In the shadow of revolution and humanitarian response

Understanding aspirations and wellbeing in Northeast Syria

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HPG
Humanitarian
Policy Group

ODI

Q Social Inquiry

How to cite: Siddiqui, N., Spencer, A., Guiu, R. and Shwan, A.A. (2024) *In the shadow of revolution and humanitarian response: understanding aspirations and wellbeing in Northeast Syria*. HPG case study. London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/in-the-shadow-of-revolution-and-humanitarian-response-understanding-aspirations-and-wellbeing-in-northeast-syria).

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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IDP	internally displaced person
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NES	Northeast Syria
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
USAID	US Agency for International Development
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Union

Executive summary

This paper is one of two case studies contributing to a wider research agenda on the contours of wellbeing in protracted crises conducted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI. It examines how people conceive of and pursue lives of meaning within the context of Northeast Syria (NES). The aim is to influence the humanitarian system to better address issues of wellbeing, with the analysis informing responses to protracted crises in other settings.

It explores wellbeing through the lenses of place, community and aspirations among the residents and displaced populations of Qamishli city within NES and the Kurdish state-building project of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). AANES has significant territorial control and operates like a state, such as through the provision of services, but it is not internationally recognised. As such, this is also a case study of life in an unrecognised de facto state where citizens must bear the negative political, social and economic effects of the international non-recognition of their government.

For residents and displaced communities within the city to feel a greater sense of wellbeing, they need agency, choice and self-sufficiency; economic opportunities; and cultural and community engagement. In conditions where this is possible, people have a collective purpose, but also a sense of their own place within their society. Community members do not feel that any of these elements of wellbeing are sufficiently met now, over a decade into the crisis, five years since Turkish occupation in parts of northern Syria stunted the revolution, and in a context where political settlement and reform remain indefinitely stalled. As such, people are tired and scared, and live in anticipation of the worst in the absence of a recognised state. There is a widespread desire to migrate, even amongst those who have invested so much in the AANES project, driven by a need to ensure safety, opportunity and choice for their children.

While Qamishli is the headquarters of many local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating within the international humanitarian response for NES, very little assistance goes to community members there. This is a source of deep frustration to local NGOs whose focus of work is elsewhere in NES, but whose priorities lie with supporting the people of Qamishli beyond humanitarian aid provision, such as through supporting infrastructure repair, peaceful co-existence, and good governance and public participation.

The city's considerable exclusion from the international humanitarian response is due to insufficient resources for the whole of Syria and donor requirements linked to sanctions adherence; wider geopolitical considerations, including what 'conflict-affected' means (where a lack of active conflict inappropriately renders the city not 'conflict-affected'); the non-recognition of AANES as an autonomous authority; and a specific focus on 'saving lives' rather than a broader focus on wellbeing. This raises questions among community members and local authorities alike about how humanitarian

priorities are set and by whom. It also underscores the international response's power in the way it is structured and implemented in reinforcing the past and ongoing marginalisation of Kurdish-majority areas by the Government of Syria and regional neighbours as well.

This dynamic belies the fact that most humanitarian and stabilisation interlocutors have a stated desire to work more directly with local AANES authorities to enhance the impact and sustainability of their programming. As such, that which prevents ordinary citizens from being fully able to pursue flourishing lives is also what has prevented a more fully fledged and robust response in Qamishli and NES as a whole: the lack of recognition for the state.

Qamishli thus serves as another reminder of the perils of relying on humanitarian aid to mitigate conflict. It underscores that so much of what impacts people's wellbeing in Qamishli requires holistic, long-term and political solutions that humanitarian actors rarely address. However, the findings here have implications for this context and humanitarian responses in protracted crises more broadly, including those involving de facto and/or unrecognised states.

Recommendations

Engage more and directly with de facto state authorities for aid provision and systems strengthening

Humanitarian and stabilisation actors in NES have expressed considerable willingness and desire to work more closely with AANES authorities to leverage the limited resources they have to help more people in a sustainable way, but they are bound by donor restrictions. Non-recognition does not necessarily rule out the prospects for international engagement (Tindall, 2023) but does dictate the type of engagement possible.

Donors should consider what configuration of engagement they would allow that moves beyond the bare minimum of support in contexts where there are immense needs and de facto authorities are relatively well placed to address them. At the same time, **humanitarian and stabilisation actors should push the bounds of what is immediately possible within existing responses**, to create enabling environments for wellbeing while further advocating for wider and more sustained change in this regard.

Implement conflict-sensitive communication and prioritisation

Although prioritisation is driven by limited resources, **humanitarian actors need to pay greater attention to conflict-sensitive communication and community engagement**.

The current NES response forces international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and coordination bodies to prioritise based on need and level of conflict-affectedness. In a context such as Qamishli, which has significant humanitarian need, being told that your community cannot be helped

because it has not experienced enough violence, armed conflict and upheaval is deeply hurtful. It serves to minimise and, worse still, erase the very real and difficult experiences people have endured. This in turn generates animosity towards others who are receiving support.

Expand multi-year funding and programme cycles that cover more communities

If protracted crises continue without political resolution, donors must move beyond emergency response funding and programme cycles that only cover specifically designated conflict-affected areas. **Donors must expand longer-term, multi-year funding and programme cycles**. These should seek to address the critical aspects of wellbeing across its components, such as through connecting individual material needs with more communal ones, thereby slowly working to create space for individual agency as well as community-building.

Leverage different resources for funding

In the NES context, limited funds and the similarities between early recovery and stabilisation interventions have led for some to call for **better coordination between humanitarian and stabilisation actors through pooling, or at least better coordinating resources**.

Another option to consider is **the use of sub-state and municipal donor funds**. Jazira region authorities have cultivated relationships with several cities in Europe and have received funds and technical capacity assistance for infrastructure rehabilitation. Some of these funds have come via diaspora within municipalities lobbying their local governments for support to Qamishli. These funds are not as large as that which would come from international development assistance, but have helped with systems-strengthening efforts that humanitarian and stabilisation actors did not prioritise.

Invest in institutional strengthening and in local NGOs

Donors should complement their aid with more funds designated for stabilisation or political efforts with specific support for strengthening local civil society actors, conflict resolution, and local governance (Hall and Beals, 2023). More sustained and consistent funding in this regard is warranted.

Local NGO interlocutors in Qamishli and local humanitarian coordination actors in NES all expressed a strong desire to engage in the deeper issues facing their communities, beyond aid distribution. They want to contribute to creating more vibrant and cohesive communities and institutions more responsive to their needs. Community members in this sample have lost more than a decade to hardship and setback. Civil society actors have the will to try to push back against the pervasive despair and hopelessness they see in their communities.

1   Introduction

1.1   Background and aims

> Regardless of the difficult circumstances people may find themselves in, they seek not just to live, but to do so in ways they believe have meaning and value (Lough et al., 2023: 6).

The different aspects of people's lives that underpin these efforts – including material conditions as well as subjective, social and moral elements – exist on a continuum and are hard to separate from each other. The processes involved in people's efforts to live 'good', 'meaningful' or 'flourishing' lives that they believe have value, and the efforts by policy actors to measure and influence them, taken together comprise the concept of 'wellbeing' (Lough et al., 2023). Such framing also aligns with more recent conceptualisations of home, return, and durable solutions to protracted displacement (Bradley, 2018; Siddiqui, 2021; Fàbos and Brun, 2022).

This lived experience in pursuit of wellbeing, particularly among populations experiencing prolonged conflict, instability and displacement, sits in sharp contrast to the focus of humanitarian assistance which emphasises providing short-term, 'life-saving' support aimed largely at improving people's material conditions to alleviate suffering and prevent death in moments of acute crisis. However, these moments of crisis are often not short-lived but protracted. As such, humanitarian assistance evolves from one-off interventions to an open-ended system of governance. These interventions can run counter to what people living in protracted crisis deem critical for leading lives of meaning and value.

This paper is one of two case studies contributing to a wider research agenda on the pursuit of wellbeing in protracted crises conducted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI. It examines how people conceive of and pursue lives of meaning within the context of Northeast Syria (NES). The aim is to influence the humanitarian system to better address issues of wellbeing, with the analysis informing responses to other protracted crises.

NES is a particularly relevant context to explore the processes and dynamics among conflict-affected residents and displaced communities therein. It is an example of a long-term crisis supported to a varying degree by a mix of local and international assistance and taking place within the Kurdish-state-formation project in Rojava, also now known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).[1]

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1   The region formally became known as the AANES in 2018. For simplicity, the report will hereafter use AANES in reference to authorities and governance, even when referring to events pre-2018, and NES in reference to the geographical region.

This allows for an analysis of how the shadows cast by a stalled revolution and an imbalanced, geopolitically driven aid response impact the pursuit of wellbeing among conflict-affected and displaced people.

The subsequent sections of this paper will elaborate on the understanding of wellbeing employed for data collection, research methodology, and an overview of the NES context including humanitarian response structures, before delving into findings across the three main dimensions of wellbeing captured in the study – place, community and aspirations – and how they intersect with the international humanitarian response in NES. The case study concludes with recommendations.

1.2   What do we mean by wellbeing?

As briefly described above, wellbeing may be considered around three core domains:

> the material or objective aspects of life such as food, income, and commodities, the subjective perceptions about what is important in life, and the relational aspects of life where what people value or consider important emerges from their interactions with others (Lough et al., 2023: 8).

Centring the notion that wellbeing is intrinsically linked to social relationships reflects the importance many societies place on living well collectively as a community. When viewed in this more relational framing, the connection of place to wellbeing moves beyond simply being the physical backdrop to human action to a space that people actively build and maintain that is imbued with shared and contested understandings of history, culture, values and identity. This relational framing of wellbeing also highlights that what matters most to people in the present and their ability to act on it is linked to how they understand the past and how they imagine the future. Consequently, people's aspirations and the ways in which they seek to live meaningful lives relates to their own agency and choice; the norms, values, and expectation of others; and the power structures in which they are embedded.

Taken together, wellbeing can be seen as a 'holistic, active process, where people's efforts to lead good and flourishing lives involve the interplay of material, subjective, and relational dimensions of life, played out in specific places over time' (Lough et al., 2023: 12). Using this framing, wellbeing will be examined through the lens of place, community and aspirations.

1.3   Methodology

This study takes an in-depth qualitative approach to understanding the pursuit of wellbeing in protracted crises through semi-structured interviews with residents and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in NES, as well as with local administration officials and international and local interlocutors involved in the humanitarian response in the area.

The research focused primarily on Qamishli city within the Jazira region of NES (Figure 1). It is the second-largest city and capital of this region and one of the most ethno-religiously diverse in NES,

incorporating Kurd, Arab, Assyrian Christian and Yazidi populations, among others. This urban centre also contains a mix of displaced and non-displaced communities, and houses both AANES institutions and a limited number of Government of Syria institutions.

Figure 1   Data collection location and location of origin of internally displaced study participants
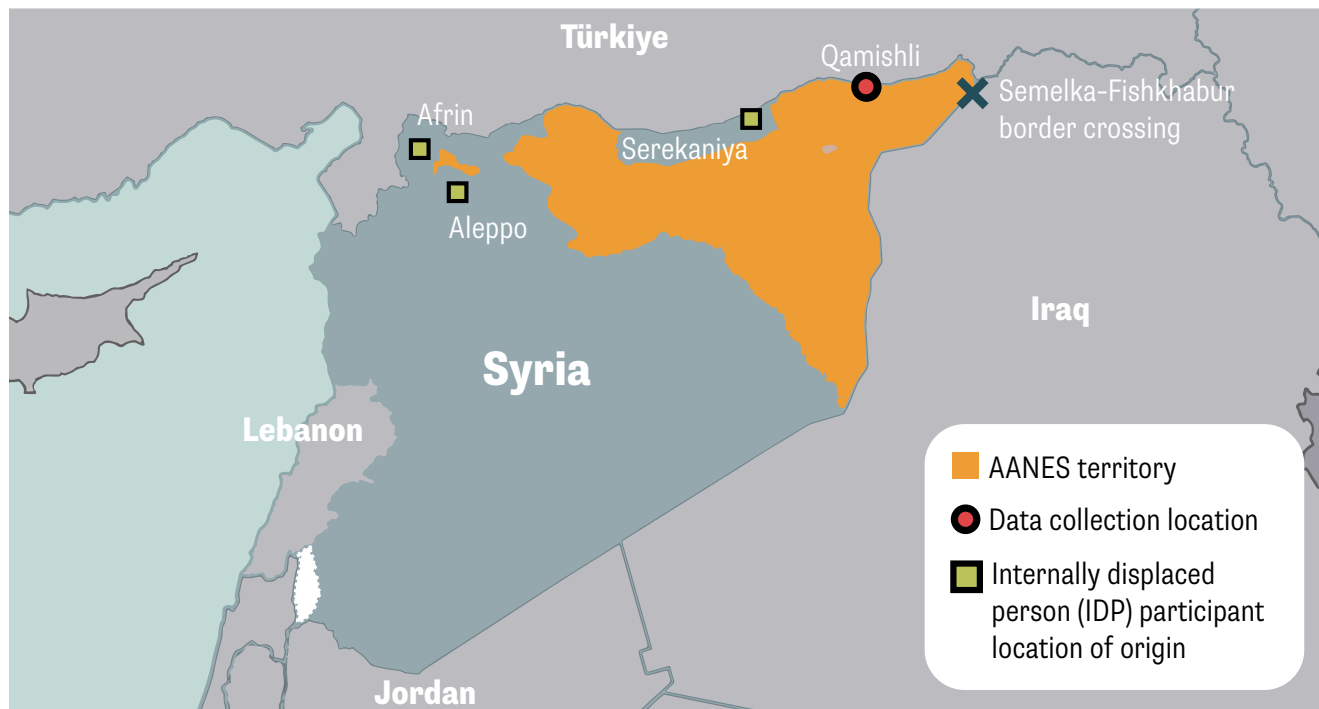
Because the term 'wellbeing' has negative connotations in Arabic and Kurdish, having been co-opted by political factions as electoral propaganda and because it is often conflated with service provision alone, it was not used in any interviews conducted. Rather, distinction was made between material and social needs (i.e. place, community and belonging) and welfare, with the latter relating more to living meaningful or leading flourishing lives (i.e. aspirations and agency).

These topics were explored in detail through semi-structured interviews with 29 adult community members, over the age of 18, residing in Qamishli city, split roughly evenly between residents and IDPs. This sample comprised 16 Kurds, 8 Arabs, 3 Christians, and 2 Yazidis. Study participants' ages ranged from 20 to 80 years old, split into the following age groups: 13 young people (aged 20–39), 14 middle-aged people (aged 40–59), and 2 elderly people (aged 60+). Among the IDPs in the sample, 11 came from within NES and former AANES-controlled territories (i.e. Afrin and Serekaniye) and two from outside of it (i.e. Aleppo). Approximately one-third of participants were women.

Because of the complex nature of the humanitarian intervention in NES, an additional 24 key informant interviews were conducted with local AANES authorities responsible for the Jazira region across sectors; local NGOs based in Qamishli city and operating across NES; INGOs, particularly those

operating in NES and the Jazira region; international donors including political actors engaged with the AANES; and representatives of coordination mechanisms for NES and the wider Syria regional response.

All interviews with community members, local authorities, and local NGOs took place in person in Qamishli in August 2023. Because most international donors, INGOs and coordination mechanisms are not based in Qamishli city, these interviews were conducted remotely over the course of September and October 2023.

A team of three senior researchers, with expertise and experience conducting qualitative research with displaced and conflict-affected communities, joined by a local Qamishli-based researcher and journalist, conducted all interviews with community members, local authorities, and local NGOs in the study site. Community member recruitment to the study occurred through a combination of canvassing and snowball sampling. Following this, members of the senior research team in conjunction with HPG conducted the remaining interviews with international donors, INGOs, and coordination mechanisms remotely.

For all interviews, ethical guidelines were followed including free (voluntary) participation, prior informed consent and confidentiality and anonymity assurance. Each interview was conducted in the preferred language of the study participant. Only interviews conducted with study participants based outside NES (or Syria as a whole) were audio-recorded with permission. This was to further ensure comfort of community members and further protect those working directly in NES as their presence is deemed illegal by the Government of Syria. After collecting data in Qamishli city, interview guides were tested and adapted for validation and applicability to context. Data analysis and theme identification were conducted by the senior research team and included a data analysis workshop with HPG.

The findings presented in the analysis herein are drawn from these interviews and field observations.

2   Context

Qamishli is a diverse city of between 200,000 and 300,000 people comprised of predominantly Kurd, Arab, Assyrian and Yazidi populations. It is located at the Turkish border and is the closest large city to the Semelka–Fishkhabur crossing with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and is within territory that contains much of Syria's oil wealth and cash crops. This strategic position puts it at risk of incursion from Türkiye, the Government of Syria, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As a part of the Kurdish-majority areas of NES, the city also served as the de facto capital of the AANES until the seat was moved onto Ain Issa in the Raqqa region in 2018 (van Wilgenburg, 2018). Ultimately, the city is reflective of complex dynamics that have shaped NES and the international response to the Syrian crisis which began over a decade ago.

2.1   The creation of the AANES

Ethnic minorities in Syria have long faced discrimination by the Ba'ath regime of the Government of Syria. Kurds in particular were denied citizenship and access to state services and were restrained from political, cultural and linguistic expression of their heritage (Federici, 2015; Khalaf, 2016). Kurdish majority areas of the country were also underdeveloped, with limited infrastructure as a matter of policy. Whilst there was desire to mobilise politically for change, attempts were often fragmented and lacked resilience, owing to years of suppression at the hands of the Syrian government. This was most evident in the government's response to the 2004 uprising by Kurds in Qamishli, during which it is estimated that hundreds of civilians were killed or injured by government forces (Khalaf, 2016).

Against this backdrop, in March 2011 anti-government protests spread across Syria as part of the pro-democracy movements in countries in the region (Egypt, Tunisia and Libya) and crackdowns by the government became increasingly violent. By July 2012, as hostilities spread across the country, the Syrian uprising had been deemed civil war by the International Committee of the Red Cross (Al Jazeera, 2012). At a time of increased violence between government and opposition forces in other parts of the country, Syrian armed forces were withdrawn from Kurdish-majority areas in the north of the country (Federici, 2015).

In this void, previously fragmented Kurdish political parties, in part led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), came together to create the autonomous Kurdish administration called Rojava, with its initial governing charter formalised in 2014. Rojava is a Kurdish word for 'West' and signifies that this region represents one of the four parts of Greater Kurdistan. While Kurdish language and politics appear to dominate, it is important to note that NES is multi-ethnic and home to sizeable Arab and Assyrian populations and Turkmen, Yazidi and Armenian communities as well. The political make-up of the coalitions in power in the region has changed over time and there remain divisions amongst Kurdish parties, but at present the AANES is governed by the Syrian Democratic Council (see Box 1).

Box 1   NES territory and AANES control

Abutting Türkiye, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Iraq, NES territory has changed significantly since 2012 as Kurdish forces (with the support of the United States-led Global Coalition) recaptured cities from ISIS, expanding their influence across much of northern Syria. The regions comprising NES over time have included the Kurdish-majority and mixed areas of Jazira, Afrin and Euphrates, and the Arab-majority and mixed areas of Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and Deir Ez-Zor.

Inclusion within NES, however, does not imply full AANES control over these regions (Figure 2). External threats from Türkiye have put pressure on the peripheries of the territory, with AANES ceding control of Afrin and surroundings in 2018 and parts of the Euphrates and Jazira regions in 2019. The Government of Syria also retains control in specific pockets of the Jazira region, including parts of Qamishli and Al-Hasakah cities. There also remain smaller pockets of ISIS-controlled areas at the southern borders of NES as well.

Figure 2   Areas of control in Syria
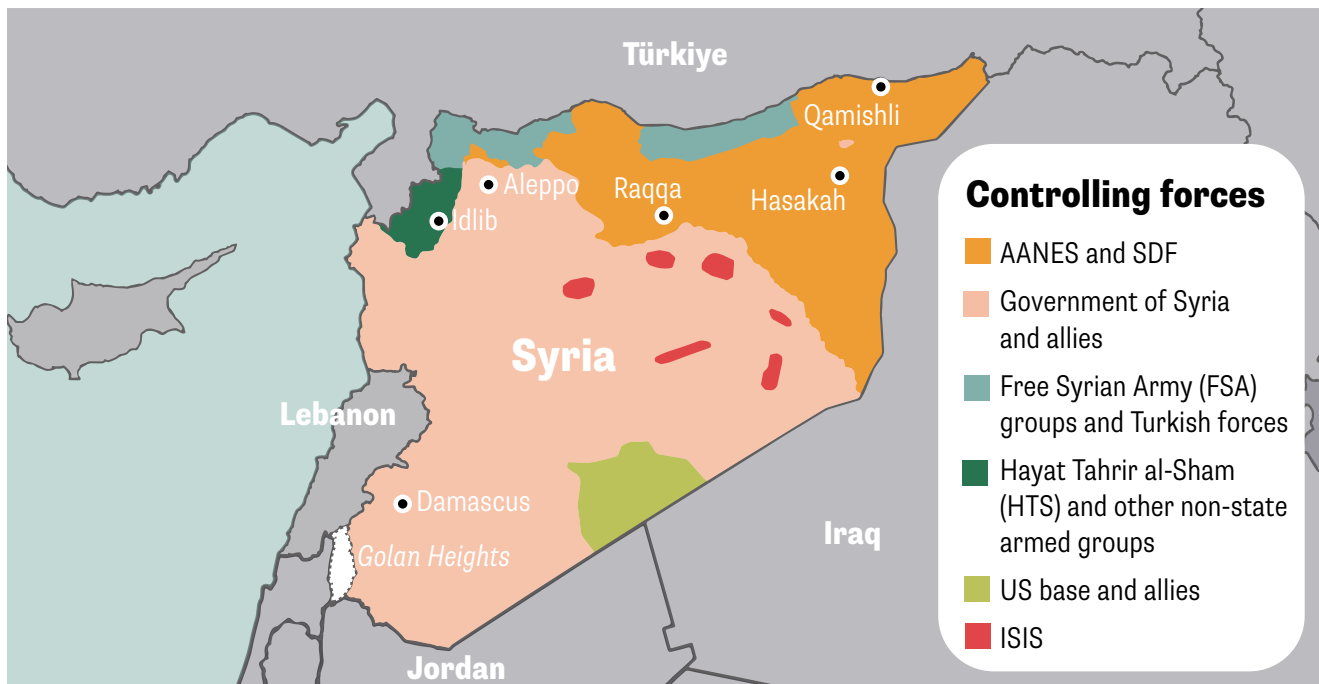
Source: www.gisreportsonline.com/r/syria-war-assad/

Despite these developments, AANES is still seeking recognition in the international community. Thus far, only the Parliament of Catalunya (Spain) has recognised its autonomous status (van Wilgenburg, 2021). Intense geopolitical tensions between United Nations (UN) permanent members of the Security Council and NATO and its allies prevent an endorsement at the international level and the implications

of this are extensive (Ajjoub, 2023). It is beyond the scope of this research to explore these in detail, but it is important to note that this lack of recognition excludes AANES from UN processes including, for example, the discussion to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict (ibid.; see also Section 2.4). The Government of Syria does not officially recognise the autonomy of AANES.

2.2   Overlapping crises

Throughout these political developments, AANES has also been proactively managing conflict from state and non-state groups. As with many parts of Syria and other countries in the region, ISIS posed a threat to populations in NES, and the YPG and its female counterpart the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) were drawn into the conflict. A key factor in determining the legitimacy of the governing parties was the successful defeat of ISIS in 2015 in Kurdish-majority areas in Syria at the hands of the US-backed YPG and later the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the military arm of AANES (Gunes and Lowe, 2015; Khalaf, 2016). This legitimacy is, however, contested in Arab-majority areas now under AANES control including Deir Ez-Zor (Kittleson, 2023; Mohamed, 2023).

Turkish interests in the region relate to the PYD. Türkiye views it (and the YPG) as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Çevik, 2022). The PKK has been designated a terrorist organisation by Türkiye, the United Kingdom (UK), US, and European Union (EU) (amongst others) and as a result, narratives around self-defence and protection are deployed to justify Türkiye's incursions into NES (Federici, 2015; Çevik, 2022; Deewanee, 2022). Since 2016, three military operations (Euphrates Shield in 2016, Olive Branch in 2018 and Peace Spring in 2019) have been launched to prevent the AANES expanding and connecting its presence along the length of the Turkish border (Çevik, 2022). Each of these operations has caused waves of internal displacement, with little hope for return, and the threat of future incursions further complicates the stability of NES and the humanitarian response. This is further underscored by the drone strikes Türkiye launched across NES in October 2023, targeting 150 locations, killing civilians, damaging critical infrastructure and energy facilities, and drawing a response from US military installations in the area as well (Ali and Hayatsever, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023a). Since October 2023, there have been two more rounds of airstrikes; one in December 2023 and one in January 2024, which further damaged infrastructure in the region (NES Forum, 2024).

This level of instability has had significant economic consequences for NES and Syria as a whole. Following more than a decade of civil war, Syria's economic situation is dire (see Box 2). The value of the Syrian pound (or lira) has plummeted to an all-time low; in 2023, its value dropped by half again against the US dollar to SYP14,200 (Makki, 2023; UNOCHA, 2023a) and the economy has been 'crippled' with high inflation exacerbated by currency depreciation (UNOCHA, 2022). Over a period of 10 months in 2023, the cost of the food basket had doubled, reaching four times the price of two years earlier (UNOCHA, 2023a). Across Syria, 16.7 million are reportedly in need of humanitarian assistance in 2024, of which 5.5 million have been displaced (including over 2 million people living in sites of last resort) (ibid.).[2]

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2   Sites of last resort include camps, informal settlements and collective centres.

Box 2   Sanctions and their impacts

Since the beginning of conflict in Syria in 2011, the country has been under one of the most extensive sanctions regimes in the world, imposed by the EU, UK, US, Canada, Switzerland and Australia, among others (Leclerc, 2023). These actors are also major donors for humanitarian assistance and, in some cases, stabilisation, in the country. Their sanctions policies contain limited humanitarian exemptions. Syria also falls under UN sanctions pertaining to the prohibition on trade in antiquities and on sanctions on ISIS (ibid.).

Among the most expansive sanctions are those imposed by the US, some of which predate the current crisis. They include primary sanctions that amount to an embargo on almost all trade and financial ties with the country (ibid.) and secondary sanctions under the so-called Caesar Act which came into effect in 2020 and apply to entities of any nationality that are found transacting with sanctioned actors in multiple sectors of Syria's economy, particularly energy and construction (Alloush and Simon, 2020).

The concern with such sanctions, humanitarian exemptions notwithstanding, is that while their aim in the Syria context is to punish war criminals, extract political concessions, and help push forward an eventual political transition, they may inflict more harm on the civilian population than they do to their intended targets (ibid.). Academic literature highlights that economic sanctions have broadly corrosive effects on the economic, physical, social and political wellbeing of citizens in target countries. Specific impacts include significant damage to formal economies, isolation from international financial institutions, the proliferation of black-market economies and shadow sectors, severe economic instability, greater poverty and income inequality, limited access to basic needs, eroded public health conditions, and increased repression (Early and Peksen, 2022).

These conditions are found in Syria and can at least partially be attributed to sanctions. Considering AANES is not internationally recognised as autonomous, it falls under the majority of these Syria-wide sanctions, though recent issuing of US General Licenses has permitted some previously prohibited activities in non-regime-held areas like NES and Northwest Syria (see OFAC, 2022 for more details). Furthermore, because the Government of Syria also does not recognise this autonomous status, the region faces an internal embargo as well.

As such, the only way for goods and indeed humanitarian assistance to come into NES is via the Semelka–Fishkhabur crossing with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This border point itself has been subject to periodic closure at the behest of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government and is also viewed as an illegal crossing by the Government of Syria.

While the start of normalisation between Syria and states in the region is seen by proponents as a way to improve the country's economy, critics note that the fault of economic collapse is with the state itself which has proved to be systemically corrupt, incompetent, and driven by greed. It is unlikely that economic and development support offered would benefit the public (Lister, 2023). Further to this, it is unlikely that normalisation would lead the Government of Syria to make concessions to resolve the conflict. Even so, in response to these developments, AANES has made overtures to the Government of Syria to negotiate a peace deal if it is not detrimental to Kurdish gains and the right of people living in AANES (Zaman, 2023).

2.3   Humanitarian needs in NES

As a result of these overlapping crises, there are complex humanitarian needs in NES. The most pressing needs relate to those of IDPs, who are living in camps, collective centres, informal settlements and urban settings. Figures from July 2023 (provided directly to the authors by actors working in the region) show that there are over 650,000 IDPs in NES and almost 298,000 of those reside in last-resort sites. The majority of people have fled from areas controlled by other actors including the Government of Syria, Turkish-backed forces, and ISIS. Some people have been displaced since the start of the conflict over 10 years ago, but others fled more recently (2018 onwards) in response to military operations. Whilst hostilities are deemed to have lessened somewhat since the start of the pandemic in 2020, IDPs lack the ability to return to their areas of origin due to the economic situation and a lack of basic services therein and/or because they would face violence or persecution if they did. Instead, they are choosing to head towards camps where they perceive that they are more likely to receive humanitarian assistance (UNOCHA, 2022).[3] As a result, over 1,400 households are on waiting lists for placements in informal camps in NES (ibid.). Relatedly and to a lesser extent, there remain instances of conflict-related displacements in response to escalations in violence between the SDF and other local militia (including ISIS resurgence) and Turkish military operations. In 2022, 3,000 new arrivals were reported in camps (ibid.).

Along with IDPs, host communities face significant humanitarian needs in NES. As the economic situation continues to deteriorate, the population is facing a dilapidation and failure of basic services that undermine their own needs and threaten the host communities' ability to support and integrate a large IDP population. Socioeconomic needs are vast and households in the region 'report livelihoods (52% of households) and electricity (35%) as needs' (ibid.: 87). Water scarcity has also become a key issue for NES (ibid.). For example, the Alouk water station resumed limited and intermittent functionality in September 2023, after nearly a year-long closure.

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3   There are reportedly 12 displacement camps in NES that face varying degrees of support from different aid actors. Those considered 'formal' camps are supported by UN operations, some 'informal' camps received ad hoc food distributions, and other informal camps were supported intermittently by NGOs and the local authorities (Human Rights Watch, 2023b).

The population more broadly also faces emergencies that relate to the protracted nature of the conflict, a lack of resilience in public services and infrastructure and ultimately development failures. For example, the Syrian Ministry of Health declared a cholera outbreak in September 2022 that was attributed to the aforementioned water crisis and declining socioeconomic situation (UNOCHA, 2022).

These needs and their ramifications may only increase in the wake of the damage caused by recent drone strikes. AANES authorities estimate that 4.3 million people in NES, particularly within Al-Hasakah and Qamishli cities and their surroundings, may be impacted, given that 18 water-pumping stations and 11 power stations were rendered non-operational from these strikes (Human Rights Watch, 2023a).

During the December 2023 round of airstrikes, two health facilities were targeted and suffered significant material damage and in January 2024, the targeting of Sweidiyeh power and gas station had a considerable impact on energy provision in Jazira. As a result, 11 major cities and towns across NES, as well as 2,750 villages, are now fully without electricity access, affecting over one million people (NES Forum, 2024). Adding pressure to the previously mentioned strain on the Alouk water station, recent airstrikes have forced the water station offline, impacting nearly 610,000 people in Hasakah and surrounding areas (ibid.).

2.4   Humanitarian response architecture in NES

Humanitarian response in Syria is devolved into three key hubs:

- the Syria Humanitarian Country Team in Damascus (with sub-offices across the country)
- the Syria Regional Response (cross-border) hub in Gaziantep, covering Northwest Syria
- the NES NGO Forum in Al-Hasakah.

The Syria INGO Regional Forum based in Amman also includes Jordan-based members operating within Syria and in nearby countries hosting Syrian refugees. This devolution reflects the intensely political nature of this protracted crisis, with humanitarian organisations needing to negotiate access between government-controlled areas and those controlled by opposition groups and de facto administrations, including the AANES. As a result of these governance complexities, the international humanitarian response architecture in NES takes on a unique structure (Figure 3).

Figure 3   Humanitarian coordination in Syria
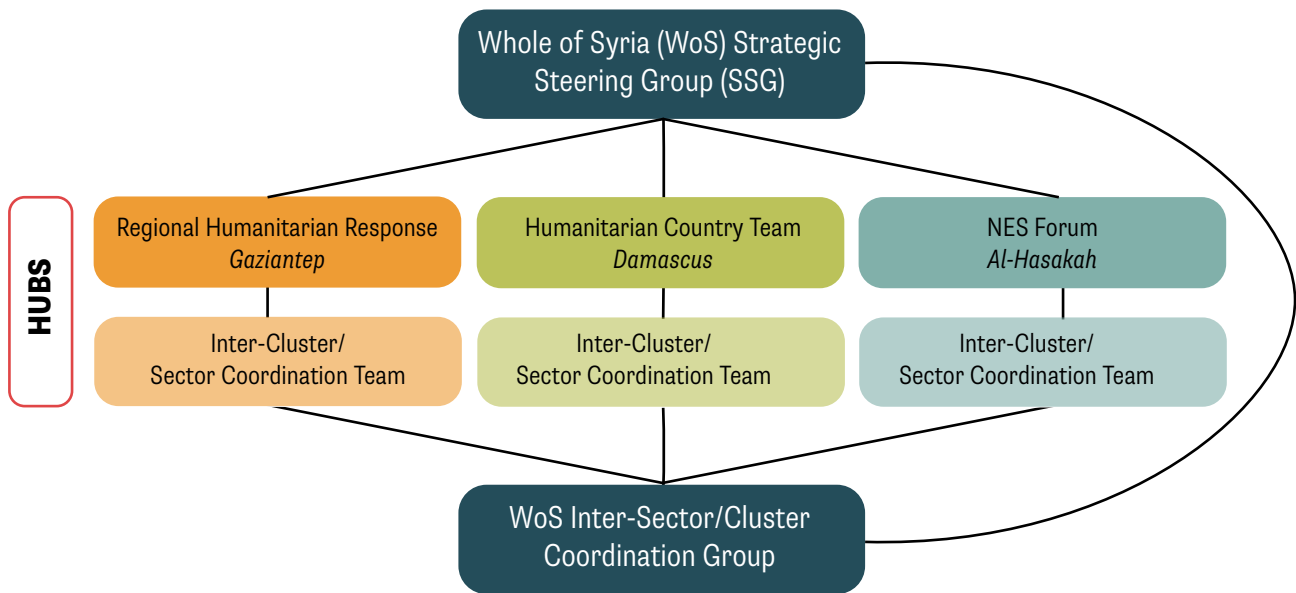
Source: Adapted from UNOCHA, 2015

The NES NGO Forum (NES Forum) takes a lead role in the humanitarian response in the region. Its role is twofold. Firstly it represents and advocates for its membership (primarily comprised of INGOs and some local NGOs) with relevant local authorities, UN counterparts and donors, and engages on members' positions on humanitarian needs and access negotiations (NES Forum, n.d.). Secondly, mandated by the Whole of Syria Strategic Steering Group, the NES Forum undertakes a coordination role for its members and other actors present in the region. As part of this role, the Forum and its members host the Inter-Sector Working Group. In other contexts, the humanitarian sector coordination is hosted by UN agencies, but owing to the political sensitivities of UN operations in the AANES-run areas, specifically that the UN can only operate in Government of Syria-held territories or pockets and with organisations officially registered with these authorities, INGOs are instead playing the hosting role in NES. They contribute their own funds to staff and operate the NES Forum. The INGOs operating in NES are registered with AANES authorities and not with the Government of Syria, though they maintain some level of communication with registration authorities therein.

Alongside the NES Forum are nascent platforms of local NGOs, including the 156-member NES NGO Platform and the Local NGO Coalition, which seek to better connect with this international coordination, strengthen their members, and assist in determining priorities and needs in AANES. These local organisations are also registered exclusively with AANES authorities and only work in AANES-controlled areas but have access to and networks in a wider geographic area of NES than international actors.

3   A microcosm of hardship and resilience

Qamishli city serves as a microcosm of the converging and overlapping legacies, populations and governance in NES. Driving into the city from the Semelka–Fishkhabur crossing, one passes oil derricks pumping along the countryside, in distant but not so faraway view of the Turkish border. The city itself is dusty, densely packed, and increasingly overcrowded. The hum of public and private generators, the heavy tangle of electrical wires criss-crossing the streets from above, the orderliness of some neighbourhoods and the informal and ramshackle nature of others, all highlight the resultant and increasing strain on the city's infrastructure and its growing inequality. Qamishli is a place of confluence, but a feeling of separation persists.

Such divided proximity is most stark when driving through the area held by the Government of Syria, 'Security Square', in the middle of the city. Syrian army officers patrol Government of Syria offices and institutions, and posters of revolutionary martyrs that line the streets give way to those depicting Syrian government leadership instead. It is near Security Square where the only indication of international humanitarian presence in the city is seen, in the form of UN agency suboffices. This is because, by and large, there is very limited international humanitarian response directed toward the city. Wellbeing for conflict-affected and displaced populations is inescapably intertwined with these complex political economy and international aid dynamics.

Figure 4   City map of Qamishli, including Government of Syria-controlled areas
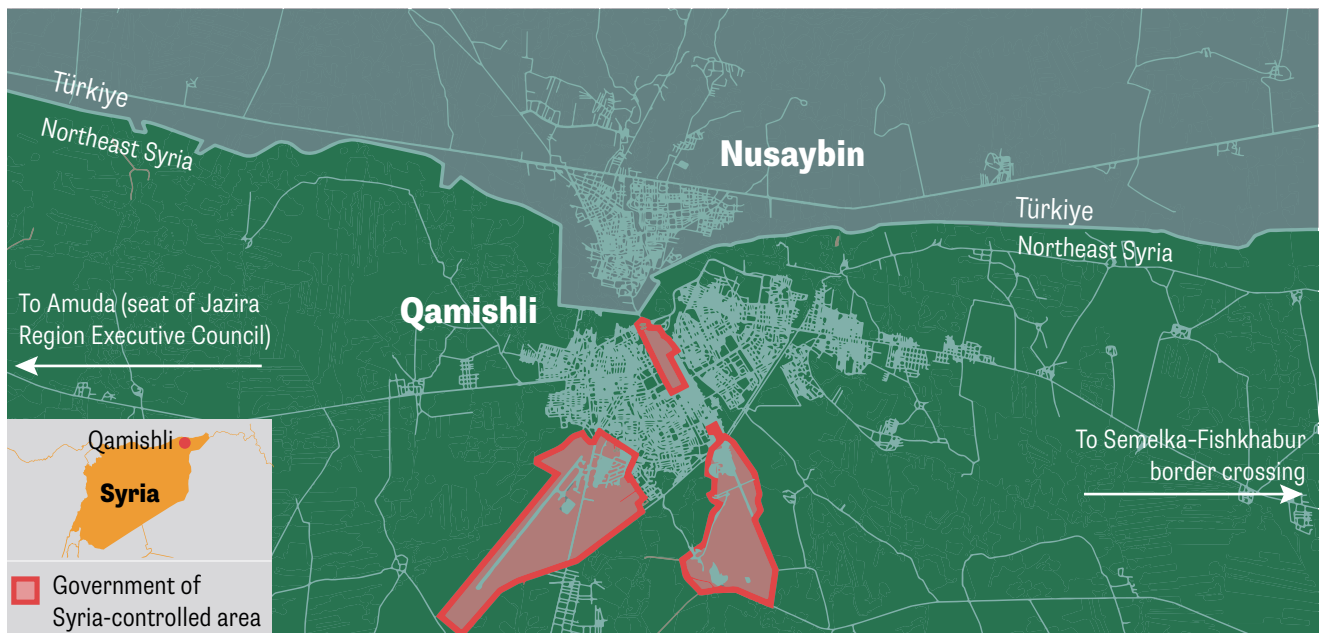
This chapter details these contours in the everyday lives of residents and IDPs alike. Specifically, it details the ways in which people experience the material reality of life in their city, and its impact on wellbeing, through its physical space, public service provision, dual institutions, and interactions (or not) with international aid.

3.1   Physical space, harsh environment, and ambient security risks

Heat and poor air quality keep people of Qamishli city indoors in the summer. The streets and central market are devoid of much foot traffic during the day. This emptiness belies the fact that by all accounts, the city has become increasingly overcrowded. This spike in population stems from waves of conflict-related displacement from around the country as well as the climate-induced economic migration of rural populations from surrounding areas and those seeking better opportunities from Government of Syria-held areas.

Despite the city's denizens being primarily indoors during the day, their presence can be felt in the gridlock of traffic and incessant buzz of generators, straining to keep up with increasing demand. As such, people 'also suffer from pollution, from cars and generators' (Kurd male resident). These conditions are a source of hardship for most but are a particular grievance among IDPs from more temperate parts of NES. Those displaced from Afrin made specific note of the climate and lack of green space to offer any form of physical relief.

> Afrin is a very green area, not like this desert that is Qamishli. [In Afrin] we have a Mediterranean climate. It is fresh [...] We are attached to the green, to the trees. It is rare to find fresh stuff in Qamishli. (Kurd female IDP from Afrin)

> At the beginning it was difficult, mainly because of the weather. Afrin is a place with a lot of nature and has four clear seasons. Qamishli is just summer and winter. When we came here, we didn't see any trees or green areas. Everything is dust. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

This lack of green space is also a concern that parents and caretakers raise, given that there are not many places for children to gather and play: 'I want kids to play outside, eat mud, get yelled at by their mothers' (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye) but this is not possible because:

> There are no services for them. If [kids] want to go on the street or gardens, it is forbidden. They have to stay inside. It would be great to have places for children to go and spend time. (Kurd female resident)

While climate conditions and limited space contribute to children staying inside, these constraints are compounded by security concerns, linked primarily to Turkish attacks:

> Kids are scared in their daily lives because of the [Turkish] drones. They do not feel confident playing around. (Kurd male resident)

Indeed, the city's proximity to Türkiye is a source of anxiety in general and is particularly difficult for those displaced into Qamishli because of Turkish military incursion and occupation of their homelands:

> Qamishli's location is also close to Türkiye. It brings sadness to see Türkiye from here. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

Respite comes when the sun goes down. Streets and cafés begin to fill and many families head toward the outer edges of the city to picnic in the cooler air. This latter, seemingly idyllic setting is punctured by the glow of lights in the near distance from a SDF-run detention centre that holds terrorism suspects. Several picnickers note that the prison used to be a school, underscoring the securitisation of civilian infrastructure and public space in the city. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the presence of both AANES and Government of Syria institutions and forces in the city – yet another physical manifestation of the political fight over the area and its people.

> When there are tensions between the Self-Administration and the regime, it means that sometimes I cannot cross checkpoints and go to work and it prevents my kid from accessing school. (Arab male IDP from Aleppo)

These experiences of the physical environment connect to wellbeing in two important ways. First, in the recognition of the emotional and physiological benefits of green spaces (Westlund, 2010), the lack of nature in Qamishli is detrimental to wellbeing. Secondly, the interplay between social relationships and physical environment in creating a sense of place, by making 'action meaningful through shared understandings and interpretation of action' (Turton, 2005: 278), is difficult to achieve. For example, despite security risks, people often gather for picnics, but it is difficult to create a positive sense of space and community. Qamishli's physical difference in climate and landscape from IDPs' places of origin and its visibly proximity to Türkiye pose distinct barriers to wellbeing.

The humanitarian response in Qamishli has both intentionally and unintentionally contributed to these place-oriented aspects of wellbeing. Local organisations have very purposefully invested their limited resources into improving the physical space people interact with in their daily lives. This includes repairing bus platforms, adding solar panels to neighbourhood streetlights, planting trees, and engaging in environmental clean-up, among other initiatives. On the other end of the spectrum, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) supported the installation of lights at the outskirts of Qamishli for security purposes in coordination with the SDF for their own operations and movements. This underscores the way in which the importance of a sense of place is often overlooked in favour of spatial organisation or security (Lough et al., 2023). These lights were reportedly not a priority for city authorities, considering the funds could have instead been used for more pressing service provision needs. However, they did serve an unintended benefit to the public as residents and IDPs have taken advantage of the lighting to create a social space for themselves to interact with each other and the nature at the city limits.

3.2   The neighbourhood commune: a site of inconsistent and insufficient aid

Qamishli residents and IDPs recognise the AANES as the primary duty bearer in the provision of electricity and water and in the distribution of fuel and food assistance. The food and fuel distribution is organised by the most localised unit of governance within the AANES: the neighbourhood commune. Each neighbourhood in the city has a dedicated commune office. These are run by two volunteer co-chairs (one man and one woman) selected from the neighbourhood. Commune co-chairs are also responsible for keeping track of who lives in the neighbourhood, fielding complaints on services and identifying needs to share with higher-level authorities, sharing information about AANES policies and regulations, addressing disputes, helping their neighbours navigate AANES bureaucracy, and providing limited documentation (e.g. ration cards, housing rental or ownership agreements, etc.). In practice, as observed during data collection, these offices also serve as a somewhat chaotic and cacophonous spaces for older men from the neighbourhood to congregate and complain amongst themselves.

How well these communes operate seems to depend in part on the neighbourhood, with some being more organised than others, as well as individuals' views of the overall new governance structures of the AANES. For some, the system works very well:

> Every morning, I get a voice message from my commune about the availability of bread and to register to get it. It is the same for the gas allocation. I find it very well organised. (Arab male IDP from Aleppo)

Other residents question the legitimacy and efficacy of their communes:

> There is no actor to go to when solving issues like service access. In the commune, they first bring people to sit, I do not know what procedures there are for their election, and they think they are ministers (Christian male resident).

And others still fall somewhere in between, recognising the commune as a useful structure but feeling that the resolution of issues remains limited and slow, with people having to forgo certain needs in the meantime:

> Everybody has access to the commune, and they can go and comment on any lack of services. But problems happen and take ages to resolve. (Arab male IDP from Serekaniye)

One neighbourhood, for example, has gone months without gas as the commune tries to deal with the issue:

> We have a huge problem with gas. There was a three-month negotiation with the commune over this, but nothing has happened, so we have been living without it. (Arab female resident)

Volunteer commune co-chairs understand the limitations their neighbours describe above and attribute them mainly to the new and still unrecognised administration now in charge of a rapidly expanding

population. Being a volunteer commune co-chair provides these individuals deeper insights into the challenges the AANES faces in terms of public service provision and aid distribution since they must deal with them daily. They make decisions on how best to serve those most in need at the very local level with the limited resources they have at their disposal.

> Most of the challenges we face are in terms of overcrowding. We have applications every day for more people to live here and it puts pressure on us and the AANES to provide [...] Right now, there are 2,300 families in need, but we only have enough bread for 1,000 families, so we have to choose who gets it based on their poverty situation. (Arab male resident)

> If we talk about AANES, we have to realise it isn't a state and only one administration. The requirements and needs of the population exceed the ability of the AANES to provide for. They are doing their best to provide services and food, but capacity is limited [...] We have a crowded population and not enough capacity to deal with it. (Kurd female resident)

The constrained ability of neighbourhood communes to consistently distribute fuel and food to everyone in need on a regular schedule and communicate it clearly has a potentially corrosive effect on people's ability to invest in the future, based on an awareness of the resources and options available to them in the present (Lough et al., 2023). This state of 'chaos' (Dunn, 2014: 302) is compounded by the ad hoc distribution of international humanitarian assistance in the city.

IDPs and some resident families reportedly received UN food baskets containing oil, sugar and rice until recently when distributions stopped altogether. The cessation is attributed to the reduction of funds to the Syria response in the wake of other large-scale humanitarian crises.

> The crisis in Ukraine also affected the provision of aid with organisations like WFP [World Food Programme]. They cut their services and left families exposed. (Christian male resident)

Prior to this, distribution seems to have been sporadic at best, with some receiving baskets monthly, others at irregular and unpredictable intervals, and others still once or twice and then nothing more. The Syrian Red Crescent and other Government of Syria-registered Christian organisations carried out these distributions on behalf of the UN. A local aid organisation also provided some food assistance, but stopped its distributions reportedly after its own locally sourced funding ran out. The limited contents of the food baskets, their erratic schedule of distribution, and the use of Syrian government-registered or -aligned entities has led to some recipients to believe that perhaps 'it was only [used as] data collection from IDPs to be given to the regime' (Kurd male IDP from Serekaniye).

This may be seen then as forms of both 'humanitarian bargain' and 'surveillance humanitarianism'. The former refers to dynamics in which humanitarians are permitted to provide minimal forms of lifesaving assistance in exchange for being complicit in a coercive stripping away of people's ability to demand or strive for something more (Newhouse, 2015). The latter pertains to keeping track of people's identities

and personal circumstances to determine who is and is not eligible for aid (Latonero, 2019; Iazzolino, 2021). In the context of Qamishli, it is perceived by community members as a way for the Government of Syria to continue exerting its control and repression over the population.

The food distribution also seemed to cause more hassle than the aid was worth since it 'made no sense and did not match any criteria [of need]' (Kurd female IDP from Afrin). As one neighbourhood commune co-chair describes it:

> Aid distribution always causes problems because they include some families and not others. [Organisations] distribute quickly and leave and only cover 10–20 families here and they only come once or twice a year. (Arab male resident)

This seems to reinforce the perception that the 'UN is collaborating with the regime and is diverting aid to them' (Kurd male resident). It also indicates the need for a more AANES-directed response because local organisations seem to better prioritise poor people but have limited capacity to reach everyone in need without additional support. Such support is not forthcoming to Qamishli given the limited international resources to cover vast needs across Syria.

The international humanitarian response for Syria has always been, and continues to be, underfunded, with 2023 seeing the largest gap in funds secured versus funds needed since 2016 (an issue common across protracted crises globally). Specifically, the country's humanitarian response plan for 2023 was only one-third funded (UNOCHA, 2023b). Prioritisation for non-UN aid distribution in NES relies on assessing population needs overall and targeting aid to where it is deemed the most needed by the most people. As such, 'organisations take needs assessments, but they disappear' (Kurd male resident), leaving people uncertain about whether they will receive support and the rationale for why they do not.

3.3   Insufficient public service provision and limited international support

Inconsistent to non-existent public electricity and water provision are the primary grievances that both residents and IDPs highlight as impacting them the most in the conduct of their daily lives in this regard. Most people report having between two and four hours of public electricity a day. Water provision seems particularly unequal between and even within neighbourhoods, where some streets have water almost daily or one day on and one day off, and others go for many days in a row without it. This latter condition, in particular, creates undue material and psychological strain on households:

> The water in my neighbourhood is out constantly. Many households don't have access to water. We have to use private water tanks and buy water. It is so stressful for us. One has to stand on the roof to watch how much water is in the tank. (Kurd male resident)

AANES authorities responsible for Qamishli city and the wider Jazira region are keenly aware of the shortfalls and inequality in service provision. Municipal leaders highlight that they face difficulties in

meeting people's needs due to historical neglect, and that the only way to tackle this is through more open dialogue with their constituents to explain the situation and how they are prioritising addressing these gaps with the resources they have.

> The eastern side of the city is worse than the west. This we inherited. It was built like this on purpose. So, we are trying to fix this and also extend into new parts of the city [...] From the outside, it looks like we have a big budget, and nothing is happening. Opening dialogue is good to show we are doing what [communes] prioritise. Qamishli is harder to deal with especially because it is getting bigger and more populated and harder to fund with our capacity. (Local authority)

It is hard to know how well this communication is working thus far, given the perception some people still hold that provision is better in areas closer to the seat of AANES institutions and in predominantly Kurdish neighbourhoods in the city – and that this patchwork of provision is by design.

> The actor that should provide these services is not doing it. Is this sustainable? As long as there are people benefiting from this, it will continue. (Christian male resident)

A more overarching sentiment among members of the community is that the region is rich in resources, but they do not reach ordinary people.

What is clear here is that dealing with critical needs in Qamishli involves responding to wider infrastructure needs. AANES does not have enough resources and capacity to address these needs alone and in general does not and cannot receive international support for systems strengthening in this regard. This is due to the structure of the international response in NES and the carveouts made along geopolitical lines for where to operate and what to do, with a specific focus on 'saving lives' rather than sustaining them meaningfully. This latter aspect of the response is a relatively common approach within protracted crises, curtailing possibilities for engaging with what matters for affected people in leading good lives (Carruth, 2021).

Within this response, the complex plurality of sanction regimes across Syria has resulted in a broader, chilling effect as numerous financial institutions, donors, and even aid workers themselves resort to some degree of self-imposed restrictions to keep from accidentally running afoul of technical prohibitions (Leclerc, 2023). This is a particular difficulty for humanitarian organisations whose remit includes early recovery and stabilisation interventions, where the line between what is and is not considered 'reconstruction of Syria', which would constitute a direct violation of many sanction regimes, is particularly blurry (ibid.). This also prohibits the scope of development actors to engage in NES.

Furthermore, because INGOs take the place of the UN in response coordination in NES, the response here does not have access to UN Pooled Funds for programming support. Rather, individual INGO members of the NES Forum each have bilateral arrangements with donors that tend to place strict compliance protocols on their work and continue to operate under shorter-term humanitarian funding

cycles. INGOs have reportedly faced significant pushback from donors for proposed longer-term, area-based programming. The concern is that these efforts may run counter to sanctions prohibitions and may in some way lend more formal recognition to AANES.

Stabilisation actors' priorities within the NES context seek to help ensure the 'enduring defeat of ISIS' (donor representative), limiting where these heavily earmarked funds can be used since the areas where ISIS was concentrated are within the Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor regions of NES. For most donors contributing funds into NES, doing so in areas with no Government of Syria presence (or Turkish occupation) is ultimately due to sanction regimes and wider geopolitics. This contributes to a greater focus on Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, and displacement camps as well. Camps are seen as more 'internationalised' areas by the Government of Syria and are areas where UN agencies, donors, INGOs and local NGOs can operate in more direct coordination without violating various restrictions and prohibitions related to sanctions.

As such, most Qamishli residents indicate not really knowing what international actors are doing, though they do 'hear of programmes taking place elsewhere, but we do not know under what criteria they happen or why' (Christian male resident). Some recognise that aid is being sent to camp-based populations and to Arab-majority areas of NES in the aftermath of the ISIS conflict there, to the detriment of those in need in Qamishli. This view comes from interacting with such aid recipients in their daily lives as small business owners and aid workers in the city, rather than from formal communication from local authorities or interlocutors of the international response itself.

> With NGOs, all the food is going to Raqqa and elsewhere, none for here. I have a customer [at my bakery] from Raqqa who received cash assistance, like $200–$300 per month, and was faring well there. Meanwhile, there is lots of deprivation here – you can see people eating from the trash. (Arab male resident)

> We receive very limited support from local or international NGOs. There are some efforts to fix water in Al-Hasakah and so much goes to rebuild Raqqa. From my experience as a hotel owner, we also get local NGOs coming from Raqqa for meetings. We see them come and then leave again. (Kurd male resident)

This discrepancy in response and its impacts on communities is not lost on those working within the humanitarian response in the vicinity of the city either. Their inability to shift from a camp-centric response to a wider area-based approach creates considerable animosity among populations living in Qamishli city and surrounding areas. To illustrate this, one local interlocutor working for an INGO highlighted the example of Camp Roj near Qamishli. It is a closed camp with a vulnerable population with alleged links to ISIS, the majority of whom are children, and where international human rights monitors report abuses (UNOHCHR, 2023). The humanitarian intervention within it is relatively limited, but it is visible to the surrounding community who do not benefit from any such response.

> [They] see international actors building a playground in the camp for kids, meanwhile they themselves don't have basic services – the area has a huge water issue – and they aren't being helped. (INGO personnel)

The efforts of humanitarian and stabilisation actors to adhere to donor requirements linked to both sanctions' restrictions and wider geopolitical considerations, including the non-recognition of the AANES as an autonomous authority, raise questions among both community members and local authorities over whose wellbeing matters in this context. It also underscores the international response's own power in the way it is structured and implemented in reinforcing the past and ongoing marginalisation of Kurdish-majority areas by the Government of Syria and regional neighbours.

> Before 2011, this area was marginalised because it is a Kurdish community. After 2011, it is marginalised because it is led by Kurds. (Local activist)

Thus, rather than experiencing an impartial approach to addressing technically specified needs, local authorities understand the response as 'serving political agendas' and feel that INGOs need to make 'a better effort in covering everybody in a given area, irrespective of ethnicity'. In the absence of international support, community members in Qamishli are overly reliant on under-resourced local authorities; this negatively impacts their wellbeing.

3.4   Private economic actors, rising costs of living, and the toll on leading a dignified life

Residents and IDPs resort to other means to meet their basic needs given the lack of regular and sustained public electricity and water provision. These other means primarily involve paying for services from the private economic actors that have sprung up in the absence of full state provision, with little to no oversight or regulation into their business practices. As such, people are 'subject to abuse' (Kurd male resident) by generator operators and water companies. They report experiencing arbitrary provision, rapidly increasing prices, and discrimination at the behest of these private actors, with no possible recourse to hold them accountable for their actions.

> Those who control the market leave very little for the rest of us. People are at the mercy of generator owners, who may arbitrarily cut your supply if they feel like it. (Arab male IDP from Serekaniye)

> The owners of the generators are increasing the fees. They claim that it is because of the [fluctuating] USD exchange rate. In reality, they are getting their fuel subsidised by the AANES, but there is little accountability from the administration about what happens. (Christian male resident)

> Once we had an incident where [the water supplier] thought we were ISIS or something like this. The water supplier heard us speaking with an Aleppo accent and we did not get service for weeks. (Arab male IDP from Aleppo)

This same scenario plays itself out regarding healthcare as well. Private clinics have proliferated and offer the most widespread coverage in the city. The cost of care is expensive and, in some cases, prohibitively so. With limited regulation to date, 'private doctors have created a monopoly on this' (Arab male resident).

> The problem is the private healthcare is very expensive. If one of my kids gets sick, I have to pay 1,000 liras to get medicine. The [AANES] health committee is negotiating to put restrictions on this to stop the rising prices. (Kurd male resident)

Qamishli does have Government of Syria-run medical facilities in its Security Square, but residents and IDPs note that care is very difficult to access at these facilities. The city also has an AANES-run public hospital, though it is dedicated to specialty heart and eye care only.

While all community members report facing financial burdens regarding basic services, IDPs in particular also indicate the rising cost of rent, both for housing and for any businesses they establish, as a new and additional strain on their household economic situations.

> Daily life is very difficult for me and my family because we have to pay rent for housing and for the shop and if we don't work one day, we don't have any money for that day. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

Compounding this is the fact that while wages and salaries are paid in liras, rents are due in US dollars, which is becoming an increasingly difficult equation for people to balance given stagnant wages and the fluctuating exchange rate.

This status quo is becoming increasingly untenable for many people because the economic situation in Qamishli has worsened considerably in the last few years. Economic deterioration is attributed primarily to AANES's prolonged isolation given the external embargoes imposed on it by Türkiye and Iraq, and the internal embargo it faces from the rest of Syria. The recently instituted and expansive Caesar sanctions and a rapidly increasing population exacerbate economic difficulties further. This creates an imbalance between people's needs and what can be sourced, raising prices and making the cost of living unaffordable.

> I earn 10,000 liras [per week] and I spend 50,000 liras [per week]. This is humiliating. (Arab male IDP from Serekaniye)

The situation seems particularly jarring for those from Afrin given that it was a more 'self-sufficient' (Yazidi female IDP from Afrin) area and even under siege, people could live off their own provisions, which is not possible now in Qamishli where everything must be purchased and is not produced locally.

> This not only has an economic impact, but a psychological one too. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin).

These constraints also make it difficult for residents and IDPs to be able to rely on public and private safety nets within Syria as a whole: most families are struggling and can only provide so much help to each other, the AANES does not have the ability to support all those who need assistance, and the Government of Syria reportedly stopped sending monthly pensions to the elderly in the region.

Instead, some people rely on remittances sent back by relatives in Europe and the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

> My brother has to send me money from Sweden. And my wife has a job. With this and my brother's money, we survive. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

Ensuring that at least one relative lives abroad has become a prevalent coping strategy.

> Many families always send one household member outside to Europe to send money back here. I would have never imagined it could happen to us. (Yazidi female IDP from Afrin)

One community member interviewed is already making plans for such a move: 'I will send my little brother across the border as soon as I can afford it' (Arab male IDP from Aleppo).

Underscoring the material and economic hardship community members (and particularly IDPs) report is the psychological and emotional toll of losing the ability to provide for one's family (Siddiqui, 2021), no matter how hard one tries in the current climate.

> I had so much before the conflict, and it all evaporated [...] I feel betrayed and abandoned and humiliated. After a whole life of doing okay, now I find myself struggling to get along. (Kurd male IDP from Serekaniye)

This sentiment emanates across interviews: 'I need dignity' (Arab male IDP from Serekaniye).

These overarching experiences of hardship highlight the importance of dignity in leading a meaningful and flourishing life for the people of Qamishli; specifically, in being able to exert one's own agency and voice in deciding one's destiny (Mosel and Holloway, 2019). This view of dignity is intrinsically linked to resilience. The result is that any sense of agency is specifically linked to individualised, entrepreneurial, and economically productive outcomes (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). Scant attention is paid to the structural and political drivers at the heart of the crises that limit how much an individual can do on their own (IOM et al., 2020). Community members express deep frustration and despair over this situation, as they are unable to meet family needs.

> We were left to ourselves. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

At the same time, as difficult as the situation is for people in Qamishli city, there is also a recognition that 'the life conditions here are better than in regime areas' (Arab male resident). This drives

population movement into the city and continues the cycle of economic contraction and infrastructure strain in the absence of an internationally recognised administration, where the AANES is unable to receive international support.

3.5   Parallel institutions, difficult choices

Living in a de facto state that has its own structures, but still retains pockets of official state control and institutions, often forces people to choose between the two for critical public goods and administrative needs (Tindall, 2023). This is certainly the case for the residents and IDPs of Qamishli, who rather than only choosing one system or the other, tend to move between the two in an effort to balance their needs and preferences with the practical (and constrained) realities of their daily lives. These decisions are made based on their current circumstances but with an eye to future prospects as well, particularly for their children. Such decision-making and navigation are most pronounced with respect to education and many forms of civil documentation. These daily activities are accompanied by longer-term efforts to extend agency into the future where possible (Lough et al., 2023). It should be noted that while people are making decisions, it is often the least bad option, reflecting the severe constraints on people's agency in their current circumstances.

3.5.1   Education

For families in Qamishli, access to basic and higher education is of critical importance. Education is seen as the key to greater opportunities for their children either within Syria or abroad and as a means to ensure 'they are not enlisted to military service' (Arab male resident). It is a way to impart wellbeing now and, in the future, to enable their children to lead flourishing lives. As such, community members must weigh their preferences for the curriculum and language their children are taught with the associated financial costs of the various education services provided, and the recognition of the diplomas and degrees the different institutions provide.

What is taught in schools and how it is taught is not only critical for imparting learning; it also serves as an important vehicle by which a state can transmit collective knowledge and cultural and societal values. It can play an important role in the ways in which civic life is practised (Ramírez-Barat and Duthie, 2017; Martin, 2023). As such, AANES has expended significant effort and resources into developing its own education curriculum in Kurdish and Arabic and establishing public schools and universities in Qamishli. AANES closed private schools and those run by the Government of Syria teaching the state's official curriculum in the city, pushing them into Security Square where they operate in a significantly more limited physical capacity. The only non-AANES schools operating in Qamishli and surrounding areas outside Security Square are private religious schools run by the Syriac, Armenian and other Christian Church denominations (Al-Ahmad, 2023).

Attempts by the AANES to either close these schools or have them register with the AANES and use its curriculum for their secular teaching have been met with significant resistance. For AANES education

authorities, this obstinance is due to such schools 'making money as proxies of the regime through education' (Local authority). Among the Christian community in Qamishli, the view is quite different. They reportedly see this as an imposition and a stripping away of their own rights and identity.

> There is a push now to impose the curriculum of the AANES on the Christian community. This was part of an attempt to close the Syriac schools, but we protested by saying that if they close our schools, which have been operating since 1946, we would then close our churches. For the Christian community, the schools represent our dignity. This is why we are so protective. (Christian male resident)

It is likely a combination of these factors.

Perhaps the biggest influence, however, is that taking on AANES curriculum would threaten the perceived legitimacy of these schools because certificates, diplomas and degrees conferred by AANES education authorities are neither nationally nor internationally recognised, while those issued by the Government of Syria under its own curriculum are recognised (Al-Ahmad, 2023). For example, high school students with AANES-issued diplomas can only apply to AANES-run universities and degrees from these institutions in turn would only qualify them for jobs within the AANES public and private sectors.

In practice, what seems to occur is that practical need, viability and cost win out over any personal preference, identity or alignment with curriculum. Thus, while for some 'it is inspiring to see students and kids learn to read and write in Kurdish like I never could and that they don't need to learn things about regime propaganda' (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye), nearly all parents interviewed placed greater importance on having their children's educations and qualifications – and in turn their dreams – be recognised and realised. It is also important for the education received to be of high quality in terms of the content of the curriculum and competitive standards, which many recognise as being more possible within Government of Syria-run schools (Martin, 2023).

This holds true even for parents who work as public servants and teachers within AANES, where sending their kids to Government of Syria-run and private schools would cost them their jobs (and thus potentially the financial resources to pay for such education). This is the situation several public employees interviewed find themselves in. As one AANES teacher explains:

> Because AANES schools are not recognised, we send our kids to regime schools. If AANES finds out, I will lose my job because administration employees must send their kids to local schools. They don't give us a choice. But, we are sending our son to a regime school because he has dreams. He wants to be a computer engineer and that is not possible in local schools. (Kurd female resident)

In the absence of free choice, resulting from AANES policy, public employees take considerable risk, exerting some level of agency and autonomy for the benefit of their children.

Recent experiences of having AANES educational documents rejected while attempting to resettle outside of Syria has also made a significant impression on school choice. One IDP from Afrin, who

was also previously associated with the AANES education system, notes that having had his children rejected from schools in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (where they previously sought protection) shaped his decision-making when coming back to NES and settling in Qamishli. Specifically, that his kids would need to go to school outside of NES altogether.

> In Afrin, my kids used to go to AANES schools and had good-quality education in Kurdish. Before when we lived in Aleppo, they were studying in Arabic. When we went to [the Kurdistan Region of Iraq], my kids couldn't go to school because their documents from AANES were not recognised, even though my son was first in his class in school in Afrin. When we came back here, we were going to send our kids to local schools, but then sent them to Aleppo to go to Arabic schools there instead. We considered sending our kids to AANES schools but remembering what happened in [Kurdistan Region of Iraq], they go to state schools now. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

The preference for nationally and internationally recognised education has put considerable pressure on Government of Syria-run schools since the physical capacity that they now have does not match demand. Families often must rely on (and pay for) private schools, courses, and tutors to fill in the gaps.

> I have seven kids and the oldest is in ninth grade. I had sent my daughter to study the Syrian curriculum, but after ninth grade, there are not enough schools. So, after this, she will do private courses to take exams. All the rest of my kids go to Syrian schools in Security Square as well. (Kurd male resident)

This is not to say that families are forgoing AANES schools altogether. Within this sample, some also navigate between curricula as a cost-saving measure because AANES schools are free and physically easier to access since they are spread across the city. Some families tend to send their younger children to AANES schools and then shift over to Government of Syria-run schools as they get older.

> I have kids in both. For primary education, I send my kids to local administration schools and then as they get older, we switch to state or private institutions. (Arab male resident)

The switch is often costly in terms of transportation[4] to and from Security Square and because of potential tuition fees for private institutions, but sequencing when one's children access these institutions can save money and demonstrates people's agency, albeit within narrow choices.

For children and youth, the ability to learn and gain knowledge and skills from school is a critical source of wellbeing, in addition to the sense of normality and social connection regular attendance provides (Winthrop and Kirk, 2008). At the same time, the deep focus on education, especially in such a constrained setting, and the sacrifices parents and families are willing to make for it, puts a lot of pressure on children and youth to spend all their time studying.

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4   Some parents may also have safety concerns for younger children who would have to cross checkpoints on their way to school.

> [Children and youth] can't do what they want and there is a lot of weight on them to succeed. Families are often putting a lot of resources to pay for education, so kids feel they have to succeed to not let their families down and to be able to have a future somewhere. (International expert and INGO personnel)

This dynamic was evident in the research sample. In recounting his daily routine, one young Arab IDP from Aleppo describes working in the mornings in Qamishli city, then driving 1.5 hours each way to Al-Hasakah city to attend courses and study for his economics degree at the only Government of Syria-run university in NES. He then returns home to continue studying while also working on learning English and obtaining an online computing licence. When there is time, he also volunteers with local organisations. This is all to:

> finish my education and gain good employment with a good salary in a place to help people, like a local or international organisation. Maybe international is better. I'd like to migrate, but the possibility is not here now. If I could, I would [...] I have multiple skills and am at university. (Arab male IDP from Aleppo)

The pursuit of numerous and varied skills, qualifications, and experiences ensures one is more prepared for any opportunity that may come. Such an effort can be seen as a means to enable greater agency and choice, but it may come at the cost of other forms of mental and physical wellbeing when it is not balanced with space for leisure and rest.

Underlying this reality is a recognition from people that options and opportunities for the young in Qamishli are few and far between, regardless of how skilled one is or how hard one works. As another young Kurd IDP from Afrin, who lost his opportunity to play football in Europe due to the pandemic and now plays locally while finishing his university education, laments, 'You cannot be a good football player or a good student here no matter what you do. Everything has a limit here.'

3.5.2   Documentation

Obtaining identity documentation involves interacting with Government of Syria institutions as all official civil identification, including passports and birth registrations and certificates, are issued by them. This does not, however, make the process of obtaining such identification easier in terms of time or administrative burden. By all accounts, renewing passports or registering births is a cumbersome process that involves submitting paperwork into an already extremely backlogged queue. It may also require travel to Damascus to complete. The only way to expedite the process is to pay reportedly exorbitant fees and bribes.

The process is often fraught with immediate risk that may outweigh potential future benefits. Many men report hesitation in seeking updated identity documentation out of fear of being conscripted into military service, which they had managed to avoid. One resident explains that he is also concerned because he is erroneously being sought by the Syrian intelligence services and cannot move around nor draw too much attention to himself or to his family:

> We are stuck because we cannot get passports. We can't get it from the government because we are afraid of being drafted and I am wanted by the regime because I have the same name as someone they are looking for. The AANES cannot help. (Arab male resident)

Those who had previously used the Semelka–Fishkhabur crossing to enter the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for onward regular travel to, for example, Europe, also have an additional concern. Ahead of renewing their passports, they must undergo a court process to clear this travel from their records as such crossings are deemed illegal by the Government of Syria.

> Now my Syrian passport expired so I need to pay $1,000 to renew it and I can't afford it. I lost three [international work] opportunities because of this. I am going to try and fix this through *wasta* [connections] in Damascus. I also need to go to court to get clearance first since I had been crossing through Kurdish areas to travel and this is not recognised by the Syrian regime. It is concerning and scary sometimes. (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye)

Given all these constraints, it is perhaps not surprising that nearly all community members interviewed have expired passports and a number have children who remain unregistered with recognised authorities. This is a cause of great concern to some as it limits their prospects for any kind of movement and options for the future, while others take a more pragmatic view, since in their current circumstances, 'Where are we going anyway?!' (Arab female resident).

Within the realm of administrative documentation, there is some room for manoeuvre. Since both AANES and the Government of Syria provide such paperwork, 'There is plenty of duplication in everything. I have to pay licenses for my two businesses and two cars twice, to two administrations' (Christian male resident). Keeping documentation with both AANES and the Government of Syria seems to be a hedge against any potential governance changes to Qamishli and is a forward-looking strategy to assure future outcomes for investments and business ventures.

The one sector in which AANES documentation and authorisation are paramount and externally recognised to the exclusion of Government of Syria documentation is within the NGO sector. Those seeking to establish organisations in Qamishli that provide humanitarian assistance in NES and/or work on issues pertaining to human rights, democracy and peacebuilding (among others) register exclusively with AANES. This is in part because they would likely never be allowed to establish under the Government of Syria or would be quickly shut down if they were. The other major reason they only seek registration with AANES is because international donors supporting humanitarian and stabilisation efforts in NES will not work with international and local organisations registered with the Syrian government. As such, while these donor governments do not recognise AANES as a state, they do recognise its NGO registration paperwork. This has contributed to a proliferation of local NGOs springing up in the city since 2012, so much so that the AANES NGO Department for the Jazira Region has:

> suspended the registration of new local NGOs because we want to check first their capacity and limit registration to those with a minimum level of functionality. (Local authority)

Here, too, is a sense of extending agency into the future with the formation of an organisation, not only as a source of income but also to contribute to helping the community. Of note, the opposite is the case for any funds administered by the UN, which can only work with local and international organisations registered with the Government of Syria. This parallel structure creates its own issues in the public perception of humanitarian assistance and its impact on the lives of people in Qamishli.

3.6   Tension and dependency in the wake of limited international aid

The uneven response described above has created tensions between communities, between communities and AANES authorities, and between AANES authorities and local NGOs on one side, and INGOs and coordination mechanisms on the other. These are related to who is providing aid and where it is taking place.

Some community members interviewed in this sample have witnessed evidence of international assistance going elsewhere (to say nothing of the haphazard UN food basket distribution some have experienced in their own neighbourhoods), as the extent of their engagement with the international response. For others, direct interaction with international assistance occurs in their roles as personnel of local organisations working with international partners. Among this sample, three community members (two Kurds and one Yazidi) are project staff of such local organisations. While highlighting that their respective organisations do small projects in Qamishli related to basic infrastructure repair and social cohesion, the bulk of their focus is on remote human rights documentation in Turkish-occupied areas and deradicalisation programming for children with perceived ISIS affiliation. This geographic distribution of focus and programming is similarly described by the heads of local organisations also interviewed for this analysis. Most are Kurdish-run and headquartered in Qamishli, and while they carry out small-scale initiatives in the city, their primary areas of work are in other, Arab-majority, more ISIS-affected parts of NES. This is dictated by limited resources and international donor funding priorities and restrictions.

The situation creates tensions in Arab-majority recipient communities elsewhere in NES as well, stemming from Qamishli-based Kurdish personnel with reportedly limited knowledge of these contexts coming in to implement aid programmes. For these communities, such a move is perceived as a consolidation of AANES authority and, by extension, Kurdish power in NES.

> The mismatch of funds and exclusion of more Kurdish areas causes tensions between groups. Kurds move to Arab areas to work, and Arabs see this as a power play because the narrative is that Kurds are in power now. There are tensions and threats. (Local NGO personnel)

It is a noticeable enough issue that one local NGO leader originally from Raqqa has sought to take a different approach as he expands his organisation's work to other parts of NES.

> I have tried to do the opposite. I moved from Raqqa to [Qamishli city] and I am hiring locally. I have staff local to each area in the four different offices we have. (Local NGO personnel)

New regulations and requirements put forth by the AANES for local NGO registration includes provisions for, among others, a management committee made up of experienced individuals from a diversity of backgrounds and places of origin to help mitigate these issues going forward. Time will tell how well these regulations help in curbing tensions and divisions within civil society across ethnic lines.

Taken together, this level of response has the effect of undermining Qamishli community members' perceptions of the AANES as an authority capable of governing them.

> The situation negatively impacts the reputation of the Self-Administration. If [the AANES] see that aid distribution is so politicised, why can't they step in and change it? Why can't they force proper distribution? People are asking this. (Kurd female resident)

Local administration officials in the Jazira region also acknowledge that the lack of international response within the communities under their authority causes local tensions and undermines their ability to carry out their own priorities for service provision and distribution.

> We expected and hoped the international community and organisations would help us, especially given how different we are from the regime, but we didn't receive the help to match needs. There needs to be flexibility among INGOs to work with us and specific cities or communities. This mismatch between international assessments and our own causes issues with the population. (Local authority)

Underlying this frustration is the authorities' recognition that they cannot engage with most donors directly to receive funds and set priorities. This is due to sanctions, particularly on infrastructure development, and a lack of international recognition of the autonomy of AANES.

Stabilisation fund administrators who engage in more direct work with local authorities also indicated that in general they only have authorisation to disburse grants or capacity-building to specific technical line ministries to carry out projects, and not to the governing bodies of various AANES regions, though they do coordinate priorities with authorities.

Formal recognition itself does not yield direct funding to AANES either. While the Parliament of Catalunya reportedly would prefer to support development efforts in AANES directly, not just for ease of implementation but as a show of political support, it cannot do so because of NES's lack of financial institutions and formal banking systems. Instead, it too must work through INGOs for its planned support projects. The same holds true for the infrastructure support that Jazira region authorities secured via municipal partnerships with European cities. These relationships take time to establish, and funds still must come through INGOs.

In addition, local authorities and local NGO personnel recognise that the Jazira region does not seem to be a priority under existing funding schemes where resources are limited, and conflict-affected areas refer to those held by and then retaken from ISIS. However, most local authorities and local NGO personnel interviewed dismiss the explanation they have received from humanitarian and stabilisation

response counterparts that Kurdish-majority areas are 'not conflict-affected enough' as the reason why less attention is paid to Qamishli and the Jazira region more broadly. This rationale does not ring true to their own experiences nor those of residents and IDPs, as it ignores military incursions by Türkiye, and it is insensitive overall to the history of the region. Instead, some local NGO interlocutors, in particular, view this seeming exclusion as an undercurrent of anti-Kurdish bias.

The overall scenario then leaves everyone stuck in place, but still dependent on one another, with little room for manoeuvre to change these dynamics. The international response needs AANES support and authorisations to operate and by all accounts, AANES authorities and various INGO and coordination interlocutors have a strong and proactive relationship in this regard.

> We're lucky to work with an administration that works so hard for us to be here and lucky to enjoy a relatively consistent supply chain [through Semelka–Fishkhabur]. (International humanitarian worker in NES)

The international response, however, cannot shift substantially without a change in the way donors allocate and characterise assistance. AANES, on the other hand, cannot 'force the NGOs out or to change' (Local authority) because they too have no say in how donors choose to fund. Furthermore, the presence of international actors on the ground is an additional protection against the wider threats AANES faces, particularly from Türkiye and the Government of Syria. Forcing these actors out or threatening their access would leave the communities in the Jazira region even more exposed than they are now. It is a risk AANES authorities do not seem willing to take without a more legitimised status or political settlement.

4   A new community emerging: fractured and constrained

Qamishli is, in many ways, a transient place, with a population in flux. Since the crisis in Syria began, many of the city's original inhabitants fled the conflict, often for Europe. Many of its current residents, including those in this sample, had also lived elsewhere in Syria or abroad prior to the start of the crisis and then came back, or had fled earlier in the conflict and returned as conditions seemed to improve or the hardships of displacement became too great. As residents have moved back and forth or left more permanently, IDPs have filled in the empty spaces. These new populations have come from within and outside of NES. The churn of populations and communities has created a sense of disconnect and uprootedness across those interviewed.

As these populations slowly attempt to engage with one another, they are also having to learn and navigate new social norms and governance structures being developed by the AANES. This is the case not only for new populations coming into Qamishli, but for those who have always lived in the city as well, since not every area or neighbourhood came under AANES control at the same time. For example, some residents report being from neighbourhoods that came fully under the control of AANES as late as 2020, when local police and security forces pushed out Syrian forces.

Overall, the denizens of Qamishli are participants (willing or not) in the creation of a dramatically changing society and emerging state in real time. This ongoing break with past values and norms, coupled with scarce resources and continuing population movements, not only makes it difficult to uphold social notions of what it means to live well with others, but also creates additional disruptions to pre-existing social structures and communities (Beckett, 2017; Feldman, 2018).

This chapter thus explores the impacts of fluid contextual and aid dynamics on relational wellbeing in Qamishli by examining how these changes have shaped communal life and expression in the city, and the prospects for new local structures to foster community or not in the current scenario. This includes the ways in which humanitarian response actors have engaged with the population for this purpose.

4.1   Constrained celebrations and community life amid increased freedom of expression

The data collection for this case study occurred in relative proximity to several holidays that are of salience to the populations of Qamishli: Nawroz for Kurdish communities, Easter for Christian communities, and Eid al-Fitr for Muslim communities (Arab and Kurd alike). As such, community members were able to describe how their recent celebrations compared to those prior to the crisis. Being able to publicly observe and celebrate these holidays plays a significant role in making

life meaningful for those in Qamishli. It also provides a window into the changing and more limited ways in which people now interact more broadly; following displacement and with limited resources, celebrations have diminished over time.

For Kurdish residents and IDPs, the celebration of Nawroz significantly improved in the wake of the crisis and the creation of AANES:

> We can express our culture, dress, customs. This is not political. I am very excited to dress up and do things we couldn't before. (Kurd male resident)

Previously, Nawroz was 'celebrated in secret' (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye) as public commemoration of it was prohibited by the Government of Syria. Those who sought any form of celebration faced repression and threats of violence, as one resident recounts:

> When my eldest son was very young, we dressed him for Nawroz [in traditional Kurdish attire] and at a checkpoint were told we had to change his clothes. We had to bribe the official to let us keep the clothes. Back then, if going for picnics [to celebrate], the Ba'athists would throw stones at us, or regime vehicles would drive through to scare us. Even in pictures of celebrations, we would have to hide our faces. (Kurd male resident)

Now it is possible to have big celebrations, but these seem to have waned, particularly among IDPs from Afrin and Serekaniye since their displacement due to Turkish occupation. The protracted nature of the conflict and displacement, and seeming lack of a resolution, is negatively impacting the wellbeing of the community in this regard. One IDP notes her lack of commemoration now as a form of protest:

> Since 2019, I have boycotted all celebrations. I want to go home to do it. My family spends time with people, but not me. (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye)

For other displaced Kurds, the smaller scope of celebration has to do with the smaller scope of their extended families and community networks in displacement.

> Celebrations used to be better before displacement because all the family was together. Now, all are scattered. One brother is in Aleppo, another in Germany. It's not like it was before. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

> Our social life is very limited [...] we celebrate with our direct neighbours, at a smaller level. (Kurd female IDP from Afrin)

The sense of having smaller celebrations now is not unique to Kurdish IDPs alone, but across the sample for both residents and IDPs who observe Easter and Eid. Christians and Arabs in general note

that commemorating holidays was much better prior to the start of the crisis in 2011. This is linked to having more intact communities, more stability, and a better economic situation then than now. One resident's past and current experiences of Easter provides a telling example in this regard:

> For Easter, I just took my kids to church and went back home. Before, we used to bring 6–7 kilos of sweets and receive visits. Now, with 250 grammes of sweets you have enough and even this is too much. As Christians, working on the local community means being a member of the church. We used to have carnivals with cars going around. I used to have a large restaurant and celebration hall, but in 2015 [ISIS] blew it up. It had a huge impact on us, and these types of activities stopped for good. And many members of the Christian community migrated away. (Christian male resident)

For Arabs too, 'Eid is absolutely different now. Before the crisis, we could have new clothes and good food. Now it is not as exciting. Now it is just the basics' (Arab female resident).

The constriction of collective commemoration is also reflective of the general social landscape as well. Social interactions are reportedly more limited now given the effects migration and displacement have had on the city, to say nothing of the wider impacts living under conditions of prolonged conflict and instability has had on the existing networks and extended family structures that remain.

> Now in Qamishli, a lot of people are new. People are more isolated, even kids. (Kurd male resident)
>
> Everyone is damaged in a way. Relatives are cold, no one is happy. It is the same for our neighbours. Everyone is dealing with their own problems. We used to visit relatives, but everyone lives in isolation now. We can go months without seeing anyone. (Arab female resident)
>
> I used to have hundreds of people at my events. Now with only 30 people attending, I cannot even manage to keep them satisfied and comfortable. (Christian male resident)

The more urban and populous nature of Qamishli is also a factor in limiting the social interactions of IDPs coming from smaller cities, towns and villages.

> In Qamishli now, it is strange for Kurds. No one knocks on the doors of others. Maybe because Qamishli is bigger, it is hard for people to have a social life. (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye)
>
> The Arab community here tries to keep a social life, but as IDPs, it is not like before the conflict. Serekaniye was a small community, and everybody knew each other. (Arab male IDP from Serekaniye)

Indeed, IDPs from Afrin and Serekaniye seem to find the social and cultural milieu in Qamishli less vibrant and significantly more fractured than their home communities and, as such, feel little belonging to the city. Those coming from other similarly urban places of origin and who were displaced as children tend to have an easier time in connecting with others:

> I came here when I was 9 years old. Most of my friends are here and I have Kurdish friends here as well. (Arab male IDP from Aleppo)

Thus, 'living in the weather of war' (Arab male resident) in all its manifestations seems to have had the effect of atomising and isolating most individuals and families, even within their own communities, making it harder to create new bonds.

This seems further exacerbated by having to adjust to living under a new paradigm the AANES seeks to institute, that of a pluralistic society. It serves as a significant departure from past experiences given that, 'The regime was very strict about this, saying the whole society is one identity' (Arab male resident). Such a mindset is very hard to shift without significant time and resources dedicated to it, considering how strong a hold the Government of Syria's policies, practices and ideology has had on people for so long.

> Freedom of expression was absent before. It is better now, but not perfect […] I am very cautious because I have had very negative experiences with the regime. It affected me psychologically. (Arab male resident)

It requires significant civic trust between citizens and the state to enact; trust that not everyone has in AANES, since some see it as yet another imposed governance system that they had no say in putting forward:

> I have no trust at all in institutions. You trust something in which you participate or elect, but not those that have been imposed without consent. (Arab male resident)

This new governance approach and the ensuing expansion of once suppressed Kurdish identity, in particular, may be seen as a threat to Qamishli's established power and status hierarchies. As one resident explains:

> The regime had a habit of dividing people with Kurds at the bottom, Arabs in the middle through the Ba'ath Party, and then Christians. Under the regime for Qamishli, all the heads of municipalities were Christian. That is why their neighbourhoods are in better conditions now. They are now mixed with Kurds, Arabs, Christians, and IDPs. (Kurd male resident)

The outward migration of relatively large portions of Qamishli's pre-crisis population, coupled with an influx of Arab populations in particular from other parts of NES and Syria, also has the potential to shift the balance of power and influence at the local level. This may add to existing historical grievances communities have with one another as well. Taken together, these dynamics seem to exacerbate tensions and rifts between groups that are palpable to longstanding residents and newcomers alike. There also seems to be a greater focus placed on ethno-religious identity in Qamishli compared with other places.

> Here, people group you more depending on who you are [ethno-religious identity-wise]. (Kurd female IDP from Afrin)

Whilst the greater freedom to express different identities and cultural practices has opened opportunities for greater wellbeing, it seems to also have highlighted divisions and sowed social and political concern within the wider community as well. This potentially compounds a sense of isolation and perception of being unable to live 'good' lives under these conditions. This aligns with findings that at a collective level within protracted crises, the neighbourhood social environment – related to relations and shared values with one's neighbours, trust in formal and informal institutions, and public participation in civic events or public affairs – is significantly correlated with psychosocial wellbeing (Siddiqui, 2021).

4.2   The neighbourhood commune: space for community- and collective identity-building?

While the higher-level authorities' approach is reportedly not to distinguish between groups, neighbourhood commune co-chairs recognise that this is not possible at the local level where:

> everything else is politicised. We ourselves in the commune need to keep balance between groups to govern properly. (Kurd male resident)

One way of doing this is through organising community events for neighbours to participate in. One co-chair highlights that in her mixed Kurd/Arab neighbourhood, events are organised for Nawroz, Eid, and martyrs ceremonies, among others. She goes on to explain that Kurds tend to organise these activities and Arabs participate in them. Another co-chair indicates that people come together for weddings, funerals, and to share resources where possible. In this sense, these structures mirror existing community networks, which are 'a different type of commune' (Arab male IDP from Serekaniye).

Another way to keep some balance between groups and build community is through the mechanism by which neighbours bring complaints or raise concerns to the commune. This is reportedly done through collective action and consensus, where a group brings forward a petition to carry out an activity or seek repairs to public infrastructure. Various AANES departments also hold public sessions to explain their work and priorities, receive feedback, or share new policies or regulations. All these initiatives may be seen as an 'improved ability to make people's voices heard and feel part of the community' (Kurd male resident).

Within this sample, there are some community members who want 'nothing to do with the seminars or conferences' (Arab male resident). Others still find the requirement for collective agreement to resolve seemingly obvious and critical issues, such as repairing a neighbourhood's broken public generator, an impediment because:

> people are all busy and socially, before the conflict, we knew all our neighbours but now the neighbourhood is full of people we don't know. (Kurd male resident)

Thus, rather than fostering community through consensus to address a need, the system has resulted in people suffering without electricity in the extreme heat for a prolonged period. This may be linked to the lack of resources available to neighbourhood communes to more proactively shepherd people through such collective processes.

INGOs for their part have reportedly had some success with community-building efforts in other parts of the Jazira region, utilising commune structures for public discussion to determine priority projects related to electricity and sanitation, among other needs. The reportedly high level of public engagement in such programming may in part have come from an understanding that if an INGO was leading the effort, it may be possible for it to be implemented relatively quickly with resources already allocated, rather than waiting for local authorities to intervene.

INGO interlocutors noted that efforts linked to 'soft' aspects of aid, like social cohesion or mental health and psychosocial support, are much more possible to implement (even under the donor restrictions they face) than 'hard' elements, like infrastructure, since they do not run afoul of sanctions. Such interventions may also help in reconciling both the opportunities and challenges of new means of expression for leading more meaningful lives. However, these 'soft' elements of aid alone are reportedly not the priority of local authorities nor the public when so many other needs remain unattainable for most. Instead, such programming could be seen by community members as 'deliberate and disrespectful' wastes of their time and energy, if they do not consider people's own priorities and the relations that frame them over time (Lough et al., 2023: 38).

Local civil society actors want to go further than this in community-building and good governance efforts. They recognise the gap that exists between authorities and the public from an overreliance on commune structures and initiatives, to the exclusion of other means to engage people. According to one local NGO actor:

> We have some projects in mind to engage authorities and people more directly. Authorities are receptive, but they say they already have structures to communicate with the public. We are trying to advocate for better connection for all people. Those who are with [AANES], those who are not, etc. (Local humanitarian actor in NES)

Such efforts may help contribute to establishing greater civic trust, quicker institutional response to needs, and prospects for more robust community-building, thus connecting material, subjective and relational dimensions of wellbeing. This is the type of longer-term work local NGOs wish to engage in to help in 'shaping the country, changing minds, and raising awareness' (Local NGO personnel), rather than implementing solely short-term aid projects. Unfortunately, the financial support and resources needed for these efforts have not been readily available to local NGOs nor to Qamishli city in general to carry them out in a more substantive way.

5 Flourishing lives and aspirations on hold … and sought elsewhere

Disruptions to and the demolishment of the status quo, like that which AANES emerged from, can create a space in which 'we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper' (Solnit, 2009: 3). This prospect for reimagining and recreating society is one many community members now in Qamishli are deeply invested in and collectively working towards. It has had profound effects on perceptions of their own wellbeing. The progress and momentum of this endeavour, however, seems to have abruptly come to a halt in the wake of the 2018 and 2019 Turkish occupation of Afrin and Serekaniye – the sense of possibility foreclosed by the reality of geopolitics. This has left a de facto state in place that has significant ambitions but limited resources and capacity to fully enact its project. The citizenry, whether they support the project or not, live in an open-ended condition of deep uncertainty, precarity and abandonment. Such a scenario seems to limit the prospects people have for living meaningful lives, keeping them instead trapped in a 'never-ending present' where it may seem pointless to work toward future goals (Brun, 2015: 24). At the same time, it also puts significant pressure on parents, especially to be forward-looking, to ensure their children have the choices they do not.

This chapter delves into how and when residents and IDPs felt they were living good lives, the prospects and needs for living flourishing lives now, aspirations for themselves and their families in the future, and how these needs intersect with those of the international humanitarian response in NES to better support wellbeing.

5.1 Comfort, safety, and living a good life

For many community members and IDPs, particularly Kurds and Yazidis, life under AANES is where they have felt most comfortable and a meaningful life is most attainable. The period between 2012 and 2018 is the high point in this regard. This does not necessarily mean that people experienced comfort and safety, since at varying points communities were under siege and experiencing terrorist attacks. Rather, there seemed to be a broad sense of collective struggle and protection as well as community-building and reimagining, which buoyed people through this time. As one IDP explains:

> We had many cultural and intellectual activities. We could be self-sufficient. We had solar panels. Many locals were engineering graduates. We had doctors so we opened a hospital. We had the first terrorism court. We managed to become a factory for many things like clothes, food, small manufacturing. (Yazidi female IDP from Afrin)

Wellbeing was lifted by these opportunities for aspirations to be realised, for a collective identity and for state-building. Several community members in this sample also contributed their skills and time to this

effort, including helping institute the AANES locally, developing an education curriculum to community organising, and establishing artist collectives and holding cultural events, such as film festivals, across NES. The sense that a long-held collective dream could become reality propelled this effort.

> Seeing the flags and Kurdish language being spoken by police, it was my dream coming true. I started to volunteer then, as a promise to give back. (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye)

For others in the sample, comfort was found prior to the crisis instead. This was when it was most possible for them to live full and varied lives on their own terms.

> In 2010, it was when I felt more comfortable. There were jobs, electricity, an active market. I used to go to Europe to organise events. Lebanon was a hub where we used to spend a lot of time. We moved to Damascus. When I went to Europe, I never thought of the need to stay there and not come back to Syria. (Christian male resident)

All these experiences of comfort, despite taking place over different times and in political scenarios, have a similar throughline of agency and self-sufficiency, economic possibility and electricity, and cultural and community engagement. People had both a collective purpose and a sense of their own place within their society. These experiences encompass critical components of wellbeing as a concept (Lough et al., 2023) and underscore the notion that a good life means not only meeting material needs but 'having good friendships, good relationships with the people around you, and a good relationship with yourself' (Arab male resident).

It is important to note, however, that for all those in the sample who experienced these periods of comfort, however short-lived, there are others still who reportedly never had such experience. As one resident recounts:

> I have never been comfortable anywhere. Syria is a police state where you are never safe, neither when sleeping. I lived in Türkiye between 2012 and 2017 but came back here. There was so much discrimination that I preferred to return. Once back, I got arrested by the regime first and then by AANES. (Arab male resident)

Instead of having true agency in any matter, decisions seem motivated by determining and pursuing the least bad outcome.

What ties all these varied experiences together in the end, however, is how changeable everyone's circumstances are. The community members in this sample have had to live 'multiple lives' (Arab male resident), dictated by forces beyond their control, whether derived internally from the Syrian government and the wider crisis in the country, or externally in relation to geopolitical interests.

5.2   Uncertainty and its impacts

A common refrain across interviews about Qamishli is that it faces three direct threats to its current existence: Türkiye, the Syrian government and its forces, and ISIS. As such, the reported priority of AANES authorities overall is providing security against attacks and encroachment. Dealing with security threats sometimes overrides other priorities of the AANES project, limiting other critical aspects of its governance. For example, the Jazira Region Women's Council reported having its approved budget reduced as funds were diverted for security purposes.

While there is recognition across the sample that Qamishli is still one of the safest places to live in Syria as a whole, the threats posed by these actors, especially Türkiye and the Government of Syria, have not significantly diminished over time. The Turkish occupation of parts of NES as well as airstrikes against Qamishli persist. Regional normalisation of relations with the Government of Syria and global political actors writ large pose additional existential threats to AANES's control of the city, while internal and external embargoes carry on in any event.

Consequently, community members remain in a sustained paroxysm of uncertainty, powerless to global politics and ground down by a 'stressful outside atmosphere and inside too' (Arab male resident). The material and psychological anguish of this situation is felt not just by adults but younger generations as well:

> Kids are concerned about what happens. Every day they wake up worried and at the end of the day are relieved that nothing happened. (Kurd female resident)

This status quo is increasingly untenable, nor sustainable, as precarity reigns. People feel a bad outcome is more likely than a good one and until then, they must continue living in hardship, under conditions which seem certain to deteriorate further. People are left feeling 'psychologically tired' (Arab female resident) and 'always scared' (Kurd female IDP from Serekaniye).

This uncertainty is echoed among all actors responding to needs in NES as well. International backing helps sustain the SDF in security provision, and it helps to stave off greater incursions by antagonistic actors to AANES. However, this support is timebound and linked to the fight against ISIS. It may disappear once this mission is deemed complete. Knowledge of this dynamic reportedly further erodes AANES authorities' confidence and ambition as primary duty bearers over the population because 'nobody, including AANES, knows if they're going to be here 18 months from now' (international humanitarian actor in NES). This in turn limits how much risk donors and organisations are willing to take in committing to systems strengthening in the chance that at some point in time 'bad' actors can leverage such infrastructure for their own gain.

Such hesitancy and neglect in Qamishli further reinforces community members' tiredness and fear, with a sense of limited possibilities for hope and reconnecting with past experiences of living good lives in their current location.

5.3   The difficulty of pursuing flourishing lives in a de facto state

The gains made so far with respect to greater freedoms under the AANES are reportedly not enough to sustain flourishing alone. Across the sample, stability is seen as the keystone for being able to pursue and live a flourishing life. In this context, stability specifically means having a more widely recognised state and authority in charge. This would better guarantee security and allow goods, capital, and people to come into Qamishli, while allowing its people to access regional and international systems, such as finance and more comprehensive development assistance. In short, it would generate enabling conditions to improve wellbeing across all the dimensions community members have articulated.

What this would entail however differs between groups within the sample. For the Kurdish and Yazidi community members in this sample, legitimisation generally means recognition of the AANES as an autonomous body and state.

> Our aspiration is to be internationally recognised. By default, this would have an impact on the aspirations of families and children for the future. The most important thing for all of this is to get stability. Recognition would ensure that. (Kurd female resident)

> The key is to legitimise the Self-Administration. Then companies will invest and improve our situation. Then the Self-Administration can expand services. It will be like a normal state. Otherwise, everything is a futile effort. (Kurd male resident)

Others are more circumspect in declaring support for any one entity to be in charge, but still insist on the critical importance of having an agreed upon settlement between, among others, the AANES and the Government of Syria to formally recognise how Qamishli and NES as a whole fit into the wider global system. This does not necessarily imply support for one side over the other in this scenario but perhaps a more pragmatic view on what is possible right now. Indeed, a couple of people in the sample went so far as to hint that they wished Syria in general had a different system of government.

> Without a real strong institutional system, life will not work. Institutions need to be responsible to people in terms of rights, freedom of speech, right to work, right to participate, personal rights. And the authority should be with the state, not military services. (Arab male resident)

Local administrations, INGOs, local NGOs, and response coordination interlocutors have all come to the same conclusion. That which prevents ordinary citizens from being fully able to pursue flourishing lives is also what has prevented a more fully fledged and robust response in Qamishli and NES as a whole: the lack of a widely recognised state. As such, these interlocutors point out the need for, if not recognition of AANES, a political settlement as the only way to allow for more expansive and sustained longer-term intervention in NES. 'I don't want to be pessimistic, but without a political solution for all of Syria including NES, investments don't matter' (local NGO personnel). The greater funds and investments that would flow into Syria through normalisation with Arab and Gulf states may not impact NES at all if there is not clarity of governance.

At this juncture, neither AANES recognition nor political settlement seem likely in the near future. There remains little to no international support for the AANES in this regard. And as one resident notes:

> No actor is putting any effort at bringing stability back, on any level. Actors here are not talking to each other. It is going from bad to worse. (Christian male resident).

It is not entirely correct that no efforts have been made, but rather that progress on any ongoing or proposed initiatives are stalled, perhaps indefinitely.

The Government of Syria has thus far ignored AANES's most recent overtures for starting a new peace process in the wake of regional normalisation (Zaman, 2023) and have faced no specific consequences for doing so nor for stalling other efforts for settlement and reform. Furthermore, the AANES 'does not have any leverage or pressure to put on anyone to get them to negotiate' (International political actor) given the limited capacity of its senior-most executive leadership to engage in international advocacy to gain more visibility, increase its diplomatic presence, seek out options for banking, or generate support from other sub-state and municipal entities.

Even so, those study participants working for INGOs, coordination mechanisms, and even stabilisation funds find their inability to work more directly with AANES governance authorities a hinderance to the sustainability of their programming and the response overall. Many expressed desire to engage the administration more directly if they were not bound by donor state restrictions in this regard.

> We cannot work without engaging the [AANES]. I know a lot of donors, for instance, do not work with the [AANES] administration at all and that is problematic in my point of view because we need the governance body to control this kind of work. We cannot just do it randomly. And again, to work together to maximise impact. (Donor representative)
>
> We're dying to work on system strengthening, early recovery and want to push into development. We're stuck in the wash around of humanitarian programme cycles and stuck on the restrictions provided by donors. (International humanitarian actor in NES)
>
> People are happy to work with AANES, but donors do not allow it. It is a political blockage. But, if we are building infrastructure, we have to or should work with AANES. Donors won't let us work with the AANES [education] curriculum, but how can we do work on education without using their curriculum? (INGO personnel)

This runs counter to the view expressed by some local counterparts that response actors have an anti-Kurdish bias (see section 3.6). It is unclear how widely the desire to work more closely with the AANES is known at a localised level because the situation remains as it is with so many geopolitically driven restrictions on action. Frank discussion amongst wider circles of the response may not feel prudent nor

possible to these actors. At the same time, this desire requires a less conservative approach; one that is willing to push the bounds of what is possible right now to better serve aspects of wellbeing while working toward more sustained change to the nature of the response going forward.

5.4   Aspirations for the future: return or leave

The best prospects for the future are perceived to be found outside of Qamishli. For the displaced from Afrin and Serekaniye, their primary aspiration is to return home. The specificities of the city's physical and cultural environment, experiences in revolution and community building, and the way they were forced out likely drive this desire, as it is not found among IDPs from other places in the sample.

> My main aspiration is to return to Afrin. Not just for the trees, stores, houses. But the spirit or soul of Afrin. The people of Afrin together will make it better and better. (Kurd male IDP from Afrin)

The desire for home is strong even though it is also recognised that such a prospect is impossible for now.

> There is no hope to return now. We are staying here waiting and waiting for a moment when we will be able to return under the mantle of the AANES. Because we believe in it. (Yazidi female IDP from Afrin)

The effort of waiting may be seen as an active process of labour and struggle and an indication of attempting to lead a meaningful life in the present (Twigt, 2020).

Migration is still a widely considered prospect, especially if the status quo continues. Migration is the primary aspiration of nearly every single community member interviewed.

> If the borders opened up for one second, everyone would leave. (Arab male IDP from Aleppo)

This is even the case for those heavily invested in the revolutionary project of the AANES as well as those who have a more ambivalent view of it. The motivating factor for migration, either to Europe or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, even if the proposition itself is risky, is to secure better futures for their children; futures where they have more opportunities and agency to decide the course of their lives in safety and not be forced to continually choose the least bad options.

> The reason 90% of people are leaving is for their kids. They are forced to leave here because the future is uncertain. (Kurd female resident)

5.5   International aid: unable to meet basic needs let alone support flourishing lives

As community members find the prospects for flourishing in Qamishli considerably diminished at present and their aspirations have them seeking to leave, a consistent finding across interlocutors engaged in the NES response is that the response it is not structured in such a way to be comprehensive and adaptive to both immediate and longer-term needs. Funding cycles remain short, there is still mostly a focus on emergency response, and it is not sufficiently informed by affected populations. As one local NGO interlocutor noted:

> All capacity is very limited and is short-term, 6 months, 12 months. It is reflected on people. We know there is assistance but only for a short time and only for limited areas. It is not comfortable to me. (Local humanitarian actor in NES)

There are increasing calls within the response to improve coordination between humanitarian and stabilisation funds and to pool limited resources together for more integrated and comprehensive coverage as a starting point. There is also growing recognition of the need to worry less about potential scenarios where nefarious actors could take over infrastructure or systems and seek to strengthen what exists to support more people. While these are critical possibilities for change in the response, donor redlines remain.

> With our donors now, we can't get around our constraints. We're stuck and that's why year 13 [of the response] we're still . . . it's the first year we're pushing back against creation of further camps. How in year 13 are we still doing this? (International humanitarian actor in NES)

Navigating this and pushing for different implementation on the ground will likely require response leadership with the 'political clout' (international humanitarian actor in NES) and leverage to change donors' minds.

Local NGOs for their part also see their role as beyond providing aid and rather taking up the 'social and political' (local NGO personnel) interests of society more broadly. They view institutional strengthening and access to international forums as critical for this endeavour. The stakes are higher for local NGOs to make connections between civil society, the local administration and the population, particularly in areas that remain outside the coverage of the humanitarian response. Efforts in this regard, linked to human rights promotion and violations documentation, good governance, and social cohesion, encompass different funding streams. These have more flexibility on what can be supported in NES without breaching sanctions. As one local civil society member succinctly put it:

> If it is not possible to remove the political isolation of AANES, at least remove this isolation for civil society organisations. (Local NGO personnel)

6   Conclusions

The preceding analysis of Qamishli city provides a case study of life in an unrecognised de facto state. The findings here reflect other research in highlighting the negative political, social and economic effects citizens have to bear due to the international non-recognition of their government (Tindall, 2023). Residents and IDPs in Qamishli endure the material and psychological impacts and indignities of partial and unequal public service provision, rising costs of living and limited opportunities, navigating parallel institutions and choosing between bad options. All the while, they see international assistance going elsewhere.

The greater freedoms they experience and communal structures now in place are not enough to buoy community relations, as more and more people come into the city from other places amid ongoing hardship and uncertainty. The times when people felt comfort, possibility and hope were under conditions where they could exert agency and self-sufficiency, experience economic opportunity, and participate in culture and community-building. Community members do not feel that any of these elements of wellbeing are possible now. Over a decade of crisis, five years since Turkish occupation put a damper on revolution, and where political settlement and reform remain indefinitely stalled, are the key drivers of hopelessness. As such, people live in what some interviewees described as 'the weather of war': tired, scared, and anticipating the worst in the absence of a recognised state. Migration seems to be the predominant aspiration in these circumstances since agency and choice are limited in Qamishli at present. The desire to migrate, even amongst those who have invested so much in the AANES project, is driven by a need to ensure safety, opportunity and choice for their children.

While much of the international response did not reach Qamishli at the time of data collection, humanitarian actors did recognise that the same issues that hinder wellbeing, hinder their work as well. Operating in a de facto state and under multiple sanction regimes confines the response to the very basics of aid, relegating actors to providing food baskets when what people need and want is infrastructure, opportunity, choice, and space to feel they are contributing to their communities. The way in which the response itself is structured and implemented is seen by local authorities and civil society as reinforcing past and ongoing marginalisation of Kurdish majority areas in general.

Qamishli serves as another reminder of the perils of relying on humanitarian aid to mitigate conflict. This creates conditions in which aid budgets expand without a clear mandate, war economies entrench, and cycles of violence and vulnerability continue. Key issues, including the demarcation of territory and protection of those who cannot safely live under the Government of Syria's control, are not sufficiently addressed (Hall and Beals, 2023). This only underscores that so much of what impacts people's flourishing in Qamishli is beyond the scope of the current humanitarian system. The findings here have implications for this context and humanitarian responses in protracted crises elsewhere, particularly those involving de facto states.

6.1 Recommendations

Engage more and directly with de facto state authorities for aid provision and systems strengthening

Humanitarian and stabilisation actors in NES have expressed considerable willingness and desire to work more closely with AANES authorities to leverage the limited resources they have to help more people in a sustainable way, but they are bound by donor restrictions. Non-recognition does not necessarily rule out the prospects for international engagement (Tindall, 2023) but does dictate the type of engagement possible.

Donors should consider what configuration of engagement they would allow that moves beyond the bare minimum of support in contexts where there are immense needs and de facto authorities are relatively well placed to address them. At the same time, **humanitarian and stabilisation actors should push the bounds of what is immediately possible within existing responses**, to create enabling environments for wellbeing while further advocating for wider and more sustained change in this regard.

Implement conflict-sensitive communication and prioritisation

Although prioritisation is driven by limited resources, **humanitarian actors need to pay greater attention to conflict-sensitive communication and community engagement**.

The current NES response forces INGOs and coordination bodies to prioritise based on need and level of conflict-affectedness. In a context such as Qamishli, which has significant humanitarian need, being told that your community cannot be helped because it has not experienced enough violence, armed conflict and upheaval is deeply hurtful. It serves to minimise and, worse still, erase the very real and difficult experiences people have endured. This in turn generates animosity towards others who are receiving support.

Expand multi-year funding and programme cycles that cover more communities

If protracted crises continue without political resolution, donors must move beyond emergency response funding and programme cycles that only cover specifically designated conflict-affected areas. **Donors must expand longer-term, multi-year funding and programme cycles**. These should seek to address the critical aspects of wellbeing across its components, such as through connecting individual material needs with more communal ones, thereby slowly working to create space for individual agency as well as community-building.

Leverage different resources for funding

In the NES context, limited funds and the similarities between early recovery and stabilisation interventions have led for some to call for **better coordination between humanitarian and stabilisation actors through pooling, or at least better coordinating resources**.

Another option to consider is **the use of sub-state and municipal donor funds**. Jazira region authorities have cultivated relationships with several cities in Europe and have received funds and technical capacity assistance for infrastructure rehabilitation. Some of these funds have come via diaspora within municipalities lobbying their local governments for support to Qamishli. These funds are not as large as that which would come from international development assistance, but have helped with systems-strengthening efforts that humanitarian and stabilisation actors did not prioritise.

Invest in institutional strengthening and in local NGOs

Donors should complement their aid with more funds designated for stabilisation or political efforts with specific support for strengthening local civil society actors, conflict resolution, and local governance (Hall and Beals, 2023). More sustained and consistent funding in this regard is warranted.

Local NGO interlocutors in Qamishli and local humanitarian coordination actors in NES all expressed a strong desire to engage in the deeper issues facing their communities, beyond aid distribution. They want to contribute to creating more vibrant and cohesive communities and institutions more responsive to their needs. Community members in this sample have lost more than a decade to hardship and setback. Civil society actors have the will to try to push back against the pervasive despair and hopelessness they see in their communities.

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