

CONTEXT UPDATE

Whole of Syria | September 11, 2023

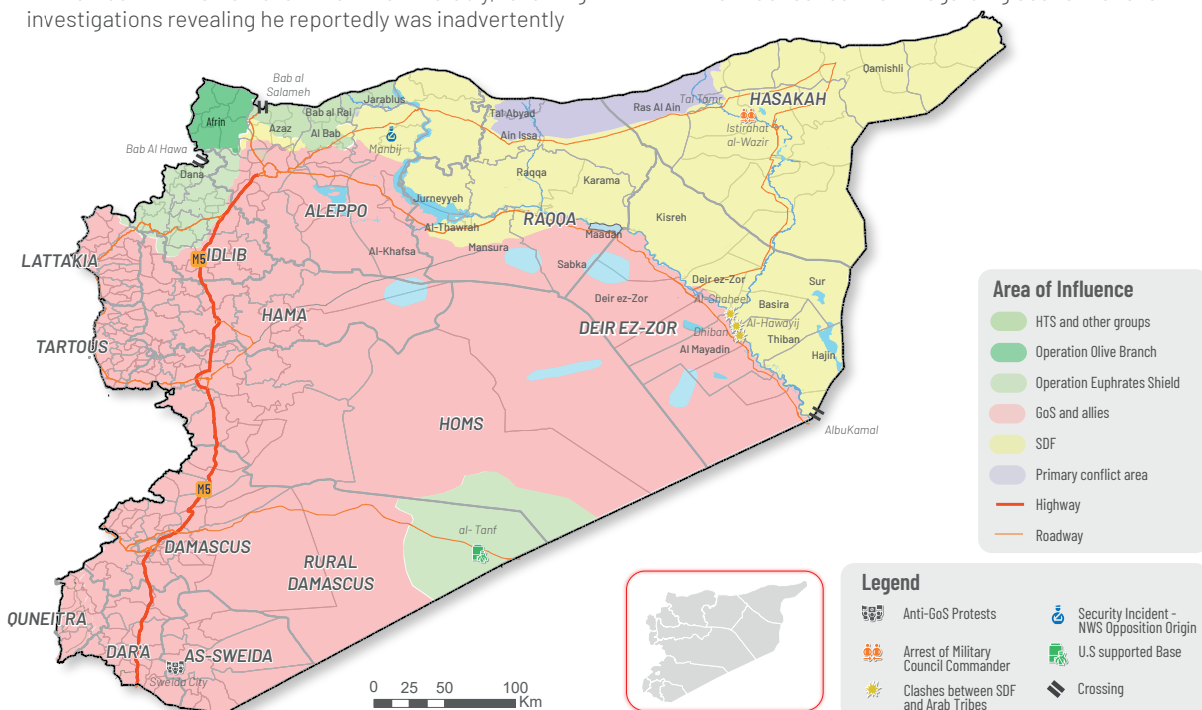


INTRODUCTION

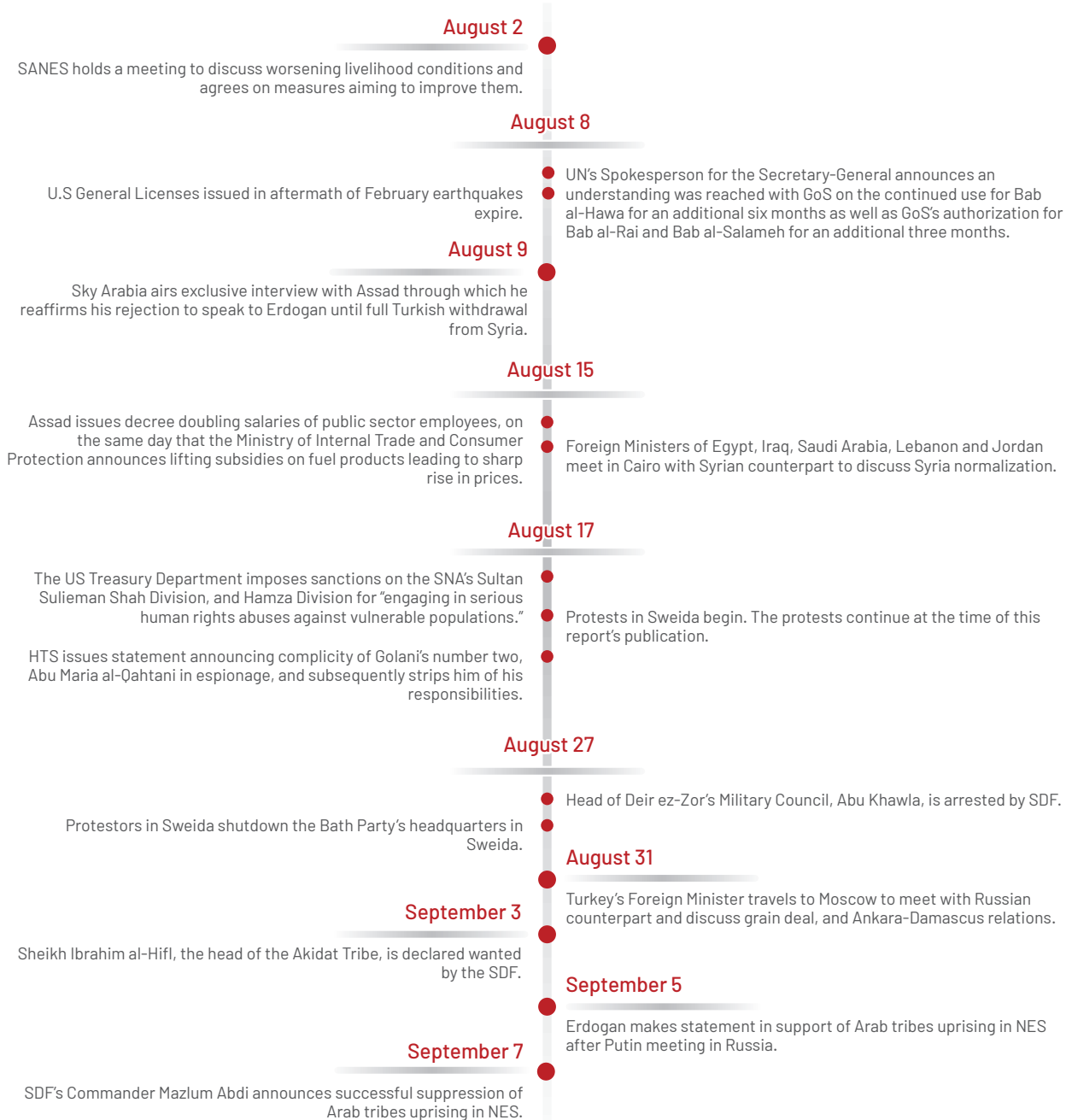
This report was generated by iMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Syria as a whole, and the operating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

Key Takeaways

- Despite reaching a reported “understanding” between the UN and the Government of Syria (GoS) for aid access through Bab al-Hawa, aid deliveries to Northwest Syria (NWS) remained stagnant in August with no UN shipments passing through the crossing in the entire month. The conditions of this consent-based mechanism remain unclear. These delays have caused severe food and water shortages with humanitarian needs expected to deteriorate further if barriers persist, emphasizing the need to urgently clarify the exact necessary operational conditions. Any agreement between GoS and the UN on such conditions would only be meaningful if it reflects the needs and concerns shared by operational partners.
- Reports spread in early August suggesting that 3,500 fighters from the Syrian National Army (SNA) would collaborate with the Free Syria Army (FSA) at the al-Tanf base. This came following remarks made by the commander of the FSA in which he noted increased coordination between the FSA and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Although these rumors would be denied by the FSA commander, as well as leaders within the SNA, they highlight the dynamics present between opposition groups, as well as their international backers.
- Haya't Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued to conduct security campaigns to address concerns regarding collaboration of its members with external entities. Most notably, following investigations revealing he reportedly was inadvertently responsible for leaking information to perceived opponent entities, HTS isolated its second-in-command, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, leading to emerging divisions within the group.
- Tensions between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor escalated following the arrest of the commander of Deir ez-Zor's Military Council. This led some local tribal leaders to call for fighting against the SDF as it was interpreted as another incident of SDF marginalization of Arab Syrians in areas they control. Others adopted a more inflammatory rhetoric reframing the issue as an Arab-Kurdish ethnic conflict. Though the uprising was seemingly suppressed, these issues will continue to be exploitable unless underlying causes and local grievances are adequately addressed.
- Sweida witnessed persistent protests due to sharp increases in fuel prices and deteriorating economic conditions in GoS-controlled areas, with grievances shortly after escalating to more political issues with calls for the removal of the Assad regime. The GoS appears to largely be ignoring the protests while tightening control over areas where they have a larger presence. Although potential suppression from the GoS may impact re-engagement with Arab nations, the narrative of instability attributed to foreign interference and sanctions could be used as leverage in international negotiations to extract concessions regarding economic relief.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The month of August witnessed several developments across Syria, all of which highlight the current challenges that the country's various hubs face. Aid access to NWS remained a pressing concern. Although the UN had announced reaching an "understanding" with the GoS regarding aid access through Bab al-Hawa, obstacles persisted in August. Delays and a lack of clarity surrounded the consent-based mechanism, causing a severe reduction in aid deliveries. The humanitarian situation in NWS deteriorated, marked by shortages of essential supplies, including bread and drinking water.

Furthermore, rumors spread about potential collaboration between the SNA and the FSA with reports suggesting that 3,500 SNA fighters were poised to join forces with the FSA at the al-Tanf base near the 55 km border area. This news coincided with increased coordination between the FSA and the SDF hinting at a shifting alliance landscape among opposition forces. However, these rumors faced skepticism and were denied by various actors, including the SNA and FSA leaderships, and were likely hindered by Turkish objections to any cooperation with the SDF.

HTS continued to experience internal turmoil due to suspected collaboration between some members and external entities. These operations resulted in multiple arrests, most notably, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a key figure considered the right-hand of the group's leader, Golani. While HTS downplays the severity of the issue, signs suggest tensions persist within the group with some supporting al-Qahtani and others branding him a traitor. Suspicions arose about the impartiality of the investigation committee, raising concerns that the allegations against al-Qahtani might have been fabricated, potentially indicating Golani's diminishing control over the organization's house-cleaning efforts. Despite its reputation for cohesion, HTS's internal divisions, if not managed carefully, could lead to significant hostilities in areas where the group operates.

In NES, the tensions that started in July between the SDF and Deir ez-Zor's Abu Khawla escalated after arresting the controversial figure, stemming Arab tribes to answer the calls and fight against the SDF. Over the past few months (and years) there has been a growing perception that the SANES policies prioritized the benefit of local, but mainly external Kurdish while neglecting local Arab tribes. More than 90 persons died as hostilities were exchanged across various areas in Deir ez-Zor and NES. Although seemingly suppressed, the SDF and SANES would do well to work on addressing the underlying issues that cause these events, as they would continue to be a weakness exploitable by other powers in Syria otherwise.

Protests erupted in GoS-controlled Sweida due to sharp increases in fuel prices and worsening economic conditions. Demonstrations, more widespread than previous ones, took aim at President Bashar al-Assad and the GoS, calling for leadership change. In response, the GoS appeared to downplay these developments securing its control in other areas where they have a larger presence like Latakia. The GoS narrative attributes instability to foreign interference and sanctions, potentially using these events as bargaining chips in international negotiations with Arab counterparts. At the same time, the current instability in the south could also be an obstacle to future normalization proceedings with neighboring countries.

ANALYSIS

| Developments in Northwestern Syria:

Aid access to NWS remains limited as details of consent-based modality are negotiated. Despite the UN announcing reaching an “understanding” with the GoS on aid access through Bab al-Hawa on August 8, the month of August saw severe impediments to aid access into NWS. In the month of August, OCHA reported that 164 trucks crossed into NWS, all of which passing through Bab al-Salameh.¹ This marks a severe reduction of the volume of aid that would regularly cross from Turkey into Syria. For example, during the month of June, a total of 893 trucks crossed into NWS, with 779 of them (87%) crossing from Bab al-Hawa.² Further supporting this was the administration of Bab al-Hawa crossing noting that although 412 trucks passed through Bab al-Hawa in August, none of them were from the United Nations.³

The challenge in using Bab al-Hawa arises from the ambiguity and lack of details concerning how this consent-based mechanism would be operationalized, and what are the exact concessions made by the UN to GoS to be granted this access (if any). As of the end of August, it was noted that deliberations between GoS and the UN have not yet concluded and were still being finalized as noted by the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary General.⁴

This disruption in access comes at a time where humanitarian needs in NWS are at their highest. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported observing bread shortages in most camps, and severely diminished access to drinking water among several of the indicators showing further deterioration of the humanitarian landscape in NWS by the last week of August.⁵

Amongst many of the considerations that need to be agreed upon is the role of the UN Monitoring Mechanism in this new arrangement, the level of control and influence the GoS would hold over aid transportation and distributions, as well as the way in which access can be negotiated with opposition parties and administration that are growing weary of the gains made by GoS since the earthquake, and the growing consensus on GoS as the official, sovereign administration in Syria.

Human rights advocates, and humanitarian organizations were all understandably skeptical of a deal on access that is dependent on the whims and approval of Assad. While many still advocate a return to the UNSC-based mechanism, or perhaps less-realistically, delivering aid without having to rely on UNSC resolution or the permission of GoS – which many have long argued is possible based on certain interpretation of International and Humanitarian Law – there is a real need to agree on terms of access through Bab al-Hawa at the soonest possible time. However, it is critical that any negotiations taking place between GoS, and the UN reflect the concerns and demands of humanitarian operational partners, especially local organizations who will be in most direct and immediate friction with local authorities in aid delivery. As such, any agreed upon details should ensure their concerns are addressed and include concrete Duty of Care measures to protect them and guarantee their wellbeing. Furthermore, negotiations with any hesitant local administrations on new arrangements for aid delivery should be a responsibility carried by UN agencies, rather than local organizations, to minimize any risks they would otherwise face.

Turmoil persists within HTS ranks in Idlib. In the past few weeks, there have been intensive security campaigns conducted by the General Security Directorate affiliated with HTS. These actions were reportedly taken in light of information indicating collaboration between many of its members and external entities. The campaign led to the arrest of many of its members and leaders, as well as the detention of civilians whose names were mentioned during investigations regarding their external connections with anti-HTS entities. However, one of the most notable developments during the month of August was the isolation of the group’s second in command, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, widely considered to be Golani’s right-hand man.⁶

One distinguishing organizational feature within the HTS is its continuous rotation of leaders within its brigades, ranks, and secondary-level security leadership. This practice largely prevented any one leader from forming personal power bases and creating something akin to a parallel organization within the organization. It ensures the continued loyalty of these leaders to HTS's central leadership, primarily Golani and the top-tier leaders. However, this time, the allegations reached one of the group's top-tier leaders, removing him from his position.

The relatively soft tone of the statement made by HTS after al-Qahtani's arrest seems to indicate they are opting for a more diplomatic approach to instill stability within their ranks. However, the group continues to experience tensions and division across two currents, one that backs al-Qahtani, prominent members of which include the al-Wais, a prominent religious figure in the group, and another that deems al-Qahtani a traitor. It also doesn't help that the head of the investigation committee formed is largely believed to be on the side of the latter, pushing some to believe these allegations were fabricated and are a symptom of Golani losing control over an effort that started with the intention of cleaning house and re-establishing order within the group's ranks.⁷

Though usually presented as a more cohesive or disciplined force in NWS than the SNA, the isolation of one of the group's most prominent leaders, one that still enjoys the support of significant components of the HTS, can carry a polarizing and divisive effect on the group,⁸ which if not handled correctly, could lead to eruption of significant exchange of hostilities in the areas in which the group has a presence.

Rumors Spread on SNA and SDF Coordination

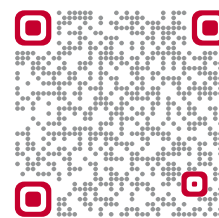
Efforts. The early days in August saw the widespread dissemination of voicemails and rumors that spoke about an effort through which 3,500 fighters within the SNA ranks would join efforts with the Free Syria Army in al-Tanf base near the 55 km area. This news came in conjunction with a statement made the week before by Mohamed Farid al-Qasem, the FSA chief commander, in which he noted increased recent coordination between the FSA and the SDF and look forward to having similar increased coordination and cooperation with other forces of the opposition.

Another factor that lent some credibility to the rumors was that such an initiative coincided with the recent speculations regarding the intention of US forces in al-Tanf to combat and cut off the Iranian militias and the land supply lines crossing the Iraqi border into Syrian territories. The operation's objective was rumored to be controlling the border strip from al-Tanf to Albukamal.⁹ This, however, was denied by the Pentagon Press Secretary who noted that such allegations were false.¹⁰ Rumors of SDF and SNA coordination were also denied by al-Qasem¹¹, and so would representatives of the SNA.¹²

The realization of such efforts would have also faced significant resistance and is rumored to have been prevented by Turkish objections that opposes any fraternization with the SDF. Another obstacle to these rumors being realized is the position the United States still holds elements of the opposition of NWS in. The most recent example of this was on August 17 when the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on the Hamza, and Sultan Suleiman Shah Divisions within the SNA's Second Legion over several severe human rights violations, and specifically the role they played in displacement of Kurds, and various acts in NWS following Turkish led operations in Afrin.¹³

This further serves to illustrate the nature of opposition forces and their components in various parts of Syria including NWS. Although pragmatic enough to transition and shift alliances if it serves their own personal benefit, such major changes are still only possible with the support and approval of the different international backers, in this case, Turkey and the US.

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| Whole of Syria Developments

Conflict between SDF and Arab tribes ignites. As reported in [iMMAP's July Context Update](#), tensions between the SDF and the Deir ez-Zor's Military council began to escalate after an altercation over crossings in which field resources informed us the SDF was attempting to replace security forces present there with their own elements.

These tensions escalated with the SDF conducting an operation through which they surrounded elements of the Council, fire was exchanged, and lives were lost. Further escalations between the two groups led to the arrest of Abu Khawla and various other prominent members of the council. Despite his infamy, Abu Khawla still had the support of the tribes in the area owing to his belonging to one of the largest tribes. Abu Khawla also played a significant role in US-led efforts to combat ISIS and as such, was a difficult figure to ignore or remove.¹⁴

The events escalated as calls were raised by leaders from prominent tribal leaders including the Akidat and Baggara tribes to join the fight against the SDF, as they considered the recent events an affront to the dignity of Arab tribes and populations in the area. These incidents happened during a time where public perception of the SDF's were increasingly negative, as many believed their policies and actions have grown increasingly favorable of PKK ambitions and interest, at the expense of local Arab populations. This was capitalized on by some who warped the conflict into an ethnic one pitting Arabs against Kurds. One of such figures was the brother of Abu Khawla who after escaping captivity, made statements that were inflammatory and promoted threats towards Kurds in the area.

Fighters and tribes in NWS joined in solidarity the calls of support raised by tribes in NES during the recent conflict between the SDF and Arab tribes. Members of the SNA factions launched attacks on SDF elements in various areas including Manbij and Tal Tamr and were only deterred by Russian aerial bombardment.¹⁵ It is worth noting, however, that although attacks were launched from NWS to NES, our field sources note that although SNA elements were involved, attacks were largely not done in their capacity of SNA fighters, but rather, as members of tribal armed force that answered the calls in NES.¹⁶

The escalations also bear importance due to the manner in which it could be capitalized on by many entities including Turkey, GoS, and Iran. An important angle to consider in this is Turkey's. On September 5, Erdogan made comments in support of the Arab tribes calling their acts a principled struggle for dignity.¹⁷ Other inflammatory remarks included that Arab tribes are the true proprietors of Deir ez-Zor, an opinion he noted is shared by Putin. Further comments aimed to directly undermine the US efforts noting that arms and ammunitions provided by the US have not served peace but instead contributed to bloodshed in the region.¹⁸

Additionally, some, including the SDF's Commander Mazlum Abdi, noted that GoS contributed (at least in part) to the escalations in NES.¹⁹ Later news reports also concluded that the real reason behind Abu Khawla's arrest was curbing a scheme through which he hoped to take control of Deir ez-Zor from the SDF and expel Kurds from the area.²⁰ This scheme was also supported by GoS as Abdi would later note that fighters from regime controlled areas, as well as regime officers were captured as part of their security operations, and that the events were indeed planned as part of scheme hatched in "collusion" with GoS.²¹ Though Abdi also noted that grievances of tribes were valid and that they would work to address them, the events shed light on the current rifts that exist in SANES controlled areas, which if not addressed comprehensively, can continue to be capitalized on by GoS, Iranian, or Turkish ambitions, which would lead to massive displacements of Kurds in NES, and a massive deterioration in humanitarian conditions.

Protests erupt in GoS-controlled Sweida. On August 15, Bashar al-Assad issued a decree through which he doubled the salary of public sector employees.²² On the same day, the Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer protection issued several decisions through which they raised the price of different fuel categories.²³ The price of one liter of industrial mazot, and subsidized mazot diesel fuel jumped from 3,000 SYP to 8,000 SYP, and 700 SYP to 2,000 SYP respectively. ²⁴ These sharp increases, coupled by a continuously worsening exchange rate, which in August reached a new high of 15,000 SYP per 1 USD, caused major uproar in various GoS-controlled areas, including Sweida.²⁵

On August 17, protestors took to the streets of the Druze-majority governorate of Sweida. Although not the first of their kind in the past few years, demonstrations in response to the deterioration of living conditions in August appeared to be significantly more widespread than previous ones. Various protests were organized in the governorate and protests persisted through the period covered in this report. As protests continued to take place over the course of weeks, and maintained momentum, protestors began taking aim at Assad, his family and the GoS, calling for his ousting and a change in the country's leadership.²⁶ On August 27, protestors shut-down the headquarters of the country's ruling Baath party in the governorate.²⁷ Protests were also reported to resonate with Syrians in other GoS-controlled areas including Dar'a and Latakia.²⁸

Damascus's response seems to largely focus on ignoring these developments, and GoS-aligned media including SANA all have little to no coverage of these issues taking place in Sweida, while maintaining ground in areas they have more control over that have seen more subtle forms of demonstrations. An example of this is the reported heightened tensions in areas like Rural Damascus's, where a town saw an escalation of hostilities between residents and the GoS's notorious Fourth Brigade.²⁹ Another example was GoS's appointing Firas Ahmad al-Hamed, a sanctioned figure with a long-documented history of human rights abuses, as the Governor of Tartous without a stated reason, which some interpreted as a show of force to pre-emptively curb any further expansion of the demonstrations to areas the GoS controls.³⁰

here is little certainty about whether or how GoS would change its approach in addressing these developments. It could be argued that a hostile retaliation and violent suppression of protests in Sweida could form an obstacle in the progressing discussions on Arab nations re-embrace of Assad. The protestors calls are reminiscent of those seldom heard in those areas since the early days of the Syrian crisis, and a violent crackdown on them would bring back some very direct recollections to the reasons Syria lost its membership in the Arab League in the first place.

At the same time, the impetus for Assad's re-embrace was never the consideration that conditions in Syria have stabilized and therefore merit Damascus's re-engagement. On the contrary, as noted in earlier reports, the shift in the approach towards Assad (at least officially) is largely driven by the acknowledgement that the political and humanitarian conditions in Syria only deteriorated over the past decade. If anything, these developments, as well as those taking place in NES in August, would only further illustrate the level of such deterioration. GoS's narrative will only highlight the cause of instability to be foreign interference, and western sanctions, and will likely use these developments as talking points in future meetings with Arab counterparts with the aim of demanding more aid (especially early recovery) in GoS areas, and the lifting of sanctions. Furthermore, until the details of negotiations between GoS and the UN on access to NWS through Bab al-Hawa are revealed, it is fair to assume that Assad is already using that issue as a pressure point to exact similar gains.

CONCLUSION

Contextual developments during the month of August shed light on the deteriorating state of humanitarian, social, and political conditions in Syria's various areas. The challenges presented by a new aid mechanism that relies on permission of GoS are already becoming apparent as humanitarian partners struggle to navigate a new operational environment, the details of which remain unclear more than a month after a supposed understanding on using Bab al-Hawa was reached between the UN and GoS. The urgency in needing to finalize and agree on the details of how this new mechanism will be operationalized needs to be carefully weighed against multiple humanitarian and security considerations. For this, the perspectives and reservations held by operational partners, especially local organizations, need to be represented and any red lines they set need to be respected. This is especially important considering the potential risks humanitarians might face in dealing with the increasingly unstable and insecure opposition forces that control NWS.

The arrest and isolation of HTS's Abu Maria al-Qahtani illustrates the continuing instability within the group. The prominence of the figure, and the influence he has within the group also means that his arrest will likely have a polarizing effect on the group posing further challenges to Golani. As the current internal investigations taking place within HTS reportedly aim to identify and sideline threats arising from information leaking to opponents and espionage, the group's leadership appears to be paranoid and is expected to exercise further scrutiny and control over areas they administer, posing potential challenges to humanitarian access to areas in Idlib, especially considering the lack of details currently available on the new consent-based aid mechanism.

The escalation in tensions between the SDF and Arab tribes highlighted the precarious state of local perceptions towards the SANES and SDF, and the incendiary impact ignoring it would have. Suspected interference GoS also highlights how poor Arab-Kurdish social cohesion in NES can serve as a potential exploitable weakness by other parties to the conflict, leading to further instability in the area and worsening security conditions.

Lastly, the eruption of protests in Sweida demonstrates how little to no improvements were made to the economic and political conditions in GoS-controlled areas over the past few years. Initially starting in response to rising fuel costs, protests soon after took aim at overall deterioration of living conditions, and soon after, calling for the removal of Assad. GoS's current approach appears to largely ignore the instability in Sweida, likely aiming to use them as further proof for why sanctions need to be eased, and early recovery funding needs to be expanded. At the same time, the developments could pose an impediment to Arab countries' ambitions for fully restoring ties with Damascus as the complexity of the issues that need to be addressed to stabilize Syria becomes harder to ignore.

ENDNOTES

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