JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA



AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA



AL-WAQQAS BRIGADE



SULTAN MOHAMMAD  
AL-FATEH DIVISION



SAMARQAND BRIGADE



JAYSH AL-NUKHBA



20TH DIVISION



SUQOOR AL-SHAM



LIWA 113



### SECOND LEGION



SULTAN MURAD  
DIVISION



MU'TASEM DIVISION



LIWA 112



FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN



SULTAN MALIKSHAH  
DIVISION



SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL  
BRIGADE



MUNTASIR BILLAH  
DIVISION



LEVANT REVOLUTION-  
ARIES



LIWA AL-SHAMAL



9TH DIVISION



FAYLAQ AL-SHAM  
NORTHERN SECTOR



HAMZA DIVISION



SULTAN SULEIMAN  
SHAH DIVISION



AHRAR AL-SHAM,  
EASTERN SECTOR



### THIRD LEGION



AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA



JAYSH AL-ISLAM



FAYLAQ AL-MAJD



LIWA 51



LIWA AL-SALAM

# ANALYSIS

## NWS Armed Conflict and Displacement

**HTS Incursion in NWS.** iMMAP's October 19 Spot Report outlined the recent incursion by HTS into areas controlled by SNA-affiliated factions. The conflict was sparked by an escalation of hostilities between the Third Legion and the Hamza Division – both SNA affiliates – over the assassination of a local activist in the city of al-Bab. HTS capitalized on these clashes to advance into areas of Afrin, Kafr Janneh, and Jandaris. This was done ostensibly in support of the Hamza Division, with support from other SNA factions, including the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division and Ahrar al-Sham. By October 13, HTS and allied forces had largely taken control of Afrin City. Negotiations were subsequently held between HTS and the Third Legion, leading to an initial settlement and ceasefire on October 14. Hostilities persisted until October 17, when Hayat Tha'eron forces moved into Kafr Janneh, reportedly under Turkish guidance, to halt the exchange of fire. As negotiations continued between the Third Legion and HTS, Turkey pressured HTS to withdraw from areas of Afrin and Kafr Janneh, reinforced by the establishment of multiple new checkpoints in Deir Ballout and Ghazawieh between Idlib and Aleppo. By October 21, reports emerged of a withdrawal of HTS forces from Kafr Janneh, Afrin, and Jandaris.

However, the settlement was widely perceived as an act of capitulation to HTS as it allowed the group to define their presence in SNA-controlled areas through HTS-aligned proxies. Articles in the agreement suggested that the Third Legion would abandon their control of crossings and civil institutions, which constituted considerable sources of revenue. For instance, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division established a new bureau aiming to “rectify injustices” in Afrin. Protests also occurred in Idlib, reportedly instigated by the SSG, calling for the unification of armed factions in NWS under the HTS banner. A significant remaining HTS presence was also evidenced by reports of additional taxes placed on fuel passing from Azaz to Afrin and Idlib by Third Legion's al-Jabha al-Shamiya to disrupt fuel access for HTS in these areas.

**Turkish Involvement in NWS.** Noteworthy developments since iMMAP's October 19 Spot Report include significant Turkish engagement, which has exerted pressure upon SNA factions to form a consolidated security force. Clashes persisted through the end of October, until a meeting between Turkish authorities and the leadership of prominent SNA factions took place in Gaziantep on November 2. The meeting reportedly focused on security conditions within the OES and OOB areas, with Turkey seeking to bring SNA factions under unified leadership and to prevent them from interfering in matters of civil administration. Pressure was exerted under a figurative threat that Turkey would bring in HTS to secure control of the security apparatuses in OES and OOB, should talks between SNA factions fail to reach their desired outcome.

Although none of the parties explicitly disclosed the terms agreed upon during the series of meetings between Turkey and the SNA, many were reportedly leaked on social media and later corroborated by subsequent changes in SNA mandate and structure. Following the withdrawal of HTS from OOB areas, Turkey moved to dissolve smaller SNA factions, reintegrating them under the three main legions of the SNA and punishing those that facilitated HTS advances. It further acted to diminish the SNA's oversight of military and civil institutions and formed mechanisms for greater coordination between itself, the SNA, and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). Turkey placed military checkpoints under police control and closed the SNA's Joint Commission for the Retrieval of Rights on November 8, with the announcement noting that civil and military institutions would be activated in their stead.

Additional meetings between Turkey and the SNA in early November led to further changes in OOB and OES areas. On November 9, reports circulated on local social media channels of additional agreement terms that would reduce SNA autonomy. These granted the SIG's Ministry of Defense greater authority over the SNA and included plans to reopen the Abu al-Zendeen crossing. Further, Turkey mandated that all communications be conducted through the MIT and forced the Third Legion to expel key figures.



The US had also expressed their concern for the HTS incursion,<sup>3</sup> with reports of suspension of funding to several organizations working in NWS. This comes at a time of major overall funding gaps for all activities in NWS and as cross-border operations again come up for renewal in the coming months.

**Changes in SNA Structure.** On November 14, reports were shared regarding changes to the structure in which the SNA operated prior to the recent HTS incursion. Significant reforms include the dissolution of “chambers” and “military commissions” within the SNA’s organizational structure, replaced by a system organizing different factions into three legions (as indicated in the organogram on page one). Although these modifications were not formally announced, they are corroborated by changes announced by official SNA channels. One such change was the re-incorporation of the Hamza Division and Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (key allies to HTS in its incursion in Afrin) into the Second Legion.<sup>4</sup> This comes after both were suspended from the legion in September due to failure to adhere to the legion’s decisions.<sup>5</sup> This was also accompanied by a change in the Second Legion’s Leadership, now led by al-Sultan Murad’s Fahim Issa. Although uncertainty remains regarding disciplinary measures the divisions may face, Turkey appears to be leveraging the animosity other factions have towards Hamza and Suleiman Shah Divisions to bring them back into a more controllable formation.

The Third Legion’s Shura Council, which had served as an executive board to the Third Legion and included the leaderships of various factions it had encompassed, was dissolved on November 14. This move seems to further confirm the leadership of SNA to be moving in a more centralized direction that leaves less space for actions to be taken independently by different factions. Unification of SNA factions may prove conducive to humanitarian goals in OES and OOB areas, as infighting and clashes between factions have previously interrupted aid distribution in the region.

However, a consolidated SNA could lead to greater incidence of conflict with other entities, such as the SDF, as it evolves into a more disciplined and useful military force for any future Turkish operations in northern Syria. Early signs of this are already apparent, as SNA factions are reportedly on high alert and preparedness levels to assist Turkey in their retaliatory attacks against the SDF in response to the recent Istanbul attack. Such large-scale action invariably poses increased risk to the continuity of humanitarian operations and renewed displacement throughout northern Syria.

**Fragmentation in Ahrar al-Sham.** Ahrar al-Sham has witnessed significant changes to its structure that could compromise its reliability as partner for future HTS ambitions. On November 1, Ahrar al-Sham issued a statement on social media announcing the dismissal of six founding members, sparking a sequence of fragmentation in the group.<sup>6</sup> The dismissal was seen by some as an attempt to build a stronger alliance between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS, as the excommunicated figures were reportedly critical of the increasing role of Ahrar al-Sham as an HTS ally. This alliance had been particularly scrutinized after Ahrar al-Sham’s involvement in HTS’s recent incursion into Afrin.

In response, five elements within the group (Liwa al-Iman, Liwa al-Khattab, Liwa al-Adiyat, Liwa al-Sham, and Kateebet al Hamza) denounced Ahrar al-Sham’s leader, Amer al-Sheikh, for his rapprochement with HTS and compromising the principles upon which the movement was founded.<sup>7</sup> They appointed Yousef al-Hamawi (Abu Suleiman) as their new leader and announced their split from Ahrar al-Sham on November 8, sparking clashes with those factions still aligned with HTS under the contested leadership of Amer al-Sheikh on November 10.<sup>8</sup> The conflict culminated in a HTS military convoy surrounding the base of the five splinter groups in Teranda, in support of Amer al-Sheikh.<sup>9</sup> Although de-escalation followed Turkish demands for the withdrawal of the convoy, field reports suggest further clashes are likely, as the split represents a substantive loss to HTS.

Tensions were exacerbated later this month with the announcement that the Eastern Sector, or 32nd Division, of Ahrar al-Sham had been incorporated into the SNA’s Second Legion.<sup>10</sup> The 32nd Division had previously assisted HTS in advancing into SNA-controlled areas on two occasions this year. The Second Legion appears to have been designated within the SNA to absorb factions that have previously held close ties with HTS, as its new formation also includes the Hamza Division and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, the two factions that had lent support to HTS in its recent incursion into Afrin.

Ahrar al-Sham’s value as an ally to HTS has now been considerably reduced, with a depleted force following Amer al-Sheikh’s leadership ousting and the loss of support of the 32nd Division. As the SNA increasingly neutralizes HTS-leaning factions through their integration into its Second Legion, future HTS ambitions to further expand into OES and OEB areas are significantly deterred.

**New displacements.** HTS's incursion into Afrin, subsequent hostilities, and continued insecurity have created an increasingly unstable security situation in NWS. The Kuwait al-Rahmeh camp in the countryside of Afrin has experienced significant targeting in the recent period, with destruction inflicted on the camp during recent clashes between SNA factions. The camp has further incurred reported damages as a result of bombardments attributed to the SDF and further targeting by GoS-affiliated forces. Large sections of both tents and infrastructure were reported to be damaged in the camp, leading residents to displace to nearby camps and towns including Afrin. Due to its proximity to frequent areas of exchanged attacks between different entities (SDF, HTS, and SNA), the camp has been damaged prior to these incidents this has reportedly led residents of the camp, as well as camp management for those residing in Kuwait al-Rahmeh to ask to be relocated into different camps in Afrin.<sup>11</sup> In response to this, the director of humanitarian affairs in Afrin announced the initiation of a plan to relocate camp residents to nearby camps in Sharran and Ma'batli in rural Afrin.

**Shifting GoS targeting.** Amid developments between Turkish-backed groups, HTS, and Turkey in the recent period, mutual shelling between HTS, Turkish-backed groups, and the GoS and affiliates has continued in NWS. The recent period has seen a significant change in targeting by GoS affiliated forces in NWS, with attacks targeting displacement camps and other civilian areas in northern Idlib, OES, and OOB areas that were previously not heavily threatened by such bombardments.

As noted in [iMMAP's September Context Update](#), targeting of central and northern Idlib has not fueled long-term displacements, as this has been perceived to be limited in scope. The November 6 GoS cluster bomb attack reported on Maram camp in northern Idlib, which resulted in civilian casualties and material losses and drew widespread condemnation, caused displacements from the camp. However, these were assessed to be largely or entirely temporary, with most residents returning to rehabilitate and resettle in their tents days later. Escalations are perceived to serve as a negotiation tactic in the Syrian context. Despite this attack being the most destructive of its kind in recent years, it is believed that this perception is also shared by residents of the camps which likely influenced these returns, as they believe in the unlikelihood of prolonged displacements under current patterns of targeting.

**ISIS resurgence.** In NWS, two ISIS cells were reportedly arrested in November, with Turkey capturing 11 ISIS affiliates<sup>12</sup> and HTS apprehending an ISIS-affiliated cell reported to have targeted HTS and Turkish forces in Idlib.<sup>13</sup> ISIS and anti-ISIS operations have continued to increase in multiple regions of Syria in November, with GoS and SDF-held areas enduring significant hostilities in particular. In Daraa, clashes between the Russian-aligned Eighth Brigade and a reported ISIS cell extended for several weeks in late October and early November. Hostilities extended until the ISIS cell was reported to have withdrawn from the area.<sup>14</sup> The Pentagon has expressed concerns over the potential for a potential Turkish ground invasion, which it claims would "jeopardize" the fight against ISIS.<sup>15</sup> Strikes on three SDF military positions near al-Hol reportedly facilitated recent escapes, with an SDF spokesperson announcing the capture of escapees via Twitter.<sup>16</sup> Approximately ten international organizations have reportedly suspended work in the camp as a consequence of Turkish bombardment. On November 30, ISIS announced the death of their leader Abu Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, naming Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi its new leader in the same statement.<sup>17</sup>

## I Turkish Escalation in NES

A November 13 attack in Istanbul that killed six and injured dozens more was swiftly attributed to the PKK/YPG with Turkish intelligence rapidly arresting and interrogating suspects.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as the primary suspect, now in Turkish custody, entered the country from Syria via smuggling routes through Afrin, the MIT reportedly undertook immediate operations to identify and arrest people smugglers in OES and OOB areas. The PKK and SDF have both denied responsibility, with the SDF Press highlighting the Istanbul bomber's strong ISIS ties via its Telegram channel.<sup>19</sup> As many reports on the bombing have noted, the attack in Istanbul has reminded many of numerous attacks by both ISIS and the PKK from 2015 to 2017.

The Istanbul attack inspired a swift reaction from Turkey across NES, with airstrikes on November 19 targeting multiple positions in NES, as well as Kurdish areas of neighboring Iraq, launching the Turkish Operation Claw-Sword. Airstrikes have been followed by a sharp escalation in shelling and drone strikes by Turkey and Turkish-affiliated forces. As tensions increased, an attack attributed to the YPG killed at least two civilians in Turkey,<sup>20</sup> in addition to shelling of Turkish military bases in Kaljabrin and areas near Bab al-Salama crossing in



Azaz, as well as Dabiq in northern Aleppo. Turkish and Turkish-affiliated attacks in NES have caused numerous military and civilian casualties and targeted multiple GoS and SDF military positions. Notable damaged or destroyed facilities include major grain storage silos, a hospital (formerly treating COVID-19) in Kobani, a gas and power field and multiple oil fields in the Qamishli area, multiple GoS and SDF positions, and a power plant outside of Derik. Two rockets further targeted US- led international coalition positions, drawing condemnation from CENTCOM.<sup>21</sup>

Mutual shelling has continued to escalate in multiple areas of NES and northern Syria, with renewed speculations of a Turkish ground incursion in NES. Turkey has further fueled these speculations with multiple threatening statements, with Erdogan announcing intention of a ground invasion when “convenient” on November 23<sup>22</sup> and Turkish officials noting the country’s army needed just a few days to prepare for such an offensive on November 28.<sup>23</sup> These threats come despite Russia’s urging Turkey to avoid a full-blow ground offensive following the 19th round of Astana talks,<sup>24</sup> and the US’s advocacy for de-escalation in NES.<sup>25</sup> Erdogan has noted the continued possibility of meetings with Assad,<sup>26</sup> even as the GoS-allied Russian military leadership in Syria met with SDF leadership in NES, reportedly to discuss deployment of GoS forces along the Turkish border.<sup>27</sup> While this escalation likely signifies Turkish testing responses to a full-scale offensive, it may also seek to push Assad to participate in normalization talks.

## **| Cholera**

IDP camps in SDF-controlled Tal Rifaat are particularly vulnerable to a rapid spread of cholera, as GoS forces along their supply routes have severely restricted access for medical resources into the area, limiting response capacity. The SDF and GoS have previously been known to maintain communication and cooperation in areas of northern Aleppo. However, since mid-October, the 4th Armored Division has increased its presence in the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud, and Ashrafieh, as well as parts of rural northern Aleppo, through which humanitarian supplies and assistance are delivered to Tal Rifaat. The 4th Armored Division reportedly levied additional taxes on these supplies in addition to preventing fuel and supply trucks from reaching camps in the area.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, GoS forces have recently intensified airstrikes to use cluster munitions on IDP camps around Kafr Jales in Idlib, damaging water infrastructure across Maram Camp, Wadi Khaled Camp, and Water Station

Camp in Kafr Ruhin in addition to causing widespread casualties.<sup>29</sup> This has destroyed already fragile sanitation infrastructure, placing even more pressure on struggling medical facilities in the region. Over half of IDP camps in Idlib have open sewage systems with an even greater proportion suffering from clean water shortages,<sup>30</sup> leading to a 129% increase in suspected cholera cases in Idlib in the last two weeks of October.<sup>31</sup>

Healthcare workers in NWS are facing increasingly difficult working conditions in the last few months which has inhibited the region’s capacity to respond fully to the ongoing cholera outbreak. Medical staff from across Azaz, al-Ra’i, Afrin and al-Bab hospitals went on strike in October to protest the two-month delay of their salaries, disparity between Syrian and Turkish workers’ salaries, voluntary contracts, and their poor working conditions. Protesting workers were reportedly intimidated and threatened with dismissal or internal investigations by the Turkish-run hospital administrations, and, on November 9, the administration of al-Ra’i hospital issued a decision to fire several participants. Medical students had also demonstrated in front of a SIG building in Azaz on October 30 to protest a refusal to train graduated students, calling for a university hospital and adequate residency training.

The regional consequences of Syria’s cholera outbreak also highlight how the country’s ravaged sanitation and health infrastructure can escalate treatable diseases to crisis levels. It continues to affect Syria’s neighbors, with the Israeli Health Ministry announcing positive cholera samples from a Yarmouk River reservoir predominantly used for agricultural irrigation and that flows from Syria. Israeli authorities have since cut off water flow from the reservoir to its largest freshwater lake to prevent a full-scale outbreak in the country.<sup>32</sup> WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Regional Director noted that eight of 20 countries in the region are now currently grappling with cholera and Acute Watery Diarrhea outbreaks.<sup>33</sup>

A record number of cholera outbreaks worldwide, combined with an increased reluctance from manufacturers to produce and distribute cholera vaccines, has led the International Coordinating Group (ICG) to restrict response campaigns to a single-dose approach following a global cholera vaccine shortage.<sup>34</sup> As higher-income countries have domestically eradicated cholera, there is reduced demand to fund the production of cheap cholera vaccines that are required to be made in bulk. This has led to one of the biggest manufacturers of cholera vaccines, Shantha Biotechnics, to announce that it will be stopping the production of cholera

vaccines by end of 2022, and distribution by end of 2023.<sup>35</sup> Although a single-dose approach will offer and prioritize immediate protection to populations in Syria and across the Middle East, there will need to be further assessment on how to offer long-term protection to those that are still living in conditions conducive to the spread of cholera and other water-borne diseases. Future drought and water shortages driven by climate change will continue to lead people to rely on unsafe water sources, risking further outbreaks if effective WASH and healthcare rehabilitation in post-conflict environments does not keep pace.

## Threats to Service Provision, Livelihoods, and Aid

As the international community continues to focus on and divert aid streams towards Ukraine in the face of its widely publicized challenges ahead of the winter season, Syria approaches winter with a significant funding gap that threatens all sectors and areas across the country. Syria Response Coordinators has noted a sharp rise in need in NWS in recent months, compounded by rising prices, citing those in need to number 3.7 million, 85 percent of whom reside in camps.<sup>36</sup> According to the group's recent surveying of IDPs in the area, access to water and heating resources, repairs and thermal insulation for tents, and firefighting equipment were among the needs reported by an overwhelming majority of those assessed.<sup>37</sup>

**Cross-border resolution.** Amid shifting power dynamics in NWS, increased targeting of displacement sites, and the continued spread of cholera, the primary modality for the provision of essential aid will again come before the UN Security Council (UNSC) in January. The UNSC's cross-border resolution, which has regularly required renewal since its original adoption in 2014 (and subsequent exclusive adoption of Bab al-Hawa in 2020), has long been under threat of veto by Russia. In support of its GoS ally, Russia has advocated for the channeling of all international aid through GoS territory and cited the UN's use of other avenues as threatening to Syria's sovereignty. However, this modality would almost certainly be compromised by corruption and the political manipulation of humanitarian aid. This has already been demonstrated by dynamics surrounding existing UN-administered aid channeled through Damascus, as the WHO's representative in Syria is the subject of a probe for mismanagement and corruption.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, a recent study notes that nearly a quarter of assessed UN procurements in Syria were awarded to companies owned by individuals sanctioned by the EU, the UK, and/or the US.<sup>39</sup>

The resolution was last renewed for a period of six months in July 2022, which the humanitarian sector largely condemned as too short a period to ensure durability of programming and planning. There remains an immense funding gap for humanitarian actors on the WoS level, with these financial pressures in NWS in particular exacerbated by the threat of discontinuation of existing aid modalities. As the January expiration of the current resolution approaches, uncertainty as to the mechanism's future threatens humanitarian aid provision that is a critical lifeline to 2.4 million people in NWS.<sup>40</sup>

**Challenges to education.** As highlighted in [iMAP's September Context Update](#), a significant percentage of Idlib's teachers have worked on an entirely voluntary basis, while the majority of those who were paid had salaries underwritten by humanitarian actors, rather than the SSG. As funding streams rapidly dry up for operations across Syria, some organizations have reduced or withdrawn their support for education in HTS-held areas. Further, the SSG reportedly imposed new fees on students this academic year and mandated a uniform that students were forced to buy in order to attend. Of 130 reported secondary schools, only 93 are now believed to be financially supported. As previously noted by iMAP, many families have thus chosen to enroll their children in private education, incurring high tuition costs and supply fees in already untenable economic circumstances.

On October 23, a number of schools in areas under SSG administration were forced to close after months without funding. Schools that announced closures included Al-Mutannabi Secondary School for Boys, which has been among the most prestigious schools in the governorate and reportedly was attended by around 2000 students. These closures and the sustained poor conditions in the education sector generated wide-scale discontent, with local teachers and activists blaming the SSG and calling for an end to newly imposed fees. In response, the SSG called an emergency meeting of the General Shura Council on October 29, announcing a plan to provide support for teachers' salaries ranging from 100-300 USD in those schools not already aided by humanitarian organizations and donors.

The move included the reopening of schools that had closed in October, although it remains to be seen how the SSG will actualize these promises with limited resources and governing capacity. The SSG's lack of resources and focus on education, alongside ongoing uncertainty of humanitarian funding, continue to threaten an education sector already challenged by poor material conditions, work force attrition and emigration, overcrowding, and absent international recognition of issued credentials. A group of teachers responded in early November by declaring their commitment to continue operations independently from the SSG Ministry of Education on a voluntary basis, in light of the absence of NGO funding. Several local NGOs have also launched campaigns to provide greater support to education, with particular focus on displacement camps, which frequently face the greatest challenges in the sector.

Poor conditions for education in Idlib and other areas of NWS have influenced high dropout rates, with one study by Jusoor Center earlier this year citing dropout ranges across opposition-held NWS to average at 58%.<sup>41</sup> In areas of OES and OOB under Turkish-backed SIG administration, the secondary education system has been heavily impacted over the last months by protests and strikes by the teachers' syndicate. These protests demanded salary increases and improvements in teachers' standards of living in light of rising costs and a deteriorating economic situation. Strikes were met with a heavy-handed response in Azaz, with a SIG decision reducing teachers' salaries by a reported 280 TRY in early November. This response comes at a time of increasing SIG promises to improve the living standards of SNA fighters and affiliates, demonstrating heightened prioritization of security interests over the provision of basic services to residents of the areas under SIG control.

**Fuel Shortage.** Recent HTS-SNA dynamics have impacted areas of control and disrupted crossline movement and transportation of essential goods in NWS, with an ensuing fuel shortage particularly impacting Idlib, where HTS-linked Watad Company had historically enjoyed a monopoly. The region has experienced an ongoing fuel crisis since the events of late October, following HTS's advancement and negotiated withdrawal from Afrin. This has led to an increase in taxes and fees extracted by SNA forces at crossline checkpoints under their control, disrupting fuel importation into Idlib, which was further compounded by reported delays in the receipt of foreign fuel.

In late October, the SSG canceled all active permits for fuel dealings in Idlib, requesting that interested parties re-submit bids, likely as a response to allegations against several high-ranking Watad executives. Watad swiftly announced its closure, citing its inability to meet new conditions. Following its dissolution, the SSG reportedly selected six companies to replace it, initially on a trial basis. While it is unclear how they have performed, given the fuel crisis and ongoing trial period, local observers posit that major changes are unlikely, given that fuel is a major source of income HTS is unlikely to forego access to.

This move comes as HTS attempts to prove its capability of managing domestic and civil issues better than the SNA. In mid-November, Madad, the company largely responsible for fuel distribution in OES and OOB areas, announced its willingness remove its taxation of shipments of fuel going to Idlib, on the condition that SNA factions and HTS do the same. Although the SNA reportedly agreed to not tax several trucks, HTS refused, noting its reliance on taxation of fuel as an important source of revenue. This further reinforces the unlikelihood of HTS allowing newly permitted fuel companies to operate without extracting financial benefits.

# CONCLUSION

Turkey's delayed reaction to the HTS incursion in Afrin aimed to minimize incidents of infighting between SNA factions through unilateral restructuring and reduction of their roles in matters of civil administration. These changes fragmented and reduced the power of key HTS allies within the SNA. These actions further evidence Turkish interest in greater stability in OES and OOB areas, as well as consolidating a more reliable ally in a reformed SNA.

An attack in Istanbul attributed to the PKK/YPG fueled significant Turkish retaliation and a subsequent escalation in hostilities between Turkish and SDF allied forces. Mutual targeting has resulted in significant civilian and military loss of life and damage to major infrastructure. Further, statements made by Erdogan and Turkish officials have threatened an imminent Turkish ground offensive.

Cholera continues to spread in NWS, with rapid infection rates recorded in Aleppo and Idlib despite significant efforts by relevant actors to provide treatment and testing of both water sources and infections. As winter approaches and costs of basic needs rise, the level of humanitarian need in NWS is increasing, and may be further compounded depending on the upcoming decision regarding cross border aid provision in January.

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