



COAR

Center for Operational Analysis and Research

NORTHERN CORRIDOR

NEEDS ORIENTED STRATEGIC AREA PROFILE



Azaz City Square.

Credit: Azaz Local Council

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PURPOSE

When intervening in complex crises, the alignment of programs with needs is necessary, but also often insufficient. For several years, humanitarian actors have focused almost exclusively on needs, without examining the broader context in which these needs arise and in which subsequent interventions are delivered. As a consequence, outputs meet needs without necessarily addressing their underlying causes. This can contribute to the perpetuation of existing conflict drivers, and, in cases with complex war economies, may create new drivers entirely. The NOSAP is a pilot project that seeks to identify and deconstruct the ambiguities of conflict-affected areas in Syria to support a needs-based humanitarian strategy with an awareness of the various stakeholders, spoilers, and broader socio-political and economic dynamics that shape not only communities, but also interventions. Rather than concern itself with geographical areas determined by Government of Syria administrative boundaries, the NOSAP instead defines geographies based on social self-identification, communal solidarities, and political and economic linkages.



METHODOLOGY

A combination of primary and secondary qualitative data and secondary quantitative data has been synthesized to produce this paper. COAR has employed a field researcher network that is based across in Syria as well as those in neighbouring countries with close linkages to Syria; researchers were selected based on demonstrated expertise and knowledge of critical geographic and thematic concepts relevant to each NOSAP, and drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds. Secondary research undertaken by COAR's desk-based analysts has triangulated, contextualized, and assessed the validity of primary data, with sources ranging from English and Arabic language media (including social media), academic and INGO studies, outputs from the Urban-S project, and engagement with peer researchers. Quantitative data is deployed to support a needs-based reading of the area and for contextual purposes (population figures, displacement and return trends), and has been derived from the UN and local NGO partners.



READING THE REPORT

NOSAPs are divided into two parts. The first part is an overview of key thematic topics that are most relevant to an understanding of the Northern Corridor, with each theme followed by a series of accompanying recommendations. The second part of the NOSAP is divided into the following indicative topics: Context and Population, Governance and Services, Community and Society, Economy, and Security. Each section includes an executive summary, granular insight and analysis into relevant local dynamics, key stakeholders within that theme, and discussion of issues associated with the local humanitarian and human ecosystem.

Northern Corridor



Study Area



Main Roads

Zone of Control Minimap



Syria Democratic Forces (SDF)



Government of Syria (GoS)



UNDOF



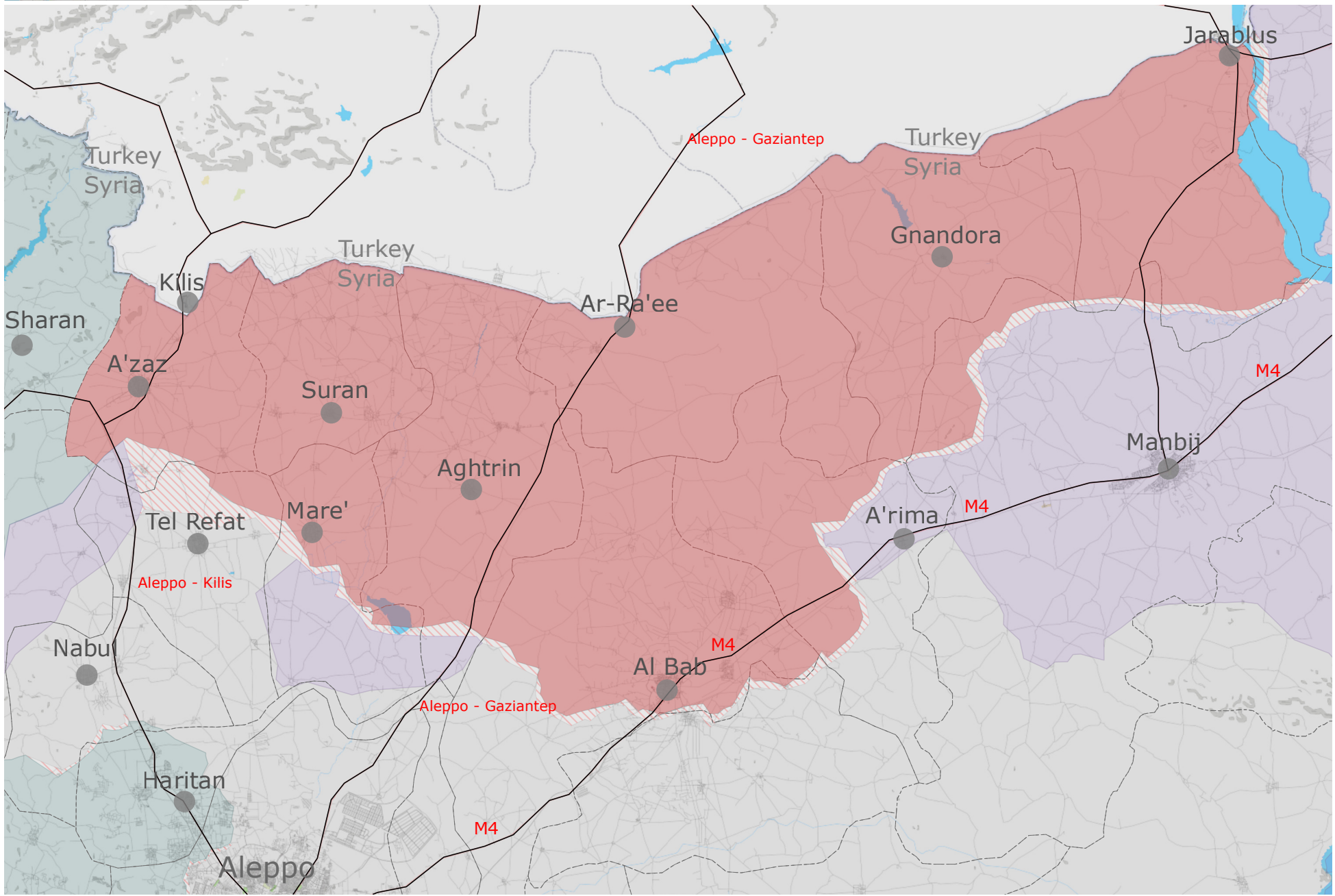
Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs)



Islamic State (IS)



Contested Area



PART 1

KEY AREA DYNAMICS

Four key dynamics must be taken into consideration when attempting to address humanitarian and development needs in the Northern Corridor:

1

Since the conclusion of the Euphrates Shield military operation in 2017, the Turkish government has come to dominate political, economic, and security dynamics in the Northern Corridor. The area should be considered as having been all but officially annexed given Turkey is unlikely to abandon its national security and economic objectives and relinquish its growing authority.

2

Turkish investment has helped arrest a decline in local economic conditions, and incipient economic growth has been observed. This is positive, but Turkish-led development is shaped by political-military ambitions, and illicit and shadow activities remain critical to the local economy. Ensuring the dividends of local development are shared equally with residents is essential.

3

Turkey has attempted to unite the armed groups of the Northern Corridor by creating the Syrian Interim Government's National Army, but all Turkish-backed groups in the region are practically independent, openly compete, and are both unaccountable to, and unpopular with the local population. This contributes to a climate of instability, and armed group behaviour can only be regulated by Turkish authorities.

4

The Northern Corridor hosts large numbers of displaced people, with nearly a quarter of a million people still living in camps. These people are in need of support across multiple sectors, particularly with respect to livelihoods and shelter. However, the prospect that further numbers will arrive must be anticipated: The Northern Corridor will likely become the last bastion for those individuals unwilling to live under the Syrian government, and Turkey is unlikely to address service shortfalls independently.

TURKISH DOMINANCE

The Northern Corridor was a heavily contested region until Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed groups forced the retreat of ISIS and the Kurdish-linked SDF between 2016-17. This operation, entitled ‘Euphrates Shield’, brought an end to multi-partite contestation of several lucrative Syria-Turkey border crossings, drove a wedge between Kurdish-administered territory in Syria’s north, and effectively placed over 2,000 square kilometres of Syrian territory under Turkish control. Since this time, the Turkish government has strengthened its grip over the area considerably.

Not only does Turkey retain a nominal monopoly on violence through its authority over the constituent members of the National Army, it has also absorbed many of the functions of government within politics, economy and society. Turkish officials serve on municipal council bodies, Turkish businesses operate widely, and Turkish goods flood local markets. The infiltration of Turkish culture is such that it has arguably begun to erode the ‘Syrian’ identity of a borderland in which identities have always been blurred, and which is now home to hundreds of thousands of people from across Syria who are unwilling to live under the Syrian government. Turkey’s long-term ambitions in northern Aleppo have not been articulated, but it is difficult to foresee a reversal in the current trend towards the ‘Turkification’ of all aspects of civic life. At present, the Northern Corridor must be viewed as a Turkish-administered proto-state which is now all but officially part of Turkey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ADAPT TO A LONG-TERM TURKISH PRESENCE.** In all likelihood, Turkey will not relinquish its grip over the Northern Corridor for the foreseeable future. Whether the area is officially absorbed into the Turkish orbit is practically irrelevant: For as long as a threat from Kurdish actors is perceived, for as long as commercial reconstruction opportunities exist, and for as long as the Syrian government is in a weakened state, Turkey will retain its position of local authority, either directly or through increasingly well-established proxies.
- **CONSULT KILIS AND GAZIANTEP.** Relief, development, and stabilization actors are required to work within a wholly Turkish-dictated operating context. Turkish provincial governments in Kilis and Gaziantep are the gatekeepers of this context, and monitor adherence to the parameters they set in partnership with the Turkish emergency and development agency, AFAD.
- **INVEST IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH MUNICIPAL COUNCILS.** Despite being answerable to, and monitored by the Turkish government, municipal councils are relatively independent, and deploy their own resources to coordinate and deliver locally-led and international relief and development projects. They are also the pre-eminent form of local Syrian governance and the focal point for recovery stakeholders including the Stabilization Committee and the private sector.

- CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT FOR PROGRAMMES IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA.** There have been reports that the Turkish government has revoked or refused to renew aid permits for those working in areas under the control of the Kurdish Self-Administration. This applies to both non-Syrian NGOs and local implementing organizations. Organizations working in Kurdish Self-Administration areas must therefore consider their broader acceptance strategies when proposing to undertake relief and development work in the Northern Corridor.
- STRENGTHEN CIVIL SOCIETY. COMPARED WITH GOVERNMENT-HELD AREAS, THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR HOSTS A FAIRLY VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETY.** Certainly, many local organizations have struggled to adapt to the demands placed on them by the Turkish-imposed framework for third sector operations. However, providing local civil society organizations can overcome Turkish bureaucracy and work within the parameters set by the Turkish authorities, there is latitude for the expression of a more local voice in the Northern Corridor's recovery.
- SIMILARLY, CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT ELSEWHERE IN SYRIA.** Though it is unlikely to be able to retake the area, Damascus regards the Turkish presence in northern Aleppo as an occupation. Working in close coordination with the Turkish authorities in Northern Corridor is therefore likely to be viewed unfavourably by the Syrian government and may impinge on access to government-held areas, both for donors and partners.

STEADY, BUT UNEVEN ECONOMIC RECOVERY

The Turkish government has shown considerable interest in expanding its commercial interests into the Northern Corridor through a combination of increased trade, the development of local commercial, political, and physical infrastructure, and facilitating the entry of the Turkish private sector. This results from Turkey's status as the area's *de facto* governing authority, which is in turn linked to broader Turkish economic objectives to secure commercial opportunities in Syria, as well as improved trade access to the Gulf and beyond via the Northern Corridor's border towns. Indeed, Turkey has reportedly been forthright in its ambition to play a role in the reconstruction of Aleppo governorate, and the Northern Corridor represents an excellent staging post for the pursuit of these interests given Turkey can effectively mould its own preferred operating environment within Syrian territory.

For the residents of the Northern Corridor, increased Turkish economic activity has been a major factor in helping arrest the area's economic decline. Prices of everyday items have normalized (matching Turkish prices), goods are now widely available, agricultural production is seeing improvements, and jobs are beginning to return with recovering local manufacturing and industry. Though this is certainly positive, it should be noted that these improvements are not being undertaken by a state actor which is directly accountable to the people it governs, neither is Turkish investment necessarily concerned with driving broad-based development and recovery for residents of the Northern Corridor. There is therefore a risk that the dividends of Turkish spending will not be shared equitably with the wider population. This is an issue which will likely be compounded by the continued prevalence of the shadow economy, particularly given the ongoing connection of both Turkey and local political, economic and security actors with commerce conducted outside of a regulated economic and financial system.

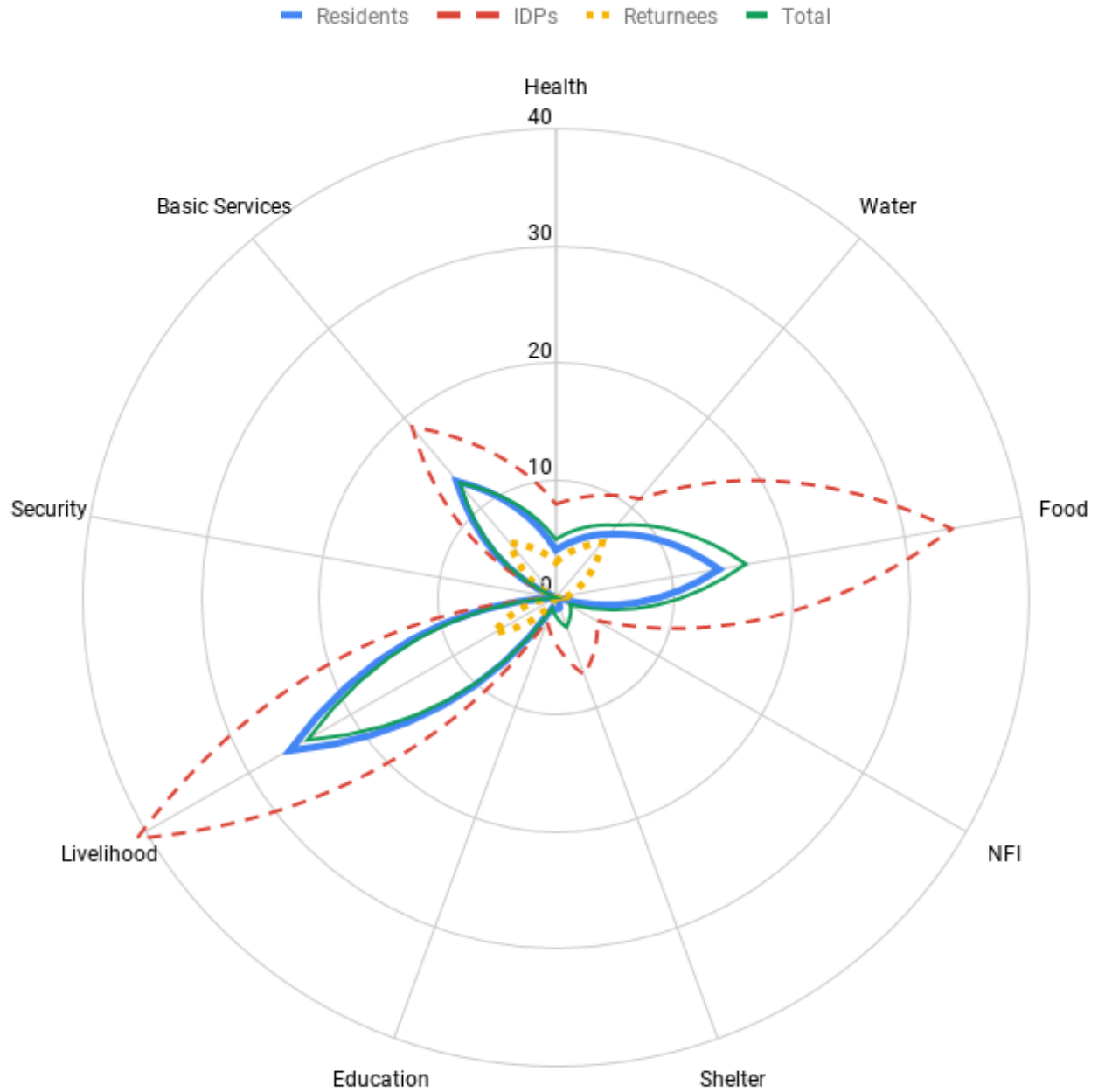


Figure 1. 'Northern Corridor Overall Needs Overview', July 2019, data used for this graphic is drawn from selected communities only, specifically those listed in Figure 4.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ENGAGE SYRIAN CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE.** Syrian Chambers of Commerce are active in surveying and pursuing local business opportunities, have large and diverse commercial networks, and are linked to municipal councils. These institutions are not only a potential source of private sector partnership opportunities, they can also help ensure that relief and development interventions synergize with pre-existing and future local investment. That said, the prevalence of the shadow economy, the likely involvement of many Chamber members in this economy, and the potential for elite capture must be considered as a potential risk of engagement.
- CONCENTRATE COORDINATION EFFORTS THROUGH MUNICIPAL COUNCILS.** Municipal councils are the lynchpin of Turkish governance in the Northern Corridor. They are the focal point for the majority of local spending and are the main coordination body for the deployment of Turkish and local investment. With the Syrian Interim Government seemingly impotent, local councils are therefore likely to be the political authority which increasingly sets the agenda for the administration of local economic affairs in formal commercial activity.
- MONITOR THE ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT INDUSTRIALISTS AND BUSINESSMEN OF TURKEY.** This organization has an office in the Northern Corridor and is likely to provide a strong indication as to planned Turkish investment in the area. Anticipating and complementing this investment by exploring private sector partnership opportunities, piggybacking on private spending, and directing I/NGO resources to other areas is strongly recommended.
- CONCENTRATE ON AGRICULTURE.** Turkey already coordinates notable support to agricultural development programmes, primarily through the agricultural departments of its provincial governments in Kilis and Gaziantep and those within municipal councils. Complementing these efforts is strongly recommended given agriculture is the area's most important industry and major source of employment. Livelihood opportunities within agriculture are also likely to help rebalance the economy in favour of local residents, decreasing the influence of the shadow economy and elite local Turkish and Syrian business actors.

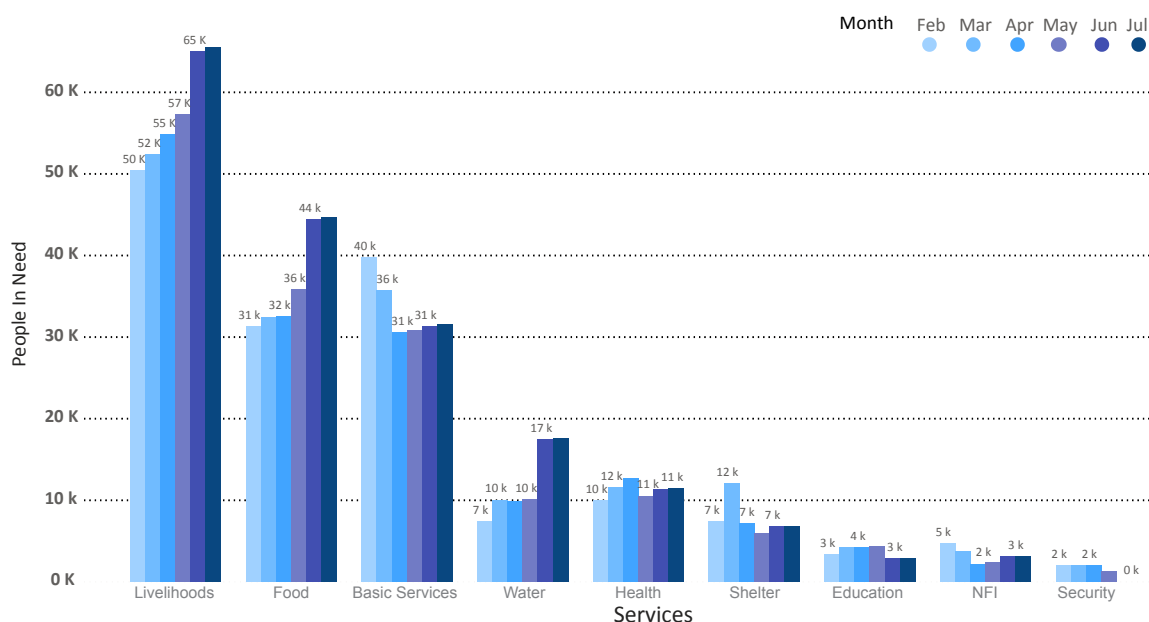


Figure 2. Needs by Sector, Feb 2019 - Jul 2019

UNACCOUNTABLE SECURITY FORCES

The National Army was formed by Turkey from a collection of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in the Northern Corridor. While the National Army nominally is a unified body that is divided into separate brigades and sits under the Syrian Interim Government, in actuality it is more of an umbrella designation for Turkish-backed armed groups, and each individual group answers directly to Turkey and maintains its pre-National Army form. Partially for that reason, the constituent groups in the National Army regularly involve themselves in the local war economy, often engage in both open and clandestine military actions against each other, and are largely unaccountable to any actor other than Turkey itself.

The lack of accountability of the numerous National Army groups has deeply impacted their popularity with the population of the Northern Corridor, and National Army combatants are often viewed with suspicion or outright distrust. To that end, Turkey has taken steps to regulate the National Army, primarily by forming a Military Police and local police forces. However, even these actors have been unable to adequately control the National Army armed groups; the Military Police have effectively become just another armed group themselves, and the local police, while more popular, lack real authority and are limited to policing local criminal cases. Ultimately, the only actor which is capable of controlling armed groups in the Northern Corridor is Turkey, making the numerous individual grievances and complaints against armed groups extremely difficult to address.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **CONDUCT DETAILED RISK ANALYSIS.** Many of the armed groups in the Northern Corridor have embedded themselves in the region's economy, especially the cross-border trade. Thus, programs can risk impacting relationships between different National Army armed groups, and also present a potentially lucrative income generation mechanism. Risk analysis should focus on which specific armed groups within the National Army may stand to benefit from individual programs in order to conduct proper mitigation.
- **APPEAL DIRECTLY TO TURKEY.** As noted, armed groups are essentially unaccountable to local governance bodies, local councils, and the police forces. Directly appealing to Turkish authorities in either Gaziantep or Kilis is likely the best means of resolving incidents of armed group interference, and mitigating armed group interference in the future.
- **CONSIDER MOVEMENT AND TRANSPORTATION DIFFICULTIES.** Different armed groups in the National Army often control checkpoints on major highways, ostensibly as security measures but practically as a means of extracting tolls. The movement of goods across the Northern Corridor is thus increasingly challenging, as are concerns for at-risk individuals such as women and some IDP populations.

DISPLACEMENT: SYRIA'S LAST 'SAFE HAVEN'?

Barring their time under ISIS control, the towns of the Northern Corridor have been amongst the largest recipients of IDPs in Syria. This is partly because of massive conflict-related displacement in Syria's most populated city, Aleppo, but also because of the Northern Corridor's proximity to the border and the millions of Syrian refugees living in Turkish territory. The result has been the creation of one of the most diverse populations in terms of area of origin, and the dilution of the area's 'native' population. Those fleeing violence saw their numbers rise even further subsequent to the Euphrates Shield operation, which coincided with massive territorial gains by the Syrian government, and resulted in the organized evacuation of large numbers of people with anti-government sympathies to northern Aleppo. At present, hundreds of thousands of IDPs reside in the Northern Corridor, and are significant minority population.

As the war winds down, the possibility that this number may grow even further must not be ignored. Like northern Aleppo, Idlib governorate has been a major destination for displaced people and those that oppose the government. This area is now under assault however, and it is unclear how long it will remain a place where those unwilling to live under President Al-Assad will be able to find shelter. Similarly, the northeast is officially under a Kurdish administration, but its claims to statehood remain doubtful, and the return of Syrian government authority is probable. As a result, Turkish-administered northern Aleppo represents the only real long-term destination for IDPs seeking to evade the Syrian government and live in an environment of relative security. Should government forces continue to reclaim the northwest of the country, further arrivals to the Northern Corridor therefore become highly probable, and are likely to place an increasingly heavy burden on the Northern Corridor's already over-stretched local resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **MONITOR AND ANTICIPATE POPULATION AND IDP MOVEMENTS.** The Northern Corridor may be stable, but the likelihood of further significant IDP arrivals remains. Monitoring conflict dynamics and population movements in northwestern Syria is strongly advised, particularly given this area hosts many people who are effectively 'on the run' from the Syrian government, unwilling to live under President Al-Assad, and are therefore likely to displace to northern Aleppo should the opposition lose Idlib governorate.
- **SECURE JOBS FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE.** The Northern Corridor's displaced populations are generally well-established in their respective communities, but they suffer disproportionate levels of unemployment and greater financial insecurity. Their prospects for independent recovery are stymied without employment, and many are unlikely to be picked up by Turkish investment in the area's economic development.
- **FUND SHELTER SUPPORT PROGRAMMING.** Over 170,000 people live in camps in the Northern Corridor, with a further 200,000 displaced people scattered mainly in rented accommodation and in the homes of relatives. There is a considerable need for support to improved living arrangements for those in camps, and for rental support to live more independently. Turkish agencies are undertaking housing development programmes in partnership with the Stabilization Committee, and potential complementarities should be explored.
- **BALANCE SUPPORT ACROSS RESIDENTS AND IDPS.** IDPs present with greater needs than resident populations, most notably in terms of food support. However, there is a sense amongst the resident population that IDPs receive disproportionate amounts of aid, and this has contributed to some local social tensions. Anticipating the potential impact of relief and development on intercommunal relationships is an important part of do no harm-related planning.



PART 2:

KEY THEMES

Bakery in Azaz

Credit: Azaz Local Council Facebook Page

1. CONTEXT AND POPULATION

1.1 AREA INTRODUCTION

The Northern Corridor could not have been distilled into a unique area as per the parameters of the NOSAP methodology prior to the current conflict.¹ It is only through the experience of the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield operation in 2016-17 that a measure of cohesion has evolved, producing a distinct region with common political, economic, social and security-related characteristics. This is largely down to Turkey, which not only acts as the area's supervising military authority, but has also adopted many of the functions of the Syrian state, investing heavily since forcing the retreat of ISIS and Kurdish forces. This has led to a unique operating environment for humanitarian and development actors within the Syrian context, and is tantamount to working in a conflict-affected, Turkish-administered proto-state on Syrian soil.

The peculiarity of this environment has received less attention than it likely warrants. More active conflict theatres, such as in northwestern Syria, as well as unresolved questions over the long-term status of areas with complex international components, such as the Kurdish-controlled northeast, represent more immediate priorities in the Syrian conflict. Indeed, compared to conflict dynamics in these locations, the Northern Corridor would appear settled: Although there is a sense of insecurity owing to attacks by YPG and ISIS sleeper cells and intermittent confrontation between National Army member groups, a sharp decline in local humanitarian conditions seems improbable, and foreign parties do not actively contest Turkey's continued occupation.² The long-term status of the Northern Corridor is far from resolved however, and the status of the area poses a number of important long-term questions.

Chief among these is whether Turkey intends to ever leave the region, or whether the operating context will be informed by Turkish control for the foreseeable future. At this time, there are a number of reasons to assess that the latter appears far more likely. On the security front, the issue of Kurdish control along Syria's northern border remains unresolved, and Turkey retains an interest in preventing a resurgence of a Kurdish presence in northern Aleppo. Within the political domain, local council bodies demonstrate only nominal acknowledgement of the opposition government in-exile, the Syrian Interim Government, and are instead subject to the overarching administration of Turkish provincial governments in Kilis and Gaziantep. And in economy, the Northern Corridor demonstrates considerable integration with neighbouring Turkish communities: Commodity prices are generally the same on either side of the border, Turkish banks have opened in major communities, and there is a strong culture of cooperation between Turkish and Syrian chambers of commerce.³

Few definitive statements on Turkey's long-term intentions have been made, but if the Northern Corridor's current rate of integration with the Turkish state continues, it is hard to envisage the Syrian government reclaiming the area politically, and almost certainly not through military means. When approaching the Northern Corridor, one must therefore acknowledge that it has effectively been de facto annexed by Turkey, and this may remain the case indefinitely. With this understood, it is tempting to assume that working with the Turkish government is a more manageable proposition than working in areas under the control of the Syrian government. This is true to a point; however, it demands that intervening aid actors adapt to Turkish policy in what remains a political grey area, and in which the relationships between the 'state' and local actors are informed by distinct political objectives.

¹ On this point, it is worth stating that communities across the area experienced similar socio-economic conditions prior to 2011. Northern rural Aleppo was largely neglected by the Syrian government, was underdeveloped, and suffered a chronic lack of public services. It was largely for these reasons that the opposition was able to take root in the area, though this is little different from many other parts of the country.

² There is certainly opposition to Turkish policy in the Northern Corridor. As would be expected, the Syrian government strongly rejects what it describes as a violation of its sovereignty. Iran similarly rejects the Turkish presence in the area. And the Kurdish Self-Administration views the Turkish intervention as more concerned with putting a stop to Kurdish expansion than defeating ISIS and other groups.

³ If this were not enough, the Northern Corridor's city of most political importance and the headquarters of the Syrian Interim Government, Azaz, has public parks which have been renamed in recognition of the Turkish role in the region.

1.2 STUDY AREA

The Northern Corridor is a predominantly rural area which straddles the northern reaches of Aleppo governorate and the Syria-Turkey border. It is large by the standards of prior NOSAP reports, spanning over 2000 square kilometres. This area which extends eastwards from Azaz, on the border of Afrin, to the Euphrates River at Jarablus, just 40km north of Manbij. Al Bab is also included within the Northern Corridor having been captured by the

Turkish-led offensive in 2017, and is significant for its position on the M4 Highway, which links Syria's most populous city, Aleppo, with the country's eastern governorates. Besides the M4, the landscape is largely unremarkable, and includes few features of strategic or geographic interest. Major communities covered by this report include Azaz, Jarablus, Al Bab, Ar-Ra'ee, Aghtrín, Mare', and Suran.

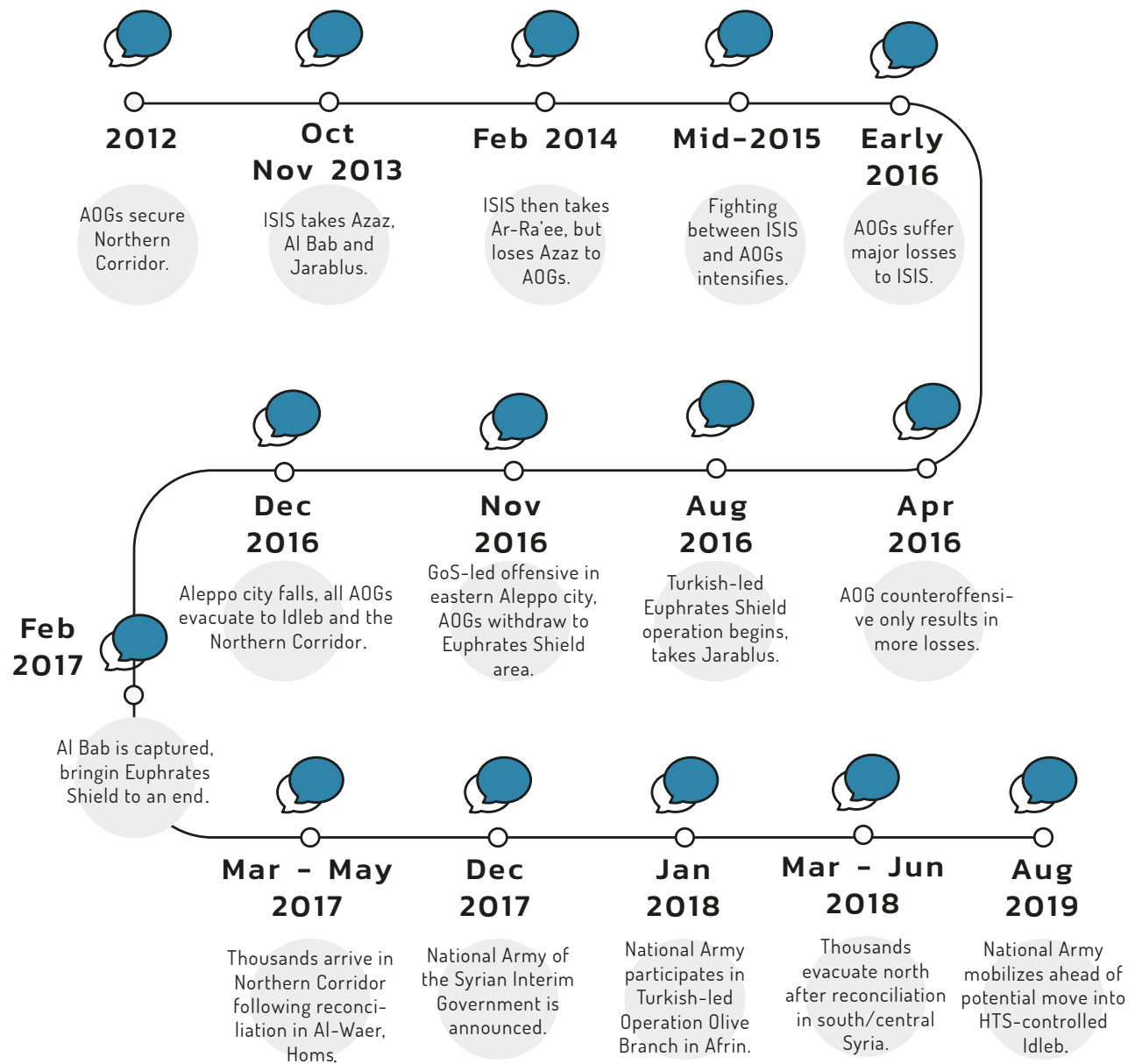


Figure 3. Conflict Timeline

1.3 DISPLACEMENT



*IDPs arriving in Jarablus.
Credit: Geiroom*

Proximity and the prevalence of cross-border family ties drove substantial departures from the Northern Corridor to Turkey in the early years of the Syrian conflict. Precise numbers are difficult to obtain, but over the three years during which armed opposition groups, ISIS, Syrian government forces, and ISIS contested the area (2013-2016), hundreds of thousands of people are thought to have left for Turkey, or were internally displaced to areas outside of ISIS control.

Subsequent to Operation Euphrates Shield and an improvement in local security, returns began in large numbers: 40,000 people returned to the Northern Corridor in the immediate aftermath of the offensive, with this number reaching around 70,000 by the end of 2017. From 2018 onward, the relative stability imposed by Turkey supported further arrivals, with the area becoming a destination for people displaced and/or evacuated by the massive

territorial gains secured by Syrian government forces across south and central parts of the country. People have since been moving into the area on an ongoing basis, but five main waves were observed. First, approximately 20,000 people arrived subsequent to the reconciliation of Al-Waer, in Homs governorate. Second, the Eastern Ghouta reconciliation agreement stipulated the evacuation of fighters, activists and civil servants, of whom 19,181 arrived in northern Aleppo. Third, the Syrian government's capture of Eastern Qalamoun prompted around 8,000 people to evacuate to Jarablus and Al Bab, a number which included former opposition combatants and their families. Fourth, around 10,000 people arrived in the Northern Corridor following the reconciliation of Northern Rural Homs.⁴ And, finally, southern Syria's reconciliation agreement led to 5,000 people moving north, a number mainly including activists and civil society figures.

⁴ 35,000 people were slated to move to northern Aleppo following reconciliation in Northern Rural Homs, but logistical issues at the border between Syrian government and Euphrates Shield territories forced most convoys to be redirected to Hama and Idlib. Eventually, just two of the planned nine convoys actually arrived in the Northern Corridor.

As a result of these movements and a general trend towards displacement to Turkish-held areas, particularly from Idleb governorate, Aleppo city, and Kurdish-controlled areas, there are an estimated 79,019 IDPs residing in the communities listed in Figure 4 (38% of the population in these communities).⁵ These numbers are likely to grow given the Syrian government-led offensive in the northwest will produce further displacement on an ongoing basis, and may ultimately result in large-scale evacuations. This is especially because there are now few options for civilians unwilling to live under Syrian government control except to take to shelter in Turkish-held areas like the Northern Corridor.

Notably, local sources have indicated that IDPs in the Northern Corridor are securing employment opportunities at a greater rate than original residents, and particularly within third sector organizations. This is reportedly due to the higher levels of education and experience among IDP populations within humanitarian and NGO work, especially those arrived from Rural Damascus and Northern Homs. In general, IDPs have greater access to humanitarian assistance than the local resident population, which has created some localized tensions between IDP and non-IDP groups (section 3.1). Despite the complaints of original residents, available data indicates that IDPs demonstrate greater need in most sectors, meaning relief and development agencies must carefully balance their work with public perceptions in order to maintain local accountability and acceptance.

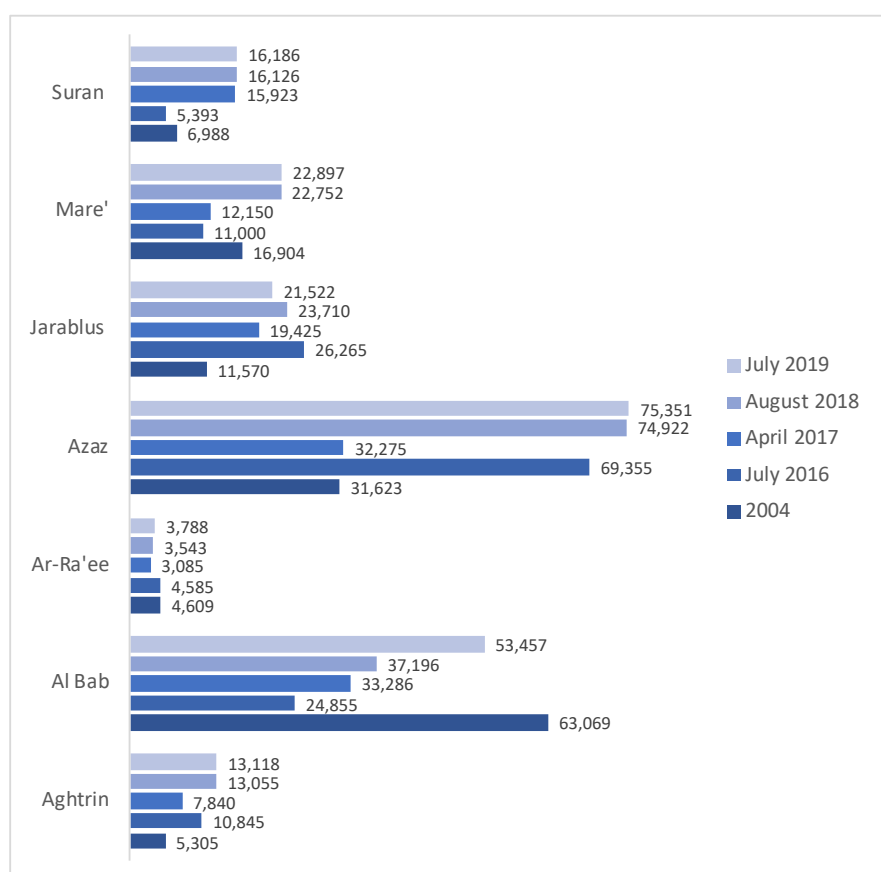


Figure 4. Northern Corridor population numbers in selected communities at: last census (2004), pre-Turkish Intervention (July 2016), post-Euphrates Shield offensive (April 2017), arrival of reconciled populations and others displaced by Syrian government gains (August 2018), and the latest available.

⁵ Local sources estimate that as many as 375,000 IDPs are now present in the entire Northern Corridor, which would be just over half of the area's total population.

1.4 HOUSING, LAND & PROPERTY

There are few critical HLP issues in the Northern Corridor region. Overall, local governance actors do not interfere in property rights or the local housing market, there are several ongoing efforts to regulate property documentation and legal awareness, and efforts to build housing and shelter for IDPs are ongoing. That said, there are several issues of concern: armed groups within the National Army have a history of appropriating property to house their combatants or extract revenues, and rent in the Northern Corridor is both high, and largely unregulated.

First and foremost, the local councils in the Northern Corridor do not significantly interfere in the real estate market. This does have some negative effects - rents are reportedly high due to the fact that landlords and property owners have few rent control regulations. However, in Syria this is a somewhat welcome development, considering how local governance in many Government of Syria-held areas has been instrumentalized in service of mass housing and property appropriation. Indeed, in most major cities in the Northern Corridor local

councils document real estate ownership, and there are real estate registries in every major local council which records all real estate transactions. Mass appropriations of housing are thus unlikely to occur in the Northern Corridor region in the foreseeable future.⁶

However, the fact that local governance actors have not interfered in the housing market and have engaged in property documentation does not mean that these local governance bodies have the authority to prevent HLP abuses. Local sources complain that local councils have a limited capacity to actually enforce housing rights, due to the fact that the councils, courts, and local police are ultimately unable to exert any real authority over the myriad military groups within the National Army. To that end, there are several reported cases in which armed groups within the National Army have seized property from local property owners. Generally, these seizures have been limited, and are confined to the property of individuals who have left the area, Government of Syria supporters, and individuals linked to ISIS or the YPG.

⁶ This should be viewed in stark contrast with the neighboring Turkish-controlled region of Afrin, where mass property appropriations targeting the Kurdish population are reportedly the norm.

2. GOVERNANCE & SERVICES

SECTION SUMMARY

Local councils are the dominant formal governance bodies in the Northern Corridor. Local councils administer different cities and are nominally linked to the Syrian Interim Government; however, local council are in reality much more closely supervised by and answer to Turkish governance bodies in Gaziantep or Kilis.

Local councils are nominally elected by their constituent communities; however, these elections are closely supervised by Turkey, and in practice Turkey essentially selects the composition of these councils. Essentially, nearly all local governance bodies in the Northern Corridor are directly controlled by Turkey, and act as arms of Turkish policy-making in the region.

The primary informal governance bodies in the Northern Corridor are a set of Sheikh's councils, which work closely with local councils. However, their authority is subservient to the local councils, and they generally function as a Turkish-selected public accountability mechanism.

Aid activities are closely controlled and monitored by the Government of Turkey; indeed, registrations and permissions must be secured in Gaziantep or Kilis, as opposed to locally, and Turkish policy mandates that organizations working in the Northern Corridor partner with Turkish organizations such as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority of Turkey (AFAD) or Turkish line ministries.

Services in the Northern Corridor are available and largely affordable to all the civilians in the area. Almost all the public services are provided, coordinated with, and supervised by the Turkish government.

Health and Education are the most well-served sector in the area, with the Government of Turkey rehabilitating and establishing new health centers and schools to accommodate the large needs of the population.

2.1 FORMAL GOVERNANCE: STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS



MUNICIPAL COUNCILS AND THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT

Since the towns of the Northern Corridor fell under opposition control in July 2012, no formal political structures of the Syrian government have been present. Instead, a series of municipal council organizations were formed by political activists and prominent community figures, and have been subject to the controlling influence of the various military and political authorities that have moved into the area since this time. The current configuration and purpose of these councils is informed by the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield intervention of 2016-17,⁷ which led to the disengagement of municipal councils from their founding partners in the armed opposition and their subsequent alignment with the Turkish government. Turkish control over the

Northern Corridor therefore reactivated the role of municipal councils, which had suffered from severe marginalization and disruption during the period that ISIS was in control of much of the area between 2013 and 2016.

Now over two years since the conclusion of the initial Euphrates Shield offensive, municipal councils have re-established themselves as the area's pre-eminent local political structures. This has been achieved by virtue of direct Turkish financial support to councils and a period of sustained calm in which councils have been free to build greater institutional capacity under a more robust security apparatus.⁸ Moreover, Turkey is known to make municipal council staff salary payments, and played a major role in financing critical infrastructure projects shortly after the retreat of ISIS. Shortly after ISIS

⁷ The Turkish-led military operation which led to the seizure of Afrin in early 2018 is sometimes referred to as Euphrates Shield II. Officially, this was called Operation Olive Branch, and concerns a different area to that covered by the original Euphrates Shield operation and the Northern Corridor.

⁸ It should be noted that although the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) is the 'official' governing body for the Northern Corridor's municipalities, it has largely been sidelined by both the Turkish government and municipal councils themselves. In practice, the SIG therefore has no real authority over municipal councils, but may have a role in recovery by virtue of its association with the Stabilization Committee, a civilian body which plays a role in coordinating Turkish-funded relief and development activities (Box 2).

was forced to retreat from Jarablus in 2016, power services were restored, offers were made to connect Northern Corridor and Turkish water networks, and hundreds of aid, construction, and repair vehicles made the journey across the border on a daily basis.

As would be expected, Turkish support to the municipalities of the Northern Corridor has come with considerable levels of Turkish influence. This can range from control over the selection of municipal council officials, to the inclusion of Turkish government representatives, or aldermen, in local decision-making bodies. Turkish influence is formally administered through two Turkey-based gubernatorial offices, in the neighboring provinces of Kilis and Gaziantep (Box 1).

In effect, these provincial governments mirror governorate councils in areas under the control of the Syrian government, but their responsibility to their Syrian subordinate bodies is not formalized and municipal councils operate with mixed levels of independence. Local sources are of the view that Ankara plays a limited role in defining policy in the Northern Corridor, instead leaving coordination and decision-making to mid-ranking mayoral officials in Kilis and Gaziantep. They add that the nature and levels of support provided at the discretion of these officials seldom correlate with the size of the recipient community or the needs therein, suggesting that the criteria informing Turkish provincial council decisions does not adhere to a dedicated policy or budgetary plan.

BOX 1: NORTHERN CORRIDOR, FORMAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

The Northern Corridor is divided into seven subdistricts: Azaz, Suran, Mare', Aghtrin, Ar-Ra'ee, Al Bab, and Jarablus. A dedicated municipal council administers each subdistrict, and oversees the activities of community level local councils within the sub-district to a greater or lesser degree. Local councils tend to be found in larger towns, but with 27 local councils in the Northern Corridor in total, they may also be found in smaller communities. All municipal councils report to a Turkish Provincial Government authority, based either in Gaziantep or Kilis. Eastern sub-districts (Al Bab, Jarablus, and Ar-Ra'ee) have been assigned to Gaziantep, with western parts (Azaz, Mare', Suran, Aghtrin) assigned to Kilis. In line with this structure, the Turkish government has appointed a Turkish alderman-type figure attached to Kilis or Gaziantep to municipal councils as appropriate. This individual monitors and informs council activities.

There is no connection between municipal authorities in the Northern Corridor and those of the Syrian state in government-held areas, neither are there any linkages with governance bodies under the Kurdish Self-Administration. That said, there is some coordination with local council bodies in opposition-held parts of Idlib governorate which do not fall under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Relationships also exist with Ministry of Local Administration bodies under the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), but these are inconsistent, and a number of councils reportedly prefer to define themselves as independent administrations. The SIG is the area's official governing body, but as described in Box 2, it cannot be described as a unifying and authoritative political structure for local governance.

The current Turkish approach allows municipal councils a notable degree of independence. Councils have been free to seek increased autonomy by developing alternative funding streams for administrative and operational expenses. Indeed, most councils engage in some form of tax collection, and are relatively autonomous when it comes to the administration of communities falling within their jurisdiction. This has reportedly strengthened their ability to work more in partnership with the Turkish government than as mere subordinates, and specialized offices have been developed to improve coordination and address specific local needs, particularly with regard to local economic affairs.⁹ That said, some municipal councils do not extend their jurisdiction as widely as might be expected, sometimes leaving communities peripheral to major towns to a local community-level council.¹⁰ Inevitably, this leaves peripheral communities with fewer resources, less direct engagement with Turkish officials, and, ultimately, slower rates of recovery.

Whereas the relationship between the Northern Corridor's municipal councils and the Turkish government functions fairly well, their integration with these community level counterparts is inconsistent. Certainly, the integration of municipal and local councils is robust in some locations, but some local councils operate largely independently from the municipality and are subject to lower levels of municipal and Turkish oversight. Local sources explain the reasons for this can vary, and may include: a lack of established ground rules for coordination; limited local council representation at the municipal level; the desire for some local councils to implement local projects independently; finance and capacity shortfalls at municipal level, and, finally; disharmony between municipal and local council members on local objectives. These

sources added that such differences can — and have — emerged when the two levels of local government are required to coordinate on the delivery of development programming, and even on simpler in-kind aid distributions funded by the Turkish aid agency, AFAD. Leadership quality can also be a factor in this regard, as some city and municipal council leaders are reportedly more active in driving local development and liaising with relevant stakeholders than others.

Variance within municipal performance also derives from the fact that the council election process is widely considered as illegitimate. Carried out under Turkish supervision, local sources report that council elections are thought a 'fiction' by many, and that this lack of accountability can lead to vocal criticism. Where municipal councils fail to meet public expectations, occasional protests demanding the dissolution and re-election of council officials have taken place. Events of this kind have been reported in Azaz, Suran, and Al Bab in the past 12 months. This is often in response to poor service provision and/or evident service quality disparities between neighbouring communities, but accusations of nepotism, corruption, and embezzlement have also emerged and have similarly stimulated public demonstrations. Protests are seldom consequential however, as Turkish government support ensures that the composition of councils remains largely unchanged. Ultimately, municipal councils are accountable only to the Turkish authorities, and Turkey is able to move the levers of local power to ensure that its actions are largely unchallenged.

⁹ This does not apply across the board. Some local councils are more active in strengthening internal capacity than others.

¹⁰ For example, there are local council bodies in the towns of Qabasin and Baza'a, which are both subordinate to the Al Bab municipal council.

BOX 2: THE SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT AND THE STABILIZATION COMMITTEE

The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) is an opposition-affiliated government in-exile which styles itself as the legitimate inheritor of Syria's Ba'athist Council of Ministers and the government of President Al-Assad. Based in Turkey and with a headquarters in Azaz, the SIG is the pre-eminent official Syrian governance authority in the Northern Corridor, and maintains a nominal presence throughout the area. In reality, the SIG's claims to legitimacy have little bearing on the actual machinations of governance in the Northern Corridor. Indeed, most city councils are aligned with the SIG in name only, whilst some even actively refute any association. Most councils in the area would sooner claim themselves as administrators of independent administrative units than profess alignment with the SIG. This is likely a result of Turkish influence and the localized aspirations of local council bodies. As a result, it cannot be said that the SIG is anything like an overarching institutional framework for the consolidation of local council activities and those of the Turkish authorities, nor does it play any substantive role in articulating an official vision for development and recovery.

It should be noted, however, that consultation with the SIG is advisable, particularly in Azaz. This is primarily for the involvement of prominent local SIG figures in the local political fabric, but also because the SIG-affiliated 'Stabilization Committee' is a potentially important local interlocutor for relief, development and stabilization actors. Formed in 2015 under the now defunct Aleppo Revolutionary Council, the Stabilization Committee has since been integrated into the SIG. Staffed primarily by technocrats, it is analogous to the Executive Offices of municipal councils in government-held areas, in so far as it plays a role in coordinating the delivery of donor-funded recovery activities. It has sought to develop linkages between municipal councils, conducts needs assessments, maintains records on resident and IDP populations, and takes a special interest in the reconstruction of infrastructure. It is thought to meet with the largest municipal councils in the area twice monthly in Azaz in an effort to coordinate relief and development work. Attendees are mainly from the Northern Corridor, but meetings have previously included representatives from Menbij, Tel Rifaat, and other Kurdish-controlled areas.

2.2. INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

Despite a strong culture of tribe and family, informal governance actors have a peripheral impact on the administration of the Northern Corridor. Prominent families exert nominal influence through the involvement of notable members in municipal and local council bodies, but there is reportedly limited expression of family interest and opinion through formal governance channels. Some of the area's larger cities nevertheless allow for prominent families to play an informal role in local governance, most notably through the facilitation of so-called 'Sheikh Councils'.

Sheikh Councils are present in Azaz, Jarablus, and Ar-Ra'ee,¹¹ and are comprised mainly of prominent local family leaders. Ordinarily, Sheikh Councils mediate and resolve local disputes, and have been assigned a role in the selection of civil governance bodies. The extent to which the latter is a purely superficial function is difficult to gauge, but the strength of Turkish oversight in the political domain would suggest that Sheikh Councils likely have a limited role in local election processes. Notably, some Sheikh Councils have evolved to serve as a city-wide public body for the monitoring of both civil and military affairs. Entrusted to monitor armed group and council member activities, they therefore serve something of a public accountability function. Again, however, the question as to whom Sheikh Councils are themselves accountable is less than clear-cut: Certainly, they can be expected to act to protect the public interest, but their ability to do to the fullest extent is likely limited when the behaviour of armed groups and local officials is strongly influenced by Turkish interests.

Though the Northern Corridor region is noted for being a tribal region, tribal involvement in local governance is extremely limited at this time. A Tribal Council is present, but this is a largely incipient structure with a voice which rarely

extends further than matters of inter-tribal, inter-familial and individual dispute. The Tribal Council is only activated when the parties concerned consider it an appropriate recourse. It is unlikely to be a form of civil society which will be encountered by relief, development, and stabilization actors.

2.3. AID ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW

Shortly after the Northern Corridor fell under opposition control in 2012, several local organizations implemented programmes to address deteriorating local conditions. Most projects undertaken at this time were focused on relief however, as aid actors working in the area lacked comprehensive plans to strengthen the Northern Corridor's development prospects. This was largely due to limited locally available development-related skills and expertise, a lack of organizational capacity to support large-scale development programmes, and the largely remote cross-border response undertaken by international aid actors. Programmes were therefore constrained by locally available capacity, and owing to the complexity of the operating environment and persistent conflict conditions, this capacity was unable to improve at a rate commensurate with the area's evolving needs.

After falling entirely under Turkish control, the Turkish government sought to consolidate aid work in the Northern Corridor into its own relief and development framework. New procedures were therefore established in mid-2017, which effectively led to a crackdown on Turkey-based cross-border INGOs and a drawdown in local organizations unable to comply with Turkish red tape. Layers of bureaucratic obstacles were implemented by numerous Turkish agencies. For instance, Turkish nationals were required on project staff lists, and detailed accounts of funding and beneficiaries were required which aid actors were seldom able to provide.¹² Hundreds of organizations ceased operations or relocated

¹¹ Local sources report that others are likely present in other cities in the area, but were not able to secure confirmation.

¹² Working overwhelmingly in opposition-held areas, much of the aid response was funded through informal financial vehicles and therefore difficult to account for with accuracy. Access and monitoring was also a challenge for agencies working remotely.

elsewhere in between late-2017 and early 2018, leaving responsibility for the coordination and delivery of the aid response firmly in the hands of the Turkish authorities. Though competent, the Turkish aid system has evidently been unable to meet needs to the same extent as the previously more international response.

Current registration requirements demand that aid actors aspiring to work in the Northern Corridor must obtain a work permit from the Turkish government. To do so, organizations must register with the Turkish provincial government which corresponds to the location in which they intend to implement programming. For work in western sub-districts of the Northern Corridor, namely, Azaz, Suran, Mare', aid actors must register with the local government in Kilis. Work in eastern sub-districts must be obtained from Gaziantep.¹³ Once permission is secured, ongoing project coordination must be undertaken in partnership with the relevant Turkish provincial government and/or Syrian municipal council department. For example, emergency relief programmes should be undertaken via the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), while an education program must be implemented in coordination with the Turkish Education Directorate of the corresponding state. Coordination with municipal councils through a memorandum of understanding is required, and project outcomes must be shared with Turkish provincial government bodies.

These requirements are preliminary steps in a process which is subject to strong Turkish influence, and is littered with several practical restrictions and ethical concerns. Most notably, organizations are obliged to work within sectors and projects determined and approved by the Turkish authorities.

Programmes within food, sanitation, education, health, and security are likely to face fewer obstacles, but basic services are largely off limits given AFAD imposes restrictions on any work related to infrastructure, water, and electricity. Indeed, such projects are ordinarily led by municipal councils in partnership with the Turkish authorities so that tenders can be issued to Turkish contractors only. Such restrictions indicate that potential Turkish government interference in programme selection, and the possibility that political agendas may trump community needs. The latter is obvious in reports that the Turkish government has sought to restrict agencies which are currently working in Kurdish-held parts of Syria.¹⁴ Much of the red tape instituted by the Turkish government in mid-2017 also remains in place, placing heavy administrative burdens on both international and local aid agencies.¹⁵

Presently, AFAD is the ultimate authority for the monitoring, coordination and supervision of all aid and relief projects in the Northern Corridor. Turkish government departments are also heavily involved in the coordination, approval, and implementation of development projects via provincial government ministerial branch offices. As for Syrian NGOs, a number of national organizations have been operating since 2012, most notably Al Ihsan Association, and the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU),¹⁶ and there is a fairly vibrant local civil society. Despite a considerable reduction in the number of international and local aid agencies since the conclusion of the Euphrates Shield operation, approximately 50 national and international NGOs currently work in the Northern Corridor. Most have adapted to and abide by Turkish requirements, are based in Turkey, and deliver programmes primarily within the health and education sectors.

¹³ Working across communities where the oversight of both Turkish provincial administrations applies requires permissions from both Kilis and Gaziantep, potentially delaying project implementation across all desired communities simultaneously.

¹⁴ It is unclear if restrictions on organizations with ongoing programmes in Kurdish-controlled areas has had a negative impact on reconstruction and recovery in the Northern Corridor. Having compounded Turkey's earlier 'purge' of foreign and non-compliant aid organizations, it is unlikely that civilians experience a more responsive aid infrastructure.

¹⁵ For instance, all aid workers are obliged to personally obtain Turkish work permits in order to work in the Northern Corridor, largely to facilitate travel between Syria and Turkey.

¹⁶ Both of which are described in the stakeholders section for this chapter.

2.4 SERVICES OVERVIEW

POWER, WATER & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Compared to other parts in Syria, the Northern Corridor generally experiences better public services, mainly because many are supplied by Turkish private companies. Local reports indicate that electricity is broadly available for everyday use in all Northern Corridor communities, with larger towns having access to state-provided electricity directly from Turkey via the Turkish ET Company (although smaller communities and rural areas are more reliant on generators). Civilians still report electrical needs however, largely because current costs are often too high for the average local salary. It is also important to note that although widely available for personal use, power is still not fully available for industrial and agricultural purposes. Municipal councils of the Northern Corridor have recently sought to play a role in the distribution, allocation, and pricing of electricity in partnership with the Turkish government.

Though water networks are not regarded as heavily damaged, access to potable water is an issue of concern given that the majority of communities are reliant on water trucking. This issue arises from a combination of factors, most pressingly: The high operational cost of extracting water from wells; the inability of municipal councils to cover network expenses without foreign support; and sudden local population growth caused by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Like electrical services, water costs are relatively high compared to an average salary in the Northern Corridor.

Civilians use the Turkish telecommunication companies Turkcell, Vodafone, and Avea for mobile and mobile data. Base stations in Turkey tend to cover most local requirements, but new base stations have been erected deeper into Syrian territory to ensure greater signal consistency. The entry of Turkish telecoms companies into Northern Corridor markets is now over a year old, with Turk Telekom having opened its first branch

in Azaz in mid-2018. Arabic-speaking employees have been hired, and the companies have invested in relatively new infrastructure, with 4.5G mobile data available widely in the area.

ROADS, TRANSPORT, & WASTE

Local sources report considerable damage to roads between towns and communities of the Northern Corridor, largely due to conflict conditions and a failure to comply with vehicle weight regulations. The Turkish government has prioritized road repair through a wide-ranging collection of maintenance and restoration projects, new road construction projects, and the development of routes meeting international standards. The latter has been focused on supporting improved transit between the major towns of the Northern Corridor, Aleppo city, and Turkey, indicating plans for an expansion of current trade volumes. Municipal councils are also devising road repair projects with funding and coordination support from the Turkish government, and there is an expectation that greater numbers of tenders will be issued over the medium term. These will likely be limited to Turkish construction companies.

Public transport projects appear to have been assigned a high priority by local governance actors. Municipal councils have rehabilitated garages in the area's main towns, adapted pricing to make public transport more affordable, and have improved the all around quality and reliability of bus services. This has gone some way to improving public mobility, but local sources are eager that these improvements continue. Although costly, garbage collection services are available in the majority of communities and shelters. These services are provided through municipal councils in coordination with national and international organizations.

HEALTH & EDUCATION

Healthcare is likely the most functional service in the Northern Corridor. The Turkish government has actively repaired hospitals and established

several new hospitals and health centers in Suran, Ar-Ra'ee, Azaz, Mare', and Al Bab. Indeed, local sources report that the newly opened Al-Bab hospital has excellent and wide-ranging medical equipment, as well as numerous specialized care units (obstetrics, surgical theaters, ICU). Reflecting the extensive role assumed by the Turkish government for local service provision, the Al-Bab hospital is administered by the health directorates of Gaziantep and Kilis provincial governments. Some medical cases require transfer to Turkish hospitals, but local sources report this as not problematic and patients are frequently sent for treatment in Turkey. Several health centers have been established by international health organizations in coordination with Turkish health ministries in the area.

Education services are regarded as functional, and fall under the supervision of Turkish Education Directorates in Kilis and Gaziantep. There are approximately 500 schools in the Northern Corridor that accommodate 150,000 students. Education is free, and organizations operating in the area generally provide school supplies, but have no role in administering the quality of education. School curricula are implemented by the SIG,¹⁷ but some subjects have been modified in line with a Turkish worldview, most specifically geography and history. For instance, 'Ottoman occupation' of the Arab world has been redefined as 'Ottoman rule'. Notably, a decision was reached in 2018 by the now defunct Free Aleppo Provincial Council regarding the inclusion of Turkish language instruction in the primary and secondary curricula. This decision has yet to be applied, in part because the Free Aleppo Council is no longer active, but it is notable that numerous schools have nevertheless adopted Turkish language names which reference 'martyrs' that were killed during Operation Euphrates Shield. A combination of the Turkish flag and the flag of the Syrian revolution also appears on official school transcripts. As for higher education, Gaziantep University has

opened an affiliate institution in Jarablus, and the Harran University has similarly done so in Al-Bab.

CIVIL DOCUMENTATION

Civil registry and documentation centers were established in the Northern Corridor soon after the Turkish government assumed control. They are managed by municipal councils and linked to the relevant civil documentation center in Kilis and Gaziantep. Turkey has access to all data provided through local centers. As of early 2018, municipal councils in the Northern Corridor began issuing ID cards for civilians of the area, both residents and IDPs. This comes as part of a series of regulatory measures to unify civil matters in the area and to facilitate administration from the Turkish side. In general, civil registry services are available, affordable and accessible to all individuals looking to document marriages, births, deaths, and other official papers.

GOVERNANCE STAKEHOLDERS

- **KILIS PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT AND MAYOR MEHMET ABDI BULUT:** Turkish government body responsible for the funding and administration of Northern Corridor municipal communities in western areas. Mayor Bulut was recently appointed as Mayor of Kilis subsequent to the Turkish local elections in March 2019.
- **GAZIANTEP PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT AND MAYOR FATIMA ŞAHİN:** Turkish government body responsible for the funding and administration of Northern Corridor municipal communities in eastern areas. Given the limited amount of Ankara-based policy-making on aid and development in the Northern Corridor, Şahin is perhaps the pre-eminent governing official for the Northern Corridor.

¹⁷ Notably, in 2014 the SIG modified Government of Syria official curricula to exclude any reference to the regime, its ideological and Baathist orientations and its totalitarian ideas. The project was funded by the Government of Qatar.

- **SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT:** Government in-exile of the opposition and official governing authority in the Northern Corridor. Based in Azaz. In practice, has limited control over council decision-making and is sidelined by Turkish and the councils themselves. Has minor role in recovery through its association with the Stabilization Committee.
- **STABILIZATION COMMITTEE:** Founded in 2015 under the now defunct Free Aleppo Provincial Council, the Stabilization Committee is now aligned with the Syrian Interim Government. Comprised of technocrats and professional specialists (engineers), the Committee is similar in purpose to municipal level Syrian government Executive Offices. Plays an important role in the coordination and delivery of local and Turkish-funded recovery activities.
- **MUNICIPAL AND LOCAL COUNCILS:** Former opposition-linked governance bodies which have fallen under Turkish influence following the Euphrates Shield operation. Lynchpin of governance in the Northern Corridor, council bodies are critical actors in the coordination of relief and development projects and have a direct line to Turkish governance bodies and ministerial departments.
- **ASSISTANCE COORDINATION UNIT (ACU):** A Syrian national NGO founded in 2012 by the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in Gaziantep. Coordinates emergency assistance to all civilians affected by the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The ACU produces needs assessment reports covering the Northern Corridor and northwestern Syria.
- **AL IHSAN ASSOCIATION:** Large Turkey-based Syrian humanitarian organization which maintains joint agreements with UN agencies to include the World Food Programme, UNICEF, IOM, and UNFPA. Also linked to Gulf aid organizations such as the King Salman Humanitarian Center and Qatar Charitable Organization, as well as the international organizations World Vision, GOAL, CARE, and Save the Children. Reported as having a strong presence in the Northern Corridor.
- **TURKISH IHH:** A Turkish humanitarian relief organization, one of its most important donors is the King Salman Humanitarian Center.
- **TURKISH RED CRESCENT:** Based in Ankara and takes a special interest in development projects in the education, health, and housing sectors. Also implements relief projects and provides camp coordination and management services.

3. COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

SECTION SUMMARY

The social landscape of the Northern Corridor is marked by two major dynamics. First, its incredible diversity, which contains representation from populations from across all of Syria. And second, the mounting ‘Turkification’ of local social identities subsequent to the prominent role of Turkey in the Northern Corridor.

The Northern Corridor is perhaps the most diverse region of Syria. In addition to the local population of predominantly Sunni Arab tribesmen, rural and urban IDPs from across every governorate in Syria have displaced to northern Syria due to the relative stability of the region since the Turkish Euphrates Shield intervention and the forcible evacuations in south and central Syria in 2017 and 2018. Combined with limited access to aid, this has produced numerous social tensions between local and IDP populations, and between IDP populations themselves.

Turkish culture and Turkish social identity is a growing force in the Northern Corridor. Public parks and streets are given Turkish names, the Turkish language is an increasingly prominent part of public life, Turkish curricula are in use in higher education, identification cards are issued by Turkish governance bodies, Turkish passports are often given to prominent individuals, and the economy is closely linked to southern Turkey. More importantly, Turkey remains broadly popular with the general population of the Northern Corridor, and Turkish culture and a Turkish-oriented identity is increasingly supplanting Syrian identity.

The Northern Corridor region is generally tribal, and prominent tribe and large families have traditionally dominated the social landscape. However, tribe and family are primarily social signifiers and dispute mediation mechanisms in the area at this time, and have little impact on local governance. That said, tensions between major families do sometimes escalate into violence.

3.1 COMMUNITY COHESION

The Northern Corridor is a traditionally agrarian society comprised mainly of Sunni Arab tribes, with small Kurdish and Turkman communities scattered on the outskirts of major towns and communities. Social cohesion was high prior to the conflict, which can be attributed to the community's reliance on agriculture, the collective experience of working and trading in the same markets, and shared traditions, identities and tribal kinships. The area accommodates an array of tribes, of which some are original inhabitants of the area, and others have relocated from other parts of Syria as a result of the intense conflict conditions and displacement. Tribes are reportedly limited in their role, and have only recently formed a Tribal Council to mediate local tensions and disputes. The Kurdish community is also a part of the broader tribal landscape in the region, and has little connection to the PKK or other separatist parties, which has mitigated potential tensions with the rest of the population and with the Government of Turkey. The Turkman community, on the other hand, has recently experienced an increased sense of nationalism, which has only been reinforced by the Turkish intervention in the Northern Corridor.

Two main dynamics are identified as informing the area's social landscape in important ways. First, there has been a marked shift in the demography of the area, characterized by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of displaced people from across Syria. This has created tensions between the original population and IDPs, particularly in relation to aid provision. Second, largely due to the sweeping extent of the Turkish intervention in the Northern Corridor, there are signs that locals are increasingly self-identifying with Turkey. Essentially, the region is experiencing a 'Turkification' of the social landscape.

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

In some ways, the Northern Corridor region is one of the most diverse regions of Syria. As mentioned in section 1.3, the area has been a

major displacement destination for many conflict-affected populations since the end of the Euphrates Shield operation. Indeed, in some communities, such as Azaz and Al-Bab, the population of IDPs is larger than the original resident population. As a result, tensions have reportedly emerged between residents and IDPs, especially in relation to aid and humanitarian assistance. Relief and development programmes in the Northern Corridor have tended to target IDPs and poor individuals. But given the scarcity of livelihoods and resources, local sources indicate that the resident population has grown increasingly dissatisfied with the distribution of aid, often perceiving that IDP communities receive a disproportionate focus from aid actors. Moreover, tensions and competitions between major families and social groups residing in the area have been recorded on several occasions. In part, this is due to the fact that humanitarian assistance in the Northern Corridor has generally been provided based on the number of members within a family, which disadvantages large families, and creates inter-familial tensions.

Given the ongoing conflict in northwestern Syria, the potential for further large-scale displacements to the communities in the Northern Corridor remains high. The humanitarian needs of the overall Northern Corridor population is therefore likely to deteriorate to some degree, and more pressure will be placed on aid agencies to ensure equal and fair provision of assistance. To that end, an appropriate examination of beneficiary demographics within both camps and communities should be a key component of program design in order to ensure an equitable distribution of aid to all segments of the community.

'TURKIFICATION'

Historically, the Turkish population of Gaziantep and Kilis and the communities of the Northern Corridor have had amicable relations and close kinship ties due to their geographic proximity, similar cultures, and shared religion. Widespread trade and business relations also contributed to strong ties between the Turkish and Syrian

communities on both sides of the border. Additionally, large numbers of the population of the Northern Corridor have displaced or evacuated to Turkey since 2011. Indeed, the majority of large families in the area currently have relatives residing in Turkey that frequently send remittances to Syria. A positive view of Turkey is common across the large majority of the population owing to the role the Turkish government has played in sheltering the population from conflict and providing relief and assistance to the population.

Since the Euphrates Shield intervention, signs that a new social identity linked to Turkey are manifesting. Branches of Turkish public universities were opened in Al Bab, Azaz, and Jarablus and started receiving students for the 2018/2019 academic year. Six branches of the Turkish National Post office (PTT) were established in Azaz, Mare', Jarablus, Al Bab and Ar-Ra'ee in order to facilitate salary payments and remittances from Turkey. The Turkish language is increasingly learned and spoken. For example, in Suran, street signs were replaced to show directions in the Turkish language,¹⁸ while in other towns, several parks and squares were given Turkish names, such as 'Ottoman National Park', or 'Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Square'.

Many Syrians in the Northern Corridor are also becoming administratively linked to Turkey. It is common for Syrians working in positions of authority, such as municipal council members, to receive Turkish passports. Syrian ID cards are also linked to the Turkish government, and have been integrated into the Turkish civil records systems in Hatay, Kilis and Gaziantep. The Turkmen community in particular is closely linking itself to a Turkish identity, and the already small differences between 'Turkmen' and 'Turkish' culture are being increasingly downplayed. However, it is the case that many Syrians in the Northern Corridor have a more positive view of the Turkish government than the Syrian government, and considering the growing influence of Turkey in nearly every

aspect of civic life, Turkish cultural influence is progressively becoming a dominant force in local society. In future, the process of 'Turkification' may diminish the 'Syrian' identities in the area, particularly for the IDPs that are unlikely to ever return to their home communities.

3.2 GENDER

Gender-based discrimination is an enduring component of the social fabric and traditional conservatism that prevails in communities in the Northern Corridor both prior to and during the conflict. Reflecting the reality of many rural communities in Syria, women in the Northern Corridor have traditionally been marginalized from participating in the Syrian workforce, and generally enjoyed little political influence in society. Traditional gender dynamics in the Northern Corridor have however increasingly transformed in tandem with the ongoing conflict. This transformation has caused a restructuring of the household, where women now often must assume the role of breadwinners and main decision-makers.

Indeed, as a result of ongoing conflict, women's participation in the workforce has increased, although women remain uniquely restricted in several ways. The need for women to secure household income grew with the widespread conscription and detention of adult males, and more women therefore began to seek out employment. Working women are certainly experiencing challenges related to these transforming dynamics, as many still struggle to find suitable jobs. Additionally, gender hierarchies are reinforced within the workforce; men are often granted leadership positions in the majority of organisations, and women are largely excluded from decision-making positions. Moreover, the prevalence of early marriages in the region, and the high rates of poverty and illiteracy amongst local populations further curtail women's involvement in the workforce. Widespread violence has

18 For more information see Al-Markieh (2019) [Turkification of Northern Syria](#).

also affected women in particular, as women's freedom of movement has been restricted not only by patriarchal norms, but also fears of sexual violence at checkpoints throughout the Northern Corridor.

SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- **LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY:** Compared with areas under the control of the Syrian government, the Northern Corridor hosts a fairly vibrant civil society. Certainly, Turkish controls over the third sector operating environment have made it difficult for smaller organizations to adapt to the bureaucratic demands of working in the area. But there is nevertheless a climate in which civil society can operate without severe interference from the governing authorities (armed and political), and the growth of local organizations should therefore be encouraged.
- **SHEIKH COUNCILS:** Informal governance bodies located primarily in the Northern Corridor's larger communities. Sheikh Councils are comprised mainly of prominent local family leaders but and ordinarily play a role in mediating and resolving local disputes. They have some informal governance functions within municipal councils. Perhaps the most significant vehicle for the expression of prominent family influence in the area, but this is bound by the norms of the Sheikh Council, is diluted by the sheer diversity of the Northern Corridor, and individual families are not regarded as especially influential.
- **TRIBAL COUNCIL:** An informal grouping which is called upon to primarily resolve inter-tribal, inter-familial, and individual disputes. Not regarded as especially influential and called upon by civilians on and as - necessary basis.

4. ECONOMY

SECTION SUMMARY

The economy of the Northern Corridor has improved since the Euphrates Shield intervention. Turkey has devoted considerable resources to local economic recovery, integrating elements of the Northern Corridor economy with the economy of southern Turkey. However, the benefits of this economic revitalization have not been spread amongst the entire population; local elites and Turkish businessmen certainly benefit the most from local economic opportunities, and nearly 80% of the population is below the poverty line.

The Northern Corridor's economy has been traditionally based on agriculture. Local agriculture had diminished even before the conflict due to government policy and the conflict has only further impacted agricultural production though infrastructure damages and the loss of internal markets.

Even before the war, a thriving cross-border trade with Turkey had developed in the Northern Corridor. However, much of this fell into a 'shadow economy' dominated by smuggling, informal businesses, and armed gangs. This situation has continued (and expanded) throughout the conflict, and the informal shadow economy now dwarfs the formal economy despite Turkey acting as the new governing authority.

Turkey has prioritized the reconstruction of local economic and financial infrastructure, and integrating this infrastructure into the Turkish economy. This includes rebuilding or reforming local chambers of commerce and the banking sector. Indeed, chambers of commerce in particular are increasingly acting as the dominant local economic entities in major communities.

4.1 SECTORAL OVERVIEW



*Türk Telekom Opens A Branch in Al Bab.
Credit: Enab Baladi*

PRE-WAR, CONFLICT, AND PRE-EUPHRATES SHIELD

Agriculture was the Northern Corridor's most important sector as a proportion of total trade prior to the Syrian conflict. Like other rural areas in Syria, the Northern Corridor's reliance on farming proved a major economic weakness from the outset of Bashar Al-Assad's presidency. Very generally, Al-Assad's decision to shift Syria's macro-economic policy from one focused on agriculture and self-sufficiency to one of urban and industrial development contributed to a major economic decline in the Northern Corridor. For instance, even prior to the Syrian conflict, just 50% of livestock breeder fodder needs were available at affordable prices after government-supplied feed was discontinued, causing inevitable knock-on effects for production output and quality. Heightened unemployment followed, and as the

conflict intensified, local infrastructure and access to internal markets declined, and the 'shadow' economy soon came to dominate the Northern Corridor region.

Much of the Northern Corridor's shadow economy revolved around the import and export of goods across the Turkey-Syria border, by both legal and illegal means. Cross-border trade was large-scale and organized, and also involved even the most small-scale traders seeking a living in a broader climate of economic decline. As resources grew ever scarcer in the pre-war period, control over commodities, access routes, and border crossings became increasingly contested by armed gangs. This competition evolved into full-blown conflict with the onset of the Syrian war, as gangs

morphed into militias and fought one another for dominance over critical supply lines to and from Turkey. As conflict in northern Aleppo grew more complex, these militias would later confront Syrian government forces, the Kurdish Syrian Defence Forces, and ISIS. Under these conditions, the shadow economy became so critical to the Northern Corridor's economy that it drew practically every part of society into a perverse web of economic interdependence.

AGRICULTURE

With an estimated 100,000 hectares of cultivated land, the Northern Corridor's pre-war economy was rooted in agriculture. Local sources estimate around 75% of agricultural land in the area was dedicated to the cultivation of grains and fruit trees, indicating a fairly homogenous rural economy. Most agricultural output was committed to Syrian markets, particularly Aleppo city, with a fairly limited number of food-, fertilizer-, seed-, and pesticide-related SMEs harnessing the Northern Corridor's proximity to Turkey to any notable extent. Grains were (and remain) the area's most important crop by some margin. Wheat constitutes the lion's share of winter crop production, and barley is grown widely in summer. With the exception of the countryside surrounding Al Bab, the lands of the Northern Corridor are predominantly rain-fed, and are sensitive to rainfall fluctuations and drought. Indeed, northern Aleppo experienced the most profound decreases in agricultural production of any Syrian governorate following the 2014 drought. When compared with pre-war averages, wheat and barley production fell by one third in ISIS-held areas, and by a massive 60% in areas under the control of the opposition.¹⁹

Evidently, the differences in production levels under conditions of drought in ISIS and non-ISIS areas highlight that a considerable proportion of agricultural decline in the Northern Corridor was linked to conflict-related effects which varied across communities. This was often a symptom of acutely local war economies and the availability, price, and quality of agricultural inputs that local armed actors were willing and able to provide by means of cross-border or cross-line relationships with Turkey, the Syrian government, ISIS, and other armed groups. Globally, however, agriculture in the Northern Corridor faced many of the same issues as those witnessed by farming communities elsewhere in Syria: Public and private infrastructure had suffered high levels of damage and looting; market access was constrained by front lines, export restrictions, checkpoint tariffs, and significant damage to Aleppo city; and state-administered agricultural support services had largely fallen away.

SHADOW ECONOMY

Having hosted well established smuggling networks for decades, the expansion of the shadow economy was an inevitable consequence of the Northern Corridor's economic decline. Just 5km from the Bab Al-Salameh Syria-Turkey border crossing, Aza'z was among the centres of this activity, but practically all of Syria's northern border towns were involved in the shadow economy to some extent. Indeed, in the pre-war years, the Northern Corridor was renowned as a key site for the (legal and illegal) export of Syrian fuel derivatives for significant profit,²⁰ whilst cars, electronics, and medicines were brought in from Turkey for sale at far more favourable prices than were available locally. In collusion with customs officials, Syrian brokers were the engines behind this trade, but as it became an increasingly popular source of income, it also became an increasingly

19 Jaadar, H., Woertz, E. (2016) [Agriculture as a funding source of ISIS: A GIS and remote sensing analysis](#), Food Policy, 64, pp 14-25.

20 In 2006, 10 litres of fuel were priced at \$1 in Syria and \$15 in Turkey. As a result, many people in the Northern Corridor developed their own 'micro-refineries' to process oil products for sale in Turkish markets. The trade was so profitable that it was not uncommon for traders to even carry small amounts across the border on horseback.

contested one. Gangs of smugglers began to arm themselves against one another and would often resort to violence which the government did little to prevent.²¹

The rise of the opposition in 2012 saw armed groups leverage these networks in order to support their political-military objectives. The armed group which forced the retreat of Syrian government forces from Azaz, Asifet Ash-Shamal, was led by a local smuggler-turned fighter, Omar Dadikhi. Like his many counterparts with a localized monopoly on violence, Dadikhi was known to have used his background in smuggling to support his militia during opposition control, both through the sale and supply of ordinary and illicit goods. Allegations of war profiteering against such groups were frequent at this time, and their activities expanded to such an extent that civil bodies were unable to regulate their behaviour and protect the public interest. Relationships between the political and military opposition reached breaking point when local warehouses and aid assets were raided, and protection money was extorted from business owners and wealthy individuals. Given the absence of alternative economic resources however, opposition military actors had little choice but to capture local assets and supply in service of their own survivability. The inevitable side-effect was to drive a wedge between political and military sides of the opposition, effectively marking the beginning of the end for the revolutionary component of the uprisings in the area. These events also highlighted the near total breakdown of commercial activity conducted via formal channels and the importance of the shadow economy to the functions of ordinary society.

When ISIS moved into much of the Northern Corridor in 2013, it dragged many of the Northern Corridor's war profiteers, traders, brokers, businesses, factories and ordinary citizens into its own oil and taxation-based economy. This had the effect of generating interdependence between parties which were simultaneously at war with one another: Armed groups needed oil for military operations, civilians and business needed fuel for everyday purposes, and ISIS needed buyers. This perverse system of mutual benefit was not without conflict as ISIS, local armed groups, Syrian government forces, and the Syrian Democratic Forces fought over lucrative supply routes from Turkey to Aleppo city and beyond – much in the same way that armed opposition groups had done when the area was exclusively under their control. Competition over the spoils of the shadow economy persisted throughout the multi-pronged anti-ISIS campaigns launched by the U.S.-led coalition, the Russian military, Kurdish forces, and the Syrian government, lasting up until the Euphrates Shield operation in 2016-17. This ostensibly brought border crossings, brokers, local armed groups and other shadow economy actors and assets under the Turkish umbrella. But as is touched upon both later in this chapter and in that on security, disputes between armed actors over the lucrative shadow economy remain a source of frequent instability.

21 A local mayor from Homs governorate [stated](#) in 2007 that the government had established laws to prevent local security forces from intervening in the smuggling trade and addressing smuggling-related violence.

EUPHRATES SHIELD AND TURKISH CONTROL

Conflict in the Northern Corridor has inevitably led to the destruction of local infrastructure and the flight of much of the area's human and industrial capital. Fighting throughout Aleppo governorate, and particularly in Aleppo city, has similarly weakened the area's prospects for economic recovery, having effectively decimated the Northern Corridor's most important market for local agricultural and manufacturing output. These effects have combined with macro-economic issues within the broader Syrian economy, such as a massive decline in value of the Syrian Pound, and have contributed to a dramatic increase in unemployment rates and a severe deterioration in household incomes. Around three quarters of the population have moved into the informal and shadow economies to help make ends meet, and estimates from local sources fix unemployment in the Northern Corridor at over 60%.

These numbers are likely better than they might have been if the Turkish government were not currently acting as the area's de facto governing authority. Indeed, conditions in the area may be poor, but Turkey has played a major role in helping to stabilize the local economy, revive capital flows, and arrest the decline in living standards. It has achieved this in two main ways: First, by developing the Northern Corridor's economic, financial, and physical infrastructure, and; second, by increasing trade volumes through the Ar-Ra'ee, Jarablus and Bab Al-Salameh international border crossings. Evidently, this support has not been out of pure benevolence. Turkey stands to gain a great deal from strengthening its grip over the Northern Corridor's economic assets. Not only will it diminish the prospects of Kurdish actors gaining a foothold in the area, thereby fulfilling one of its national security objectives, Turkey will also profit from easier trade access to Syrian and Gulf state export markets, with Azaz, Mare', and Ar-Ra'ee

likely serving as anchors for the expansion of Turkish economic activity down to Aleppo city and along the M4 and M5 highways.

TURKISH INVESTMENT IN LOCAL ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Turkey's investment in the Northern Corridor has been considerable. Besides providing direct funding to municipal councils to administer public service development projects, the most significant Turkish investment has been in the area's economic and financial infrastructure. Indeed, this has had an important enabling effect on private investment and public spending, and has served as the foundation for the area's incipient economic recovery and steadily improving socio-economic conditions.

Municipal councils and the Stabilization Committee have been deployed as Turkey's most important political instruments for rebuilding the local economy. Both entities have received financial and technical support to accelerate recovery, leading to the launch of a range of initiatives such as housing projects and industrial city development programmes.²² Specialized offices within councils have also been created to address the economic challenges presented by different sectors, and are complemented by local chambers of commerce and industry in key towns, each of which were established shortly after Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation and likely with Turkish support.

In the absence of an official regulatory regime, local chambers of commerce have taken a leading role in supervising economic development, performing a variety of important monitoring, regulatory, and relationship management functions. For example, the 200-strong Azaz Chamber maintains the business records of its members, works to resolve issues between Syrian businesspeople and the Turkish government, records import and export information at the Bab Al-Salama border crossing,

²² The most successful industrial city development in the Northern Corridor is found in Al Bab and is administered by the Al Bab Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

and undertakes periodic reviews of member activity. Other Chambers in the area vary in size and capacity, but are known to variously conduct business surveys, collect trade statistics, administer industrial city activity, and play an important role in coordinating local business activity with Turkish officials and business figures, often through municipal council platforms. Notably, Turkey has also established an office for its own 'Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen of Turkey' in Suran, in Azaz sub-district. This body has been tasked with building partnerships with local capital in the Northern Corridor, expanding Turkish trade and construction opportunities, conducting local studies, and identifying opportunities for Turkish business in the area.

Turkish support to the Northern Corridor's basic financial infrastructure is also found in banking. No state banking services have been available in the area since the opposition secured control in 2012, and there is no presiding financial authority to oversee the conduct of financial service firms. The hawala industry has therefore exploded, and has become an important alternative for cash transfers and currency exchange, as well as a critical lifeline for dispersed family units, to include thousands of Northern Corridor refugees sending remittances home to northern Aleppo from Turkey. Informal banking services lack the capacity to support the kinds of activities necessary for the Northern Corridor's reconstruction however, and Turkey has begun to permit the Turkish Post to open branches in the area to provide more formal banking products to businesses and consumers. At present, the Turkish Post is known to facilitate salary payments to staff of Turkish-affiliated local institutions, Turkey-Syria bank transfers, and provides a local bill payment and cash collection service. There are also reports that Turkey is attempting to wrestle control over financial inflows from hawalas and the black market, seeking to regulate money transfer through the bodies of the Turkish Central Bank.

In line with its probable economic objectives in the Northern Corridor, Turkey has demonstrated strong interest in the rehabilitation of the area's poorly maintained road network and the creation of new routes which meet international standards. At this time, discussions are thought to focus on facilitating commercial transit via the Northern Corridor's three international border crossings at Ar-Ra'ee, Jarablus, and Bab Al-Salameh. Commercial traffic via these locations has seen a notable increase since border crossing administration was handed to the relevant municipal council after the Euphrates Shield operation, and plans to improve trade routes are likely concerned with increasing Turkish exports to Syria and further afield via Syria's M5 and M4 highways. In effect, Turkey seems set upon using the border towns as a foothold in an expanded land-based trade network reaching into Syria, the Gulf, and beyond.²³ Reconstruction of this kind also offers considerable opportunities for Turkish construction companies, and Turkey is reported to have expressed an interest in playing a major role in the reconstruction of Aleppo city and Aleppo governorate in general.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Trade volumes from Turkey to the Northern Corridor have reportedly increased in the past two years and have helped resolve many of the area's economic problems by increasing capital flows and reviving commercial and industrial activity. Most of this trade has been one way, with regulatory and product certification issues meaning few Syrian goods from the Northern Corridor are sent across the border. Indeed, only a limited number of agricultural items are approved for export. Despite the current trade imbalance, the supply of Turkish goods into Northern Corridor markets has greatly relieved supply shortfalls of key items such as food and building materials, and has contributed to a general improvement in the quality, availability, and price of market goods. Local sources report

²³ Of note, roadworks undertaken in the area so far have been carried out through a Turkish-financed tender process. Upon securing a contract, Turkish construction companies work in coordination with municipal council service office departments.

that prices have stabilized, and in fact now largely match prices across the border.

As would be expected for a proto-state lacking a dedicated authority for the management of the economy, trade rules are practically absent in the Northern Corridor. Commerce is conducted and regulated largely at the discretion of Turkish and Syrian merchants and intermediaries, and is independent of a formalized tax or regulatory regime. Some municipal councils have sought to bring this under their control, but the reality is that powerful local shadow economy actors gain a great deal from moderating their own terms of trade, even if this results in frequent confrontation, competition and conflict. The risk of diversion, tax avoidance, and illegal shipments is therefore high, and poses some largely unavoidable risks to aid actors around procurement. It is also the case that, in a context where the most powerful market actors set the terms of commerce, the dividends of an improving economy may be extracted by Syrian and Turkish business figures.

4.2 OPPORTUNITIES

The Northern Corridor's economy is recovering steadily owing to the broadly stabilizing role played by Turkey, as well as the investment of the Turkish government into the area's financial and physical infrastructure. This presents numerous opportunities for humanitarian, development, and stabilization actors providing they work to address emergency and developmental needs within the parameters set by the Turkish government. Indeed, with livelihoods cited by both residents and IDPs as their highest priority need, aid organizations should look to capitalize on Turkish investment to support job creation within sectors most commonly approved by the Turkish authorities, namely food, sanitation, education, and health, specifically within the formal economy.

Stimulating formal employment within these sectors is an important response to the prevalence of the local shadow economy, which is linked to several of the area's most troubling issues, to include continued conflict between local armed groups. Higher levels of formal employment will also help combat Turkish economic opportunism in a post-war Syria, and help ensure that the dividends of the Northern Corridor's incipient economic recovery are more favourably balanced between local communities and the Turkish and local enterprise which is currently setting the rules of the game. Primary areas of focus should be within agri-business support programmes, particularly those which harness the area's improving connectivity with Syrian markets. Given the decimation of Aleppo and the greater value in Turkish markets, effort might also be well spent in helping Syrian exports to overcome Turkish regulatory and certification barriers.

Information on how to support economic development in the Northern Corridor is widely available and presents growing opportunities for private sector partnerships. Syrian Chambers of Commerce are active, are linked to local governance bodies, and have an excellent view of the local economic landscape. Similarly, the Stabilization Committee is also likely to have useful insights into Turkish investment given its role in coordinating Turkish-funded recovery activities. Given this level of access and the mounting activity of the private sector in the Northern Corridor, the potential for complementing private sector investment is relatively strong and is encouraged. Evidently, the extent of the shadow economy demands that such initiatives carefully assess the possibility that they will reinforce negative local dynamics and disempower conflict-affected populations.

ECONOMIC STAKEHOLDERS

- LOCAL CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY:** Civilian bodies established in the wake of Euphrates Shield and likely with Turkish support. Concerned mainly with the development of the business interests of its members through building trade relationships, Chambers in the Northern Corridor have developed additional functions within regulation and monitoring of local commercial activity. Funded by local municipal councils and linked closely to both Turkish business counterparts and the Turkish government.

 - AZAZ CHAMBER OF COMMERCE:** More than 200 member organizations. Aside from ordinary Chamber activities: Maintains business records, mediates Turkish-Syrian trader issues, issues entry/exit permit documentation at Bab Al-Salameh crossing. Receives financial support from the Azaz municipal council. Strong relationships with Turkish businesses and the Provincial Government of Kilis.
 - AL BAB CHAMBER OF COMMERCE:** Linked to Al Bab municipal council and shares some revenues with local governance bodies. Besides ordinary Chamber functions, is known to collect statistics on business operations in Al Bab and administer the industrial city. Coordinates closely with Turkish counterparts and the Provincial Government of Gaziantep.
 - JARABLUS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE:** Linked to Turkish counterparts and coordinates with the Turkish Provincial Government in Gaziantep. Maintains a working relationship with the Al Bab Chamber of Commerce and seeks to position itself between local and foreign businesspeople.
 - MARE' CHAMBER OF COMMERCE:** Financially dependent on the Azaz municipal council but provides some revenue in return. Linked to Turkish Provincial Government in Kilis and coordinates with counterpart Turkish Chambers.
- STABILIZATION COMMITTEE:** Serves as a platform for the coordination of recovery programming across the Northern Corridor and areas where the Syrian Interim Government has a presence. Mainly works with municipal councils, but given the relationship of these councils with Chambers of Commerce, will necessarily extend to initiatives involving business.
- ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT INDUSTRIALISTS AND BUSINESSMEN OF TURKEY:** Headquartered in Istanbul and established in 1990. Has opened a branch office in Suran concerned with building partnerships with local businesses in the Northern Corridor as a means to explore commercial opportunities for Turkish business. Conducts studies and shares information with Turkish businesses, and provides advisory services to Turkish business on project selection.
- TURKISH PRIVATE SECTOR:** Turkish businesses are increasingly entering the Northern Corridor's marketplace and range from banks to mobile telecoms companies. For example, the Turkish Postal Corporation established banking and postal services in the Northern Corridor in 2017, now has a bank branch in every major city in the area, and is reportedly working with Turkish provincial governments in Kilis and Gaziantep to develop the local banking sector.

5. SECURITY

SECTION SUMMARY

The Northern Corridor is insecure because security actors are deeply uncoordinated, openly competitive, and regularly abusive to the local civilian population.

The National Army is the area's primary security actor and is ultimately the source of much local instability. The Turkish government formed the National Army in late-2017 under the auspices of the Syrian Interim Government, primarily as a mechanism to unify the different Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in northern Aleppo.

The National Army is not a unified actor however, and is more of an umbrella designation for its myriad constituent groups. Turkey retains command over the strategic coordination of National Army members, but they largely act independently at the local level and do not report to the SIG's Ministry of Defence. Member groups are not only local, but originate from across Syria. Numerous internal grievances are found within the National Army, with groups regularly compete for local resources. The only factor unifying members is the fact that they are all individually backed by Turkey.

National Army groups are often deeply unpopular with the local civilian population. They regularly extract resources from local businesses and checkpoints, frequently commit abuses against civilians, and often engage in clashes and asymmetric attacks against one another.

There are two separate police forces in the Northern Corridor: A Military Police Force, which is intended to regulate different National Army groups, and a civilian police force which manages internal security and criminal activity. Both have engaged in conflict with each other and with National Army groups, and struggle to maintain order in a relatively lawless security environment.

In addition to regular conflict and tensions between National Army groups, ISIS and YPG sleeper cells regularly conduct attacks throughout the Northern Corridor. So long as the security actors in the area remain uncoordinated and mutually hostile, the security situation will remain unstable.

5.1 INTRODUCTION



*National Army in the Northern Corridor.
Credit: Enab Baladi*

Like the rest of the Northern Corridor region, Turkish policy dominates the security dynamics in nearly every respect. Up until the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield intervention in August 2016, the large majority of the Northern Corridor was under the control of either ISIS, with a lesser presence of a collection of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups based in northern Aleppo. Following the completion of the Euphrates Shield offensive in March 2017, Turkey has found itself in control of a large, highly diverse, and deeply insecure region controlled by a plethora of armed opposition groups that were practically only unified by the fact that they were all supported by Turkey.

To that end, Turkey (alongside the SIG) created the National Army to unify the area's disparate armed groups under a single umbrella. Naturally, this was a highly challenging process. Though every armed group in the Northern Corridor now sits within the National Army (which itself nominally sits under the SIG Ministry of Defence), individual armed groups maintain their distinctive identities, and there are serious tensions between different armed groups based on past disputes, areas of

origin, or competition over local resources. To some extent, Turkey contributes to these divisions in so far as it continues to fund each group separately, as opposed to solely funding the National Army to then distribute payments. Turkey therefore retains significant control over each individual armed group, while the National Army itself is rather more an 'umbrella' designation than a unified body.

Divisions within the National Army have led to a state of insecurity throughout the Northern Corridor, as constituent groups regularly clash with, or target one another as well as the military and civilian police. This insecurity is compounded by the fact that the YPG and ISIS maintain sleeper cells throughout the area and conduct regular asymmetric attacks. Presently, differentiating between YPG attacks, ISIS attacks, and National Army disputes is extremely difficult, which contributes to a general state of lawlessness throughout the area. This is unlikely to change so long as the National Army remains a disjointed and unaccountable group that is unable to control its constituent parts.

5.2 MILITARY/SECURITY OVERVIEW

As noted, the constituent members of the National Army are the primary military authority in the Northern Corridor. However, there are also two distinct police forces with differing mandates and levels of effectiveness which govern local disputes between armed groups and local criminal proceedings. Ultimately, whilst National Army armed groups are often at odds with one another, and are an occasional local security threat in their own right, Turkey retains significant control over each individual group and has the capacity to apply pressure should they engage in egregious community abuses or act outside of Turkish policy.

THE NATIONAL ARMY

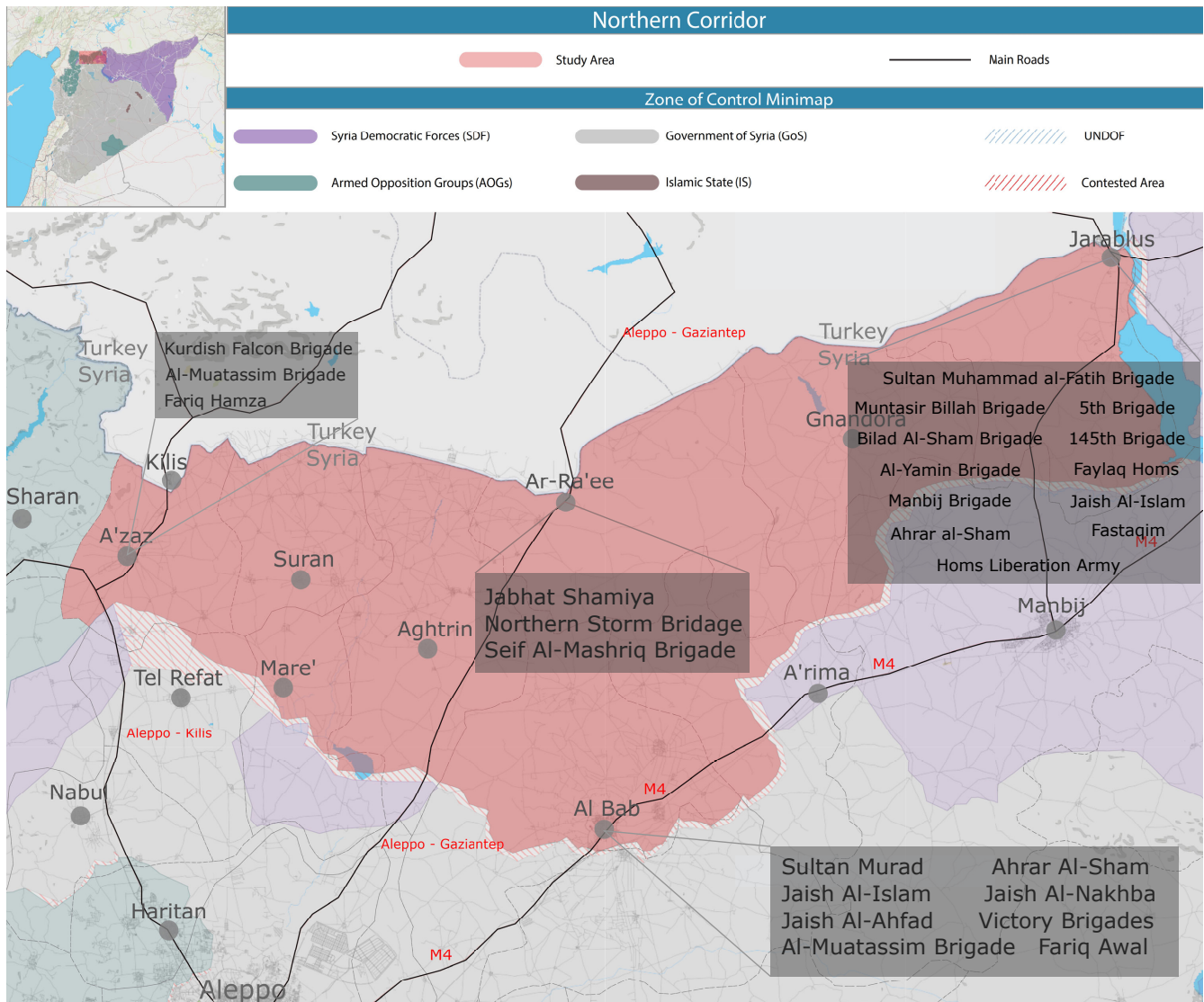
The National Army began its formation in October 2017, and was officially announced in December 2017. It is divided into four ‘corps’, each of which contains three divisions. The structure of the National Army is less relevant than its constituent groups however, which practically represent distinct military units. There are at least 25 different distinct armed opposition groups within the National Army. Each group is nominally assigned a different city and region in which they are based, although practically there is considerable intermixing between the different groups. The most powerful and influential individual armed groups are: The Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih Brigade and the Muntasir Billah Brigade (both based in Jarablus); Jaish Al-Islam (based in Jarablus and Al Bab);²⁴ Sultan Murad (based in Al Bab); Fariq Hamza (based in Azaz); the Al-Mutassim Brigade (based in Azaz and Al Bab); and Jabhat Shamiya (based in Ar-Ra’ee). Turkey reportedly funds each group individually, and combatants are provided a monthly salary in addition to regular rations.

There are two major sources of tension within the National Army. The first is the fact that there is considerable intermixing between different

groups, and considerable competition over local resources. Essentially, while each group is assigned to and strongest within one city, most groups do not adhere to these assignments. Many armed groups therefore maintain positions along commercial roads and valuable agricultural lands, especially in the region between Ar-Ra’ee and Al Bab, as well as at important cross-line crossing points. The second major source of tension is the diverse range of areas of origin of different armed opposition groups. Some, such as Jabhat Shamiya and Sultan Murad, are local to northern Aleppo, whereas others, such as Furqat Hamza and Sultan Sleiman, are primarily tribesmen from Eastern Syria. Others still are comprised of evacuated combatants from south and central Syria, such as Jaish Al-Islam and Faylaq Homs. This varied National Army group profile means they are seldom united by place, contributing to increased contestation of lucrative local assets and intermittent open clashes between National Army groups. Clashes generally require mediation from Turkish representatives, and often the threat of punishment or the withdrawal of salaries is used to reassert control.

Many National Army groups have an extremely poor reputation with the civilian population. National Army groups are accused of abusing civilians in a variety of ways: appropriating property; confiscating goods at checkpoints; arbitrary killings; and sexual abuses are reported on a semi-regular basis. Practically every armed group in the National Army has been the target of some form of allegation or another, and Turkey has taken steps to attempt to bring some semblance of accountability (see the Military Police Forces, below). For instance, Turkey has reportedly pushed for offending individuals to be punished or removed from their positions. For the time being however, current public perceptions are unlikely to change given the disconnect between armed groups and the limited oversight applied to their behaviour.

²⁴ Jaish Al-Islam is partially comprised of local combatants, and is also largely comprised of Jaish Al-Islam members that were evacuated from Eastern Ghouta following the reconciliation and evacuation of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018.



MILITARY POLICE FORCES

Considering the deep tensions between different National Army groups and persistent complaints of civilian abuses, the Turkish government advocated for the creation of a Military Police Force in February 2018. Local Military Police services serve two functions: First, they attempt to regulate clashes between different armed opposition groups, and second; they are expected to prevent armed opposition groups from committing violations against the civilian population. Like the National Army, the Military Police sit under the SIG's Ministry of Defence, but practically answer to Turkish security officials. The Military Police headquarters is located in Al Bab, and two branch offices have been established in Jarablus and Azaz.

Each of these locations maintains a military court for the adjudication of armed group crimes and abuses.

While the Military Police have been designed as an independent 'check' on the various armed groups within the National Army, they generally act only at the behest of Turkish security officials. In addition, local sources report that Military Police seldom intervene in civil policing matters when National Army groups are implicated, unless civilian police forces are unable to control and prosecute National Army combatants. Reportedly, both Turkey and the SIG have begun to prioritize addressing the abuses of the National Army, and there is some likelihood that the Military Police will be strengthened in the foreseeable future.

CIVILIAN POLICE AND PUBLIC SECURITY

Civilian police forces were established with Turkish support in early 2017, and are headquartered in Jarablus. Two bodies are of importance: The regular civilian police, which generally address local criminality, traffic regulation, and basic civil defence, and Public Security, which functions as an internal security force and is better equipped and trained. Recruitment generally takes place in Syrian refugee and IDP camps in both Turkey and Syria, and enlistment is voluntary. Training for the civilian police is mostly focused on basic policing, particularly robbery, drug trafficking, kidnapping, rape, domestic violence, and murder. The Public Security, which reportedly has more than 1,000 members, is trained in internal security, and focuses on combatting ‘terrorism’ (i.e., ISIS and YPG sleeper cells), as well as mine and IED removal. In general, civilian police operate under the administration of municipal councils, whilst Public Security is a more holistic unit which operates across every area of the Northern Corridor.

Notably, while the civilian police is generally respected by civilians in northern corridor, its relationship with National Army armed groups and the Military Police is poor. Several clashes between different National Army groups and the civilian police have taken place, and Military Police forces have on occasion arrested different civilian police or Public Security members. These disputes are often related to civilian police or Public Security forces attempting to regulate the activities of armed groups, especially in corruption cases.

5.3 SECURITY CONCERNS

Despite the perception amongst many civilians that the area is a relatively safe region for the fact it is under Turkish, not Syrian government control, the Northern Corridor is nevertheless marked by insecurity. Indeed, IEDs, assassinations, clashes, and kidnappings are a weekly occurrence. Certainly, some areas are more insecure than others: Al Bab and Qassin are particularly violent, likely due to their proximity to the front lines with

Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces in Afrin. Conversely, Jarablus and Azaz are fairly secure, and witness little violence. Attributing violence in the Northern Corridor is extremely difficult however, largely because of the covert and fluid nature of the area’s three main security concerns: ISIS sleeper cells, YPG sleeper cells, and disputes between different National Army groups.

ISIS SLEEPER CELLS

Large parts of the Northern Corridor were formerly controlled by ISIS, and ISIS is thought to maintain some sleeper cells in the area. The group regularly claims IEDs and isolated assassinations in the area, but it is often difficult to confirm whether ISIS is actually responsible given ISIS regularly claims attacks in which it was not involved. Similarly, National Army groups are believed to attribute attacks to ISIS, when in fact these attacks have been carried out by different National Army groups. In general, local sources believe that ISIS sleeper cells are certainly a factor in the Northern Corridor, but that the large majority of incidents are carried out by either YPG sleeper cells or different National Army groups.

YPG SLEEPER CELLS

Given the proximity of formerly YPG-held Afrin to Northern Corridor, the YPG has launched asymmetric attacks into the area throughout the Syrian conflict. Following the Turkish-led ‘Operation Olive Branch’, in which National Army groups and Turkish Armed Forces took control of the majority of Afrin district, these attacks have only increased in frequency. In part, this is because the SDF maintains control over part of Afrin district, in and around Tel Rifaat. Open conflict in this area is a semi-regular occurrence, and the National Army attempted a later aborted offensive into the region in the summer of 2019. Indeed, attempting to combat YPG sleeper cells is one of the primary directives of the Public Security forces.

NATIONAL ARMY DISPUTES

As noted, different National Army groups have extremely poor relations with one another, and engage in clashes on a semi-regular basis. However, also as noted, the Military Police, backed by Turkish authorities, are assigned to mediate these disputes and punish the responsible parties. Many National Army groups therefore resort to assassinations of rival group leaders or IED attacks on military positions as a means of avoiding open culpability. National Army group leaders are overwhelmingly the most common targets of assassination in the Northern Corridor. Certainly, some of these attacks can be attributed to ISIS or the YPG (and indeed, these attacks are almost always attributed to the YPG or ISIS). However, local sources explain that locals widely believe that a large number of these attacks are actually carried out by different rival National Army groups. Additionally, National Army groups are also known to occasionally clash with local civilian groups, especially tribal or family groups. Shopkeepers and businessmen are also frequent targets of different National Army factions, mainly as a means of intimidation and extortion of ‘protection’ money.

5.4. SECURITY FORECAST

Front lines in the Northern Corridor region are unlikely to change, especially as the Turkish government has made it clear that it will forcefully respond to any Government of Syria offensive (which is itself an unlikely proposition). However, the security situation in the area is likely to remain precarious out to the medium-term. For as long as the National Army remains unable to control its constituent members, these groups will continue to compete over resources and dispute past grievances, exacting a serious toll on the local civilian population. Indeed, though Turkey has indicated it intends to more holistically securitize the Northern Corridor, this would likely require unifying the National Army by strengthening its institutional structures. In doing so however, Turkey may lose some of the direct control it holds over individual members. For that reason, insecurity,

lawlessness, and internal conflict will likely remain the default state of the Northern Corridor for the foreseeable future.

SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS

- **THE NATIONAL ARMY:** The National Army was formally announced in December 2017, as a merger between numerous different Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in northern Aleppo. It sits under the SIG Ministry of Defence, but practically answers directly to the Turkish Ministry of Defence. It is nominally led by Haytham Al-Afeisi, a defected Syrian military officer from Azaz. Its spokesman is Youssef Hammoud, also from Azaz. In reality however, each individual armed group leader in the National Army more or less directly controls his individual group. There are at least 25 distinct armed groups within the National Army. Some of the most prominent are listed below:
- **THE SULTAN MUHAMMAD AL-FATIH BRIGADE:** Based in Jarablus, Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih combatants are primarily from northern Aleppo. The group is led by Zuheir Istambouli, a defected Syrian military officer. The majority of combatants are Arabs, and a significant component of their combatants are from SDF-held Menbij.
- **MUNTASIR BILLAH BRIGADE:** Based in Jarablus, Muntasir Billah was originally based in Ar-Raqqa. Muntasir Billah was forced to withdraw to northern Aleppo by ISIS in 2013. The group is largely comprised of Arab tribesmen from Ar-Raqqa, and Turkmen from Tel Abiad. Reported to retain a presence in Afrin.
- **JAISH AL-ISLAM:** Based in Jarablus and Al Bab, Jaish Al-Islam was previously one of the most prominent armed groups in the Syrian conflict. Originally based primarily based in the (now reconciled) area of Eastern Ghouta, Rural Damascus governorate. The majority of Jaish Al-Islam combatants in the Northern Corridor are evacuated combatants from Rural Damascus.

- **SULTAN MURAD:** Based in Al Bab, Sultan Murad is one of the oldest and largest Free Syrian Army units in the Syrian conflict. Sultan Murad combatants are generally from northern Aleppo, and Sultan Murad is known to have a large number of Turkmen combatants. The group is led by Fahim Issa, a Syrian Army defector from Al Bab.
- **FARIQ HAMZA:** Based in Azaz, Fariq Hamza is comprised of combatants from northern Aleppo. Fariq Hamza previously took support from the U.S., and was instrumental in combating ISIS in the early stages of the Euphrates Shield offensive.
- **AL-MUTASSIM BRIGADE:** Based in Azaz and Al Bab, Al-Mutassim Brigade was one of the larger Free Syrian Army groups in northern Aleppo prior to the creation of the National Army. Al-Mutassim previously took support from the U.S. as part of its support to armed groups in northern Syria. Nouredine Al-Zinki, a prominent armed group in Idleb, merged a proportion of its forces with Al-Mutassim following their withdrawal from Idleb after being defeated by Hay'at Tahtir Al-Sham in early 2019.
- **JABHAT SHAMIYA:** Based in Ar-Ra'ee, Jabhat Shamiya (The Levantine Front) is actually a collection of numerous smaller groups, to include combatants from Ahrar Al-Sham, Nouredine Zenki, Jaish Al-Islam, Liwa Al-Tawheed, and Suquor Al-Sham. Jabhat Shamiya is therefore more of an umbrella within an umbrella, composed of combatants from across the country as opposed to operating as a unified group.
- **THE MILITARY POLICE:** Formed in February 2018, the Military Police sits under the SIG Ministry of Defence. It is responsible for regulating different National Army groups, and preventing civilian abuses. Despite this mandate, it is relatively unsuccessful. It occasionally clashes with different National Army groups as well as civilian police, and is ultimately only able to take decisive action when it has the full backing of Turkish authorities. The Military Police is led by Ahmed Al-Kurdi, a defected Syrian Army General.
- **CIVILIAN POLICE:** Established in early 2017, civilian police are divided between a local police units, which sit within the municipal council jurisdictions, and Public Security, which operates across the entire area. Civilian police are the most broadly popular security actor in the Northern Corridor, although they are heavily constrained by different National Army groups and the Military Police.

ANNEX 1:

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

DISASTER AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY (AFAD)

Description	Turkish government disaster and emergency management agency. In the Northern Corridor, AFAD has several functions: 1) The implementation of relief and small development programmes (food baskets, provision of flour to ovens, cash programs); 2) supervision of the work of the relief and development organizations (i.e. ensuring it aligns with Turkish policy); 3) management of displacement camps and shelters, and; 4) inter-agency coordination.
Comments	AFAD is a highly competent agency and the conduit for Turkey's administration of its response to local humanitarian and development needs in the Northern Corridor. Although it is an Ankara-based government agency, its activities are reportedly driven predominantly by Turkish officials in Kilis and Gaziantep. It is therefore understood that local mid-ranking Turkish officials are responsible for coordinating the entire Turkish aid effort in the Northern Corridor, primarily through the supervision, monitoring and training of local Syrian NGOs. AFAD is viewed favourably by civilians throughout the Northern Corridor.

MUNICIPAL AND LOCAL COUNCILS

Description

Former opposition-linked governance bodies which have fallen under Turkish influence following the Euphrates Shield operation. As the main governance actors in the Northern Corridor, council bodies are critical in the coordination of relief and development projects and many have a direct line to Turkish representatives. The Turkish government has appointed a Turkish alderman-type figure attached to the Kilis or Gaziantep Provincial Governments as appropriate. This individual is commonly the focal point between Turkish provincial and Syrian local councils. Of note, there is some coordination between Northern Corridor municipal council bodies and counterpart local governance bodies in opposition-held parts of Idleb governorate which do not currently fall under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Municipal councils demonstrate relative autonomy despite their receipt of Turkish funding. Indeed, they are largely independent bodies with an important voice in the management and future of the communities falling within their purview, and play a critical role in the coordination of local projects. With some councils working to implement local taxation measures, municipal councils may increase their autonomy over time. Indeed, no reports of direct Turkish intervention over municipal council spending were uncovered as part of this research.

Comments

Though they play a critical role in coordinating local recovery activities, municipal council relationships with other municipal councils and their subordinate local council bodies are often dysfunctional. This is likely to challenge the smoothness of projects implemented across multiple local jurisdictions, and risks arising from this issue should be anticipated. It should also be noted that while Turkey does not actively shape the activities of municipal councils on a day-to-day basis, it has reportedly intervened to shut down Syrian governance institutions in the Northern Corridor where it alleges corruption amongst local officials, for instance, in Ehtemlat (east of Azaz), in early 2019. It is understood the closure of Ehtemlat municipal council was enforced by Turkish-affiliated armed groups and may have been instructed by the Kilis Provisional Government. Indeed, in reports related to this incident it was alleged by unnamed Syrian officials that local armed groups are intent on securing influence over municipal council bodies, demanding careful monitoring of council membership and influence.

TURKISH PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS (KILIS AND GAZIANTEP)

Description

Turkish government bodies responsible for the funding and administration of Northern Corridor municipal councils, as well as the overall coordination of the Turkish aid and development response. Kilis Provincial Government, under Mayor Mehmet Abdi Bulut, is responsible for western areas, determined as Suran, Azaz, Mare' and Aghtrin. The Mayor of Gaziantep Provincial Government, Fatima Şahin, is responsible for the administration of eastern areas, namely Al Bab, Jarablus, and Ar-Ra'ee. Both Şahin and Bulut are members of the ruling AKP party. Whereas Bulut has been in his position for 6 months, winning the mayoral seat in the March 2019 Turkish local elections, Şahin has retained her post and has served since 2014.

Given the absence of any real Turkish central government policy for the reconstruction of the Northern Corridor, Turkish Provincial Governments in Kilis and Gaziantep have assumed governance-related decision-making authority in the area. This makes the offices of the Kilis and Gaziantep Provincial Governments the most powerful political actors in the Northern Corridor, and their mayors the most influential local personalities.

Comments

There have been complaints as to the extent to which Turkey was actually prepared for investing in local recovery. For instance, it is claimed that Turkey only began coordinating with local civil society after the Euphrates Shield offensive had begun, and that its focus had (at least initially) been primarily military. That said, the reputation of Kilis and Gaziantep Provisional Governments are broadly positive throughout the area. Just two weeks after ISIS was defeated by Operation Euphrates Shield in Jarablus, in September 2016, the Mayor of Gaziantep became the first Turkish official to visit Syria since 2011, and almost immediately oversaw large-scale infrastructure redevelopment and reconstruction works. It is also widely known that local councils rely on Turkish support for their continued operations.

As the dominant authority in the Northern Corridor, it is essential that Kilis and Gaziantep provincial governments are consulted by relief, development and stabilization actors. They are the institutions from which project permissions must be sought, and are the key to engagement of relevant government ministries, AFAD, and any other relevant Turkish government functions.

STABILIZATION COMMITTEE

Description	Sometimes called the ‘Stabilization Commission’. Formed in 2015 under the now defunct Aleppo Revolutionary Council, the Stabilization Committee has since been integrated into the SIG. Alongside conducting needs assessments, maintaining records on resident and IDP populations, and taking a special interest in the reconstruction of local infrastructure, the Committee has sought to develop the institutional capacity of municipal councils. Unconfirmed reports suggest the Committee meets with the largest municipal councils in the area twice monthly in Azaz in an effort to coordinate local relief and development work. Attendees are mainly from the Northern Corridor. Prior to Operation Euphrates Shield, meetings were known to receive delegations from Menbij, Tel Rifaat, and other Kurdish-controlled areas.
Comments	Although nominally linked to the largely ineffective SIG, the Stabilization Committee is a generally independent body which has retained a role in local recovery by virtue of its association with armed and political actors from the pre-Operation Euphrates Shield era. In some respects, it is synonymous with the Executive Offices of municipal councils in government-held areas, particularly for its largely technocratic and advisory remit, its role in data collection, and its liaison between local stakeholders on relief and development matters. If the Committee continues to hold regular meetings with municipal councils to coordinate aid work, these would represent an excellent platform for the engagement of numerous local stakeholders, the sharing of ideas and best practice, and the exploration of potential partnership opportunities.

CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE OF THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR

Description	Chambers of Commerce and Industry are civil bodies comprised of Syrian businesses and business figures. Each Chamber in the Northern Corridor was established in the wake of the Euphrates Shield offensive and likely with Turkish support and/or at Turkish initiative. Concerned mainly with the development of the business interests of its members through building trade relationships, Chambers in the Northern Corridor have developed additional functions ranging from monitoring of local commercial activity to managing the administration of industrial city complexes. Funded by local municipal councils and linked closely to both Turkish business counterparts and the Turkish government. The largest Chambers in the area are based in Azaz, Al Bab, Mare' and Jarablus.
Comments	Chambers of Commerce and Industry have emerged as the most important locally-based stakeholders when it comes to the management of the local economy. In some respects they have substituted for the functions of government, such as in helping regulate trade with Turkish business and manage industrial city facilities. It should be noted, however, that the business activities they are supporting are undertaken without the oversight of a governmental authority, and are effectively regulating the market in their own interests and those of their Turkish business partners.

SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT (SIG)

Description The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) is an opposition-affiliated government in-exile which styles itself as the legitimate inheritor of Syria's Ba'athist Council of Ministers and the government of President Al-Assad. Based in Turkey and with a headquarters in Azaz, the SIG is the pre-eminent official Syrian governance authority in the Northern Corridor and maintains a nominal presence throughout the area.

The SIG's claims to legitimacy currently have little bearing on the actual machinations of governance in the Northern Corridor. Indeed, most city councils are aligned with the SIG in name only, whilst some even actively refute any association. Most councils in the area would sooner claim themselves as administrators of independent administrative units than profess alignment with the SIG. This is likely a result of Turkish influence and the localized aspirations of local council bodies.

Comments Despite presenting itself as the most important governance body in the area, engagement of the SIG therefore has limited outcomes for relief and development actors. That said, it is part of the political fabric in Azaz to some extent, and its association with the Stabilization Committee means it should not be entirely discounted. As a platform for the coordination of primarily locally-led relief and development efforts, the Stabilization Committee is a useful local interlocutor. When considering Syria-wide acceptance strategies however, it may be that the Stabilization Committee is best reached by working via municipal councils given their more neutral character compared to the more opposition-orientated SIG.

THE NATIONAL ARMY

Description The National Army was formally announced in December 2017, and is a merger between numerous different Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in northern Aleppo. Officially, it sits under the SIG's Ministry of Defence, but practically answers directly to the Turkish Ministry of Defence. There are at least 25 distinct armed groups within the National Army, each of which is assigned a home community. Although officially led by Haytham Al-Afeisi, a defected Syrian military officer from Azaz, each individual group acts more or less independently.

The National Army is not an army in the conventional sense in so far as its constituent members are not bound to abide by the overarching command structure of the SIG's Ministry of Defence, nor that established by the Turkish Armed Forces. This creates space for National Army groups to engage in inter-factional disputes and contestation over local resources. National Army groups are therefore marked by considerable competition. This even extends to the governance domain in some cases, with reports of National Army groups seeking to gain control and influence over municipal and local councils.

Comments The Turkish military is in a position to moderate the behaviour of National Army groups, most notably by withholding salary payments. However, the group is a considerable risk factor for aid programming, particularly because its poor reputation amongst civilians has been earned by criminal acts which neither Turkey nor local Military Police Forces have robustly acted to prevent. The possibility that National Army groups will directly interfere with relief and development work is unlikely, particularly where this contains a Turkish component. But they are likely to contribute to a general state of insecurity which could indirectly affect programmes for as long as the National Army remains a constellation of competitive armed groups. In addition, their exploitation of local economic assets, such as control over trade routes and agricultural land, demands careful assessment and monitoring in order to help prevent their extraction of aid resources.

The content compiled and presented by COAR is by no means exhaustive and does not reflect COAR's formal position, political or otherwise, on the aforementioned topics. The information, assessments, and analysis provided by COAR are only to inform humanitarian and development programs and policy.



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