

SYRIA YEAR IN REVIEW 2021

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TEAM

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KEY POINTS

- > The Syrian economy continues to deteriorate across the board, with different administrations struggling to mitigate its effects.
- > Residents in SIG and SSG areas were hard-hit economically due to their dependency on the fluctuating Turkish lira which lost approximately 75% of its value in 2021.
- > Despite the scaling back of large-scale military operations, security incidents continue to take place across the different areas; government sieges in southern Syria, ISIS regrouping and expanding its operations in Autonomous Administration and government-held Deir- ez-Zor, airstrikes in Idleb and Northern Aleppo, and intra-opposition fighting in SSG areas.
- > Service provision continues to be poor with the Syrian government and Autonomous administration failing to provide sufficient amounts of wheat and fuel for residents. This has caused widespread and continuous protests in Administration-held areas.
- > Health sectors across different zones of control are woefully unprepared for the influx of COVID-19 patients due to the lack of funding and resources, while the northwest faces closure of its hospitals.

INTRODUCTION

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

Economic deterioration has been the most significant change affecting Syrians throughout 2021. External and domestic economic shocks, combined with short-term or ill-advised economic policies from the various administrations has meant a nationwide slump, from which recovery looks extremely difficult.

The Syrian pound's continued depreciation against the dollar has been both a consequence and a driver in the slump, affecting both Syrian government and Autonomous Administration-held areas. The Syrian government's and Central Bank's increasingly restrictive measures partially succeeded in stabilizing the exchange rate between April to July which resulted in unaffordability increasing by just 0.5%, a significant improvement on 38% in 2020.

Autonomous Administration areas also implemented measures to cope with the deteriorating economy, such as its attempts to reduce the price-wage gap for particular groups, including public sector employees and healthcare workers. Additionally, the increased dollarization of the local economy, including for primary commodities such as wheat, grains, and other farming products in northeast Syria also mitigated the pound's depreciation, meaning unaffordability decreased by 2%.

The hardest hit region in Syria was the northwest, in areas both under the opposition's Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and under the governance of the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG), due to both a lack of capacity for economic policy and development and dependency on the unstable Turkish lira. The lira depreciated by 75% in 2021, resulting in drastic price changes for basic necessities such as bread and fuel. Administrative bodies in the northwest also implemented measures to cope with the depreciation of the currency; the SSG increased employee salaries, however increases were insufficient to fully close the price-wage gap in its areas. The fluctuating Turkish lira and respective administrative bodies' inability to deal with the core issues resulted in unaffordability increasing by 25% and 43% in SIG and SSG areas respectively.

Without effective means or methods to cope with the deteriorating economy, nationwide trends are likely to continue into 2022.

POLITICAL OVERVIEW

Strides in political developments across the different administrations took place, without yielding significant tangible results. In Damascus, a lack of progress made by the Syrian Constitutional Committee (the United Nations-facilitated constituent assembly process seeking to reconcile the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition, by amending the current or adopting a new Constitution of Syria), was dubbed by the UN special envoy for Syria as “a big disappointment” with none of the delegations able to move on with the process even after a methodology was agreed upon. Externally however, the Syrian government has made great strides in its efforts to normalize its relationship with regional actors. President Bashar al-Assad spoke with heads of state in Jordan and the UAE, resumed trade, received visits from high-level delegations, and participated in intelligence and security meetings with regional actors both bilaterally and multilaterally.

In the northeast, intra-Kurdish talks were held between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) supported by the newly elected Biden administration as promoting the Syrian peace process. These however tailed off in the latter half of the year, failing to yield tangible results due to multiple factors revolving around mistrust and a lack of consensus. Additionally, the Autonomous Administration’s relationship with Russia, and subsequently the Syrian government, seems to have been strengthened with the simultaneous threats of a Turkish invasion and fears of a US withdrawal akin to Afghanistan.

In the opposition-controlled northwest, changes within departments in the SSG point towards a more centralized control of power. Also in areas under the control of the SSG, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, leader of its primary military power of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been actively committed to rehabilitating his own image and that of the armed groups as a legitimate force. Jolani’s efforts have attempted to change western perspectives of him and the organization with the ultimate objective of having HTS removed from various terrorism lists and be accepted by the international community. The SIG continues to administer its areas according to instruction from neighboring Turkish governors.

SECURITY OVERVIEW

While wide-scale military operations were largely absent this year, some important developments took place. In Dar’a governorate in particular, known for its largely autonomous former-opposition governance, the Syrian government moved to take control, imposing reconciliation agreements following major sieges, first in Tafas in February and then in Dar’a al-Balad from June

to September. In As-Sweida governorate, a new armed group called the Counter Terrorism Forces, funded by foreign sources, emerged. The new group was founded on an openly defiant anti-government rhetoric. Its appearance resulted in significant clashes with government-backed militias which threatened to further destabilize the governorate.

In areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration, ISIS activity continued to increase, particularly in Deir-ez-Zor governorate. The group targeted members and those working for the Administration, issuing threats of injury or even death to force their resignation. ISIS has also continued to demand protection fees from traders, business owners, and oil well workers, again using threats of violence to extort the money. Increased ISIS activity has led to the projection of their influence over certain local administrations, for example by forcing new rules which prevent women from waiting in queues in front of bakeries. Furthermore, the accumulation in influence and capabilities has emboldened the organization to temporarily capture and hold territory in Ar-Raqqa governorate. In turn, the SDF and the International Coalition have responded to this resurgence by conducting raids across Administration-held areas, capturing several high-ranking ISIS members and fighters, but which have failed to comprehensively put a stop to activities.

In northern Aleppo, clashes took place involving the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Russia. Turkey continues to maintain hostile relations against the SDF, which it considers affiliated with its enemies in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Russia for its part has conducted airstrikes against positions of the SNA, in order to prevent them gaining further territory, which have hit both civilian and military locations. Moreover, the Turkish armed forces were attacked in both northern Aleppo and Idlib, resulting in many soldiers being killed or wounded. In opposition-held northwest, HTS has worked hard to distance itself from many of the remaining extremist groups, to try to remove its international classification as a terrorist group. The defeat of groups in Jisr-Ash-Shugur in Idlib and Jabal al-Turkman in Lattakia have further solidified HTS' military control and cemented its role as a stabilizing force for maintaining the 5 March ceasefire agreement.

HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW

The humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate in Syria with COVID-19 spreading, various administrations failing to provide basic services, and cross-border aid continuing to be limited. In government-held areas, the arrival of the Delta variant to Syria and the lax implementation of precautionary measures led the number of cases to skyrocket, resulting in the healthcare system being overwhelmed. Hospitals in several governorates have reached 100% capacity and have found themselves unable to accept patients. Moreover, while government health officials have

called for a stricter implementation of precautionary measures, the government has been counter-productive in allowing public events, including marathons and carnivals to take place.

In Autonomous Administration-held areas, the healthcare sector has been facing COVID-19 amid a reduction in financial assistance to healthcare facilities in Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa. Indeed, the sector's lack of resources and infrastructure has caused it to buckle under pressure in the face of an increased number of cases. However, while the Administration attempted to implement precautionary measures, residents refused to abide by them to avoid limiting their livelihood opportunities.

The healthcare sectors in SIG and SSG-held areas have also been unable to cope with increased COVID-19 numbers. Medical facilities in the northwest, many of which have already been hit in combat operations, have had reduced financial support due to the inability of both governments to access humanitarian funding due to their lack of legitimacy and recognition by the international community.

Service provision has also been problematic throughout all zones of control. The Syrian government continues to fail to provide sufficient fuel-related products or bread in its areas. The fuel shortage has resulted in significant transportation issues for employees and students. Additionally, it still has not distributed the majority of its diesel allotments to families, some of whom are resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms to stay warm. Moreover, the bread crisis in government areas has also intensified following the government's inability to increase wheat imports and low wheat production, forcing it to introduce new distribution mechanisms and increased rationing. The Autonomous Administration has also struggled to provide fuel at affordable prices throughout its areas of control. Fuel prices increased by 50% in Deir-ez-Zor, while attempts were made to implement a 30%–220% increase across other areas before the decision was withdrawn by the Administration following protests. The Administration has also failed to provide sufficient amounts of wheat, particularly in Deir-ez-Zor, leading bakeries to limit bread production to two or three days per week.

Cross-border humanitarian aid delivery remained limited to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey into the northwest – the Autonomous Administration has protested at the unfair aid distribution due to the continued closure of al Yaroubiyeh crossing, however it is unlikely that this situation will change. Moreover, cross-line humanitarian aid remains in its infancy stage with concerns that it will be the sole humanitarian aid delivery method in the future, both putting humanitarian aid delivery to other zones of control at the mercy of the Syrian government and further legitimizing it.

I. ECONOMIC TRENDS

Government attempts to stabilize currency and prices

The Syrian government attempted to employ several mechanisms to control prices and the exchange rate following freefall depreciation of the Syrian pound against the US dollar. The Central Bank blamed the depreciation on “blackrooms located outside government-held areas in northern Syria, eastern Syria, Idleb, Istanbul and Ankara” that are benefiting from currency speculation. On 14 February, the Syrian Central Bank announced [interventionist measures](#) “in an attempt to achieve stability and balance.” The Central Bank reportedly conducted joint operations with the judicial police in several governorates, particularly Damascus, seizing companies and parties involved in currency speculation, in addition to confiscating Syrian pound and US dollar banknotes. It later stated that it would continue with its “multi-faceted interventionist approach until the exchange rate returns to its previous balanced levels.” However, the exchange rate later continued to depreciate, reaching its all-time low in March.

Following the steep depreciation, the Syrian government allowed importers to purchase US dollars from registered exchange companies at a [platform exchange rate](#) of 2,850 SYP per USD in early April. The head of the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection’s pricing department, Ali Akl, stated that the decision would stabilize the black market rate through reducing the gap between official and black market exchange rates. Akl added that it would enable better enforcement of price-control measures since it deprives traders of the excuse that the black-market rate is higher than the official rate. However, local sources reported that prices continued to rise and the gap later widened between the platform rate and the black-market rate when the pound crossed the 3,000 SYP per USD threshold again towards the end of April.

The introduction of the new exchange rate was followed by Central Bank governor Hazem Qarfoul being [sacked](#) on 14 April by president Assad and blamed for the pound’s depreciation, later being replaced by Issam Hazimeh on 20 April. One day after Qarfoul’s departure, the Central Bank devalued the official exchange rate to 2,512 SYP per USD in an attempt to “unify the exchange rate and attract more foreign currency through official channels”. This enabled the government to reduce its subsidies after it had been funding importers through its banks at the 1,256 SYP per USD at a 138% loss. However, running low on foreign currency reserves, the government decided to limit funding imports at the official rate on 6 June to [ten items](#), redirecting importers of the remaining products to exchange companies to purchase their foreign currency at the abovementioned platform rate.

Additionally, the government introduced an [import price floor](#) in US dollars for specific items in June, as both a price-control measure and a standardization of customs fees, to guarantee that they would be accurately priced. However, the price floor was set regardless of the global price of the items, meaning that importers might have had to pay additional costs if the price were lower internationally. Moreover, secretary of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, Mohammad Hallak, stated that the price mechanism which the Ministry of Domestic Trade uses is likely to fluctuate regardless of the import price floor, due to other factors, including transportation costs (and fluctuating fuel prices on the black market), and prices continuing to be depreciation-driven. The government's successive attempts and currency and price control failed due to administrative mis-implementation coupled with rampant corruption and failure to tackle the main source of Syria's recent economic deterioration; low foreign currency reserves.

Government implements restrictive policies

In addition to failing to keep control of the exchange rate, the government seems to be taking desperate measures to implement policies that favor short-term gain over long-term benefit. Indeed, the government implemented policies considered to be restrictive to its productive foreign currency-generating sectors. On 31 August the Central Bank issued [Circular 1071](#) which forces exporters to sell 50% of their profit (in foreign currency) to the Syrian government at the official exchange rate, meaning that their takings would lose value as a result of the depreciation of the pound. Additionally, the government [restricted](#) agent withdrawals from Syrian banks on 2 September, requiring account owners themselves to grant special permission for withdrawal operations in person through a bank-issued agency document. This obstacle to withdrawal may have been created to restrict access of money to citizens, meaning that the government still has access to available funds and reserves for its own use without having to expand the money supply (via money creation) as this would further devalue the pound. Later, on 21 October, the Central Bank [modified Circular 1070](#) shifting the administrative order for import funding requests, making the process more meticulous. The modifications made it more difficult for importers to use funding streams outside formal mechanisms, meaning the modification allows the government to more closely monitor importer's funding sources.

With the government running low on foreign currency reserves, it may be problematic for many importers to procure sufficient funding for the products they need and may result in importers ceasing their operations for lack of sufficient funding or push them to continue purchasing foreign currency on the black market, burdening them with bribes and/or putting them at risk of arrest under charges of money laundering. The above mentioned measures have contributed to the [industrialist exodus](#) that has continued from Syrian government areas in mid-September. Media

sources [reported](#) on 26 September that 47,000 industrialists (both workers and workshop owners) left the country in the span of two weeks. Indeed, difficulties in importing raw materials for production and reduced profit from export operations have encouraged many to leave Syria for [other countries](#) with a more appropriate investment climate.

Government measures lead to short-term improvement

Despite the restrictive nature of the abovementioned measures, they have partially succeeded in stabilizing the currency. This led to the affordability of specific goods¹ decreasing by only 0.5% compared to 38% in 2020. Indeed, currency stabilization was achieved between April and July where wage value growth exceeded that of price and currency depreciation (shown in Figure 1). However, as mentioned above, these policies favored short-term gain over long-term benefit meaning that the benefit was short-lived with unaffordability spiking again after July, as wage value growth was superseded again by both price value and currency depreciation.

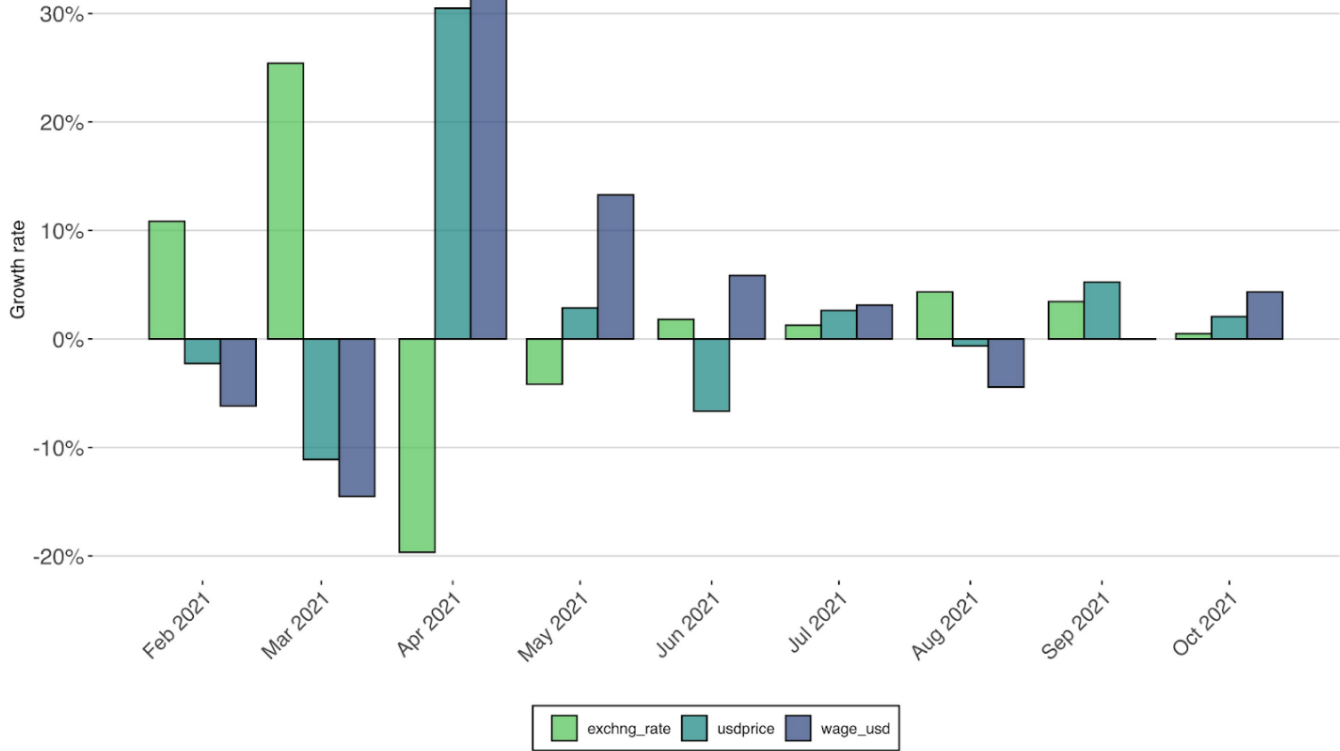


Figure 1: Exchange rate growth, USD value of prices, and USD value of wages in Syrian government-held areas (Source: HAT)

¹ Eggplants, eggs, diesel, (whole) chicken, salt (iodised), sugar, and tomatoes

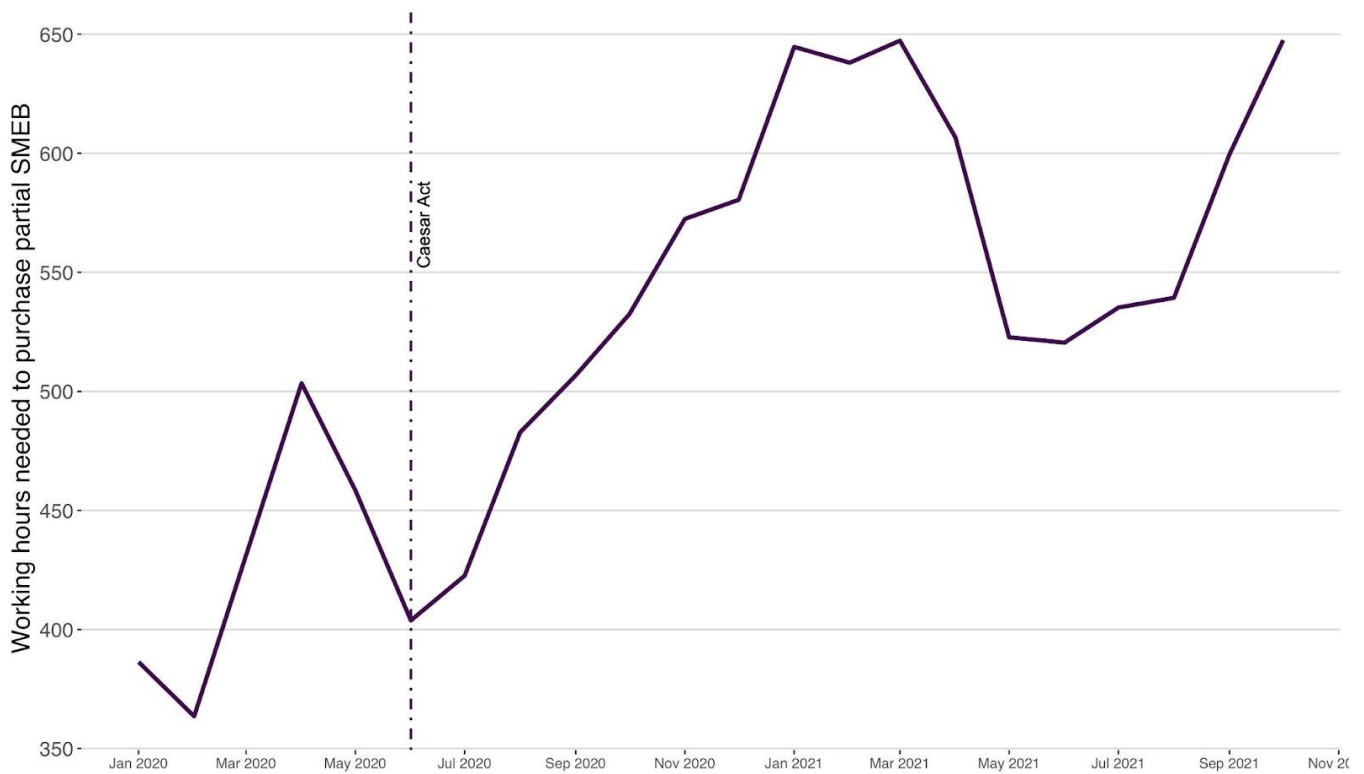


Figure 2: Affordability of the SMEB in Syrian government-held areas, Jan 2020 – Nov 2021 (Source: WFP)

Autonomous Administration struggles to appease protesters

While the Syrian government introduced restrictive measures to mitigate the pound’s steep depreciation, the Autonomous Administration in the northeast took less drastic measures. The US dollar has always been in circulation in Syria, particularly in the northeast, it saw an uptick in usage for all large transactions, purchases, and high value assets. This includes the dollarization of primary commodities such as wheat, other grains, and oil.

Furthermore, as the pound quickly depreciated, the Administration implemented a number of measures that targeted particular groups of people. For instance, the Administration increased the salaries of its employees with attempts to address the gap in purchasing power. This occurred on a number of occasions. In April 2021, the Administration **raised** the salaries of its employees by 30%, and in September 2021, **raised** the salaries of pharmacists and doctors by 30% too. However, the increase in salaries came after the implementation of a new **tax law** in June via Circular No. 40. This was problematic because there were many reports of employees who had not received their pay raise from the April decision. Local sources explained that this placed further pressure on individuals, with many already struggling to make ends meet without the added burden of increased taxes.

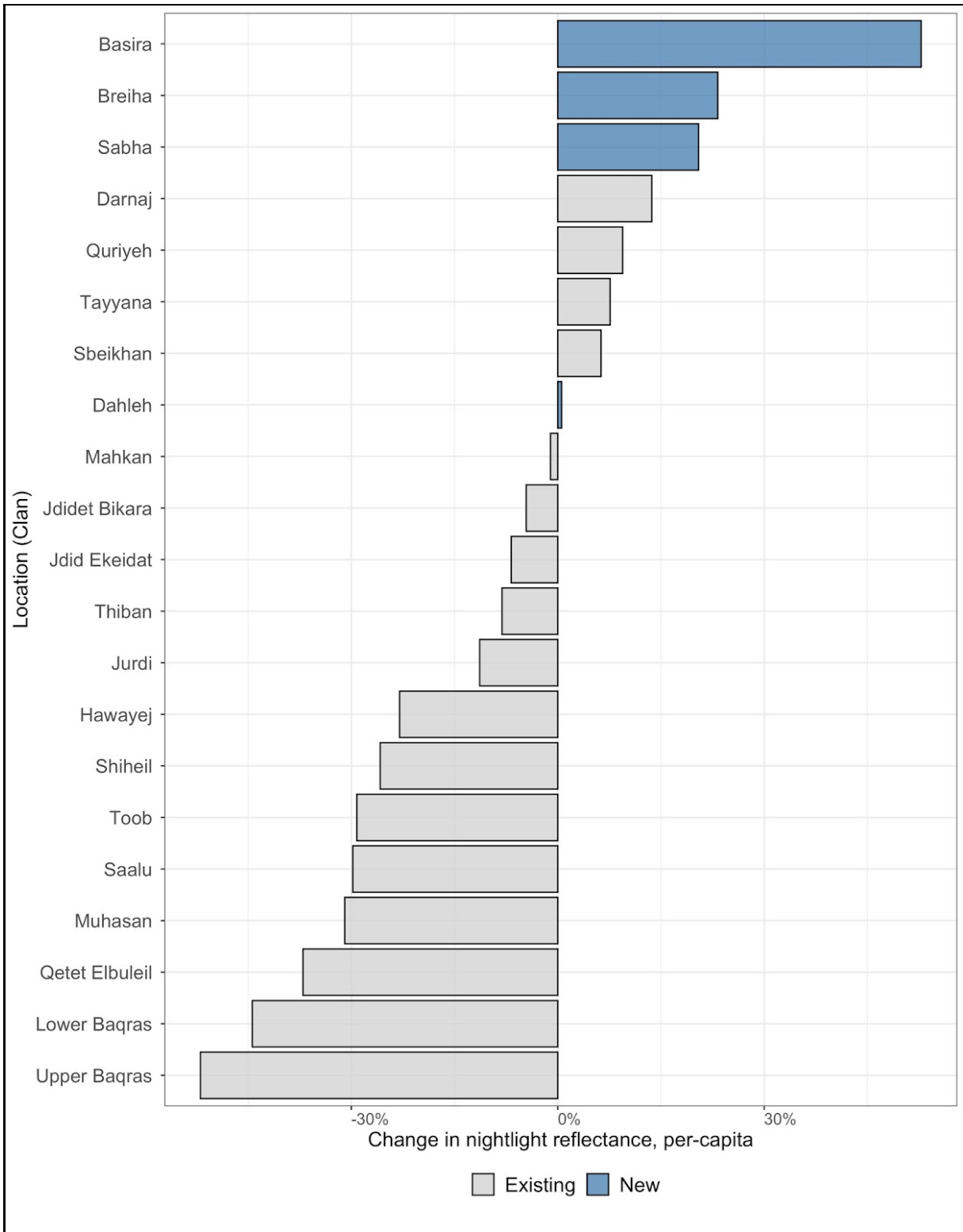


Figure 3: changes in night lights reflectance data along border communities of the Euphrates River in Deir-uz-Zor and as is shown, three of the newly established routes (in blue) are in locations where there's been the greatest increase of night lights data, a proxy for GDP growth (Source: HAT).

SDF crackdown on illegal river crossings

The SDF also implemented [crackdowns](#) on illegal river crossings along the Euphrates in eastern Deir-ez-Zor, from February 2021, which affected the local economy. The illegal river crossings, which separate Autonomous Administration from Syrian government-held territory, are a primary source of income for many locals living on the eastern bank of the Euphrates – smuggling has been a lucrative business for many, making it a vital source of income in the region, despite its illegality. A clear example of the crackdown’s impact on the local economy can be seen in Figure 3 when the SDF carried out anti-smuggling campaigns in July and August in certain towns, and smuggling routes in other towns were later opened. Three of the newly established routes showed an increase in night lights reflectance, used here as a proxy indicator for GDP growth.

Despite increased taxation and the SDF crackdown on illegal river crossings and its disruptive impact on the local economy, Autonomous Administration areas fared much better than the remaining zones of control in terms of affordability. The working hours required to purchase one SMEB decreased from 613 hours in January to 538 hours in October, noting an 8% increase in affordability (shown in Figure 4).

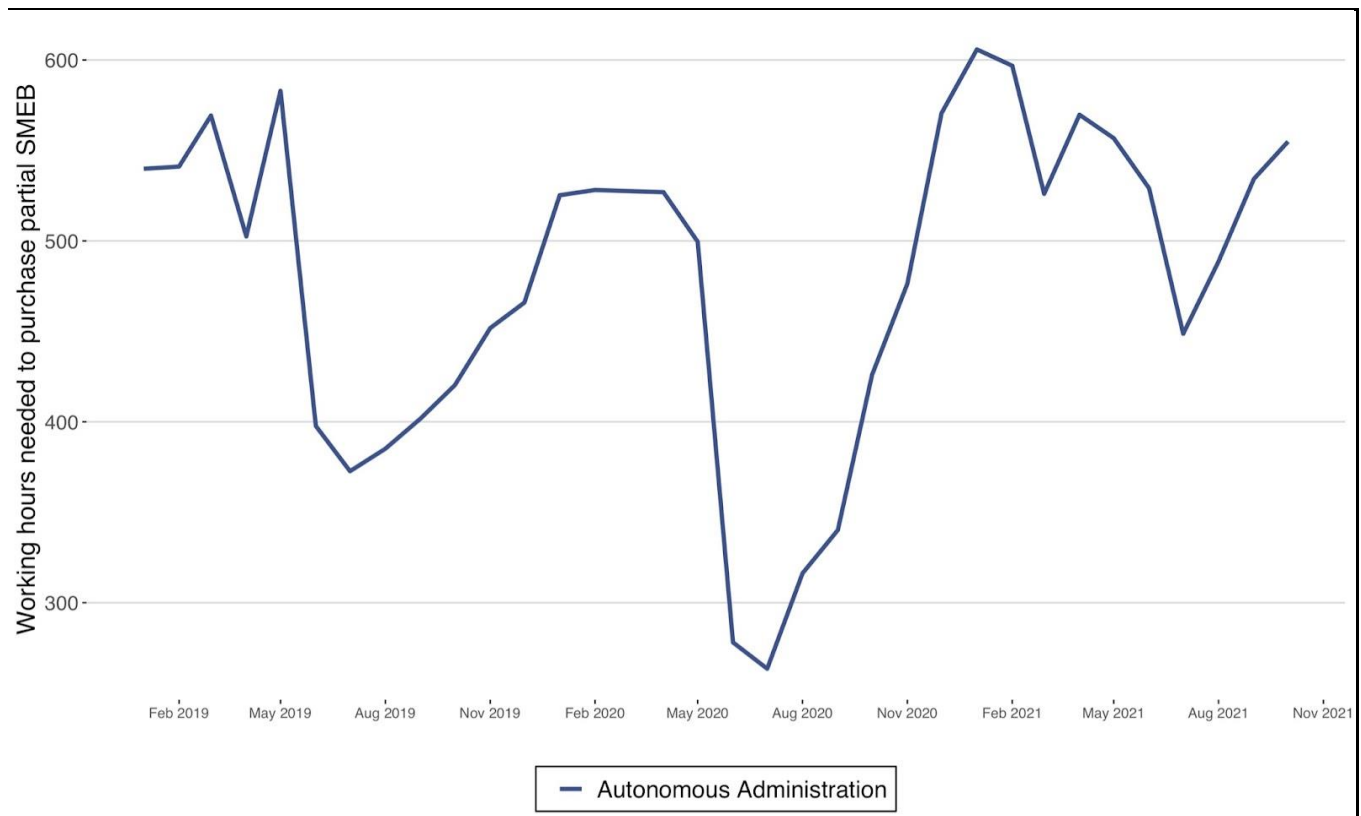


Figure 4: Affordability of the SMEB in northeast Syria, 2019-2021(Source WFP).

Lira depreciation affects the northwest

While Syrian government and Autonomous Administration areas have felt the effects of the Syrian pound's depreciation to varying degrees, northwest Syria's case is somewhat different. Both the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) operating in Idleb and western Aleppo and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) operating northern Aleppo chose to [adopt](#) the Turkish lira as an alternative currency to the fluctuating Syrian pound. But the solution soon became a problem. The Turkish lira gradually lost 75% of its value from the beginning of the year until December, exacerbating the economic crisis. The deteriorating economic situation triggered popular protests over the continuous rise in prices – bread prices were mainly affected by the depreciation of the Turkish lira exchange rate; in Idleb in January, 2.5 TRY was enough to buy an 850 g bread packet, however in November this was reduced to 450 g; the price of a tonne of wheat also increased from \$315 to \$400 in the same period. In northern Aleppo, in Azaz, 1 TRY bought 300 g less bread in November compared to January. Although increasing bread prices are a concern in relation to food security, the most obvious effect of the depreciating lira was the hike in fuel prices. The Watad fuel company, which imports fuel from Turkey and holds a virtual monopoly in the northwest increased prices by almost 120% between January and December, as shown in Table 1.

Daily wage workers in the northwest were the worst affected by the depreciation of the currency – many saw their real wages reduced by 38% when exchange rates and price changes were taken into account. For government workers, the impact was reduced somewhat by SSG increases to salaries, which happened in [February](#) and in [September](#).

Table 1: Increase in fuel prices, northwest Syria, Jan--Dec 2021

TRY per USD exchange rate	7.36	13.66	86%
	17 Jan (TRY)	8 Dec (TRY)	Percentage increase
Imported petrol	4.62	11.84	156%
Imported Diesel 1	4.93	11.21	127%
Refined Diesel	3.82	7.07	85%
Gas cylinder	78	165.5	112%

Another factor that caused disruption to the economy was the continued closure of the crossings with Syrian government-held areas. This has cut off much of the trade between the zones of control, severely limiting domestic trade revenue for producers in the northwest. In opposition-held areas under the SSG, this has been true since the end of 2019, when a government military offensive ended with a ceasefire between Russia and Turkey, with both parties agreeing to maintain the zones of control in exchange for stability.

In northern Aleppo, the crossings between SIG and the Syrian government-held areas were closed as part of COVID-19 mitigation measures. During the subsequent period, HTS attempted to reopen the crossings with the Syrian government for commercial purposes, however this was met with widespread popular rejection. The continued closure has impeded commercial movement between the two regions, while areas under control of the SIG and SSG now had to import produce from Turkey at higher prices than they would previously had paid. The rise in prices in the markets in northwest Syria, particularly for vegetables and other basic commodities has led to the number of working hours required to purchase one SMEB basket to increase by 18% from 459 hours in January to 543 hours in October in SIG-held areas and to increase by 12% from 686 hours in January to 769 hours in October in SSG-held areas (shown in Figure 5).



Figure 5: Increase in working hours needed to purchase a partial SMEB, northwest, Jan 2020 - Dec 2021

II. POLITICAL TRENDS

Constitutional Committee meetings a disappointment

The Syrian Constitutional Committee – a 150-member body which comprises 50 representatives of the Syrian Government, 50 from the opposition and 50 from civil society, founded in 2017 and led by the UN with the aim of supporting a peaceful future for the country – has failed to make any significant progress in 2021. Its primary goal is to draft a new constitution, supportive of a peaceful transition for Syria, however difficulties in agreeing to working methods and overall practical application of constitutional reform have stalled progress.

UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, announced that the fifth round of constitutional committee talks would take place on 25 January. During the press briefing ahead of the fifth round, Pedersen [called](#) for “more effective and operational working methods” to make the meetings better organized and more focused. He suggested that the committee work on drafting a constitutional reform through “considering specific constitutional issues, and draft provisions” and called for “more urgency into delivering progress”. However, Pedersen also noted important prerequisites for the process to be both taken seriously and succeed:

- › The constitution is handled correctly in order to build trust and be a launchpad for a broader political process;
- › political will from different parties is needed to move forward;
- › progress on other files pertaining to UNSC Resolution 2254 (ie, safe and voluntary return of refugees), must be made.

Pederson subsequently said that the talks had been largely unsuccessful, with the committee failing to come to any significant agreement.

More talks were then held in October, however once again the talks ended without significant progress, and Pederson quoted as saying they were a “big disappointment”.

The recurring theme from [Pedersen’s statements](#) regarding the reason behind the failure of the two latest rounds of talks was the lack of agreement on how to move the process forward. Despite a methodology being agreed upon prior to the sixth round, delegations reneged on their promised contributions to the discussion on the various topics on the agenda, highlighting the potential absence of a political will on both sides to take the matter seriously. Parties have fundamentally

opposed positions which makes progress and negotiating in “good faith” difficult. Within the deeply entrenched Syrian conflict, it is not only domestic actors which must reach consensus, but regional and international actors – something not currently included in the reconciliation process.

International community acknowledges Syrian government

The Syrian government, with Russia's help, has been pushing for reintegrating the country regionally since its eviction from the Arab League in November 2011. The first signs of reintegration took place back in 2015 when Tunisia reopened its embassy in Damascus, posting mid-tier diplomats. Later, the UAE and Oman reopened their embassies in 2018 and 2020 respectively, while Jordan dispatched a *charge d'affaires* in 2019, a position which had been vacant since 2012. Reintegration efforts continued in 2021 at a quickening pace due to several factors with Jordan, UAE, Iraq, and Egypt expressing their desire to normalize their relationship with the Syrian government.

The election of Joe Biden to the US presidency has reduced pressure on Damascus, with a commitment to continuity rather than additional disruption more evident – despite statements from the current secretary of state, Anthony Blinken, reiterating that the US has no intention of supporting efforts to normalize relations, rehabilitating president Bashar al-Assad, or lifting sanctions, there are increasing signs of leniency.

The first indicator came when the US supported the creation of transit lines for gas and electricity through Syria to Lebanon. This is significant in that it requires US allies to cooperate with the Damascus government, something which previously would be diplomatically problematic; (US Ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea announced on 19 August that the US “has been talking to the governments of Egypt, Jordan, the government here [Lebanon], and the World Bank.”) Following the announcement a Lebanese ministerial delegation visited Damascus making it the first official diplomatic visit in a decade.

Then, On 28 September, the US State Department ‘welcomed’ the resumption of commercial travel between Syria and Jordan.

Finally, media sources have spoken about a leaked confidential document which was allegedly negotiated by Arab leaders, including King Abdullah of Jordan, with the US and Russian presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin. Similar to the Lebanon and the transit lines, the document allegedly guarantees that Jordan is not sanctioned under the Caesar Act for working on an established Arab gas pipeline project involving Syria. Assad’s victory in the Syrian presidential elections on 26 May has ensured his presence in Damascus for the next seven years – Arab leaders throughout the

region, including president Michel Aoun of Lebanon and King Abdullah, congratulated him on his win, indicating acknowledgement if not acceptance.

Regional economic exhaustion has also been a contributing factor. Since the onset of the Syrian conflict, regional trade has taken a hit, affecting the economies of various countries in the region. A decade of conflict and, since 2020, COVID-19 has [hit](#) Jordan particularly hard, with King Abdullah looking for ways to revitalize the country's ailing economy. Several ministerial-level meetings between Syria and Jordan took place discussing various issues ranging from trade to security. These meetings have led to various changes, notably the reopening of the Nasib-Jaber border crossing on 29 September enabling the resumption of trade, and [phone call](#) between Assad and King Abdullah on 3 October for the first time since the Syrian conflict's onset.

The UAE has also sought to expand economic cooperation and trade with the Syrian government. Media sources [quoted](#) the country's Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre who reportedly published a report on 2 May stating that "foreign trade, foreign investment, tourism and the logistical sector with the movement of trade and investment and global transportation" which are important sectors linked to the Emirati economy "declined significantly in 2020 worldwide." The country's economy shrank by 6.1% last year amid COVID-19 with construction, wholesale and retail trade, and food services taking a hit. This led the UAE to continue pushing for economic cooperation with the Syrian government, also resulting in several ministerial-level [meetings](#) discussing various topics. These meetings have culminated in UAE companies reportedly [signing](#) a deal on 11 November to establish a 300 MW Solar power plant in Widyan Elrabee (Nashabiyeh subdistrict) two days after a high-level UAE delegation, headed by foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, [visited](#) Damascus and met with Assad.

While the normalization process has seen significant improvement in 2021, the US seems to have imposed a ceiling on the extent of normalization with the Syrian government.

The abovementioned UAE deal to establish a solar power plant in Widyan Elrabee was followed by a statement issued by a US State Department spokesperson saying: "Secretary of State Anthony Blinken clarified that we have not lifted the Syria sanctions and have not changed our position regarding opposition to reconstruction until an improvement regarding a political solution is made which we consider to be both necessary and vital."

The spokesperson later added that "while humanitarian aid to Syria is exempted from sanctions, many other investments in regime [Syrian government] areas are not exempt."

While the statement does not call out the UAE, the timing and the mention of ‘other investments’ is noteworthy and may indicate a disapproval of the project compared to other minor endeavours where the US has seemingly turned a blind eye. However, it is unclear how and if pressure will be exerted on the UAE to either suspend or stop the initiative altogether.

Intra-Kurdish talks continue

Intra-Kurdish talks between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) continued at the beginning of the year, amid the Biden administration coming to office. The US embassy in Syria [tweeted](#) on 15 January that it “supports the ongoing intra-Kurdish dialogue” as the talks “support and complement the broader political process under [UNSCR 2254](#)”. Mazloum Abdi, commander in chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and one of the sponsors of the intra-Kurdish talks, has [also](#) time and again shown his support for dialogue “to protect the interests of [the] people”. However as the year went on, it seems that talks have dwindled, as multiple factors have played into this.

The most [significant](#) reason behind this seems to be a general distrust between both parties and a lack of consensus on agreeable demands from both sides. Nevertheless, this has played out on the streets of Syria. During the month of September, [protests](#) broke out in Kurdish-majority areas – mainly Quamishli – when the Kurdish National Council (KNC), who are opposed to the Autonomous Administration, called for protests against the deteriorating living conditions and increased prices of commodities in the area. Demonstrations quickly turned violent between



Protestors from the Revolutionary Youth Union (Source [AI Monitor](#)).

protestors from opposing political spectrums, with reports of members of the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU), who are affiliated with the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), [attacking](#) protestors and chanting pro-PKK slogans. As such, it seemed that intra-Kurdish rivalry was showcasing itself on the streets of Kurdish-majority areas in the northeast as parties struggled over power and recognition in the northeast.

Administration strengthens ties with Russia, fears US withdrawal

Also seen in 2021 was a further push for political dialogue between the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration, particularly amid fears of a Turkish incursion on Administration-

held areas. This was particularly evident throughout the months of October and November, as [rumors](#) were widespread about the Administration's willingness to engage with the Syrian government to stave off a potential Turkish attack. This also included unconfirmed reports attributed to the Russian Reconciliation Center about the possibility of an agreement between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government, which would ultimately allow the entry of the latter's forces alongside the Russian military police into Administration-held areas of western Deir-ez-Zor.

At the same time, high-level Russian and Kurdish military commanders were meeting for regular talks. For example, local [media](#) reported on a classified meeting between Kurdish and Russian military commanders in Tabaqa airport on 28 October. Reportedly, the meeting lasted four hours, while no formal statement has been made on the discussions. One day prior to the meeting, local [media](#) reported on four Russian military aircrafts, the Sukhoi SU-27, landing in Quamishli airport. This marked the first time SU-27s had landed in Kurdish-held areas, and the first time they conducted reconnaissance flights from Quamishli airport. So far, it is likely that pro-Russian leaning Kurdish commanders within the SDF and the YPG have begun playing a larger role within the Administration, particularly after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, amid increased fears by the Kurds that the US would follow suit in the northeast. Since then, however, the US has [reiterated its commitment](#) to supporting the Autonomous Administration.

HTS moves to overhaul extremist image

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has undergone efforts to [rebrand](#) itself in relation to the international community – it is currently categorised as a terrorist group by many Western countries, including the US, EU, and Turkey, and has been working to become recognized as a legitimate political force within Syria. Since March 2020, with the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey and the cessation of the military offensive in Idlib, HTS commander in chief Abu Mohammed al-Jolani has become the de-facto military leader in the region, and has called for stability. Should his opposition forces break the ceasefire, there is a risk of further military action by Damascus and its Russian allies on Idlib. Jolani has therefore developed dialogues both domestically and internationally which has enabled HTS to establish trust with foreign actors, and gain some approval from the communities in the northwest.

Domestically, Jolani has increased his public presence in Idlib; he has met with civilians, inspected living conditions in camps and markets, listened to citizen complaints, and been present at important events. He has also worked on projecting the image of a civilian leader, exchanging

military uniforms for plain clothes. Jolani's new image markets himself as a relatable leader, although there remain concerns over [arbitrary arrests and detention](#), among other things.

Militarily, HTS has successfully defeated much of the extremist opposition to the Syrian government, both [at home and abroad](#), which has provided some level of security, although low-level attacks continue from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces in the south and remaining opposition fighters in the northwest. Furthermore, Jolani has signaled a willingness to coordinate and integrate with the SNA in Turkish-administered areas of northern Aleppo, so that northwest Syria operates under a combined force, against the Autonomous Administration in the northeast and Damascus government in the south. Jolani's intentions became clear following increased fear by factions of the SNA that their areas of influence would be subjected to security breaches by HTS, particularly after visits of prominent HTS leaders to northern Aleppo. At the same time, the head of the Turkish-backed Syrian Islamic Council, Sheikh Osama Al-Rifai, recently [elected](#) as the *Mufti* of Syria, visited the northwest for the first time. The visit was seen as an attempt to organize and unify the religious authority in northern Aleppo against a possible HTS expansion.

Internationally, Jolani has also been keen to raise his profile. He allowed a first media interview with western media outlet on PBS' [Frontline](#) with American journalist Martin Smith in February, stressing during the interview with Smith that HTS was not a threat to the US or Europe – they were instead focused purely on fighting the Syrian government and ISIS. He added that the organization's association with Al Qaeda (HTS was formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's branch of Al Qaeda) was in the past, and they had never carried out operations outside Syria. Jolani agreed that HTS was critical of some Western policies in the region, however had no intention of fighting the west. These statements, and further attempts to cooperate with Turkish interests in the northwest, have apparently been successful – James Jeffrey, a former UN special representative to Syria under the Trump administration, has been quoted as saying HTS was the “least bad option” in Idlib, and could become an “asset” to US strategy in the country.

III. SECURITY TRENDS

Government siege of Dar'a

Syrian government forces began the year with the [siege](#) on Tafas city. Syrian government representatives and the Russians met with the Tafas Central Committee (TCC) on 20 and 25 January issuing a list of demands. When the TCC found itself unwilling and unable to meet all of the listed demands, the government deployed significant reinforcements, including tanks, armored vehicles, and soldiers, to besiege the city. The Tafas siege lasted six-days with clashes taking place between both sides on 25 January, later spreading across the governorate on 28 January. The standoff eventually led to both sides reaching a [reconciliation agreement](#) on 9 February which saw the re-entry of government institutions into the city for the first time since 2013.

Government activity notably subsided following the end of the Tafas siege in an attempt to [maintain calm](#) ahead of the presidential elections. However, the elections did not go smoothly as planned with major [disruptions](#) taking place ranging from strikes, attacks on polling stations, threats towards polling station managers, and widespread protests.

Following the elections, the Syrian government chose to [retaliate](#) by closing down roads leading to Dar'a al-Balad. The closure gradually continued leading to a full-blown siege which started on 24 June. While the siege was underway, the Syrian government and the Dar'a al-Balad Central Committee conducted extensive negotiations until an agreement was reached 24 July. However, the government mis-implemented the agreement two days later, resulting in extensive clashes between both sides which later spilled over on 29 July, engulfing the whole governorate. Negotiations resumed afterwards while fighting continued in and around Dar'a al-Balad gradually becoming more intense with the government deploying more heavy artillery. The government eventually coerced the Dar'a al-Balad Central Committee through intense bombing campaigns, particularly towards the end of August to coerce, into accepting a [reconciliation agreement](#) on 6 September whose terms were synonymous to surrender.

Dar'a reconciliation fails to improve security

Following the reconciliation of Dar'a al-Balad, the Syrian government moved to [reconcile](#) numerous communities across Dar'a, stopping short of Busra Esh-Sham. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, government forces entered 55 towns and cities, reconciled around 6,200 individuals, and received approximately 950 weapons. While the government has

portrayed the reconciliation and disarmament as a success on its media outlets, local sources have stated that former-opposition groups still retain a large number of weapons and that former-opposition groups in the western countryside and eastern countryside remain largely intact.

More recently, the Syrian Arab Army's 4th Division, 15th Division, and Iran-backed militias have significantly reduced their presence in Dar'a, with security being maintained largely by the government's intelligence forces. The continued presence of former opposition forces, their reduced security mandate, and the reduced government military presence has resulted in a security vacuum which saw a spike in criminality and the return of unrest. The shadow war between government and former-opposition forces has seemingly continued with the number of assassination attempts on the rise again. For example, on 27 October, Raafat Abu Safi, a reconciled former-opposition fighter was shot and killed by unknown gunmen in Hrak township. Also, unknown gunmen on a motorbike conducted a drive-by shooting on 2 November, killing SAA Lieutenant Nouredin Shawamri.

Counter Terrorism Forces, a cause of instability in As-Sweida

While Dar'a was experiencing severe instability, security in As-Sweida was also becoming increasingly volatile. On 28 July, a new armed group called the Counter-Terrorism Forces (CTF) [announced](#) themselves in As-Sweida in a statement introducing themselves and their objectives. The announcement followed [rumors](#) of their existence and growing presence across the governorate. Local sources estimated that the group numbered between 1,000 and 3,000 fighters, mostly present in eastern As-Sweida countryside in addition to a presence in northwest As-Sweida countryside which is largely limited to Mazra'a township.

The group, the military wing of the newly formed political party [Hizb al-Liwaa al-Souri](#), had been secretly recruiting young men in As-Sweida, taking full advantage of the deteriorating economic situation and offering them a salary of 250,000 SYP per month. Moreover, the CTF's anti-government and anti-Iran [rhetoric](#) placed it in the crosshairs of both the government's security and intelligence agencies and Iran-backed militias. This resulted in clashes taking place between both sides across the governorate in locations with a notable CTF presence such as [Mazra'a, Raha](#), and [Hreiseh](#) heightening tensions in the governorate. Moreover, their authored security incidents and kidnappings threatened to [drag](#) other prominent local actors into the fray, further destabilizing the security situation. However, despite its progress, expansion, and fight against the government, the armed group damaged its own [reputation](#) on several occasions after a detainee in their custody was killed under torture and after their forces mutilated a body of an alleged enemy fighter. This led one of the groups' few local allies, Laith al-Balous, to [distance](#) himself from

the group and condemn their actions. Additionally, despite the group's [announcement](#) of new headquarters in eastern As-Sweida, local sources reported a reduction in their activities across the governorate. Moreover, the group began facing financial difficulties which resulted in the [secession](#) of fighters from Qarayya, Mazra'a, and Raha townships. The CTF [attributed](#) its late payments to a campaign by the NDF and government agencies against them which involved the arrest of CTF fighters responsible for salary payments along with the funds designated for said payments. However, despite the group's influence and size being scaled back, it has still launched [attacks](#) against government forces and is still [promoting](#) anti-government rhetoric across making it likely that it is still a destabilizing factor albeit at a smaller scale.

ISIS activity in the northeast

ISIS activity in the northeast continues to be the primary security concern in the area, given the group seems to be reorganizing, and increasingly interfering in civilian matters. And so, despite their territorial defeat, ISIS seems to be growing. The beginning of 2021 saw high levels of ISIS activity in the northeast, and that was mostly concentrated on (but not limited to) the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor. The attacks were also steadily focused on members of the SDF and other employees of the Autonomous Administration. This included a large number of drive-by shootings on SDF checkpoints and ambushes on Syrian government forces in the desert.

Significantly, ISIS targets not only included military figures, but also very much impacted civilian life in the northeast. For example, ISIS threatened with death [family](#) members of the SDF in Sabha (Basira subdistrict), warning them that their relatives had to leave the SDF. On another occasion also in March, ISIS [threatened](#) 27 individuals via written statement in Jdid Ekeidat to "repent working with the Autonomous Administration or face consequences."

Most of those mentioned in the statement are Arab residents who occupy positions in the Autonomous Administration and the SDF. Moreover, ISIS time and again demanded [extortion](#) money from local traders. For example, On 6 November, local sources reported on dozens of text messages sent to local traders and owners and high-ranking workers of oil wells, demanding the individuals pay large sums of money to ISIS under a "royal cost". In addition to sending death threats to those who refused to respond to the messages, further messages followed with pictures of guns, bullets, and pictures of the individual's homes and businesses as a threat. This is not novel, and ISIS continues to use this as a means of accumulating funds.

ISIS's influence over some administrative councils was also troubling, with the news of ISIS pressuring the Sabha civil council to issue a [decision](#) in March prohibiting bakery owners from

selling bread to female customers, especially after ISIS operatives have been consistently warning and threatening people gathered in front of the bakeries in Shihail, Basira and Thiban against women picking up bread from local bakeries. ISIS was also, on multiple occasions, distributing [financial aid](#) to wives of killed ISIS fighters. Moreover, on a recurring and sporadic basis, local sources report that ISIS recurrently threatens civilians who own cigarette shops in eastern Deir-[ez-Zor](#). Many are thus forced to close their shops, or face further consequences. Most recently, amid a bread and wheat shortages in Deir-[ez-Zor](#) which prompted demonstrations and strikes, ISIS members [stormed](#) the People's Assembly in the town of Basira and threatened to close its administrative institutions, which would not be allowed to re-open unless wheat and bread became available in bakeries again.

Further, ISIS targets also grew to include attacks on oil and gas infrastructure. In February, ISIS attacked the [Al-Taim station](#), southeast of Deir-[ez-Zor](#). They fired mortar and anti-armor shells before infiltrating the site, where they fought with the station guards. During the clashes, three ISIS fighters detonated their explosive belts, while the rest of them withdrew towards the Syrian desert, before the arrival of the Syrian government military reinforcements. In another similar attack, in October, ISIS attacked a number of oil fields near the desert town of [Al Rasafeh](#) (Mansura subdistrict), about 30–35 km southwest of Ar-Raqqa city. Some media sources have reported that around 10–15 government and allied forces were killed during the attack, making it one of the most brutal attacks by ISIS – the group also gained territorial control over the area for an estimated 24 hours.

As a counter-terrorism measure, the SDF and the International Coalition (IC) upped their search and arrest operations from May (specifically in Administration-held Deir-[ez-Zor](#)) as a result of the continuous ISIS attacks in the region. This usually includes ground operations by the SDF, with aerial support from the IC. The increased SDF and IC campaigns seem to have [impacted](#) ISIS activity. For one, a large number of high-ranking ISIS '[Princes](#)' and other members were captured during these raids, with local sources reporting that until August, the number of individuals accused of being ISIS detained by the SDF and the IC reached approximately 63 individuals.

What later occurred was interesting in that [ISIS](#) began adopting a different strategy in the region, mainly by expanding its attacks in the northeast to incorporate areas west of the Euphrates, such as western Deir-[ez-Zor](#), as well as Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa governorates. ISIS cells have also been active in Syrian government-held areas in Deir-[ez-Zor](#), especially in the Al Mayadin and Al-Shola deserts: ISIS launched an attack on the Deir-[ez-Zor](#)–Damascus road on 30 July, against government-affiliated National Defense and Al-Quds forces positions in Al-Shola. ISIS also

attacked Russian positions in Al-Shola oil field and targeted electricity towers in the area, which led to their destruction and power outages in the city of Deir-ez-Zor for three days.

Local sources and local [media](#) stated that ISIS has reshuffled its personnel, as campaigns against it have pushed many to flee to Iraq. Lukman Khalil, a high-ranking military commander within the SDF, stated that ISIS ideology has been difficult to contain.



Meeting between the SDF, Syrian Democratic Council, and Autonomous Administration to reiterate the continued fight against ISIS. (Source: Coordination and Military Ops Center - SDF [Twitter](#).)

“They are re-emerging...[and] this time they are doing it on both sides of the river”, he added.

Violations of the ceasefire agreement in Idleb

Small-scale violations of the 5 March 2020 [ceasefire](#) agreement between Turkey and Russia continued in the northwest, despite it largely holding on a wider scale. Syrian government and Russian forces have contributed to the violations by bombing areas in the northwest, particularly in southern Idleb, almost daily in the latter parts of the year.

Damascus and its Russian allies have used the battlefield as a means to put pressure on Turkey and the international community on several occasions. On 23 March, the Turkish Foreign Ministry summoned Ankara’s Russian ambassador after attacks against Al Maghara Hospital in Atareb, and Russian airstrikes which hit several locations close to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northern Idleb, including a gas factory, a parking lot for fuel trucks and a fuel market in Sarmada.

Additionally, attacks in June and July, before and after the UN security council meeting to renew the cross-border aid resolution through Bab al-Hawa crossing, were described as “the worst since March 2020” by [UNICEF](#) – 35 villages in Jabal Al-Zawiya in southern Idleb, western Aleppo, and the al-Ghab Plain in northern Hama came under intense military bombardment. During these bombardments, nineteen service and medical facilities, camps and schools were bombed, while sixty-five civilians, including 29 children, 10 women, and 5 humanitarian workers were killed. Furthermore, the [Response Coordination Group](#) stated that 4,361 civilians were displaced as a result of the violence, and have migrated towards the Syrian-Turkish border. Protests against the attacks broke out in Jabal al-Zawiya, Idleb city, Teftnaz and Azaz. The protesters demanded a

response from Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed opposition groups in northern Aleppo, as well as from HTS.

The attacks also intensified between August and September ahead of a bilateral meeting between presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin on 29 September to discuss developments in Idleb, where Syrian government and Russian raids extended to Turkey's areas of influence in northern Aleppo more than once; one raid hit the headquarters of the armed group Al-Hamzat Division, affiliated with the SNA, killing and wounding more than 15 of its members. The Syrian Civil Defense (or White Helmets) teams and centers were [subjected](#) to 15 attacks between January and September. The Syrian Civil Defense also [published](#) a report, on 18 November, in which it documented the death of 63 children from the beginning of June until 17 November, due to artillery attacks and air raids on cities and towns in northern Syria. The report stated that the number of victims had doubled dramatically after Russian and government forces began using [Krasnopol](#) shells, which were responsible for 90% of the deaths. According to the Syrian Civil Defense these numbers indicate that the aim of using this weapon is to kill the largest number of civilians, displace the population from their homes, and empty the area.

SNA in northern Aleppo

Repeated clashes between the SNA and SDF in northern Aleppo took place, without significant territorial gains made by either side. At the same time, the SNA accused SDF forces of targeting civilian areas, including a hospital, in northern Aleppo. The SDF has denied these claims, accusing the Russian military of conducting the attacks. The Russian air force launched five air raids around Afrin city on 31 August. These raids were the first of their kind since the SNA took control of Afrin in March 2018. Moreover, one Russian airstrike targeted a training camp belonging to SNA-aligned Failaq al-Sham, an armed faction close to Turkey.

IED explosions and assassination attempts were also significant security developments in the Turkish-administered areas northern Aleppo. These explosions [targeted civilian areas](#), military commanders and Turkish soldiers. They resulted in the killing and wounding of dozens of civilians, however, no party has claimed responsibility. The Turkish Ministry of Defense and the SNA accused the SDF of carrying out the attacks with the aim of destabilizing the area. The SNA also accused the Syrian government and/or ISIS sleeper cells, who also have a vested interest in destabilizing the security situation. After a [series of explosions](#) targeted Azaz, Afrin and Al-Bab subdistricts, authorities in Azaz and Al-Bab cities announced strict security measures, however the attacks continued.

From mid-July, the SNA took major steps to form bodies which unify its many factions. The first body was the unified operations room, called Azm, formed in July by al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah and the Sultan Murad Division; the two largest factions in the SNA. Later, 13 other SNA factions joined Azm, five of which announced their full integration into one body named the Tha'eroun Movement, while six others merged within the ranks of the Third Corps. The second body was the [Syrian Liberation Front](#) (SLF) with an estimated 20,000 fighters.

According to statements of the two new bodies, their goals are to eliminate the fractured organization within the SNA, with the aim of facing security challenges in the northern and eastern Aleppo countryside. However, there are many signs that the new formations reflect a major division among the SNA which could later develop into internal confrontation between Azm and SLF over control and influence in northern Aleppo.

Turkish military secures northwest

In January, the Turkish military started reinforcing its observation posts and establishing new ones across southern Idlib, particularly around the M4 highway and Jabal Al-Zawiya region, following the [dismantling](#) of others posts in government-held areas between October and December 2020. The new posts created two defense lines near the frontlines with Syrian government forces in the form of a chain, all located in strategic areas that overlook large areas of the Idlib and Hama countryside. These posts are made up of many Turkish soldiers and weaponry able to conduct both defensive and offensive operations, making potential military operations by government forces difficult in that they would be in direct confrontation with Turkish soldiers (something Damascus would want to avoid).

Throughout 2021, 12 Turkish soldiers were killed and 23 were wounded – the Turkish Ministry of Defense accused the SDF of being responsible for four of these attacks, a previously unknown group [Ansar Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq](#) claimed responsibility for another four, and an unknown group called [al-Talee'a al-Mujahida](#) claimed responsibility for one. The Turkish army deployed surveillance cameras at 3 km intervals, from the village of Badama west of Jisr-Ash-Shugur to the city of Ariha to protect armed vehicles and soldiers. They also set up concrete guard posts on the M4 highway to protect bridges along the road.

Following the death of a number of Turkish soldiers in northern Aleppo, for which the SDF was accused, Erdogan [threatened](#) to launch a military campaign against the Autonomous Administration. Turkish threats were followed by a Russian [attack](#) on vital areas in the northwest,

which indicated the possibility of an upcoming military campaign against Idleb if Turkey moved forward with its intended operation against the SDF without a prior agreement with Russia.

HTS moves against hardline groups in Idleb

In order to reduce the possibility of a military offensive being launched against the opposition-held northwest by Damascus, the 5 March ceasefire agreement must hold. One of the clauses within the agreement calls for a removal of ‘terrorists’ from the region. HTS, in its drive to establish itself as a legitimate force to govern the region and to distance itself from extremists, has taken major steps to [eliminate](#) rival groups, many classified as terrorists. HTS continued its arrest campaign against the leadership and members of [Hurras ad-Din](#). Two prominent commanders of Hurras ad-Din published two statements asking for an independent [judiciary](#) to resolve differences between it and HTS and offering to reconcile. The two statements did not contain threatening language towards HTS or the possibility of a military escalation showing an inability of Hurras ad-Din to challenge the larger group.

Additionally, in October, HTS launched a military [operation](#) against the extremist groups of Abu Fatima al-Turki, (also known as Jund Allah) made up of Azeri militants, and Junud al-Sham, made up mainly of Chechen Sunni mujahideen led by Abu Muslim al-Shishani. In June, Shishani had been offered amnesty to either join HTS or evacuate his areas of control, however he rejected the offer. The military operations were largely successful for HTS – it managed to remove the most powerful independent extremist groups from the Lattakia frontlines overlooking the strategic M4 highway in southern Idleb.

IV. HUMANITARIAN TRENDS

COVID-19 overwhelms government health sector

COVID-19 cases rose dramatically in Syrian government-held areas this year, forcing the health sector to take exceptional measures. Healthcare workers first [sounded the alarm](#) in March with the director of ambulance and emergency in the Ministry of Health, Toufic Hisaba telling media sources that intensive care units (ICU) were filling up with patients presenting with COVID-19 symptoms. The Ministry of Health stated at the time that hospitals in Damascus city had reached 100% capacity, leading other hospitals to open up COVID-19 ICU wings. The steep increase also forced the Ministry to suspend non-emergency medical operations in Damascus and Tartous and took steps to ensure healthcare workers would be available.

The COVID-19 pandemic reached its peak in Syria later in the year with the [arrival](#) of the Delta variant in August. This led official numbers in September to reach a record high of 4,160 cases compared to 1,039 in August with the actual number, according to Awa, being ten times higher. The increase meant hospitals in Damascus, Lattakia, Tartous, Dar'a, Aleppo, and As-Sweida were at full capacity as their respective COVID-19 wings filled up, forcing them to transfer new patients to other governorates. The increase was noticeable following the reopening of schools and the lack of adherence to precautionary measures by both students and staff. Indeed, the head of school health in the Ministry of Education, Hatoun al-Tawashi [told](#) pro-government media on 31 October that the number of cases in schools has reached 1,740 (1,476 teachers/ 264 students). Moreover, while the government was unable to implement nationwide precautionary measures, it did not discourage public gatherings either. The annual students' union carnival was [held](#) on 25 October for Damascus university students for the faculties of architecture, civil engineering, medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry with thousands of students participating without adhering to any precautionary measures.

With COVID-19 cases continuing to rise it was made apparent that the virus was indirectly [correlated](#) with the spread of the Mucormycosis fungal disease, colloquially known as Black Fungus. Cases of Black Fungus were reported in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Dar'a governorates. While the disease is not infectious, it does affect individuals who are immunocompromised and have a reduced lung efficiency to clean out the fungal spores, both shortcomings caused by COVID-19 and its standard treatment. Diagnosing patients with Black Fungus can also be challenging; it requires a biopsy, sample examination, and a CT scan at times. This can be particularly difficult for the government's under-funded, under equipped, and under-

manned healthcare system overwhelmed by COVID-19. This results in many patients arriving at the hospital in the late stages of infection where the application of treatment is often too late.

Damascus struggles to supply fuel, crisis intensifies

Fuel supply to government-held Syria was [severely disrupted](#), causing shortages throughout. The crisis had re-intensified following a 200% [reduction](#) in Iranian oil shipments, a primary fuel source for government-held areas, in November 2020 compared to previous months. The shortages continued well-into the next year, leading the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources to announce a 17% reduction in petrol and 24% in diesel allotments to governorates on 10 January. Severe fuel scarcity meant some governorates, such as As-Sweida, only received 1% of their allotments, leaving under ten gas stations to service entire governorates. This led to longer queuing in front of gas stations and increased traffic congestion in neighborhoods and roads where they were present. The shortage also raised concerns from the Syrian farmer's union who were worried about the diesel shortage's impact on the year's wheat harvest. Diesel is heavily used in the agricultural sector to power water pumps for irrigation, and machinery for harvest. The union [stated](#) that only 41% of the government-supplied diesel was delivered compared to last year with only 15% actually distributed.

The crisis further intensified towards late March with longer queues, some exceeding 1 km, with citizens sleeping in their cars to keep their place in the queue. The intensification was blamed on the Suez Canal blockage by the [megaship Ever Given](#), delaying Iranian oil shipments.

Moreover, the general decrease in fuel supplies resulted in a price [increase](#) implemented by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection on 15 March ranging between 30% and 50%. The crisis dragged on leading to several parts of the government being [shut down](#) due to the absence of transportation with ambulances reportedly running out of fuel and university students travelling to class by pick-up trucks and motorcycles. The government then introduced a new distribution mechanism to reduce the queueing and regulate consumption. In the [new](#) system, smart card users receive an SMS message on a weekly basis informing them that their allotments are ready. However, significant delays occurred as expected and the mechanism did not solve the core problem which is low supply. The crisis seemed to ease later on around late April following the [arrival](#) of oil shipments to the port of Banyas on 10 April, however the reported [attack](#) on an oil shipment in late April in addition to the frequent [interception](#) of Iranian oil tankers highlighted the fragility of the government's Iran oil supply chain.

Despite the resumption of oil shipments, shortages continued, albeit at a lower intensity. Government officials [stated](#) on 27 November that 70% of families have not received their allotment of subsidized diesel, pushing the government to further reduce its allotments, [reducing](#) the subsidized diesel rations from 200 L to 50 L. Moreover, the price of fuel-related products continued to increase. The official price of diesel and petrol were further [increased](#) in July with the price of diesel used for industrial purposes [increasing twice](#). Diesel shortages and increasing unaffordability of fuel has pushed many families, particularly in mountainous areas, to use [unconventional](#) heating methods which pose a health risk. Additionally, many residents [protested](#) the government's decisions to both increase prices and reduce allotments, telling officials that it is in their right to receive their allotments in full in order to keep their families warm. Local sources have stated that it is going to be a cold winter for Syrian families if the government fails to deliver the respective diesel allotments.

Bread shortages lead to rationing, food insecurity

The bread crisis has also intensified in Syrian government areas. Local sources reported on reduced governorate flour allotments in addition to the [reduction](#) of the amount of bread per packet as early as February, pointing to higher bread scarcity. Wheat imports remained an issue with the Syria grain establishment revealing a 44% [decrease](#) in soft wheat imports between 2019 and 2020 and its inability to increase that number in 2021. Bread scarcity only increased when local wheat production took a [hit](#) during the harvest season following a severe [drought](#) and increasingly [expensive](#) production costs.

Additionally, the [competition](#) between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government over wheat purchases denied the latter of much needed wheat. The increased scarcity was later made clear by the [introduction](#) of bread into the smart card system in Lattakia, Tartous, Homs and Hama for the first time on 1 August and later in [As-Sweida](#) on 1 October. Moreover, bread rationing increased under the smart card system with many citizens unable to receive their subsidized bread rations due to [discrepancies](#) in the distribution mechanism. However, the discrepancies and excessive rationing led to [protests](#) and road closures in Lattakia, Tartous, and As-Sweida forcing the government to partially [renege](#) on some of its decisions.

Autonomous Administration unable to control rising cost of fuel

The beginning of the year saw increased fuel prices, where Administration-held areas of Deir-ez-Zor witnessed a fuel price [increase](#) of 50%. This was mainly attributed to the Syrian pound's continued depreciation. Oil investors and traders pay for purchases of crude oil in US dollars.

Furthermore, fuel smuggling from Administration-held areas to Syrian government-held areas was high, as demand increased due to wintry conditions. As such, residents were incapable of obtaining fuel at reasonable prices, prompting protests across eastern Deir-ez-Zor. Amid the crisis, in May, the Administration’s Executive Council issued Decree No. 119 **increasing** the price of fuel in areas under its control from 30–220%. This was obviously not welcomed by the general population who was already struggling to secure all types of fuel, and protests ensued across different areas including eastern Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh. Demonstrations were violent, with many instances of protestors attacking SDF checkpoints. As a result, the Administration rescinded its decision on 19 May via Decree No. 123.

Bakeries stop production in Deir-ez-Zor

Another primary failure of the Administration in Deir-ez-Zor in particular, were shortages in wheat and bread provision. On multiple occasions, bakeries halted their operations, with bread shortages ensuing. For example, from 8–9 November, **protests** took place in Basira in eastern Deir-ez-Zor and in Al-Hissan in western Deir-ez-Zor against bakeries halting the production of bread. Bread production has stopped because of a severe wheat shortage, as the price of 1 kg of

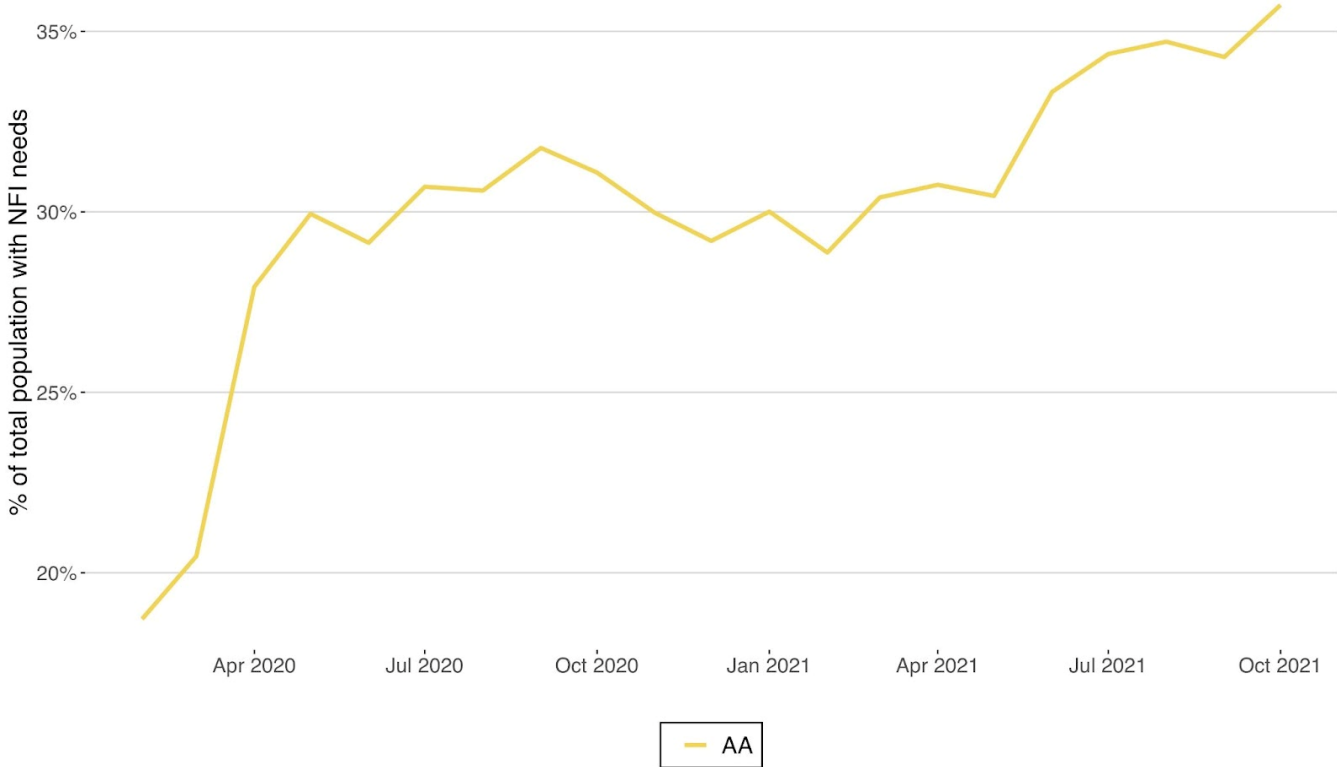


Figure 6: NFI needs in northeast Syria, Apr 2020 - Oct 2021. (Source: HAT).



Protests in eastern Deir-ez-Zor, November (Source: [Orient News](#))

wheat increased and is now priced at 2,300 SYP. In Basira, protestors stormed the Local Council, while in Al-Hissan, protestors blocked main roads.

The reasons for the shortages were largely because of a lack of supply; the Administration had reduced flour allocations to bakeries due to poor wheat production in the northeast. The past year's harvest season has been severely crippled, with the Department of Agriculture in the Deir-ez-Zor Civil Council estimating a decrease in wheat production this year by 40–45% compared to last year's season.

Firstly, the percentage of precipitation has decreased this year, affecting wheat crops in general, and rain-fed agriculture in particular. Weak precipitation is also coupled with high temperatures which negatively affected the wheat crop.

Secondly, there is the issue of a lack of irrigation water. A large number of northeast Syria suffers from total or partial destruction of agricultural infrastructure and irrigation stations and canals. Despite the rehabilitation of a number of these stations, they remain insufficient to irrigate the areas planted with wheat on time, and the hours that these stations are set to operate is insufficient (due to lack of electricity or motor). The drop in the level of water from the Euphrates also severely impacted this.

Finally, the high price of fuel has also negatively affected agricultural production. Although the Autonomous Administration provides fuel at a subsidized price to the agricultural departments in their areas of control for irrigating crops, the quantities of fuel are insufficient and the quality is poor. Moreover, the price of fertilizer is also priced at the dollar rate/black market rate, making it difficult for farmers to afford. Finally, a major issue behind the lack of availability of wheat is corruption. Bakery owners sell a large portion of subsidized flour allocations to local merchants who then sell them on or smuggle them to Syrian government-held areas. Many local sources in Deir-ez-Zor confirmed that owners of bakeries are resorting to this in coordination with some officials in the Mills Administration and the Supply Directorate, and that large bribes are being paid. This is therefore a very profitable business.

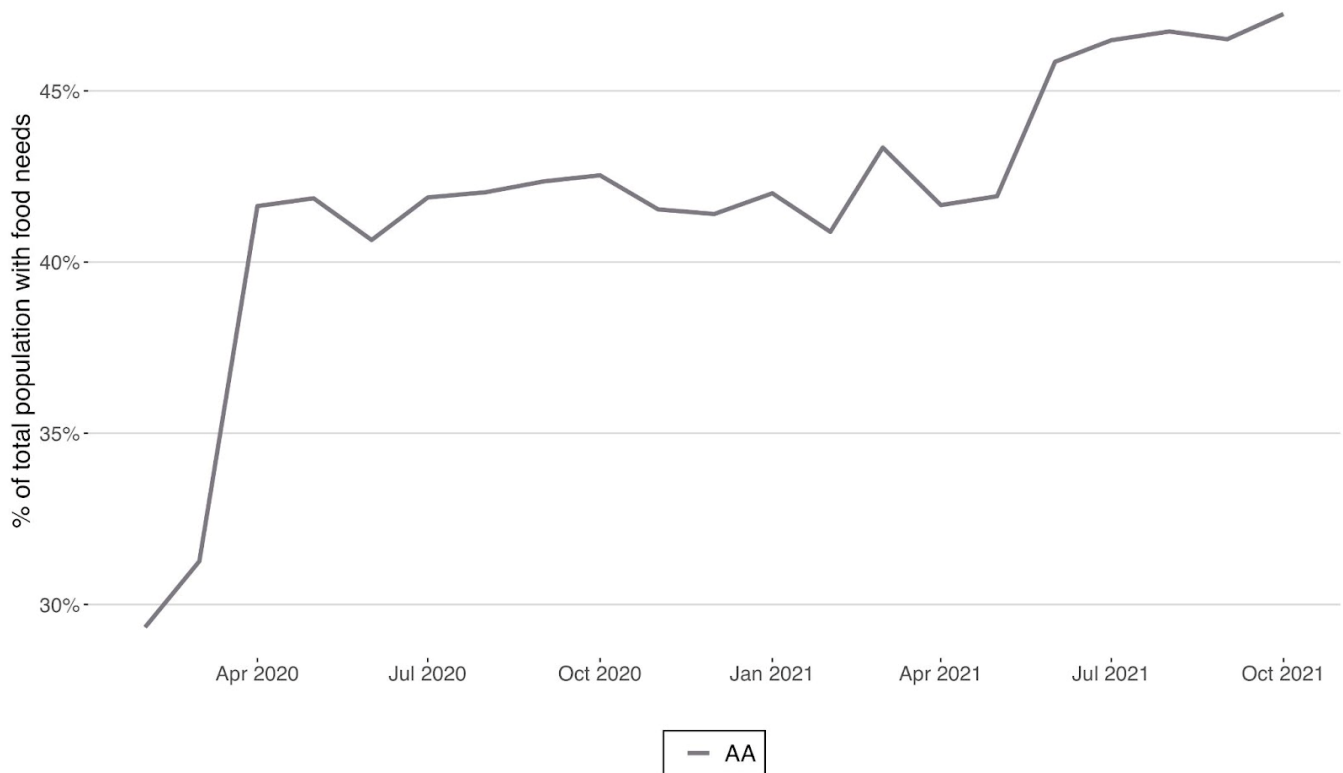


Figure 7: Percentage of total population in Autonomous Administration-held areas with food needs (Source: HAT)

Lack of funding threatens healthcare sector in northeast

The provision of healthcare services was also a major worry in the northeast, as multiple hospitals were on the brink of losing funds and halting their operations, bringing about concerns of the total collapse of the health sector in certain areas.

In eastern Deir-ez-Zor, many doctors work as volunteers to keep providing healthcare to residents. As such, [protests](#) broke out in November in Shiheil and Basira following news that funding to the Shihail General Surgical Hospital would come to an end at the end of November. The hospital is a primary location for healthcare provision in the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor, with a dedicated COVID-19 unit serving most of the region. Other fears were also raised with regards to Al-Furat Hospital in Abu Hamam, one of the largest hospitals where nearly 100,000 civilians from neighboring towns rely on. [Reportedly](#), the Administration has severely decreased funds to the hospital, as well as decreased doctors' salaries to 260,000 SYP per month, prompting many to leave towards neighbouring towns or countries. Furthermore, many hospitals remain [damaged](#), despite promises of rehabilitation. Similarly in Ar-Raqqa, protestors including the city's residents and medical workers conducted a sit-in demanding the continuation of funds for the Ar-Raqqa National Hospital's maternity and pediatric wards. As seen in Figure 8, basic service needs

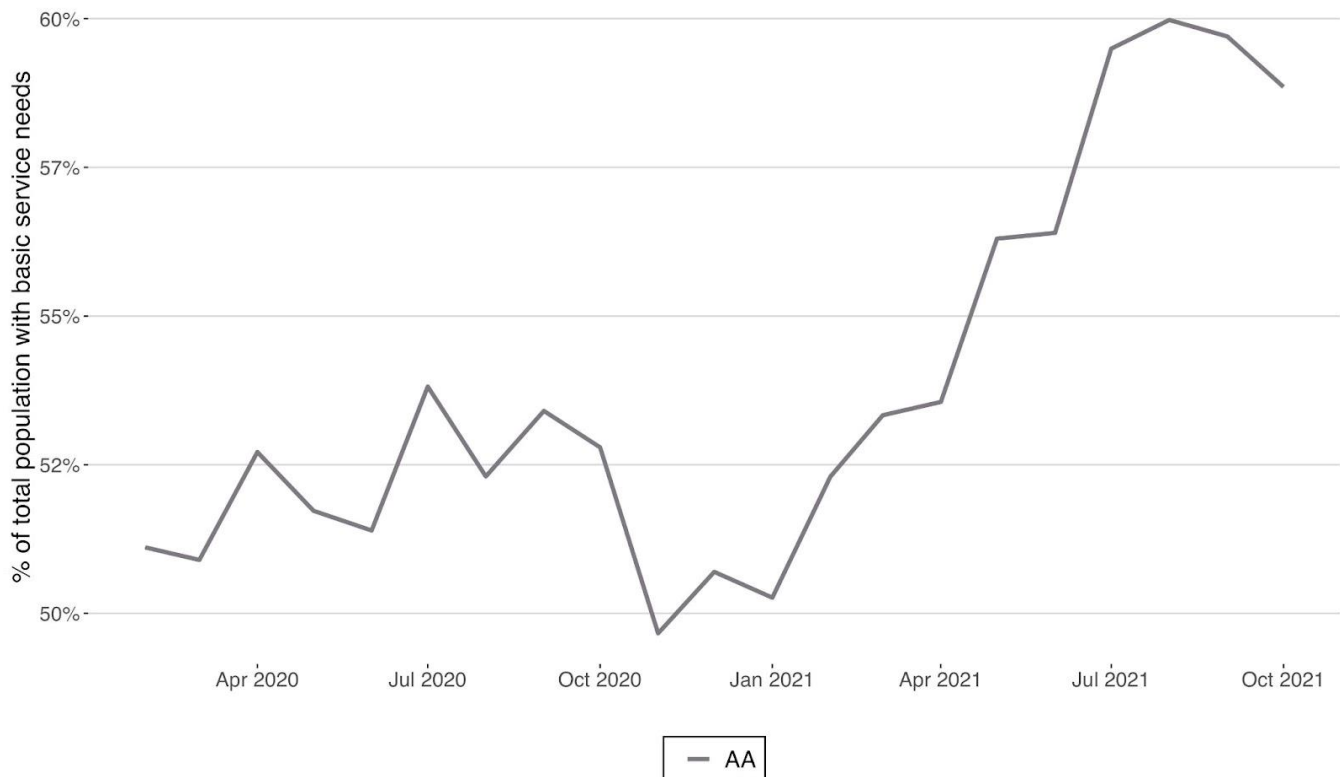


Figure 8: Percentage of total population in Autonomous Administration-held areas with basic service needs (Source: HAT)

witnessed an all-time high around mid-2021, due to the lack of healthcare provision, medicine shortages which are linked to Syrian government-held areas, and the depreciation of the pound.

The northeast was also hit by COVID-19, as Administration-held areas lacked resources and infrastructure to deal with the pandemic. The Administration did impose a number of curfews as a precautionary measure, however many residents rejected the curfews due as they severely limited their livelihood opportunities. Nevertheless, as of November 2021, only 40,000 residents across the northeast are vaccinated, with the majority distrusting the vaccine, and lacking any initiative to get vaccinated.

Security Council extends the use of Bab al-Hawa crossing for humanitarian aid

The Security Council unanimously adopted [Resolution 2585](#) to extend the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for humanitarian aid deliveries for six months until January 2022, with the expectation of a subsequent renewal for another six months, until July 2022. The second six-month extension will be subject to a substantive report by the Secretary-General who is requested to brief members regularly on the implementation of the resolution, transparency in aid delivery operations, progress on cross-line access, and compliance by the parties. The text stressed, for the

first time, the need to enhance cross-line aid deliveries, in a victory for Damascus – should the Syrian interior become the basis for the distribution of aid, it would allow the Syrian government to know what enters the country and where the food and humanitarian supplies go.

The Autonomous Administration rejected the resolution, largely due the continued closure of Al Yarubiyah crossing, which was closed [last July](#). The Administration claims that by closing-off cross-border aid from Iraq, essential medical and food aid have been prevented from entering the northeast, leading to unequal humanitarian aid distribution.

A new aspect of the resolution is the welcoming of the expansion of humanitarian operation efforts, including ‘early recovery’ projects. Previously, aid provided for reconstruction efforts was contingent on political advancements to a resolution to the conflict – an [observation of this](#) is that it appears within the phrasing that these early recovery projects may now supersede this. Additionally, the requirements of the Secretary-General to report on all aspects of the cross-border aid make further extension conditional (although language around the resolution suggests it is for the most part, secured).

First crossline aid convoys into opposition-controlled northwest

For the first time since Idleb came under the control of armed opposition groups, two humanitarian aid convoys entered from Syrian government-held areas in Aleppo to opposition-controlled areas in Idleb through the Mezanaz–Maaret Elnaasan crossing point. According to the SSG, three trucks passed through the crossing in western Aleppo on 30 August and were followed the next day by the second convoy of twelve trucks.

The initiative came as an implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2585 to extend the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for humanitarian aid deliveries. Crossline deliveries were a contentious point within the extension of the Resolution, with critics of cross-line aid from Damascus concerned about these aid routes being a step towards normalization with the government (giving more power to the Assad government and in theory reducing the need for cross-border aid from Turkey), while proponents (including Russia in the Security Council) are keen to legitimize the Syrian government by having aid delivered through Damascus.

On 31 August, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [said](#) that the first phase of WFP cross-lines supplies had succeeded, as the first shipment of humanitarian aid was transferred from Aleppo to Sarmada in Idleb. The shipment contained 9,600 of 27,000 food baskets scheduled to be delivered in the same way by mid-September, providing aid to 50,000 civilians. The Ministry maintained the importance of reliable mechanisms for distributing aid among citizens to prevent it from falling

into the hands of HTS “terrorists” who control the de-escalation zone. The statement also called for the continuation of intensified international efforts to secure humanitarian aid access to Idlib and other areas in northern Syria through cross-line access.

Idlib local activists and media outlets protested against the opening of crossings with the Syrian government, viewing crossline delivery as a step towards legitimizing the Syrian government in areas outside its control.

Covid-19, northwest

COVID-19 cases increased in the northwest throughout 2021, with the highest increase in cases recorded in September (approximately 34,184). The [Delta variant](#) spread more quickly than previous variants, and was first detected in August. On 5 December, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the pandemic had [reached](#) 92,786 across northwest Syria, out of 327,021 tests (28.3%) and deaths reached 2,291.

The Idlib Health Directorate received three batches of COVID-19 vaccines from [April](#) containing 449,000 doses (90,200 doses of [AstraZeneca](#) and 358,800 doses of the Chinese [Sinovac](#)). The vaccination campaign [started](#) on 1 May through the Syria Immunization Group, prioritising medical and relief staff and medical personnel from local organizations then extending to people over the age of 50, those with chronic illnesses over the age of 18, and public affairs workers over the age of 30. On 4 December, Idlib Health Directorate [announced](#) that the total number of people who have been vaccinated has reached 204,584 (106,508 one dose and 98,076 two doses), representing just 5.11% of the total population.

NGOs call for more support for hospitals

Hospitals and medical centers treating COVID-19 patients [struggled](#) to cope with the increase in cases, facing shortages of beds, resuscitation equipment and oxygen. The highest risk populations, including IDPs in camps, struggled to contain the virus with overcrowded conditions, lack of good hygiene facilities and poor knowledge of the dangers of COVID-19 all increasing the risk of transmission.

NGOs and INGOs issued statements on [6](#) and [20](#) September warning of the deteriorating health situation in the northwest warning from possible collapse of the healthcare system if precautionary measures continue to be ignored. The health sector in the northwest depends mainly on the support provided by NGOs. The SSG and SIG are not able to access humanitarian funding as they remain unrecognized internationally. Even so, several NGOs have [halted](#) their

support to a number of hospitals in Idleb citing a lack of funding. The suspension of support has affected some of the largest hospitals in the northwest coinciding with the announcement by many COVID-19 medical centers that they have reached their maximum capacity.

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

