

# CONTEXT UPDATE

Northeastern Syria | January 5, 2023

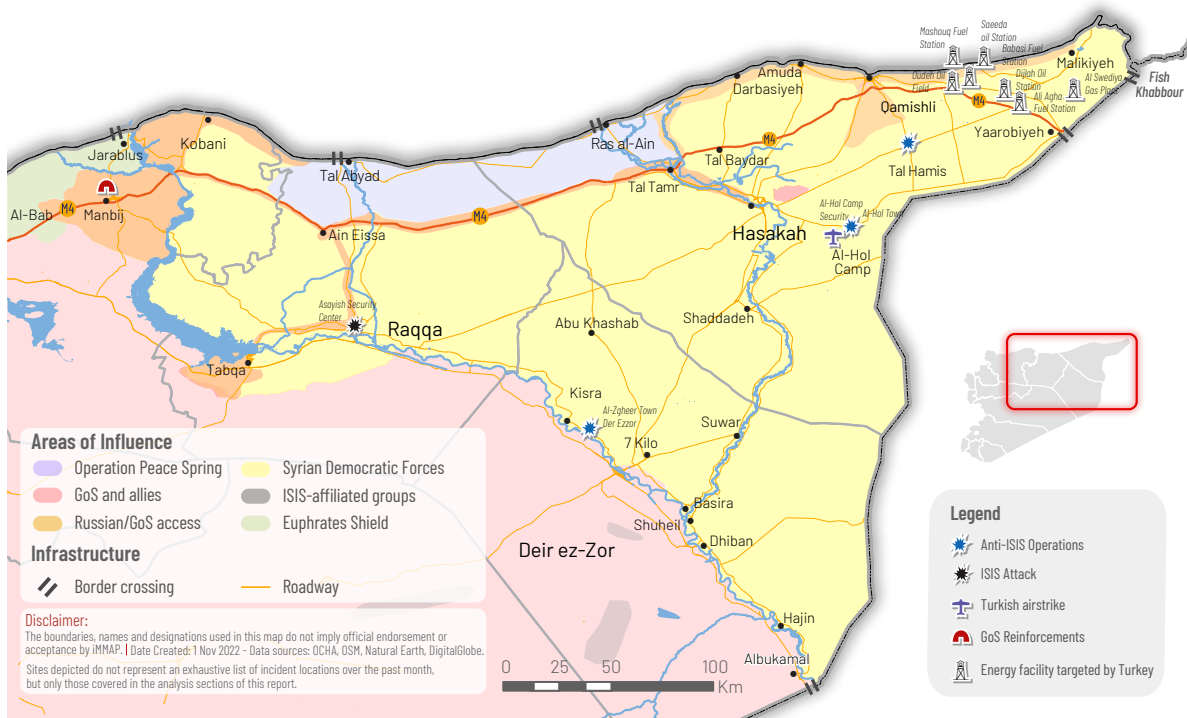


## INTRODUCTION

This report was generated by iMMAP 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 Northeast Syria, as well as Whole of Syria, and the operating environment for humanitarian actors. The contents of this report solely represent the analysis of iMMAP and do not represent the views or positions of iMMAP's donors and partners. Moreover, the names and designations used in this report do not imply acceptance by iMMAP's donors and partners.

## Key Takeaways

- The launch of Turkey's Operation Claw-Sword in late November and subsequent retaliatory attacks launched by the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) resulted in significant losses to life and infrastructure damage in Northeast Syria (NES). Although Turkey's continued threats of a ground-offensive have not yet been actualized, continued attacks impacted security, humanitarian access, and service provision in NES.
- The announcement of a meeting held between Russian, Turkish, and Syrian defense ministers in Moscow represented an unprecedented development in normalization talks between Ankara and Damascus since the start of the Syrian crisis. Although it is too early to understand the full impact of this meeting, the continuous thawing of relations between Erdogan and Assad is likely to influence shifting power dynamics across Syria. iMMAP's [Ad Hoc Report](#) on normalization prospects between Ankara and Damascus discusses these developments in further detail; the findings of this report will be presented and discussed in a webinar on January 10. Kindly use the following link to [register to attend](#).
- Operation Claw-Sword has diminished the SDF's capacity to contribute to anti-ISIS operations in NES. Further continuation of Turkish threats of a ground offensive and attacks in NES are likely to further embolden ISIS's resurgence.
- Syria's Health Minister announced the receipt of two million doses of oral cholera vaccines at the end of November, with the outbreak continuing to spread in NES as Turkish targeting has threatened humanitarian access and movement in the area.
- The Syrian National Army (SNA)'s position and structure have continued to shift, with the month of December seeing a continued Turkish push for the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to play a more central role in coordinating their communication with the SNA. Although the Third Legion made gains by reclaiming locations it lost in the recent HTS incursion, a key faction within it, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, was weakened by recent restructuring.
- Fuel shortages and rising prices have continued to challenge Government of Syria (GoS)-controlled areas, with Damascus introducing new measures in response. This, along with the general deterioration of living conditions, has motivated prolonged demonstrations in multiple governorates.



# TIMELINE



# SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Following a November 13 attack in Istanbul that killed six and wounded dozens, Turkey swiftly blamed the attack on the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the People's Protection Units (YPG). Although both entities and the SDF have denied any involvement, and highlighted ties of the alleged bomber to ISIS, Turkey retaliated by launching airstrikes in NES and Kurdish-governed areas of northern Iraq on November 19, constituting the start of Operation Claw-Sword. This has continued with escalations in crossline shelling and targeting by Turkish and Turkish-backed forces, with the SDF responding in kind. Turkish attacks aim to undermine the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) military and operational capabilities by targeting a wide range of military targets, as well as key-infrastructure locations. Attacks also hindered the SDF-International Coalition anti-ISIS efforts as they stretched the SDF's forces thin leading to a temporary suspension of their anti-ISIS operations.

As continued threats of a Turkish ground offensive in NES were met with opposition from the US and Russia, Turkey continued to push for the two countries to pressure the SDF to retreat 30 km away from the border, while continuing to signal readiness to advance talks with Damascus. Russia continued to play a mediation role across the different actors meeting with the SDF, GoS, and Turkey. Though GoS and Russian reinforcements to SANES-controlled locations in Tal Rifaat were deployed, and Russia conducted multiple meetings with the SDF in December, their role in the month was particularly noted in progressing the normalization talks between Ankara and Damascus through facilitating and hosting a meeting between their respective Defense Ministers at the end of December. The meeting drew wide condemnation from various actors across Syria including the SDF, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the SNA, as well as Syrians living in SANES, SIG, and Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)- controlled areas who organized multiple demonstrations in protest to the announcement.

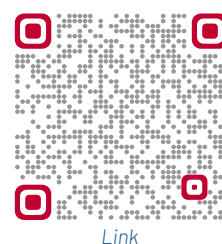
Cholera continued to spread in Syria, with the most affected governorates including NES' Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Aleppo. However, the receipt of two million doses of oral cholera vaccines, and prioritization of most affected areas in their deployment, promises an improvement in alleviating the severity of the epidemic in Syria. Though Turkish targets did not include dedicated cholera treatment centers, the hostilities led to the

hindering of humanitarian operations in the area including health-focused ones. Turkey continued to push for SIG to play a more central role in their communications with the SNA in NWS, and diminishing the SNA's role in policing and civilian matters. Though the Third Legion regained some of their locations they lost to HTS as part of their incursion into Afrin in October, one of its main components – al-Jabha al-Shamiya – was weakened as seven of the factions it used to encompass declared they were breaking from it to form a new faction.

Instability continued in regime-controlled areas in southern Syria in areas including Sweida and Dara'a as living conditions continues to deteriorate, and overall dissatisfaction with the regime led in some instances to calls to overthrow it. A main factor impacting Syrians across the country but particularly in GoS-held areas is the dwindling availability and rising prices of fuel, leading Damascus to introduce various measures aiming to minimize energy consumption.

The SDF-controlled al-Ashrafieh and al-Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods in Aleppo, in addition to al-Shahba'a areas which includes IDPs camps and villages in northern Aleppo countryside, have endured a months-long siege by the GoS-backed 4th Division. The siege has prevented the entry of fuel and humanitarian assistance to the area, drastically impacting living standards in these areas and suspended the operation of most sectors. In early December, local reports indicated that the Asayish gave GoS forces a period of 48 hours to lift the siege, threatening a siege on GoS security squares in retaliation. Following this ultimatum, 15 diesel tanks were reportedly seen entering the camps in the northern Aleppo countryside. Despite this limited reprieve, diesel has not been distributed to one third of the people in those areas, leaving them without heating, with demonstrations in these areas in late December demanding an end to the siege.

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# ANALYSIS

## | Escalations of Conflict in NES

Turkish airstrikes and subsequent attacks as part of Operation Claw-Sword have caused significant civilian and military loss of life in NES, impacting local populations, SDF fighters, and GoS forces, with one attack targeting US-led International Coalition forces that did not result in casualties. Turkey has again renewed threats of a ground invasion in unspecified areas of NES, reminiscent of similar threats made in October 2021 and earlier in 2022 that did not come to fruition. Although such an incursion has not yet been actualized, threats and escalations have generated renewed fears and limited displacements in areas of NES targeted in Turkish attacks.

These have largely been to more rural areas near displaced families' areas of origin. Given that these displacements have largely not gone far from communities, it is likely that these families anticipate a return to their homes, although this would likely be contingent on a de-escalation. Turkish attacks have led to displacements from various areas including Tal Tamr, Abu Rasin, Ain Eissa, and Kobani. Displacements seem to vary in nature in terms of their projected length and duration; IDPs residing in areas neighboring potential Turkish targets for a ground offensive (such as Tal Tamr) will likely await a more robust sign of Turkish de-escalation. However, other areas further from the Turkish border saw more limited displacement that seems to be temporary in response to the recent escalation. Turkish threats have further drawn international condemnation from both the US and Russia, with Russia swiftly moving to arrange negotiations with both Turkey and the opposing SDF.

**Infrastructure impact.** In addition to significant losses of life, both civilian and military, Turkish targeting has damaged infrastructure, facilities, and private property in NES. Ongoing mutual shelling and attacks as part of Operation Claw-Sword has resulted in numerous casualties, as well as losses and destruction of facilities and infrastructure in various areas of NES. Though drone and airstrikes launched by Turkey did result in civilian casualties, they seem to have primarily targeted military outposts, as well as key energy facilities in the area and at least six oil fields and processing plants including al-Rumeilan oil field, al-Sweidiyeh gas and oil field, and Saeeda Oil station. Damage to the al-Sweidiyeh gas plant led to a power outage in most areas of al-Jazira region,

as well as a severe shortage of home gas cylinders in the market and subsequent sharp increase in their prices in the black market from 30,000 SYP to almost 100,000 SYP. The plant has since resumed operation, but field reports indicate there still remains a shortage of gas in the area. Other damages to infrastructure included the targeting and destruction of a center that had been previously dedicated to COVID-19 treatment, as well as another clinic. Other facilities that were damaged included schools, bakeries, and silos.

Though damages to energy and fuel infrastructure seems to have been largely temporary, their continued targeting is likely to hinder the provision of services and humanitarian assistance, especially as winter conditions continue to worsen in various parts of Syria and NES, in which fuel and energy shortages become increasingly problematic.

**Anti-ISIS operations.** Turkish airstrikes targeted Asayish security forces near al-Hol camp with five strikes on November 21.<sup>1</sup> The attacks reportedly killed eight guards and temporarily halted the camp's supply of water, power, and aid deliveries within the camp.<sup>2</sup> Turkish aggressions near al-Hol camp have also reportedly facilitated multiple escapes from the camp. Though reports indicate that most of the escapees were soon recaptured. Following the onset of Turkish escalations, the SANES and SDF warned of decreased capacity for counter-ISIS operations in light of heightened security concerns. In protest to the US's position against Turkish attacks, the SDF announced a temporary suspension of joint anti-ISIS operations.<sup>3</sup> The Pentagon, however, announced that operations resumed in full on December 9.<sup>4</sup>

Anti-ISIS operations in NES seem to indeed to have resumed, with three operations targeting hotbeds of ISIS cells in NES between 7-10 December in al-Hol town, Tal Hamis, and Deir ez-Zor.<sup>5</sup> US CENTCOM also announced three helicopter raids were conducted within the span of 48 hours on December 20 which yielded the arrest of six ISIS operatives including an ISIS senior official as part of "partnered operations." While reports of an increase in frequency of ISIS operations cannot necessarily be attributed to recent disruptions to security operations,

it is highly likely that an escalation in Turkish operations will produce security gaps for ISIS cells to exploit, further destabilizing and threatening security in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Of particular significance was an ISIS operation against an Asayish headquarters in Raqqa that led to the death of 6 SDF and Asayish fighters on December 26. Though the SDF managed to kill one of the suspected perpetrators and arrest another, the Democratic Civil Administration office of Raqqa announced a curfew and a state of emergency<sup>7</sup>. In response to the attack the SDF and International Coalition launched Operation Thunderbolt on December 29, aiming to eliminate ISIS fighters in areas from which they suspected the attack originated.<sup>8</sup>

**Developments in Tal Rifaat.** As part of Operation Claw-Sword, Turkey named several targets an incursion could target, including Kobani, Manbij, and Tal Rifaat. The threat to these areas was highlighted by sustained SNA and Turkey shelling and airstrikes. In line with their long-standing security concerns, an unnamed Turkish official reported that Ankara issued a two-week deadline on December 7 for the US and Russia to pressure the SDF into retreating from areas of Manbij, Tal Rifaat, and Kobani.<sup>9</sup>

In Tal Rifaat, GoS and Russian forces sent reinforcements to several locations including Jijan and surrounding areas.<sup>10</sup> Though this served as deterrent against a ground Turkish invasion into the area, it also could be perceived as a testing ground of tactics having to do with to larger-scale efforts pertaining to normalizing relations between Damascus and Ankara as the latter had expressed their openness to replace SDF forces with GoS ones.<sup>11</sup> This proposition seems to have received condemnation and rejection from SNA factions who oppose discussions and concessions made to the GoS.<sup>12</sup> As such, the increased presence of Russian and GoS forces in Tal Rifaat could be perceived as a test to Russian attempts to appease Turkish demands, while also presenting gains to the regime, which could likely feed into the larger calculus of normalizing relations between Ankara and Damascus.

**Shifting diplomatic relationships, and developments in Ankara-Damascus talks.** Russia has expressed strong opposition to a Turkish ground offensive, with high-level Russian diplomats arriving in Turkey in early December. Despite speculation of normalization developments (detailed in iMMAP's recent [Ad Hoc Report](#)) as Erdogan has continued to signal willingness to advance talks with Damascus, the GoS has reportedly continued to

be resistant to rapprochement with Ankara.

In a statement made on December 15, Erdogan announced a tentative roadmap to realize normalization ambitions, noting interest in advancing Russian-mediated talks and highlighting next steps.<sup>13</sup> Erdogan noted that this proposal was shared with the Russian president, whom he said had expressed his backing of the proposed roadmap.<sup>14</sup>

Although this statement did not specify a timeline for discussions, the Turkish Ministry of National Defense announced on December 28 that its minister, Hulusi Akar, and the head of the MIT, Hakan Fidan, had met with the Syrian Defense Minister, Russia's Defense Minister, and the heads of Russian Intelligence in Moscow.<sup>15</sup> The Ministry described this meeting as constructive, and reportedly covered topics including the Syrian crisis, refugee issues, and joint efforts to combat terrorism.<sup>16</sup> This meeting is consistent with the roadmap announced by Erdogan earlier in the month, advancing talks beyond what had previously been between intelligence figures.<sup>17</sup> Further, the Turkish Foreign Minister stated on December 31 that a meeting with his Syrian counterpart could take place as soon as mid-January.<sup>18</sup>

These developments were met with condemnation and rejection within various areas in Syria. In NES, protests took in Deir ez-Zor where dozens reportedly went out in condemnation of the recent rapprochement, and in rejection of the increasing Iranian presence in the area.<sup>19</sup> The SANES' Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) also released a statement in which they noted they look at the recent with suspicion and speculation and attributing the recent developments to Turkey taking advantage of the Syrian crisis for the sake of an electoral victory.<sup>20</sup> Protests broke in the Turkey-backed areas including Azaz, Afrin and al-Bab as hundreds of protestors gathered to demonstrate against the recent development in rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus.<sup>21</sup> Areas in Idlib saw similar rejection demonstrated by protests, public condemnation, and statements made by multiple entities including HTS leader al-Golani. Al-Golani's televised statement focused on condemning the thawing relations while appealing to Syrians across the country.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Russia has conducted multiple meetings with the SDF in Qamishli since early December. Although the exact topics under discussion have not been officially announced, it is widely believed that these talks seek to facilitate greater SDF-GoS cooperation. Despite ostensibly being in opposition, as Damascus has long viewed the SANES as a separatist group and the SANES has sought independence from the GoS, the two have



long cooperated on security matters, particularly in light of Turkish aggression. In response to previous Turkish threats of ground incursion in 2021 and earlier in 2022, the SDF has welcomed increased cooperation with the GoS on security matters. The two reportedly formed a joint operations room on November 25, in response to recent attacks, strengthening their military presence in areas of NES along the Turkish border. GoS reportedly sent major military reinforcements to the countryside of Kobani in late November, including heavy weapons at the request of SDF commander Mazloum Abdi.

Despite these developments and sustained military coordination, cooperation between Russia and the SDF has long failed to extend beyond limited security collaboration, and the SDF has reportedly rejected Russian attempts to facilitate their withdrawal from key areas in favor of GoS or other control to appease Turkey. The SDF is unlikely to capitulate to any Russian attempts to facilitate greater GoS control in NES, although it is likely to continue to accept greater presence of GoS and Russian forces in areas of NES where both entities already have security operations.

While the implications of these recent developments for GoS-Turkish normalization prospects remains opaque, a more detailed look at the history and potential scenarios is presented in iMMAP's [Ad Hoc Report](#) on the topic. In the near term, iMMAP will be hosting a presentation and discussion on those findings on 10 January; For further information, kindly register to attend iMMAP's webinar on the report through this [link](#).

## | Cholera Developments

Cholera continues to spread in Syria, leaving thousands sick and many dead in its outbreak, with WHO estimating the total at 61,671 suspected reported cases, including 100 attributed deaths. In IDP camps in NES and NWS, a total of 5,037 suspected cases have been reported, although a lack of sufficient testing has meant that most cases are never confirmed in a lab. While suspected cholera cases have been reported from all Syrian governorates, the most affected governorates are Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, Raqqa, and Aleppo.<sup>23</sup>

On November 30, Syria's Health Minister announced receipt of two million doses of oral cholera vaccines funded by WHO, UNICEF, and the Global Alliance for Vaccine and Immunization (GAVI).<sup>24</sup> The vaccines were used in an immunization campaign targeting citizens above one year of age in governorates most affected by cholera in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, and Raqqa.<sup>25</sup>

The two-week campaign started in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa on December 4, although kick-off was delayed in Hasakah until December 20.

The cholera treatment response in NES has not changed significantly since the beginning of the outbreak, and no new cholera treatment centers were established in the period covered. Suspected cases are hospitalized and treated in the already established health centers. However, the SANES Health Authority allocated wards in hospitals for cholera treatment, provided health centers with medicine and emergency supplies, and is currently working on the rehabilitation of al-Kisra hospital in the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor to allocate its biggest ward for cholera treatment. The SANES is also supporting cholera response through monitoring water quality in water stations, distributing cholera kits, raising community awareness, sterilizing water tanks, and providing sterilizers to health care centers and hospitals. Most of the NES population do not fully adhere to preventive measures due to a lack of awareness and the poor economic situation. Many are unable to purchase clean water, and many communities lack sewage systems, health centers, and clean water resources.

In response to Operation Claw-Sword, some organizations suspended activities in NES- especially in al-Hol camp- only to resume a few days later. Although no cholera treatment centers were damaged or destroyed by the operation, shelling led to the destruction of a hospital in Kobani and damages to a treatment center in Qamishli. The Kobani hospital, which had previously been dedicated to treating COVID-19, had been emptied five months prior.

## | Broader Syria Developments

**SNA restructuring continues.** As reported by iMMAP in its November Context Update, the Turkish-backed SNA has been undergoing changes in their structure following HTS's incursion into Afrin in October, and subsequent pressure exercised by Turkey. In the month of December, this appears to have persisted as SIG's Ministry of Defense (MoD) appeared to play a bigger role in coordinating Turkish communication with the SNA. On December 16, the military council held a meeting chaired by the defense minister and attended by leaders of the three factions in which a number of issues were discussed and agreed upon including reducing the number of checkpoints, and handing them over to the military police to be run in a more centralized manner.<sup>26</sup> Another point that was discussed was the unification

of the media offices of the different factions under the MoD, as well as standardizing custom fees across the different crossings.<sup>27</sup>

After almost two months of withdrawing from Afrin and surrounding areas, the Third Legion mobilized on December 13 to regain control of headquarters lost to HTS and affiliates in the recent HTS incursion in October.<sup>28</sup> Though different news channels differ on the extent of gains made by the Third Legion, most report that the legion did indeed regain control of their headquarters in the Afrin-neighboring villages of Atmeh, and Kafr Janneh. While HTS sent reinforcements to the borders of Afrin city in clear objection to the moves, reinforcements route was cut by Turkish forces who had deployed forces on the Afrin-Kafr Janneh route while the Third Legion retook their headquarters.<sup>29</sup> Turkey has taken steps towards restructuring the SNA, while restoring factions' control of areas lost during the recent HTS incursion into Afrin. Any increased Turkish reliance on HTS in its anti-SDF operations would likely lead to international condemnation due to HTS's designation as a terrorist organization.<sup>30</sup>

Al-Jabha al-Shamiya, a major component of the Third Legion, has experienced restructuring in December, with seven of its factions<sup>31</sup> forming a new division under the Third Legion under the names "50th Division" or "Ahrar al-Tawhid".<sup>32</sup> The change came as part of an announcement made by the Ahrar al-Shamal 2 Division, which joined the Asefet al-Shamal formation in Azaz, another major component of Al-Jabha al-Shamiya.

If actualized, Turkey's continued efforts to restructure the SNA and their roles in OES and OOB areas is likely to have a positive impact on security – and by extension – humanitarian conditions as dissatisfaction with various factions' infringements in the areas is noted to have been on the rise. However, this process of restructuring could also yield Turkey a more cohesive SNA they can rely on for future operations, which would prove a hinderance to sustained humanitarian operations. The political security and humanitarian dynamics are also likely to be further affected by the outcome of the January 10 UNSCR vote.

**Unrest in Sweida.** Over the past few months, two Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) supported groups were dissolved following prolonged tensions and accusations of illicit activities in the south of Syria. In July, Druze-majority Sweida, underwent tension between members of Quwat al-Fajr group (QFR), a local armed group affiliated with MID, led by Raji Falhout,<sup>33</sup> and residents of the town of

Shahba. Following the tension, several villages mobilized to attack QFR, led by Rijal al-Karama (Men of Dignity), with the assistance of other local armed factions. The latter is a self-financed and armed local group that enjoys a large popular base in Sweida and receives funds from Druze clergy and businessmen from all over the world. The armed clashes resulted in Rijal al-Karama assuming control of QFR's headquarters. Several of Raji Falhout's men were either taken prisoners or killed, while his fate remains unknown.<sup>34</sup>

Following QFR's dissolution, social and religious dignitaries in Sweida, in cooperation with Rijal al-Karama and the local factions continued their efforts to disband the violating armed groups, while attempting to bloodshed. In August, they announced that an agreement was reached with Kifah al-Hmoud's group, also affiliated with MID, to disband the group and seize their weapons. Based on the agreement, Kifah al-Hmoud pledged not to carry out any "unethical behavior."<sup>35</sup> Raji Falhout and Kifah al-Hmoud were reportedly involved in violations including kidnapping, robbery, and drug smuggling. Although the two largest groups affiliated with MID were dismantled, it cannot be assumed that GoS has not recruited other persons to serve its agenda and expand its influence in the area.

Sweida has been experiencing a state of unrest, with protests erupting throughout December over the deteriorating living conditions amid rising prices, power cuts, food, and fuel shortages. In a protest on December 4, protesters stormed a government building and tore up the picture of Bashar al-Assad, denounced poor living conditions, held up banners, and chanted slogans calling for improvement and demanding the overthrow of the regime.<sup>36</sup> The protest was met with gunfire from the Syrian security forces, killing at least two, including a policeman, and wounding over 18.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, protests continued in Sweida throughout December demanding improvement in living conditions.

Coinciding with protests in Sweida, demonstrations have spread in villages and towns in Dara'a since December 21, notably in the cities of Jassim, Tal Shihab, al-Sanamayn, Dael, al-Naima, al-Muzayrib, and Ibtai'. Protestors have demanded the release of detainees from regime prisons, calling for the overthrow of the regime, rejecting the Iranian presence in Syria, and denouncing the reconciliation deals that were held by the regime and Russia. It was reported that GoS forces and the 9th Division opened fire in Jassim and al-Sanamayn to disperse protestors.<sup>38</sup>

**Fuel crisis persists.** Tensions have increased across all GoS areas as Syrians struggle to secure basic energy needs with the conditions governing fuel supply further deteriorating. The GoS justified the restricted availability and rising price of fuel to an increased reliance on and delays in imports, which has recently come largely from Iran.<sup>39</sup> Facing these challenges, the GoS reportedly enacted new directives aiming at reducing fuel-usage in the past month, including the temporary closure of government offices for two days in December,<sup>40</sup> as well as cutting the allocation of fuel to governmental vehicles by 40% until the end of the year.<sup>41</sup> However, the GoS faced criticism for simultaneously announcing an almost 100 percent increase in the price of fuel sold through BS Oil.<sup>42</sup> BS Oil is a private Lebanese company affiliated with the Katerji International Group whose owner, Hussam Katerji has close ties with the Assad regime.<sup>43</sup> Though the price of subsidized fuel has not changed, entitling vehicles to 25 liters every 10 days, reports indicate that motorists have only been able to access such fuel every 20 days.<sup>44</sup> Though Iran decided to increase their monthly supply of oil to the regime by 1 million barrels to reach 3 million, delays in the supplies reaching Syria have hindered the effectiveness of this increase in support.<sup>45</sup>

Conversely, Idlib's recent severe fuel shortage (as reported on in started to improve in the second half of December. Idlib's fuel supply had been compromised by several factors including the delay in receiving imported fuel from Turkey's Mersin, as well as supply restrictions and increased prices of fuel from NES due to political tensions between the SNA and HTS and the dissolution of the Watad fuel company. During the last month, as tensions between SNA and HTS decreased and imported shipments through Turkey entered NWS, fuel supply conditions appear to have improved. Nevertheless, fuel prices remain critically high and are unaffordable to most across Idlib.<sup>46</sup>

In NES, a number of fuel and energy facilities were damaged as a result of Operation Claw-Sword, including al-Swediya gas plant which is relied on for the generation of an approximate 50 percent of electricity in the al-Jazira region and all gas cylinders used domestically. Field reports indicate that the damage done to the facilities was largely temporary and that the supply of gas and electricity returned to normal after approximately ten days. Turkey's targeting of key energy facilities and infrastructure appears to be calculated, however, as the SANES rely heavily on income from oil production sold within their regions as well as to Iraqi Kurdistan and

regime-held parts of Syria.<sup>47</sup> As such, renewed operations aiming to completely destroy such facilities are likely to have crippling effects on the SDF's bargaining position while also further deteriorating fuel availability and prices across Syria at a time where harsh winter conditions continue to worsen across different areas in Syria.

**Efforts to tackle Captagon smuggling ramp up.** As mentioned in iMMAP's [October Context Update](#), the US-led International Coalition forces enacted a change in the leadership of al-Tanf base in September instating Captain Muhammad Farid al-Qassem as the base's new commander for the Syrian Free Army (SFA), formerly known as Maghawir al-Thawra. The last two months of the year saw an increased apparent collaboration between the SFA and the coalition on matters of border security particularly as it pertained to the hindering drug-smuggling operations across the Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi borders. Most recently in December, the SFA announced the seizure of 167,000 Captagon pills that were to be smuggled into Jordan and gulf countries.<sup>48</sup> Operations aiming to hinder drug smuggling across the Jordanian border persisted and potentially increased in recent months as well. In the first week of December, the Jordanian Army announced the foiling of 4 different smuggling attempts in one week.<sup>49</sup> As a main destination and transit location through which a large majority of exported drugs pass through, Jordan has ramped up their anti-drug campaigns this year as the country reported an increase of 15,000 drug-related cases in the year of 2022.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, the US is increasing efforts to combat the trafficking of drugs originating from Syria. On December 23, President Joe Biden approved the National Defense Authorization Act, a spending bill amounting to a massive 858 billion USD.<sup>51</sup> This included the signing of H.R.6265, a mandate requiring US agencies to target the Captagon drug trade of Assad.<sup>52</sup> Though the exact tenants of the strategy remain unclear at the time, Congressman French Hill, who introduced the bill noted that he expects the Biden administration and congress to develop more specific actions in the first few months of 2023.<sup>53</sup> As reports of the Assad regime's reliance on revenues generated from the trade of illicit substances emerge, but remain anecdotal, the bill will aim to draw a concrete connection of the drug trade and regime in an attempt to enact further restrictions aiming at weakening the regime.



# CONCLUSION

The launch of Operation Claw-Sword in late November and subsequent mutual targeting by the SDF and Turkish forces resulted in significant losses and damage to life and infrastructure. Turkey continues to threaten a potential ground-offensive, although such threats are yet to be actualized. Continued attacks have impacted multiple sectors in NES, hindering service provision, humanitarian access, gas and oil production, and power outages. Turkish attacks have further impacted the SDF's capacity to carry out anti-ISIS operations in NES. Continuation of Turkish threats of a ground offensive and attacks in NES are likely to further embolden ISIS operations and resurgence in NES and across Syria.

The operation and subsequent diplomatic interventions have resulted in significant developments in talks between Ankara and Damascus, drawing condemnation across the Syrian opposition. The announcement of a meeting held between Russian, Turkish, and Syrian Defense Ministers in Moscow on December 28th represented an unprecedented development in normalization talks between Ankara and Damascus since the start of the Syrian crisis. Should discussions progress further, a resulting thaw in relations between Erdogan and Assad is likely to impact shifting power dynamics across Syria.

Across Syria, economic challenges and a fuel crisis have influenced increasing political unrest and rising dissatisfaction. Cholera continues to spread in NES, even as Syria's Health Minister announced arrival of two million doses of oral cholera vaccines. As the coldest months of winter worsen already hostile living conditions in NWS, humanitarian actors and local populations anticipate the January 10 end of the current UN cross-border mechanism, of which renewal remains uncertain.

# ENDNOTES

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- 3 Middle East Eye, "[US and SDF stop all joint operations against Islamic State amid Turkish bombing](#)," December 2, 2022.
- 4 Kurdistan 24, "[SDF resumes operations against ISIS](#)," December 13, 2022.
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- 6 SOHR notes that between 2-26 of December, ISIS conducted 16 operations leading to the dead of 11 people, which they reported to note an increase in their recorded activity.
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- 10 SOHR, "30", "هي الأضخم منذ بدء التصعيد التركي... تعزيزات عسكرية لروسيا والنظام والمساحين المواليين لإيران تصل إلى ريف حلب," November, 2022.
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