

CONTEXT UPDATE

Northeastern Syria | November 2, 2022

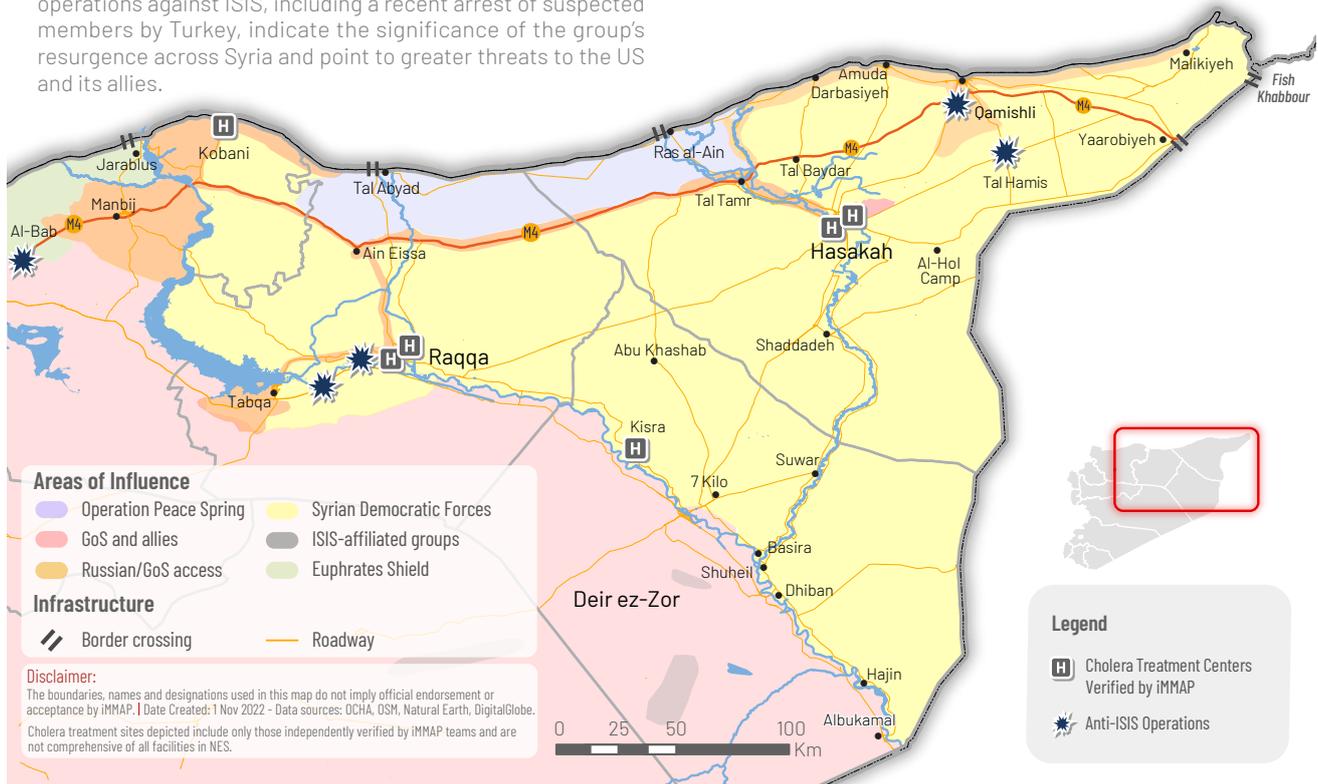


INTRODUCTION

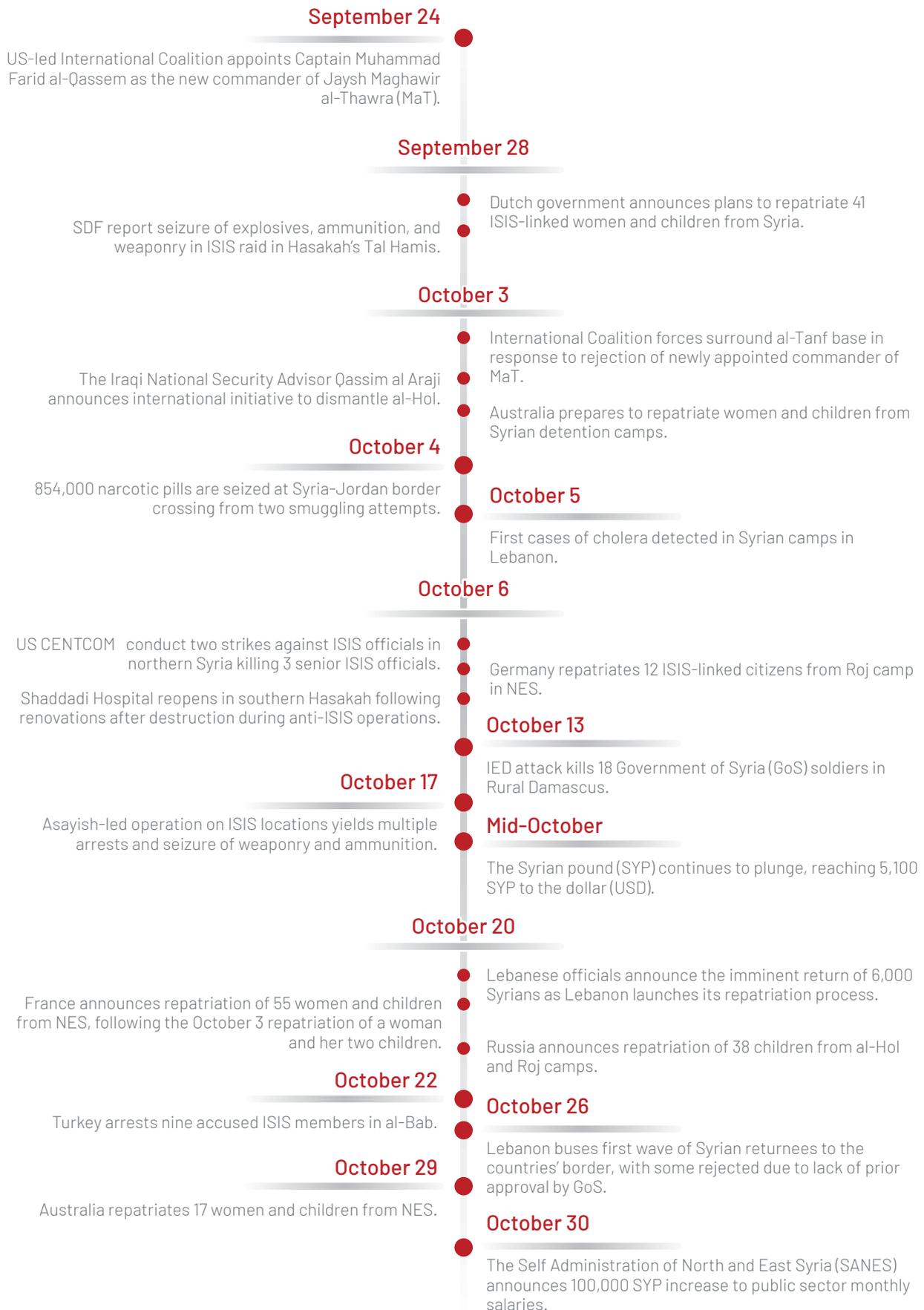
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northeast Syria, as well as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

Key Takeaways

- The cholera response in Northeast Syria (NES) is inhibited by limited treatment facility capacity and a lack of governorate-level testing, with efforts to address devastated water and sanitation infrastructure undermined by substantial funding gaps leading to dissatisfaction with authorities. The threat of cholera to displaced populations in Syria has extended beyond its borders, with the disparity in response between Lebanon and Iraq highlighting the importance of preventative investment into the region's health infrastructure.
- Protracted drought conditions and increasing financial burdens are decimating Syria's agricultural sector, with dramatically low crop yields indicating an imminent and acute food security crisis. Poor governance and high import prices have undermined agricultural inputs available. International efforts have failed to effectively support the sector, inhibiting farmers' production capacity and livelihoods, and exacerbating food shortages.
- Operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have continued to ramp up in NES, with both the US and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) carrying out significant operations against ISIS targets. Reported ISIS attacks and the escalation of operations against ISIS, including a recent arrest of suspected members by Turkey, indicate the significance of the group's resurgence across Syria and point to greater threats to the US and its allies.
- Anti-ISIS operations come at a time of increasing international focus on al-Hol and Roj camps, as numerous countries have made plans and taken tangible steps towards repatriating their nationals from the camps. Recent court decisions and a UN report have highlighted the duty of countries to their nationals who remain in Syria alongside an Iraqi statement of plans to dismantle al-Hol camp.
- The Coalition's dramatic shift in leadership of the Syrian Free Army (formerly Maghawir al-Thawra) highlights the severity of perennial concerns over the adherence of the group's leadership with Coalition goals, as well as its alleged complicity in illicit activities. The new leader's positive reputation in Jordan may lead to revitalized border security operations, although this change alone is unlikely to result in a major shift in Jordanian policy towards Rukban camp.
- Rising drug production and smuggling continues to enrich armed groups in Syria, with the Syrian regime's link to the illicit industry having the potential to threaten its relationship with neighboring Jordan. Drug trafficking is an increasing source of conflict in Syria amid economic impediments to other revenue streams.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The spread of cholera across Syria has become increasingly critical, with the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) reporting 17,476 suspected cases in NES by the end of October. Although all governorates of Syria report acute watery diarrhea (AWD) cases, NES continues to be most severely affected as the source region of the outbreak. According to WHO data, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Hasakah account for approximately 81% of all reported suspected cholera cases in Syria.¹ The outbreak further threatens populations outside Syria's borders, with cases of cholera first detected in Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon on October 5.²

In an interview last month, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Syria Representative Mike Robson noted compounding climate conditions, residual security issues, and the status of the economy to have contributed to the decimation of Syria's 2022 grain crop.³ He noted Syria's wheat harvest in 2022 was down an approximate 75% from volumes recorded prior to the crisis. The International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent (IFRC) has cited 2022 wheat production in Hasakah to be the lowest in almost 50 years.⁴

An US airstrike targeted and killed two Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) officials in NES on October 6. The strike killed Abu-Hashum al-Umawi, a deputy Wali in Syria, and another high-ranking ISIS official.⁵ This came the day after an unprecedented US raid near Qamishli that resulted in the killing of a high-level ISIS arms smuggler, Rakkan Wahid al-Shammari, wounding one associate and detaining two others.⁶ Earlier, on September 28, the SDF had reported the seizure of an extensive supply of explosives, ammunition, and weaponry in a raid conducted in the village of Qairawan, in Hasakah's southern Tal Hamis. SDF reports that these supplies had initially been intended to be used in a potential operation in al-Hol in parallel to attacks on the al-Sinaa prison in January-February.⁷ Syria's southern Dara'a governorate saw an escalation of security operations by The Government of Syria (GoS) this month following an October 13 IED attack on a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) vehicle, killing 18 soldiers in Rural Damascus. GoS and its allies have stated that the attack was conducted by ISIS, although no group has claimed responsibility.⁸ According to the Russian Defense Ministry and Syrian state-sponsored sources, subsequent anti-ISIS operations resulted in the killing of 20 ISIS members by October 17.⁹

Tensions rose around al-Tanf in southeastern Syria as the US-led Coalition unilaterally replaced the leadership of the local armed group in al-Tanf, Maghawir al-Thawra (MaT).¹⁰ After an intervention by Coalition forces and meetings with the Military Council, MaT leadership accepted the change and, later, opted to re-brand the group as the Syrian Free Army.¹¹ The group and its new leader, Muhammed Farid al-Qassem, have since conducted coordination meetings and outreach programs to civilian populations, including Rukban camp. Additionally, the dramatic growth in drug smuggling from Syria has continued to draw attention this month, as Jordanian authorities seized 854,000 captagon pills from two trucks at the Jaber-Nassib border crossing on October 4.¹²

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ANALYSIS

| Cholera Outbreak

Spread to vulnerable communities. Vulnerable populations are being disproportionately impacted by the spread of cholera in Syria, with 26% of cases reported by October 15 being children under 5 years old.¹³ Women may also be particularly at risk due to greater exposure to contaminated water through typically domestic roles. The primary risk identified by the Whole of Syria (WoS) health sector is the impact of cholera on IDP camps, collective centers, and informal sites due to their poor living conditions, with those in NES particularly vulnerable. There have been increasing concerns regarding WASH provision to IDP camps in Manbij. Cleaners provided by an NGO were reportedly removed from al-Rasm al-Akhdar camp east of Manbij due to a lack of funding, with no services in place to continue, leaving residents to sanitize tanks and sterilize water themselves with extremely limited resources. Most concerning, however, is the situation in al-Hol camp, where there has been a temporary but sharp limitation in the referral of non-emergency patients to medical facilities over the last few months. This implies potential interruptions to a structured medical response to a cholera outbreak within the camp, that may require considerable advocacy with camp authorities to overcome.

Treatment and testing limitations. Issues surrounding the provision of medical resources and limited facilities for cholera treatment continue to be highlighted as a key barrier to an effective response. Medical supplies have struggled to reach SANES-governed areas due to the closure of the Ya'arubiyah crossing with Iraq, international supply chain issues, and obstruction to imports from GoS areas. There have also been restrictions on the transport of medical resources within NES following increased levels of illegal smuggling in cholera medicines in the region. The SANES Executive Council has now prohibited the transport of such resources between districts in NES without written Health Authority approval.¹⁴

A further critical limitation within NES is the number and capacity of cholera treatment centers (CTCs) in the region. iMMAP field teams have verified the operations of active CTCs at Kobani Health Center, Hasakah National Hospital, Al Hekma Hospital (Hasakah), Al Shahida Midia Clinic (Raqqah), the Comprehensive Clinics Compound (Raqqah), and Al Kisra Small Hospital (Deir ez-Zor).

This is not an exhaustive list, with additional facilities tracked by partners and evidence of further CTCs under construction across the region. However, these sites all reported limited capacity to sufficiently treat cholera patients within their community—a challenge that has been cited in cholera management across the board in NES. This reflects broader deficiencies in response across NES, due in part to the adaptation of existing COVID-19 treatment centers or general hospital wards that are unprepared for integrated epidemiological responses.¹⁵ Kobani Health Center is SANES' only CTC dedicated solely to the treatment of cholera; however, its capacity of 40 beds has already been identified as significantly too low.¹⁶ Moreover, the fragile security context in Deir ez-Zor limits access to the area, hindering the timely construction of CTCs in the governorate and entrenching the area as a hotspot for the epidemic in Syria.

Inadequate surveillance and poor care response times in NES have been directly attributed to the constraints of centralized cholera testing at the Central Public Health Lab (CPHL) in Damascus. Currently, water and patient samples are collected from locations including 11 IDP camps, 14 collective shelters in Hasakah, 23 collective shelters in Tabqa, and 16 drinking stations in eastern Deir-ez-Zor.¹⁷ These are initially taken to Al Hekma Hospital in Hasakah before being transported daily to the CPHL by WHO, with results taking 3-4 days to return. This inhibits effective daily case reporting, and therefore dynamic local care responses. Laboratories in Hasakah still face considerable funding deficits to afford cholera-specific diagnostic equipment despite recent rehabilitation,¹⁸ leading SANES to call for increased support to meet the requirements of critical governorate-level testing centers.

The WHO itself has acknowledged likely under-reporting of cholera cases and noted a systemic issue of data inaccuracy.¹⁹ This is partially attributable to differing reporting systems and difficulties faced in information sharing between GoS's Ministry of Health (MoH) and WHO's EWARN, creating a fragmented testing and surveillance infrastructure in the country with potential discrepancies in reporting. Moreover, most data are received at medical facilities that register only the more severe cases, leading to a deficit in reporting of mild

to moderate cases across the country.

Safe water supply. The politicized interruptions to Alouk water station and low Euphrates water levels have driven a proliferation in the digging of unsupervised private water wells across the region, considerably damaging its water table. On October 20, the SANES banned the digging of any further wells to preserve underground resources. This pushes already vulnerable communities towards a further dependency on private water trucking, with associated expense and heightened risk of cholera contamination. Previous reports found that only 57% of trucked water to Hasakah had sufficient free chlorine residual levels for sterilization²⁰ and private companies are widely known to use contaminated water from the Euphrates. Deir ez-Zor's Al-Kisra Hospital Director has noted that all current AWD patients at his facility had drunk un-sterilized water from trucks that extract it directly from the river.²¹

Efforts from the international community have, however, made material progress in securing sanitized water supply routes for the population across NES. Chlorination points with increased oversight have been mapped at key water stations on private water trucking routes along the Euphrates to ensure sufficient water sterilization of all tankers entering Hasakah²² (as a particularly reliant community on trucking), with UNICEF and Action Against Hunger also disinfecting trucks and tanks when required. Importantly, SANES has established chlorination points at al-Hamma and Nafsha stations in western Hasakah, which act as a critical supply point of 61 wells for water trucks in the governorate.

Critical perceptions of authorities. As identified in [iMMAP's September Context Update](#), a key challenge facing the cholera response in Syria has been the integration of educational campaigns into community networks. There have been tangible improvements in this regard, with campaigns mobilizing awareness channels proven to be effective during COVID-19, including the involvement of religious leaders and community health volunteers. However, despite increased understanding of cholera amongst communities, there remains a significant sense of helplessness against the disease in the face of structural and pervasive potable water shortages in Syria.

In NES, this frustration has been directed towards SANES and alleged corruption within the Self Administration. SANES ceased water chlorination at key supply stations in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa for several months this summer, reportedly due to embezzlement of funds by officials causing a significant budget deficit.²³ Deir ez-Zor is now

the worst affected governorate in Syria, comprising 51.9% of all suspected cases in Syria, while Raqqa is second at 24.2%.²⁴ The Water Foundation in Municipalities of Deir ez-Zor Civil Council has been unable to provide water stations with necessary supplies or renovations due to a lack of financial capacity in recent months. Anecdotal field reports indicate that these failures have exacerbated already negative perceptions of SANES governance, which have been highly critical of its capacity to provide basic services and alleged corruption.

The international community has similarly highlighted a lack of funding as the primary challenge in dealing with the epidemic in Syria, with UNICEF outlining an immediate gap of \$11.14 million.²⁵ However, as a key actor coordinating the country's WoS cholera response, particularly in Government of Syria (GoS)-held areas, the leadership of WHO's Syrian office has also recently faced accusations of corruption and mismanagement of funds during the COVID-19 crisis, triggering one of the biggest internal WHO probes in years.²⁶ Concerns have been raised by staff that not only will this have prevented funds being appropriately allocated to the urgent rehabilitation of the health sector in Syria, but that these allegations could push future donors away and exacerbate existing funding gaps.

Regional threat. Displacement camps experience acute conditions conducive to cholera infection; high population density, poor sanitation infrastructure, and extreme poverty. Lebanon is particularly vulnerable to a rapid cholera outbreak due to such conditions being prevalent across its large refugee camps, in addition to the country's response capacity being limited by its generally poor health infrastructure, an ongoing economic crisis, and deteriorating political stability.

Iraq has successfully countered several cholera outbreaks as recently as 2007,²⁷ 2015,²⁸ and June 2022. A long history of cholera in Iraq has informed a dynamic public health response to the disease, ensuring preparedness through a comprehensively trained and equipped health workforce, local access to medical and testing supplies, and timely implementation of comprehensive prevention and control measures. Further, the Iraq Health/WASH cluster's joint Cholera Preparedness and Response Plan has incorporated valuable lessons learned to improve prevention of and preparedness for future outbreaks. This highlights the regional importance of investment into preventative measures for the future spread of water-borne diseases and other epidemics, in the context of intensifying global water shortages and global supply chain issues. For instance, although Jordan has

proficient health infrastructure, it is likely to face a cholera threat for the first time since 1981.²⁹ It would therefore be prudent to enhance diagnostic capacity beyond recent imports of rapid tests and to augment the training of medical staff to deal with cholera and other diseases that are becoming an increasing threat across the region.

I Agriculture and Food Security

Protracted drought conditions this year and increasing financial burdens on farmers have magnified the risk of severe food insecurity in Syria. The country's breadbasket, Hasakah, and all of NES saw drastically reduced wheat crops this year of only 388,000 tons, relative to the reported annual need of 600,000 tons.³⁰ Fuel prices have been identified as the biggest challenge facing farmers in the region, with field reports suggesting a further imminent and sharp increase in the price of diesel sold to farmers by SANES. This has pushed some farmers to abandon irrigation and reduce their cultivation to only rainfed agriculture. However, as drought conditions become ever more critical, rainfed yields continue to see noted reductions due to the close dependency of Syria's wheat crop on rainfall, with this year reaching only 15% of expected harvest levels from rainfed wheat areas.³¹

Farmers have thus far been dependent on SANES subsidization of diesel to be sheltered from the high and volatile market prices for fuel. However, farmers who utilize this subsidization are obligated to sell their crops exclusively within SANES-areas, among other restrictions in their contracts. For example, farmers have been prevented from benefitting from international support programs, as SANES has previously refused to sell subsidized diesel to farmers that participated in USAID's project to supply farmers with free seeds, instead of purchasing them from SANES.

Perceptions of SANES have subsequently deteriorated, with many farmers seeing SANES as particularly weak in its efforts to maintain, support and extend agriculture in the historically fertile region. Accusations of corruption across agricultural centers stem from the disparity between the low prices at which SANES is willing to buy agricultural outputs and the expensive yet poor quality inputs available to farmers. Although inputs are reported to be widely accessible, prices have drastically increased across NES since last year, exacerbated by an increased reliance on commercial imports with little provision by SANES. iMMAP's Integrated Market Monitoring Initiative published their Q3 Bulletin on monitoring of [Price Agriculture and Livestock inputs](#) and highlights

the significant impact of the depreciation of the Syrian Pound (SYP) on the price of agricultural inputs.³² The SYP plummeted to 5,100 to one USD by mid-October, with the currency's decline drastically impacting the living conditions of the country's poorest, including farmers across NES. Moreover, there are widespread complaints about the worsening quality of seeds as well as a lack of oversight of imported expired fertilizers and pesticides by wholesalers, which has led to the damage of entire harvests and contributed to further crop shortages.

These conditions are compounding to severely threaten farmer's livelihoods in NES. Both arable and pastoral farming are primary sources of income in Hasakah, with farmers therefore adopting coping mechanisms such as the destocking of animals and relocation into urban areas or abroad.³³ This diminished agricultural productivity is likely to further impact critical food insecurity in Syria via increased bread prices within worsening economic conditions. So far, there have been no significant interventions by international organizations to support the NES agriculture sector and prevent this trajectory from worsening. Previous projects have largely failed to align with local agricultural cycles, such as providing drip irrigation networks and summer seeds at inappropriate times, while local efforts in Hasakah have been limited in number and impact. As international grain markets become increasingly weaponized and therefore unreliable, relief efforts targeting food security in Syria should focus on preventative measures including the scaling up of these projects that are sympathetic to local agricultural cycles and ecosystems.

On a broader Syria level, similarly insufficient volumes of wheat production led GoS to sign an agreement with Russia to import 600,000 tons to supplement their wheat requirements until the first half of 2023, having this year produced only 1.7 million out of their yearly need of 3.2 million tons. However, this reliance on Moscow for its wheat has recently been highly vulnerable to the Ukrainian conflict, with remaining possibilities of disrupted imports.³⁴ Tensions have also heightened between the regime and local farmers, culminating in members of Military Intelligence reportedly opening fire on local farmers protesting against the GoS for failing to reimburse farmers' lost earnings after damaging several fields.³⁵

ISIS Developments

US strikes on ISIS leaders. The recent US raid on ISIS targets in GoS-controlled security squares near Qamishli in NES was the first known counter-terrorism operations conducted by US forces in GoS controlled areas since 2008. It was distinguished further by the targeted location, which was in relative proximity to a Syrian airfield where Russian troops were present. Russian forces were reportedly not alerted prior to the attack taking place,³⁶ an omission attributed to the sensitivity of the operation.³⁷

US CENTCOM allegedly spent more than 1,000 hours collecting intelligence on the targets prior to the strikes to limit the risk of collateral damage.³⁸ This extensive intelligence gathering was likely supported by information gained weeks prior during comprehensive anti-ISIS operations by SDF and affiliated Asayish in al-Hol camp and throughout NES. Other recent security operations conducted by the Asayish yielded the arrest of 17 ISIS members as well as the seizure of weapons and passports in al-Khatoniyah and Al-Mansora villages in Tabqa countryside on October 17. The unprecedented nature of the US raid, in conjunction with increasing anti-ISIS operations by the SDF, emphasize the threat posed by ISIS in NES, as well as significant resource allocation of intelligence agencies in the region to prevent further ISIS resurgence.

The IED attack killing 18 GoS soldiers on October 13, subsequent anti-ISIS operations by Russian and GoS forces, and a string of killings in Dara'a outline the fragile security context that has come to define southern Syria since reconciliation. In addition to the actual threat of ISIS affiliates, the plurality of armed groups and lack of centralized security operations have created a dangerous environment in which personally motivated murders and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by GoS targeting former opposition members can be attributed to ISIS affiliations. Furthermore, as iMMAP reported in its September Context Update, ISIS continues to pose threat to security in NWS. Turkey announced it had arrested nine ISIS members suspected of plotting attacks in Turkey in an operation conducted on October 22 in al-Bab.³⁹

Repatriations from al-Hol. As noted in iMMAP's September Context Update, concerns of ISIS resurgence have led to greater international interest in al-Hol camp in recent months. Following statements made by General Michael Kurilla in September, the US Senate announced bipartisan legislation aiming to address the growing

crisis in Syrian camps. This seeks to establish a policy for repatriation and prosecution (where appropriate) of camp inhabitants, developing an interagency strategy to address needs in camps, repatriation, prosecution efforts, and creating a comprehensive reporting requirement on progress of the strategy's implementation. The US administration has offered other countries support in the form of assistance in identity verification, advising on rehabilitation options, discussing legal challenges, and offering logistical support.⁴⁰

Completed and planned repatriations from al-Hol and Roj camps were announced by countries including Australia,⁴¹ Canada,⁴² France, Iraq (which has already conducted multiple repatriations), the UK,⁴³ and Russia. France repatriated a woman and her two children on October 3,⁴⁴ followed by a larger operation on October 20 repatriating a total of 55 French women and children.⁴⁵ This second move came a week after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that France must re-examine repatriation requests of two nationals whose case had been denied initially.⁴⁶ Some experts believe this signified a break in France's previous approach to consider repatriation on a case-by-case basis,⁴⁷ as a number of court cases in Europe have sought to challenge multiple countries' policies regarding their nationals in Syria.

On October 12, The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a report accusing Finland of violating the rights of Finnish children by leaving them in life-threatening conditions in Syrian camps.⁴⁸ The case was made on behalf of six Finnish children residing in al-Hol camp by their relatives, and mentioned 33 other Finnish children without access to legal assistance.⁴⁹ Though three of the children involved (and their mother) were repatriated in 2019, three remain in the camp.⁵⁰ In response to this report, Finland must revert back to the Committee within 180 days on steps taken to rectify these actions.⁵¹ Although the camp's dire conditions have caused international concern and mobilization, countries' repatriation efforts have been slow to develop, with Australia only reporting repatriation plans of 20 of their nationals out of an estimated total number exceeding 60 individuals (more than 20 women and 40 children).⁵² Similar efforts by other countries also seem to be slow-paced.

The statements made by General Michael Kurilla appear to have renewed urgency in resolving the predicament posed by al-Hol, reinforced by the early October announcement of plans to dismantle the camp. The details of this arrangement and participating countries remain vague. However, developments including the announcement of

US legislation offering logistical support to countries in the repatriation process, adoption of repatriation procedures and increased repatriations, and advocacy from legal bodies including the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the European Court of Human Rights all point to increased international buy-in. Al-Hol is likely to continue receiving heightened attention in coming months, with the winter season predicted to further exacerbate its already poor living conditions. Anti-ISIS operations by a variety of actors also point towards increased perceptions of the threat posed by the camp and its residents to regional security.

| Broader Syria Developments

Leadership changes in al-Tanf. In late September, the US-led International Coalition forces unilaterally removed Muhannad al-Talaa as commander of Maghawir al-Thawra (MaT), replacing him with Captain Muhammad Farid al-Qassem. After an initial rejection, MaT Military Council eventually accepted the new commander, who promised a phase of increased coordination and new priorities for the group. The group has since re-branded as Jaysh Suriya al-Hurra or the Syrian Free Army. The Coalition's move came after months of reported dissatisfaction with al-Talaa's performance from both the Coalition and Jordanian authorities.

The decision to appoint new leadership was met with harsh criticism on social media channels supportive of al-Talaa, citing dubious plots to undermine the revolution and questioning al-Qassem's revolutionary credentials and alleged complicity in illicit activities.⁵³ In response to the controversy, on October 3, the Coalition surrounded the al-Tanf base and ordered that all non-coalition fighters leave without their weapons.⁵⁴ Al-Qassem then met with the MaT Military Council, represented by Issam al-Salibi and Maher Darwish, who accepted the new commander and the integration of his additional forces to MaT.

Formerly the commander of the once US-supported opposition group Liwa Shuhada Qaryatayn, al-Qassem, also known as Abu Hussam, is a pragmatic choice, as he reportedly enjoys good relations with civilian actors and Coalition forces as well as a positive reputation with Jordanian authorities. This is in stark contrast to his predecessor, al-Talaa, whose status was marred by reports of unwillingness to adhere to Coalition directives and alleged involvement in illicit activities, including corruption and drug trafficking.

The dramatic shift in command highlights the importance of Jordanian border security to the Coalition's presence

in al-Tanf and may indicate a shift in priorities for the newly dubbed Syrian Free Army that includes a revitalized border patrol mandate. While speculation of an intended merger with the SDF has circulated in social media, such a move would be impractical and is highly unlikely. Additionally, some observers have proposed that al-Qassem's relationship with the Jordanian authorities may prompt a reconsideration of the Jordanian position towards Rukban camp, which has drawn increasing international attention and advocacy in recent months. Although not impossible, it is unlikely that the appointment of a new commander at al-Tanf alone would shift Jordan's policy on Rukban.

Drug smuggling. Mass production facilities of captagon have been identified in southern Syria, the predominant supplier of one of the most popular narcotics across the Middle East. By June 2022, Jordanian border forces had already seized 33 million captagon pills smuggled from Syria, more than double the year prior.⁵⁵ Levels of smuggling in other drugs have also exponentially increased, with a reported 36kg of heroin confiscated this year, relative to 1kg in 2021.⁵⁶ This spike in drug production and smuggling in Syria has been accompanied by increased scrutiny and attribution of responsible actors. Jordanian and local sources claim the Syrian regime has instrumentalized local armed groups, many of whom are former opposition elements, in key smuggling thoroughfares in Dara'a and Sweida.⁵⁷ The coordination of these groups has allegedly been conducted by multiple security-intelligence actors and non-state actors including pro-Iranian militias,⁵⁸ predominantly Hezbollah.

The involvement of the Syrian regime in the drugs trade is seen to be counterproductive to its normalization efforts with Jordan and will similarly hinder any wider rapprochement with its bordering countries. The value of Syria's captagon exports alone sits at 35 times that of its legal export market⁵⁹ and has been identified as a prioritized income stream within a desperate economy for Assad. The profitability of this drugs trade for the Syrian regime is therefore perceived to disincentivize other economic boosts offered by improved diplomatic relations with Syria's neighbors.

Moreover, as the value of the drug export trade increases relative to worsening economic conditions for Syrians, power and control over drugs production and logistics will likely become a more prominent conflict driver between local armed groups. In Sweida, videos recently emerged on social media sites depicting Rijal al-Karama forces investigating a captagon production facility of its now-dissolved rival Quwat al-Fajr (QAF); a group

led by Raji Falhout, considered to be one of Sweida's most powerful commanders and drug smugglers with close ties to the Syrian Military Intelligence Directorate. Narcotics manufacturing and regulation has contributed to tensions in northern Syria between the Turkish-affiliated Hamza Division and relevant anti-narcotics enforcement (discussed in greater depth in [iMMAP's September Context Update](#)). Efforts to tackle the escalating importance of drug facilities to these groups will struggle to provide viable economic alternatives to members so long as it is profitable for the Syrian government, indicating that a security-focused response may be more effective than humanitarian socioeconomic initiatives.

Return dynamics. In conjunction with ongoing Turkish efforts to return Syrian refugees to areas of northern Syria, the Lebanese government has taken steps towards implementation of its own "voluntary" repatriation plan. With increased anti-refugee sentiment, deteriorating regional economic prospects, and decreasing access to basic needs, Syrians in other neighboring countries are likely to feel increasing insecurity and pressure to return from their locations of displacement. Despite these repatriation initiatives, consensus among humanitarian and international actors remains that no part of Syria is amenable to returns. Further, the continued or increased hostilities in many areas, ongoing drought, economic crisis, and cholera outbreak serve to contribute to decreased feasibility of returns for Syrians abroad.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing cholera outbreak has continued to ravage NES and spread across all areas of Syria, with displaced people particularly vulnerable due to often poor WASH service provision and overcrowding in many displacement sites. Insufficient international funding and health resources to combat the outbreak have led to a poor public health response that has allowed cholera to spread unchecked into neighboring Lebanon and pose a threat to the entire region. Lessons learned from Iraq's timely, successful response to multiple instances of cholera outbreak in recent decades, including earlier this year, may be applied to the Syria response to ensure adequate measures are implemented going forward.

Prolonged drought, influenced by climate change and worsened by political manipulation of water resources, poses a threat to agriculture, food security, and livelihoods, in addition to contributing to the spread of cholera. This is compounded further with rising fuel prices and high costs of other inputs to drastically reduce NES's wheat harvests. High prices are exacerbated by the decline of the SYP, which hit 5,100 to the dollar in mid-October.

Continued ISIS attacks and unprecedented anti-ISIS operations by multiple actors illustrate the expanded threat posed by the group's resurgence and further imply increased recognition of this by the SANES and other relevant security actors. Heightened concerns regarding ISIS have also served to inspire greater international scrutiny on the al-Hol and Roj camps in NES in recent months. October saw a dramatic surge in repatriations from multiple countries, in addition to a court decision and UN report emphasizing countries' responsibility to their nationals, particularly children, remaining in the camps.

The US-led Coalition's unilateral change in leadership of the newly renamed Syrian Free Army inspired tensions in the area of al-Tanf base in the recent period. Coalition intervention eventually allowed for the implementation of the leadership transition, with expectations for greater adherence with Coalition goals and improved patrols on the Jordanian border as well as speculation of improved coordination with Jordan on issues including Rukban camp.

Although shifts in policy on Rukban are unlikely to occur based on this change alone, greater patrolling along the Jordanian-Syrian border is long overdue, as drug production and trafficking in Syria becomes a more pertinent regional concern.

These developments and challenges fall against a backdrop of continued mutual shelling between Turkish-aligned forces and the SDF and GoS in northern NES, alongside major developments in NWS. These developments are better detailed in iMMAP's recent Spot Report and will be further discussed in iMMAP's November NWS Context Update next month.

ENDNOTES

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