

NAVIGATING FRAGMENTATION: IMPROVING FREE MOVEMENT IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

The disastrous earthquakes that hit the northwest of Syria in February 2023 highlighted the inadequacy of the humanitarian system in the face of emergencies in areas that have slipped away from the control of the Syrian regime for close to ten years. Free movement of people and goods across conflict lines is a daily challenge that hinders hope for peace and reconstruction.

Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army fighters check IDs at a checkpoint near the town of Afrin, Syria (October 2022). Photo: OMAR HAJ KADOUR / AFP



RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Interim and Salvation governments

- Establish a single civilian police force that is not affiliated with any armed groups in the northwest, while developing the justice system.
- Establish a single traffic police branch within the civilian police across northwest Syria.
- Transfer the control of internal checkpoints from the military police to the civilian police.
- Train police personnel at checkpoints to promote better and indiscriminating inspection practices. Teams should systematically include at least two female members - to reduce risks of isolation on male-dominated security teams - to carry out physical inspections on women.

For Turkey as a guarantor of Syrian peace

- Use Turkey's relationship with both the Interim Government and Salvation Government to encourage a clear separation between military and civilian affairs, as well as the promotion of good governance.
- Regulate the price of fuel that enters northwest Syria from Turkey.

For the international community and donors

- Support the development of a regional company for public transportation in northwest Syria, regulated by the establishment of a common and politically neutral Directorate of Transportation.
- Reform the conditions and processes of aid delivery to northwest Syria to prioritise flexible, innovative, and collaborative strategies to reach people in need.

CONTEXT

The Syrian Civil War resulted in the division of the country into several areas of control. This fragmentation of authority and territory has also resulted in the alienation of Syrian communities. As war became normalised and negotiations are stalled, mobility is an essential asset that could bridge divisions and foster interactions, thereby promoting forms of local peace.

The northwest of the country slipped away from the Syrian regime in September 2013 and gained de-facto autonomy under the control of two opposition governments and more armed groups. There are currently **four main areas of control that are relevant to the process of movement of local populations**. While Idlib is under the influence of the Salvation Government, the three other regions are theoretically under the control of the Syrian Interim Government but are effectively administered by a network of local councils affiliated with Turkey:

- **Euphrates Shield region** extends along the Turkish border between Jarablus in the east, Azaz in the west and Marea in the South (north and north-eastern countryside of Aleppo city).
- **Olive Branch region** includes Afrin and its administratively affiliated cities (north-western countryside of Aleppo city).
- **Peace Spring region** stretches along the Turkish border between Ras al-Ain in the east and Tal Abyad in the west (in the north of Raqqa city).
- **Idlib region** and its countryside.

This brief explores the challenges and strategies for Syrians to navigate fragmentation in northwest Syria. It shows that the fragmentation of governance and the authority enjoyed by Turkey has adverse consequences on human security and the human rights of local populations, as well as humanitarian action. This calls for a change in the demands and actions of the international community and the humanitarian community towards the Syrian

regime and the guarantor states of the Syrian peace process.

FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE – CHALLENGES

Syrians living in the northwest of the country face several challenges to their movement between each area mentioned before.

While movement within cities and each region are considered relatively easy, comfortable and risk-free (during the day) by residents, they **avoid travelling to the city and countryside of Idlib for fear of arrests by Tahrir al-Sham and the imposition of high taxes at checkpoints**. Borders between the areas run by the two opposition governments are described as being as **hard as country borders**.

The **lack of a unified legal framework to regulate the transportation of people and goods** across the northwest of Syria, notably between Idlib and Aleppo governorates, is a key obstacle to the free movement of residents.

The lack of a unified authority to control checkpoints across the northwest of Syria prevents the adoption of common practices and a code of **conduct to regulate practices at checkpoints**. Checkpoints in Idlib are under the supervision of the Public Security Forces and the Security Department of the Checkpoints. In the north of Aleppo, checkpoints belong to the civil and the military police. The Free Syrian Army's (FSA) initiative to establish civilian police to regulate all checkpoints, with the financial support of American and European governments in 2014 failed. Additional special checkpoints are purely military and regulate access to camps and barracks. As a result, military forces in general are not held accountable; practices of bribery are not controlled nor punished.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Salafi armed group affiliated with the Salvation Government became infamous for **discriminative practices**

against residents travelling from Aleppo governorate. More discriminative inspections are carried out across northwest Syria against **residents who were forcibly displaced** after so-called reconciliation agreements in regime-controlled areas.

The region suffers from **recurring clashes between armed factions** - as exemplified by the military offensive launched by HTS on Afrin in October 2022 - which result in roads being cut off, making movement impossible.

The **high cost of transportation and the lack of adequate public transportation for civilians**. For instance, the last car (the equivalent of a private taxi) leaves Idlib towards Azaz at around 5 pm.

The **lack of traffic regulation and traffic patrols** is one of the reasons used to justify the opening of checkpoints (mobile and fixed) and the control given to military forces. However, these military forces **lack the knowledge to organise the movement of people and goods**.

GROUPS AT RISK

Citizens that were **smuggled and/or forcibly displaced to the northeast from regime-controlled areas** are vulnerable to the process of crossing checkpoints. They are forbidden to show an ID document issued by the Syrian regime or risk being accused of treason or illegally smuggled. They are often subjected to longer and provocative inspections by all armed groups.

Women face particular challenges to circulating freely to Idlib areas due to the control of a Salafi armed group. **The movement of a woman without a mahram (male chaperone) may pose a problem** when crossing checkpoints controlled by HTS. However, the situation of women has generally improved since the 2020 ceasefire deal for Idlib province struck between Russia and Turkey. Movement is generally safer as long as a woman is accompanied by a man.

Merchants and farmers, while safe while moving from one area to the other, are **financially vulnerable** especially if they move goods from/to Idlib. Goods are subjected to high taxes (USD 100 per ton of goods between Idlib and Afrin) which considerably reduces the potential for local trade within the northwest of the country.

FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE – STRATEGIES

Residents emphasise that the **freedom movement has greatly improved since 2020** and that, although it might be long and tedious, travelling across northwest Syria is possible and relatively safe during the day. The treatment of travellers at checkpoints has generally improved within each area.

Renting a private car is one of the safest and fastest travelling methods in northwest Syria as they are not subjected to lengthy inspection at military checkpoints. A number of car owners offer to transport residents from one region to the other against a fee. However, this is an expensive service that renders residents financially vulnerable, especially students who attend university in a different city.

Humanitarian workers and volunteers in civil society organisations benefit from greater freedom of movement, especially when they travel in small groups. Armed groups across the northwest adopted practices to facilitate the movement of aid and staff to reach in-need people.

Syrians who fear crossing checkpoints seek the help of **relatives or friends who have good relations with military factions** at checkpoints and can ease the movement of people and goods.

Some cities **provided public transport to their residents**. This is the case in the city of Idlib, where HTS established the Al-zajel

foundation and opened it to private investors. The initiative was praised by locals who testified that the presence of public transport solved many daily problems and greatly improved their living standards and social relations. There is also a bus travelling from Idlib to the Azaz area during day time.

When they cannot afford the costs of transportation or fear crossing checkpoints, Syrians simply avoid travelling. While less common than in regime-held areas such as Daraa governorate, this avoidance **prevents Syrians from rebuilding social fabric and reclaiming public spaces**.

FREE MOVEMENT OF AID – CHALLENGES

Since the northwest of Syria came under the control of a multitude of opposition armed groups in 2013, **security concerns have been the biggest obstacle to the free movement of aid**. Not only there is a lack of regulation to protect humanitarian aid and workers, but they are often targeted by bombing campaigns launched by the Syrian regime and Russian forces, even though the latter is a guarantor of the peace process.

The **use of the humanitarian file as a bargaining chip** by Russia at the UN Security Council to make political gains in favour of the Syrian regime is a key challenge to the circulation of aid in northwest Syria. Over four million residents depend on the UN border crossing Bab al-Hawa between Idlib and Turkey.

The closure of Bab al-Salama border crossing in 2020 and the increase of displaced people in northwest Syria led to increased pressure and **confusion of roles and responsibilities between military and civilian actors**. For instance, armed groups sometimes have to choose between providing security to residents and coordinating humanitarian activities to respond to an emergency.

Bab al-Hawa border crossing is controlled by the armed group HTS which is listed as a terrorist organisation in a number of Western countries. This makes **processes of negotiation for the movement and delivery of aid very complex** and the distribution of aid throughout the northwest **unfair and discriminatory**.

The **Russian invasion of Ukraine** led to a conflict that has become a key preoccupation for the international community and donors, and Syria has consequently dropped further down on the list of global humanitarian emergencies.

Lengthy delivery time affects the **quality of food products** that can become unsuitable for human consumption. For instance, food is often affected by worms and insects.

FREE MOVEMENT OF AID – STRATEGIES

Armed groups across northwest Syria **exempt all humanitarian aid entering from Turkey from taxes and other fees** (i.e.; shipping and cleaning). Also, humanitarian workers are allowed to circulate easily across checkpoints and are not subjected to lengthy inspections.

The **development of local civil society in the northwest**, backed by a network of organisations based across the border in Turkey, is a key opportunity for the adoption of good practices of aid circulation and delivery. These organisations became experts in delivering aid in highly complex environments and navigating across conflict lines.

The existence of a **network of local councils** and the experience they gained dealing with the humanitarian consequences of the Syrian conflict and emergencies (such as Covid-19) is an opportunity to identify populations most in need and distribute aid.

The **opening of branches of the Turkish Government Post** in Afrin, Azaz and al-Bab. The Post facilitates the arrival of aid in northwest Syria, where the banking system is non-existent, as well as shipments of goods between Turkey and Syria. However, delivery time is long (20 days between Istanbul and Olive Branch areas). Moreover, one of the conditions imposed on (humanitarian and development) organisations is the convert salaries of Syrian staff from American dollars to Turkish liras, leading to a great loss of value in salaries.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Over a decade of violent conflict has left deep scars on the Syrian socio-political and geographical landscape. The country is fragmented into four governance and territorial entities, and communities are divided by conflict lines. Two parallel reports ([2021](#), [2022](#)) have highlighted the challenges and opportunities for a series of local actors, notably local civil society, to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic in the framework of a fragmented conflict.

Yet, global challenges – such as the Syrian refugee crisis, the threat posed by transnational radical groups, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic – do not stop at borders. Identified “fragments” do not operate in complete isolation and are indeed inter-dependant when it comes to the circulation of goods and, since March 2020, the monitoring and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The same goes for relations between Syria and its neighbours despite the privatisation and politicisation of external borders.

The research aims to address this issue by shedding the light on the ever-evolving and interactive process of fragmentation, looking at dynamics of “rebordering” (Vignal, 2017: 826) during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to exploring if and how the humanitarian community can contribute to the creation of “peace routes” across conflict lines and borders, this report also maps the network of responsibility and trust in the process of humanitarian coordination, and the impact of such practices on various governance actors.

Research Questions

- How do forms of aid navigate routes across governance entities, territories, and populations in Syria and between Syria and its neighbours?
- What are the navigation challenges and strategies for people inside Syria and how does fragmentation impact their human rights?
- How does the international humanitarian community get involved locally with de-facto governance institutions, armed groups and local civil society when there is a lack of a legitimate central State?
- How does humanitarian aid transit in Syria impact the political legitimacy and public authority of national governance actors?

Methodology

The data presented in this brief were collected between September 2022 and March 2023 in Syria – in northern Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa governorates – and in neighbouring countries, notably Iraq, Jordan and Turkey. The researchers conducted 84 interviews with international and local civil society members, governance stakeholders, medical professionals, and military personnel. All interviews were conducted in person by the authors of the brief as well as by research assistants with key access to certain stakeholders inside Syria. The researchers attempted to provide a representative sample of the general Syrian population in the areas of focus, and to ensure representative inclusion of political views (i.e., in support of the Syrian regime and opposition governments) and genders (male: 69.65% - female: 30.35%).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was developed by Juline Beaujouan, Principal Investigator of the research – in collaboration with independent researchers inside and outside Syria, including (by alphabetical order) Muhannad al-Rish, Abdallah El hafi, Eyas Ghreiz, Ayham Odat.

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ABOUT PEACEREP

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University. PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.

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