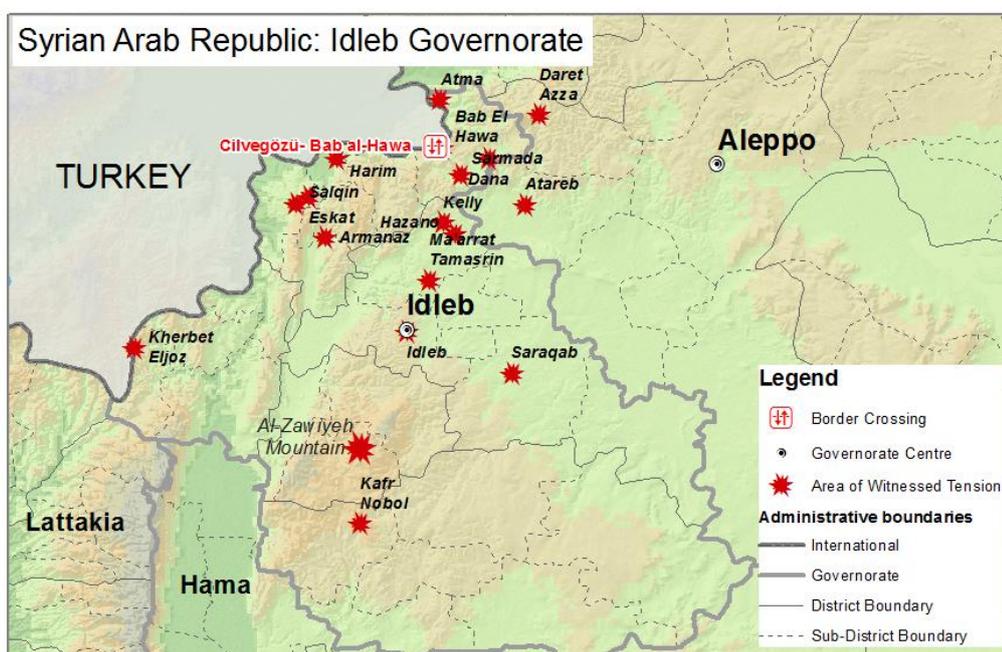


## Highlights

- From 19 – 25 July, infighting among non-state armed groups (NSAGs) disrupted the provision of humanitarian services in northwestern Syria.
- The Bab Al-Hawa border crossing effectively was closed between 19 – 25 July, after the Turkish border became inaccessible from the Syrian side, resulting in the stoppage of humanitarian aid and commercial cargo from Turkey to Syria.
- Several humanitarian organizations suspended operations for several days since 19 July. Most have resumed activities since then.
- As of 26 July, the situation in north-western Syria has seemingly calmed down; although dynamics on the ground may present further difficulties to a humanitarian response.
- Limited population displacement occurred, although civilians were killed and injured in crossfire.

The following map illustrates areas that witnessed tensions since 19 July:



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

## Situation Overview

During the morning hours of 19 July, intense clashes between Ahrar Al-Sham and Hayyat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) erupted in multiple locations in Idleb governorate. While hostilities occurred in several communities throughout the governorate, the heaviest armed clashes were concentrated along the Syrian-Turkish border, where a large concentration of IDP camps are present.

Immediately after the clashes started, the warring parties erected road blocks and sand barriers on many of the governorate's main routes, halting most civilian and commercial movement. As such, the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing, which is the main crossing point for humanitarian supplies into the area, became inaccessible from the Syrian side. Coincidentally, the Turkish authorities had planned to close the crossing to commercial and civilian traffic for maintenance work from 19 – 21 July, but keeping a lane open for humanitarian shipments. However, with the crossing becoming inaccessible on the Syrian side, no trucks were able to cross into Turkey to pick-up humanitarian aid.

The fighting stopped temporarily in the evening hours of 19 July after an initiative by prominent figures in northwestern Syria was launched to end the fighting. On 20 July, fighting resumed in many locations, particularly in the area around the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing. Conflict near IDP camps located around Qah and Atma towns reportedly caused

panic, with unconfirmed reports indicating that IDPs were wounded by stray bullets. The following day, the fighting around the crossing caused a fire at an old factory that several NGOs use for storage of humanitarian aid, causing significant material losses. By mid-day, Ahrar Al-Sham issued a statement announcing that an agreement was reached between them and HTS, whereby the control of the crossing is to be handed over to a civilian administration.

In addition to the events that took place at the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing, most of the border areas between Syria and Turkey in north-western Syria is now controlled by HTS. Additionally, HTS is reportedly in control of Daret Azza town in the western countryside of Aleppo governorate, a town located on the trade route from Afrin to the western countryside of Aleppo governorate. In some of the towns that witnessed infighting among NSAGs, worrying reports of assault on civilians emerged. In Saraqab town, a media activist was reportedly shot during an anti-HTS demonstration. Furthermore, a media activist in Salqin town was arrested by the group for unknown reasons, only to be released few days later. On 23 July, HTS also established full control over Idlib city after the withdrawal of the remaining Ahrar Al-Sham fighters. Around the same time, a VBIED explosion took place in Al-Zira'a neighbourhood in the city, reportedly resulting in the killing of 17 people and the wounding of 65. In some locations, armed factions agreed to join HTS, resulting in the change of influence in the area. In the aftermath of the explosion, HTS publicly executed two persons who were accused of being behind the attack.

## Humanitarian Impact

There are 2.3 million people residing in NSAG-held areas in northwestern Syria, a million of whom are IDPs. More than 1.3 million people in need are present in Idlib governorate, let alone the NSAG-held areas in adjacent governorates. The Turkey cross-border humanitarian operation reaches more than one million people in northwestern Syria on a monthly basis.

From 19 to 25 July, the tensions and hostilities around the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing brought the shipping of humanitarian and commercial supplies to north-western Syria to a standstill. All UN humanitarian shipments scheduled to cross during that period between 19 – 25 July had to be suspended, as were NGO shipments. On 26 July, the Turkish authorities allowed trucks that were stuck at the crossing since 19 July to cross to the Syrian side in order to clear the backlog that the closure had created. The Turkish authorities stated that they will keep the border crossing open, provided that a Syrian civilian administration handles all border crossing matters and provided that there is no armed group presence near the border. Following the agreement between Ahrar Al-Sham and HTS on 21 July, the civilian administration on the Syrian side remained the same as prior to the hostilities.

The effects of the closure of the border were almost immediately felt throughout northwestern Syria. Flour shortages, for example, were quickly felt in the IDP camps near the border and in communities away from it. A large number of bakeries were forced to close down or reduce output significantly. The price of a ton of flour reportedly rose nearly immediately from 230 USD to 270 USD from the recent tensions.

For the first few days after the escalation in hostilities on 19 July most NGOs operating in the sectors of Food Security, WASH, Education, and Protection suspended operations in the governorate. The Health Cluster also reported limited suspensions. Some NGOs were able to maintain their operations in parts of the southern and western countryside of Idlib governorate which were not affected by the hostilities. Since 24 July, most NGOs resumed their operations. There are concerns that certain types of programming will face more restrictions on their work, such as for some protection activities. There are also reports of increased access restrictions, such as checkpoints at which armed groups demand a percentage of aid.

In the short term, the humanitarian impact of the recent changes in northwestern Syria is likely to be difficulty in maintaining humanitarian access to people in need, rather than new needs brought on by the conflict. Based on past similar experiences, the growing influence of armed groups in the area may result in increased interference in humanitarian work. This would jeopardize the humanitarian operation, which serves over one million of these people each month. The humanitarian community for the cross-border operation into Syria from Turkey is drafting a plan to address this challenge, and will take into account new needs that might arise from potential larger scale conflict in the medium term.

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