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CONTEXT UPDATE

Northeastern Syria | September 5, 2022

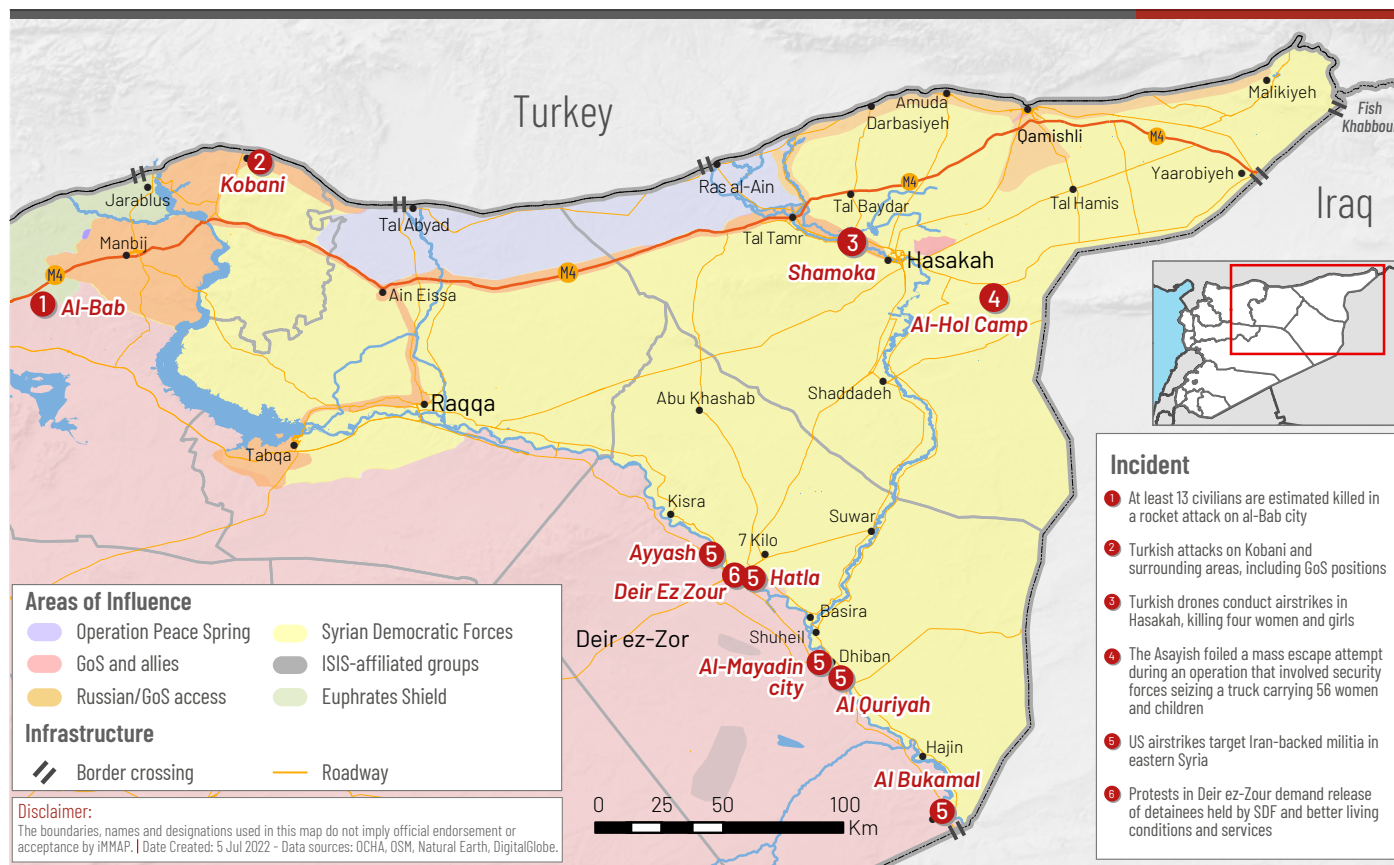


INTRODUCTION

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

- In recent weeks, Turkey's once-hostile attitude towards Damascus appears to have softened, with Ankara hinting at a policy shift from regime change to regime re-engagement- a shift likely motivated by domestic political calculations as well as regional shifts towards restoring relationships with the Assad regime. Talks of potential rapprochement have triggered protests in multiple locations in northern Syria.
- Despite talks of normalization between Ankara and Damascus, violence has continued to escalate in northern Syria along the Turkish border. In August, a Turkish attack targeted a Government of Syria (GoS) post in the Kobani area, followed by an attack by the GoS on a market in al-Bab. Looming threats of a Turkish incursion and ongoing violence have contributed to displacements and reported preparations for future displacement.
- Violence has persisted in other areas of Northeast Syria (NES) beyond conflict lines. The US countered a presumed pro-Iranian militia attack in southeastern Syria with airstrikes reported on multiple positions in Deir ez-Zor. Tensions erupted in Deir ez-Zor into multiple protests over deteriorating living conditions, arrests and detentions, and other grievances.
- The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has continued to conduct attacks in August, as well as an attempted escape by its affiliates from al-Hol camp, where the humanitarian and security situation remains a pressing concern. Iraq has conducted repatriations of its citizens residing in the camp, with a limited number of non-Arab countries undertaking similar efforts after intensifying pressure from the international community.
- Water access has continued to be a cause of concern for residents, as shortages and pollution pose serious challenges to water supply. Wheat outputs slumped from the previous year due to poor rainfall and droughts, as escalations of violence also adversely impact rural livelihoods.





TIMELINE

- **July 29**
Turkish Foreign Minister announces that Turkey is ready to support the Government of Syria (GoS) against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).
- **July 30**
SDF's intelligence arrest 16 activists and media professionals in Raqqa accused of espionage amid heightened tensions with Turkey.
- **August 5**
Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hold meeting in Sochi to discuss a range of issues, including economic cooperation, the war in Ukraine, and the Syrian crisis.
- **August 6**
Erdogan reveals that Turkish intelligence has maintained periodic contact with Syrian counterpart to counter terrorism and enhance security.
- **August 11**
Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu calls for reconciliation between opposition groups and the Syrian regime.
 - Turkish-backed factions cut off water supply from Alouk water station, with drinking water briefly restored at the end of August and stopped due to electrical faults hours later.
- **August 12-13**
Mass protests erupt in Idlib and northern Aleppo in response to reconciliation remarks made by Ankara's foreign minister.
- **August 15**
A drone strike targets US al-Tanf airbase in southeastern Syria, with no reported casualties and no immediate claims of responsibility.
- **August 16**
Turkish attacks target Government of Syria (GoS) positions in the Kobani area.
- **August 18**
Turkish drone strikes in Hasakah kill four women and girls.
- **August 19**
At least 13 civilians are estimated killed in a rocket attack on al-Bab city, reportedly carried out by the GoS.
- **August 19**
Erdogan says Ankara does not seek Assad's removal, suggests Turkey needs to take 'higher steps' with Damascus.
- **August 23**
Turkish foreign minister says Ankara has no preconditions for dialogue with Damascus but emphasizes focus on border security.
- **August 23**
US airstrikes target Iran-backed militia in Deir ez-Zor in response to an August 15 drone strike targeting US al-Tanf airbase.
- **August 25**
The Asayish announce launching the second phase of the 'Humanity and Security' campaign in al-Hol camp.
- **August 27**
Turkish forces shell positions near the M4 highway in northern Raqqa.
- **August 28**
Residents in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor protest demanding the release of individuals arrested by the SDF in an anti-drug campaign.



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Recent weeks have seen mounting speculations surrounding the state of Ankara's foreign policy towards Syria, especially following remarks made by Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. Towards the end of July, Cavusoglu expressed his country's willingness to support Bashar al-Assad's regime against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), stressing Turkey's readiness to provide 'all kinds of political support' to Damascus.¹ These statements were followed by similar, yet more controversial remarks on August 11 when Cavusoglu called for reconciliation between the Syrian opposition and the GoS.² New details also emerged confirming previous reports on Cavusoglu's meeting with his Syrian counterpart in October 2021 on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Belgrade.³ Reportedly, during their brief meeting, Cavusoglu emphasized the importance of finding lasting solutions to the Syrian crisis, encouraging Damascus to come terms with the opposition. Although reactions to Cavusoglu's statement varied, a wave of protests erupted in Turkish-backed opposition areas in northern Syria.⁴

Speculations of an Ankara-Damascus rapprochement have overshadowed talks of a potential incursion. After failing to secure the green light for a fresh offensive and, having been encouraged by Moscow and Tehran to open dialogue channels with Damascus, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears to be reconsidering his policy on Syria. This comes after a series of reconciliations the region has seen in recent years, which have ushered in a new geopolitical landscape. A potential reconciliation with Damascus comes at a critical juncture in Turkey's domestic politics as the upcoming Turkish election scheduled for next summer draws near. Erdogan's prospects for reelection are increasingly challenged by host-society fatigue and the socioeconomic burden of Syrian refugees amid soaring inflation – concerns that his rivals have frequently drawn on. By mending fences with Damascus, Erdogan hopes to relieve some domestic pressure and improve Turkey's border security. On the ground, however, violence has continued in various parts of NES, with August 16th witnessing a Turkish attack on GoS positions near Kobani. Continued mutual shelling and the possibility of a renewed offensive has led to iterative small-scale displacements, particularly in Tal Tamr and the countryside of Manbij, Kobani, Ain Issa, and Tal Rifaat. In addition, some displacements were also recorded in the countryside of Qamishli, as well as Derbasiyah and Amuda. Most displacements have tended to be temporary; while some families took refuge in safer villages and others fled to city centers.

Unfavorable climate conditions continue to batter agricultural production, with poor rainfall and droughts contributing to wheat shortages. Crop yields slumped lower than the previous year, as threats of a Turkish invasion amid increasing aerial raids and mutual shelling cause a sense of uncertainty among farmers and adversely impact rural livelihoods. Further, frequent disruptions to water supplies from the Alouk station have contributed to severe shortages.

Beyond these dynamics, the security and humanitarian situation in al-Hol Camp remain sources of concern, as ISIS cells continue to conduct operations inside the camp. Since the start of this year, the group has carried out 43 operations, leaving over 40 dead.⁵ This has prompted the Asayish to escalate its counter operations inside the camp, with early August seeing a thwarted mass escape attempt.⁶



ANALYSIS

| Normalization Prospects

After years of fraught relations and despite being a leading regional proponent of Assad's ouster, Ankara's attitude towards Damascus has softened in recent weeks, particularly following the Sochi Summit. Although on August 19 Erdogan reiterated his country's readiness to launch an offensive, he also asserted that Turkey does not seek regime change in Syria, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and hinting at a change of heart.⁷ Such a shift in policy, if implemented, comes on the back of several regional reconciliations with Damascus, and could have profound consequences for both the Syrian opposition and the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES). With less than a year left to the highly anticipated Turkish election, Erdogan's re-election prospects are being threatened by growing anti-refugee sentiments and worsening economic conditions. Erdogan hopes that restoring ties with Damascus could ease the increasingly contentious Syrian refugee issue and save his election campaign.

Although speculations of a potential rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus are not novel and tend to surface from time to time, they have gained traction in previous weeks due to developments and statements from Turkish officials. As early as April, the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet reported that Ankara was searching for opportunities to open dialogue channels with Damascus⁸- reports reinforced by Turkish officials' statements in recent weeks. These statements triggered negative reactions from GoS opposition groups in both Turkey and Syria. While Turkey-based Syrian groups expressed their categorical rejection for any reconciliation efforts, hundreds staged protests in Turkish-backed opposition-held areas in northern Syria to voice their objection.⁹ Turkey-based Syrian refugees fear that such incidents could trigger backlash, compounding soaring anti-Syrian sentiments. Although Cavusoglu has accused media outlets of distorting his statements, clarifying that he had called for a 'compromise' rather than 'peace,' these messages have thus far failed to assuage fears of a potential normalization.¹⁰

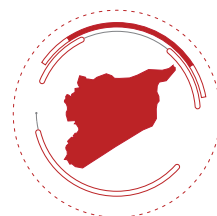
Sochi summit and the Adana Accord. Following the conclusion of the Sochi bilateral summit in early August, during which Putin urged his counterpart to coordinate Ankara's security concerns with Damascus, a seemingly convinced Erdogan revealed that periodic contact between the two countries' respective intelligence agencies have remained intact despite deteriorating relations.¹¹ Russian officials have repeatedly urged Turkey and Syria to restore the Adana 1998 security pact, which saw Damascus recognize Ankara's cross-border security concerns by designating the Kurdistan

Worker's Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization, shutting its bases and activities in Syrian, and even expelling the group's leader from the country.¹² The accord also provided a framework under which Turkey could carry out security operations five kilometers (km) into Syrian territory in the event that Damascus fails to neutralize threats posed to Ankara. However, the agreement was shelved when relations disintegrated between the two countries in March 2012 after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. Moscow believes returning to the agreement could alleviate Ankara's security concerns and preclude another potential incursion into northern Syria. But any attempts at reviving the agreement will necessarily involve re-engaging Damascus, paving the way for political normalization and resumption of diplomatic ties.

Ankara's shifting priorities. The fact that Turkey has not pursued another offensive appears to stem from its realization that such a move would not yield in lasting solutions to its security grievances – a message that was conveyed by Moscow and Tehran during meetings held in late July.¹³ Both countries proposed coordination with Assad as an alternative to another incursion, highlighting that security threats to Turkey can only be neutralized with a strong centralized government in Damascus. This falls in line with Russia and Iran's attempts to reintegrate Assad onto the regional and global stage.

Until recently, Erdogan had staunchly opposed high-level contact with Damascus. While speculation of mending relations may be merely driven by political calculations ahead of the 2023 election, rapid developments of recent weeks could suggest a more substantive shift in Erdogan's policy towards Syria. After failing to secure support for another offensive and as public opinion mounts against the \$2 billion annual cost of Turkey's occupation of northern Syria, Erdogan may find himself without an alternative but to re-engage Damascus.¹⁴ Talks of or actual normalization will likely sway some nationalist voters amid Turkey's growing anti-refugee resentment. Such talks could also serve to undermine Erdogan's main opposition's rhetorical ammunition often directed at him. Further, improved diplomatic relations with the GoS could also pave the way for the large-scale repatriation of Syrian refugees, while also drive the re-activation of the Adana Agreement to establish a common front against the PKK.

Conducive conditions for potential rapprochement. While it is reasonable to assume that normalization or a switch in stance could damage Erdogan's credibility, it is important to situate this development within the broader regional context. Recent years have seen a notable shift in regional dynamics that has ushered in a new geopolitical



setting characterized by normalization and realignment. A potential Ankara-Damascus rapprochement comes amid a recent push by several Arab states to normalize or at least improve relations with Syria. While it may be argued that Ankara could expose itself to sanctions for normalizing ties with Damascus, there is no evidence that Washington is contemplating such a move. Although senior officials have expressed disappointment by efforts to legitimize Assad, the US has not imposed sanctions on any normalizing state. Beyond Syria, the region has also seen a series of reconciliation deals over the last couple of years- from the GCC ending its rift with Qatar to Turkey and Saudi Arabia turning over a new leaf in their relations.

The view from Damascus. Even when on the cusp of losing power, Assad was unwilling to compromise with his opponents. This is unlikely to change, especially as conditions are relatively more in his favor now. Moreover, normalization with Turkey could represent an embarrassment that may prove difficult to weather domestically, particularly among Assad's inner circle, as Ankara continues to occupy territories in northern Syrian. There is little incentive for Assad to immediately restore relations with Turkey, although this may depend on concessions offered to Damascus as well as pressures from Moscow. While Assad may open avenues for dialogue, it is likely that he would also attempt to frustrate any tangible outcomes before the Turkish election. With a less hostile negotiating partner rivaling Erdogan, Damascus may hold back serious engagement until after the election.

Reactions to a potential rapprochement. As normalization talks intensify, it will be critical to see how the SANES and Turkish-backed opposition groups respond, as both stand to lose the most in the event that Ankara resumes ties with Damascus. Several high-ranking SDF officials have already expressed varying concerns about Turkey's maneuvers, fearing that a potential rapprochement and the revival of the Adana Accord could create a unified front between the GoS, Turkey, Russia, and Iran against its affiliated SDF. Compounding this uneasiness is Washington's half-hearted policy towards the SDF, as well as its silence on hints of rapprochement and Ankara's increasing drone assassinations of senior SANES figures in recent months.

Anecdotal field reports suggest there is no consensus among public perceptions towards potential reproachment, but rather an array of interests, motivations, and concerns.

Many within SANES held areas are wary of normalization and the potential near- and long-term security threats posed by transfer to GoS control. As such, many are likely to view rapprochement, and its concomitant uncertainties, negatively, with the exception of some Arab tribes historically unopposed to the GoS.

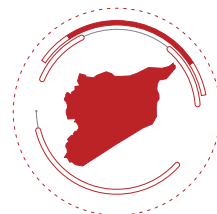
However, even among those tribes, internal divisions exist, particularly for Arab IDPs who fled to areas now controlled by SANES. Others view normalization a step towards access to key GoS services, such as education (a critical issue in NES), while others hope the stability implied by normalization may bring an end to prolonged displacement. Naturally, positive views towards normalization are more likely among individuals with little overt political or armed-group affiliations. Those with direct or indirect ties to such entities are likely to fear normalization and are, presumably, more likely to be displaced as a result, should normalization lead towards reconciliation and the increased presence of GoS security actors.

Reactions among Turkish-backed factions varied; while some condemned Ankara's statements, others refused to criticize Turkey. The Salvation Government condemned Ankara's statements, describing them as insulting to the Syrian revolution and its aspirations, and emphasizing that there is no alternative to overthrowing Assad. If opposition-held areas are handed over to the regime as part of a compromise, significant displacements to SANES-controlled areas are likely to ensue. Some opposition groups are likely to be motivated to strike an alliance with the SDF to form a common front against Turkey and Damascus. While it is probable that some groups will disband, violent opposition will continue, likely in the form of decentralized cells conducting asymmetrical engagements, similar to those claimed by the Popular Resistance in post-reconciliation Daraa.

Violence on Multiple Fronts

Escalations along Turkish border. Four months after Erdogan's initial threat of invasion in early May, Turkish plans in Syria remain murky, as actions and statements indicate multiple contradicting plans and sentiments. Following July's trilateral summit between Iran, Russia, and Turkey in Tehran, Ankara intensified its drone campaigns against the SDF and other actors in the region. In mid-August, these attacks continued, with a Turkish aerial bombardment striking a GoS position in the Kobani area.¹⁵ A reported GoS retaliatory attack on al-Bab, an area under Turkish-backed control, killed numerous civilians when it struck a crowded marketplace.¹⁶ Shelling between parties has continued across many areas of NES and areas under the control of Turkish-backed factions, with little indication of de-escalation ahead of a potential rapprochement.

Reactions towards Turkish bombing of GoS positions in SANES-controlled NES were mixed. While some believe that the strike targeted SDF leaders at the site, others believe that Turkey intended to target the GoS. According to field insights on the local civilian population, bombing of the area incited panic for many residents. This is largely due to assumptions that the presence of the GoS military would prevent Turkish and



Turkish-aligned forces from targeting the area. Further, the August targeting of the Kobani area has increased residents' fears of a large-scale military operation that could lead to their displacement to areas away from the Syrian-Turkish borders. Escalating violence between Turkish-backed factions, the SDF, and the GoS and its allies has contributed to some displacements from various parts of NES (see Displacement Trends section).

Northern defections. Meanwhile, Turkish-aligned opposition groups in northern Syria have faced a wave of defections, largely involving defections to other groups within the Turkish-backed opposition. Such defections are primarily motivated by differences in salaries between factions and desire to associate with the stronger factions among those present in northern Syria, in addition to fears surrounding normalization and other geopolitical influences. Although these remain relatively few in number, defections are likely to increase amid talks of normalization, intensifying Russian bombing of opposition areas, and fears that Turkey will ignore GoS advances into opposition areas. According to field reports, some among the Turkish-backed opposition suspect that an agreement between Russia, Iran, and Turkey would grant GoS the control of areas currently controlled by opposition groups in northern Syria. These may be further exacerbated in the event of a greater resurgence of ISIS and other extremist groups—a fear that has been articulated by US officials on multiple occasions.

However, these defections are unlikely to impact a potential Turkish incursion, as they are limited in number and Turkey can draw on additional military capacity in the case of an invasion.

Iranian-US attacks and counterattacks. Far from the northern border with Turkey, an August 15 drone attack targeted the al-Tanf US military base in southeastern Syria, with one drone being repelled and the other causing no major casualties or damage.¹⁷ Although there was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, it was generally assumed to be directed from Iranian-backed militias who have commonly targeted US positions in Syria and neighboring Iraq. Russia has reportedly ignored these militia's presence since its involvement in Ukraine, with Iranian-aligned forces operating in areas of Deir ez-Zor and recently emerging in Hasakah. Residents of Deir ez-Zor where Iranian-aligned forces operate have previously advocated for the SDF and US-led coalition to clear the area of these groups, as some residents were displaced due to their presence. On August 23, the US bombed various positions of pro-Iran forces in Deir ez-Zor,¹⁸ with few casualties reported as the sites were reportedly evacuated prior to the bombings.

Deir ez-Zor protests. Deir ez-Zor witnessed a wave of protests throughout August. In early August, residents undertook multi-day demonstrations, demanding improved living conditions, the equitable distribution

of oil and fuel, and the release of members of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council held by the SDF.¹⁹ On August 28, Deir ez-Zor witnessed protests in Al-Husan demanding the release of people arrested in the anti-drugs campaign that was launched by SDF the week before.²⁰

Displacement Trends

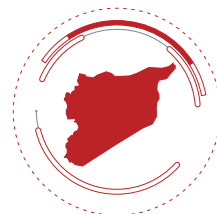
With threats of a potential Turkish incursion looming amid increased mutual shelling, NES has recorded some small-scale displacements in various parts of the region, including Tal Tamr, the countryside of Manbij, Kobani, Ain Issa, and Tal Rifaat – although these may be iterative in many cases depending on the security situation. In addition, there have been reported displacements from the countryside of Qamishli (Tal Ziwan and Sikirka), Derbasiyah (Qarmane and Jatala), and Amuda due to mutual shelling between the SDF and Turkish-backed forces. Some families sought refuge in safer villages, while others fled to city centers (Manbij, Raqqa, and Tabqa). Field inputs also suggest that a number of families have already begun preparing in the event of a Turkish offensive, securing housing elsewhere, transporting valuables, and even relocating their businesses. Moreover, over the past five months, SANES-controlled areas have also seen an uptick in emigration to Europe and other countries in the region, particularly among youths who face dire economic conditions and compulsory conscription by the SDF.

ISIS Operations and Al-Hol Camp

ISIS operations and counteroperations. ISIS continues to launch operations and counterattacks throughout NES and GoS-held areas. In August alone, ISIS cells carried out 14 attacks in SDF-controlled areas and five in GoS-held territory, leaving nine and 14 dead, respectively. In al-Hol Camp, ISIS cells reportedly carried out 43 operations since the start of 2022.²¹ The Asayish has recently escalated its operations against ISIS cells inside the camp.

Security in al-Hol Camp. The security situation at al-Hol Camp remains a major concern for local authorities and humanitarian actors on the ground. The Asayish foiled a mass escape attempt during an operation that involved security forces seizing a truck carrying 56 women and children in early August, finding a network of trenches and tunnels dug under the camp and used by ISIS loyalist cells to smuggle individuals and carry out assassinations.²²

Days later, the Asayish stormed the camp and arrested individuals with suspected links to ISIS.²³ There have been numerous attempts to smuggle individuals and families out of the camp, an act that, beyond intermediaries, sometimes involves the complicity of camp guards. The camp has further seen a spike in violence and security incidents, prompting the UN to express serious concerns. Over 100 murders have



occurred inside the camp over the past 18 months, 26 of which were recorded in 2022.²⁴ As families continue to languish in the detention camp, many lack access to basic services and necessities, face poor sanitary conditions, and experience high malnutrition rates amid sweltering heat and heightened insecurity.

Repatriations. In the face of a deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in al-Hol, the SANES has repeatedly urged countries to repatriate their respective citizens to stem an ISIS resurgence (a growing fear), citing that the notorious camp promotes violence, nurtures instability, and propagates extremist indoctrination of young children. While most countries have largely refused to take back their nationals for political and security considerations, choosing to leave them stranded in a deplorable camp where the prospects for radicalization are extremely high, there have been recent incremental efforts made by some Western and other nations to bring back their nationals. Further, August saw the first batch of families (70 families) return to Deir ez-Zor since ISIS' attack on the al-Sinaa Prison earlier this year.²⁵

But despite these promising signs, the camp continues to shelter approximately 55,000 people from over 50 nations (according to official estimates), although the majority are Syrian and Iraqi nationals. More than half of the camp's population are children under 12 years of age.²⁶ On August 13, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that 620 individuals (150 families) were handed over by Kurdish authorities to the Government of Iraq (GoI).²⁷ Since the start of 2021, the GoI has initiated four repatriation operations from al-Hol. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission Iraq, Iraq has repatriated at least 2,500 individuals to date.²⁸

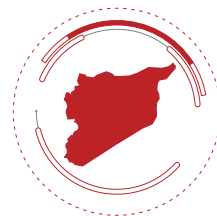
Repatriated Iraqi families are transferred to the sprawling Jadaa Rehabilitation Camp in Qayyara south of Mosul to undergo security screenings and receive assistance, including care and rehabilitation services, ahead of return to their areas of origin. Established in 2021, the camp contains 500 tents, operated jointly by the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement and the International Organization for Migration. Iraqi authorities refer to the camp as a 'transit rehabilitation center,' aimed at rehabilitation returnees through educational courses that focus on anti-extremism. Once completed, the government facilitates returns to areas of origin through collaboration with local mukhtars and tribal leaders – both of whom must give their approval. Reportedly, the government provides these families with housing and essential services, although it is unclear whether this is confined to a specified time period.²⁹ As of late May, Jadaa sheltered more than 450 families, with July seeing some 100 families leave the camp.³⁰ UN agencies and NGOs provide various forms of assistance to in-camp families.

Camp residents express various concerns pertaining to return to their hometowns, including tribal retaliation for perceived ISIS affiliation, as well as stigmatization. Although UNDP Iraq had worked with the GoI to develop local reintegration strategies for these families, implementation mechanisms remain unclear. In general, the repatriation process has triggered strong objections and protests from residents in Ninewa, particularly among minority groups who view returns of perceived ISIS-affiliated families as an insult to victims.³¹ Further, these groups contend that returnees could destabilize their communities and create new security risks and social tensions.

Grain Shortages, Farming, Services

Wheat shortages. Recurrent wheat shortages continue to threaten NES and Syria as a whole. Similar to the previous harvest season, poor and erratic rainfall, prolonged dry spells, as well as shortage and rising prices of fertilizers, pesticides, and diesel have dampened crops yields in the region. According to the SANES' Agriculture and Irrigation Authority, wheat output slumped by 100,000 tons since the previous year, as only 388,000 tons of wheat were harvested this year – over 200,000 less than the quantity needed to meet the region's needs.³² Further, ongoing aerial raids and mutual shelling continue to impact rural livelihoods, particularly along conflict lines in the countryside of Hasakah and Manbij. Uncertainty over a potential incursion discourage farmers from cultivating their lands, with some opting to lease their lands to inexperienced farmers, contributing to an overall decline of agricultural production.

Diminished water access and pollution. Frequent malfunctions and deliberate shutdowns continue to disrupt operations of the critical Alouk water station located in Ras al-Ain countryside, resulting in severe water shortages. Since August 11, Turkish-backed factions have cut off water supply from the station, depriving nearly one million people in NES who rely on the station for direct and indirect supply.³³ Since November 2019, Turkish-backed opposition have halted the station's operations 24 times.³⁴ Other essential services reliant on the station have also been impacted, including electricity, which impacts the operation of critical infrastructure such as health facilities. Spills from illicit oil smuggling activities between SDF- and GoS-held areas contributed to increasing pollution in the Euphrates River – a primary water source for agriculture and consumption,³⁵ raising public health concerns residents.



CONCLUSION

Although a Turkish incursion in NES remains possible, the month of August has brought increasing hints of moves towards normalization between Turkey and the GoS- a development that could prevent or alter any incursion and drastically impact political dynamics and control in Syria. Normalization remains speculative, with only Turkish statements and allies' interests hinting towards the potential for rapprochement. Damascus currently has less incentive to engage in serious normalization efforts, with Turkish elections looming and the potential for a replacement to Erdogan that might be a more favorable negotiating partner for the Assad regime.

Turkish actions on the ground in August were far from those that might be expected in the face of potential normalization. A Turkish attack near Kobani targeting GoS military positions killed a number of GoS soldiers, to which the regime retaliated with an attack in al-Bab that incurred numerous civilian casualties. These were far from the only actors engaged in violence, with Iranian-affiliated militias launching a drone attack on the US al-Tanf military base in southeast Syria and US retaliations targeting several pro-Iranian positions in Deir ez-Zor. Multiple areas of NES and northern Syria have seen protests over the past month, with those in Turkish-opposition areas protesting potential GoS-Turkey normalization and residents of Deir ez-Zor demanding better living conditions and demonstrating against SANES anti-drug arrests. ISIS activities and counteroperations have continued in August in NES, with particular focus in the al-Hol camp, where repatriations of Iraqis and residents from outside the MENA region have been speculated to help prevent ISIS resurgence based in the camp.

Escalations and Turkish threats have influenced limited displacement in the northern areas of NES, with many iterative displacements due to shelling and an unknown number of preemptive displacements in anticipation of Turkish invasion to elsewhere in Syria or abroad. Further, agriculture has been impacted by shelling and threats, with persisting wheat and water shortages exacerbated by pollution concerns in the Euphrates.

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Endnotes

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