

MAY 2023

SYRIA
MONTHLY
REPORT



CA – SYR
CRISIS ANALYSIS – SYRIA



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



Economy & markets

Iraqi-Syrian trade relations

The Iraqi trade minister, Athir al-Ghariri, met with the Syrian petroleum minister to discuss cooperation, bilateral relations, and exchange ideas on mutual projects and investment opportunities. They discussed the importance of facilitating investment in oil and energy, specifically in relation to the rehabilitation of the Kirkuk–Banyas oil pipeline connecting the two countries.



Economy & markets

Syrian pound

The Syrian pound depreciated to a record low on the black market, reaching SYP 9,125 per USD, and appreciated slightly to SYP 8,400 per USD on 17 May, prior to the Arab League Summit



Social instability

Semalka-Fishkhabour border crossing

The US special envoy to northeast Syria, Nicholas Grainger, met with SDF and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) officials to address disagreements which led to the closure of the Semalka border crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan on 11 May. The American envoy called for coordination between northeast Syria and Iraq, and to avoid political infighting. He said the US would help work towards increased cooperation.



Humanitarian updates

Lattakia port

The first 228 Chinese prefabricated houses arrived in Lattakia and Aleppo, sent to support earthquake survivors. According to a statement by the government officials, more ships carrying a further 225 housing units and food aid are expected.

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Regional updates

Arab League

Arab states reinstated Syrian membership to the Arab League, following over a decade of suspension. During a meeting of member state officials in Egypt, it was agreed Syria would be allowed to attend the Arab League Summit, due to be held in Saudi Arabia on 18 May. The league's Secretary-General, Ahmad Aboul Gheit, said, "Syria's return to the Arab League does not mean the end of the crisis" and that "the Syrian issue cannot be settled in a day or month – settlement will take time."

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Conflict and security

As-Sanamayn

Members of the government's Security Committee met with Ankhal township's community leaders in As-Sanamayn city. During the meeting, Committee members requested that weapons be handed over and that all wanted individuals reconcile their affairs, and promised to release detainees if community leaders complied with their requests. They threatened military action if they did not.

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Humanitarian updates

Syrian refugees in Lebanon

One hundred Syrians deported from Lebanon arrived in the Al-Houkoumiyah camp in Ar-Raqqa. Media sources reported that the Ar-Raqqa Civil Council, affiliated with the Autonomous Administration, has promised to provide them with "the necessary support". The Lebanese army has allegedly carried out raids and detained dozens of Syrians since the beginning of April which have led to forced returns.

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Summary

In the aftermath of the Arab League Summit, many of Syria's Arab neighbors have been clear about their expectations of Damascus in their moves toward normalization with the Syrian government. Discussions have included the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, combating illicit narcotics activity, and increasing Arab efforts to find a solution to the Syrian conflict. The government's capability to bring about these changes remains limited, particularly with opposition from Western governments, and the continuation of opposition against Assad and sanctions against his affiliates.

In government-held areas, the Syrian pound continues to fluctuate, with a steady downward depreciation undermining any attempts by the Central Bank to stabilize foreign currency reserves and black market exchange rate. A visit by Ibrahim Raisi, the Iranian president, to Damascus, in which a number of military and economic agreements were brokered has reinforced the Syrian-Iranian relationship, important to Iran because of the need to broker regional alliances.

In the northeast, wheat and barley farmers are dissatisfied with the new purchase price for the crops set by the Autonomous Administration. They say the higher purchase price is eroded by the continuous depreciation of the Syrian pound, while expensive transportation and production inputs, and inefficient delivery mechanisms put their profits at risk. The closure (and subsequent reopening 25 days later) of the Semalka-Fishkhabour border crossing between northeast Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq highlights intra-Kurdish tension, and had a knock-on effect on commercial activity and humanitarian activities.

In the northwest, wildfires spread throughout the region, caused by dry, hot conditions, open fires in IDP camps, discarded cigarette butts in agricultural fields and shelling by government and Russian forces. The Syrian Civil Defence struggles to contain wildfires in spring and summer, with limited resources and extensive land to cover. Protests against HTS for the arrest of members of Hizb al-Tahrir, a global non-violent political party, spread throughout Idlib and Aleppo. Arrests are in line with HTS actions to remove political (and military) threats in their areas of control, and also to demonstrate opposition to extremist groups to the international community.

Cover image: Farmer harvesting wheat (Source: [Middle East Online](#))

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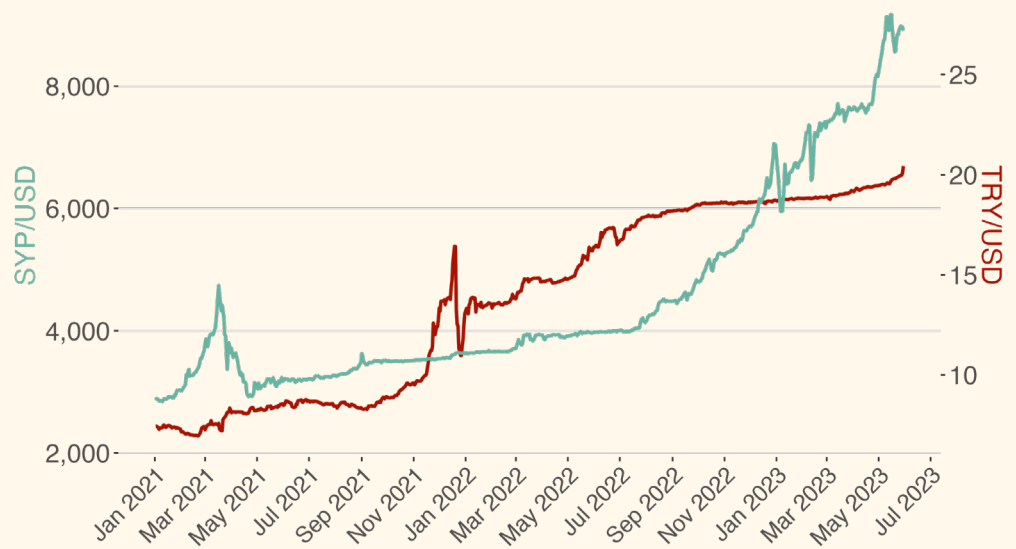
Hizb al-Tahrir arrests spark protests against HTS 16

Economic indicators

	March 2023	April 2023	May 2023
SYP/USD official exchange rate	3,000	3,000	3,000
SYP/USD parallel market rate	7557.1 (5.6%)	7,733.1 (2.3%)	8,816.2 (14%)
TRY/USD official rate	19.0 (0.9%)	19.3 (1.7%)	19.7 (2%)

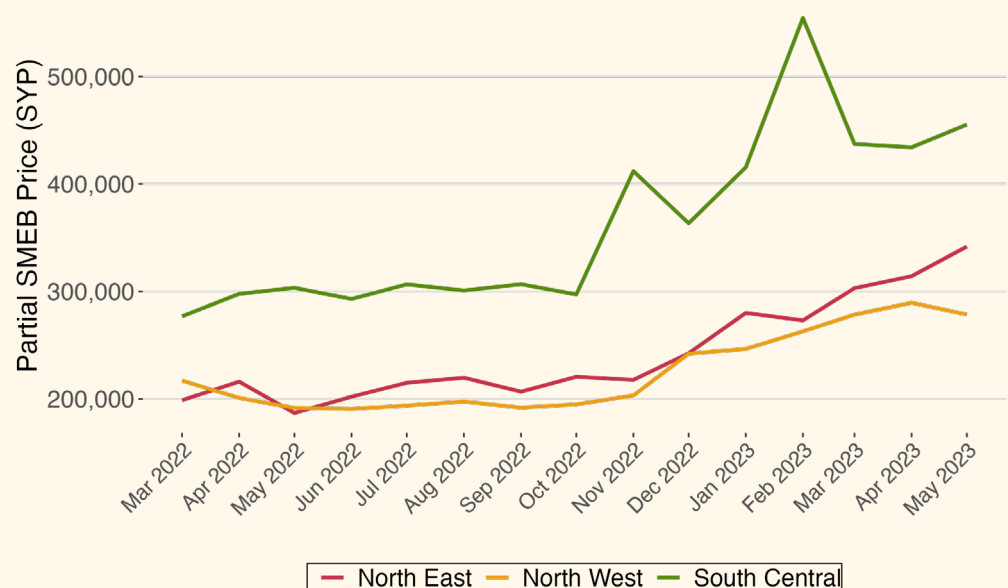
Economic indicator 1.

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



Economic indicator 2.

SYP/USD and TRY/USD, exchange rates



Economic indicator 3.

Change in partial SMEB price by zone of control,

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

International

Syria's commitments in the aftermath of the Arab League

Since Syria's readmission into the Arab League (largely attributed to Saudi support), and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's [attendance](#) at the 32nd Arab League Summit in Jeddah, Arab countries have been vocal about their requirements from Damascus, as part of normalization efforts with the government.

Based on the content of speeches, press conferences, and summit closing statements, key themes were highlighted. They included reconnecting Syria with the Arab world, preserving Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, combating illicit narcotics activity, and increasing Arab efforts to find a solution to the Syrian conflict. The Syrian government will probably benefit from recovering regional legitimacy and recognition, through improved economic and political coordination with its Arab neighbors. However, these benefits remain limited and possibly subject to change. As indicated in previous monthly reports, this is largely due to regional and western countries' stances toward the Syrian government and the Syrian government's inability, and perhaps unwillingness, to fulfill the expectations of its new regional proponents.

Curbing the narcotics trade

An issue that has been raised continuously, by Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and other regional actors, is the need to curb narcotics production and trade out of Syria. In May, some regional actors stepped up activities; on 8 May, two [airstrikes](#), allegedly ordered by the Jordanian army, first hitting a water purification plant in the village of Kharab al Shahem, a location reportedly used as a warehouse and launch point for the smuggling of illicit narcotics across the Syrian-Jordanian border. The second strike targeted the house of notorious narcotics [smuggler](#), Mer'i al Ramthan, in the village of al She'anb, killing him, his wife, and six of his children. Later in May, media sources reported that several narcotics dealers and traffickers working in As-Sweida and Dar'a governorates [received](#) text messages calling them to turn themselves into the Jordanian border guards.

The Syrian government also displayed an increased intent to curb illicit narcotics trafficking throughout May. On 2 May, the Police and Public Security Forces in the city of Al Bab, east of Aleppo, released a [statement](#) saying that the Anti-Narcotics Division had arrested members of two drug trafficking gangs. Later, a joint patrol of the government's Air Force Intelligence and Military Intelligence branches [raided](#) the house of a drug trader near al Fawwar village, western Dar'a. In another incident, a security patrol reportedly [raided](#) the farm of an accused drug dealer, near Moraba town, Busra Esh-Sham in eastern Dar'a, who managed to escape prior to the event. Finally, on 21 May, the government's Anti-Narcotics Department carried out several raids [arresting](#) drug dealers in

the city of Al Mayadin in Deir-ez-Zor. According to media outlets, two members of the Al-Qaterji militia, and others from the National Defense Forces were arrested.

Though notable, attempts to curtail the narcotics trade remain largely limited – a closer look into the individuals that were targeted reveals that they are likely to be smaller local dealers and producers. As a result, raids and arrests on these individuals are likely to have minimal effect on curtailing the narcotics trade. The only reported attempt to arrest a high-profile target was the [raid](#) in Mora-ba, in Busra Esh-Sham. According to media outlets, the dealer was believed to have vacated his residence to an unknown location following the alleged Jordanian-ordered airstrikes. Similarly, other media outlets also [reported](#) that drug dealers have started relocating from areas near the Jordanian border to other areas in Syria.

The regionalization of Syria's narcotics trade as an issue, coupled with signs by the Syrian government to conduct counter-narcotics operations, may be used as a platform to increase activity between Syria and its regional neighbors. However, Damascus' capability (and willingness) to curb illicit narcotics smuggling remains questionable. For now, those who Damascus targeted likely remain low-level drug dealers, rather than king pins. Thus, the impact of the government's actions are likely to be rather limited, especially with high-ranking officials within the government and Assad family [perceived](#) to have a role in the trade itself. Instead, these operations likely aim to display goodwill from the Syrian government to its regional neighbors

Political solution remains unlikely

Despite possible shared interests, Arab states have also varied in their willingness to cooperate with Damascus. While some countries such as Saudi Arabia have spearheaded Syrian reintegration, others, such as Qatar, refuse normalization with Damascus, outside the confines of UNSCR 2254 (which calls for a political solution to the crisis). The Emir of Qatar, Tamim Al Thani, [departed](#) from the Summit's session prior to Bashar al-Assad's opening statement. Other states such as Egypt and Jordan appear to support at least basic cooperation with Syria (potentially considering their own economic and security interests) however have also reaffirmed their commitment to UNSCR 2254.

Despite regional moves toward reintegration, western actors remain opposed to normalization. Both the [US](#) and the [UK](#) voiced their commitment to UNSCR 2254, and released statements against the Syrian government under Assad remaining in power. Most recently, members of the US Congress [introduced](#) the Assad Anti-Normalization Act to deter normalization with the Syrian government, which later [passed](#) the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 17 May.



Arab leaders group photo ahead of the Arab League summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (Source: Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs official [Twitter](#) page)

South & Central

Black market exchange rate hits a new low

Throughout May, the Syrian pound depreciated for both the unofficial (black market) and [Money Transfer and Cash Foreign Exchange](#) (MTC – used largely for remittances) exchange rates.¹ There were small fluctuations within the depreciation – prior to the Arab League summit, after Ramadan and following a new Central Bank policy to make imports more expensive – however there was generally a steep downward trend for the pound. The black market exchange rate depreciated by approximately 12% against the dollar, from [SYP 7,925 per USD](#) on 28 April to [SYP 8,875 per USD](#) by 1 June, while the MTC rate depreciated by approximately 9% during the same period.

According to media outlets, the Syrian pound reached its lowest point on 10 May, ([9,125/USD](#)), then showed a slight [improvement](#) following the Arab League Summit (to SYP 8,400), before settling at the SYP 8,875 rate. The MTC rate was similarly impacted, appreciating from SYP 8,100 to 8,000 before and after 19 May. Although it is impossible to establish direct causality between Syria's attendance at the Summit and appreciation of the pound, an increase in confidence for the pound (with greater Syrian integration within the region) is likely to positively impact exchange rates.

In addition to the Summit, the end of April marked the end of Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr. During Ramadan, money transfer companies [revealed](#) that the number of remittance transactions increased between 30–40%, with some sources reporting a 70% increase. Also, on 11 April, Bashar Al-Assad [granted](#) a one-time cash bonus of SYP 150,000 to pensioners, state employees and the military, to a total of SYP 368 billion. Media outlets also [reported](#) that the beginning of Eid saw a large influx of expatriates, and consequently, dollars into local markets. In effect, the fluctuations outlined above could be the result of the delayed impacts of significant dollar and pound injections, increasing the money supply into markets.

Government-led efforts to counter depreciation backfire

On 9 May, the Central Bank raised the rate of the customs dollar (the pound's foreign exchange rate for customs and airlines transactions) from SYP 4,000 to 6,500, a one-time 34% increase which had a detrimental impact on imports. One [aim](#) of increasing the the customs exchange rate was to protect the pound against further depreciation by reducing imports (as they are more expensive) and the subsequent demand for foreign currency. By limiting imports, a consequent shortage in supply [occurred](#) on the market for imported items (eg, electri-

¹ The [official](#) exchange rate (used for the state [budget](#) and public sector transactions) remained at SYP 3,000 per USD, and the rate used by [private banks](#) stayed at SYP 6,532 per USD.

cal appliances, imported tobacco, solar panels);² some traders would hoard their goods until the opportunity arose to make better profit margins, while others further exploited the situation by demanding prices higher than the exchange rate, to avoid future losses.³ Such actions are particularly common due to the [inefficient](#) price monitoring mechanisms set and implemented by the Ministry of Trade and Consumer Protection.

The Central Bank's priority appears to be to increase its foreign currency reserves, to steady the balance of payments deficit, and stabilize the economy. However, policies so far have failed to curb the depreciation of the pound; Syrians continue to struggle with affordability, seeing their real wages eroded week on week by black market inflation.

Iranian President visits Damascus



Official welcoming of President Ibrahim Raisi in Damascus (Source: [Enab Baladi](#))

Since March 2023, significant diplomatic developments have taken place in the Middle East, with direct ramifications in Syria. In April 2023, China brokered a historic agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia after years of indirect regional confrontation. What later followed was a number of mutual visits between Damascus and Saudi Arabia. Against this backdrop, Ibrahim Raisi, the Iranian president headed a high-ranking ministerial delegation⁴ on a [visit](#) to Damascus from 3–4 May – the first of its kind since former president Mahmoud Ahmedinijad's visit in September 2010.

² When these policies coincide with a temporary high liquidity in SYP (following the issuance of the grant and receiving money transfers), inflation can be amplified as high demand is not met by a proper level of supply, in line with the analysis put forward in the second subsection.

³ Traders in the Damascus [market](#) for electrical appliances did both, concealing part of their supplies and selling part at a rate of 10,000 SYP/USD.

⁴ The delegation included ministers of foreign affairs, defense, roads and urban development, fuel, and information and communications.

The visit showed the strategic political and symbolic value of the Damascus–Tehran alliance. Throughout the two days, multiple bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) were signed in key economic sectors, which media outlets reported as demonstrating Iran’s continued influence in Syria. Yet, the feasibility of these agreements, the level of commitment of the parties involved to carry them forward, and the extent to which they are legally binding remain uncertain.

Visit boosts economic, military and political cooperation

The strong political statement and timing of Raisi’s visit cannot be understated. Occurring amid ongoing Arab–Syrian normalization efforts and the possibility of a Turkish–Syrian rapprochement, and a few days following a Russian, Turkish, Iranian and Syrian [quadripartite meeting](#) in Moscow, it highlights Iran’s intentions to maintain its position in Syria.

On 3 May, in a [meeting](#) with Assad, Raisi praised the Syrian government’s ‘victory’ despite threats and sanctions, supporting the “legitimate government’s right to exercise its sovereignty over all Syrian territories”. This aligns with a previous statement made on 1 May by Nasser Kan’ani, spokesperson for the Iranian foreign minister, who said that Syria had now entered a [reconstruction phase](#), and that Iran’s efforts in this process will be as dedicated as its military support. Moreover, during his visit to Sayyeda Zainab, a prominent shrine south of Damascus, Raisi reinstated Iran’s [role](#) as a leader of the ‘axis of resistance’ alongside Hezbollah and the Syrian government. This visit underlines the strategic/military dimension of Iran’s presence in Syria; it enjoys a solid military footprint in the Syrian Badia and government-controlled Deir-ez-Zor governorate bordering Iraq, and has been seeking to increase its influence around the Golan Heights in the south.

Continued Iranian–Syrian military partnership was embedded in the long-term comprehensive strategic [pact](#) to increase security cooperation, signed by both presidents, as well as through the [meeting](#) between the countries’ defense ministers, where Iran’s representative voiced readiness to help equip the Syrian army and establish defense infrastructure. Additionally, an ex-Islamic revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander [claimed](#) that the meeting would include discussions about bolstering the Syrian front-line with the Golan Heights. Such developments are not novel and go in line with previous [commitments](#) from Iran to supply the Syrian Arab Army with its locally produced Khordad 15 air defense system. They also show that Iranian military influence has thus far not been undermined by Syrian–Arab normalization efforts.

Economic coordination was also at the forefront of discussion. Since 2014, Iran’s role in supporting the Syrian government has been [estimated](#) at a crucial \$8 billion⁵; the extension of credit lines have financed the import of Iranian goods and much needed fuel. The Syrian government’s dire financial situation has made it almost impossible to repay Iran’s contributions; however, it is assumed that Iran

⁵ This estimate was made by the Israeli Defense Forces According to the Syria Report, and based on leaked Iranian official documents, the Syrian government’s overall debt accrued to Iran between 2012 and 2021 is [estimated](#) much higher at \$50 billion, including both loans related to oil, commercial goods, and military supplies.

expects a satisfactory return on its years-long investment in Syria through gaining footholds in the economy.

The response to Iran's concerns have been addressed via bilateral economic agreements, which would formally shape and guarantee its economic influence in Syria. The Iranian minister of roads and urban development, Mehrdad Bazerpash, [announced](#) the establishment of a joint Committee for Follow up on Debts and Receivables during a visit to Damascus in late April 2023;⁶ the committee reportedly would work on transferring Syrian real estate properties to Iranian ownership as payment for incurred debts. Similarly, one source [reported](#) that the Syrian government will grant around 5,000 hectares of land to Iran in southern Damascus, although it is difficult to verify this claim.⁷

That said, the 15 agreements signed during Raisi's visit have augmented previous Syrian-Iranian economic deliberations. They cover a wide array of economic sectors (and subsectors), including banking, tourism, transportation, real estate, oil, energy and agriculture. Iran has been active for years in many of these sectors, the focus on transportation-related deals (land-based and aerial) that facilitate commercial trade signals Iran's attempt to [monopolize](#) this key sector. These sectors indeed carry a significant weight in the Syrian government's economy; according to the [Syria Report](#), the energy (water, electricity, and gas) sector ranked third for budgetary expenses in 2022 (SYP 253.7 billion) while agriculture came third, followed by financial markets, insurance, and real estate, then transportation. On a different note, one MoU also [stipulated](#) a plan to establish a joint bank and adopt national currencies in bilateral trade transactions. If implemented, it would allow both countries to engage in import-export transactions using the Syrian pound and Iranian rial, reducing reliance on the already scarce foreign currency (primarily US dollars) due to existing sanctions. Discussions about establishing a joint bank have occurred on several occasions before, with media sources reporting this in [late 2019](#), [late 2021](#), and early [this year](#), but there is no definitive evidence that it has been established.

Nature of economic cooperation in question

Although the Syrian government will likely share the benefits from this economic cooperation, concerns persist as to the relative distribution of these benefits with Iran, and the viability of some agreements. For instance, the agreement to remove tariffs on exports might have a detrimental impact on the already stumbling Syrian balance of payments. According to the Syria Report, the Syria-Iran [trade balance](#) for the first four months of 2022 was \$-76.7 million (Syria exported \$6.5 million and imported \$83.2 million worth of goods). On 20 March 2023, an Iranian official spokesman announced that Iranian exports to Syria [jumped](#) by

⁶ The Syrian-Iranian Economic Committee also [agreed](#) on removing the customs fees on exported goods and carrying on work on the Shalemja- al Basra railway (connecting Shalemja in Iran, Basra in Iraq, and Lattakia in Syria), allowing Iran to invest in Syria oil fields, and rehabilitate/establish existing/new power stations to alleviate the electricity crisis.

⁷ Similarly, another source [reported](#) a vibrant real estate activity, involving Iranian-backed actors, across the Homs-Damascus motorway, the Harasta-Duma Road (Eastern Ghouta), and near Adra industrial zone. Local sources confirmed the activities, adding that Iranian-backed armed actors are seeking to connect their territories of control through purchasing and acquiring land in the zone between Deir ez-Zor, and Damascus, and the eastern Lebanese-Syrian borders.

11.4% during the past calendar year. However, the treasurer of the joint Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce expressed his [concerns](#) about the extant trade imbalance, adding that measures should be taken to improve the quality standards of Syrian products and facilitate access to the Iranian market.

Year	Total	Exports	Imports	Balance of payments
2020-2021	139,341,135	17,428,415	121,912,720	-104,484,305
2021-22 (11 months)	232,689,508	27,291,205	205,398,303	-178,107,098
2022 (4 months)	89,700,000	6,500,000	83,200,000	-76,700,000

Syria-Iran Trade Balance (USD) - Source ([Syria Report](#))

A key topic during the discussions was Iran's ability to support improvements to Syria's electrical infrastructure, partly to end electricity shortages in government-held areas – though this support remains in question. To begin with, the head of the Iran Grid Management Company stated that it would [not be possible](#) to connect electricity from Iran to Syria due to the absence of shared land borders; he added that such a prospect would require cooperation with Iraqi authorities, an unlikely scenario. Iran has [rehabilitated](#) two units of the Aleppo city thermal power station and is planning to inaugurate two power stations that run on gas, according to its energy minister. Additionally, Iran and Syria reportedly agreed to [expand](#) the credit line towards electricity-related transactions. At the time of writing, there has not been any information about major electricity-related projects, but a significant Iranian investment in this sector would eventually reflect on both electricity provision and prices. Lastly, whether Iran will be committed to honor the recent deals remains to be seen, with one source [noting](#) that MoUs are not legally binding and rather set the groundwork for potential formal agreements.⁸

Raisi's visit to Damascus has come at what seems to be a turning point in the regional dynamics of the Middle East. The Saudi-Iranian restoration of ties can potentially stabilize the region, but it may not necessarily contribute to further developments in Syria, as Saudi Arabia's priority concern could lie elsewhere (such as neighboring Yemen). Meanwhile, the political and symbolic rhetoric of the visit shows an insistence by Iran to maintain its strategic presence in Syria and further increase its economic influence. In terms of economic bilateral relations, the visit may pave the way for a potential improvement of service provision in government-held areas if the signed MoUs and deals are implemented. Nevertheless, the strong emphasis placed on economics may rather be a politically motivated facade and a signal to the Gulf states (primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE), whose vast resources will be fundamental and much needed once Syria enters the post-war reconstruction phase.

⁸ Several (around [6-8](#)) deals signed during Raisi's visit to Damascus were MoUs.

Northeast Syria

The 2023 wheat and barley season

Purchase price increases offset by record depreciation

The Autonomous Administration has increased the official purchase price for wheat and barley for the 2023 harvest season, to \$0.43 (SYP 3,870) and \$0.35 (SYP 3,150) per kg respectively. These prices are approximately 38% and 57% higher than the SYP 2,800 and SYP 2,000 per kg prices set by the Syrian government for [wheat](#) and [barley](#), respectively. The prices set by the Autonomous Administration are also approximately 76% and 97% higher than the prices it set for the previous season. The Administration's price announcement also came at the backdrop of statements by the co-president of the Economic Commission [revealing](#) that the projections for wheat this season are at 1 million tonnes; a figure nearly triple the 388,000 tonnes produced in the [2022](#) season.

Farmers continue to be dissatisfied however – continued depreciation of the Syrian pound is likely to negate any increase in profits, while higher costs of production inputs (fertilizer, transportation, irrigation) further erode margins. In 2022, the purchase price for wheat and barley was based on an unofficial exchange rate of SYP 4,100 per USD. As discussed above, rates as of 1 June have depreciated to SYP 8.875 – the value of the pound has decreased by approximately 116%. Additionally, local sources report that different price brackets for the quality of the wheat, again set by the Administration, will mean some farmers will be paid less than the promised \$0.42 per kg if their harvests come up short on inspection.

Farmers dissatisfied

Local sources and media outlets reported farmers' dissatisfaction with the purchase price. On 9 May, media outlets circulated a [statement](#) by a number of community leaders from Deir-ez-Zor, labeling the pricing as "unfair." Field data shows that the average cost of cultivating one dunam of irrigated wheat in Al-Ha-sakeh increased by 45% from an average of SYP 257,000 to SYP 372,750. Data for production costs in Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa is unavailable, however local sources indicated that the costs have also significantly increased. Poor logistical planning has meant transportation costs have also gone up; lorry owners transporting wheat to one of the 24 [delivery centers](#) set up by the Administration are asking for up to \$250 for their services, further adding to farmers' expenses.

Lorry and transportation costs are exacerbated by how the Administration operates its centers. According to local sources, farmers can sell their produce at 24 centers throughout the northeast, however, these centers are not all open simultaneously; one opens when the other reaches full capacity. This has led to farmers and lorries being forced to wait, days in some cases, to sell their produce, and are asking farmers to pay up to \$25 per night, while the wheat stock

within the lorries degrades. Farmers in the northeast lack options; harvests have been good, however with an inability to make reliable profits, livelihoods are at risk.

Semalka–Fishkhabour border crossing reopens after 25 days

On 11 May, the Semalka Border Crossing Administration [announced](#) that the Semalka– Fishkhabour border crossing connecting northeast Syria to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) will be closed from May 12, until further notice – it was then reopened on the 5 June, after 25 days, with civilian, humanitarian and commercial movement allowed to resume.⁹ European and Iraq resident permit holders were [allowed](#) to cross into the KRI on 13, 15, and 17 May, while residents from the northeast were allowed to cross into Syria on the same day.

Intra-Kurdish tensions

Throughout May, Kurdish actors within northeast Syria and the KRI released statements blaming each other for the closure of the border. On 12 May, the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) – a group of political parties operating in the northeast – released a [statement](#) justifying the KRG’s order to close the border. According to the statement, the closure came as a response to the Administration preventing KNC members from crossing into the KRI on 11 May, while stressing that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – the Administration’s ruling party – continues to exploit the crossing for its political agenda. On 15 May, the Fishkhabour border crossing administration [justified](#) its decision, stating that they could not “remain silent to the PYD’s tyranny”, and revealing that the PYD had attempted to smuggle weapons into the KRI to “sow unrest and strife”. The following day, the Semalka border crossing administration [condemned](#) both statements, the decision to close the border, and denied all accusations against the PYD.

There are long-standing intra-Kurdish divisions between the dominating parties of the KRI and northeast Syria. The PYD and People’s Defense Units (YPG) are currently the main actors in the Autonomous Administration and among the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Meanwhile, the KRG’s dominant party is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). As reported in CA-Syria’s 2023 March Monthly [report](#), the main points of contention are differing views on independence and statehood, cooperation with Turkey, and competition for Kurdish popular support in Iraq.

Similar to many, the KDP also considers the PYD to be the [Syrian branch](#) of the PKK; which also has



Semalka Border Crossing on the Syrian - Iraqi border - (Source: [Rudaw Arabia](#))

⁹ European and Iraqi resident permit holders were [allowed](#) to cross into the KRI on 13, 15, and 17 May, while residents of northeast Syria were allowed to cross into Syria at the same time.

tense relations with the KDP and is engaged in battle over influence in Kurdish communities. 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 the 'Mesopotamia' political party in early March. In turn, the KDP supports the 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.

The recent closure of the border has precedence, and is usually caused by an intensification of the rivalries between the actors. For example, [skirmishes](#) between the PYD-affiliated Revolutionary Youth Union and the KRG border forces in December 2021 prompted the KRG to close the border for over a month. Similarly, the KRG [partially](#) closed the border in May 2013, only allowing humanitarian and medical patients into the KRI, after PYD reportedly detained 75 Syrian KDP-affiliated politicians in northeast Syria.

Border closure stops trade, while aid workers are evacuated

Over the years, the Semalka–Fishkhabour has become an important economic [lifeline](#) for trade across the border, for steel, sugar, cement and fertilizers. Large-scale vegetable traders have also brought convoys into the KRI from the northeast. Tariffs imposed on imports on both sides are now an important revenue stream for the dominating parties.

The closure of the crossing has therefore affected several sectors. On 30 May, commercial trucking companies in Quamishli were [reported](#) to have closed their offices forcing the majority of their employees into unemployment. On 1 June, the head of the Pharmacists Union in Quamishli [told](#) media outlets that stocks of infant formula in the city would only last ten more days, adding that given that 90% of the product is imported from the KRI, the “the continued closure of the crossing will lead to a catastrophic situation.” The head of the Pharmacists Union also accused traders of increasing their prices under the pretext of the border's closure. Similarly, residents in Ar-Raqqa [revealed](#) to media outlets that the price of a tonne of cement increased from \$105 to \$250 because of the closure, causing construction to stop.

The work of NGOs and humanitarian organizations was also impacted. Several international NGOs [withdrew](#) their international staff from the area, worried about them getting stuck in the northeast, while agencies were concerned that aid and medical deliveries would not be able to enter Syria. The crossing is now open again, however there have been limited details on the causes (and resolutions) making the likelihood of further closures unclear.

Northwest Syria

Wildfires spread across northwest



Fires in agricultural lands in Idleb.

The Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) [responded](#) to 145 wildfires throughout the northwest in May, 40 more than in April.¹⁰ The fires caused material damage to civilian homes, bakeries, IDP camps, agricultural lands, and primitive fuel refinery stations, while few civilian injuries were recorded.

Fires in northwest Syria are common, and increase in April and throughout the summer, with dry conditions meaning they spread quickly and can be difficult to contain. The use of unsafe cooking methods in IDP camps is a common cause, as is discarded cigarette butts sparking in fields during harvests. Government and Russian forces have also been known to target agricultural land, setting fires during the harvest season in the past.

Civil Defense struggles to contain fires with limited resources

Since the beginning of May, the Civil Defense has intensified awareness campaigns to prevent fires and developed a plan to respond to agricultural crop fires by setting up positions close to cultivated areas as main response centers, establishing advanced firefighting points and strengthening them with the necessary equipment, materials and volunteers. The Civil Defense's ability to control the number of fires remains limited due to the wide area they cover and with the limited resources available (the Civil Defense covers the areas of northwest Syria from Jabal Al-Zawiya, south of Idleb, to Jarablus, east of Aleppo). Agricultural lands during the harvest season and IDP camps are the most vulnerable to fires – they are often difficult to reach, while camps can be overcrowded, with many flammable tents.

¹⁰ The CA-SYR team counted 145 fires in May through the Civil Defense Facebook page, which announces the number of recorded fires on an almost daily basis.

Fears of government shelling causing fires along frontlines

On 31 May, government forces [targeted](#) agricultural fields in the al-Ghab plains, causing extensive wildfires which could not be contained (as the bombardment continued). As a military tactic, targeting land pre-harvest is useful, both reducing resilience along the frontlines and preventing economic activity. Families in these areas have been left without livelihoods, while much-needed crops have been destroyed. Since the February earthquakes, the government has increased shelling in southern Idlib – should this continue, further fires are likely.

Hizb al-Tahrir arrests spark protests against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham



Women's protests against HTS arrests in Idlib (Source: [Baladi News](#))

Dozens of demonstrations were held in more than 11 villages in HTS-controlled areas, protesting an HTS' [arrest campaign](#) which targeted members of Hizb Al-Tahrir (Liberation Party). HTS arrested 20 members of Hizb Al-Tahrir, including the head of the media office. During one of the arrests on 7 May, a member of the HTS Public Security Department was [killed](#) and another was injured after their car was shot at in the village of Deir Hassan. This incident led to further arrests, under the order from General Security, justifying the actions by calling the accused of being "a group of slanderers, deserters, and those who tamper with the security of the region, based on a judicial order issued by the Security Prosecution."

For the first time, the demonstrations spread widely in the northwest; first concentrated in Kelly, Atmeh, and Atareb subdistrict, and despite HTS attempting to tighten security and disperse protesters, they [spread](#) to northern Aleppo, to Azaz, Al-Bab, Bab Al-Salama, Mare', and Suran. The protestors in Aleppo refused to allow HTS into their subdistricts, while those in Idlib were led mainly by women: all demanded the release of the detained.

Background of Hizb Al-Tahrir

Hizb Al-Tahrir is a global Islamic political party that calls for the return of an Islamic caliphate and rejects national borders.¹¹ As a non-violent group its mandate is to use political means to achieve its goals (rather than military action), however its ideology is considered extreme by many governments, leading to the group being [banned](#) in many Arab and Asian countries, as well as in Germany, Russia and Turkey.¹² Since 2011, Hizb Al-Tahrir has increased its presence in opposition-controlled areas, where its [activities](#) have been limited to media support, lectures, and discussions. The party does not have an official headquarters in Syria, but activities are largely concentrated in western Aleppo and Idlib – it does not have extensive support or influence in the areas due to the lack of relief or service activities, but at the same time, its presence is distinguished by a high degree of organization and media activity which can at times exaggerate its role (reflected in the coverage of protests).

Behind the arrests

HTS has arrested members of Hizb Al-Tahrir in the past, but it appears to have been the scale of recent arrests which caused the protests. HTS justified its campaign by saying that “members of Hizb Al-Tahrir had coordinated individuals and groups wanted by the judiciary, to establish cells to target the revolution, accuse them of treason and demonize liberated areas by distorting their image.”

These justifications are difficult to verify, and there are other reasons for the arrests. HTS seeks permanently and continuously to ensure its unilateral control over its areas of influence in Idlib and western Aleppo and to eliminate all potential threats. Hizb Al-Tahrir is vocal against HTS policy, and although uses non-violent means, poses a challenge to authorities particularly if it can gain popular support. With the Turkish relationship with Damascus thawing, HTS is even more intent on representing the northwest as the only realistic group capable of governing; should Hizb Al-Tahrir gain popular support this could be threatened. The arrests signal to other potential groups that dissent against HTS will not be tolerated.

Additionally, Hizb Al-Tahrir’s extremist ideology, known globally, is likely to impact HTS’ attitude towards it. HTS would like to be seen as combaters of extremism (despite being classified terrorists by some countries), so arrests could also be further efforts to improve HTS’ image internationally.

¹¹ Hizb Al-Tahrir was [founded](#) in Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, who used to work as a judge in the Court of Appeal in Jerusalem. The party is currently led by the Jordanian [Ata bin Khalil Abu al-Rashtah](#).

¹² It has members in many Arab countries, the most important of which are Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia.



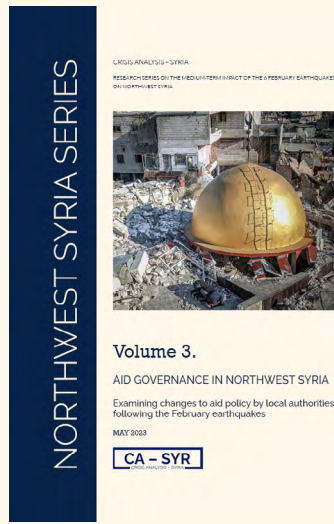
CA-Syria Monthly Report, April 2023

Syria, with help from Saudi diplomatic efforts, has been readmitted into the Arab League.

In government-held areas, assassinations of individuals involved in illicit narcotics activities increased. A frustrated Jordanian government launched airstrikes, inside Syria, targeting the narcotics trade. Also, the return of Palestinian refugees to the camp post-reconstruction has been marred with difficulties.

In the northeast, there was an increase in clashes between tribes. The role of social media to instigate and exacerbate the disputes is new. In Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, food prices increased, while access to potable water is scarcer.

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

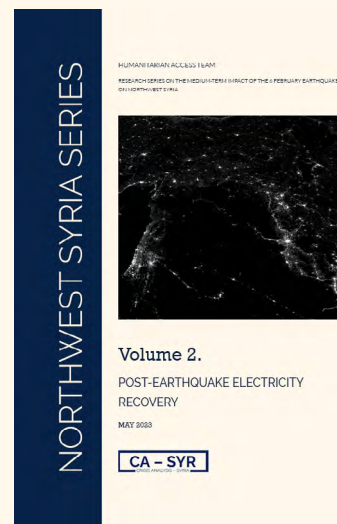


NWS Series Vol. 3

Aid governance in northwest Syria

We are pleased to share the third installment of the Northwest Syria Series, in which we unpack the recent operational environment for aid programming in northwest Syria following the February earthquakes.

Through an assessment of the recently established Directorate for the Affairs of Earthquake Victims in Idleb and parallel governance approaches in northern Aleppo, our report aims to clarify the approach governing actors are taking toward aid actors and other stakeholders within the post-earthquake recovery.



NWS Series Vol. 2

Post-Earthquake Electricity Recovery

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

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

