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CONTEXT UPDATE

Northwestern Syria | May 4, 2023

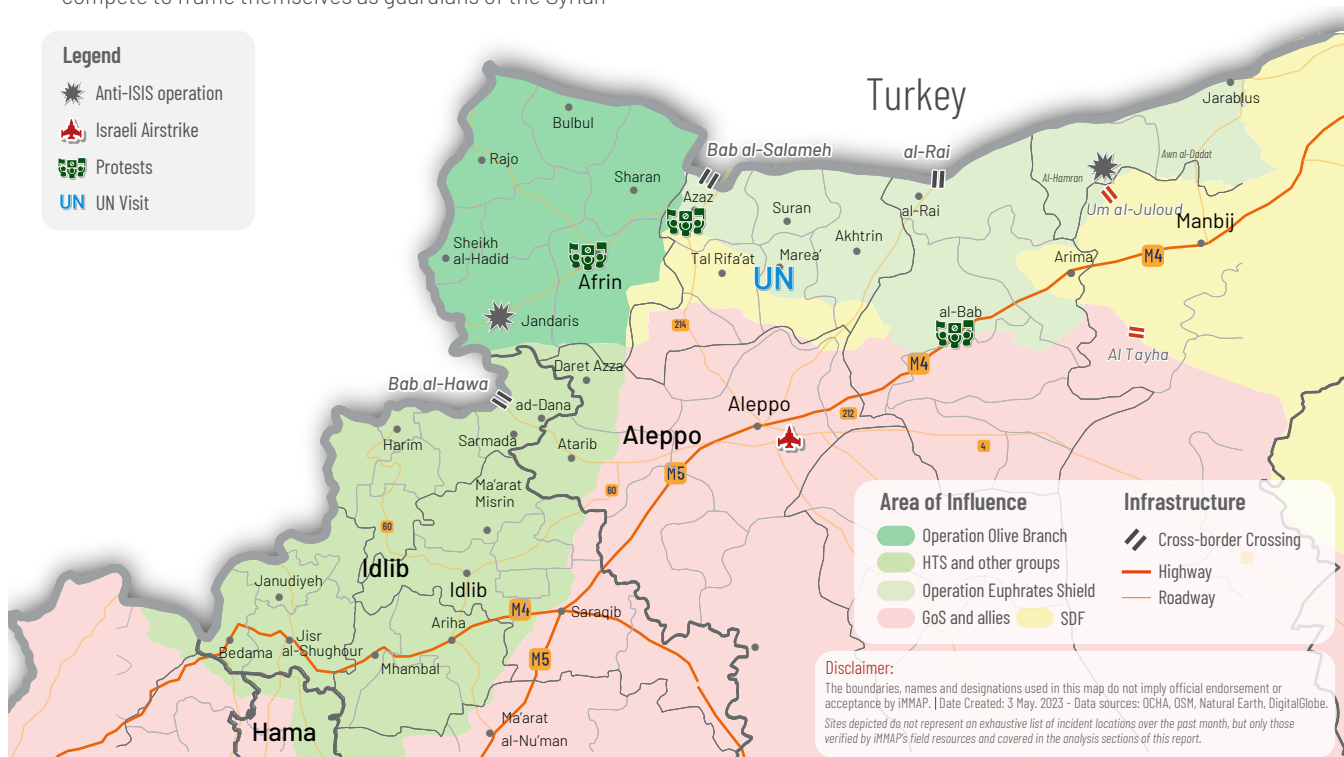


INTRODUCTION

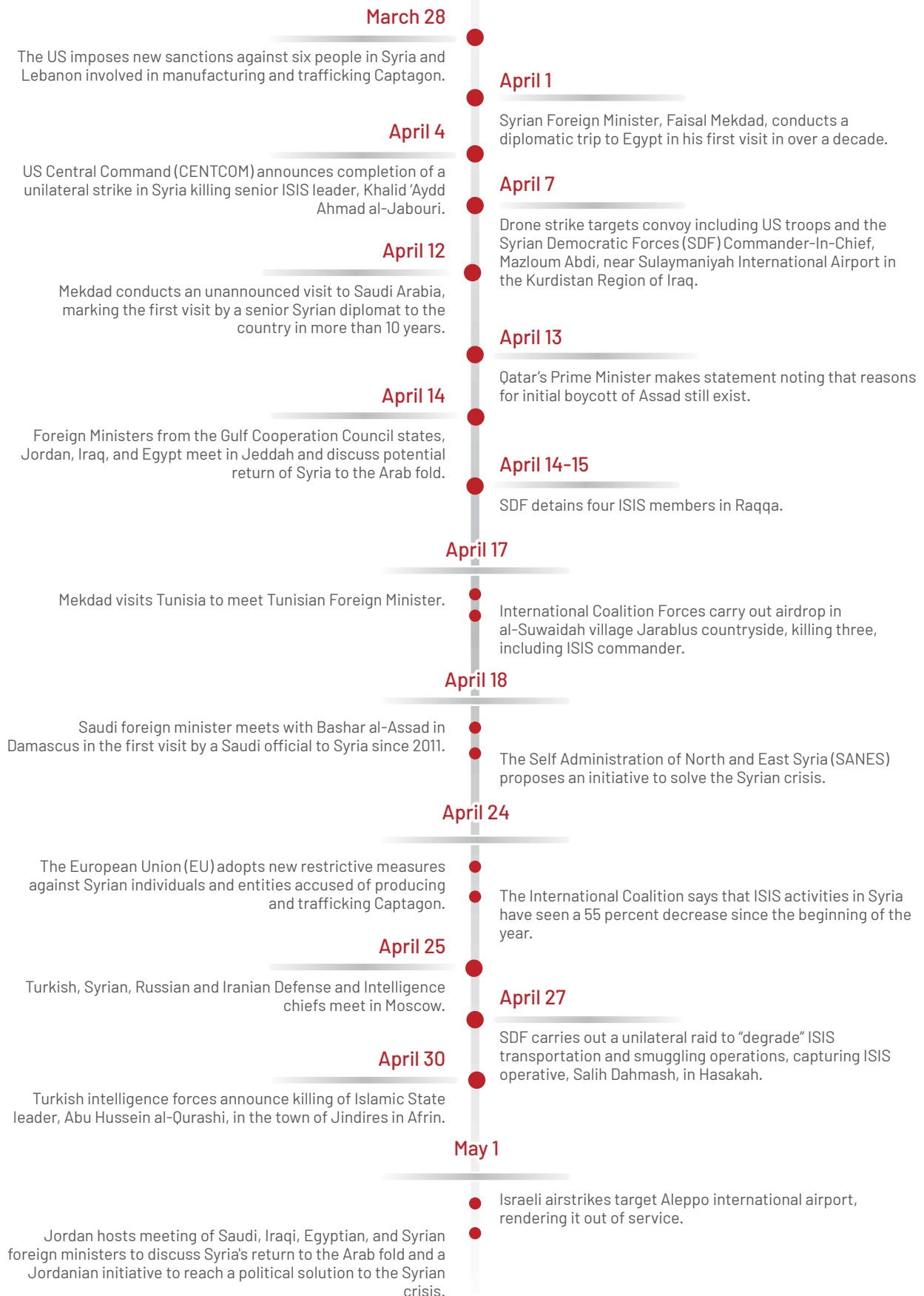
This report was generated by iMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northwest Syria, as well as Whole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

- A quadripartite meeting between Turkish, Syrian, Russian, and Iranian Defense and intelligence ministers in April marks the resumption of Ankara-Damascus normalization since the earthquakes. Despite descriptions of the meeting as "constructive," disparity in the content of statements issued by both parties suggest barriers remain over the conditions accepted for the basis of discussions, crucially around the issue of Turkish withdrawal and security guarantees.
- A period of regional rapprochement with the Assad regime has accelerated over the last month as Arab states look ahead to a meeting of the Arab League in May. As the Government of Syria (GoS) begins to enjoy the increased legitimacy of improved bilateral relations, calculations begin over the minimum concessions necessary for full regional acceptance while refraining from jeopardizing support from key states.
- Syrian opposition authorities are growing increasingly fearful of exclusion from a process aimed at reaching political resolution in Syria, and have begun to vocally position themselves at varying levels of cooperation with normalization. While Northwest Syria (NWS) authorities compete to frame themselves as guardians of the Syrian revolution, the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) proposes a more cooperative initiative for a solution to the crisis.
- The tone of the US regarding Syria's regional diplomacy has noticeably softened over the last month, despite the first use of the Caesar Act by the Biden administration and a continuation of anti-ISIS operations in the country. As geopolitical developments continue, and should Arab states succeed in drawing concessions from the Assad regime, further pressure will be placed on the political future and influence of the US in Syria.
- The expiration of the temporary opening of al-Rai and Bab al-Salameh crossings, the Turkish elections, and a meeting of the Arab League in May all will determine operating conditions for humanitarian organizations in NWS in the near future. Geopolitical shifts will influence conflict patterns, displacement trends, the type of response required (and funded), and, ultimately, the authority under which organizations must navigate to implement humanitarian programming.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Ankara-Damascus rapprochement had slowed in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake relative to its previous momentum. However, a meeting held in Moscow on April 25 by the Turkish, Syrian, Russian and Iranian Defense and intelligence ministers indicates a resumption of active diplomacy. Despite the meeting being described as constructive, inconsistency in the substance of statements issued by Damascus and Ankara seems to indicate barriers to the progress of negotiations. Damascus has insisted that talks should be based on conditions including Turkish withdrawal from Syrian territories and cessation of support for opposition forces in NWS. Ankara, on the other hand, has insisted that discussions should not be based on any pre-set conditions. Thus, parties have seemingly reached a level of stalemate, delaying any potential developments on this issue until after the results of the Turkish elections and increasing Arab normalization gives new impetus to negotiations.

The month of April saw a rapid acceleration of Arab efforts to engage the GoS in regional diplomacy, with Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Mekdad, conducting diplomatic visits to Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and, perhaps most significantly, Saudi Arabia. The ultimate direction of these initiatives appears to be focused on the full reinstatement of Syria into the Arab League, based on a widespread resumption of Arab bilateral diplomatic ties with Damascus. However, the process has so far, and will likely continue to be, incremental in building on the sum of bilateral engagement by individual Arab countries. During this process, Assad will make calculations on the concessions necessary to achieve an end to his regional isolation. As more states buy-in to the momentum, however, compromises demanded from the GoS will likely diminish unless a regional consensus is reached.

As these efforts start to gain traction, various Syrian opposition authorities are growing increasingly fearful of exclusion from a process aimed at reaching political resolution in Syria. In NWS, the Syrian Interim Governments (SIG)'s image as an entity capable of administering the region or carrying out negotiations on behalf of Syrians independent of Turkey's influence, has been further eroded. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), as well as aligned Syrian National Army (SNA) factions and leaders, have capitalized on declining public sentiment aimed at the

SIG. This posturing comes as such actors attempt to secure their seat at the negotiating table of any resultant political process. In the same manner, SANES announced an initiative to solve the Syrian crisis, expressing that, unlike their counterparts in NWS, they are willing to engage with GoS, as well as other Syrian stakeholders, to reach a political solution. Elements of this initiative indicate that SANES believe the security of a Kurdish territory against Turkish aggression is better protected within a Syrian state, while demonstrating that they are relevant Syrian partners in negotiations for actors, such as Arab states, who want less non-regional interference.

Although officially maintaining an opposing position to normalizing relations with GoS, US comments on Arab efforts to engage Assad do not seem to point to any intentions of prevention. However, this apparent neutrality seems to be contingent on Arab countries fulfilling their stated objectives in a manner tangibly consistent with UNSCR 2254. Until then, the US is likely to maintain their presence and pursue their objectives as demonstrated by the continuation of their application of the Caesar Act and consistent anti-ISIS operations.

On April 24, the International Coalition said that ISIS activities in Syria have seen a 55 percent decrease since the beginning of the year, driven predominantly by their cooperation with the SDF in Northeast Syria (NES).¹ This month, on April 17, the International Coalition Forces carried out an airdrop in al-Suwaidah village in Jarabulus countryside, the first of its kind in 2023. Targeting Abd-al-Hadi Mahmud al-Haji Ali, a senior ISIS leader and international operations coordinator, the raid also resulted in the death of two other operatives.² On April 4, US Central Command Forces (CENTCOM) announced conducting a unilateral strike in Syria killing ISIS senior leader, Khalid 'Aydd Ahmad al-Jabouri, responsible for planning attacks in Europe and developing ISIS leadership structure.³ Additionally, the SDF, in collaboration with the US-led International Coalition, detained four ISIS members during a patrol in Raqqa,⁴ and carried out a unilateral raid to degrade ISIS transportation and smuggling operations.⁵

ANALYSIS

| Normalization

Ankara-Damascus normalization resumes. The quadripartite meeting between Turkish, Syrian, Russian and Iranian defense and intelligence ministers was the second of its kind and a continuation of an initial meeting in late December 2022. Although falling short of Ankara's long-sought-after meeting of foreign ministers, the meeting was described by both parties as "constructive,"⁶ reportedly including topics such as strengthening security conditions in Syria, combating terrorist organizations, and intensifying efforts to expedite return of refugees to Syria.⁷ Notably, statements issued by both Moscow and Ankara included a desire to reaffirm and preserve Syria's territorial integrity.⁸

However, Turkey's statement noted that concrete steps towards normalizing ties between Turkey and Syria were discussed,⁹ which was then refuted by GoS-aligned media outlet, al-Watan.¹⁰ Similarly, present in the statement made by Syria's Defense Ministry, but absent in statements made by Turkey or Russia, were discussions around Turkey's withdrawal from Syria and a reopening of the M4.¹¹ This disparity in statements made by Ankara and Damascus on topics discussed in the meeting indicates that little progress was made in the meeting. Assad is in a stronger position as a result of progressing diplomatic gains from other Arab states, while approaching Turkish elections in May places him in much less of a rush to restore ties with Erdogan. For Erdogan however, any gains in restoring ties with Damascus would help his chances of victory.

Turkey is unlikely to comply with GoS requests for conditions of a withdrawal from NWS without trusting in clear plan that would achieve their security requirements. In an interview held on April 24 (a day prior to the meeting) Turkey's Foreign Minister noted that "Türkiye's exit from the region would create a power vacuum that terrorists would rush to fill" and that Ankara's withdrawal from Syria is contingent upon the establishment of "total security."¹² Turkey's vision of such security will likely include guarantees against perceived threats of the SDF, as well as some sort of reconciliation between the NWS factions it supports and the GoS. This, however, will prove to be complicated considering GoS' persistent referral to opposition groups as terrorists, as well as recent statements by HTS and SNA rejecting such prospects.

The rate of Ankara-Damascus rapprochement is unlikely to accelerate in the short-term until the Turkish elections on May 14. The insistence and pace in which Erdogan attempted to engage Assad has been substantially motivated by ensuring an election victory. Assuming he achieves this victory, the period after the election could see the impetus for these talks diminish as this imperative is removed. Nevertheless, Turkey will be incentivized to continue the normalization trajectory as focus on the return of Syrian refugees will persist while anti-Syrian sentiment grows in the region. However, Assad has gained greater leverage in negotiations with Turkey by holding off from outlining concessions as rapprochement with other regional powers has evolved. Turkey would now risk, for example, increased Arab pressure for Turkish withdrawal from NWS prior to its security objectives being achieved by waiting to offer Assad sufficient incentive to prioritize negotiations with Ankara. Turkey's urgency in pursuing normalization may, therefore, be retained; but it remains difficult to see what Ankara can offer Assad to bring him to a trickier negotiating table when he is achieving success elsewhere.

Arab-Damascus diplomacy gains momentum. The February earthquakes ushered in a period of regional rapprochement between Arab countries and the Assad regime, with further developments occurring in April through a series of visits from Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad. Arab states have begun to establish their positions on the return of Damascus to the Arab fold in anticipation of the meeting of the Arab League in Riyadh on May 19, outlining their perspectives on moving on from the political status quo in Syria. Notably, Jordan proposed a "peace plan" aiming to "directly engage the Syrian government on a detailed plan to end the conflict."¹³ The end of Assad's isolation was also discussed in a meeting conducted in Riyadh on April 14 and attended by the Foreign Ministers of Gulf Cooperation Council states, as well as those of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq.¹⁴

The readmission of Syria to the Arab League is at the forefront of the regional agenda as a normalization of predominantly bilateral developments has rapidly gained momentum over the last few months.¹⁵ Although efforts to reinstate Syria's membership have been boosted by the reiterated and new support from key regional powers

such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, some Arab countries still reject the proposal on the basis that the reasons for Syria's original suspension still stand. Syria's membership to the League was suspended in 2011 following Assad's violent repression of protestors during the Arab Spring, after failing to reach an agreement on several proposals presented by the Arab League to de-escalate tensions. Continued supporters of the Syrian opposition, particularly in NWS, are particularly vocal that Assad has offered no assurances of protection for citizens he has previously and systematically targeted. Referring to continued GoS violations against Syrians, the Qatari Prime Minister has commented that "there were reasons for the suspension of Syria from the Arab League and the boycott of the Syrian regime in that time and these reasons still exist... the war has stopped but Syrian people are still displaced. There are innocent people in prisons – there are many things."¹⁶

Thus far, Assad has pursued Arab normalization through efforts to improve bilateral relations with key regional stakeholders. Indeed, Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad made remarks in an interview that a return to the Arab League would be "almost impossible before correcting bilateral relations."¹⁷ In order to consolidate these into an overall regional inclusion, however, GoS will likely need to substantiate a willingness to make concessions on key issue-areas raised in these meetings. This will require a delicate diplomatic strategy as the regime simultaneously evaluates the interests and positions of an array of regional powers. There has been a noticeable trend of disparity in the level of detail included in statements following diplomatic meetings between Syrian officials and their regional counterparts. This likely indicates a hesitation from Damascus to publicly commit to any particular compromises at this stage.

Biding its time before showing its cards has benefited the GoS within its strategy of pursuing normalization over the last year. Countries have become increasingly uncomfortable within the current status quo while Assad benefits from the dialogue and optics around possible rapprochement, particularly with Turkey. This has also allowed the regime to benefit from a fear of exclusion by Arab states from the direction in which Middle Eastern, and Gulf in particular, diplomacy is evolving on an international landscape dominated by the Ukraine conflict. Initial proponents of normalization, such as the UAE, have motivated others, such as Saudi Arabia, to position themselves strategically in regard to Syria as they calculate broader power politics for the region.

However, with each country that shows willingness to help Damascus move forward from its isolation, the bargaining

power of each country diminishes as more players join the table, and the lesser concessions Assad will need to make to each on a bilateral basis. Unless Arab states are unified in the compromises they demand from the regime, the price of normalization for the GoS will continue to decrease. Assad, therefore, is unlikely to indicate on which matters these concessions will be made before such consensus is reached. Nevertheless, a failure of Arab initiatives to achieve concessions from the regime would be considered a point of geopolitical embarrassment should Assad continue to act against UNSCR 2254 while drawing the legitimacy benefits from improved diplomatic relations. As explored below, although not explicitly supporting normalization efforts, the US has emphasized the need for rapprochement to be transactional in nature. As the Gulf states look to demonstrate their geopolitical clout and security autonomy in the region beyond US guarantees, they will need to demonstrate they can apply their leverage on the GoS to achieve gains in return.

Exclusion of Syrian opposition. Many states who are now mending relations with the Assad regime have also been historic supporters of the Syrian opposition and are vulnerable to accusations of abandonment of Syrians in NWS. A number of other Arab League countries have expressed concerns, including Morocco, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, and even Egypt, who has recently started restoring ties with Damascus.¹⁸ A key point of hesitation to readmit Syria to the League is that the Syrian opposition has not been engaged in the normalization process thus far. Azaz, Afrin, and al-Bab have seen frequent reactionary protests overwhelmingly rejecting increased normalization in recent months, including during Eid.¹⁹ Both the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the SIG issued multiple statements expressing their opposition to attempts to bring Assad into Arab League. The SSG expressed their explicit concern regarding Saudi's embrace of Assad, urging them to reconsider their approach.²⁰ Similarly, the head of the Syrian Coalition, Salem al-Muslet, also reportedly issued similar communications to various Arab foreign ministers, the Arab League, the Islamic Cooperation Council, and the Gulf Cooperation Council.²¹

Indeed, statements alluding to the future of opposition areas in NWS have begun to emerge from the series of diplomatic meetings between GoS officials and their regional counterparts in the last month, which have driven a sense of uncertainty for opposition communities. Countries, such as Egypt, have previously made remarks that a full embrace of Assad into the Arab League is contingent upon his engagement with opposition forces towards a political solution.²² But there have been no

signs of their inclusion in any such discussions with Syrian officials, or even in separate consultations held with the opposition regarding a political solution in Syria. Moreover, the Jordanian Foreign Ministry's statement from regional talks with Syrian, Iraq, Saudi, and Egyptian foreign ministers on May 1 noted agreement between parties to "work to support Syria and its institutions in any legitimate efforts to extend its control over its lands, impose the rule of law, end the presence of armed and terrorist groups on Syrian lands, and stop foreign interference in Syrian internal affairs...".²³ The seemingly shared impetus on the preservation of Syrian unity and sovereignty, and corresponding decrease in mention of protecting targeted communities, implies a risk of future disregard of those in opposition-held areas.

Contrary to the SANES, the SSG and SIG have both expressed a complete rejection of engaging GoS in reaching a political solution to the crisis; a sentiment reciprocated by the Assad regime. Thus far, opposition authorities have largely been excluded from a process aimed at reaching a solution to the Syrian crisis. Further doubt in the power of opposition elites has subsequently spread within their own communities. Those they claim to represent have begun to question whether they are capable of or incentivized to protect their security and interests as international actors do not see them as key stakeholders to a political resolution, while Turkey has also not brought them to the table. This has been exacerbated further with widespread perceptions over the SIG and Syrian Opposition Coalition's (SOC) inability to instill a rule of law and institutionalize matters of governance, as well as an over-reliance on Turkish directives and resources to manage their affairs. This has led to a continuing erosion of the popular appeal and credibility of Turkish-backed authorities in NWS.

Such erosion was exemplified by the head of the political office of the SNA's al-Mu'tasem Division, Mustafa Sejari, continuing to voice perceived weaknesses of the SIG and SOC over the last month. As outlined in [iMMAP's March Context Update](#), his previous remarks accused the SIG and its institutions of inadequacy and in need of reform, as well as possible greater acceptance of HTS in SNA-controlled areas. Sejari added to this rhetoric in April with further criticism of opposition authorities' strategy and the acceptance of Arab-Damascus normalization by international supporters. In the face of accelerating diplomatic shifts, he accused the SIG and SOC of "confiscating and restricting the opposition, militarily, politically, and administratively."²⁴ Sejari also directed blame towards the US administration, in particular, for "giving

a green light" for normalization efforts to take place.²⁵

Sejari's statements alone will likely have minimal impact on the political positions of opposition authorities, or their inclusion in future diplomatic meetings. Mu'tasem Division is just one faction within one Legion of the SNA structure, and despite his position, Sejari's comments cannot be seen as wholly representative of his Division or Legion. Sejari does not possess the necessary credibility to rally public opinion nor instigate the reform he, and many before him, are calling for.

However, they do highlight broader levels of public dissatisfaction with the SIG and its institutions in NWS, as well as the noteworthy absence of response from the authority to such criticisms.²⁶ Consistent with their previous zero-sum strategy, HTS has looked to take advantage of this absence, monopolizing public discourse with stronger positioning against Arab normalization. HTS has also purported a greater level of independence to Turkish influence, adopting a more explicit attitude of acting in self-interest should the priorities of international backers change according to their own objectives. Recent diplomatic developments are bringing parties closer to considering the key stakeholders in a future reconciliation process. HTS will likely build upon their persistent self-branding as guardians of the Syrian revolution to position themselves as the best protectors of, or most suitable representatives to negotiate terms for, Syrians fearing a return to territory controlled by GoS. A key variable of their likely success will inevitably be the attitude towards NWS by Turkey following the election in May, and any potential shifts in the support Turkey provides the SIG and SOC on the NWS and international landscape.

I NWS Humanitarian Landscape

As efforts to respond to increasingly urgent needs in NWS following the February earthquakes continue, humanitarian actors are looking ahead to the month of May with anticipation. The temporary re-opening of al-Rai and Bab al-Salameh crossings for a period of three months is set to expire on May 13. Although primarily depending on Bab al-Hawa for cross-border operations, al-Rai, and Bab al-Salameh have been used for an estimated 17% of UN shipments from Turkey into NWS since February 9.²⁷ An extension of approval for these crossings remains uncertain, as well as the concessions the Assad regime would demand in exchange for keeping them open. However, an indication of GoS willingness was given in the statement from the Jordanian Foreign Ministry following the multilateral Amman meeting on May 1, in which they expressed their satisfaction with GoS'

consideration of an extension.²⁸ This point was notably absent, however, from GoS' own statement, and needs to be considered against the incentive of these Arab states to demonstrate an ability to extract apparent concessions from the regime. Uncertainty around cross-border access is just one of the consistent challenges and elements of the frustrating operational environment for local and international NGOs in NWS that the February earthquakes have clearly exposed. As geopolitical developments advance, and the position of actors such as the US show signs of adaptation to the new diplomatic reality, the humanitarian sphere will have even greater questions over the future of the financial and policy structures within which they operate. Geopolitical shifts towards normalization also signal a change in NWS conflict patterns, displacement trends, the type of response required (and funded), and, ultimately, the authority under which organizations must navigate to implement humanitarian programming. iMMAP's Research & Analysis Unit will be evaluating how the post-earthquake context is currently impacting the humanitarian response in its Ad Hoc report next month, as well as the considerations necessary to ensure local aid organizations are empowered to help Syrians in this evolving environment.

| Whole of Syria Developments

SANES initiative for Syria Political Resolution. In light of recent Arab rapprochement with Damascus, SANES proposed an initiative on April 18 proposing a roadmap aiming to resolve the Syrian crisis.²⁹ SANES noted that it has put forward this initiative after the failure of previous international and regional attempts to reach a solution to end the crisis in a manner that does not contradict UNSCR 2254. GoS did not immediately issue any official response to the initiative. However, SANES have positioned themselves in a relatively constructive, and even cooperative, position compared to other opposition authorities in NWS. This can be seen as an effort on SANES' part to demonstrate their relevance for inclusion in the growing discussions towards a political solution in Syria, with several elements of the initiative pragmatically appealing to pertinent issues already raised by Arab countries in meetings with the regime.

Unlike the administrations in NWS, SANES has expressed willingness to engage in the process of restoring relations with GoS, seemingly in the hope of obtaining gains in any deal that may be reached, while offering some resolution on problematic points for the regime. For example, assurances for improved and protected conditions for refugees to incentivize voluntary return

has been highlighted in read-outs from the series of international diplomatic meetings in the last month.³⁰ In their initiative, SANES stated a willingness to receive refugees hosted by other countries, putting themselves forward as part of the solution to the futures of thousands of Kurdish refugees abroad, while ensuring demographic continuity and protection for their own community. It also called for the fair distribution of NES economic wealth and resources, including oil, gas, and agriculture across all Syrian regions, but stressed that this should be achieved through reaching an agreement with the Syrian government through dialogue and negotiations.

Most notably, SANES emphasized the unity of the Syrian territories in its initiative, expressing readiness to engage in dialogue with the GoS and other relevant parties towards resolution to the Syrian crisis. This attitude towards a unified country may suggest that SANES do not see a federal future for themselves in the Syrian context, as has been achieved elsewhere in the region. However, it also refers to SANES' priority of a Turkish withdrawal from Syrian territory. Following previous strategic partnerships during the conflict, such emphasis in SANES' initiative may therefore indicate that it believes the security of a Kurdish-dominated region in Syria against persistent Turkish aggression is best achieved within a Syrian sovereign state governed by the Assad regime than as a fully autonomous region itself. Arab countries would be unlikely to grant the international support and effort needed to establish such a region, that would inevitably require significant backing by the US.

A withdrawal of US backing for SANES in NES is increasingly in the interest of multiple stakeholders in the Syrian context. Sentiment is growing against "externally imposed" solutions to the crisis and towards a diminished role of international actors that are attributed to upholding the current untenable status quo. Even SANES themselves have suggested as such, with explicit mention of the US. Badran Ciya Kurd, de facto foreign minister of the SANES, noted that "We want Syrian-to-Syrian dialogue. We want international actors, the White House, Russia to support this initiative that will bring stability and peace to Syria. Any international actor that puts pressure on us to stop this initiative means they are against a solution to the conflict."³¹ This poses questions around the US's own perspective on its future involvement with its traditional security partners in NES, that they still perceive to be crucial to fight against a growing ISIS presence in the region. However, it would undoubtedly be a much more substantive effort in the long-term to translate this cooperation into political backing for a more

autonomous Kurdish region in the face of decreasing internal and international appetite. Moreover, the perceived threat to the security of countries such as Turkey and Iran, who are internally vulnerable to Kurdish separatism, would pose unwelcome and costly risks of provocation.

Evolving US strategy in Syria. As more countries in the region mend relations with Damascus, and internal stakeholders begin to position themselves strategically in line with a regime-underpinned solution, the US has undergone a noticeable softening of its tone in regard to the future of the Syrian state. Biden began his administration with a reiterated commitment to sanctions on regime affiliates and staunch positions against any possibility of supporting other states in rapprochement with the regime. However, as reported in [iMMAP's March Context Update](#), the earthquake instigated a shift in sentiment which has culminated in guidance from US officials that any normalization with the regime should be transactional in nature. This has continued over the last month despite calls in a letter in March from 40 former senior US officials, Syria analysts, and civil society activists calling for a stronger position and reconsidered approach to the increasing pace of regional normalization.

In February, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price had noted that the administration “would encourage normalization or improvement of relations” with Damascus if it would “fulfill the political guidelines, the political roadmap that has been spelled out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.”³² Within this context, it is notable that statements issued following regional bilateral and multilateral meetings with Damascus officials over the last month have iterated that they comprise the beginning of a process that is consistent with UNSCR 2254.³³ However, US support for the rhetoric and intention of this regional diplomacy is another matter to the tangible consequences for Syrians as a result of normalization. Indeed, following the multilateral meeting between regional foreign ministers in Amman on May 1, the Biden administration commented that they were “encouraged to see the joint communique mention many priorities that we and our partners share” but that they “sincerely hope that the Syrian regime will follow through on its commitments, in good faith and in accordance with international norms.”³⁴

Moreover, regarding SANES’ own initiative announced last month, a State Department spokesperson reportedly noted to Al-Monitor that it “affirms the unity of Syria as the foundation for any political solution, in accordance with UNSCR 2254, which we believe remains the only viable solution to the conflict in Syria.”³⁵ While the US may not be explicitly supporting SANES engagement with GoS, nor are they likely to do so, statements such as these are indicative that they are unlikely to stand in the way of these developments so long as they end up being conducive to more stable conditions in Syria.

In the coming months it will be key to observe how this softened tone may translate to other US objectives and strategies in the Syrian context and beyond, particularly in the humanitarian context. For example, as evolving rapprochement in the region will inevitably boost the legitimacy of the Assad regime as the sovereign authority in Syria, it will become increasingly difficult to argue against the centralization of aid operations through Damascus. Moreover, Arab countries mending relations with Assad are all incentivized to reduce the scope of US bilateral sanctions on Syria. Yet, on March 28, the Biden administration implemented the Caesar Act for the first time by imposing new sanctions against six individuals in Syria and Lebanon, including two cousins of Assad, involved in manufacturing and trafficking Captagon.³⁶ However, there are undoubtedly economic opportunities identified within the calculations of Arab countries regarding normalization with Damascus. Although it is unlikely that the Caesar’s Act will be lifted, it will become increasingly difficult for the US to consistently apply sanctions regimes against regional pressure from key economic and security partners. Additionally, and crucially, a softened tone from the US is unlikely to translate to a decreased military capability in the country to pursue its security interests against ISIS and continued Iranian presence, despite calls for reduced international interference. Looking forward, the US will need to find a way to reconcile a way to retain this security capability in the face of opposition from most other international actors while its traditional partners shift in their positions of support.

CONCLUSION

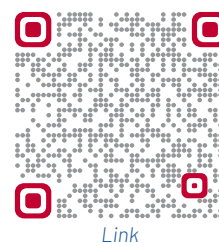
The month of April saw an escalation in the pace and volume of efforts spent to engage GoS in the regional diplomatic sphere. Although it remains unclear how developments could unfold in the long term, it is likely that the next few months could bring changes to various international and internal dynamics in Syria. Should Arab initiatives prove to be taken seriously by Damascus, the manner in which various opposition entities will be approached will be a highly sensitive endeavor as demands for Assad to pay his debts in concessions for improved diplomacy will increase.

Although the SANES have expressed their willingness and preparedness to take part in negotiations, there are still no guarantees that the GoS will offer means for reconciliation. However, NWS opposition forces will undoubtedly prove more difficult to bring into line of a political solution underpinned by an Assad-government. Although currently rejecting prospects of any reconciliation with Assad, the continuous fragmentation and competition between HTS and the SNA's different factions for popular support indicates incentive for acknowledgement as a legitimate and representative authority whose interests need to be considered as part of any political resolution in Syria.

The US seems to have recently distanced itself from any of these developments, reserving judgement until they see whether such efforts will indeed bear fruit or not, under their guidance that normalization should be transactional in nature. Until then, they are unlikely to rely on any of these efforts to safeguard their own interest and will continue security operations and sanction programs.

In the short term, however, humanitarian actors will anxiously look to developments in May. Events including the potential extension or closure of al-Rai and Bab al-Salameh border crossings, the Turkish elections, and the meeting of the Arab League will all impact the operational humanitarian environment in NWS and beyond. .

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