

March 2023

Humanitarian Access Team Syria

Syria Monthly Report



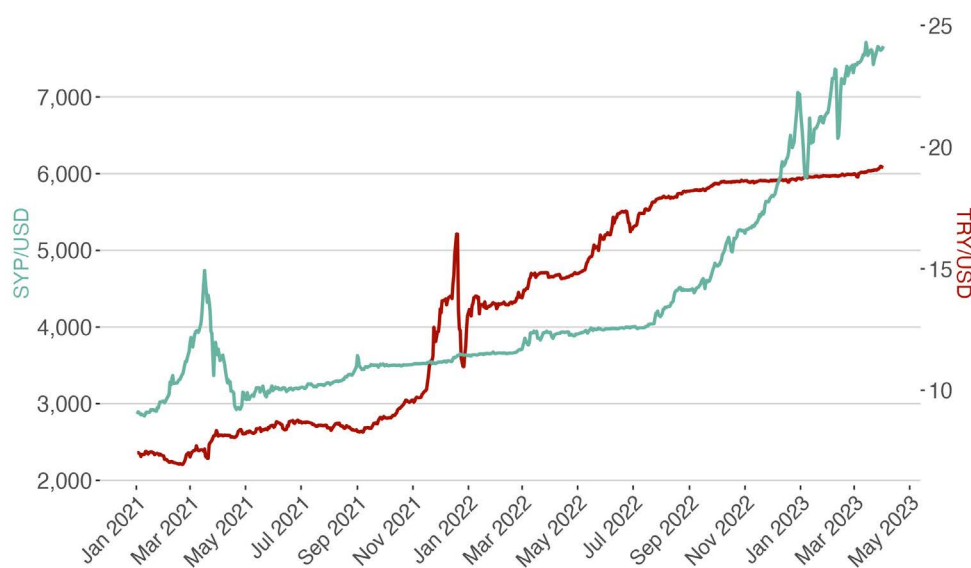
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Economic indicators

	February 2023	March 2023	April
SYP/USD official rate	3,000	3,000	3,000
SYP/USD black-market rate	7,158 (10%)	7,557.1 (5.6%)	7,646.2 (1.2%)
TRY/USD official rate	18.8 (0.4%)	19.0 (0.9%)	19.2 (0.8%)

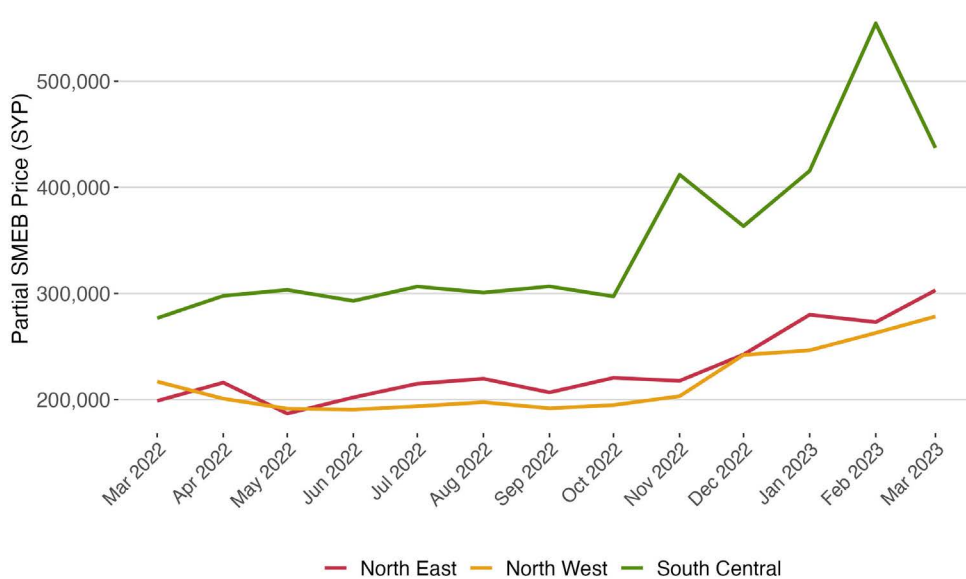
Economic indicator 1.

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.

HAT's 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.

Summary

Developments in economic and political relations with Damascus signal further momentum toward normalization of the Assad government by Arab states. Saudi Arabia is the most recent country to consider reestablishing diplomatic ties, and has floated the idea of inviting Bashar al-Assad to the Arab summit in Riyadh in May. Jordan is pushing for an Arab-led peace initiative to resolve the Syrian conflict – the initiative has gained support across the Arab world. Western countries are standing firm against the any attempts to normalize relations with the Syrian government.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent is trying to streamline aid distribution by asking beneficiaries to confirm and update their personal information in its head offices in Dar'a. Unfortunately, these offices are close to government checkpoints, meaning individuals wanted by the security or military agencies are unlikely to risk making the trip into the city, for fear of either detention or conscription.

Food prices in Damascus rose ahead of Ramadan, and look set to continue to increase. The government has introduced a new subsidized food basket, and added chickpeas and bulgar wheat to the smart card system, to help households, with limited success. The Central Bank is again trying to increase foreign currency revenues; this time by allowing traders to use their own dollar reserves to fund imports, and requiring international organizations to pay for fuel in dollars.

Syrian traders in Aleppo appear to be cautious of the growing presence and influence of Iran-backed business owners and militia who have reportedly been expanding their presence in the city. This has come at the expense of the city's traders who view the growing presence as a threat to their influence, economic interests, and a nuisance to their commercial activities.

SDF security campaigns, ostensibly necessary to combat ISIS, have drawn criticism for also appearing to justify arrest and detention of detractors of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration. The relationship between civilians and the security forces are increasingly strained. Torrential rains have flooded northern Syria, damaging private property, infrastructure, agricultural lands and destroying shelters in IDP camps, in areas already impacted by the earthquake on 6 February.

The Barzani Charitable Foundation's provision of aid in opposition-held northwest Syria exposes the tangled and multi-layered loyalties of Kurdish political and security actors, heavily influenced by regional Kurdish dynamics. The killing of four Kurdish civilians in Jandairis during Newroz celebrations has exacerbated civil unrest and disrupted security dynamics in Turkish-controlled areas – residents called for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to step in to control security in the immediate aftermath, and during the funeral, to which the group blithely obliged.



Thousands of mourners gather for the funeral of four Kurdish civilians killed on the eve of Newroz in Jandairis. The perpetrators are alleged to be members of an SNA military faction, while the incident has reverberated throughout northern Aleppo.

*Cover photo: Flooded agricultural lands in northeast Syria.
Source: Reuters*

International

Normalization, economic integration, and policy shifts



Delegates attend the Arab League summit in Cairo, on February 12, 2023 (Source: [Arab News](#))

Arab states extend diplomatic relations Developments in economic and political relations with Damascus signal further momentum toward normalization of the Assad government by Arab states. Saudi Arabia has made noticeable efforts to mend ties with the Syrian government, with media outlets [reporting](#) Russian-mediated Saudi–Syrian talks to restore diplomatic relations throughout March, [agreements](#) to reopen embassies, and Saudi plans to [invite](#) Bashar al-Assad to the Arab Summit held in Riyadh in May. If this invitation is issued, it would become the first serious official attempt by Arab states to reintegrate Syria into the region since 2011.

The UAE and Jordan also extended diplomatic relations toward Assad and his government; Sheikh Mohamad Bin Zayed Al-Nayan, UAE's president, invited his Syrian counterpart to [visit](#) for the second time since the earthquake. Jordan began pushing an Arab-led peace initiative to resolve the Syrian conflict, first discussed in [late 2022](#) and revived after the earthquake in February. The [initiative's](#) key characteristics reportedly aim to provide economic assistance for Syria, lobby for a gradual lifting of sanctions, gain support for reconstruction, and engage in a democratic political process. Even [Qatar](#), a country that maintains a strong position against Damascus ([reiterated](#) post-earthquake when many

other Arab states were pledging support for the government) has voiced support for the Jordanian initiative. More recently there have been reports that Egypt's president, Abdulfattah al-Sisi could visit the Syrian capital.

Economic opportunities

Economically, the UAE which has already floated cooperation with the Syrian government, set up a [meeting](#) on 16 March between the Emirati charges d'affaires, Abdul Hakim Ibrahim Al-Nuaimi, at the embassy in Syria, and the Syrian (now former) minister for industry, Ziad Subhi Sabbagh, to discuss enhanced economic and industrial relations between the states. In another event much promoted by the Syrian government, Musan Nahhas, a representative from the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce attended the Arab-French Economic Summit in Paris on 15 March. During the Summit, Nahhas urged the [lifting](#) of sanctions and better Arab cooperation. Reporters were quick to point out that the invitation was extended by the Union of Arab Chambers (confirmed by Nahhas), and not from any official French source. The French government drew public criticism for allowing Nahhas to attend, however has not officially commented. A French diplomatic source told the [Syria Report](#) that France's position against normalization with Syria remains strong.

Western countries stand firm

Macro-level moves to reintegrate Syria regionally are increasing, particularly since the earthquake. However, states are broaching the matter cautiously, ensuring ample time should an exit strategy be needed. Although there have been changes in attitudes regarding the Syrian government, the possibility of fully-fledged Arab normalization remains in its infancy, largely due to Western positions against Assad. In the US, a group of American former [officials](#) and experts on Syria have signed a letter urging the Biden Administration to push back against any normalization attempts with the Syrian government and its affiliates – the US has made multiple statements against normalization.

Alongside the US, the EU [reiterated](#) its rejection of a rapprochement, as has the UK. Western states

have made it clear that a comprehensive political solution is required, based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254. For Saudi Arabia, reintegrating Syria would threaten its relations with the US, an economic ally.

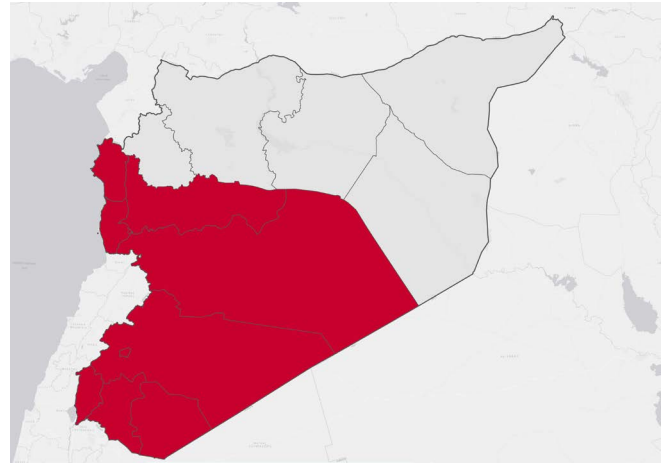
The rate at which regional states are moving to negotiate and discuss concessions over regional issues makes it seem as though reintegration is inevitable. However, underneath the meetings and visits lie the same level of military and political activity that existed before the earthquake. These signal that high-level negotiations are not set on solid ground. Even more, this highlights that contingency strategies are available to leverage major gains and display disagreements in the event negotiations steer towards unfavorable ends for either party.



Bashar al-Assad arrives in Moscow for meetings with Vladimir Putin. Source: AP

Evidently, during Assad's visit to Moscow, he [asserted](#) that he welcomes the opportunity for new bases to be established in Syria and stressed the possibility of their permanence. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the US Central Command (CENTCOM) completed their first [joint counter-drone exercise](#) to enhance Saudi's defense capabilities despite the former appearing to edge more towards China and Russia for regional affairs. Concerning Syria's normalization with Arab states, major points must be agreed upon before the incoming Arab Summit set for [May 19](#) in Saudi Arabia to gauge Arab sentiments towards the Syrian government.

South & central



SARC tries to streamline aid distribution

A new policy was implemented by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) to curb what the organization deems as 'inefficient distribution' of food baskets in Dar'a al-Balad, the former opposition-held enclave of Dar'a city. On 1 March, media outlets [circulated](#) news that SARC now requires beneficiaries of food baskets provided by a major UN agency in Dar'a al-Balad to provide updated information at SARC's office in Dar'a city in person, as a precondition to continue to receive the aid. The SARC has asked its beneficiaries to update their addresses, work status and income, and number of direct family members.

The SARC's new plan intends to ensure a fairer and more equitable distribution of food baskets among all those in need. According to local sources, long waits are, in part, due to the lack of measures to efficiently filter and set beneficiary lists. Some residents are able to receive multiple rations by registering their family members, relatives, and other personal contacts as separate profiles. As a result, a single household could receive more than one ration of aid at the expense of another, who would see their rations delayed. Media outlets and local sources reported beneficiaries complaining of delays in receiving their food baskets, some for up to three months.

New policies risk excluding people in need

While many residents made the trip to SARC's offices in Dar'a city to renew and update their information, local sources and media outlets also [reported](#) that others, such as former opposition fighters, young men failing to report for conscription, and those wanted by the Syrian government are unlikely to do so. SARC's offices inside Dar'a city are in close proximity to checkpoints manned by Syrian government authorities who would check personal identification papers of those making the journey – many fearing detention will avoid the trip into the city. Consequently, although SARC intends to fight corruption, it also risks excluding individuals and households from benefiting from much-needed aid.

Drivers behind shortages left unaddressed

Making distribution equitable – although both pragmatic and crucial – is also an attempt to deal with the reportedly growing issue of a reduction in food aid for households. The ongoing failure of the economy has increased demand for food baskets, with people simply having less money to buy food. They also have less money to pay fees at checkpoints, which many of the government's security forces and affiliated armed groups rely on. Extortion is common, and with fewer people able to pay, local sources report that security forces and armed groups confiscate food baskets from aid cargoes as a form of payment for safe passage, to be resold later. SARC's efforts to monitor distribution are also attempts to deal with this decline in supply. SARC finds itself largely in a difficult situation. Without being able to prevent food baskets from being expropriated, it needs to make sure all aid is being distributed appropriately; however, the need to remove the possibility of duplicating aid deliveries will also exclude some of those in need from receiving aid.

Food prices rise ahead of Ramadan

Government officials and pro-government media reported significant food price increases ahead of Ramadan. Food prices have increased compared to the previous year, despite reduced demand as a result of low household purchasing power through-

out government-held areas. Moreover, the government has been unable to properly impose price control measures or provide a sufficient alternative for cash-strapped families to afford food as the holy month began in late March.

Prices in Damascus city [increased](#) by between 15–20% in the past month despite demand being notably low compared to previous years, with an additional 15% increase predicted during Ramadan, according to pro-government news outlets. The president of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, Mohamad Laham [said](#) that prices are generally expected to increase in the first two weeks of Ramadan due to supply and demand dynamics; he highlighted that in-kind food donations and assistance would increase demand, and therefore prices. However, the secretary of the Consumer Protection Association, Abdel Razak Habza, [said](#) that there are no valid reasons for price increases, particularly that of food, and attributed them to the greed of wholesale traders.

High prices coupled with low purchasing power have led to a notable reduction in demand on the market. Al-Hal market vegetable and fruit committee member, Mohamad al-Akad, [said](#) that the average price of a cooked meal is now SYP 25,000, 17% of the average monthly salary of SYP 145,000 in Syria – an average employee's salary in Syria is insufficient to feed one person, let alone a household, for a month. This was highlighted by WFP Syria's

Items	March 1 (SYP)	March 15 (SYP)	Percentage change
Lentils (1kg)	11,000	13,000	18%
Bananas (1kg)	8,000	10,000	25%
Cucumbers (1kg)	3,800	4,000	5%
Sugar (1kg)	7,000	8,000	14%
Beef (1kg)	45,000	55,000	22%

Price changes between 1 and 15 March in Rural Damascus ahead of Ramadan (Source: HAT).

country director, Kenn Crossley, who showed on [Twitter](#) that a teacher’s salary of SYP 125,000 per month would only be enough for one meal during Ramadan.

Stagnant wages, the depreciating Syrian pound, and turbulent markets have led to a notable change in consumer behavior. Low purchasing power means shoppers are buying fruit and vegetables per piece (as opposed to per kilogram). Prices have been high due to increased production costs; farmers are compelled to export produce, such as tomatoes, apples and oranges to the Gulf countries and Iraq to maximize their profits, reducing domestic supply. Dates, an essential food during Ramadan, now cost up to 50% more compared to last year, with consumers again buying smaller amounts, rather than large boxes.

Government steps in

The Syrian government enacted measures on 23 March intended to increase the availability and affordability of staple foods following the price increases. The Damascus branch of the Syria Trade Establishment (STE) [introduced](#) a subsidized Ramadan food basket of the most in-demand items, priced at SYP 99,000 (advertised as 20–25% less than the market price of SYP 123,000), disaggregated by item (shown below). Three thousand baskets have been sold already, and they will continue to be provided as long as there is demand. The STE also [introduced](#) 1kg of chickpeas to the smart card

scheme at the subsidized price of SYP 7,000 per kg and made 2 kg of bulgar wheat available every week at the subsidized price of 5,000 SYP per kg. Finally, the STE increased the supply of meat and chicken, in an attempt to lower prices and is selling them between 20% and 30% less than the market price depending on the type of meat.

The government’s mitigation measures have come under [criticism](#). At 68% of an average salary (SYP 145,000), the STE’s food baskets are still unaffordable for many, and not as much below market price as advertised, at only 14% (market prices are 116,000 for the products). They are also small; there is only enough rice and vermicelli to feed a household of five for two days, cooking oil will only last for ten days, and tomato paste, jam and tea for two weeks. In terms of subsidized bulgar wheat and chickpeas, their availability through the smart card could be delayed, because of problems in the system.



Items included in the new government-subsidized food baskets

Item	Quantity
Rice	3kg
Cooking oil	2L
Vegetable Ghee	1kg
Super Picto tea	200g
Apricot jam	200g
Vermicilli	200g
Tomato paste	1.3kg

Items included in the new government-subsidized food baskets.

Central Bank continues search for foreign currency

In the interests of both saving and generating foreign currency, the Syrian government has enacted measures throughout March to further mitigate the economic and financial deterioration. Continued efforts to stave off the full depletion of its foreign currency reserves have led the government to cease funding for imports and charge international organizations and embassies for fuel in dollars. The Syrian Central Bank’s foreign currency reserves have been running low, making it unable to import

essential items (fuel and wheat) and stabilize the fluctuating pound, forcing it to plug its budget deficit through issuing more treasury bonds, enact indirect foreign-currency generating measures, and reduce subsidies and social safety nets.

Decision 336 helps traders finance imports

On 14 March, the Syrian Central Bank issued decision 336 to temporarily allow traders and importers to buy imported raw materials with their own foreign currency (largely US dollar) resources, without having to go through official funding mechanisms implemented and managed by the Bank. Traders and importers were previously required to purchase foreign currency either from the Central Bank or designated exchange companies at a special exchange rate. This has slowed down imports, as there has either been a shortfall or delay in the supply of dollars from official channels. Decision 336 allows traders to use their own dollar supplies (from foreign bank accounts, for example), and means the government can keep the foreign currency it was providing to traders for other uses.

International organizations and embassies, to purchase fuel in dollars

The Central Bank is also using sales of fuel to generate foreign currency. The Syrian Company for the Storage and Distribution of Petroleum Products (SADCOB) [issued](#) a decision to sell oil derivatives to embassies, international organizations, and diplomatic missions in dollars from 1 March – to be able to then subsidize the product for those in need. The price list for these international actors represented in government-controlled Syria can be seen below.

Fuel type	Price (USD)	Price (SYP)
Diesel (1L)	1.4	10,465
Octane 90 (1L)	1.5	11,213
Gas canister	15	112,125
Industrial gas canister	25	186,875

Fuel price list for international organizations, embassies, and diplomatic missions

The decision comes in line with other similar measures to indirectly generate foreign currency revenue. For example, requiring foreign students in Syrian private universities to [pay tuition fees in dollars](#), requiring [passport renewals abroad to be paid in dollars](#), requiring Syrian citizens [returning to the country to exchange \\$100](#) at the official exchange rate, and requiring exporters to [exchange 50% of their foreign currency profits](#) at the official exchange rate.

Iran's growing influence in Aleppo

Recent humanitarian measures enacted in Aleppo to find alternative shelters for displaced families hint at latent tensions between Iran-backed militias and the city's commercial traders. Iran-backed militias have reportedly been expanding their presence in the city, [buying up property](#) and even managing security and governance over large parts of the city. This has come at the expense of the city's traders who view the growing Iranian presence in the city as a threat to their influence, and economic interests, and a nuisance to their commercial activities.

Government to house displaced families

The Syrian government has announced several measures to house Aleppo's 11,935 displaced families following the earthquake in early February. Aleppo governor, Mohamad Hijazi [said](#) on 15 March that 500 prefabricated houses, with space for two rooms, and a kitchen and bathroom, would be installed in the Jibreen industrial area (Jebel Sama subdistrict) on 80 hectares of land (800,000 m²) along with their own services infrastructure. Hijazi had [stated](#) on 16 March that tents set up through local initiatives to house displaced families would be removed because they "harm the general appearance," telling the households staying in them either to go back to their undamaged houses (which they had left for fear of further quakes) or to find properly equipped shelter. Media sources also reported that the Ministry of Housing would [build 400 housing units](#) in Haydariyeh (Jebel Saman subdistrict). The 500 prefabricated houses to be set up in Jibreen were [donated and installed by the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Unit](#) (PMU) stationed in Aleppo governorate.

Aleppo's traders help households afford alternative shelter

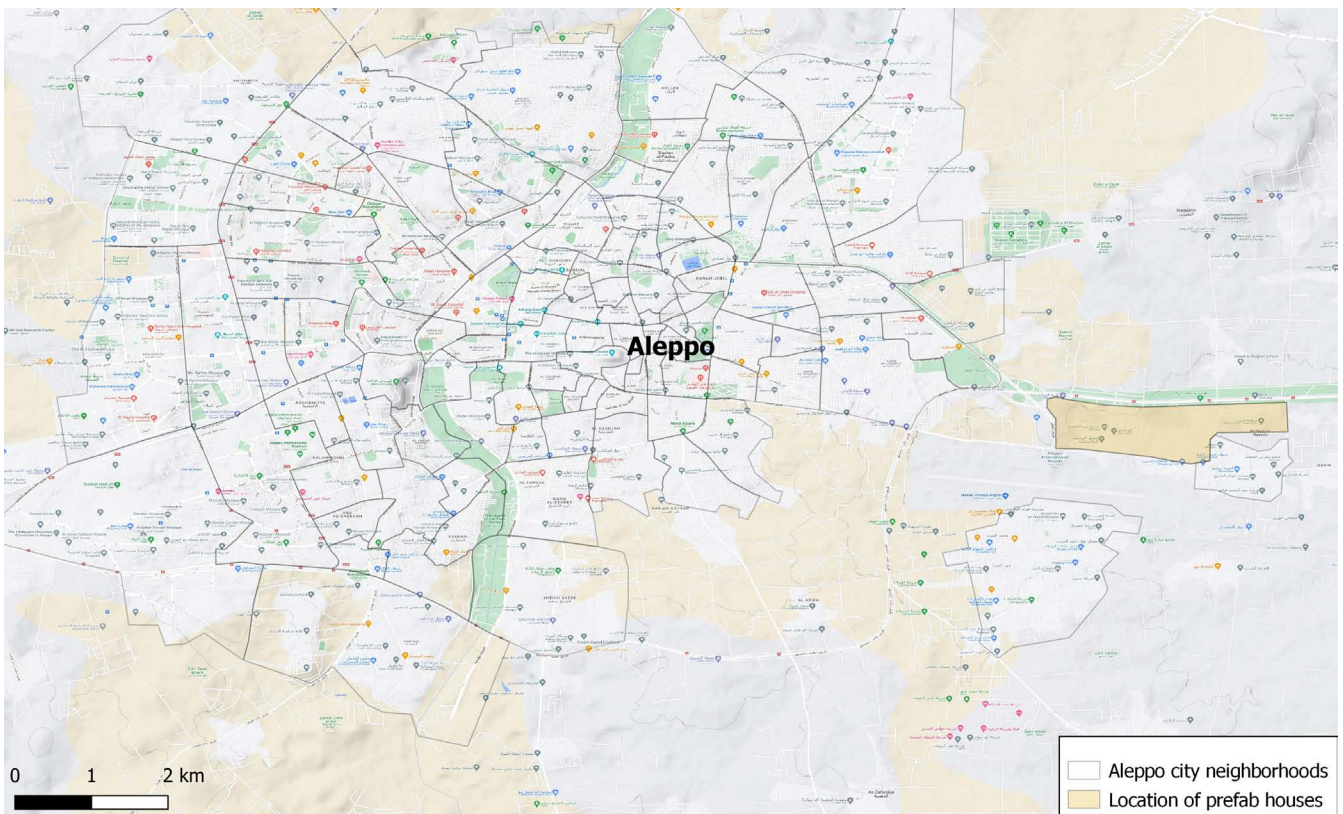
The Aleppo Chamber of Industry announced their own measures to assist displaced families, with a [budget of SYP 2 billion](#). The money, collected from charitable donations, would be used to provide SYP 2 million in financial grants to 1,000 displaced families to support rent payments. Media sources reported that approximately 500 families have received the grants with the Chamber working on providing money to the remaining 500. The Chamber will also reportedly be [rehabilitating 400 housing units](#) in Hanano (Aleppo subdistrict).

The Head of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry, Fares Shihabi, [criticized the use of prefabricated housing](#), saying that “it is not a solution, even if it is going to be a temporary one for the duration of the year. No family can live in a prefabricated house for more than five years, which is why available real estate should be surveyed and used either as rental units, or donated for a period of time, in addition to granting them tax exemptions to help them cope with the crisis.” Shihabi suggested that a better solu-

tion would be to facilitate access to empty housing complexes, apartments and dormitories in western Aleppo, of which there are almost 6,000, and to help families pay their rent and assist in paying for their existing properties to be restored if needed.

Criticism hints at latent tensions

Shihabi’s criticism of the PMU’s plan to install prefabricated houses, while valid, is likely to also be fueled by concerns over the growing Iranian presence in Aleppo. Ever since Iran-backed militias spearheaded the assault on opposition-held parts of the city in 2016 and [helped the Syrian government recapture it](#), they have been present in force setting up military bases across the governorate and near the city. Iran-backed militias began to maintain security and govern parts of the city, to the extent that the PMU was the primary managing force behind the humanitarian response and relief efforts in the city following the earthquake. Moreover, Iran’s consul in Aleppo reportedly [surveyed the city before local government officials](#) were able to, assessing the damage following the earthquake and establishing temporary shelters.



Map of the approximate area where PMU prefabricated houses in Aleppo

Local sources stated that this increased presence does not bode well with the city's traders, echoing Shihabi's criticism of the prefab shelters. Aleppo's traders have conducted business amongst themselves for generations, giving their business relationship a familial undertone. This has made them wary of new Iran-backed business owners. Aleppo's traders are predominantly Sunni and Christian, leading to a religious and cultural disconnect with the largely Shia Iranians, which could hinder trade.

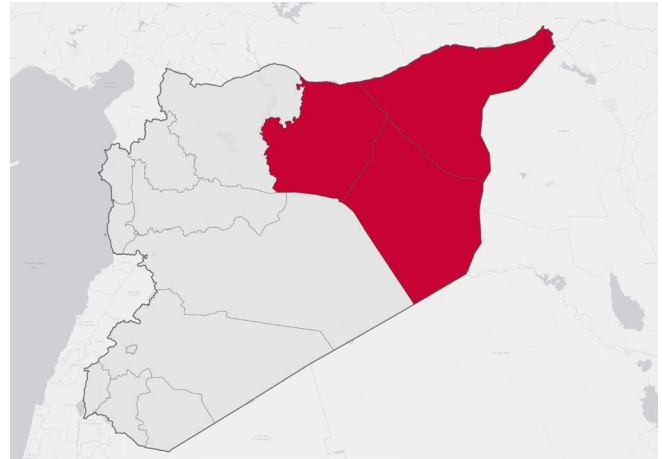
Aleppo's traders have economic influence, clout, and wealth due to their commercial activity and the status of their city as the country's economic and financial center; Aleppo is important to the national economy, contributing 24% to the national GDP in 2012. This makes the government keen to ensure the continuation of its economic activity. As an example of their leverage, even against state institutions, Aleppo's traders [went on strike](#) in August 2021 after government security agencies conducted numerous raids against their businesses; these security agencies were ultimately forced to back down and reduce their scrutiny.

Aleppo's traders hindering Iran's expansion

Despite widespread Iranian presence in Aleppo, Iran-backed militias have been less successful in expanding their influence when compared to other governorates. Local sources stated that Aleppo traders' economic clout and influence has been a contributing factor hindering this expansion. Aside from their social and civic obligations, Shihabi's proposition, the rent being paid, and the donations being distributed may be a concerted effort to minimize the opportunities presented by the earthquake's aftermath for Iran-backed militias to further expand their influence in the city. Indeed, Iran-backed militias have taken advantage of the deteriorating humanitarian situation and economic hardship as a gateway for entering communities and later indoctrinating them. Local sources have stated that it is in the traders' interests to block Iranian expansion attempts since it poses a direct threat to their economic interests. Iran-backed militias have been a nuisance for the traders' commercial activity, extorting the transportation convoys passing through their checkpoints. The larger the

Iranian economic presence in the city, the less influence local business owners have, reducing their own power and profits in the city.

Northeast



SDF faces protest against enhanced security measures

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has faced a flurry of online rumors which threaten to undermine attempts to tighten security in Al-Hasakeh city. On 2 March, media outlets circulated [news](#) of the SDF informing 350 households living in Youth Housing projects within neighborhoods of Al-Hasakeh city to evacuate their homes. Authorities affiliated with the SDF and the Autonomous Administration failed to disclose the reason behind the order – however, [rumors](#) of the SDF's intent to turn the neighborhoods into security zones to house their employees spread.

Local sources confirmed that the families were told to evacuate, but said that the numbers reported by media outlets were largely inflated. They also denied other [rumors](#) circulating online that the SDF used force to evict the residents, stressing that residents were only informed, and that no physical action had been taken against them. Furthermore, local sources disputed the idea that the SDF intended to replace existing residents with employees working in affiliated institutions, saying evacuation orders were given to secure the neighborhoods, to prevent ISIS attacks similar to the one in January

2022 where ISIS combatants [attacked](#) the al-Sina'a prison in Al-Hasakeh city housing thousands of ISIS prisoners in an incident that grew into a seven-day battle leading to the death of 79 SDF and 246 ISIS combatants and 7 civilians.

Despite the controversy over evictions, media outlets also reported that the SDF put in place measures to ensure the return of residents to their homes. On 12 March, media sources [reported](#) that those ordered to evacuate would be allowed to return pending security screenings and the ability to provide proof of residency in those neighborhoods to municipalities and the SDF's Self-Defense forces. According to local sources, while some might be able to return, others, especially the IDPs from Deir-ez-Zor – the majority of whom were asked to evacuate – will likely face obstacles.

The Youth Housing projects were built and owned by the Syrian government prior to 2011. Since then, many of these projects housed IDPs fleeing hostilities throughout northeast Syria. As a result, many are expected to be unable to provide cadastral documentation (rental agreements or proof of ownership) to prove their residency in those neighborhoods. In addition, local sources indicated that many, especially youth, would be reluctant to visit the SDF's Self-Defense forces for screening for fear of being conscripted. Local sources reported that similar evacuations with the same measures had taken place in the past. However, many were unable to return to their housing and were forced to relocate to their areas of origin.

SDF security campaigns increase disillusionment

The SDF's continued security-focused policy to combat ISIS risks solidifying negative perceptions towards it and the Autonomous Administration. [Reports](#) indicate that at least 633 individuals, including 93 women and 10 children, accused of having ties or being involved with ISIS were arrested in raids conducted by the SDF across all areas under

its control in 2022. As of the first week of March, the SDF had launched 63 arrest operations against suspected ISIS combatants in 2023, the majority in Ar-Raqqa. According to local sources, while many in Administration-controlled areas believe that the majority of arrests targeted ISIS combatants and affiliates, there is the perception that the SDF also arrested individuals known for opposing the Administration and its activities, under the false pretext of affiliations with ISIS.

Counter-ISIS policies are not the only driver widening the chasm between local communities and the SDF and the Administration. Throughout this [year](#) and [2022](#), media outlets also reported several conscription campaigns launched by the SDF across SDF-controlled areas. Local sources reported an existing perception among local communities that the SDF's conscription policy unjustly targets Arab communities and populations in northeast Syria, in comparison to Kurds who are seen to be less targeted. Similarly, seemingly ideologically-driven policies implemented by the Autonomous Administration, including attempts to impose a unified (Kurdish-leaning) curriculum, have been heavily criticized within Arab-dominated communities. Though these perceptions are neither new nor below the surface, it is important to highlight that these tensions continue to grow. Consequently, many past, present and future decisions taken by the SDF and the Autonomous Administration may be met with skepticism.

Torrential rains flood northeast

In mid-March, heavy rainstorms hit northeast Syria, flooding public infrastructure, civilian property, agricultural lands and IDP camps. The floods claimed several [lives](#), and increased humanitarian and livelihood needs in the region¹

On 15 March, the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) [announced](#) that the roads connecting Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa cities, and one connecting Ar-

¹ Rainstorms and floods also hit northwest Syria and southern provinces of Turkey, [causing](#) material damage and human losses. Hundreds of tents and newly established shelters housing earthquake-affected families in Aleppo and several houses in Idleb were damaged, with the Syrian Civil Defense [noting](#) that camp residents continue to face poor humanitarian conditions, due to worn-out shelters, insufficient provision of services and absence of adequate healthcare services.

Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor² cities were impassable due to torrential rains and the collapse of several bridges in the northeast. Local sources indicated that the road linking Al-Hasakeh city and its southern villages, the Tel Hmis–Quamishli road, and the Tell Brak–Quamishli road were closed for several days.

In Al-Hasakeh governorate, the Khabour river burst its banks, flooding dozens of [houses](#) in Ghweran, Al-Layla and Al-Nashwa neighborhoods, causing damage to civilian property; local sources added that dozens of houses and shops in rural Quamishli and Qahtaniyyeh were also heavily impacted by the floods. Households whose properties were partially collapsed reportedly took shelter in the houses of their relatives, with local sources noting that they had not received compensation from local authorities to repair the damages. In northern Ar-Raqqa, the majority of roads [leading](#) to Tell Abiad city and Suluk were cut off, while villages in rural Ar-Raqqa – Hazimeh, Rohayat and Al Meshyrfah – were impacted by the Balikh river overflowing. Households have appealed to civil society organizations to provide urgent assistance. Additionally, torrential rains [disrupted](#) services in the countryside of Ar-Raqqa – a water station feeding Karama town and its surrounding areas was suspended due to the water being cloudy (high turbidity).

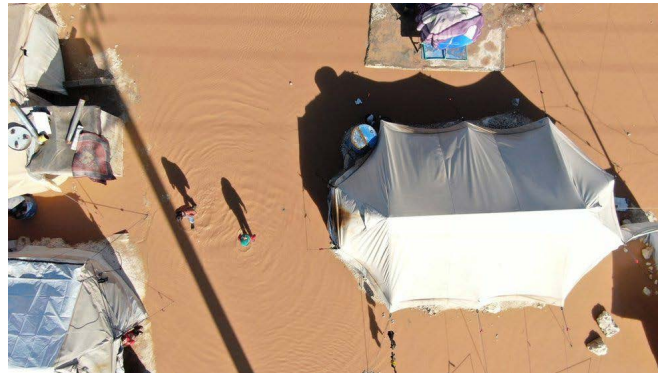
Subsequently, the Autonomous Administration's Commission of Local Administration and Municipalities [deployed](#) emergency teams to open the roads that were cut off by the floods, and to address issues related to public service [disruptions](#).

Humanitarian needs in IDP camps

Floods further worsened the provision of humanitarian aid and shelter in Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor governorates. Local sources indicated that heavy rainfall and floods damaged dozens of tents in Al-Hol, Arisha, Washokani and Serekaniye camps in Al-Hasakeh governorate and forced many families to evacuate to other tents. In northern Ar-Raqqa, Al-Shalash camp, which hosts 250 households, was severely [damaged](#), with media sources noting that people were injured by a collapsing tent.

Salman informal camp and Abu Khashab camp in rural Deir-ez-Zor, where IDPs were already suffering due to inadequate living conditions and lack of services, were also [heavily hit](#) by the rainstorms.

In response to the heavy rains, local sources indicated that emergency committees were formed to prevent further flooding in IDP sites, help affected families relocate to other tents, and distribute food, medical, hygiene, and heating supplies. IDPs in Autonomous Administration-held areas face various [challenges](#), including unemployment, unaffordability of and lack of access to basic commodities and medical supplies, and inadequate living conditions in worn-out shelters. Local authorities frequently call on humanitarian organizations to support camp residents and address their shelter, food, and healthcare needs.



Flooded tents in northeast Syria. Source: BBC News

Damage to agricultural lands

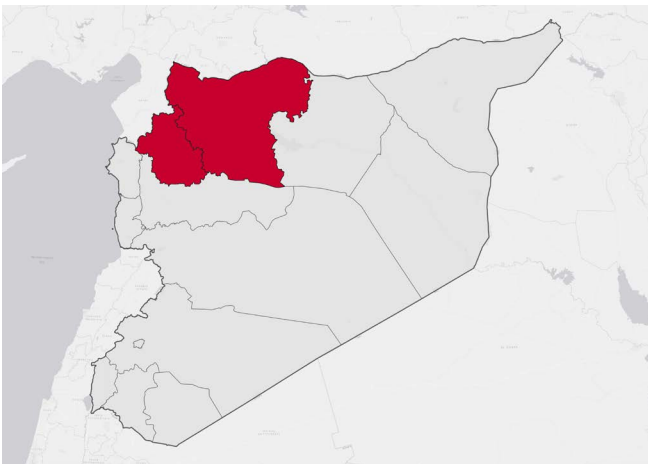
Floods hit thousands of hectares of agricultural land in rural Ar-Raqqa, [threatening](#) the primary livelihoods of a large number of families in the region. The Director of Agriculture in Ar-Raqqa, affiliated with the Syrian government, [stated](#) that 4,000 hectares (40km²) of land had been affected. Although some farmers reportedly claimed that the floods would have a positive impact on rain-fed crops, especially wheat, media sources [noted](#) that agricultural lands and agricultural machinery along the Khabour river were destroyed. In this context, the Agriculture and Irrigation Authority of the Autonomous Administration [warned](#) residents of villages near the Khabour river's banks of the rise in

² Heavy rainfall led to the closure of markets and schools in Al-Mayadin city, under the control of Iranian-backed militias.

water levels, with local sources noting that Syrian government and Autonomous Administration institutions have not implemented effective measures to support affected farmers and reduce the impact of natural hazards.

For locals, the damage caused by the floods in the northeast is yet more indication of the Administration's inability to effectively support communities. According to local sources, torrential rains and forest fires took place in 2019 and 2020 causing damage to agricultural lands and crops, with loss of agricultural inputs incurred by farmers with no significant support from local authorities. In 2022, torrential rains [caused](#) displacement from IDP camps in Ain Al Arab (Kobani). According to local sources, the Administration's response to natural disasters remains reactive – to date, the only mechanism in place to deal with such occurrences is an emergency room established by Central authorities in cooperation with its local affiliated committees (including energy and traffic) and the Kurdish Red Crescent to assist civilians affected by natural hazards in the northeast.

Northwest



Barzani Charitable Foundation delivers aid to Afrin

For what is thought to be the first time since the onset of the Syria crisis, the Barzani Charitable

Foundation has entered northwest Syria, establishing its presence to provide emergency aid in response to the February earthquake – the Foundation was among the first responders able to bring cross-border aid via Turkey into northwest Syria after the earthquake. The Barzani Charitable Foundation, which was [founded](#) in 2005 in Erbil, is directly linked to the Barzani family and the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KDP, which has a friendly relationship with Turkey, has tense relations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which is classified as a terrorist organization by Turkey and the US. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) (the leading political party among Syrian Kurds), has influence in the Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria, but is distrusted by Turkey and the KDP, who consider it the [Syrian branch](#) of the PKK. There is historically hostility between the KRG (and the KDP), and the Administration (which includes the PYD).

On 19 February, the first Barzani Foundation office in Syria was [opened](#) in Afrin city to coordinate support in the region. From 10 February to 10 March, the Foundation facilitated eight aid convoys, [benefiting](#) 60,000 affected people in 75 villages in the Afrin region, according to the Foundation's report. The aid included 57 trucks, five ambulances, and three medicine trucks, while about 11,000 food baskets were distributed. The Foundation's activities in Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo have brought to the surface long-standing frictions between authorities in the KRG and the PYD.³ KRG-aligned media sources alleged that the charity has attempted to open offices in Autonomous Administration-held areas in northeast Syria, but has been [rejected](#) by the Kurdish authorities. The Autonomous Administration also refused to allow aid sent by the KRG, from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, directly after the [earthquake](#). As a result, relief and aid teams from the Foundation had to enter Afrin via Turkey.

The aid that entered northeast Syria from Iraq came primarily from Sulaymaniyah – an Iraqi governorate home to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

3 The People's Defense Units (YPG) is a primarily Kurdish military group in Syria who make up the bulk of the SDF.

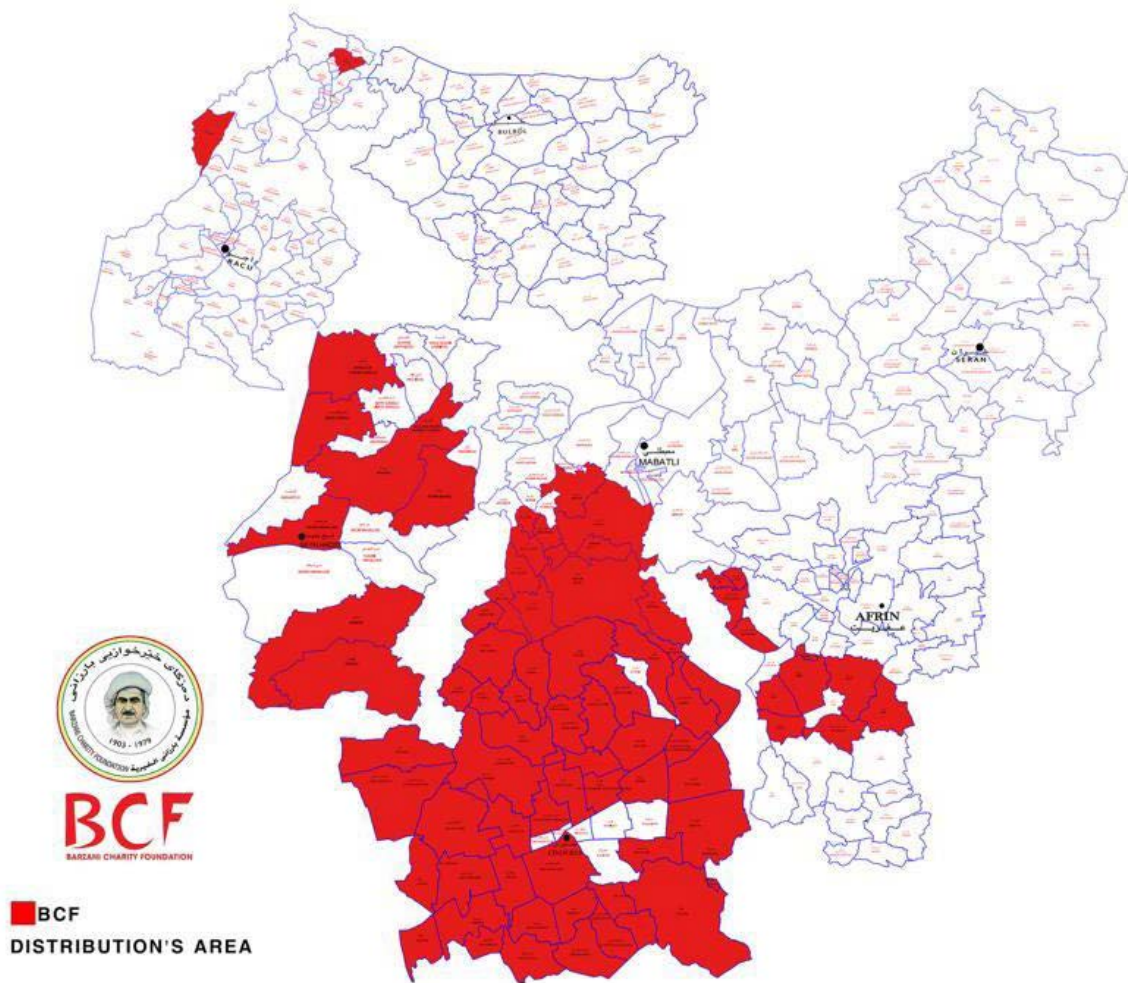
(PUK), a political group which maintains good relations with the PYD. The last of these aid convoys entered through [Yarobiya](#) crossing on 7 March, heading to the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited areas of Aleppo city that were affected by the earthquake. However, Syrian government forces, who control much of the city, also refused to allow entry of the aid – the Administration was forced to [withdraw](#) the aid on 14 March. However, on 29 March, local sources reported that the Syrian government finally allowed the convoy to pass.

Intra-Kurdish differences and their implications

[Relations](#) between the dominating political party within the KRG – the KDP headed by Masoud Barzani – and the dominating actors within the Autonomous Administration and the SDF – the PYD and the YPG respectively – are, as described above,

strained. The main points of contention are differing views on independence and statehood, cooperation with Turkey, and competition for Kurdish popular support in Iraq. The PKK allegedly [supports](#) armed groups such as the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) (in constant battle with the KDP over influence) and has [established](#) political parties such as the recently created ‘Mesopotamia’ political party in early March, headquartered in Sulaymaniyah. In turn, the KDP supports the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Administration-controlled areas, composed of several Kurdish parties and the PYD’s main political competitors in an attempt to offset PYD – and by extension PKK – influence inside Syria.

Aid provision to Kurdish communities in Syria is therefore dictated by the complex intra-Kurdish relations inside Iraq. The Sulaymaniyah governorate has traditionally been a stronghold for the KDP’s



BCF aid distribution in villages in northwest Syria. Source: BCF

competition in Iraq, the PUK (which holds several cabinet positions within the KRG). In recent years, PUK–KDP relations have continued to deteriorate as recently illustrated in [disputes](#) over budgets, [de-tails](#) within the KRI’s electoral law, and other issues within Iraq.

In light of these divisions, aid sent by the KRG for earthquake survivors indicates attempts by opposing Kurdish actors to vie for influence in Kurdish communities in northwest Syria. To send aid to Kurdish areas inside Syria affected by the earthquake, the Barzani Foundation had to travel into Turkey, to deliver aid directly to opposition-controlled areas – rather than the much more direct route through the Syrian border in the northeast, through Administration-held areas. The aid was not allowed to reach Kurdish-affected communities in Aleppo city, as it was blocked from passing through Administration-controlled border crossings and areas. Contrast this with aid sent from Sulaymaniyah, a governorate considered the stronghold of the PUK, which retains much better relations with the SDF (as exemplified in a December 2022 [visit](#) to the northeast areas by PUK president Bafel Talbani), which is allowed to pass through administration-controlled areas and reach Aleppo city.

For Turkish authorities to allow the Barzani Foundation to deliver aid via Turkey is also interesting; Turkey likely seeks to signal that its hostilities are not with the Kurds in general, but are confined to the PKK and its affiliates in the region. Therefore, coordination with Kurdish groups with distinct political backgrounds from the PKK is expected.

Kurdish civilians shot in Jandairis

In the earthquake-ravaged Kurdish-majority city of Jandairis, four Kurdish civilians were [killed](#) on the night of 20 March during the annual Nowruz (Kurdish new year) celebrations, sparking public outrage against local armed groups affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). The crime caused widespread public anger among the city’s Kurdish residents, who viewed the incident as racially-driven persecution; the perpetrators were of Arab ethnicity and accused of belonging to SNA military factions from rural Deir-Ez-Zor.

The incident started when the victims lit fires in front of their house to celebrate Nowruz; a verbal altercation occurred between the victims and the perpetrators, who allegedly feared that the fire might extend the newly built tents for those affected by the earthquake in the neighborhood. The dispute escalated into violence, and the four men were shot and killed, while others were injured. The bodies of the victims were [transferred](#) to a hospital in the city of Atma, northern Idlib, under Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s (HTS) control. Dozens of the victims’ family members went to Atma, where they demonstrated in the city and demanded HTS intervention to expel SNA factions from Jandairis. Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, the HTS commander, met the [demonstrators](#) in the street and promised them protection from further attacks.



Victims’ families demonstrating in Atma. Source: Syria TV

HTS intervention

On 21 March, the bodies of the victims arrived in Jandairis, accompanied by HTS military convoys. The funeral of the victims took place amid a massive popular demonstration in which thousands of the city’s residents participated. HTS took control of the city, the Military Police [headquarters](#), and most of the checkpoints inside and on the outskirts of the city – further clashes between civilians and SNA factions were avoided. HTS has had a presence in Jandairis since last October, after intervening in internal SNA clashes, to support the Hamzah Division against Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah; it has unofficially stationed loyal combatants in Jandairis, and strengthened this presence following the earthquake. Numbers were reinforced during the funeral.

To prevent HTS from exploiting the incident to its advantage, both the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and SNA condemned the shootings and promised to hold the perpetrators accountable. The SIG minister of defense, commanders of the SNA Corps, and members of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces also attended the funeral. On the same day, the Military Police (in cooperation with the SNA's Liberation and Construction Movement)⁴ announced that three people were [arrested](#), accused of committing the crime. This arrest, in addition to reported Turkish [pressure](#), forced HTS to withdraw from the city only hours after taking control.

HTS' involvement in the aftermath of the shootings could mark a new attempt to expand its influence to the SNA areas, a trend that has become increasingly prevalent over the last nine months. HTS' previous interventions in the SNA-held areas, in June and October 2022, came to support allied military factions against opposition armed groups; intervention in these incidents was rejected by civilians throughout northern Aleppo.

On this occasion however, HTS had popular support. By claiming to pursue justice for the Nowruz killings, HTS can claim it responded to the popular demands of an oppressed group; [media sources](#) circulated calls by the victims' families for Jolani to expel the SNA from Jandairis. HTS' is of course happy to leverage popular support to gain influence. Jolani's willingness to meet with the victims' families, and the rapid HTS response, support the HTS desire to be seen as a protector of the people. Protecting minorities is also in keeping with recent HTS initiatives to move away from accusations of intolerance and Islamic fundamentalism (as discussed in a recent HAT report on [Christian and Druze](#) minorities in Idleb).

The importance of Jandairis

Jandairis would be an important strategic location for HTS, if it wanted to expand into SNA-held areas – it is close to current HTS areas of control, and inhabited by a persecuted Kurdish minority, likely to

be more sympathetic to HTS leadership. Moreover, control over Jandairis will allow HTS to supervise the Al-Hamam border crossing with Turkey, recently reopened to allow aid to enter for earthquake victims. Maximizing control over border and cross-line corridors ultimately aligns with HTS' aim to expand sources of economic and political influence; the dispute over control of the Hamran crossing in eastern Aleppo, which is still ongoing between the HTS allies and the SNA, falls within the same context.

⁴ Created in June 2022, this formation includes Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the Sharqiya Army, the 20th Division, and Suqour al-Sham (Northern Sector), which are part of the First Corps of the Syrian National Army.

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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. HAT's most important function is to collect and analyze disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT 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.

