

JUNE 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.



## Regional updates

### Intra-Kurdish relations

The Semalka border crossing between northeast Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) reopened, with trade, transportation of aid, and civilian movement allowed again.



## Social instability

### Protests against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

There were multiple demonstrations against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader Abu Mohamed al-Jolani in the northwest. During a peaceful demonstration in Idleb, HTS security forces tried to separate the protesters. As a reaction, protestors expelled the HTS security forces, while other protestors assaulted them. Similarly, women began protesting in A'zaz city in the Aleppo countryside. The protests spread into public demonstrations against HTS and Al-Jolani in different areas of Idleb and Aleppo countryside.



## Humanitarian updates

### Food security

The World Food Program announced it will be forced to cut food aid to 2.5 million people because of a lack of funding, out of 5.5 million people receiving assistance in Syria. The announcement comes ahead of the seventh Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region'.



## Humanitarian updates

### Rukban IDP camp

The Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) delivered the first US aid shipment in eight years to Rukban IDP camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border. The aid shipment contained seeds, irrigation tools, and school supplies. More aid, including baby supplies, prenatal vitamins, school books, and food, will be sent in the following weeks. This marks a shift in US policy towards Rukban, as it previously claimed the responsibility for aid provision rested with Damascus.

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## Economy & Markets

### Syrian Salvation Government

Wheat farmers in Idleb complained that the purchase price for wheat set by the SSG's Ministry of Economy is too low. The Ministry set the price of first-class hard wheat at \$320 per tonne, compared to last year's \$450.

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## Politics and policy

### Foreign ISIS fighters

Autonomous Administration officials revealed that they have been working on establishing independent courts to prosecute foreign ISIS fighters who are in its custody in accordance with both domestic and international terrorism laws.

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## Humanitarian updates

### 7th Brussels Conference

During the 7th Brussels Conference, the EU and member states pledged EUR 9.6 billion in support for Syria. International financial institutions and donors have also made pledges of EUR 4 billion in the form of loans. During the conference UN agencies stated that only a tenth of the funds needed to support Syria have been secured for 2023.

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## Public health

### Cholera in northwest Syria

Medical teams in the northwest, in collaboration with the WHO, have completed the second Cholera vaccination campaign; 1,119,799 people received the vaccine. Cholera spread to most parts of Syria as of August 2022, infecting thousands and causing more than 100 deaths.

## Summary

### Economic indicators

### International

Syrians attempt to flee new conflict in Sudan

### South and Central

Syrian government expects bumper wheat harvest

Depreciation, inflation and low wages as 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line

New round of settlements in Dar'a attract high turnout

### Northeast Syria

Administration students seek government qualifications

Activists stand against narcotics traders in Ar-Raqqa

### Northwest

Seasonal water shortages in Al-Bab

Truck drivers protest in northern Aleppo

# Summary

Displaced Syrians in Sudan, in the face of civil war, are scrambling to leave. Many have made their way to Port Sudan on the coast, where they are trying to find ways out. One option has been repatriation flights, while some have paid thousands for commercial flights. Others who cannot return to Syria, and are unable to travel to third countries have resorted to paying smugglers to take them into Egypt, at great risk to themselves.

The bumper wheat harvest of 2023 has failed to translate into bumper profits for farmers. High production costs, coupled with a low government purchasing price and increased transportation fees mean farmers are facing a loss. Food prices in general in government-held areas continue to increase, with the usual suspects of depreciation, supply problems, import restrictions and poor economic policy all contributing factors.

In Dar'a, government security forces are implementing a new round of settlements, which have attracted an unexpectedly high turnout – the majority of settlement joiners have been civilians who seek military service deferrals and travel permissions. Local grievances, violence and general distrust in the government persists however, undermining the purpose of settlement procedures to promote reconciliation and stability.

Students in the northeast have been traveling to government-controlled areas to take exams. Qualifications awarded by the Autonomous Administration remain unaccredited, both in Syria and abroad; for students to secure recognized qualifications they must pass exams based on the government's curriculum. This however is proving increasingly costly, and challenging.

Narcotics traders in Ar-Raqqa are being exposed by a social justice group on Facebook – this has led to several arrests by the Internal Security Forces. Civil engagement in security is a positive step with the Syrian Democratic Forces, who have historically reacted harshly to civilian activism.

Seasonal water shortages are happening again in Al-Bab city, with wells supplying the city drying up in the summer. There are two solutions to the long-standing problem; one is to rely on the Syrian government to restore water pumping to the city (unlikely), and the other is to build new infrastructure from the Euphrates, which will take time. Residents are unlikely to see their struggles alleviated any time soon.

Truck drivers who have seen their jobs eroded are protesting across Turkish-backed areas. Turkish trucks and drivers are now allowed to transport produce into Syria, instead of unloading and reloading into Syrian trucks at the border. Although ostensibly pragmatic, this decision increases dependence on Turkey and puts the truck-driving industry in northern Aleppo at risk, in an area where both industry and job opportunities are already extremely limited.

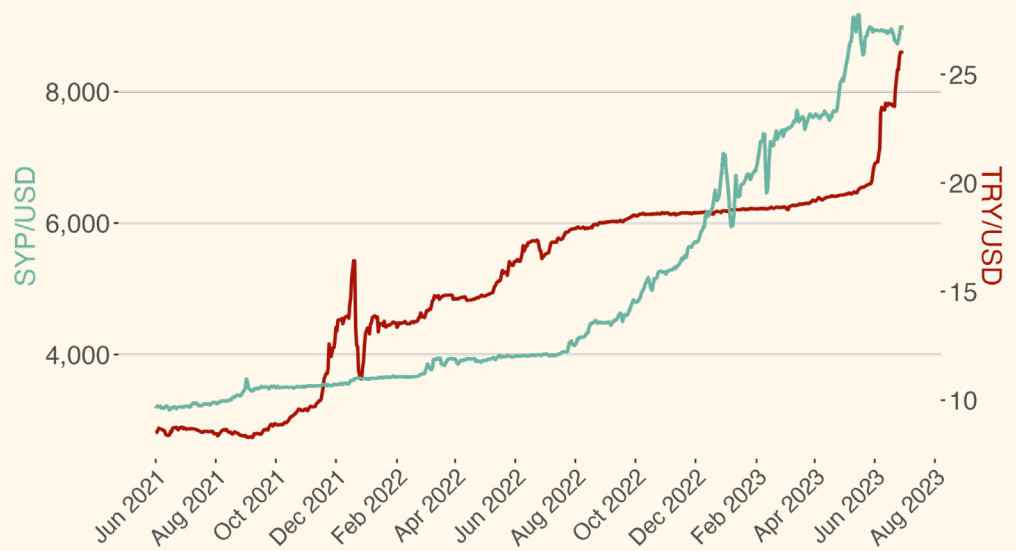
Cover photo: Ferry in Port Sudan taking passengers to Saudi Arabia. (Source: [Al-Jazeera](#))

# Economic indicators

	April 2023	May 2023	June 2023
SYP/USD official exchange rate	3,000	3,000	3,000
SYP/USD parallel market rate	7,733.1 (2.3%)	8,816.2 (14%)	8,903 (0.9%)
TRY/USD official rate	19.3 (1.7%)	19.7 (2%)	23.7 (20%)

**Economic indicator 1.**

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



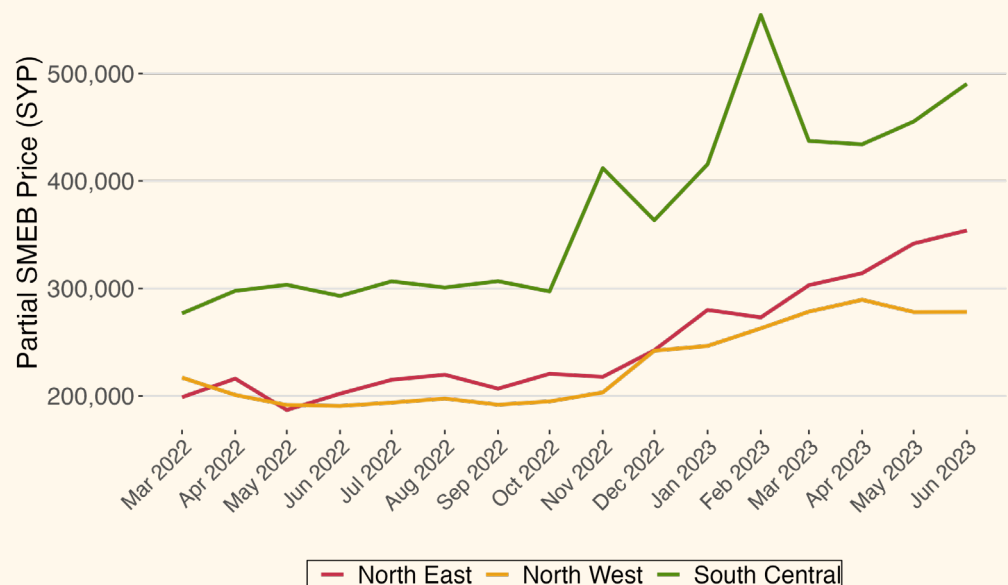
**Economic indicator 2.**

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

## Syrians attempt to flee new conflict in Sudan

On 15 April, [clashes](#) broke out in Sudan between the Sudanese Army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), with the fighting [ongoing](#) into July. Home to approximately [100,000](#) Syrian migrants and refugees, many were displaced by the conflict and sought refuge in the coastal city of [Port Sudan](#), after running [out](#) of food and water, and losing access to basic [amenities](#) such as running water and electricity. The choices available for Syrians are limited and dependent on their financial means, their [political](#) and legal status with the Syrian government, and their ability to resettle in a third host country.

### Repatriation efforts fall short

In what appeared to be an attempt to respond to the crisis, media outlets reported that the Syrian government initiated repatriation flights for Syrians with the support of [Saudi Arabia](#), [Jordan](#), [Algeria](#), and [Cham Wings](#) (the privately owned Syrian airline) on 26 April. The three states evacuated hundreds of Syrians from Sudan, via their capitals and on to Damascus. Similarly, the Autonomous Administration [announced](#) the establishment of a “specialized committee” aiming to work and coordinate the repatriation of Syrian nationals originally from areas under its control on 27 April. By 2 June, the committee was reportedly able to repatriate [369](#) Syrians, including women and children, in three trips. The trips were coordinated with Cham Wings and [paid](#) for by the Autonomous Administration.

Although repatriation flights were promised, many Syrians preferred to guarantee their travel (amid an uncertain number of repatriation flights) by paying for their own commercial flights – for example, by buying a Cham Wings flight to Damascus. The costs were prohibitive to many; not only were passengers expected to buy an [air ticket](#) for \$590, but allegedly also had to pay an additional [bribe](#) of \$500–1,000 to brokers of Cham Wings in Damascus to guarantee the seat and safe return. Because some Syrians were unable to return to Syria for political or socio-economic reasons, and others did not have passports to be able to enter neighboring countries, smuggling networks were reportedly formed. It was reported that two smuggling [routes](#) to Egypt were set up, the first through the sea from Port Sudan and the second by land from Wadi Haifa. The cost of smuggling on these routes reportedly ranged from \$1000–2000.

The repatriation efforts promised by the Autonomous Administration and supported by the Syrian government stopped after just three flights, with planned trips [postponed](#) until further notice. Reports emerged of a disagreement between the Administration and Damascus, who were supposed to be coordinating the flights, causing them to be grounded. In mid-June it was [revealed](#) that the third flight was pressured into landing in Damascus by the Syrian government, which was [trying to claim](#) that it had provided free flights – the Administration then announced it was halting further flights until an alternative plan was found

while [thousands](#) remained stuck in Sudan and waited for support. Media reports indicated that the national Syrian airline, Syrian Air, had announced four [repatriation](#) flights from Port Sudan to Damascus. The flights were scheduled to [land](#) in Port Sudan every Friday from 30 June until 21 July. Limited information was found to clarify the credibility or follow-through of this announcement.



*Internally displaced people in Port Sudan. (Source: [Open Democracy](#))*

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# South and Central

## Syrian government expects bumper wheat harvest



*Farmers harvest wheat in government-controlled Syria, where officials are expecting higher than average crop yields. (Source: The National)*

The Syrian government [announced](#) on 22 June that approximately 426,000 tonnes of wheat had been collected during the harvest season so far, an improvement from the 276,000 collected last year during the same period. Mohamad Hassan Qatana, the minister of agriculture, had [said](#) that he expects a rise in domestic levels of wheat production that could enable the government to reduce 50% of its wheat imports. Additionally, during a visit to Hama governorate to oversee the wheat collection process the prime minister Hussein Arnous [stated](#) that wheat production is expected to reach 350,000 tonnes in Hama alone and that the government is aiming to collect a total of 1 million tonnes overall.

### Increased production a result of improved government support

A primary contributing factor to improved harvests is likely to have been improved rainfall in government-held areas. This, coupled with [newly developed](#) seeds that are more drought resistant, need less water and can handle elevated levels of saline in the water (Aksad 1469 and Duma 45), have contributed to the bumper crop.

Several other factors look to have contributed to the improved harvest, facilitated by Damascus and government officials. Local sources have said that the government increased the amount of agricultural subsidies provided, with many registered farmers receiving their full allocations of inputs. Qatana [stated](#) that

agricultural subsidies this year covered 70% of farmers' needs, while in some areas the government supplied additional electricity to farmers who own irrigation machines; in government-held Deir-ez-Zor for example, farmers were allocated an additional six hours of electricity per day. Governorate officials also showed an increased interest in wheat cultivation this year and were available to provide farmers with the necessary assistance. For example, local sources reported that Dar'a governor Louay Kharita regularly met with farmers in the governorate to listen to feedback and follow up on their progress.

The government enacted facilitative measures to ensure collection of the largest amount of wheat possible. New collection centers were reportedly [opened](#) in Hama, with two additional centers expected to become operational in Slahib, As-Suqaylabiyah, and Muhradah to accommodate additional deliveries. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection [directed](#) wheat collection centers to accept wheat shipments from farmers in Ar-Raqqa, Idleb, and Deir-ez-Zor who own land outside government-held areas who provide only their national ID, without having to show registration papers required from farmers in government-held areas.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry also directed its affiliated subsidiary institutions such as the Syria Trade, Grain, Bakery, and Construction Establishments to support farmers and ensure successful collection of the wheat harvest.

### Autonomous Administration outbids the Syrian government

The Autonomous Administration significantly [outbid](#) the Syrian government, setting the wheat purchasing price at \$0.43 per kg, while the government set its own price at SYP 2,800 (\$0.30) per kg. It is not unusual for the Autonomous Administration to have a higher purchase price than Damascus, however the gap this year is notable.

Reasons for this are likely to be related to the continued [depreciation](#) of the Syrian pound, which has depleted government resources, preventing it from setting higher prices. A bumper crop this year also means competition between the two actors is decreased; as supply increases, there is less pressure on prices to be high to attract farmers. The government also makes it difficult to sell to areas outside its control, also reducing the need for competitive pricing. Harvesters are required to share data on the amount of wheat they harvest for every farmer, allowing officials to keep track of the total amount of dunams farmers cultivated (both registered and unregistered)<sup>2</sup> and adjust the amount of wheat they expect from them accordingly. Local sources stated that the government usually expects 300kg of wheat from each cultivated dunam registered with the Ministry of Agriculture. Farmers who sell their wheat to traders on the black market or smuggle them to Autonomous Administration-held areas are tried by the government's economic security court and sentenced to prison, are forced to pay a fine, and could potentially have their lands temporarily confiscated.

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1 When farmers deliver their wheat shipments to the collection center, they have to present their registration papers provided to them by the Ministry of Agriculture at the beginning of every season. The registration paper states what type of crop the farmer will plant, how many dunams of the crop will be planted, and how much agricultural subsidies the farmer will be allotted accordingly (fertilizer, diesel etc.).

2 Farmers have to register the amount of land (dunams) that they want to cultivate every year with the Ministry of Agriculture so they can be allocated agricultural subsidies accordingly.



## Farmers at risk of being out of pocket

Despite the increased government support, the government's purchasing price this year is too low for farmers to be able to make a profit. Many farmers have complained that the price set does not cover the cost of production (shown below) and [expressed their disgruntlement](#) with the government reducing its wheat purchasing price this year relative to the dollar. In addition, while agricultural subsidy provision has improved, local sources say that many farmers in Rural Damascus, particularly in eastern and western Ghota, have said that they did not receive either their diesel or fertilizer subsidies, forcing them to purchase both on the black market at up to 64% higher than subsidized prices.<sup>3</sup>

Other factors eating into farmers' profits include issues around quality and transportation costs. Prices as low as SYP 2,000 per kg are being paid for lower quality produce (with quality inspectors asking for up to SYP 75,000 for positive quality reports) while farmers have to pay at least \$75 per shipment to [transport](#) the harvested wheat to collection centers. Government military and security personnel at checkpoints also often ask for a [fee](#) of between SYP 100,000–200,000 to allow safe passage. The practice of buying wheat from the black market to bolster harvest shortfalls from the set level of 300kg per dunam (and avoid fines from the government) can also erode farmers' profits.

Item/Service	Price per dunam (in SYP)
Plowing	50,000
Urea (x2)	390,000
Irrigation (Water)	50,000
Pesticides	40,000
Harvest and threshing	150,000
Subsidized diesel (2L)	11,000
Additional costs	Cost in SYP
Transportation	690,000 (\$75)*
Checkpoint fee	100,000
Quality inspector fee	50,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,531,000</b>

\* Using the unofficial exchange rate of SYP 9,200 per USD

Cost of wheat production per dunam (Source: CA-SYR)

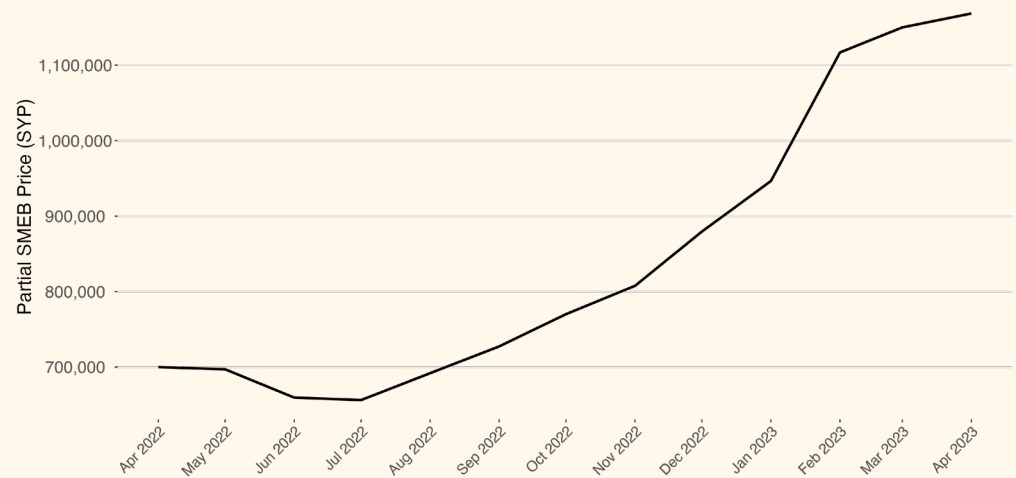
While farmers are supposed to be earning SYP 840,000 per dunam<sup>4</sup>, they could be spending at least SYP 1,531,000 per dunam on production, leaving them with a 45% loss.

3 Black market diesel costs SYP 9,000 per liter, while black market bag of urea fertilizer costs SYP 240,000.

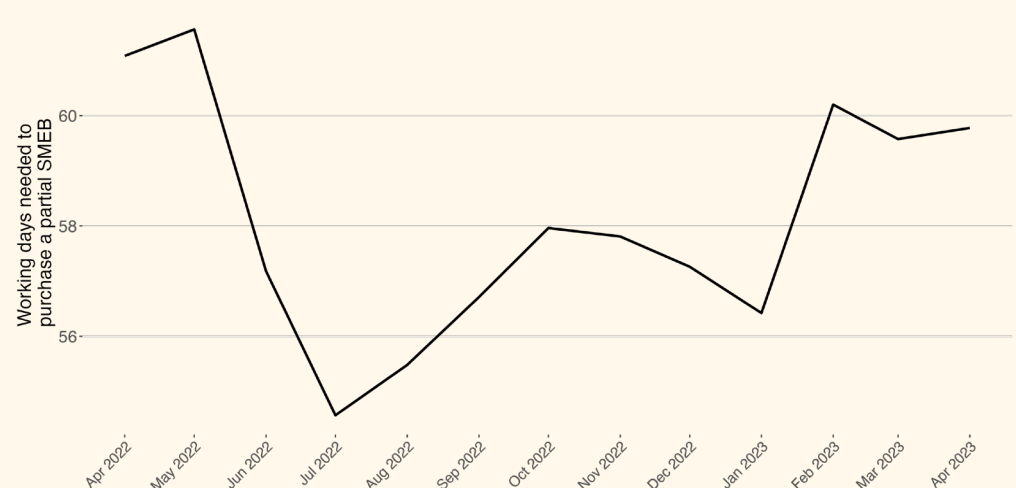
4 Based on the government estimates of 300kg per dunam, and purchasing price of SYP 2,800 per kg.

## Depreciation, inflation and low wages as 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line

Residents in government-held areas have seen their purchasing power melt away as the pound continues to depreciate to record lows<sup>5</sup> and prices continue to increase. The ICRC [reported](#) on 14 June that “nearly 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line with more than 15 million people needing humanitarian assistance.” The Syrian government is increasingly unable to resolve the economic and financial crisis as [structural problems in the Syrian economy](#), rampant corruption, [restrictive economic policies](#), and lack of low foreign currency have been weighing it down, making it unable to stabilize the pound or boost economic activity.



Price of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Baskets between April 2022 and April 2023 (Source: WFP data/CA-SYR)



Number of working hours required to afford a Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket between April 2022 and April 2023 (Source: CA-SYR)

<sup>5</sup> The Syrian pound crossed the 9,000 SYP per USD threshold on 10 May.

## Eggs join list of unaffordable items

Food prices in government-held areas have been increasing for several years, making one item after another unaffordable for cash-strapped Syrian households. [Fruit](#), [meat](#), and now eggs, have become luxuries for many; pro-government media reported that egg prices [increased](#) 20% from SYP 1,000 to 1,200 per egg, leading an egg tray (approximately 20 eggs) to cost about SYP 25,000. For an average household of five to eat one egg each per day, it would cost SYP 6,000, and SYP 180,000 per month, 17% higher than the [average salary](#) in the country.

Following the price increase, the government intervened. Officials met with the Poultry Breeders Committee and [agreed](#) to set a fixed price for eggs (SYP 30,000 per tray) until the end of June. However, local sources reported breeders and traders in many locations have ignored the set price, with some selling a tray for SYP 33,000. A member of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, Mohamad Hallak [said](#) that he expected market activity ahead of Eid al-Adha to be poor due to the recent price increases, and households' relatively low purchasing power.

## Prices can only rise

Prices in government-held areas have continued to increase for several reasons. Primarily, the Syrian pound's steep depreciation last month, finally stabilizing between SYP 8,700 and 9,000 per USD has pushed many traders to increase their prices to preserve their profit margins; local sources stated that traders are pricing according to a SYP 10,000 per USD exchange rate.

On 18 June, the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources [increased](#) fuel prices for the private sector for the second time in as many months, with prices jumping from SYP 1.4 million to 4.4 million per tonne between April and June. As well as fuel, economic expert Mohamad Koussa also expects electricity prices for facilities that consume over 1,500 KW/h will eventually increase, further adding inflationary pressure on market prices.

At the same time as input costs are increasing, the Syrian government has continued issuing restrictive policies that are hampering trade and economic activity. The government issued a decision in early June requiring food importers to [sell 15% of their imports](#) to the Syria Trade Establishment (STE) at cost price. Traders objected to the decision, as the STE prices then undercut their own in local markets and [discouraged](#) many food importers from ordering more stock, reducing supply and pushing prices up.

Corruption has also played a significant role in increasing prices. Media sources reported that traders [must pay five different bribes](#) to government security agencies, amounting to 20 to 30% of the shipment's value; traders have to pay bribes at every stage of the import process; to port officials, to 'security escorts' in transit, and at checkpoints. These extralegal payments result in unforeseen costs that have to be paid and later translated into increases in consumer prices for importers and traders to stay in business.

Item	January price (SYP)	June price (SYP)	Change
Chickpeas	6500	9000	38%
Bulghur	7000	8500	21%
Lentils	6800	10000	47%
Milk	3500	4500	29%
Rice	6500	9000	38%
Banana	8500	13000	53%
Sugar	7000	9000	29%
Cooking oil	14000	16000	14%
Minced beef	40000	67000	68%

Percentage change in the price of food items in As-Sweida governorate (Source: CA-SYR)

## Minimum wages lag behind inflation

Media sources [said](#) on 20 June that the Syrian Ministry of Finance estimated that the inflation rate in government-held areas increased by 100.7% in 2022 and 104.7% in 2023, bringing the total since 2011 to a 16,000% increase.

With prices continuing to increase, wages have struggled to keep up. The current [minimum wage](#) in government-held areas (SYP 93,000, or \$10 per month) is insufficient to cover the cost of one meal for a household, forcing many Syrians to resort to various coping mechanisms such as removing certain foods from their diet, [taking on debt](#) to afford food, sending children to work, and [skipping meals](#).<sup>6</sup> The WFP [reported](#) back in January that Syria has the “sixth highest number of food insecure people in the world, with 2.5 million who are severely food insecure.” However, it seems that the government is so far unwilling to increase the minimum wage to help workers adjust to the high cost of living. On 6 March, Syrian a member of parliament, Zuheir Tinawi, said that the government cannot [afford to increase the minimum wage](#). Tinawi would later also [blame the earthquake](#) for the delay in wage increases, saying that the February earthquake response exhausted the government’s financial resources.

The government is likely to postpone increasing the minimum wage for as long as possible. Firstly, it may be that, as had been said, it simply cannot afford to. It has been attempting to reduce its budget deficit by reducing public sector expenditure, including removing subsidies (ie, the removal of fuel subsidies for the private sector). However, subsidy removal is more likely to increase inflation than close the budget deficit since it will [push up both expenses and, subsequently, prices](#). Increasing the minimum wage can also have an adverse inflationary effect on the economy; increasing the minimum wage in addition to the salaries of

<sup>6</sup> The current minimum wage in government-held areas of 93,000 SYP (10 USD) per month is lower than the [international poverty line](#), which is set at a daily wage of 3.65 USD.

more than 1.7 million government employees is likely to drastically increase the money supply, leading to a further depreciation of the pound.

However, the decreasing purchasing power and public pressure might eventually coerce the government into increasing wages at a certain point. Economic expert Rasha Sayroub [stated](#) that essential items and services that make up 75% of household expenditures, such as food, non-alcoholic drinks, electricity, and water have seen the highest price increases. Moreover, if the government does end up deciding to increase wages, another expert [believes](#) it is unlikely to be more than 40%, possibly to enable the government to implement it and minimize the secondary side effects to the largest extent possible.

## New round of settlements in Dar'a attract high turnout

On 3 June, the Syrian government [opened](#) a settlement center at the Houriyat Palace in Dar'a city, setting in motion comprehensive settlement procedures involving individuals wanted for compulsory/reservist military service and defectors from the Syrian army, for both residents and Syrians abroad.

Pro-government politicians in the area [touted](#) the settlements as an opportunity for reconciliation between the government and local communities, a gateway towards stabilizing the volatile security situation, and an incentive to encourage refugees to return to government-held areas. This all conveniently is in line with the [step-by-step framework](#) proposed by Jordan concerning potential normalization between Damascus and its Arab neighbors. The realization of these objectives, however, remains far-fetched. The government's securitization of settlement procedures, lack of response towards local grievances, and failure to honor settlement commitments undermine the initiative.

While settlement procedures remain the go-to-policy for reconciliation for the Syrian government in Dar'a governorate, most recently conducted in [April](#) and [May](#) 2023, this month's settlement was different in that it managed to record a significant turnout, with pro-government sources [estimating](#) over 27,000 participants; in fact, the government [extended](#) the settlement period, initially set between 3 and 8 June, for another week to accommodate more settlements.

The high turnout can be understood by the opportunities offered by the settlements. They [grant](#) individuals wanted for compulsory/reservist military service and army/police defectors respective deferral periods of six months and one month, after which they have to report to their assigned deployments. Joiners also [received](#) cards that allowed them, in principle, freedom of movement in government-held areas. Most importantly, those wanted for compulsory military service could apply for passports and obtain travel permission to leave Syria.<sup>7</sup> The majority of settlement joiners have been civilians who sought military service deferrals and travel permissions.

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<sup>7</sup> Local sources confirmed that government authorities did not grant travel permissions to defectors or those wanted for reservist military service.

## Violence and insecurity continue despite settlements

The government's narrative that settlement procedures will improve the security situation in Dar'a governorate appears groundless. Evidence of the shortcomings in the government's use of settlements as a tactic were clear throughout June. Violent incidents continued almost daily basis, with a [documented](#) 36 casualties in the governorate, including 19 civilians, 4 settlement joiners, and 8 members of the military and police.<sup>8</sup> A car bomb also [exploded](#) near the Houriyat Palace on 8 June,<sup>9</sup> signaling opposition to settlement procedures.

The limited – if any – impact brought by the settlements is largely due to the lack of trust found in armed individuals and former opposition fighters still targeting government forces in these settlements. According to media sources, the settlement procedures [include](#) an amnesty for armed individuals/former opposition fighters still targeting GoS forces in addition to those who have pending security-related issues. However, local sources claim that people falling within these categories did not take part in settlements, due to the high level of distrust in government security forces. The individuals whose undergoing of the settlement would lead to enhanced security in the governorate were missing from the count, therefore limiting the effectiveness of the settlement in relation to its overall goal.

The lack of trust in government settlement procedures is well founded. On 14 June, media sources [reported](#) that three young men (civilians), who recently went through settlement procedures, were arrested by the Air Force Intelligence branch near the city of Izra'. Arrests of settlement joiners are quite common and highlight the unwillingness of the government's security branches to honor settlement-related commitments. With pro-opposition armed individuals discouraged from joining settlement procedures, it is unlikely to expect a reduction in targeted assassinations in Dar'a governorate.

There were also other reasons that rendered the government's attempts unworthy of gaining the trust of armed individuals. Local sources also pointed out that in contrast with the September 2021 settlements, which were based on a binding administrative government decision, the current iterations are based on a verbal security order; therefore, the degree to which the government's security branches will adhere to settlement commitments is dubious.

Apart from the obvious security considerations rendering it unattractive for armed individuals to participate in these settlements, the settlements also fail to mitigate and overcome grievances that once turned residents in Dar'a against the government. As has been the case with previous settlements, government personnel overseeing the procedures at the Houriyat Palace reportedly harassed settlement seekers in various ways. Several individuals [complained](#) about verbal insults by government members and claimed they were requesting payments of SYP 50,000–100,000 to grant them access to the settlement center. Such violations within the settlement process indicate that the government is not serious about its attempts to rebuild trust with Dar'a's local communities.

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8 In May, the same source (local news outlet Dar'a 24) [documented](#) 30 casualties.

9 Only material damage was reported in this incident.

Settlements will likely fail to stabilize Dar'a as long as the Syrian government continues to prioritize security over reconciliation. Pushing for a dialogue between the state and local communities, and addressing the issues of detainees and victims of forced disappearances remain absent in the government's agenda. Consequently, local grievances and general distrust in the government will likely persist, further undermining the prospect that settlement procedures serve the goals of reconciliation and stability.

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# Northeast Syria

## Administration students seek government qualifications



Officials from the Autonomous Administration announcing plans for a new 'Rojava University' in northeast Syria. (Source: ANF News).

On 7 and 8 June, the [examination](#) period for students wishing to obtain high school and middle school diplomas provided by the Syrian government began. According to a government Ministry of Education [official](#), there were 5,179 examination centers across the whole of Syria for the 587,612 students who registered to take the exams. Media sources [estimated](#) that thousands of students from areas outside of the government's control in northeast and northwest Syria also registered to obtain education certificates from government schools – this is common practice, as the curriculum set by the Autonomous Administration remains unaccredited. However increasing costs and restrictions for students attending non-government schools are posing challenges to their attendance.

According to local sources, the lack of accreditation for education provided by schools run by the Autonomous Administration is a key reason behind students wanting to take government exams. The curriculum and diplomas provided by the Autonomous Administration are not [accredited](#) inside Syria or internationally. University options for students who complete high school and obtain diplomas provided by the Autonomous Administration are limited to those established by the Autonomous Administration. Consequently, students who wish to continue their education in government-administered universities will be denied entrance

Local sources added that students with Autonomous Administration diplomas will also have limited job opportunities. Graduates of Autonomous Administration schools and universities can only apply to jobs within northeast Syria, and



only in sectors managed by the Autonomous Administration. Similar to university entry requirements, students who wish to work within government-controlled areas will also face challenges securing jobs in the private sector and have almost no hope of securing public sector jobs. With an unfounded perception that Administration-controlled areas will eventually revert to being governed by Damascus, local sources reported that residents are trying to ensure they are appropriately qualified. Syrians hoping to leave Syria must also take government exams to have hope of qualifications being recognized abroad.

### Concerns with the curriculum

Residents, teachers and students have also had issues with the curriculum introduced by the Autonomous Administration. In 2016, the Administration [introduced](#) its curriculum into schools, banning the previous universal curriculum developed by the Syrian government – this culminated in [banning](#) private schools from teaching the government’s curriculum in September 2022.

Residents of northeast Syria, especially Arabs in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, have criticized the Administration’s curriculum as politicized – [reports](#) show that Arab history has been replaced with Kurdish history, while other subjects are skewed toward the Kurdish majority in the northeast. The Autonomous Administration reportedly introduced genealogy into classrooms, which was [frowned](#) upon by conservative residents because it discussed the oppression of women in familial structures.

### Challenges facing students trying to take exams

Despite the advantages of a government certificate, students face challenges trying to take the exams. With the Administration [ordering](#) the closure of private schools and institutes teaching the curriculum, students have been reportedly forced to either study the material on their own initiative, or seek help from a private tutor. According to media sources, private tutors are now asking for [fees](#) between \$100–300 for a course of private lessons.

Transportation to government-held areas to take the exams is an added cost for households; for example, students in Administration-controlled parts of Ar-Raqqa must travel to schools in Sabkha or Maadan to attend their exams. Vans carrying up to 11 people travel the exam centers, via Fourth Division checkpoints at which they must pay up to SYP 100,000 to pass through – students must pay SYP 210,000 for a return ticket. Increased scrutiny at checkpoints has also led to students having to reach the departure point for these vans at 04:00 to arrive at their allocated examination centers by 07:00.

Local sources in Deir-ez-Zor also reported similar issues. Students pay up to SYP 10,000 just to get on the ferry, cross the river into government-controlled areas, and then rent vans to transport them to exam centers. While the costs of the vans in government-controlled areas in Deir-ez-Zor are unknown, local sources indicated the likelihood that they also increase during exam season given the increased activity, and owners viewing this as an opportunity for greater profit. Local sources in Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli also reported similar issues, but to a

lesser extent as students can access exam centers within the security squares in Quamishli and Al-Hasakeh city.

Long waiting times and increased transportation costs are not the only issues reported by local sources in Deir-ez-Zor. Students from Administration-controlled areas in Deir-ez-Zor face discrimination upon their arrival at exam centers. According to local sources, students who would have long beards and hair are often labeled as ISIS members. Similarly, local sources in Deir-ez-Zor also reported students fear crossing checkpoints manned by government-affiliated forces in Deir-ez-Zor due to the threat of being arrested for being perceived as an ISIS affiliate.

## Activists stand against narcotics traders in Ar-Raqqa

On 4 June, media reports circulated news of an online activist-led [campaign](#) targeting narcotics dealers in northeast Syria's Ar-Raqqa. According to various online and local sources, the campaign is spearheaded by a group of anonymous activists who created a well-known Facebook page called "[Raqqqa – Eyewitness](#)" several years ago. At the beginning of June, Raqqqa – Eyewitness announce a separate backup [page](#) and started publishing the names, pictures and known residences of several narcotics dealers operating within Ar-Raqqa city. The page quickly grew in popularity, gaining 18,000 followers, posting daily content and generating hundreds, sometimes up to a thousand, interactions per post.

### Facebook page identifies dealers for ISF

According to media and local sources, the amount of hype generated by the page led to a response by the SDF's Internal Security Forces (ISF) throughout the month. According to reports, several narcotics dealers operating in the city were arrested. On 5 June, local sources reported the ISF tightened its measures at checkpoints in an attempt to capture the dealers whose names and pictures were circulated by the page. On 7 and 12 July, respectively, local sources reported that an unspecified number of narcotics dealers who were exposed by the Facebook page were arrested by the ISF, while the ISF's Anti-Narcotics Forces [announced](#) seizing 180 blocks of marijuana found on five individuals during an anti-drug operation.

Throughout the month, the action taken as a direct result of information provided by the page was notable. On 25 June, the page [boasted](#) that they had had a hand in the arrests of 'tens' of dealers and in prompting others to flee the area. The post also revealed that the page intended to archive all the posts and remove them from social media in an attempt to give dealers and users the option of walking away. However, the post also stated that they would resume their activities after the Eid period, sending a warning to dealers.

Despite the achievements, narcotics use and trade remain an issue in Ar-Raqqa. According to local sources, narcotics use has increased significantly over the past year, particularly H-Booze (an amphetamine) which has become popular. Similarly, media outlets noted the [widespread](#) availability of narcotics in the city,

with public parks in the city [becoming](#) areas for consumption. Though the arrests themselves are significant, indicating the power of social media and civil society, media outlets [pointing](#) towards the possible involvement of individuals working within the SDF in Ar-Raqqa's drug trade highlight the complexities of the issue.

Notwithstanding the limited results and potential issues with vigilante justice, the developments over the past month should be viewed in a positive light. According to local sources, the page managed to gather significant traction for its cause, with its efforts well respected and appreciated by residents in Ar-Raqqa. [Reactions](#) and comments on the posts themselves were also generally positive. With the SDF and ISF having limited the space for activism and civic engagement in previous years through regularly [arresting](#) activists, positive reactions to activism are indicative of a possible turn in policy that could be an opportunity to strengthen relations between the SDF, ISF and civilians in Ar-Raqqa should this be capitalized and built on.

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# Northwest

## Seasonal water shortages in Al-Bab city



*Children carry water in Al-Bab city, where seasonal shortages plague residents. (Source: Syria HR).*

With the advent of summer again come water shortages in Al-Bab city – five out of thirteen (locals say eight) water wells supplying the city with water – the only natural supply since 2017 when water was cut off from the city during the conflict – have gone out of service. Al-Bab city, home to 300,000 people, depends mainly on groundwater wells in the villages surrounding the city, especially those located in the Sosyan area. Water shortages in the city are an annual seasonal occurrence, with less rain in the summer meaning less groundwater, and less replenishment of the wells supplying the city.

The local council in Al-Bab city has launched a [distress](#) call for local and international organizations to help solve the problem; the local council organized a [demonstration](#) in the city, on 23 June, to ask that the international community find urgent solutions to restore water security. The lack of water supply from wells in the area has raised the price of five barrels of water (1,000 liters) from TRY 40 in the winter to TRY 60 in June, while 4,500 hectares of agricultural land is at risk of desertification due to water scarcity, according to the local council.

### Al-Bab residents solely dependent on wells

Before 2017, Al-Bab city was supplied with water via Al-Ain Al-Bayda station south of Al-Bab which gets its water from the Euphrates river, through the water pumping station in Al-Khafsa (Menbij subdistrict). Clashes between the Syrian government and ISIS at the beginning of 2017 damaged the supply line to the city, and the Syrian government took control of the [Al-Khafsa](#) pumping station

in March 2017, cutting water off from the city. Since then, the residents of Al-Bab have [relied](#) on water tanks filled from wells.

Currently, Al-Bab is supplied with water from 13 wells located in Sosyan, Ra'ee and Sandi, north of the city. Some humanitarian organizations rent a number of wells and supply the residents with water tanks, while the local council pumps water from the wells in the Sosyan through a limited water network (that does not cover the entire city). The local council also pumps water from the wells to the main reservoir (the Jabal Aqil reservoir) and established two reservoirs, each with a capacity of 2,000 barrels, and sells the water to residents via tankers. In June, local sources reported that the percentage of water pumped by the local council decreased to only 25% of the quantities it was pumping throughout winter, as a result of the wells drying up. Additionally, the lease of some wells have expired and their owners are refusing to renew them – they say the wells have depleted to such a level that they need to conserve the water for their own private agricultural use.

### Potential solutions

In previous years there have been similar problems with water shortages in Al-Bab city, and other areas north of Aleppo, especially Azaz. The main cause for this has been a lack of the necessary resources and infrastructure needed to pump water from wells and reservoirs to households. Local councils raised money by collecting fees from residents and securing funding and support from different organizations. Current shortages however are more concerning, with a full-blown crisis threatening if water supply to Al-Bab is not increased – with the amount of water in the wells insufficient, alternative options are limited.

According to the local council, there are two [solutions](#); water can be pumped from the Ain al-Bayda station, south of Al-Bab, under the control of the Syrian government, or water can be supplied from the Euphrates River, drawn from Jarabulus city or Ghandorah Lake northeast of Al-Bab. It is unlikely that the government will agree to the first solution, while the second will take time – to raise funding, and build infrastructure – meaning that for this summer at least, residents in Al-Bab will continue to experience a lack of water supply, and increased prices.

## Truck drivers protest in northern Aleppo

Throughout the reporting period, there was a new wave of [protests](#) by Syrian truck drivers and loading workers against the protracted issue of the entry of Turkish goods using Turkish-owned and operated trucks into northern Aleppo through the Bab al-Salama crossing into Syrian Interim Government (SIG)-held areas. The protests were [held](#) over multiple days, with protestors blocking the Azaz–Bab al-Salama road with burning tires, and announcing a sit-in near the Bab al-Salama crossing.

Syrian drivers have seen their employment opportunities cut off since 2021, when the Turkish authorities allowed Turkish drivers into Syria to deliver goods – rather than unloading them onto Syrian trucks at the border. Since then, there

have been regular protests from drivers and loading staff [asking](#) authorities to restore the old system, which provided employment opportunities to 1,000–5,000 people in northern Aleppo.<sup>10</sup> The decision to prevent Syrian trucks from entering Turkey, and to allow Turkish trucks to enter Syria left drivers and truck owners with limited work. Truck owners have since struggled, with some selling their trucks for spare parts to raise money.

### Cutting out Syrian drivers risks collapse of commercial transportation sector

The decision to allow the Turkish drivers to carry their cargo into northern Aleppo is ostensibly pragmatic; the transfer directly from Turkey to merchant warehouses in Syria [protects](#) the goods from damage during unloading and reloading from Turkish to Syrian trucks at the border, and speeds up the transportation process. However, there are some issues with the Turkish deliveries. Aside from general logistical issues (ie, the language barrier between the driver and the merchants, and Turkish trucks being generally larger than Syrian trucks which can obstruct traffic in cities), some merchants have complained of being exploited by Turkish drivers demanding high transportation fees amid a lack of competition. In addition, the northwest already has a lack of livelihood opportunities, and limited industry. Policies that preserve both jobs and industry could help growth (and reduce dependence on Turkey), and remove the threat of a collapse of trucking capabilities in northern Aleppo. The SIG has said that it is communicating with the Turkish government to find a solution to this problem, but nothing has changed so far.

There is potential for jobs in trade with the northeast. On 11 June, the SIG's [Ministry of Defense](#) prevented trucks from the Autonomous Administration in the northeast from entering the northwest, making the drivers unload and reload their cargo across the zones of control. If this continues, it could provide jobs for truck drivers in SIG-administered areas, but the scale and volume of trade between the two areas is small, limiting the opportunities.

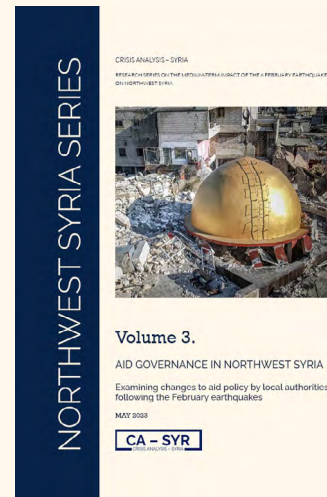
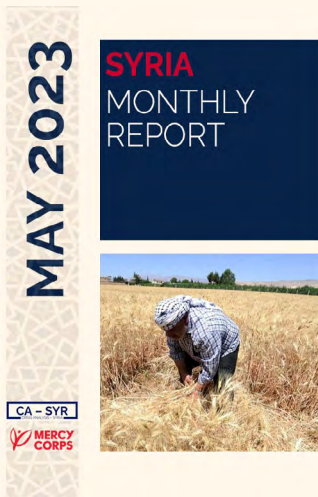
### Drivers in Idleb better protected

In Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)-controlled areas, the situation is different. Turkish trucks are not allowed to enter Idleb through the Bab Al-Hawa crossing, and Syrian trucks are prohibited from entering Turkey; trucks are unloaded and reloaded at the crossing, to be transported by their respective drivers. Turkish trucks in northern Aleppo are not allowed to travel to SSG areas.

It is assumed that Turkey does not allow its trucks through Bab Al-Hawa into Idleb primarily for safety reasons. Its influence and presence is far greater in SIG-controlled areas, making security easier to control. Additionally, it is possible that the classification of HTS as terrorists by some international actors (including Turkey), makes it more difficult to have a Turkish civilian presence in SSG-controlled areas.

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<sup>10</sup> Although many sources claim 5,000 jobs were impacted, this number is likely to be exaggerated; more probable estimates are that 1,000 jobs were lost.



NWS Series Vol. 4

Post-earthquake cashflow challenges

Following the earthquakes, humanitarian actors mobilized to provide aid to affected populations in northwest Syria, prompting the need for a major influx of cash across the region. However, difficulties with local availability of cash, currency devaluation, and last-minute policies enacted by financial actors hampered fast mobilization of such support. This report lays out the financial barriers to rapid aid mobilization in recent months.

[Go to report](#)

CA-Syria Monthly Report, May 2023

*In the aftermath of the Arab League Summit, many of Syria's Arab neighbors have been clear about their expectations of Damascus; the government's capability to bring about these changes remains limited. In government-held areas, 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. The closure 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. Protests against HTS for the arrest of members of Hizb al-Tahrir, a global non-violent political party, spread throughout Idleb and Aleppo. Arrests are in line with HTS actions to remove political (and military) threats, and to demonstrate opposition to extremism.*

[Go to report](#)

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.

[Go to report](#)

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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.

