

APRIL 2023

SYRIA

MONTHLY REPORT



CA - SYR

CRISIS ANALYSIS - SYRIA



This timeline provides a snapshot of key events throughout the month. These events have been selected for their impact and relevance, and do not necessarily feature as full articles in the Monthly Report.



Conflict & security

Israeli airforce

Damascus: The Israeli air force bombed Fourth Division headquarters near Damascus in response to the launch of an Iranian drone towards the Golan Heights. The Israelis have conducted multiple strikes in Syria, targeting Iranian-backed militia headquarters, Lebanese Hezbollah forces and Syrian army military locations.

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Conflict & security

International coalition bases, Deir-ez-Zor

Two International Coalition military bases in the Koniko gas field and Omar oil field were attacked by Iran-backed militias stationed in Jdid Ekeidat (Khasham, Deir-ez-Zor). The US response was swift.

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Humanitarian updates

Turkey-Syria earthquake

The Syrian Response Coordination Group (RCG) has issued a final report on the impact of the 6 February earthquake. An estimated 1.844 million people in northern Syria have been affected, with documented economic losses of around \$1.95 billion. The humanitarian response across all sectors came to just 39% of what was needed, while the needs of just 24% of survivors were met.

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Regional updates

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

The Syrian foreign minister, Faisal al-Miqdad, arrived in the Saudi city of Jeddah on 12 April, the first top-level diplomatic mission between the two countries since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Later in April, Tunisia restored diplomatic relations with Damascus, and Iranian officials met with Syrian counterparts to discuss further economic cooperation.

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Conflict & security

A'zaz

Turkish forces, the SDF, and the Syrian army clashed in northern Aleppo. The SDF carried out simultaneous attacks on Turkish military positions in Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas. Four Turkish soldiers were wounded. In response, Turkish forces and their affiliated factions bombed several villages in northern Aleppo where the SDF and the Syrian army are deployed.

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Climate, environment & natural disaster

Northern Syria

Torrential rains hit northern Syria, cutting off main roads connecting Aleppo to Ar-Raqqa, damaging the Al-Barouda bridge and flooding agricultural land. Water also swept through dozens of IDP camps, and fruit and veg stalls in Al-Hal market in Ar-Raqqa.

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Conflict & security

Jindairis

Turkish intelligence forces claim to have killed the suspected leader of ISIS, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qureishi, in a raid near Jindairis, northwest Syria. A US drone strike killed another prominent ISIS member, Khaled Iyad Ahmad al-Jabouri, on the outskirts of Kelly in northern Idlib on 3 April.

23



Civil unrest

Northern Syria

Demonstrations were held in dozens of cities and towns in Idlib and Aleppo rejecting Arab normalization with the Syrian government. Hundreds of Syrians also participated throughout Europe.

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Summary

Syria, with help from Saudi diplomatic efforts, and the support of Jordan and other regional actors, was been readmitted into the Arab League on 7 May. Despite the landmark moment, regional and Western states remain opposed to normalization with the Syrian government.

Assassinations of individuals involved in illicit narcotics activities increased throughout the month. The spike could be the result of community vigilantism against narcotics networks in their communities, increased competition between traders, or simply general instability. In parallel, Damascus' attempts at curbing drug trafficking have yielded limited results. A concerned Jordanian government allegedly launched two airstrikes, in unprecedented military action inside Syria, targeting drug dealers and warehouses.

The Syrian government is accused of trying to obscure the Palestinian identity and origins of Yarmouk camp, by renaming it Yarmouk street and removing flags and banners of Palestinians. The return of Palestinian refugees to the camp post-reconstruction has been marred with difficulties.

In northeast Syria, media outlets and local sources reported a notable increase in clashes between tribes in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. The role of social media to instigate and exacerbate the disputes is new, as local tribal leaders in Thiban called on internet providers in the region to block platforms such as Facebook and Kwai (a short video app, similar to TikTok) on 8 April. Despite the Autonomous Administration and the SDF introducing some conflict resolution mechanisms in order to resolve these issues, the mechanisms in place mostly focus on temporary solutions rather than resolving the root cause of tribal disputes.

Throughout Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, meat, chicken, sugar, and vegetable prices in the northeast increased, attributed to low supply, trader hoarding, and higher livestock prices. The Administration introduced price ceilings and penalties – these mechanisms were limited in effectiveness, largely due to the lack of enforcement.

Access to clean, potable water in northeast Syria is increasingly difficult. Throughout the governorates – Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh – challenges include low Euphrates river levels, pollution, poor infrastructure, and regular cuts in service upstream in Turkey. Poor access has had negative impacts on health – where an increase in water-borne diseases was reported in Ar-Raqqa – and agriculture as the farmer's continue their reliance on groundwater extraction through unofficial well drilling.

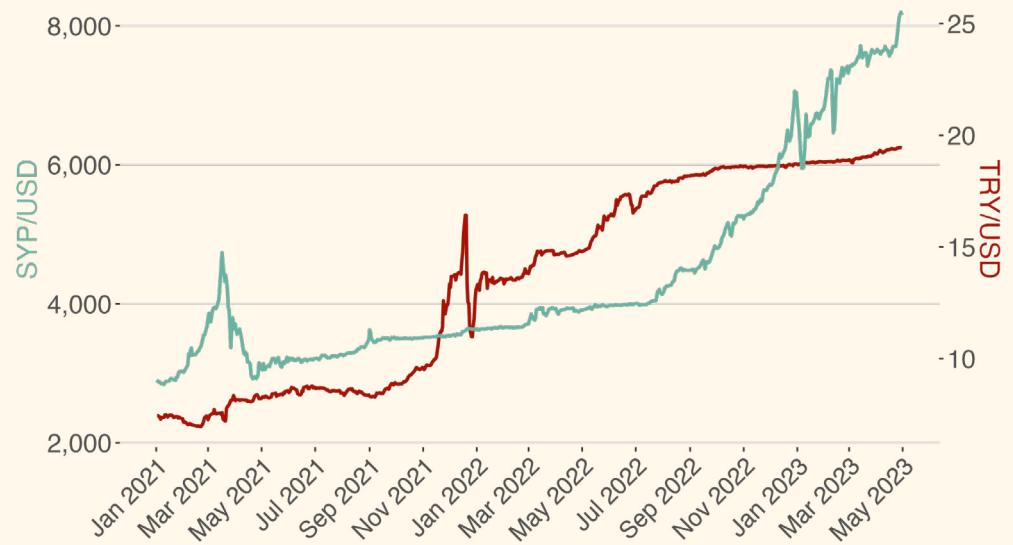
In northwest Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a number of small-scale acts of aggression against Faylaq al-Sham, justifying them as responses to community complaints against the Syrian National Army (SNA)-affiliated faction. Amid ongoing talks of a Syrian-Turkish rapprochement, HTS looks to be acting strategically to secure its position in negotiations.

Economic indicators

	February 2023	March 2023	April 2023
SYP/USD official exchange rate	3,000	3,000	3,000
SYP/USD parallel market rate	7,158 (10%)	7557.1 (5.6%)	7,733.1 (2.3%)
TRY/USD official rate	18.8 (0.4%)	19.0 (0.9%)	19.3 (1.7%)

Economic indicator 1.

Official and parallel market exchange rates, SYP/USD and TRY/USD,



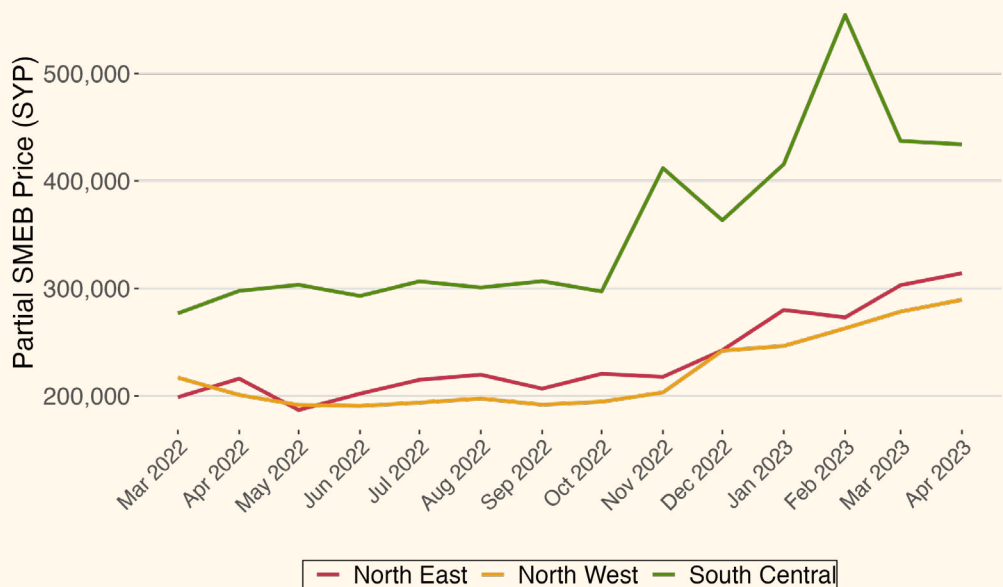
Economic indicator 2.

SYP/USD and TRY/USD, exchange rates

Economic indicator 3.

Change in partial SMEB price by zone of control,

The partial SMEB price monitoring tool is in part built on Sphere recommendations of a 2100kcal daily diet per person. Items covered in the assessment include basic food items such as bread, rice, bulghur, lentils, oil, sugar, meats, vegetables, and fruits.



International

Saudi support helps Syrian readmittance to Arab League

Saudi Arabia has continued its efforts to promote normalization with the Syrian government despite Western opposition, culminating in Syria's [return](#) to the Arab League on 7 May. Saudi and Syrian officials, with Russian mediation, began negotiations last month, aiming to [restore diplomatic relations](#). Negotiations had seemingly accelerated to the point where Saudi Arabia was floating the idea of [inviting](#) Syria to the Arab League summit to be held in Riyadh in May. This led to an impromptu meeting between Arab nations in Egypt to vote on the issue, and an agreement to reinstate Syrian membership.

Saudi–Syrian diplomacy

The Saudi and Syrian foreign ministers exchanged visits this month, the first official visits to each other's countries since 2011. Saudi foreign minister, Prince Faisal Bin Farhan, [visited](#) Damascus on 18 April to meet with the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. The Saudi Foreign Ministry stated that the visit showed a desire to find a political solution to Syria's conflict that would preserve the country's "Arab identity and return it to its Arab surroundings". Bin Farhan's visit was a significant step towards ending Syria's regional isolation, particularly given the Kingdom's influence in the wider Arab region. Saudi Arabia also [hosted a Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\) meeting](#) in Jeddah on 14 April with representatives of all GCC countries, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq in attendance to discuss the possibility of Syria's return to the Arab League. Diplomats in the meeting reportedly [stressed](#) the "importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis." Finally, Syrian foreign minister, Faisal al-Mekdad accepted Bin Farhan's invitation to visit Jeddah on 12 April, landing in Jeddah to "discuss the efforts made to reach a political solution to the Syrian conflict."



Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Mekdad, lands in Jeddah on 12 April (Source: [Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#))

Regional and national actors follow

Saudi Arabia's endorsement of rapprochement with the Syrian government laid the groundwork for other Arab states to follow suit. Regionally, Tunisia now has a [diplomatic mission](#) in Damascus, as of 14 April, with Syria also reopening its embassy in Tunis. Egyptian foreign minister, Sameh Choukri, issued a supportive [statement](#) during his visit to Turkey on 14 April saying that “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria should be preserved” and that “foreign forces should withdraw from the territory of Syria.” Similarly, Jordan hosted a [meeting](#) on 1 May between the foreign ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and Syria as a continuation of the Jeddah meeting to further discuss Syria and the possibility of its return to the Arab League.

Nationally, the Autonomous Administration appears concerned about increased integration with the Arab world – if successful, the government would gain legitimacy, improving its negotiating power. The Administration looks to be extending overtures to Damascus; SDF Commander, Mazloum Abdi, [stated](#) on 13 April that he hopes that the SDF will join the Syrian army in the future, and that the SDF is motivated to further develop its relationship with the Syrian government. Additionally, the Autonomous Administration has again brought up the possibility of dialogue with the Syrian government [emphasizing](#) Syria's unity, and suggesting a nine-point plan for reaching a solution to the Syrian conflict.

West and its allies stand firm against normalization

Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to push for Syria's regional reintegration, not all Arab countries have accepted the idea. Media sources [reported](#) that Qatar, Morocco, Kuwait, and Yemen initially refused Syria's readmission into the Arab League. For some, this was likely done to protect their national interests; the US [designated](#) Qatar a major non-NATO ally last year, granting it better access to US training and security systems, while Qatar still hosts the largest US military airbase (Al-Udeid air base) in the Middle East. Additionally, the US [approved](#) the sale of missile systems worth \$524.2 million to Morocco on 13 April.

Western countries have continued issuing statements denouncing normalization with the Syrian government. US ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, Beth Van Schaack, [said](#) that “reintegration should not be a gift, but rather an opportunity to force the Assad regime and others to grant humanitarian concessions, such as releasing detainees and those who have forcibly disappeared, getting in contact with the victims' families, and allowing refugees to return and have access to their properties.” Acting deputy representative to the UN, Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis, [said](#) on 27 April that “the United States will not normalize our relationship with Assad, and we have strongly discouraged others from doing so.” DeLaurentis added that the US would not lift sanctions “or support reconstruction absent genuine, comprehensive, and enduring reforms and progress on the political process.”

The EU also expressed its disapproval, [stating](#) that “accountability and justice for victims remain essential for a stable, peaceful Syria, based on a credible, inclusive and viable political solution in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.” Brussels [expanded](#) Syria's sanctions list to an additional 25 in-

dividuals and 8 entities involved in the “production and trafficking of narcotics” and private security companies that “act as shell companies for regime-affiliated militia.” However, this is unlikely to deter Saudi Arabia as it develops its foreign policy and prioritizes its own strategic interests. Saudi Arabia has further frustrated Western powers by [refusing US requests](#) to increase oil production (and then moving to [cut](#) production), and improving relations with [Russia](#) and [China](#).

Syrian return to the Arab League

Syria was readmitted to the Arab League on 7 May under [decision 8914](#), which allows participation in the League’s various committees, welcomes all statements and positions supportive of its regional reintegration, and affirms steps that need to be taken for the process to move forward. Qatar’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Majed Bin Mohamad, [said](#) that his country’s position towards “normalization with the Syrian government has not changed” however his government “would not be an obstacle to Arab League decisions.” Mohamad added that normalization with Syria “is primarily contingent upon progress toward a political solution.” Arab League Secretary General, Mohamad Abu al-Ghaith, stressed that readmission did not mean relations had resumed between Syria and all Arab states. Finally, the White House [notified](#) its Arab allies that the Caesar sanctions remained in place, and the US would not consider normalization.

Aside from a return to the Arab League, Syria is unlikely to be accepted by Western states. Numerous regional and international actors have varying levels of influence inside Syria that could either facilitate or jeopardize its position. For example, the US, Russia, Iran, and Turkey all have a military presence in the country, while the UAE has projected soft power into Syria for several years, encouraging economic cooperation, and more recently [generously donating](#) humanitarian aid in the form of funds and material assistance, particularly [after](#) the 6 February earthquake. A political solution to the conflict is needed, however, as UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, [summed](#) up during a Security Council briefing “no existing groups of players – not the Syrian parties, not the Astana players, not the Western players, not the Arab players – can alone bring about a political solution” and “that it would require everyone make contributions, in a coordinated, multilateral effort.”

South & Central

Syrian Central Banks approves foreign currency loans

The Syrian Central Bank has allowed Syrian banks to provide loans in foreign currency at a time when its own reserves are low, and while enacting measures to reduce foreign currency spending. The Central Bank issued [Decision 169](#) on 11 April, directing banks that are licensed to deal with foreign currency transactions to provide loans in foreign currency. The loans are contingent on specific [conditions](#), (shown below). Confusingly, Decision 169 comes on the heels of [Decision 336](#), which temporarily allows traders to pay for their imports from sources other than the Syrian Central Bank. It absolves the Central Bank of the responsibility of having to pay for imports from its own foreign currency reserves, raising the question of why the Central Bank would allow banks to give out foreign currency loans, and at the same time take steps to restrict foreign currency use, to increase reserves.

Conditions for receiving a foreign currency loan

The loan applicant should be a person living in the Syrian Arab Republic who vows to pay back the loan in the same currency it was received, either through foreign currency bank accounts inside Syria, foreign currency accounts abroad, or in cash.

The loan is to be used to fund services or trade-related economic projects, which can bring foreign currency into the country.

Proof is given to the banks showing that the applicant has enough foreign currency revenues to pay for the loans either from a foreign currency bank account abroad which proves the existence of a relationship with a foreign company or domestically through projects that are licensed to trade using foreign currency.

The loan will be used to fund the needs of the investment project through importing machinery, equipment, transportation vehicles, and raw materials.

The bank receives guarantees that the loan will be paid back and is being used for its intended purpose.

The bank provides the loan gradually as the project shows achievements in different stages within a specific time period.

The loan will not be used to purchase real estate.

Conditions in decision 336 for applicants to receive foreign currency loans.

The Central Bank's decision puzzled experts, who say the government is committing to an impossible initiative. Syrian economist and former professor, Rasha Sayroub, [questioned](#) the banks' ability to hand out foreign currency loans given the unavailability of sufficient foreign currency capital. Sayroub said that

the capital available in Syrian banks is around \$2.5 bn, unevenly distributed; the Syrian Commercial Bank for example holds \$1.5 bn of the amount. Additionally, many private banks have most of their foreign currency capital either in bank accounts abroad which cannot be accessed from Syria (due to sanctions), or stuck in Lebanese banks with no ability to withdraw. Finally, nine of the fourteen private banks operating in Syria do not meet the minimum capital requirements outlined in [law 3/2010](#), set at SYP 10 bn (\$1,329,000).

Banks use trade to exchange foreign currency

Despite Sayroub's claims, local sources have said that Syrian private banks have taken advantage of Decision 336 to indirectly access their foreign currency capital abroad. The banks have been conducting deals with traders, offering to pay for their imports from the banks' foreign currency accounts abroad in exchange for traders paying the bank back in cash. This deal ensures that traders pay for the imported items on time and enables the banks to have access to their funds abroad, helping them bypass sanctions.¹ Private banks could fund the loans in this way, however, it is unlikely that the amount would be sufficient to fund a significant number of them.

Increased foreign aid flow and new potential investments rumored to be behind decision

The government may also be laying the groundwork for legislation in the event foreign investment begins to flow into the country, and subsequently into Syrian banks, following readmission into the Arab League, once reconstruction begins. The Central Bank's decision was preceded by [amendments](#) to investment [law 18/2021](#) on 22 March, which grants additional investment incentives such as customs tax exemptions. The investment-related legislation could be intensifying because the government is expecting regional rapprochement to yield a significant improvement in trade and bilateral economic relations that could eventually translate into significant investments. Indeed, Assad has highlighted the importance and centrality of reconstruction for the Syrian government.

Given that Syrian banks are likely to be unable to provide foreign currency loans, there may be other reasons why Decision 169 was issued. Critics have pointed out that the Central Bank has been collecting earthquake relief funds and donations from aid agencies and foreign governments. It has devalued bank and remittance rates over the past two months to attract more donations and remittances through official channels; the bank rate went [from SYP 4,522 to 6,532 per USD](#) on 2 April and the remittance rate [from SYP 7,250 to 7,300 per USD](#) on 11 April. It is possible that Decision 169 is a scheme to enable the laundering of these funds; the banks will use earthquake relief donations as loans to applicants affiliated with the Syrian government; the money will eventually be funneled through to the banks, to pro-government businessmen.

¹ Sanctions prevent Syrian private banks from conducting wire transfers from their accounts abroad into Syria, making them lose access to their whole foreign currency capital.

Assassinations linked to illicit narcotics networks spike in Dar'a

During April, media and local sources reported a surge in assassinations targeting individuals involved in illicit narcotics activities across Dar'a governorate. Several factors help explain the reason behind the increase in assassinations; some could be viewed as attempts by local armed groups and community members to curb the narcotics trade, while others were linked to rivalries and competition between narcotics smugglers. Assassinations also took place amid moves toward Arab normalization with the Syrian government – some based on the condition that narcotics operations in Syria are curbed – as Saudi Arabia continues to [thwart](#) shipments entering its borders, and Jordan threatens the use of military force to curtail narcotics smuggling on its borders.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) [reported](#) 61 security incidents throughout April, a significant increase compared to 26 in March. Among the 47 documented casualties, 13 were individuals involved in illicit narcotics activities, both civilians and members of government-affiliated military and security groups. A number of the incidents took place in areas known to act as production or transit sites for narcotics (primarily captagon pills), around the Lajat region and western Dar'a countryside.

On 9 April, there were three assassinations in Nawa city; one media source [claimed](#) the perpetrators could be armed ex-opposition members fighting the spread of narcotics among their community. Similarly, on 10 April, two narcotics dealers were [captured](#) by residents of eastern Dar'a and executed. According to local sources, a popular demand among residents and communities in Dar'a is to combat the governorate being used as a hub for narcotics smuggling – attacks on individuals can be viewed as a community response to combat narcotics in the area. Although it is unlikely that narcotics dealers are systematically being targeted by local armed groups and communities in Dar'a, there have been past examples of community vigilantism in Syria, particularly if state security is either complicit or ineffective; for instance, locals have [kidnapped](#) government military and security members in return for the release of detainees – this has proved effective in both Dar'a and As-Sweida, as a tool for negotiating release. Accordingly, it might also be used to fight the spread of illicit narcotics.

Assassinations are also likely to be linked to competition between dealers and smugglers; on 6 April, a [dispute](#) over a hashish shipment in Tel Shehab between the Aqabat and Hatamle families escalated, killing one individual. Similarly, on 1 April, four individuals were [killed](#) near the Syrian-Jordanian border following a dispute between the government's Air Force Intelligence and Military Security-affiliated groups over a narcotics shipment. These incidents are common when disagreements emerge over the distribution of profits or control over smuggling routes.

In western Dar'a, in contrast to other parts of the governorate, the majority of assassinations (a total of 46 attempts) are likely the result of the high level of instability and loose government control; general criminality is high, and lawlessness is prevalent throughout the rural towns and villages.

Government's interests unserved by curbing narcotics

Syria's foreign minister agreed to combat the narcotics trade in Syria as part of a [Saudi-Syrian](#) joint statement on 12 April, and during discussions with Jordan toward [Syrian-Arab](#) normalization on 1 May. However, since then there have been no indicators that the activities have diminished. In April, Saudi authorities intercepted three smuggling attempts into the country (on [13](#), [25](#), and [29](#) April), confiscating around 20 million captagon and amphetamine pills at both land crossings and the Jeddah port. On 14 April, Lebanese security forces [exposed](#) a smuggling network and confiscated around 10 million captagon pills, stating that the shipment was destined for Senegal then Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the Jordanian border guards thwarted three smuggling attempts across the borders with Syria on [12](#) April, the [1](#) and [4](#) of May, confiscating at least 2 million captagon pills.

The Syrian government's attempts to curb narcotics trafficking have yielded limited results, with some [arguing](#) that it is using its narco economy as a political bargaining chip and will avoid adopting decisive policies against it. According to local sources, much of the government security apparatuses' attempts to curb smuggling in Dar'a are a way to carry out arbitrary security policies under the pretext of combatting the narcotics trade. For instance, on 27 April, a Military Security patrol [arrested](#) an unknown number of Bedouin IDPs on the outskirts of Nahta and Samma villages south of the Lajat region between Dar'a and As-Sweida. While Bedouin [involvement](#) in smuggling activities in Syria is well-documented, there is no evidence linking the recent arrests to narcotics. Government security branches have however consistently targeted the Bedouin IDP communities in Lajat during recent years, reportedly to [expel](#) them from the area, despite not providing them suitable conditions for return.

Other sources have [emphasized](#) the difference between the Syrian government's willingness to combat the smuggling of illicit narcotics and its capacity to do so. The regional captagon industry involves multiple stakeholders with vested interests, spanning high government officials, security and military officials, armed non-state actors, and local networks.

In southern Syria, operationally speaking, the narcotics trade has reflected the [decentralized and fragmented](#) security structure, where military and security branches both cooperate and compete. It is questionable whether the Syrian government is able to dismantle such a lucrative enterprise, particularly at a time when economic hardship is prevalent, and trade and investment opportunities are limited (largely due to sanctions).



Confiscated amphetamine in a shipment of potatoes, Saudi Arabia (Source: [Arabic CNN](#))

Jordan threatens military action against illicit narcotics smuggling

For Jordan, the impact of narcotics smuggling from Syria is huge; a significant percentage of documented crimes in 2022 were [related](#) to the possession and consumption of narcotics, an alarming figure in a country with already [overcrowded](#) prisons. In addition to thwarting smuggling attempts, Jordan is reported to have adopted an offensive strategy to combat the flow of narcotics from Syria; it has escalated rhetoric against the trade, and threatened unprecedented military action.

On 5 May, Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman al Safadi, [told](#) CNN that Jordan was willing to launch military action inside Syria if the Syrian government failed to curb smuggling. On 8 May, there were two airstrikes against targets linked to the narcotics trade in southern Dar'a and As-Sweida governorates. The strikes, rumored to have been ordered by the Jordanian military, [hit](#) a water purification plant in the village of Kharab al Shahem, reportedly a temporary warehouse and launch point for the smuggling of illicit narcotics across the Syrian-Jordanian border, and [the house](#) of notorious narcotics smuggler, Mer'i al Ramthan, in the village of al She'anb, killing him, his wife, and six of his children. The Jordanian military is yet to release a statement claiming responsibility for the attack while the Jordanian foreign minister, Ayman al Safadi neither claimed nor denied Jordan's responsibility. Safadi did say [however](#) that the illicit narcotics trade was brought up with Syrian officials in Amman, specifically the formation of a Syrian-Jordanian working group to discuss mechanisms through which the threat could be handled.

Future outlook

The narcotics trade's growing importance – locally for profits, and regionally because of the support to international criminal networks – is likely to mean more violence in areas known for production and distribution, like western Dar'a. The Syrian government's inability (or unwillingness) to curtail the industry has meant Jordan is now taking a much harder line. The recent military attacks on narcotics-related targets in southern Syria highlight how serious curbing illicit cross-border smuggling is for Amman. New rules of engagement with the illicit narcotics network, justified by the need to protect Jordan's national security and interests (and potentially appease Saudi Arabia, where much of the narcotics ends up), are being created.

Palestinian identity obscured in Yarmouk camp

In April, the Syrian government reportedly [changed](#) the name of Yarmouk camp to Yarmouk street, after completing lengthy restoration and rehabilitation of the buildings – reducing the status of the neighborhood as a home to Palestinian refugees, and incorporating it into the reconstruction of Damascus. The symbolism behind the gesture sparked fears among the camp's residents, who stated that the government was attempting to strip it of its Palestinian identity by removing its name, and any Palestinian flags and symbols.

Durable solution for returns fall short

Officially, the Syrian government has reportedly continued investing in projects and activities in the camp with the aim of facilitating the return of camp residents. In April, the government reportedly [held](#) a number of workshops to rehabilitate streets within the camp. In March, in collaboration with civil society organizations, the governor of Damascus launched a campaign to remove rubble and rehabilitate public service infrastructure.

Despite this, residents believe various factors continue to obstruct their return, including destroyed buildings, ongoing criminal activity in the camp, administrative processes, and absence of property ownership documents. Critiquing the March efforts, media sources indicated that these activities were [implemented](#) in an unorganized, slow, and ineffective manner by organizations [affiliated](#) with pro-government Palestinian factions. Media sources also reported several cases of [theft](#) in the residential areas where these organizations were implementing rehabilitation projects.

The spread of criminal activity is not new in Yarmouk camp; media sources [indicated](#) that personnel affiliated with pro-government Palestinian factions, the Syrian army's Fourth Division, and the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) regularly rob residential neighborhoods. In parallel, local sources report that government security forces are often also involved in the drug trade and financial extortion to grant security clearances to those who wish to return to the camp.

Administrative and legal changes have also impeded the return of the camp's residents. In March, the Security Committee of Damascus and Rural Damascus [amended](#) the requirement of obtaining return approval. Instead of personally visiting the Palestinian Branch of National Security Offices, those wishing to return to Yarmouk should submit a written request to the military security detachment inside the camp, responsible for conducting security checks. Security services have [rejected](#) applications of individuals with previous arrests, known affiliation with opposition factions, or who were wanted for compulsory military service. The MID then arrested several individuals who had entered the camp without security approval. Media sources [noted](#) that from an estimated 10,000 applications received by 22 April, only 200 had received responses from relevant authorities.

Administrative delays and mismanagement have both prevented the residents from returning to the camp and increased the financial burden on those who can barely afford rental costs. The absence of property ownership documents is another major challenge to returns; local sources report that even those who hold ownership documents are exposed to financial extortion in exchange for approval during the investigation processes, adding that the majority of approvals are being granted to members of pro-government Palestinian factions, members of Syrian government forces and intelligence and influential members of society.

Some observers argue that the Syrian government's regulations continue to violate housing, land and property rights of residents of Yarmouk. In January, the governor of Damascus [announced](#) that the property owners in the camp should

visit Yarmouk Services Department to remove the building rubbles or demolish the damaged buildings which are at risk of collapse, and imposed fines on those who fail to adhere to the decision within a month. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) noted that this decision violates [Law no. 3 of 2018](#), according to which the governor is responsible for assessing the damage to the buildings, the costs of rubble removal, and announcing the specific zones which shall be cleared. STJ also highlighted, regarding the procedures announced in early 2023, “that clearing the debris so hastily would erase signs of the buildings and turn the area into an unrecognizable terrain”, posing challenges to prove property ownership, particularly in the absence of relevant documents. Additionally, lengthy administrative procedures to obtain ownership documents and displacement which may prevent them from proving ownership during the given timeline were not taken into consideration. Local sources added that rubble removal, demolition of buildings and reconstruction are associated with high costs borne by civilians, who are already struggling to secure shelter and livelihoods.



The entrance to Yarmouk camp renamed Yarmouk street (Source: [Quds Press](#))

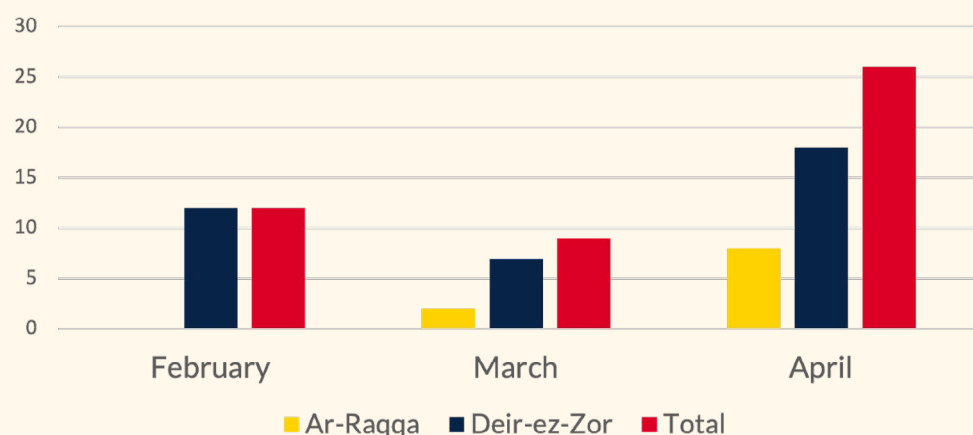
Northeast Syria

Tribal conflict causes instability in northeast Syria

Throughout April, media outlets and local sources reported a notable increase in clashes among tribes located in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. A total of twenty-five incidents were reported, increasing from seven incidents reported in March and twelve in February. The majority of incidents in April (17), took place in the Sur, Thiban, Hajin, Suran, Basira, Khasham and Kisreh subdistricts of Deir-ez-Zor. In Ar-Raqqa, the incidents were reported in the Karama, Ar-Raqqa, and Al-Thawrah subdistricts.

Local sources and media outlets noted that the majority of clan-related violence in northeast Syria is related to unresolved grievances between tribes and clans. For instance, on 6 April, a [clash](#) between the albu-Khalaf and the albu-Izz clans – both of which are part of the Ekeidat tribal confederacy – was reported in Thiban leaving one person dead and others injured. Similarly, a [clash](#) between two other clans (also part of the Ekeidat tribal confederacy) was also reported on 22 April. In Ar-Raqqa, two clan clashes [reportedly](#) killed five people and injured 10 others, in an incident in the town of Hamrat Balasim lasting two days.

Clashes resulting from unresolved grievances between clans and tribes are neither new nor uncommon in northeast Syria. However, the difference in the instances of violence in April 2023 is the role of social media in instigating the feuds. According to local sources in Deir-ez-Zor, many of the violent clashes taking place in April began on social media, where a dispute between two users would then translate to physical clashes. This has reportedly prompted local tribal leaders in Thiban to call on internet providers in the region to block platforms such as Facebook and Kwai (a short video app, similar to TikTok) on 8 April.



Number of tribal clashes recorded throughout northeast governorates, Feb-Apr 2023. (Source: CA-SYR)

Conflict resolution mechanisms, cyclical violence, and their implications on social cohesion

Solutions brought forward by local stakeholders are a temporary, rather than permanent, end to hostilities between disputing parties. Throughout April, local stakeholders including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and tribal figures attempted to intervene on multiple occasions. For instance, during the clashes in Ar-Raqqa's Hamrat Balasim, media sources [reported](#) that tribal leaders unsuccessfully attempted to stop the hostilities, while local sources added that dozens of residents from Hamrat Balasim and neighboring villages positioned themselves within the line of fire, successfully forcing both parties to lay down their weapons – however, hostilities later resumed. In Deir-ez-Zor, local sources stated that the SDF-affiliated Hajin Military Council sent a convoy to Thiban on 18 April to put an end to warring clans, however similar to Ar-Raqqa, they reported that tensions and clashes between both parties are likely to resume sometime in the near future.

The Autonomous Administration has multiple 'Reconciliation Committee' in each civic council which deal with issues of tribal and clan-based violence and long-standing grievances such as land disputes. These committees are composed of local community leaders who are meant to resolve any problems. However, [reports](#) in 2021 indicated that the capacity of these councils is limited, and they are understaffed. Rather than being elected by the communities they represent, reports show that committees are mostly hand-picked based on favoritism by local authorities – they therefore lack popular support and public belief in their ability to resolve differences, and the tools and capacity to do so. [Reports](#) have also indicated that courts within Administration-held areas are overwhelmed by the amount of property-related cases, and have been unable to legally process a significant number of the disputes.

The cyclical pattern of tribal and clan-based conflict is often associated with members' inability to resolve issues internally, and resorting to the use of violence as a tool for 'justice' in the area. Seemingly operational conflict resolution mechanisms across northeast Syria focus on an immediate cessation of violence, rather than resolving the root causes of conflict. In effect, these tensions resurface, and hostilities resume. According to local sources in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, the inability to resolve these issues has had a negative effect on social cohesion, as the violence is compounded and multiplies. With the emergence of social media now as a trigger for new disputes, violence is expected to continue, further negatively impacting social cohesion.

Prices increase during Ramadan

The price of meat, chicken, sugar, and vegetables in the northeast has reportedly increased throughout the month of Ramadan and the Eid al-Fitr period (see table below). The price of sugar also increased, while supply decreased; sugar is mainly imported from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) by the Newroz Consumer Corporation – an Administration-owned [company](#) which sells to wholesalers and shop owners operating in local markets. Throughout Ramadan, the price of a 10 kg bag of sugar in local shops in Ar-Raqqa city and in Menbij, reached SYP

80,000 (the Administration had set the price at SYP 59,000). Though these prices are not exhaustive nor inclusive of all markets across northeast Syria, local sources reported that the prices are indicative of the extent of change that took place across major markets.

Areas	Meat Price Pre-Ramadan (SYP)	Meat Price During Ramadan (SYP)	Percentage change
Quamishli	50,000	65,000	30%
Al-Hasakeh	50,000	65,000	30%
Ar-Raqqa	47,000	60,000	28%
Deir-ez-Zor	50,000	55,000	10%

Changes in meat prices. (Source: Media and local sources)

Areas	Chicken Price Pre-Ramadan (SYP)	Chicken Price During Ramadan	Percentage change
Quamishli	13,500	16,000	19%
Al-Hasakeh	13,500	16,000	19%
Ar-Raqqa	13,000	16,000	23%
Deir-ez-Zor	11,000	14,000	27%

Changes in chicken prices. (Source: Media and local sources)

According to officials working with the Newroz Consumer Corporation, price hikes came as a result of traders and shop owners [withholding](#) their stock from markets in an attempt to force prices up. However, local sources reported rumors circulating among residents that the Newroz Corporation withheld sugar stocks from traders who were unwilling to purchase other products (ie. molasses), in an attempt to empty its warehouses. Sugar shortages were reported in Ar-Raqqa until the second week of April, and has been generally available since. In Menbij, shortages continue.

Market regulation fails

Officials within the Autonomous Administration [attribute](#) price increases to: (i) the closure of trade crossings because of official holidays, limiting the supply of products to markets, and (ii) traders' intentionally hoarding stocks to drive up prices. In an attempt to combat price fluctuations, the Administration introduced several mechanisms, mostly in the form of price ceilings and penalties: On 29 March, the Economic Commission [announced](#) price ceilings for red meat set at SYP 50,000 per kg, while outlining that violators would be fined three times the value of the item sold to consumers, their goods would be confiscated, and they would be prosecuted. Throughout April, local sources reported a

number of instances where butchers were caught by market patrols. Similarly, later on 4 May, the Economic Commission [threatened](#) merchants who hoarded sugar with fines worth three times the value of stocks they had withheld, and being banned from operating in the market for two years.

The Administration's controls, though well-intentioned, are limited in terms of effectively regulating prices. This is partly due to the lack of enforcement mechanisms. According to local sources, much of the price increases are attributed to herders increasing the price of livestock. The increasing cost of meat coupled with the depreciating Syrian pound meant people opted for chicken instead, inevitably driving up poultry prices as well. Price ceilings issued by the Administration made no difference, and market patrols were scarce, meaning the prices stayed high.

Affect of high prices on local communities

Although price increases during festive seasons are not new, communities in the northeast are becoming less and less resilient to these economic shocks; a charity based in Ar-Raqqa which usually works twice a week provides food assistance in the form of meals for approximately 400 in-need families a month, [reported](#) seeing that number increase to 700 during Ramadan. According to media [reports](#), salaries for some residents, even workers within the Administration, cannot sustain families for more than a week. This is compounded by the continued depreciation of the Syrian pound, further weakening purchasing power.

Water scarcity threatens quality of life in northeast

Low rainfall, prolonged drought, declining Euphrates river water levels, damaged water infrastructure, and water pollution have resulted in reduced access to safe water and adequate sanitation in northeast Syria, putting local population's health and livelihoods at risk.

Factors affecting access to water

In early April, following the torrential rains in northeast Syria, the Karama Water Unit [suspended](#) a water station in Ar-Raqqa governorate due to high water turbidity (cloudiness and sediment in the water) – the [overflow](#) of non-potable waters from the Balikh River into the Euphrates had polluted the [main source](#) of drinking water in Ar-Raqqa governorate. In parallel, residents of Deir-ez-Zor governorate have faced numerous [challenges](#) accessing potable water; damaged water infrastructure, ineffective wastewater treatment by local municipalities, and the absence of modern methods of water management all contribute to a fragile infrastructure. Despite the Autonomous Administration's efforts to organize water [collection](#), supply and [sterilization](#), local sources indicated that ineffective water management continues to force local populations to rely on water trucking – a costly alternative, often not subject to quality monitoring.

Additionally, water treatment and purification in households is not widespread, with people lacking the knowledge and equipment to do so.

In Al-Hasakeh, the Alouk water station's continuous interruption has also deprived around 460,000 people of their primary source of water supply; residents blame Turkey for using water as a political tool, while Turkey claims drought, poor electrical infrastructure needed for pumping stations and war-damaged pipes have blocked water supply from Turkey into Al-Hasakeh.² During a quadri-lateral meeting on Syria, held in Moscow in early April, the Syrian deputy foreign minister reportedly raised the issue of [water security](#), highlighting its significance in the normalization process with Turkey, and accusing Turkey of weaponizing the natural resource.

Water shortages a public health crisis

Low Euphrates water levels have had a detrimental effect on [public health](#) and [agriculture](#) in northeast Syria disrupting drinking water supply and cutting off access to irrigation water. The director of the Sawsan Association for Development and Medical Care, [stated](#) that Euphrates' water stagnation resulting from reduced water flow has contributed to the increase in skin and intestinal diseases, noting that 200 cases of water-borne diseases are recorded every month due to water pollution. Lack of access to safe water was also reported in [Al-Hasakeh](#) and [Quamishli](#) cities, amid a rise in [cholera](#) cases in Syria. Additionally, in the agricultural sector, in the absence of modern and sustainable irrigation methods, farmers rely on groundwater extraction (unregulated well drilling operations) – drought and inefficient use of natural resources have further [exacerbated](#) water scarcity, contributed to contamination of groundwater, and hindered agricultural productivity.

Natural and man-made causes of water pollution and scarcity undermine the local population's access to water and sanitation. Trapped between climate change, political agendas, and water mismanagement at institutional level, their reliance on alternative means to secure basic needs will only exacerbate health and livelihood risks.

² After six-month interruption, Alouk water station started operating on April 21, however it was reportedly [suspended](#) on May 2

Northwest Syria

HTS flexes authority over Turkish-affiliated group in Idleb

Over the course of the month, media sources reported a number of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) small-scale aggressions against Faylaq al-Sham. HTS [justifies](#) this as a response to community complaints against the Syrian National Army (SNA)-affiliated faction that has been accused of harming residents and neglecting their duty of protecting communities. However, given the current context, and both HTS and SNA's relations with Turkey, these incidents could also be viewed as strategic attempts by HTS to ensure its longevity.

HTS intimidation of Faylaq al-Sham

On 12 April, HTS raided posts manned by Faylaq al-Sham, an SNA affiliated-faction located along the front lines with the Syrian government forces in southern Idleb's town of Bara. According to a statement from Faylaq al-Sham, HTS [raided](#) four of their posts, in addition to an operations room, arresting 11 combatants. Tension between the two sides was renewed on 19 April, when HTS forces crossed the Ghazawiya crossing, between Idleb and SNA-controlled areas in northern Aleppo, [dismantling](#) seven private fuel stations in the area, where groups affiliated with Faylaq al-Sham are deployed. HTS justified its actions as a means to prevent civilians in Idleb from smuggling cheaper fuel into HTS areas of control.

In yet another incident, media sources reported that HTS informed the Faylaq al-Sham affiliated leadership of the Hanano Brigade to [evacuate](#) its headquarters in the city of Kafr Takharim. HTS' demand came after two Hanano Brigade combatants were arrested in the city earlier in April for unknown reasons; this event was largely seen as HTS reneging on a previous [November 2019 agreement](#) which allowed the Hanano Brigade to remain in Kafr Takharim.

Complicated loyalties of Faylaq al-Sham

[Formed](#) in 2014,³ Faylaq al-Sham is part of the National Liberation Front, a faction in the SNA. The group is also a member of the Al-Fatah al-Mubin operations room alongside HTS.⁴ The faction has military posts in several areas in Idleb and Aleppo, and played an active role during operation Olive Branch alongside the Turkish army, emphasizing the faction's close relations with Turkey. In addi-

³ Faylaq al-Sham was established after the merger of 19 Islamic opposition factions and groups that were operating in large areas of Syrian territory, from Aleppo in the north to Damascus.

⁴ Al-Fath al-Mubin is an operations room responsible for managing military operations in Idleb and the countryside of Aleppo, Latakia and Hama. It consists of the National Liberation Front, Jaysh al-Izza, and HTS, but the most prominent, largest, and semi-controlled faction is HTS.

tion, Faylaq al-Sham was responsible for escorting Turkish military convoys into the northwest from Turkey and for providing protection for Russian-Turkish joint patrols on the M4 highway (part of the March 2020 [ceasefire](#) agreement between Turkey and Russia). Apart from ties with Turkey, Faylaq al-Sham also reportedly receives [external support](#) from Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.

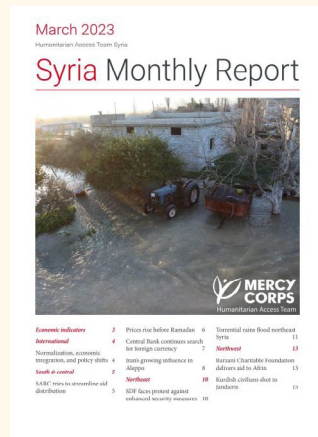
Faylaq al-Sham has adopted a neutral position during intra-militia clashes in the northwest, most notably during a series of internal clashes led by HTS against other armed groups, including Ahrar al-Sham. It has also been [accused](#) of supporting HTS during conflict against SNA factions, including during military confrontations against the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement in western Aleppo in November 2017. Finally, in June last year, HTS was allowed to advance, for the first time, into SNA-held areas – there was no opposition from Faylaq al-Sham who, at the time, was responsible for securing crossings between the two zones of control. Faylaq al-Sham has denied these accusations, stressing that it did not receive the support required from the remaining SNA factions to prevent HTS' advances, despite warning of HTS' military build-up.

HTS prepares for changing regional dynamics

Renewed aggression from HTS toward a faction close to Turkey comes at a time when Turkish rapprochement with the Syrian government is seemingly accelerating. HTS is keen to solidify its position as a major actor in the northwest, ensuring any agreement between Ankara and Damascus does not overlook its interests. Recent statements by HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani would indicate just this, when he stated that HTS had “many [options](#)” to influence security in the northwest, in reference to its military capabilities.

It is likely that HTS is concerned over the possibility that a Turkish-Syrian agreement could involve ending HTS presence in the northwest. Therefore, as has been seen throughout the Syrian conflict, a common practice is to pit armed opposition groups against each other, with the aim of forming new alliances among them – a ‘divide and conquer’ approach. Turkey has leverage over the SNA, to agree to terms with the Syrian government or even to dismantle its affiliated faction – for the same dismantlement to happen with HTS, both Damascus and Ankara would likely need to engage in military combat. Faylaq al-Sham, with its strength and good relationship with Turkey, will be relied upon to strike HTS. HTS looks to be gradually seeking to remove its forces in its areas of influence to protect itself.

It is also possible that HTS is simply continuing its policy of control over Idlib and northern Aleppo – the group has always tried to eliminate or co-opt rival factions, ensuring loyalty throughout its forces. Prior to the government's military offensive in 2019, no other armed groups were allowed to operate in HTS areas; post-2019 a lack of resources meant that HTS had to allow some, including Faylaq al-Sham, to operate in southern Idlib to secure border areas. Recent aggressions could be a return to pre-2019 policies.



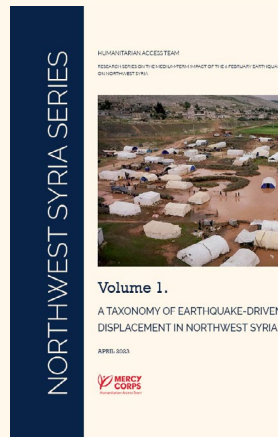
Syria Monthly Report, March 2023

Developments in economic and political relations with Damascus signal further momentum toward Syrian reintegration.

The Central Bank is again trying to increase foreign currency revenues, while Syrian traders in Aleppo are cautious of the growing presence and influence of Iran-backed business owners. The SARC is trying to streamline aid distribution by asking beneficiaries to register in head offices in Dar'a, posing a security risk.

There is increased instability in the northeast, with SDF security campaigns, ostensibly necessary to combat ISIS, drawing criticism for also appearing to justify arrest and detention of detractors.

The Barzani Charitable Foundation's aid provision in opposition-held areas exposes the multi-layered loyalties of Kurdish actors. The killing of four Kurdish civilians in Jandairis, in Aleppo, during Newroz celebrations has disrupted security dynamics in Turkish-controlled areas.



A Taxonomy of Displacement in Northwest Syria

This is the first thematic brief in a series focused on the medium-term impact of the February 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

Displacement has been an ongoing, intricate and sensitive dynamic faced by humanitarian response actors operating in northwest Syria. The 6 February earthquake reportedly displaced 201,834 people, representing 10.1% of the total number of IDPs in northwest Syria.

This report aims to create a general framework through which these IDP sites are understood by placing them in different categories, and identifying their weaknesses. This report also aims to show the differences between groups of IDPs and the shortcomings of weak existing governance modalities within certain IDP sites, before outlining the future trajectory of these camps should the status quo remain.



Post-Earthquake Electricity Recovery

In this second installment of the Northwest Syria Series, we analyze the rate of electricity recovery three months on from the earthquake using night light reflectance data. While some positive regional trends are observed in the short term, electricity access is less accessible to the most at-risk communities, such as low-income and displaced residents.

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The Crisis Analysis – Syria (CA-SYR), formerly HAT, was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. CA-SYR's most important function is to collect and analyze data and information. Since 2015, our analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the conflict. CA-SYR is a team within Mercy Corps, and is part of the Mercy Corps response to the Syrian crisis.

