

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND CHALLENGES IN NORTHEAST SYRIA WITH AN INCREASED PRESENCE OF GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA FORCES

SITUATION REPORT

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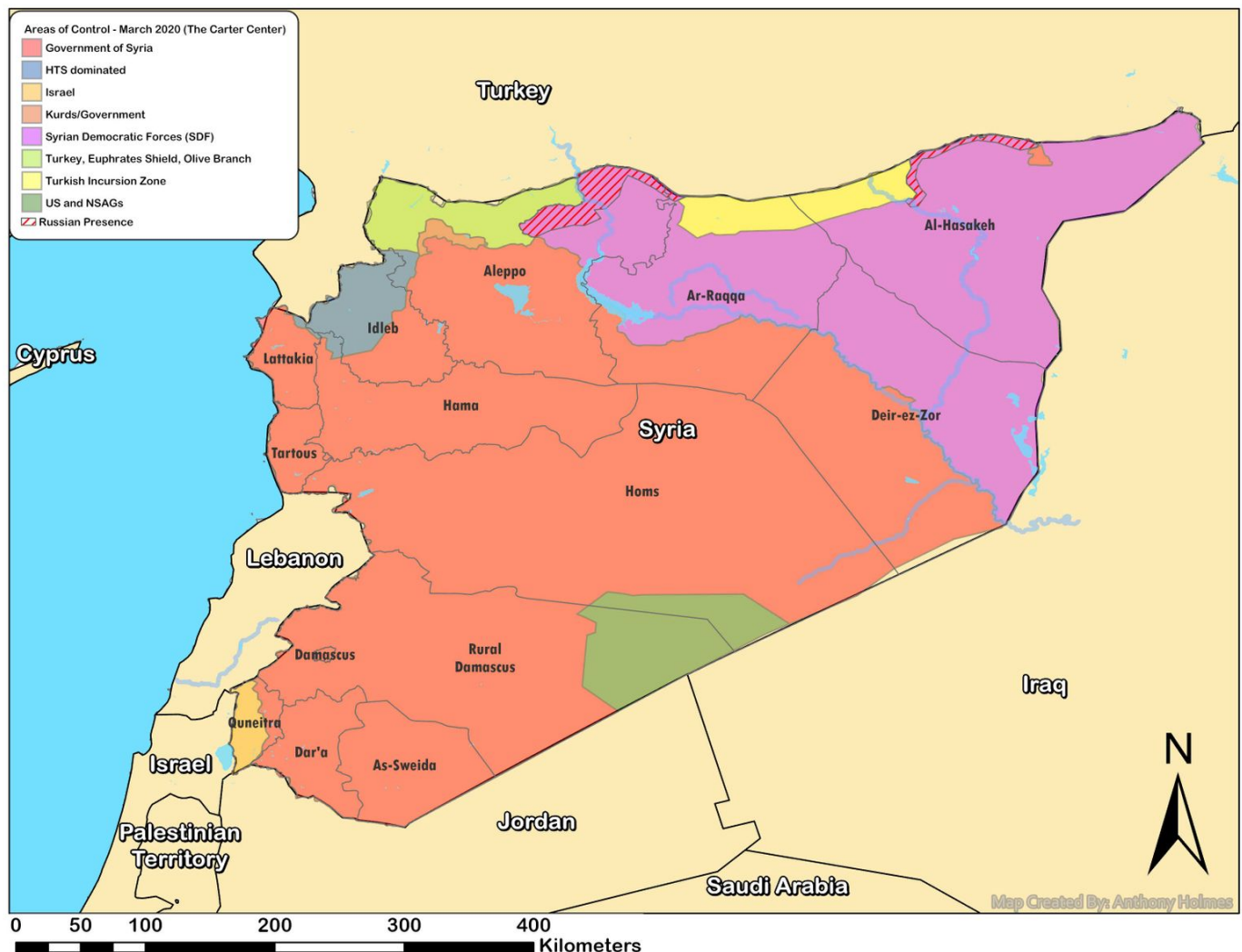
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following Operation Peace Spring, the Turkish-led incursion into northeast Syria in October 2019 through which Turkey gained significant pockets of land in the region, the Kurdish self-administration (KSA) responded by allowing Government of Syria (GoS) and Russian forces to enter select areas under Kurdish control. The KSA hoped to prevent further advances by the Turkish government and Turkish-backed forces, using the GoS and Russian government forces as further protection against loss of territory. The areas of northeast Syria in which GoS forces have established a presence include nearly all KSA territory northwest of Al-Sheddadi (south of which US forces maintain a continued presence). To evaluate the impact of these shifts, Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team interviewed respondents from local non-governmental organizations and community governance bodies across these KSA-controlled areas with a new presence of GoS forces. Respondents were asked about general operating conditions of humanitarian actors in these areas, as well as the general movement of goods and people within and across different armed groups' areas of control.

Results of these interviews show the introduction of GoS forces has significantly changed conditions for humanitarian responders already facing challenges. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from conflict-ridden areas of the northeast (as well as other areas of Syria) have continued to seek shelter in KSA-controlled areas where there is a GoS presence, placing additional burden on humanitarian actors. Respondents also noted difficulties in the delivery of health-related equipment. In meeting these challenges, implementers have had to contend with a new landscape of checkpoints and road closures brought about by the introduction of new armed actors. Checkpoints with GoS forces have posed a particular problem for humanitarian implementers, with staff members of military age limiting their movements because of a fear of conscription. Other implementers noted altered supply lines and additional taxes extracted at these new checkpoints, necessitating the use of middlemen in order to quickly transport goods. In structuring operations in these areas, implementers must consider the ramifications of these shifted supply lines and additional restrictions.

RETURN OF GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA FORCES TO NORTHEAST SYRIA

BACKGROUND



While the Government of Syria (GoS) has maintained a nominal presence in the Kurdish self-administration (KSA)-governed cities of Qamishli and Al-Hasakeh throughout the nine-year Syrian conflict, the KSA had assumed all daily administrative functions in territories of northeast Syria under its control.¹ Following the KSA’s expulsion (with US backing) of Islamic State (ISIS) forces from areas of Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo, and Deir-ez-Zour governorates, it has maintained de facto security and administrative control over the entirety of northeast Syria, (largely separated from GoS territory by the Euphrates river). The KSA and GoS had previously engaged in sporadic negotiations about a potential return of northeast Syria to under a federalist system of control, but these talks had not seriously progressed prior to October 2019.²

(1) Prior to October 2019, this presence mainly consisted of control of the Qamishli Airport and several small neighborhoods and government offices in the city itself, as well as approximately a third of urban al-Hasakeh.

(2) Where the GoS and KSA divide political authority autonomously, the GoS nationally and the KSA sub nationally in the northeast, both operating directly upon the people. This constitutional division of power is established between the national government (GoS), which exercises authority over the whole national territory, and provincial government (KSA) which exercises independent authority within its own territories.

The current political and security divisions that shape the humanitarian response in northeast Syria, however, stem directly from the events that unfolded rapidly after the October 2019 Turkish-backed Operation Peace Spring. This military operation, initiated by the Turkish armed forces (TAF) and factions affiliated with the Turkish Free Syrian Army (TFSA), displaced over 300,000 residents from a pocket of territory extending south from the Turkish-Syrian border to the M4 highway, and sparked a rapid reconfiguration of the KSA's stance towards the GoS.

From the start of the Operation Peace Spring, key decision makers in the KSA (apprehensive about future territorial losses amidst calls for what was then described as an imminent withdrawal of all US forces from northeast Syria) called for GoS forces to enter northeast Syria to stave off future Turkish advances.³ Small contingents of GoS troops, accompanied by Russian forces, quickly established a presence in the urban areas of Ar-Raqqa and Al-Tabqa (in the Ar-Raqqa governorate), as well as a broader cordon surrounding the pocket of territory occupied by TAF and the TFSA. While the TAF and TFSA largely halted major offensive actions in late October 2019, GoS and Russian forces maintain a presence in a variety of areas across the north east. This re-establishment of GoS control proceeded with limited KSA input, occurring outside the previously mentioned framework of GoS-KSA talks.



Figure 2- American and Russian forces confront each other on an overlapping supply line in NES (Source: Voice of America)

The US announced in October 2019 that it would maintain a military presence in areas of Deir-ez-Zour governorate under its control, and would not as previously stated fully withdraw from the area. This has not only created a divided security dynamic, it has also meant US, GoS, and Russian forces now share

overlapping supply lines across the north east and near the border with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Encounters between their respective supply lines have caused occasional spikes in tension throughout recent months. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) who use these same supply lines into northeast Syria have also been caught between the opposing groups, exacerbating an already-challenging humanitarian response while attempting to maintain a steady flow of aid into the region.

(3) New York Times, 'Trump orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Northern Syria,' October 2019

METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate the impact of these developments, Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) interviewed residents of KSA-controlled territory with a GoS presence who worked in both local NGOs and community-level governance bodies.⁴ The questions focussed on how operations and access had changed before and after Operation Peace Spring. Questions covered changes in access, political and military changes, as well as the distribution of aid. All questions were open ended and were specifically written so they did not influence any bias from the responders. In total two Mercy Corps implementing partners were interviewed, two representatives from other local NGOs and one representative from a local government body. While the interviews were conducted in Ar-Raqqa for logistical issues those being interviewed were working in or representatives of Ain Issa subdistrict of Ar-Raqqa governorate.

OVERALL CONDITIONS

When asked about the overall operating conditions in their communities, respondents from local governance bodies and implementing partners spoke positively of the impact of the lull in fighting on the overall mobility of staff and supplies around areas of northeast Syria with the presence of GoS forces.⁵ However, while this relatively uniform (if occasionally lacking) implementation of the ceasefire between Turkish-backed and KSA forces has created a relative calm, respondents still described a range of operational challenges. Among the most prominent were:

- **Health Sector Challenges:** Even prior to October 2019, key health facilities in much of KSA territory had faced shortages of essential supplies and inadequate building conditions. New restrictions on movement and supply routes installed following the arrival of GoS (especially along the key M4 highway) have further deepened these challenges, making it difficult for implementers in the health sector to receive necessary amounts of essential supplies.
- **Lack of Reliable Infrastructure:** With the arrival of GoS and Russian forces into various KSA territories, the provision of basic utilities (mainly electricity and water) has grown more complicated. Prior to October 2019, implementers working in the areas of Ar-Raqqa, Al-Tabqa and Manbij struggled to rebuild functioning water and electricity networks after years of armed conflict (including extensive damage inflicted during

(4) The specific communities will not be disclosed for confidentiality of the responders.

(5) This relative lull in fighting followed the October 17, 2019 announcement of a ceasefire between Turkish-backed and KSA forces.

the campaign to reclaim these areas from ISIS forces).⁶ With this dynamic in mind, respondents described provision of electricity and water from facilities in both GoS and KSA-held – sometimes falling outside the control of both parties, which has complicated reconstruction efforts. This has also been exacerbated by the split authority structure between the centralized komin administrative system that exists across areas under KSA control and the local councils specifically established in areas retaken from ISIS (both of which existed before the introduction of GoS and Russian forces). GoS troops, while not attempting to establish a ‘parallel’ state infrastructure, have increased the burden felt by komin and local council authorities in KSA controlled areas with a GoS presence that border territories under full GoS control (mainly the areas of Ar-Raqqa and Manbij). Restrictions on movement and increased fees on key services (like electricity) emanating from GoS-held territory have complicated supply efforts and infrastructure repair. The pressure stemming from the reintroduction of GoS forces, they note, has therefore seriously complicated the reconstruction of key infrastructure and basic service grids as GoS checkpoints obstruct the free flow of essential materials. While the presence of GoS forces has not been accompanied by significant GoS reconstruction funds, respondents noted the crossings between GoS and KSA territory that now permit an increased traffic of goods. While these changes give local merchants greater flexibility in sourcing needed goods, they could also pose complications for humanitarian actors whose donor policies prohibit business with GoS-affiliated entities under international sanctions.

● **Persistent Internally Displaced Person (IDP) Flow:** While the large IDP flow out of the Peace Spring pocket has mostly abated following the decline in clashes between TAF, TFSA, KSA, and GoS forces, IDPs from other areas of Syria have continued to seek shelter in areas of northeast Syria with a GoS presence. A recent GoS offensive in Greater Idleb alone displaced over 1,200 residents towards these territories in the past three weeks alone.⁷ Respondents all described these continued IDP flows as a serious challenge, noting the specific strains that placed on the area’s shelter and health sectors. Nevertheless, respondents did not specifically attribute a change in IDP movement from KSA areas to the arrival of GoS and Russian forces.

(6) REACH, ‘Syria: Households in Ar-Raqqa City Face Severe Infrastructure Damage and Insufficient Services’, Feb 2018.

(7) OCHA, ‘Syrian Arab Republic: IDP and Spontaneous Returnee Movements’, January 2020

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES AND SHIFTS

Working in these conditions, implementers and local governance actors within this area of northeast Syria noted the following dynamics, challenges, and overall themes in the humanitarian response after October 2019:

● **Shifting Procurement Markets:** The start of Operation Peace Spring caused a rapid shift in the chains through which NGOs and INGOs procure materials. Following the offensive, respondents described a rapid series of closures between KSA-controlled areas and those areas of northern Aleppo governorate under the control of TFSA factions. Because this latter area served as an informal gateway between KSA territory and the opposition enclave of Greater Idlib, local NGO supply lines that had previously received materials from other opposition-controlled areas of Syria have been forced to modify their procurement practices, sourcing more materials from GoS-affiliated actors. While respondents did not name a particular type of material when describing these procurement difficulties, they noted an overall decrease in quantity as a result of these changing supply lines.⁸

● **Difficulty in Local Contracting:** The shifting security dynamics in KSA-controlled territories with a GoS presence have also frustrated the efforts of implementing partners employing local labor. The introduction of GoS and Russian forces has placed additional financial burdens on the movement of goods and people across the new network of checkpoints that demarcate various communities in the area, mainly in the diversion of goods and impositions of informal 'taxes' at GoS checkpoints. Due to these increased burdens, implementing partners have reported difficulty contracting with construction firms and hardware vendors capable of supplying and installing heavy infrastructure. Respondents specifically mentioned water tanks and sewer piping as difficult to procure and install because of the new requirements for transporting these types of material through GoS checkpoints. Considering future IDP movements in these areas, this could have adverse implications should the region be forced to absorb particularly vulnerable populations.

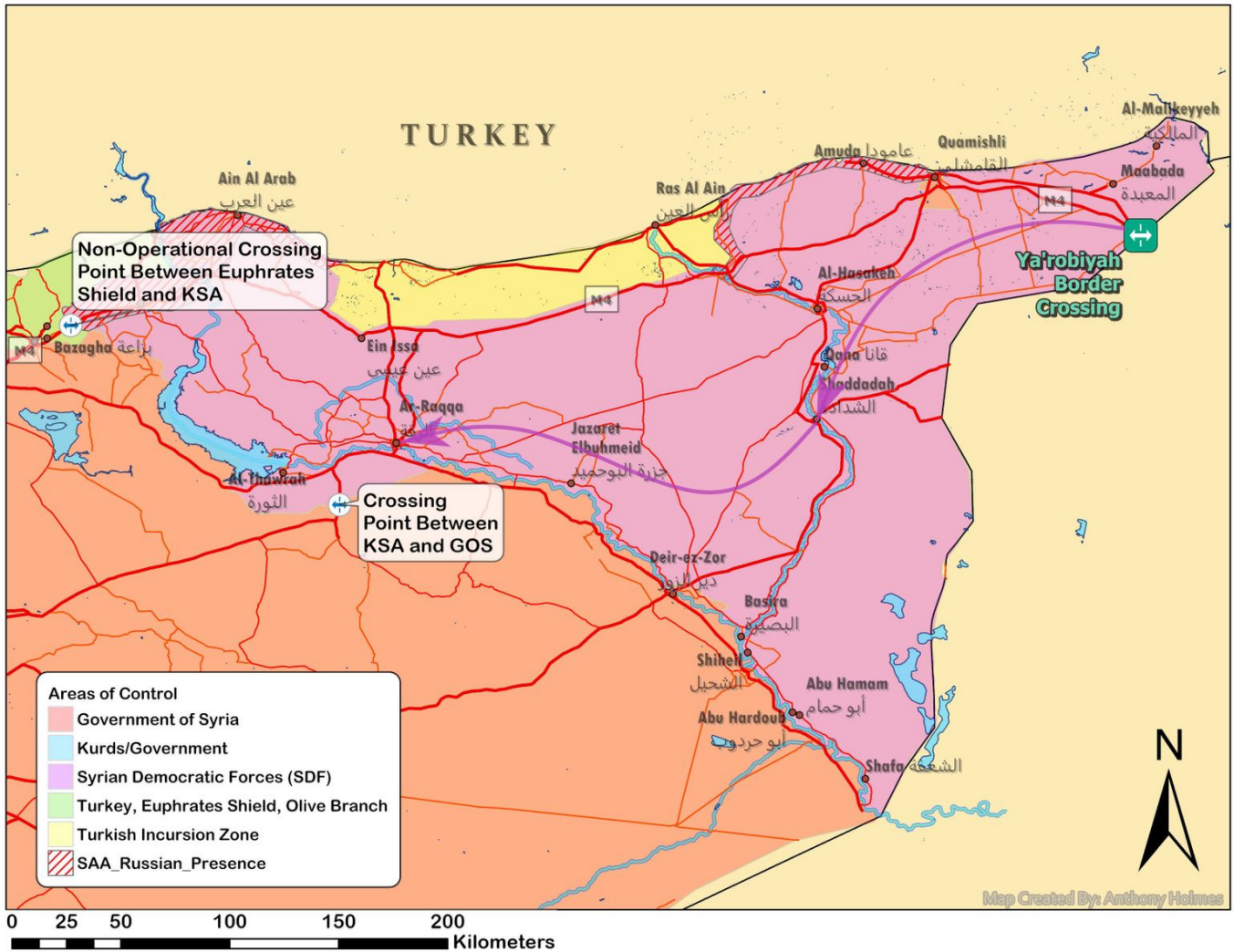
● **Challenging Environment for International Coordination:** While all respondents described strong relationships prior to October 2019 between their local organizations and the larger INGOs with which they coordinate, the introduction of GoS and Russian forces into northeast Syria appears to have seriously

(8) Greater Idlib refers to areas of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama governorates under the loose control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an armed opposition group currently under international sanction. While the TAF has maintained a presence in Greater Idlib throughout 2018 and 2019 in an attempt prevent the refugee flow that would accompany large scale GoS advances in this area, Turkey does not exercise a similar degree of influence over day-to-day governance issues in this area as it does in other regions of Syria under its control.

complicated many of these working relationships due to GoS opposition to many of the specific INGOs operating in northeast Syria. Specifically, representatives of local governing bodies with an increased GoS and Russian presence spoke apprehensively on a general level about maintaining open contact with international humanitarian bodies, suggesting implicit or explicit pressure by GoS intelligence bodies against open manifestations of this type of coordination. While respondents did not describe their official registration statuses with KSA bodies as adversely affected by the GoS presence, they described an atmosphere of broad apprehension that could informally inhibit this type of cooperation with international bodies moving forward.

● **Local Implementation Autonomy:** Despite these difficulties in sourcing materials and contracting labor for infrastructure-intensive projects, implementing partners still reported their ability to select beneficiaries for the distribution of basic items and follow required monitoring and evaluation procedures without significant hindrance by armed actors.

CROSSLINE MOVEMENT



Given the fluid nature of the NGO and INGO supply lines that connect areas of the KSA with a GoS presence with the rest of northeast Syria and Syria as a whole, respondents spoke with varying degrees of concern about the current and future effects of restrictions on movement on the delivery of humanitarian aid. Though respondents described the crossing arrangements between armed factions as more stable than those that had previously governed this area throughout late 2019, they still noted the many ways in which the presence of GoS forces has restricted the quantity of aid delivered through the most commonly used crossing points. Specifically, respondents focused on the following effects of these recent security developments:

- **Lengthened Supply Chains:** Because of the disruption that Operation Peace Spring has caused on traffic transiting the east-west M4 highway – armed clashes between Turkish-backed and KSA forces preventing routine vehicle traffic – respondents in the western-most areas of northeast Syria described the steps that they have taken to reconfigure their supply chains. In order to reach the urban areas of Manbij,

Ar-Raqqa, and Al-Tabqa, for example, trucks must now travel from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's northeast Syria border, south towards al-Shaddadi before crossing westwards (trucks had previously traveled directly west over the M4). This new route, with damaged and poorly maintained low-capacity roads, has strained humanitarian providers and local governance officials in these communities who had previously relied on traffic from INGOs operating out of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Respondents ascribed the decrease in the quantity of aid provided to these areas (noted above) as partly stemming from these changed supply routes.

● **Continued Movement of Goods and People:** Despite these logistical difficulties, respondents described the gradual establishment of a modus vivendi (mode of living) between KSA and GoS forces. Over the past few months, this has allowed for a resumption of the traffic of goods and people across northeast Syria. Respondents in humanitarian and governance organizations across the region, however, reported a general sense of apprehension among residents about the increased presence of GoS and Russian forces on main roadways. While this has not prohibited established organizations from moving goods and people across the area, it has led to a general decrease in traffic among local residents. As one resident described these lines of control, “we consider them a border between two countries”.

● **Use of Middlemen:** Despite this resumed traffic across different areas of northeast Syria, respondents noted that the increase in GoS and Russian checkpoints in the area has forced humanitarian providers to contract with a range of connected intermediaries in order to safely and quickly transport essential goods across lines of control. While these respondents were reluctant to discuss the specific natures of these relationships, they spoke in general terms about the importance of utilizing personal connections to navigate an expanded web of checkpoints and armed groups following the October 2019 shift in security dynamics across northeast Syria. Without the use of these middlemen, respondents implied, forces at GoS checkpoints would either prohibit the passage of heavy equipment and materials (construction materials and machinery) or siphon large amounts of it.

● **Increased Fears of Conscription:** Respondents also described how the return of GoS forces to northeast Syria has increased fears among young men who had previously avoided GoS conscription. Additionally, KSA forces have also continued conscription drives in these areas, adding to the obstacles that may be encountered at a checkpoint for individuals avoiding conscription. Because of this, military-aged males have become particularly apprehensive about traveling on checkpoint-laden roads or across lines of control after October 2019.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the above findings in mind, HAT would urge humanitarian actors operating in these areas to consider the following recommendations:

1. Closely monitor IP supply lines

The newly resurgent presence of GoS forces in certain KSA areas, coupled with continued conscription drives from KSA forces, has produced widespread anxiety among male humanitarian staff members of age for military service. This ensuing reluctance to travel through checkpoints controlled by either of these factions (GoS in particular) should force INGOs to give extra attention to logistical tasks that might require their staff members to assume this extra risk.

2. Incorporate security staff into all logistics-related decisions

The quick advance of GoS and Russian forces into territories that had previously been under the exclusive control of the KSA (along with the ensuing establishment of checkpoints across mutually used roads) has created a range of new obstacles for both INGOs and NGOs seeking to rapidly move supplies and people across these areas. The fact that these organizations have then turned to sub-contracted middlemen to negotiate these new obstacles raises challenges for international implementers concerned with sanctions on GoS-affiliated entities. INGOs should continuously vet and audit all parties involved in their supply chains, paying special attention to any newly contracted staff members.

3. Continuously reassess donor-attribution and coordination policies

Because of the general anxieties expressed by local implementing partners about open attribution of projects linked with specific Western donors (considering the possible presence of GoS intelligence units in these areas) implementers should constantly examine and reevaluate their policies on donor recognition and attribution of specific assistance delivered.

CONTACT

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The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. Successful humanitarian and development interventions require a nuanced and objective understanding of the human ecosystems in which these interventions occur. To this end, the HAT's most important function is to collect, triangulate, synthesize, analyze and operationalize disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly nimble, adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the Syrian conflict.

