

# CONTEXT UPDATE

Northwestern Syria | July 13, 2023

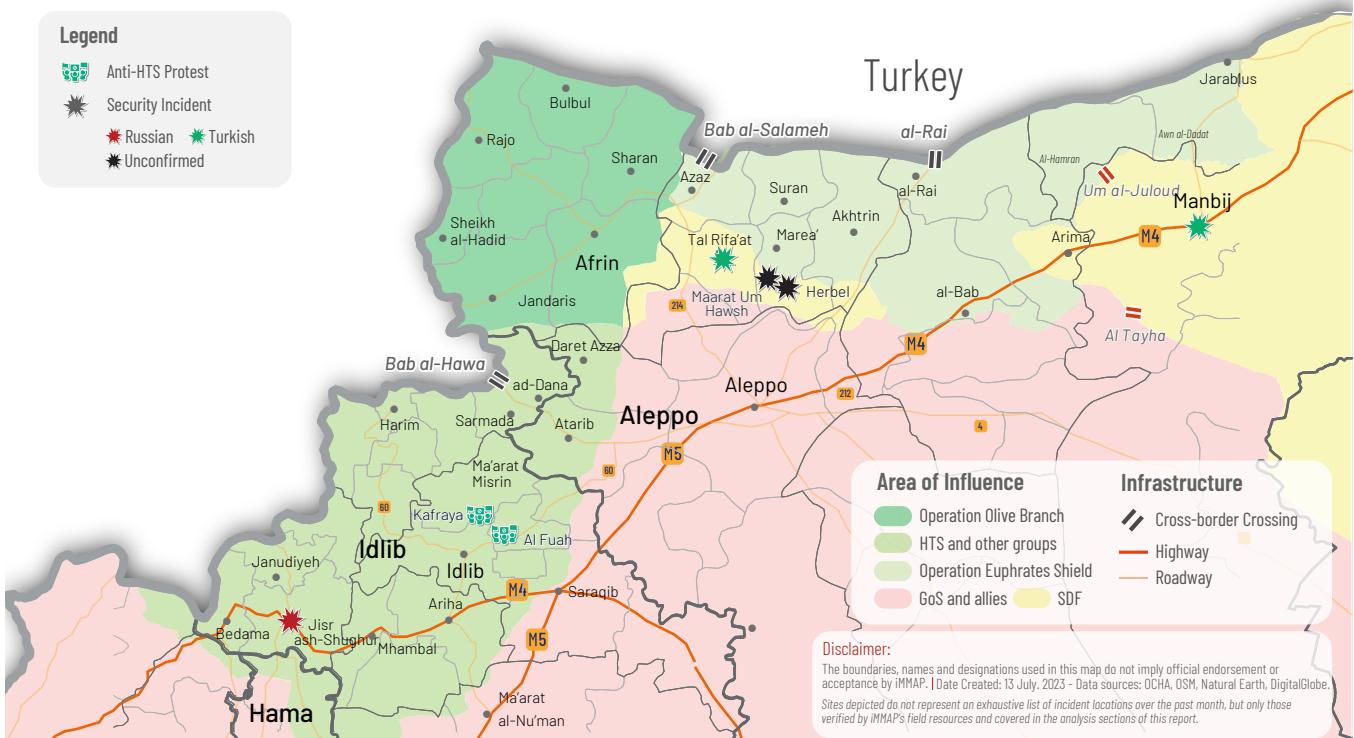


## INTRODUCTION

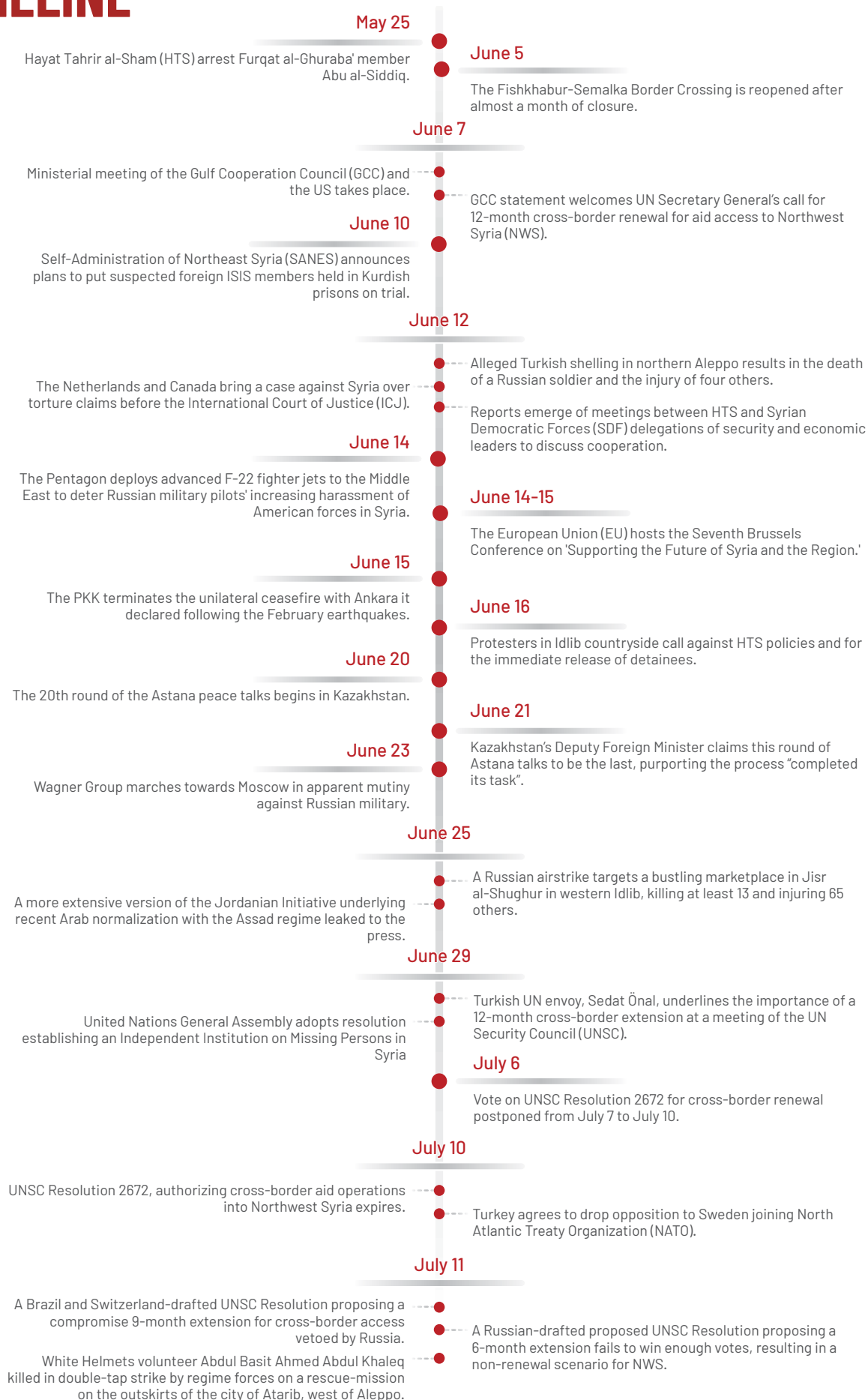
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northwest Syria, as well as Whole of Syria, and the operating environment for humanitarian actors. The contents of this report solely represent the analysis of iMMAP and do not represent the views or positions of iMMAP's donors and partners. Moreover, the names and designations used in this report do not imply acceptance by iMMAP's donors and partners.

## Key Takeaways

- The failure of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to extend the cross-border mandate has jeopardized vital humanitarian assistance and created acute uncertainty for those Northwest Syria (NWS) as stakeholders await the possibility of a further resolution vote. A Russian veto for a 9-month extension was underpinned by bullish posturing as it faces internal and external threats to its credibility and adds to debates over the resilience of a cross-border mechanism vulnerable to political co-manipulation.
- In June, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued its strategy to consolidate internal control and stability, distance itself from jihadist elements, and weigh its bets on potential intra-opposition alliances amid the context of developing international normalization with the Government of Syria (GoS). As it looks to further rehabilitate its image, Turkish support and dictate over the group will be a key variable for future HTS expansion strategy across NWS.
- Steps towards Turkey-Syria rapprochement are yet to pick up the pace since the foreign ministerial meeting in May and a seemingly stuck Astana round in June. However, the safe return of refugees remains at the forefront of the agenda for both Turkey and normalizing Arab states, the step-by-step roadmap of which was detailed further in June with a leak of the Jordanian Initiative.
- June saw an uptick in the level of security incidents in NWS involving key stakeholders to the Syrian conflict, comprising Turkey-Russia, Turkey-Kurdish, and Russia-HTS attacks. Some incidents are underlined by expected increases in tensions according to diplomatic developments, although mark some of the deadliest violence seen in the country this year.
- The Wagner mutiny had little direct impact on the Russia military in Syria, with any rebellion effectively contained in the immediate days of the march on Moscow. However, there will likely be longer-term, indirect impact on Russian strategy as its thinning resources and funds are stretched further with the loss of a profitable security force under its relatively direct influence.



# TIMELINE



# SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Throughout June, humanitarian actors yet again prepared for the expiration on July 10 of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution safeguarding access vital UN cross-border relief for over four million in Northwest Syria (NWS). On July 11, Russia continued its unchecked power play politics in Syria by blocking a renewal of the resolution, endangering an already dire humanitarian situation in NWS, with millions in desperate need of assistance. The UN-brokered agreement has been in place for nearly a decade to facilitate overland delivery of aid from Turkey to opposition-held areas. Its failure comes amid escalating needs resulting from a protracted conflict and recent earthquakes.

Initially, the USA, UK, and France had pushed for a one-year extension, but in the face of Russian opposition ultimately agreed to a compromise put forth by Switzerland and Brazil proposing a nine-month extension.<sup>1</sup> 13 out of 15 council members voted in favor of the draft, with China abstaining.<sup>2</sup> However, the nine-month plan faced a Russian veto, who insisted on, and proposed its own, resolution of a shorter renewal period of six months. Russia's UN Ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, warned that the aid operation would halt if other member countries continued to push beyond a six-month renewal.<sup>3</sup> The six-month resolution also failed at the UNSC, with only Russia and China voting in favor. 10 other UNSC members abstained, while the US, UK, and France voted against. Although Nebenzia indicated in his statements at the vote of the six-month resolution that the UNSC mandate for the aid operation could not be salvaged if it did not pass, negotiations reportedly continue over a further possible resolution.<sup>4</sup>

In Idlib, continued protests against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) faced further repression with an arrest campaign across Kafraya and al-Fuah, while the group intensified action against jihadist elements of the group as it continued its strategy to consolidate internal control over its territory. Reported meetings between HTS and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) leadership also reflect attempts to assess intra-opposition potential alliances in the face of fragile international backing.

Further details of the Jordanian Initiative that has broadly underpinned recent Arab normalization developments emerged last month. The initiative outlined three-stages to the step-by-step process, from short-term humanitarian agreement to mid-term security priorities, and finally to long-term political solution. The topic of refugee returns remains the framing condition of many other steps to the process amid increasing concern over how possible effective oversight and guarantees to increased early recovery will tangibly lead to greater political protection for those returning, both by force and voluntarily. The further normalization process between Turkey and Syria has come to somewhat of a stalemate following the foreign ministerial meeting in May. The return of refugees and withdrawal of Turkish presence from Syrian soil remain contentious issues between the parties, with the process by no means reaching a conclusion. However, comments from Kazakhstan as the host of the Astana talks, which held their latest round in June, indicate that a shift in diplomatic track is needed in the context of Arab normalization.

Amid these diplomatic developments, NWS has seen an escalation in security incidents from key stakeholders in the Syrian conflict. On June 12, multiple sources reported that a Turkish attack in Tal Rifaat resulted in the death of a Russian soldier and the injury of four others, alongside multiple other attacks on Kurdish positions in the area. Notably, on June 25, a devastating Russian airstrike targeted a bustling marketplace in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib, marking the most fatal attack seen in Syria this year.

In what was widely classified as an act of mutiny, fighters belonging to the Wagner Group marched towards the Russian capital expressing readiness to go "all the way" against the Russian military on June 23. Although the rebellion is not likely to directly impact Russian military presence or capability in Syria, the broader impacts on Russian domestic and global credibility, as well as the impact on Russian revenue streams, may indirectly influence Russian diplomatic and military strategy.

# ANALYSIS

## I UNSC Cross-Border Resolution Fails

The expiration of UNSC Resolution 2672 on July 10 and the subsequent failure of renewal has generated expected outrage across the humanitarian sector and diplomatic stakeholders. This renewal vote occurred in a novel post-earthquake context characterized by a step-by-step normalization process between the GoS and Arab states, further destruction of infrastructure, and existing access for UN aid shipments via two further border-crossings, Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai. These conditions largely encouraged parties to believe a 12-month renewal resolution was achievable.<sup>5</sup> However, various geopolitical and military developments over the course of the last few weeks crucially impacted Russia's strategy of brinkmanship going into negotiations, while western powers sought to capitalize on damaged Russian credibility to force concessions.

**Calls for 12-month renewal.** Before the devastating earthquakes struck Syria, humanitarian needs across the country were already at all-time high, having been compounded by a cholera outbreak in September 2022.<sup>6</sup> The earthquakes further intensified widespread displacement, structural damage, and disruption to essential services, placing exceptional strain on vital infrastructure such as water stations and sewage networks. Fragile sanitation conditions reignited risks of waterborne diseases, including cholera,<sup>7</sup> while incapacitated healthcare facilities are unable to meet medical needs as they additionally face high levels of trauma injuries, mental health needs, and staff shortages.<sup>8</sup> This brought attention to the limited scope of current cross-border operations to address such interconnected and systemic vulnerabilities in the NWS humanitarian response.

Humanitarian actors had therefore drawn from such earthquake impacts to bolster reiterated arguments to depoliticize cross-border access and return to a resolution extension of at least 12 months, after it was reduced to six months in July 2022.<sup>9</sup> An open letter from 26 NGOs active in NWS urged the UNSC that a minimum 12-month extension period is crucial for implementing ever more vital humanitarian programming aimed at restoring access to basic services.<sup>10</sup> In reference to the humanitarian assistance needed to address the critical levels of poverty and economic collapse in Syria, UN Under-Secretary-General For Humanitarian

Affairs And Emergency Relief, Martin Griffiths, also briefed the UNSC that a 12-month extension “reflects a pragmatic outlook on the current operation”.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, governments that have been pursuing warmer relations with the GoS in recent months also advocated for a 12-month extension. A joint statement following a ministerial meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the US on June 7 welcomed the UN Secretary General's call for a 12-month renewal, expressing support for including all currently open border crossing points (including Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai) in the UNSC resolution.<sup>12</sup> The Turkish envoy to the UN, Sedat Önal, also noted at a UNSC meeting on June 29 the “need for predictability” for UN aid operations, particularly for an increased focus on early recovery projects, underlining the importance of a 12-month cross-border extension.<sup>13</sup>

Those advocating for a 12-month extension have increasingly rooted their arguments within a need to facilitate early recovery projects, which are currently inhibited by the six-month resolution period. It has been increasingly acknowledged that the pressing and multi-faceted challenges which have arisen out of a 12-year conflict, compounded by the earthquakes, cannot be adequately addressed through short-term time frames and interventions. References to the inclusion of and a push for the implementation and progress on early recovery projects have been explicitly included in the wording of previous UNSC resolutions, including 2672 passed in January.<sup>14</sup> Particularly since the earthquakes in February, there has been greater focus on the need for longer-term projects that often fall within the early recovery stage of the humanitarian response.

The UN Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) issued its Third Reserve Allocation strategy of US\$60.7 million in late May, comprising the second phase of its earthquake response.<sup>15</sup> While US\$6 million of this was allocated directly to the Early Recovery and Livelihoods (ERL) cluster, further funding of other clusters aimed at providing longer-term and integrated humanitarian assistance to communities in need. This included “supporting the transition from emergency to sustainable response” and “improving access to basic services, through integrated single and multisectoral activities”. To achieve this, the allocation strategy recommends activities such as “sustained emergency rehabilitation” of critical infrastructure and essential services such as

connecting and expanding water stations across NWS. Although a step beyond humanitarian relief, these early recovery initiatives are still widely referenced as ‘quick fixes,’ ‘minor repair,’ and ‘emergency rehabilitation’ to achieve short-term, minimal operational support. Similarly, the complementary Aid Fund for Northern Syria’s (AFNS) first Regular Allocation launched in May promoted early recovery outcomes.<sup>16</sup> As AFNS is not subject to the same limited time periods of the UNSC cross-border resolution, the pooled-fund is set to target opportunities for more medium-term strategic interventions that work towards the full resumption of economic activities and already urgent infrastructure needs prior to the earthquake. The US\$40 million Regular Allocation has allocated 22.5% towards ERL, WASH, and shelter. However, in the context of a non-renewal scenario, AFNS will need to deal with competing priorities as it looks to continue the vital humanitarian relief programming currently undertaken by the SCHF, adding to concerns that recent progress on early recovery will be set back.<sup>17</sup>

These calls come against a backdrop of acute general funding gaps which continue to widen and threaten the humanitarian response in Syria, despite their distribution. Roughly only 12 percent of the Syrian Humanitarian Response has been funded.<sup>18</sup> During the 7th Annual Brussels Conference on ‘Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region’ on June 15, international donors pledged 4.6 billion EUR in aid for 2023, and 1 billion EUR for 2024.<sup>19</sup> However, these pledges fall short of the previous year’s 6.4 billion EUR, and fail to meet the ever-higher levels of need.<sup>20</sup> The combination of ongoing humanitarian needs and diminished funding continues to exacerbate the already challenging situation for vulnerable communities in NWS.

**Geopolitical calculations at the UNSC.** Russia’s bullish stance at the UNSC was a surprise to those who considered there to be a possible strategic opening for a 12-month extension due to Russia’s current foreign policy and leadership challenges. As the Ukraine war becomes ever more protracted, placing acute pressure on Russian resources and focus, alongside internal tensions illustrated by the Wagner mutiny last month (see below), the capacity of Russia to manage an additional diplomatic conflict over cross-border access seemed thin. Moreover, the cross-border resolution provides a regular instrumental diplomatic opportunity with which Russia can extract concessions from the west both in the Syrian sphere and beyond. Previous resolutions have increasingly included language advocating for more early recovery assistance to Syria, and it seems this iteration equally included demands for greater

sanctions relief and conditions for refugee returns.<sup>21</sup>

However, when it came to the vote, both Russia and China firmly pushed back against P3 members of the UNSC, offering the six-month renewal simply as a modality to wind-down cross-border operations.<sup>22</sup> This stance is likely impacted by broader geopolitical developments and increasingly western-aligned foreign policy moves by Turkey, who has become an important partner, or intermediary, of Russia on the international stage. In the days and weeks before the resolution vote, Turkey dropped its opposition to Sweden joining NATO, while it was indicated Ukraine may have some viable pathway to join the alliance. Additionally, Turkey released five Ukrainian commanders of the Azov Regiment back to Ukraine that had been captured during the Russian siege of Mariupol last year, which drew Russian accusations of Turkey breaking an agreement to hold the prisoners until the end of the war.<sup>23</sup> These wider events comprise moves towards Russian red lines, and have likely incentivized Moscow to posture more aggressively in more peripheral spheres where it holds strong presence in fragile contexts.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, longer-term strategic incentives remain for Russia to withhold a veto of the cross-border resolution after this immediate period of geopolitical posturing. It is currently unclear, however, how a climb-down from either Russia or the UNSC P3 will occur, and what concessions may be drawn in the process. As other globally significant diplomatic agreements are brought to the UNSC this week, including a vote on the extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative,<sup>25</sup> the future of cross-border access in Syria remains inextricably linked with multifaceted Russian foreign policy calculations.

**Humanitarian Impact.** This latest instalment of UNSC cross-border drama has once again highlighted the weaknesses of a humanitarian system that has become existentially dependent on political calculations and subsequent diplomatic risk. Russia’s veto rightly drew criticism from global leaders, with US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield strongly condemning the veto, characterizing it as an “act of utter cruelty.”<sup>26</sup> However, this has been accompanied by an ever-growing consensus about the need for humanitarian assistance in NWS to be more resilient against Russian and GoS manipulation. Human Rights Watch (HRW) UN Advocacy Officer, Floriane Borel, criticized the inefficiency of the UNSC and the politicization of aid, describing Russia’s behavior as a “painful reminder that the Security Council should not decide on humanitarian assistance.”<sup>27</sup> Syria Relief & Development (SRD) additionally pointed to the harmful impact of regular uncertainty around cross-border

renewal on the work of Syrian NGOs.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of whether parties are able to reach a compromise at the UNSC to vote on a further resolution in the next few days, such uncertainty so close to the aftermath of the February earthquakes will inevitably add strong impetus to ongoing conversations around increasing the resilience of an essential cross-border aid mechanism for NWS.

## I HTS Strategy

As reported in [iMAP's May Context Update](#), areas under HTS control in Idlib have witnessed increasing instability as protests against the group were violently repressed with widespread arrests. Yet, protesters across the Idlib countryside continued to voice their discontent with HTS policies on June 16,<sup>29</sup> calling for the immediate release of detainees. In response, HTS launched an arrest campaign in the village of Kafraya and the town of al-Fuah, alleging that the detained individuals were advancing foreign interests in the region. In the days prior to these protests, HTS had initiated multiple rounds of arrests under various pretexts, including incitement of protests and attempts to destabilize security. This reflects a continuation of HTS internal strategy to expand and consolidate control within NWS and maintain an appearance of stability by the use of force if they deem necessary.

In additional attempts to put forward perceptions of authority over the territory it controls, HTS also has intensified its anti-Islamist posturing with further operations against jihadist forces in NWS. HTS has imposed restrictions on these groups through various means, including dissolving and displacing some factions, confiscating their weapons, and forcing them to comply with the policies of HTS leadership. In June, tensions have flared between HTS and Furqat al-Ghurabá, led by French jihadist Omar Omsen (also known as Omar Diaby), after the arrest of its member known as Abu al-Siddiq in May.<sup>30</sup> Furqat al-Ghurabá condemned the arrest and accused HTS of repression and intimidation. Furqat al-Ghurabá operates with a degree of autonomy in terms of its administrative and internal organization, stationed in a camp near the Turkish border in northern Idlib. HTS had previously apprehended Omsen in 2020 due to concerns surrounding his mini-administration in the area, but was released in January 2022.<sup>31</sup> In 2016, Omsen was designated as a global terrorist by the US State Department for recruiting jihadists to Iraq and Syria.<sup>32</sup>

Other attempts by HTS to improve their image as a more moderate and disciplined opposition force in NWS included reported contact held between HTS and the SDF security and economic leaders in June.<sup>33</sup> Discussions between

HTS and SDF were reported to primarily revolve around economic and political interests, with HTS seeking an agreement on the trade of fuel. The agreement would involve the HTS-affiliated Shamal Company acting as a middleman to receive and ensure select refineries process fuel, subsequently returning it to traders in NES.<sup>34</sup> HTS reportedly also sought the designation of specific oil fields in NES for them to receive fuel from, the yield of which they benefit from due to the more competitive prices, although no agreement appeared to be reached in this regard. Through this agreement, HTS would centralize a large portion of fuel trade to take place through affiliated-institutions, as well as expanding their financial standing. Future developments, such as details of Shamal Company's dealings with NES as described, will determine the accuracy of the content and the success of the reported economic agreement.

In principle, reports of the political matters discussed during the meeting are consistent with some elements of the current strategic positions of HTS and the SDF. The meeting between the parties also allegedly included political discussions, such as an offer from HTS to formally join anti-terrorist operations conducted by the SDF with the support of the International Coalition.<sup>35</sup> Although this would go some way to improving the HTS anti-jihadist image of reform and parting with their terrorist designation, it risks jeopardizing their relationship with Turkey, who has largely protected them in the face of Russian and GoS aggression, and with whom HTS has previously cooperated on anti-terrorism efforts.<sup>36</sup> However, the relatively concrete assurances they can derive from sustaining cooperative relations with Turkey are increasingly in tension with their ultimate goal of expanding into northern Aleppo, currently controlled by the Turkish-backed SNA. This was illustrated by the meetings referring to the possibility of a joint civil administration between HTS and SDF upon taking control of SNA-territory; allegedly given expressed support by the US to the SDF.<sup>37</sup> In the context of normalization and the beginning momentum towards a Syrian political resolution, these meetings can be interpreted as HTS hedging their bets on the best strategy for survival and expansion. Similarly, the SDF may also be seeking to create an element of alliance in the face of increasing uncertainty around their international backing as Ankara-Damascus normalization continues. Although their underlying incentives for these meetings will likely be predominantly underpinned by a desire to establish some form of buffer against increasing Turkish aggression (see section below).

A key determinant of the progress and execution of

these discussions, therefore, is the Turkish response, which would likely forcefully deter any substantial political alliance between SDF and HTS. However, until opposition forces are meaningfully included and engaged in discussions regarding the future of Syria, possible inter-opposition dynamic shifts are likely to continue with potential for discussions of unification, as they seek to create a more consolidated and internationally-backed force against the GoS. However, tensions and disagreements over tactics are not to be overlooked within opposition groups, including internal HTS dissatisfaction and dissidence. While HTS leader al-Golani seems eager for the group to part ways with its jihadi past, this opinion is not universally shared within Idlib, including by factions and entities such as Furqat al- Ghuraba' and Hizb al-Tahrir. HTS's violent methods of repressing opposition voices, and continued appeals to external over local audiences, could devolve into a prolonged state of instability in Idlib and surrounding areas. Should such clashes prove to be protracted in their duration, it would likely have significant implications for humanitarian operations, further exacerbating needs in certain areas.

## Detailed Jordanian Normalization Initiative.

Further details of the Jordanian initiative, a proposed step-by-step roadmap for Arab normalization, emerged in June, following the leaked publication of the paper to the press.<sup>38</sup> The initiative provides more detail on the approach, including the various concessions the GoS is expected to make and rewards they would receive for reaching certain milestones. It outlines different tiers of priorities, from short-term humanitarian agreement to mid-term security priorities, and finally to long-term political solution. The end goal of the initiative expresses the expectation that Iranian and Hezbollah forces completely withdraw from Syria in exchange for the withdrawal of other foreign forces that entered Syria since 2011. The lifting of sanctions is also referenced as well as funding Syria's reconstruction, which does not seem to have been deliberated with Iran, but rather seeks Russia's endorsement.<sup>39</sup>

In some regard, Assad finds himself in a similar situation to that in which he has positioned Erdogan, where he is expected to make grand concessions to reach the end goal of lifting sanctions and receiving reconstruction support. However, unlike the GoS's demands on Turkey, the Jordanian initiative is a more gradual step-by-step approach. This means Assad could still settle for some short- and mid-term gains while

pushing back on longer-term objectives for now. The most immediate of these, on the humanitarian front, requires Assad to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery through both cross-border and cross-line modalities. In exchange, GoS would receive investment in early recovery programming, including WASH, education and shelter.<sup>40</sup> A further reward during this humanitarian phase would be the establishment of a safe mechanism for monetary transactions in Syria for humanitarian programming and remittances, as well as a new mechanism to allow Syrian imports of some currently sanctioned dual-use goods.

However, if poorly implemented with insufficient guarantees, these concessions offered to the Assad regime could risk the safety of refugees returning to GoS areas while further fueling the economic siphoning and diversion of aid through Damascus. Arab countries' most immediate priorities according to the initiative seem to be improving living and political conditions in Syria to prepare for refugee returns. Lebanon is already reportedly forcefully returning refugees to Syria, with HRW noting hundreds were recently deported by the Lebanese Armed Forces, placing them in direct threat of persecution, torture, and disappearance.<sup>41</sup> There is a real worry that Arab countries would settle for surface-level, small-scale concessions offered by GoS to justify the deportation of refugees without the sufficient necessary reforms taking place. Examples of this could be glimpsed in the recent reconciliation process re-launched in Syria's southern areas.<sup>42</sup>

## Ankara-Damascus Relations in Stalemate.

Although long sought-after by Erdogan, the quadrilateral meeting held on May 10 between the Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, and Russian Foreign Ministers seems to have contributed little to the momentum of normalization talks between Damascus and Ankara.<sup>43</sup> Remarks and statements made by Turkey and GoS both point to the proceedings reaching a stalemate as Assad still demands full-scale Turkish withdrawal and cutting ties with the opposition in NWS.

This, however, does not mean Turkey's interest in pursuing normalization has waned; especially in the aftermath of a heated election, central to which was the issue of refugee return, Turkey's interest has likely increased. Following the meeting, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, described the talks as "constructive and fruitful".<sup>44</sup> He also expressed Turkey's commitment to Syria's territorial sovereignty, noting the importance of

advancing the political process and creating conducive conditions for the return of refugees. As advertised in his campaign, Erdogan's strategy is to pursue restoring ties with Damascus, and consequently refugee returns from Syria, in a paced gradual process.<sup>45</sup> The first meeting of Turkey's National Security Council since Erdogan formed his new cabinet resulted in a statement openly acknowledging that international cooperation was needed to ensure Syrians' voluntary return.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Cavusoglu emphasized in his read out of the ministerial meeting Turkey and Syria's mutual commitment to combatting terrorist organizations, including the PKK and the YPG.<sup>47</sup>

Indications regarding the slow level of momentum and potential barriers to an Ankara-Damascus normalization pathway could also be seen out of the recent round of Astana talks held between June 20 and 21. Items in the joint statement made by Iran, Russia, and Turkey seemed mostly consistent with those of previous rounds.<sup>48</sup> Yet, notably, it did not provide any further progress on establishing the roadmap that the GoS has deemed necessary for any substantive improvement in relations between both parties. The meeting was also attended by the UN's Syria Envoy Geir Pederson, indicating the UN's interest in contributing to the talks to ensure (to the best of their capacity) that their trajectory is consistent with Resolution 2254.

The biggest announcement made following the conclusion of this round however came from Kazakhstan's Deputy Foreign Minister on June 21, in which he called for the meeting to be the last, marking the conclusion of the Astana process as it "has completed its task".<sup>49</sup> The announcement contradicted the joint statement which had noted the 21st round would take place in the second half of 2023. Negotiating parties, however, do not seem to agree that the process has served its purpose, but that future meetings will likely be hosted in a different location. Alexander Lavrentyev, noted alternative locations could include Russia, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>50</sup>

The host country's comments attributed this conclusion to Syria's recent readmission to the Arab League,<sup>51</sup> illustrating the diplomatic gains made by Assad in recent months. Ayman Sousean, Syria's Assistant Foreign Minister, reiterated the regime's position that the relationship with Turkey cannot be repaired until Ankara completely withdraws its forces.<sup>52</sup> As it breaks its diplomatic isolation, the Assad regime is emboldened and appears unwilling to compromise, despite Moscow's pressure to mend ties with Ankara. Indeed, the regime's successful strategy throughout the conflict and normalization process thus far has been playing a waiting game, biding its time for

more favorable domestic, regional, and global conditions.

## | Security Conditions Escalate

There were multiple notable escalations in instability across the country in June from key stakeholders in the Syrian conflict. On June 12, multiple sources reported that a Turkish attack resulted in the death of a Russian soldier and the injury of four others after their vehicle was targeted on the road between Maarat Umm Hawsh and Herbel in northern Aleppo. While some sources attributed the attack to drone strikes or artillery fire, others suggested that it was targeted by a roadside bomb planted by SNA factions near the area.<sup>53</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Turkish forces had bombed Maarat Umm Hawsh and surrounding farms in areas under Kurdish control while a Russian military patrol was passing through the region. However, the Turkish government denied allegations of involvement.<sup>54</sup>

The unilateral ceasefire announced by the PKK in the aftermath of February's earthquakes,<sup>55</sup> expired on June 13.<sup>56</sup> Turkey had largely not adhered to the ceasefire themselves, continuing to launch attacks across NES. These largely followed previous target patterns on the Kurdish-held Shahba area located north of Aleppo, as well as Tal Rifaat, and Manbij. Other targets included the outskirts of Kobani and Zirkan (Abu Rasin), located north of Hasakah. According to the Rojava Information Center, Turkey has carried out 30 drone strikes in NES since the beginning of the year, killing 42, including 10 civilians, and injuring 26.<sup>57</sup> The conclusion of the Turkish elections appears to have marked an even greater escalation in hostilities from Turkey in NES as SOHR documented a total of 10 drone attacks that left 19 people dead and 18 injured during the month of June.

On June 25, a devastating Russian airstrike targeted a bustling marketplace in Jisr al-Shughur, a city located in western Idlib, killing at least 13, including two children, and injuring 65 others.<sup>58</sup> This was the most fatal attack Syria has seen so far in 2023.<sup>59</sup> Reports suggest that the airstrike was in response to attacks launched from Idlib into GoS areas; however, 9 of the 13 casualties were civilians.<sup>60</sup> Although initially withholding comment on the incident, the Russian Ministry of Defense later announced it will continue airstrikes in Syria to pursue its security goals.<sup>61</sup> This attack is just one of 35 further airstrikes conducted in NWS in the last ten days of June,<sup>62</sup> illustrating the uptick in Russian aggression in the region that is typically seen in the lead up to the Astana talks, which saw its 20th round this month.



The recent escalations across Syria have been underpinned by a series of geopolitical developments over recent weeks. Diplomatic events such as the Astana talks inevitably drive an atmosphere of posturing as Syrian conflict stakeholders seek to evidence their military weight. Russia, in particular, will seek to demonstrate their retained capability against Turkish-aligned forces in the face of Ukraine pressures on their air forces in Syria, including HTS capability to make incisive attacks within GoS territory south of the Idlib M4. For Turkey, although attacks on SDF strongholds do not mark a change in strategic direction, the intensification of airstrikes must be considered within Turkey's broader and reiterated strategy of Kurdish containment. Over the last several months, Turkey has increasingly conducted security operations against Kurdish forces along and inside of the Syria and Iraq borders, comprising an evolution of and pushing beyond previous attacks within southern Turkish territory. Although these recent attacks from security actors within the Syrian context can be seen as flare-ups of existing dynamics, humanitarian actors and observers should continue to monitor steady and long-term trends of escalation as geopolitical and diplomatic developments continue.

## Implications of Wagner Mutiny

As Russian capacity and resources continue to be overstretched with the prolonging of the war in Ukraine, a relatively unexpected development in June presented further challenges to Russia's global influence and in Syria. In what was widely classified as an act of mutiny, fighters belonging to the Wagner Group marched towards the Russian capital expressing readiness to go "all the way" against the Russian military on June 23.<sup>63</sup> Although allegedly coming as close as 200km of Moscow, the private military company ceased their march the following day.<sup>64</sup> Yevgeny Prigozhin, the group's leader, fled Russia to Belarus, while it was reported that Wagner fighters who did not participate in the march will be offered Russian military contracts in the dissolution of the group.<sup>65</sup>

Although Moscow has long denied any ties to the Wagner Group, Putin admitted in a statement condemning the mutiny that the Russian state funded Wagner and almost paid them almost 1 billion USD in just one year.<sup>66</sup> The paramilitary group has also long been known to have served an instrumental in preserving and expanding Russian influence in interests and influence across the world, including Syria. As such, Russian state officials scrambled to restrict Wagner movements outside of Russia as events unfolded, to preserve stability in countries

where Wagner operates.<sup>67</sup> Although analysts believe the impact on Russia's role in Syria will be minor relative to other contexts,<sup>68</sup> the Wagner mutiny could have potential indirect impacts on Russia's policy and strategy in Syria.

Wagner fighters participated in military operations in Syria's Palmyra and Eastern Ghouta<sup>69</sup>, and were involved in providing security for oil installations.<sup>70</sup> The group's presence was reported to be minor in the immediate period before the mutiny, estimated at 250-450 personnel in Syria.<sup>71</sup> Following the mutiny, Russia's deputy foreign minister flew to Damascus informing Assad that Wagner operatives in Syria are to no longer operate independently.<sup>72</sup> Later reports gave details of a crackdown by Syrian and Russian forces against Wagner troops, including blocking communications, summoning commanders to Khmeimim military base in Latakia, and asking them to either sign contracts with Russia's defense ministry or promptly leave Syria.<sup>73</sup>

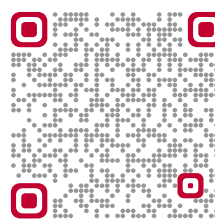
Nevertheless, Wagner events have appeared to have had little to no immediate direct effects in Syria. Relative to other contexts, the official presence of the Russian military, the comparatively small Wagner presence, and the swift Russian response to take control the situation all seem to have contributed to quick containment of the crisis by June 24.<sup>74</sup> However, there may be some potential indirect effects that could impact Russia's future strategy. As Wagner companies reportedly generate hundreds of millions of dollars annually from their operations in across Africa, which are subsequently used to finance Russian military operations, the disruption to these revenue streams could further stretch Russian resources in Syria.<sup>75</sup> As Russian resources are already overstretched, including their military capability, there will be a level of prioritization within Russian strategy as to which conflicts take precedence. Moscow may therefore be pushed in future to reduce involvement in conflicts outside of Ukraine, and encourage financial and security avenues for GoS to become less-dependent on Russian resources. Moreover, although the mutiny was contained, Putin's strongman image has suffered a severe blow. Exacerbated internal dynamics and credibility have therefore inevitably played into Russian strategy at the UNSC in regard to the cross-border resolution.

# CONCLUSION

The failure of cross-border renewal comes at a time in NWS of acute humanitarian need following the earthquakes and an increasingly fragile security context as parties to the conflict assert themselves for diplomatic weight. The impact of the loss of a UN cross-border mechanism will be severe, and crucially puts at risk recent developments in humanitarian strategy that are seeking to address the longer-term, structural deficiencies in the NWS aid landscape. Although the capacity for continuity planning and the establishment of AFNS has been tangibly built upon in recent months, no alternative modality currently exists that can replicate the scale of the UN cross-border mechanism. The inevitable consequence, therefore, will be fatal humanitarian impact, as resources already do not provide for all those in need. Regardless of the UNSC outcome, conversations will need to be accelerated on how the NWS humanitarian sector can increase its resiliency against political co-option by the GoS and its allies, to ensure substantial cross-border assistance continues to reach those in need. In the case of non-renewal, there will additionally need to be an evaluation of how progress on early recovery initiatives will not be lost as humanitarian partners understandably focus their efforts on ensuring the continuity of life-saving and immediate humanitarian relief.

As wider diplomatic developments continue, normalizing states will play an increasingly important role in ensuring the GoS is held to account on stated compromises, as well as deterring the GoS and its allies against antagonistic behavior like the cross-border veto. Turkey is currently in a relatively influential role in regard to Russia, and should instead use this dependency to find acceptable compromises in the Russian position. Arab states, many of whom were historically fierce supporters of the Syrian opposition, must likewise start exercising some of their diplomatic weight against the GoS to draw adaptations in regime behavior should there be any meaningful progress towards a sustainable political solution.

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