

CONTEXT UPDATE

Whole of Syria | October 10th, 2023

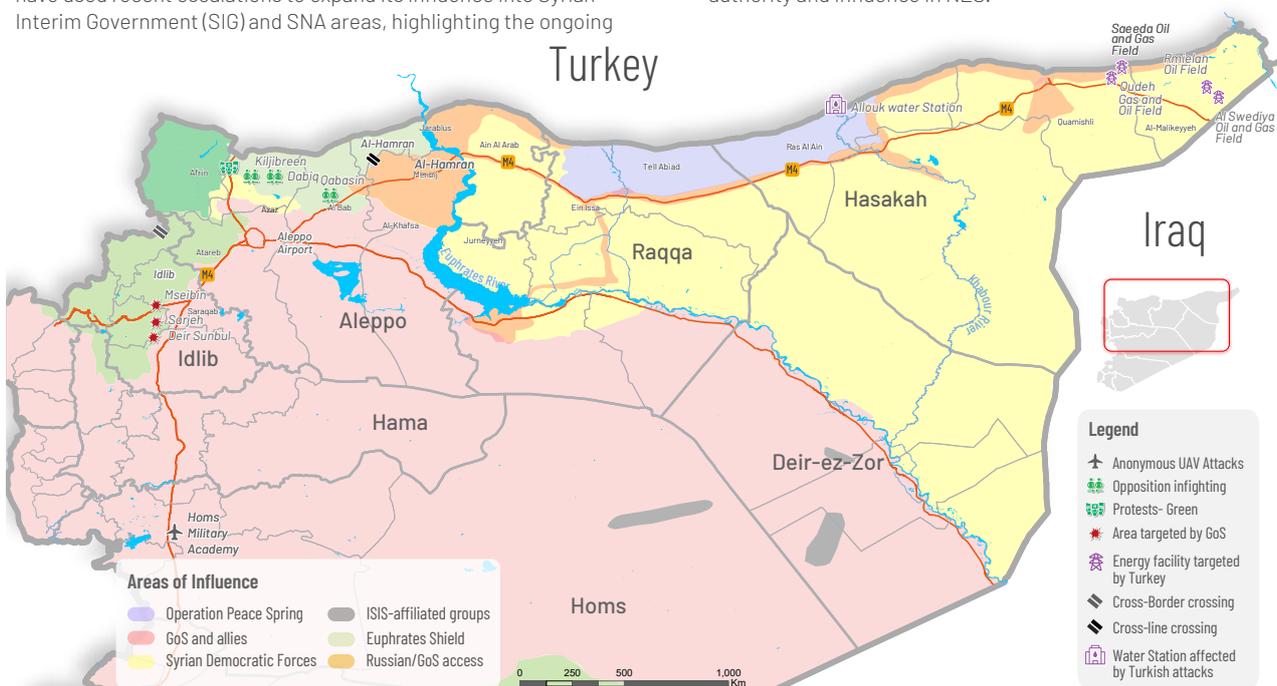


INTRODUCTION

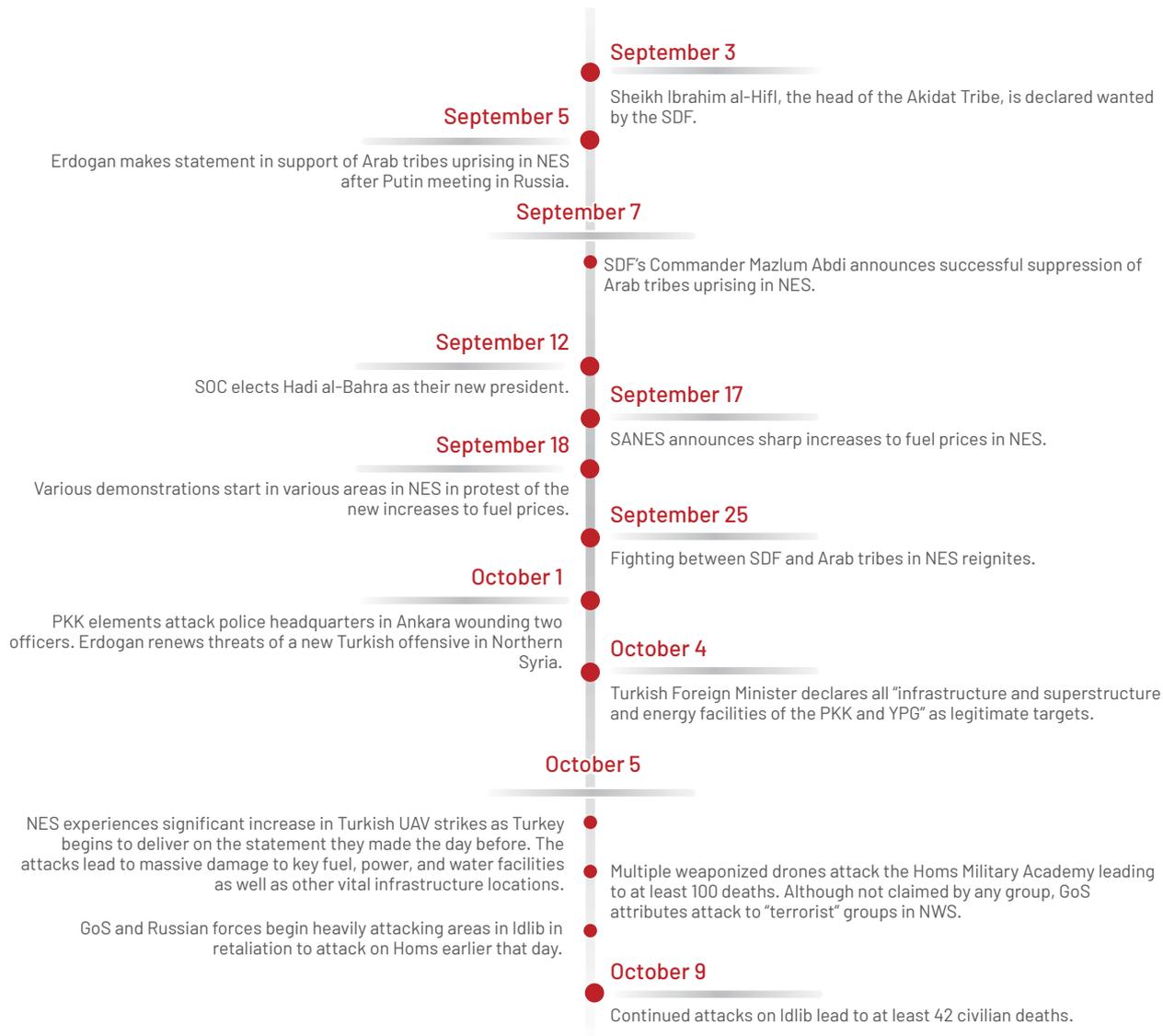
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Syria, and the operating environment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

- Hadi al-Bahra was elected as President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SOC) on September 12, generating controversy due to the allegations of external influence and interference. The election of al-Bahra, sheds light on the current state of political affairs in Northwestern Syria (NWS) and may reflect Turkey's evolving strategy toward Syria and the potential for further engagement with the Assad regime.
- The recent bombing outside Turkey's police headquarters in Ankara, claimed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has raised concerns of a potential new Turkish offensive in northern Syria. Although not presenting any evidence, Turkey's Foreign Minister cited the attackers' Syrian origin as a justification for considering PKK and YPG infrastructure in Iraq and Syria as legitimate targets. Turkey subsequently launched heavy attacks on key infrastructure facilities in northern Syria, causing extensive civilian casualties and damage to critical sites.
- The further fragmentation of Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Sector, and subsequent joining of the Syrian National Army's (SNA) Second Legion, compromised the influence and benefit Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) had extracted from al-Hamran crossing since October last year. This led to escalations between different opposition groups with conflict spreading to various areas in NWS, leading to significant casualties and displacements. HTS is also reported to have used recent escalations to expand its influence into Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and SNA areas, highlighting the ongoing fragmentation of SNA factions and HTS's persistent expansion strategy in Syria despite internal turmoil.
- Following a deadly drone attack on the Homs military academy leading to an estimated 100 deaths, an escalation of GoS and Russian attacks on Idlib caused massive civilian deaths, injuries, and damage to infrastructure. Turkey, has not made official statements on these developments during this report's coverage period, possibly indicating prioritizing its focus on the situation in NES. While access through Bab al-Hawa was restored, an increasingly strained GoS-Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) relationship could pose challenges in January when GoS's consent for the crossing's use is set to expire, potentially leading to more concessions and demands in exchange for approval.
- Despite promises to address local grievances and complaints, the Syrian Autonomous Administration in NES (SANES) introduced even harsher economic measures in September, including sharp fuel prices and commodity prices. These measures led to protests in various NES areas demanding a rollback of the decisions, as well as renewed clashes between Arab tribes and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The disconnect between the SANES' actions and the comments of figures like Mazlum Abdi and Ilham Ahmad could suggest a growing rift within leading NES bodies, with some influenced by the PKK advocating non-compromising authority and influence in NES.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The period spanning the month of September and first days of October saw a worsening of stability, and humanitarian conditions across Syria's various hubs. Developments during this period also highlighted some of the key issues Syrians face in terms of the different governing structures, and political conditions they live under. In NWS, the election of Hadi al-Bahra as the new president of the SOC was cause for significant controversy and outrage due to the lack of transparency involved in the electoral process, and signals that his presidency was one that was pushed upon the Syrian opposition without rather than a result of democratic or a representative process. Compounding this was speculation that al-Hadi's appointment could be a strategic move made by Turkey that reflect the change in their tone regarding restoring ties with Damascus.

Another sign of the dysfunctional state of de facto authorities in NWS was also exhibited in the most recent bout of infighting between various opposition groups. Yet again, different SNA factions, as well as HTS, renewed fighting over control of al-Hamran crossing, with financial gain being the primary driver for all involved. HTS attempted to further expand into SIG-administered areas, with them only retreating after direct Turkish intervention as has been the case in previous attempts. At the same time, although acting as a guarantor, Turkey appears to have been largely silent regarding the heightened hostilities directed by GoS and Russian forces towards Idlib in the first week of October.

In NES, the continued and seemingly deliberate neglect of public grievances regarding the continuously deteriorating living conditions, coupled with the introduction of further severe economic measures has led to continued protests in various parts of the region. The failure to adequately engage with the concerns made by leaders of Arab tribes also led to the re-emergence of hostilities between forces comprised of Arab tribes and the SDF. The SANES continuation of their uncompromising position will only lead to the further erosion of any credibility and reliability as a local governing body, and with time, as a strategic partner of the coalition in the country.

Conditions in NES deteriorated further, however, following a renewed escalation of Turkish attacks on numerous vital infrastructure, and superstructure facilities including oil, power, and water structures exacerbating an already unstable security landscape and severely hindering access to key needs and services. This escalation serves as Turkey's retaliation against an attack claimed by the PKK in Ankara, adding to previously mentioned concerns regarding the PKK's current influence and strategy in Syria and Turkey.

ANALYSIS

Recent elections in NWS shed light on Syrian political opposition's current state of affairs. On September 12, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SOC) elected Hadi al-Bahra to succeed Salem al-Meslet as President with 65 out of 79 casted votes.¹ The elections - originally scheduled to take place in July but postponed due to political disagreement within the SOC - generated significant controversy in various SIG-controlled areas, shedding light on the challenges Syrians face to find representation through larger forums working towards a solution to the Syrian crisis. The results of the elections sparked multiple protests across NWS, with protestors storming SOC headquarters in Azaz.

Originally established in 2012, the SOC was intended to serve as a body to represent various oppositional voices in international forums to achieve several goals including "making the transition towards a free and democratic country".² However, in recent months and years, public confidence in the validity and effectiveness of the Coalition has severely eroded. An example of this was the manner in which Salem al-Meslet, the previous President to the Coalition, was assaulted in Azaz as reported in [iMMAP's January Context Update](#).

The conditions under which al-Bahra was elected point towards an even more worrying degree of dysfunctionality within entities meant to represent the opposition. One of the reasons these elections were so problematic were comments leaked by a member of the Coalition in which he noted that Abdurrahman Mostafa, the President of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), essentially forced members to vote to al-Bahra.³ The previous President to the Coalition Ahmad Moath al-Khatib went as far as to state that the Coalition, as initially intended, is dead.⁴ This also is not the first time the extent to which democratic practices are upheld within the SOC. As recent as June of this year, a message leaked from a previous Vice President to the Coalition expressed frustration at how the makeup of the SOC is largely dictated by about ten members ahead of time.

Another issue this sheds light on is the extent to which Syrian opposition voices have become dependent on non-Syrian actors and influence. During our coverage of the relevant contextual developments over the past year, we have frequently noted the extent to which the SIG is dependent on Turkish resources, and directives. Al-Bahra's election appears to be yet another example of the same trend, and could point to some aspects of Turkey's strategy towards Syria in the coming period. Al-Bahra has also been a divisive and controversial figure owing to some rumors about him having ties to GoS. Although none of these appear to be substantiated, a case could be made that al-Bahra is a more pragmatic and flexible figure than most of his opponents. As such, while some has read the insistence on his appointment as a concession made to GoS by Turkey, most agree that choosing him is a strategic move for the coming period as Erdogan, as well as the region, no longer discount engagement with Assad as a viable route. Should progress be made on talks between Ankara and Damascus, al-Bahra would be one of the more suitable figures Turkey could rely on, especially if said talks expand to include the opposition.

Bombing in Ankara raises concerns of a new Turkish offensive. On October 1, an attack made by a suicide bomber outside of Turkey's police headquarters in Ankara led to wounding two police officers. It was also reported that a second attacked was present but was promptly neutralized by the Turkish police.⁵ The attacks were also promptly adopted by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The last time the PKK took responsibility for an attack in Ankara was 2016. It is also worth noting that the attack took place within close vicinity of the Turkish Parliament with the bombing taking place hours before the Turkish parliament was set to reconvene after their summer recess.

President Erdogan addressed the parliament as initially planned hours after the attack describing it as a “last struggle” for terrorism.⁶ The Turkish president also promptly took the chance to renew pledges of establishing a security belt 30 KM beyond the country’s southern borders, raising concerns of a fresh Turkish offensive into northern Syria. On October 4, Turkey’s Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that Turkish investigations revealed that the two attackers came from Syria, citing this as the rationale for considering “all infrastructure, superstructure, and energy facilities of the PKK and YPG, especially Iraq and Syria (as) legitimate targets”.⁷

Indeed, the days that followed witnessed heavy Turkish attacks targeting numerous energy, water, and infrastructure facilities throughout various parts in NES. Targets included the Rumeilan, Swediyah, Saeedeh, and Oudeh oil and gas fields as well as numerous key water and electricity stations in areas including Amouda, Dirabsiyeh, and Qamishli among others. The Allouk water station also reportedly suspended provision of water following these attacks.⁸ Between October 5-6, the NES NGO Forum noted that 24 strikes led to damaging more than ten critical infrastructure sites, as well as at least five civilian deaths.⁹ As of October 9, some sources reported the number of casualties to have risen to have reached 18, 11 of which being civilians.¹⁰

These attacks cause humanitarians and observers alike to be weary of Erdogan delivering on his promise and launching a new ground offensive into Northern Syria. While such threats are far from new, and there remains limited certainty on Turkey’s willingness and ability to follow through with them, it is worth assessing some of the recent contextual changes that could weigh in on the realization of such promises.

One thing to consider is the recent increasingly erratic, and somewhat belligerent actions of PKK in NES. We will elaborate on this further in following sections but the insistence of the SANES and SDF, which largely seems to be driven by PKK ambitions and directives, appear to deliberately aim to reinforce their image as an uncompromising force that is unwilling to placate or address any local public grievances or criticisms against them. This is seen in the sharp rhetoric adopted by figures in the SANES while announcing severe budget cuts, major increased commodity prices across key items, and a renewal of hostilities against Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor shortly after the situation was said to have been contained.

Additionally, although serving as their primary ally in the fight against ISIS in Syria, the escalation of local grievances by Arab tribes in NES has caused frustration with the SDF and brought up questions about their reliability as a partner in the area. With a US objection against yet another Turkish incursion being a main obstacle to Erdogan’s pledges being fulfilled, should the PKK continue to their escalatory behavior in Syria and Turkey, it may become more difficult mount such objections against what Turkey would describe as the right to defend their national security. Anti-SDF local sentiments in Syria being at an all-time high at the moment, would also facilitate a higher-than-usual local support for a Turkish intervention in SANES areas. At the time of reporting, however, it does seem like US objections against another Turkish operation do in fact still stand, with a US F-16 fighter jet reportedly downing an unmanned Turkish drone that came close to what is considered “US-restricted operating zone”.¹¹ This unique incident could also serve to illustrate that barring any extraordinary developments in the situation, the US will likely continue to curb any attempts to challenge the current status quo in northern Syria that would hinder, or jeopardize their operations and presence in the area.

Changes in opposition groups dynamics. On August 31, a branch of Ahrar al-Sham’s Eastern Sector announced joining of the SNA’s Second Legion.¹² In October last year, with the assistance of HTS, as well as SNA factions including the Hamza and Sultan Sulieman Shah Divisions, Ahrar al-Sham took control over al-Hamran crossing, widely considered to be one of the most profitable crossings to control and tax due to the volume and variety of goods that primarily pass through it including fuel, and construction materials. Ahrar al-Sham’s control over the crossing in October also yielded a win to HTS as it granted them a share of the crossing’s profits, which some had estimated to be a major one.

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However, this recent change marked a departure from that profitable position as it effectively put the crossing under the control of the Second Legion once again. The portion of the Eastern Sector that rejoined the Second Legion was also reported to constitute much of the group with those still aligned with HTS making up a minority. However, it is reported that the latter benefited from reinforcements they received from Tajamo' al-Shahba' – another HTS affiliated force – as well as HTS forces to mount an offensive against the newly separated group to regain control of the crossing¹³, which they succeeded with at the end of the first week of September. This also resulted in fighting escalating and extending to various areas including Qabbasin, Tal Btal, al-No'man, Shdoud, Dabiq, Ihtimlat, and Kaljibreen among others.

As in previous times, Turkish forces intervened to stabilize the situation and put an end to the infighting that led to significant loss of lives, injuries, as well as displacement a lot which appears to have been temporary¹⁴. Although these developments are very much in keeping with previous trends and patterns, the recent escalations do stand apart as unique in their scope and how wide the fighting spread and the extent of casualties. There was also a reported anonymous use of drones that targeted HTS affiliated forces and tipped the scale in favor of the Second Legion, leading many to believe them to have been of Turkish origin.¹⁵

The crossing is currently reported to be under the control of the Second Legion. However, there remains uncertainty on what or if an agreement was reached between the SNA and HTS on the distribution of profits. It is also worth noting that HTS has used the recent escalations, as well as the spillover from escalations in NES as cover to further creep into SIG and SNA areas, with field reports observing higher presence of SSG and HTS figures in areas including Azaz in the last month or so, potentially pointing to a continuation of the pattern we saw last October when HTS crept into Afrin and maintained some presence there long after they were reportedly sent back to Idlib.

This also shows that while HTS has been dealing with significant internal turmoil in recent months, their modus operandi of expanding local influence and control of resources, assimilating opposing factions, and preserving military discipline within their ranks to continue. It also demonstrates how SNA factions continue to be fragmented and divided in their priorities failing to act as a consolidated security force in NWS. With instability persisting in Syria's various hubs, and with many international actors currently examining their strategy in Syria which could potentially lead to more instability, it is likely that HTS would continue to capitalize on any gaps or opportunities they are presented with to continue their expansion, which would lead to further exchange of hostilities and hinderances to aid delivery.

Hostilities escalate in Idlib with civilian casualties on the rise. On October 5, multiple weaponized drones targeted the graduation ceremony of the Homs military academy leading to at least 100 deaths, in what is considered one of the deadliest attacks against a GoS army installation.¹⁶ Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack so far, the GoS assigned the blame on what they called "terrorist" groups referring to the opposition in Idlib.¹⁷ Later in the same day, and continuing through the time of this report's writing, areas in Idlib saw substantial escalations as GoS and Russian attacks led to 42 civilian deaths and injuring of 214 civilians in by October 9.¹⁸

Turkey, a guarantor of the largely unreliable cease-fire in Idlib signed into place in 2020¹⁹ have yet to make any official statements on these developments.²⁰ One possibility for Turkey's lack of reaction could include their focus currently being directed at the situation in NES, which would be telling of Turkey's prioritization of objectives in Syria. Another possibility could be that Turkey is deliberately turning a blind eye due to the sensitive nature of their current relationship with their Russia, with some speculating that this may be a move done with the expectation Russia minimizes objections against Turkish attacks in NES.

Idlib, and NWS have been especially vulnerable in the past few months with humanitarian needs at their highest and humanitarian access being suspended for more than two months. Although access through Bab al-Hawa was restored last month, an increasingly antagonistic relationship between GoS, and the SSG, would spell trouble in January when GoS's consent to use Bab al-Hawa – the legal basis for the new access mechanism – is set to expire as they might attempt to exact further concessions, and exact more demands, in exchange for their approval to use the crossing.

SANES fails to deliver on their promises, enacting further harsh economic measures. As reported on in [iMMAP's August Context Update](#), Mazlum Abdi, the chief commander of the SDF had announced on September 7 that the clashes with Arab tribes reached an end after more than a week of fighting led to more than 90 deaths.²¹ In an interview, Abdi noted that local grievances and complaints made by the public on the SDF and SANES policies are acknowledged, and would be addressed.²² Despite this, however, the SANES instead doubled down on their practices introducing even harsher economic measures.

On September 17, the SANES announced sharp increases in the prices of different fuel categories, for some of which increases amounted to almost 300% of the previous price. industrial mazot, and free mazot, would both see an increase of 525 SYP to 2050 SYP per liter.²³ As a result, the price of key commodities also saw sharp increases. The price of tourist bread rose from 3500 to 4500 SYP per package. The SANES also continue to be behind on paying wheat farmers long after their crops were bought. Our field reports indicate that these delays are likely to contribute to an impaired wheat production next season as these delays in payments cause farmers to be behind on preparing their fields for the next season, while others, opt to reduce the amount of land they will be using to grow wheat.

In response to these measures, protests erupted in various areas of NES including Derik, Kobani, and Qamishli. Our field source also confirmed that protests in Qamishli were also reportedly joined by activist and journalists for more than 11 days pleading for the SANES to rollback their decision. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the tone employed by government officials in their statements on such measures were relatively harsher in tone than usual, lacking any real attempt to try and appease the dissatisfaction and rejection voiced by the public.

This dissonance between Abdi's comments, and consequent contradictory actions by the SANES, is one reason causing critics to believe a rift is growing within leading figures and bodies in NES. On one side of said rift are figures including Mazlum Abdi and the Syrian Democratic Council's (SDC) Ilham Ahmad, who appear to be more compliant with public demands, and the International Coalition. Opposite of them is the growing influence of the PKK within the SANES which appears to hold a viewpoint that is non-compromising on their authority and influence in NES and could likely be insisting on enacting the recent economic measures as a show of force. However, this remains unsubstantiated and as such needs to be considered as a possibility worthy of paying attention to when viewing subsequent and future developments.

Another potential byproduct of the SANES and SDF failure to address the public dissatisfaction in NES was the reemergence of clashes between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor, two weeks after SDF had reported that they had brought the situation and areas of active fighting under their control. Clashes reportedly began in Dhiban with the head of the Akidat tribe Ibrahim al-Hifl issuing a call for Arab tribes' fighters to fight against the SDF²⁴, bringing yet another source of instability into the region which only serves to compound the deterioration of humanitarian conditions, especially considering the renewed wave of Turkish attacks that has been targeting NES in early October.

CONCLUSION

The period spanning from September into early October has witnessed a deepening of instability and deteriorating humanitarian conditions across Syria. These developments shed light on the complex challenges Syrians face under various governing structures and political circumstances. In Northwestern Syria, the contentious election of Hadi al-Bahra as the SOC's president exposed the lack of transparency and democratic representation in the process, raising concerns about external influence.

Additionally, infighting among opposition groups in NWS, particularly over the lucrative al-Hamran crossing, illustrated the dysfunction within these de-facto authorities. Turkey's role as a guarantor was noticeable in these conflicts, but its silence amid heightened hostilities directed at Idlib in early October raised questions.

In Northeastern Syria, the SANES' failure to address public grievances and the introduction of harsh economic measures fueled ongoing protests. Neglecting the concerns of Arab tribal leaders led to renewed hostilities between Arab tribal forces and the SDF, further eroding the SANES' credibility and reliability as a governing.

Moreover, Turkish attacks on vital infrastructure facilities exacerbated instability and hindered access to essential services, prompted by a PKK claim of responsibility for an attack in Ankara. These developments underscore the intricate and volatile dynamics in Syria's evolving political landscape.

This month also highlighted how little influence and control Syrians have over their own future, with various administrations, governments showing disregard and neglect the needs of those they are meant to represent and protect.

This report represents the last installment of our Context Update Reports Series. Over the course of the past sixteen reports, and sixteen months, we have observed the deterioration of living conditions, impediment to humanitarian access, increased volatility and insecurity, heightened politicization of humanitarian aid, and significant increases to humanitarian needs across Syria.

The Syrian context has always been a dynamic one, however, it could be argued that the pace of relevant developments has seen significant acceleration in 2023. The recent eagerness of some countries to rushing to find a political solution to Syria has served as a catalyst to move away from the status quo the country has exhibited in the last few years.

However, it is crucial to note that no real solution can be found without adequately addressing the contextual changes, and root causes - most of which persist twelve years after the beginning of the crisis - that led to the current conditions Syrians live in. Any solution, or decision, made on behalf of Syrians, should first and foremost, prioritize their needs, aspirations, and the betterment of their wellbeing. Although this should be too obvious of a point to make, it is one we unfortunately find ourselves needing to explicitly make.

ENDNOTES

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