

# CONTEXT UPDATE

Northeastern Syria | April 6, 2023

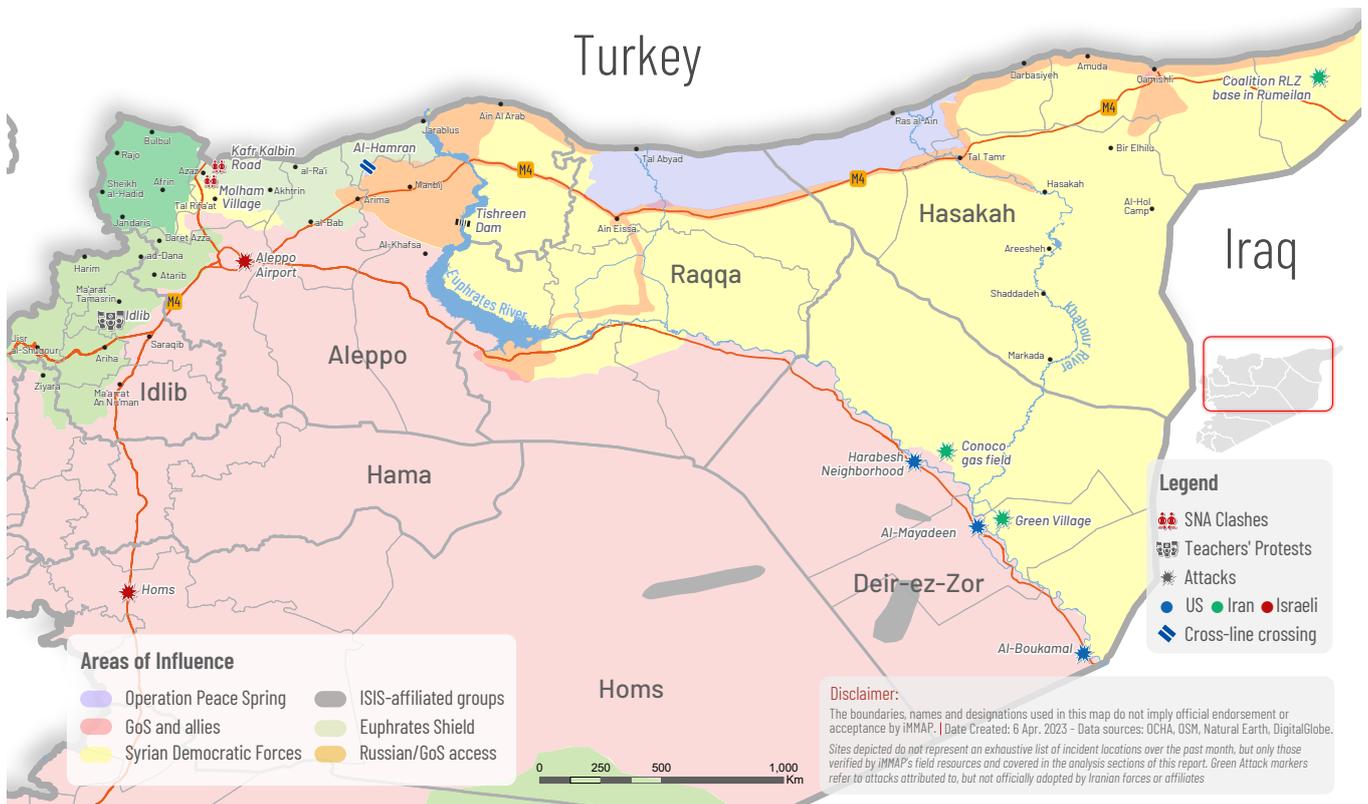


## INTRODUCTION

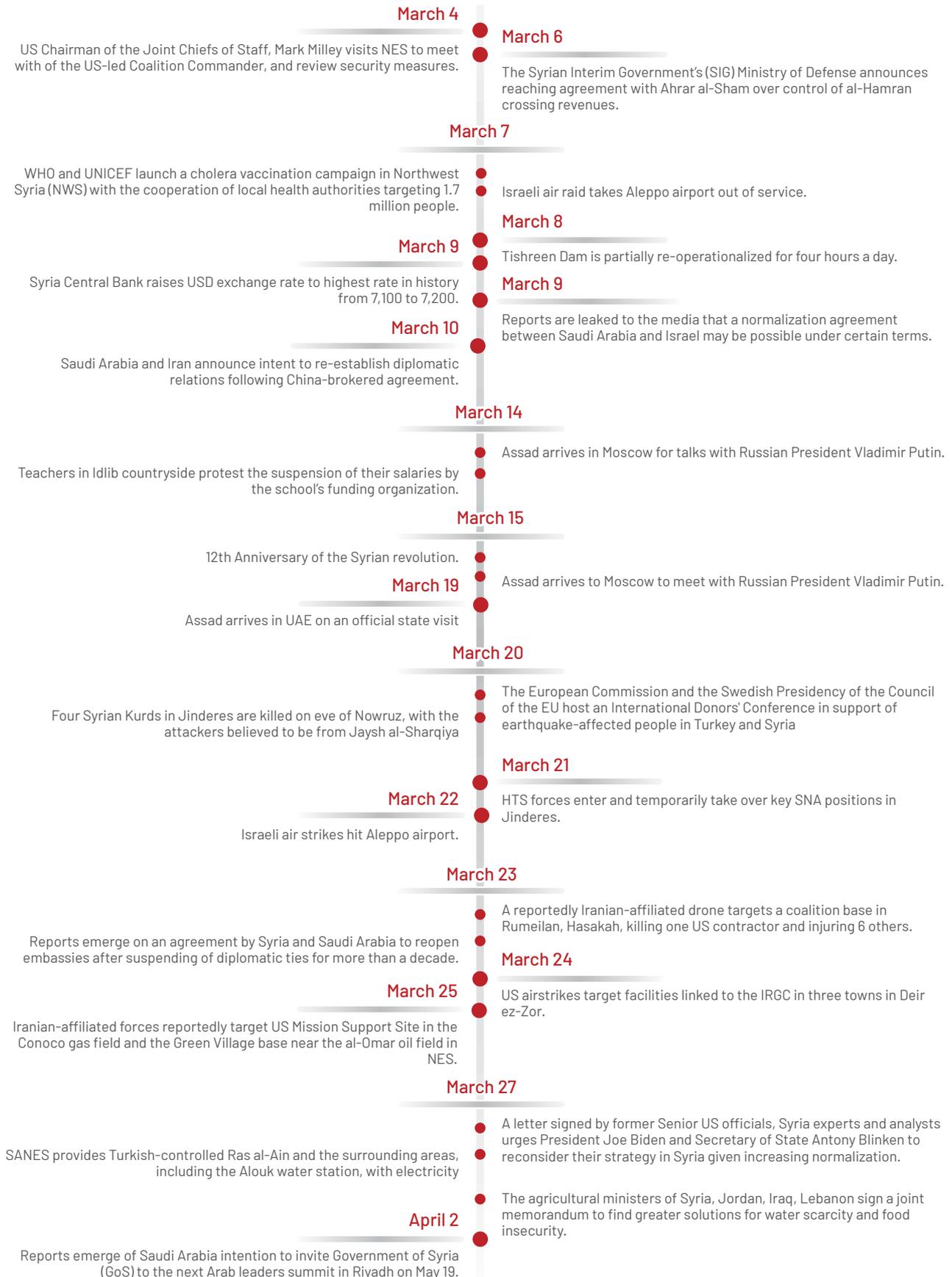
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northeast Syria, as well as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

- Acute deterioration of living conditions in Northeastern Syria (NES) led to notable changes in consumer habits and increased adoption of negative coping mechanisms. Although primarily attributed to drought impact on the agricultural sector and tumbling depreciation of the exchange rate, criticism continues to be levelled at the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) for mismanagement of mitigation measures.
- Recent US-Iran tit-for-tat conflict this month is contextualized within an evolving geopolitical backdrop as Saudi Arabia announces a series of notable diplomatic announcements, including intent to re-establish relations with Iran. With increasing Arab-Damascus normalization, the US position in Syria has been questioned as continued ISIS security threats and high-profile advocacy dampens isolationist domestic pressure.
- Re-emergence of infighting between Syrian National Army (SNA) factions after the earthquake has provided additional opportunity for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to capitalize on worsening perceptions of the SNA and a trend of increasing gravitation of sub-factions towards HTS. An attack on Nowruz celebrants by SNA forces in Jindires and internal accusations of ineffective Syrian Interim Government (SIG) leadership suggest attempts of strategic positioning by these factions.
- An already overstretched humanitarian landscape in Northwestern Syria (NWS) is further exacerbated by damages to key health and education sectors following the earthquake. An increased prevalence of suspected cholera cases and decisions by Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) to dismiss a large number of teachers place further strain on these facilities.



# TIMELINE



# SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Sharply deteriorating living conditions in NES have been attributed to several structural and geopolitical factors, such as persistent drought in the agricultural sector despite recent rainfall. This has been exacerbated by mismanagement by the SANES preventing effective mitigation of security and environmental pressures. The snowballing devaluation of the Syrian pound has also led to uncontrollable inflation as salary increases are nowhere near sufficient to match rising prices in the import-dependent economy. Heightened insecurity as a result of continued Turkish aggression, comprising several attacks on oil fields and infrastructure in the region over the last few years, has also inhibited investment into the region.

A series of diplomatic announcements by Saudi Arabia with regional stakeholders in the Syrian conflict in March have provided a backdrop to recent US-Iran tit-for-tat attacks in NES. This has prompted questions over US strategy in Syria and its involvement in developing regional normalization dynamics. Domestic pressures for re-evaluation further added to this discussion, including from Congress, as wider advocates call for a reconsideration of political and humanitarian objectives beyond anti-ISIS security operations in the country.

The recently formed Tajamo' al-Shahba' faction was party to multiple instances of infighting within the ranks of the SNA in March. Though self-identifying as part of the SNA, such claims were met by rejections from the SIG, as well as other components of the sub-factions that reportedly made up Tajamo'. The disputed faction's interest alignment with those of HTS, as well as the controversial statements made by an SNA official, could point to a potential change in the dynamics of the various opposition forces operating across NWS.

Four Kurdish celebrants were killed on the evening of Nowruz in the city of Jindires on March 20, following an altercation with persons reported to be members of the SNA's Jaysh al-Sharqiya, part of the Liberation and Construction Movement. Although the Movement released a statement denying the perpetrators' affiliation

with them,<sup>1</sup> the incident was met with widespread condemnation from various factions within the SNA, as well as the Syrian Interim Government (SIG).<sup>2</sup> HTS capitalized on the resulting uproar as al-Golani appeared in Jindires shortly afterwards posturing himself as the guardian of the rights of minorities.

In early March, the SSG reportedly dismissed a large number of teachers in Idlib from their jobs on the basis that there are a number of academic degree holders assigned with job titles that are not commensurate with their specialization. The Ministry of Education stated that specialized graduates would replace dismissed teachers, who would be either appointed in other positions or wait for their status to be settled. In response, many teachers staged a three-day sit-in in front of the Directorate of Education in Idlib and published campaigns on social media, demanding a reversal of the decision. According to the protestors, 600 teachers were dismissed in the "unjust" decision.<sup>3</sup> Further, on March 14, several teachers in a privately funded school in Idlib countryside, as well as teaching staff in SSG public schools, protested the suspension of their salaries by the respective donor-organization and authorities.

According to the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), there was a total of 60,279 suspected cholera cases in NWS as of March 25 and 583 confirmed cases reported by the Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN) since September 16, including 23 deaths.<sup>4</sup> As detailed in iMMAP's [January Context Update](#), there were 37,910 suspected cholera cases in NWS as of January 14 according to WHO. This highlights the drastic increase of cholera cases since the earthquake, requiring a more robust health response to avoid the consequences of a cholera resurgence beyond the recently completed vaccination campaign.

# ANALYSIS

## | Growing Economic Pressures in NES

The economy in NES has, since late 2022, experienced a period of particularly acute instability leading to deteriorating living conditions for residents in the region. In recent months these have become even more pronounced, as structural conditions including worsening drought in the agricultural sector have been notably exacerbated by a perceived mismanagement of resources and lack of action by SANES. This has contributed to widening negative sentiment towards the administration, that is affecting both private sector investment and the trade economy, as well as actors and programming within the humanitarian sector.

**Consumer habits.** Economic pressures have manifested in a widespread change of consumer habits across NES, with inhabitants decreasing spending on food through reduced consumption and switching to cheaper goods. There has also been a general reduction in the demand for more expensive, or luxury, items such as meat, clothing, and other non-essentials. A persistent wheat shortage continues to impact the prices of tourist bread, as SANES-affiliated bakeries see increased demand due to its relatively cheap prices, although it is widely acknowledged to be of poorer quality. A widespread increase in the percentage of consumers using credit at their local grocery stores has also been noted. Field reports indicate an increase in crime as a result of these diminishing living conditions, with theft of women's bags being particularly noted. There has also been a marked effect on increasingly stringent labor conditions, as employees work overtime in order to improve their living conditions in addition to a visible increase in child labor, begging, and sifting through waste to salvage basic food necessities across the region.<sup>5</sup>

**Drought and the Agricultural Sector.** Last month saw two periods of intense rainfall in NES, providing some hope to farmers for this harvest season. Although signs of the risks of desertification were prominent in areas which saw sudden floods, including in Raqqa and Kobani,<sup>6</sup> farmers have estimated that rainfall levels seen in March are sufficient to cover the needs of irrigated lands. This rainfall provides the additional cost-saving benefit of a reduced need for fuel to power water pumps for long periods of time, as well as increasing the supply of electricity generated by dams for more cost-effective irrigation methods. Rainfed crops crucial to address the region's bread prices, such as wheat and other cereals, have also

naturally benefited. Yet, although providing some short-term relief, such replenishments to the water supply do not address the structural deficits in NES water infrastructure.

With NES having experienced its third consecutive year of drought, the agricultural sector in Syria's breadbasket remains exceptionally vulnerable to reduced rainfall due to the reliance of its irrigated crops on Turkish water flow. The continued politicization of water resources and the frequent construction of upstream dams by Turkey has also left water supply for irrigated agriculture from the Euphrates and al-Khabour rivers largely contingent on rainfall. A recent assessment by Mercy Corps showed that agricultural production in the last harvest in 2022 decreased by more than 80% relative to 2020 levels. As the majority of NES inhabitants rely on agriculture for their income, this impact of drought has been particularly crippling for livelihoods in the region.<sup>7</sup>

The impact on livelihoods in NES is further exacerbated by the reliance on dams and hydro-electric power for electricity generation across NES, with low water levels increasing households' exposure to high fuel prices and often deficient diesel allocations by SANES. As outlined in iMMAP's [February Context Update](#), SANES energy office decommissioned the Tishreen Dam on the Euphrates in Aleppo for the first week of March leading to a critical reduction in the governorate's energy generation. Although Tishreen Dam was partially re-operationalized for four hours a day from March 8, and is now fully operational, the interruption contributed to electricity shortages in areas including Kobani as hydro-electric power generation is the primary source of electricity across NES. Although water was prioritized for irrigation and drinking in the dam's decommission, the lack of power has ultimately also impacted residents' potable water supply as they rely on electricity to extract water from wells, with many forced to rely on expensive and diesel pumps.

The severe impact of drought on citizens' livelihoods in NES will inevitably continue so long as the current water infrastructure system continues. Field reports suggest that, although intent is there, SANES do not have the means, tools, or plans to increase water levels in the dams across NES. There has, however, been some signs of investment, including an announcement by the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF) of the approval of two new electricity projects

in NES and NWS with a targeted budget of €135,430,155. One of which will provide solar power to 14 health centers in villages in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor countryside, indirectly benefiting health services for 58,909 people.<sup>8</sup> Other adaptation measures have included moving away from preceding GoS agricultural policy of mono-cash crops, such as wheat and cotton for export, with the planting of fruit trees by farmers now encouraged. However, this does little to help the widening bread shortage in the region. Moreover, such mitigation measures do not tackle the geopolitical roots of the issue, although the importance of regional cooperation to address the evolving consequences of water shortages in fragile contexts is becoming increasingly recognized. On March 27, the agricultural ministers of Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon signed a joint memorandum, agreeing to push to find greater solutions for water scarcity, increase the use of technology, and cooperate to achieve food security for populations.

**Tumbling Exchange Rate.** After the severe impact of drought on the agricultural sector as a key livelihood source for many across NES, deteriorating living conditions have primarily been attributed to the continued depreciation of the Syrian pound against foreign currencies. On March 9, Syria's Central Bank raised the USD exchange rate to its highest rate in history from 7,100 to 7,200 in an attempt to control black market currency exchange operations. Similar exchange rate volatility was seen in NES, with rates on the black market reaching 7,500 SYP.<sup>9</sup> This recent period of volatility has followed an influx of funds in USD into the Syrian Central Bank following the earthquake, but which have not been released into the broader market to increase liquidity in favor of bolstering financial reserves. This has led to a decline in the supply of USD on the black market, thereby raising the exchange rate, or price, of USD available. With the exchange rate at 50 SYP per USD in 2011, the inflation caused by the severe depreciation over the course of the conflict has immensely diminished livelihoods across the country.

SANES' Economic Mismanagement. Although there are undoubtedly structural causes to the recent deterioration of living standards in NES, there are increasing accusations of economic mismanagement against the SANES. For example, moves to abolish price controls on essential goods, initially aimed at increasing competition, simply allowed merchants and store owners to increase their prices. Similarly, SANES issued an extension to the ban on the export of livestock from areas under its control this month, aiming to preserve livestock supply and control meat prices. However, this resulted in continued significant losses for breeders who could not reduce their domestic prices due to the high costs of other agricultural inputs, as well as the unavoidably reduced purchasing power of consumers. Other measures impacting construction and related sectors have also been particularly highlighted by field reports, including the imposition of multiple taxes on building permits, the authority's monopoly on cement and iron imports, and an increase in the regulation of multi-story buildings. However, sources attribute the start of livelihoods deterioration to the subsequent instability and heightened security risks following the Turkish operations and increasing attacks on NES. Heightened insecurity has notably impacted investment and construction projects in the region, augmenting the humanitarian impact of the slow repair of essential service facilities in NES, such as healthcare and education. Investment has also reportedly been impacted by perceived disruption of the NES labor market and of competitive, local trade by PKK affiliates. Not only has this corruption directly diverted profits and investment from local trade, but it has also discouraged further investment in the region.

## | Challenged US Strategy in Syria

**Iran-US security incidents.** Last month saw an increase in tit-for-tat strikes between US and Iranian-aligned forces in NES at a time of significant developments in regional geopolitics. In the afternoon of March 23, a reportedly Iranian, self-destructing Qasef-1 drone targeted the coalition RLZ base in Rumeilan, Hasakah, killing one US contractor and injuring 10 others.<sup>10 11</sup> The Avenger missile defense system employed at the RLZ base was reportedly offline for maintenance, which has prompted questions regarding the sources of Iranian intelligence for the timing of the attack.<sup>12</sup> Some have pointed to the particularly frequent Russian fly-overs of US-airspace in NES in the last month, having flown over various US bases 25 times during March.<sup>13</sup>

In response, US airstrikes targeted facilities linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in three towns in Deir ez-Zor on March 24, including a munition warehouse, a nearby control building, and an intelligence-collection site.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian Advisory Committee in Syria stated that US airstrikes left several fighters dead and wounded,<sup>15</sup> with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) stating that 11 fighters were killed in total; six at an arms depot in Harabesh neighborhood of Deir ez-Zor, and 5 others at military posts near the towns of al-Mayadeen and al-Boukamal near the Iraqi border.<sup>16</sup> Later that night, and into the early morning of March 25, Iranian rockets and drones targeted US bases in two simultaneous attacks. The first, on March 24, targeted a Mission Support Site in the Conoco gas field, injuring one US service member. The second attack later comprised of several drones targeting the Green Village base near the al-Omar oil field. US military officials have told media sources that these Iranian-backed attacks were coordinated and “showed a higher level of sophistication” than those previously.<sup>17</sup>

**Geopolitical considerations.** More concerted efforts by Iran’s affiliates to expel US forces from the region with increased coordination between the IRGC and Hezbollah in Syria were prompted by General Soleimani’s assassination in January 2020.<sup>18</sup> The vacuum created by the reduced role of Russian forces in Syria due to the Ukraine war has also provided Iran an opportunity for increased geographical scope and freedom of action. Since Iranian President Raisi took office in August 2021, he has prioritized reducing tension with Iran’s neighbors, and this renewed aggression against the US is set against a background of a series of Iranian diplomatic developments over the last month.

Key among which is with Saudi Arabia, culminating in the announcement of a China-brokered agreement with Saudi Arabia to re-establish diplomatic relations on March 10,<sup>19</sup> and which has suggested a change in positioning relative to traditional American security partners.

A series of diplomatic announcements this month by Saudi Arabia with US opponents in the Syrian context may suggest that the Gulf power is looking to establish a more proactive regional position outside of, or even contrary to, US security strategy. Saudi Arabia has simultaneously made substantive moves towards rapprochement with the Assad regime since the earthquake, indicating the necessity to move forward from the status quo. On March 23, reports emerged that Syria and Saudi Arabia have agreed to reopen embassies after almost a decade of cut diplomatic ties, in addition to reports that the GoS would be invited to the next Arab leaders summit on May 19.<sup>20</sup> Particularly as Iran’s foreign minister is expected to be involved in quadripartite Ankara-Damascus normalization negotiations in April,<sup>21</sup> it would seem that the political current is increasingly against the US position in Syria as regional governments increasing share strategic vision for the next stage of the Syrian crisis.

Such arguments, however, overstate the divorce of Saudi Arabia and US security interests. The announcement of an intention to re-establish diplomatic ties with Damascus came just a day after news was leaked to the press that a normalization agreement with Israel was possible with certain terms.<sup>22</sup> Deepened security ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel are perceived to be a way to leverage security guarantees from the US for the Kingdom. Iranian rapprochement could well be used as a tool to counter Iranian influence in Syria and beyond, particularly if Saudi rapprochement with the regime were to include a possible increase in the trade of fuel. Previous evidence from Iranian efforts to mend relations with its regional neighbors has seemingly only ended in Iran offering concessions, including a reduced presence of regional proxies.<sup>23</sup> US officials have reiterated their position that although they are against normalization with the GoS, but if countries are to engage further then they must at least receive something in return.<sup>24</sup> A reduced threat of attrition from Iran may well be sufficiently advantageous for the US to accept a closer Saudi-Iran relationship; indeed, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan noted an ongoing dialogue with the Saudis about negotiations with Iran.<sup>25</sup>

**Pressure increases on US strategy.** Although the Biden administration denied that the March Iranian-attributed attacks were escalatory, it stated that the US would “respond forcefully” to defend its forces on the ground in Syria. However, questions were posed as to whether the US is willing to push back sufficiently to deter Iranian behavior, with the retaliatory strikes acknowledged to have limited effect.<sup>26</sup> The Pentagon later announced that it would bolster the current 900 US troops stationed in Syria as a consequence of the strikes. The deployment of a squadron of A-10 attack aircraft to Syria was expedited by several weeks, including the nuclear aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush. Commander of US CENTCOM General Michael “Erik” Kurilla had highlighted the perceived threat of Iranian dominance in Syria to Congress the day of the first strikes, stating that the country possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, new impetus for US-led anti-ISIS coalition efforts in Syria was given when the introduction of a bill by US Congressman Matt Gaetz that would have effectively led to withdrawal of US troops in Syria soundly failed to pass a vote in Congress on March 8.<sup>28</sup> US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley had made a surprise visit to NES to meet with the commander of the US-led Coalition and review security measures on March 4,<sup>29</sup> resulting in a statement from his visit that US deployment in Syria is still worth the risk.<sup>30</sup> These developments indicate the diverging domestic political opinions on US involvement in Syria. Contrary to the positions of Gaetz and other isolationists, others have recently presented arguments for the need to rejuvenate American strategy in the country. On March 27, a letter signed by nearly 40 former senior US officials, Syria analysts, and civil society activists urged President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken to reconsider their approach to Syria. It called for a stronger US position against increasing regional normalization with the Assad regime as well as a formalized ceasefire to ensure a more effective aid response and steps towards a political transition.<sup>31</sup>

It remains uncertain if the US will adopt a more robust tone to opposing normalization efforts in the near future. Though many are echoing the need for a new approach to spur political change in Syria, there is little evidence to suggest the US will, or are able to, present adequate alternatives for a political solution, especially considering the rapid pace in which regional countries are looking to bring Syria back into the Arab-fold. However, the US is also unlikely to decrease their military and security presence in Syria anytime soon as many of their security concerns remain unabated, potentially becoming ever more severe. ISIS operations continued over the past month, with the SOHR reporting a total of 30 operations taking place in NES and the Syrian Desert in March. Concurrently, 11 anti-ISIS operations were also reportedly conducted in the month.<sup>32</sup> Remarks by General Milley and signatories to the previously mentioned letter, as well as prevalence of ISIS operations in different parts of Syria, all suggest a need for a US need to continue such operations. Furthermore, the persistent and regionally emboldened influence of Iran in Syria gives the US further reasons to continue, and perhaps even expand, a security presence within NES.

## | Northwest Syria Developments

**Further fragmentation of the SNA.** Public perception of SNA slightly improved following the earthquakes, as the period saw a notable de-escalation in hostilities between opposition forces and contributions by certain factions to search and rescue efforts across NWS. However, this has remained short-lived as tensions slowly reappeared within the ranks of the SNA over al-Hamran crossing. Following HTS's incursion into Afrin in October 2022, Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Sector took control of al-Hamran following the retreat of the SNA's Third Legion. Though the SIG Ministry of Defense has tried multiple times to regain control of the crossing since then – as part of their continued efforts to restructure and establish a certain level of unification between the ranks of the SNA – such efforts were largely unsuccessful. Most recently, on March 6, they announced that Ahrar al-Sham had agreed to hand over control of the revenues generated from the crossing to the Ministry.<sup>33</sup> However, as per previous attempts, Ahrar al-Sham took back control of the crossing less than 48 hours after the agreement.

Ahrar al-Sham has been known to often call on support from allies including al-Hamza and Sultan Suleiman Shah Divisions to deter attempts to relinquish control of the crossing, and have appeared to form further alliances last month to retain al-Hamran. On February 2, a number of factions including Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Sector, Liwa al-Tawhid, and Liwa al-Zinki announced the formation of a new body within the SNA called Tajamo' al-Shahba' (al-Shahba' Gathering).<sup>34</sup> Although they identified themselves as part of the SNA, the SIG's Ministry of Defense quickly denied this claim on February 4 refuting their relation to the SNA.<sup>35</sup>

It is questionable how long the al-Shahba' Gathering's formation will last, as the comprising factions do not seem to have a unanimous will from their individual components and sub-factions. For example, Liwa' al-Fateh and the First Division (two of Tal Rifaat's most significant SNA sub-factions) of the Nour al-Din al Zinki Movement refused to join the new alliance. Notably, an already-fragmented Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Sector also issued statement,<sup>36</sup> noting that the recent decision to join the al-Shahba' Gathering came from the "isolated" faction leadership.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, these developments signify an intensifying trend in which different SNA factions and sub-factions are breaking away from original formations in favor of establishing alliances driven by self-interest.

Crucially, this independent action often favors HTS strategy of expansion, with al-Golani continuing to capitalize on SNA fragmentation to strengthen their foothold in SIG-controlled areas.

**HTS benefit from Jindires tragedy.** The attack on four Kurdish Nowruz celebrants on March 20 brought outrage to an already devastated city as a result of the earthquakes last month. Amid worsening SNA-public sentiment during this period, the response of HTS was particularly notable as another sign of its increasingly expansionist strategy. Soon after the incident, al-Golani visited Jindires with various videos across social media showing him comforting bereaved families, promising them justice and to place them under HTS protection, as well as offering supportive statements to the Kurdish people.<sup>38</sup> True to al-Golani's established modus operandi, HTS forces entered Jindires the next day, taking over various facilities and offices that belonged to Jaysh al-Sharqiya, as well as the military police headquarters, effectively granting them control over the city, if only temporarily.<sup>39</sup> HTS later withdrew back to Idlib, reportedly in response to Turkish orders, but succeeded in communicating a show of force and popular support.

Al-Golani's response to the incident once again aimed to bolster his credentials and further demonstrate HTS capacity to behave as a more disciplined military and security force relative to unrestrained SNA factions, as well as, in this instance, portraying HTS as protectors of minorities in NWS. The quick withdrawal from Jindires even led to some to speculate around HTS's own involvement in the murder.<sup>40</sup>

Deliberate efforts from HTS to undermine the SIG and SNA are illustrating their inability to contain HTS ambitions in NWS as it slowly cannibalizes and assimilates break-away SNA factions. Also noteworthy is that reports of HTS's withdrawal from SNA areas are widely attributed to claims of Turkish influence, rather than independent SIG or SNA authority. This poses further questions over the independent power of the SIG should Turkish strategy in Syria change and suggests that SNA forces would be unable to defend their areas without Turkish interference.

**SNA sub-faction calls for institutional reform.** SNA opposition forces are increasingly looking to position themselves according to the leadership they perceive to have the most longevity, as SNA leadership continues to face such external pressures from HTS and increasing Ankara-Damascus rapprochement.

Recent statements made by the head of political office of the Second Legion's Mu'tasem Division are indicative of such dynamics, with the spokesperson calling on social media for action to reform and unify Syrian opposition forces under a central "internal" leadership.<sup>41</sup> The statements took direct aim at SIG institutions referring to them as "failed" and "only a government in appearance."<sup>42</sup> Additional accusations that the SIG were "incapable of reform" were especially notable as many understood this, in conjunction with calls for centralized opposition forces, to allude to an increased willingness to work with HTS. This was a material shift in tone from this particular spokesperson, who had explicitly attacked HTS in previous statements over the past few years; although the spokesperson later clarified that most immediate priorities concern reform within the ranks of the SNA, and specially some of its leadership.<sup>43</sup> However, he also noted that the "protection of Idlib" would be the Division's key priority.<sup>44</sup> Impetus for these statements seem to be – at least in part – escalating regional normalization developments with GoS. Opposition forces increasingly sense they are excluded from discussions, which risks a situation in which they would have to reconcile and unify with HTS in preparedness for any future attempts of GoS to expand their presence in NWS. While the credibility of such reform efforts, and trajectory it might take remain uncertain, it remains likely efforts by SNA sub-factions to position themselves strategically will continue.

**Earthquake impact on education.** Education in NWS was severely affected by the earthquakes in February, with a need for children's return to schools identified as key to relieve urgent issues of child protection and psychosocial impact.<sup>45</sup> Many schools were turned into temporary shelters following the earthquake. According to OCHA, more than 100 schools are still being used as collective shelters in Aleppo, Lattakia, Tartous and Hama as of March 23.<sup>46</sup> The deaths of a large number of teaching staff and students is another tragic outcome of the disaster, with the SSG Ministry of Education stating that 39 teachers and 421 students died.<sup>47</sup> This, in addition to destructive consequences of the earthquake on infrastructure and all facets of life in NWS, has severely affected students' mental wellbeing.<sup>48</sup>

Significantly low attendance rates result from an avoidance of going back to school by children's anxiety of another earthquake, while families also fear for their children's safety. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming targeting children predominantly takes place within schools in NWS, and, as such, continued disruption to the education sector is only likely to further

exacerbate the mental health needs of children in NWS. This highlights a need to provide greater interventions for both children and adults to alleviate post-earthquake trauma and behavioral change. Advocacy from humanitarian organizations have highlighted a requirement for long-term, integrated programming that combines MHPSS with cash assistance, shelter, health, and protection to help minimize future risks resulting from deteriorating mental health.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, the earthquakes only placed further strain on an already overstretched education system in NWS, which faced damaged infrastructure, high dropout rates, a lack of funding, and increasingly low teachers' salaries. The challenges the education sector faces in NWS have shown little to no improvement since last year. As highlighted in iMMAP's [November Context Update](#), schools in SSG controlled areas were threatened by the government's lack of focus and funding of the education sector, uncertainty of humanitarian funding, and workforce attrition. This forced a number of schools to close after months without funding and led to several teachers' protests. As exemplified by recent March events of widespread teacher dismissal and the refusal of salary payments, these tensions within SSG areas continue in the post-earthquake context, with now particularly acute consequences. These trends are also visible within Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) and Operation Olive Branch (OOB), areas, with teachers governed by the Turkish-backed SIG administration, also protesting around two months prior the earthquake demanding a salary increase at the beginning of the second semester. The SIG secondary education system has similarly been heavily impacted by protests and strikes by the teachers' syndicate, demanding salary increases and improvements in teachers' standards of living. This was previously met with a SIG decision reducing teachers' salaries.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these urgent needs, deteriorating trends in the education sector are expected to drastically worsen post-earthquake, due to a widespread focus of funding centered on earthquake response, damage to infrastructure, and loss of lives. As a result of the earthquakes, a total of 2,947 schools, including 2,513 schools in Aleppo, Lattakia, Tartous, Hama, Homs and Idlib and 434 schools in NWS were damaged. Of these, 2,294 lightly damaged schools have reopened in Aleppo, Lattakia, Tartous, Hama, Homs and Idlib.<sup>51</sup> However, in conjunction with the repair of these facilities and in the context of restricted livelihoods for many across the region, the employment and payment of teachers' salaries must be maintained by both NWS authorities as well as funding organizations.

**Cholera update.** An increased prevalence in the number of confirmed and suspected cholera cases since the earthquake has been attributed to families being displaced into collective centers and shelters (often lacking adequate WASH measures and standards), a suboptimal humanitarian response to the earthquake, and a dwindling humanitarian funding. This is further exacerbated by physical damages to health facilities, with 67 health facilities fully or partially damaged due to the earthquake as of March 20, while 10 health facilities have been suspended, which hinders an effective response to rising cholera cases.<sup>52</sup>

However, part of this response has seen recent success, as WHO and UNICEF, in coordination with local health authorities, launched a ten-day oral cholera vaccination (OCV) campaign in NWS on March 7. The campaign, targeted 1.7 million people aged one year and over living in areas most impacted by the earthquake and at the highest risk of cholera,<sup>53</sup> including Maaret Tamsrin, Sarmada, Atmeh, Dana, Harem and Azaz.<sup>54</sup> The campaign was implemented by 1,400 teams of health workers and community volunteers using house-to-house strategy, as well as reaching displaced people living in camps, markets, and school sites.<sup>55</sup> The oral vaccination campaign in NWS, now complete, administered a total of 1,669,298 people (95% administrative coverage) with one OCV dose.<sup>56</sup> However, there continue to be warnings of increases in other water-borne diseases in NWS post-earthquake, especially in overcrowded camps and collective shelters. WHO has indicated that management of such diseases inevitably require systematically improved WASH and sanitation services in these areas.<sup>57</sup>

# CONCLUSION

Living conditions in NES continue to sharply deteriorate. A combination of factors that include continuing prevailing drought conditions, a struggling agricultural sector, and a worsening SYP exchange rate has led to a notable change of consumer habits. Examples of how this manifested include a reduction of demand for higher quality items deemed non-essential, a rising demand for lower-quality essentials (including bread and other staple-foods), and more negative coping mechanisms as indicated by the rising rate of thefts and crimes, as well as a visible increase in child labor. Although a lot of these issues have roots in structural and political causes beyond their control, the SANES have also been subject to rising accusations of financial mismanagement, and an overall inadequate response to the plethora of worsening conditions in NES.

The rapidly changing regional geopolitical landscape also seems to be contributing to rising instability in NES. The apparent increased hostility of Iranian attacks on US bases in March could be motivated by recent developments in diplomatic relations in the region, key among which is the restoration of diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia through a China-brokered agreement.

Regional developments have also seemingly led to a re-emergence of debate with regards to the US's response to trends that seem to point to an increasingly growing appetite of Arab countries to normalize relations with GoS and bring them back to the Arab fold. While some have attempted to advocate for a withdrawal of US troops from Syria, others have argued for a need to maintain and perhaps expand US presence in NES. The Biden administration was also target of criticism regarding the US response to recent developments, as it was seen by some critics as being too lax. Though it remains unclear if the US's strategy for a political resolution in Syria will change any time soon, the continuation, and potential increase in incidents that threaten US security interest all but guarantee their military and security presence in Syria will continue in the near future.

Humanitarian needs in NWS were further exacerbated in the aftermath of the earthquake. An increase in the prevalence of suspected and confirmed cholera cases, as well as a severely weakened educational sector (due to recent SSG policies, and losses and damages to education staff and infrastructure) all point to an even higher need for a more robust humanitarian response to health and education needs.

After a period of relative de-escalation of hostilities between the different opposition forces in NWS following the earthquake, the month of March saw a re-emergence of infighting between the different factions of the SNA. The continuing fragmentation in the ranks of the SNA's various factions, and sub-factions, has led to the multiple security incidents. Although prospects of the recently established al-Shahba' Gathering remain unclear, the interests of the newly formed faction seem to align with those of HTS which has and continues to capitalize on such discord to further present themselves as an entity more capable of maintaining the peace in NWS than the SNA and SIG. These developments as well as controversial statements made by an SNA official could point towards a trend of increasing gravitation of SNA fighters and sub-factions towards HTS. This also seems to be motivated, at least in part, by a growing sense of abandonment within opposition held areas in light of increased regional efforts aiming to normalize relations with the regime.

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